

## **Mennonite/s Writing: Poetics and Theopoetics—An Introduction**

*Hildi Froese Tiessen*

This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* contains one more installment in the rich saga of Mennonite/s Writing in North America. As I write this introduction, the organizing committee for the seventh international “Mennonite/s Writing” conference—a committee including scholars and writers from Fresno, California to Waterloo, Ontario, and coast to coast, across the United States—is deliberating on dates for their first planning meeting. (This seventh conference in the series is to take place at Fresno Pacific University in 2015.) At the end of May 2013 a dozen scholars of Mennonite literature met at Penn State University for a three-day symposium focused on “Mennonite/s Writing: After Identity”; the proceedings (edited by Rob Zacharias<sup>1</sup>) are under contract with Penn State University Press. Last year *Rhubarb* magazine (edited in Winnipeg by Victor Enns) and the journal of the Center for Mennonite Writing (the *CMW Journal*, edited in Goshen by Ann Hostetler and Ervin Beck) continued to publish a robust range of stories, poems, and essays by writers who identify as Mennonite. Plans are underway for a special session on Mennonite/s Writing at the 2014 annual national Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. The field of Mennonite/s writing—including both the creative writers and the scholars who give particular attention to their work—remains extraordinarily vigorous.

During the winter of 2012 I convened and hosted a reading/lecture series at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, featuring well-attended performances by writers Rudy Wiebe, David Waltner-Toews, Patrick Friesen, Julia Kasdorf, David Bergen, Darcie Friesen Hossack, and Carrie Snyder, and presentations by scholars Magdalene Redekop, Rob Zacharias, and Paul Tiessen. Last spring Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Zacharias’s forthcoming book, *Rewriting the Break Event: Tracing the Russian Mennonite Migration through Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2013).

hosted the sixth conference on Mennonite/s Writing (convened by Kirsten Beachy), and the 2012 Symposium on Manitoba Writing of the Manitoba Writers Guild in Winnipeg included a panel on Mennonite literature (organized by Victor Enns). This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* features some of the work profiled at some of these events. The Grebel readings and lectures are available online in a complete series of videos.<sup>2</sup> *Rhubarb* magazine,<sup>3</sup> the *CMW Journal*,<sup>4</sup> and the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*<sup>5</sup> have published other proceedings from these various gatherings.

Like other conferences on Mennonite/s Writing—which featured panels on the emergence of Canadian Mennonite/s Writing in Manitoba, for example, or celebrated the publication of the first collection of Mennonite writing from the west coast—the gathering in Virginia included focused panels such as the one re-presented at the beginning of this issue, which deals with “theopoetics”: the field of inquiry that weaves together matters of concern to some poets and theologians, or to theological poets or poetic theologians. Well, you need to read the four pieces (which, in their initial public iteration in Virginia, ignited the most animated discussion of the conference) to see what I mean. Following the essays comprising the theopoetics panel is the Sunday morning meditation Rudy Wiebe delivered on the last day of the Virginia event. Like the pieces that precede it, Wiebe’s reflection on silence reveals how comfortably fine language and the concerns can exist side-by-side in Mennonite writing.

Following the theopoetics pieces are edited transcriptions of some of the writers’ performances in the truly compelling Mennonite/s Writing sessions that took place in the Grebel chapel in the winter of 2012. If the first items making up this issue address—however obliquely—the religious heritage of Mennonites, the items completing it more nearly address the cultural and literary heritage. Patrick Friesen, Darcie Friesen Hossack, and David Waltner-Toews in their contributions are responding directly to my request that they “walk us through their careers as writers.” (My interest in literary communities—which goes back over three decades now—lies at the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/events/celebrating-mennonite-literature>.

<sup>3</sup> See the special number on Manitoba Mennonite Writing, Issue 30 (Summer 2012).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mennonitewriting.org/journal/>.

<sup>5</sup> Volume 87, no. 1 (January 2013).

root of that request.) Their responses, along with those of Rudy Wiebe, Julia Kasdorf, and David Bergen—which are available in video form online—offer fascinating insights into the lives of writers and the ways that the diverse worlds they occupy infect and inflect their experiences, their thinking, and their work.

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While I was preparing my paper for the recent symposium at Penn State, I was drawn to read some pieces in the field of American Jewish writing. Benjamin Schreier, a Penn State scholar who is also the editor of *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (and who graced us with his presence at one of the “Mennolit” sessions at Penn State), observes in a compelling article that Philip Roth—a Jewish writer with whose work Jewish readers have not consistently been pleased—created conflicted characters Schreier describes as struggling with how to describe themselves as Jews. It seems to me, as I review the entire raft of papers included in this CGR issue, that the writing in it consists, perhaps as much as anything else, of a similar sort of struggle. Taken together, these pieces create a complexly constructed portrait of Mennonites for whom the questions that drive their creative thinking and writing include these: How do we Mennonites—how shall we—draw a reasonably coherent portrait of the people we are, the things we do, the heritage we knew, and the future we imagine? The writers in this issue demonstrate that these are questions that are well worth our consideration, questions that can productively both trouble and inspire us.

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