Why Rudy Wiebe is Not the Last Mennonite Writer

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"I live in America, help me out, but I live in America, wait a minute
You might not be looking for the promised land,
but you might find it anyway
Under one of those old familiar names. . . ."
– James Brown, "Living in America"

On the night of September 17, 2002, I was at a baseball park in Winnipeg, one of the centers of North American Mennonite culture, with my teenage son. We were there to see a concert by the perpetually sixty-nine-year-old James Brown. My background is Russian Mennonite, and I grew up with an elaborate family mythology of traumatic flight from communism during World War II and redemption in the new world. I have no formal ties with any Mennonite institutions. My son is a thoroughly assimilated member of the game console generation, whose whole idea of being a Mennonite is based on his great-aunt's cooking and my poetry readings and dinner conversation.

In Winnipeg on September 17, James Brown performed a frenetic version of his 1980s hit from "Living in America." Brown was on stage with his band that includes two drummers, two bass players, four horn players, three guitarists, four background singers, and two highly toned dancers who wore bikinis imprinted with the Stars and Stripes. When James began to intone the "old familiar [place] names" of the song lyric, he went through the litany of New Orleans, Dallas, New York City, etc. as usual, but when he came to Chicago he substituted Winnipeg, also a three-syllable word. I assumed this was part of his usual assimilationist rhetoric, and noticed that the Canadian crowd did not respond well to this expression of cultural free trade.

At the time of the concert I had already begun writing this paper, and in the coolish fall air of the Winnipeg Goldeyes baseball park, I asked myself if James Brown was right. Was I really "Living in America"? Was Winnipeg a smaller, colder Chicago? What did it mean for me to consider myself a Mennonite, or even a Mennonite writer, when my son and I attended a James Brown show rather than singing tenor together in the church choir? Rudy

Wiebe's first novel appeared in 1962, the year of my birth. What was the case for Wiebe as the last Mennonite writer, and all of us who come after as more or less assimilated camp followers, living in America, desperate to move a little product, sell a few books? My first draft of this paper made that case. This version is partly the story of my conversion to the opposite point of view.

Before trying to parse the "Mennonite writer" tag, I want to separate that moniker into its components, beginning with "writer."[1] In the twentieth-century world beyond the little Mennonite one, writers were busy electing themselves unacknowledged legislators and indeed high priests of a new religion called art, a religion with the trappings of both science and mysticism, and one which ignored the mass killings and horrors that characterized the century. T.S. Eliot, in many ways the daddy of literary modernism, is a convenient exemplar of the role that literary writers were trying to establish for themselves: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. . . . It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science,"[2] wrote Eliot famously in 1919, filled with bloodless detachment one year after the Great War ended and two years after the Russian revolution. Eliot's own contradictory personality is endlessly fascinating: this was a Christian who had his sane but unstable first wife confined in an asylum where she died,[3] and whose unintended legacy to pop culture is Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, a sleazy Broadway adaptation of his verse for children.

The only writers in Mennonite communities at the time Eliot helped define literary modernism were the preachers, who published their obsessive-compulsive repetitions of theological propaganda in church magazines and books.[4] These writers had a religion already; they did not need to invent anything. Their writings were intended only for the faithful – the endogamous, visually predictable folks in the churches – much as modernist writing was only for the initiates (only naive teenagers like I was read the footnotes to *The Waste Land*). The preacher-writers often ventured outside their communities for graduate school, learning Greek words to embellish the dogmas they already accepted as absolute truth. The preachers' sermons and writings served the same function as the pronouncements of mullahs in fundamentalist Islam: to reinforce doctrine, suppress dissent, and rationalize ugly schisms such as the one between General Conference and Mennonite

Brethren churches in nineteenth-century Russia. Like secular writers, the preachers used the force of their often charismatic personalities to insist on the suprapersonal nature of the dogma they dispensed. The great, impersonal tradition was one that had their personal stamp on it. And yet they were part of an idiosyncratic minority religion, much as the tradition-worshipping Eliot was also an avant-garde writer.

Even if you pick other icons of modernism – such as the Jesuit-educated James Joyce, paring his fingernails as he builds the temple of art, or Ezra Pound, with his peculiar combination of anti-Semitic ranting and high art whining – there is no getting around the extreme individualism of the modernist ideal and also the way in which it idolizes art-making itself. The Mennonite preacher-writers did not see themselves as separate from their communities, nor did they see themselves as visionaries or artists of any kind. There was simply no need for that until the secular, European world's traditions and culture had penetrated the Mennonite psyche, carried along by war, geographic and linguistic displacement, inter-marriage with other ethnic groups, urbanization, and all sorts of other social change. (Literary theory only changes people's lives in rich, secular societies, much as anorexia only occurs in countries where there is plenty to eat.) It was the shock of the new and the modern world, as well as the education that the preachers had done their best to ignore and protect us from, that made us dissatisfied with them as bearers of the Word.

But still, a "Mennonite writer" is a contradiction. It is hard to imagine how anyone could continue to be in a rigid little Protestant sect that believes both in pacifism and Christian capitalism, in patriarchy and the priesthood of all believers, in separation of church and state but often only when that's convenient, and simultaneously pursues an artistic agenda that bears any trace of modernist influence, or indeed valorizes making art out of one's own experience and history, even when that experience is different from the official version of propaganda and pulpit.[5] And yet, in 1962, Rudy Wiebe seems to have done exactly that in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the novel whose fortieth anniversary formed the occasion for the 2002 Mennonite/s Writing conference in Goshen, Indiana.

The genesis of that novel and its origins in Wiebe's experience of his own past were best documented by Wiebe himself in 1987 in a lecture titled "The Skull in the Swamp."[6] In this piece he talks about the enormous influence

of his teacher and mentor, F.M. Salter, the first professional reader to complain about Wiebe's addiction to certain stylistic tics associated with William Faulkner. Wiebe's lecture tells the story of Salter's role as teacher, editor, taste police, and goad. It also tells the story of how Wiebe's writing career began with the controversy around his first novel, a controversy that would now simply be lost in the 500-channel universe. Wiebe quotes from letters he received from devout Mennonites who lived in the communities he wrote about, expressing their shock that their secrets were now public in the form of a realistic literary novel, a format that discarded the familiar ideological filter of the preachers. In addition, Wiebe talks about how he had to resign from his editorship of the Mennonite Brethren conference newspaper and then accepted a job teaching English at Goshen College in 1963.

So perhaps the story of Wiebe's career is really a confirmation that being a "Mennonite writer" is a simple thing. Maybe we can start with the assumption that a Mennonite writer is simply someone who works with materials that are part of the Mennonite community's shared experience or history. Writers may need to move from one Mennonite sub-brand to another occasionally if controversy threatens their livelihood, or become financially independent of the mullahs entirely, but really one can be in the literary world and the Mennonite one at the same time. Further, it is possible that Mennonite writers might lose all formal identification with a Mennonite faith community and still deal with some aspects of Mennonite experience. However, this is still problematic: what this assumption means is that Sandra Birdsell's novel *The Russländer* is "Mennonite" writing, and much of her other work is not; so is she a Mennonite writer?[7] If the right answer is "sometimes," then perhaps we are dealing with a question of marketing more than with literary, ethnic, or church affiliation. So what is "Mennonite writing," and can there be any of it after Rudy Wiebe?

Ann Hostetler has recently asked a similar set of questions: "What is a Mennonite poet? Does ethnic/religious context influence a writer's form or discourse? How and by whom is Mennonite ethnicity constructed? Is it possible for someone to be culturally Mennonite, although not a member of the church, when the church defines itself as a community of believers baptized as consenting adults?"[8] Hostetler's argument that "ethnic" literature depends for its success on its "intercultural translatability" is one that I largely

accept, but translatability itself is a difficult concept. At what point have we translated ourselves so far out of our humble ethnic skins and into the literary values of the postmodern academic world that we are ready for a bar code as fully assimilated, cooperative, well-educated post-colonial writers? Could a Mennonite writer be mass-produced on this model, and if so, why would anyone bother?

If mass-production of sterile work is undesirable, maybe we need to go back to the question of what a Mennonite is in the first place. A "Mennonite name" is a signpost of ethnicity and belonging sometimes,[9] but what if it is not accompanied by the intellectual and spiritual conformity that normally go with membership in a sectarian church? For contemporary leaders of the Mennonite Brethren church community in Winnipeg, like Art DeFehr, there is an easy answer to this question: "You don't have to be a Mennonite to be a Christian, but you must be a Christian to be a Mennonite!"[10] The Soviet army in 1945 did not make fine distinctions like DeFehr's in East Prussia. Rudy Wiebe eloquently reminds us of this fact in his latest novel, *Sweeter Than All the World*, in the horrifying sixteenth chapter where Elizabeth Katerina Wiebe is gang-raped by invading Soviet soldiers along with a nun who is raped and murdered. To the Soviet invaders, these women are simply German scum. They speak German, and therefore they are less than human. If they were discovered speaking Russian in a formerly German zone, then they would be traitors to the Soviet Union and sent back to the mother country for death in a forced labor camp. Linguistic and cultural difference matter as much as any confession of faith, and sometimes more. The cultural and political ambiguity of the Russian Mennonites, caught between German and Russian armies in both world wars, was often startlingly resolved at the point of a bayonet or with a bullet to the head. Literary criticism must account for these radical simplifications, and not behave like fundamentalist Christianity, assuming that the world is not real but just a temporary home, a text to be cleverly deconstructed or dodged.

There are examples and counter-examples too. The Armenians who were massacred by the Turks in 1915 were seen by their murderers as members of a religion, and not as an ethnic group. Women and children were often spared upon conversion to Islam.[11] Sometimes reading the right book can save you. In the Balkans in the 1990s, people were murdered and abused

based on their membership in an ethnic and cultural community; snipers did not check to see what God you worshipped before shooting. The Tutsis in Rwanda who were mass murdered and brutalized in 1994 by Hutus spoke the same language as the men and women who perpetrated the atrocities. When thousands of men, women, and children were hacked to death, shot, incinerated, and raped by Hutu militias, no one asked to see the victims' confession of faith. Sometimes history is bigger than a text or a language.

I think it is useful to look at the Jewish-American experience briefly to gain some perspective on the Mennonite literary world after Rudy Wiebe. Cynthia Ozick's essay "Toward a New Yiddish" was written as a lecture in 1970. In this essay she argues that "if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish . . . we will not be heard at all; for us America will have been in vain," and further that "Jewish" writing is "a type of literature and a type of perception."[12] Ozick implicitly defines Jewishness as a broadly cultural phenomenon. For her the perception and perceptiveness of Jewish writers, regardless of their religious affiliations, is located partly in the religious and ethical Hebrew tradition and also in the linguistic and cultural experience reflected in the Yiddish language.

Obviously Jewish culture is older, larger, and more culturally influential than Mennonite culture. But many parallels to Mennonite experience come to mind, beginning with the life and death of Low German and what that means for Mennonite culture and writing. The loss of Yiddish in Jewish culture and the emergence of the 'secular' in Jewish writing seem to be repeating themselves in Mennonite writing. There has been a clearly traceable movement from naïve folk literature in Low German to the emergence of many sophisticated writers engaged with the Mennonite experience over the last two decades. These new writers are producing work in English for an audience that extends beyond their ethnic communities but also speaks to those communities.

Ozick sees Jewish writers as having a place in maintaining the cultural and historical memory of their communities. I suggest that this role is paralleled in contemporary Mennonite writing where the church community often engages in radical fundamentalist amnesia while it is the writers, frequently alienated from the faith community, who are interested in the group's history. Here is what Ozick says: "My Russian-born father had a

plain word to signify a certain brand of moral anesthesia: *Amerikaner-geboren*. I translate it without elaboration as having been autolobotomized out of history" (160). Surely "autolobotomization" is one of the hidden themes of Mennonite writing, from Rudy Wiebe to Di Brandt and onwards.

As for the idea that a preoccupation with our own history removes us from the universal truths that are not to be found in the merely ethnic and the parochial, Ozick writes that Literature does not spring from the urge to Esperanto but from the tribe. When Carl Sandburg writes in a poem "There is only one man, and his name is Mankind," he is unwittingly calling for the end of culture. The annihilation of idiosyncrasy assures the annihilation of culture.[13] For an idiosyncratic Mennonite like me, this passage brings to mind the deeply tribal theory of the virgin birth held by Menno Simons. J.C. Wenger, in the 1956 edition of Menno's *Complete Writings*, dismisses Menno's 1556 "Reply to Martin Micron" (in which Menno lays out his bizarre theory of the virgin birth) as "tedious," "wrong," and "unprofitable." What made Wenger uncomfortable, of course, was Menno's weirdness, his difference, his insistence on a poetic "heavenly flesh" that does not conform to any of the rationalist or historicist Christologies that came out of the theological cookie-cutters of better-dressed Protestants. There is no denying that Menno's treatise on the virgin birth is tedious, incidentally, but that is not really a distinguishing feature of this work compared to any of his others.

So here's another question. If we are convinced by some combination of the experience of other ethnic groups and the forced simplicities of our history to revel in our own difference and to make a literature out of it imbued with those perceptions unique to our long-term cultural experience, does that make us post-colonial writers rather than Mennonite ones? Maybe Rudy Wiebe was never a Mennonite writer either – he was just the first post-colonial to appear in our midst. The seminal text of post-colonial writing is *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Here's what the three authors of this book said in 1989:

> We use the term 'post-colonial' . . . to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression.[14]

After this totalizing, almost imperialist, territorial claim, they go on to lay out the classic postmodern wish-fulfillment fantasy:

> European theories themselves emerge from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of 'the universal'. . . . Paradoxically, however, imperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupations and power. . . . Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy. The impetus towards decentring and pluralism has always been present in the history of European thought and has reached its latest development in post-structuralism.[15]

This is really an essentialist, romantic fantasy wearing black and speaking a little French, with a clever title borrowed from Salman Rushdie. In this account, history, in the multitudinous forms of European imperial aggression, is a nightmare from which "post-colonial" writing is trying to awake, writing back *at* the traditional centers of culture and power; indeed, power is irrelevant, and marginality, with its magical ability to "radically destabilize" the traditional center, is the new source of quasi-mystical power. So-called post-colonial theory, then, strikes me as built on a special kind of false consciousness, one in which the text is privileged over the world, and one which equates the masterpieces of European culture with the monstrous acts perpetrated by European civilizers, often in colonized countries. Of course, I am oversimplifying here, and there has been at least a decade of sophisticated critique of first-generation post-colonial theory coming from within academe.[16] In addition, a whole world of rich imaginative literature has been uncovered and anthologized by the evangelists of post-colonial theory. But does it help us decide if there are Mennonite writers after Rudy Wiebe? I don't really think so, although it may be a reminder that the next generation of so-called Mennonite writers may be African or Caribbean. Mennonites have been mentally colonized by Baptists, tsarists, communists, capitalists, and bloody-minded patriots of all kinds. Mennonites also have a brilliant tradition of colonizing themselves and others. But we have also placed ourselves on the margins of history precisely at those points of rupture or maybe rapture when new worlds are born at the center: the Russian Revolution, the World Wars, the Thirty Years War, the Spanish Inquisition's

foray into Europe, Münster. As a group we have a Graham Greene-like talent for ending up in trouble spots. This should make us anti-colonial and filled with the energy to dissent from the ethics and aesthetics of the center, while being unable to take our eyes off the chaos and heat of that same center. We should be passionate realists and dispassionate experimental writers.

I am of course moving towards saying that there is some kind of Mennonite vision of things which our literary artists since Rudy Wiebe have begun to articulate. I disagree with Jeff Gundy's statement that "poets of Mennonite extraction have radically varied experiences – almost one per writer."[17] While it is true that there is a huge range of individual experience within the diverse history of Mennonites even just in North America, I suggest that there are some commonalities of experience too. I think of the admittedly somewhat ironic passage in Patrick Friesen's essay, "I Could Have Been Born in Spain":

> If I met a Mennonite on, say, 4th St. in New York (I would be able to tell by the walk), I would say, "Hey, I know you; let's go and talk."
>
> Then we would go to the corner bar or restaurant and find out who our relatives are and how, exactly, each of us is lost.[18]

Below I attempt to sketch what kind of artistic vision Mennonite writers might have, based on the work of a number of writers who are continuing in Rudy Wiebe's wake.[19] Julia Kasdorf writes that "a few Mennonite intellectuals . . . wonder if I am entitled to tell the stories I have told and suspect that I have simply crafted a marketable fiction of identity for myself."[20] I think it is possible to acknowledge both that "ethnic" or "post-colonial" labels make writing marketable in a literal sense, and also that a "Mennonite writer" *needs* a fiction that is marketable to herself, a story that makes every kind of sense. Victor Jerrett Enns, editor of *Rhubarb* magazine, recently solicited responses to the question of "What is a Mennonite writer?" for a forthcoming issue. Here is my response to the question, as much a marketable fiction as any other:

> I define a Mennonite writer as anyone whose writing is shaped in a primary way by a Mennonite sensibility. A Mennonite sensibility, to me, is one that includes some intellectual or visceral knowledge of Mennonite experience (preferably both), whether that experience

> be cultural, historical, theological, or literary (preferably all of these). This means, of course, that you don't need to be either an ethnic or a religious Mennonite to be a Mennonite writer.[21]

I don't claim any particular originality in this definition, and in fact the whole question has been addressed with particular clarity by Hildi Froese Tiessen in her introduction to the Summer 1990 *Prairie Fire* special issue on "New Mennonite Writing," where she notes the fact that the contributors write out of ". . . an experience rarely in the past encoded by artists . . . an experience which is at one time universal and particular, complexly communal and personal, ethnic and religious."[22]

I think there is a further clue to what knowledge of Mennonite experience might look like in Kasdorf's essay "Writing Like a Mennonite": "That trauma can both confine one to silence and compel one to find articulation is clear in the brief history of Mennonite literature."[23] And the trauma of history, the contradiction of Mennonites' painful withdrawal from and simultaneous engagement with the relentless world, is as real for so-called Swiss Mennonites as it is for Russian Mennonites, as indeed it is for many groups, none of which has an exclusive claim on trauma or silence.

Look at this, says Sandra Birdsell in her novel *The Russländer*: look at our passionate attachment to the world and all the beautiful things we accumulate. Look at this world from the eyes of a woman trained to be silent and subservient, to lower her gaze, to never use language to describe either the splendor or the horror of what she sees:

> The reflection of lit candles on the Christmas tree quavered in the glass front of a cabinet across the room. Shelves inside the honey-coloured cabinet were laden with Aganetha and Abram's wedding china, pieces which Katya had held to admire, how each rose pattern was slightly different, the gold inscription of their names. . . . (27)

As David Suderman puts it later in the novel, when the troubles of 1917 and the larger world begin to intrude on the idyllic existence of the heroine: "we're here, but we keep saying we're not" (137). This is the quintessential Mennonite position, detached and obsessively attached at the same time. Birdsell's loving re-creation of the lost world of Mennonite villages in Russia also captures the ambiguity of Mennonite perception: neither German nor

Russian, neither intellectuals nor peasants, neither violent nor gentle, here and not here at the same time, the novel's viewpoint character observes sharply while almost never speaking a sharp word.

Look at this, says Julia Kasdorf, our attraction toward and repulsion away from everything "Loud":

> Children, reaching for the reddest crayon,
> when do we learn what is too much?
> When do we start averting our eyes
> at overdone Puerto Rican girls on the train,
> . . . . When do we start
> calling flowers and women "cheap,"
> as if life were a sale? Are we so far gone
> we don't know how to praise them, loud
> as the shopkeepers on Church Avenue
> who save insults for their best customers?
> Carmine, the butcher who loves me, shouts
> *Wadda ya want with chicken breasts?*
> *Don't you know white meat makes you ugly?*[24]

We want desperately to be as flamboyant as we feel, but like Katya in *The Russländer*, we also want husbands to choose us because we are quiet and decorous.

Look at this, says Patrick Friesen, we never stop wanting to be right with the Lord, to be spiritual beings even when the church tried to choke the life out of us:

> the town believes so hard they worship themselves thin and hardly anyone reaches for the wine
> you fall asleep at the edge of the clearing when you wake snow has fallen for a million years
> you have grown young and ancient you rise in the still air your breath in clouds before you
> the shadow of a man beneath the moon struggling through the snow and night[25]

Look at this, says Rudy Wiebe, look how we are rooted in our past, rooting in it like pigs in shit, how we never get away from it, how it holds us and

traps us appearing on every channel, how it frees us too, how it lets us be Mennonite writers even if we don't all go to church, how the past lets us build a type of perception and a type of literature that is our own and also everyone else's, that maybe belongs finally only to God:

> Adam wipes his eyes, and finally he can look up. Faces blur into focus . . . and what does he know about her now anyway, decades of life gone by, she and Joe and their seven children with names like Tanguay, Wong, Lopez, Porteous and a solitary Loewen between them, those Russian stories ancient as piled stones, and several of her middle-aged children divorced and all their married-again spouses and twenty-two grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. . . . All their eyes looking at him: why is this crazy uncle interrupting the funeral, so rich he never has to be a doctor . . . always running around somewhere. . . . It's for Helen, you witless nits, a few words over her body, the human being she was, you who knew her best, say it![26]

Look at the divine comedy of our bodies and desires, says David Bergen, look at the comedy of religion in a world that no longer believes, look at Lena S. telling Mason, the minor teenage poet:

> 'My father has tests. Three of them. Supper at our house, a quiz on some historical figure – the last time, it was Galileo – and you'll have to memorize a Bible passage. My father asked if you were a Christian and I said yes, but I don't think he believed me.' She glanced at him. 'You are, aren't you?'
>
> 'I guess so. If I have to be.'
>
> . . .
>
> 'You have to be,' she said.[27]

The world described by these Mennonite writers is the same world where Bakhtin turned manuscripts into cigarette papers, the world of consequences and concentration camps, not the academic fantasy where there are binaries and not oppositions, no simple conflicts between the hungry and the obscenely, garrulously wealthy, and no humor of the kind found in Rabelais and Kasdorf and Friesen and Armin Wiebe and David Bergen and so many

others. We live in a world that is radically at odds with the value system and language of our Mennonite predecessors. We have literally lost a language, maybe more than one, and we are in the process of losing culture and memory as well. It is up to artists from the Mennonite community to practice their art with the kind of integrity that will shed a little light on their contradictory experience and fading memories.[28] For whatever it turns out to be worth, we are Mennonite writers, we are in the world, and we are not.

Notes

[1] I don't mean to imply that there's something new about the question of what is a Mennonite writer. See, for example, the "personal statements" on their work and identity by a diverse group of Canadian "Mennonite" writers in *Prairie Fire*'s special issue on "New Mennonite Writing," 11.2 (Summer 1990).

[2] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), 17.

[3] See Robert Craft, "The Perils of Mrs. Eliot," *New York Review of Books*, May 23, 2002.

[4] I am assuming that there was no significant Mennonite literary writing other than Rudy Wiebe's work until the 1970s. Not everyone will agree.

[5] Julia Kasdorf, in her essay "Bodies and Boundaries," describes the 1997 decision of the Franconia Conference of the Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania to expel North America's oldest Mennonite church over their acceptance into membership of openly gay and lesbian people. I am reminded both of the Taliban, approaching the problem more directly by collapsing brick walls on top of homosexuals, and of the many other Mennonite conferences in Canada and the United States expelling those churches willing to accept homosexual people. See *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 78.

[6] Rudy Wiebe, "The Skull in the Swamp," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 8-20. Julia Kasdorf's account of the reception of Wiebe's novel in her essay "Marilyn, H.S. Bender, and Me" in *The Body and the Book* is also notable for its insights and feminist perspective.

[7] This same point applies to Rudy Wiebe's *oeuvre*. See note 20 below.

[8] Ann Hostetler, "The Unofficial Voice: The Poetics of Cultural Identity and Contemporary U.S. Mennonite Poetry," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72.4 (October 1998): 514.

[9] Lois Barrett tells a familiar story about church people asking her if Barrett was a "Mennonite name" in her essay "Flowing Like a River," in *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1988), 21. I note with approval that Barrett married a Mierau.

[10] Art DeFehr, "Mennonite by Chance and by Choice," in *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen, 35.

[11] See István Deák, "The Crime of the Century," *The New York Review of Books*, September 26, 2002, 50.

[12] Cynthia Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," in *Art & Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 169 and 177.
[13] *Ibid.*, 168.
[14] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 2-12.
[15] *Ibid.*, 2-12.
[16] ". . . as Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge have well demonstrated, the concern in *The Empire Writes Back* with 'textuality' as an abstraction 'tends to function at the expense of specific histories and power-relations in different parts of the world.'" See Dennis Walder's *Post-colonial Literatures in English: History Language Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 69-70.
[17] See Ann Hostetler, "The Unofficial Voice: The Poetics of Cultural Identity and Contemporary U.S. Mennonite Poetry," 514.
[18] Patrick Friesen, "I Could Have Been Born in Spain," in *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen, 102.
[19] I am indebted to Ann Hostetler for her useful distinction, also in "The Unofficial Voice," that the Russian Mennonite and "Swiss Mennonite" traditions are quite different historical experiences, especially in terms of the descendants of Russian Mennonites who emigrated to North America during the two world wars and are still close to this traumatic experience. However, I think there is sufficient commonality between these Mennonite groups that one can still talk about an emerging Mennonite aesthetic and even rhetoric in recent Mennonite imaginative literature.
[20] Julia Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 10.
[21] Maurice Mierau, personal e-mail to Victor Jerrett Enns, November 1, 2002. This definition takes into account the uneasiness many "Mennonite writers" feel about having their entire output labeled as ethnic writing. For example, at the Mennonite/s Writing conference in Goshen where I presented this paper on October 25, 2002, Rudy Wiebe stood up and spoke about his many books that don't have any Mennonite characters or explicitly Mennonite content in them, thereby objecting to the characterization of his work as simply "Mennonite."
[22] Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Introduction," *Prairie Fire*, 11.2 (Summer 1990): 9. See also Froese Tiessen's introduction to another special issue of a literary magazine, "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada," *The New Quarterly*, Vol. X, Nos. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1990): 9-12.
[23] Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 177.
[24] Julia Kasdorf, *Eve's Striptease* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 43-44.
[25] Patrick Friesen, *the breath you take from the lord* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 2002), 39.
[26] Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World* (Toronto: Albert A. Knopf Canada, 2001), 362.
[27] David Bergen, *The Case of Lena S.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2002), 67.
[28] I do not mean to suggest that Mennonite writers become elegists for a mythic Golden Age, as Kasdorf puts it so eloquently: "Do I want to spend my one and only life grieving the demise of a traditional, patriarchal, insular subculture? Why must even my writing, that most excessive and self-indulgent enterprise, be converted into an instrument for community service?" (*The Body and the Book*, 18-19).