

Guest Editor's Foreword

As a general rule, it is rarely a good idea to invite a typical academic conference to sing – especially without advance notice, musical accompaniment, or lyrics. But when Elsie Neufeld requested a song from the audience that gathered for “Mennonite/s Writing VIII: Personal Narratives of Place and Displacement,” she had good reason to believe they could manage the task. After all, as Ann Hostetler noted in titling her anthology of Mennonite poetry in North America *A Cappella*, singing in harmony without accompaniment is “one of the few consistent artistic traditions among Mennonites since the Reformation” (xv). It was perhaps not a surprise, then, that this particular audience was both willing and able to oblige Neufeld’s request for “606,” responding with a robust and touching rendition of “Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow” in four-part harmony. And yet, even as I sang along in my warbling tenor, my thoughts turned to David Wright’s well-known poem in which a self-described “new Mennonite” considers his somewhat uncomfortable position in the pew next to those whom he ironically suggests “know better / what real Mennonites really are,” followed by his parenthetical confession that “(I need the book on 606)” (148-49). What are we to do, I wondered, with the deeply personal pull and push of our collective histories and traditions, particularly today? How are we to recuperate, celebrate, interrogate, and better understand the broader range of personal narratives told by Mennonites – which, after all, have not always been in harmony?

The essays in this issue’s JMS Forum explore these and the related issues that arose at the 2017 “Mennonite/s Writing VIII:

Personal Narratives of Place and Displacement” conference. For the opening essay, I invited the conference keynote, Dr. Julie Rak of the University of Alberta, to further explore the implications that her talk on the limits of nationalized literary studies might hold for Mennonite literary studies. Among her insights is an encouragement for those working in this field to embrace, rather than look to overcome, its relatively marginal status. A “desire” for “recognition by the larger paradigm,” Rak cautions, could risk leading Mennonite/s Writing away from the type of counter-cultural work that a subfield charged with its own set of histories, concerns, and perspectives is uniquely positioned to offer.

The remainder of the essays offer more focused examinations of personal narratives on the theme of ‘Place and Displacement’ from across the broader field of Mennonite/s writing. Hildi Froese Tiessen’s essay, for example, returns to the early personal-critical writing of Di Brandt and Julia Spicher Kasdorf to trace how these key poets’ strategic self-positionings were enabled by the emergence of postcolonial thinking about language and community in the early 1990s. Janice Schroeder’s essay, meanwhile, offers a deft exploration of the series of “overlapping displacement plots” that structure Maurice Mierau’s adoption memoir, *Detachment*, reminding readers of the interlocking histories that inform and strain even the most intimate of narratives.

The next two essays offer contrasting examinations of how poets working in the Mennonite context have been formed and received. Jeff Gundy’s essay is an intimate portrait of how his own experiences of leaving home as a young man to encounter a wide range of music, poetry, and professors – “baffling and contradictory and compelling as it was” – informed his emergence and work as a poet. Kasdorf’s recuperative essay, meanwhile, makes a compelling argument for the importance of Jane Rohrer’s poetry within an enlarged discourse of Mennonite/s Writing, and offers an important reminder of the type of personal, professional, and institutional pressures that resulted in her work being neglected in the first place.

Each of the following four essays offer differing accounts of what Travis Kroeker refers to as “scandalous displacements.” Kroeker’s own essay explores the theological implications surrounding the imagery of “word” and “light” in Miriam Toews’ novel, *Irma Voth*, and Carlos Reygadas’ film, *Silent Light*, describing the goal of his essay as the “magic trick” of turning Toews “into a theologian.” Daniel Shank Cruz’s essay, by contrast, sets out to trace the trajectory of what he names “The Queer Call of Wes Funk.” Cruz’s essay notes the supernatural but secular

elements implicit in Funk's account of his writing career, paralleling Kasdorf's essay in recuperating the work of a writer that has been neglected by the broader field to date while adding to the surge of recent work exploring LGBTQ Mennonite writing. Margaret Steffler's essay, meanwhile, offers a careful exploration of how two key authors in the Mennonite/s Writing tradition – Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews – have explored the death of family members in both memoir and fiction. Steffler's theory-informed meditation on language and writing echoes Kroecker's methodology, as does her conclusion that the mourning we might expect in memoir is sometimes more fully explored in fiction. Finally, Paul Tiessen's essay, which returns us to what he calls the "*Peace Shall Destroy Many* event of 1962-63," aims to reorient our understanding of a key moment in the so-called "traumatic origins" narrative of the field. Drawing on material from Wiebe's recently published collected essays, Tiessen invites us to reconsider Wiebe's first book in light of the fact that the church-community's initial response to its publication was much more complex and nuanced than has been acknowledged to date.

The special forum concludes with an essay by Di Brandt. Questioning the parameters of the conference theme and insisting upon the importance of what she calls the "creative challenge of the new Mennonite writing," Brandt looks to both the past and the future: back to the particular time and place from which Mennonite writing first emerged in Manitoba, and forward to the possibility of fulfilling its promise with a more generous and inclusive future. Gesturing to the recuperative efforts underway in many Indigenous contexts today, Brandt reminds readers of the vital and vulnerable role played by the authors who sought to "document and respond [...] as creatively as possible" to the complexities and contradictions that accompanied "our rapid modernization in the space of a few short decades," and insists on the need to account for our histories to enable us to turn toward "paradigms of re:placement, re:location, and re:vision."

In keeping with the tradition of annual Mennonite Studies conferences at the University of Winnipeg, all of the panels at the Mennonite/s Writing conference were plenary sessions, ensuring a strong audience for each speaker and enabling a shared conversation to emerge over the several days of the event. And, as is often the case, some of the most interesting work at the conference is not represented here in these pages, either because they were committed to other venues or were works in progress. Raylene Hinz-Penner's presentation, for example, called attention to the "whiteness" of conventional Mennonite migration narratives,

while Johannes Dyck (Germany) and Tatiana Plokhotnyuk (Russia) presented new research on Karaganda church elders and NKVD police stenographers, respectively. Other presentations offered careful investigations of genre, literary, or historical texts, including those by Magdalene Redekop, Grace Kehler, Ann Hostetler, Aileen Friesen, Mary Ann Loewen, and myself. Myron Penner recounted a creative project on themes related to the conference, while a sizable number of presentations – including those by Dora Dueck, Connie T. Braun, Dorothy Peters, John D. Thiesen, Elsie Neufeld, and Larry Warkentin – offered more personal reflections on the dramatic lives and experiences of family members or key historical figures. Andrew Harnish’s account of wrestling with a conservative congregation and David Elias’ entertaining rumination on the “way of the barn” were memorable reflections, as were Fran Martens Friesen’s and Hope Nisly’s meditations of the function of faith, class, and race in adoption narratives.

The conference also included a number of other events that are not reflected in this special issue but deserve mention. The “creative” evening event, hosted by Hildi Froese Tiessen in front of a full house at the Canadian Mennonite University’s beautiful new Marpeck Commons, featured readings by Jennifer Sears, Len Neufeldt, Jessica Penner, Casey Plett, and Maurice Mierau, as well as a new musical piece by Carol Ann Weaver, who was accompanied by soloist Marni Enns. A “Mennonite/s Writing Tour of Winnipeg,” organized by Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Tiessen, brought conference attendees to key literary locations around the city, while Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship welcomed Rhoda Janzen, Daniel Shank Cruz, and Ann Hostetler to speak to their congregation on Sunday, October 22, and Di Brandt, David Bergen, and Luann Hiebert the following Sunday. Finally, the conference closed with a wonderful evening of readings by Miriam Toews and Rhoda Janzen, each of whom read from their work before sharing the stage for an extended discussion period.

As its name suggests, *Mennonite/s Writing VIII* was the eighth major event in the ongoing “Mennonite/s Writing” series of international conferences, with previous conferences being held at Conrad Grebel University College (1990); Goshen College (1997, 2002); Bluffton (2006); University of Winnipeg (2009); Eastern Mennonite University (2012); and Fresno Pacific (2015). My sincere thanks go out to the members of this latest conference’s organizing committee, including Dora Dueck, who first suggested the topic of “personal narrative” as a conference theme, as well as Ann Hostetler, Hildi Froese Tiessen, Paul Tiessen, Daniel Shank

Cruz, and, of course, conference co-convenor Royden Loewen. And, since behind the scenes every conference is a whirl of activity and surprises, we are especially grateful to the host of volunteers at UW and CMU, and especially Andrea Dyck, who ably managed to make it all run smoothly.

Finally, I am pleased to be able to acknowledge the various organizations and funding bodies that supported the conference financially. We were awarded grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Marpeck Fund, the latter of which facilitates scholarship among the Mennonite-affiliated post-secondary institutions in North America. The conference was also generously supported by grants from the University of Winnipeg and its Chair in Mennonite Studies, York University's English Department, Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, and Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, as well as the Defehr Foundation. The University of Winnipeg and the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation also provided valuable in-kind support for the conference, as did the Canadian Mennonite University, which warmly hosted the "Creative Event" of readings and performances.

Many of the essays collected here productively explore the conference theme by examining the personal elements of well-established authors and formally published texts, reminding us of the often-close relationship between historical and literary narratives within Mennonite/s Writing scholarship. Among my own takeaways from the conference, as well, was a greater appreciation for the depth of this relationship in the intimate personal narratives to be found in various forms of life writing, including diaries, letters, unpublished memoirs, and so on. My hope is that this 2018 issue, along with the conference presentations and discussions that were shared in Winnipeg, will encourage further scholarship in this area, for my sense is that a host of fascinating texts and untold stories of Mennonite/s Writing are currently sitting in attics and archives across North America, and indeed around the world.

Readers of this issue will be interested to know that plans are already underway for the thirtieth anniversary Mennonite/s Writing conference, to be held at Goshen in 2020. We can look forward to the conversation continuing, then, in novels, poems, and essays, as well as in diaries, memoirs, and letters – and perhaps also, if we're lucky, in song.

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Works Cited

Hostetler, Ann. "Introduction: Mennonite Voices in Poetry." *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*. Ed. Ann Hostetler. Iowa UP, 2003: xv-xx.