Detachment Theory: History, Story, and Language in Maurice Mierau's *Detachment*: *An Adoption Memoir*

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During a farewell ritual for a pet cat that must be euthanized, Maurice Mierau states to his partner and children: "We live in a world where a lot of things don't make any sense" (193). Indeed. Yet *Detachment: An Adoption Memoir* is less the story of Mierau's inability to make sense of the world than a struggle for the right form for doing so. Mierau's memoir repeatedly questions the frameworks for personal storytelling in the face of trauma. These frameworks include Mennonite history and the Mennonite heritage tour, psychotherapy and the theory of attachment, and even language itself. Another is the genre of the adoption memoir.

Three overlapping displacement plots structure *Detachment*. The first two are the plots of the war exile and the orphaned child. As we learn in the opening pages of the book, Mierau's father is a survivor of the violent expulsion of Mennonites from Ukraine during the Second World War, while his sons are recent adoptees from post-Cold War Ukraine. The ostensible thread connecting

these two plots is Ukraine, but the opening chapter of *Detachment* reveals a third displacement plot, one that stems from Mierau's growing sense of his own attachment struggle, which he acknowledges in therapy sessions. This struggle, not Ukraine, serves as the most important link between himself, his father, his sons, the memoir, and between past and present. *Detachment*'s narrative of the therapeutic search for the self binds together its other two displacement plots. That is, Mierau acknowledges his role as the storyteller whose task is either to discover or invent a relation between his own plot and that of his father and his sons. Therapy allows for this, yet *Detachment* repeatedly questions the value of personal therapy as a model for healing the wounds of the past.

Published in 2015, *Detachment* is one of relatively few adoption memoirs of the past two decades written by an adoptive father. In seven chapters of unequal length, Mierau describes his 2005 trip to Ukraine with his partner Betsy; the complicated process of adopting two biological brothers – Peter and Bohdan, aged five and three – from different orphanages; their return to Winnipeg; and the story of becoming a family. However, these events are filtered through memories and associations from Mierau's past, and invented scenes – historical fictions – of his grandfather Cornelius Mierau's murder and his father's expulsion from Ukraine as a child. Chapter 1 of the book, "Shrinking," begins midway through the adoption story, in a therapist's office "above a bank in a Winnipeg strip mall" (11), where Mierau begins describing the stress that the adoption has placed on his marriage. The scene allows Mierau as client-storyteller to introduce basic historical information about his sons' and his father's stories, a sketch of Mennonite exile, and personal details about his own life to the therapist, both professional listener and stand-in for the (non-Mennonite) reader. In a few brief strokes, Mierau outlines the flight of "German-speaking" (15) Mennonites from Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, the first of several embedded "auto-ethnographic announcements" that Julia Spicher Kasdorf has recently identified as a common feature of Mennonite writing that "sorts insiders from outsiders" (25).1 The reference to Mennonites' escape from Ukraine during the Second World War also signals that the story of Peter and Bohdan's adoption will not resemble a happily-ever-after fairy tale that begins and ends with Mierau, Betsy, and their sons. Rather, Mierau asserts that adoption is a historical practice, one that, in his family's case, is integrated with the longer history of Mennonite settlement in and expulsion from Ukraine, and its shaping of an adoptive father's intimate

relationships. *Detachment* reminds us that transnational adoption is never "one family's story" but is always situated in a matrix of lived experiences and official and unofficial histories.

While Mierau does not self-consciously set out to rewrite the adoption memoir, *Detachment* challenges several of the genre's typical features. One of them is the frequent use of the language of romantic love in parental adoption memoirs – of "falling in love" with the adopted child. The use of such language is unsurprising, but it is also one-sided and ahistorical, effacing what Margaret Homans identifies as the "geopolitical economic inequities that enable transnational adoption" (20). *Detachment* avoids the "falling in love" trope, the Christian rescue narrative, and the figuring of the child as a divine gift, a "miracle" who was "meant to be" a member of the family – all common features of both secular and Christian adoption memoirs by adoptive parents. In their place, Mierau lays bare the material conditions of adoption in Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics since the end of the Cold War, revealing the legal, economic, political, and institutional forces that underwrite the transnational adoption of children by couples from western nation states. By linking in his Mennonite father's experience of violent displacement from Ukraine in the 1940s, Mierau signals the deeper socio-political history of the region, one that might have some bearing on one Ukrainian woman's inability or decision not to parent her children over six decades later.

Heritage

In contemporary transnational adoption practice, prospective adoptive parents are encouraged by social workers and agency practitioners to consider adopting from countries with which they have a prior relationship of some kind. Any ancestral connections parents may have to their child's "country of origin" are considered especially advantageous to a successful adoption, as though recognizably innate or essential qualities of identity inhere in the "birth culture" to which parent vaguely, and child firmly, "belong." But as Homans rightly points out, "birth culture" is an oxymoron; the term elides biogenetics and human reproduction with place, territory, language, cultural traditions, and so on (8). In the well-meaning attempt to ensure that children's rights to cultural belonging are not erased in the name of cultural assimilation, progressive adoption discourse promotes an

essentialist view of geographical place as both a child's origin and destiny (Homans 9).

Is a country an origin? Religious Mennonites are taught to resist the notion, despite the popularity of European Mennonite "heritage tours" and the positioning of Russia, in particular, as a lost-and-found "'ancestral home'" in twentieth-century North American Mennonite literature (Reimer qtd in Zacharias, *Rewriting* 13). In *Detachment*, Mierau combines the cultural practice of the Mennonite heritage tour with the foreign adoption process. In bringing these two strands together, *Detachment* positions Ukraine as both an imagined space of origin and a site of "return," a foreign country and a lost homeland. In the second chapter, entitled simply "Adoption," the primary plotline concerns the adoption process, including Mierau's and Betsy's first encounters with Peter and Bohdan at their orphanages, and their negotiation of the Ukrainian adoption system and its social workers, translators, government officials, and orphanage workers. This is what we might refer to as the "red tape plot" of the chapter, in which Ukrainian officials and child welfare workers are largely viewed as obstacles that Mierau and Betsy must overcome to bring their children "home." But the secondary plot of this chapter involves the new family's trip to Zaporozhye and Mierau's father's village, Nikolaipol, (formerly Nikolaifeld). With Betsy and his recently adopted children in tow, Mierau embarks on a self-directed pilgrimage to the village – hardly a cushy tourist destination – from which his father was expelled as a child when he was roughly the same age as Peter. This is what we might call the "roots plot" of the chapter.

The "roots plot" of *Detachment* evokes contemporary Mennonite heritage tourism, but it also resembles another contemporary pilgrimage form: what are known in the adoption community as "roots trips" or "homeland visits," in which transnational adoptees return to their place of birth either with or without their adoptive parents. Roots trips are regarded as important milestones: opportunities for adoptees to maintain a connection to their birth cultures. Similarly, the Mennonite heritage tour is premised on preserving or at least acknowledging North American Mennonites' links to European countries of "origin." By bringing his Ukrainian-born children to his Ukrainian-born father's village, Mierau undertakes both heritage tour and roots trip for all of them. Yet the pilgrimage is marked by failure. At one point Betsy suggests they tour Zaporozhye before they are united with the children, but Mierau insists that they wait until the adoption is finalized so the boys can accompany them. Although he self-consciously wonders whether his "obsession with family

history was a form of narcissism" (66), his hope is that the heritage tour will strengthen the familial/ancestral bonds he assumes must be there between himself, his children, and his parents. "What I hoped was that someday Peter and Bohdan would understand how tightly entwined their story was with mine, and with my father's own troubled history" (67). But just how "tightly entwined" are their stories at this point? Is Ukraine a self-evident and primal connection between them or is it an invented space, a crafted tie of kinship born of Mierau's (and arguably the broader Mennonite) "obsession" with the Russian expulsion narrative and the "break event" of Mennonite exile from Russia (see Zacharias, *Rewriting*)? Betsy reminds Mierau that she too has a (non-Mennonite) ancestral association with Ukraine, in that her paternal grandparents came from a region in western Ukraine "near where the boys were born" (66). Mierau brackets that connection, arguing that because he knows more – has conducted research – about the place his father left, it will be more meaningful for all.

The heritage tour turns out to be a grueling one, involving a ten-hour train ride from Kyiv to Zaporozhye. The children are of course restless and hard to manage. As three-year-old Bohdan's emotional range begins to bloom, he accidentally destroys the camera, and Mierau admits that "for the first time Bohdan did not look cute and adorable to me. I wanted to smack him" (81). Tourist stops at Soviet monuments and museums "meant nothing" to Peter and Bohdan; their indifference seems to disappoint Mierau (77). They arrive at his father's village and locate the house he was born in using an old photo. They are invited in by the current owners, but "every detail in the house disappointed me," writes Mierau. "I had expected to sit in reverent silence and weep in distress or bitterness. Instead I felt only irritated and tired" (85).

Ultimately, then, one of the available forms for making sense of both Mennonite history and adoption – the heritage tour and the roots trip – is marked by failure, insofar as providing a bonding opportunity for Mierau and his sons. Unlike later journeys Mierau will undertake with his children in different parts of the world, which I briefly discuss below, there are seemingly no grand epiphanies for Mierau during his visit to Nikolaipol.2 Although at one point he refers to a "dream-like familiarity" (83) with the landscape, Mierau later writes, "my ancestors were only here for 150 years. . . . [T]hey abandoned the fertile soil for other plains a world away, their work and their faith *detachable* from any national feeling or loyalty to a particular time or place" (87, emphasis added). He declines an invitation from the guide to take a soil sample home as a souvenir, admitting that "this rich black

earth meant nothing to me," just as the Soviet landmarks and museum exhibits "meant nothing" to Peter and Bohdan. "My ancestors had come for the soil. But they had no roots in it either" (87). Mierau's rejection of Ukrainian soil is metonymic of *Detachment*'s implicit challenge to the conflation of biology and history, genetics and place, identity and soil on which so-called progressive adoption discourse depends. It also tests claims about ethnic identity in North American Mennonite culture and literature as "rooted" in Russian soil. If there is anything about Ukraine that links Peter, Bohdan, Mierau, and his father, it is the story of their detachment from it, rather than their allegiance to it.

Detaching from Attachment

If *Detachment* challenges the premises of the roots narrative that underwrites heritage tourism, it also contests the dominant paradigm for understanding childhood psychological development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: attachment theory and its practical application, attachment parenting. *Detachment* flies in the face of progressive adoption training curricula for pre-adoptive parents, which rely on the highly influential theory of attachment pioneered by British psychologist John Bowlby in the post-war period. That *Detachment* is indebted to this enormously influential body of theory is signaled by the book's title and its cover design, in which the first two letters of the word ATTACHMENT, in black sans-serif typeface, are crossed out with two "painted" white letters: DE (Fig. 1). By literally and figuratively overwriting the attachment narrative as one of detachment, Mierau's book tests the theoretical and practical underpinnings of therapeutic models that organize standards and goals of psychological health in adopted children and adoptive families.

John Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* series, published between 1969 and 1980, has frequently been identified as *the* theory underlying *all* western therapeutic models (Cleary 33). Bowlby described attachment as a series of "proximity-seeking" behaviours that begin in infancy and extend into patterns of thought and feeling in adulthood. In the primary attachment scenario, an infant seeks a primary attachment figure – whom Bowlby always called "the mother" – to respond unconditionally to his or her basic needs. Ideally, attachments form in a reciprocal, call-and-response series of repeated interactions over time in which both parent and child are "rewarded" – the child with food, the parent with a smile of satisfaction, for example. A "working

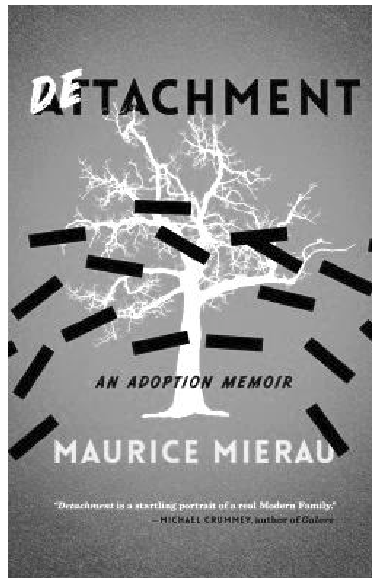

Figure 1. Cover of *Detachment: An Adoption Memoir*.

model" of self and other is formulated through early attachments. When an infant's or child's needs are unmet or inconsistently recognized by a primary attachment figure, normal social and emotional development is compromised. Insecure attachments arising from loss and separation from the mother manifest as separation anxiety, separation being "*the* paradigmatic human experience for Bowlby" (Cleary 36).

If Bowlby's theory is foundational to the western therapeutic model, and forms the basis for the popular "attachment parenting philosophy" advocated by William and Martha Sears among others, it is no less influential for the "special case" adoption represents. Attachment in adoption is a specific academic subfield of developmental psychology. Pre-adoption training courses for North American parents, and a host of books on adoptive parenting, such as Deborah Gray's *Attaching in Adoption* (2002), rely unquestioningly on the long tradition of attachment psychology pioneered by Bowlby and his colleague Mary Ainsworth, often without acknowledging either of them directly or with only a passing reference, so firmly is attachment theory now accepted as *the* explanation for human psychological development. As one parenting book puts it, "Attachment, the affectionate relationship between a child and caregiver that endures through space and time, is critical to healthy human development" (Hopkins-Best,

180). How adoptive parents and children form secure attachments when the child has been separated from his or her first mother, or has been institutionalized or shifted between multiple placements in foster care, is a subject of enormous theoretical and practical interest. Some advice books, such as Lois Ruskai Melina's *Raising Adopted Children*, insist that the attachment process is no different in adoptive than in non-adoptive families, only that it may take longer to establish (61). But what if we stepped back for a moment to ask whether attachment theory is the best or the only explanation there is to describe adoptive relationships and "healthy human development?" *Detachment* asks precisely this question.

While Mierau doesn't refer to Bowlby at any point in *Detachment*, the title and cover design of the book, his sessions with the therapist, and later his acceptance of the diagnosis of "attachment disorder" in one of his sons suggests he is familiar with the clinical application of attachment theory. However, *Detachment* bears an ambivalent attitude toward the therapeutic narrative of self-analysis that relies so heavily on the theory of attachment. In the opening chapter of the book, Mierau "presents" as an unwilling client who is irritated by the therapist who, coincidentally, shares the same first name as his ex-wife. Late in the book Mierau mentions that he has come to the end of his therapy sessions and has found them of limited value. On the other hand, in the chapter "Inventing My Family," he uses psycho-therapeutic strategies to engage with his children and help them manage their trauma of abandonment. The diagnosis of attachment disorder assigned to his eldest adopted son and presented to the reader in the form of a checklist of typical behaviours (sleep issues, hoarding, lying, explosive tantrums), seems to be a useful sense-making tool for Mierau, but it provides little comfort. Imagining himself the father of a future criminal, Mierau writes, "I loved Peter, but he scared me" (141).

Yet in addition to these events in what we might call the "attachment plot" of *Detachment*, Mierau's memoir implicitly challenges some of the premises of attachment theory in deeper terms. Specifically, by yoking the story of his father's trauma to his children and to himself, Mierau broadens the psychological script of attachment which views subjectivity as individuated, mechanistic, and historically decontextualized, rather than rooted in "communal memory" (Cleary 40). In detaching from attachment theory, *Detachment* probes the historical, cultural, and political circumstances of grief and loss inherent in the shared "break events" of both transnational adoption and Mennonite exile. That

is, *Detachment* refuses attachment theory's common sense: its view of "cultural absences and political wounds as the pathology of individuals" (Cleary 35).

In Rose J. Cleary's feminist assessment of Bowlby's legacy, attachment theory "not only describes but prescribes the nature of our psychological lives and ills" (40). That is, we look for and then explain adopted children's "behaviours" through a very particular – not to mention western European – lens that privileges therapeutic practice and vocabulary over other cultural forms of knowing and remembering that structure relationships. Bowlby's theory of attachment stressed mechanism over meaning (Cleary 39), but in the struggle for meaning and connection that underlies *Detachment*, it gradually emerges that, for Mierau, the cultural texts he shares with his children – opera, *Star Wars*, the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, and family holidays to South Carolina and Cuba – are more meaningful than therapy, as are the fictions he must invent in the absence of historical certainty.

Storytelling

The epigraph to *Detachment* is drawn from Patty Cogen's 2008 book *Parenting Your Internationally Adopted Child*. It reads, "A child's post-traumatic stress symptoms, including explosive and uncontrolled emotions, are significantly reduced when he hears the parent tell the story of the traumatic events, specifically acknowledging the child's feelings and perceptions about them" (n.pag). The epigraph affirms Mierau's decision to tell not only the story of his children's trauma, but also his father's – two separate family histories that are now linked through him. While the epigraph refers specifically to adoptive families, the irony is that Mierau himself has never heard the story of his own family's trauma from his father, and thus turns to research, the heritage tour, and finally fictional invention to fill in the blanks left by his father's silence.

The therapeutic value of storytelling is announced in the Cogen epigraph. But as the storyteller, Mierau is in a complicated position vis-à-vis the claim that children derive emotional resilience from hearing the story of their trauma told by a parent. For Mierau knows only fragments of both his father's and his sons' stories, and can claim ownership over neither of them. His father's refusal or inability to relate what he witnessed as a child is a key theme of *Detachment*. Mierau himself has experienced little of the comfort that might come from hearing his father tell the story of

his family's traumatic past. Most of what he knows comes from his Aunt Lil, who was also a witness to the same atrocities and wartime displacement as Mierau's father.

Mierau avoids casting himself as a victim of his father's silence, or as trauma survivor. He is neither. Yet Mierau's childhood does share some of the themes of orphanhood, including thirty-four different addresses by the age of seventeen (16), and a sense that "friendships never lasted long" by the age of five, his father having kept the family constantly on the move. Similarly, institutionalized children, especially those who are shifted between multiple placements in state foster systems, are often reluctant to form deep relationships for fear of interruption. While early in the book Mierau acknowledges that he had a "happy childhood" (17), the dialogue with the therapist in the book's opening chapter indicates that suppressed anger with his father's detachment and "inexpressiveness" (167) might be at the root of negative patterns that affect both Mierau's relationship with his wife and his attachment struggle with his sons.

> "What's difficult, Maurice?" the therapist asks.
> "Paying attention." I paused, trying to put my difficulty into words. "I'm never completely with my sons or Betsy. Often I'm thinking about work. I want to write a book about my dad's childhood and Peter and Bohdan's."
> "So you're writing a book about people you ignore. How come?" (19-20)

This is a highly reflexive moment in *Detachment*, one of several. The book the reader holds in her hands is both the obstacle and the cure to Mierau's "difficulty." As the audience for the memoir, we become aware of what has been sacrificed – the father's time and attention to his family – so that we can read a memoir about the multi-generational legacy of fathers' absences, either through death, abandonment, or inattention. Yet late in the book Mierau writes, "My own grief had shallower roots than my father's or my sons', yet I was the one exploring their earliest memories. Peter did not do so in his diary, nor did my father in his autobiography. The only way to numb my pain was to keep writing this book, to try to catch up with my family by typing" (178). Mierau's is the historian's pain of not knowing, of dead ends, of gaps in the record. Crucially, in the absence of reliable information, Mierau invents in order to remember. Late in the book, he writes the story of his grandfather's torture and execution so that he might construct the kind of plausible family history that his father is unable or unwilling to relate. The separate traumas endured by his biological and adoptive family members prompt rather than shut down

creative invention. Writing becomes a form of self-soothing, with the reader standing in for the therapist.

If the pain of not knowing is strong for Mierau, it is so for his children as well. Mierau and Betsy hire a private investigator named Olga to unearth as much information as she can about Peter and Bohdan's first family and the circumstances that led to their placement in Ukrainian state care. In a scene near the end of *Detachment*, Mierau and Betsy tell their sons—and the reader of the memoir – what they have learned from Olga. The parents decide ahead of time that Betsy will be the one to tell the boys what they have discovered because "I [Mierau] would have begun to weep and mix up the details" (179). In his written account of this moment, Mierau describes his sons' embodied responses to the details of their birth family's history. As readers we are brought into a very intimate scene – witnesses to two children's profound grief as it registers in their very bodies.

Internationally adopted children often know very little about their birth families. Like many parents of transnational adoptees, Mierau and Betsy tell their children what is known about their birth family in the spirit of full disclosure and adoptees' rights to information about their birth culture, a right enshrined in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Homans 112). This convention, together with the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, set the standards for international adoption agencies, the prevention of child trafficking across international borders, and pre-adoption training and education for prospective adoptive parents. But this scene also raises certain ethical questions about truth telling and disclosure. Who gets to tell whose story, and under what circumstances? Mierau writes that "Peter often preferred the beautiful lie to the difficult truth" (179). Another name for the beautiful lie might be, simply, fiction.

Orphanhood and fiction have an abiding affinity with one another in many cultural traditions, while adoption is often regarded as an invented or "as-if form of family-making" (Homans 2). But more than simply providing an exciting narrative of a hero's separation, loss, and reunification (with either the parent or the self), fiction has an important role in adoptees' management of the meaning of their experience and identity formation. In the absence of verifiable information, many adoptees invent elaborate stories about their birth parents and the circumstances that led to their displacement from their first families. Adoptees' origin fictions about their birth families are a well-known phenomenon in the adoption community, and are regarded as powerful coping strategies – "psychologically necessary fantasies" – for adoptees

(Homans 154). In guaranteeing adoptees' right to information about their own "background," the UN Convention, with the best of intentions, privileges difficult truths over beautiful lies. But we might also ask what right we have as adoptive parents – I will take this opportunity to disclose that I am one myself – to disrupt our children's beautiful lies with the difficult truths? Even if the Convention on the Rights of the Child privileges the right to authentic historical data about a child's cultural "background," what text would offer such airtight information? In *Detachment*, the answer is far from evident. After all, Olga's report, positioned as *the* truth-telling document at the heart of the memoir, is also a kind of story. Although grounded in a fact-gathering model of empirical investigation, Olga's report, or what we might call the "authenticity narrative," is also, partial, incomplete, full of gaps and elisions; it does not and cannot tell the full story. Olga's report is conveyed by letter, it is written or translated into English, which is likely not Olga's first language, then related orally to Peter and Bohdan by Betsy, then told to us by Mierau as he remembers and interprets it. It is thus a highly mediated and remediated story, and we haven't even considered the question of Olga's oral and/or written sources. It is in many ways every bit as unbelievable as those private fictions Peter may have invented to manage his emotions. As Homans writes, "the lack of connection to birth parents and to cultural origins [may or may not be] traumatic, [but] the desire for origins generates a tremendous creative power, even if fictions, and not some stable, singular truth about the past, are what that desire produces" (155). All origin narratives are forms of invention; the "authenticity narrative" produced in *Detachment* is one among many. Notably, Peter and Bohdan respond to their story – or is it Olga's story? – with a mixture of fascination and doubt.

Mierau's memoir raises important questions about the ethics of sharing adopted children's birth stories, and what it means to search for origins and roots, to share information, how to share it, and when. Activist adult adoptees are likely to read this scene of the memoir as a violation of Peter and Bohdan's right to privacy and to the control of their own story. Are the disclosures of the adoption memoir *for* the adoptee, the adoptive parent, or the reader? What if anything are we as readers to do with the "uncomfortable truths" of children's lives? Any parenting memoir, adoptive or not, inevitably invites a consideration of such questions and I do not have a ready set of answers here. Let me simply point out that *Detachment* animates two overlapping issues in the adoption community: 1) the understandable desire for authentic

knowledge of the past that many adoptees have, and 2) "the imaginative work that itself constitutes identity" (Homans 114). This overlap between authenticity and imagination is best demonstrated in the section of the book that follows the revelation of Peter and Bohdan's origin story. In "Back in the USSR," Mierau *himself invents* the story of his grandfather Cornelius Mierau's murder – the origin, or *an* origin, of his father's trauma. Mierau writes that he had come to a "dead end" as far as his grandfather's story was concerned. "There were no official records other than his death certificate, and no witnesses had survived. For raw material I had interviewed my surviving uncles who had been in Soviet prisons, and read Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* more than once" (205). In the absence of other records, Mierau invents scenes, dialogue, a persona for Cornelius, and witnesses to his torture and execution. The story ends abruptly with Mierau's statement: "I stopped typing. Somehow the act of imagining my grandfather's horrific death, the brutality of his end, had laid something to rest in me. I sent a copy to my father and he had nothing to say about it. But his silence no longer frustrated me" (210). This "imaginative work" prompts a sense of resolution for Mierau that replaces or compensates for his need for his father to tell this story, a dimension of the memoir that resembles Miriam Toews's autobiography of her father in *Swing Low*. Mierau invents for himself and his father – who is an orphan of the war – not a "beautiful lie" but a true-life fiction, one that is accepted without comment by Mierau's father.

Mierau thus takes on the therapeutic task of the storytelling parent, while his father becomes the traumatized listening child announced in the Cogen epigraph, a role-reversal that might go some way towards repairing old attachment wounds for both. But here I also want to argue that Mierau's imagining of Cornelius Mierau's violent death presents yet another challenge to attachment theory. That is, "Cornelius Mierau" – Mierau's grandfather – functions in the text as an "imaginal other" whose life and death is honoured by Mierau's invented memory of him (Cleary 38). Bowlby's theory, grounded as it was in the paradigmatic scenarios of separation and loss, was premised on the rejection of the kinds of imaginative forms of identification with the dead that Mierau dramatizes in *Detachment*. As Cleary demonstrates, mourning rituals were interpreted by Bowlby and other psychologists of his generation as acts for and about the survivor, "envisioning the lives of the living as detached from the dead" (Cleary 40). Grief became a staged "process," the loss of the other enfolded into the private self-making project, rather than a

communally oriented event that brought the dead into living dialogue with their mourners. In sharing the story of his grandfather's death with his children (and the reader of the memoir), Mierau invites us all to participate in his birth family's ongoing story while, by implication, inviting his children into a space of communal memory and invention of the birth family from whom they are separated.

Language

I have argued that *Detachment* questions the premises of various tools of meaning, including the adoption memoir, heritage tourism, historical evidence-gathering, and attachment theory. I want briefly to argue that *Detachment* also questions the building block of all of those forms: language itself, both written and spoken. One of the sources of tension in the early days of the boys' arrival is Mierau's need for silence so that he can think and write, and the children's (especially Peter's) need to talk, often at "rock concert" volumes (122). While Mierau refers to himself as verbally withdrawn, like his own father, Peter is verbally explosive, like many trauma survivors. Yet it is also at the level of language that Peter and Mierau make strong connections—their "relations" are linguistic rather than biological. In one scene, for example, Mierau and Peter argue about the meaning of the word "attractive." Mierau tries to impose meaning by asserting that the word Peter really means to use is "destructive," but Peter doesn't agree. After some debate, and with tension rising, Mierau finally declares:

> "Peter, you can't use words as if they have a private meaning just for you. …"
> "Yes I can." (195)

Calling himself a "hypocrite" (196), Mierau later admits that he too has his own private definition of attractive, one that includes some destructive qualities. The tone of this nonsensical, or perhaps anti-sensical scene is ambiguous: it is playful, but we also hear frustration in Mierau's voice, one that arises less from being a parent of young children than from the writerly task he imposes on himself to wrest sense from the world with language. ("We live in a world where a lot of things don't make any sense.") Peter feels none of the constraints around language and its meaning that Mierau does.

Language is also, of course, the tool of Mierau's trade. A running theme of *Detachment* is the emotional and financial stress faced by writers and those who live with them, and we realize, almost guiltily, that it is the demand of writing *Detachment* that leads to the therapy sessions described in the opening chapter. As Mierau later recalls, "in my third floor office, with the door closed, I tried to explore the connections between my father's terrible childhood and the adoption of my new sons, often just staring at the blank screen . . . . At mealtimes . . . my mind lived inside my fragmentary manuscript" (98). Through a series of literal and figurative withdrawals that he acknowledges at various points in the memoir – into his office, the Internet, nature poetry, the past, his manuscript – Mierau recognizes his father's patterns of avoidance and detachment. With his marriage in jeopardy, Mierau states to the therapist, "This is my last chance to be their father. They need that, and so do I" (20).

Although he grudgingly admits that therapy helps to repair his relationship with Betsy, it is in shared moments outside the demands of historical accuracy, truth telling, confession, and even written and spoken language that Mierau and his family start forging the bonds of love and belonging. For example, the sight gags in the Marx Brothers' Duck Soup made us "laugh like fools" (163) and bring a sense of release. A line from *Star Wars* "Search your feelings, Father" is significant for both Peter and Mierau. Peter's profound response to the music in the Verdi opera *Il Trovatore* fills Mierau with a love for him "more fierce than I ever had before" (185). A family holiday on the beaches of North Carolina prompts a feeling of being "rooted to them and to this spot" (204). In another example, a squabble over a paddleboat while on holiday in Cuba leads to this reflection: "Peter's beautiful, emphatically determined face was the image of my dilemma: I could not imagine being without him. His stubborn, joyous enthusiasm and dark anger resembled my own. But he was not an extension of my personality or my family history. He bore my name, but he was entirely himself" (216). I read these moments of realization, especially the final one, as a rejection of what Theodor Adorno called "identity thinking," where an object of thought is malformed by its incorporation into the meaning system of another. What I am calling Mierau's detachment theory is perhaps another name for Adorno's "negative dialectics," where the specificity of the suffering other is not appropriated but *noticed* and respected through embodied acts of attention (Adorno 203).

What unites these moments is that they are all "elsewhere" – in a different place, either literally or figuratively. They are a release

from everyday demands and routines, they are culturally other to Winnipeg, to Ukraine, to official Mennonite History. These moments and texts foreground image, sound, and touch. The suggestion seems to be that a family history is invented not so much through laborious research and long hours typing in front of the computer screen, or in the therapist's office, or in official documents or memoirs, but in shared moments that do not rely solely on language and its written forms to make sense of the world, the past, and each other.

Yet if Mierau questions the adequacies of language and the sacrifices it demands of professional writers, *Detachment* is not a book that "writes off" language altogether, or that writes its author out of a job. Mierau is by no means a naïve optimist when it comes to the powers of language and literature, but it seems clear, as I argued earlier, that writing *Detachment* was as much a source of healing as it was a cause of psychological stress. The power of language – even or especially language detached from the struggle for meaning, liberated from the demands of sense-making – is the note on which I want to end this article.

In the adoption community, the moment of "first contact" between parent and child is regarded as a profound, and profoundly ambivalent moment. Adoptive parents often compare it to the moment of birth, imbuing it with the language of the miraculous. For adoptees, the moment is often mixed with fear, confusion, and grief. Mierau's description of his and Betsy's first meeting with Peter in his Ukrainian orphanage – what was then his home – conveys some of that sense of emotional upheaval. Peter is "talking and talking without a pause for breath" – an early sign of his trauma that Mierau doesn't yet recognize as such (39). But it is in Peter's use of language – words, even words Mierau doesn't understand – that he first recognizes a bond:

> Oleg was no longer translating but I didn't care. The words no longer signified in their *meaning*. It seemed to me then that Peter experienced the world as I did, as words that tumbled out of mouths or fingers, not always under control, giant numbers of them like space probes sent to meet other sentient beings that must be out there somewhere. We'd made contact. (39)

In a world that often makes no sense, either with or without a translator, *Detachment* wrestles meaning from the ruins of displacement, historical authentication, personal storytelling practices, and language to forge a space of contact. The encounters described in Mierau's memoir between generations, and across geographical distances, are neither easy nor comfortable, but

transformative. *Detachment* prompts us to consider what it means to be brought into the history of another through adoption, and the adoption memoir.

Notes

[1] The auto-ethnographic announcements in *Detachment* are delivered with varying degrees of integration. The one I have just described is embedded seamlessly into the dialogue with the therapist, whereas others appear as "extraliterary supplements" to the broader narrative (Kasdorf 25). See for example page 82-83 of *Detachment*.

[2] The sense of frustration evident in Mierau's account resembles the disappointment and "'disenchantment'" with present-day Ukraine expressed by other Mennonite writers such as Sandra Birdsell. See Zacharias, "Reading," 90.

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