

From Plain People to Plains People: Mennonite Literature from the Canadian Prairies

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Mennonite writing has become an integral part of the Canadian literary mosaic. Writers such as Rudy Wiebe and Miriam Toews, who hail from the Canadian Prairies, are known even beyond the Canadian borders, and there is a distinct number of younger writers from a Mennonite background who have made their voices heard from the 1990s onwards. This recent growth may seem surprising when we look at the history of Mennonite Canadian writing in English. The first English-language publication by a Mennonite writer to be received by a large non-Mennonite readership was Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which was published as late as 1962. However, the flow of Mennonite fictional writing in English, especially from the Canadian Prairies, has not ceased since then. In our article we will briefly explore the development of Mennonite writing in English from the beginnings until now. As Mennonites developed as a separate (and separatist) group, willing to journey around the world for their freedom of faith, we want to ask how the writing of Canadian Mennonites reflects this traditional culture. Furthermore, we will analyze the specific cultural, linguistic, and narrative elements in modern Mennonite writing, especially that from the Canadian Prairies. The first part of our paper will deal with traditional Mennonite writing and memory culture, while the second part will study more recent trends towards experimentation and the deconstruction of the tradition.

Canadian-Mennonite Writing: A Historical Overview

- 1 Mennonites have settled in Canada in two main areas: Ontario and Western Canada. The first group moved to Ontario from Pennsylvania in the late eighteenth century. Another wave of Mennonite immigrants came to Western Canada from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century (*Kanadier*), while a third group arrived during the first decades of the twentieth century (*Russländer*). The first group of Mennonites—Anabaptists who had separated from the Catholic church in the sixteenth century—had originally come from Switzerland and Southern Germany, whereas the second group had left their Frisian and Northern German homeland first for Eastern Prussia and then for Russia and Ukraine. The migration of the Mennonites was largely the consequence of their peaceful conviction; this made them abhor military service and look for remote places where they could establish their own communities far away from government institutions. In this context, it is interesting to note that—as Robert Zacharias points out—“Mennonite Canadian literature,’ understood under the banner of ethnicity, quickly became associated nearly exclusively with Russian Mennonites” (37). The “Russian” Mennonites are still the group of Canadian Mennonites that is most active in the field of literary contributions in English.
- 2 While many Mennonites settled in Canada, others left North America behind for even more withdrawn communities in Latin America, where Mennonites could live apart, have their own schools, and speak their own language—or rather languages. Mennonites would speak High German in church, Plautdietsch—a Low German dialect—within their own group, and the respective national language with the local population. This multilingual situation has been seen by several scholars as one of the reasons underlying Mennonite literary creativity. However, it is not so much this literary creativity which is at the center of this paper, but rather the way in which Canadian Mennonite writers have dealt with the history of their religious and ethnic group.
- 3 To illustrate the importance of history in Canadian Mennonite self-perception, we would like to start with excerpts from two poems by contemporary Mennonite writers from the Canadian Prairies, Audrey Poetker-Thiessen and John Weier. Poetker-Thiessen starts out with a complicated answer to a seemingly simple question of origins:

where do you come from
he asked & i said
do you mean where do i live
& yes he said what
else could i mean
& i said where i live
is not home
to a mennonite
where do you come from
means this side or that
& then it means
from russia or switzerland
after which it means
the netherlands belgium
& prussia & switzerland
again i explained
to him when he asked
before that i said
we lived in darkness (Poetker-Thiessen 13)

While Poetker-Thiessen addresses the problem of the second-generation migrants to Canada, John Weier's poem deals with the attitudes of the parents' generation:

his mother's russia
was a terrible place
full of things not
to be remembered
[...]
canada was the land of hope. [...]

his father, at seventy-six, wakes every morning in
ontario, eats his breakfast, then walks from one end
of the village in russia to the other, past the janzens,
the wiebes, the driedgers. (Weier 7–8)

Poetker-Thiessen's speaker uses the immigrants' different memories and allegiances to their European past as a way of understanding the historical subdivision of Canadian Mennonite society, whereas the father in Weier's poem still seems to live in that European past of the Mennonite community. While Poetker-Thiessen's speaker makes use of the past, Weier's speaker's father still lives in the past and does not seem to have reached Canada yet, at least not spiritually. Both poems represent the move to Canada as a transition from darkness to hope.

- 4 Traditionally, the birth of Mennonite writing in English (rather than German or Plautdietsch) is linked to the publication of Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, a novel set in the Canadian West which problematizes the non-violent ideology and autocratic power structure of the Mennonite community at the time of the Second World War. One of the critical questions the author raises is whether the Mennonites, who were granted refuge by the Canadian state, should fight for their new home country in the war against Nazi Germany. Wiebe's novel, set in a Saskatchewan Mennonite community, also displays the traces of the Mennonites' European past in the traditionally patriarchal and autocratic behavior of the community's elders such as Deacon Block, a strong but also somewhat ambiguous character in the novel who had led his group of believers from Russia and Ukraine to the New World.

Memory and Post-Memory

- 5 While his first novel—and several others written by Wiebe in the meantime—deals with Mennonite history and the situation of Mennonites in a centrally important phase of the twentieth century, Wiebe's later novel, *Sweeter Than All the World* (2001), gives a panoramic historical overview of Mennonite wanderings from their original European settlements in Frisia and then Prussia, Russia or the Ukraine to Canada, but also beyond that to South America. In the same year Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World* appeared, Sandra Birdsell published *The Russländer*, a novel about the persecution of erstwhile successful Mennonite settlers in the Ukraine and their ensuing escape to Canada and to the Canadian Prairie province of Manitoba, which finally provided shelter. At the end of the novel, Katya Vogt, who escaped from the traumatic persecution in Europe, has finished speaking her personal memories into an archivist's tape recorder: "And then she told him that when their journey ended in Manitoba she was amazed at how similar the countryside was to the steppe" (349). Birdsell expresses the same point—of Plain People coming to the Plains—in even more detail in an interview:

I found that the various landscapes the Mennonites inhabited were interchangeable. That is, what I saw in the Vistula Delta region in Poland and on the steppe in Ukraine is similar to the landscape east of the Red River where I often stayed on farms with Mennonite aunts and uncles. Except that the landscape in Ukraine looks a bit harsher now, I think, than it may have then. Unless the memories of those who lived there painted a paradise greener than it was. However, I don't think that's entirely the case, as all the photographs and writings suggest a lushness and bountiful land in the area where the people in *The Russländer* lived. (Birdsell *Getting It Right*)

- 6 In *Sweeter Than All the World* and *The Russländer*, both published in 2001, the Mennonite authors living in Canada today write about a communal past in Europe that they themselves never participated in. If these are memories, they are memories of the community, but not personal memories of the authors: their characters too have to reconstruct the past. As Linda Hutcheon suggests in her seminal essay on Canadian historiographic metafiction (which, however, does not focus on the Mennonite experience in particular), such a writing style is a rather typical example of the traditional and widespread concern with national identity construction in Canadian novels since the 1960s, a tendency that—as we see—applies as well to the Canadian Mennonites.
- 7 Such a process of remembering a past that one has not lived through resembles what the Jewish literary scholar Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory" (see also Tiessen). For Hirsch, postmemory is less an act of recall than a creative act:

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. (5)

- 8 As far as later generations' literary working through and re-remembering of traumatic memories such as those of the Mennonite immigrants to Canada is concerned, this process resembles the act of "transgenerational transmission of trauma" that Sylvia Langwald describes in her recent *Diasporic*

Generationality (110). Langwald combines the study of memory, postmemory, and generation difference, and for her, “[p]ostmemory is part of the second generation’s struggle with and negotiation of its identities in relation to family and origin, friends and society” (120). Although she primarily focuses on the East Asian diaspora in Canada and Britain, Langwald’s approach should also prove helpful for the study of Mennonites and other ethnic and religious minorities. As for the Mennonites, Robert Zacharias writes that “because of its many rewritings, the story of the rise and dramatic fall of the Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia has transcended the particularities of its history and has taken on the role of a larger collective myth” (14), that of a “break event” in Europe. In this context; writing novels is one way of dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. Zacharias also points out that “Mennonites have a long tradition of comparing themselves with Jews, and the Exodus frame appeals to their sense of themselves as distinct or even chosen people” (80). Furthermore, in *Sweeter Than All the World*, Wiebe includes references to nineteenth-century Ukraine, according to which

the Czar’s government started the Plan for the Jews, the *Judenplan* Mennonites called it. It was to be a model colony of landless Jews settled in villages on government land learning how to farm. And Mennonites, considered such good farmers, were supposed to live and farm with them, to show them how. (221)

- 9 What these novels by established Mennonite writers, such as Wiebe and Birdsell, present is an occupation with history and memory. The type of memory at the center of these narratives is in fact postmemory that is based on communal myths and memories of the Mennonites rather than personal and individual memory based on the narrators’ own experience. It is fascinating, furthermore, to see that this act of remembering is called forth by and insists on topographical parallels between the geographical locations of the European steppe and the North American Prairies. But the parallels go beyond mere topographical similarities and also rely on linguistic features: High German and Low German words and place names serve as signposts and traces of the—albeit ephemeral—presence of Mennonites in parts of both Eastern Europe and North America.
- 10 Mennonites are, of course, not only an ethnic group but also a religious community, and in the context of religion, the function of history and memory can be different from that in historical writing. Robert Zacharias explores this in his analysis of what he calls the “theo-pedagogical strain” in Mennonite writing. He sees this strain exemplified in Al Reimer’s novel, *My Harp is Turned to Mourning* (1985). While the overall mood of Reimer’s novel dealing with the exodus of the Mennonites from Ukraine is elegiac, there is also a part of the novel’s epilogue that deals with the comparatively positive life of those who immigrated to Canada. Here we have what one might interpret as suggestive parallels to Milton’s Adam and Eve being evicted from the Garden of Eden at the end of *Paradise Lost*. Echoing the subdued but somewhat hopeful Miltonic ending, Reimer writes that at least for the Mennonite couple moving from Europe to the Prairies,

[t]he disturbing ghosts from the past that sometimes haunted their dreams made them cry out and cling to each other in the dark. But with dawn’s budding they would rise together to face the inexorable light that swept them forward from day to day. (436)

- 11 The traumatic Russian experience of a successful and supposedly peaceful Mennonite Commonwealth being finally destroyed in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution has often provided the basis for Mennonite narratives and indeed has been referred to as the “master narrative” of Canadian Mennonite writing up to the 1990s (Kroetsch qtd. in Tiessen and Hinchcliffe 224–25). However, at the dawn of the 21st century, Mennonite writers have begun to explore new territories, and European trauma is being replaced by other “break events” that may lie closer to the Mennonite’s new North American homeland.

Contemporary Mennonite Writing and Queer Perspectives

- 12 Contemporary Mennonite writing (2000–2015) from the Canadian Prairies often deconstructs traditional narratives of migration or focuses on contemporary experiences instead of referring to those of former generations. Additionally, Mennonite writers move beyond traditional narrative structures to more experimental forms. In this second part of our article, we will analyze some of the new topics and forms, exploring how contemporary writers challenge traditional narratives, what new topics they consider, and asking whether these challenges present a turn in Mennonite Prairie writing.
- 13 In order to address the question of topic and form, we will now present a concise overview of contemporary Prairie writers who either have been considered Mennonite by scholars and/or who deal with Mennonite subject matter. *Mennonite Writing in Canada*, a bibliography compiled by scholars Ervin Beck and Hildi Tiessen and updated in 2015, shows that more than thirty writers from the three Canadian Prairie Provinces have published novels, short stories, and poetry collections over the last fifteen years. Their writings amount to more than eighty publications, not counting single poems, short stories, and essays. Among this list of writers, familiar names such as Miriam Toews or Rudy and Armin Wiebe appear—three writers who have become successful not only in Canada but also internationally. However, the list also reveals the names of lesser known writers such as Melanie Dennis Unrau and Chadwick Ginter, who have only recently published their first novels. While the more traditional writers—such as Rudy Wiebe and Sandra Birdsell—have stuck to the familiar topic of Mennonite history and identity, the topics other writers tackle show a great variety and diversity in terms of subject matter and style. Whereas Winnipeg-born author Karl Schroeder has become famous for his science fiction novels and short stories which take his readers into fantastic worlds, Corey Redekop and Byron Rempel explore the supernatural in their writings. Redekop’s novel *Husk* (2012) portrays a hapless actor who dies in a bus toilet and awakens as a zombie on the dissecting table, subsequently roaming Toronto in search of human flesh. Redekop, Rempel, and Schroeder represent an increasing number of authors whose writings exceed a traditionally Mennonite context and theme.
- 14 We will concentrate on two contemporary writers and the challenge they pose to traditional narratives. In order to approach this subject, we have chosen queer Mennonite texts which have rarely been included in a scholarly discussion of Mennonite Canadian writing. This neglect is unfortunate because queer Mennonite texts do not only present an exciting new research area in Mennonite studies but also allow us to broaden our understanding of Mennonite literature in general. Queer Mennonite writers often criticize societal standards such as a continuing homophobia—a topic valid within and outside of Mennonite communities (cf. Shank Cruz).
- 15 The recently deceased writer Wes Funk describes a specifically Mennonite Prairie setting to criticize antagonism against homosexual men. In *Dead Rock Stars* (2011), the first-person narrator, Jackson, owns a record-shop in Winnipeg. He tries to become independent from his family and community, who—upon discovering that he is queer—either go into denial or openly humiliate him. In contrast to Birdsell’s presentation of the Prairies as a familiar and safe space, Funk’s narrator describes the passing Prairie landscape as dreary and blunt while driving to his family’s farm:

Even though it was nearly spring, the grey clouds hung in the sky so dull that late March afternoon as I began the long drive towards my parents’ farm. There was no sunshine, no birds chirping, no signs of life surfacing in the cold hard ground under the snow piled in the ditches. (Funk 3)

- 16 Similar to Birdsell’s narrator Katya Vogt, whose first impression of the Prairie landscape reminds her of her life on the Russian steppes, Jackson is also reminded of the past when seeing the landscape. However, the feelings that are invoked by those memories are very different. Jackson’s mood changes rapidly, and he starts to feel “grey, just like the weather” (3) the closer he gets to his hometown. He is confronted with memories of sibling rivalry, acts of forgiveness, and growing up gay on the Canadian

Prairies, which are contrasted to the city, Winnipeg, where Jackson presents himself as a quirky, fun-loving record-store owner with a passion for rock 'n' roll. Thus, each chapter bears the title of rock songs from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Jackson criticizes the small-town attitudes he perceives as backwards and discriminating. Appalled by the display of stereotypical gender roles within his family (19), he feels the strong need to distance himself from this rural farming culture by constructing it as "another world" (15), as alien to him as Mennonites' past in Europe. However, the fact that he falls in love with a farmer—combined with the circumstance that his father wished for all of his three sons to take care of the farm together—makes him reconsider the possibility of returning to his hometown to help with the farm. In order to take this step, Jackson has to deconstruct and reinterpret the term community. Mennonite scholar Alicia Dueck points out that the definition of Mennonite community is often problematic for queer Mennonites, because—as she reflects in her study on Mennonite sexual identity—

there is a silencing and suppression of sexual processes of identification outside of the heterosexual norm of marriage within the Mennonite community. There is a limited space, and sometimes no space at all, to practice other ways of living or discuss that which is outside this norm. (22)

- 17 Dueck argues that anyone deviating from the heterosexual marriage norm finds him- or herself immediately outside the Mennonite community (22–23). These problems of belonging and community lie at the heart of Funk's novel, and the author subtly points to the problems that develop when definitions of community are too narrow and essentialized. However, Funk moves beyond a mere presentation of the problem and lets his narrator experiment with different interpretations of community. Thus, Jackson ultimately learns to integrate his individual as well as his communal identity by transforming the meaning of community altogether. To be able to fulfill his father's wish to share the farm work with his siblings, Jackson begins to focus on individual aspects of community, such as "real teamwork" and "some unification" (Funk 79). This deconstruction allows him to partially re-enter his hometown farming community and be part of his family without having to assimilate to all of their convictions.
- 18 Funk's narrative, along with other writings that deal with queer Mennonites such as Jan Guenther Braun's novel *Somewhere Else* (2008), draws attention from a communal and shared to an individual and fragmented identity, which in turn allows readers to perceive the contradictions and challenges inherent in Mennonite fiction. Quite another example of a Mennonite writer challenging traditional norms of sexuality is Lynette D'anna's novel *Vixen* (2001).^[1] The novel is a first-person narrative of a suicidal and psychotic young woman who remains unnamed for three quarters of the novel. She is torn between her lover Ruby's, sadistic streak and Ruby's ultimate suicide/murder as well as the lost memories of her mother and grandmother from whom she was apparently abducted at the age of three. In addition, dreams of her foster mother, who may be responsible for the abduction, remind her of the sexual and emotional abuse she suffered during her childhood and youth. This web of delicate and difficult topics is presented in a number of short narratives that sometimes contain no more than one sentence. Especially in the first half of the novel, these text fragments often appear to be unrelated and incoherent in style and form.
- 19 The novel marks its forays into different genres with various fonts, such as the inscription on a tombstone in gothic letters (17, 135), a lexicon entry (102), a hand-written note (175), some hash marks (93) used to count the days in a mental hospital, as well as the lyrics of both John Denver's "Leaving on a Jet Plane" and Nazareth's "Love Hurts" (71). The varied textual composition creates a unique style, demanding—as in most of more experimental literature—a very attentive reader. Although one might assume that the narrative follows the narrator's stream of consciousness (which, in some of the chapters it does), this impression is repeatedly troubled by the narrator's direct address of the reader: "I can guess what you are thinking. Some people are just born to lose. Maybe that is what I am, a loser. Maybe they have been dead right all along" (171).

- 20 Another important aspect in this highly fragmented novel is the narrator's constant contemplation of the necessity of storytelling itself, reflections which let her regain parts of her memory. The connection between memory and language becomes apparent when the narrator connects her loss of words with lost memories: "I think I have forgotten something. Sometimes I don't remember how to speak" (39). In her book, *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*, social scientist Gay Becker discusses the effects of disruptive events on peoples' lives, such as the death of a relative or the diagnosis of a terminal illness.^[2] Basing her research on client interviews, she has concluded that the narrativization of the traumatic event is a necessary step towards closure. Narratives are important in dealing with trauma, Becker argues, because they enable people to create meaning from their traumatic experience, a similar process that was explored earlier as postmemory in connection with Wiebe's and Birdsell's novels. Similarly, the most important way to establish coherence is to create a story. The novel provides a place for the exploration of trauma: "Narratives of disruption," Becker explains, "are people's efforts to integrate disruption and its aftermath with prevailing cultural sentiments" (15). The female narrator in *Vixen* tries to make sense of her disruptive and traumatic memories by telling her story.
- 21 While memory, postmemory, and religious or theo-pedagogical memory have been key elements in Mennonite writings for a long time, both the process of commemoration and its effects need to be differentiated from the previous example of queer Mennonite writing. In the case of D'anna's novel, it is the identity and memory of the individual that are stressed. Rather than telling a story that serves to unite a community, D'anna's narrator tells a story that she alone can make sense of and identify with, which marks a shift in focus in contemporary Mennonite writing from communal identity to individual identities. While trauma has traditionally been defined as an aspect of the past, queer Mennonite writers emphasize the need to refocus on aspects of contemporary life.
- 22 Storytelling and remembering become powerful and potentially threatening tools in this process of identification in *Vixen*. For example, the narrator's lover Ruby discourages her from writing poems by telling her to "end this pesky writing venture" (99). Poetry seems to be especially central to the novel, and some of the chapters may be read as individual poems, such as the following excerpt: "A poem leaves a space. It gathers in the unanticipated and it offers shelter. Shifts perspective, alters time. Its purpose is to warp and clarify, to solace and enrage" (137). The focus of the novel is on non-normative sexuality, violence, sexual and emotional abuse as global topics that need to be addressed both within and outside of Mennonite communities. While memory is still present in D'anna's novel, it serves a very different function; in fact, *Vixen* lacks particular references to Mennonite life that are central to the poems of Poetker-Thiessen and Weier. While the latter have been trying to approach Mennonite origins in Europe, D'anna's story questions this focus on the main character's personal past. Furthermore, the novel criticizes a sense of Canada as the promised land by pointing out problems of contemporary life.
- 23 Let us conclude by considering our third question: Do these developments and challenges present a turn in Mennonite Prairie writing? We argue that both Wes Funk and Lynette D'anna challenge traditional notions of Mennonite identity by either addressing sexuality directly or breaching the norms of heterosexuality in their writing. By directly criticizing the essentialized understanding of Mennonite community in his novel, Funk is more explicit in addressing the apparent oxymoron of homosexuality and Mennonite identity. Literary scholar Daniel Shank Cruz, who works on queer Mennonite writing in North America, celebrates authors who turn their attention to this topic, because, as he argues,

little has been done in the realm of literary criticism to explore the tension between those two identities [Mennonite and queer]. This lack is dangerous because, as the history of literary criticism on various minority literatures shows, focusing on a single aspect of a person's identity is ultimately an oppressive dead end both for academic theory and lived practice. (143)

- 24 D'anna's text—by moving beyond a certain level of navel gazing that is typical for traditional Mennonite writers—goes one step further. This apparent distance from traditional Mennonite topics may indicate a

move towards more global concerns, a move that would also render Mennonite writing more accessible to a wider readership. Thus, in contrast to the earlier books discussed in this article—which depict concerns with Mennonite history, religion, community, and communal identity—the novels by Funk and D’anna suggest a turn in Mennonite Prairie writing. However, by featuring fragmented identities that challenge an ideal of sameness, both novels ultimately allow for a greater variety in expression of identity. As such, they are representative for an increasing number of contemporary Mennonite writings. In addition to historical novels and novels which employ storytelling as one of the most important means to establish a shared identity, a growing number of narratives discuss contemporary problems in a globalized world. This new perspective allows Mennonite Prairie writers to move beyond specific Mennonite topics and settings in their fiction and turn towards a discussion of the contemporary challenges we all are facing. In addition, we are witnessing a transition from communal to individual concerns as well as a deconstruction of Canada as a promised land for Mennonites.

Notes

[1] “In all societies, the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life, and meaning is assigned to specific life events and the roles that accompany them. When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption. Such disruptions represent loss of the future. Restoring order in life necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the disruption and life itself” (Becker 4).

[2] Lynette D’anna has been using this name as a pen name after her first publication, *sing me no more* (1992), had been published, still under the name of Dueck, which is a very typical Mennonite last name often found among Mennonites on the Canadian Prairies.

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