

Paradigms of Re:placement, Re:location, and Re:vision: The Creative Challenge of the New Mennonite Writing of Manitoba (and the World)¹

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Let me begin by expressing gratitude to the First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Immigrant peoples of Canada, who signed peace treaties with one another, and welcomed our people, the Mennonites, to come to this land and become full citizens of a new country, while retaining a sense of our own history and peoplehood and cultural practice.

Indigenous writers like Maria Campbell and Tomson Highway, and also Immigrant writers like John Ralston Saul and Adrienne Clarkson, have reminded us what a remarkable thing Canadian multiculturalism is, admired and marveled at around the world. It was the First Nations and Métis people who taught the rest of us this concept, in their life-saving hospitality toward us on this continent, and in their wise insistence on inscribing intercultural respect in the treaties that became the basis for Canadian identity for the last hundred and fifty years.

The reason we discuss the topic of Mennonite/s Writing in Canada, in a modern, secular, cosmopolitan academic context, is because of multiculturalism: the innovative models of interpersonal and intercultural tolerance, dialogue and collaboration across differences in an openly shared context, that are the highest founding principles of this country.

The new Mennonite writing of Manitoba, that began with Patrick Friesen's first poetry collection *The Lands I Am* in 1976, was profoundly multicultural in both spirit and practice from its inception. This particular oeuvre emerged immediately after the several Multiculturalism Acts of the 1970s and 80s, in overt, active dialogue with non-Mennonite contemporary writing in Winnipeg. That first wave of new Mennonite writers, who did not have a Mennonite literary context to write out of, or be received into, and were forced to invent themselves and their own context of reception radically as they went along, included also Armin Wiebe, Di Brandt (me), Maurice Mierau, Vic Enns, Sandra Birdsell, Sarah Klassen and Audrey Poetker.

Rudy Wiebe's later writing falls in the "new Mennonite" category as well, though his first two novels are set within a more traditional Mennonite conceptual frame. Miriam Toews, David Bergen, Vern Thiessen, and David Elias came slightly later, when the "new Mennonite" writing had already begun to be collected and conceptualized. And of course there are many more new Mennonite writers now, in or from Winnipeg, Jan Guenther Braun, Jeremy Reimer and others.

A sea change occurred in North American and world culture in the mid-60s, which included the widespread arrival of cars, and highways, and transistor radios, and televisions, and rock 'n' roll, and rapid urbanization. And increased access to public education. And Viet Nam. These irresistible instruments of change blasted open the previously separatist culture of the Mennonites in North America, and thrust it from the "pre-medieval," both conceptually and practically speaking, into the multicultural cosmopolitan postmodern in a single decade. The new Mennonite writing that began in the 1970s and came into its full flowering in the 1980s and 1990s, was deeply marked by these changes, and that experience of transition has been in many ways its main subject.

It's tricky, of course, to make generalizations about a cultural group which includes various historical strands and diverse cultural organization in the present; there are always exceptions and counter-examples to be had. One must choose which specific instance might serve iconically for the whole. In this case, I am choosing the rural, peasant-based farming villages of southern

Manitoba and what happened when their children moved to the cities in the volatile decades of the 60s and 70s as the "default" group for Mennonite cultural life in Canada, and beyond that, the U.S. and internationally. The new Mennonite writing that emerged from this scene was hugely influential in the development of regionally based, ethnically inflected literature in western Canada, and has punched well above its weight in calling forth a specific, far-reaching, nationally and internationally inscribed critical response from both global Canadian Studies networks and the transnational Mennonite/s Writing conference project.

The church-affiliated Mennonites of Manitoba were unprepared for the new Mennonite writing that suddenly appeared in their midst. They were struggling deeply themselves to figure out how to retain their traditional peasant and church-based cultural identity while moving to English language church services, modern education, communication and land practices, and increasing industrialization and urbanization – of the sort they had spent centuries resisting fairly successfully in various countries in their long migrant history from northern to eastern Europe, then to Ukraine/Russia, then to Canada. For the most part, they considered the new Mennonite writing treasonous to the separatist traditionalist (and patriarchal) agenda of the churches. There was a huge cultural split that occurred among the Manitoba Mennonites as a result. The churches moved toward greater uniformity of conventional public story-telling and dismissal (and sometimes outright vilification) of the new Mennonite writing, while the writers, on the other hand, sought to renew the culture by revising the stories we tell about ourselves and each other in dialogue with our new circumstances and surroundings to more accurately reflect who and what we are now.

Multiculturalism, which made the new Mennonite writing possible, came with a dialogic and intercultural component. How could it be otherwise? The new Mennonite writing was profoundly successful in reconfiguring Mennonite cultural identifications in our modern, hybridized, multicultural time, and in renewing interest in the heritage especially among young people, through the diverse, dialogic expressiveness made possible by the multiculturally inflected creative arts. A similar thing happened in other cultural groups in Canada, including Black and Ukrainian communities, the First Nations and Métis peoples (as Louis Riel famously prophesied more than a hundred years ago), and many others. Far from being treasonous to the respective traditionalist identifications of our various cultural heritages, the new multicultural writing of Canada facilitated their renewal in

powerful ways. For these cultural groups, too, there has been a divergence in cultural identification between the artists and writers with their innovative cosmopolitan outlook and dialogic engagements, and the locally organized conservation-minded centres of worship and historical documentation, including museums and community-based festivals. Professional literary and artistic reception groups like Mennonite/s Writing, the Black Canadian Studies Association and others have sprung up to articulate and perhaps mediate between these different interests in their respective communities, though the question of how to straddle traditionalist interests and innovative directions in the North American context has not gone away.

There's an interesting thing happening with multiculturalism in this country right now. Writers like Tomson Highway and Marilyn Dumont and Louise Halfe, and Patrick Friesen and Miriam Toews and myself, pioneers in inventing an imaginative, forward-looking language for our distinct cultural heritages yet closely shared present lives in multicultural Canada, did not envision the reclamation of our work back into culturally separatist categories, or exclusionary social practices. We were writing about ourselves, our experiences and imaginings, in the widest and deepest possible human sense, in dialogue with the multiple strands of our shared and individual histories and heritages, in love with the sweetest most infinite possibilities of our hurts and our hopes, the way writers have always done – for whoever was there to receive it, for whoever could hear it, for the whole world. “I came from far away and brought everything with me,” is how I put it in a poem some years ago. I also wrote, “It wasn't about being Mennonite, or Indian, or Jew. It was about you, you” (*mother, not mother*, 30).

There's a risk now, that Canadian multiculturalism may develop or recuperate more narrowly inward-looking configurations of separatist thinking. This is so among Mennonites, and among other cultural groups as well. It's a phenomenon we see materializing all over the world, isn't it, a centripetal force in direct response to the homogenizing and scattering forces of globalization, perhaps, or a return to longitudinal (and backward-looking) thinking and behaviour at the expense of more newly woven together lateral (and forward-looking) identifications.

Some of this turnaround is deeply welcome, and represents, at least in the case of First Nations and Métis peoples in Canada, an impressive and inspiring comeback of a powerful culture adapting itself creatively to the present times after much suffering and rapid change in circumstances under the colonialist impulses that marred our "new" country's multicultural aspirations from the

beginning. Is this so for Mennonites as well, or are we falling prey to xenophobic instincts rooted in our difficult migrant past? Are we in danger of constructing a false genealogy of our literary and cultural life to pave over the difficult birthing pangs we, the new Mennonite writers, as authentic spokespersons for our people, have suffered, both from the Canadian mainstream and the repressive forces in our own midst?

Mennonites like to take from everyone, and give back only to each other, only to themselves; they don't know how to say thank you properly to their many friends and neighbours, or how to enter into properly dialogic and reciprocal relations with others: this is a complaint I've heard about Mennonites in Manitoba and elsewhere from many quarters. This kind of dynamic builds up resentment against us, and risks plunging us back into ethnic fear, and the deep-seated martyr complex that inflects our historical understanding of ourselves. This understanding is rooted in unresolved traumas of the distant past, traumas that needn't be repeated, in my view, if we understood them better.

This is why I was ambivalent about the topic of displacement for Mennonites, the subject of Mennonite/s Writing VIII conference in Winnipeg, which inevitably calls up our centuries-long migrant history from one country to the next, never quite at home anywhere. The way we have liked to tell it, we were the innocent ones, the disliked, the hated ones, hounded from one inhospitable landscape to another. But of course we have been displacers as much as the displaced. Every time we were displaced, we in turn displaced others in finding a new place to pitch our tents. And pretty fine tents we've been able to pitch here in Canada! We have much to be grateful for. And much to be responsible for, to our generous hosting country, First Nations, and multicultural neighbours.

And yet, as is perhaps true for all peoples whose oppression has been deeply internalized over many generations, our greatest misdeeds have been internal to the community. Mennonites have collected some pretty nasty headlines in the news in recent years. A whole village of families lost its children to government intervention in rural Manitoba a few years ago for extreme violence in childrearing. A Colombian theatre group has been performing a play around South America about the infamous so-called "ghost rapes of Bolivia," that the whole world has heard about. Miriam Toews bore eloquent witness to this horrific story in a moving essay published in *Granta Magazine* recently (2015). That horrific story has left its indelible mark on us; we must put

our minds and spirits together in deeply revisionary ways to figure out what to do with it.²

The new Mennonite writing, inspirational as it is, is also riddled with stories of social and physical violence among Mennonites, from *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to *The Shunning to Agnes in the sky* and *mother, not mother*, to *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *A Complicated Kindness*, among many other texts. For a culture that likes to think of itself as utopian and peace-loving, we surely have been a violent and hard-ass bunch! There is a secondary story of social violence emerging now, of the harsh response many of our writers have endured from certain segments of the Mennonite population for their writing, and I include myself among them, predominantly through tactics of negative gossip and various forms of shunning, of the sort that Mennonites are well practiced and very good at, that have had a very painful impact on us and people we care about.

The way the people who've been doing these things understand it, I'm told, is the other way around. It is we who have defamed the people, they say, by writing books that expose them to public view, whether beautifully or harshly is not really the point. They would have liked to preserve a more traditional oral, locally controlled economy when it comes to our people's personal and communal identifications, even if they've moved into a thoroughly modern reciprocal economy in the rest of their lives. Facebook and its new possibilities of employing negative gossip in the cause of various kinds of social normativity has nothing on us! We have been experts at gossip as a major form of social normativity forever. *Waut wauren de Lied saijen*, as we used to constantly worry about in the Darp ("What will the people say," that old village adage held unrelenting power over us). We are master storytellers, all.

And then there is the other way our stories and people have been socialized and controlled, through the fiercely protected public discourse of the churches, where women, for one, were strictly prohibited from standing behind the pulpit until just recently. So recently that most of us still bear prominent scars of that long oppressive silencing of Mennonite women's voices, wishes, and views in our psyches and relationships.

Mennonite/s Writing is an interesting cultural project, optimally situated to address these issues, it seems to me, in dancing its pretty fancy dance between the academy and the churches, between modernity and traditionalism, between outward and inward looking dynamics and directionalities, and in moderating a Mennonite reader response practice, that is both scholarly and community-based. Mennonite/s Writing has been a heartwarming

and illuminating, and often troubling, project for new Mennonite writers like myself and the critics involved as well, who sometimes vacillate between wishing to be affiliated with the Mennonites religiously or culturally and not, given the exigencies on either side.

Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), my undergraduate alma mater, where I was first encouraged to become a professional writer and championed as one, has kept itself pretty far away from the new Mennonite writing, and from the conference project called Mennonite/s Writing, at least until recently, flirting with interest in the new Mennonite writing only at a distance. The Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg is another such frontline site. Royden Loewen, co-convenor of the 2017 Mennonite Studies conference in Winnipeg and a member of the Centre, has certainly offered himself as a public champion of our people in the past, stepping up pretty quickly to defend the Mennonite people in the media, for example in the sad case of the community in southwestern Manitoba which had all its children taken away on charges of domestic violence a few years ago, an incident most of you will vividly remember.³

What about in the case of Mennonite writers who feel they are getting hurt by backlash dynamics in the Mennonite community, or justifiable pushback dynamics, as some would call them, precisely for having challenged the incidence of domestic and community violence among our people? What about the backlashes and pushers back themselves? Who shall look to the needs of the people who feel they are being publicly exposed, or embarrassed, or shamed, or inappropriately challenged, by being written about, however fictionally or beautifully, in our literature? And who shall champion the people who feel oppressed and silenced by these very same social restrictions on creative expression, the victims of domestic or community abuse, the sensitive children, women and otherwise sensitive people in our midst? Shouldn't we all be working together to address and resolve these important cultural questions instead of pitting the interests of these different groups and persons against each other, or at best turning a blind eye to the cultural suffering and wellbeing at stake for persons caught in these processes?

Do CMU and the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies and the organizational leaders and cultural thinkers involved in Mennonite/s Writing have anything helpful to say about these matters? Does the Violence Prevention office at Mennonite Central Committee have any resources to offer to help us resolve these painful, ongoing differences? Do the urban or rural Mennonite

churches of Manitoba have any grievance or “truth and reconciliation” processes that might be mobilized to address these issues in a communally based way? Have they made efforts to explain to the people in the churches what the new Mennonite writing is about, why it’s important, how they too can participate in the project of updating their imaginative understanding of the heritage in the present in creative ways, instead of throwing stones at those who do? Has anyone in the churches spent time on teaching people dialogic strategies to replace the throwing of stones (so to speak) at those who disagree with or threaten them within the culture?

I have approached persons in all these organizations to ask them these questions directly, and so far the answer is No. But my feeling is, that’s because these issues have not yet been theorized as precisely as they need to be, for an active, transformational cultural response to take place. I’m doing my best to do some of that theorizing here.

Miriam Toews has called the Mennonites a “broken people,” who no longer know who we are, or how to be together in a healthy way (Granta 2015). I’m not so sure. The Mennonite community *gestalt* is very strong, and runs deeply in all of us, including in me and in Miriam, who have sometimes tried to get away through our writing and cannot. Mennonites have pretty impressive organization skills. We cut a fairly big figure in Winnipeg and elsewhere, in the US, and Central and South Americas, for example. But here’s what I do think: we’re a people seriously in transition, caught between two contradictory cultural paradigms, and having to figure out how to move ahead without losing our souls in the grand canyon gouged in steep rock between them.

The new Mennonite writing of the 1980s in Manitoba by Patrick Friesen, Armin Wiebe, and me, was understandably alarming to the traditionalist, rural Mennonite communities of Manitoba, from whence we came. The culture was in huge upheaval, trying to deal with the unstoppable tide of modernization sweeping into its midst. The people were unschooled, for the most part – at least in the modern sense, though they were deeply trained in the old archive of formidable peasant skills, with an oral repertoire of Plautdietsch and German literature known by heart, as the saying goes, from classical poetry to folktales to ribald ditties and songs. Armin Wiebe and I have both written extensively about that old peasant Darp world elsewhere.⁴

Hard as it is to believe now, the traditionalist-minded Mennonites of Manitoba (and everywhere else) really didn’t see the modern book economy arising around them, despite the fine

(and to many, alarming) breakout example of Rudy Wiebe two decades earlier. And if you are a non-Mennonite reader reading this, I would wager that your people have no less complex issues of literary reception among you in these times of social upheaval, anxiety and anticipated change, that have affected everyone after all, and I hope you find this portrait and call for greater attention to these matters also relevant and useful for you. Many of the issues under discussion here apply in one way or another to every other cultural group of Canada and indeed North America and beyond, at this time.

Our people didn't know what had hit them. The new Mennonite writing and the national and international media attention it garnered seemed like a radical betrayal of the separatist, authoritarian, church-centered identifications that had kept the Mennonites together in challenging historical circumstances, over several centuries of migration and flight from oppression. Then again, they had been sending their children to public schools with modern English curricula in a newly formed country for a generation. They found themselves caught between cultural paradigms without any resources to help them through that maelstrom. Our elders were delighted that we got to go to school for many years and educate our minds, a privilege they would very much like to have had themselves. They'd praise us for bringing home prizes and other honours. And then they'd turn right around and say, "Don't read so many books. Don't ask so many questions. You must practice more loyalty and obedience to the church and the ways of our people."

We understood what they meant. I, for one, find myself saying that sort of thing to my students and younger friends nowadays as well. Get your head out of that iPhone and back into that book. Or the dishes, or the garden. Something real. The communications revolution we are all part of at present, moving from text culture to digital culture in some ways replicates precisely what we went through then in moving from orality to literacy. What goes around comes around, is what that feels like to me some days.

I also understood when they said they wanted us to practice more loyalty and obedience to the ways of our people, as specifically interpreted by themselves. That is, more loyalty and obedience specifically to *them*. The elder I get, the more the veneration of elders and their way of carrying history makes sense to me. Specifically my elder way of carrying our history and understanding the ways of the world. Haven't I been around the block a few times? Shouldn't everyone see things the way I do now

that I'm getting near the top (or is it the foundational bottom) of the intergenerational heap?

See the volatile argument between a peasant father and university-educated daughter in my first poetry collection *questions i asked my mother* for a spirited example of the intergenerational and also gendered face-off over these sorts of things. These two characters are perhaps more fiery in demonstrating their intergenerational differences than many, but the issues they are trying to straddle and reach across are iconic of what our people went through in the mid-20th century. It's no accident that snippets of Shakespeare's *Lear* haunts my work, including this piece. The great English playwright lived in a similarly volatile and momentous time of cultural change. It was in fact the very same change that our people resisted successfully until the 1960s, from traditionalism to modernity. The huge transformations implicated in that shift that have now deeply impacted the whole world.

This is where we got stuck, isn't it? In the question of who owns the story of our people and who gets to tell it. In our disagreements about which parts of our traditionalist culture and heritage we want to keep and hold onto, and which we are willing to let go or change, as we become ever more assimilated into the modern paradigm and economy we spent so many centuries trying to avoid. In the question of who gets to say what it means to be a good Mennonite, straddled as we are now between highly contradictory and conflicting cultural paradigms and ways of life. Whose right, whose job, it is to say so.

These are partly issues of oral copyright, partly issues of authority in community organization, and partly issues of spirituality, of understanding the difference between the stories and spaces that are sacred, or private, and need to be protected, and those that can be spoken aloud and shared. And partly issues of gender. And those voices and stories that *must* be spoken aloud and shared, to prevent abuse of vulnerable persons.

Robert Zacharias has written eloquently about the "break event" that occurred among the Russian Mennonites in the early 20th century, through political upheaval in their surround, resulting in trauma, death, displacement, exile and forced emigration for pretty well the whole culture still living there then. He suggests that that break event is iconic for all North American Mennonites now, in the way it replays the motifs of persecution and exile that marked our beginning in the Anabaptist movement in 16th century Europe, and in the way it continues to structure our sense of

ourselves (in displacement, or exile, from our previous homes) a century later, in the present (2013).

I would argue, however, that the break event we're talking about here, our rapid modernization in the space of a few short decades, that the new Mennonite writing of Manitoba sought to document and respond to as creatively as possible, is the by far greater and more significant break event for Mennonite culture and identity as a whole, both in the big historical picture, and in the largest deepest sense, cutting to the heart of who and what we are, impacting our fundamental understanding of ourselves in irrevocable ways.

This monumental break event was thrust upon us from the outside, but it was also accepted and even embraced within the culture in many significant ways. It penetrated into the heart of who we are, how we live, who we hang out with and do business with, how we understand our own heritage and future now. This was a "soft" conquest as opposed to the extraordinarily violent conquest and displacements of war, but for that very reason managed to capture and reconfigure us so much more deeply. The Manitoba Mennonites who foresaw that modern English education would take away their children, and moved to Mexico and Central and South America in resistance, managed to forestall the conquest of modernization a half century longer, but it has happened to them now too. It has happened pretty well to all people, around the world, some landing relatively softly as our people have done, economically speaking, some made much more impoverished and desperate by these changes.

The traditionalist world of the Manitoba Mennonite villages, that was still so robust and powerful a mere half century ago, is gone now. The villages are still there, but they are thoroughly integrated into the modern economy. They still sing the old hymns and read the same Bible stories and make sermons about them, but they do it in English, on Sundays, while they listen to the radio and read the news of the world on the internet and travel and read books and watch movies, like everyone else, the rest of the week. The more modern-minded Rüsslander Mennonites, who entered the global industrial economy much earlier, centuries earlier, in fact, nevertheless kept to the same traditionalist sense of origin and history and local communitarian sense of sovereignty too, until recently, and into the present. So did the Amish, the Hutterites, and the so-called the Swiss Mennonites of the US and Ontario, to greater and lesser extents.

Why has the new Mennonite writing, which sought to build creative imaginative bridges between the old and the new, between

now and then, been so pervasively rejected (or vilified, or ignored) by the churches and church-based colleges, especially in Manitoba, where this important revisionary cultural work began and has continued to flourish most robustly? This vibrant and vital oeuvre, after all, explored seriously the patterns of identification which now need to be revised in light of these huge cultural changes around and among us. It is time for the people to take note.

In many ways the Mennonite/s Writing project has been about creating a context of reception for the new Mennonite writing in which these things can be discussed and understood, and theorized in an interdisciplinary context. There is much activism that needs to come out of this discussion as a result, and I hope we can all put our minds to these very specific issues very directly in the next while.

I have long pondered why it is that First Nations, Métis and Inuit writers and their home communities in Canada have so much less controversy between them regarding these matters than we Mennonites do among ours, though their oppression and its resulting socio-economic devastation in the face of modernization has been demonstratively so much greater. We might look to these cultures for inspiration and advice in how to proceed in creative and healing directions in these matters, in ways that do not pit the generations or different cultural interests of the community against each other in culturally suicidal fashion.

For example: both Elders and the new more hybridly identified Indigenous writers actively promote the creation of healing bridges between traditional identifications and practices and the contemporary mainstream. Sophisticated conceptions of oral copyright and research/publication protocols have been developed and instituted in academic and legal forums, which encourage full participation in contemporary cosmopolitan contexts while retaining key affiliations and practices specific to the heritage and culture. Sacred stories and rites come with elaborate processes of respect for both participants and visitors. Intercultural dialogue and understanding is encouraged. The processes of trauma and recovery from both external and internalized political oppression have been extensively theorized in traditional and modern ways. Cultural institutions are clearly differentiated from one another, from healing lodges and societies to friendship centres, cultural and education centres, intellectual study groups, and so on. Writers and artists generally are aligned with both the preservationist and revisionary aspirations and leadership in the culture. Poetic thinking, particularly, is held in high regard.

Here's how Indigenous poet and Elder Lee Maracle, of the West Coast Sto:Lo First Nation, the "River People," explains the role of poetry and poetic thinking in traditional First Nations cultures:

Because force was never used to maintain internal discipline, choice, co-operation, and individual obligations became sacred. This condition led to the development of poetry and stories whose language refused to direct the listener to answers, but rather stimulated thought in the listener on a given condition, perception, or direction. Personal response to language art was connected to concepts of choice and tempered by the social value of co-operation. The listener then becomes central to the story or poem and is engaged in the process of imagining, building, constructing, and responding to the speaker's art. (306)

Mennonites have tended to do things the other way around. Conformity of belief and thinking and social practice, and obedience to authority have been greatly stressed. These are seen as the basis of good social harmony and sound community. They are the rationale behind much of the domestic violence in childrearing, the subjugation of women, and the exclusion of queer and otherwise "different" persons in the culture, when they happen. This makes individual differences in people and their creative self-expressions, when they appear – as they eventually must unless everyone has become a robot or a puppet or a mouse – seem much more scary and threatening and anti-social than they need be, and than they really are. And give the traditional reader very little ground to stand on in response.

Even though much of our sacred text, the Bible, is written in highly expressive poetry, drama and narrative, and our churches themselves orchestrate a form of drama and music every Sunday morning. Even though we have, or used to have (before the advent of television), robust homegrown Mennonite literary and creative arts practices of our own, in poetry, theatre, and music, often practiced at a very high calibre, and often led by the women, whose job it was to entertain and beautifully organize the domestic and social life of the people the rest of the week. These were creative arts practices quite capable, I might add, of self-reflection and self-improvement, and filled the softening gestures of irony, comedy, tenderness, praise and lament. We new Mennonite writers and artists do come by our craft and vision honestly.

In fact it's strange to think or talk about Mennonite creative arts as controversial in Manitoba (and everywhere else) at all, given the extraordinarily high profile our artists have earned here and elsewhere. Randolph Peters, Aganetha Dyck, Wanda Koop, Elvira Finnegan, Tracy Dahl, Leanne Zacharias, Paul Zacharias, Vern

Thiessen, Randolph Peters, Irmgard Baerg, Naomi Forman, Mel Braun, Phil Enns, David Bergen, Katherena Vermette, Miriam Toews: these are all Winnipeg-based Mennonite artists who have achieved prominence on the professional world stage – in addition to the writers mentioned previously. The list goes on and on. We are an artistic culture, after all.

It turns out we don't all have to agree on what the story is, or even all adhere to the same values, or hold memberships in the same local communities, to enjoy a beautiful shared life together. That's what living in multicultural, Indigenous-inflected Canada has taught us. We are all on this earth together: that is the fundamental experience that we hold in common, and that gives us ample ground to diversify without losing the capacity to understand each other and collaborate despite many differences.

The trouble with utopias, no matter how you imagine and build them, as diverse cultural theorists including Alexis de Tocqueville, Hélène Cixous and Mark Featherstone have observed, is that they inevitably require gated communities and walled cities to exist, and therefore strong borders between "us" and "them." Such borders need constant, vigilant policing, and eventually breed a kind of paranoia that lends itself to the projection of every fear upon the "other," the "enemy" lurking outside – and inside – the gate. We Mennonites like to imagine ourselves as superior to other groups with our "intentional community" practices, despite our frequent reliance on others outside our group for hospitality and survival in our long migrant history. But as these visionary thinkers show, the problem of utopian (and therefore necessarily also dystopian) thinking and practice in Western cultures dates back at least to Plato and Abraham, and underlies much of the world's organizational and nation-building efforts in the present. Is the worry about being inundated with the marks of the stranger within our nation states and local communities that underlies much of the modern refugee crisis not the same worry that informs the low tolerance for innovative thinking and artistic expression in our churches?

Is it possible to practice an aspirational ethics without falling into the us/them, insider/outsider, you/me, he/she trap of "paranoid utopianism"? Featherstone posits "positive globalization" as the answer: based not on a specific practice or vision of the future, but rather on a deep valuing of creative communication between self and "other," wherever they are encountered. He imagines radical personal and social practices of appreciation and the honouring of uniquenesses and differences between us all, both on the local and global levels (192). Cixous puts it even more simply and

profoundly, a beautiful recipe for resisting the inward-looking narcissism of gated identifications: "I will look for the other where s/he is without trying to bring everything back to myself" (55, n.5).

So, listen up, sons and daughters – and friends – of utopian and separatist-minded Menno Simons! Democracies and polycultures, we now know, have much better resilience traits and survival rates than tightly controlled monocultures. Let's unpack those old Immigrant suitcases with their outmoded survivalist strategies from violent places and times past, and with rich ceremonies of gratitude and intercultural neighbourliness, come home. Home to who and where we are now, home to our deepest heart's truth, and memory and longing, home to full-spectrum appreciation of difference in harmony, our great human challenge.

Paradigms of re:placement, re:location and re:vision: these are above all what we need to cultivate for our people, updating ourselves and our stories to who we are and who we want to be now. We can do that without giving up our admiration and loyalty for the heroism and generosity and suffering and vision of our ancestors. It just means we won't be living in or for, or turned to, the past, so much, or continually recycling the trauma experiences of the past into the present and future.

We can accomplish these much needed revisions quickly and effectively, by hosting many more trauma healing and creativity workshops, lectures and courses in our churches, community centres and university programs (as Grace Kehler and a few others have been doing for some time). We are living in an unprecedented time, when excellent transformational healing therapies, including family and community systems therapies, are available to us all as never before: let us avail ourselves of them at this privileged time, while we have the opportunity!

We could ensure that the new Mennonite writers and literary scholars and the "new new" Mennonite writers and scholars who have emerged after them, are given opportunities to engage face to face with the people in the churches and church-based schools. We need to create more strategies of refuge, reception and honouring of the new writers and writing within the churches and church-based schools, as a very few have done from the beginning (Goshen College's exemplary offer of safe harbour to Rudy Wiebe after the intense hatred and vilification he encountered in the Canadian Mennonite community for his early work stands out in this regard).

We could widen our cultural practices to really accommodate the deep intercultural lessons we have been challenged to learn this past half century, and to follow the lead of our most creative

thinkers and artists, who offer to show us the way out of our heritage of exile and sense of martyrdom and victimhood, into greater dialogic neighbourliness with our surround. We have the opportunity to cultivate a stronger, deeper appreciation of our own true "Indigenous" heritage and artistic expressiveness; and to develop many holistic, deeply reflective creative strategies for healing and renewal in each of us, and in our families and communities. We live in challenging times; we need to update our understanding of ourselves so we can mobilize the full range of our strengths, wishes and vision, to meet them.

I give my last words to Indigenous poet and visionary elder Lee Maracle. Hyuschka. Megwitch.

We believe that words are sacred and have power and impact. Our poems and stories will show us how to create oneness between ourselves and the world. (310)

We are trying to be ever stronger, ever greater, ever more interesting, collect more stories, create more stories, and see more and more of Shadowland so that when we enter the spirit world, we enter that world with a storehouse of imagery, poetry, and stories to share

Words are to express that spirit of ever growing, ever strengthening, and ever walking toward the light, which is the spirit world, because we're in Shadowland. And so the language of expression among ourselves is tremendously metaphorical, tremendously poetic, even in our everyday speaking lives. (308)

Notes

- ¹ This essay was presented in a previous version at *Mennonite/s Writing VIII: Personal Narratives of Place and Displacement*, hosted by the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba, October 19-21, 2017.
- ² See Jean Friedman-Rudovsky for a particularly empathetic and insightful analysis of the story, as it appeared in *Vice Magazine*, 2013.
- ³ You may read more about this incident that happened in June, 2013, here: <https://globalnews.ca/news/655706/mennonite-community-distressed-after-42-children-seized-by-cfs/>.
- ⁴ See for example, Wiebe's *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* and *The Second Coming of Yeeat Shpanst*, and *my questions i asked my mother*, and *So this is the world & here I am in it*.

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