"I didn't have words for it": Reflections on Some of the Early Life-Writing of Di Brandt and Julia Kasdorf

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Authorial Addresses

In her essay entitled "The Autoethnographic Announcement and the Story" (published in 2015), Julia Spicher Kasdorf[1] reflects on having been prompted, just prior to the publication of her first volume of poetry, *Sleeping Preacher*, in 1992, to compose a preface or afterword that would offer her readers a gloss on the "Amish and Mennonite culture" that figured prominently in her early poems. That suggestion, she recalls, "confounded" her then: "In addition to writing poems, had it also become my job," she asks, "to write prose that would explain my background in rational sociological or anthropological or theological language?" ("Autoethnographic" 21).[2] Citing Mary Louise Pratt's use of the term "autoethnographic text," Kasdorf goes on to examine several instances of the sort of explanation she had been urged to provide alongside her poems – informative interludes she identified as

"autoethnographic announcements." These would function in Mennonite writing, she observes, not only as ethnographic explanations of who the Amish and/or Mennonites are, but also as "declaration[s] of identity" that "temporarily [sort] insiders from outsiders, facts from fictional misrepresentations, and [tell] the truth" (25). In the course of her discussion she identifies Rudy Wiebe's earnest (but, as it turns out, not entirely accurate[3]) "Foreword" to *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which offers a summary history of the "Russian" Mennonites, as an example of such an explication, along with Rhoda Janzen's satirical "Appendix" to her best-selling *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* (Janzen's "A Mennonite History Primer" runs 17 pages), and Miriam Toews's two-paragraph fulmination about Mennonites in the opening pages of her immensely popular "Mennonite" novel, *A Complicated Kindness.* Factual or not, informative, playful, earnest or satiric, the sorts of expositions Kasdorf identifies – elucidations that are variously attached to or embedded within literary texts – were ostensibly composed to provide a context for the primary work to which the "announcement" is attached, though they function in other ways as well, as we shall see.

Kasdorf's essay prompted me to consider other, similar sorts of authorial addresses in Mennonite texts. To be sure, the autoethnographic announcement, as Kasdorf points out, allows an author the opportunity to offer information that would seem (at least to someone, often the publisher) to be necessary for the reader seeking to comprehend the context in which a primary text operates. But there are other sorts of intratextual or extratextual authorial interventions poised to inform the reader – not about the cultural or historical or theological context in which a given work is situated, but rather about the author herself. These addresses, which tend to be distinctly more personal and often evoke a sense of writer-reader intimacy, appear, almost of necessity, outside the main text, but usually alongside it. Or they might be published as independent works – essays, interviews. Most often they occur in the form of what Gérard Genette[4] called paratexts: discursive gestures, generally made by the author, that surround or prolong a text – the sort of thing one might find in a foreword, an introduction, a preface, an afterword, or an appendix.

These latter sorts of authorial commentaries do not occur in the work of all Mennonite writers, of course, but they did figure conspicuously in early work by the prominent Mennonite poets Di Brandt and Julia Kasdorf, both of whom, as it happens, were well known among readers of Mennonite literature and beyond in the very years when certain significant events affecting literary-

critical thinking (the emergence of the discourse of postcolonialism, for example) were beginning to have an impact on the literary community. The language introduced by postcolonialism not only served to inform and transform the broad literary landscape, but also changed the way writers belonging to minority cultures in particular saw themselves, assessed their condition in the context of the various cultural landscapes they occupied, and performed their role as author.

Looking for Words

In 1989 Di Brandt prophetically anticipated a prominent theme of this essay when she reflected on her earliest writing (her first volume of poems had been published two years before). "I didn't know then what a huge cultural distance there existed between Reinland and Winnipeg," she declared then, invoking the traditional southern-Manitoba Mennonite village in which she grew up and the urban centre to which, she would argue, she migrated as surely as anyone who travels between vastly different cultures is a migrant. She continued: "or rather, I knew it, deeply, intimately, in my bones, but I didn't have words for it." She went on: "The rest of the world, for us, was *other* …"; she didn't have the words to span the vast cultural divide that confronted her then (*dancing* 32).

This paper, which focuses on Brandt's and Kasdorf's early writing, draws attention to the fact that their relatively frequent personal and (in the development of Mennonite literature as a field) influential addresses – which often took the form of prose essays about their early creative work – were composed during a significant international literary moment. To be sure, both poets had to some degree, from the outset of their careers as writers, registered the shaping influence of the critical discourses of feminism and postmodernism, well-established and influential critical perspectives they, as young writers thoroughly engaged with literary concerns – indeed, as critically-engaged academics – encountered as a matter of course. They were not alone among literary figures in coming to the realization that the languages of feminism, which Brandt applauded for "its articulate strategies of resistance and subversion and survival," and postmodernism, which she commended for having "crazy affinities for contradictions and split identities and discontinuous narratives" (*dancing* 35) were not adequate to address some of the most salient questions arising out of their particular condition. While neither of

them was a migrant in the conventional sense of the term (that is, neither was confronted by the experience of having to cross international borders), each struggled, like any number of contemporary minority-culture writers around the world in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to find language adequate to express the condition of trying to move between what were, for them, distinctly different and incompatible cultures. That is, each of them was driven to find language that would capture and convey – and ideally, also, somehow integrate – the divergent experiences of living in her traditional Mennonite or Amish community while also living in "the world" – or, as Brandt would say – "the worldly world" ("how" 27).

The language that would give adequate expression to their experience – a discourse addressing issues related to borderlands and migration and hybridity and the "third space" – arrived with postcolonial theory, which was beginning to make an impact in literary circles just as these poets were beginning to publish their early work.[5] Seeing their home communities – and, in turn, the world beyond them – as distinctive and monolithic, and apparently not yet recognizing that these worlds need not be incommensurable, nor that the potential of inhabiting the space in between these discrete spheres of experience and activity might be productive and liberating, Brandt and Kasdorf turned to personal writing – the kind of writing that would seem to allow them to bridge the troublesome gap between their sectarian communities and their secular environment. "Do we not turn to memoir and other kinds of personal writing to find language to understand the events of our own lives?" Kasdorf wondered later, when she reflected on the highly personal discursive gestures embedded in her early work ("the body" xiii). As for Brandt, striving in 1989, as she put it then, to "write [her]self out of" her culture, she confessed that she found no other way than to compose what she referred to as "another autobiographical story" (*dancing* 23). Indeed, it was their own personal writing that, in effect, conveyed each of them across the gap each perceived to exist between the worlds that – in compelling and distinctive ways – had a hold on them.

Registering Ambivalence

Kasdorf's early propensity to register the trope of leaving one cultural landscape to occupy another (and suffering a certain ambivalence about such a move along the way) was not restricted

to the prose declarations she composed as commentaries on the experience of writing and publishing her earliest volume of poems. The trope of leaving, and the ambivalence about leaving, resonated throughout *Sleeping Preacher* itself, from the very first poem, where the urban environment in which the poet/speaker was living and the nostalgically rendered agrarian community in which she had been nurtured are featured in juxtaposition. "I don't like New York," the speaker remarks, making use of a compelling symbol of urban worldliness. She goes on, invoking a striking image that expresses her ambivalence about her move to the city while suggesting her deep and abiding attachment to land – presumably the rural terrain she identifies with the home she once knew: "but sometimes these streets / hold me as hard as we're held by rich earth" (3). This prominent trope, that draws attention to how conflicted the speaker is, how difficult it is for her to withdraw herself from the community that brought her up to live in a particular way, in a particular place, is clarified and expanded in the volume's second poem, where the speaker reflects on her relationship with her recently deceased grandmother, Vesta Peachey: "When old church ladies call me her name," she writes, "I must tell them I'm no one they know, / no one who stayed in that Valley of silos / and holsteins." Nevertheless, she confesses, "I have carried her out of that Valley, / Between Front Mountain and Back / I've taken her still clutching / her bulbs and berry canes" (4).

An ambivalence one might find in any number of literary texts by Mennonite authors is evident as a constant dynamic accompanying this leaving of the old world; but evident, too, is the celebration of the one who has had the courage to leave, the rebel with the temerity to refuse the constraints enforced by and represented in the home community. Instructive in this regard is the parenthetical and paratextual note at the end of Kasdorf's volume of poems, which offers a gloss on the figure who is featured in the title of the collection: the "sleeping preacher" – a figure whose "spirit preaching" made him "unaccountable to the processes of community censure," given that he might very well be delivering "the direct voice of God" (61). Aha. The sleeping preacher had found a way to claim a place in the community even while released from its constraints. This poet would surely covet such a role. Consider how she extends the celebration of escape in another poem, entitled "Riding Bike with No Hands," in which she speaks of learning to ride a bicycle, and revels in the "quickening" she felt "long ago when Daddy let go." She recalls how she

"coasted off in the lawn" then, "exquisitely balanced," and "absolved from all attachment" (57).

The recurring theme of a difficult withdrawal from the culture of one's birth is seminal in the early prose commentaries of Brandt, too, who finds an equally dramatic way of expressing her troubled condition of trying to negotiate between two worlds of experience, declaring with inimitable drama that when she began to write she had been living with her heart and soul "somewhere halfway between sixteenth-century northern Europe and the Old Testament, and [her mind and body], at least some part of them, in twentieth-century Canada" (*dancing* 33).

Self-fashioning

Life-writing – as life-writing – among Mennonite authors has received until now only scant critical attention.[6] Here I am focusing on one aspect of this field, not on memoirs or autobiographies, those readily recognizable bona-fide genres, but rather on some pithy and, to some degree, intense, personal appeals to the reading audience Brandt and Kasdorf made early in their careers – their exercises in what is now generally identified in literary circles as the practice of "self-fashioning" (a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1980). "Self-fashioning" – using publishing opportunities to create a public persona and perform a self (even if conceived as a fiction) – afforded each of these young poets and essayists whose relatively exotic subject matter was not quite as comfortably received initially as it would be in the years ahead (in the heyday of so-called ethnic literatures and multiculturalism) the opportunity to confirm her authority and authenticity as a writer; to direct, through urgent-seeming personal appeals, the reading of her work. This is not to say that these poets soon abandoned their personal appeals to the reader; as late as 2001, Kasdorf wrote: "I want to disturb you too, my reader, even as I would like to seduce you sweetly through the pages of this book" (*the body* xvi). Self-fashioning was particularly useful to these writers in the early years when the practice allowed them to shape and limit the public narrative that would determine how both they and a particular minor literature might be received.

In their particular context, the practice of self-fashioning allowed these brilliant poets to create a legitimate space for themselves and their out-of-the-ordinary work, and to claim what Kasdorf would later call "the important, somewhat glamorous roles of transgressor and exile" ("Sunday" 7). In a similar vein, Brandt,

in retrospect, reflects on “writing [herself] into scandal and success” (*dancing* 10). Each one of them was – and recognized herself to be – a trailblazer, after all, and found currency in embracing her role as the bold, even audacious individual who would dare to challenge boundaries generally accepted by other participating members of her community. “[T]his act of rebellion and subversion shatter[ed] my identity as I knew it at that time,” Brandt declared later, adding that she had “to recognize in [her]self the ‘rebel traitor thief,’ willing to sell out, blow up, throw away the family stories and the official narratives of the culture, for art … .” Would she be killed, she wondered, “for this act of utter betrayal?” (*dancing* 10). Yet, as their colleague and contemporary Patrick Friesen would observe of his own role as a transgressive poet, these young women were prepared to proceed with one foot in, one foot out of their community, as Brandt observes in her tribute to Friesen composed in January 1992. Here she commends Friesen, whom she identifies as a significant mentor, for demonstrating “how to locate yourself on the edge of a community, dangerously, precariously, the cutting edge, without falling in or out” (*dancing* 58-9). That is, Brandt and Kasdorf were, as another Mennonite poet of the time, Sheri Hostetler, remarked, willing to trouble the cultural and religious environment that had nurtured them – but, they were, at the same time, not prepared to leave, to go away.[7] So they were confronted not simply with the challenge of escape, but with the task of bridging apparently incommensurate worlds. They needed to figure out a way of writing across the gap, of embroidering a bridge of words that would allow them to function within both of the divergent landscapes they then occupied almost alternately. The practice of self-fashioning – of placing themselves as real, live figures negotiating a treacherous cultural landscape – offered them at least a provisional discourse. Through personal writing they were able to begin to map the unfamiliar terrain in which they found themselves.

At a colloquium on Western Canada in the German city of Trier in 1989, Di Brandt observed that “what Germans find shocking about the new Mennonite writing is its confessional quality its nakedness” (“dancing” 23). Indeed, she and Kasdorf appeared to be willing to reveal a lot about themselves while they attempted to straddle two worlds, using personal narrative and a coaxing voice to forge a link between them. While addressing – often intimately – the full range of her readers, each of Brandt and Kasdorf was able to establish a position for herself both inside and outside that place we so often and so casually refer to as the Mennonite community.

And each poet's persuasive and affecting description of what it meant for her to relate to the place from which she said she feared being displaced would resonate throughout the early development of Mennonite writing. In fact, this compelling narrative of alienation and displacement – identified by fellow poet Jeff Gundy in 2005 as the "Ur-myth" of Mennonite writing: "the agonistic story of how the most visible and prominent cried out against communal repression and endured the costs" (*Walker* 25) and identified later, by Kasdorf herself, as "the transgressive myth of origins" ("Sunday" 8) – would draw the attention of a range of readers and critics alike. And, given its mesmerizing and paradigmatic dynamic and character, Brandt and Kasdorf's rendition of this "myth of origins" would ensnare their readers' imaginations and be re-told by Mennonite writers—and critics—over and over again.

Place

At the first conference on Mennonite/s writing in Waterloo in 1990, Robert Kroetsch memorably commented on southern Manitoba's having been richly inscribed by Mennonite writing. "[I]n Canada," he exclaimed, "finally we have a landscape that is a literary text and *that* might be the greatest accomplishment of the Mennonite writer ..." (*Acts* 224). "Paradoxically," Julia Kasdorf wrote in 1991, "*a precarious sense of location* is exactly what has fueled much of my writing so far" (*Body 46).* Indeed, an investigation of geographic place in Mennonite writing has enormous potential. From the sumptuous, dizzying evocation of prairie in the prose and poetry of Di Brandt to celebrations of the land writ large in the giant fictions and reflective essays of Rudy Wiebe; from the evocative conjuring of more intimate mid-west American spaces in the poems of Jeff Gundy to the diverse, oftentimes nostalgic summons of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian steppes in the works of Sandra Birdsell or Dallas Wiebe, Mennonite writers have suggested that place – where you are, the landscape you inhabit – matters.

"It is impossible for me to write the land," Brandt swoons. But she does write it: "This land that I love, this wide, wide prairie, this horizon, this sky, this great blue overhead, big enough to contain every dream, every longing." She goes on, deliciously: "It was heaven, the prairie was ..." (*So* 1). Evocations of these myriad, often magnificent topographical places might seduce the reader, but they fall short of telling the whole story about Mennonite

writers and place. If the individual's position relative to a particular natural landscape is worth exploring in Mennonite writing, so too, of course, is the individual's position relative to the panorama of human beings who make up her community. We know that the individual can readily be placed within – and displaced from – either: from her geographic location and from another sort of place, her cultural and spiritual and genealogical home.

The "place" of community a number of writers spoke of in the early years of the present surge in Mennonite writing – especially the 1980s and 90s – was a narrow, oppressive enclave resistant to forces of change. Few would deny that that common ground so many Mennonite writers identified in their work has shifted or, in many instances, disappeared altogether in these past decades, thanks to what Julia Kasdorf efficiently calls "cultural change and strategic assimilation" ("Autoethnographic" 34). But the transformation Kasdorf registers is not just a matter of cultural change and assimilation; it's about how Mennonites have come to think about being Mennonites in the world and how they have come to think of the world itself, and their place in it. The binary paradigms and the very language some Mennonite writers depended upon to describe the conditions of that common ground, even so recently as a few decades ago, are, we all know, no longer available as persuasive tools.

But in the late 1980s and early 1990s both Brandt's and Kasdorf's descriptions of their vulnerable condition as writers caught between worlds were powerful, resonant performances. When Brandt wrote of "finding myself in exile" and "living my inheritance on this black earth among strangers" (*questions* n.p.) and Kasdorf of her own "fear of abandonment and dislocation" (*the body* 43), each appealed, on the one hand, to the "worldly" reader, who found her exotic; and, on the other, to the empathetic reader among the Mennonites – the one who took solace in asserting that she was not one of the throng who would threaten the Mennonite writer who dared to speak in public. The persuasive statements Brandt and Kasdorf appended to their early work were skillfully constructed and efficiently performed tropes invoked during a particular era when boundaries were, to borrow the words of Hilary Fraser, "at once so momentous and so permeable" (197) – and therefore, one might add, so troublesome and disorienting. The particular exercises in self-fashioning that served Brandt and Kasdorf then would have had scant persuasive impact as little as a decade later. Not only had the wide world changed, and the literary world with it; so too had the language available to address

persuasively how any writer might negotiate the various places she occupies.

Struggle for Cultural Legitimacy

"I'm British, I'm English," Rudy Wiebe asserted in a mock interview called "The Blindman River Contradictions," published in 1984. In this piece he would later designate a "story," a cleverly contrived "fake" interview that masquerades as an apparently brazen piece of self-fashioning, Wiebe directs a sharp focus on the practice of self-fashioning and makes light of it (while not failing to reveal, playfully, a few things about himself). "I never had anything to do with Mennonites," he declares; "that's a fiction I made up because of course in western Canada there's much more point to being ethnic than to being English." He continues, observing that he "had the races of the world to choose from and … made a really bad choice; I should have chosen Jewish," he says, "which would have given me tremendous literary contacts in ways I can never have as a Mennonite" (347).

Wiebe was, of course, not alone in chronicling the place of self-fashioning in that pre-Facebook world, just as he was not alone in registering a minority-culture writer's struggle for cultural legitimacy and in conceding that it was the non-Mennonite world that would make his literary reputation. To be sure, while Mennonite writers like Brandt and Kasdorf railed against the Mennonite community that would seem at once to reject and to smother them, while they planted in the public consciousness the image of the Mennonite writer as oppressed outsider, as ambivalent escapee from a narrow and oppressive – and exotic – minority environment, they too were among those who found a way to stake a claim in the worldly world of the "English" that, after all, appeared for most twentieth-century North American writers, for a long while, to offer the only legitimate base for a substantial literary career. These writers faced having to negotiate not only the cultural terrains in which they lived their apparently bifurcated lives, but also the dominant culture's literary landscape that threatened to elude them and ignore their work if they did not choose astutely how to represent themselves and their personalized narratives. And while each fashioned her literary persona for all, she shaped how all her readers grew to comprehend the dynamics that defined the Mennonite writer's relationship to her audiences, and forged a compelling paradigm that would markedly affect the trajectory of Mennonite/s Writing.

Beyond Fixed Points of Departure and Arrival

The appeals Brandt and Kasdorf made in their early work were personal and expressed with urgency: "i hate having to choose between my inherited identity & my life: traditional Mennonite *versus* contemporary Canadian woman writer, yet how can i be both & not fly apart?" ("Three" 183), Brandt complains, while Kasdorf declares without equivocation: "I've had it both ways – to be in the community and in the world – which of course means to have it neither way" (*the body* 46).

Julia Kasdorf and, a few years earlier, Di Brandt, pre-dated the wide-ranging and enormously influential language adopted by literary theorists and others around the world at the time that Homi Bhabha published his seminal work *The Location of Culture*, in 1994, and introduced the notion of the interstitial space *between* worlds and declared that space integrative and productive. Bhabha's fresh way of writing about people moving between regions and between cultures was barely reaching public consciousness when Brandt and Kasdorf began to find their way as writers. Had these young Mennonite poets absorbed the language of postcolonial theory at the beginning of their careers, would they have described their worlds – and their ability to negotiate them – differently? Not that they might have described the details of their experience otherwise, but that they might, for example, not have accepted the implication that the multiple cultures they occupied were in some real sense monolithic and exclusive. And what about that dominant paradigm Jeff Gundy identified as the "Ur-myth"? Had these poets found a way, early on, to name and occupy a "third space," might they have had a very different impact on how we have come to imagine the development and dynamic of Mennonite writing, or even life generally among late twentieth-century Mennonites?

In 2011 Benjamin Schreier, a critic of American Jewish literature to whose work I have made reference elsewhere,[8] observed of Philip Roth's characters that it's not that they "do not want to be Jews; it is that they do not know how to describe themselves as Jews" ("The Failure" 101). One might say that a similar, parallel condition confronted also, for a while, powerful and influential minority-culture writers like Kasdorf and Brandt, who found themselves burdened with the challenge of describing themselves as Mennonites (while attempting to elude what they perceived as the negative impact of embracing such a definition). And one might add that Mennonite writers' often conflicted encounter with such a challenge has had a significant and lasting

impact on the development of the Mennonite literary scene. It's not, for example, that these young poets wanted to escape absolutely the traditional places they had known, but rather, as they themselves remarked, that they didn't have the words to explain what their modern condition between places might mean – that it didn't necessarily imply, as the young Brandt feared, that she might fly apart, or, in the words of the young Kasdorf, that she might be condemned to occupying no place at all.

To be sure, the issue of the availability of language – of words adequate to express what one is driven to say – would not have been a novel concept for someone like Kasdorf, who, in her first collection, muses on the subject in a gentle poem about the speaker's father, who was clearly challenged, she observes, by the inadequacy of words for expressing a full range of human experience: "When he came home / from college, dreaming at last in English," she wrote of her father, "he reached for words that didn't exist / in Pennsylvania Dutch, to talk with his aunts, / and for the first time wondered what you could think / if all you spoke was a language with words enough / for cooking and farm work and gossip" (12).

As for Brandt, her own understanding of the complexities of discrete languages and discourses was embedded in her understanding of the world from the beginning, as she observes when she speaks of the three languages that punctuated her existence while she was growing up: Low German (*Plautdietsch*), High German, and English. "We had very strict rules about not mixing these languages up, nor ever speaking them in the wrong place" she wrote in 1989. "And so we did this complex weekly juggling act between three profoundly different conceptual and linguistic paradigms, without ever batting an eye. It wasn't really translating that we did, going from one language to the other, so much as stepping from one paradigm clearly into the other, and then back again" (*dancing* 33-34).

The critical discourses available for expressing the condition of these writers, each of whom were in a genuine sense migrants even without crossing international borders, defined and delimited the paradigms each understood to be definitive of her own experience as surely as did the distinctive languages Brandt spoke of here. As long as the dominant discourse defining migrancy offered a binaristic paradigm limited to fairly rigid notions of here and there, the language of writers trying to come to terms with the condition of the migrant was limited. Paul Carter observed usefully in 1992 that the binary oppositions of here and there, them and us (most commonly thought of in relation to the migrant, but

equally applicable to the person who moves between any two cultures) might be supplanted if we were prepared to regard movement between places, locations, cultures "not as an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but as a mode of being in the world" (*Living* 101). Simply "being in the world" had been a challenge for both Brandt and Kasdorf, each of whom had accepted her condition as embodying the imperative that she move awkwardly between fixed points.

In 1991 Julia Kasdorf wondered about what it was that set her, as a Mennonite, "apart from the mainstream." When, one day, she might "break through this invisible sphere that both comforts and confines," would she, she wondered, "be released into … what? The world, whatever that means?" (*The Body* 46-7). At about the same time, in 1992, she began an investigation into the life of Joseph W. Yoder, who, she wrote, emerged for her "as a heroic author who refused to yield to the religious community of his birth and who was able to write his own life, defining himself and his truths in terms that were broader than his relationship to that community and its God." Yoder's story, she observed, "maps a progression from identification with traditional family and sect to identification with the democratic, pluralistic nation, propelled by education and creativity" (*Fixing* 239). In other words, Kasdorf observes that Yoder landed in, and functioned within, the "world." She notes that her study of Yoder had begun as an investigation of "how anyone from an ethnic or traditional background can become an artist without breaking ties with his place and people of origin"; but it became something else. She became "more interested in understanding how this particular Amish-born individual became an American, engaged in public life and discourse, even as he maintained conversations with individuals from his community of birth" (*Fixing* 13). Years later she registered her recognition that the boundary she had assumed existed between her Mennonite culture and "the broader culture" ("Autoethnographic" 28) had disappeared. She had borrowed the term "contact zone" from Pratt, who spoke of it, Kasdorf observed, as "the social space in which 'cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.'" The "contact zone," she wrote then, was "no longer out there somewhere" ("Autoethnographic" 23, 34).

So, finally, when we examine the personal writing, the acts of self-fashioning, in the writing of these poets, we encounter much more than we might have anticipated. That is, by constructing bridges that would allow them to span the apparently disparate worlds they occupied early in their careers, both Brandt and Kasdorf – through personal writing – very effectively addressed

the restrictive binary logic of their time. Through personal writing often offered merely in snatches, often in paratexts and personal essays, these poets came to define how they themselves – and the condition of the Mennonite writer, and the dynamic of the Mennonite literary community, and the character of much of the work we call "Mennonite/s Writing" – grew to be seen in the last decade of the twentieth century. Shortly after Brandt and Kasdorf began to publish their early work, the discourse of postcolonialism, that embraced the notion of the binary-defying "third space" and that pervaded and shaped how minority literatures and their authors came to be seen, offered them an alternative paradigm – a fresh discourse – that allowed each one of them to express herself in a manner that was not circumscribed by binaristic and monolithic models. This alternative paradigm encompassed and integrated divergent and emerging ways of being in the wide world.

Kasdorf, in an essay dated 2000, reflecting on her regular trips between New York City and her home place in central Pennsylvania, invokes this new paradigm when she declares that what invigorated her "was not an arrival at either end but the suspension of the demands that either destination placed on me. I liked being able to think in the free space between places," she wrote, "and the ways that my own travel could make a connection between them." She proceeded to embrace "the experience of embodying a connection between disparate locations," declaring that from childhood, she had "learned to love the anticipation of arrival and also to follow a road between the traditional community and the non-Mennonite world. Now that distance is not as great as it once seemed" (*body* 8). Di Brandt, later in her career, would similarly invoke the fresh paradigms theorists had developed to permit and support a new way of thinking about being a member of a minority culture within a broader context. "I have been writing myself back into life … : grieving my lost identity, pasting together the shattered bits of myself piece by piece in new configurations as I learn to relocate myself in the contemporary world," she wrote in 1996 (*dancing* 10), suggesting the emergence of a new perspective. The liberating language she adopted was most evocatively expressed in the exclamation recorded in the title of her second collection of essays (2007): "So *this*[9] is the world," she exclaimed with palpable exuberance, "and here I am in it …".

Notes

[1] Kasdorf self-identifies sometimes as "Julia Kasdorf" and sometimes as "Julia Spicher Kasdorf." Because she used "Kasdorf" in her first book, and I am interested primarily here in her early work, I will refer to her from here on as "Julia Kasdorf."

[2] This paper was inspired by an essay Julia Kasdorf prepared for a symposium on Mennonite/s Writing at Penn State University in 2013 and subsequently published in *After Identity*: *Mennonite Writing in North America* in 2015. It re-visits and extends my own 1996 essay on Mennonite literature and binary thinking, first presented at the second conference on Mennonite/s Writing, in Goshen, Indiana in 1997 and subsequently published as "Beyond the Binary: Reinscribing Cultural Identity in the Literature of Mennonites"; and my 1992 essay entitled "Mennonite writing and the post-colonial condition," published as the introduction to *Acts of Concealment*: *Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, the curated proceedings of the first conference on Mennonite/s Writing, in Waterloo, Ontario in 1990. This essay reflects my interest in literary history and suggests that the dominant paradigms affecting the development of Mennonite literature in some of the most productive early years of that minor literature's present iteration (I refer here to the late 1980s and early 1990s) were significantly influenced by, among other things, available discourses.

[3] See Kasdorf, "Autoethnographic" 27.

[4] See Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext."

[5] It's worth noting that the seminal study of postcolonialism in literature, entitled *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, was published in 1989; Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, equally influential in the field, did not appear until 1994. My own earliest exploration of the instructive value of postcolonial critical thinking in reading Mennonite literary texts was in my introduction to the proceedings of the first conference on Mennonite/s Writing — *Acts of Concealment* (1992). Here I referenced Bill Ashcroft, *et al*'s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). I preface that introduction, entitled "Mennonite writing and the post-colonial condition," with a quotation from Sandra Birdsell that effectively glosses the discussion of Brandt and Kasdorf in this essay: "Someone asked me about being on the edge or the periphery, and I really don't feel that way. I see myself as being at the centre, but I don't know where that centre is. Maybe it's writing." My subsequent essay entitled "Beyond the Binary: Reinscribing Cultural Identity in the Literature of Mennonites" (1996) was informed by Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). Subsequent forays into the field of Mennonite literature and postcolonialism include two essays on Rudy Wiebe by Ervin Back: "Postcolonial Complexity in the Writings of Rudy Wiebe" and "Rudy Wiebe and WB Yeats: Sailing to Danzig and Byzantium," as well as Amy D Kroeker's MA thesis entitled "'Separation from the World': Postcolonial Aspects of Mennonite/s Writing in Western Canada," and Cheryl Lousley's "Home on the Prairie?: A Feminist and Postcolonial Reading of Sharon Butala, Di Brandt, and Joy Kogawa." All these were published in 2001. Vikki Visvis's "Postcolonial Trauma in David Bergen's *The Time in Between*" appeared in 2013. Sofia Samatar's "The Scope of This Project" and Daniel Shank Cruz's "On Postcolonial Mennonite Writing: Theorizing a Queer

Latinx Mennonite Life" appeared in 2017.

[6] A notable major study in the area is Jesse Hutchison's 2015 PhD dissertation for the University of Waterloo, entitled "Private People in Public Places: Contemporary Canadian Mennonite Life Writing." Hutchison focuses on autobiographical writing by Di Brandt, Connie Braun, Katy Funk Wiebe, Miriam Toews, and Rudy Wiebe.

[7] See Hostetler's various pieces throughout *Mennonot: For Mennos on the Margins*, a modestly produced literary magazine created/edited by Sheri Hostetler and Steve Mullet. This informative and humorous, thoughtful and instructive little magazine devoted to giving voice to Mennonites who don't conform to conventional Mennonite stereotypes appeared in 13 issues, published from 1993 to 2003. A digital archive of *Mennonot* is available online at www.keybridgeltd.com/mennonot/downloads.htm.

[8] See, for example, my "After Identity: Liberating the Mennonite Literary Text," in Zacharias.

[9] Emphasis mine. The expression "this is the world & here i am in it" appears first in Brandt's published work in the opening poem of her second volume of poems, *Agnes in the sky*. Brandt makes frequent use of this resonant phrase, including in an essay in that eponymous volume of essays, where she writes: "I've been … trying as hard as I can to understand what that idealistic, crazy, stubborn, ecstatic, beautiful, terrible heritage was about, and what it means to me, and to everything, now. *So this is the world, and here I am in it, one of the many lost & found, if you can believe it across all this space* … (*So* 210–11).

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