

IN THIS ISSUE

This issue is comprised of six essays first delivered as talks at the Mennonite/s Writing IX conference, held at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana on September 29–October 2, 2022 as well as one additional paper on Mennonite eco-hymnody. The overarching theme of the conference was “Thirty-Two Years: Reflecting on the Past, Creating the Future,” acknowledging the time elapsed since the first Mennonite/s Writing Conference at the University of Waterloo, Conrad Grebel University College, in 1990, directed by Hildi Froese Tiessen,¹ and gesturing towards the continuing development of a burgeoning and diverse field of literary creation.

Literary scholarship is necessarily retrospective, as research is time-consuming and considers already published works that have accumulated interest and merit over time. New directions are most often indicated by new writing, some of which appears in the *Journal of Mennonite Writing*, Spring 2023 www.mennonitewriting.org, along with video links to plenary speakers and sessions at the conference and a number of book reviews and other material. Related work will also be published in the upcoming online issues of *Mennonite Life* and *The Pacific Review*.

Beginning with **Hildi Froese Tiessen’s** “Fourteen Reflections after 32 Years,” the six conference essays presented here contribute to an assessment of the production of creative writing by Mennonite writers and the development of related scholarship over more than three decades, as well as suggesting directions it might take going forward. Froese Tiessen’s engaging personal voice invites readers on what she modestly terms a “brief, rather idiosyncratic, personal journey,” offering nuggets of institutional memory data, details, and useful footnotes. Sharing her own position as a second-generation Canadian-born Russian Mennonite, she prompts those of us in the conversation to explore their own assumptions and predilections. “Mennonite writers do not share a single fable of identity, but we have shared, and remain poised to share, our diverse narratives.”

Ervin Beck, a founding scholar in the field and a significant organizer and contributor to the Mennonite/s Writing conferences, urges scholars to

¹ Initially scheduled for 2020 to mark the 30th anniversary of the first Mennonite/s Writing conference, this one was postponed twice due to COVID-19 restrictions.

consider and include the literary scene among plain groups of Mennonite writers in "Plain Poetry for Plain People." He focuses on the history of *Ink and Quill Quarterly* and its predecessor, *Original Poetry*, which have published poetry and fostered discussion about it during roughly the same period as the Mennonite/s Writing conferences have, although there has been little overlap between the two groups. Beck would encourage more. Although the literary production of Plain People is grounded in their own sense of faith and community, it does not ignore literary culture and even instructs its writers on form and style.

Erin Tremblay Ponnou-Delaffon's "Reading Toews Reading Camus: Existentialist Echoes in Miriam Toews's 'Secular Mennonite' Ethics and Aesthetics" demonstrates the transtextual possibilities of Mennonite literature in conversation with other literatures. Noting the obsession of several of Toews's characters with the writings of Albert Camus, Ponnou-Delaffon poses Toews's embrace of art as a form of resistance. In the face of Camus's nihilism, Toews's "Sisyphian joyful resistance resounds, ever renewed in the textual transcendence of the written page and the readerly encounter."

Paul Tiessen returns us to consideration of a key figure in Mennonite literature in "Rudy Wiebe and Those Mennonite Readers, 1984: Laughing Matters" in which he contrasts the Mennonite responses to Wiebe's novels *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) and *My Lovely Enemy* (1983). Published twenty years apart, the novels drew very different responses. While the first is notorious for the criticism leveled at Wiebe's exposure of contradictions in Mennonite culture, the second is perhaps more scandalous in its subject matter of adultery. Wiebe, however, had by this time achieved status as a world-renowned author, which prompted Mennonite editorial voices to suppress Mennonite criticism of this novel. Tiessen is at work on a much-anticipated critical biography of Rudy Wiebe.

Robert Zacharias, the leading second generation Mennonite literary critic, focuses on the ways in which contemporary writers from Canadian Russian Mennonite background are creating their own literary critical matrix through intertextual references in his essay, "'Near the Stacks of the East Village Public Library': On Intertextuality as Mennonite Literary History." The East Village is a reference to the fictional town created by Miriam Toews in *A Complicated Kindness*, loosely based on Steinbach, Manitoba. It is also the site where the "found manuscript" of Nathan Dueck's experimental novel *He'll* is purported to have been tucked away. Zacharias also includes Casey Plett, Jan Guenther Braun and Andrew Unger in his study. The protagonist of Plett's short story "Enough Trouble," Gemma, quotes Miriam Toews in order to comment on her

struggles with depression. Characters in Andrew Unger's *Once Removed* read books by Di Brandt, Sandra Birdsell, Miriam Toews, and others. And Jess, the protagonist of Guenther Braun's *Somewhere Else*, discovers the poems of an outsider Mennonite woman secreted away in her father's desk. Zacharias acknowledges that in exploring intertextual references among a group of writers from a similar Mennonite background that "I am more than a little wary about the idea of literary generations, which again seems to imply that old romantic model of a field understood as a clear and coherent body of literature that builds, develops, and matures over time." But these examples also demonstrate the ways in which a coherent virtual library of Mennonite writers can and is being constructed through the texts of a new generation, not limited to a particular group.

Casey Plett's conference keynote address, "Authority, Storytelling, and Community," gestures towards the ongoing creativity and diversity in Mennonite writing, and its spirit of both play and serious world-shaping. Foregrounding the complex nature of stories and storytelling, she addressed a theme that emerged again and again in various ways throughout the conference. "I think often about our agency. I think often about our narratives, the narratives we are drawn to and that we choose. I think of the narratives we choose to pass on and the ones we choose to not pass on. I think of the narratives we are drawn to, and the narratives we don't want to look at," Plett writes. And then she proceeds to tell several stories that compel our belief, but also undermines that belief by noting the motivation behind stories. Our stories are no longer one story, if they have ever been. Telling stories requires agency—by choosing to tell a certain story, or to tell it a certain way, we are exercising that agency. She invited conference participants to think of their own agency in attending and participating in the conference. "You are literally part of it through this gathering, because you have come here and put your body in a chair. Magdalene Redekop said in her latest book that *identity is something that we create while interacting with others*. Accordingly, this weekend I am excited to both participate in and witness what we create with each other, and I am excited to be here with all of you." Through her talk, Plett referred to numerous works by other writers, inviting us into the community of shared narratives.

We hope that our readers will also feel invited to exercise their agency and participate in this virtual community by reading, participating, and discussing the ideas shared here. We also invite you to explore the resources in the three online periodicals mentioned above, *The Journal of Mennonite Writing*, *Mennonite Life*, and *The Pacific Review*.

The final article in this issue was not presented at the Mennonite/s Writing IX conference, but its theme fits well within the focus of the conference. In “Toward a Mennonite Eco-Hymnody,” **Joseph Harder** examines expressions of the natural world in Mennonite English hymnals published from 1902–2020. He categorizes his findings under four headings: material-spiritual dualism, Romanticism, agrarianism, and justice. Through multiple examples and footnotes he demonstrates that Mennonites have moved gradually away from a dualism—one that treats the material world as inconsequential in light of our true spiritual, heavenly home—toward an increasing recognition of the need to care for creation as an ethical issue. Along this trajectory, Harder traces a course through the adoption of Romanticism in which humans stand apart from nature and appreciate its pristine beauty. Before reaching true expressions of ecological justice, Mennonite hymnody also expresses an understanding of stewardship as agrarian activity. Harder applauds the direction in which *Voices Together* (2020) takes Mennonite hymnody and ends by pointing to new scholarship in eco-theology that can inform the next generation of hymn writers.

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