Hyphenated Mennonites

"Latino Mennonites? I've never seen one of them," the man seated on the bench across from me said as he glanced at the title of the book in my hands, "Where do they live?" I laid the book on my lap, looked over at him, smiled, and replied, "You're looking at one. So I guess we live right here in Durham."

My mother is Costa Rican—she's *tica*, as we say. And my father is from Colombia—a *colombiano*. So I'm Latino, I know that much. And since I'm the pastor of a Mennonite congregation, I must be Mennonite, right? A Mennonite, even though I'm not related to the cousin of your cousin's cousin. A Mennonite, even though I've never been to a relief sale. A Mennonite, even though we've never made zwieback rolls at our house during the holidays. We make tamales, wrapped with banana leaves, not cornhusks—Costa Rican tamales, with a side of *gallo pinto*.

What does it mean to be a Mennonite? And how about a Latino Mennonite?

In his book *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), Felipe Hinojosa tells the story of Latina and Latino Mennonites in the United States, a story that begins with missionary encounters in the 1930s and ends with the integration of Hispanic congregations and leaders into the structure of Mennonite Church USA in the 1980s. Hinojosa narrates the excitement and awkwardness of white people inviting themselves into someone else's community, as mission workers left their farms to live out the gospel in Hispanic communities in Puerto Rico, South Texas, New York City, and Chicago. These sites of missionary work displayed the promise of the gospel, the gathering together of a people of various ethnicities, cultures, and languages, worshiping God as the interracial body of Christ, a people without dividing walls, a church without the hostility of segregation.

Yet, among some of the mission workers, there was also a concern for ethnic purity. "The Mennonites would preach to us and live in our community," remembered Ted Chapa, who was a young Mexican American boy in Mathis, Texas, at the time. "But if one of their sons or daughters wanted to marry a Mexicano or Mexicana, that was a no-no and they would open the Bible and explain why that should not happen" (34). Hinojosa doesn't shy away from letting us read the prejudices of Mennonite leaders from the past. "I was never strong for mixing Mexicans into our church building with our whites," declared a leader in the Illinois Mennonite Conference in the 1930s, "the separate place for worship for the Mexicans was to my mind wise, in fact imperative" (20). The minister was concerned not to disrupt the racialized landscape of Chicago. However, Hinojosa records other voices, other white Mennonite leaders who spoke out against the sin of racism. For example, in the 1950s, Guy F. Hershberger, professor at Goshen College, claimed that "to take part in any form of race discrimination…is a contribution to war" (60).

Despite such a mixed history of missionary activity and race relations, Latinos and Latinas became part of the Mennonite church. "Even with the racist missteps and paternalistic patterns of Mennonite missionaries," Hinojosa explains, "they managed to organize…Latino Mennonite

churches" and "managed to impart an ethic of peace, service, and simplicity in the communities where they worked" (46). Hispanics became Mennonite as a result of people giving their lives to relationships across racial barriers; our interracial denomination is sustained because of "the memories of basketball games, shared meals, and service projects" (218)—a history of being together, without stripping away our racial and cultural differences.

Hinojosa's book adds another pattern to our patchwork identity as Mennonites. We can no longer tell the story of what it means to be Mennonite in North America without telling the story of missionary encounters in Hispanic communities, and the racial and cultural hybridization that has happened as a result, as those of us who are Latinos and Latinas have appropriated a Mennonite identity. According to Hinojosa, when Latinos/as (and African Americans) began to claim their identity as Mennonites in the late twentieth century, there emerged an "identity crisis for white Mennonites" (49). As black and brown people found a home in the Mennonite church, white Mennonites had to renegotiate their own understanding of what it meant to be Mennonite. In the United States, Hinojosa claims, "race, not peace and nonresistance, have been at the center of evolving notions of Mennonite theology and identity," "race has served as a means for a greater redefinition of Mennonite identity" (12, 215).

I've been a Mennonite for a decade, and I'm still working out what it means to belong in our tradition. I joined because—living in a country committed to endless wars, living in a nation-state where Christianity functions as the dominant religious logic for the people in power—I had to become part of an historic peace church, if I wanted to somehow still identify myself as a Christian. I need be part of a community of nonviolence, extending beyond my historical moment, and extending beyond my city and state, beyond this country, that teaches me how to pray against violence, that shows me how to live against violence. I wouldn't know how to call myself a Christian if I couldn't identify myself as a Mennonite.

After reading Hinojosa's book, I don't know if I would have had the perseverance to work out my Latino Mennonite identity in the 1950s. "There was also a sense that in a church dominated by people with surnames like Yoder and Miller," Hinojosa observes, "the new and unfamiliar crop of leadership posed a threat to this tightly knit ethno-religious community" (72). Nonetheless, black and brown people stayed with the Mennonite church, and made room for the rest of us today. As Ted Chapa, a former Latino Mennonite leader, put it: "because of what we did back then, the doors of the church have been opened for minorities" (203).

Mennonite theology and culture has always been an amalgamated identity, a history of commingling, a fusion from the beginning—from Benedictine communalism to Hussite radicalism, from Swiss clothing to Dutch baking. So-called "Mennonite" Zwieback rolls, after all, were common in the port cities of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, food for people on the move, sailors and migrants. The further we dig into Mennonite identity, the further we find ourselves among our neighbors, among cultures and traditions of non-Mennonite peoples. There is no essence to Mennonite identity, only serial hybridization—an identity created through merger after merger of cultural traditions, ethnic identities, and theological commitments. A Mennonite is a multiplicity. To be a Mennonite is to be part of a hyphenated people, even if we've forgotten all the combinations that make us who we are. Although unpronounced, the hyphen is there within any Mennonite identity.

As Mennonites continue to hybridize, perhaps we may soon find ourselves at a church potluck, loading our plates with Puerto Rican *cuchifritos*, Mexican *arroz con pollo, and Costa Rican gallo pinto*, alongside Borscht, Zwiebach, Pfeffernuesse, and shoofly pie—all having become traditional "Mennonite" food.

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