

Mennonite/s Writing and Cruel Optimism: An Interview with Julie Rak

**Julie Rak, *University of Alberta* and
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The keynote speaker at the 2017 Mennonite/s Writing conference in Winnipeg was Dr. Julie Rak, Professor of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. A well-recognized authority in the study of personal narratives, Doukhobor writing and Canadian literature, Rak was invited to the conference in the spirit of the first Mennonite/s Writing event held in 1990 at Conrad Grebel University College, where participation by established non-Mennonite critics including David Arnason, Clara Thomas, and Robert Kroetsch proved immensely productive.¹ Rak was an active and inquisitive participant throughout the conference's three days, and she used her keynote address to explore how and why the formal, institutionalized study of Canadian literature—or "CanLit"—is currently in a state of crisis. Among the various consequences of this crisis, Rak observed, has been a problematic re-entrenchment of dominant modes and genres of writing, limiting the range of literary study at a time when an attention to personal narratives is most pressing and promising.² When a shortage of time at the conference made it difficult to fully explore

the talk's implications for Mennonite literary studies, Rak generously agreed to a follow-up interview to further explore these questions for this special issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.

Although the interview below resists easy summary, a number of themes, concerns, and possibilities emerge. Perhaps most clear is Rak's emphasis on the unique set of challenges and opportunities that come with working in a small field of study, such as Mennonite literature. For example, she warns that the understandable desire for a minor field to be "recogni[zed] by the larger paradigm" has its dangers: given the conservative and arguably reactionary state of that larger paradigm at present, earning its recognition may simply mean incorporating its most problematic elements into the smaller field. Even the desire itself, she cautions, could serve to hinder scholars from recognizing the various opportunities that come from working in a minor field of study. If the broader international discourse of Mennonite/s Writing was to understand and embrace itself as a counter-narrative to national literary critical conversations, she suggests, it could be well positioned to work outside the assumptions that dominate the conventional streams of literary studies. Such work could include an exploration a long-ignored subset of questions in literary studies—including the "radical possibilities of religious faith when it runs headlong into secular ideas about private property, education and so on." Rak also notes that there is a broad range of theoretical work on personal narratives that could be hugely enabling for the critical conversation that began at the conference, and offers what I take to be a gentle but pointed two-part caution for the field: that a lack of engagement with this theoretical work could restrain the field's otherwise promising interest in the personal as a site of social action; and that the risk that a focus on personal narratives will slide into a logic of literary celebrity is perhaps especially pronounced in minority fields, where yielding to the "autoethnographic demand" comes with a particular set of rewards.

With my thanks to Dr. Rak for her continued engagement on these questions, I am pleased to present our conversation below.

ROBERT ZACHARIAS (R.Z.): Thank you, once again, for your active role in the Mennonite/s Writing VIII conference, and for agreeing to participate in this follow-up question and answer exchange for the journal.

Your keynote address at the conference, entitled "CanLit, Genre, and Cruel Optimism," took note of a range of "crises" in Canadian literary studies at the moment, including the UBC

creative writing sexual assault case, the Joseph Boyden affair, and Nick Mount's problematic account of the field in his new book, *Arrival*. Your talk also seemed to gesture to what I thought were some challenging questions about the form and function of institutionalized fields of study more generally, and I wanted to invite you to tease out your talk's implications for the field of Mennonite literary studies in Canada and beyond.

My first question relates to how you understand the history, function, and position of Mennonite writing within Canadian literary studies. My sense was that when you gestured to Mennonite writing and writers in your keynote—whether as a minor field of study or as a loose collection of authors and poets—you positioned the field as being on the periphery, or perhaps on the margins, of the dominant discourses and institutions of literary study, rather than a part of their larger logic. If this is, indeed, how you would position the field, what challenges and opportunities are presented to scholars working in the field today? How might Mennonite/s Writing's longstanding effort at establishing an international critical discourse affirm or complicate this position?

JULIE RAK (J.R.): I am delighted to get to participate. I am not the best person to position the field in an ultimate sense, of course, because I am not doing Mennonite literary studies, but I am able to discuss how I see the area positioned relative to mainstream Canadian literary studies. I am assuming too that there is a more interdisciplinary field of Mennonite studies to which Mennonite literary studies is also oriented, and that the latter would include those who do cultural studies, religious studies, linguistics, and history in addition to some other areas that I didn't see represented at the conference. I am assuming that such an orientation exists, but that too will be important to the future of Mennonite literary studies. To return to the matter at hand, I do see Mennonite literature as a minor field of study oriented towards (and mostly not within) English-Canadian literature as a whole. I do not think this a bad position to be in, because being on the margins of a relatively conservative formation like Canadian literature in English has its benefits. It's possible to be more creative on the margins, and to try things out that might not be allowable in the larger context. I see challenges too, of course. It's a small area, and of necessity it is about its own concerns, some of which are unconnected to the concerns in the larger field. It's a narrow area of study, which means that I saw many interesting moments in the conference when speakers "drilled down" through a tradition or way of understanding to get at interesting issues.

There were times too when I saw a critique of the foundation of Mennonite literary studies develop, and that's a good sign as well.

R.Z.: My second question is related to the first, and picks up your presentation's invocation of Lauren Berlant's work as part of your suggestion that the current crises over race and sexual violence in CanLit are not aberrations but rather accurate reflections of CanLit as an institutionalized field of study. You cautioned that when fields of study are saddled with oppressive histories and repressive institutions, additive or recuperative modes of critique attempting to move toward a greater inclusiveness or diversity may end up being counterproductive, an example of what Berlant calls "cruel optimism"—a situation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."³ Mennonite/s writing has often understood itself as offering a productive critique of larger Mennonite histories and institutions, but recent work has begun to identify, and call for a move beyond, the critical field's implicit assumptions of whiteness and heteronormativity.⁴ What, in your view, might enable such work to move beyond expressions of cruel optimism?

J.R.: There are many problems with the larger CanLit industry itself, as the events of 2016 and 2017 show. There are problems too with the field of English Canadian literature and its attempts to support the industry in its accommodation of difference. A lot of CanLit critics soft-peddle the considerable problems of teaching and researching a national literature still based on settler-colonialism. It's one reason why those who want to work in the field of Indigenous literature don't want to be known as CanLit critics, and it's why Rinaldo Walcott, a cultural studies critic, "broke up" with CanLit this year very publically at TransCanada IV in light of what he sees as the unbearable whiteness of the critical class in the field. We should all be realistic about why this is happening. The politics of accommodation in the field of Canadian literature haven't worked all that well, especially in the last two decades. My talk was about this problem, although I didn't discuss everything wrong with accommodation. For instance, LGBTQ+ literature in Canada is very poorly studied and understood, although LGBTQ+ history and politics is well known and documented in this country. Why is that? Same thing goes for literature by and about people with disabilities in this country. It's important not to keep the additive "both/and" approach to Canadian literature, to think that if we can just add in extra writing, make our gigantic literary history tomes bigger, we will

have addressed the problem of what is left out. If we keep on doing this, we aren't changing anything.

In the case of Mennonite literary studies, what might be desired that could be an obstacle to its flourishing is recognition by the larger paradigm. There's a danger in that desire for recognition. Mennonite literary study ideally could not work on the same premises as English Canadian literature as a field, or at least not all the time. I don't see the field as an "add-in," because its audience, its premises and even its sense of history are very different. That's a good thing. If the field proposed to work differently as a subfield, it could provide a much more pointed critique of the problems in Canada, such as the problem of ongoing xenophobia and racism that are part of what Canada is, or what I see as a tendency to provide narrow genres and their industrial success as the indicator of success. I saw a couple of talks gesture towards this possibility of radical solidarity and I would welcome that.

R.Z.: My next questions are somewhat broader, and invite you to reflect on the position of personal narratives specifically within the context of Mennonite literature. For example, one of the contested questions in *Mennonite/s Writing* today is whether scholars ought to be extending, complicating, or moving away from the identity-based approaches that have dominated the field thus far. While a focus on life writing might seem an avenue for extending identity-based work, are there other ways to meaningfully engage life-writings—whether as individual texts, as genres, or as discourses—that would productively complicate the field's interest in Mennonite identity?

J.R.: I would say yes, absolutely. Life writing studies has been developing a set of its own methods for how to look at different kinds of life writing, and the issues that preoccupy many of the scholars in the field are different from those in literary studies. For instance, life writing scholars are often interested in the truth claims of memoir and biography. Instead of focusing on identity as a central issue, those scholars think about the reasons why authors write their identities into existence in a certain way—it opens the door to thinking about fraud, the public sphere, all kinds of things. People who study diaries or letters can follow currents in feminist theory, sociology, or the theoretical work of Philippe Lejeune in order to understand how they work materially, rhetorically, even politically. Other people work in the areas of trauma or memory studies, and connect life writing to that, or to media studies. I think

that there are a lot of possibilities there for Mennonite writing scholars that could push some of that work away from purely literary critical approaches.

R.Z.: As in many fields of study, the critical conversation about Mennonite literature has often overlooked life writing such as letters and diaries, as well as auto/biography and (with notable exceptions) memoir, focusing instead on more traditionally “literary” genres such as fiction and poetry. At the same time, Mennonite/s Writing also has robust tradition of authors publishing deeply personal explorations of their position within a broadly defined Mennonite context.⁵ Why might minoritized or identity-based fields of literary study seem to encourage formal personal reflections from affiliated authors while ignoring the broader personal narratives offered by life writing more generally?

J.R.: I’m not sure how to answer this question, because I think there’s a difference between what happens in the literary industries and what literary critics think about. To start with authors, I think two things happen. One is that what Eleanor Ty in the context of Asian North American literature has called “autoethnography” as a demand can come into play.⁶ So, writers who are identified as Asian (or Caribbean, Indigenous, or LGBTQ+ and so on) are often asked to write ethnographically about themselves, and then they only can do that if they are looking for institutional recognition. Many years ago, Maxine Hong Kingston was chastised by other Asian American authors because she refused to represent her culture “accurately”—that’s the autoethnographic demand at work. It’s the kind of box a minority-identified author can be placed in. The other is that authors often write personal reflections when they already have careers because they have become part of a literary celebrity system. They make use of liberal ideologies that privilege certain ideas about the importance of the self and experience, and they use those to connect their personal stories with a public image of themselves. That’s not about identity politics as much as it’s about celebrity and branding.

The critical conversation is different. I think that literary critics everywhere (not just Mennonite literary studies) ignore ephemera like diaries and letters and continue to ignore the importance of non-fictional forms, despite the fact that published nonfiction is a big deal. It doesn’t happen as much with critics who study the cultural production of the past, but it’s a real problem with contemporary literary criticism and theory. There’s a lot of

reasons why this happens, but one is that critics like Martha Nussbaum still advocate for critical methods that privilege certain kinds of literary objects. I think that's because English and Comparative Literature are programs that are under threat right now, and so some scholars are taking refuge in a pure idea of the literary as "what we do." Purity discourse will destroy contemporary literary studies eventually if it is allowed to continue in this vein.

R.Z.: How has attending to personal narratives and life writing productively changed the critical conversation in other fields of identity-based literary inquiry, and how might it open new avenues of thought for Mennonite/s Writing?

J.R.: That's a huge question, and I think I can't really answer it here, except to say that via feminist discourse beginning in the 90s, life writing methods and research intervened in larger discourses about women's lives and the meaning of experience. The same thing happened in African American literary studies too, via research about slave narratives, and then about other personal narratives by African American writers. I think the same thing is happening now in the study of digital writing and cyberculture. I think that the critical conversation in most cases swings towards ethical concerns because of the influence of life writing as a field. I'm still waiting for this breakthrough to happen within Canadian literary studies.

R.Z.: Your study of Doukhobor autobiographical discourse included an exploration of how religion complicates academic discussions of personal narratives and subjectivity. Given the centrality of faith and religion to Mennonite history and institutions, I wonder if there are specific insights from that study you might identify that could raise some productive questions for scholars engaging the religious aspects of Mennonite life writing.

J.R.: When I wrote *Negotiated Memory*, I was interested in how the developing Canadian state was so threatened by a small group of religious anarchists, and how it was that statecraft could not tolerate a religious view of the world that could not be accommodated by either liberalism or capitalism in its rejection of militarism, private property, and the idea of the individual will. It's like in *Star Trek*, where the Federation can't handle the existence of the Borg, even though it's obvious that the Borg is very effective as a collective, because somehow everyone being slightly

conforming individuals is seen as innately superior to being collective. At key points in Canada's history there were opportunities for Canada not to be a secular capitalist state, and those opportunities were rejected every time. This question can also be asked about Louis Riel and the formation of a Métis state in the nineteenth century, for example. I mean, what if that had actually happened? Canada simply could not tolerate such a thing, and Riel was definite about the religious nature of his vision. So I would be interested in the radical possibilities of religious faith when it runs headlong into secular ideas about private property, education and so on, and I'd be interested in knowing if it's possible to critique religious excesses and also think about radical potential. Doukhobors had a lot of mystical visionaries in their history: some of their leaders and mystics were women who successfully challenged conventional ideas about what women can do in that culture. I'd want to know if there are similar kinds of figures in Mennonite history, and if there is life writing by or about leaders or mystics like that. I'd say that looking to Indigenous writing on this subject would be helpful for Mennonite studies scholars who are interested in exploring their own traditions in this regard.

R.Z.: And, finally, I'll invite you to reflect on the conference itself in a more general fashion. The thirty-eight presentations at Mennonite/s Writing VIII in Winnipeg showed something of the range of concerns, approaches, and methodologies active in the field's current examination of personal narratives. As an authority in the study of life writing and personal narratives, what aspects of the conference were most notable to you? Were there any themes, approaches, or concerns that were particularly interesting, promising, or problematic? Where there any specific texts or avenues that struck you as ripe for future study?

J.R.: I'm going to challenge you back. I saw good presentations about race issues in Mennonite studies, queer issues, the contemporary role of the built environment, the importance of certain kinds of microhistory, interesting personal narratives themselves. But to be honest, with one or two exceptions, I didn't see a whole lot of work about personal narratives that made use of available scholarship that wasn't in Mennonite literary or historical studies already. I would encourage scholars in Mennonite studies who are interested in life writing and other forms of personal narrative to look at some of that material and bring it to bear productively on their own work. I didn't present a

lot of that work in my keynote because I thought it was important to critique CanLit as a formation via the problem of ignoring genre (itself an important strand of life writing studies in Canada), but really, thinking about the theory about genre as social action from rhetorical theory would I think bring out some of the nascent theoretical issues that I saw in papers featuring personal narrative work. That could be exciting to see!

Notes

- ¹ Rak's many publications include *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013), *Negotiated Memory: Doukhobor Autobiographical Discourse* (UBC Press, 2004); *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (Wisconsin P, 2014, with Anna Poletti), and an edited edition of Philippe Lejeune's *On Diary* (U of Hawaii P, 2009, with Jeremy Popkin). Scholarship from the first Mennonite/s Writing conference can be found in Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe's edited collection, *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* (Waterloo, U Waterloo P, 1992).
- ² Part of the keynote focused on Nick Mount's recently published popular history of the field, *Arrival: The Story of CanLit* (Anansi, 2017). Rak has since expanded this section and published it as "Another Dumpster Fire: An Opinionated Review of *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*, by Nick Mount." The provocative review can be found on the popular academic website, *Hook & Eye* (hookandeye.ca)
- ³ Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011, 1.
- ⁴ General calls for rethinking the scope of the Mennonite/s Writing have been made by Di Brandt, Jeff Gundy, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, and myself, while more specific calls include Sofia Samatar's "The Scope of This Project" (*Journal of Mennonite Writing* vol. 9, no. 2 [2017]) and Daniel Shank Cruz's "On Postcolonial Mennonite Writing: Theorizing a Queer Latinx Mennonite Life" (*Journal of Mennonite Writing* vol. 9, no. 4 [2017]); as well as the Mennonite/s Writing VII panel on Queer Mennonite writing by Cruz, Jan Gunther Braun, Casey Plett, and Andrew Harnish, published in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016), 279-302. Raylene Hinz-Penner's presentation at Mennonite/s Writing VIII, not included in this issue, also considered the need for the field to consider its position in larger discourses of whiteness.
- ⁵ A list of recent work in this vein would include books by Rudy Wiebe, Miriam Toews, Katie Funk Wiebe, and Jean Janzen, Brandt, as well as by Spicher Kasdorf, Gundy, Katie Funk Wiebe, and Jean Janzen, and essays by Cruz, Samatar, Plett, Braun, and others.
- ⁶ Editor's note: see Eleanor Ty, *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2008.