Beyond “What We by Habit or Custom Already Know,” or What Do We Mean When We Talk About Mennonite/s Writing?

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“Identity . . . is at once impossible and unavoidable.”
– Robert Kroetsch1

Abstract: This essay deals less with the primary creative texts that make up “Mennonite literature” than with the critical discourse that continues to develop around these texts—with critics’ participation in what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong refers to as a “textual coalition.” In particular, my reflections focus on the relatively small, though vibrant, field of criticism that, for the most part, addresses authors and texts the critics deem to be representative of a Mennonite writing community or a Mennonite literary tradition. I argue that the question that lies at the core of this essay—“What do we mean when we talk about Mennonite/s writing?”—has generally not been addressed by the Mennonite “textual coalition,” and that discussion of the question can be richly informed by some of the critical debates that have engaged critics of other minority-culture literatures that developed alongside Mennonite/s writing within the broad literary panoramas of North America.

This exploration of what we mean when we speak of Mennonite/s writing has its roots in what were, for me, two substantial literary experiences. The first spanned several decades, beginning in the 1970s, when I began to pay attention to the early, published fictional writing of Rudy Wiebe. While I was a graduate student in the Department of English at the University of Alberta, a department Wiebe had joined as a young professor of creative writing in 1967,2 I made a study for a course on the fiction of the Canadian West of Wiebe’s first and third novels:

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2. In 1967 Wiebe moved from Goshen, Ind., to his home province of Alberta, where he taught in the Department of English at the University of Alberta.
Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962) and The Blue Mountains of China (1970).³ I was, at the time, interested in the fact that these were “Mennonite” texts, but did not think of them as belonging to any sort of Mennonite literary tradition.

In Canada Wiebe had been preceded, to be sure, by other writers of Mennonite heritage, several of whom had published modest chapbooks in German. Most prominent among them was Arnold Dyck, whose major work, in German, included a nostalgic Bildungsroman published in installments during the 1940s about Mennonites on the plains of Ukraine,⁴ and, in Low German, a collection of humorous stories about two flat-footed Mennonites from southern Manitoba named Koop and Bua.⁵ Others, who wrote in English, included Mabel Dunham, an Ontario woman “of Mennonite descent through her mother,”⁶ who, as early as 1924, began to write historical novels about some of the Swiss American Mennonite pioneers like Benjamin Eby and Sam Bricker, who had contributed to the development of the first Mennonite settlements in Canada, in southern Ontario, in the early 1800s.⁷ Another such writer was Paul Hiebert, a Mennonite chemistry professor, who won the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour in 1948 for Sarah Binks, a faux biography of “the Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan.”⁸ Sarah Binks had no apparent connection with Mennonites. Moreover, Koop and Bua, Eby and Bricker, and Sarah Binks would have shared few readers in the early 1970s, and were unlikely to be thought of by anyone except, possibly, Rudy Wiebe, in the same breath.

In the 1970s, Wiebe was the only author among the Mennonites in Canada writing for a national audience and whose fiction explicitly addressed Mennonite experience. At that time there was nothing that could be identified as a Mennonite “literature.” It was when Patrick

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³. This student project became the first published scholarly article devoted to Wiebe’s work: "A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Early Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," Journal of Canadian Fiction 11:4 (Fall 1973), 71-76.
⁴. Arnold Dyck, Lost in the Steppe. trans. Henry D. Dyck (Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 1974). This novel was originally published in five modest volumes (1944-1948) as Verloren in der Steppe.
⁷. B. Mabel Dunham’s The Trail of the Conestoga was first published by Macmillan in Toronto in 1924, with a foreword by W. L. Mackenzie King, who was then the prime minister of Canada.
⁸. Paul Hiebert, Sarah Binks (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010). The novel was originally published in 1947, by Oxford University Press Canada.
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Friesen, Sandra Birdsell, Di Brandt, Victor Enns, and Audrey Poetker, along with Al Reimer, David Waltner-Toews, Armin Wiebe, and others, began to write and publish, in the 1980s and 1990s—work that was embraced by readers first in Manitoba and then more broadly across Canada, and work that addressed the condition of being Mennonite in that era—that a Canadian public began to see something of a literary phenomenon among Mennonites.

This literary movement gained a palpable momentum through the support of hospitable regional publishers (especially Winnipeg’s Turnstone Press) and an exuberant, stimulating, wide-ranging drive by the Canadian government to renew its national culture at various levels, from the grassroots to government policy. At that time, Canada was friendly both to the arts and to all shades of the non-Anglo-Saxon “other.” Among the Canadian literati, issues of race had not begun to preclude interest in issues related to white ethnicity. In fact, from the late 1980s through the 1990s Mennonite writers of Canada were considered both “other” enough to warrant serious attention in those early years of multiculturalism, and prolific and gifted enough to sustain it.

By the mid-1980s I was teaching a course in Mennonite literature at Conrad Grebel College at the University of Waterloo and, following the publication of Liars and Rascals: Mennonite Short Stories (1989) and in the context of the Mennonite World Conference assembly taking place in Winnipeg in 1990, I was invited by two prominent Canadian literary magazines—first by Prairie Fire (Winnipeg) and then by The New Quarterly (Waterloo)—to edit special issues devoted to Mennonite/s writing. At the same time, I was also invited to help plan and convene the first conference on Mennonite/s Writing, an event born in the imagination of Miriam Maust, organized and sponsored by The New Quarterly.

9. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed into law in 1988; it was preceded by the adoption of a national multiculturalism policy, in 1971.
12. The first conference on Mennonite/s Writing took place at the University of Waterloo in 1990. The second and third, hosted at Goshen College in Indiana, took place in 1997 and 2002. The fourth happened at Bluffton University in Ohio in 2006. The fifth took place at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba in 2009. This was followed by the sixth, at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia in 2012, and the seventh, at Fresno Pacific University in California in 2015. By the late fall of 2015 there were plans underway for two more conferences, in 2017 and 2020.
13. The idea of a conference on Mennonite writing originated with Miriam Maust, an American “Swiss” Mennonite literary scholar and poet who had settled in Waterloo, where she served as one of the poetry editors of The New Quarterly.
Quarterly, funded by a combination of institutional and private donors, and hosted in 1990 on the campus of the University of Waterloo. I mention these developments because they define, in large measure, the substructure of this essay, which is concerned with critical writing about Mennonite literature. Although scholars like Harry Loewen had begun to write about Mennonite “literary arts” (composed in both German and English), questions about how to speak of this emerging field of “Mennonite literature” began around the time of the special issues and the first conference. It was then that I began to employ the slash in the now commonly-accepted brand “Mennonite/s Writing” to assert, among other things, my ambivalence about using the term “Mennonite” as a bare adjective, a simple signifier. To speak of this new writing phenomenon simply as “Mennonite literature” would have the effect, I feared, of both declaring and delimiting the “essence” of this burgeoning body of literature. Perhaps, I ventured, writing by Mennonites could be referred to simply as “Mennonite writing”; but I knew the label was inevitably more complicated, more knotty than that. Then, as now, the term “Mennonite” signaled numerous divergent, inconsistent, and unstable commitments to identity, and was coded differently within a wide range of chronological, geographic, cultural, and religious settings.

One of the most significant things to happen during those early years of Mennonite/s writing was the development of a critical literature—mostly, at that time, in the form of reviews. Many reviewers did not share my ambivalence about the term “Mennonite” and used the term fairly freely (sometimes indiscriminately) as a definitive modifier to tag or label any and all of the incipient generation of Mennonite writers, their communities, and their texts. As more and more writers of Mennonite heritage and their texts achieved increasing regional, national, and international recognition, many of the writers, while recognizing the value of the new literary label “Mennonite,” resisted the label, revealing their own skittishness about being limited or entrapped

14. Except for the closing banquet and readings on the last night, which took place at the University of Waterloo’s St. Jerome’s College and at the country home of Vern and Elfrieda Heinrichs, respectively, the conference—which consisted of plenary sessions only and included as presenters and participants a number of prominent Canadianists, such as Robert Kroetsch, Clara Thomas, Stan Dragland, and John Lennox—took place mostly at Conrad Grebel College.


16. For a useful list of critical responses to creative work by Mennonite writers, please see Ervin Beck’s fine bibliographies at www.goshen.edu/academics/english/ervinb/canada/ and at www.goshen.edu/academics/english/ervinb/usa/.
by it. At the same time, however, some embraced it, revealing their desire to benefit from the growing momentum in the field.  

I shared the interest many readers of these early “Mennonite” texts had in ethnography, but with the qualification that the term “Mennonite” as a modifier surely had a different tenor in every literary voice and was, moreover, read differently by every member of a writer’s audience. Indeed, I am struck now by the fact that no member of my children’s generation is capable of reading any of those early works—whether written by Rudy Wiebe or Di Brandt, or others—in the same way any Mennonite of my generation would have read them; this younger generation simply occupies a different world: the collaboration among reader and text now cannot approximate the collaborations that attended these writers’ works when they first appeared in print. Ways of reading, as Diana Fuss has famously observed, are both culturally variable and historically specific. 

In order to demonstrate that there was no one way to speak in one voice of all these writers and their communities, and to assert that there was no single entryway into their texts, I embarked on a series of interviews with writers who grew up in Mennonite homes and within 

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17. Any number of informal or formal interviews published at the time revealed these writers’ attitudes.

18. It’s worth remarking here, in anticipation of some of the questions this essay is likely to raise, that the term “Mennonite” was—and, for some, remains—a contentious term, especially when applied to creative writers like Patrick Friesen, for example, and others who have at some time openly announced a certain distance from the Mennonite communities in which they grew up and the Mennonite churches they once attended. I can recall Patrick Friesen telling me that one of the first times he came to Waterloo to read from his work at Conrad Grebel College in the early 1980s, he was challenged by a senior Mennonite professor of the college to explain how it was he had the temerity to call himself a Mennonite. Friesen was not alone in encountering those sorts of taunts then, taunts that reflected a not uncommon uneasiness and a proprietorial attitude felt and expressed by some about Mennonite identity. Regardless of whether or not you were raised in a Mennonite family, community, and church, these detractors would assert that if you were not an active, baptized member of a Mennonite congregation, you had no right to identify yourself as a Mennonite. Furthermore, anyone who presumed to embrace a cultural or “ethnic” Mennonite identity (as a badge of birth and heritage)—whether that person was a church member or not—faced being derided for being insensitive to “new” Mennonite converts who seemed to have the right to claim one of any number of ethnic heritages, but who, the detractors argued, might feel alienated by assertions of Mennonite “ethnicity.” These issues have been, and here and there remain, thorny. Certainly they form part of the substructure beneath the matters with which this article deals.

Mennonite communities. I asked each of them what it meant for them to be nurtured, as they all were, within a community of Mennonites. Deliberately constrained by my own definition of the Mennonite writer as someone who knows by personal experience what it means to be, or to have lived as, a Mennonite, and of Mennonite writing as writing by a Mennonite writer—and compelled by a desire to demonstrate the variety of Mennonite experience, the diversity of texts these writers produced, and the contingency of Mennonite identity—I wanted to head off any tendency within communities of critics, reviewers, and general readers to assume an unexamined commonality among the writers and texts that had come to be identified as “Mennonite.” I wanted to preclude or impede the sort of assumptions about unity and cohesion that might constrain or distort the individual text’s reception or impact.

So one could say that the first literary experience that lies at the root of this discussion was my growing awareness, in those early years, of a literary movement that was becoming substantially more than a simple clutch of texts. But what was it, then? And how would we proceed to speak or write of it?

This investigation has also been stimulated, in the second instance, by my encounters with several recent, published critical/theoretical observations about a number of the ethnic and ethnoracial, or minority-culture (these are all contentious terms) literatures that have found their place in the literary landscapes of North America. And these literatures are many, of course. Among the more prominent is Afro American, along with Chicano, Native American, Asian American, and Jewish American literatures and their Canadian counterparts, and others. Each of these by now well-established literary traditions includes both creative and critical works, as well as the actual and implied conversations among all those works—exchanges among critics or writers or between critics and writers, most of which are well beyond the scope of this essay. I invoke these conversations here insofar as they offer perspectives on the questions that lie at the heart of my investigation.

Critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong has observed of Asian American literature that it “may be thought of as an emergent and evolving textual

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coalition, whose interests are promoted by a professional coalition of Asian American critics.” Although the questions I raise here concern what we now call Mennonite/s writing, my observations are concerned less with the primary creative texts that make up “Mennonite literature” than with the critical discourse that continues to develop around them—with critics’ participation in what Wong refers to as a “textual coalition.” In particular, my reflections are rooted in my belief that the relatively small, though vibrant, field of criticism addressing Mennonite/s writing—and the question that lies at the core of this inquiry: What do we mean when we talk about Mennonite/s writing?—can be richly informed by some of the critical debates that have engaged critics of other minority-culture literatures that developed alongside Mennonite/s writing within the broad literary panoramas of North America.

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The Mennonites, of course, are first of all a religious group; but it is worth reminding ourselves that in Canada Mennonites have had a firm place in the landscape of multiculturalism since the 1970s and 1980s, when multiculturalism was embedded in official policy of the Canadian government as both a sociological/demographic fact and a political ideology. In Canada, Mennonites are widely regarded simply as one of the country’s wide spectrum of “ethnic,” or minority-culture, groups. It would seem that the place of Mennonites in the U.S., where the concept of “ethnic” is otherwise inflected than it is in Canada, is different. This is one of the factors driving my inquiry: What do we mean when we speak of “Mennonite” literature across North America? This essay only begins to frame this question, a question richly informed, as I have already suggested, by scholars pondering similar things in the context of other minority-culture literatures in North America.

In a 2012 article entitled “Affectionate, Anxious, and Perplexed,” critic Dean Franco observes that “Jewish American literature study . . . needs a


22. It should be noted that the critical work I am referring to throughout this essay is work that, for the most part, takes place within the context of conferences and symposia, essay collections, special issues of journals, and books (such as the most recent volume on Mennonite literature “after identity”). Because of the way these works are defined (as studies of Mennonite writing, for example), they address authors and texts that the critics deem to be representative of a Mennonite writing community or of a Mennonite literary tradition. There are, of course, many books and articles of criticism that offer studies of creative work published by Mennonite writers that are written by critics who take interest neither in Mennonites nor in any Mennonite features in the literary work or works they have chosen to examine. This welcome, often insightful work lies, more or less, outside the scope of my commentary here, though it implicitly addresses some of the issues I raise.
rethinking of major concepts to account for new or newly understood realities.”23 As several of Franco’s colleagues have remarked, scholars of Jewish American literature have been a little late, relative to scholars committed to the study of other “ethnic” (or “ethnoracial”) literatures, in addressing the perplexing issues endemic to their literary-critical investigations and commentary. In 2014 Benjamin Schreier observed that “of all the ‘ethnic’ American literary fields, the Jewish American literary field has probably seen the least sustained theorization and self-criticism over the last generation or so.”24 Schreier’s observation, offered in the context of substantial theoretical debate in the context of Asian American or African American literatures, may well hold true for Jewish American literature. But the field of Mennonite literature has seen even less theorization of the kind to which Schreier refers—theorizing that would, as he observes in the context of Jewish American writing, both “contest the legibility of the category”25 (the category of “Jewish” in his context and “Mennonite” in ours) and strive “to decenter and pluralize the field of scholarly labor (in talk of histories, literatures, cultures . . .)”26 in literary study.

Mennonite literature, to be sure, is a relatively small player in the vast landscape of ethnic literatures that have found themselves in a discursive situation where the concept “identity” that anchored these new literatures and lay at the roots of countless anthologies of minority-culture writing has figured prominently. This troublesome term, identity, lies at the heart of the critical debates.27 The term is problematic because, as Robert Kroetsch has remarked, it is both unavoidable and impossible. For more than a decade now it has been described in terms of exhaustion28 and abandonment.29 The late Stuart Hall referred to identity as a concept “under erasure” and “no longer serviceable”; yet it

25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 760.
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is an idea, he observed, that, paradoxically, “cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all.”

Perhaps the concept “postidentity,” along with other related “posts,” begins to offer a way of dealing with the conundrum to which Kroetsch and Hall allude. Or “postethnic,” which, commentators like David Hollinger remark, reflects a “determination to keep track of the past, to register its legacy without denying the reality of change.” It implies, Hollinger goes on to say, “a strong hold-over from the past, but a refinement of that legacy in relation to new opportunities and constraints.”

“Postethnic” invokes both heritage and adaptation. The “post” in the word, as in “postcolonial,” designates “not a chronological but a conceptual frame”; it denotes not a phase but a new perspective, a new way of seeing. It “encourages cultural and political dynamics responsive to individual perceptions and ambitions,” Hollinger observes, adding that it implies “the experience of being able to really choose.”

During recent decades when various “posts” announced their presence and secured their impact upon literary studies, critics devoted to commentary on particular ethnic literatures began to ask new kinds of questions about minority culture texts, even as the literary texts to which they gave their attention proliferated—many of them written in what Kenneth Warren calls a “new register,” or composed in such a way as not to address “what we by habit or custom already ‘know’” about a particular group. Like Warren, Schreier suggests that critics need to find ways of distancing themselves as readers from “the expected recognition” of a population (Jewish, in his case) that is “already conceptually coherent, legible, and historiographically legitimate despite geographical and temporal diversity.”

Matters of identity often do not surface prominently in more recent literary texts produced by writers nurtured in minority-culture communities, though legible traces of a particular identity might persist here and there. In recent years, the literary critical work of assembling anthologies and analyzing—often as ethnographic—individual texts that had figured prominently during the emergence of minority-culture literatures, when matters of identity were a strong concern, has in large measure given way to meta-critical investigations focused on the assumptions underlying various critical responses to those early texts. These investigations might include addressing questions about what can be said to be distinctive about an African American or a Jewish American or a Canadian Mennonite literary text, for example. Or they might endorse theoretical explorations of what it means to read an ethnic text as an ethnic text—or not. How, in Schreier’s words, might literary critics manage to “destabilize the habits and patterns” that still prevail in the language and paradigms of identity politics?

In the winter of 2012, a symposium of several scholars of Mennonite literature convened at Penn State University “to re-frame the critical discourse surrounding Mennonite writing in North America.” Gathered around the theme of “after identity,” the group began to explore what the organizers, Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Robert Zacharias, cautiously referred to as “a certain critical ambivalence” about the role of “cultural identity” in Mennonite literature.

In the midst of these tentative probings into the challenging critical landscape of postidentity and postethnicity, critics of Mennonite writing have yet to address what some observers regard as the pressing concerns being debated actively and productively among commentators of other ethnic literatures in North America. Jennifer Glaser, for example, observed in 2013 that scholars of Jewish American studies had recently been “struggling to find a new, more expansive identity and vernacular,” a “portal into wider discourses.” Specifically, she referred to inquiries that might include consideration of questions such as these: what do we mean by terms such as “Jewish American” or “African American”? How, in Schreier’s words, might literary critics manage to destabilize the habits and patterns that still prevail in the language and paradigms of identity politics?

38. Language from a memo entitled “After Identity: Mennonite/s Writing in North America,” by Julia Spicher Kasdorf, attached to a July 12, 2012, email to the author and others, from Kasdorf; and from a follow-up memo attached to a Sept. 5, 2012, email to the author and others, from Kasdorf.
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American” or “Canadian Mennonite” when these modifiers precede the word “literature”? Or what does it mean to read “Canadian (or American) Mennonite literature” as “Mennonite literature”?

To corral and tag any of these minority-culture literatures is to invoke the understanding that they are distinctive. Yet, if they address the question at all, critics struggle to identify the nature and meaning of this distinctiveness—not least critics and reviewers of Mennonite literature, who have tended to signal, rather unselfconsciously, in their use of the word “Mennonite” a certain commonality of narrative, a fairly undifferentiated unity, and to invoke certain cultural or religious markers that are in fact not held in common by Mennonites in the many Mennonite communities in Canada or the U.S., or, indeed, on other continents where 70 percent of the world’s 2,100,000 Mennonites now live. In fact, the Mennonite creative writing that is being published today evokes and documents “multiple, conflicted, and emergent formations” 40 and delivers numerous and varied, inconsistent, and possibly contrary or contradictory expressions of identity. Critics of Mennonite/s writing have tended not to catalog these. We are just beginning to speak of them. How shall we proceed?

If Mennonite literature is, to borrow the language of Wai-chee Dimock writing about American literature, “a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations . . . a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying,” 41 perhaps our present deliberations could be informed by consideration of the multiple expressions of identity embodied not in an apparent literary tradition, but in a particular Mennonite writer’s work. That is, the multiplicity of subject positions that find expression across a writer’s oeuvre might, in fact, provide a paradigm for the wide diversity of texts we now speak of as in some sense “Mennonite.” An instructive illustration of such diversity might be found in the verse and prose works of Di Brandt, for example, and the various subjectivities to which they give expression. Among these we might recognize the novice writer full of trepidation, accused of being a rebel, traitor, thief; the eco-poet; the revisionist historian of Anabaptist/Mennonite history; the “Canadianist” literary critic; the feminist theorist; the self-identified survivor of domestic violence; the shunned dissident; the brilliant urban intellectual; the daughter; the mother; the lover; the world traveler; the prairie dweller; the reluctant occupant of seemingly alien “hyper-industrialized” and


“environmentally-stressed” landscapes, the Mennonite; the Kanadier, the secular Mennonite; the non-Mennonite. To which of these speakers or characters or critics or narrators do we refer when we embrace Brandt or her work, or both, as “Mennonite”? Is this question worthy of consideration? Does it matter that Brandt herself has expressed concern about the nature and legacy and future of Mennonite creative expression, asking:

what does it mean to be Mennonite? is it a racial/tribal/ancestral thing? is it a land/social practice? is it a political/religious movement? does belonging to a Mennonite church make you Mennonite? does not belonging to a church make you not Mennonite any more? does abandoning the old land/social practices as most Mennonites, not only the writers but everyone else as well, have done in the last half century in NA mean that the Mennonites are no longer Mennonite?

And what do anyone’s responses to any of these questions imply for Mennonite/s writing, which we continue to identify and define implicitly and explicitly in various print and other contexts without expressing the urge to explore what it is that we tacitly agree demonstrates some identifiable commonality among producers of Mennonite literary texts or among the texts themselves? What is it, after all, that we implicitly affirm whenever we participate in a conference on Mennonite/s writing, or read a poem or prose narrative, or host or attend readings by “Mennonite writers,” or read or contribute to a special issue such as this one? What is it we agree upon—what commonality do we give expression to—when we assert that among the texts we interact with on some of the intersections of our lives is this thing called Mennonite/s Writing?

Within the field of Mennonite literature studies, many of us critics have tended to rely on paradigms of ethnicity produced in the inaugural moment of the field, and so have “run the risk,” in the words of Susan Koshy, “of unwittingly annexing the newer literary productions within older paradigms.” We have tended to assume, perhaps too often, certain unfolding, “common” narratives—illustrated persuasively, for example, in Rob Zacharias’s 2013 study of literary treatments of the Mennonite exodus out of the Soviet Union during the 1920s—rather than to investigate what Koshy identifies as the “premises and

42. See Brandt, in an online interview at http://www.herizons.ca/node/204.
assumptions underlying our constructions of commonality.”

During the era of identity politics many of the questions that presented themselves to critics of “ethnic” literatures, including Jewish or Mennonite, appeared straightforward enough, and “ethnic” literary texts tended to be read, as often as not, as exercises in autoethnography, where it was assumed that identity precedes text. But critical eras and fashions shift and, while creative writers continue to publish new and stimulating and provocative texts, we literary critics often lag behind as we struggle to make a particular kind of sense of the diversity of texts produced by the writers we read and study. “Criticism,” Franco writes provocatively, “has to catch up to literature.”

Critics in some fields of literary discourse, as I have already noted, have made greater strides on this score. Take, for example, commentators on Asian-American literature. A decade ago, Canadian scholars Eleanor Ty and Donald Goellnicht declared in their introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Asian North American Identities* that the term “Asian American” (which tends to subsume Asian Canadians) no longer had “the same resonance” as it had in the early 1990s. Scholars of Asian American literature, they remarked, “recognizing the diversity of identities covered by the umbrella term [Asian American] are less likely today to make . . . emphatic statements about ‘common experiences.’” Citing Shirley Lim, they observed that Asian American literature is “collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions.” A number of recent studies in Asian American studies have revealed the deep probing that has sharpened critics’ perception of this field and driven them to consider abandoning “the assumed coherency if not the ultimate efficacy of Asian Americanness as a viable subject category.”

Similarly, Kenneth Warren in his provocative 2011 volume *What Was African American Literature?* has argued that the conditions that gave rise to African American literature and framed its initial critical reception might very well no longer persist. He observed that “the boundary”

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49. Ibid.
creating the “distinctiveness” of that literature had “eroded.” Warren asks whether the notion of a distinct and collective African American literature is still viable. Should the prevailing paradigm be challenged?

There is little doubt that the relatively cohesive and distinctive diasporic Mennonite culture that took shape in particular geographic contexts during particular periods in history, and that nurtured each of the writers of the first generation of Mennonite writing in English in Canada, has more or less disappeared—or has been transformed by geography and circumstance into something other than what it was. This is not surprising, given that Mennonites—at least Mennonites who write and publish poetry and prose fiction that reach regional and national and international audiences—tend to be subject to the myriad of influences that affect the lives of virtually everyone living in the modern and postmodern Western world.

In the spring of 2015, novelist Carrie Snyder, who belongs to a new, younger generation of Mennonite writers, was featured on a Kitchener CBC radio program just after the release of her novel Girl Runner. In response to a line of interview questions that assumed that all Mennonites always and deliberately set themselves apart from the world, Snyder offered a contrarian riff on the often-expressed Mennonite idiom that states that Mennonites are “in the world, but not of the world.” She asserted instead that her generation of Mennonites was raised “in the world and of the world.” As Snyder averred that morning, the cultural conditions that gave rise to the wave of Mennonite writing we have observed especially since the 1980s play only a minor part in the traditions of many Mennonite writers publishing today—if they persist at all.

Furthermore, a new audience, of a different generation and in a different place geographically, historically, religiously, culturally, even linguistically, reads these texts differently. As Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon remark in their introduction to a 2012 volume of essays on literary communities in Australia, literary texts in any tradition attract “distinct communities of reading”—whether defined geographically or chronologically or culturally; and in each of these communities each text might, of course, have “fundamentally different meanings.” Perhaps, then, critics would do well to abandon the notion that what we call Mennonite literature can be considered collectively. We might, indeed,

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appropriate for reflection Warren’s provocation that critics ask of a particular assemblage of texts both why anyone would regard them as distinctive and why, collectively, they should be thought of as constituting “a literature.” Like individual writers, the writing community we identify as Mennonite is continuously reconstituted, in the words of Katherine Ewing, “in response to internal and external stimuli”; and like individual writers, the community is often projected as whole—even “in the face of radical contradictions”—because as critics we tend to keep “only one frame of reference in mind at any particular moment.” This tendency is one of the challenges that confronts us now.

There is no question that creative work by writers who claim a Mennonite heritage or who identify themselves as adherents to the Mennonite faith continues to proliferate. Among the most widely-applauded works of Canadian fiction for 2014, for example, are novels by four Mennonite writers, all of whom have developed a national audience well beyond what they might admit as any sort of “Mennonite base”: Miriam Toews, whose No. 1 Canadian bestseller *All My Puny Sorrows* explores the nature of love and the apparent inevitability of death in a complex modern Mennonite family; David Bergen, whose *Leaving Tomorrow* features a protagonist at once repelled, confounded, and comforted by his Mennonite background; Rudy Wiebe, whose *Come Back* foregrounds a protagonist who first came to light as the young Mennonite child Hal Wiens in Wiebe’s first novel (1962) *Peace Shall Destroy Many*; and Carrie Snyder, younger than the others, and from a distinctively different Mennonite tradition, whose *Girl Runner* is, according to the author, “entirely un-Mennonite in content.” Snyder’s novel, after creating a stir at the Frankfurt Book Fair, was released in Canada last fall, and was slated for publication in at least eleven distinct territories, in eight languages, in 2015. In what sense will it—or any other of these novels—be read as a “Mennonite” text? And if any or all of them are, what might that mean? And if they are not read as “Mennonite,” what is the tenor and range of our response, our embrace?

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54. See Katherine P. Ewing, “The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency,” *Ethos* 18:3 (1990), 258. See Ewing for a discussion of how, as she puts it, “in all cultures people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly” (251).

55. Ibid., 274.

56. Miriam Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2014). The American and British reviews have been spectacular as well.


59. Carrie Snyder was brought up in a family of “Swiss” Mennonites.

60. Carrie Snyder, personal email to the author, May 23, 2014.
Citing Michael Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher in his study of material culture and Jewish thought in America, Ken Koltun-Fromm observed in 2010 that “there is talk ‘about many Jewish American literatures.’”61 We have spoken of at least two Mennonite literatures since the first two Mennonite/s writing conferences were devoted to writing in Canada and in the U.S., respectively. Commentators on “Mennonite/s writing” tacitly acknowledge, also, “bonnet fiction”—or Amish romance novels—as a literature, even while they all but ignore possibly more earnest fiction titles released from Herald Press, the publishing imprint of MennoMedia, a ministry of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.62 The 2015 Fresno conference on Mennonite/s Writing hosted a powerful session focused on LGBT writers and texts; in the closing session of the conference some participants voiced the question: “Where are the people of color?” Even though we have seen a few works of fiction published by Mennonites in Germany or Paraguay, for example, we await work that will surely emerge from among the Mennonites in India and Africa and Indonesia and Central and South America and other parts of the world. In what terms will we receive that work? How will we speak of it? Will we be able to resist appropriating it? How will those Mennonite writers beyond our borders receive us? Will those writers and their communities resist us? How might we frame the disposition of those writers relative to the Mennonite/s Writing tradition that has established a strong foothold in North America?

The more the literature of Mennonites proliferates, the more diverse are the voices. Yet, while literary critical debates compound among critics and theoreticians writing about other minority literatures—that is, debates about what people mean when they speak of any particular literary tradition—there is very little conversation among Mennonite critics that takes into account a “vexed” question: What is Mennonite about Mennonite literature?63 What I am remarking upon here is that both formal and informal responses to Mennonite/s writing have placed unexamined confidence in the notion that Mennonite literature must be considered collectively. In fact, by gathering at the seventh international conference on Mennonite/s Writing in Fresno, California, in the spring of 2015, critics and writers and readers alike once again tacitly implied that

62. See the Menno media website: www.mennomedia.org.
a certain unified essence of “Mennonite” literature persists over time and space. How shall we define it? Does it matter?

To be sure, the first generation of Mennonite literary texts in Canada revealed a struggle against an ethno-religious culture that was more or less coherent within certain temporal and geographical boundaries. Later generations tend not to struggle explicitly against that earlier culture, though they might, like Carrie Snyder, endorse some of the principles of Anabaptism. More or less fully assimilated into dominant cultures, these writers, many of whom refer to themselves as “secular Mennonites,” might not even know what form such an earlier culture might have taken.

I am not suggesting that we retire the category “Mennonite” when we speak of certain literary texts. In fact, quite the opposite. Paraphrasing Koshy, “Mennonite/s writing” offers us “a rubric that we cannot not use.”64 But we might be informed by critics outside our circle who have responded in various complex ways to similar literary traditions. That is, we might give some attention to contextualizing the term “Mennonite literature” and particularizing its uses, so that we critics of Mennonite/s writing, like the writers themselves, might write in a new register, both acknowledging more fully the capacious and protean quality of the lived experience of Mennonites in the assorted landscapes of Canada, the U.S., and beyond—and tracing in critical discourse the fascinating trajectory of Mennonite/s writing as a field in transition.

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