

Competing Cosmologies: Reading Migration and Identity in an Ethno-religious Newspaper

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Between 1977 and 2000, the Mennonitische Post, a Canadian-based newspaper, published thousands of letters by members of a unique diaspora. The extended community of Mennonites whose grandparents had emigrated from Canada in the 1920s to resist the imposition of English-language public schools now rediscovered old ties within the pages of this newspaper. It was, however, a divided community: many of the children and grandchildren of the emigrants had “returned” to middle-class Canada; others had built “horse and buggy” communities in Central and South America. Yet the two groups shared the literary space of the Post, and in doing so they engaged in an intricate task of setting boundaries, both external and internal. This essay thus considers how immigrants speak to one another through letters published in ethnic newspapers in transnational contexts. When they do so, they enter a complex, multilayered discussion, articulating not only a common social boundary between the diasporic community and the host society, but significantly, self-validating sub-lines built on competing cosmologies within the diaspora.

Entre 1977 et 2000, le Mennonitische Post, un journal qui a son siège au Canada, publia des milliers de lettres provenant de membres d’une incomparable diaspora. La communauté étendue des mennonites dont les grands-parents avaient émigré du Canada dans les années 1920 afin de résister à l’imposition d’écoles publiques de langue anglaise redécouvrit alors des liens anciens dans les pages de ce journal. Il s’agissait cependant d’une communauté divisée : bon nombre d’enfants et de petits-enfants des émigrants étaient « rentrés » au Canada où ils faisaient partie de la classe moyenne; d’autres, par contre, avaient formé en Amérique centrale ou en Amérique du Sud des communautés utilisant encore le cheval de trait. Les deux groupes partagèrent pourtant les pages du Post consacrées au courrier des lecteurs, assumant de la sorte une tâche complexe : celle consistant à fixer des frontières, à la fois intérieures et extérieures. Nous examinons ici la façon dont des immigrants se sont parlé par le truchement de lettres publiées dans

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des journaux ethnoculturels en contexte transnational. Ce faisant, ces gens ont amorcé un débat complexe, multidimensionnel, qui, en plus de donner expression à une frontière sociale commune entre la communauté diasporique et la société d'accueil, a validé par lui-même des sous-entendus reposant sur des cosmologies concurrentes à l'intérieur de la diaspora.

IN 1977 THE *Mennonitische Post*, a Canadian-based newspaper, was launched with the goal of linking a unique diaspora. Its aim was to bring together an extended community of 65,000 Mennonites whose grandparents had emigrated from Canada in the 1920s to resist the imposition of English-language public schools. Scattered across the Americas—Mexico, Belize, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina, as well as Canada to which many had returned—its readers rediscovered old ties within the pages of a common newspaper.¹ By far the largest section of each issue of the *Post* was the letter column consisting of writings from ordinary readers. The *Post*'s editors copy-edited and published a veritable deluge of such letters, usually submitted as hand-written texts, an estimated 20,000 from 1977 to 2000.² A study of 250 of those letters reveals a body of writing in rudimentary High German, speaking about the mundane, everyday lives of a migrant people. The letters convey messages about loved ones, births and deaths, weather patterns, transnational visits and secondary migrations, church life, and market strategies. In the process of producing and reading these texts, however, the writers engaged in a complex process of setting social boundaries.

Indeed, as they wrote they entered into an intricate, overlapping medium of discussion. It reinforced not only a common social boundary between the diasporic community and the host society, but, significantly, also reinforced and demarcated self-validating ethno-religious subgroups built on competing cosmologies within the diaspora. These letters reached out to the widely dispersed ethnic group on the one hand, but also to family members and close friends in more intimate language on the other. In both cases the writers did more than share stories and news items; they implicitly announced their cosmologies, their particular ways of looking at the world. Their letters reflected specific ideas on religion, ethnicity, class, and the modern world. Often, the underlying ideas in these messages were sharply at odds with the ideas of other members within the wider ethno-religious group. Thus the messages reflected competing cosmologies among subgroups within the diaspora.

Those Mennonite subgroups included the most communitarian and parochial on the one hand and the more acculturated and upwardly mobile on the other. The communitarian were often the least polished of the writers; in their letters they

1 For a history of the migrations from Canada to Latin America in the 1920s, see Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982). For an overview of this diaspora, see Royden Loewen, *Village Among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

2 An estimate based on the *Post* editor's report in 1983 that in the first six and a half years the newspaper had received 8,000 letters (*Mennonitische Post*, August 19, 1983). For further information on the Old Colony Mennonites, see the corresponding entry in the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online and Delbert F. Plett, ed., *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada: 1875-2000* (Steinbach: Crossway, 2001).

articulated a culture and even asserted a belief system that has hitherto been rooted in an oral culture. In the process they shored up old ways, reinforcing them with vocabulary recognized by their closest kith and kin, telling stories that assumed common understandings. Conversely, the most assimilated of the writers spoke in a different vocabulary in which they announced their own, more acculturated cosmology. Their narratives suggested greater comfort with the wider world, an ability to negotiate its labour markets and integrate into middle-class cultures, to find meaning in “symbolic ethnicity,” to embrace a more individualistic religiosity, and even to pursue a paternalistic diaspora-wide altruism.³ This literary co-habitation by both the communitarian and the acculturated subgroups, both the pre-modern and modern, in a single genre or medium may have strengthened a common ethno-religious identity, but, hidden from the view of the casual reader, it also reinforced sharp sub-identities.

The *Post* had been founded by the Mennonite Central Committee, a progressive social service agency based in Canada, with the hope of bridging the various subgroups that had descended from the migration of the 1920s. As sectarian pacifists, speaking their ancestral West Prussian Low German (an unwritten dialect infused with Dutch and Russian words), the Mennonites were either strangers in Latin American cultures or newcomers who had “returned” to Canada. Over the years, the migrants had diverged, a separation underscored by particular migration patterns. While the original 7,500 settlers had settled mostly in northern Mexico, with a smaller group in the Paraguayan Chaco, subsequent generations had undertaken a series of secondary migrations, often reflecting changing religious ideas. In general terms, the most traditionalist—the so-called “horse and buggy” Old Colony Mennonites—moved ever farther southward, from northern Mexico to British Honduras (currently Belize) in the 1950s, to the Bolivian Oriente beginning in the 1960s, to East Paraguay in the 1970s, and to southern Mexico’s Campeche state and the Argentine Pampas in the 1980s. The most accommodating—including “car-driving” Old Colonist, *Reinlaender*, *Sommerfelder* and *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites, as well as several overtly mission-minded, evangelical groups—demonstrated a willingness to embrace a degree of modernization, even urbanization. Beginning in the 1950s, but especially in the 1970s and 1980s, they “returned” northward in large numbers and found wage labour or founded small businesses in various points of Canada (mostly in southern Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta), but also as “undocumented” migrants to the western United States.

Despite the unusual nature of this Mennonite diaspora, its internal dynamic reflects migration culture in general, especially in that no migration occurs without significant internal divergence and even conflict.⁴ To seek an understanding of

3 For the classical work on “symbolic ethnicity,” see Herbert Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America” in Herbert J. Gans, ed., *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honour of David Riesman* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1979), pp. 193-220. For a recent discussion on “symbolic ethnicity,” see Philip Kasinitz, “Herbert Gans and the Death of Miss Norway,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5 (2014), pp. 770-773.

4 For a survey of recent trends in migration history, see Christine Harzig and Dirk Hoerder with Donna Gabaccia, *What is Migration History* (Malden MA: Polity, 2009). See also historians who have variously

the genre of the published letter in the ethnic press and its impact on immigrant communities, I begin by considering two more general genres, the ethnic newspaper and the private immigrant letter. In a sense, the published letter in the newspaper is a hybrid of these two genres. Both the ethnic newspaper and the private letter are produced in the context of dislocation and the search for validation and meaning. The public forum of the newspaper reaches out broadly to a dynamic and evolving ethnic community,⁵ while the private letter is highly personal, often a testimonial from the heart. In the newspaper-based letter the two literary projects converge.

The ethnic newspaper itself is usually seen as bridging two cultures, the immigrant and the host societies. In *Immigrant Mind, American Identities*, Norwegian literary scholar Orm Overland argues that the “foreign language press ... served many functions” for the immigrant, most importantly, perhaps, “to introduce immigrants ... to American society and politics,” not in a simplistic, unilinear communication feed, but in a complex dialectic in which old ways were not discarded but “transformed to American qualities.”⁶ The ethnic press in this instance served as an instrument of integration. In her work on Slovakian newspapers in the United States, June Granatir Alexander takes a somewhat different tack, arguing that, by reading immigrant newspapers, newcomers found the cultural material to hone simultaneous American nationalism and an ethnically oriented Slovakian patriotism: newspaper editors, for example, insisted during World War I that Slovaks “were prepared to do ... [their] duty [as President Wilson] leads us to victory”; during events in Czechoslovakia leading up to World War II, newspapers were easily able to “stir ... an interest in European matters among rank and file members,” one infused with Slovakian nationalism.⁷ In both cases, the newspaper supported a “reinvented” ethnic culture that allowed the immigrant to survive a heart-wrenching uprooting and transplanting.

Like the ethnic press in general, the private immigrant letter sought stability within the chaos of relocation, but at an individual level. Certainly David Gerber’s extensive work on immigrant letters, as well as Ryan Eyford’s in this issue, examine a genre with its own dialectic across space, but shedding light nevertheless on what transpires within the immigrant letter section of the newspaper. Gerber insists that immigrant letters possessed a “specific textuality,”⁸ distinguished by a particular “epistolary ethic” in which two parties agreed to exchange letters, thus producing

written about “ethnic fractionalization,” “intra-ethnic conflict,” and “internecine conflict in immigrant churches,” including the following: Eric Kaufman, “Land, History of Modernization: Explaining Ethnic Fractionalization,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2015), pp. 193-210; John Higham, “The Mobilization of Immigrants in Urban America,” *Norwegian-American Studies*, vol. 31 (1986), pp. 3-33; Jon Gjerde, “Conflict and Community: A Case Study of the Immigrant Church in America,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 19 (1986), pp. 681-697.

5 For a discussion of this term, see Kathleen Neils Conzen, *et al.*, “The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 29 (1992), pp. 3-41.

6 Orm Overland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 31.

7 June Granatir Alexander, *Ethnic Pride, American Patriotism: Slovaks and Other New Immigrants in the Interwar Period* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), pp. 36, 199.

8 David Gerber, “Epistolary Ethics: Personal Correspondence and the Culture of Emigration in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 19 (2000), p. 4.

a “dialogical genre,” that is, “a mutual creation conceived in dialogue.” In this instance, this particular genre described “negotiations through which the culture of emigration was formed.”⁹ Letter writers responded to earlier letter writers; their conversations created and reinforced the narratives of particular migrations. Like all parties in conversation, writes Gerber, the letter writers screened their lives; they selectively disclosed and even engaged in “acts of deceiving and withholding.” In a way every letter was a political act, meant to secure a particular emotional and cognitive response from the reader—whether sympathy, empathy, admiration, or affection. As they wrote, letter writers reflected that “psychological need for continuity,” maintaining “relationships with particular others who [were] significant to the immigrants’ understanding of themselves.”¹⁰

A comparison of the narrative forms of the immigrant newspaper and the immigrant letter clarifies the genre of the published immigrant letter. What seems clear is that the genre differs from the ubiquitous “letter to the editor,” usually seen as a means of engaging the most widely conceived public and recognized by Benedict Anderson and others as constituting one among many ways that “allow citizens to imagine publics they cannot directly observe.”¹¹ If such “letters to the editor” are meant to contribute to political debate, whether local or national, the immigrant letters in ethnic newspapers serve quite a different function. They are epistolary texts reaching out simultaneously to loved ones and to strangers, in the process reinforcing both those internal social demarcations and wider ethnic boundaries.

In short, they represent a hybrid writing. Their cultural effect is similar to what Judith R. Blau argues occurs within the ethnic press generally. Employing Georg Simmel’s ideas, Blau speaks of “overlapping circles of association” that are “constructed from memberships in various groups” within the wider immigrant community. Readers opening the pages of a newspaper look for news of people they know personally, and at the same time they imagine a wider public, one filtered by the editors of the newspaper.¹² They address tightly interwoven subgroups within the immigrant community as well as the more fluid, imagined diasporic community, itself shaped by the wider social categories of regions and nations, including their politics, climates, and economies. In reaching across these “overlapping circles of association,” the writers articulate a high degree of self-awareness set within a wider world in flux. Like writers generally in ethnic newspapers, the ordinary letter writers reached outward and inward at the same time. As did writers of individual, unpublished letters, they “couched” and

9 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

10 David A. Gerber, “Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters: Personal Identity and Self-Preservation in Personal Correspondence,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39 (2005), pp. 315, 318. See also David A. Gerber, “The Immigrant Letter between Positivism and Populism: The Uses of Immigrant Personal Correspondence in Twentieth Century American Scholarship,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 16 (1997), pp. 4-36.

11 Andrew J. Perin and Stephan Vaisey, “Parallel Public Sphere: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 114, no. 3 (2008), pp. 781-810.

12 Judith R. Blau, “Group Enmity and Accord,” *Social Science History*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2000), p. 397. See also Judith R. Blau, Mim Thomas, Beverly Newhouse, and Andrew Kavee, “Ethnic Buffer Institutions: The Immigrant Press, New York City, 1820-1984,” *Historical Social Research*, vol. 23 (1998), pp. 20-37.

“withheld” to achieve an end that legitimized their life worlds within the diaspora. In these acts they implicitly pitted their particular understandings of life against those of fellow ethnic and ethno-religious members.

A Communitarian Cosmology

One of the surprising developments in the Canadian-based *Mennonitische Post* after its launch in 1977 was the extent to which the most insular of the Mennonites, the traditionalist “horse and buggy” Old Colonists, joined in the transnational conversation. Often only their addresses—Capulin or Sabinal in Chihuahua, Shipyard in Belize, Nuevo Durango in East Paraguay, Guatrache in Argentina, Riva Palacios or Las Piedras and a dozen other colonies in Bolivia—identified them as “horse and buggy” people. Most letters held little drama and contained little emotion; they were the stories the reclusive Old Colonists felt safe speaking about in the ethno-religious wider world. They were news items—deaths and marriages, bad crops or good prices, notices of migration—or they were friendly greetings to friends and kin scattered throughout Latin America. The writers, who included both men and women, the elderly and the youthful, also articulated a distinctive world view, including their specific ideas of right and wrong and their understanding of what held the world together. It was not that they wanted others to know why they were “good” Mennonites or what it meant for them to be devotees, for they were not a proselytizing body. Rather, it seems they spoke in the vocabulary they knew in order to communicate to loved ones.

These anti-modern writers, for example, especially engaged readers within the imagined borders of the dispersed “horse and buggy” Old Colony community, and, judging from their responses to other letters, they typically ignored letters from more progressive quarters, unless they involved immediate kin members. Clearly the writers imagined a wider Low German village superimposed on half a dozen countries of the Americas—from Canada to Paraguay. Mostly, however, they focused on the specific communities home to traditionalist Old Colonists, still faithful to the old teachings on simplicity. Thus, when farmer Dietrich Braun of Durango, Mexico, wrote the *Post* in its founding year, 1977, to encourage residents from La Batea and La Honda in the neighbouring state of Zacatecas also to submit letters, he was addressing other “horse and buggy” Mennonites.¹³ These people were his particular circle of engagement. When Marie Bergen of La Honda described the 1994 Christmas travels of her uncle and aunt, “the Bernard Bergens” of Campeche state in southern Mexico, she too was mapping her Old Colony “horse and buggy” world. She noted that for Christmas the couple from steamy Campeche “travelled [2,500 kilometres north] to Capulin [near the United States border], for New Years to [nearby] Sabinal, for Epiphany they were here [in La Honda in central Mexico] and on the 10th of January they returned to Campeche.”¹⁴ The boundaries of a network of “faithful” congregations marked the primary social field of each writer.

¹³ *Mennonitische Post*, July 3, 1977.

¹⁴ *Mennonitische Post*, March 17, 1995.

Often within these letters was another “map,” shaped by kinship networks, layered over the primary one. It revealed itself in references and greetings to non-practising Old Colonist relatives in the wider diaspora. Thus, in his 1988 letter, Abram Banman of Las Piedras in Bolivia, having described his own life as a poor, middle-aged cheese maker and mechanic, quite abruptly announced, “and so, now I wish to take a world trip.” He conveyed personal greetings to his car-driving children in Ontario and the in-laws at Taber in southern Alberta as well as in La Crete in the province’s northern boreal forest.¹⁵ This importance of family lines, extending over national boundaries, was also readily evident in the numerous obituaries submitted by the “horse and buggy” Mennonites. Grandparents in particular were seen as the anchors of these networks. Thus when “Widow Abram Froese” of Riva Palacios, Bolivia, died in April 1990 at age 94, not only was her death announced, but she was heralded as a *Stammutter* (matriarch) par excellence; being a mother of nine children, a grandmother of 90, a great-grandmother of 443, great-great-grandmother of 66, made “her the *Stammutter* of 627 souls.”¹⁶ The tenor of the obituary was non-sectarian, reaching out into a wider hemispheric diaspora.

In these letters, rarely addressed to anyone outside either their kin group or faith subgroup, the Old Colonist traditionalists also articulated a world view hitherto spoken only in action and oral tradition. Even if the primary intended audience consisted of co-religionists, the public nature of the *Post* meant that a wider Mennonite audience could now observe the goings on and musings within the most reclusive of the sectarian communities. Inadvertently the letters told of the religious values that constituted the inside story of the Old Colonists’ mindset, implicitly contesting the ideas of more modern Mennonites. Indeed, the sum of their letters illuminated the contours of their particular, anti-modern cosmologies and communitarian values.

The first of such values was the idea among the Old Colonists that one’s destiny was not to be moulded but accepted. This *a priori* idea could be contained in any letter, from the salutation to the funeral announcement. “Good health and a strong faith,” was Isaak Bergen’s wish for his readers when he wrote from Riva Palacios, Bolivia, in 1987,¹⁷ but it was less a challenge to secure “good health” than a wish that this fortune was one’s fate. Similar ideas laced the body of the letter, especially the many references to weather patterns. For the agrarian householder, joy was linked to rainfall and unhappiness to drought, but both were divinely determined. In a typical letter, a writer signing herself as “Mrs. Johann B. Heide,” of Little Belize Colony in Belize, noted in 1985 that she wished her readers “courage and strength ... even when, at this time ... one wonders why it remains so dry here that people have been unable even to plant.” She reminded her readers that “the Lord knows what he has in mind for us and we want to be thankful, hoping that the future holds promise for us.”¹⁸ It was in moments of reported tragedy, however,

15 *Mennonitische Post*, January 22, 1988.

16 *Mennonitische Post*, July 6, 1990.

17 *Mennonitische Post*, April 18, 1987.

18 *Mennonitische Post*, September 6, 1985.

that divine fate was uttered most unequivocally. In 1983 Susanna Hildebrandt of Nuevo Durango, East Paraguay, wrote a two-part letter: the first was penned just before the joyous engagement party of daughter Lena, one of the last two children at home; the second, a few weeks later, now reported an horrific tragedy, the death of Lena's newlywed husband, Peter Wall, due to a head wound he incurred while drilling a well on the farmyard. A grieving Hildebrandt wrote how death came to this isolated agrarian community within hours of the accident. It was "all too sudden for the young wife," no matter that "only Loving God knows, how many prayers we sent to ... heaven." The ultimate moment of death, Susanna was sure, was divinely appointed. It came only after "the hand that had kept death from occurring was pulled back, suddenly allowing death to happen; thus we could see what Almighty God can do."¹⁹ In a society separated from modern medicine, only complete acquiescence to divine will allowed Hildebrandt to make sense of her situation.

Rather overt, almost naive, affective expressions of a communitarian love marked a second component of the Old Colonists' religious outlook. Indeed, the use of the word "love" was ubiquitous in their letters. References to "our loving mother," "beloved *Aeltester*," and "Loving God" were common. Helena Braun invoked the words "Loving God" three times in her letter of 1993: she uttered "thanks to the Loving God" for "health"; she spoke about her ailing mother, dying until restored by "Loving God [who] saw it otherwise"; and she prayed that "Loving God accompany" her *Aeltester* and ministers on a "danger-filled journey" to Mexico.²⁰ Such utterances of affection anchored an amorphous wider world. Even a people's state of spirituality was measured with reference to "love," a living love versus a "cold love." In 1985, Wilhelm Braun of Tres Cruces, Bolivia, offered by the way that "love" among the Mennonite colonies "need not be considered 'dead'," but, judging from unspecified local behaviour, "it is quite evident that it is 'cold'." Braun's idea of "love" spoke less to degrees of affection than to a particular teleology. As he concluded, the lack of "love" should not be surprising, "for Jesus prophesized that the 'love' would become cold in many [people] during the 'last times.'" Rational thought, social contract, or common citizenship had no place in Braun's apocalyptic world view.

A third component of an Old Colonist religiousness more specifically separated the "horse and buggy" people from their more modern kin in the North: their biblically referenced identity of being "pilgrims and strangers," a migrant people unsettled in a temporal world. Often, letters hinted at an uncertain citizenship and worry that the Mennonites' venerated *Privilegium*—the legal guarantee or "privilege" of church-run schools and military exemption they had negotiated with Latino governments—might be stripped by hostile regimes. One sign of this concern was a fascination with stories of Mennonite suffering in the Soviet Union, even though it was an experience quite outside the Old Colony narrative of emigration from New Russia to western Canada in the 1870s. In a typical letter Abram Neufeldt of Durango, Mexico, a retired schoolteacher and father of

¹⁹ *Mennonitische Post*, October 7, 1983.

²⁰ *Mennonitische Post*, February 19, 1993.

twelve, shared a multi-layered set of worries in 1986. He had read “much about Russia [in the years after 1917], what Mennonites experienced at that time,” and he confessed that “such events produce worry,” for, as he saw it, the Old Colony’s own moral failings must disappoint God who might well withdraw the hand of divine protection. As Neufeldt saw it, “[W]e have forgotten it too quickly, or talk too little about it to our children, what the government did for us.... To date the government is still gracious to us, for which we still owe a great gratitude.”²¹ Present life was always uncertain. Reflecting this outlook, funeral announcements spoke of a hope for a better life in eternity, the inevitable quiet passing of pilgrims to another world. Thus when Aganetha Klassen announced her mother’s death in 1990 she also offered that “from our heart we know she is resting, but we also have a certain hope that she will acquire God’s Kingdom, as she was always very hungry for God’s Word.”²² Here was no Protestant claim of certain life in heaven, but a hoped-for reward after a life lived faithfully.

A fourth aspect of the Old Colonist religious worldview, the adherence to their church *Ordnung* (specific codes of conduct), most sharply delineated the writers’ worlds within the Mennonite diaspora. Indeed, this teaching of obedience to a church order infused the most visible features of the Old Colonists’ faith, the material markers of simplicity: the full-length, dark-coloured, home-sewn clothes; the ubiquitous horse and buggy; the lantern-lit houses; and the small, steel-wheeled tractors. Still, the writers who spoke of the *Ordnung* did so without apology or explanation. In 1993, Jacob Redekop of Durango, Mexico, reminded readers that the “*Ordnung* is to guide us towards salvation,” meaning that “we are to be obedient in all things” and especially to one’s own “mother and father.” His further elaboration on the point separated the general readers from the Old Colony church members. He added that the *Ordnung* also entailed submission to “the *Gemeinde* [the church], this we have been taught since childhood.” He concluded with a lament, quite clearly addressed to his own co-religionists. As he put it, if “only the *Ordnung* would be observed ... the *Aeltesten* [the lead ministers] wouldn’t have to preach so much about pride and arrogance, and they would be able to attain more strength from above.”²³ This deference to the church and its leaders signalled a textual construction meant for rather intimate conversation with fellow “horse and buggy” people. When Helena Woelke of Durango, Mexico, wrote in 1988 that “I attended church today,” where “Rev. Jakob Neudorf served us with the ‘Word’,” she added a confession: “too bad that one forgets it so quickly.”²⁴ Woelke’s utterance of personal failing was offered in Old Colonist parlance, implicitly inviting a response from similar-minded migrants.

Old Colonist writers in the South may have written mostly for their own acquaintances with specific religious vocabulary, but in their letters they also reached out more generally to modern Mennonites in the wider diaspora. While many Old Colony writers in Latin America sent friendly greetings to non-practising

21 *Mennonitische Post*, June 6, 1986.

22 *Mennonitische Post*, March 16, 1990.

23 *Mennonitische Post*, February 5, 1993.

24 *Mennonitische Post*, March 18, 1988.

family members in the dispersed Low German communities in the Americas, and to Canada in particular, the letters could also be overtly critical of Mennonites in the North. Some even expressed utter disdain for middle-class culture in North America. A 1977 letter from Bolivia, identified only as having been written by “The Searching Pilgrim,” recounted life in Canada from 1947 to 1969, where the writer recalled that English-language schools had produced a generation “ashamed to be identified as Mennonites” and willing to trample on the very “birthright” passed on by “our great-grandparents and grandparents and mothers and fathers, who moved from Germany to Russia, from Russia to Canada and Mexico, and so forth.”²⁵ Northern assimilation met with this southern “pilgrim’s” contempt. In his letter from Riva Palacios colony in Bolivia in 1990, Jacob Klassen also lambasted evil in Canada. He described “certain people” deceptively leaving his colony, heavily indebted, without conscience, obtaining Canadian citizenship and flying off to Canada. He warned that “a day will come when God will judge the world in justice and then we will all have to stand before the judgment seat.”²⁶ Migrants could travel from one country to another, but their final destination was the same, a final, divinely appointed accounting.

Reaching out beyond the immediate group also exhibited itself in more general stories told by Old Colonist writers. Often these accounts were imbued with general Mennonite understandings. In a letter from 1987, a Durango Colony resident from Mexico related a tragic accident that spoke of historic Mennonite teachings on non-violence and non-retribution. In this account, a car-driving Mexican visited Frank Klassen’s farm and, upon leaving, accidentally drove over and killed the Klassens’ toddler playing in the farmyard. According to the writer, the shocked and terrified Mexican “offered the Klassens money, as much as they wished,” but Frank Klassen’s Mennonite values interceded: “‘No,’ said Klassen, ‘we are not the kind of people who take payment for our children when they are killed,’ and Klassen added, ‘I will also not report you.’” In a country of “rough and tumble” justice, Klassen was at once offering grace and reasserting his Mennonite identity.²⁷ Similar messages were sent into the diaspora in letters describing crimes against Mennonites in the South, where police protection was either non-existent or unpredictable. In the same year as the accident at the Klassens’ farm in Mexico, numerous Mennonite homes in Bolivia were subjected to home invasions. A letter writer from Riva Palacios described the invasion of ten Old Colonist households in which a party of nine armed and masked Spanish-speaking thieves crashed through doors, threatened families at gun point, fired their guns into the walls “screaming, give us money,” and stole a variety of household items, including cattle and farm equipment.²⁸ According to the Mennonite letter writer, local Bolivian officials cited the Mennonites’ own economic success for the home invasion, as well as the fact “that the Mennonites as a religious group do not allow

25 *Mennonitische Post*, August 4, 1977.

26 *Mennonitische Post*, September 7, 1990.

27 *Mennonitische Post*, August 24, 1987.

28 *Mennonitische Post*, March 1, 1987; February 14, 1987; April 3, 1987.

any force, even when they are held up.”²⁹ This message would have had resonance in the wider Mennonite world.

Indeed, Old Colonists in the South assumed that Mennonites generally rejected state intervention in their lives. During the drought of 1994, for example, David G. Redekop of Durango, Mexico, announced that the “government has come and offered money to help the farmers, including poor Mennonite farmers.” He warned, however, that “when the world comes and offers poor people money ... this is seen by many as not right, because the farmland is the foundation for everything, for people, for cattle, etc.; it is land that we lack.”³⁰ Land offered Mennonites autonomy; state aid was a bridge to cultural subservience. This generally accepted social boundary between the general Mennonite diaspora and the wider world was articulated also with reference to physical space. Heinrich Banman of Valle Esperanza wrote in 1987 that “today ... ‘Carnival’ is celebrated here in Bolivia, a day I believe all Mennonites are ... more or less happy to be at home, to such an extent, as far as I know, that the bus didn’t even leave [for the city] today.”³¹ It was understood that a revelling Latina would give pause not only to the most traditionalist of the Mennonites, but even to the more modern car-driving groups.

Occasionally Old Colony writers did share their localized, internecine upheavals with the wider Mennonite community. Some writers spoke of the Old Colonists’ bitter ecclesiastical infighting in emotional and compelling ways. Anna S. Janzen of Nuevo Durango, Paraguay, lamented in 1980 that her Old Colony family had been torn apart at its core in a move southward to escape modern practices in Mexico: “For 17 years I have had to battle with deep longing, as the world is so unspeakably big,” she wrote. It was a broad diaspora that had occurred for no other reason than that “no unity can be found, especially amongst us Old Colonists.” She was deeply saddened and found comfort only in the scriptures, promising that “blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.”³² The lure of riches—technology and consumer goods—from the outside world produced profound social upheaval for simple people on the inside. Specific stories of conflict in some letters added detail to general laments. In 1992 and 1994, letters from Durango, Mexico, for example, spoke of a schism in which ministers, including the “old *Aeltester* Johann Klassen,” had stopped attending church to protest the growing use of cars and public electricity and ordered the stalwart within the congregation to prepare for a migration farther southward, from modern Mexico to more isolated Bolivia.³³ The wider diaspora was intensely curious about internal Old Colony battles; the Old Colonists’ willingness to speak openly about conflict suggested how deeply searing they were.

Spoken lament was hardly the only medium employed by Old Colonist letter writers to address members of the wider diaspora, however. The letters also revealed a penchant for humour, even the sarcastic, self-deprecating, and ironic,

²⁹ *Mennonitische Post*, March 6, 1987.

³⁰ *Mennonitische Post*, June 3, 1994.

³¹ *Mennonitische Post*, April 16, 1987.

³² *Mennonitische Post*, August 17, 1980.

³³ *Mennonitische Post*, October 21, 1994; September 18, 1992.

meant to bridge the gap between various sub-groups in the dispersed community. Their jokes could parody gendered behaviour and question power structures, but they could also reaffirm both internal and external social markers. Jacob M. Wiebe's lengthy letter of November 1982 covered everything from the weather to social networking, and it concluded with a response to news he had heard of "people who had sent their money out of the country so that 'moth and rust' might not consume them," whereupon he added sardonically, "[I] wonder if Panama is without rust?"³⁴ Wiebe's slight was directed to modern Mennonites using an international banking system to fight currency fluctuation. Less biting, but not without its underlying moral tone, was the letter from a Durango writer who noted in 1989 that he had heard about millionaires in Canada and wanted to take the opportunity "to write about the 'Mennonite' millionaire, as I am one of them; here, in Mexico, the one who owns a cow is a millionaire, and if the cows gives a bit of milk, one can well be a double or triple millionaire."³⁵ The joke highlighted the devalued peso in Latin America's unstable economy, leaving any farm family with millions in almost worthless currency, but it was also an assertion of the Old Colonists' life world of self-imposed poverty.

Despite their desire to be left alone, Old Colonist "horse and buggy" Mennonites did engage the wider world by writing to the Canadian-based *Mennonitische Post*. As they wrote, however, they did more than converse with kin or like-minded co-religionists; they articulated their particular anti-modern world view. Perhaps in the very act of writing to the *Post* they assisted in drawing a circle around the wider ethno-religious group scattered in the Americas. They also drew overlapping social circles within the diaspora, one demarcating their immediate religious sub-group committed to contesting a middle-class hegemony and another to include close kin outside that group, occasionally extending to anyone interested in their stories.

Cosmologies of the Acculturated

The letters from accommodating Low-German-speaking Mennonites who had "returned" to Canada differed measurably from those of the Old Colony stalwarts in Latin America. They were linked by kin and recalled vividly their former Old Colony worlds in Latin America, but, as newcomers to Canada, they now embraced new ideas on social space, work and class, and religion and culture. Their worlds removed them from the cycles of agrarian culture and the demands of a communitarian religiousness and placed them in worlds of wage labour, personal piety, and "symbolic ethnicity."

Few Canadians wrote without reference to their status as residents in the northern hemisphere. Common allusions to weather were not lethargic attempts to make conversation as much as declarations of global location. References to seasons and especially to winter—both in negative and positive terms—were common. Margaretha Siemens wrote from Ontario in 1986, for example, to say that "we have a large house which in winter costs very much to heat.... As we

³⁴ *Mennonitische Post*, January 7, 1983.

³⁵ *Mennonitische Post*, November 17, 1989.

are only three people, it also seems very lonely.”³⁶ Even cold weather could be celebrated, however. Gerhard Bartsch, a member of a “car-driving” Old Colony church, wrote in 1990 from Eden, Ontario, to report on early spring weather in Canada: “quite differentiating, one day snow, another rain, the third day sunshine,” but no matter that he could “see snowflakes fall through the window ... people and the birds seem to be joyful that spring has come.”³⁷ Winter alone drew romantic allusion from other writers. An especially poetic writer (with a religious touch) from Plum Coulee, Manitoba, described the region’s first snowfall in November 1982: “quiet and beautiful, quite unremarkably, falls the first snowflake, then comes the second, third, the hundredth. Soon come thousands, then millions of flakes, falling to earth in complete silence.... The earth and our errors are covered over, as if with a newly constructed white woolen blanket. It all looks so fresh and clean and painted ... white.”³⁸ Such a letter certainly demarcated the writer from kin in the dusty northern Mexico mountain valleys or steamy rainforest and bush land of Campeche, Belize, and eastern Bolivia.

Having established their new locations, the Canadians also seemed eager to share their larger worlds, indeed, their broad social maps beyond Canada. It was clear that the Canadians travelled farther and more frequently and that their transnational interactions were more complex than their kin in the South. Travel logs outlined expensive trips to the South to visit kin: by bus to northern Mexico or by air from Toronto, Winnipeg, or Calgary, via Miami and Atlanta and Denver, to Asuncion, Santa Cruz, or Belize City. Some letters spoke of an even larger world, of trips by Canadian Mennonites to various parts of the globe and within a remarkably reconstructed Mennonite world. A 1981 letter from Chilliwack, British Columbia, for example, described the travels of friend C. W. Friesen to Nairobi, Kenya, one of “many who were there to plan the next [Mennonite] World Conference,” the global assembly held once every six years by modern Mennonites from North American and European cities and the offspring of converts to the faith in Africa and Asia.³⁹ Consisting of professionals, social activists, and missionaries, the world of the Mennonite World Conference lay a cultural light year away from the Low German communitarians scattered in the Americas. Other writers referred casually to missionaries returning home to Canada, notes reflecting the significant cultural distance from the writers’ own non-proselytizing pasts in the South. In his letter from Blumenort, Manitoba, in 1987, Gerhard Koop, a newly arrived immigrant from Belize, reported in passing that he had picked up his sister Maria Koop from the Winnipeg airport when she “arrived home for a four month furlough from Mexico, where she serves as a missionary” and, without elaboration, offered her a second hearty and approving “Welcome home!”⁴⁰

³⁶ *Mennonitische Post*, April 18, 1986.

³⁷ *Mennonitische Post*, April 20, 1982.

³⁸ *Mennonitische Post*, February 19, 1982.

³⁹ *Mennonitische Post*, November 6, 1981.

⁴⁰ *Mennonitische Post*, April 16, 1997.

Canadian Mennonites who travelled to the South for visits shared little of the “white man’s burden” of their missionary kin, but many nevertheless reported with a special eye to the strange and the primitive. Typical letters recounted myriad friendly reunions in the South, often encased with references to the unusual and even mysterious. True, many travelogues, such as one kept by Frank Peters of Aylmer, Ontario, describing a two-week bus trip to Mexico, did little more than list visits to some 30 households in Chihuahua and Zacatecas states, noting whom they met and where.⁴¹ Others offered more cultural detail. When Johann and Katherine Wiebe of Coatsworth, Ontario, made their 20-day visit to Bolivia in the summer of 1986, they highlighted meeting a new stepmother at Tres Cruces, but added that they had seen many “new things” at the colony, including how the Johann Ennses in Rosenhof had “discovered how to smoke pork sausage and hams under water” and that “the taste is very good!”⁴² Perhaps the “exotic” here was tepidly encased within a familiar foodway, but other references focused on mysterious places, in the dark. A. N. Hiebert’s description of his tenth trip to Mexico in 1984 emphasized the night he searched for his cousin’s home in a particular Mennonite village, amidst myriad “small lights” and looming “brick walls” and treacherous looking “waterholes.”⁴³ Other letters contained paternalistic perspectives on economic survival in the poor and fledgling communities of the South. Johann Neufeld of Alberta, for example, visited the Old Colony community of Shipyard, Belize, in early 1982 and mailed the *Post* a detailed evaluation of it. In a tone of self-assuredness, he reported that in “places it did not look all that poor, the businesses are very much focused on butchering chickens, others are contractors, some are carpenters.” He also offered his racialized perspective that Shipyard’s neighbours, “the native people, have much to learn; time is not worth a lot out there; the people hang out around the streets, as if they have no worries; it will all happen already.”⁴⁴ This letter and others demonstrated a perception that seemed to come from the privileged position of mobile people from the North.

By happenstance, this sense of certainty is also evident in the newly arrived migrants from the South as they described their new worlds in Canada. Letters filled the *Post*’s columns under the provincial headings of Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta and occasionally Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. Invariably, these letters described life in Canada and often the struggle to assimilate to modern ways in new places in strange economies. No matter how difficult the struggle, though, the letters sounded the bravado of survival. Even the most vulnerable, those moving between Canada and Mexico, sojourning for economic survival in the former in summer and seeking solace among kin and familiar places in the winter, exuded human agency. In 1990 Abe Neufeld described his work in the following manner: “[I]n summer and fall we work on a tobacco farm [in Ontario], in winter I work in my workshop [in Mexico], repairing automobiles or doing [finish] carpentry, and in spring I haul families from Mexico

41 *Mennonitische Post*, February 16, 1990.

42 *Mennonitische Post*, September 5, 1986.

43 *Mennonitische Post*, February 17, 1984.

44 *Mennonitische Post*, May 7, 1982.

to Ontario.”⁴⁵ There was no mention of the difficulty of uprooting, of parachuting children into strange places, or of uncertain and exploitative work situations.

Those who settled down as wage labourers, tradespersons, or managers sounded a similar positive attitude. In 1979, Abram Doerksen of Winnipeg, formerly of Paraguay, wrote about job volatility: he had worked “for the last five and a half years installing cabinets in houses,” but now, because the “company is closing down at the end of this month,” he said, “I will need to obtain another job.” It seemed barely a concern for him, as he quipped that he might find that job “perhaps at KitchenKraft.”⁴⁶ Doerksen seemed nonplused about the challenge of negotiating this labour market. Other letters also hinted at personal satisfaction gained from wage labour in the highly technologized agricultural sector, even if in less than savoury working conditions. Maria Buekert’s letter from Winkler, Manitoba, in 1981 reported on having met “Jacob Fehr of the Plum Coulee region, a son of Isaac Fehrs of Mexico, who relayed his ‘good day’” to friends in the South and added that “he and his daughter chore 5000 hogs and do all the work involved in that.” Buekert may have been slightly condescending with her quip, “Good, if this is what you know how to do,” but the large number of animals in his care clearly gave Fehr all the status he needed in the circle of readers for whom Buekert wrote.⁴⁷

Even letters from wage labourers who reported on class difference and wealth differentiation seemed less likely to speak of exploitation than of falling into the lure of consumer culture and unchecked capitalism. True, Abram Banman’s 1994 Christmas-time letter noted increasingly difficult working conditions in the Leamington, Ontario, greenhouse in which he worked. He even attributed the problem to “the owner [who] always gets greedier” and proceeded to describe his avarice: “He currently has twenty one greenhouses, and this summer he wishes to build another five, as well as a large warehouse, from which the semi trucks are to pick up cucumbers. It appears as if [his] money never runs out and [he believes] the world has no end.” Banman was especially saddened to think that Canadian culture cajoled ordinary workers into similar self-centredness. He added, “[T]he worker can also become greedy, as ... [some] people work seven days a week, refusing to forfeit either time and money ... and [ironically] use Sunday to make their purchases for Christmas!” It was the world of material striving that worried him; indeed, he felt “sorry for people who have slid so far.”⁴⁸

If the problem in Latin America was the worry of drought and poverty, the overriding concern in Canada was with the lure of wealth and materialism. Middle-aged Anna Giesbrecht of Saskatchewan, a mother to adult children in Bolivia, drew a similar conclusion in her missive in 1993 announcing the death (at Swift Current’s Palliser Hospital) of her 89-year-old Aunt Margaret. In a subtle but pointed criticism of the state of the Mennonite household in Canada, where both husband and wife worked away from home, Giesbrecht described her aunt’s

45 *Mennonitische Post*, January 19, 1990.

46 *Mennonitische Post*, April 6, 1979.

47 *Mennonitische Post*, February 6, 1981.

48 *Mennonitische Post*, January 21, 1994.

difficult last years at her son's and daughter-in-law's house, compelled to be alone during the day as her children worked away from home, a social arrangement, Giesbrecht pronounced publicly, that "was not good for her."⁴⁹

One aspect of life in Canada that the newcomers accepted broadly, even if they did not crow about it, was its social safety net of free state medicine and institutional support for the elderly. Few letters featured narratives similar to that of one *Post* reporter who highlighted the successful home of Isaac Klassen, his wife, and five children of Horndean, Manitoba: Isaac's income as an electrician allowed the Klassens to own their own home after a mere two years in Canada, but, as importantly, they had succeeded in their aim to take advantage "of the [public] schools and Medicare" in Canada.⁵⁰ If such overt aims by immigrants to partake in state medicine usually went unmentioned, letters nevertheless frequently referred to ill relatives within modern health facilities. From across Canada, letter writers listed regional and local hospitals as if they were household names: a 1990 note from Leamington spoke of two local men in the Windsor Regional Hospital; another from the same year described a 12-year-old boy from Kennetcook, Nova Scotia, in the Truro Colchester Hospital; a 1994 letter from Hague, Saskatchewan, referenced Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon.⁵¹ Some writers injected their texts with references—in English—to state-of-the-art medical devices: a second writer from Kennetcook in 1990 spoke not only of "pillen" and "x-rays," but of a "Lithotripter," a "Biopsy," and a "Cat Scan" at a hospital in Halifax.⁵² Myriad other notes referenced the Mennonite elderly prospering in seniors' homes: one letter writer reported in 1987 that her uncle and aunt, "the Gerhard D. Ungers," had just moved into Lions Manor in Winkler, Manitoba, a good move as "they are enjoying this arrangement"; another from Ontario wrote in 1990 that "Widow [Mrs.] Jacob Quiring is in the seniors' home" and sends "hearty greetings to her children in Bolivia."⁵³ While there was little boasting of participation in the modern welfare state of the North, the matter-of-fact language with which life in this context was presented suggested a full embrace of modern Canada's social amenities.

Many Canadian immigrants also expressed a comfortable cultural accommodation with a multicultural Canada. They might have been "quiet in the land" in the South, but, having returned to the North, they now took their place in the land of immigrants, ironically celebrating aspects of the very Latina culture they had avoided in the South. In Canada, they developed their own "symbolic ethnicity" exhibited in what came to be known as *Treffen* days, literally "meeting" days. At these events, hundreds of Low-German-speaking immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Paraguay, gathered to eat "ethnic" foods that combined Russian and Latin American cuisines, hear speeches of yesteryear, and simply be reacquainted with old friends. In a typical note, a writer invited fellow immigrants

49 *Mennonitische Post*, September 3, 1993.

50 *Mennonitische Post*, November, 6, 1987.

51 *Mennonitische Post*, April 6, 1990; March 2, 1990; May 6, 1994.

52 *Mennonitische Post*, March 2, 1990.

53 *Mennonitische Post*, April 6, 1990.

to a *Treffen* day at Morden, Manitoba's Stanley Park and promised an afternoon with "coffee and [gas] barbecues available to cook sausages and hamburgers."⁵⁴ In a much fuller invitation, another Manitoba writer announced in 1985 that it was apparent that now that one can "buy Tacos in the stores in Winkler and Yerba tea in Steinbach ... that the influence of Mennonites from Mexico and Paraguay has [rooted itself] in southern Manitoba." The writer was not satisfied, however, as "Tacos and Yerba tea" were tangential to the immigrant account, and "what matters is that Mennonites are moving in here and no one carries out a festivity for them." The writer suggested that the thousands of immigrants across Canada plan for "an annual celebration," perhaps "at the Village Museum [in Steinbach, because] ... these immigrants from the South are also pioneers and have had to struggle a lot, not with farming and hunger as their ancestors, but with the language ... and unemployment."⁵⁵ A year later the *Post* carried a story of just such a gathering at Steinbach's museum, featuring Paraguayan folk music and a day of pronounced "Latin taste," including "food, exhibits and stories," all meant to welcome "the many thousands of Mennonites who have returned to Canada over the past 15 years."⁵⁶ Canada was a welcoming land, and a reinvented ethnicity affirmed a confident stance within the broader host society.

The *Treffen* days signalled a new religious turn, a new separation between ethnic and faith identities. Many letter writers in Canada may still have adhered to Old Colony churches, including some old teachings on traditional dress and craft-based vocations, but others now wrote about being drawn to modern evangelical churches that allowed for assimilation to middle-class ways. They also spoke a religious vocabulary that highlighted the individual over the communitarian. Contrasted to the old notions of communal love, acquiescence to a divinely ordered destiny, humble pilgrimage, and obedience to a church "order" common in the South, Canadian writers described competing ideas of personal piety, the "assurance of salvation," and evangelical outreach. Their ideas implicitly pitted a modern pietism against an old religiousness.

Three letters from British Columbia underscore this new view on religion that was seemingly gaining ground among the uprooted Old Colonist newcomers in Canada. When John and Helen Penner wrote from Vanderhof in 1977, they shared the story of a deathbed conversion of "brother-in-law Dyck who in the 'twelfth' hour accepted the Lord as Saviour and asked for the forgiveness of sins and thus with clear consciousness took his farewell from this world."⁵⁷ His was an eternal certainty arising from sudden conversion, not a humble utterance of hope after a lifelong pilgrimage. It marked a religious accommodation to the large Canadian evangelical churches' emphasis on personal spirituality, a claim on "salvation" and Sunday church attendance. A 1983 letter writer from Clearbrook, reporting the passing of two ministers, felt compelled to add that the "Bible says those who are in Jesus Christ are not damned," that what mattered was that one "walked ... in

54 *Mennonitische Post*, June 16, 1989.

55 *Mennonitische Post*, February 15, 1985.

56 *Mennonitische Post*, June 6, 1986.

57 *Mennonitische Post*, July 21, 1977.

the spirit,” and that, in his 2,300-seat church, “our Mennonites are punctually in church on Sundays.”⁵⁸ If the Old Colony pilgrim in the South spoke of “following” the teachings of a physical Christ within agrarian community, the northern cousins increasingly spoke of celebrating a “life in” a spiritual Christ during prescribed worship services. It was a fundamental religious difference, and Canadians did not mind hinting at it. When widow Maria Wall of northern Prespatou, British Columbia, mentioned her gratitude for good health in 1990, she invoked language unknown among “horse and buggy” people in the South: “one receives [divine blessing] not because one has earned it, but only as pure grace, from our Heavenly Father” and “God be with you till we meet again, if not here then there, where no separation will occur again.”⁵⁹ Her idea of “grace” reflected a broadly conceived Protestant ethic; her dismissal of “earning” a blessing was also a dismissal of the old *Ordnung* that kept her kin firmly rooted in their anti-modern ways in the South.

Finally, like their stalwart relations in the South, the migrants in Canada employed humour to convey the social contours of their worlds. However, unlike the jokes from the “horse and buggy” people that contextualized their anti-modern worlds, northern writers poked fun at their bumpy pathways of integration into Canadian society. They told jokes about driving Canada’s busy roads, drinking its chlorinated water, and especially learning the English language. Frequent accounts had the newly arrived immigrant struggling to speak English to a Canadian—only to discover that the very person he or she was addressing was a fellow Mennonite quite capable of speaking High or Low German. Abram Doerksen of Winnipeg wrote in 1979 of such an event soon after arriving in Canada from Paraguay. He reported visiting a watch repair shop, where he decided that since his “mouth ... was tired of speaking English” he would let “my hands communicate as well as my mouth.” After a torturous time of “explaining and showing everything” with his hands, the watch repair technician suddenly quipped in German, “you evidently speak better in German than in English.” Doerksen could only demur: “well yes, then I finally just gave up; after 14 years in Canada, I can rest my hands when I speak in German.”⁶⁰ To his mind, learning English was a good thing, a necessary tool of integration, but acquiring that tool was profoundly difficult.

Conclusion

The letter published within an ethnic or ethno-religious newspaper sheds light on migration culture in numerous ways. As a medium written in private, but made available for public consumption, it was a hybrid source, neither entirely public nor wholly private. It was addressed to readers with whom the writer had close kin or congregational relations, but couched in ways to make it understandable to a wider public. If the ethnic newspaper reached across a wide diaspora, and the individual immigrant letter worked to create intimate and self-validating affinities within a small subsection of the diaspora, the published immigrant letter did both.

⁵⁸ *Mennonitische Post*, December 16, 1983.

⁵⁹ *Mennonitische Post*, September 7, 1990.

⁶⁰ *Mennonitische Post*, April 6, 1979.

It thus helped articulate both the social boundary of the wider diaspora and the internal lines of social demarcation.

The thousands of letters published in the *Mennonitische Post* in the generation after its founding in 1977 served to link the Canadian-descendent, Low-German-speaking Mennonites spread across the Americas. The letters shared a common vocabulary of an immigrant people within Spanish or English host societies. They comprised a religiously informed pacifist community, a people with a history that spanned Holland, Russia, and Canada, now scattered within the western hemisphere. As the letters also addressed subsections within the diaspora—the Old Colony traditionalists calling on one another to live out old teachings in faithfulness, and the more accommodating, Canadian-based, return migrants speaking of middle-class worlds and symbolic ethnicity—each subgroup also embraced and strengthened the identities and cultural agendas of its own kind.

By doing so they certainly also exposed their particular understandings of religion and culture to less-than-sympathetic readers. It is unlikely that, by reading the accounts of fellow religionists across the ideological divide within the diaspora, readers became convinced to embrace hitherto antithetical positions. More likely they glanced at texts constructed from competing cosmologies and were reassured that they were best situated in their present cultural location. What may not be apparent from a cursory glance at a newspaper like the *Mennonitische Post* is that, within the pages of the paper, under tidy headlines, an immigrant culture was not only being reported, but also being formed. It was a culture that was bifurcated, dynamic, and intersecting. The ethnic newspaper may have been a single document, but it rarely contained a single culture.

