

# Bringing Experience to Consciousness: Reflections on Mennonite Literature, 2004

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It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day for lack  
of what is found there.

— William Carlos Williams,  
*from* “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”

The voices of most Mennonite writers are meant to be heard not only within the community but well beyond it. When our better writers shake up our spiritual complacency, challenge our cultural stereotypes, subvert our middle-class pretensions, and discredit our accumulated false myths, they achieve, at their best, literary universals that resonate for readers everywhere.

— Al Reimer, *from Mennonite Literary Voices*

Literature, at least in its modern Western incarnation, is about bringing consciousness—and sometimes unconsciousness—to words. The literary representation of consciousness takes various forms in poetry, in prose, in fiction, in drama, and in the many hybrids flourishing today. While artists speak with individual voices, their selves are shaped by particular communities and contexts, as well as by the larger cultural milieu. Thus art is always grounded in the regional and particular and situated in human time, culture, and place. As it gestures towards what some have called “universals,” it draws its energy from particulars of lived experience. Literature brings us the news of being human in collaboration with the conventions of literary forms, conventions that the best writers always strain against, just as they strain against the conventional norms of the societies in which they are situated.

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, Mennonite readers had to get the news of literature, if they sought it at all, from writers

who knew nothing of being Mennonite. During the past several decades, with the outpouring of creative writing in the United States and Canada by Mennonite writers of literary accomplishment and vision, English-speaking North American Mennonites can get this news from an increasingly wider array of poets and novelists, some of whom share their religious and cultural heritage and who offer their own interpretations of it. With the broader recognition of the value of regional and ethnic contexts in literature of the past several decades, Mennonite writers in the United States and Canada have found a niche in the publishing worlds of both countries. In reflecting on the recent development of Mennonite literature through 2004, and peering ahead a year or two, it is clear that not only does a Mennonite literature exist, it is flourishing. How long it will flourish as Mennonite literature, and for what audiences, remains to be seen. How one defines literature as Mennonite can also be contested. But the fact that Mennonites are writing literature, and that many different kinds of people are reading it, seems unlikely to change in the near future.

The genesis of Mennonite literature written in English, in both the United States and Canada, has been chronicled in a number of places, so I will rehearse it only briefly here.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, Mennonite literature was first recognized in Canada and has played a more prominent role in the literary scene there. This is not surprising when one considers that Mennonites in Canada comprise a larger percent of the population than they do in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Rudy Wiebe's first novel in 1962, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, is generally considered the beginning of Mennonite literature in English. Now recognized as one of Canada's leading novelists, Wiebe has since won the Governor General's award twice: in 1973 for *The Temptations of Big Bear* and in 1994 for *A Discovery of Strangers*. In the 1970s Patrick Friesen pioneered Mennonite poetry publication with several widely recognized collections and his strong publishing record continues to date. In the 1980s Mennonite women writers entered the literary scene, among them Di Brandt and Sarah Klassen, whose first volumes both won publication awards and who have continued to publish consistently since. Di Brandt's most recent collection of poetry, *Now You Care* (2004), was short-listed for three awards, including the Griffin Prize. Both fiction and poetry have continued to thrive in Canada, but fiction has most recently been in the limelight, as exemplified by an array of distinguished works released in the past few years, among them novels by Sandra Birdsell (*The Ruslander*, 2001, short-listed for the Giller Prize), Rudy Wiebe (*Sweeter than All the World*, 2002), Armin Wiebe (*Tatsea*, 2003, winner of the McNally-Robinson Book of the Year Award and the Margaret Lawrence Prize), and Miriam Toews (*A Complicated Kindness*, 2004, Governor-General's Award).<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, Mennonite literature has developed more slowly than in Canada and its primary achievements have been in poetry. The publication in 1992 of Julia Kasdorf's first collection of poetry, *Sleeping Preacher*, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press, and the publication of four of her poems in *The New Yorker*, serve as a landmark for the recognition of Mennonite literature by a wider reading public in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Since the publication of *Sleeping Preacher*, most of the literary activity in Mennonite literature in the United States has continued to be in the genre of poetry with award-winning collections by Juanita Brunk, Jeff Gundy, Keith Ratzlaff, Betsy Sholl, and most recently Joanne Lehman.<sup>5</sup> Cascadia Publishing House (formerly Pandora Press US), an independent publisher of Anabaptist titles, has recently taken a strong interest in poetry by Mennonites, publishing poetry volumes by Ann Hostetler and David Wright in 2002 and 2003, and introducing the "Cascadia Poetry Series" in 2005 with volumes by Dallas Wiebe, Cheryl Denise Miller, and Shari Wagner. In addition, Cascadia has published a creative nonfiction memoir by Cynthia Yoder as well as Jeff Gundy's most recent collection of essays, *Walker in the Fog: On Mennonite Writing*.

In the past few years a number of Mennonite poets have ventured into the genres of the essay and creative nonfiction, writing about the contexts from which their voices and work have emerged, and have sometimes served as arbiters of the emerging Mennonite literary culture. Jeff Gundy's *A Community of Memory: My Life with George and Clara* (1996) explores the little-known history of his Amish ancestors who immigrated to Illinois from Alsace in the mid-nineteenth century and examines the ways in which retelling their stories has shaped his own consciousness. *Scattering Point: The World in a Mennonite Eye* (2003) collects Gundy's essays on his more recent Mennonite past. Julia Kasdorf's *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (2001), a collection of her essays, serves as both memoir and cultural criticism in its exploration of the effect of publication on her relation to her community as well as the places, images, and experiences that have shaped her artistic consciousness. She further investigates the effects of place and culture on artistic production in her biography of Pennsylvania writer Joseph W. Yoder in *Fixing Tradition: Joseph W. Yoder, Amish American* (2002). Kasdorf, Gundy, and Hostetler have all contributed essays to *The Measure of My Days: Essays in Honor of John Ruth* (2004) to commemorate this important Mennonite writer, preacher and teacher's contribution to the evolution of Mennonite writing. Jean Janzen's *The Elements of Faithful Writing*, based on her Menno Simons lectures at Bethel College, will be published in 2005 by Pandora Press. The anthology of poetry by writers from Mennonite

contexts which I edited, *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (University of Iowa Press 2003), includes an introduction and an appendix on the development of Mennonite literature. Although the publication date of this anthology is recent, a number of the poets it represents have already published new collections, among them Di Brandt's *Now You Care*, Jeff Gundy's *Deerflies* (2004) and Jean Janzen's *Piano in the Vineyard* (2004). Shari Wagner's first collection, *Evening Chore* (2005), and a number of new voices have emerged, a testimony to the ongoing literary productivity of Mennonite poets.

It was my personal encounter with poetry by Mennonite writers in the 1990s that led me to edit *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*. While this collection brought together work by United States Mennonite poets for the first time, in the spirit of Hildi Froese Tieszen's anthologizing of Mennonite poetry and short fiction in Canada in the 1990s, it also includes six Canadian poets. The work of editing *A Cappella* involved the pleasurable task of reading poetry by writers from a wide array of Mennonite contexts and discovering the ways in which their voices reflected "selves" created by radically different Mennonite communities. Because the anthology was a response to my initial "discovery" of Mennonite writing, and because Mennonite readers—beyond an initiated few—are still discovering the extraordinary literary productivity among their fellow Mennonites, perhaps some reflections on my journey as its editor will serve as an exemplum of how such reading can "change one's life."

The first Mennonite poet I read was Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, whose poem "I am Dancing with my Mennonite Father," caught my eye on a serendipitous browse through *The American Scholar* in 1985. This poem won the magazine's Elinore Smith poetry prize that year. The first Mennonite poet I met was Julia Kasdorf in the spring of 1993 at Elizabethtown College at a conference on the Amish. I had read Kasdorf's poetry a few years before, astonished at the bold voice and clear images from an Amish and Mennonite heritage that I shared. Although I was both a Mennonite and a poet, as well as a scholar of American Ethnic literature, I had not previously encountered writing about explicitly Mennonite subjects by Mennonite writers in a major literary venue. In my own poetry I had avoided Mennonite imagery; I simply didn't know how to write out of that part of my experience. I had not attended a Mennonite college, although my parents were alums of Hesston and Goshen Colleges, and I had lived outside of Mennonite circles for most of my adult life. I was only dimly aware that any such thing as a Mennonite writing "scene" existed in its fledgling stages. Yet my Mennonite upbringing had indelibly shaped not only my values, but my very way of seeing and being in the world. And since bringing the unconscious to life in language is the task of the writer, knowing that

others had given voice to this part of their experience hinted to me that perhaps it was possible to do so.

The summer after I met Kasdorf, I discovered a book by Jeff Gundy on one of the dining room tables at Camp Friedenswald during family camp. While I was reading *Inquiries*, two young men on the staff came over and asked me if I knew their teacher, Jeff, who was a really cool guy. The next year, when I attended the Cincinnati Mennonite Arts Weekend, I began to get a bigger picture of what was happening in poetry among Mennonites. Not only were Mennonites writing, they were beginning to read each other. Not only did I meet both Gundy and re-encounter Kasdorf at this weekend, but I also met Raylene Hinz-Penner and heard the name of the *infant terrible*, Di Brandt, whispered with awe among those in the know as “one of the angry poets.” I learned that many of these poets had met each other at the first Mennonite/s Writing conference at the University of Waterloo, organized by Hildi Froese Tiessen, and heard rumors of another one planned for 1997 at Goshen College in Indiana by Ervin Beck.<sup>6</sup> I began to wonder whether I was missing out on something. After hearing David Waltner-Toews read his Tante Tina poems and meeting Cynthia Yoder at a subsequent Mennonite Arts Weekend, I began to wonder where I could find work by a group of Mennonite poets all in one place. So the anthology was born out of my own curiosity and desire to locate poets writing out of their Mennonite heritage. Now, a year after its publication, I keep mentally adding new poets to a revised version in my head as I encounter writers such as J. L. Conrad, Rhoda Janzen, and G. C. Waldrep.

Poetry brought me back to the church again after a long period of living away from Mennonites. I had always loved hymn singing, in which one could be re-immersed in a bath of sound after a long drought. But in hymn singing, everyone is singing the same words and tune. While our voices merge in harmony, our inward perceptions remain secrets from each other. Poets brought me the news from minds caught in the multiple, simultaneous worlds of contemporary consciousness. The poetry showed me that the imaginative space for interpreting life and spirituality among Mennonites was broader than I had previously experienced. Perhaps in the interest of preserving community decorum, Mennonites have been reluctant to make these interior worlds public. The invitation of contemporary Mennonite poets to others in their community to honor such complexity through art has been long overdue, and perhaps accounts for the fertile ground on which their words have fallen.

The traditional reluctance among Mennonites to embrace the imaginative, the individual voice, the “lie” of literature in favor of the statement of fact, the more sober narrative of history, the pragmatism of sociology and statistics, is something of a cliché today, but was often

a harsh reality for aspiring writers from an earlier generation. Elaine Sommers Rich's novel for children, *Thee Hannah*, published in 1960 by Harper and Row, explores this conflict in its literature-loving heroine with persons in her community who object to literature as unbiblical. Fortunately, in the novel at least, her grandfather bishop brings the fractured community back together by reading clearly metaphorical poetry from the Psalms. My own family did not object to the arts; in fact, my parents were writers--a historian and an anthropologist. But personal writing, as projects later in life showed, proved extremely challenging for them. In their encouragement of their children's imaginative endeavors, they suggested that literary pursuits were the task of a future generation.

One of the first things I had to do as an anthologist was to define "Mennonite." Since my aim was to find a broad representation of good poets, I searched across a broad spectrum of Mennonites. As the merger of the Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference (GC) denominations in the United States was taking place, I liked to joke that my anthology is far more inclusive than the newly merged entity institutionally defined as "The Mennonite Church USA." First of all, the anthology includes six Canadian poets—Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen, Sarah Klassen, Barbara Nickel, Audrey Poetker, and David Waltner-Toews--fully one quarter of the twenty-four poets in the volume; more, if you include the "cross-over" writers such as Leonard Neufeldt, who had a distinguished career as an academic in the United States, but who published all three of his poetry collections in Canada; or Jean Janzen, who was born in Canada and published her first volume of poetry there, but who has lived most of her life in the United States. Two of the six Canadian poets spent formative time in the United States as Goshen College students, where Rudy Wiebe also spent a fertile three years in the 1960s.

The United States writers in the volume represent a range of Mennonite traditions, from the Mennonite Brethren to the General Conference to the Swiss Mennonite. These poets also include new Mennonites and "honorary Mennonites," those who have spent enough formative time with Mennonites, either as children or as adults, to significantly shape their "consciousness." Mennonite Brethren poet Jean Janzen, with six volumes of poetry to her name and one book of prose, is the most prolific of the Mennonite poets in the United States. As the author or translator of eight hymn texts in *Hymnal*, whose intended audience is also broader than the Mennonite Church USA, she is an artist who serves the church passionately and faithfully, a founding member of a congregation which embraces the arts, and a poet who expresses in her work an understanding of grace and the sensuality of spiritual experience, more fully articulated in the

context of Mennonite Brethren theology than in the Pietist-resistant Swiss Mennonite version. The anthology also includes the poetry of Janet Kauffman, whose long poem, "Working Tobacco" is the one my Lancaster County in-laws turned to first and affirmed with nods, "Yep, it was just like that." Kauffman, who grew up in Lancaster County and worked tobacco on her grandfather's farm, is not a member of a Mennonite church, although she attended her grandparents' Mennonite church and summer Bible school while growing up. She is best known for her award-winning experimental fiction, and is the author of *Collaborators*, a novel explicit in its Mennonite content yet completely fresh and free of stereotype and filled with images of female strength and tobacco farming. I will discuss it later in this essay. Kasdorf, nee Spicher, artfully braids together the strands of Swiss and Russian Mennonite history in her poem, "Mennonites," and in some of her other work as well. A denizen of Big Valley, Pennsylvania, one of the older, more remote and untouched Mennonite and Amish settlements in Pennsylvania, she explores the stories of her family and community with the bittersweet love of a daughter and the detachment of an ethnographer. Her status among Mennonite writers in the United States parallels that of a young Rudy Wiebe in Canada, in the sense that she has opened up territory for other writers by mapping what is both instantly recognizable and yet unarticulated in the Swiss Mennonite sensibility, and in the sense that she has paid a personal price for this in relation to her Mennonite community of origin. In addition, her work brings the issue of gender to the fore, as featured in the title of her second volume of poetry, *Eve's Striptease*. Her deeply Mennonite-content poems, Kasdorf has recently published a book of essays entitled *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life*. Yet in the introduction to that book she offers an Episcopalian perspective, as if to underscore the necessary distance a writer must set between deeply felt experience and her ability to write about it. Betsy Sholl was not raised Mennonite, but is what the Quakers would call a "fellow traveler," one whose life has intersected with Mennonites for several extended periods of her life—at Mennonite Fellowships in Maine, in Pittsburgh, in Lewisburg—and who practices in her own life the values of peace, service, and mutuality taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, Raylene Hinz-Penner, and Keith Ratzlaff come from the General Conference Mennonite tradition and Russian Mennonite roots. Of the three, only Hinz-Penner is active in a Mennonite congregation, the new Mennonite Church USA. Her resonant speaking voice and Oklahoma cowgirl boots have enlarged my picture of what it means to be a Mennonite woman. Of the remaining ten poets in the volume, eight were raised in the Swiss Mennonite tradition, and two—Todd Davis and David Wright—are adult converts. Two

others—Jane Rohrer and Juanita Brunk—were raised and educated in the Virginia Mennonite Conference and at Eastern Mennonite College, but neither identifies as a Mennonite today. Jessica Smucker Falcon, raised in a Lancaster Mennonite community and partly educated at LMH and Goshen College, does not attend a Mennonite Church, but loosely identifies herself with a heritage that is so overwhelming it is still present even in her absence from its congregations. This leaves a total of five poets out of twenty-four in *A Cappella* who were born and raised in a Mennonite congregation descended from Swiss Mennonite heritage, the predominant Mennonite strand in the United States, and who are current members of the primary Mennonite denomination in the United States, the Mennonite Church USA.

They are Jeff Gundy, Carmen Horst, Sheri Hostetler, Shari Wagner Miller, and me. Jeff, a professor at Bluffton College, is a midwestern poet known for his wit, his postmodern self-consciousness, and his obsession with humility. His response to the epic overtones of Kasdorf's solemn and ironic poem "Mennonites" pictures the "backslidden/ overlearned, doubtridden, egodriven/ quasibeliever who would be less anxious/ and surer of salvation if [he] could/ only manage to give up the car,/ the CD player, and coaching soccer."<sup>7</sup> He returns over and over to themes of renunciation, guilt, and humility, probing the hypocrisy in unquestioned comforts of middle class Mennonite life. In recent work he has moved closer and closer to an embrace of the world so often cautioned against by his denomination. It is not the world of fancy coffee and soccer coaching, but rather the natural world and the mystical union with the divine that closeness to nature invites. A pivotal moment occurs in *Rhapsody with Dark Matter*, where something pulls him under the water while swimming and holds him there, suggesting a deeper encounter with the unconscious, the well-spring of the writer attempting to bring new things to consciousness. Sheri Hostetler, like Gundy, asks us to examine our ethic of renunciation. Now a Mennonite pastor at the First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, Hostetler was the founding editor of *Mennonot: A Zine for Mennos on the Margins*, its 13 issues a treasure trove of Mennonite humor on the edge and a cutting edge place for Mennonite writers, both Canadian and US, to appear in print to an inside audience already selected for its shedding of superficial pieties. Whether or not the dry wit of these poets, their embrace of the natural world, and insistence on paring down to essentials is due to the Swiss Mennonite theology, farming origins, or association with Bluffton College (Sheri Hostetler was a Bluffton graduate) is open to speculation. But both Gundy and Hostetler are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the church through poetry. In an interview Hostetler told me that it was writing poetry that brought her back to the church.<sup>8</sup>

Carmen Horst, who grew up in the Argentine Chaco, and Shari Miller Wagner, who grew up in Indiana but traveled with her doctor father to Somalia and spent time on an Indian Reservation as an adult, write about encounters with those from other cultures in their poems, "Interpreter" and "Second Language," respectively. Through poetry these writers express the contemporary aspect of North American Mennonite experience that is dedicated to encounters with members of other cultures through service. These poems, in particular, address the challenge of representing the other without subsuming the other into the self. In "Interpreter," the self of the speaker is almost lost as the act of mediating communication smears her with the breath and desires of those between whom she serves as transmitter. "It is like preparing an egg for Pysanky," Horst writes, the self must be emptied of the yolk of being in order to serve others. That the poet does not empty herself permanently, but still yearns to lose herself either in service to others or in ecstatic communion with the natural world, is evident in her other poems in the anthology. Miller, in "Second Language," associates her coming of age and her discovery of writing with her observation of symbols and signs in Somalia, the sacred texts that adolescent Somali girls wear inside of leather bracelets "sewn shut like their virginity." When she returns to Indiana cornfields, she discovers that they have been written on by her memories of Somalia, gaining new meaning. My own poetry in this volume is also focused on relationship. The "Female Ancestor" who is always bending over to tend others' needs finds her alter-ego in "The Priestess of Love," whose eagerness to embrace the world and its creatures will find her bound to those she loves.

Novels written by Mennonites in the United States are few and therefore it is also difficult to make any generalizations about Mennonite fiction from them, but a number of recent publications, among them *Searching for Intruders* (2002) by Stephen Raleigh Byler, *Eyes at the Window* by Evie Yoder Miller (2003), and *The Book of Flying* (2003) by Keith Miller, suggest that the scarcity of fiction by Mennonites may soon become a thing of the past. Except for Evie Miller Yoder, these writers are covert about their Mennonite identity. The variety of their work, however, represents a wide range, from the historical and realistic (*Eyes at the Window*) to the fantastic and allegorical (*The Book of Flying*). The most stylistically and psychologically probing, however, is represented, in my opinion, by *The Collaborators*, a 1986 novel by Janet Kauffman, an experimental writer and a pioneer of Mennonite subject matter, and the more recent *Searching for Intruders*, by Stephen Raleigh Byler. Both of these novels distinguish themselves by transcending both the tendency towards stereotype and the dogmatic realism that plagued some of the earlier attempts at fiction writing by Mennonites. In *The Collaborators*, Kauffman creates a powerful

portrait of the mother-daughter relationship in which the Mennonite mother is an overwhelming presence of both acceptance and dissent in her understanding of Mennonite community. "My mother lied to me about everything," the novel opens. "She told me she believed in Hell. She told me she was a pacifist, a good Mennonite, and could never kill, not even in self-defense.... On the sly she told me, and more than once, that the world had nothing to do with God."<sup>9</sup> This strong mother, delineated as an avid swimmer, skilled tobacco farmer, and quirky commentator on the world suffers a stroke and in the second half of the book her silent daughter must learn to speak. She does this by remembering her mother's voice, but also through a correspondence with a friend of her mother's who is a lapsed Mennonite and scholar of French Medieval literature, the *Lais* of Marie de France. The spare plot of this novel suggests that the writer-daughter must draw both on the strength of the mother and her spoken word, but also on the written world of the Mennonite woman author and scholar who has traveled afar and connected with stories of women, including the feminine divine beyond the community, as she develops her voice.

Stephen Byler grew up in Lancaster County the son of a prominent Mennonite lawyer and attended Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) before Yale and Columbia (EMU is not mentioned on the dust jacket—one must be in the Mennonite circle to find out his origins). His first novel, *Searching for Intruders*, is written in vignettes that allude to a troubled relationship between a violent father and a son seeking for "heterosexual masculine tenderness," as critic David Plante puts it. Byler's novel is a unique portrayal of a consciousness fresh out of the world of sophisticated and worldly Mennonite young people seeking to live in contemporary culture incognito, but burdened by the old-fashioned legacy of a belief in kindness and mutuality. The passivity and caution of his protagonist, Wilson Hues, when combined with his self-absorption, seem to draw him into troubled relationships with women. When he psyches himself up to some form of gentle self-assertion he knots up in self-conscious agony. The troubled consciousnesses of the characters in Kauffman's and Byler's stories are redeeming in their honesty, and haunted by a tragic awareness that things will not work out for long. Both of these novels are rooted in the body and frank about sex. Byler's book intersperses glimpses of communion with the natural world, either in Montana or Pennsylvania—pastoral landscapes intruded on by human guilt or violence—with scenes of passionate lovemaking. So it seems that the "quiet in the land" of Swiss Mennonite heritage share themes of communion with the natural world, humor about humility, an obsession with renunciation of self in service of the other, and a passion for sex. No wonder they've been so quiet all these years.

What does it mean to be a Mennonite writer? My definition includes a writer who is a practicing member of a Mennonite congregation, as well as a writer who has been raised in one of the many distinctive varieties of Mennonite community, where the cultural and religious context permeates the psyche and fuses with identity. For such writers, bringing words to consciousness often means examining hidden assumptions, deeply held values, and threads of identity formed in their lives, especially their early years as Mennonites. Because of the different histories and contexts of Mennonite community, across the borders of the United States and Canada as well as within them, it is difficult to generalize about Mennonite writers or about what they represent. Poets are not theologians or sociologists; they do not provide doctrine or cultural theory. Rather, they write “out of” lived experience, and selves formed in a cultural context.

Lived experience. In my understanding, this is what Mennonite faith and life is all about. The Mennonite faith, while based on a scriptural hermeneutic, has always been mistrustful of words not scriptural, of religious symbols found in Christian art, and even of forms of scriptural interpretation, such as Biblical inerrancy, that violate the often unarticulated but deeply felt values of community life. Mennonites have long emphasized action over words, doing rather than saying, prioritizing the lived body of Christ in action in congregational community over creedal definitions of faith. How does one become a disciplined, disciplined member of this body? Through the body: the senses, relationship, work, right action, congregational worship, communal prayer.

There is a great deal of variety among Mennonite groups, whose emphasis on the gathered body of believers and mutuality in relationships both divides and unites them, depending on one’s perspective. In other words, the emphasis on the body of believers causes the formation of high-context local subcultures that often exclude others. Conflict on matters of theology and praxis sometimes arises between such local groups, as well within them. Conflict among members of Mennonite congregations in the past has often led to the formation of splits and splinter groups. Some differences are hard to tolerate in a community where members are supposed to be parts of “one body.” Yet this emphasis on community itself creates a rich psychic geography for writing. For instance, although I grew up attending church in the Eastern Pennsylvania territory often associated with the writer and historian John Ruth, I already knew as a young adult that the community he described in *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* was too confined to adequately represent either my experience or the places my imagination wanted to travel. Even my relationship to Mennonite Community involved travel. My family drove 22 miles

each way from the suburbs of Philadelphia to a rural congregation in Franconia conference each Sunday, my father worked in the urban world of Philadelphia, and I attended a suburban school. My parents had joined their fortunes from two distant communities, the Amish of Big Valley, Pennsylvania and the conservative Mennonites of Tofield, Alberta to create our family. And there were layers of travel, education, and acculturation in between: summers spent visiting Hutterite colonies, weeks at my Old Order Amish Aunt's farm, time spent digging huge potatoes out of the garden on the Alberta home farm, and trips to Austria, Canada, Italy, Germany, France, and the Netherlands, as well as to the American cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, D.C.

The Mennonite community in which I, along with many other writers whose formative experiences include the regular crossing of cultural boundaries, am at home is the virtual community of discourse rather than the landed, isolated community that sometimes serves as a limited model of what community can be.<sup>10</sup> Gathering work from Mennonite writers has taught me that there is no representative "Mennonite Experience" or "Mennonite." Even trying to find population statistics for this paper has been a bewildering experience. Mennonites are passionately local, bound to particular histories and genealogies as well as spiritual and communal practices. But they are also a social, writerly people who are in the midst of flux and transition--in other words, very much alive. Mennonite literature is a way we can bring our own Mennonite experience to consciousness and share it with each other. I hope that in the midst of those arguments about deeply held traditions we will also open the doors to new Mennonite voices from African American, Cheyenne, Laotian, African, Indian and many other contexts. And at least in literature Mennonites should include among their numbers, in true Anabaptist spirit, the heretics, the fellow travelers, all those deeply marked and formed by Mennonite lived experience, including those who keep it alive by passionate resistance.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See both the introduction and appendix to *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2003. See also Jeff Gundy, "American Mennonite Poetry and Poets: Beyond Dr. Johnson's Dog," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. 71, no. 1, January 1997, 5-41. See also Ann Hostetler, "Three Mennonite Women Poets and the Beginnings of Mennonite Poetry in the US: Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, Jean Janzen, Jane Rohrer," *MQR*, vol. 77, no. 3, October 2003, 521-546. For further information on Canadian literature, see Hildi Froese Tiessen's introductions to *New Quarterly* 10, nos. 1 & 2, Spring and Summer 1990 and *Prairie Fire* 11, no. 2, Summer 1990. The most complete bibliographies of Mennonite Literature have

been compiled and are continually updated by Ervin Beck and can be found at [http://www.goshen.edu/english/ervinb/bibliographies/menno\\_us\\_bib/BeckBib.html](http://www.goshen.edu/english/ervinb/bibliographies/menno_us_bib/BeckBib.html) and [http://www.goshen.edu/english/ervinb/bibliographies/menno\\_us\\_bib/BeckBib.html](http://www.goshen.edu/english/ervinb/bibliographies/menno_us_bib/BeckBib.html)

- <sup>2</sup> Baptized members of the Mennonite Church USA are around 115,000 in 2004. According to 2003 Mennonite World Conference figures there are 323,000 Mennonites in the US if you include 80,000 Amish, 35,000 Conservative and Old Order Mennonites, 26,000 Mennonite Brethren, 20,000 Brethren in Christ, and 7,000 Beachy Amish. In Canada numbers reported by Mennonite World Conference include the 37,000 members of MC Canada plus 28,000 Old Order and other Conservative Mennonite Groups, and 35,000 Mennonite Brethren. In Canada, the overall population is much smaller (approaching 32 million) but the proportion of Mennonites is much larger than in the US. Secondly, in Canada, the government sponsored grants encouraged “ethnic” writing during the 1970s and 1980s in a climate that encouraged Mennonite writers to join this category. Mennonites, who in Canada tend to be relatively recent immigrants (within the past 100 years—130 if you count the earliest settlements) and have held onto their German language into recent history, are considered ethnic writers in Canada, where ethnicity seems to be based more on national origin and language than on race. Their literary output has been of such high quality that Hildi Froese Tiessen could write in 1990 that Mennonites were one of Canada’s leading literary ethnic groups (“Mennonite/s Writing in Canada: An Introduction.” *The New Quarterly*, vol. 10). In the US, on the other hand, where ethnicity has been used, especially during the 1990s, as a euphemism for people of color, and Mennonites tend to have immigrated much earlier than in Canada, one must often make an argument for Mennonites to be considered ethnic writers at all. In the United States, Mennonites are simply one of many hundreds of Christian sects vying for attention. To claim Mennonites as an ethnic group in the United States can be a problem for two reasons. First of all, privileging cultural definitions over religious ones seems like a secular imposition on religious identity, at least for some. Secondly, it highlights their white European origins and in the process marginalizes those of other cultural origins who are now members of our denomination in increasing numbers. The present climate among Mennonite leaders in the United States is to gesture towards the global Mennonite Church, where our institutions and our literature lag far behind this world picture. It is almost as though we are in a hurry to embrace all of our neighbors without first examining our own literary and cultural unconscious.
- <sup>3</sup> This essay is based on a conference paper, originally paired with a paper on Canadian Mennonite literature by Tom Penner, and delivered at the State of the Art of Mennonites in North American Conference at the University of Winnipeg in October 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> Several poets were published in major literary journals in the U.S. before 1992, including Jeff Gundy, Jean Janzen, Jane Rohrer, and Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, but none of them were granted award-winning book publication or exposure in such a major venue as *The New Yorker* before this time.
- <sup>5</sup> *Morning Song* was awarded the Wick Poetry Prize by Kent State University Press and will be published in March 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> A series of “Mennonite/s Writing” conferences, begun by Hildi Froese Tiessen at the University of Waterloo in 1990 and continued by Ervin Beck at Goshen College in 1997, and again in cooperation with Hildi Froese Tiessen in 2002, have brought many US and Canadian Mennonite writers into more intentional conversation. Another “Mennonite/s Writing” conference is scheduled for October 26-29, 2006 at Bluffton College.
- <sup>7</sup> How to Write the New Mennonite Poem” originally appeared in *Mennonot: A Zine for Mennos on the Margins*. Reprinted in *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, University of Iowa Press, 2003, with permission of the author.

<sup>8</sup> Unpublished essay by Sheri Hostetler.

<sup>9</sup> *The Collaborators*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1986, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> See Ann Hostetler, "Dancing on the Bridge: The Virtual Community of Mennonite Poetry" in *The Measure of My Days: Essays in Honor of John Ruth*, edited by Reuben Z. Miller and Joseph Miller, Cascadia Publishing, 2004.