Book Reviews

Literary Reviews

Robert Zacharias, ed. *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016. Pp. viii+244. Softcover, $31.95.

The title of this volume is intriguingly ambiguous: it implies that Mennonite literature has entered a "post-identity" epoch, while at the same time suggesting the quest for a conception of Mennonite identity that could inform critical and theoretical discussion of Mennonite works. In the essays that make up this volume, it is clearly the latter aspect that stands in the foreground.

Robert Zacharias's "Introduction" presents a succinct but comprehensive and well-documented summary of the history of the various Mennonite communities in North America and the kinds of literary writing they have brought forth. In addition to this overview, which includes a discussion of past perspectives in Mennonite criticism, Zacharias also sets out the parameters that might frame a critical discussion of Mennonite literature in terms of identity theory in a contemporary context.

In his own contribution ("The Mennonite Thing"), Zacharias defines the latter as an "essentialized and decontextualized Mennonite identity" whose prevalence is partly explained by the fact that it can so readily be commodified. Although contemporary identity theorists see identity as hybrid and constructed, this trend is at

odds with the recent proliferation of identity-based theoretical and critical studies that focus on race, gender and ethnicity. Mennonite authors, for their part, continue to "directly invoke and explicitly explore Mennonite identity as one of [their] central concerns." They often do this using distancing strategies, a kind of disavowal in which – paradoxically – the identitary markers being disavowed reinforce the disavowed identity and, in the process, authenticate the Mennonite identity of the writer.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf delves further into the use of identitary markers referenced by Zacharias. In her analysis of "autoethnographic announcements," she points out that their function goes beyond providing explanatory context for non-Mennonites, and often represents a transgressive element targeting Mennonite "insiders" (she shows how autoethnographic inscription in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* is used to depict Mennonite piety as life-denying, and to characterize the smugness and hypocrisy of a small-town Mennonite community). The autoethnographic issue is taken up again in Paul Tiessen's essay on "Double Identity." Using Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* as an example, Tiessen reveals the distortion of content (and the author's intention) that often occurs in the inevitable "hybridization" of a work due to extratextual elements involved in literary publication, such as cover design and blurbing, for which non-Mennonite entities are usually responsible. In commodifying the content through extratextual elements outside the main body of the text, Tiessen argues, the content of the text itself ends up being distorted.

In "A Mennonite *fin de siècle*" Royden Loewen explores the changes wrought on Mennonite communities as a consequence of urbanization – especially since the end of the last century – resulting in economic success and assimilation into the social mainstream, but accompanied by cultural upheaval and a sense of uprootedness. Loewen invokes some of the best-known contemporary Mennonite writers of "transgressive" texts to show that, far from applauding this cultural shift into the mainstream of "modernity," many of them see in it a loss of authenticity, the *absence* of "traditional Mennonite virtues," those markers of Mennonite identity that have been obliterated in the monoculture and sterility of urbanization. A number of essays in this volume seem to confirm Loewen's thesis. Di Brandt, in her contribution, reiterates the regret she expresses in an earlier work at the erasure of the "free-spirited heritage" of the Mennonite villages, including its tolerance of otherness: "There was a lot of eccentricity of various sorts toler-

ated in the villages, much more than is allowed in our communities now."

The focus of Erwin Beck's essay ("Mennonite Transgressive Literature") is on the negative reactions of Mennonite readers who see "Mennonite transgressive literature" as in many ways distorting the norms, values and practises of the Mennonite community.[1] Notwithstanding his concern to "include and respect readers' understandings of Mennonite texts," Beck's implicit plea, with which his essay concludes, for an "alternative" to "transgressive" literature, reads as oddly prescriptive.

"After Ethnicity" by Anne Hostetler examines the doubly "othered" status of ethnic women writers. Using works by Di Brandt and Julia Spicher Kasdorf as examples, Hostetler thematizes the role of gender, voice and an "ethic of care" in Brandt's and Kasdorf's poetry, pointing to their potential for healing and restoration as well as to their validation of autonomy and desire. Di Brandt, in her own contribution to this volume, "In Praise of Hybridity," not only reinforces Hostetler's observations, but exhorts the Mennonite community at large to resist the exclusionary delimitations reflected in the position of many Mennonite churches to, instead, affirm the racial, gendered or ethnic other, pointing to the many forms of hybridization that have defined Mennonite history and culture as salient features of Mennonite identity itself. The essay that follows Brandt's, "Queering Mennonite Literature" by Daniel Shank Cruz, is even more explicitly programmatic: "…[Mennonite] critics should highlight … activist elements, … especially the recent trend of queer Mennonite literature."

Jeff Gundy's piece ("Towards a Poetics of Identity") points to the ways in which a reader's/writer's Mennonite identity and personal experience determine the experience of "the world" as well as that of reading (or writing) works of literature. If Gundy's essay privileges the role of personal (Mennonite) experience in the production and reception of literature, Jesse Nathan's "Question, Answer" focuses on the broader Mennonite cultural repertoire that manifests itself in individual works written by Mennonite authors, uncovering a kind of deep narrative structure based on the dialectical structure of catechesis that has played a central role in the history of Mennonite religion.

Magdalene Redekop ("Is Menno in There?") argues against the moralistic and ultimately teleological assumptions that underlie much contemporary theory, and proposes instead a dialogic model in which the reader/critic is attentive not only to what a text *says* but also to what it *does* and how it does it, an approach whose ef-

fectiveness is impressively illustrated in her reading of Patrick Friesen's poem "the man who invented himself." Such a dyadic model can accommodate variant readings, and involves acknowledging that a Mennonite reader will see/hear/recognize "inflections" in the text that may escape non-Mennonite readers. Invoking the notion of *Spielraum* (which Redekop translates as "play space" but which also translates as "latitude" or "scope") to designate the inherent openness of a literary text, Redekop cautions against privileging the biographical element in "Mennonite" works, as such "Mennonite" readings are often reductive.

The volume concludes with a contribution by Hildi Froese Tiessen ("Liberating the Mennonite Literary Text"). Tiessen's essay takes up a number of the issues raised by Redekop, although Tiessen seems more concerned with thematic elements. Like Redekop, Tiessen argues for a Mennonite critical discourse that accommodates the full context of Mennonite works rather than privileging their cultural specificity, thus "liberating" Mennonite texts from the reductiveness that has in the past characterized so much Mennonite critical writing on Mennonite works.

After Identity offers a comprehensive overview of issues to do with identity in Mennonite writing. Its publication coincides with a critical and theoretical trend that increasingly problematizes the notion of identity in literary works, a trend that is partly the result of a renewed interest in self-narration in the form of autofiction, autobiographies, memoirs and diaries. In exploring crucial aspects of identity and identitary marking as they manifest themselves in Mennonite literature and criticism, this volume will be an important source for researchers interested in that elusive entity, "the Mennonite Thing."

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Notes

[1] Such defensive reactions to perceived distortions of a community as seen through the depictions of fictional protagonists and their engagement with it are hardly limited to the Mennonite context. Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) caused an uproar in the Canadian Jewish community. Irène Némirovsky, author of *Suite française*, was vilified as a "self-hating Jew" by Jewish critics and as a "traitor" by French ones.