
INTRODUCTION

Mennonite Literature as a Case Study in Minor Transnationalism

In a brief 2013 essay entitled “Sunday Morning Confession,” the noted American poet and critic Julia Spicher Kasdorf paused to reflect on the sixth Mennonite/s Writing conference, which had taken place just a few months earlier on the lush campus of Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia. The essay begins with a concise articulation of what Kasdorf suggests had become the conventional history of the small but vibrant body of Mennonite writing in North America, beginning with a trailblazing author-hero from central Alberta whose first novel shocked the conservative Mennonite world in 1962, preparing the way for a surge of Mennonite writers in Canada and the United States a generation later. As an introduction to the concerns of this study, Kasdorf’s retelling of this account is worth quoting at some length:

From the first of these Mennonite/s Writing conferences, Mennonite writers have gathered and told one another the story of Rudy Wiebe’s troubles after *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. It’s a story that says the publication of a work of literature by a big, worldly press (McClelland and Stewart) was so transgressive that Wiebe became an exile. That’s more or less true, but the story has become a freighted myth of origins for Mennonite writers, which goes

something like this: for his sin, Wiebe was cast out of the Garden. [. . .] We have said that ever since the publication of *Martyrs Mirror* in 1660, there was no *serious* Mennonite literature until *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. [. . .] The writer steals the fire of authority previously held by the big men in the church, and from that small flame literature blazes. (It's Adam and Eve and Prometheus and James Joyce all at once!) (7)

In Kasdorf's account, the conventional literary history of Mennonite literature in North America is less a straightforward description of the field's past than it is a potent mix of literary, biblical, and classical allusions, perpetuated by a set of cultural gatekeepers invested in the patriarchal trappings of literary celebrity. It leaps from the *Martyrs Mirror*, that vast seventeenth-century martyrology recounting the trials of the early European Anabaptists, to Wiebe's 1962 *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, a proto-modernist account of Mennonite settlers on the Canadian prairies, by the logic of something called literary "seriousness," effacing several centuries of writing in the process.

Although Kasdorf is clearly slipping into parody, she is not exaggerating the field's iterative return to Wiebe's novel—Paul Tiessen calls *Peace* the "urtext within Mennonite literary culture" ("Double" 70), for example, and Jeff Gundy calls it the "inevitable starting point for discussions of contemporary Mennonite writing" ("Doubt" 337)—nor is she the first to ponder its implications. In a brief but remarkable 1997 essay, Mavis Reimer asks why "academic readers so quickly enshrined Wiebe as origin of modern Mennonite writing" ("Literary" 119) and points to the institutionalization of Mennonite studies "within the secular university" as a possible answer (120). "Reading Wiebe as a Mennonite writer is reading backward" (119), she insists; it was not Wiebe but later critics who were keen to establish the world of Mennonite writing that they described as the consequence of his work. Crucially, Reimer follows up this insight with a question I will attempt to answer at some length in this study. "Recognizing that our reading of Wiebe as origin itself produces Wiebe as origin," she writes, "might also lead us to ask what writers or traditions of writing we ignore and devalue in creating this historical narrative" ("Literary" 120). Some fifteen

years later, Kasdorf reiterates Reimer's question and her call to action. After reflecting on her own role in the establishment of this critical narrative—what are the “ghoulish or egotistic appetites the transgressive myth satisfies for individuals like me who keep repeating it,” she asks by way of confession (8)—Kasdorf closes with a set of questions clearly meant as a challenge to the field at large. “I wonder what possibilities might open up for Mennonite writers if we told other myths of origin when we gathered,” she writes, encouraging scholars to “ask not only what new stories (and poems and essays) we can write [. . .] but also what new histories of this literature can we tell” (10).

Reading Mennonite Writing is, in one sense, an extended effort to test, engage, and expand on such calls to rethink the standard critical narratives of Mennonite literary studies in North America. As Reimer's early insights suggest, Mennonite literary studies has a long history of self-consciously interrogating its own founding narratives, which I have traced elsewhere as a form a metacriticism.¹ Although I have begun this study with Kasdorf for her clarity and wit, a surge of recent work in this area suggests this metacritical tradition may be reaching a head, with scholars reconsidering not only the field's past but also, increasingly, the plausibility of its future. This study takes its larger impetus, then, from a host of related work in the field, which, while varying widely in its proposals and its assessment on the health of the field itself, has collectively articulated a pressing need for Mennonite literary studies to interrogate its founding narratives, methodological assumptions, and, perhaps, its viability as a scholarly field. With Kasdorf and Reimer, I am interested in reexamining the field's so-called mythic origin, but I also want to consider the impact of another one of the field's originary narratives—this being the one that historicizes its emergence as a minority literature in the 1980s and '90s—in order to problematize the larger call for new histories that has been at the heart of the field's metacritical concern of the past two decades. Here I will have my own set of confessions to make, having worked hard to write that account of the past myself.² What if a key step toward opening “new possibilities” for Mennonite literature is not simply moving past the field's so-called “mythic origin” by more fully historicizing its emergence as a minority literature, but to consider how literary history itself, far from a

neutral methodology for engaging the past, has been quietly working to limit the field's present?

In looking at literature by and about Mennonites from across North America, this book can also be read as a case study in the broader field of transnational literature. Paul Jay's much-quoted dictum that "nothing has reshaped literary and cultural studies more than its embrace of transnationalism" (1) remains true, but this study takes up Mennonite literature in North America—primarily, though not exclusively, in Canada and the United States—as a case study in the belief that the generalizations necessary for the theorization of transnational literatures are most useful and best tested in the narrower contexts of individual fields of concern. There is no question that the shape and tenor of Mennonite writing has been deeply informed by the immediate regional and national contexts within which it has emerged, and historicizing these specificities remains a productive and unfinished critical project. At the same time, one of the primary arguments of this study is that we must be careful not to allow a historicization of the field's emergence within particular contexts and communities to fully determine its broader parameters or possibilities. As Magdalene Redekop suggests in her recent *Making Believe*, local and national differences have often been ignored in the field in favor of the artificially "smooth finish of transnational Mennonitism" (168). One productive way to respond to such a condition, as Redekop does in *Making Believe*, is to delve more deeply into the regional and national specificities. Another way to respond, as I am doing in this study, is to rough up that "smooth finish" a bit, exploring the limits but also the possibilities of the transnational assumptions and aspirations that have long been expressed by the field itself. It is notable, after all, that scholars of Mennonite writing in North America have attempted to work across national, racial, ethnic, and denominational lines for so long. My argument here will be that taking those efforts seriously could offer not only a body of literature broader than has often been imagined but also a rich archive of critique and a unique articulation of cultural difference that, read carefully, can challenge the methodological nationalism, as well as the racialized and secularized assumptions, that have informed the identity- and nation-based study of minoritized literatures across North America over

this same period. If recent work in the field has made clear that the aspirational rhetoric of inclusive transnationalism in Mennonite literary studies often obscures how thoroughly its practice has been directed by the ill-fitting critical discourses into which it emerged, it has also signaled something of the promise and possibilities of self-consciously reading across a broader set of texts, genres, locations, and contexts.

Accordingly, this introduction turns to Françoise Lionnet and Shumei Shih's influential articulation of "minor transnationalism," which interrogates "major discussions of transnationalism" ("Thinking" 6) and their implicit assumptions of a "universal minority position" (11). Lionnet and Shih encourage scholars to consider the specific shape, history, and trajectory of individual fields as they transverse not only geopolitical but also critical and conceptual borders. At the same time, they encourage scholars to emphasize and explore the specificity of minor fields, looking to explore the lateral networks of relation between and within minor fields rather than defaulting to define them in relation to dominant modes and discourses. Contemporary Mennonite literary studies in North America, I want to suggest—its subject a surprisingly diverse mix of faith and cultural communities, faith-based institutions, and a tangle of kinship and migration lines that stretch across and beyond the continent—are particularly well positioned to serve as a study of such a framework. In identifying ways in which critical discourses have "rendered invisible subject positions that did not readily fall into such accepted categories as those of official minorities" (4), Lionnet and Shih offer a means through which to consider a broader past and possibilities *specifically* of Mennonite literary writing and, perhaps, help us to enable the surprisingly radical possibilities of this small field. What, if anything, is unique about Mennonite literary studies, and how might we more fully appreciate and grapple with the elements that distinguish it from other literary traditions?

Like many other fields of identity-based literary scholarship that emerged as "minority literatures" during the 1970s and '80s, Mennonite literary studies is currently grappling with how best to build upon the work that enabled its formation in a contemporary context with often starkly different critical and political assumptions about identity and literature. Is it possible for the field to build on its earlier critical conversations

without being forever tethered to its founding assumptions? Can we meaningfully reconsider the field's past without simply retracing the lines of thought that have led to our frustrated present? As the conversation moves into its fifth decade, it seems clear that the past of Mennonite literature in North America is up for grabs. And by "past," of course, I mean the future.

ON MENNONITE HISTORY AND/AS LITERARY CONTEXT

One of the challenges of working in a minor field of study is that, nearly by definition, scholars cannot assume much by way of general readers' prior knowledge of the subject at hand. This is the case for scholars working in Mennonite literature, certainly, who are routinely encouraged to preface their analyses of poetry and fiction with contextualizing remarks about Mennonites in general. The task of providing sufficient context for such work, however, turns out to be surprisingly tricky. As part of my argument in this study has to do with the way in which Mennonite literary critics handle the past—and because it seems only fair to follow Kasdorf's account with a confession of my own—I want to ask readers' indulgence to offer this context via a brief reflection on the historical overview with which I began the edited collection *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America*. I recount that passage in full here:

The Mennonites of North America are descendants, by faith or birth, of the sixteenth-century Christian dissenters collectively referred to as Anabaptists. Stressing adult baptism, nonconformity, and nonviolence, the diverse Anabaptist movements that sprang up in Europe during the early sixteenth century were subjected to widespread persecution. The first large migration of Mennonites to North America occurred as part of William Penn's "holy experiment" in Pennsylvania around the turn of the eighteenth century. Many of the descendants of these Mennonites, often called Swiss Mennonites or Pennsylvania Dutch, later established the first Mennonite presence in Canada when they emigrated from the United States following the American

Revolutionary War. The second major cultural or ethnic group of North American Mennonites, often referred to as Russian Mennonites, arrived from their once-prosperous colonies in present-day Ukraine in three mass migrations (1870s, 1920s, and 1940s). The larger Mennonite faith, however, has spread around the world through missionary efforts, and today there is a global Mennonite religious community of more than 1.5 million baptized adults, with the largest population in Africa. There are roughly five hundred thousand baptized members of Mennonite churches in North America, scattered broadly across some 150 different groups and denominations. Although the majority of North American Mennonites are assimilated into mainstream culture, others—especially those from Old Order or related Amish and Hutterite traditions—continue to live separated from “the world,” maintaining distinct ethnoreligious traditions with conservative dress, unique dialects, and a reluctance to embrace modern technologies.

In *After Identity*, I followed this historical paragraph with an endnote comparing such passages to what Kasdorf memorably describes as the “autoethnographic announcements” common in ethnic literatures, those obligatory but charged moments when a literary text breaks its façade, and the author pauses to offer a set of historical and sociological details for an audience that is presumed to be outside the community. Mennonite literary criticism is imagined to be a form of nonfiction, of course, but it, too, is subject to its own version of this demand, and here, too, these brief historicizing gestures, destined by their brevity to be partial and misleading, erupt as moments of “*apparent* nonfiction” (Kasdorf, “Autoethnographic” 25) and risk being mistaken as determining the field’s “real” referent and parameters.

I have quoted this piece of “apparent nonfiction” at some length here to provide general readers of this study with some basic historical context, of course, but also to illustrate something of the conundrum that historical contextualization poses for literary scholarship. Such passages are not simply context for the critical argument to follow but are—always and unavoidably—an important part *of* that argument. When faced with

constraints of space and time, what do we select as the key contextual concerns for the field? What do we leave out? Revisiting the passage above in light of the claims of this project, several assumptions embedded within it seem clear: it presents the field of Mennonite writing as a minority literary expression of specifically Russian and Swiss (read: *white*) ethnic Mennonites, positioning the racial and cultural diversity of Mennonites as a global rather than a North American phenomenon, and subsuming the smaller but longstanding Asian, African, and Latinx Mennonite communities in Canada and the United States within the generic phrase of “different groups.” It overlooks Mexico as part of the North American Mennonite context altogether and emphasizes migration even as it depoliticizes it. What is more, by introducing the notion of assimilation with the subordinating conjunction *although*, it seems to bend toward the exoticizing draw of the most stereotypical elements of Mennonite dress and culture. And, crucially for me here, it also affirms a narrative, linear form of history as the collection’s primary method of engaging the past.

As this larger study will make clear, I do not mean to question the need for historical context for literary analysis, and I certainly do not mean to dissuade analysis of work that focus on even the most conventional of Swiss or Russian Mennonite narratives. My concern, rather, is to think more carefully about the shape and forms of history we collectively invoke, and in which we invest. Necessary as it may seem, offering these types of abbreviated narrative histories as the primary context for literary analysis may be affirming forms of community we might otherwise want to question, and retracing the types of methodological assumptions that continue to delimit the field’s possibilities. I will explore the complexities of Mennonite literary history at some length in the pages below. First, however, I would like to turn to the field’s complicated present.

MENNONITE LITERATURE IS DEAD; LONG LIVE
MENNONITE LITERATURE!

To judge from the range and prominence of creative work by and about Mennonites as we begin the 2020s, it would seem clear that Mennonite

literature in North America is in robust health. The last decade has seen a host of new writing by a range of the best-established figures in the field, including Rudy Wiebe, David Bergen, Jeff Gundy, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Patrick Friesen, and Di Brandt. Following the 2018 publication of *Women Talking*, her bestselling novel set on a Bolivian Mennonite colony, Miriam Toews was the subject of glowing profiles in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*; the book itself has been optioned by Brad Pitt's film company, Plan B. Rhoda Janzen's quirky memoir, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, reached the top spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list. At the same time, a new generation of Mennonite writers has been busy winning major awards and suggest a rich future for the field, including Casey Plett, whose celebrated *Little Fish* won the \$60,000 CND Amazon Canada First Novel award and landed her a Hodder Fellowship at Princeton, and Sofia Samatar, whose evocative speculative fiction has been anthologized in numerous *Best American Science Fiction* collections and earned her the 2014 World Fantasy Award. Little wonder that a 2016 survey essay by Jeff Gundy marveled at what he called the "lovely excess of writing and writers" in the field, noting that there are "so many vibrant and varied voices echoing through the halls and corridors of Mennonite/s writing these days that it's impossible to do justice to them all" ("Mennonite/s"). More recent bibliographic review essays by Daniel Shank Cruz echo Gundy's assessment. "In 2017 the field is in full flower," he writes in one essay, noting "more Mennonite creative writers [are] active than ever before" ("Bibliography" 98). "Any reasonable observer of the field of Mennonite literature," he insists in another, "must agree that it is currently flourishing" ("Introduction").

As it turns out, reasonable observers do not agree. I began this study by invoking Kasdorf's call for new histories of the field, yet hers is but the clearest of a host of suggestions over the past decade that the broader field has reached something of a limit. When Kasdorf and I extended invitations to a group of leading or promising scholars in the field to convene at Penn State for a week to address concerns related to her 2013 "confession," all nine agreed to participate immediately. The resulting collection, *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America*, clearly reflects, as I put it in the introduction, a "shared frustration with the direction of the

field” (11) and has been read as evidence the field is near a crisis.³ Indeed, several of the most established scholars in that collection wondered openly at the enduring narrowness of Mennonite literary criticism’s purview (Brandt, “In Praise” esp. 128ff.), or worried that its critical wheels are “spinning” so much that the field is “not making progress” (M. Redekop, “Is Menno?” 196). Even some of those celebrating the vibrancy of the field’s literary production have expressed doubts about the direction of the critical conversation. In *Making Believe*, for example, Redekop celebrates the “embarrassment of riches” that is Mennonite literary production in Canada (165) but confesses a sense that her topic “could vanish into thin air at any moment” (xv). In the same review essay in which he applauds the range of contemporary Mennonite writing, Gundy casts a doubtful eye on the critical frameworks through which that work is being examined. “Maybe it’s time for a new narrative,” he writes, adding: “It’s *always* already time for a new narrative, isn’t it?” (“Mennonite/s”) It’s an argument I echo implicitly by searching for a new critical framework in my introduction to this study and have made more directly elsewhere, celebrating the growth of new writing by and about Mennonites while arguing that “the very foundations of the Mennonite/s Writing project are swaying” (“Garden” 29).

At times, this critical concern about the field’s future has tipped beyond simple expressions of concern. Even Hildi Froese Tiessen, whose prominence and endurance in the field has led Cruz to christen her the “god-mother of Mennonite literary criticism” (*Queering* 1), has wondered aloud if perhaps “critics would do well to abandon the notion” that Mennonite writing “can be considered collectively” (“Habit” 24), and suggests that the Mennonite literary text may need to be “liberated” from the critical conversation that has surrounded it (“After” 210). In the same paragraph where she notes, “Mennonite literature seems to be in no danger of vanishing” (“After” 220), Froese Tiessen suggests that “the conditions that sustained its origins and the early critical readings of it no longer compel many who have an interest in the field.” Writing two and a half decades after she organized the first “Mennonite/s Writing” conference, she goes on to invoke Franco Moretti’s suggestions that “literatures tend to remain in place ‘for twenty-five years or so,’ and that almost ‘all genres active at

any given time seem to arise and disappear together according to some hidden rhythm” (“After” 220).

Froese Tiessen’s arguments are complex and she routinely tempers such expressions of concern with notes of optimism, but others are more pessimistic. The editor’s introduction to a recent special issue of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* dedicated to Mennonite literature, for example, suggests the essays included therein “unavoidably raise questions as to whether the concept of ‘Mennonite/s Writing’—and the conferences associated with it—is sustainable” (Roth 10) and asks if these essays might constitute “the valedictory commentary on ‘a shape of life grown old’” (10). And, in an essay memorably entitled “The Voice Is Coming (Faintly) from the Grave and It Says Mennonites Are Dead, and So Is Mennonite Writing . . .” the Canadian writer and critic Maurice Mierau flatly suggests the field has already died. When a term like “Mennonite writer” is applied to new writers, he insists, it is but “a marketing gimmick of decreasing effectiveness” (28).

From “flourishing” to “dead”: How are we to judge these starkly different assessments of the Mennonite literature today? One way is to take the celebratory rhetoric surrounding the range and success of individual Mennonite writers as evidence of the health of literary writing itself and take the anxieties about its imminent demise as referring specifically to the state of the critical conversation that surrounds it. This study takes its initiative from what I have suggested is a shared sense of frustration with the critical conversation, after all, and who would deny that the best poetry, fiction, and drama of any literary field runs well ahead of its critical response? At the same time, it is something of a surprise to find many of the field’s best-established critics openly worrying that the critical conversation—which is to say, *their own work*—is suddenly unequal to the task of engaging the literature it supports and surrounds, especially given that so many of them are counted among the field’s most notable creative writers themselves. What is more, perhaps the central point of overlap between the scholarly work of Jeff Gundy, Di Brandt, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, and Ann Hostetler—all poets themselves, all major critical figures in the field—is that it so productively disregards the conceit of a sharp distinction between creative and critical work. Nor is this disregard

restricted to the poets: *11 Encounters with Mennonite Fiction*, among the most recent edited collections of scholarly work in the field, begins with its editor explaining she “urged the writers to ‘lean in the direction of a personal essay’” (Froese Tiessen, “Encounters” 1). Recent book-length studies by Magdalene Redekop and Cruz foreground the personal in similar ways, albeit for different reasons, with Cruz noting with agreement that Gundy argues Mennonite criticism “often disregard[s] the borders between the academic and the personal, opting instead for a hybrid of genres” (*Queering* 17).⁴ Perhaps even more to the point, however, is the fact that it is a critical act to gather texts together under the title of “Mennonite literature” or “Mennonite/s Writing,” the very act required in order to speak of individual texts in the collective terms of a body of literature whose health can be assessed.

Another way to look at the uncertainty and range of critical assessments of the field today is to suggest that it reflects a broader uncertainty about the framework and method by which Mennonite writing has worked to understand its past. Part of my argument here is that “Mennonite/s Writing,” with the forward slash—first conceptualized by Froese Tiessen for the 1990 inaugural “Mennonite/s Writing” conference and adopted as a guiding term for the subsequent critical conversation and conference series—is deeply rooted in the field’s emergence as a minority literature, and that much of the critical conversation is straining under that legacy. This is a decidedly less romantic account of the field’s history, and if it, too, is now well established it is worth recounting in brief for our purposes here. In Canada, the federal government’s efforts to foster a national identity via the arts dovetailed with its early multiculturalism policies during the 1970s and ’80s, creating funding and publishing opportunities that helped a range of minority literatures—from Black Canadian literature to Italian Canadian literature and so on—establish themselves as areas of scholarly interest as the “cultural contributions of the other ethnic groups.”⁵ It was in this period and framework that the unlikely surge of writing by the so-called “Russian Mennonites” in Winnipeg was first fostered and celebrated as a “Mennonite miracle.”⁶ As a result, in the context of Canadian literature, “Mennonite” came to be understood nearly exclusively as “Russian Mennonite,” and in ethnic rather than religious terms. In the United

States, by contrast, there stood a Puritan tradition of faith-based writing as a ready frame of reference,⁷ and, as Ann Hostetler notes, a racialized discourse of ethnicity that emerged from political resistance movements and which arguably corresponded less easily with prevailing assumptions about Mennonites.⁸ When well-received poetry by Swiss Mennonite writers in the United States began emerging slightly later than in Canada—including work by Jeff Gundy, Jean Janzen, and Kasdorf herself (who published work in several issues of the *New Yorker* in 1992)—it was encouraged by a critical conversation that was often self-consciously looking to build on the critical conversation that had begun north of the border, while remaining more open to engaging the religious elements of the work.⁹

The Canadian and American contexts have offered differing emphases for the field, then, and important work remains to be done understanding regional and national expressions of the field. However, the enduring emphasis on understanding Mennonite literature as a North American phenomenon has meant the national critical conversations were rarely fully separate.¹⁰ Indeed, scholars routinely engaged the literature through an implicitly transnational frame, looking to reflect what John D. Roth and Ervin Beck have called the “truly international nature—and cross-fertilizing influence—of Mennonite writing” (viii). Although early critical efforts like John Ruth’s *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* (1978) and Al Reimer’s *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present* (1993) are clearly written from Swiss American Mennonite and Russian Canadian Mennonite positions, they routinely reach across the Swiss–Russian and US–Canadian borders, often without comment, to consider the prospect of a larger body of writing. Recent collections, anthologies, and scholarly monographs have confirmed the transnational framework for the field—including the field’s most prominent literary anthology, Ann Hostetler’s *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (2003), which includes poets from Canada and the United States on the logic that the Mennonites’ “religious, ethnic, and linguistic criteria cross national boundaries” (182). I will have more to say about the transnational nature of the field shortly but will pause here on Cruz’s observation that “Mennonite literature has always treated being Mennonite as an ethnic identity in both Canada and the United States, and thus has always treated Mennonite literature as an

ethnic literature” (*Queering* 7). While the critical emphasis on Russian and Swiss Mennonite ethnic identity in early discussions of Mennonite writing reflected both the prominence of work by writers of these backgrounds at this formative moment and the demographics of North American Mennonite communities in this period,¹¹ it also worked, in the United States as in Canada, to downplay religious difference and circumscribe the field as a minority literature expressing forms of white ethnic expression. In the terminology of Charles Taylor’s work on identity that was so prominent at that time, we can say that through the logic of the politics of recognition, Mennonite literature—as “Mennonite/s Writing”—emerged as a transnational minority literature that gave both voice and audience to the newly articulated field.¹²

Scholars of Mennonite literature will recognize the project of historicization above and are likely to agree that much work remains to be done to fully explore the rise of Mennonite writing in its various regional, national, or transnational iterations. Part of the challenge faced by these efforts, I want to suggest, is that the methods and models of conventional literary history encourage us to route our historicizing efforts through the linear, developmental logic of the field’s emergence as a minority literature. Once a dominant method of literary studies, literary history rose to prominence as part of the romantic nationalisms of the nineteenth century, selecting and plotting freshly canonized texts into narratives of progress to support claims of national maturation. By the first half of the twentieth century, such histories were widely recognized as forms of hagiography and roundly challenged, as David Perkins recounts, by scholars critiquing their emphasis on context over content and form; their reduction of individual books to manifestations of collective identity; and their reliance on teleological narratives of development that reduced the past into an authorization of a politicized present (1–2). Importantly for my argument here, however, Perkins and others have suggested that the developmental model of literary history retained its position in the latter half of the twentieth century primarily via its use in “sociological literary histories” (9), including those written by underrepresented communities “turn[ing] to the past in search of identity, tradition, and self-understanding” (10). In a parallel argument, Linda Hutcheon suggests it was the “potent

combination of the nostalgic impact of origins (the founding moment) and the linear utopian projection (into the future)” (7) that made national literary history a powerful model. For scholars working from marginalized groups, she continues, the “strategic power of identifying with an obviously successful national narrative of progress outweighs at least temporarily the dangers of co-optation by a model that, after all, was often responsible for excluding the very groups these literary historians seek to represent” (6). In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s related argument, historiography was “embraced as strategy” by subaltern studies rather than as a final destination, wielded for its authorizing power rather than its critical nuance (285). The question, as Spivak writes, is whether such “strategic blindness will entangle the genealogist in the chain” (285). Or, as Stephen Greenblatt has cautioned about the “strategic appropriation of the national model of literary history—with its teleological, developmental narrative of progress—in order to confer authority upon an emergent group” (54–55): “Such groups may believe that they are appropriating traditional forms, but it may well be the forms that are appropriating them” (59). As we will see in the next section of the introduction, this is almost precisely the caution leveled to the field of Mennonite literary studies by Julie Rak, keynote to the 2017 Mennonite/s Writing Conference in Winnipeg, albeit in a slightly different register (“Interview”).

How do such arguments relate to the search for new histories of Mennonite literary studies? They help us appreciate the challenge posed by the methodological pull of the relationship between literary history itself and the field as a minority literature, which always risks directing our gaze through the developmental logic that fostered and authorized its belated emergence as an “ethnic literature.” There is little question that the iterative celebration of Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many* as a “mythic origin” for the field’s development reflects what Hutcheon calls the “potent combination of the nostalgic impact of origins (the founding moment) and the linear utopian projection (into the future)” (7). There are, of course, no shortage of notable earlier works written in English by or about Mennonites in North America, including several published by major publishing houses dating back to the early 1900s, but when critics went looking for precedent for the remarkable community of “serious” Russian

Mennonites literary authors that had emerged in Winnipeg, they were uninterested in novels like Mabel Dunham's *Trail of the Conestoga*, the 1924 bestselling romance about Swiss Mennonites rambling up to Ontario from Pennsylvania—to say nothing of earlier works of science fiction or extended critical satires, or embarrassingly parochial biographies or didactically religious children's literature or self-published personal memoirs. Instead, using the developmental logic of conventional literary history, they looked for earlier works that were recognizable as clear antecedents to the work flourishing at the time and just happened to find it in the scandalous debut of the field's most celebrated writer. Wiebe's novel, in turn, would offer a "beginning" for the field in Edward Said's sense of the term, in that it designated "the possibility of, as well as the rule of formation for, subsequent texts," establishing a "discontinuity" with what precedes it and "an authorization for what follows" (34). The key point for me here is the tight relationship between the so-called "mythic origin" historical narrative and its ostensible corrective historicization. Identified as the field's urtext decades after its publication as part of the field's establishment, the selection and endurance of Wiebe's 1962 *Peace Shall Destroy Many* as Mennonite literature's "mythic origin" needs to be understood as a direct product of the field's emergence as a form of (ethnic) minority literature, rather than an alternative history. The designation of a mythological literary beginning is not in conflict with a linear, developmental understanding of literary history that relies on direct lines of influence, for both establish not only the "possibility" of a field of study but also, to a powerful extent, the "rule of formation" for subsequent work in the field. Is it really such a stretch, after all, to move from a "mythic origin" to stories of a "Mennonite miracle"?

Nowhere have these two lines of thought come together more clearly than in two recent essays by Mierau. In the first, which I referenced earlier, he flatly suggests that both Mennonites and Mennonite writing are "dead" ("The Voice" 27). Although few have been so blunt, the arc of his argument will be familiar. Authentic Mennonite literature was, he argues, the product of a clash between the isolated, German-speaking Mennonite villages of the Canadian prairies and contemporary culture. With the loss of the linguistic and cultural markers that attended the assimilation of

these Mennonite communities into a secular, English mainstream, he reasons, Mennonite literature itself is finished—because there can no longer be such a thing as a “Mennonite writer.” Mierau is a provocateur and the essay is highly stylized, but he returned to this argument in his introduction to *Rhubarb’s* 2017 fiction anthology, *9 Mennonite Stories*. Quoting his previous essay at some length, Mierau insists that “producing more Mennonite writers will be difficult, and maybe impossible” (1), given the “disappearance of [...] distinctive Mennonite theological and cultural markers” (6). The stories selected by David Bergen for the larger anthology affirms the narrow view of Mierau’s introduction: all nine of the authors highlighted in the collection are of Russian Mennonite descent; all are Canadian and eight of them are from Southern Manitoba; half of the stories were first published decades ago.¹³ If there are good reasons for this narrow focus, Mierau never presents them, choosing instead to present the narrow collection of stories as if it were reflective of the larger field. If the categorical error here seems obvious to the point of being trite, it is also necessary to articulate clearly: in these essays, Mierau is conflating one particularly prominent strain of writing by Russian Mennonites in Manitoba with the field of Mennonite literature itself, metonymically presenting the decline of the specific set of historical and cultural contexts that cultivated the former with the decline of the latter.¹⁴

Mierau’s high rhetoric is most useful as something like a limit case, but part of my argument here is that his conflation of a specific set of its key texts and formative contexts as the implicit parameters for the broader field, or even its stated “default,” is indicative of how the specifics of the field’s inauguration as a minority literature in Canada can work to limit the broader possibilities of Mennonite writing in North America.¹⁵ It funnels our critical gaze not only to a specific time and place, with its canonical authors and texts—so that Redekop can quote Froese Tiessen to suggest there is a critical “consensus” that “we cannot speak of contemporary Mennonite writing in Canada without placing at its center Manitoba, where it began” (qtd. in *Making Believe* 168)¹⁶—but also to the assumptions, genres, conventions, and methods of that same period. Consider the fate of Dunham’s *Trail of the Conestoga* in such an arrangement: a bestselling book by a Mennonite and about Swiss Mennonites, it quite

literally put Mennonites on the Canadian literary map.¹⁷ But Dunham's work was dismissed by early scholars as being just "marginally attributable to the Mennonite people" (J. Thiessen 70), and, along with Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks* (1947), as being "isolated literary phenomena" that can be "regarded only peripherally as 'Mennonite'" (A. Reimer, *Mennonite* 20). As Reimer's description of Dunham as "isolated" suggests, *Trail of the Conestoga*—about Swiss Mennonites in Pennsylvania and Ontario, written in Ontario in 1924—was firmly ahead and outside of the development of Mennonite literature as a body of literature. Before a critical mass of Manitoba-based Russian Mennonite writers made it possible to think of their work as a body of writing in the 1980s, as Froese Thiessen reports, there was simply "nothing that could be identified as a Mennonite 'literature'" ("Habit" 12). Writings by Mennonite authors such as Hiebert and Dunham, she observes, were "unlikely to be thought of by anyone except, possibly, Rudy Wiebe, in the same breath" ("Habit" 12). As an account of the field's consolidation and subsequent development, these are simple statements of fact. But given the ways in which a developmental literary history encourages a teleological account of the field's past and possibilities, it is worth asking whether we have consistently drawn a clear enough distinction between the historical development of Mennonite literature as a conceit and as a field of study—between the authors, texts, and contexts that made it possible to think about Mennonite writing as a body of writing in the first place—and the broader history of literary writing by and about Mennonites in North America, along with its presumably much larger set of figures, texts, and contexts. Now that the critical discourse of Mennonite literary studies is well established, is there any reason why we would continue to allow those early parameters to shape our understanding of the broader history of Mennonite writing in North America so sharply? Why is it that as I write, *The Trail of the Conestoga* is still missing from the "Mennonite/s Writing" bibliographies, the field's most extensive bibliographic projects?¹⁸ What other texts, authors, genres, and geographies have been similarly unrecognizable from the perspective of the field's founding terms and concerns?

Let me close this section of this introduction with several clarifications. The first is that I certainly do not intend to suggest the field can be

understood as being sharply divided between scholars looking to restrict the field to a specific version of its past and those pushing to move it forward into a broader future. To the contrary, what I mean to suggest is that this tension exists *within* many of our accounts of the field, even where careful scholars are wrestling directly with the question of literary history as part of our collective effort to rethink the field's possibilities. Given that this account grounds the field in the early work of Russian Mennonites in Canada, it may not be surprising that we seem to find this tension most often in the work of Canadian critics of Russian Mennonite descent, including myself. In *Rewriting the Break Event*, for example, I worked hard to historicize the emergence of Mennonite Canadian writing as an "ethnic literature" in Canada and traced the revisions and rewritings of a single historical account in the field. I stand by the project but acknowledge it remained largely within the boundaries it was looking to critique—one of the factors motivating my return to similar questions in this study.¹⁹ Recuperative projects have already begun to complicate the field's narrow past—Cruz's efforts to establish a genealogy of queer Mennonite writing is especially notable in this regard, as is Kasdorf's edited edition of Joseph W. Yoder's 1940 bestseller *Rosanna of the Amish*—but an additive model will always strain against the centrifugal pull of the field's established literary history as a minority literature. This is why, in chapter 1, I adapt Franco Moretti's notion of distant reading as an alternate form of literary history, and why, in the next section, I suggest the possibility of intentionally moving outside the minority literature frame.

So, is Mennonite literature in North America flourishing or dying? Understood as a body of works in Canada and the United States bound to the most traditional elements of euro-Mennonite identity, animated by a literary history that tethers it to the villages of Southern Manitoba via its development in the charged conflict zones of Swiss and Russian ethnocultural Mennonite identity—that is, as a form of ethnic minority writing—Mennonite literature may well be at risk of disappearing along with the villages themselves. Understood in a broader sense, however, as a critical framework for gathering and engaging the larger, longer, and ever-increasing production of literary works by or about Mennonites across North America, it seems clear that Mennonite literature is continuing to

thrive. In the next section, I will look at some of the many ways in which Mennonite literary critics are working to expand the field and will suggest these efforts might be fostered by thinking about the field as a case of what Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih call a minor transnationalism. In moving away from the widest paths of literary critical discourse, it is possible—perhaps even probable—that the critical interest in Mennonite writing as a minor transnational literature will prove less substantial than it has been as an ethnic minority literature. Academic popularity is hardly the strongest of arguments, however, and as I argue in my next section, it is also possible that the field will have more to offer as a minor literature working self-consciously outside the parameters of “mainstream” criticism than it has had as a minority literature attempting to work largely within it. In the end, then, it is possible that both assessments of the field may be true: as a form of minority literature, Mennonite literature may be nearing an end, even as its future as a literary tradition outside that frame is bright indeed. Mennonite literature is dead; long live Mennonite literature!

TOWARD A MINOR TRANSNATIONALISM

Reflecting on her experience as the keynote speaker at the eighth Mennonite/s Writing conference in Winnipeg in October of 2017, Julie Rak offered a word of caution. Of Mennonite literature specifically in Canada, she suggested it might be best understood as a “minor field of study oriented towards (and mostly not within) English-Canadian literature as a whole” (“Mennonite/s” 19). By “minor field,” of course, Rak meant not to indicate that Mennonite literature was insignificant but rather that it is relatively small, and—importantly—that it does not fully adhere to the assumptions and models of the dominant critical discourse in the country. For Rak, the fact that the field’s size and specifics set it outside the mainstream of literary studies was not a limitation but rather an opportunity. Indeed, efforts to move the field toward a “recognition by the larger paradigm,” she cautioned, could be understood as an example of what Lauren Berlant refers to as “cruel optimism,” in that “what might be desired that could

be an obstacle to its flourishing” (Rak, “Interview” 19; see also Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*). Striving for recognition by the larger paradigm, Rak argues, requires minor fields to emulate the logic and methods of that paradigm; in the process, they risk adopting the limitations of the dominant modes of critique and losing what makes them of value as a specific field. Although Rak’s comments were made specifically in relation to the Canadian context, they resonate with my sense that the value of the larger field lies in the specificities that are obscured when we attempt to route it through the language and logic of conventional literary studies. Given that Mennonite literary study’s “audience, its premises and even its sense of history are very different” from conventional literary studies, Rak concludes, perhaps its most productive direction would be to intentionally “work differently as a subfield” (“Mennonite/s” 21).

Calling for the field to self-consciously estrange the minority writing frame and strategically embrace its specificities as a minor tradition is meant to help us recognize and foster the ways in which it has sought to “work differently.” As I expect is already clear, I am in full agreement with what I take to be the spirit of Kasdorf’s call for “new histories” of the literature, as well as with Gundy’s assertion that it is “*always* already time” for renewing the critical narrative—along with his earlier exhortations for critical humility, in which he described individual critics as “walkers in the fog” inescapably reliant on each other to gain a fuller picture of the field.²⁰ Despite the expressed anxieties of the field’s stagnation, it appears there are a host of renewal projects already underway, including: an affirmation, via the rising field of theopoetics, of the field’s religious foundations (*Crosscurrents* 60.1 [2010]; *Conrad Grebel Review [CGR]* 31.2 [Spring 2013])²¹; and fresh explorations of overlooked genres, such as the related field of Amish romance novels (Weaver-Zercher 2013), personal narratives (*Journal of Mennonite Studies [JMS]* 36 [2018]), documentary creative writing (*Journal of Mennonite Writing [JMW]* 10.4 [2018]), and speculative fiction (*JMW* 11.1 [2019]). There are efforts underway to expand the field toward the US–Mexican border (*JMW* 10.1 [2018]); to explore the field’s connections with related work in visual arts (Redekop, *Making Believe*); and, perhaps most notably, there are recuperative projects exploring racialized and, especially, queer Mennonite writing (Samatar; Cruz;

Guenther Braun; Plett). In a small field sustained by the committed work of a few dozen scholars, this breadth of work—alongside the recent publications of substantial manuscripts and edited collections²²—suggests to me less a field in “crisis” than one in the midst of a critical renewal. It is worth asking, however, whether our existing frames will be able to sustain this promising expansion of the field into new concerns, genres, and communities. Might there be a way to reconceive the field’s critical frame so that it fosters these expansive efforts, rather than resists them?

Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s influential 2005 collection of essays, *Minor Transnationalism*, offers one possibility. Even as they celebrate the possibilities enabled by the transnational turn that has occurred over the past several decades in literary criticism, Lionnet and Shih caution that the generalizations required for these broadening scales of study risk distorting the shape of the fields they help bring into view. The “major discourses of transnationalism and globalization,” they argue, “assume that ethnic particularity and minoritized perspective are contained within and easily assimilated into the dominant forms of transnationalism” (6–7). Engagements with minor discourses tend to read them through their “vertical” relationship to the major, they argue, obscuring the “lateral networks” of relation and the specificities of individual traditions (1). “For tactical and strategic purposes,” they write, “minority identities have been constructed in strong and bounded terms that have unfortunately rendered invisible subject positions that did not readily fall into such accepted categories as those of official minorities” (4). Rejecting the conceit of a “universal minority position” (11), they call for a rejection of the “compulsory mediation by the mainstream for all forms of cultural production” (2), as well as a “historicizing” of “the field of minority discourse production” in order to “show how transdisciplinary academic practices can construct transnational objects of knowledge, thereby transforming our established interpretive frameworks and disciplinary conventions, while also producing alternative genealogies and narratives of the past” (15).

In making space for a reconsideration of the specificities that are often lost within dominant discourses of minoritization and transnationalism, Lionnet and Shih’s “minor transnationalism” offers a critical discourse that can help us register the “cruel optimism” that has tied Mennonite

literature's ostensibly unique and transnational form of cultural difference to productive but ill-fitting critical paradigms. Indeed, as Vijay Mishra (2006) writes in his brief but careful engagement with Lionnet and Shih's work, the "minor" as a category is "often elided [. . .] in many generalist works on transnationalism," positioned as intrinsically secondary and constituted in relation to the dominant modes and flows. Accordingly, he argues, the minor "requires analysis (as transnationals)" on its own terms. Understanding the "transcultural dimensions of literary production require[s] a rather different interpretative model," he continues, one that "break[s] away from the binaries of culture and knowledge (the latter, as the European argument goes, something that great works of the West produce, the former no more than an anthropological archive from the periphery), high and low." As the larger collection makes clear, Lionnet and Shih are not arguing for a false depoliticization of minority writing but rather arguing against its *restriction* to an oppositional politics that obscures its wider possibilities while implicitly re-entrenching its supplementary status within an expanded transnational scale that replicates the marginalizing logic of the national frame.

How might reconceptualizing Mennonite literature as a form of minor transnationalism encourage us to think differently about the field? Estranging the linear, developmental model of history that has tethered the field to the framework of its emergence should encourage not only archival explorations of underappreciated periods, genres, or movements from the field's enlarged past but also alternative ways of engaging well-known works and new methods of historical scholarship. Similarly, understanding Mennonite writing as a form of minor transnationalism also encourages us to interrogate the assumptions of high *literariness*—read: "seriousness"—that the field inherited from the dominant modes of critique. This can lay an affirming critical foundation to explore a range of work long dismissed as unworthy of critical interrogation, some of which can be seen as central to Mennonite writing, including personal narratives, such as diaries and memoirs; children's and young adult literature; speculative fiction; and, of course, religious writing. Exploring the stakes and possibilities of such work is the project of the chapters to follow.

If part of the argument of my account of Mennonite literature's emergence as a transnational phenomenon was that the transnational rhetoric of the field has obscured the ways in which it remains invested in an understanding of Mennonite cultural difference as a form of ethnicity, it is also true that the field's forty-plus-year archive of transnational work places a productive pressure on the ways in which the transnational itself is conventionally theorized in North America. The oft-repeated critical lament about the relative absence of Canada within hemispheric studies, for example, is the result of a number of overlapping pressures that are relevant to my project here—including an emphasis by American scholars on the country's southern border (Sadowski-Smith and Fox 15), and a palpable anxiety among Canadianists that the transnational “often functions as an alibi for multinational processes in which dominant American perspectives define all others as ‘local’ understandings” (Berland 100).²³ The transnational flows of Mennonite literary studies, however, run almost directly counter to the directions we have come to expect in North America: it is the United States' northern border that has been most relevant to the field; it is the Canadian context that is understood to have initiated the critical conversation; and it is Canadian authors who have garnered the most sustained attention.²⁴ Mennonite writing in North America is valuable, in such a context, not only because it inserts Canadian texts and contexts into a US-dominated critical discussion but also because it serves as a reminder that such wide-ranging critical frameworks are most useful and best tested at the level of individual fields. In Mennonite writing, it is the Mexican–American border that has long been ignored, despite the hemispheric-wide migration patterns of Russian Mennonites having established long-running colonies in Mexico and South America, and its early emergence in Canada initially left American critics thinking “wistfully about the lively Canadian Mennonite literary scene, with its high-profile and controversial writers” (Gundy, “U.S.” 5), and hoping that one day Mennonite “Canadian and U.S. creative writers and literary critics will, at last, meet as equals” (Roth and Beck viii). Herb Wylie is correct to argue that critics interested in hemispheric literary studies must thus take into account the “fundamentally asymmetrical” balance of power between the United States and Canada (49), but twentieth-century Mennonite literary

studies is a notable case in which the nature of this asymmetry was complicated, if not outright inverted.

The most immediate and substantive consequence of reframing Mennonite literature as a case study in minor transnationalism, however, is its marking a shift of the field from its emergence as a form of *minority* writing and reconceptualizing it as a *minor* field.²⁵ In the most basic sense, I am using *minor* in this study to mean *smaller* and *outside the mainstream*, while by *minority* I mean, in keeping with its common usage in North American literary studies, *racialized* minority. While there are, of course, no shortage of cases in which a subsection of a national literature is both minor and minoritized in these ways, I would suggest that it is a categorical error to equate the two, and that Mennonite writing is a case in point. Here I worry that even Lionnet and Shih slip too easily between the terms, for it seems clear to me that the construct of the “minority” is itself part of what can be productively transversed and interrogated by the “minor.”²⁶ Because the term “Mennonite” is first a religious designation (around which several distinct cultural and ethnic identities have coalesced but with which they cannot be fully equated), it makes more sense to refer to Mennonite writing as a *minor* literature. Where Mennonite writing happens to be written by a subject racialized in the North American context—say, in the poetry by the Japanese Mennonite writer Yorifumi Yaguchi—there is no contradiction at all: it is both a work of *minor* and *minority* literature. Indeed, the fact that the lateral, cross-cultural networks that Lionnet and Shih suggest are underappreciated *across* minor fields are also in operation *within* Mennonite writing is central to the field’s potential contribution to the larger study of literature. Cruz’s argument that “Mennonite literature’s inclusion of multiple Mennonite ethnicities along with its transnational nature are rarities in literary studies” (*Queering* 9) registers the potentiality of “lateral networks” within the field that have yet to be fully explored.

Embracing a minor frame can also help to estrange a presumption of whiteness that the field inherited from its formation as an ethnic minority literature. While this frame was arguably an accurate reflection of the specific texts and contexts that marked the field’s emergence, it is not only clearly inappropriate today as a *prescription* for the field, but it was

notably out of step with the larger conversations about race that were occupying the broader Mennonite church in that formative period. “Between the 1950s and the 1970s conversations on race in the church highlighted the anxiety that Mennonites felt about being a ‘white’ church,” writes Felipe Hinojosa, “forcing them to take into account the needs of Latinos and African Americans, to diversify their church structures, and for the first time to consider new definitions of Mennonite identity in the United States” (*Latino* 215). Those debates can be tracked in several notable works exploring nonwhite Mennonite traditions in North America published in the period—including Le Roy Bechler’s *The Black Mennonite Church in North America* (1986) and Rafael Falcón’s *The Hispanic Mennonite Church in North America* (1986), both published by Herald Press, as well as Hubert L. Brown’s *Black and Mennonite: A Search for Identity* (1976), published a decade earlier—but they are all but completely absent from the formative works of Mennonite literary criticism from this period. As Jeff Gundy has noted, the first substantial effort to theorize Mennonite literature in North America, Ruth’s *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* (1978), was written at a time when “civil rights and feminism were transforming American culture and (more slowly) the Mennonite church” and “the gay rights movement was slowly gaining momentum as well,” but it “shows little interest in any of these issues” (“Explorations”). This may be true, but it is also true that Ruth was far from alone in such oversights. The Mennonite writing of the latter twentieth century was rightly celebrated for its gendered and theological critiques of Mennonite patriarchy and religious fundamentalism, and its emergence among the white “Russian” and Swiss Mennonite communities is hardly a surprise, given that this community—then as now—constituted the large majority of North American Mennonites. In hindsight, however, we can see how the emergence of Mennonite writing specifically as a form of ethnic minority literature functioned to extend the normative whiteness of institutional Mennonite identity at the very time when it was elsewhere under critical interrogation. Understood alongside studies like Hinojosa’s *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith and Evangelical Culture*, it is clear that the mobilization of Mennonite cultural difference as a form of “white” ethnicity in literary studies took place in the larger context of a “twentieth-century racial crisis in the

Mennonite church” that was “turn[ing] ethnic Mennonites into white Mennonites” (216).

Shifting the critical frame from *minority* to *minor*, then, is not meant to evade the enduring questions of race, gender, and identity in the field but rather meant to help foster a renewed and more nuanced engagement with them. It may be true, as Michael Millner has reported, that the academic discourse surrounding identity is marked by “a sense of exhaustion around the whole project” (541); it is an exhaustion that has been expressed in Mennonite literary criticism, to be sure, as well as by Mennonite historians expressing surprise that the field’s literary critics and writers “continue to reflect on identity issues” (M. Epp 12).²⁷ It should be clear, however, that the intersecting problems articulated by the poststructural and postcolonial critiques of the 1990s and early 2000s have not been adequately addressed and resolved, and that brushing aside enduring concerns about gender, class, race, and ethnicity would only work to affirm the flawed models we continue to inhabit. “There is no dispensing with identities,” as Anthony Appiah argues in his 2018 study, *The Lies That Bind*; “but we need to understand them better if we can hope to reconfigure them, and free ourselves from mistakes about them” (xvi). Indeed, as Millner goes on to suggest, scholars are exhausted in large part by the need to return to them via the same structures and institutions that have been recognized as complicit with the essentializing logic they have set out to critique—a complicity inherited in part, as I’ve argued above, by a strategic reliance on recognizably flawed methodologies, but also by the institutionalization of minority difference by government policy and academic practice. In Roderick A. Ferguson’s provocative account, the rapid institutionalization of minority difference within the American academy was as much about rearticulating that difference in manageable terms as it was about empowerment and meaningful change. The post-1960s institutionalization of resistance movements into academic fields “would discipline through a seemingly alternative regard for difference” (6), he writes, with the result being “an abstract—rather than a redistributive—valorization of minority difference and culture” (8). Ferguson’s assessment of the regulatory/disciplinary role of minority difference in the US academy resonates with comparative accounts of the “sedative politics” of Canadian

multiculturalism, whereby the radical elements of Quebecois sovereignty and racialized minority movements were depoliticized, redirected, and disciplined into academic and cultural performances of difference.²⁸ For scholars and academics whose thinking has been enabled by these same disciplines and institutions, part of the challenge is engaging the enduring terms and concerns that surround identity without replicating or reinvesting in its restricting logic—to work, in the resonant terms of Ferguson’s epigraph, “in the institution but not of it.”

Reframing the field as a minor literature may help refresh the field’s engagement with identity in two directions. The first is to help us better appreciate the early and enduring function of tropes of ethnicity, authenticity, and whiteness within the field as a minority field. It is when the field is understood as the natural expression of a coherent and homogenous community, after all, that it is subject most forcefully to the demand that the writing be an earnest, mimetic re-presentation.²⁹ Rey Chow’s articulation of coercive mimicry, or the processes by which “those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected [. . .] to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them” is instructive here (107). This is the challenge, surely, of Taylor’s logic of multiculturalism as a politics of recognition, in which cultural production must replicate audience expectations in order to circulate within the discourse—it demands, in Chow’s terms, that subjects “objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate their familiar imaginings of them as ethnics” (107). Chow’s terms offer a concise way to understand Kasdorf’s experience of being received as an “ethnic” Mennonite writer in the late 1990s: “As a Mennonite author, I have become both spectator and sight,” she writes, “conscious of conventional expectations about my background and the ways that my work fulfills or fails to meet those expectations” (*Body* 53). Here, too, the unvarnished, straightforward prose of so much early Mennonite writing—“From the beginning,” writes Reimer, “the Mennonite literary imagination seems to have been drawn to a gritty realism serving didactic purposes” (*Mennonite* 11)—seems to have dovetailed conveniently with critical demands for writing that is readable as autoethnography. In several chapters of this study, I engage this history in order to better understand its function in

the field: in chapter 2, I consider how the perceived “authenticity” of life writing was strategically marshaled by early Mennonite authors and scholars alike, for example, and in my discussion of the Mennonite Thing in chapter 3, I trace how the contemporary field continues to wrestle with the cultural force that remains attached to the most recognizable, essentializing imagery that surrounds Mennonite identity across the continent.

Having estranged the specific set of identity-based concerns that have settled onto it as normative via the minority literature frame, the second critical direction fostered by a minor literature frame is to deepen our appreciation of identity categories underappreciated in the field to date. “I hear Mennonite writers and critics in North America talk about being tired of identity discussions, of desiring to get past and away from Mennonite identity,” writes Sofia Samatar, “and I think of how different those discussions would be, how newly troubling and electric, if we considered ways of being Mennonite outside Dutch-Swiss-German ethnicity and the North American context” (“Scope”). Samatar’s welcome suggestion is anticipated in an earlier issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Writing*, where editor Ann Hostetler notes that “the Mennonite literature curriculum needs to more actively seek out and include Mennonite writers of color,” and that with Mennonite colleges having “been producing writers and cultural critics for several generations now—it is time to recognize the infusion into Mennonite literature of non-Eurocentric viewpoints” (“Learning”). Those scholars working most closely and productively with identity in Mennonite writing today are pushing against the heteronormative, Eurocentric presumptions of the field’s origins as a minority literature. Perhaps the most sustained of these recuperative efforts have been in the productive field of queer Mennonite writing, but Mennonite writing also offers both early and recent critiques of the presumed whiteness of Mennonite institutions.³⁰ I explore both these conversations further in chapter 1 and, especially, chapter 5 of this study, but perhaps the most stinging critique of this history is to be found in the voices absent from the field altogether.

Of course, the dominant identity marker of Mennonite cultural difference is religious, and it is my contention that the minority literature

framework, along with multiculturalist discourses, have often worked to render Mennonite religious difference in ethnic terms. As Michael W. Kaufmann has noted, contemporary literary studies have long been “generally accepted” to be “a decidedly secular enterprise” (607), but recent work contemplating what Jürgen Habermas influentially refers to as the “post-secular”—describing the “society that posits the continued existence of religious communities within a continually secularizing society” (329)—suggests a framework in which efforts to engage Mennonite religious difference might receive hearing. As it has been theorized to date, the post-secular tends in my view to engage religious thought with a grudging respect that sees it as unavoidable, much as when Stanley Fish (2005) identifies religion as the subject most likely to succeed the “triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy”—only to add it is “one thing to take religion as an object of study and another to take religion seriously.” A similar division could be made in Mennonite criticism, where religion has not always been “taken seriously” as a “candidate for the truth,” even when it has been recognized as an “object of study.” It would certainly be too much to suggest Mennonite literary studies has outright ignored religion, but it is my hope that intentionally estranging the field’s parameters as a minority literature may help us further explore the religious and theological aspects relevant to the field—recognizing how they intersect with, but should not be superseded by, questions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Rak, whose first book examined Doukhobor autobiographical discourse, points to “the radical possibilities of religious faith when it runs headlong into secular ideas about private property, education and so on,” as well as the question of whether it is “possible to critique religious excesses and also think about radical potential” (“Mennonite/s” 22) as examples of the type of questions that, while currently outside the mainstream of literary studies, could be explored by a freshly engaged Mennonite criticism. Such topics, she suggests, should help it move beyond the “tendency to provide narrow genres and their industrial success as the indicator of success” for literary authors (19). Tanis McDonald has made a related point in somewhat different terms. Reviewing a recent work of Mennonite poetry, McDonald notes: “The place of faith in the contemporary world is perhaps the least cool

subject on the planet, and in its uncoolness, one of the most urgent, desperately in need of discussion beyond demagoguery or cant, where its real human struggle and connections and overlaps between faiths and peace and compassion can find resonance” (398). Taking Mennonite religious discourse seriously will mean reminding ourselves of the long tradition of straightforwardly evangelistic writing by or about Mennonites that stretches back through and alongside the self-consciously literary tradition that was comparatively late arriving, as I do in chapter 1 of this study. It will also mean attending closely to the theological specificities of Mennonite thought necessary to appreciate and understand projects that might not immediately seem to foreground faith at all, as I do in chapters 4 and 5.

Finally, I want to suggest that understanding Mennonite writing as a minor transnational literature, at least as I am describing it here, would mean rethinking, perhaps even suspending, the foundational assumption of the field as it has been imagined since the early 1990s: that the purpose of Mennonite literary studies is to engage *literature that has been written by Mennonites*. As a broader field, Mennonite literature has long exceeded the church membership lists that might approximate the citizenship records that are the implicit foundation of national literary traditions and cannot be logically defined by the discourses of race or ethnicity that provide structure and political urgency to minority literatures. In lieu of such parameters, critics have—as I noted elsewhere—“consistently responded to problems of definition by outlining the parameters of the field as broadly as possible,” even as it “remains fairly narrow in its strict devotion to authorial biography” (Zacharias, “Introduction” 2). These definitions include Hostetler’s “diverse spectrum of sensibility informed by Mennonite experience” (*A Cappella*, xviii), or *Rhubarb* magazine’s “diversely defined Mennonites[:] genetic, practicing, lapsed, declined, and resistant,”³¹ or, paradigmatically, Al Reimer’s “wide-angle lens”: “the work of writers who spent at least their formative years in a Mennonite milieu—family and/or community and/or church—regardless of whether they now consider themselves ‘Mennonite’ in a religious sense, or in a purely ethnic sense, or in both senses, or in neither sense” (*Mennonite Literary Voices* 2). Much of the field’s frustrations with identity, I have suggested, comes from our

attempts to explicitly define the field in the broad terms but remaining tethered to the biography of the author—that is, in method and scope, within the logic of minority writing. The result is a slippage, or tension, within even the most careful works, so that even where scholars are explicitly straining to move away from identity-based readings of texts by Mennonites they continue to look for “traces” (Froese Tiessen, “Homelands” 22), “accents” (Redekop, *Making Believe* 208), or a “tone” (Nathan 181) that would provide evidence of that link, whether or not the works in question directly engage Mennonite characters or settings. Redekop’s *Making Believe* is admirably clear on this point: “Nothing I have written here should be taken as support for the notion that readers should actively look for what is Mennonite about a particular text,” she insists, only to add: “The fact remains, however, that for the purposes of writing this book I have necessarily had to separate out books written by authors with Mennonite names and that while doing so I have repeatedly registered Mennonite accents in the writing” (208). I recognize this tension—*The fact remains*—in my own work, as well. In my oversight of literary reviews at the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, for example, it often results in an embarrassingly parochial form of biographical sleuthing in order to justify the inclusion of an author’s work within the field. *Is that a Mennonite last name I see in this publisher’s new catalog? Maybe she married in? What would he think about having his work reviewed as “Mennonite”?* Such decidedly uncritical questions are only rarely acknowledged, and yet they exert a powerful gatekeeping function in all fields that understand themselves as expressions of, or closely related to, specific communities.³² How could we expect to move beyond the most conventional accounts of the field as an “ethnic” literature if our critical frame relies heavily on ethnic markers and kinship ties for inclusion?

As will become clear over the course of this study, I am most interested in writing *about* Mennonites rather than *by* Mennonites, which are often but not always the same thing. It is worth noting that when we look back at critical writing about Mennonite literature before the field emerged as—or should we say *transformed into*?—an area of minority literary studies, we can find cases of scholars happy to explore writing *about* rather than *by* Mennonites. Harry Loewen’s influential edited collection,

Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues (1980), for example, notes that “Mennonites are receiving increased attention in certain creative works written by non-Mennonites” (2–3), and nearly half the essays in the collection’s “Literary Images” section explore such work, including Victor G. Doerksen’s examination of the eighteenth-century German author Heinrich Jung-Stilling; J. W. Dyck’s essay exploring “The Image of the Mennonites in Josef Ponten’s *Volk auf dem Wege*,” and Loewen’s reading of “Anabaptists in Gottfried Keller’s Novellas.” With several notable exceptions, such analyses have disappeared from the critical conversation, in keeping with the convention of minority literary studies to tie the field to the identity of the author rather than the content of the work—itsself part of the Romantic ideal that a body of writing ought to reflect something essential about the community from which it emerges.

My hope is that Lionnet and Shih’s notion of minor transnationalism, understood as I am adapting it in this introduction, may offer a methodology that can foster the expansive vision that the field has long anticipated and which I believe it is now struggling to enact. David Damrosch’s influential work, which suggests “world literature” is best understood not as a single set of texts but as a way of engaging texts that circulate and are read beyond their immediate contexts, is a useful comparison point for what I am proposing. “World literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works,” he writes, “but rather a mode of circulation and of reading” (5). Just as reading a book as a work of “world literature” in Damrosch’s terms is not to pretend it was written by “the world,” to read a book as a work of “Mennonite literature” in the context I am articulating here is not to presume it must be read as the autoethnographic expression of a Mennonite author. Instead, it is to consider how the literary text, widely defined, intersects with Mennonite concerns, whether as a matter of character, setting, theology, or theme, or authorial position, and perhaps even a matter of genre or form, or some combination of these elements.³³ It is to interrogate the conceit of the “literary itself,” not in order to ignore questions of complexity and quality but to recognize its shifting and socially conditioned nature, and, crucially, its gatekeeping function. Picking up on a distinction made in a different context by Terry Eagleton, we can say

that to reframe Mennonite writing as a minor literature is to adopt a *functional* rather than *ontological* definition of the field (9), recognizing that Mennonite literature is a mode of reading rather than of writing—that it is not a *thing* that can be meaningfully defined but rather something we *choose to do with a text*.

READING MENNONITE WRITING: A STUDY
IN MINOR TRANSNATIONALISM

In the chapters that follow, I undertake a number of experiments in understanding Mennonite writing as a minor transnationalism. Chapter 1, “1986: Toward a Minor Literary History,” is a methodological experiment in non-narrative literary history, drawing on work by Franco Moretti and the digital humanities to attempt an adapted distant reading of all the literary texts published in English by and about North American Mennonites in a single year. Suspending the teleological selectivity of conventional literary history, this lengthy chapter looks to reanimate the genres, texts, and concerns that have been lost in what Moretti (2000) calls the “slaughterhouse” of the field’s literary history, revealing a rich set of writing that forces a reconceptualization of the early field. While chapter 1 explores a host of texts in a single year, chapter 2, “*A Russian Dance of Death: Mennonite Diaries and the Use of Truthfulness*,” traces a single Mennonite diary across decades, countries, and languages. Arguing that the role of life writing in the establishment of the field has been vastly underappreciated, this chapter offers a comparative reading of the numerous editions of the Dietrich Neufeld diary—written in French and translated for self-publication in Germany in 1921, translated into English for publication in California in 1930 and retranslated as the inaugural project of the Canadian Mennonite Literary Society in 1977—to explore how the “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune 1989) functions within the context of minor transnationalism.

The third chapter, “The Mennonite Thing,” draws on Slavoj Žižek’s work on the inversion of ideology and the fetishistic structure of the

“Ethnic Thing” to explore the ironic function of identity in much of contemporary Mennonite literary studies. The Mennonite Thing, as I formulate it here, is the conceit of a static and “authentic” Mennonite identity expressed through (but not reducible to) stereotypical markers of Mennonite culture, language, and faith. In this chapter, I examine a prominent strand of writing in the field—from poetry by Jeff Gundy and Julia Spicher Kasdorf to the online satirical website *The Daily Bonnet*—that routes its engagement with the most conventional aspects of Mennonite identity through a variety of distancing gestures, strategically mobilizing notions of Mennonite cultural authenticity in ways that are not directly readable as autoethnography. My fourth chapter, subtitled “On Faith and Fantasy in Mexico,” tests the geographic assumptions that have long circumscribed the field by pairing Canadian Mennonite Miriam Toews’s novel *Irma Voth* (2011) with Mexican director Carlos Reygadas’s celebrated film, *Silent Light* (2007). Reygadas’s film is a set on a conservative Russian Mennonite colony in northern Mexico, using local colony members as actors and starring Toews, the Canadian author, in its leading role. I read *Irma Voth* as a careful and strategic retort to Reygadas’s film: where Reygadas exaggerates the Mennonites’ isolation to render it a form of fantasy, Toews returns the community to its broader social and historical context, affirming the flawed agency of individual colony members and critiquing the community’s efforts at self-isolation as a catastrophic failure of the imagination.

The fifth chapter, “Endure,” concludes the study’s close analysis by reading Casey Plett’s trans coming-of-age novel, *Little Fish* (2018) alongside Sofia Samatar’s science fiction novella, “Fallow,” to explore their shared interest in complicating conventional notions of a Mennonite past. In *Little Fish*, an opening debate about trans and cis experiences of time shifts into a trans woman’s efforts to explore the possibility that her beloved Mennonite grandfather may also have been trans, while in the Afrofuturistic “Fallow” (2017), a young Mennonite activist undertakes a “rescue project” to inscribe her racialized family’s history within the heavily protected archive on their intergalactic colony. Returning to the question of history with which I began this study, then, the chapter closes with the

suggestion that *Little Fish* and “Fallow” insist that a reconsideration of the Mennonite past is a necessary step toward the enabling of the possibility of a broader, more inclusive future. It is an argument echoed in the book’s brief summative conclusion, where I reiterate the major claims of each chapter and look to draw them together as a larger case study in minor transnationalism.