

Introduction

Theapoetics and Apocalyptic Times

On Saturday, 14 March 2020, I turned forty. My partner had a full day of festivities planned for us: brunch at Ocean Blue, my favorite restaurant; a relaxing afternoon on the couch perusing the books I received as gifts; and then dinner with our three closest friends back at Ocean Blue, with a session of Dungeons & Dragons and homemade whoopie pies for dessert. But there was an edge of uneasiness accompanying the day. I was on sabbatical and had been having a calm semester, but our friends, all fellow professors, were dreading the upcoming spring break week because our institution had just announced that it was moving all courses online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They would have to spend the week scrambling to adapt their courses to the new environment. On Sunday, I spent the day recovering from the previous evening's debaucheries. On Monday, I realized that the pandemic would affect everyone's lives when then governor Andrew Cuomo closed all schools and various kinds of businesses, including restaurant dining rooms, statewide. On Friday, Cuomo ordered the closure of all nonessential businesses.¹ In hindsight, as I write this in April 2021 (and still, as I do a round of revision in January 2022, and still, as I do another round of revision in July 2022, when numbers are again spiking and monkeypox has entered the mix, and still, as I do my final edits in December 2022 during another spike before turning the manuscript in to my publisher), my birthday feels like the last "normal" day.

A few months earlier, as I was finishing the semester and wondering what I would work on during my sabbatical, I received two invitations four days

apart to contribute essays to theological projects, one on Anabaptist vitality in the twenty-first century and one on Mennonite political theology.² The timing of these requests may have been coincidence, or may have been a sign of something deeper, perhaps an act by what Sourayan Mookerjee identifies as “the animist agentic magic lying in the deepest recesses of antecapitalist life that the colonial project sought to drive from the face of the earth.”³ Either way, they felt like a definite call from the theological Mennonite community, which I have had a vexed relationship with for twenty years. I said yes to both because I was happy that the editors felt I would have valuable ideas to contribute, but I also felt perplexed because I do not consider myself a theologian. I decided to write both essays about how you can read Mennonite literature theologically because it has often acted as theology for me since I left the church in 2002. As I began writing the essays, it became clear that a significant strain of Mennonite literature has always been concerned with ethics and therefore can be read as a kind of secular theology.

At the same time, I was working on a paper proposal for the 2020 Mennonite/s [*sic*] Writing conference (subsequently postponed to 2021, and then 2022) about how Mennonite literature should respond to the nefarious tag team of the 2017–21 White House occupant’s administration in the United States and the global climate catastrophe that is already manifesting itself in terrifying ways. I have had an interest in apocalyptic literature since 9/11,⁴ and was using my proposal to intertwine this interest with my work on Mennonite literature for the first time. I was going to focus my paper on the future, but when the pandemic hit, more immediate, direct thinking about apocalypse became necessary.

Of course, a sense of impending doom is not new for some of us. Apocalyptic times have been present for people of color in the Americas since 1492. In other words, the idea that apocalyptic times have just begun is a product of white privilege. Much Mennonite literature remains flawed in its lack of engagement with this fact due to its lack of engagement with the lives of people of color in general, though the works of Sofia Samatar, Casey Plett, Abigail Carl-Klassen, Becca J. R. Lachman, and Ken Yoder Reed that I examine later are notable exceptions, as are Rudy Wiebe’s novels *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People*.⁵ I am a Puerto Rican with Taíno and African ancestry, so this ongoing apocalypse has shaped my paternal family’s history. My maternal Mennonite ancestors took part in settler colonialism when they settled what is now Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in the early 1700s.⁶ However, after my birthday the interrelated symptoms of the 2017–21

White House occupant's administration and the pandemic felt especially close and oppressive. The current apocalypse affects everyone.

As I joined the wave of people turning to literature for comfort, panic-buying stacks of books to ensure that I would not run out of reading material, I began thinking about an old, old topic in literary discourse, that of literature's role in society. The pressure cooker of the pandemic led me to the intersection between looking at Mennonite literature theologically and looking to literature as a balm in terrible times. I realized that rereading the Mennonite literature I was writing about for the three essays offered my generally secular self spiritual comfort. This realization surprised me, and I decided to explore it further.

Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature is the result. The book argues that literature is an essential ethical resource for all of us, secular and religious, as we navigate these terrible times that disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls "the triple pandemic" of COVID-19, fascist white supremacy, and climate change, all of which remain strong despite regime change in Washington, DC.⁷ To make this argument, *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* examines a specific literary tradition as an example while also showing that we can imbibe these ethics from whatever literary tradition we belong to. As a Mennonite, I revisit the question of Mennonite literature's role in the faith community, which is one that dates from the beginning of the field's critical discourse, as I recount below. Therefore, the book offers one retelling of the field's history like Julia Spicher Kasdorf calls for in a 2013 essay, "Sunday Morning Confession," that asks the field to abandon prescriptive themes of "transgress[ion] and exile" when telling its history in order to be more inclusive of the rich variety of work that creative writers have written and continue to write.⁸ Scholars have offered more expansive versions of the field since that time in a number of venues, including the 2013 After Identity: Mennonite/s Writing in North America symposium, the LGBT Fiction panel at the 2015 Mennonite/s Writing conference, Robert Zacharias's 2016 essay "A Garden of Spears" and 2022 book *Reading Mennonite Writing*, Jeff Gundy's 2016 essay "Mennonite/s Writing," and Samatar's 2017 essays "The Scope of This Project" and "In Search of Women's Histories." My 2019 book, *Queering Mennonite Literature*, also does so by calling for a queering of transgression and exile to show that these values are Mennonite ones rather than antagonists to the tradition.⁹ *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* builds on all these efforts. The introductory note to Kasdorf's essay states that it is partially in response to three younger critics—Zacharias,

Anita Hooley Yoder, and me—who have taken Kasdorf’s early transgressive work as a model, and to Kasdorf’s “guilt” about perhaps leading us astray. Zacharias discusses the essay in *Reading Mennonite Writing* and responds to it in radical, thought-provoking ways, in part by examining texts “*about* Mennonites rather than *by* Mennonites” and asserting that “Mennonite literature is a mode of reading rather than of writing.”¹⁰ Although I appreciate Zacharias’s emphasis on examining how we read Mennonite literature because I am arguing that one way to do so is theapoetically, I am not ready to fully abandon the field’s transgressive narrative yet. Transgression is a necessity for me as a queer (I’m bisexual¹¹ and kinky) Latinx Mennonite who has had to face both institutional and personal Mennonite queerphobia and racism my entire life. Instead, I hope to strike a happy medium between Kasdorf’s and Zacharias’s calls for alternative histories and an advocacy of transgression, which sometimes necessitates exile, to show that theapoetic Mennonite literature’s power comes from its healthy transgression of the world’s valorization of violence and transgression of institutional Mennonitism’s overly zealous policing of its boundaries.

As I explain below, *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* suggests one way to read Mennonite literature and offers its hybrid form as an example of the kinds of texts this reading strategy might produce. The book is not an argument for what Mennonite literature *should* be or do but what it *can* be or do. It does not engage the question of whether Mennonite literature should exist as an academic field because that is a vibrant conversation going on in other venues, most notably Magdalene Redekop’s 2020 opus *Making Believe*, which asserts that “there is no such thing as Mennonite art” while also acknowledging the “contradiction” of spending over three hundred pages discussing such art.¹² Instead, like most critics, I think that the construction “Mennonite literature” is a helpful one, albeit imperfect, and I document how the field has developed since its first book of literary scholarship, John L. Ruth’s *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* (1978).¹³

THE LITERARY VISIONS OF JOHN RUTH AND AL REIMER

Previous discussions of the faith community question date it back to Ruth’s book. The question relates to the broader one of how Mennonites should relate to the world. Ruth begins by establishing the importance of storytelling for individual and group identity, and lamenting the lack of storytellers other than historians in the Mennonite community.¹⁴ He acknowledges that

“most discussions of this topic [i.e., the role of writers and literature] begin by making impressive claims for the necessity of the autonomy of the artistic imagination” and then spends the rest of the book showing that such claims are not “impressive” because it is noble for writers to serve their community.¹⁵ Ruth argues that Mennonite writers should devote their work to the church, calling for “the imaginative courage for the literary artist to become involved in the very soul-drama of [their] covenant-community.”¹⁶ He wants writers to help construct and portray the “Mennonite identity” of his title.¹⁷ This work is theological and therefore limited by Mennonite orthodoxy instead of having the “autonomy” that Ruth rejects, as he rejects the unquestioned validity of writing by Mennonites who leave the community.¹⁸ Ruth’s argument’s theological nature, which makes *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* a work of theology as well as literary theory, is understandable considering that it was published by the denominational publisher, Herald Press, as part of the Focal Pamphlets Series, the purpose of which was to “interpret and discuss problems of contemporary life as they relate to Christian truth.”¹⁹ Ruth wrote the book on assignment, so it exemplifies its call to writers to serve the community.²⁰

The other theological element of *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*’s argument is one that most readers of *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* will take for granted. This is unfortunately still not the case in some segments of the Mennonite community. Ruth argues that writing, and artmaking in general, is not sinful but has value for the faith community because creative talents are gifts from God.²¹ His advocacy for what we now call Mennonite literature was revolutionary for the time despite the limitations he suggests. The continued Mennonite resistance against literature’s validity is why storytelling about the field’s origins has emphasized the transgressiveness that Kasdorf wants us to reconsider.

Even though its outlook is conservative, Ruth’s book was groundbreaking because it created Mennonite literary scholarship as a field. Kasdorf explains that it also “cleared a path” for many creative writers. Jeff Gundy states that it “remains important for those of us who still care about the pursuit of truth and justice and beauty and God, not necessarily in that order.”²² All of the terms in Gundy’s list are theological and political and thereby imply that literature functions in these realms. I will talk about how I feel about the fourth term later, but I care deeply about the first three and hope that my book offers tasty food for thought about how to find them, as Ruth’s does.

Al Reimer's 1993 book, *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present*, offers a sustained reply to *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* from the perspective of a time when there was much more Mennonite literature available to discuss than when Ruth inaugurated criticism about it.²³ Aside from Herald Press's proselytizing tomes, Ruth had only a handful of texts, such as Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *The Blue Mountains of China*, Warren Kliewer's *The Violators* (the only two Mennonite writers Ruth mentions),²⁴ Dallas Wiebe's *Skyblue the Badass*, and Merle Good's *Happy as the Grass Was Green*, to respond to.²⁵ The explosion of Mennonite literature in the 1980s that Reimer celebrates established a foundation that writers in the United States and Canada continue to build on prolifically. Ruth's book is proactive in its call for a Mennonite literature, whereas Reimer's is reactive because it has the luxury of the irrevocable establishment of this literature to respond to.

Mennonite Literary Voices also has a different theological orientation. Ruth's book looks inward, focusing on the Mennonite community, whereas Reimer's looks outward, focusing on how Mennonite literature has been shaped by the broader literary milieu and the outside world in general, and looking at how that shaping affects the literature's relationship to the faith community. In contrast to what Kasdorf calls Ruth's "sectarian poetic," Reimer argues for embracing Mennonite writers who want a "general readership" and who, in many cases, "are no longer [theological] Mennonites."²⁶ This embrace includes an acknowledgment that writers should write what they want to write instead of worrying about how their subject matter relates to religious orthodoxy.²⁷ Reimer includes critiques of Mennonitism as part of this aesthetic freedom. Whereas Ruth says in an interview that he "get[s] a lot of pleasure in having people jolted but not attacked,"²⁸ Reimer celebrates writers such as Di Brandt and Patrick Friesen whose work can definitely be said to "attack" their home communities in necessary ways. Reimer appreciates that these writers are still interested in conversation with the Mennonite community and argues that their critiques can play a "prophetic" role from their position on "the dissident frontier from which all good art and literature speaks."²⁹ Reimer is interested primarily in aesthetic excellence, a secondary concern for Ruth. However, Reimer does acknowledge a collective element of writing by contending that "the literary voice has to be heard in the community" for it to make a difference and that this hearing will not occur if the writing is not good enough to deserve it.³⁰ So both authors agree that the writers need the community and vice versa.

Along with writing in different eras, Ruth's and Reimer's different roles affected their perspectives. Ruth wrote as a minister who had been called by the lot, though he had a PhD from Harvard and had worked as an English professor before becoming a full-time historiographer and filmmaker for the church, all of which gave him significant "individual power" within the community despite his call for a communitarian writing ethic.³¹ Reimer wrote as an English professor who was an important voice in Mennonite studies but who had no official theological authority. Almost all of Ruth's writing is historiography, whereas Reimer authored a successful novel alongside his criticism and thereby was familiar with a creative writing perspective. In *Mennonite Literary Voices*, he reveals that he did not publish his novel with Herald Press because they wanted to censor his language.³² He tried to offer his fiction to the institutional Mennonite community as Ruth calls for, and it rejected him.

The field embraced Reimer's ideas about writers' relationship to the community almost immediately after they were published, and literary criticism on Mennonite literature has mostly focused on other questions since then, with the notable exception of Ervin Beck's 2015 defense of *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*'s position from a reader-response theory perspective.³³ Ruth himself indicates sympathy with Reimer's outlook in several statements from the mid-2000s. According to Kasdorf, Ruth has said in conversation "that he would not write the lectures that became *Mennonite Identity* in quite the same way now" and that he appreciates how Mennonite literature developed in the intervening years. In a discussion with two Russian Mennonite writers, Jean Janzen and Rudy Wiebe, Ruth says to Janzen after she states that "I don't think we [herself and Wiebe] are speakers for the community" (i.e., that they do not take up the role that *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* calls for), "that produces better art than our [Swiss Mennonite] way" of responding to the community's call rather than writing what one wants to write.³⁴ This statement acknowledges the importance of authors writing without worrying about community standards while also leaving room for the legitimacy of some authors writing explicitly in service to the community should they so choose, a reasonable compromise despite Ruth's outdated use of the Russian/Swiss binary to represent the two practices.

Although many critics recap the books' debate,³⁵ and my choice to retell it might seem like a repetition of the field's mythology that Kasdorf warns against, I do so to reframe it, partly by pushing it earlier, and partly by arguing that

ultimately the literature itself—not literary critics or theologians—resolves the debate.

The relationship between literature and the faith community is one Ruth was thinking about since at least 1964. In a sermon entitled “Revolution and Reverence” that responds to controversy over the publication of a Lawrence Ferlinghetti poem in a “Mennonite youth magazine,” Ruth argues that the church must converse with 1960s radicalism.³⁶ He calls for Mennonites to embrace the arts as a corrective to our refusal to engage the wider world because “the serious artist, Christian or not, is a seer.”³⁷ Ruth takes literature’s legitimacy as a resource for the faith community for granted, a stance that, as I say above, was heretical in 1978, let alone 1964. Ruth also argues that writers have a prophetic role to play nearly thirty years before Reimer. Unlike *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*, “Revolution and Reverence” focuses solely on secular literature because almost no nondidactic Mennonite literature existed at the time. At most, there were a handful of texts in English for Ruth to examine,³⁸ though it is probable he only knew of one, Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Mabel Dunham’s *The Trail of the Conestoga* (1924) and *Toward Sodom* (1927) and Gordon Friesen’s *Flamethrowers* (1936) had all already faded into obscurity, but Elizabeth Horsch Bender’s 1957 article on Mennonites in literature in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* mentions them, so it is possible that Ruth tracked them down.³⁹ Kliewer’s *The Violators* was published the year Ruth preached “Revolution and Reverence,” but it was probably not out yet considering that the sermon took place in February.⁴⁰ As a result of this lack, the sermon argues for the use of secular, “worldly” literature in the faith community, with Ruth mentioning Henry David Thoreau, the Beats (including Ferlinghetti), and *Moby-Dick* favorably.⁴¹ Thus, “Revolution and Reverence” is more liberal than *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*, closer to Reimer’s thinking and Ruth’s later thinking, because the book examines how Mennonites can represent themselves to the world rather than what they can learn from it. Like *Mennonite Literary Voices*, the sermon focuses outward, even though it asks the literature-and-the-faith-community question from a purely theological standpoint, not a critical one. The Mennonite roots of seeing theological value in secular literature stretch back to at least this time. “Revolution and Reverence” reminds us that the history of the field is less fixed than we may assume.

MENNONITE THEAPOETICS

In the last decade, a number of Mennonite writers and scholars have begun conversing with the field of theopoetics, pushing its boundaries away from

its original task of examining theology as literature to examine literature theologically, and thereby restarting the conversation about literature's theological role from the literary side.⁴² Instead of asking what role literature should play for the community, theopoets assume that literature written on its own terms as art has theological relevance and try to illustrate that relevance. Theologian Jeremy M. Bergen admits this usefulness, observing that traditional (in the academic disciplinary sense) theology is not enough, that the community needs something else, by naming the importance of literature for broader Mennonite thought. He acknowledges that "the discourse that most directly engages the complex relationships between Mennonite identity, culture and faith, including lack of faith, is that of Mennonite literature and its critics."⁴³ Gundy also wonders if Mennonite writers might help to bring "renewal to a tradition now threatened with bureaucratic ossification."⁴⁴ Anita Hooley Yoder concurs, asserting that poetry's ethical outlook "is a crucial element in the quest for peace, inside and outside of our churches."⁴⁵ These statements critique the faith community in that they argue that its theology is insufficient, but they also affirm the community via their willingness to converse with it.

Ethics for Apocalyptic Times joins this conversation to illustrate it from a secular point of view. By "secular," I mean what Maxwell Kennel calls in his definition of "secular Mennonite" a "broad and undefined [i.e., not necessarily synonymous with atheism] category of the world that exists apart from the bounds of Christian theology, its church, and the category of religion in general."⁴⁶ I show how Mennonite literature teaches ethics, which can be useful for readers within and without the Mennonite community, because, as Gundy, paraphrasing theologian Grace Jantzen, argues, "the question is not what we believe, . . . [but] how we act in the world." Similarly, Mennonite poet Connie T. Braun argues the theopoetic notion that poetry that "witness[es]" to "suffering . . . serves as an ethical act."⁴⁷ Read this way, Mennonite literature offers an example for how literature in general can act as an ethical force in this time of pandemic and apocalypse. These ethics are necessary because we may well need to put them into practice. Who knows what these times will require of us?

Ethics for Apocalyptic Times also argues that, although Mennonite writers did not heed *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art's* charge to write intentionally in service to the community (nor should they have; I do not argue for literature as propaganda but show how it offers ethical arguments as art), if we read Mennonite literature through the lens of theapoetics—a term I define momentarily—many pieces of Mennonite literature actually accomplish what

Mennonite Identity and Literary Art calls for while also fulfilling the prophetic outsider role that *Mennonite Literary Voices* calls for by “reflect[ing] in the deepest sense what is actually happening in the Mennonite community, and not what we like to think is happening or hope is happening.”⁴⁸ The literature’s implicit choice to follow Reimer and interact with the world gave it the freedom to also answer Ruth’s call, but on the writing’s own terms. Therefore, thirty years on from Reimer’s reply to Ruth, the literature has manifested the best of both worlds.

In a dinner conversation at a gathering of Mennonite writers at Laurelville Mennonite Camp on 9 June 2018, poet Britt Kaufmann asserted that the movement from “theopoetics” to “theapoetics” is necessary. Her call for an emphasis on the feminist aspects of the Divine through the use of “thea” (“goddess”) liberates the field from patriarchal language and moves it away from the often-elitist realm of academic discourse into the broader public sphere that includes space for those inside and outside the academy. I therefore choose to use it because patriarchal religion also oppresses queer folk such as myself. Theapoetics happens at the margins because those of us there need new ways to relate to the Divine that are not disciplined by the institutional faith community.

None of us at the table had encountered the term before. However, theologian Molly Remer writes about it in a 2015 book, sharing Kaufmann’s feminist viewpoint to define it as “experiencing the Goddess through direct ‘revelation,’ framed in language.” Remer also writes that theapoetics views “lived experiences as legitimate sources of direct, or divine, revelation.”⁴⁹ Simultaneously a practice and a theory, theapoetics makes space for both lived experience and literature as theology. It takes a low church view of how to relate to the Divine just as Mennonite theology does because it argues that encounters with the Divine can happen anywhere without the need for sacraments or priestly interlocutors or a church building. Its emphasis on individual experiences, on the personal being political, is a queer, feminist one. As queer writer Michelle Tea observes, “we may be having spiritual experiences, but we are having them in our bodies,”⁵⁰ so it is necessary to consider theology as an embodied endeavor, a project that many theologians have already taken up but one that still struggles with queer bodies, and especially queer of color bodies like mine.⁵¹ Therefore, via theapoetics it becomes possible to examine Mennonite literature as a form of theology from the literary side of the connection, even though this literature is a secular enterprise in that its authors write it as art rather than rhetoric.

Indeed, Redekop declares that Mennonite writers “worked hard during the 1980s to establish the category ‘secular Mennonite’”—that is, someone raised Mennonite who is no longer in the church—as a way of showing that being Mennonite does not always mean adhering to a certain set of beliefs.⁵² Paradoxically, though, naming oneself as secular is a theological move, so in a sense Mennonite literature has always been theological even as it has fought against such a label. Kennel’s theological definition of a “secular Mennonite” as “a person for whom the cultures, values, and identities of Mennonites are important in a way that cannot be captured by either straightforward acceptance or rejection of theological statements,” and who is able to undertake the queer task of “serv[ing] as a challenge to dualistic thinking of all kinds” helps make space for this paradox because it acknowledges the validity of a position that draws strength from multiple communities, not just the Mennonite community or the world.⁵³ Mennonite literature’s power comes from its willingness to search for the Divine everywhere, not just within the faith community.

I find the term theapoetics helpful because it looks at theological discourse slantwise like Kennel’s definition. Theapoetics does not require writing to be systematic; it revels in the unruly just as queer theory does. Literature can illuminate a sideways path toward a healthier faith community. Instead of being stuck in an exclusionary vision of community like institutional Mennonitism’s strictly defended boundaries, literature can help us move toward a relational community that includes humans, animals, and the environment. Literature reminds us that ethical responsibility does not end with other humans but extends to all of creation, a principle the ignoring of which has played a major role in getting us to our apocalyptic moment. Mennonite literature serves the broader Mennonite community because the field itself functions as a nurturing community and has done so since the 1980s. Zacharias observes that those in the field are frequently described as “family.” In a 2004 essay, Ann Hostetler documents how the field has created a vibrant “virtual community” inclusive of Mennonites of all theological stripes.⁵⁴ This is even more so the case now. Aside from meeting at semi-regular Mennonite/s Writing conferences,⁵⁵ members of the field build community through social media venues such as the “Mennonite Lit. Writers” Facebook group run by Andrew Unger and Darcie Friesen Hossack,⁵⁶ informal dinner meet-ups at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs annual conference and other conferences, reading drafts of each other’s work, and referencing one another in our creative writing, not just our scholarship.⁵⁷ The field

fulfills Mennonite poet Nikki Reimer's hope for "dissident groups of writers operating in interconnected pods, holding each other accountable, and collaborating toward a more equitable community" of writers and in general.⁵⁸ Mennonite writers share Ruth's concern for the community from *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*, but we do so in new ways that acknowledge the community can profit from the world's ideas, not just vice versa. The theological community can benefit from this knowledge by using a theapoetic approach that broadens its vision of what theological thinking can be. As I show in the chapters to follow, this path is a queer one politically (i.e., in the way queer theory often uses the term) in its visions of a radically new society, and sometimes sexually in its affirmation of all sexualities.

There is a mystical element that Jane Bennett describes as "weirder and more wayward [than merely aesthetic] energies flowing in and out of" literature that theapoetics names in a way that literary criticism does not.⁵⁹ Thus, theapoetics enriches the study of both literature and theology. Traditional God language does not work for me (nor, for that matter, does Remer's "Goddess" language, though it gets closer to what I am looking for), but theapoetics' model of viewing personal experiences as something more than just having to do with oneself does. Remer also writes that "*my thealogy is the earthy, the mundane, the practical*," elements that Hooley Yoder calls "the poetry of life."⁶⁰ Although Remer happens to be writing from a spiritual framework, this is a philosophy that works in the secular realm. She cites Elizabeth Fisher's claim "'that the sacred and secular are one.'"⁶¹ This is an idea present in the queer tradition since at least Walt Whitman's 1855 poetry collection *Leaves of Grass*. Writing about Whitman from a secular viewpoint, Mark Doty echoes Remer's religious language to name writers' call, avowing that "artists need to live as if revelation is never finished," which is a theapoetic statement if there ever was one because of its belief that writing always has something to teach us.⁶² In his description of "Anabaptist theapoetics," Gundy uses similar language in his belief that "revelation is continual and ongoing."⁶³ So theapoetics queers theopoetics by doing secular theopoetic work, which becomes theapoetic work.

Mennonite theologian Melanie Kampen echoes Remer's emphasis on the importance of experience in her call for decolonial theology that asks "'Who is suffering? Who is experiencing violence and trauma? And why? How is power distributed?'" to counter the intersectional violence of colonization, which affects women, people of color, queers, and the disabled, among others. Kampen posits that "experiences of" the oppressed are "primary

sites of knowledge” that theology must use.⁶⁴ Her argument amplifies Remer’s to show that theapoetics is a decolonial endeavor as well as a queer, feminist one.

LITERATURE AND ETHICS

Although I choose to focus on Mennonite literature here, explorations of the intersection between literature and something bigger (whether you use theological language for it or not) appear frequently these days in the broader literary community, and my book’s advocacy of the ethics present in the literature I examine is applicable to everyone, not just Mennonites. For instance, one of these appearances takes place at the end of Elizabeth Acevedo’s novel *The Poet X*. The protagonist, Xiomara, whom poetry has rescued from an oppressive Catholic upbringing, says, “I think when we get together and talk about ourselves, about being human, about what hurts us, we’re also talking about God. So that’s also church, right?”⁶⁵ Xiomara understands the theapoetic idea that personal experience is connected to the Divine even if it takes place away from theologically sanctioned spaces. As Gundy posits, “The problem of ‘the world’ is the most pressing one we face—Mennonites, yes, but everybody else too.”⁶⁶ We all must reckon with apocalypse, and theapoetics helps us do so by showing how to encounter the Divine in our everyday experiences of the world.

Doty’s Whitmanic call to seek “revelation” in writing describes the spiritual, ethical importance of writing. Literature offers aesthetic entertainment and works for societal change simultaneously by fostering community. Just as prayer in a religious context is an attempt to bring the person praying closer to God, so too are the acts of reading and writing attempts to build relationships between readers and writers. In a discussion of Audre Lorde’s well-known statement that “poetry is not a luxury,” Redekop agrees that “we need it [poetry] in order to live,”⁶⁷ not just to teach us how to live. In these times, I think the same goes for literature in general. Redekop further contends that “art is not a frivolous pursuit in the midst of the crisis of our time. Talking *about* art is another matter altogether.”⁶⁸ I agree wholeheartedly with the first sentence but disagree with the second. We need champions for the art to work alongside the artists themselves to help make the activist community writing engenders visible.

Although theapoetics is helpful for investigating all literary genres, and *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* examines mostly fiction, poets are the writers

currently making the most impassioned arguments for literature's relevance in our terrible times. But poetry is often under attack. Ben Lerner describes how "every few years an essay appears in a mainstream periodical denouncing poetry or proclaiming its death" because of its perceived irrelevance. Reimer plays with this critique in her 2014 collection *DOWNVERSE* [*sic*]. The book's epigraph reads "I hated your poem. / Your poem was so boring. / — inebriated audience member at a poetry reading."⁶⁹ Similarly, an untitled poem midway through the book includes a prose fragment that mimics something an online troll might type: "only a poet would say that the reason non poets don't like poetry is because they don't understand it. and therein lies the real problem. it's not the poetry that is disliked. it is the poets who deliver it in such a way that they think they are somehow better, fairer, superior creatures than the rest of us that turns the stomach. you wrote some words that may or may not rhyme. you memorized them. you said them in front of people. they clapped. or didn't. good for you. now go cure cancer."⁷⁰ The poem refutes this critique in a delightfully snarky way by embedding it within a collection of poetry, which is itself a response that validates poetry's importance. It is necessary for me to also respond because I make the same kind of lofty claims for theapoetic literature that poets are making for poetry.

Poetry's—and, by extension, literature's—detractors want it to do something. It is not enough for it to just be there as itself. Likewise, there is a long tradition of poets agreeing that poetry must act in the world. For instance, Amiri Baraka writes that "poetry has to be as functional as anything else in our lives" because "we're trying to change the world."⁷¹ Poetry is political. As any poetry reader knows, it does do something, even if that something is difficult to name. Perhaps the most famous expression of this idea is found in the work of William Carlos Williams, who was actually a physician, though he did not cure cancer. He asserts: "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet [people] die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there."⁷² Literature offers us healing if we let it so that our everyday lives are not "miserable," in part by modeling the theapoetic principle of showing how daily existence is sacred. Matthew Zapruder picks up on this idea. He writes of poetry's "news," which Williams acknowledges is there even if it is "difficult" to get, that it "is something more than mere information, facts and opinions," it is "gospel" or "good news." It offers spiritual sustenance. Indeed, Zapruder considers himself a "religious person" because he reads and writes and teaches poetry even though he does not practice religion.⁷³ He claims poetry as its own religion with poems as its theology. So literature does

something, it gives us sustenance, but we have to seek that something out. Theapoetics takes work.

Literature's "news" often has a teaching purpose. Whitman argues that poetry has an ethical function, claiming that it can give readers a "*good heart* as a radical possession and habit."⁷⁴ Poetry's intense, observant way of viewing the world teaches us to appreciate the world more and to treat it with kindness. Reading literature changes us, but often in gradual rather than instantaneous ways, so the change can be difficult to see just as our heart is hidden from our sight.

In recent times, writers advocate for this change to occur in service to societal rebirth as a response to our apocalyptic times. For instance, Willie Perdomo asserts that we are in a "moment" of revolution "and that poets might play a key role in that moment."⁷⁵ This is an ambitious claim that some might see as too utopian to be useful. However, I agree with Melva Graham's observation that this skepticism "is the voice of white supremacy" because it attempts to silence the work of writers of color such as Baraka, Graham, Perdomo, Lorde, Williams, and myself by telling us that our work does nothing.⁷⁶ It repeats the critique documented in Reimer's poem. Another queer writer of color, Alexander Chee, argues that the interaction between readers and books is so transformative that it is the "reason that when fascists come to power, writers are among the first to go to jail. And that is the point of writing."⁷⁷ Like the voice in Reimer's poem, some people might not find writing interesting, but politicians know that it is powerful, which is why they try to suppress it, whether through cutting arts funding or more drastic measures. Writers must use this power even if it leads to persecution.

Therefore, I reject the assumption that writing does nothing and argue that literature has a role to play in these apocalyptic times that will inevitably change North American society in some way. The US government's refusal to take climate change or COVID-19 seriously has terrifying implications for the entire world. In such a situation, it is difficult to be optimistic. This was especially the case when I first drafted this paragraph in July 2020 while the 2017–21 White House occupant's minions were kidnapping protesters into unmarked vans. In her recent book *Showing Up*, Mennonite Esther Stenson includes a poem, "Museum Afterthoughts," that acknowledges such despair in its depiction of war, environmental degradation, and the genocide of Indigenous Peoples in the United States. It ends "Perhaps it were better that we, like dinosaurs, / would fossilize while there is still time."⁷⁸ Even in a collection that consists almost completely of poems about nature or the virtuous

lives of plain-dressing relatives, Stenson offers the sentiment that it is time for humanity to close up shop before we destroy the planet even further. But I believe that advocating for literature is one thing US citizens can do to reject these governmental actions and assert our citizenship in the global community so that the change will be positive. These poets' calls for transformation through the power of literature are politically queer because they want a completely new society rather than tweaks to the old one, and because they believe their vision is possible.

Revolution does not necessarily mean violent uprising, though. One of the reasons poetry can be such a powerful tool is that it often rejects mainstream beliefs in the inevitability of violence. Gundy speculates that "the percentage of committed pacifists and peace activists among poets is probably at least as high as it is among Mennonites." Rachel Tzvia Back's poem "What Use Is Poetry, the Poet Is Asking" exemplifies this pacifism. Recalling Williams, it directs its question to "the evening news" before arguing for poetry as an antidote to war. Again, we see belief in literature's ethical usefulness. Revolution can also bring healing. For instance, although Rebecca Lindenberg's poem "A Brief History of the Future Apocalypse" testifies to personal apocalypses such as earthquakes, plane crashes, and the deaths of loved ones, she reminds us in a note on the poem that aside from "destruction," "apocalypse" also "means revelation, renewal, transformation."⁷⁹ I use the term in both senses here. My use of the destructive sense is not a scare tactic—it's a little late for that—nor does it refer to the genre of spiritual writing whose most well-known example is the New Testament's Book of Revelation because *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* is not a work of eschatology.⁸⁰ Instead, I mean the general, more pop culture sense (insert the title of your favorite alien invasion or giant meteor movie here) of a cataclysmic event that changes society irrevocably. I am also interested in the hope Lindenberg references by citing the second definition. We cannot avoid our ongoing apocalypses, but we can seek to live through them ethically. It is important to remember that all hope is not lost and that something good may be built out of the rubble of these times.

In *Making Believe's* acknowledgments, Redekop writes about her family's "love," "[It] brings me deep joy and hope for the future, without which I would not have bothered writing this book."⁸¹ Her statement strikes me because it illuminates something true that I had never articulated before I read it. Whatever else writing is, it is an act of hope that there will be a future and that readers in that future—even if it is just you rereading your

journal—will read what you have written and will benefit from it. This hopefulness is why writing is especially important during our time of pandemic and apocalypse. In a note to her poem “You Are Your Own State Department,” Naomi Shihab Nye observes that “sometimes the audience at a reading feels so supple and hopeful it breaks my heart. It’s as if people think the poet might put things back in place. This is a tenderness beyond measure—a belief in the powers of language and metaphor—a dream of abiding meaning.”⁸² As a writer and reader, I share this belief in literature’s power to “put things back in place,” or, better yet, put them in a new, queerer configuration that makes the world better for all of us. *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* participates in this endeavor.

THEAPOETICS IN MENNONITE LITERATURE AND BEYOND

In the first five chapters that follow, I narrow my focus to Mennonite literature, but I widen it again in the final chapter and the epilogue to offer more examples of how theapoetic principles exist in other traditions. Again, unlike Redekop, who “do[es] not believe that there is something called ‘Mennonite/s Writing’ that transcends inconvenient differences between Canada and the United States or between Swiss Mennonites and Russian Mennonites,”⁸³ I believe it is helpful to consider Mennonite literature coalitionally as a field that includes all of these different perspectives and acknowledges those differences but coheres because these perspectives share beliefs in nonviolence and the importance of community. With Gundy, I believe that Mennonite literature’s variety is “its greatest strength,”⁸⁴ so I examine a miscellany of texts from the past forty years from Canada and the United States. This examination is an example of why the construction “Mennonite literature” is helpful. Naming the field makes pieces of literature available for the Mennonite community to interpret; it creates a usable archive. Redekop observes that “community” is “perhaps the most enduring of Mennonite values.” It is part of what Hildi Froese Tiessen calls the “trace” of theological Mennonitism that remains in secular Mennonite literature.⁸⁵ The community can undertake this interpretation with any piece of literature it wants to, as Gundy does with writers such as Whitman and William Stafford in his theopoetic treatise *Songs from an Empty Cage*, or I do in chapter 6. But I do think it is no surprise that many pieces of Mennonite literature include aspects of “Mennonite thinking” by advocating for nonviolence, communal mutual aid, and the importance of politically queer thinking, even when they do not

include Mennonite subject matter.⁸⁶ The field makes these “traces” that share what theologian Karl Koop calls “a hermeneutics of [Mennonite] tradition” visible,⁸⁷ albeit in unorthodox ways, serving the community by challenging it from theologically heterogeneous positions. I include older and quite recent texts to show how a significant strain of the field (there are many, many texts that I do not examine, and not all of them fit this framework because the field is a diverse one) has been and continues to be theapoetic.

Although Ruth may not have only had “literary” writing—that is, fiction, poetry, and memoir written for adults for art’s sake rather than as a teaching tool—in mind in *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*,⁸⁸ I focus on such literature because work published by companies such as Herald Press obviously has theological elements. I am interested in the theological elements of works that are written as secular endeavors, not in writing created with any kind of didactic purpose.

I do not consider myself a theologian and write *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* from a secular viewpoint. Nevertheless, my discussions of theapoetics and ethics makes the book a piece of theology alongside its status as a piece of literary criticism. I write it as a theological effort of the kind Stephanie Chandler Burns calls for in her advocacy of queer Mennonites’ employment of “ordinary theology,” which is “the type of theological reflection engaged in . . . within everyday life” whether one is an academic theologian or not. As she asserts, “Queer theology is queer people talking about theological concepts,” so this book is queer theology regardless of my academic training.⁸⁹ I am not a “theological Mennonite” in the sense of following institutional Mennonite theological orthodoxy, and when I use this term, I refer to those who do. But within the framework of ordinary theology, I am a Mennonite who has a theology, the contours of which will become apparent throughout *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times*. Ordinary theology’s emphasis on everyday experience dovetails with theapoetics’ belief in experience as theological material. This belief results in the creation of multiple theologies that make room for groups that official Mennonite theology has traditionally oppressed, such as women, queers, people of color, and the disabled. Queer theory teaches that binaries like the one this paragraph sets up between theological Mennonitism and ordinary theology are usually false, so I hope it is clear throughout this book that I still think that Mennonitism has lots to offer. But when the institutional community constructs and enforces a binary that you are outside of, its existence feels very real. Institutional Mennonite theology has a lot to answer for.⁹⁰

Therefore, in my work on Mennonite literature I continue to struggle with a question that Kasdorf asked toward the beginning of her career: “If one has gifts, what is one’s responsibility to the Mennonite community?”⁹¹ Regarding another aspect of responsibility to one’s community, Ruth says that “a lot of times you recognize a call only in retrospect.”⁹² This is how I feel about *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times*. I was working on another book project when the idea for this one seized me, and the first draft poured out of me in about four months. The Mennonite community keeps pulling me back in despite my attempts to leave it behind. I thus find myself reluctantly agreeing with the speaker of Patrick Friesen’s poem “A Kind of Longing” that “the longing [for spiritual sustenance] never leaves.”⁹³ I go back to Mennonite stories because these are the narratives that have shaped me and taught me how to relate to the world, so it is necessary for me to wrestle with them and see what parts of them I must reject and what parts I still find helpful and can keep as I continue to build a new lens through which to view the world.

As a literary object, *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* places itself in the realm of creative writing as life writing and in academic discourse as an intervention in literary criticism, Mennonite studies, queer theory, and theological discourse. I could not have written it without the goad of Mennonite literature that has helped me to revisit my spiritual life in recent years. Although I remain outside of Mennonite orthodoxy, I am much farther away from atheism now than I have been for most of the past twenty years. The autobiographical aspect of the book manifests itself in each chapter via some personal stories that relate to my own experiences with the texts under consideration. These stories go in tandem with my more traditional literary criticism of the texts.

The book inhabits a hybrid, messy genre that goes under various names: “anecdotal theory,” “research-creation,” “autotheory.”⁹⁴ Although scholars have been slow to examine the genre, its history dates back to books by queer women of color such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* (1984), and Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).⁹⁵ The genre’s queer, decolonial roots are why it fits with theapoetics. Some Mennonite writers are gaining notice in the field, so it is also a Mennonite mode. For instance, Lauren Fournier examines the importance of Samatar’s term “life-thinking” for defining autotheory, and Simon Pope discusses Mennonite visual artist and writer Rachel Epp Buller’s work as an important example of research-creation.⁹⁶

I write in this genre because, as the title of Natalie Loveless’s research-creation “manifesto” *How to Make Art at the End of the World* asserts, it is a

practice that can help us navigate our apocalyptic times because the speculative visions and language of visual art and literature have the potential to reveal new ways of living. As a part of these visions, it is necessary to create “new, unruly, driven stories” to use as teaching tools. Therefore, as scholars and creators we must “move forward, one classroom, degree, article, book, conference, conversation, and artistic research project at a time” rather than giving in to despair and hopelessness as I am often tempted to do, wanting to just sit on the couch with my cats.⁹⁷ Hence my choice to write this book. Fournier declares that the genre “reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice.”⁹⁸ Instead, according to Loveless, the genre “insists that . . . artistic production is no longer solely an *object* of scholarly inquiry but is itself a legitimate *form of research and dissemination*.” It is embodied like theapoetics, “a practice of love . . . erotic.”⁹⁹ Some of the texts I examine use autotheoretical strategies as part of their theapoetics by drawing on their authors’ lives, exemplifying how the genre can be a form of “self-preservation.”¹⁰⁰

The self in the genre always “draws shared breath with communal bodies of knowledge.” Its melding of personal experience with broader public questions of how to live offers the potential for new ways of thinking about ethics.¹⁰¹ One way it does this is in its recognition that who writers cite in our work is “politic[al].”¹⁰² Sandra Ruiz writes in an endnote that “endnotes . . . are pregnant with possibilities—stories and lives missing from dominant discourse.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Sara Ahmed observes that who we choose to cite can either reinforce exclusionary academic conversations or expand them.¹⁰⁴ To participate in this expansion, the genre often includes what Vilashini Cooppan calls a “flood of quotation” as a way to establish affinity with other creators.¹⁰⁵ Citation is a kind of digging, an archival archaeology that finds the most fascinating bits of others’ foundational work and puts them together into something new. Ahmed states that “citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured.”¹⁰⁶ For those of us who love the physical acts of reading and writing, citation is a way to pay homage to what adrienne maree brown calls our “personal pleasure lineage[s],” the gatherings of those who have taught us to love our bodies despite capitalism’s constant body policing.¹⁰⁷ Naming these lineages is a creative act, what Fournier calls a queer “artist[ic]” medium.¹⁰⁸ This profuse, world-making citational aesthetic, which I employ in my main text, endnotes, and generous index, is an act of joyful community building rather than simply being an act of scholarly obligation. As Zefyr Lisowski says, “I speak in a

footnote because it's the clearest way I know to not speak alone."¹⁰⁹ Our citations show gratitude to those who teach us. They also create an archive for others to peruse and take inspiration from.¹¹⁰ So make sure to read the endnotes, not just the main text!

There is a common sexist, racist critique of authotheory and research-creation similar to critiques of memoir in general that views their genre as "narcissistic." But, as Chelsea Rozansky asserts, "It isn't narcissism, but a kind of badass move, to assert your presence in a discourse that marginalizes you."¹¹¹ I do so here in Mennonite discourse specifically and academic discourse more broadly, both of which people of color and queers still must fight to access.

A MAP OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1, "Sofia Samatar's 'Request for an Extension on the *Clarity*,' Queer Objects, and Theapoetics," examines Samatar's memoirish story "Request for an Extension on the *Clarity*" from her 2017 collection *Tender* alongside Ahmed's concept of a "feminist killjoy survival kit" from her 2017 book *Living a Feminist Life*. Inspired by Ahmed's work, I close-read a segment of Samatar's story about the narrator's library to help describe my own queer killjoy survival kit and how this archive offers me emotional support. My investigation of Ahmed's concept helps to illuminate more of theapoetics' queer underpinnings. Although the word "queer's" ideological advocacy of openness makes attempts to define queer somewhat paradoxical, I use it throughout *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* in at least three ways that queer theory uses it. The first is as an adjective to describe someone (or writing that describes someone) who is LGBTQ₂IA+. The second is as an adjective to describe a political stance that calls for radical societal change in all areas, not just sexuality. The third is as a verb to refer to the action of reinvestigating the foundations of something for the purpose of working toward this radical change. This book is a queer one, but it does not focus specifically on sexually queer Mennonite literature, which I write about elsewhere.¹¹²

The chapter is also an example of how a reader (in this case, me) can experience theapoetic teaching from a text. I draw inspiration for the chapter's autobiographical elements, as with those throughout *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times*, from those in Samatar's fiction and essays. Samatar tells Amina Cain in an interview that she has "sworn never to write another" traditional "academic essay." On a related note, in an interview with Alicia Cole, Samatar declares that she is "always trying to merge things, rather than balance them.

I want to create new things that are mixtures of genres or categories I've been told are incompatible."¹¹³ Although I am not quite ready to abandon academic writing myself, I appreciate how Samatar integrates the personal in her own work so skillfully and work to do likewise here.

Chapter 2, "Theapoetics in Mennonite Poetry, Then and Now," begins with a description of my faith crisis in college and how Mennonite literature, and especially Mennonite poetry, helped me to stay connected to my Mennonite self. In hindsight, I realize that this connection was possible because of the poetry's theapoetic aspects. I study these aspects in the early work of two writers who were the most important for teaching me how to stray from institutional Mennonitism while also remaining in conversation with the community, Jeff Gundy and Di Brandt. I read Gundy's poetry through the lens of his 1998 essay "In Praise of the Lurkers (Who Come Out to Speak)," which theorizes writers' relationship with the faith community. Gundy's poems consistently write against religious orthodoxy while at the same time reveling in the presence of the Divine in the world. I then discuss Brandt's 2018 essay "Paradigms of Re:placement, Re:location, and Re:vision: The Creative Challenge of the New Mennonite Writing of Manitoba (and the World)," which returns to the themes of Gundy's essay to urge the faith community to make space for its writers. I examine some of Brandt's poetry to show how it exemplifies the feminist, decolonial nature of theapoetic writing that the community needs.

The third part of the chapter shows how the theapoetic roots of Mennonite poetry as found in work by writers such as Gundy and Brandt continue to flower in the field. It does so by offering brief examinations of recent books by Becca J. R. Lachman, Abigail Carl-Klassen, Janet Kauffman, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, and Julie Swarstad Johnson.

Whereas the poetry in chapter 2 urges us toward contemplation as a strategy for learning theapoetic ethics, the fiction I examine in subsequent chapters teaches us theapoetic ethics via the examples of the actions of its characters. Writing about theapoetics' cousin, narrative theology, Martha Nussbaum observes that the field is interested in "supplementing abstract philosophical attempts at self-understanding with concrete narrative fictions, which are argued by the proponents of the project to contain more of what is relevant to our attempts to imagine and assess possibilities for ourselves, to ask how we might choose to live."¹¹⁴ To live an ethical life, it is not enough for an individual or community to be aware of abstract ethical guidelines such as "love thy neighbor" or "be nonviolent" because it is difficult to put these

guidelines into practice without concrete examples of how we should apply them in real-life situations. It is therefore necessary to teach ethics via stories that model proper ethical behavior, or, conversely, that model behavior that readers should avoid as unethical.

Stories give us a world view to work from, and as a result they do not just shape our ethics, they shape our entire lives. When stories are shared among a group of people, these narratives shape communities, which in turn shape individuals via the stories they tell, whether for good or ill. Reading others' stories always affects us; the important thing is to be cognizant of how they affect us, how they teach us, to determine how or whether to implement this new knowledge into our lives. Mennonites traditionally engage in this teaching with texts such as the *Martyrs Mirror* and other more recent real-life accounts of sacrifices for Jesus.¹⁵ Mennonites are excellent storytellers, and we already emphasize the importance of narratives for the community. Mennonites love to talk about ourselves (this book is a prime example!), as can be seen in the disproportionately large size of North American Mennonite print culture in comparison to the number of Mennonites living here.¹⁶ Unfortunately, many of the theological texts previously used by Mennonites to teach ethics have been oppressive, urging a hurtful, joyless, self-sacrificial, and misogynistic approach to the world. This is why looking to literature for some sideways theological instruction is necessary.

Chapters 3 and 4, "Conversing with the Other in Sara Stambaugh's *I Hear the Reaper's Song*" and "Secular Mennonite Ethics in Miriam Toews's *Summer of My Amazing Luck*," respectively, are close readings that examine two sides of the same ethical coin in two older texts from opposite sides of the US-Canadian border. Stambaugh's novel takes place in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, which is traditionally one of the most important US Mennonite locations, and Toews's novel takes place in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the city with the largest percentage of Mennonites in the world. *I Hear the Reaper's Song* gives an example of how Mennonite ethics are used properly in a Mennonite context, and *Summer of My Amazing Luck* gives an example of how they are used in a non-Mennonite context as a way of critiquing how the Mennonite community often fails to live up to its own standards. Both novels use the theapoetic strategy of writing from real-life experience to teach ethics. Stambaugh's book fictionalizes a railroad accident that occurred in Lancaster in 1896, and Toews's incorporates many autobiographical elements.

While chapters 3 and 4 examine two Mennonite hot spots, chapter 5, "The Theapoetic Ethics of Speculative Fiction," examines texts that often depict

other-worldly locales or realities. I begin the chapter by describing how speculative fiction has become an important genre in my life because of its emphasis on queer hope. I use Sami Schalk's broad definition of the genre and Samatar's description of its queerness to show that it is an ideal space for a secular theological endeavor such as theapoetics.

Readings of some mostly recent pieces of Mennonite speculative fiction follow. Janet Kauffman's novel *The Body in Four Parts* is one of the first works of queer Mennonite literature and Mennonite speculative fiction. Its amorphous, hybrid, superhero-esque characters create space for queer narratives within the faith community. Greg Bechtel's three "Smut Stories" likewise focus on making space for multiple experiences within community by portraying an ethic of inclusive listening. Two more stories from Samatar's *Tender*, "Honey Bear" and "Fallow," also focus on communal ethics. "Honey Bear" offers strategies for how we can relate to the Earth in our time of climate catastrophe, and "Fallow" returns to the Mennonite question of how to be "in the world but not of it" by arguing that it is impossible to live ethically unless we are actually of the world to a certain extent, interacting with those outside of our small communities. Casey Plett's story "Portland, Oregon" also examines our relationship to nature via its narrator, a talking cat. Like Bechtel's work, it advocates an ethic of empathetic listening as a form of queer hope that can help us survive these times. Much like *I Hear the Reaper's Song* and *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, Toews's novel *Women Talking* uses a narrative based in real-life events to critique Mennonite hypocrisy, most notably the violence of Mennonitism's continuing misogyny.¹⁷ As theapoetics does, the book argues for the importance of writing as tool for combating such violence.

Chapter 6, "Samuel R. Delany's Surrealist Anabaptist Ethics," begins by describing how Delany's writing became an important touchstone of secular ethics for me after I encountered it in graduate school. I then highlight the common Mennonite fascination with Delany's work and use Gundy's "Manifesto of Anabaptist Surrealism" to show how the ethical principles in Delany's writing are akin to those in Mennonitism. A reading of Delany's novel *The Mad Man* illustrates how his work has helped me to learn to enjoy my body and has thus opened a pathway for me to put my Mennonitism and my queerness into conversation. This reading serves as an example of how readers can transfer *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times's* theapoetic principles to non-Mennonite contexts.

The epilogue, “Theapoetics and Other Traditions,” continues chapter 6’s exploration of texts outside of Mennonitism by showing how two practices that combine literature and the spiritual, haiku and tarot, are theapoetic as an example of how we can apply theapoetic ideas to any literary tradition. Haiku’s emphasis on everyday experience, tarot’s emphasis on ecumenism, and their shared emphasis on ethics epitomize how we can lead lives that draw us to the Divine. These two practices have helped me survive the pandemic emotionally. My hope is that analysis of the various texts *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* considers will show you, dear reader, how reading literature theapoetically can help you navigate our apocalyptic times too.