

**MENNONITES IN UNEXPECTED PLACES:  
AN AUTHENTIC TRADITION AND A BURDENSOME PAST**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores a post-Second World War environment in which North American Mennonite scholars expressed increasing interest, sympathy and concern for Mennonite colonists in Latin America. It also speaks to broader attempts that complicate the relationship between tradition and modernity and addresses the nature of diasporic affiliation amongst a transnational religious community. In particular, I focus on Joseph Winfield Fretz's writings on Paraguayan Mennonites living in the Gran Chaco as well as articles published in the periodical Mennonite Life. These works came at a time of social, cultural and religious change for North American Mennonite communities when issues of secularization, urbanization and evangelicalism were of increasing import. Faced with these challenges, Mennonite colonies in Latin America provided academics with an "outside space" for critical reflection as well as a nostalgic return to an authentic agrarian lifestyle lacking in North American life. Sociologists such as Fretz were uniquely positioned to act as cultural brokers, imparting these vital experiences to North American audiences through periodicals like Mennonite Life. However, their romantic appraisals of colony life occasionally ran aground against the profound differences between themselves and colonists. This revealed the degree to which they were invested in, and even committed to, the changes underway in North American society. Scholars attempted to mediate these differences by insisting upon historical continuity and focusing on external difference but when these attempts failed their tone turned condescending. This was particularly apparent in discussions of religion during a time in which the North American churches were increasingly embracing evangelicalism. It was then the position of colonists and not North Americans that was defined in terms of lack. The ambivalent nature of this identification is what this paper seeks to capture, a relationship that was equally intimate and distant and in which colonists appeared as both pilgrims and strangers.

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*To my partner Karen  
and my parents Linda and Laurie*

Harold S. Bender began his foreword to Joseph Winfield Fretz's 1945 pamphlet *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*, with a disclaimer.

“The writer was well aware that the Mennonites of Mexico would not welcome publicity and had fully intended to respect their unspoken wishes. However, the information gathered was so impressive, and the interest of the members of the Mennonite Central Committee in the study was so great, that it was nevertheless decided to proceed with a brief publication. It is hoped that the Mennonites of Mexico will understand and appreciate the interest which their Mennonite neighbours in the United States and Canada have in their experience and will not object to the publication.”<sup>1</sup>

His tentative justification hinted at underlying tensions. It suggested that, for Mexican Mennonite communities, a dialogue with their North American “neighbors” was neither natural nor especially desirable. Bender embraced the paradoxical nature of the situation. If they had truly known and wished to respect the “unspoken wishes” of the community, why had Fretz been sent to Mexico in the first place? Having violated these “wishes” he asked not simply for tolerance but understanding and even appreciation on the part of the aggrieved party. Given these contradictions, out of what circumstances had this desire for knowledge, and a genuine interest in the fate of fellow brethren, originated? What was it about colonization attempts that was capable of generating such intense inter-denominational concern, a concern that trumped a community's desire for anonymity? In concluding, Bender imagined a future in which “mutual concern and mutual aid across the boundary lines of nations and church organizations will find expression.” Though this integration might prove elusive he expressed certainty that once aroused, the curiosity of his readership, who currently “have known very little of their brethren across the southern border,” would only increase.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harold S. Bender, in a foreword to *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* by J.W. Fretz, (Akron: MCC, 1945)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Six years later Fretz was in Paraguay, preparing a similar but more extensive report on another colonization effort. At the time of his visit, the future of the Mennonites living in the Chaco was still far from certain with many, particularly those Displaced Persons who had arrived in the post-war period, emigrating to reunite with relatives in North America. As both a co-religionist and an outside observer, he was sent to Paraguay by the Mennonite Central Committee (hereafter MCC) during what was seen as a critical juncture for the long-term survival of the colonies. The publication of his findings in a full-length book, Pilgrims in Paraguay, together with the numerous articles others had written on Mennonite settlements in the late 1940s and early 1950s for the periodical *Mennonite Life*, offers evidence that Bender's prophetic vision for an inter-Mennonite dialogue was increasingly being realized.<sup>3</sup>

The thousands of Mennonites on the move in the wake of the Second World War provided a practical reason for the flowering of literature on Latin American colonies, as many settlements became temporary or permanent homes for these refugees. However, these sources betray a significance beyond mere philanthropy that also sheds light on broad changes in North American Mennonite lives already well underway at mid-century. To sift through these different layers of meaning requires an exploration of the conditions in which these writings were produced, the authors who produced them, the forums in which they were presented to a larger Mennonite public and an analysis of the writings themselves with attention to their common narrative strategies. The authors' perceptions

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<sup>3</sup> J.W. Fretz *Pilgrims in Paraguay: The Story of Mennonite Settlement in South America*. (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1953) The periodical *Mennonite Life* was itself a product of this post-war boom, first published in 1946. Along with articles in *Mennonite Life* Anne Marie Krause, also from the University of Chicago produced her dissertation on Mennonite settlements in Paraguay in 1952, Annemarie Elizabeth Krause "Mennonite Settlement in the Paraguayan Chaco." Ph.D diss. in *Geography Research Papers*: 25-27. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952) as well as George Fadenrecht "Mennonite Migrations to Paraguay" (M.A. thesis, University of Kansas, 1949)

reflected their own experiences of social and religious change within the context of the “maelstrom of secularization” they saw in North America.<sup>4</sup> As Mennonites debated the survival of isolated agrarian communities and the nature of a re-defined, urban identity, the examples of those who had opted for an anti-modernity seemed increasingly productive realms of research. The emerging discipline of sociology offered some academics a vehicle for navigating this challenging terrain. Latin American colonists, increasingly represented as outsiders and holdouts embarked on an anti-modern pilgrimage, generated both admiration and condescension on the part of North American Mennonites who had supposedly compromised their faith by accepting many of the trappings of modernity.<sup>5</sup> If the diversity of experience among post-war urban Mennonites resisted a singular “malaise of modernity” that Fretz imagined in the loss of the idyllic rural community, this did not diminish its potency as an organizing concept in debates over the future of the Mennonite church.<sup>6</sup>

As a discursive space seemingly detached from the structural changes and everyday conflict of North American society, the colonies bore witness to a regenerative migration that other Mennonites could symbolically enact through the pages of Mennonite periodicals. The significant inter-denominational differences that had provided the impetus for much of this colonization were rarely stated directly, yet the recommendations and implicit understandings that were naturalized in these accounts

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<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Krahn “The Mennonite Way of Life” *Mennonite Life* 2 no.2 (April 1947): 3

<sup>5</sup> The concept of “modernity,” and its implications for the church, was central to debates within Mennonite communities in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. An early polemical example would be John Horsch *The Mennonite Church and Modernism*. (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1924).

<sup>6</sup> Laura Beattie and David Ley. “The German Immigrant Church in Vancouver: Service Provision and Identity Formation.” *From Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis*. (Vancouver: Vancouver Centre for Excellence, 2001) Beattie and Ley discuss how for many Mennonite refugees in post-war Vancouver the urban environment proved only more conducive to forms of mutual aid, and community solidarity. The term is from Charles Taylor *The Malaise of Modernity*. (Concord, Ont.: Anasi, 1991)

reflect competing interpretations of Mennonite life. Although divided along lines of social and religious practice, North Americans and Latin American colonists appear united in their wary relationship with outsiders, ideas about appropriate land use, and placement in a larger collective memory of migration. These divergent but interlocking themes coexisted in the narratives that North American Mennonites constructed about their southern brethren, narratives that claim intimacy even as they create distance. Contradictions were most apparent when the discussion moved from symbolic affiliations to practical assessments and recommendations. Mennonite scholars did their best to mediate these tensions, employing both spatial and temporal devices, yet never entirely resolved them. The contested nature of an inter-Mennonite discussion challenged bonds of solidarity and legitimate claims to representation, calling even its status as a dialogue increasingly into question.

Betraying some of these tensions best through omission, Mennonite historiography on colonization has operated most comfortably from a regional standpoint, a tendency that can be seen in the works of Walter Sawatsky and Peter P. Klassen on the Mennonite colonies in Mexico and Paraguay.<sup>7</sup> In these studies, North America serves as a staging ground, illustrating the conditions that led to migration, before it disappears from the narrative entirely or is reduced to a description of the financial contributions of the MCC. This is a problem common to nation-based histories in which the act of migration implies a “dropping out” of one national narrative with the onus on the

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<sup>7</sup> Peter P. Klassen. *The Mennonites in Paraguay. Vol. 1: Kingdom of God and Kingdom of this World*. Trans. Gunther Schmitt (Steinbach: Mennonitische Post, 2004), Rodney Sawatsky. *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California, 1971) David M. Quiring *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Crossway Publications: Steinbach, Man. 2003) is a recent work that foregrounds the tense relations and conflicting interests of Mennonites in Canada and Mexico.



receiving country to take up the story on the other end.<sup>8</sup> North American Mennonite history, influenced by narratives of secularization, assimilation and urbanization, has provided several mediations on the state of Mennonite identity amid ongoing change in which migrants' histories also end at point of departure.<sup>9</sup> These studies have examined the roles of Fretz, Bender and others in re-defining Mennonite community in a changing context but have under-emphasized the importance of colonization efforts to this process. This is in spite of the fact that some of the more profound connections between Mennonites in the post-war period appear to transcend the local and the national.

Two recent books point to an alternative conception of the intertwined subjectivities of colonists and North American Mennonites. In Diaspora in the Countryside, Royden Loewen discusses migration to Mexico by focusing on the “competing cosmologies” of those who left and those who remained behind. “Each constructed a mental picture of an historical trajectory and social space that placed it in opposition to the other” seeing their “counterparts as being inherently different and antithetical.”<sup>10</sup> Loewen points to the importance of this oppositional self-definition in the intensification of group identity. However, the negative dialectic he creates between Canadian and Mexican Mennonites – the former derided as “lapsed” in their faith, while the latter were seen as obstinately “blinded” to a changing reality – obscures some of the

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<sup>8</sup> Adam Mckeown “Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842-1949.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no.8 (May1999): 312

<sup>9</sup> Leo Dreidger. *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*. (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), Calvin W. Redekop ed. *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: University Press of America, 1988) Tensions were also apparent within the broader field of North American Mennonite history. Canadian Mennonite historian Frank H. Epp, “vigorously argued that the time was right for Mennonite history in a national framework. The Americans should do the same, Epp advised, and not pretend to write an international history while in fact playing out one more chapter in the long history of American domination of Canadians.” “Good History,” Epp said, “has well-defined borders.” James Juhnke “Mennonite History and Self-Understanding: North American Mennonitism as a Bipolar Mosaic.” in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 96

<sup>10</sup> Royden Loewen. *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth Century Rural Disjuncture*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 14

more positive, unified imaginings that colonization produced. At times this could take the form of a shared historical trajectory. Difference might then be re-conceptualized to represent a distinct point on a broad continuum rather than a diametrically opposing worldview. This was an option most readily available to those like Fretz, whose scholarly mobility removed them from the personal animosities affecting the divided community. In *The Amish in the American Imagination*, David Weaver-Zercher explores the power of nostalgic identification that could exist side-by-side with the type of mutual condescension described by Loewen. Looking at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Weaver-Zercher identifies the politics of representation at play in the paternalistic claim of Herald Press - the same publishing house that produced *Pilgrims in Paraguay* - that they alone could provide an authentic portrayal of their Amish “cousins.”<sup>11</sup> Loewen and Weaver-Zercher both offer a starting point for thinking beyond the material relationships between North American Mennonites and colonists to how these are played out in a discursive space that transcends national boundaries.

Describing such relationships as those of “intimacy and distance”<sup>12</sup> seems to come close to the “ambivalent sliding”<sup>13</sup> or oscillating perspectives that characterized the attempts of Mennonite scholars to forge connections while mediating difference. Their language could shift accordingly, from laudatory to condemnatory within the scope of an article. This tactic cut across the diverse thematic concerns that Mennonites had in colonization, linking assessments of modernization with responses to evangelical changes within the church. In discussions from the social through to the spiritual, each positive

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<sup>11</sup> David Weaver-Zercher. *The Amish in the American Imagination*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), Initially part of the same Anabaptist church, the Amish and the Mennonites officially split in 1693.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 259

<sup>13</sup> Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2004) 214

pronouncement seemed to have its negative corollary. In Indians in Unexpected Places, the book from which I borrow my title, Philip Deloria makes a similar point about the representation of indigenous people in relationship to the new technology of the automobile in the early twentieth century. He shares with Latin American historians of *indigenismo* the contradictory understanding that “indians were among the most potent symbols used to critique the modern,” while it was often ardent modernizers who were most active in championing this movement.<sup>14</sup> Mennonite scholars found themselves in disturbingly similar positions. They were products of the very transitions to which they turned to colonists as the antidote. Deloria reminds us that the passage of modernity, despite its vociferous rejection of tradition, also required “reassurance.”<sup>15</sup> That modernism and antimodernism, rejection and identification, are not opposing tactics but intimately and inextricably linked through their relationship to nostalgia and tradition can clearly be seen in Fretz’s work. An identification with indigenous culture was not further marginalized by the adoption of the automobile but made all the more pressingly relevant by the anxiety that this new technology produced. Mennonite colonists, like the indigenous subjects of Deloria’s book, helped scholars mediate a difficult period of technological and social transition to the public through the technology of mass media. They offered this public a reconciling vision, of the present redeemed by “a nostalgic past more authentic and often more desirable than the anxious present.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Philip J. Deloria *Indians in Unexpected Places*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004) 166, *Indigenismo* advocates, Peruvian intellectuals like Haya de la Torre, championed the glorious pre-Colombian past of the Aztecs and the Incas in the attempt to forge a distinctly non-European identity while often ignoring the present-day state of indigenous communities. For the latest in a series of works dealing with the relationship between *indigenismo* and modernism, see the forthcoming title, Jorge Coronado *The Andes Imagined: Indigenismo, Society, and Modernity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009)

<sup>15</sup> Deloria, 166

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Spatial mediations were equally important to this process. Though traditional Old Order Mennonite communities were still present in North America at the time, descriptions of colonists were more comfortably removed “across the southern border.” Gaston Gordillo, in a study of the Toba of the Argentinean Chaco, also points to the ways that narrative and memory are constructed spatially as well as temporally. The investment of meaning whereby the ambiguity of space is transformed into a coherent and bounded place is an ongoing process in which “ ‘over here’ and ‘over there’ are part of the same, tense spatial embrace.”<sup>17</sup> For Gordillo, place-making is not merely an exercise of colonial power but an everyday activity that is employed by all groups in their attempts to forge an identity and mediate cultural change. The perspectives of these authors contribute to my understanding of the profound implications for Fretz’s work that lay behind Bender’s innocuous expressions of “interest” “sympathy” and “concern.” They also reveal why a certain understanding of North American Mennonite identity relied on a corresponding image of “our brethren down south.”

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When Mennonite academics like Mennonite Life editor Cornelius Krahn situated themselves as authorities “amid the maelstrom of secularization” they spoke with a sense of novelty and immediacy, hope and fear. Yet several authors have shown that Mennonite communities have continually faced challenges over land, state interference, religious practice and generational conflict, re-defining aspects of their identity along the way.<sup>18</sup> To locate the writing of Pilgrims in Paraguay within a critical stage in North

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<sup>17</sup> Gaston Gordillo, *Landscapes of Devils: Tensions of Place and Memory in the Argentinean Chaco* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 171

<sup>18</sup> In particular, John D. Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppe: Settling the Molochna Basin, 1783-1861* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003), Fred Kniss *Disquiet in the*

American history can too readily embrace the modernist understanding of history-as-rupture that terms like the “Great Disjuncture”<sup>19</sup> imply. It simultaneously constitutes a *hazy before*, a period of permanence and stability that was suddenly brought to an end. If we instead view these descriptions as performative, giving shape to a process that appears contradictory, drawn-out and difficult to delineate, the more provocative route might be to question the means and devices by which this change was rendered intelligible by Mennonites like Krahn and Fretz.

Even a cautious approach to change can’t avoid the recognition that the early and middle decades of the twentieth century witnessed significant shifts for both Mennonites and other rural communities. While the Great Depression had exacerbated the process by which impoverished families were forced to move off farms into small towns and urban centers, the Second World War increased this trend with growing industrial employment in the cities.<sup>20</sup> Successful farming in the post-war period involved the commercialization of operations with the introduction of greater mechanization and scientific innovations in fertilizer, modified seeds and livestock.<sup>21</sup> Automation and consolidation only further decreased the rural population necessary to support this agricultural production.

Mennonites responded in a multiplicity of ways, some occupying vanguard positions in these new forms of agriculture while others, who had left the land, re-articulated a

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*Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997) and James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics and Peoplehood: Europe, Russia, Canada, 1525-1980.* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006) Kniss, Loewen and Staples all argue for a dynamic relationship between sectarian communities and the external world as well as within such presumably homogenous groups. As such, cultural change is ongoing and negotiated rather than imposed or outright resisted.

<sup>19</sup> The term is from J. Shover, *First Majority, Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America* (DeKalb: Illinois, 1976) critically discussed by Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside*

<sup>20</sup> These trends are identified in J.W. Fretz, “The Renaissance of a Rural Community” *Mennonite Life* 1, no. 1 (Jan 1946)

<sup>21</sup> Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside*, 19-32

“symbolic ethnicity”, creating “virtual communities” in small towns and urban centers.<sup>22</sup> An irony of this increasing urbanization was the importance that city dwellers placed on maintaining or re-establishing connections to the “rural hinterland.”<sup>23</sup> However faced with a rural environment that may no longer have resembled the one that urban Mennonites had so recently left, the colonies in Mexico and Paraguay offered a return to an *authentic* agrarian lifestyle to which publications like Mennonite Life were instrumental.

J.W. Fretz’s childhood experiences with the “Great Disjuncture” provide an individual perspective on the urbanizing trends of Mennonite communities. The ninth of eleven children, Fretz was brought up in the progressive General Conference Church of his father, which accepted the use of automobiles in contrast to the more traditional Old Mennonite Church in which his mother had been raised.<sup>24</sup> His childhood was spent on a farm in a rural area outside of Philadelphia. His parents’ attempts to modernize the family farm both through the installation of domestic amenities and the purchase of desirable new breeds of livestock led to bankruptcy in 1922.<sup>25</sup> The family moved to the nearby industrial town of Lansdale and pursued independent wage labour work. In the 1930s, Fretz eventually attended Bluffton College before he was pulled into the orbit of the University of Chicago.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>23</sup> Leo Dreidger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*. 47

<sup>24</sup> Leland Harder, “The Personal and Scholarly Pilgrimage of J. Winfield Fretz.” *Mennonite Life* 54, no.2, (June 1999): 4-16. For a young Fretz the distinction that automobility provided was impressively apparent on Sunday mornings, “when they came to church in their buggies, and we came in our cars, we literally left them in our dust.” 5

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5-7

<sup>26</sup> Royden Loewen and Paul Toews see the urban experiences of Fretz in Chicago as essential to his ideas about community stability. According to Toews, Fretz felt that Mennonites in the city had lost substantial connection to their roots both individually and institutionally. Loewen presents a similar opinion of Fretz’s thought at the time, that where Mennonites have entered cities “solidarity has been shattered and identity

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Time spent at the University of Chicago offered Fretz an analytical tradition to aid in understanding the effects that these cultural changes might have on Mennonite identity. He spent from 1938 to 1941 in the city, earning an M.A. and PhD in sociology, publishing theses that dealt with urban Mennonite transitions in Chicago, institutional creation and mutual aid.<sup>27</sup> The sociology department, under Richard Park, played a foundational role in the development of North American sociological theory through its attempts to define and theorize processes of assimilation and urbanization.<sup>28</sup> Park and other sociologists from the University of Chicago frequently encouraged the work of academics like Fretz who appeared to have both privileged, insider relationships, along with a scholarly distance, from the communities they studied. As “marginal men” they seemed uniquely positioned to uncover “local knowledge” while maintaining their “transcendent” and “disembodied” critical perspective.<sup>29</sup>

For many of the Mennonite academics migrating from rural environments to the city, Chicago was a formative experience. They would later go on to staff Mennonite-led academic institutions across the country, especially Bethel, Bluffton and Goshen colleges.<sup>30</sup> The small town backgrounds and rural imaginations of these scholars revealed themselves in the way they approached social phenomena in the urban

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has been lost.” Paul Toews, “J. Winfield Fretz and the Early History of Mennonite Sociology.” *Mennonite Life* 54, no.2 (June 1999) 19, Loewen *Diaspora in the Countryside*, 203

<sup>27</sup> These were “Christian Mutual Aid Societies Among Mennonites” (M.A. 1938); “A Study of Mennonite Religious Instructions in Chicago” (B.D., 1940); and “Mennonite Mutual Aid: A Contribution Toward the Establishment of a Christian Community” (Ph.D. 1941) Toews, 17

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Schmitter-Heisler, “The Sociology of Immigration” in *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*. ed. Caroline Brettel and James Hollifield. (New York: Routledge, 2000)

<sup>29</sup> Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. (Oxford University Press: New York, 2001) 137

<sup>30</sup> Fretz worked at Bethel for 20 years before leaving to serve as president for the newly created Conrad Grabel college in Waterloo, Ontario. Harder, “The Personal and Scholarly Pilgrimage”, 13-14

environment as outsiders.<sup>31</sup> City life carried with it an implicit lack or loss in these writings with the average city dweller oft maligned as the “highly individuated stranger.” Binary distinctions between rural community and urban alienation can be seen in Fretz’s own work in the contrast between mutual aid as defining characteristic of Mennonite community and his PhD dissertation on the collapse of Mennonite identity in urban Chicago. Such understandings of the city were not always negative (these academics had after all decided to leave the idyllic rural community). Yet even when the rural/urban divide was positively redefined as between repression and liberation, the incommensurability of the categories was maintained limiting the range of possibilities available to urban Mennonites.<sup>32</sup>

The demands of a rural/urban shift stressed the role of the sociologist as mediator between interacting groups as well as between individuals and society. Examining this position, Henry Yu raises an important question in his own study of Chicago sociologists. “How did these theories provide a language for self-understanding, a means of translating the past into a sensible present, a foreseeable future?”<sup>33</sup> For Mennonites attempting to rewrite their history as a “useable past” compatible with a modern, urban future, the type of understanding offered by “charismatic brokers” like Fretz and Bender was indispensable.<sup>34</sup> In a foreword to Fretz’s The Waterloo Mennonites Kenneth Westheus, a

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<sup>31</sup> Yu, *Thinking Orientals* 32, 33, Yu describes how this rural background, like that of John Winfield Fretz, was betrayed by the “three word mantras” of their names.

<sup>32</sup> The presumed link between knowledge and emancipation is stated best by Everett C. Hughes, foreword to Calvin W. Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1969) v. “In the years following [the publication of *The Science of Sociology*], a number of theses on sects were presented at the University of Chicago. They were generally written by a member of the sect, but emancipated enough to look with some detachment at the very group in which he had been bred.”

<sup>33</sup> Yu, 94

<sup>34</sup> Dreidger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*. 193, Toews, 18



colleague at Conrad Grabel College,<sup>35</sup> describes precisely such a capacity and its relevance in an undergraduate trip to an Old Order community guided by Fretz.<sup>36</sup> In Westheus's description, the visit succeeded in conveying to his class the "gentleness, simplicity, and intimidating strength" of the community. Yet what Westheus remembers most clearly is telling, it was not the individuals encountered but Fretz himself. "Information and detail flowed from him, and in their midst not just fascination but reverence for a people whose life is a *witness* that the best of the twentieth century is not good enough [emphasis added]."<sup>37</sup> In this encounter, Westheus understood "Fretz's gift" to be the ability to render this essentially foreign way of life, and its importance to outsiders, both intelligible and accessible, a talent that leaves the visitors "spellbound."<sup>38</sup>

As a Mennonite from a far more *liberal* denomination, Fretz's position in relation to the Waterloo Old Order community, as with the Old Colony Mennonites he had encountered in Mexico, was an ambivalent one.<sup>39</sup> Westheus saw the Mennonites as a community occupying a marginal space that provided them with something of interest to the outsider, what he calls "an extra vantage point, one defined by centuries of separate, nomadic, persecuted history."<sup>40</sup> Fretz's marginality from this community allowed him to

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<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Westheus, foreword to *The Waterloo Mennonites: A Community in Paradox*. by J.W Fretz (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989)

<sup>36</sup> Old Order Mennonites or "horse and buggy" Mennonites are similar to the Amish, rejecting the use of some forms of technology (automobiles, electricity) and enforcing plain dress and endogamy among members. For a description see John C. Wenger, "Old Order Mennonites." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. (1956) <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/O544.html> (accessed 10 April 2009)

<sup>37</sup> Westheus, foreword, *The Waterloo Mennonites*, xiii

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii

<sup>39</sup> *Liberalism* refers in this case to the focus on mission-work, interdenominational cooperation and individual autonomy of the General Conference Mennonite church. "Old Colony," was a name applied to the first Ukrainian settlement of Mennonites at Chortitza as well as their descendents. Like the Old Order Mennonites, the Old Colony group also rejected the use of automobiles, electricity and other modern amenities. See J.W. Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* or Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision*

<sup>40</sup> Westheus, *The Waterloo Mennonites*, xiv

act as a bridge, transmitting this vital but parochial experience to the larger world. He could also occupy this external “vantage point” in order to criticize what he saw as lacking in North American Mennonite society. An insider relationship suggested bonds of solidarity but the sociological gaze also implied a crucial, critical distance, an ability to “survey the problem...from a vantage point outside of themselves.”<sup>41</sup> If Fretz had been sympathetic enough to understand the “unspoken wishes” of the Mennonites in Mexico in 1944, he was also obliged by the “impressive” nature of the information collected to follow through with its publication. The onus rested on the sociologist to decide where the parameters of this dual perspective would be drawn, knowing when or where to mark the difference between oneself and the object of study.<sup>42</sup>

Chicago Sociologists were interested in Mennonites for other reasons as well. In their Introduction to the Science of Sociology, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess took up the example of Mormons to make larger claims about the future of sectarian groups in a Turnerian “post-frontier” America.<sup>43</sup> Park and Burgess’ sect-assimilation cycle was in some respects largely positive. They shared with Weber the belief that a vigorous work ethic, along with the creativity and hardiness engendered by frontier life, would mesh well with the demands of a market economy.<sup>44</sup> Such sects would, from a condition of marginality, come to occupy a powerful position in encroaching urban society. Yet the cycle was unidirectional, allowing for no alternatives, and Parks and Burgess were

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<sup>41</sup> Yu, 94

<sup>42</sup> Yu, 101

<sup>43</sup> As an address given to the American Historical Association at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” argued that American identity, in particular its individualism and creativity, was shaped in a productive struggle between civilization and barbarism along the western frontier. See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1899) Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) 872-874, described in Hughes, foreword, v

<sup>44</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge 1992)

confident that, along the way to prosperity, much of the initial distinctiveness of the sect would vanish.<sup>45</sup> What the sect-assimilation cycle neglected were groups like the Old Order Mennonites in Canada who, at the very time of its formulation, were choosing independence over prosperity in migrations to Paraguay and Mexico.

Frederick Jackson Turner had argued that with the “end of the frontier” Americans would redefine themselves from a pioneer nationalism at home to an imperial imagining abroad. Yet the decline of the frontier as either a threatening or an empowering conscious presence also resulted in an intensification of its representation in books, film and advertising.<sup>46</sup> As America ceased to become a frontier landscape in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, new anxieties made it all the more imperative to capture, market and distribute “the frontier spirit” to future generations.<sup>47</sup> Historically, a struggle against intractable frontiers formed a central aspect of Mennonite self-definition as a people with an authentic, separate identity. Fretz confronted this historical legacy along with the assimilative bias he encountered in Chicago, but found a window into an alternate vision, presented by the anomalous presence of Mennonite communities in Latin America. His eagerness to transmit these experiences to receptive audiences in the North found realization in the pages of Mennonite periodicals.

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Beginning in 1946, the periodical Mennonite Life, published by Bethel College in Kansas, offered “the best in the religious, social and economic phases of Mennonite

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<sup>45</sup> Hughes, foreword, vi

<sup>46</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 60

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

culture.”<sup>48</sup> Mennonite Life was more than a simple vehicle for Mennonite scholarship. It claimed to provide a unique space in which a number of voices generational, denominational, geographical, academic and popular could converge. Unlike the highfalutin tone of the Mennonite Quarterly Review, its Goshen College counterpart, issues of Mennonite Life juxtaposed scholarly articles on Mennonite history with human-interest stories on the plight of refugees and works of poetry and short fiction. Readership also indicated their appreciation of the high-quality photography that made up a significant portion of each issue.<sup>49</sup> Within this accessible format, Mennonite academics like Cornelius Krahn (editor), Fretz (assistant editor), Bender (contributor) and others could broach their concerns with a larger audience, strengthening the bonds between the urban collegial world of Bethel College and the rural hinterland in which these academics had been raised.<sup>50</sup>

The singular appeal of Mennonite Life extended to numerous Mennonite communities with distinct practices and histories that were dispersed across Europe and the Americas. Mennonites were divided between two significant ethnic streams, Dutch and Swiss-German, and into over 20 denominational church groupings reflecting a range of practice from the traditional dress and lifestyle of Old Order Mennonites to the

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<sup>48</sup> The journal’s tagline from 1946-1961. “Published in the interest of the best in the religious, social and economic phases of Mennonite culture.”

<sup>49</sup> Mentioned in letters from John Fretz in “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.1 (Jan1947), 48, J. A. Duerksen and F.E. Mallot, “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.2 (April1947), 48

<sup>50</sup> *Mennonite Life* ceased publication in the Fall of 2008, announcing to readers that “over the decades of its existence, *Mennonite Life* has mostly focused on a particular niche for its readership. We have attempted to reach a literate, well-informed audience, but not a narrowly specialist one.” It regretted that the consensus between popular and academic readership it had straddled in the 1940s and 1950s appears “no longer viable in the Mennonite world.” *Mennonite Life* 63:2 (Fall2008) <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2008fall/> (accessed 10 April 2009)

progressive ecumenically minded General Conference.<sup>51</sup> Mennonite Life readily took part in the emergent interdenominational activity of organizations like the MCC. The refugee crisis of the post-war era provided fertile ground for this rhetoric and numerous issues of the journal urged readers to raise funds to support the resettlement of their brethren in Paraguay and elsewhere. Like the obligation of colonists towards uplift in Paraguay, need was conceived of in spiritual as well as economic terms. A 1947 issue asked readers, “Do you know how much foreign Mennonites long for fellowship with those in North America?,”<sup>52</sup> while requesting donations towards subscriptions to the journal for Paraguayan Mennonites. This simple way to ensure “a long overdue spiritual fellowship,” portrayed the journal not merely as an advocate, but a locus for interdenominational dialogue.<sup>53</sup> In a formulation that belied the profound internal conflicts that were dividing North American communities, the bulletin emphasized a common attempt at seeing the world unburdened and concluded that there was “no precise and final formula for the practice of the simple life.”<sup>54</sup> Fretz saw North and South American cooperation as “a heart-warming demonstration of Christian love and mutual aid,” pointedly leaving space to give thanks to the contributions that North Americans had

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<sup>51</sup> Such a description speaks of Mennonites as an ethnic group. Presently more than half of world-wide Mennonites are not of Swiss-German or Dutch-German descent. Significant communities of Mennonites can be found across Africa and Asia, especially in the Congo, India and Indonesia. This growth in worldwide membership was particularly pronounced in the latter half of the twentieth century. See “Mennonite Membership Statistics: 1860-2003” *Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee and Archives*. (2003) <http://www.mcusa-archives.org/Resources/membership.html#WW> or “World Mennonite Church Membership” *Mennonite Historical Society of Canada*. (1998) [http://www.mhsc.ca/index.asp?content=http://www.mhsc.ca/mennos/wdid\\_you\\_know.html](http://www.mhsc.ca/index.asp?content=http://www.mhsc.ca/mennos/wdid_you_know.html) (accessed 01 April 2009)

<sup>52</sup> “To Our Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.2 (April 1947): 49

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

<sup>54</sup> Edward Yoder, “Christian Simplicity” *Mennonite Life* (April 1947): 50

made to the Paraguayan cause.<sup>55</sup> Inter-denominational cooperation in, and over, Paraguay was an example that North American churches should attempt to emulate.

In addition to this interdenominational impetus, Mennonite Life also offered readers a new transnational understanding of a shared Mennonite community. If sectarian groups in Paraguay and Mexico appeared to outsiders as intimately wedded to locality, the journal presented an alternative de-territorialized space in which South American, North American and European Mennonite lives were placed into dialogue with one another. A novel, inclusive form of Mennonite community, one no longer bound by place or practice, was in the process of being imagined. Before they were omitted in favour of more advertizing space, letters-to-the-editor pointed to this potential through the diversity of the journal's readership. In January 1947, letters appeared from North Dakota, Ontario, Pennsylvania, Holland, Saskatchewan and New York City.<sup>56</sup> A subsequent issue saw letters written from Ohio, Hannover, the Hutterite colony in Paraguay, Iowa, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia while in another, letters arrived from Aberdeen (Idaho), Steinbach and Winnipeg (Manitoba), Pasadena (California), and Karlsruhe (Germany).<sup>57</sup> Readers from such diverse locales as Java, Texas, Oklahoma, and Brazil also voiced their concerns.<sup>58</sup>

These letters highlight the dispersed nature of Mennonite communities in the wake of the refugee crisis of the Second World War. On the pages of Mennonite Life, stories of Anabaptist forefathers, historical and contemporary colonization efforts, farming tips, production of new livestock, and urban Mennonites performed a

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<sup>55</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 128

<sup>56</sup> "From Contributing Readers" *Mennonite Life* 2, no.1 (Jan1947): 48

<sup>57</sup> "From Contributing Readers" *Mennonite Life* 2, no.2 (Apr1947): 48, "From Contributing Readers" *Mennonite Life* 2, no.3 (July1947): 48

<sup>58</sup> "From Contributing Readers" *Mennonite Life* 3, no.1 (Jan1948): 48

contradictory function. If they showed that the “religious, social and economic phases of Mennonite life” were characterized by an overwhelming diversity, the disunity of the “Mennonite experience” found coherence through this shared space and in the interpretive work of its authors.<sup>59</sup> These bonds were both lateral-spatial, connecting rural, urban and regional environs, as well as historical, with founder Menno Simmons standing, side by side, with “Modern Mennonite cattlemen.”<sup>60</sup>

The conscious acceptance and even active support for this journal indicated that academics like Fretz were not alone in their awareness of the need for “a long overdue spiritual fellowship.” Pointing to a nascent internationalism, readers congratulated Mennonite Life as it “furnishes the bridge to our Mennonite brethren the world over.”<sup>61</sup> A writer from Ontario claimed, “such a publication in the interest of all will go far in binding our different Mennonite branches closer together in one large body in future years.”<sup>62</sup> The journal also offered readers a chance to maintain their link with the “rich heritage” of the past.<sup>63</sup> This opportunity was particularly important for youth tempted by the urban, secular environment in which Mennonites increasingly found themselves immersed. According to one reader, Mennonite Life was capable of making “young

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<sup>59</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) and Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity” in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1-34, have pointed to the importance of print culture in allowing a dispersed populace to imagine a common past, present and future. Mitchell stresses that, “The ‘now’ of modernity, its culture of contemporaneity, the particular sense of simultaneity that is taken as modernity’s experience, depends upon the representation of an homogenous space. The inhabitants of this space, almost all of whom never meet one another, can be conceived as living the same empty moment, as occupying the same time-space...historical time: history is the story of a civilization, culture, or people whose diverse lives are imagined to share a singular epoch and to progress as a unit from one contemporaneous moment to the next.”, 15

<sup>60</sup> Waldo Harder, “Mennonite Cattlemen.” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.2 (April 1947), 11

<sup>61</sup> Richard Nickel in, “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.2 (April 1947): 48

<sup>62</sup> W.J. Yake in, “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.1 (Jan 1947): 48

<sup>63</sup> Letter in “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.3 (July 1947): 48

people interested in their own history and culture [again].”<sup>64</sup> The professional presentation of the journal also meant for another reader that, “we no longer need to be ashamed of our cultural level.”<sup>65</sup> In a more striking contrast, a Pennsylvania reader celebrated this academic opening, happy to see “young children getting what we never had, a chance to learn and feel.”<sup>66</sup> As with the academics whose writing filled the journal, Mennonite Life raised interesting questions about the transmission of knowledge, culture and history. It responded to a clearly-voiced and anxious need, expressed both by readership and contributors, for a “bridge” reconciling past and present, “brethren the world over”, academics and the public, and the generational gaps separating elders and youth. Central to this process were the presence of Mennonite communities in Latin America.

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Mennonites had arrived in the Chaco, the semi-arid low-lying region of western Paraguay, in three principal waves. The first group left Canada, along with Mexico-bound Mennonites, in the late 1920s, in response to a “One Language Law” that placed growing restrictions on Mennonite schools. They were joined by a second wave of Russian Mennonites who fled the Ukraine in the early 1930s during Stalin’s collectivization program. Many of those who remained in Russia arrived in a third wave in the immediate post-war period as refugees and “ethnic Germans” that had evacuated the Ukraine with the retreating German army and were avoiding forced repatriation to the

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<sup>64</sup> Letter in “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.3 (July 1947): 48

<sup>65</sup> P.J. Klassen in “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.1 (Jan 1947): 48, This issue about validation and professionalization is an important one. In *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*, the common agreement over the conflicting legacy of Harold S. Bender was over his ability to promote the academic merit of Mennonite History, “based on sound scholarship, supervised by renowned historians.” Dreydger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*, 193

<sup>66</sup> John Fretz, in “From Contributing Readers” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.1 (Jan 1947): 48



Soviet Union. In Mexico, Mennonites had settled predominantly in the northern states of Chihuahua and Durango though over time groups had spread into Zacatecas and the Yucatan. Other Mennonite communities formed in the post-war period in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia and Belize. The common thread among these varied settlements was their location in relatively isolated areas at the margins of state control, regions that in the language of modernization were seen as antithetically marginal, barren, uncultivated, and empty in spite of the presence of significant indigenous populations.

The repeated migrations of Mennonite communities since the 16<sup>th</sup> century placed the colonists in Paraguay within an important historical trajectory in which migration played a crucial role in the “maintenance and perpetuation of Mennonite identity.”<sup>67</sup> This common understanding meant that the Paraguayan experience was often emplotted as an epic reaffirmation of larger Mennonite and biblical narratives of migration.<sup>68</sup> While some referred to the wartime flight from Russia as a “Mennonite exodus”, Fretz began his dedication of Pilgrims in Paraguay by linking the colonists to “Abraham of old who went out not knowing whither he went and looked for a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God.”<sup>69</sup> For North American Mennonites living in an age of increasing comfort and material prosperity, Paraguayan colonization allowed them to retain a symbolic attachment to a history of “persecution for righteousness sake” where

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<sup>67</sup> Dawn S. Bowen, “Die Auswanderung: religion, culture and migration among Old Colony Mennonites.” *The Canadian Geographer* 45, no.4 (2001): 462

<sup>68</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, “One of the great colonization epics of all time.” 23

<sup>69</sup> Fretz, dedication to, *Pilgrims in Paraguay*, similar biblical allusions are made by Edgar Stoesz, and Muriel Thiessen Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness: Mennonite Communities in the Paraguayan Chaco, 1927-1997*. (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1999)

authenticity was related to the forced migrations of a “suffering church.”<sup>70</sup> Fretz argued that without this persecution, believers tended to quickly forget God’s intervention and the importance of “intercessory prayer.” Though Mennonites as a whole have not always been persecuted, he argued, particular branches in each generation had, serving to, “keep the rest of the worldwide brotherhood conscious of its own former days of hardship and suffering and has driven them to a sense of dependence in Almighty God.”<sup>71</sup> In a surprisingly frank gesture, Fretz conceded that material contributions to the Paraguayan cause had only been made out of excess and that, not knowing the deprivations and dangers directly, such identification could only be vicarious.<sup>72</sup> Vicariously or otherwise, the humbling presence of these historic remnants served as a strong reminder that the Mennonite church had been, and continued to be for some, a church of martyrs for the faith.<sup>73</sup>

Authors writing about Paraguay continually spoke with a sense of optimism, which they justified through reference to a historic migration narrative. Such hope-incontinuity is clearly expressed by Fretz in another article on the Chaco in which he attributes future success to the “blueprints” of Mennonite colonization, “exact replicas” transplanted from Russia to Canada, Paraguay and Mexico.<sup>74</sup> Pilgrims in Paraguay concludes a detailed and specific analysis of Mennonite social, religious, and economic practices in the Chaco with a verdict based not in this material reality but upon the unstoppable inertia of Mennonite history, a force by which, “the prairies of America’s

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<sup>70</sup> Bender stresses the importance of a “suffering church” in Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 8 (1944): 67-88

<sup>71</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 205 He further cites the importance of surviving hardship for faith’s sake 91, 98-99

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 212

<sup>73</sup> This vicarious identification could draw from an established tradition centered on the reading of Martyr’s *Mirror* a catalogue of Anabaptist “martyr’s for the faith” first published in 1660, Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside*, 65

<sup>74</sup> Fretz, “Factors contributing to success and failure in Mennonite colonization.” *MQR* 24 (April 1950): 130

middle west were converted, like the steppes of Russia, from treeless ranges of cattle, buffalo, and Indians to fertile farming lands, and established communities...that which seemed dismal and hopeless at the beginning came in the course of time to take on beauty, order, and hopefulness.”<sup>75</sup> For those North Americans who may have had difficulty in imagining life in the Paraguayan Chaco, images of previous pioneering efforts on the Vistula delta or the Ukrainian Steppe were interchangeable, just as Fretz could treat the construction of the trans-Chaco highway in Paraguay as analogous to the creation of the Canadian trans-continental railway.<sup>76</sup> Such transference allows for sympathetic understandings whereby the continuity of community placed all new lands within the scope of collective memory. When Walter Schmiedehaus came to Chihuahua on a Mennonite Life assignment in 1947 the “commonplace gray reality of Mexico” was altered upon arrival in the colonies which appeared, “a distant, singularly strange, and yet, for us, an intimate and homey land.”<sup>77</sup>

As an embodiment of Mennonite history and representative of an old order that was under threat in the north, the Paraguayan and Mexican colonies were sometimes treated as cultural museums separated by temporal as well as spatial divides from their more progressively minded brethren. In a report on Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico, Cornelius Krahn hints at both the unresolved tensions behind such a viewpoint and its likely implications, when he cautions readers to “be patient, tolerant and mindful that they may serve us as a mirror in which we view our own past.”<sup>78</sup> Fretz also points in a more lighthearted way to the courtship customs of Paraguayan Mennonites as “those of

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<sup>75</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims* 225

<sup>76</sup> Fretz, “Trans-Chaco Highway” *Mennonite Life* 15, no.1 (Jan1960): 22

<sup>77</sup> Walter Schmiedehaus, “Mennonite Life in Mexico” *Mennonite Life* 2, no.2 (April1947): 38

<sup>78</sup> Krahn, “The Mennonite Way of Life”, 3

our grandparents.” The contrast is between the “highly mechanized and comfortably furnished homes” of a presumed readership and those of colonists which are not described in terms of poverty or intentional austerity but to the curious viewer, “as if he were suddenly projected into an eighteenth century colonial home.”<sup>79</sup> This narrative passage into a different temporality is reproduced nearly verbatim by Schmiedehaus in Mexico, to whom it seemed, “as if the world-clock has been set back a few hundred years.”<sup>80</sup> The transfer of cultural continuity into tradition leads him to describe Mexican Mennonite life in a kind of stasis. A captioned photo displaying a colony street scene illustrates this attitude of interchangeability. The specificity of both history and locality disappear as the reader is challenged to distinguish between “a typical Mennonite village street Russia, Canada, Mexico.”<sup>81</sup>

The work of Krahn, Fretz, and Schmiedehaus reconciled the difference they encountered by pushing alternative practices into an imagined past where they were safely removed from denominational politics. This past returned urban Mennonites to a village life in which “face-to-face contact didn’t need to be imagined,”<sup>82</sup> where the atomized family of modern social life was replaced by one of “sanctity, unity and permanence,” and where the “highly individuated stranger” that so distressed Chicago sociologists, was willingly subject to “neighborly responsibility.”<sup>83</sup> Whether such valued conditions may have existed in colony life anymore than their negative counterparts actually existed in the city did not take away from their potency as rhetorical poles in this

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<sup>79</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims* 65, Such temporal disconnects abound, “almost a medieval pattern of handcraft”, “reminiscent of the days of the circuit riding preacher on the North American frontier” 160

<sup>80</sup> Schmiedehaus, “Mennonite Life in Mexico,” 31

<sup>81</sup> The temporal lag of Mennonites runs parallel to the condition of Paraguay more generally. For Fretz, Paraguay existed in a state of arrested economic development, functioning as a 17<sup>th</sup> century mercantilist state and not a twentieth century capitalist one. Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 151

<sup>82</sup> Loewen, *Diaspora*, 170

<sup>83</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 60, 106

dialogue. Krahn felt that these communities offered a “lesson” for turbulent North American life akin to the “extra vantage point” that Westheus attributed to the Waterloo Mennonites.<sup>84</sup> Yet a distinction was maintained. A reminder of the past was not to be confused with a model for the future, and while Paraguayan and Mexican Mennonites could offer a critical “outside” space for the reflections of the historian and the sociologist, it would become increasingly apparent that what they were not permitted to offer, was a viable alternative.

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By managing difference, Mennonite Life hoped to discover and speak to something beyond religious practice that could bind Mennonites together. In a climate of internal dispute over the future direction of the Mennonite church, the treatment that Fretz and other scholars gave to colonization attempted to structure a common Mennonite identity through external difference. The authors emphasized their commonality with colonists through the creative foils of a harsh environment and the foreignness of Latin Americans and indigenous groups. In descriptions of Paraguay, this appeared in the colonists’ relationship to the harshness of the Chaco and the general “backwardness and isolation” of the country.<sup>85</sup> The role of the environment was dual; it served as a potentially threatening influence of degradation and a foe whose eventual triumph over would stand as a testament to Mennonite hardiness and ingenuity. What is amazing for Fretz is that Mennonites had entered a region “where it was thought impossible for civilized men to live” and succeeded in introducing a “highly developed and flourishing

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<sup>84</sup> Krahn, 3

<sup>85</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay*, 2

culture into a completely barren wilderness.”<sup>86</sup> In January of 1950, an anonymous article, “Pioneering in Paraguay” expressed similar ideas of the Chaco. It championed the colonists for “conquering” the “isolated wastes”, their task explicitly likened to that of their brethren who “make the wasteland here in Canada productive.”<sup>87</sup> These, and other more implicit references, situated the colonists’ attempts in a larger Mennonite struggle against hostile environments and justified their presence as essential to processes of modernization.<sup>88</sup>

The relationship between the Mennonites and their new environment also structured the encounter with their Paraguayan neighbors, one that appeared in constant danger of abstracting itself from the particulars of contact towards a generalized description of incommensurable ways of life. Mennonite achievements were contrasted with the “low cultural attainments” of Paraguayans, not merely in the primitive conditions of the Chaco but also in the capital of Asunción where there was only “evidences of past glory” among crumbling buildings, started but never finished.<sup>89</sup> This incompleteness was seen as indicative of the nation’s unfinished modernization project, and a Paraguayan inability to match Mennonite achievements over a longer time span and with equivalent means. Fretz partly cites the Catholic Church’s detrimental influence in education and other matters but the reasons for him are more broadly cultural.<sup>90</sup>

The distinction is best illustrated in his comparison of Mennonite and Paraguayan homes. The houses of the former are characterized by “their large size, their better-kept condition and their generally neat appearance” which reflects both “pride in ownership

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 218

<sup>87</sup> “Pioneering in Paraguay” *Mennonite Life* 5, no.1 (January 1950): 6, 8, 31

<sup>88</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims* 167. He describes this role as complimentary to the 4 Points program of U.S. aid.

<sup>89</sup> “Pioneering in Paraguay” 33

<sup>90</sup> Fretz *Pilgrims* 215

and responsible stewardship.”<sup>91</sup> In contrast, “the typical rural Paraguayan house is seldom fenced in-it seems to rise naturally out of the environment.” While the Mennonites manipulate the landscape to reflect their value system and carefully define social and domestic space, the Paraguayans accommodate their behaviour to the environment, to which they are likened, allowing divisions of space to break down, as when “children and animals freely intermingle.”<sup>92</sup> These specific descriptions of land use are elevated as the defining characteristics of each group as Fretz deftly moves to contrast “Mennonite love of order, the ideal of absolute honesty, and the inclination toward frankness and directness as over against the politeness and diplomacy of the Spanish.”<sup>93</sup> If his account polarizes the personalities of Paraguayans(defined as Latin) and Mennonites, this binary understanding of cultural difference is even more stridently manifested in regards to the Chaco’s indigenous populations of Lengua, Chulupi, Guaraní and Ayoreo.

Mennonites settled in a region of the central Chaco that was home to the Northern Lengua.<sup>94</sup> In the years following the disastrous Chaco War (1932-1935), the Chulupi, Guaraní and eventually the Ayoreo also settled in and around the colonies where many worked on Mennonite farms.<sup>95</sup> Despite their active presence in the colonies, these groups

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 68

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 68 Fretz does clarify that Mennonites were forced to modify certain housing styles and behaviours in relation to the environment. 66

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 113

<sup>94</sup> Peter P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Vol.2: Encounter with Indians and Paraguayans* trans. Gunther H. Schmitt. (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2002), 65-86

<sup>95</sup> Indigenous-Mennonite labour relations have been the subject of several works. An early critical perspective was taken by Jacob A. Loewen and Leon Cadogan, *The Anatomy of an Unfinished Crisis in Chulupi Culture Change* (Asunción: Centro de Estudios Antropológicos de la Revista del Ateneo Paraguayo, 1966)

are marked by their notable absence from many of the written accounts.<sup>96</sup> When visiting Mennonites acknowledged their presence, their tone could vacillate between the threatening and the benign neither of which recognized the possibility of any competing territorial claim or even desire for landownership. Facing similar legacies of indigenous displacement, Mennonite communities in the North could hardly afford to be critical on this issue, expressing instead a silent solidarity with colonists.<sup>97</sup> In 1950, Mennonite Life described the Chaco as, “a country shunned even by Indians of some ambition and where they[Mennonites] are neighbours to the most primitive tribes imaginable.”<sup>98</sup> Mennonite colonization in an area with few Paraguayans but several prominent indigenous groups offered ripe opportunities for contrast between the Mennonites’ settled, agrarian ways and the nomadic lifestyle of their neighbours. Fretz’s descriptions emphasized the haphazard dependency that he took for the indigenous social system,

“These Indians are very loosely organized and have low cultural attainments. They hunt with bows and arrows, unless here and there, a few are fortunate enough to secure guns. Most of them live from wild plant products and such game as they are able to find in their wilderness wanderings or beg from ranchers and civilized settlers. In more recent years it has become the practice for Indians to work for wages on the edges of civilization.”<sup>99</sup>

Like the environment and other Paraguayans, the indigenous presence was an ambivalent one for the Mennonites who visited the colonists, somewhere between the Chulupi, “quite tame and in no way a danger,” and the, “wild, savage, bush inhabiting Moros [Ayoreo].”<sup>100</sup> Hiebert and Snyder caution of the same potential threat for colonists in

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<sup>96</sup> Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Vol.2* notes that this was even the case with colony records of meetings and assemblies held at the time. 68

<sup>97</sup> For a discussion of the link between indigenous displacement and Mennonite migrations see, Calvin Redekop, “Mennonite Displacement of Indigenous Peoples: An Historical and Sociological Analysis” *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes Ethniques au Canada* 14, no.2 (1982): 71-90

<sup>98</sup> “Pioneering in Paraguay” 30

<sup>99</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims* 4.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 96



Chihuahua who live currently unmolested but “surrounded by a temperamental Latinized Indian who is fickle in his attitudes and not always to be trusted.”<sup>101</sup>

In shifting constantly between themes of Mennonite-driven progress and their fundamental alterity from their surroundings, both human and natural, descriptions like Fretz’s performed two important functions. The first was a strong justification for the Mennonite presence and for the importance of colonization more generally. The second was an oppositional self-definition that made difference between Mennonite communities appear paltry by comparison. In addition to maintaining cultural survival, Mennonites had a duty to their host countries and neighbours. If Fretz was careful never to directly invoke the “Black Legend” of Spanish colonialism in the Americas to explain the “backwardness” of Paraguay and its inhabitants, it was likely because this would have been redundant. He could tactfully accomplish as much simply by conjuring up its inverted counter-narrative. “What a blessing to Paraguay as a nation, if the Mennonites in years to come could do for her what the New England Puritans and Pilgrims did for America by way of enriching her national heritage of democratic government and propagating the Christian religion with its vigorous ethics and its national cleansing power.”<sup>102</sup> In a country whose own tumultuous political leadership was for Fretz, no more than, “a lot of adolescent pranks carried on by politically ambitious individuals who seek power,” Mennonites could emerge as models of sobriety, steadfastness and separation from worldly avarice.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> P. C. Hiebert and William T. Snyder, “Are the Doors of Mexico Open to Mennonite Immigrants” *Mennonite Life*. 2, no.2 (April 1947): 45

<sup>102</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 112

<sup>103</sup> J.W. Fretz, “Paraguay – An Informal History” *Mennonite Life* 5, no.1 (Jan 1950): 38, Fretz goes on to make an interesting comparison in which the Paraguayan landscape and urban Chicago come together. “The insight into the political intrigue and the background of the endless number of revolutions and counter revolutions reminds one of gang warfare in modern cities. Paraguayans seem to take these revolutions in

The second fraternal function was equally important for a climate in which “everywhere among Mennonites there are evidences of accommodation and assimilation with national cultures.”<sup>104</sup> While Fretz did not hold Paraguay as an exception to this trend, the interactions between Mennonites, Paraguayans and indigenous groups in the Chaco only served to highlight what Fretz himself recognizes. If “it is only by comparing our own culture with other cultures that differences become apparent,” then this “cross-cultural encounter” highlighted, through the production of meaningful difference, the exceptionalism and internal coherence of Mennonite identity.<sup>105</sup> This juxtaposition offered North Americans a comparatively easy identification with colonists. As the spatial distance between these spiritual “neighbours” collapsed, difference was reinscribed to create an impregnable barrier that separated colonists from their proximate indigenous and Paraguayan neighbours in the Chaco.

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If the description of the colonists’ interactions with the environment and their participation in a historical process of migration served to forge links between North American Mennonites and themselves, other tensions, latent in the earlier descriptions, came to manifest themselves in Fretz’s recommendations for education and his understanding of religion. A reassuring sense of cultural and religious continuity existed simultaneously with a fear of economic and spiritual stagnation that only drastic change and the introduction of modern techniques could append. The Chaco as frontier oscillated somewhere between the understandings of Frederick Jackson Turner and

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stride much like Chicagoans take the announcements of blazing newspaper headlines about another gang warfare.”

<sup>104</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 119

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 113

Domingo Sarmiento.<sup>106</sup> If it was in a struggle against hostile climes that Mennonites as a people truly came into being, the isolation of new colonies, the very attribute so desired by many colonists, nevertheless posed its own threats. Fretz clearly understood the environment to function dually as creative antagonist and withering force. Richard Park's influence also stood tall where Fretz feared that this cultural barrier could collapse with Latin American Mennonites shifting from their position as model minorities to become victims of cultural assimilation within host countries.

For the Mennonite colonists isolated from their brethren by the Chaco and, with Paraguayans and indigenous groups as guides, there was "always the danger of an entire group becoming so accustomed to lower standards they will in time accept them as normal."<sup>107</sup> Returning to the idea of Paraguay as a potentially debilitating force, Fretz emphasized how the "burden of keeping the Mennonites in contact with the remainder of civilized society rests on the school system."<sup>108</sup> The colonies were a "cultural island" which desperately needed to maintain contact with the outside world.<sup>109</sup> The ever-present threat of degeneration contrasts with his positive pronouncements about the future of the colonies. The withering effects of the environment can be seen in a "regression to illiteracy on the part of ex-students" for want of opportunity to utilize their knowledge.<sup>110</sup> Fretz most directly attacked the more conservative Menno colony, less concerned with

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<sup>106</sup> Sarmiento in contrast to Turner, saw the isolation of the frontier as a degenerative force that distorted the civilizing influence of Europe as it moved further inland from the urban centre of Buenos Aires. Both authors agreed that frontier life had produced something distinct from Europe yet came to opposing conclusions about the desirability of this transition. For a breakdown of these respective Frontier theses and a discussion of Latin American Frontier History see David Weber and Jane Rausch eds., Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History. (Delaware: Scholarly Resource Inc., 1994) 3

<sup>107</sup> Fretz *Pilgrims*, 116

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 81

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

educational standards than others, but held the rise of ignorance as a danger for all colonists.

The vision of Latin American colonists, particularly those who arrived in Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s, had been to stop the gradual erosion of community independence and cultural self-determination caused by the national vision of the Canadian state. This placed them at odds with an entrenched progressivist understanding of maintenance and restoration as inherently reactionary aims.<sup>111</sup> Though church elders had led many of the migrations to Latin America, Fretz felt that it was increased education and the provision of future “doctors, ministers, teachers and businessmen” that should be a primary marker of the success or failure of colonization. A shift in church leadership from farmer-bishops to educated teacher-pastors can be seen as the specific product of urban changes and professionalization taking place in North American society. This transition coincided with Fretz’s career as a sociologist.<sup>112</sup> The larger question was over the type of knowledge to be validated. Was knowledge produced externally or embedded within the community? Fretz’s perspective privileged a form of individual detachment and scholarly distancing that he learned in Chicago.<sup>113</sup> From tradition as the root of Mennonite success, Fretz articulated an opposing vision of conservative Mennonite elders “clinging tenaciously to the past” with the need for external guidance to improve the system.<sup>114</sup> The problem, extending beyond material deprivation and poverty, was the fundamental resistance to change among community members whose “limited

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<sup>111</sup> Described by Leo Dreidger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict*, 190 as an overemphasis on “structures and boundaried traditions.”

<sup>112</sup> Loewen, 146

<sup>113</sup> Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity” describes the demands of such a position. “Freed in this way from the traditional constraints of habit or belief and transcending their *localism* [emphasis added], it was said, modern subjects could discover a universal faculty of reason and employ it to represent to themselves the experiences and feelings of others and to submit their own interior life to its pedagogy.” 20

<sup>114</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 126

vision and training...often prevent the development of such potential leadership and latent talent as do exist.”<sup>115</sup> In paternalistic language, Mennonite aid to Paraguay became the task of “pioneering among the pioneers”, those who Fretz described as “courageous” but also “bewildered”.<sup>116</sup>

While older colonists were obstacles to progress, the newly-arrived Displaced Persons of Neuland, whose migrations were not carefully planned responses to gradual change but desperate acts of self-preservation, presented other dangers.<sup>117</sup> Marlene Epp has examined the gender-specific experiences of Mennonite refugees in the Second World War of which a disproportionate amount were women and children due to the arrests and conscriptions of adult men in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>118</sup> The idea that these refugees were both victims in need of protection and threats of moral contamination is discussed by Epp and rendered explicit by Fretz. “Left to women, children and old infirmed men, they were victims of thieves and robbers...in their weakened state...many fell easy prey to illnesses; some of a permanent nature.”<sup>119</sup> The experiences of “war, famine and revolution” along with “years of wandering” threatened the breakdown of moral order and have “naturally introduced some unconventional ideas and practices,” calling for guidance and direction on the part of other Mennonites.<sup>120</sup> While images of colonists apart from the world and as bearers of tradition positioned them as “heroes of the faith,” other conceptions of society as demanding a constant reformulation produced a condescending view of the colonists, as weak, confused, damaged and in need of

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 81

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 147, 149

<sup>117</sup> Neuland was a colony created to house the Displaced Persons arriving in 1947, others founded Volendam in Eastern Paraguay.

<sup>118</sup> Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War*. (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2000)

<sup>119</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 39

<sup>120</sup> Fretz, 62

leadership from North Americans. With this rhetorical shift, Mennonite scholars defined colony life rather than North American society in terms of lack. In doing so, they revealed their own investment, critical or otherwise, in the changes taking place in the latter.

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It is unlikely that Fretz ever stated his hope for agrarian Mennonite life more clearly than in a January 1946 article entitled “The Renaissance of a Rural Community.” He begins with a bleak scene. Endemic rural depopulation meant that everywhere across North America, “urban communities have been growing and rural communities dying.”<sup>121</sup> Yet his experiences in Chicago had made him skeptical of those who uncritically embraced the “century of the city.” For Fretz it was obvious that “the future of society must have its hope in the rural community” because such communities were “seed-beds of our country’s population; they are the areas in which Christian ideals, moral values, and standards of conduct and behaviour of the highest type will be produced and maintained. It is here that democracy at its best and in its purest form can thrive.”<sup>122</sup> The rural frontier in short was the embryo from which arose much of the best of American culture but was distressingly being left alone to “stagnate and die.”<sup>123</sup>

Here a distinction emerged that can account for some of the conflicting representations of colonists in Latin American. Fretz and others occasionally leveled an anthropological gaze at the quaint customs of their brethren down south, treating alternative practices not as conscious and viable responses to change but instead as curious remnants of a bygone era. However, “salvage ethnography” was not Fretz’s

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<sup>121</sup> J.W. Fretz, “The Renaissance of a Rural Community”, 14

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

goal.<sup>124</sup> His aim, he declared, was “not that the rural community of yesterday be restored after the fashion of a museum display, but rather that the rural community be enriched and modified in the light of new inventions and improved methods of living.”<sup>125</sup> “Revitalization” was not a task suited to the “pessimists, the fatalists and the fearful” as he described the refugees and elders he would encounter in Paraguay. Instead it was a new, younger generation, “the courageous, the far-sighted and the hopeful” that should take centre-stage, promoting innovation, integration and education.<sup>126</sup> The creation of cooperatives was central to this, institutions that “have their roots in the long-time expression of Mennonite mutual aid.”<sup>127</sup> Again however Fretz distinguished between tradition and its present-day manifestation. Modern cooperatives were not a straightforward example of cultural continuity but “indeed the stream-lined expression of mutual aid in that it is more highly systematized than much of the mutual aid in the past which was often quite spontaneous and sporadic.”<sup>128</sup>

The language in which Fretz framed these concerns shifted from metaphors of death, darkness and dying, described as stagnation, isolation, and “looking-backwards” towards those of light, life, birth and rebirth seen as revitalization, systematization, enrichment and modification. The developmentalist logic of the post-war period is evident through which increased transport, trade and industrialization would belatedly usher the region out of a lingering colonial mentality and into a modern world of prosperity. With this aim in mind, Fretz would go on to become a strong advocate for

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<sup>124</sup> A critical reference to anthropologists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly Franz Boas and his students, that sought to capture and preserve the social and cultural practices of “disappearing” races. See Jacob A. Gruber, “Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 72, no.6 (Dec1970): 1289-1299

<sup>125</sup> Fretz, “The Renaissance of a Rural Community,” 14

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

U.S. aid to Paraguay through the Four Points program in the 1950s that provided funds to support many similar initiatives. However, his language is equally that of evangelical conversion in a shift from stagnation to rebirth with Fretz concluding that, “in short, Altona[Manitoba] is demonstrating that a rural community can be reborn.”<sup>129</sup> Material and spiritual progress appear as different aspects of a single struggle with both standing in the same relationship to a past that has become untenable. Fretz tended to privilege the former in his accounts, yet in other discussions in Mennonite Life, spirituality and spiritual change took on a primary importance. To understand this shift in rhetoric it is helpful to return to the religious context within North American churches at the time of Fretz’s writings.

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Though Fretz made clear the centrality of religion to community, that “a Mennonite Community that loses its religious character soon loses its identity as a Mennonite community,” faith emerged as a highly contested category.<sup>130</sup> Unsurprisingly, it was in discussions of religion that differences between North Americans and colonists were most apparent and attempts at a transnational understanding confronted seemingly insurmountable barriers. Broad changes in the North American churches, including the growth of evangelicalism and a critical engagement with religion – counterparts to the socio-economic and agricultural changes that characterized the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – heightened these discrepancies. Harold Bender’s dilemma over the Mennonites in Mexico, weighing the merits of community integrity against a desire for greater inter-denominational dialogue, and his privileging of the latter, points towards this changing

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>130</sup> Fretz, 83



spiritual alignment. Fred Kniss identifies the period from 1935 to 1958 as one of movement towards a new cultural consensus in American Mennonite communities.<sup>131</sup>

While the previous period had also been characterized by religious ferment, traditionalist groups were able to maintain sectarian divides and other regulatory customs such as conservative dress. Two primary institutions, the emergent Mennonite Central Committee(MCC) and Goshen College, with Bender at the forefront, served as loci of change. These institutions were increasingly advocates of an “outward-looking vision” both towards external society and other denominations within the church, seeing the “community as moral project” rather than a means of preserving tradition.<sup>132</sup>

These novel perspectives broadened a bounded notion of what might constitute an authentic Mennonite identity and hence placed the authenticity of the colonies into question. As dean of Goshen College in this period, Bender was well situated to guide an emerging generation of scholars in a creative re-imagining of their radical 16<sup>th</sup> century roots into a “useable past.”<sup>133</sup> This culminated in his seminal 1944 essay “The Anabaptist Vision,” in which he argued for active discipleship over faith alone, the community as a *voluntary* association of mutual aid and a principled pacifism.<sup>134</sup> While these tenets were drawn from existing Mennonite beliefs, the emphasis on an external form of “Christian witness” and a critical engagement with the faith were radical for the time.<sup>135</sup> Urban Mennonites were not simply dissenters from community life, as lapsed or failed members, but linked even closer to the unadulterated spirit of founding fathers like

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<sup>131</sup> Fred Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities*

<sup>132</sup> Kniss, 63

<sup>133</sup> Loewen, 203, Toews, 18.

<sup>134</sup> Kniss, 66 Toews, 18

<sup>135</sup> Toews, 18, argues that Fretz’s sociological approach, while employing different methods and focusing on the “village society” as the carrier of Mennonite tradition, was conducted in a similar spirit. This community of scholarship was reinforced institutionally by the annual “Conference on Mennonite Educational and Cultural Problems” in which Fretz and Bender participated. Harder, 10

Menno Simmons. As with other revisionist historians, Bender returned to the “roots” in order to make an argument about where the radical gesture of Anabaptism had faltered. Isolation as achieved through closed agrarian communities was a pragmatic response to religious persecution. It hastened the unfortunate transition of Mennonites from “religious group to ethnic group” by enshrining separation from society as a tenet of the Mennonite faith.<sup>136</sup> The core value of pacifism, could also be re-defined not as a stoical submission before God’s will and a detachment from “worldly affairs,” but, borrowing from the prominent examples of Thoreau, Gandhi and the burgeoning civil rights movement, as a form of activism and civil disobedience.

Outside of academia, the MCC provided young Mennonites with an outlet for the inspirational effects of Bender’s vision. Led by the charismatic Orie O. Miller for much of this period, the MCC had already been active in the First World War but received great impetus from its settlement of Mennonite refugees from Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. Along with supporting the work of academics like Bender and Fretz, the organization played a key role during the refugee crisis of the Second World War. Employing young committed volunteers from Mennonite denominations across the continent, the MCC appealed for funding from all Mennonite churches using a language of communalist mutual aid and evangelical Christian mission. The sectarian boundaries that divided Mennonite congregations, for some no more than “denominational bigotry,”<sup>137</sup> were the

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<sup>136</sup> From the title of E.K. Francis “The Russian Mennonites: From Religious Group to Ethnic Group” *The American Journal of Sociology* 54, no.2 (Sept 1948): 101-107, Redekop, “The Sociology of Mennonite History: A Second Opinion” in *Mennonite Identity* embraces this narrative of “enclavement” as “the gradual change from being at the center of the general protest and utopian reform to the periphery through rejection, migration, and isolation” at which point the ideology of Mennonites as the “quiet in the land” came into being. 180-183

<sup>137</sup> T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) war-time service with the MCC “was a wonderful opportunity to free themselves of denominational bigotry,” 56

greatest impediments to this sort of pan-Mennonite work and thus came under direct attack by progressives.<sup>138</sup>

The growing influence of evangelicalism also brought Mennonite communities into closer contact with other liberal-minded Protestant denominations. Unlike sectarian groups who were more inclined to see community dissolution as the inevitable consequence of urbanization, evangelicals emphasized the new opportunities for mission work and Christian witnessing that this increasing contact facilitated. The indigenous presence in the Chaco spoke to a philanthropic impulse among Mennonites to act as “witnesses” for their non-conformist Christian lifestyle. Along with their duty to render productive these “isolated wastes,” Fretz and others saw a corresponding obligation to spiritual and moral uplift. H.A. Fast captured this sentiment. Though “in 1939 the Lengua or Chulupi Indians were wandering around in their free manner as children of the forest...[they now possessed] school, intelligence, aptitude and eagerness to learn.”<sup>139</sup> For Fretz, the processes of practical education, missionary work and overall development of society were inextricably linked through “the power of Christ to change the life of man from darkness to light, from uselessness to usefulness, [which] is impressively illustrated in the lives of these Chaco Indian converts.”<sup>140</sup> Even in the isolation of the Chaco, sectarian Mennonite groups would not be entirely free from their evangelical obligations.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Kniss, 64 For a dramatic account of MCC activities during and after WW2 see Peter and Elfrieda Dyck *Up From the Rubble*. (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1991) which is also critical of the sectarian divides between General Conference and Mennonite Brethren.

<sup>139</sup> H.A. Fast, “Mennonites in Paraguay” *Mennonite Life* 1, no.1 (Jan1946): 38

<sup>140</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 96

<sup>141</sup> Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside*, 115 makes a similar point about Quellen Kolonie in Mexico, despite being a product of an evangelical/sectarian split, it was seen by Canadian Mennonites as an excellent base for mission-work.

It would be misleading, however, to see this period as a mere consolidation of progressive control in the church. Denominations responded in various ways, accepting, mediating and rejecting the evangelical pull.<sup>142</sup> This tension was clearly apparent in many of the ways that periodicals like Mennonite Life, whose cross-denominational distribution carried an implicit support for these trends, represented those, like the Mexican Mennonites in Chihuahua, that had explicitly rejected evangelicalism.<sup>143</sup>

Visitors were often struck by the skewed dynamic between individual and community they observed in these communities. Fretz's own ideals for the Mennonite faith are clearly illustrated in his critical treatment of the affiliated, but non-Mennonite, Hutterite group in East Paraguay. Observing the "confines of Hutterian life," Fretz was surprised by the rigid controls that the community imposed on its members, which "seems like the way of *personal* frustration and a crushing of *individual* initiative and *personal* creativeness[emphasis added]."<sup>144</sup> For Fretz and Bender, the Mennonite community was a "voluntary association" that implied a degree of informed choice and individual critical engagement. This created a predicament in which the community was the obvious means of religious survival while its hegemony in colony life, where there was "seldom any other choice", precluded necessary alternatives.<sup>145</sup>

Fretz criticized Menno colony for denying land ownership to non-church members. Referring to church control as theocratic, he argued that the colony's organization effectively, "invalidates the concept and the fact of a believer's church and the separation of church and state" where membership became a pragmatic consequence

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 102-103 describes the Mennonite migration to Mexico in 1944 as a specific rejection of the growing evangelical bias in the Canadian churches.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 113

<sup>144</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 59

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 83

of “group custom and personal convenience” instead of genuine belief.<sup>146</sup> These comments are particularly damning in light of the enshrinement of non-interference of government in church affairs as a core of Mennonite belief, which for Menno Colony, was one of the primary reasons for their initial decision to immigrate to Paraguay. Schmiedehaus is no less critical of Mexican colonists who have replaced adherence to the bible with a moribund tradition. In a bleak description of church practice he finds,

“[no]spark of light or comfort, of edification, or exaltation. The only subject is repentance and submission which is repeated year after year, as a religious inheritance from generation to generation, placing a dull burden on the shoulders of the growing youth which to outsiders seems too hard and too heavy...[producing]...faithful members of the church with no thought of changing even one iota of its tradition, even though in some cases a change could not do any harm, as, for example, certain things regarding the school system.”<sup>147</sup>

The juxtaposition of a long-standing and central Mennonite belief in *Gelassenheit*, interpreted as a “relinquishing of the self” through submission, humility, modesty or passivity before God, with the dynamism and metaphor-laden terrain of the evangelical conversion narrative with its focus on light, grace and joy is striking.<sup>148</sup> Yet, the condescending tone of such comments receives only cursory deferral, by Fretz and Schmiedehaus, with an outsider’s insistence on non-judgment and tolerance of other practices. It is a sharp departure from the sympathetic treatment that characterized other accounts of colonization stressing historical continuity and an authentic tradition.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 84 Bender’s description of Mennonitism stated, “Voluntary church membership based upon true conversion and involving a commitment to holy living and discipleship was the absolutely essential heart of this concept. This vision stands in sharp contrast to the church concept of the reformers who retained the medieval idea of a mass church with membership of the entire population from birth to the grave.” Harold Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision”, 43

<sup>147</sup> Schmiedehaus, “Mennonite Life in Mexico”, 35

<sup>148</sup> Robert Friedmann, “Gelassenheit” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1955) <<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/G448.html>> (accessed 12 April 2009)

Two competing visions for religious practice emerge in these accounts in which the community focus on tradition, continuity and isolation is negatively contrasted with a dynamic form of individual spirituality that needs to be continually challenged and reaffirmed in opposition to the “tendency of religious and social customs to crystallize into formality.”<sup>149</sup> In this spirit, Fretz critiques the lack of ongoing adult religious education in the colonies and argues more generally for the “spiritually healthful effects” of migration and persecution in challenging those “at ease in Zion” while removing the “spiritually weak.”<sup>150</sup> Fretz argues for such critical exposure through “the reading of religious periodicals, books and church papers,” pinpointing a role for Mennonite Life to aid in forestalling this religious stagnation.<sup>151</sup>

Within the evangelical impulse outlined by these authors, Mennonites were redeemed through their active discipleship to the surrounding society and a critical participation in inter-Mennonite discussions. Rather than possessing an inherent ethnic value as “chosen people,” Mennonites in Latin America needed to demonstrate their commitment to this novel interpretation of faith. The results were disappointing to some North Americans. In “From Russia to Mexico” Peter Reimer portrays religious progressivism in a similar light. He champions the transition of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde church from “absolute conservatism” to “a spiritually-minded, mission-minded, progressive church.”<sup>152</sup> However, he similarly fears the effects of the permissive legislation of the Mexican government on spiritual growth. The same could easily be

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<sup>149</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 89

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, 97

<sup>151</sup> Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 95

<sup>152</sup> Peter Reimer, “From Russia to Mexico: The Story of the Kleine Gemeinde” *Mennonite Life* 4, no.4 (Oct1949): 30

applied to the generous *Privilegium* granted to Paraguayan colonists.<sup>153</sup> The implication here is that true Mennonite life is threatened not by encroaching modernity and state interference but by its absence. “Will they continue to progress educationally and religiously in Mexico, where nobody is doing any pushing, where the government is leaving all those things to them...or will they, too, slip into a materialistic rut like the other Mennonites in Mexico?”<sup>154</sup> Reimer’s prescriptions foreshadow a transition in the coverage of *Mennonite Life*, apparent in the following decades, with accounts of missionary work in Africa and Asia far surpassing the number of articles published on the colonies.<sup>155</sup> The treatment that Paraguay did receive tended to focus not on the colonists but on the mission work being conducted with indigenous groups in the Chaco, and was of an increasingly critical nature.<sup>156</sup> Cultural survival was less of a priority and actually came to represent a form of escapism.

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Tradition served a dual purpose in the work of Fretz and the other Mennonite scholars published in *Mennonite Life*. When defined as an “authentic” connection to a Mennonite past, it allowed these authors to champion the position of the colonists in Paraguay and Mexico, placing them within a narrative tradition as “witnesses” to the historic migration of a “suffering church.” While relating the experiences of everyday life in Paraguay or Mexico, these representations offered a means for readership to participate, albeit voyeuristically, in this more *authentic* form of Mennonite community.

<sup>153</sup> See Appendix in Fretz, *Pilgrims*, 229-232 for a copy of the *Privilegium*

<sup>154</sup> Reimer, “From Russia to Mexico,” 32

<sup>155</sup> The online version of *Mennonite Life* contains an index organizing articles published by subject heading and year in which this trend is apparent. See “Mennonite Life Cumulative Index 1946-1999” Retrieved April 2, 2009 <[www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/indexes/](http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/indexes/)>

<sup>156</sup> Donald N. Larson, “Training Missionaries for Today’s World” *Mennonite Life* 21, no.1 (Jan1966), 4-7  
Jacob A. Loewen “Reciprocity in Identification” *Mennonite Life* 21, no.1 (Jan1966), 10-18, Fretz, “Paraguayan Indians” *Mennonite Life* 17, no.2 (April1962)

For North American Mennonites experiencing the ongoing rural/urban shift in Canada and the U.S. and articulating new ideas about religion and interdenominational cooperation, questions of tradition, collective identity, and a “useable past” took on an added importance. The sociologist and the historian, products of this transition, emerged as its principal mediators, able to comprehend the significance of colonization efforts while placing them in dialogue with the ongoing changes in North American life. These academics mediated the profound contradictions in practice and lifestyle between Mennonites in the North and the South by means of a temporal gap, which filtered difference through a historical rather than doctrinal lens, yet these tensions were never entirely suppressed. When they re-defined tradition as a form of cultural and spiritual stagnation it became, not a marker of authenticity and stability, but a crippling burden for the colonists, inhibiting the necessary progression of both individual and community. Though these conflicting representations would appear to be mutually exclusive, they existed simultaneously in the writings on colonization. The interdenominational aims of Mennonite Life and the MCC had provided the impetus to insist upon a dialogue with these Mennonite “pilgrims,” yet the products of this interaction, an estrangement over the meaning of religion and the role of community, revealed that very desire to be profoundly ideological. Through this process, the productive yet contradictory position of the colonists in the eyes of their North American brethren was revealed. It was one that encompassed both expressions of intimacy and statements of difference, an authentic tradition and a burdensome past.



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