

LGBT Mennonite Fiction: A Panel from Mennonite/s Writing VII

An Introductory Reflection

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The LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) Fiction Panel at the Mennonite/s Writing VII conference held at Fresno Pacific University in March 2015 began in community. At work on a gay Mennonite coming-of-age novel, I began to wonder about other queer Mennonite fiction. Julia Spicher Kasdorf directed me to the work of Daniel Shank Cruz. Daniel, in turn, pointed out the fiction of Jan Guenther Braun and Casey Plett. When Daniel and I met for coffee in the summer of 2014, we agreed there ought to be a panel on LGBT Mennonite fiction at Mennonite/s Writing VII, but had no sense of whether such a panel would be approved or welcomed. We approached Jan and Casey, and they shared our conviction that queer Mennonite fiction ought to be represented at Fresno. So in a spirit of optimism, we submitted our proposal. Not only was the panel approved, it was welcomed warmly. Indeed, by the time we began, the conference room was standing-room only.

The content of the panel will be clear from the following essays, both critical and personal, along with an excerpt from my novel in progress. Unfortunately, there is no record of the many insightful questions and earnest testimonials. What strikes me as I reflect back on the experience, however, is that for each us, the work of claiming our queer identities has involved clarification, amplification, concentration, and analysis. Each of us has admitted to having ducked our Mennonite identities, even letting them “lapse” at times—a product of the intolerance of so many Mennonite polities. Yet our Mennonite values—our cultural habits, ways of approaching the world, concern for the poor, the oppressed—have persisted, values that, of course, LGBT individuals so often share. It should not be necessary for anyone to have to choose between identifying as queer or Mennonite. Indeed, each of us has refused that choice, regardless of how the polities of the church see us, whether they recognize our lives as worthy. Our comings out have been profoundly intentional undertakings. Our work bears witness to our legitimacy as Mennonites *and* individuals. And if it is, perhaps, a particularly Mennonite impulse to splinter and factionalize over interpretative differences, the affirming response to the LGBT Fiction panel at Mennonite/s Writing VII demonstrated that it is also possible to forge Mennonite identities around inclusivity.