

2019

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Kira. 2014. "Living on the Edge: Old Colony Mennonites and Digital Technology Usage." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 2(2):165-85.

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Living on the Edge: Old Colony Mennonites and Digital Technology Usage

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Abstract

Mainstream society's perceptions of traditional Mennonites tend towards viewing them as technologically deficient. Yet, cell phones, computers, and tablets are increasingly prevalent within this population. Challenging stereotypes, this article considers digital technology usage by Old Colony Mennonites (OCM) in Southwestern Ontario (SWO). Rooted in the Anabaptist tradition, a lengthy history of migration led the OCM to settle in Mexico. Yet, due to economic circumstances, many continue to travel to and from SWO, resulting in a transformation; from maintaining an isolated lifestyle to one that includes some form of mainstream society. This shift includes digital technology usage, specifically texting, social media, and the Internet. Although research into Mennonite technology practice exists, these new forms of digital technologies have not received similar attention. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2012, this study took place in five Old Colony communities in SWO. Interviews, with both former and current OCMs, and others who have some connection to the Mennonites, suggest that the Old Colony navigate the lines between prescribed values and twenty-first century requirements in terms of a continuum, on their own terms. While digital technologies may create tensions within the community, they also act to blur lines between geographical boundaries, extend social networks, and allow OCMs to create their own vision of the society in which they wish to live.

Keywords

Old Colony Mennonite; Southwestern Ontario, Digital technology usage; Stereotypes

All Mennonites reject technology. (PhD student)

On September 2, 2013, a fire broke out destroying the main building of a beloved Mennonite farmers' market in St. Jacobs, Ontario. Later, in an attempt to explain why there was a delay with rebuilding a new permanent structure, a graduate student articulated the above quote to a university class. According to the student, the "delay" in rebuilding was due to *the* Mennonites' rejection of any new technologies that the building might include. This grand statement is indicative of an ongoing miscomprehension about technology usage within Mennonite communities in Southwestern Ontario and guides this research article.

Introduction

In the global North, technologies, both digital and analog, have become embedded in our daily lives and affect how we perceive and experience the world. Technology takes form in a complex body entangling us whether in sleep or in waking. It is the first thing we encounter each morning: the blast of a six a.m. alarm clock, the beep of a new email, the click of a light switch, all before leaving the warm comfort of bed. Yet, technology does not stand alone in any society. Technologies both shape and are shaped by individuals, institutions, corporations, structures, governments, and religious, political, and economic systems. Taking the mutual entanglement of these entities as a starting point this article considers digital technology usage in the twenty-first century by Old Colony Mennonites (OCM) in Southwestern Ontario (SWO). Challenging stereotypes surrounding the usage of digital technologies by traditional Mennonites,² I follow an agential realist approach, viewing the world as comprised of ontologically inseparable phenomena, to investigate the Old Colony's relationship with digital technology. I do this within the framework of three themes that surfaced through an analysis of the collected data: continual migration, maintaining separation, and the navigation of a digital technological mainstream society. In this, Barad's theoretical apparatus (*cf* 1997, 2003, 2007) is useful for thinking through how contemporary digital technology usage, essentialism, and the three themes are inextricably connected and mutually constituted³ within the Old Colony (OC).

Entering into this research with some of the same stereotypes that many non-Mennonites have about traditional Mennonites, I wondered why some drove horse and buggy while texting or why maintaining a computer in the barn was acceptable but not in the house. On the outside, it seemed contradictory and hypocritical. Further implicated in this are statements, such as the one above, that act to reproduce stereotypes about those who choose to live outside a dominant culture. Taking this as a starting point, this article attempts to provide a different narrative concerning the complex relationship afforded by traditional and specifically Old Colony Mennonites towards technology in the twenty-first century.

To develop this narrative, I begin with the theoretical framework and literature from the fields of anthropology and science & technology studies before moving to the research methodology and the data collection techniques. I then offer a short historical overview in order

to place the reader within the framework of the Old Colony (for more detail, see Draper 2010; Driedger 1988, 2000; Hershberger 2011; Kraybill 1998; Loewen 2008; Quiring 2003; Schroeder 1990). From there I examine Mennonite approaches to digital technology, and discuss each of the three themes identified above in relation to OCM digital technology usage.

Although extensive studies exist on traditional Mennonites in the context of the global village, the Mennonite canopy, and digital technology usage (*cf* Driedger 1988, 2000; Driedger and Redekop 1998; Kraybill 1998, 2006; Rohrer 2004), these investigations look at technologies such as telephones and passive technologies, in which the user does not interact directly with the technology, such as television, radio, and older non-networked computers or cell phones without Internet capabilities. New forms of digital technologies—Smartphones, Texting, and Web 2.0 in particular—have not received the same attention. Identifying this gap in the literature, I attune this research to discussions surrounding digital technology usage of not only artifacts (physical tools) but also of the networks, wire(less), and other imperceptible phenomena implicated in its usage.

Historically, the Old Colony's motivations for group migrations have been more about maintaining isolation and creating boundaries⁴ than about rejecting mainstream technology. Yet, digital technologies blur the lines between boundaries and create tensions within the community while at the same time extending social networks. Thus, this research asks whether Old Colony Mennonites' usage of digital technologies breaks down the walls of separation or whether they transform them into something else. Ultimately, OC daily digital technology practices are enacted in terms of a continuum and on their own terms while navigating the fine lines between prescribed values, ideas, and beliefs.

Theoretical Perspective

Borrowing from theorists taken up by anthropology and science & technology studies, this paper follows a genealogy set out by the limits of representational thinking (Hacking 1983), a dissatisfaction with social constructionism (Haraway 1992), and the call to pay more attention to matter (Barad 2003).⁵

Given that different cultures view and assign differing meanings to objects and things (Bennett 2004), representationalism and the notion that the words and meanings we give to phenomena are accurate portrayals is problematic for these theorists. In this, conflicting interpretations of the world and their associated meanings opens up a space or gap between representations of difference. In this way, representations act as a mirror or tracing of the actual phenomena and are unsatisfactory forms for understanding culture. Consequently, those who differ from a dominant culture often find themselves exposed to a binary form of representation, a "them" versus "us" aesthetic. In turn, this can reduce a complex culture, phenomenon, or object to a few simplified characteristics such as an understanding of the "other" as rejecting all technology. While granting power to a dominant culture, this form of discourse figures the

“other” as passive and offers a narrow conception of both Mennonite technology usage and of matter’s active involvement in the world

Accordingly, Ems (2014), in a recent study of Old Order Amish technology use in Northern Indiana, follows Pinch and Bijker (1984), stating that “technology cannot be understood without taking the social context into consideration from the perspective of the social group in which it is embedded” (47). A social construction view of technology (SCOT) seeks to understand everyday actions, beliefs, and behaviors through the social meanings differing populations afford artifacts or in this case technologies. Thus, SCOT views human action as shaping technology without affording agency to the technology itself (see Coole and Frost 2010; Edwards 2003; Mitchel 2002). Yet, as Winner (2003) writes, it does not adequately consider “the dynamics of technological change” (234) and overlooks economic conditions, political forces, structural relationships, or other factors. Moreover, according to Winner (2003, 238), SCOT does not give voice to those who have no say in the production of these technologies but who, nevertheless, are implicated in their usage. Extending this, Franklin (1999, 3-4) views technology not only as an agent of change but also as an agent of power and control. In this way, technology has not only restructured relationships between groups but also between nations and their environment. In turn, technology has the power to direct human sociality. Following this, Haraway (1988) calls for an objectivity that accounts for human and non-human agency. In other words, both the knowledge producer and the object of study have agency in the doing and undoing of the world. This article attempts to bring agency and matter back into the discussion as it examines OCM technology usage in SWO.

Agential realism rejects current representational approaches to understanding the world (one of words and discourse utilized to describe, reflect, or mirror sameness) in favor of one that accounts for and ties together epistemology, ontology, and ethics (one of practice, doing, acting, and being responsible to difference which I interpret as an ethics of care).⁶ Calling for an alternative to counter the power of representationalism to describe what is real, Barad (2007) argues for “a *performative* understanding of discursive practices [which] insists on understanding, thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (emphasis hers, 133). Barad’s use of performativity challenges the power afforded to language favoring an active involvement with the world, one in which matter begins to matter once again. Thus, the move to performativity⁷ shifts the focus from one of reflection to one of diffraction,⁸ from language as a mirror of culture to one of practices, actions, and doings. In this, diffraction patterns illuminate differences. They accentuate the indeterminate nature of boundaries. Diffraction patterns highlight not only what is there but also what is not there, the excluded or incommensurate. Thus, the OC’s migratory practices, stalwart quest for isolation, and skilled maneuvering through mainstream society are performative acts that, read diffractively, offer not only a glimpse into a different way of being in the world but one that can open up an ethic of care towards those differences. In this, agential realism is a crucial framework to attend to language, discourse, culture, and matter and all their

intra-actions (Barad 2007, 132).

Returning to the notion that “all Mennonites reject technology,” we can begin to understand how generative systems of representation and social constructionism assume mutual access to the world. When this is not the case, we find a wedge between differing interpretations or miscomprehensions of another’s way of being in the world. Thus, an agential realism approach is useful as it situates itself in local experiences and calls attention to an ethics of knowing (Barad 1997).

In what follows, I explore how, for many OCMs, migration, separation, and navigating the mainstream are mutually constituted intra-actions. Taking a social crisis within the OC church as a starting point, this article calls for a diffractive reading of OCMs’ relationship with digital technology usage in the twenty-first century.

Methodology

Conducted over a four-month period in 2012, this study took place in five Old Colony communities in Southwestern Ontario. Data collection consisted of one-on-one interviews with twelve sessions lasting approximately one hour and two shorter sessions of twenty-five minutes each. Interlocutors included Mennonite church leaders, alternative high school educators, traditional public school educators, outreach workers, ESL (English as a second language) teachers, public health nurses, and both former and current Old Colony members. All had some connection to the Mennonite church either formally or informally. Questions were semi-structured and open ended with narratives centered on digital technology ownership, use and access, education, language, literacy, economic issues, and migration. To protect the identity of these interlocutors all names are pseudonyms. As the community is small, I omitted all identifying references to churches, schools, community offices, etc., and to specific locations.

Late in the research, a further opportunity arose to observe an Old Colony literacy group for women held at a local Mennonite church. The woman’s group consisted of three levels of classes; beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Subsequently, I conducted individual interviews with two of the young women from the advanced literacy group who were mainly concerned with learning how to use computers. These interviews helped to contextualize and clarify some of my observations from the group meeting.

Historical Overview

Technology, in the form of the printing press, was one of the catalysts that prompted the early Anabaptist movement in which contemporary Mennonites are rooted. This single piece of revolutionary technology altered worldviews by extending the written word to the everyday person, setting off a chain reaction that launched the Protestant Reformation (Schiere and Schiere 2009). The printing press facilitated the spread of literacy and the circulation of new ideas. It allowed for reinterpretations of the Bible, which in turn fashioned both unconventional ideas and

the Anabaptist movement. Yet, state intolerance scattered the Anabaptists throughout Europe in turn dispersing their radical beliefs and sparking what would become an entrenched and lengthy history of migration. Two main factions resulted from the widespread persecution: the Swiss and the Dutch. The former dispersed throughout Switzerland and Southern Germany, Pennsylvania, and eventually Ontario. The Old Order, David Martin, and Waterloo Markham Conference Mennonites can trace their lineage to this Swiss group. The latter Dutch movement travelled from Holland to Prussia, Northern Germany where the Low German dialect (Plattdietsch) originated, and to the Russian Steppes. Intent on preserving their deep-seated beliefs and values, the most conservative of the Russian Mennonites made their way to Manitoba, to Mexico, and, for some, to Southwestern Ontario (SWO). These are the Old Colony Mennonites and the focus of this article.

Digital Technology Usage and Traditional Mennonites

Popular perceptions of traditional Mennonites tend towards labeling them as “horse and buggy” people. Categorization concerning technology further identifies them as (a) the people who do not use any technology, (b) the people who use technology only in the barn but not the house, and (c) the people who shun technology but paradoxically can be seen texting and using cell phones in the stores or other public places. There are many different ways of being Mennonite and many different acceptances of technology, whether digital or not, depending on the sect to which one belongs. The David Martin Mennonites keep their computers in the barn or shop for business purposes but not in the house, while Markham-Waterloo Mennonites have gone to great expense to create their own server so they can manage their members’ Internet access (Draper 2010, 274). These examples illustrate the length traditional Mennonites go to defining their own relationship with technology. While tensions surrounding technology usage within the community exist, they do use it, and the line between what is accepted and rejected is a line that is beginning to swing.

Digital Technology as Tools

Traditional Mennonites distinguish between useful technology and technology that is for entertainment such as radios and television. The computer is a separate concern as it fits in both categories. A desktop computer, located solely in a business, indicates there is some level of control over access. It is useful for its economic function such as spreadsheets, email from customers, online orders, or access to relevant information such as agricultural production, disease control, and access to current market prices that can increase farmers’ competitive practices (United Nations Development Programme 2001). While a laptop that travels with the user can operate both at work and at home, the line between entertainment and acceptable tool use is a fine one, one that traditional Mennonites negotiate on a daily basis.

Old Colony Approaches to Digital Technology

Unlike popular misconceptions that place all traditional Mennonites under an umbrella of

technological rejection, OCM accept digital technologies more readily than other traditional Mennonites; notably they use cell phones, communicate through social media such as Facebook, and text their families in Mexico. Texting specifically has become a prevalent pastime for many OCM, its inclusion as a digital practice embedded within everyday society. The effect of these new technologies within the OC provides an opportunity for further investigation, particularly in the context of separation and boundaries.

New technologies developed since the introduction of Web 2.0 have revolutionized not only the way we navigate the Internet but also the way we negotiate the global world. This manifests most aptly with wireless and Internet accessible technology, examples of which are laptops, tablets, and Smartphones. Cell phones usage has penetrated 87% globally; “The number of mobile phone subscriptions has reached 5.9 billion, an impressive figure in a world of 7 billion people.”⁹ The OC is not immune to this global trend. Although it is unclear whether any specific statistics exist for traditional Mennonite society, cell phone technology, according to a number of educators working with a diverse number of OC children in elementary and alternative schools, has clearly embedded itself within their culture. Elizabeth, a former Old Colony member and current educator of OC students, elaborates on this,

From the perspective of the students from my class, probably I would have to say about 85% of them possibly have cell phones but not all of them have televisions in their homes and not all of them have the internet in their homes but almost all of them would have cell phones and use that technology. (Interview, August 9, 2012)

To take things one-step further we must consider the cell phone and its more contemporary iteration, the Smartphone. Both are communication devices. Yet, a simple cell phone provides only what Quan-Hasse (2012, 35) calls a clear utilitarian purpose. A Smartphone has an additional layer – it is both a communication device and an entertainment tool and herein exists the problem; “When technology reaches the point of being embedded in the routines and practices of everyday life, it is said to have normalized” (Quan-Haasse, 2013, 9). Cell phone technology has normalized within the Old Colony and Smartphone technology is quickly embedding itself within the next generation. According to Feenburg (1982), “[t]he introduction of a new technology into a given social environment is a powerful culture transforming act with immense political and economic consequences” (17-18).

Internet access is a direct line to the mainstream society. Tensions exist around whether to allow it in the home or not. Julie, a practicing OCM, discussed this at length with me. Born in Mexico, Julie arrived in SWO when she was one year old. Although she and her husband have a computer, which they use mainly for watching movies and playing games, they are considering bringing the Internet into their home.

... things are going up in technology like it would be easier to pay your bills on the computer now. He’s [Julie’s husband] talking about getting Internet too. It’s a big

discussion. Our church says it's a big no no 'cause there's way too many people taking advantage of Internet. Doing things they're not supposed to but if it were only work related there would be nothing against it. It's just the way you use it.

I'm sure if we had Internet we would use it for a lot more things. I'd be researching stuff, there'd always be other things. I know my dad gets around without Internet, he still makes bills and all that, but he just has a program. I'm sure it's not necessary. Just something he was mentioning. (Interview, October 24, 2012)

This last statement goes back to the question about bringing Internet access into the home. It seems the discussion is not just between husband and wife but involves other family members and is not a light one, as it will likely change the dynamic within her home. Paradoxically, Julie accesses the Internet via her Smartphone with which she searches via Google and utilizes Kijiji. This type of connection outside of the home does not seem to be an issue for her household. The discussion surrounding what is accepted and what requires considered thought alters between home and the outside world.

While, according to Quiring (2003), the OC leadership has not opposed all modern technology, it is aware that,

... urbanization, industrialization, commercialization, communication, and interaction with the outside will lead to the breakdown of a system. The group accepts new technology, but on their terms. They evaluate new options and then choose those that they believe will not interfere with their goals, at least as much as economic realities allow for choice (37).

The degree that cell phone technology has naturalized within the OC and the degree to which Smartphones are embedding into the younger generations' concept of their own culture is the fine line the OC leaders must negotiate.

Navigating the Digital Landscape

As digital technology becomes more prevalent around the globe, it is likely that it will become more and more necessary to have the skills to be able to navigate it, whether traditional Mennonite, African, First Nations, or something else. In Canada, digital knowledge is increasingly required to fill out tax forms, to access government immigration laws, to sign up for classes, to do banking, to find employment, and to work at many jobs. As this happens, employers expect their employees to be able to navigate this world. Although dated, research indicates that in the United States, up to 60% of jobs available to workers with a high school diploma or below necessitates some proficiency in computer skills (Mossberger, et al. 2003, 65-67); this number can only have increased since. These researchers write that digital technology has raised the level of skill requirement, including basic literacy in order to read training manuals and mathematical skills to perform relevant tasks and to improve employability. To compete for

the same job as a mainstream individual, a traditional Mennonite needs proficiency in the same basic skills. Some may question whether someone from the Old Colony would be interested in such a job, yet employment is increasingly requiring digital skills and, at the very least, basic literacy skills. Similarly, a mother filling out her online child tax benefit forms or a family applying for citizenship requires these basic skills to navigate the Internet. Still, older traditional Mennonites are known for hiring someone to perform the task they cannot. If they cannot drive, they hire someone to take them to the grocery store; if they cannot use a phone, they borrow their neighbors; if they cannot fill out a form, they ask a community worker to help them. As the very conservative Old Colony members rely on their belief system to remain separate from the world and to pass their faith to the next generation (Quiring, 2003, 14), the younger generation is not so sure (Turner 2012). Through increased exposure to mainstream society, Old Colony Mennonite youth are beginning to see the correlation between higher education and higher pay. Their parents might be okay with making the minimum wage of a steady Canadian job as compared to uncertainty and poverty in Mexico, but they are not. Additionally, they see that job safety and health education is important. Many realize they cannot get by without education and that they do not want to get by without the advantages afforded by digital technology skills. There is a shift among the Old Colony to complete high school and for the trailblazers to continue with higher education. They want the better life,¹⁰ and in many cases their parents want it for them. Navigating a digital world is part of that better life and part of following their own path towards the future.

Old Colony: Practices, Actions, and Doings

The following section examines the three themes—continual migration, maintaining separation, and the navigation of a digital technological mainstream society—more closely within the context of digital technology usage and the broader social impact it has on the OC. It calls attention to the pervasiveness of digital technology and hints at the continuum of technology (matters) usage within the OC, from horse and buggy to automobiles and trains to cell phones and computers. These themes, as I argue below, are mutually constituted; they do not exist as isolated categories but intra-act with each other and with their digital technology usage. I argue that digital technology usage directs OCM sociality and is directed by the Old Colony. In this manner, I conceptualize the themes as movements, as boundaries in action, as performing separation, and as acting technologically.

Migrations, Social Crisis, and an Economic Impetus

A history of continual church sanctioned mass migrations, culminating in Mexico, has arguably led to a social crisis within the OC church. Life in Mexico was and continues to be very difficult for many OCMs; drought and poverty are only some of the factors that hampered them. Land scarcity, both in price and in quality, pressed many into moving farther south to Belize, Bolivia, and Paraguay (Canas Bottos 2008, 220). Other factors, such as the sudden high cost of oil needed for irrigation, forced successive migrations (Canas Bottos 2008, 227; Hershberger

2011, 198). Additionally, structural inequalities within the OC made it difficult to sustain themselves (Good Gingrich and Preibisch 2010, 1504). According to Castro (2004, 28-29), repeated division of the land and Mennonite expansion in Mexico has reached its limits while a lack of available land has hampered the OC's ability to sustain itself indefinitely. This landlessness and persistent drought necessitated some either to find work in industries other than the preferred farming within the Mexican Mennonite community or to migrate back and forth to Canada to seek employment opportunities within established Mennonite communities in SWO. This pattern of migration contrasts with earlier migrations in that its motivation is economic rather than religious.

This economic migration from Mexico to SWO has necessitated a transformation from an isolated traditional lifestyle to one that includes some form of mainstream society. For many it entails vocational certification, which necessitates higher education, enhanced literacy skills, and, in some cases, the acquisition of digital skills. A higher standard of living in Canada places pressure on the Old Colony to enhance their skills in order to attain higher paying work. For those who remain in Ontario, supporting a typical Old Colony family with six or more children with a Canadian minimum wage is insufficient. In Mexico, typically, the husband works and the wife attends the home and children, whereas in Canada often both must find employment. Many of the preferred occupations, such as welding, entail certification. Those without the required certification make significantly less. Yet, for many, steady work in Canada, even at the minimum wage level, is a welcome change from Mexico where land shortages, drought, and other forces like corruption, illegal trade, and drug trafficking (Canas Bottos 2008; Castro 2004) challenge employment stability. Added tensions exist within the community as many view higher education as a stepping-stone into the mainstream world which likely means stepping away from the traditional Mennonite lifestyle. For those choosing not to pursue more education, they may never alleviate their situation of extreme poverty¹¹ and realize the better life they left Mexico to pursue. For this reason, the Old Colony lives on the edge and is why an ethics of care is required to attend to this social crisis and to the OCM who, in many ways, are struggling on their own (Turner 2012).

Boundary Making in Action

I first came to Canada when I was five. My parents came for the same reasons that many other parents came during the 1970s, for economic reasons. It was very difficult to survive in Mexico without land and so they came to Canada for an opportunity to do a little bit better. My mom was the daughter of, well her family was born in Manitoba, so she had citizenship rights, and because of that all of the children had citizenship rights. So, we lived in Canada for approximately five years before we headed back to Mexico. Because at that time my dad was trying to get his Canadian citizenship, so there was a fear of going back to Mexico and him loosing the opportunity to become a citizenship [sic], so we stayed. But then, after that we travelled back and forth to Mexico quite often and lived similarly to what many of the families here - they work in agricultural fields

and travel back and forth to Mexico. (Elizabeth)

Today, culture exists in multiple places, across space and through time. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) examine the movement of people in terms of their increasing mobility not only across traditionally bounded physical spaces but also through digital space, blurring the lines of bounded cultural units. This movement, whether by choice or by force, lays the path for practices to travel gradually across borders. Through digital technologies, there is an opportunity for the exchange of ideas, beliefs, and values over digital networks. These digital technologies enabled people to create their own vision of the society in which they live, one in which boundaries are blurred, cultures are unbounded, and space is re-territorialized among differing landscapes. While cultures intermingle, blend, and amalgamate into new entities as they move across boundaries (Tsing 2000), so do the interconnections of cultural flows across digital space.

Migration for the OC, as a means to achieve separation through isolation from the dominant culture, is an extreme mechanism meant to contain the movement of ideas across boundaries. Yet, a persistent economic migration between SWO and Mexico challenges that notion. Good Gingrich and Preibisch (2010) write, “Their migration to Canada seems to be, first and foremost, a strategy for physical survival” (1504). Margaret, a current OC member in her early 20s, arrived in Canada when she was six months old. She grew up speaking Low German but told me she is more comfortable communicating in English. Married, with two young children at home, she recounts her family’s reasons for leaving Mexico,

My parents came up here because they weren’t able to make enough money out there to support their family [as farmers]. I was the sixth so they already had six children and so making a living was too hard for them. (Interview, October 2012)

For some, these migrations are problematic in that they transport the outside world into the isolated Mexican colonies. This further intensifies via digital communication technologies, which transcend traditional boundaries of space and place. Historically, much of the movement of the OC, culminating in Mexico,¹² lay within the most conservative members desire to maintain their traditional lifestyle, which they viewed the host nation threatening. Conversely, migration from Mexico to SWO challenged prescribed notions of church authority and separation. In Mexico, Epp (2008) writes, “economic and social conditions, combined with intolerable levels of rigidity and legalism in their particular church subgroups, prompted return migration to Canada beginning already in the late 1950s” (53). This migration started with families returning to Canada temporarily to work in the fields as migrant workers in the summer. Over time, it developed into a transnational process that to this day still sees families trading one set of socio-economic obstacles in Mexico for another set in Canada.

Quiring (2003) faults OCMs and the Mennonite Central Committee (a worldwide organization committed to an ethics of care) for the ongoing Mexican-Canadian migration, yet economic necessity, in the face of extreme poverty, is an overriding factor in directing OC

members to choose migration as a survival mechanism. In other words, economic pressures far outweigh church mandates leading to a shift within the OC, not quite to the extent of a split within the church, yet problematic for the community as a whole. Suppressing the flow of ideas across borders is one way of maintaining isolation. Yet, this economic migration has not only afforded the movement of ideas via land transportation, it has also contributed to the movement of ideas through space, whereby OCM in SWO maintain contact via texting and other forms of digital media with family and friends in Mexico.

Separation as Practice

Traditional Mennonites choose to remain in keeping with the practices of their ancestors rather than accept, adapt, or assimilate within the dominant or mainstream culture (Johnson-Weiner 2007, vii). Separation from the mainstream¹³ world, non-resistance and pacifism, control over education, and the cautious use of technology are ideological differences imperceptible to the human eye, yet they are the fundamental beliefs that all traditional Mennonites share and negotiate in varying ways. As Schroeder (1990) writes,

Right from their Anabaptist beginnings in sixteenth-century Europe (Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Holland), the Mennonites wanted only to be left in peace, to live a simple life resolutely ‘separated’ from the world [...] they wanted nothing to do with the world’s wars, its politics, the invariably destructive ambitions of its eccleasical [sic] and secular leaders and institutions (2).

With each move, the OC sought separation and protection from the outside world. In Mexico, they sought to re-create the same boundaries by establishing isolated colonies that worked to restrict outside contact and in turn preserve their traditional way of life (Driedger 1988, 173). They specifically embraced an extreme model by favoring isolated colonies and separating themselves not only from mainstream society but also from the more progressive Mennonite factions in order to maintain their traditional values (Quiring 2003, 17; Driedger, 1988, 204). They believed they had found the freedom to live the way their ancestors had lived in Russia, to be in control of their churches, schools, and communities in order to remain separate from mainstream society. This persistent movement of peoples across nations enacts a continual formation and re-formation of both social and geographic boundaries. Today, this practice continues with digital technologies facilitating the blurring of boundaries across digital spaces.

Performing Separation (Within and Without)

In the Old Colony church when you are baptized you have to promise [...] that you will not leave the church that you were baptized in. And just this past spring, I [as a progressive Mennonite pastor] had one of the participants in the group come and ask if she could talk to me. She asked this very question, “Am I obligated to stay within the church that baptized me?” Because ... I think they are very interested in coming [to a more progressive church] but there will be hell to pay within the Old Colony Low

German church if they come. (Thomas)

Old Colony migratory practices in SWO have resulted in a struggle around faith, identity, and the decision to remain within or leave the Old Colony Church. Thomas, an extremely congenial and caring progressive Mennonite pastor, counsels many Old Colony members within the confines of his church as they struggle over these questions of Old Colony loyalty. In this, some Old Colony members are exploring options concerning worship and are beginning to accept alternatives into their lives. As the quotation above indicates, leaving the OC church for something else, whether Mennonite or not, is a decision that many OCM struggle to make.

Canas Bottos (2008, 215), writing about transnationalism, asserts that by maintaining isolation from the host culture, Mexican Mennonites restrict any governmental attempt to enforce national identities. This statement holds true for all migrations undertaken by the OC. Their desire to remain separate from the modern world, in Russia, Canada, or Mexico, is a motivating factor to reject assimilation into the dominant society. Canas Bottos argues that the OC forms a trans-statal community due to their migratory nature, and that while they accept citizenship, they reject the ideology of the host nation. Similar to the Sociotechnical View of Technology, technological heterogeneity allows for its reinterpretation, in which the adoption of a technology does not imply an adoption of the society's values that created the artifact (Pfaffenberger 1992, 511). In other words, they accept the nation (tool) but not the values or beliefs (technology). Both tactics (rejection of dominant national identities and rejection of mainstream beliefs including technological values) affords the OC the opportunity to maintain their desire for separation and to move freely between nations, thus continuing their pattern of migration.

Driedger (1988, 174) describes two mechanisms the OC historically employed to resist change: the first is the persistent migration of the principal conservative group and the second is the transition of those who remain behind into a more progressive group. According to Victor, a former OC member and educator of OC children, the latter is accurate, as in Manitoba the remaining OC has assimilated into the dominant culture: "Many stayed but over generations have evolved out of the traditional OC lifestyle" (interview, August 9, 2012). Yet, the subsequent migration from Mexico to SWO resulted in a reversal. In this case, against the wishes of the church, a number of OC members have chosen to leave behind the extremely poor living conditions in Mexico to create a new life in Canada. Historically, the OC employed migration as a way to maintain their belief system and cultural values. This type of migration is church sanctioned and entails an entire community leaving its adopted home in search of a new host nation. It is exemplified by the OC migrations across Europe, to Canada, and finally to Mexico. Yet, in contrast, the migrations to SWO are motivated by economic necessity and are not church sanctioned. Rather than an entire community, individual families leave in search of better employment opportunities and to alleviate the poverty many suffer in Mexico. They may or may not settle permanently in Canada. They may stay for a short time or they may travel back and forth between Canada and Mexico regularly. A long-standing pattern of migration is an inherent

part of the OC identity. In the past, migrations were set in motion due to social pressures and sanctioned by the church. The migrations back to Canada, however, rest solely on economic factors challenging the OC's ability to stay in their most recently adopted homeland.

Adding to tensions between differing interpretations of technology is the notion that digital technologies can acquire social significance within the home (Strathern, 1994, 8-9). Although she specifically identifies the Amish in her writings, Strathern's argument is consistent with an OCM philosophy. This viewpoint is that communication technologies (which today includes cell phones, Smartphones, Internet connections, wireless capabilities, Skype, social media, etc.) surpass traditional face-to-face social relationships by transforming them into something else and by doing so invites exposure to unwelcome influences, such as influences from the mainstream world that challenge the notion of separation. Agre (2002) posits that "...culture is not homogeneous, and various tendencies within it are making their own conflicting sense of the technology" (150). As stated previously, there are many different ways of being Mennonite, including new, old, conservative, and progressive, and within each group, there are many ways of negotiating one's identity, and varying levels of technological adaptation are accepted. Technology usage led to many of the splits within the Old Orders. The David Martin Mennonites maintain their traditional lifestyle by driving with horse and buggy and producing their own electricity, yet shop owners increasingly recognize the necessity of having Internet access for business transactions. The Markham-Waterloo Mennonites, although still dressing in the traditional style, allow car ownership and telephones. Their more progressive attitudes toward technology led to tensions and a split from the Old Order Mennonites. Today, they cautiously use cell phones and computers, but not televisions or radios. Within the OC, there has been more acceptance of adopting modern technology, whereby according to Epp (2002, 14), the language of separation is not as stringent within this group as with some of the other traditional Mennonites. Their motivations for group migration in the past have been more about maintaining isolation from the mainstream than about rejecting their technology. Each group justifies their decisions to adopt a piece of technology based on perceived need. Margaret explains this more fully with respects to owning a computer,

They allow it. It's not something that you can't have but they try to keep it in business wise. Because a lot of the times if you end up having one but you don't really need it then you are getting more trouble than good. But they won't tell you can't have one because it's really your decision. You can judge on your own what you think is good for you or not.

Predominant OCM practices challenge the dominant mainstream values placed on technology usage and ownership. Yet, digital technology ownership and usage are increasingly necessary in both contemporary mainstream and Mennonite worlds. As economic need increasingly requires the OC to engage with the mainstream world, many struggle to find a balance between the two.

While OCMs navigate the role of technology within the framework of their core values,

those values are undergoing change. Change is fundamental to issues of separation and is a concern OCMs have fought to keep at bay throughout their storied history. It is an on-going topic of discussion, and whereas in the past that discussion has been mostly about how to hold or slow down the process of change, today it is moving toward how to adapt to change and maintain their beliefs and values, both of which are necessary for survival in the twenty-first century. Thus, digital technologies, in part, are at the core of shifting notions of identity and self (Escobar 1994, 218). Adoption of digital technologies, seen as essential for success in the mainstream world, ultimately results in new ways of thinking and being (Escobar 1994, 214). These new ways of thinking (for the OC does not necessarily entail abandoning one's heritage with new relationships with digital technology) may allow them to utilize digital technologies on their own terms and still access the advantages afforded to mainstream users.

Accepting / Rejecting Mainstream Society

Historically, the choices made by the Mennonites towards technology usage characterize a conscious decision not to adopt certain worldly constructs found within mainstream society. Old Colony Mennonites define their own identity in opposition to mainstream society. They achieve this by maintaining separation through lifestyle, with dress, and with their complex relationship to technology (Johnson-Weiner 2007, viii). This main principle of separation derives itself from a literal interpretation of the Bible, "...do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Romans 12:1-2). Yet traditionally, Mennonites did not always avoid the mainstream world. A rapidly changing nineteenth century landscape led church leaders to begin moderating dress and technology by closely adhering to the values of the 1870s (Draper 2010, 150). Perhaps, as Latour (1993, 33) notes, individuality of religion within the mainstream, the ascendancy of science, and the increasingly secularity of society at that time challenged Old Colony Mennonite beliefs, leading to their choice to remain separate. The Old Colony church discouraged individualism and modernism, favoring instead the value of a plain lifestyle, modesty, and humility (Draper 2010, 188). In this way, the degree to which each Mennonite group accepts or rejects elements of mainstream society is shaped by its own beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors. Thus, the levels of complexity amongst the Mennonite population are extensive with fine lines drawn between which aspects of the mainstream world are accepted, rejected, or indigenized.

Acting Technologically

We use a lot of technology in this building to really make sure they are really supporting our kids so that they achieve the best that they can. We are a school with a culture that's rich in heritage and history. And bottom line they are all Mennonite. They are all Anabaptists. And [...] we need to make sure all [all] are getting the same education as if you go over to Aylmer, to Arthur, or Elmira. Technology is moving at great speeds. And people are aware of it. People are using it for business. You have to have some idea. So that's how it's working for us here. And then the skills that they are learning here: if

someone puts an iPhone in their hand or puts a cell phone—when they've finished grade eight, at least they will understand the capabilities of that and know how to use it.
(Annette)

Annette is an educator of Old Colony children who attends a very progressive Mennonite public school that attunes itself to the needs of the community. The amount of technology used in her school is astonishing in comparison to other mainstream public schools in the area. Despite the significant integration of digital technology, it is with the utmost respect for the traditional Mennonite tradition that the school operates, thereby gaining absolute trust from the parents. In this way, an ethic of care is put in place in order to attend to the differences of OC communities while at the same time preparing these students for the increasingly digital world.

In Mexico, isolated colonies offer social unity as an outlet, a tight-knit community of their own to interact with their peers. In Ontario, paradoxically, OCMs are scattered through the countryside and in isolation from their peers. Margaret and Julie mentioned connecting with family in Mexico through social media via Facebook. Both text regularly, as did a number of the ladies in the literacy classes I observed. For OCMs who grew up in Ontario but maintain family in Mexico, these digital technologies work to extend social networks and spatially shorten the distance between SWO and Mexico. For those living in isolation from their peers in SWO, literacy groups and digital technologies provide a non-traditional way to interact and to maintain a connection that otherwise would be lost. Texting, as an example, is very much embedded within the OC. It functions to extend social networks both locally and globally. While, historically, the migratory practices of the OC have existed to maintain a prescribed separation from the mainstream world, texting between Mexico and SWO blurs the boundaries and allows for the exchange of ideas across vast distances. In this way, digital technologies work to facilitate intra-OC contact and communication and possibly are holding together a “traditional” community and its values, rather than threatening it by opening communication with the mainstream world.

Conclusions: Intra-Actions and the Mutability of Perceptions

In this article, I have argued for an agential realist approach to considering OCMs' usage of digital technology in light of many stereotypical perceptions of traditional Mennonite practices. Karen Barad's theoretical perspective lends itself well to this task. Although, initially developed via her interest in quantum physics, in thinking about the OC, Barad's attention to local experiences, matter, performativity, and an ethics of caring are vital factors to consider. Diffractively, attention to what is excluded or left in the shadows, is to give thought to those that do not fit within the dominant culture. For the OC, this ethnographic study indicated their motivations for group migrations have been more about maintaining isolation and navigating the mainstream than about rejecting technology. In this way, OC digital technology usage blurs the lines between boundaries, creating tensions within the community, yet at the same time extending social networks. In contrast to stereotypical views of traditional Mennonite technology

usage, I have argued that OCM navigate the lines between prescribed values and twenty-first century requirements in terms of a continuum, on their own terms. Digital technology usage within the OC expands and contracts the walls surrounding isolation and separation from mainstream society. Although it allows ideas to flow between groups, it also allows for the shrinking of space locally and globally. It may inevitably lead some to move away from the church, but it also may lead some to strengthen their ties.

Endnotes

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² In order to simplify the terminology afforded to the many different kinds of Mennonites mentioned throughout this paper, I make a distinction between Old Colony Mennonites and traditional Mennonites. “Traditional Mennonite” encompasses all Mennonites that follow the traditional lifestyle of Swiss and Dutch lineage. They dress in the “peculiar” or plain style of the eighteenth century as opposed to progressive Mennonites who dress in contemporary style. The Old Colony traces their ancestry back to the Dutch lineage and consists of those who migrated from Canada to Mexico and back again; they are sometimes referred to as Mexican Old Colony Mennonites or Low German speaking Mennonites. See the appendix for a list of the different Mennonite denominations referenced in this article.

³ Barad employs intra-actions to refer to the mutual constitution of entangled objects and subjects within the material world.

⁴ These boundaries manifest in multiple ways; geographically, socially, ideologically, and increasingly digitally.

⁵ For Barad, matter is not a thing but a doing.

⁶ An emerging site of inquiry surrounds the anthropology of care (*cf* de la Bellacasa 2010, 2011; Ticktin 2011).

⁷ Barad’s performativity is one that includes the posthuman, a decentering of the human through an appreciation of the non-human’s role or agency in the world’s becoming; this inclusivity is how matter comes to matter.

⁸ Although Donna Haraway has written extensively about diffraction (*cf* 1988, 1992), Barad follows theoretical physicist Niels Bohr’s two-slit experiments in order to investigate fully their ontology.

⁹ Retrieved October 21, 2012 (http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57352095-93/2011-ends-with-almost-6-billion-mobile-phone-subscriptions/)

¹⁰ Nearly all of my interlocutors mentioned the term “better life.” What that better life entails differs from family to family depending in part on the level of conservatism.

¹¹ While it was made clear by Victor, one of my interlocutors, that not all OCMs face extreme poverty in SWO, he did acknowledge that there are plenty who are not doing well. They face ongoing issues of poverty, exploitive practices in the workplace, in housing, in education, and with basic needs. As it was described to me, within the traditional Mennonite community in SWO the Old Colony are placed at the very bottom of a cultural ladder.

¹² Although this paper focuses on the Mexican migration, it is important to note that a more conservative group continued farther southward into Belize, Bolivia, and Paraguay.

¹³ In keeping with the body of Mennonite literature investigated, the terms mainstream world or mainstream society refers to the (Canada or Mexico) dominant culture.

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Appendix A: Mennonite Culture

The Mennonite culture has many different denominations. I here list those referenced in this article, mentioning characteristics that differentiate them.

Old Colony Mennonite: Drive any color vehicle. Typically, they have modernized conveniences excluding television and the Internet. They speak Low German in the home.

David Martin Mennonites: Use horse and buggy. Produce their own electricity. Avoid most modern conveniences in their homes (e.g. television and radio). Tend to be shop owners. Speak Pennsylvania Dutch.

Old Order Mennonites: Use horse and buggy. Tend to be agriculturally based. Avoid most modern conveniences in their homes (e.g. television and radio). Speak Pennsylvania Dutch.

Markham-Waterloo Mennonite Conference: Vehicles are usually black. Have modernized conveniences in their homes except TV, radio, Internet, and such. Speak Pennsylvania Dutch.

Retrieved September 5, 2012 (<http://www.ugdsb.on.ca/centrepeel/article.aspx?id=8437>)