Journal of Mennonite Writing

Mennonite Experience | Many Voices

About

The Journal of Mennonite Writing is a quarterly online journal devoted to literary, artistic, and cultural production. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, author, or genre within Mennonite Writing, and includes poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism. The Journal of Mennonite Writing is published by the Center for Mennonite Writing, an online community hosted at MennoniteWriting.org. The Center (CMW) provides resources for the study of Anabaptist and Mennonite-related artistic, cultural, and intellectual thought. It also houses Ervin Beck’s bibliographies of Mennonite literature—one for U.S. authors, and one, with Hildi Froese Tiessen, for Canadian authors—updated annually.

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Address inquiries to Editor at cmw@goshen.edu and include a biography that describes your connection to Mennonite faith, culture, heritage, or identity. Work should be submitted as a Word attachment. Our issues are thematic, as announced through the Center for Mennonite Writing at www.mennonitewriting.org, but we also accept submissions of poetry, fiction, memoir, and critical essays year round.

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Introduction

Postcolonial Studies (After Identity)

ERVIN BECK, ISSUE EDITOR

A funny thing happened on Ellah Wakatama’s way to writing a postcolonial critique of Sofia Samatar’s prize-winning fantasy novel, *Stranger in Olondria*. She became seduced by the act of reading, independent of ideology and literary theory. Her awareness of post-colonial elements in Samatar’s work comes through, but her reader’s delight in words and thought predominate in her essay, which is in the tradition of reader-response criticism and the much earlier "appreciation" approach to literature. Ellah is indeed a voracious and perceptive reader, as illustrated by her having to read dozens of books for the Dublin and Man Booker prizes in England, for which she has served as judge. A native of Zimbabwe living in London, Ellah has become one of the most prominent promoters, editors and interpreters of contemporary African and diasporic literature today in England. See her essay in the "Visiting Mennonites" issue of this online journal (November 2012).

Sofia Samatar’s essay may be a landmark in Mennonite literary studies, since it states "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed." Sofia, a Somali-American-Mennonite, articulates clearly and strongly the need for Mennonite literary studies to seek out and embrace global Mennonite writing, especially from Southern Hemisphere cultures. She names a few names and introduces us to a fellow Somali-Canadian-Mennonite poet. Most intriguing, she suggests a starting point for gathering and studying global Mennonite writing—in the form of hymns and songs (shades of Bob Dylan!) from other cultures, which in comparison with lyrics used by North American Mennonites will yield insights into the experiences of Mennonites in postcolonial cultures. Notice that this suggestion, if implemented, will return Mennonite literary studies to earlier interests, now much neglected, in highlighting the religious and spiritual beliefs and experiences that may unite us.

Both Sofia and Ellah are graduates of Goshen College. The
Goshen College origin of other material in this issue is provided without apology, since international studies has characterized liberal arts education there since the late 1960s.

So the intended scope of this issue of the Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing is only partly achieved. That is, an emphasis on subjecting Mennonite writing to formal, academic criticism from a postcolonial perspective. That intention is made attractive and compelling especially in light of the previous (January 2017) issue of the Journal, which featured responses to the anthology of essays, After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America (Penn State 2016), edited by Robert Zacharias. The title derives from theoretical essays by Zacharias and Hildi Froese Tiessen, who urge Mennonite authors and critics to move beyond a pre-occupation with representations of Mennonite identity and into new concerns in subject and analysis.

Exactly what those subjects and analyses would be like is not made very clear in that anthology, and indeed most of the other eleven essays in the anthology remain concerned, in their own way, and to considerable degree, with Mennonite identity. But the point is clear: If Mennonite writing is to evolve into a more mature field, as other ethnic literatures have, then it must—or will inevitably—become less concerned with explicit depictions of Mennonite experience and thought. How that will continue to justify "Mennonite" as a category in literary and critical expression is not perfectly clear. Into that discussion comes this issue on postcolonial literature and criticism. It seems to me that indeed this perspective goes beyond ethnic navel-gazing and opens up a new, unexplored field of discourse in Mennonite literary studies.

Although Mennonite literature contains a vast number of texts amenable to postcolonial criticism, very few analyses have been written by Mennonites from that perspective. My two essays on Rudy Wiebe – "Postcolonial Complexity in the Writings of Rudy Wiebe" (MFS Winter 2001) and "Rudy Wiebe and W. B. Yeats: Sailing to Danzig and Byzantium" (Ariel October 2001)—are among the rare few. True, Wiebe's writings about indigenous people have attracted many postcolonial essays, but almost entirely by non-Mennonite writers. Mennonite critics tend to focus on Mennonite subjects.
Some fine recent novels by Mennonite writers that virtually cry out for postcolonial analysis are The Time in Between by David Bergen (2005), set in Viet Nam, and Fear of Landing by David Waltner-Toews (2007), set in Java and Bali. Rudy Wiebe’s award-winning A Discovery of Strangers (1994) has received very little criticism of any kind, and the situation it depicts is intensely colonial.

Other texts that I recommended to prospective writers for this issue were all of the writings by Omar Eby about Somalia and Viet Nam; Armin Wiebe’s Tatsea (2003), about Dogrib people in early exposure to Europeans; Rudy Wiebe’s First and Vital Candle (1966), about a missionary among Ojibway people; and Chapter 11, “Wash, This Sand and Ashes,” from Rudy Wiebe’s The Blue Mountains of China (1970).

An interesting historical survey of Mennonites interacting with people of other nations and cultures could look much farther backward to texts, especially memoirs and reports, derived from the earliest service and missionary programs sponsored by Mennonite agencies. For Dutch Mennonites, that would be memoirs about Indonesia. For Swiss Mennonites, the mission at Dhamtari, India. Each Mennonite denomination that sponsored foreign and domestic missions will have its own set of memoirs, even if no fiction or poetry emerged from missionary experiences.

How did Mennonite missionaries from European and American Mennonite cultures, bearing financial and cultural power, regard and represent the "Other" in their cross-cultural encounters? Were their attitudes, as Mennonite Christians, more sensitive and humane than their counterparts in colonial governments and commercial ventures?

Beyond these early missions, and especially following World Wars I and II, when Mennonite relief and service workers spread throughout the world, travel memoirs, or travelogues, emerged as a common expressive genre, at a time when most Mennonites could not travel internationally as easily as they can today.

One such text worth considering from a postcolonial perspective is Middle East Sojourn (1951) by Samuel A. Yoder, later Professor of English at Goshen College and the first teacher of a creative writing course there. It chronicles his travels and service assignments in the then exotic lands of Palestine, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. Or
Eastward to the Sun (1953) by Sanford C. Yoder, beloved president of Goshen College, who travelled to the 50th anniversary celebration of the Mennonite mission in India and reported on his travels through England, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Italy, Germany and Holland.

Readers from other Mennonite communities can think of many other travel texts by Mennonite writers that might sparkle in a new way if given postcolonial scrutiny.

I hope that this issue will inspire a new direction in Mennonite literary criticism, one that goes beyond traditional Mennonite identity and into cross-cultural, even global identities.
A Chronicle of Ghosts

Reading Sofia Samatar

ELLAH WAKATAMA ALLFREY

There are many horizons that must be visited, fruit that must be plucked, books read, and white pages in the scrolls of life to be inscribed with vivid sentences in a bold hand.
— Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*

I. The Reader

When the invitation comes I am immediately uneasy about the request for a scholarly article. I am a reader and – perhaps somewhat defiantly – not an academic. While the theories and language of the academy inform and illuminate my understanding of literature, as a publisher, an editor, what I am most interested in is the immediate, visceral emotional response of the reader. And then, if the magic happens, the slow contemplation and rereading of a beloved text.

"Yes," I say, for I know right away which book I will choose. I want to write about Sofia Samatar's *A Stranger in Olondria*. More than anything, I want an excuse to spend time – slow time – reading this book that has been by my desk for too long, waiting for an unlikely break in my schedule. So I agree. I know my sister is a friend of the author and I call to tell her the news. Oh, you'll like it, she says, even if you don't usually read fantasy. And, you know, she was a friend of Nhamu and Sammy at college.

So this will be a very personal reading. The degrees of separation – a shared alma mater, connections with my sister, our late brother and his best friend, our African heritage, publication in this journal – focus my attention as I work out how to approach this essay. I find myself wondering, as I assemble notebook and pencils, get comfortable in my reading chair, how these myriad links and connections, established before I even turn the first page, make this book the perfect opportunity to think more
about the act of reading -- what it is, what it means, why it is essential.

I start with a little internetting to get a sense of the writer, and I find an essay published in the *Guardian* in 2014, in which she defends the range and artistic reach of fellow writers from the African continent and her diaspora. "Our literature," she says, "doesn't need better writers; it needs better readers" (Samatar, "Black and African Writers").

So this is the task. How, I ask myself, do I read Sofia Samatar?

II. The Narrator

*As I was a stranger in Olondria, I knew nothing of the splendor of its coasts, nor of Bain, the Harbor City, whose lights and colors spill into the ocean like a cataract of roses* (Samatar, *A Stranger in Olondria*, Chapter 1).

An early online review defines Sofia Samatar's multi-award-winning novel as "a secondary world fantasy and a travelogue" (Chapter 1). While I am fond of categories, I find myself puzzling over this one – a secondary world fantasy. I read in another interview that the writer is a fan of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* and feel a faint clutch of anxiety (Samatar, "On the 13 Words That Made Me a Writer"). I have never done well with fantasy – the rules are too "floral" for me, and I recall now that while I loved the language of Peake's book, I balked at continuing with the others in the series, so lost and overwhelmed did I feel in its imagined world. Indeed, the question "What is this book?" whispers and rustles at the edges of my mind as I turn the pages. It will take me a while to be able to answer.

What is clear, from the very opening lines, is that this is a writer who pays meticulous attention. I see that the book was drafted while the author lived and worked in Yambio, South Sudan, and as this is a slow read, I allow myself distractions and take some time to look this place up. Dense, lush greenery, red dust roads, boys fishing in a river, women selling at an outdoor
market ... and some pictures of guns and aid organization 4x4s. I ignore the latter and instead imagine Sofia Samatar sitting at her desk, staring outside as she slowly begins to build the world which our narrator, Jevick of Tyom, inhabits. It is a world presented to the reader in language that is rich, at times lyrical, at times muscular and emotionally rending. And always there is the confidence of a writer secure in her craft. She has worked hard to make this world, a place not in our own time or space, credible – and I believe it.

Jevick is the son of a pepper merchant on the island of Tyom, a rural community steeped in tradition and an old-world spirituality. His household, for all we are told, is conventional. He is the son of a wealthy man, an important community leader. His mothers – the wife of his father and his birth mother, a nurse-maid and then a second wife – and his brother Jom complete the family unit. In the early chapters we experience the not always benign authoritarian rule of the family patriarch, the insecurity of the childless senior wife, the humble attentiveness of the mother. Jevick is clearly a gifted boy, intelligent and quick, if, at least in his father's estimation, a little too eager to show off. I feel I know Jevick from the start, recognizing that eagerness, appreciating his care for his brother who is loving and content but clearly slow of wit and not quite of this world. This is not a household of learning. Instead, commerce and the age-old traditions of the community punctuate the days and seasons, as they have through generations.

On his return from a routine trip to sell pepper in the Northern cities, Jevick's father returns with a stranger who will change the young boy's world. With the arrival of the tutor, Lunre, comes the possibility of "more" for Jevick as the world is opened to him through the learning of a new language (Olondrian), new stories and customs.

And books. Lunre brings with him books. From the start, Jevick is in thrall. He learns the alphabet and marvels that "the signs were not numbers at all, but could speak" (*A Stranger in Olondria*, 18). This is magic and he cannot get enough of it. "In my room, in my village, I shone like a moth with its back to a
sparkling fire,” Jevick tells us. "Master Lunre had taught me his sorcery: I embraced it and swooned in its arms. The drudgery of the schoolroom, the endless copying of letters, the conjugation of verbs— ’ayein, kayein, bayeinan, bayeinun’— all of this led me at last through a curtain of flame into a world which was a new way of speaking and thinking, a new way of moving, a means of escape" (19).

Jevick’s response to the brave new world he finds in the books his tutor shows him and the people he imagines in it is unequivocal. And it is here that I begin to have my uncertainties about the protagonist. How can he cast aside his own life, yearning towards Olondria with so little questioning? As he learns with a voracity that should be admirable but is instead, for me, unsettling, I feel a sliver of dread creeping in. His mother's disquiet (she refers to Olondria as "the Ghost Country") serves as one warning (6). This will not – it cannot – end well.

In these early days of Jevick’s education he falls in love with the tales of Olondria. For Samatar has imagined for us not just a new world, with all its customs and costumes, but a language and its literature too. It is the latter – even more so than the former – that calls to Jevick of Tyom. With each story his tutor bequeaths him, the dream grows. Olondria, a place of wonder, of learning and sophistication, grows in his imagination, awaiting his discovery. But he will have to wait. His encounter with the place of his dreams will not come for a while. Under the tutorship of Lunre for nine years, the boy grows to be a young man. And then, when his father dies suddenly while out inspecting his crops, Jevick, the second son but the assigned heir, finds himself the head of the household. His father is barely mourned. "I realized that I had not wept, and recognized the strain in my heart as the secret elation of freedom," he confesses as he begins, with unceremonious and unseemly haste, to plan his long-awaited voyage to Olondria (28).

As Jevick boards the boat that will take him and his men to Olondria, it is clear that this will be a tale about journeys. A story of a self forever changed – reshaped and remade – by an encounter with the other. And the narrator hints that it will be a long
while before he comes home again and that when he does, he will not be the same person.

III. The Chronicle of Ghosts

From here the story turns and twists and our protagonist must face many perils before he finds his way home again. Make no mistake, this is no grand "boy's own" adventure – Jevick’s sojourn in Olondria is ultimately a time of darkness and despair and he is forced to face his greatest fears, physical danger and spiritual turmoil before all is done. And there are twists to the tale that even the most gifted of readers will not guess. The plotting is intricate, the progression sophisticated and complex – all this could be enough to hold the reader’s attention.

But even as I am caught up in Jevick’s travails, his initial euphoria and then his mishaps and disappointments, I find myself consistently captivated by language, for it is in this regard especially that *A Stranger in Olondria* is a truly transnational work of imagination. The prose resonates with the literature of the Ancient world – I think of Odysseus and his own interminable, interrupted and story-filled trek home from the wars. There is too the unmistakable cadence of an African oral tradition in the way that the reader is invited to become a *listener* as characters interrupt action to tell stories within stories as they illuminate and guide.

Samatar’s is a fluid, confident prose, language inflected throughout with the rhythm and careful structuring of poetry. And as with Richard Adam’s Lappin in *Watership Down* or JRR Tolkein’s Quenya and Sindarin, her meticulously generated Olondrian and Kideti are euphonious languages of such a sturdy internal logic and lexical consistency that the reader has no trouble crediting an entire culture and canon rising from their roots.

On arrival in the city of Bain (his tutor Lunre’s original home) the first thing Jevick does is to visit a bookshop. It is this thirst for knowledge, the product of a questing personality as much as it is of his education under Lunre’s tutorship, that proves Jevick’s downfall and, perhaps, his ultimate salvation. As he
arrives at his long dreamed of destination, he has already been seduced by the tales of Olondria and now finds himself enticed by the place itself.

Jevick is somewhat enamored of his own intelligence and daring, believing that his education – his reading – has prepared him to partake of the city in all its chaotic munificence. It is enough here to say that this makes him reckless, dismissive even of the advice of his knowledgeable steward Sten. He knows a little and that proves dangerous, for he does not take into account the possible dangers of his own ignorance.

This is where Samatar’s true passion shows itself. A passion for words, for the power of language, of both the spoken and the written word. Inextricably linked, there is also an acknowledgement of the complexities of acquiring knowledge – once you know another's story and the tongue in which it was originally told, can you claim truly to know them? Further, is the development of a sophisticated language system only a precursor to the oppression of those who lack their own? In the battle that ensues between rival forces (those of the book – the written word – and the devotees of the older religion, the goddess) Jevick finds himself a pawn in a terrible war between the two.

It is about halfway through the book, at the point where Jevick's life is about to take a turn for the worse, that I start to think back to that definition that had me anxious as I began reading: "A second world fantasy." I realize now that it was not a lack of understanding of the curiously defined genre that bothered me, but the very fact that this book itself refuses to be bound by such classification. "Sofia Samatar is breaking boundaries for you with every word, every image," one reviewer says. "Those lines that we are told exist between this world and fantasy, prose and poetry, realism and fabulism, oral and written language, she dims, elides" (Moore, "This Writer's On Fire). In removing the reader far from all she knows of the real world, and in deftly scrambling the established rules and classifications of genre, Samatar's unconfinable creativity invites a flight of fancy and a deep exploration of the themes of her story.

Jevick finds himself swept away both literally and metaphor-
ically in the energy and frenzy of the Feast of Birds, a carnival celebrating the goddess Avalei, lured by a girl to a darkened room, seemingly unable to resist: "My desire for her had no beginning; I felt it had always been there, blind and torrential like my desire for the city" (*A Stranger in Olondria*, 65). He wakes in a darkened room, perhaps drugged and, to his horror and the reader's, afflicted with the unwanted state of being *avneanyi*, one who is possessed by the spirit of an angel or ghost. The sojourn in Olondria – the state of being an alien in a land of wonders – now becomes for the reader and the narrator an in-depth immersion, a contemplation and a bold interrogation that pushes both to address the base desires and motivations and the higher minded aspirations of us all as humans. What is learning for? Where do truth and freedom lie? Where – or what – is God? What is the purpose of belief?

IV. The Breath of Angels

It will not spoil your own reading for me to tell you that the angel who haunts Jevick is the ghost of Jissavet, a young girl whom he meets on the boat that brings him to Olondria. By the time Jevick is caught up in the bacchanal of the Feast of Birds, Jissavet has succumbed to illness and dies in a Northern city, her body buried there and denied her people's traditional rites. Her spirit cannot rest. Over and over, in the main narrative and many supplementary tales, *A Stranger in Olondria* examines the complexities of the spiritual self. What I read here is more than "religion" alone defines, for Samatar allows for a multiplicity of belief systems, superstitions, traditions, cults and organized religions in her exploration of the nature and expression of faith.

While neither Jevick nor Jissavet, perhaps out of youthful ignorance, credit the spiritual beliefs of their own people, when faced with the cruel ultimatum of death on her part, and the terrifying evidence of an afterlife on his, they are forced to acknowledge and submit to the possibility of truths they had hitherto ignored. Jevick's ancestral gods are not the gods of Olondria, yet this does not stop him being afflicted when the angel chooses him. The divine, the afterlife, transcends the mortal’s understand-
ing of what awaits us, a power that may remain unknowable but cannot be ignored. "Darkness," he laments. "The darkness of the old gods, gods who though foreign are like my own: gods of discord, pathos, and revelation" (118). Jissavet, the manifestation of that discord, is not a benign presence. Spoiled by a doting father and docile mother, entitled and furious at the hand fate has dealt her, she is a demanding, insistent and relentless "angel."

At first, Jevick seeks the help of the Olondrian priests to rid himself of this visitation. Jissavet will have none of it. She will not release her hold on Jevick. And then, finally, she makes a surprising request.

V. A Divination

"Write me a vallon," she demands. "Put my voice inside it. Let me live … write me a vallon, Jevick. Like what you read to me on the ship that day. You said they last forever" (121). Jevick goes on to explain, "The word for 'book' in all the known languages of the earth is vallon, 'chamber of words,' the Olondrian name for that tool of enchantment and art" (16).

Although illiterate in her short time as a mortal, Jissavet the angel is convinced that Jevick will keep her alive if he writes her life in a book. It is not so much the word becoming flesh as it is the word becoming memory. And though he has the means and the ability, by this time Jevick’s experiences had taught him that knowledge is as much bondage as it is freedom.

I pause here and wonder what Samatar wants to tell me about knowledge, about education and the nature of its power to change. Was my unease about Jevick’s enthusiasm based on the fear that he was abandoning his own traditions for the lure of the sophisticated, powerful Olondria? There is, of course, the temptation to focus on this as a text of "postcolonial" literature but, as with the confined definition of religion above, this does not seem enough to me. The telling of the angel’s story, the act of writing it down, is about memory and preservation. She is known, she will be known, because her story is known. What has happened to Jevick, the fearless would-be sophisticate who left the pepper farm in Tyom with such confidence, that he so resists the opportunity
to become one of the storytellers he has so admired?
"Write me a vallon, Jevick."

In the end, he relents and while there is no easy resolution in the writing of Jissavet’s vallon, he finds, for the first time in what seems an age, some semblance of peace.

VI. The Contents of a Soul

"... being a person of mixed race, and a person of two different cultures. In my position, you have to believe that boundaries can be broken down, that so-called opposites can merge. Otherwise, you can't exist." —Sofia Samatar, in an interview with Alicia Cole in *Black Fox Literary Magazine*

Jevick writes the angel’s story in Olondrian and Kideti, a parallel text that bridges two cultures and worlds (Clarke, "Review: A Stranger in Olondria"). And here too there is more. Jevick’s education ultimately means he straddles two worlds and he is forced by traumatic circumstance to reconcile the two. When he becomes *avneanyi*, the angel’s presence complicates and layers this sense of duality, and nothing he has learned, in books, in the classroom, through experience, is enough to explain what has happened to him. He loses his arrogance when faced with the truly unknown.

I cast about for an answer to my first question: How do I read Sofia Samatar? Am I looking for the "map of a heart" as Jevick claims to have gained from his years as Lunre’s pupil (21)? That seems to me too meek an ambition. Yes, there is the rich mine of her personal history – African, American, Mennonite, Muslim – the capacity for learning and creating languages, grace and wisdom (teamed with a deliciously biting intelligence that is not afraid to show its claws) evident in all the interviews I find. This provides some information for my reading. There is evidence of a preoccupation with religion, the clash between conflicting civilizations, the trauma of the colonized mind. All that is here. But again, that by itself would provide too small a reading. Instead, with meek acknowledgement of the unlimited possibili-
ties of her chosen genre, I put away *A Stranger in Olondria* but do not return it to the shelf. The magic has happened and I know I will need to come back to the story.

This is how I read Sofia Samatar. With wonder and appreciation. With questions followed by an interrogation of her answers. For this is what good fiction does. It presents a world, opens up possibilities, provides a period of escape and invites a lifetime of contemplation.

**Notes**

1. Reference here to the ultimate idea that the book is the soul (jut).

2. "I know what the vallon is," she said. "It’s jut." (*Stranger*, 265).

**References**


About the Author

Ellah Wakatama Allfrey is a London-based editor and critic. She was Visiting Professor and Global Intercultural Scholar at Goshen College, Indiana in 2016. She is on the judging panel for the 2017 International Dublin Literary Award and was Guest Master for the 2016 Gabriel Garcia Marquez Foundation fellowship in Colombia. A recent guest contributing editor for the 'Fear' issue of Transition magazine, she is the former deputy editor of Granta magazine and was senior editor at Jonathan Cape, Random House and assistant editor at Penguin. She served as a judge for the Man Booker Prize in 2015. She sits on the selection panel for the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Fellowship and served as a literature selector for the Rolex 2014-15 Mentor & Protégée Initiative. Allfrey is series editor of the Kwani? Manuscript Project and the editor of Africa39 (Bloomsbury, 2014) and Safe House: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction (Dundurn/Cassava Republic, 2016). She has also served as chair of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. Her journalism has appeared in the Spectator, the Telegraph, the Guardian and the Observer and she has been a regular contributor to the book pages of NPR. Her broadcasting includes reviews for NPR’s All Things Considered and BBC Radio 4’s Saturday Review. She has presented BBC Radio 4’s Archive on Four and Open Book and commissioned short stories for broadcast on BBC Radio 4. She has also chaired events at venues including the South Bank and at festivals including Hay Festival (Bangladesh and Colombia) and the Emirates Literary Festival. She sits on the boards of Art for Amnesty, the Caine Prize for African Writing, the Jalada Collective (Kenya) and the Writers Centre Norwich and is a patron of the Etisalat Literature Prize. Her introduction to Woman of the Aeroplanes by Kojo Laing was published by Pearson in 2012. In 2011 she was awarded an OBE for services to the publishing industry.
The Scope of This Project

SOFIA SAMATAR

1. Notes Toward a Dream
These are notes toward a dream: the dream of a world Mennonite literature.

When I was asked to write an essay on postcolonial Mennonite writing, this dream occurred to me, or rather revived in me, welled up, for it is a dream I have dwelt with for some time.

To me, the phrase "postcolonial Mennonite writing" means work by Mennonite writers of the postcolony. It means work by writers from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It means the literary production of those regions where the Mennonite church is largest. It means the writing of the majority. It also means the work of minority writers in North America, of black, Latinx, and indigenous Mennonites, whom I include in the postcolony, not only because they are marginalized members of settler states but because, historically, they came to the Mennonite community through a process of missionary outreach. Only a constellation of all of these writers would allow us to speak of global Mennonite literature, of world Mennonite literature. The consideration of postcolonial Mennonite writing is a necessary step on the way to that dream.

Until now, postcolonial Mennonite writing has not been a subject of discussions of Mennonite literature. Reading anthologies of Mennonite writing, literary criticism and conference proceedings, one would never guess that most Mennonites today live outside the United States and Canada. If this fact is mentioned, it happens briefly, usually in the introduction, sometimes in a regretful tone, the editors announcing that while a truly global anthology of Mennonite writing is an excellent idea, it is beyond the scope of their project. The time for postcolonial Mennonite literature is perpetually, it seems, not yet. I want to move toward that suspended time. I want to trace, if possible, the contours of this project, which remains in the subjunctive, out of reach.

The dream of world Mennonite literature is certainly an
The Scope of This Project

ambitious one, but contemporary critics have a number of tools at their disposal. In the past twenty-five years, there has been an impressive amount of scholarship on the concept of world literature, produced by theorists in search of ways of engaging in literary study beyond the old models of (restrictive) area studies or (Eurocentric) comparative literature. Today, a scholar who wants to study world literature can choose from a number of approaches, including circulation and reception studies (Pascale Casanova), distant reading (Franco Moretti), dialogic pairing (David Damrosch) and investigations in deep time (Wai Chee Dimock).

All of these approaches will be useful to scholars of Mennonite literature.

Yet to many of these scholars, as well as interested readers, it may seem too soon to be talking about methodology. These approaches are all very well, but where is the object? Where is postcolonial Mennonite writing? Where are those creative works from around the world that would allow us to talk about world Mennonite literature?

Like any literature, world Mennonite literature has to be created. That is the daunting truth, the vast scope of this project. As a step in this direction, I want to discuss one major challenge and two possibilities.

Notes, all of them, toward a dream.

2. The Missionary Legacy

The major challenge of world Mennonite literature is the dual significance of the word "Mennonite." At once faith and ethnicity, church and culture, the element identified as Mennonite is carried both in the soul and in the skin. It is possible to do a great deal of literary study without directly confronting this problem: simply choose a working definition and stick to it. Even a curious object like "postcolonial Mennonite literature" can be explored without too much trouble, as long as you don’t try to study ethnic Mennonite literature at the same time. Put them together, though, and the definitions clash. How do you compare two poets—for example, the Canadian Mennonite poet Di Brandt and the Zambian Mennonite poet Sichala—when
the ethnic Mennonite experience of the former is so far removed from the doctrinal base that defines the devotional poetry of the latter, that makes the latter a Mennonite poet? It’s not merely that each expresses different aspects of Mennonite identity. It’s that what constitutes Mennoniteness for each is absent from the other. This is the challenge of global Mennonite literature: a challenge produced, like global Mennonite identity itself, by the missionary project.

The scene: Members of an ethno-religious group travel the world in order to spread their faith. Detached from ethnicity, the faith takes wing. Mennonite churches around the world develop independence, they are led by indigenous pastors, they produce missionaries of their own. In this global context, to be Mennonite is to be a believer in Christ. Meanwhile, in North America, some of the children and grandchildren of missionaries, the nieces and nephews, the cousins, the ones who read the newsletters that come home—they rethink, they withdraw, sometimes they break with the church, they grow critical of missionary work.

The problem of the missionary legacy in the study of Mennonite literature is not just methodological or intellectual. It is political and affective. Once, writes the poet Patrick Friesen, he loved listening to the stories missionaries told, but soon he realized he didn’t like what they were doing. "It seemed unfair to intrude on people in other countries and put the pressure on them to drop their religions and cultures and pick up the new sanctified ones. As if only people who called themselves Christian (who rejected other branches of Christianity) had a monopoly on wisdom and on what led to wisdom." For Friesen, missionaries are "the soft armies": "Wearing their pith helmets and safari shirts. They brought the Word, as they understood it, and this Word fell like a sledge on delicate old worlds" (Friesen, 101).

For some, the existence of Mennonite churches around the world is cause for celebration. For others, it is a source of sorrow. There are those who rejoice in new life and those who mourn delicate old worlds. This difference in feeling is the greatest challenge to the study of world Mennonite literature. It is a challenge more formidable than the issues of working in different languages
or accessing hard-to-find materials—problems world literature scholars overcome every day.

What if we went ahead anyway, through this welter of feelings? I suggest two directions for study: song and diaspora.

3. Song

"I was born into a household of song," writes Jean Janzen, "my six siblings all playing the piano and harmonizing. Surely the voice stretching the sounds of language into song lured me to venture into unknown territory" (Janzen, 61). Janzen, an accomplished poet, has written a number of hymns; her example offers a place to start looking at Mennonite poetry in a global context. For if Mennonite poetry in North America begins in song, the same can be said of Mennonite poetry around the world. A study of postcolonial Mennonite writing might begin with hymns, examining the poetry of hymn texts from different congregations.

Imagine what might arise, for example, from a comparison of Janzen's hymns to those of the Congolese hymn writer Malumalu. There are opportunities here to study the way poets use Biblical texts, the practices and experiences of congregants, and various forms of theopoetics. Religious music outside hymnals may offer another rich archive: Imagine a comparative study of 1970s Mennonite music performance that would treat the African American singer Barbara Sowell, the Spanish gospel music of the Lawndale Choir, and the Indonesian Sangkakala Band.

Song is a good place to look at world Mennonite literature not only because it is so universal, but because it is so portable. The stretching voice, says Janzen, lured her into unknown territory. Songs pull us across borders. Every Sunday, the hymns sung in Mennonite churches in North America propose, melodically and insistently, a global Mennonite identity. These hymns are Croatian, Tshiluba, Japanese, Plains Indian, Filipino. Mennonite churches elsewhere also express a complex identity in song. "We can say with certainty," write Pakisa K. Tshimika and Doris Dube, "that our songs are a better reflection of the reality of ethnic diversity of African Mennonite and Brethren in Christ...
churche than anything else. It does not take very long for a
foreigner travelling to any of our churches to realize that rather
than hearing one language during a church service, she ends up
hearing three or four languages used in the same service. The
diversity of language is most often expressed in song, thus making
our songs a powerful unifying force for our diversity and ethnic
divisions" (Dube and Tshimika, 5-6).

Dreaming of world Mennonite literature, I think of song as
a powerful unifying force. How open we are when we sing, held
by other voices. A model, if you like, for the study of world litera-
ture, which no one can do alone.

4. Diaspora

In writing of song, I propose a research direction based on
form. I would also like to propose one based on content. The
notion of diaspora, with its attendant themes of migration, perse-
cution, homelessness, and nostalgia, holds a wealth of possibility
for the study of global Mennonite literature. "What’s the master
narrative that I hear operating in this meeting?" asked Robert
Kroetsch, chair of the closing panel at the first Mennonite/s
Writing Conference in 1990. "It has something to do with the
question, ‘where is home?’ That is the question that I hear operat-
ing so intensely" (Dube and Tshimika, 5-6).

Stories of scattering, of movement, of place and displace-
ment, of losing and finding community: such themes cry out for
consideration in a global context. The question "Where is home?",
which has rung through decades of Mennonite writing in the
U.S. and Canada, is surely heard in India, in Ethiopia, in the Par-
aguayan Chaco. It is surely heard among Mennonites of various
backgrounds who are making their way among the tensions of
their home cultures and their chosen communities.

In Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture, for example, Felipe Hinojosa writes that for many in
these communities, becoming Mennonite means leaving home:
"Our family becomes the church" (Hinojosa, 9). The question
"Where is home?" must be heard, too, among those for whom
attending a Mennonite church means worshipping in a foreign
language, and among the students from all the corners of Mennonite influence who travel for an education at Mennonite schools, who find themselves far from home.

In searching for postcolonial Mennonite writing, I have suggested, scholars might begin with hymns; we might also look at the literary journals and publications of Mennonite colleges and universities, which draw students from a variety of contexts. To conclude these thoughts on diaspora, I will share an interview with a writer who was once one of those students: the Somali Canadian poet and peace activist Mohamud Siad Togane, who graduated from Eastern Mennonite University (then Eastern Mennonite College) in 1969. Togane’s volume of poems, The Bottle and the Bushman, published in 1986, refers often to his experience with Mennonite missionaries in Somalia, and in subsequent work he has returned again and again to these memories as he expresses and wrestles with his own spiritual identity.

In interviewing him, I decided to ask him the questions Ann Hostetler asked at the 2003 Associated Writing Programs Conference, addressing some of the poets she included in her anthology *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry.*

> How has your Mennonite connection informed your work as a poet?

**Togane:**

Absolutely! I am so Mennonite that once, in my Eastern Mennonite College days, in Harrisonburg, Virginia, I called myself Charlie Stoltzfus, trying to shed my real Moslem name: Mohamud Siad Togane. If I had to label myself now, I would call myself: Moslem-Mennonite or MoMennonite.

> Would you write different poems if you hadn’t been shaped in a Mennonite crucible, so to speak?

**Togane:**

Yes, I would. The Mennonites encountered a Caliban and created almost, but not quite, a Prospero!

They taught me their language
and my profit on ‘t
is
that now I know
how to curse
how to piss off people
how to bless
how to bear witness
how to speak Truth to Power
how to put bastards & bitches in their proper place
how to mau-mau mofos
how to wield the word
which is the sword of my spirit.
May Allah bless the Mennonites
For learning me their language!

What attracted you to Mennonites?

Togane:
Their ofay colour
Their ofay culture
Their ofay costume
Their ofay language
Their utter otherness
Their genuine gentleness
Their never wearying in well doing
Their bearing of one another’s burdens
thus fulfilling the law of Christ
Their never beating me as a child
in the name of God
the Most Compassionate
the Most Merciful
as the Merciless Moslems were wont to do!
Their complicated kindness—a theme Miriam Toews goes to
town on in her book: A Complicated Kindness.

How has this experience shaped your poetry?
Togane:
The Mennonites came to Somalia bearing their big black Bible in Elizabethan English in the King James Version and they diligently dinned that Bible into my head into my heart into the marrow of my bones That is why when I write what I write cannot help but carry the cadence carry the majesty carry the beauty of the language of that black Bible carry the hum of their hymns for often when I would meet with them they would speak to me to one another in psalms in hymns in biblical verses in spiritual songs singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord.³

"Their ofay culture," Togane writes, using a pejorative word for whiteness, speaking a language of attraction and repulsion. Like Caliban, he curses, and then he transforms Caliban’s famous curse: "May Allah bless the Mennonites for learning me their language." His whole interview is a complicated kindness. Expressing both resentment and love, reveling in the power of
language, Togane’s answers here continue his deep engagement with Mennonite identity, an engagement that has characterized his writing for more than thirty years. His work is one example of how postcolonial Mennonite writing might inform, expand, and reveal anew the question: "Where is home?"

5. Being Mennonite

The first work of Mennonite literature I read was a volume called Three Mennonite Poets, published by Good Books in 1986. The choice of poets—Jean Janzen from the United States, Yorifumi Yaguchi from Japan and David Waltner-Toews from Canada—represented an argument for a global understanding of Mennonite identity. I also read a review in Direction in which the reviewer complained that "sandwiching Yaguchi into the collection is forced at best," and that "[w]e’re told that Yaguchi is a Mennonite pastor, and several of his poems allude to pacifism, but it is never apparent in the poems themselves that Yaguchi is being Mennonite" (Reimer, 75-77).

Surely this is what is at stake in the notion of world Mennonite literature. In order to bring this literature into being, scholars, readers and writers will have to admit ways of being Mennonite they may never have considered, and grapple with new terms like "Muslim-Mennonite." This is exciting. It may be the greatest reward of the project. Sometimes I hear Mennonite writers and critics in North America talk about being tired of identity discussions, of desiring to get past and away from Mennonite identity, and I think of how different those discussions would be, how newly troubling and electric, if we considered ways of being Mennonite outside Dutch-Swiss-German ethnicity and the North American context. The study of postcolonial Mennonite writing may enliven debates about Mennonite identity, or it may cause the very notion to crumble; in any case, it’s too early to drop the subject.

It would be a mistake to move into a post-identity mode (should such a move prove possible) before considering the perspectives of the majority of Mennonites. It would be a mistake, especially, at this moment, in the twenty-first century, among
so many efforts to think in planetary terms, among discussions of globalization, environmental issues, and world literature—all ways of recognizing and emphasizing just how connected we are. In 2000, after being Mennonite for more than eighty years, churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo organized a forum on Anabaptism, eager to think about how their identity intersects with the history of the Reformation. A second conference in 2002 invited Mennonite churches from elsewhere in Africa to join the conversation. These are signs that we are in a moment of connection, of desire for boundary-crossing forms of identity, in which scholars of Mennonite literature can play a part.

The scope of this project, then, is on the scale of the planet. And if it seems intimidating, overwhelming, to try to connect in this way, to theorize Mennonite literature as a product of soul and skin, then we should consider that this is precisely where the project’s value lies. For the effort to think through different forms of sociality at the same time is what the dream of world Mennonite literature offers to the world.

Notes


3. For further work see http://togane.blogspot.com.

References


Togane, Mohamud Siad. Interview with the author, September 29, 2015.

**About the Author**
Sofia Samatar (GC English ’94) is an award-winning author of fantasy fiction now teaching at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Earlier she taught at California State University Channel Islands. In 2013 she earned a PhD in African Languages and Literature at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. She is married to Keith Miller (GC ’91) and they have two children, Isabel and Nico. Keith has also published three fantasy novels: *The Book of Flying* (Riverhead 2004), *The Book on Fire* (Immanion 2011), and *The Sins of Angels* (PS Publishing 2016).
Sofia Samatar: Service for Culture

ERVIN BECK

I treasure my copy of Sofia Samatar's *A Stranger in Olondria*, not only because it is a brilliant achievement by a former student, but especially because of her inscription on the title page: "For Ervin, who introduced me to Gabriel Garcia Marquez—a lifelong influence." She alludes to the International Literature class at Goshen College, which exposed her to the magic realism that blossomed into her achievement in fantasy fiction circles. She might also have cited Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, from that overstuffed course syllabus, which, as a Muslim successor to *A Thousand and One Nights*, seems even closer to her life experience and literary inspiration.

The Madison, Wisconsin, NPR website says that Sofia is a "Somali-American Mennonite Writer." Although she refers to "strangeness" in her identity, she wears hybridity with ease and confidence. All three cultural streams appear in her life and literary work.

Her American credentials are classic. Sofia was born two blocks west of Goshen College in 1971, when her father was a history major at the college. She graduated from GC with an English major in 1994. Her excellent undergraduate record earned her a full scholarship for graduate study at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where she earned a master's degree in African Languages and Literature. Sofia and her husband Keith Miller (GC '91) worked with the Mennonite Central Committee in northern Africa, first in South Sudan (1998-2000), later in Egypt (2001-2004; 2006-2009). Both taught English as a Second Language and also learned Arabic and absorbed Arabic cultures. Sofia's dissertation was on the Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih, whose novel *Season of Migration to the North*, an early canonical work from the postcolonial Arab world, may not be fantasy but is certainly phantasmagorical in its own way.

Sofia has never been to Somalia, because of the political collapse there since 1991. Her Somali credentials are less formal...
and more intimate. They come from her father, Said Sheikh Samatar (1943-2015), a Somali native from the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. The "sheikh" in his name indicates that his father was a Muslim scholar.

Said was also a student in my International Literature course and I remember his rapt attention, especially as we studied early literature from postcolonial Africa—the first time he had found himself and his culture in literary texts. He was awed by Camara Laye's *Dark Child*, from Senegal, which depicts a Muslim boy in his tribal initiation as well as his initiation into western literate culture. It became Said's favorite book. Said often said that he was raised on camel's milk in nomadic culture. He barely knew his father, who had a number of wives and many children. He memorized many of the long epic historical and literary poems that his culture preserves orally. Said earned a PhD from Northwestern University and taught at Rutgers from 1981, where he established himself as the foremost scholar in Somali studies in the U.S.

Sofia's work experience in Arabic cultures and her family's Islamic inheritance obviously influence the "Olondria" books of fantasy fiction. Worked on since 1997 and published in 2013, *A Stranger in Olondria* won the World Fantasy Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the Crawford Award, and Sofia won the John J. Campbell Award in 2014 as the "best new writer."

The novel depicts the coming-of-age of Jevick, who grew up speaking Kideti in the pre-literate culture of Tyom, was taught to read and write Olondrian, and then made his way through many challenges and perils on his journey-quest in the foreign country of Olondria. He becomes haunted by the ghost (or angel?) of the dying Jissavet of Kiem, who will not release him until he writes down her long personal story. Borges-like, the book is about books, containing stories within stories. Jevick at one point is prescribed the reading of books as therapy. After Jevick writes down Jissavet's story and cremates her bones, he is able to return to his home in Tyom.

The great achievement in his journey-quest is to have created an alphabet for his native language of Kideti and written its first book, Jissavet's *The Anadnedet*. The achievement becomes ambigu-
ous when he finds that his tutor in Olondrian literacy has given up on books, and Jevick remembers that the land of Olondria that he has left behind is wracked by factions warring over literacy and orality. That massive cultural shift, of course, embodies the same ambiguity that Sofia and Keith faced in bringing literacy to their illiterate students, especially in the foreign language of English. And it is also the cultural conflict, and ambivalence, that Sofia’s father experienced in moving from Somali oral culture to English literacy.

Like other fantasy fiction, the book creates a persuasive, imagined world—with fantastical geography, customs, religion, language, and literature. Sofia’s special achievement in fantasy fiction is probably the poetic nature of her prose. As one GoodReads blogger says, Sofia “commits poetry in prose.” The images in her descriptions sparkle with the sharp, sensuous language that one expects in poetry. The text quotes fragments of poetry from classic Olondrian literature and even long, whole poems. The Olondrian poems, fittingly, respect the once-oral literature of that culture, with formulaic, often rhymed structures. The longest Olondrian poem, "The Tale of the Angel Mirhavli," is a successful adaptation of traditional English and Scots ballad form, including archaic language.

Sofia’s second book, The Winged Histories (Small Beer Press 2016), still in Olondria, goes beyond the familiar masculine archetypes of the first book by featuring four strong women—a soldier, a scholar, a poet, and a socialite—caught up in a violent rebellion. Like much science fiction, perhaps this fantasy fiction can be read as commenting on real, current global problems. The documentation of Olondria continues in this book, with 100 pages devoted to hitherto oral accounts of the origins of Olondria, as found in the sacred text Vallafarsi, as well as more of the Olondrian language and a full genealogy of Olondrian royalty.

The Olondrian books have made Sofia famous, but since 2012 she has also published 18 short stories and 15 poems in journals. In 2017 Rose Metal Press will publish Monster Portraits, a book of illustrated prose poems by Sofia and her brother Delmar. Recently, Sofia has also embraced overtly in her writings
the **Mennonite** identity that comes to her through her mother, the former Lydia Glick, a graduate of Eastern Mennonite College (now University). Lydia was teaching English to Somalis in Mogadishu under the Eastern Board of (Mennonite) Missions, and Said was her student. They married in 1970. Sofia says that she includes religion in her writing "because I had a religious upbringing and I have a very religious family," referring to both Muslim and Mennonite streams.

Since about 2013, Mennonite subjects have, more and more, entered into her academic work and writing. She read a paper at the Mennonite/s Writing conference in Fresno, California, in 2014. The address she gave for the 2016 Martin Luther King Study Day at Goshen College was published in the April 2016 issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. In this April 2017 issue of the online *Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing*, Sofia publishes an essay on the possibilities in postcolonial Mennonite writing and introduces the Somali-Canadian Mennonite poet, Mohamud Siad Togane.

In the summer of 2016, she joined a guided tour to the Central Asia republics, tracing the route that Mennonite visionaries and refugees from Ukraine followed to Uzbekistan. That experience will feed into her work-in-progress—a book which she describes as: "a hybrid text: history, fiction, criticism and memoir . . . built around . . . the migration of Mennonites from southern Russia to what's now Uzbekistan. . . .it's kind of a fantastical story. . . a doorway to my own experience. . . I'm writing about identity, about Mennonites' writing and Mennonite literature. It's kind of a compendium of my strangeness." (Interview by Lilliam Rivera, *Los Angeles Times* 3-15-16).

To listen to Sofia in action, google the Madison, Wisconsin, National Public Radio site for the program "To the Best of Our Knowledge" on February 1, 2015. In "Somali-American Fantasy" Sofia reads from *Olondria* and responds to questions.

In the life and work of Sofia Samatar converge the distinctive elements of an education at Goshen College: intercultural, international, Mennonite, liberal arts. "Culture for Service," we say. In Sofia's case, it is also "Service for Culture."

References


About the Author
Ervin Beck, Emeritus Professor of English at Goshen College, is co-editor of The Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing, author of many publications on Mennonite literature and folk culture, including MennoFolk and MennoFolk2, published by Herald Press, and compiler of the three Mennonite bibliographies linked on the CMW homepage. From 2006-07 he taught English and dramatic literature at LCC International University in Klaipeda, Lithuania. He was on the planning committee for the two Mennonite/s Writing conferences held at Goshen College in 1997 and 2002. He lives in Goshen, Indiana.
From International to Postcolonial Literature at Goshen College

ERVIN BECK

In 1973 the English Department at Goshen College inaugurated a new course, International Literature. It may have been the first postcolonial literature course offered in the United States. It certainly was a pre-cursor that, as with the interest in "new literatures" or "emergent literatures," naturally morphed into a study of literature from the postcolonial theoretical and critical point of view.

Evidence for the significance of the course in American literary studies comes from the March 1974 issue of College English, which at that time had as its main mission English pedagogy in higher education. My essay, "International Literature for American Students," was published in that issue along with descriptions of other innovative English courses that nowadays are staples of English curricula: "A Survey Course in Negro [sic] Literature," "The Homosexual Literary Tradition: Course Outline and Objectives," "'Ethnic Literature'—Of Whom and for Whom . . .," along with "A Bibliography and an Anthology of American Indian Literature."

Strangely, the "Ethnic Literature" essay in that same issue of College English cites a course in "Third World Literature" at San Francisco State University that studies texts about Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Navajos and "Afro-Americans," as well as books by Erskine Caldwell, Jack Conroy, and James T. Farrell. Terminology has clearly evolved since 1974.

Originally, I submitted the essay to Books Abroad, published by the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Oklahoma, which early on had shown the most interest in "emergent literatures," despite its bias toward the European tradition. The editor who returned my essay because BA did not publish pedagogical essays, added, "How I wish I could have taken a course like that!" In 1977 BA became World Literature
Today, the leading journal for postcolonial and global literary study.

The course at Goshen College was mandated by the curriculum committee in order to re-inforce the college's new commitment to international studies, as embodied in the Study-Service Term, which required all students to earn a trimester of general education credits in international education, usually by spending a trimester in a "developing," or "third world," country, led by a Goshen College faculty member. The SST program is still in effect today and, in fact, has led to continuously high recognition for Goshen College in national ratings. International Literature "prepared" freshman and sophomore students for the overseas trimester, offered integrative literary studies for students returning from SST, and served as on-campus international education credit for the few students who, for various reasons, could not spend a trimester abroad.

In my final semester of study for the PhD in English at Indiana University, I was asked to plan and teach the course in the winter semester of 1973. I faced, with some panic, the disjunction between my interest in early Renaissance English drama and third-world literature, totally unprepared. Having read nothing in that area, I turned to librarians at Indiana University and colleagues at Goshen College for suggested texts. I started learning about Chinua Achebe and other now canonic authors in the field. One challenge was to identify suitable texts. Another was to find texts in affordable paperback editions. The final one was to integrate the texts in an appealing, coherent syllabus—the notion and theme of "postcolonial" not yet identified and formulated.

For coherence, I turned to a universal experience that would unite both disparate texts and widespread cultures with young college students. That theme was the rather obvious one of coming-of-age. Everybody in the world inevitably moves somehow, sometime, through childhood to adulthood. I assumed that this biological and anthropological constant would interact fruitfully with various cultures' varied customs for socializing their young.

For a theoretical construct, I turned to the anthropologi-
nal reports of "primitive" cultures' initiation customs as compiled by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. Leslie Fiedler's thinking about initiation in American culture was also helpful, as was his distinction between the *archetype* and the *signature* (individual expression). My hope was that students would understand and appreciate both universal and divergent cultural experiences as they also found themselves and their own culture in the patterns. To that end, I early on assigned a personal essay in which students dwelt on one particular initiation experience and related it to the concerns of the course.

My search for texts in the first offering of the course yielded plenty of coming-of-age narratives, although not enough, strictly speaking, from truly third-world cultures. Those were *The Dark Child* by Camara Laye (Guinea 1954), *The Good Conscience* by Carlos Fuentes (Mexico 1961), *My Childhood* by Kao Yu-Pao (China 1961), *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe (Nigeria 1960), the film *Aparajito* by Satyajit Ray (India 1956), and an anthology of short stories *17 from Everywhere* edited by Lee S. Jacobus. From more established literatures came *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosinski (Poland 1965), *Thousand Cranes* by Yasunari Kawabata (Japan 1952), *Native Son* by Richard Wright (U.S. 1940), and *Don Segundo Sombra* by Ricardo Guiraldes (Argentina 1926). Yes, it was a heavy reading load—almost a book a week—but the books tended to be short and the students willing.

I look back at that syllabus a bit ruefully in 2017, noticing the irregularities, the absence of eventual classic texts, the texts yoked by violence together and, especially, the absence of women authors and protagonists in the books. One reason was that there were virtually no female writers in such literature in 1973, or their work was not available in convenient form. It was early in the feminist movement and the women students did not object. As one student said, who became a professor of postcolonial literature eventually, "Like other women at the time, in my mind I transferred experience from one gender to another." In the next offerings of the *bildungsroman* syllabus I used Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* (Somalia 1970) and works by Kamala Markandaya
of India.

Although it was not my intention at the time, one can see in many of the texts the issues that propel postcolonial studies today, especially political domination in Yu-Pao, Kosinski, and Wright and culture hybridization in Laye, Achebe and Ray. In fact, my thinking over the years was not to change the title and the focus of the course from "international" to "postcolonial," since in sending students to developing countries we wanted them to appreciate and understand the new culture, not critique it. As an SST leader myself in Belize, for three trimester in an academic year, I noticed and regretted the personal and social consequences when students critiqued and tried to reform the "system" in which they found themselves.

I continued to use this syllabus, gradually refined, over the first three years I taught the course, which sometimes enrolled as many as 75 students, unusual for an English elective at the time. In subsequent offerings, as the field developed and more books were written and then published in the U.S., the postcolonial shape of the course developed. I eschewed American and European texts, avoided translations and sought feminist texts and consciously chose those with postcolonial implications. On occasion, I was able to justify using Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Colombia 1967).

Gradually a regional approach to postcolonial issues seemed to recommend itself, and I divided the syllabus into three units, focusing on societies whose authors chose to write in English, the language of their colonizers. Those areas were the Caribbean, Africa and India.

The authors, with sample texts, that served the Caribbean unit were often *Miguel Street* by V. S. Naipaul (Trinidad 1959), *Beka Lamb* by Zee Edgell (Belize 1982), *The Year in San Fernando* by Michael Anthony (Trinidad 1965), *Masters of the Dew* by Jacques Roumain (Haiti 1956), and *The Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat (Haiti 1998).

Likewise, the canon of authors, with sample texts, for the Africa unit were *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (Nigeria


This regional syllabus culminated in my final teaching of the course in 2002, prior to retirement, when I ended the course with Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (England 2000), which depicts emigres from all three formerly English colonized areas—Caribbean, Africa, India—interacting in London, the erstwhile seat of British colonialism. Thus did the course lead into what is now known as "diasporic" studies.

Of course, other professors in my department who later taught the course used different texts and organizing ideas.

1973, the founding date of the Goshen College course, should be seen in the context of the chronological development of postcolonial literary studies. The literary concerns reach back to the post-WW2 independence movements in modern empires, but the awareness of the field and the use of the term is much more recent. As Ashcroft, et al, put it, "[F]rom the late 1970s the term [post-colonial] has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization" (*Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, Routledge 1998, p. 186).

1947 – India independence
1958 – Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
1960 – Nigeria independence
1961 – Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, on the psychology of colonized people
1966 – *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (journal)
1971 – *World Literature Written in English* (journal)
1973 – International Literature at Goshen College
1977 – *World Literature Today* (journal)
1986 – *Callaloo* (journal for African diaspora literature)
1987 – Gayatri Spivak, theory
1990 – Homi Bhabha, theory

The course International Literature has, in general, followed this trajectory of the field of postcolonial literary studies, even though it is light in theory, as befits a course that is offered as an elective for undergraduate students in any major and that supports the unique pedagogical needs of an "international" curriculum at our liberal arts college.

To claim that International Literature at Goshen College was the first offering of a postcolonial literature course in the U.S. would be impossible to prove as well as a bit presumptuous. But it certainly was an early version, or precursor, of the field and evolved into the more focused field of postcolonial studies. Today, by my successors at Goshen College, it has been re-named "World Literature," thus further evolving to accommodate current interests in the larger field of "global literature."

**About the Author**

Ervin Beck, Emeritus Professor of English at Goshen College, is co-editor of *The Journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing*, author of many publications on Mennonite literature and folk culture, including *MennoFolk* and *MennoFolk2*, published by Herald Press, and compiler of the three Mennonite bibliographies linked on the CMW homepage. From 2006-07 he taught English and dramatic literature at LCC International University in Klaipeda, Lithuania. He was on the planning committee for the two Mennonite/s Writing conferences held at Goshen College in 1997 and 2002. He lives in Goshen, Indiana.
Review: *The Goshen College Guide to Studying and Serving Abroad*

ANN HOSTETLER, CO-EDITOR


“What does it mean to study abroad well?” asks Duane Stoltzfus, editor of this engaging, thoughtful guide to studying and serving abroad.

Nearly 8,000 students and dozens of faculty have participated in Goshen College’s Study Service Term (SST) since the program launched in 1968. On the cusp of the program’s 50th anniversary, its third generation of participants is well poised to offer thought-provoking responses to this question.

The eighteen essays in this collection—written by student participants, faculty leaders, and a country coordinator—offer glimpses into the unique approach of this 12-week program that combines language and cultural learning with service and home-stays. More than 80% of Goshen College students participate in the program that embodies the Goshen College motto, “Culture for Service.”

The structure of SST enables “teaching by example, showing rather than explaining,” writes Paul Keim, Professor of Bible and Religion and leader of SST trips to Germany and Morocco. In such a setting “every day becomes a learning laboratory.”

By juxtaposing stories of faculty leaders and students, and incorporating passages from student journals, the collection demonstrates this learning by example. Faculty essays also model the use of writing as a tool for cross-cultural processing, something required of students. The book is intended for use in current and future SST units, but it will also be of great interest to directors of other service learning programs as well as to former participants of SST.
Celia Vasquez, the country coordinator for Peru SST, says that this work helped her cross bridges in her own home country of Peru. Africanist and SST leader to Senegal and Tanzania Jan Bender Shetler reflects on the meaning of gifts in African cultures and the challenges gift-giving poses to American visitors. Before a recent trip to Morocco, I found her essay helpful in learning to be more comfortable with the Moroccan culture of bargaining. Katie’ Hurst’s companion essay on her experience as a student navigating her host brothers’ bids for her iphone also helped me move beyond the “white guilt” of “having stuff,” to consider the consequences of fulfilling the request for only one of the brothers.

Essays on language learning as a form of cultural insight, on spiritual development, on developing confidence and coping strategies, on dealing with grief and loss at home while abroad, on developing cultural competency—cover multiple dimensions of the “elephant” of SST, as evoked by Keith Graber Miller in his thoughtful reworking of the old story, and shows how many of them overlap.

As Ervin Beck notes in this issue, Goshen’s International Literature course, one of the first of its kinds in the US, followed the SST program by five years. The climate that fostered the education of such notables as Ellah Wakatama Allfrey and Sofia Samatar, whose work is featured in this issue, began in stories of travel and continued with the integration of intercultural learning into the Goshen curriculum. SST continues to provide a structure in which many more stories can be created and experienced. Savor this refreshingly honest and insightful selection of personal essays to get a sense of what it means to serve and learn across cultures in a meaningful, relationship-oriented exchange.

About the Author
Ann Hostetler is the editor of A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry (Univ. of Iowa Press 2003) and author of a collection of poems, Empty Room with Light (Dreamseeker Books 2002). Her poems and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies including The American Scholar, Nimrod, Poet Lore, The Valparaiso Poetry Review, Literary Mama, Rhubarb Magazine, Testimonies and Tongue Screws: Poems, Stoires, and Essays Inspired by the Martyr's Mirror, and
Making Poems: Forty Poems with Commentary by the Poets (2010). A professor of English at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana, she is the web site editor of the Center for Mennonite Writing and co-editor of its Journal.