

“Our Brommtopp is of Our Own Design” (De)Constructing Masculinities in Southern Manitoba Mennonite Mumming

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Article abstract

In the past and to some extent the present, various Euro North American and other cultural groups marked the period from Christmas Eve to Twelfth Night with rowdy, disguised, playful/ludic or carnivalesque behaviour that mainstream Euro North Americans associate more with Halloween than with this holiday season. Many such customs, termed the “informal house visit” involve a group (usually young men) who perambulate from one location to another within a community. They include performative aspects—often dancing and singing—as well as the expectation of a reward—usually food and/or drink—and some sociability with the visited household members. A seasonal custom performed by young men, almost always on New Year’s Eve, in rural Manitoba Mennonite villages where the church tolerated it, Brommtopp is named after the musical instrument used during the performance. Traditionally a group of some dozen teenaged boys and young married men would drive and/or walk from house to house within their own village and sometimes beyond. At each residence, the group would sing the traditional song which generally asked for money in return for good wishes. We examine the sociohistorical surround of the practice and its past and current racialised and postcolonial implications.

“OUR BROMMTOPP IS OF OUR OWN DESIGN”:

(De)Constructing Masculinities in Southern Manitoba Mennonite Mumming

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For most adult Euro North Americans, the season from Christmas to New Year’s has some (often vestigial) religious significance, but is characterised primarily by formal ritual obligations of feasting, gift giving and receiving, and visiting (see e.g. Bella 1992, Caplow 1982, Caplow 1984, Cheal 1988).¹ Periodic moments of play, like the office party, may break up the structure, but for the most part drinking (sometimes to excess) offers the only relief from the often socially and financially expensive obligations. Yet in the past and to some extent the present, various Euro North American and other cultural groups have marked the period from Christmas Eve on December 24 to Twelfth Night on January 6 with rowdy, disguised playful/ludic (see Huizinga 1950) or carnivalesque (see Bakhtin 1968) behaviour that

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mainstream Euro North Americans associate more with Halloween than with this holiday season (see Santino 1994).²

Many such customs, termed the “informal house visit” (see Halpert and Story 1969, Lovelace 1980, and Pettitt 1995), involve a group (usually young men) who perambulate from one location to another within a community, to the households of socially and culturally proximate families and individuals. These events include performative aspects – often dancing and singing – as well as the expectation of a reward – usually food and/or drink – and some sociability with the visited household members. The cultural and social surround of Newfoundland Christmas mumming has been well documented.³ Called mummering or janneying, it has been variously explained as a ritualisation of social relations and solidarity (e.g. Chiaramonte 1969, Handelman 1984, Robertson 1982, Robertson 1984), an expression of otherwise repressed hostilities (e.g. Firestone 1969, Firestone 1978, Robertson 1982, Robertson 1984, Szwed 1969), an indication of fear of strangers (e.g. Faris 1969), and a dramatisation of socioeconomic relations (e.g. Sider 1976) or sex/gender roles (e.g. Williams 1969, Robertson 1982, Robertson 1984).⁴ Only very recently has any scholar turned to its racialised implications (Best 2008), aspects it shares with the tradition we consider here.

A seasonal custom performed by young men, almost always on New Year’s Eve, in rural Manitoba Mennonite villages

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2. Such traditions include Ukrainian *malanka*, formerly a house-visiting custom, but now primarily used as a larger collective fundraiser (see Klymasz 1985).
 3. Because Halpert and Story (1968), Sider (1976), Robertson (1984), and others have so extensively detailed the practice’s forms, we do not reprise them in detail here.
 4. Scholars generally relate the suspension of mummering in Newfoundland to the coming of road links to the rest of the island – and with them the homogenising forces of Euro North American culture – as late as the 1970s and 1980s, but the practice has recently been revived. Currently, touristic, souvenir, material culture representations of mummers include both “strange mummers” (Tye 2008, 48-51) and “happy mummers” (Ibid., 51-53) to “help to create an imagined homeplace” (Ibid., 54) for expatriate Newfoundlanders (see also Pocius 1991).

where the church tolerated it, *Brommtopp*⁵ is named after the musical instrument used during the performance.

Traditionally a group of some dozen teenaged boys and young married men would drive (originally in horse and sleigh or buggy and later by car) and/or walk from house to house within their own village and sometimes beyond. The *Brommtopp* itself, constructed from calf skin, a barrel and horsetail, sounds when its player pulls and rubs rhythmically on the horsetail, producing a difficult-to-describe thrumming sound: "The player, by situating the drum against a wall, could cause sympathetic vibrations which sometimes shook the china from the shelves. The singers had to shout their song in order to be heard over the racket of the brummtupp" (Petkau and Petkau 1981, 92). Writing in the local history *Halbstadt Heritage*, Jake Bergen remembered: "If everything was made real[ly] well this strange instrument would make the dishes in the kitchen cupboard rattle" (2005, 189). At each residence, the group would sing the traditional song which could vary from one location to another, but generally asked for money in return for good wishes:

A beautiful evening and a jolly good time,
Our brummtupp is of our own design (construction).

We wish the master a golden table
On all four corners a fried fish.

In the centre of it a jug of wine
To induce the Master to jollity.

We wish the mistress a golden crown
And the coming year a pretty young son.

We wish the daughter a silver jug
And the coming year a handsome young man.

We wish the maid a light-red skirt
And the coming year a broomstick treat.

We wish the Old Maid a wooden jug,
And the coming year a hunch-backed man.

We wish the son a saddled horse
A pair of pistols and a bright polished sword.

5. There are many possible spellings of *Brommtopp*, but we follow Jack Thiessen's *Mennonite Low German Dictionary* (2003). Other possibilities we have seen in newspaper articles, local histories, autobiographies, and so on include *brummtupp*, *brumtup*, *brummtopp*, *brumtop*, and *bromtop*.

We wish the servant a curry comb and shears
 With which to groom his master's horse.

We wish the swineherd a cudgel in his hand
 With which to drive the boars from the land.

We now hear the master tinkling with a dish
 By dropping silver coins. He'll grant us our wish!

We draw a golden band over the house
 And three dark brown maidens rushed out
 (Toews 1977, 303-304).

As social historian Ervin Beck comments, "The 11-stanza 'Brummtopp Song' must have many variant stanzas, since the young people who sing it while performing the New Year's mummers' play typically compose or alter stanzas to make the song fit the household in which they are performing" (1989, 774-775).⁶ As implied in the song, the players could receive money, liquor and/or food, often the traditional *Portzeltje* (New Years fritters) (see e.g. Ibid., Epp-Tiessen 1982) in exchange for their performance.⁷ Their rowdy behaviour contrasted with usual expectations of decorum for house visits, as we'll discuss in detail below.

Costumes varied from place to place. In Blumenfeld, for example, the elaborately specified roles were:

(a) Policeman: His role was to keep order in the group that tended to become unruly in their merrymaking. He would knock on the door to say that a group of people wanted to present a New Year's Wish. If the group was welcomed, he ushered in his troupe. He was the steward of the evening's collection. The policeman was uniformed and wore a red stripe on his trousers.

(b) Clown: The clown's attempts to add humour to the performance were hilarious and ridiculous. But everyone loves a clown! His costume can be imagined.

(c) The Couple: The man and woman tried to pose as a hen-pecked husband and a nagging wife.⁸ They were dressed in styles typical of that year.

6. We are unaware of any *Brommtopp* mummers' play being performed in Manitoba.

7. Thiessen's dictionary offers two alternatives: *Portzeltje* and *Porzeltje*. He also calls these fritters *Niejoahschküake* (2003, 188). Epp-Tiessen (1982) uses *porzeltje*; Toews (1977) uses *portzelky*.

8. The "woman" would be a cross-dressed man.

(d) The Singers: The group of approximately 15 young men sang the song of New Year's wishes. They were dressed in white costumes sewn from flour sacks. They had black stripes on their trouser legs and wore white flathats. All were masked.

(e) The Brummtupp Player: He was dressed like the singers. Upon entering the house, he would find a place in the room that was close to an inside wall or near a china cupboard (Petkau and Petkau 1981, 91; see also Bergen 2005).

At other locations, the costumes seem to be more loosely improvised, with blackface and whiteface instead of masks (see also Friesen 1988, Schroeder 1999, Toews 1977) (see figure 1). However, photographs of *Brommtopp* players indicate that both gender drag and ethnic drag (Sieg 2005) – representation as othered ethnoracial groups like Jews, Chinese, and First Nations peoples – were frequently incorporated (see figure 2). The performance, singing and sometimes also dancing, followed by sociability, rarely lasted longer than ten to fifteen minutes before the group moved on to the next household. Most participants assume the tradition has roots in Prussia, predating Mennonite immigration to Russia in the 1780s and then to Manitoba in the 1870s (Petkau and Petkau 1981, 82-92).⁹ Interviewees told us that active local performances may have stopped as early as before the end of the Second World War and as late as the 1950s or early 1960s (see also Epp-Tiessen 1982, Petkau and Petkau 1981). As writer Armin Wiebe told us:

Something happened in the era that I was growing up, in the 50s... and probably happened well before that. But there seemed to be an attempt to distance the church from...the folk traditions.... And even in my experience, I remember one church that I spent my teenage years in; it seemed like the church went from having guitars used to accompany singing to singing cantatas. And the guitars – more sort of country gospel kinds of singing – got pushed out. A real shift occurred in the late 50s and 60s when the Low German language became less used. In my own experience as a teenager, my generation still spoke Low German socially, but my oldest sibling, six years younger, never became quite fluent. They could speak it to some extent and understand it but weren't fluent. And I think that's also around the time when television became [laughs] accessible with the arrival of KCND, and the

9. Erika Thiessen, who immigrated from Russia to Paraguay in 1947 and came to Manitoba in 1956, remembers the *brommtopp* from her girlhood in Russia (PG 2009-7). See also Voth (1994).

transmitter was there and the signal was strong enough. And the school system had been really working hard to improve English skills, and churches started switching from German to English. All those kinds of things happened around that time. And along with that, a lot of other traditions became not cool [laughs] (KM 2008, 1-2).¹⁰

Revival (see Rosenberg 1993) performances of the *Brommtopp* started around the late 1990s. Several interviewees told us that at the Sunflower Festival in 1977 in Altona, for example, a group of then middle-aged men did a *Brommtopp* performance. Apparently beginning in the first decade of the 21st century, many went on to form a group which has regularly performed on the afternoon of New Years' Eve at seniors' homes like Eastview Place in Altona. They have also appeared at events in Neuberghthal Street Village National Historic Site of Canada reflecting the early years of Mennonite settlement. *Brommtopp* performances were also incorporated into a series of concerts organised by the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach in 2010 (see figure 3). All these events included performers dressed in gender drag, but as we will explore, they avoid ethnic drag. The presentation incorporates mimicking the actions described in the song. Thus, for example, when the song refers to fried fish, one performer places plastic fish on all four corners of a table on the stage. At the verse about silver coins, another rattles a Folger's coffee can containing money in the faces of the audience. All perform the final stanza together, using their arms to describe a golden band and jumping as the "dark maidens" rush out of the house.

Our chapter deconstructs masculinities and their relation to the cross-ethnic, cross-racial, and cross-gender dress in the traditional and revival manifestations of *Brommtopp*. In working through this material, we have experienced the anxiety of trying to balance a fair account of the practice with our recognition that, historically and currently, it risks invoking some profoundly sexist and racist stereotypes. We begin an exploration of the tradition that seeks to address such anxieties and discomforts head on. By employing feminist, queer, trans, and postcolonial lenses and theories, our analysis of the *Brommtopp* explores how the opportunities it gives

10. This citation system gives the initials of the interviewer, Pauline Greenhill or Kendra Magnusson, the year of the interview, and the interview reference number(s).

young men of the community for transgender, transethnic, and transracial identity exploration offers insight into the fragmentation of hegemonic masculinity in Mennonite societies.¹¹ This research is primarily based on 17 interviews by Pauline Greenhill, six by Marcie Fehr and one by Kendra Magnusson, conducted between spring 2009 and winter 2010, with folks who participated in or otherwise experienced the practice in the south-central Manitoba communities of Altona, Blumenfeld, Hochfeld, Neuberghal, Plum Coulee, and others on the so-called West Reserve (discussed below).

Mennonites in Manitoba

Until as recently as the last thirty to forty years ago, Mennonites in rural Manitoba communities were to an extent culturally detached from the Euro North American mainstream. Villages tended to be socio-religious islands in a sea of greater diversity. As Armin Wiebe noted:

Long after I had left home it dawned on me one day that where I had lived was in reasonable biking distance from a French community but there was never really any interaction with them....I think I was in grade four when we had moved to town and the teacher asked "What do you call people who live in Manitoba?" and I was going to shoot up my hand and say "Mennonites!" and, luckily something stopped me [laughs]. Because up until that time I was under the impression that that was what it meant, you know; that Mennonites were people who lived in Manitoba [laughs] (KM 2009-1, 2).

Southern Manitoba Mennonite communities and cultural expressions weave together elements of displacement, dissent, pacifism and conscientious objection with self-sufficiency informed by religion as a way of life. Mennonites' rich history can be traced back as far as the 16th century and the Reformation era in Switzerland and the Netherlands and then migrant communities in Prussia (Poland) and Russia. During the 18th and 19th centuries in Prussia, Mennonites were rarely granted rights and privileges of citizenship, as they refused nationalistic loyalties and military service alike. Accordingly, the

11. Though multiple forms of masculinity exist within any society, some are recognised as privileged, normative, and prescriptive, thus termed hegemonic (see Kimmel and Messner 2010).

Prussian government extracted from them large sums of money as a consequence for non-enlistment. Realizing the economic cushion they thus sustained, Prussia granted Mennonites permission to build meeting houses and other structures, but without proprietary rights or privileges of national citizenship. Governmental bodies dictated that Mennonite churches be plain, and have no bell, no towers, and no pointed windows. Such concepts of “modesty”¹² permeated other forms of (in)visibility for Mennonites including gendered and uniform dress codes, non-materialism, and Luddite ideals (Friesen 2001, 4-6) (see figures 4, 5, and 6).

In Russia, by 1870, the government introduced a universal military service policy, requiring all young men, regardless of citizenship, to enlist in the Russian army, but at once granted Mennonites the so-called *Forsteidiensts*, a form of alternative service in forestry. The government also pressed Mennonites to teach Russian in their schools, alongside High German, but left them free to speak Low German (a Northern German dialect with some Dutch influence) in the everyday (Thiessen 2003, x-xiii; Staliūnas 2007). The 50,000 Mennonites nevertheless resisted governmental control. They attempted to negotiate a better position, and most accepted offers of exemption from military service in exchange for forestry services.

The most conservative of the Mennonites, some 17,000, found such offers inappropriate for a traditional farming society and in the 1870s migrated to North America (Friesen 2001, 6-8), seeking a new land in which they might enjoy greater rights and privileges. Delegates chosen by their communities traveled to North America to negotiate terms for immigration with the Canadian and American governments. Their requirements included acquisition of appropriate farming land, freedom of religion, autonomy of education, and exemption from military service. The American government refused to grant the latter, and denied Mennonites the wish for block settlements, but gave them control over their children’s education and educational institutions. However, in 1873, the Canadian government and the Mennonite delegates from Russia came to a mutually satisfactory agreement, and the group began their journey to Canada.

12. Modesty refers to religious and social dictates that people should dress plainly – for important occasions, preferably in black – be well covered, and subsist with a minimal amount of material goods.

Originally, most Mennonites who came to Manitoba settled in two rural "reserves,"¹³ southeast and southwest of the city of Winnipeg, creating what are now known as the East and West Reserves. The first Mennonite immigrants arrived in Manitoba in 1874 and came from the Bergthal and Borosenko Colonies in South Russia; they laid out their farm villages on the eight-township East Reserve, a land block east of the Red River reserved for them by the Canadian government (Reimer 1983). Other Mennonite immigrants came in 1875, but found the East Reserve land unsuitable for farming and decided to occupy land further west, between the Red River and the Pembina Hills. Multiple Mennonite churches and small villages grew on the East and West Reserves, including the Reinlander (or Old Colony) Mennonite Church in 1875, the Church of God in Christ (Holdeman) and the Mennonite Brethren Conference in the 1880s, the Sommerfeld Church in the 1890s, the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference in the 1930s, and the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (transition from the *Kleine Gemeinde*) in the 1950s (Francis 1955, Warkentin 2000, Reimer 1983). The most progressive of the Mennonites organized under the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in 1903, for collective social outreach, as well as international missionary work.

Most Mennonites, in both the East and West Reserves, planned the layout of their settlements in a distinctive form. House and barn were incorporated into a single long building with the house nearest the road. These structures were arranged in rows, with the farm land behind them. Few traditional house barns survive (see figure 7 and 8). Outbuildings included sheds, smokehouses, and summer kitchens (see figures 9 and 10). Often a church and school would be built mid-way through the village. Some chose to settle their families away from communal villages to take advantage of larger areas of fertile farming land.

Despite historic assurances that their distinctiveness could be preserved in Manitoba, Mennonites' local legacy is rooted in the history of an assimilative colonial process of language control. At first, Manitoba Mennonites had leave to establish their own social and economic systems, including for land tenure and education, on

13. This is the terminology normally used to describe the plots of land set aside for Mennonites (see e.g. Reimer 1983).

the reserves. But relatively quickly, they lost the control originally offered, and experienced aspects of domination by English political power and hegemony. Acts such as the one mandating attendance at government-controlled English schools reversed initial promises that Mennonites could maintain educational autonomy. The enforcement of such policies disturbed the traditional practices of Mennonite communities, and established a hierarchical language system of intersecting classes of linguistic space, specifically: English for school; High German for church; and Low German for home and everyday life. As we will show, this process of language control resulted in extensive cultural loss, as well as confusion and crisis for many Mennonites.

Mennonite geographer H. Leonard Sawatzky writes that the Manitoba School Attendance Act, established in 1916, enforced “attendance in public schools where English was the primary language of instruction mandatory for all children between the ages of seven and fourteen” (1971, 13). Recalling his personal experience as a first generation Mennonite-Canadian, Jac Schroeder claims

All the children spoke ‘Low German’...at home. The Provincial Government gave to the School Board the privilege of also teaching German as a second language. But this had to be done outside of the regular school hours of 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. when only the English language could be spoken. The School Board decided to add half an hour from 8:30 A.M. to 9:00 A.M. for instruction (1999, 153).

The allotted time for formal High German instruction at school associated it with a higher class status. The purposeful, government-sanctioned compartmentalization locating High German within formal education on the one hand legitimized its already manifest superiority (since it was associated with formal Church activities), while on the other hand simultaneously limiting its use to those formal locations. Distributing English, as the assimilating language, over space and time while relegating German to a specific time slot, formally controlled its uses and meanings. As sociolinguist Suzanne Romaine argues, “Where colonizers tolerated some plurality of language use, they established hierarchical relations among languages” (1994, 90).

Once English became the primary language and teaching tool in schools, public sphere regulation of the identities of Mennonite children and their families followed, and the process of assimilation into English urbanization began. Low German, beyond public school and church systems alike, could not become a commodified language within the English, capitalist economy which eventually surrounded and for the most part assimilated rural Mennonite village culture (Francis 1955, Loewen 1993, Warkentin 2000). As Romaine indicates, "Schooling and literacy create a division between those whose credentials give them access to town as opposed to those who have no negotiable skills on the wage market. English is a kind of cultural capital with a value in the linguistic market place" (1994, 93). Without an established writing system,¹⁴ Low German lacked the most central tool to facilitate skills on the wage market, and thus lost market capital from a localized economy to the capitalist system at large.

When language becomes linked to socioculturally defined spaces, they create specific demands on individual behaviour, often to assimilate a culture to colonialist ideals. As Romaine claims, "the aim is to remove variation and establish only one system to serve as a uniform for a group" (1994, 5). Mennonites who resisted assimilation may have guarded their traditions in the private sphere, but too often they lost their folk practices as the economic viability of their language, intrinsic to those traditions, became compartmentalized and obsolete against the capitalist system which flooded their subjectivity and culture alike.

One interviewee recalled that he and his friends were not allowed to speak Low German on school grounds after the end of the Second World War. The hostile momentum linking the German language to non-patriotism, and associating it with the enemy, forced Low German, High German, and German culture alike further into the privacy and protection of the home. In a recent conversation, Marcie's paternal grandmother, Mary Fehr, described her experience

14. High German was the primary language for writing in Mennonite communities. German language newspapers continue, including *Die Mennonitische Post*, published in Steinbach. Some rural and even urban churches still sing in German. However, Low German was occasionally written phonetically. Recent work toward establishing Low German as a written language includes Thiessen's *Mennonite Low German Dictionary/ Mennonitisch-Plattdeutsches Wörterbuch* (2003).

of starting English school in her village, Hochfeld. Along with her friends and family, she mainly spoke Low German, but occasionally used High German for more formal occasions or for writing letters. One day, along with all the other children of her village and some surrounding ones, Mary was unexpectedly brought to the village school and introduced, in High German, to a new teacher sent by the provincial government. After the introduction, Mary and all other school children were expected to start speaking English immediately, or face physical and verbal punishment. Mary's experience articulates the jarring and unexpected shift in autonomy for Mennonites in Canada, which mandated submitting to government control even in rural villages and towns.

Mennonite masculinities

Being a Mennonite can invoke a religion, a way of life upheld by tradition, or a flexible, self-defined identity not necessarily enjoined with Christianity. As Armin Wiebe commented: "I don't know if it's unique, but it's a complicated way to be, way to live, where you've got an ethnic group or an ethnic identity that's also very tightly tied up with religion and so then [laughs], then you have people who are very ethnically Mennonite or they look, see themselves that way, but [they're] not necessarily...Mennonite in terms of religion and so on" (KM 2009-01, 02). Similarly, to identify as a man, and/or as male, can mean many things. Even insofar as they participate in a rural community segregated from society at large to preserve a way of living, traditional Mennonite men manifest recognizable features of North American ideals of masculinity, engendered with specific religious doctrines and dogmas about gendered roles. Understanding the conspicuous and remarkable practice that is the *Brommtopp* requires knowledge of these masculinities within the context of Mennonite culture and history. But regardless of its meanings or origins, the rowdy custom does not mesh well with outsiders' (exoteric) views of historical or current Mennonite culture and tradition.

The hegemonic, historical, exoteric image for rural Mennonite men presents stoic and sober (both literally and figuratively) business owners and farmers. As Mennonite historian Royden Loewen discusses in "Poultrymen, Car Dealers, and Football

Stars: Masculinities in Manitoba," Mennonite masculinity changed drastically after the Second World War in response to economic crisis. Mennonites began to commercialize their farms, specializing in wheat, poultry and beef (2006). Loewen claims that men's move to commercial poultry farming represented gender transgression since, traditionally, in Mennonite communities, working with poultry was culturally defined as a feminine domain of farm life. Collecting eggs and slaughtering chickens were women's responsibility because of its close everyday physical and social relationship to cooking and kitchen work. Loewen argues that the men who commercialized their poultry doubly transgressed gender roles, first by linking their farming identities to the feminine domain of poultry, and second by masculinizing traditionally feminine work for the sake of capitalism. As a result, he argues, masculinity was itself in crisis, having to adapt and re-form in response to the pressures of commercial farming. Indeed, traditional gender roles and expectations for both women and men were renegotiated. Gendered practices shifted to sustain economic security in a time of cultural strife.

Further, as small farms were replaced by larger, more commercial enterprises, Mennonite men and women increasingly sought employment outside their villages. Families became smaller, and positions for farmhands were contracted out to non-family, non-Mennonite workers. No longer the sole laborers outside the home, nor the breadwinners at the homestead farm, the non-farm men's roles shifted (see figures 11 and 12). Many women had found paid labour in urbanized areas, especially Winnipeg, as seamstresses, housekeepers and cleaners (Epp 2008, 176) well before the Second World War, but the trend to find off-farm labour increased following 1945. The original communities became less localized, their populations decreased, and extended families fell out of touch. With fewer community connections, smaller families, and a decrease in communal farming practices, the resultant destabilization of hegemonic masculinity does not appear to have left room for what were once performative boyhood practices like the *Brommtopp*. When the maintenance of a local cultural economy made the performance of the most mainstream, conservative Mennonite identities and their strict gender scripts themselves deviant and resistant with respect to the mainstream (urban Euro North Americans), *Brommtopp*

performances and other Low German traditions became culturally anomalous.

Brommtopp

Most traditional participants and audiences, on the other hand, experienced no such sense of inappropriateness or disjunction. Many consultants, recalling their childhood and youth in the 1920s to 1950s, described a much anticipated fun and wholesome atmosphere when the *Brommtopp* players would arrive and perform. Jake Schroeder recalls: “We lived half a mile from Grandma and Grandpa’s and when we knew that they were going to come over there, and they might miss our house, we would all go over to Grandma and Grandpa’s. It was a whole bunch of people in the house waiting for the *Brommtopp*, ‘cause this was exciting! This was something that we looked forward to! It was good entertainment!” (PG 2009-24, 25).

Neighbours in Mennonite communities recognized one another; families attended church together, worked communally on each other’s farms and village projects, and followed *faspa*, a weekly family house visiting tradition usually after Sunday church services.¹⁵ Royden Loewen claims that “it was only an odd farmer [who] would not be glad to stop his work for a while when a guest appeared on the yard. Village culture encouraged visiting” (1983, 167). Calls on Sunday after church brought large families unexpectedly to each others’ doors for food, refreshments, and conversation. Families would get together and discuss sermons, farming, relatives, and sometimes, world events that someone had read in a newspaper from Winnipeg, or from local village papers, such as the *Mennonitische Rundschau* or the *Nordwesten* (Ibid., 168).

Doors were never locked, and folks rarely arranged meetings ahead of time. The idea of the feared stranger was only a distant, yet looming possibility as “not only was one fulfilling a scriptural injunction by having an open home; it was also a sign of prestige if

15. For *faspa*, the woman of the house needed to be prepared with baked goods and fresh coffee, or face humiliation: “No woman wanted to run out of food on Sunday Faspa, regardless of how many guests arrived. She wanted to be seen as prepared, hospitable, and well-organized. To run out of food would suggest otherwise” (Chornoboy 2007, 57).

one had many guests" (Loewen 1983, 168). However, many respectful social codes were transgressed in the *Brommtopp* tradition. When entering the host house, performers never removed their boots and overshoes and therefore trod the dirty, melting snow onto the kitchen or parlour floor. Also, the musician in charge of the *Brommtopp* drum poured water over the horsetail for lubrication and optimum sound, leaving a pool of dirty water that needed to be mopped up. The aftermath of a performance often mixed excitement with resentment, as the women of the house were, by gendered default, left to clean up after the messy gang of costumed singers. Indeed, some consultants suggest that the end of the *Brommtopp* tradition could be attributed to the replacement of easily cleaned linoleum tile and wood floors with carpeting and broadloom. However, interviewee Bruno Hamm linked the tradition's demise to other gendered concerns: "Because some of them had their floors all waxed and polished for New Year's and then on New Year's Eve and someone comes and messes it all up? Takes a pretty good Mother to accept it" (PG 2009-12). The connection of pollution from outside entering the home with women's concerns about their own interests genders explanations of why the *Brommtopp* tradition ended – and indeed why it has recently been revived by older men. When outsiders' values –like the idea that women should be attentive to their own individualistic concerns – enter the home, they also endanger the social climate in which *Brommtopp* flourished. But these same values also foster the revival of *Brommtopp* as an expression of another time and place, remembered with nostalgia. For as we argue, this rowdy tradition was not only about its young male performers' sex/gender Others, but also about their ethno/racial/ religious Others. This concern for expressing self and difference remains salient for the revival performers as well.

Some consultants depicted the *Brommtopp* performance as far more obnoxious and vulgar than others remember or are willing to disclose. David Schroeder recalls: "They would simply yell the minute they were on the yard and we all had dogs [that] warned us that somebody's on the yard, so it was often pretty rowdy until they got into the house. They would be dressed differently sometimes and... would be very boisterous, purposefully boisterous. So, they made a lot of racket outside" (PG 2009-15, 16). But Alvina Giesbrecht, a young girl at the time the *Brommtopp* would visit her family home, remembers that "There'd be...a lot of jokes and maybe even some

off-colour ones....Filthy ones” (PG 2009-01). Di Brandt, Mennonite writer, scholar, and artist, describes her family’s historical experience of the *Brommtoopp*:

It was definitely a disruption. You didn’t expect it. No one would have announced it or anything. It wasn’t like they would have said, “Let’s wait up for the *Brommtoopp* people to come!” No, certainly not. As for the noise, that was exactly the thing, making a lot of noise, being rude and.... irreverent. Everyone would be, sort of, “Oh good,” you know, embarrassed. People would think, “Oh, ergh, here they are again!” (PG-2009-08).

The consultants for this research agree that not every member of the community enjoyed or welcomed the *Brommtoopp*. The tradition incorporated more than merely a song and dance in exchange for baked goods and well wishes – or even alcohol. Indeed, even when it flourished, its aesthetic and behavioural ideals diverged incongruently with everyday social norms for Mennonites such as the aforementioned modesty, uniform dress, strict heteronormative gender scripts and sobriety. Further, traditional Mennonite Christian interpretations order that depicting oneself as anything other than one’s birth body and face blasphemes against humans’ creation in God’s image. Thus, while actual dress and occupational opportunities have evolved with urbanization and modernization, nevertheless the *Brommtoopp* costuming, then as now, jars with stereotypes of Mennonites.

Transgender Mennonite Men

As would be expected for a liminal, seasonal, disruptive tradition, the costumed alternative identity of *Brommtoopp* allowed young men to engage in behaviour which would otherwise be codified as socially inappropriate. Typical *Brommtoopp* performers in the practice’s heyday would be young, Mennonite men, embodying hegemonic masculine identities, from the same town or village. Now, those in *Brommtoopp* revival performances are elderly patriarchs. For both groups, everyday behavioural license would be greater than for any other man or boy, or for any woman or girl. Indeed, the alibi of a pious, hardworking male serves as license for the performers, and provides them with fluidity and privilege in the substitution of their hegemonic identities

to perform their *Brommtopp* persona. Thus, social conventions of gender scripts could be questioned under the guise of an accepted male ritual.

Still, and possibly in an effort to suspend or displace anxieties of cross-gender dress, the feminine beauty of the trans-performers could be scrutinized. Writer Eleanor Chornoboy, in *Faspa With Jast*, calls the mummies: "far too noisy men singing out of tune and looking like ugly women or goofy men" (2007, 61). Neither the historic nor the revival performances demonstrate any effort by the cross-dressed men to represent a conventionally attractive woman. In the revival performances, the transgendered costumed men mark their performative non-performance of womanhood by wearing their jeans or dress pants under their skirts and aprons, as well as by leaving on their everyday men's shoes. This careful attention of detail in order to *not* pass as a woman shows concern that their gender/sex and - for the traditional performers, sometimes sexually transgressive - behaviour could too uncomfortably resonate with everyday life.¹⁶ Thus, the judgment on the beauty, as well as the ability to pass,¹⁷ of male-to-female *Brommtopp* costumers can serve to control and repress trans expressions and identities, as well as to fortify internalized homophobia.

Armin Wiebe's prize-winning novel *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* (1984) tellingly suggests that cross-dressed performers may have stirred anxiety for traditional *Brommtopp* players and their audiences. His hero reflects: "Those other badels wouldn't have the nerves to put on a dress...his grandfather said a woman couldn't play the brummtupp. It just wouldn't be right....I don't know what do to because nobody told me that if I had a dress on I would have to do stuff like a woman, too" (1984, 16-22). The connection a man might feel to transgressing his gender script in *Brommtopp* would nevertheless remind him that

16. In a different context, also on the Canadian prairies, mock wedding cross-dressing also raised similar concerns around critiques of gender roles, rather than any attempt to pass as female (see Taft 1997).

17. Elaine Ginsberg, in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, argues that "passing" has been applied discursively to disguises of other elements of an individual's presumed 'natural' or 'essential' identity, including class, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as gender, the latter usually effected by deliberate alterations of physical appearance and behaviour, including cross-dressing....and forces reconsideration of the cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identic intelligibility" (1996, 4).

he should not wish to pass as a woman in real life. Bruno Hamm, when asked in interview if men had cross-dressed as women in the *Brommtopp* group he performed in, said “You know, I don’t really remember that. I don’t think so, because in those days it was [either] women [or]... men, nothing like, mixed” (PG 2009-12). So taboo was this subject that one interview consultant denied that *Brommtopp* players ever cross-dressed, during an interview conducted by Pauline in a hall decorated with a famous picture of the local *Brommtopp* group clearly depicting gender (and ethnic) drag. We note that this individual also participated in the revival performances we saw, though he was not one of the cross-dressers!

In traditional *Brommtopp* visits, even when a player’s primary identity would be obscured with masks or makeup, the community usually knew who he was. Interviewee Alvina Giesbrecht commented “you’d see something like that even though....cross-dressing, as far as a man was concerned, you would still recognize him” (PG 2009-01). Yet there could be exceptions, when planned trickery could lead to private guessing games between audience members, or even be deliberately calculated to fool and embarrass women. One interviewee and past *Brommtopp* performer, who asked not to be identified, described switching costumes with a fellow player, to trick his wife when arriving to perform at his family’s home. The doubly-disguised trickster would cuddle up to the woman, playfully, physically, and sometimes intimately interacting with her, and then remove his mask to reveal himself as not her husband. The woman would sometimes leave the room or hide her own face. Though she was supposed to feel ashamed for not recognising her husband – she would know his costume, having typically been the person who pieced it together – and thus for interacting inappropriately with another man, we imagine that in some circumstances the situation also offered play opportunities for women. Heterosexuality, fidelity, and honoring one’s spouse are highly valued identities for Mennonite men and women. Thus, social contract between the two men, doubly disguising their identities, creates a space of permissible male sexual openness and play, while shaming the wife’s sexual agency. This act of double disguise and the permissive space of comedy allows men to explore intimate possibility, disturbing the hegemonic ideals of heterosexual coupling, especially when the man happens to be cast as a female character. In these instances of switching costumes, and

indeed for the other instances of disguise in *Brommtoopp*, just like in Cajun country Mardi Gras, "real life social relationships were negotiated under the surface of a cultural game" (Ancelet 2001, 152; see also Sawin 2001). Unfortunately, and certainly not to downplay this consequence, from the men's perspective this happens at the expense of the confidence and sexuality of women.

The space between boy and man

Another transgressive aspect of *Brommtoopp* was its frequent association with drinking. Alcohol use, typically discouraged among Mennonites, varies in social acceptability from village to village. As described in the *Brommtoopp* song itself :

We wish the master a golden table
 On all four corners a fried fish.
 In the centre of it a jug of wine
 To induce the Master to jollity (Toews 1977, 304).

Thus, not only drinking, but indeed intoxication ("jollity"), becomes a central aim in the song's world. Some interviewees denied offering or using alcohol, yet others indicated that it was frequently offered by performers or audience as a (sometimes more than) token exchange. However, in some cases, a drunken (or suspected drunken) *Brommtoopp* performer could suffer drastically negative social consequences. Alternatively, as one interviewee who asked not to be identified claimed, the over-indulging man or boy could simply be left behind to sleep it off. Some research participants also described judgment on a performance as too energetic, too jovial or obnoxious, resulting in suspicion that the player was drunk, or even alcoholic! As Menno Kehler explains, in one case,

Everybody thought, "Well, that guy's just a terrible drunk." He just got so wound up because it brought back memories, eh? Man, could he sing.... Even his church elders talked to him about it and heard that he'd been very drunk....He was so hurt. He never sang...again. He disappeared. But, he would never! But, that's what people saw, eh? (PG 2009-13, 14).

Clearly the rambunctious, energetic behaviour a *Brommtoopp* performer embodied was not codified as socially appropriate for a

Mennonite adult man. Boyhood and youthful narrative embodiment of play, dress-up, and foolery transgressed the presumed manhood of a *Brommtopp* performer.

However, many consultants confirmed that traditional players were usually young men, commonly unmarried and thus, like Nova Scotia belsnickles, “occupied a distinctly transitional position, being no longer children, but just on the verge of assuming their full roles and responsibilities....having to give up the carelessness of boyhood and the peer group and face up to the stronger social demands and constraints of adulthood” (Bauman 1972, 239-240). As the markers of perceived succession into manhood are not only culturally relative, but also subjective, it is possible that the young men and boys of historical *Brommtopp* groups were negotiating their transitional age from boy to man through disguise, ritual, altered consciousness from alcohol, and socially inappropriate behaviour. Barry Jean Ancelet, in his descriptions of traditional Cajun Mardi Gras practice, argues that “as young boys become young men and young girls become young women, they shed their adolescence by stepping outside themselves and imitating their elders in public, yet in secret” (1989, 2). Alvina Giesbrecht, after being asked why the young men in the photographs of *Brommtopp* groups shown to her would have chosen to disguise themselves, said “These young people, these young men would not have wanted to let their parents know what they were doing; that would be one thing. Now, the parents might...they might have known but they just let them go ahead and do it. But they were not supposed to be doing it, really; it was actually a no-no” (PG 2009-01). Thus, while in public settings such as neighbours’ homes, for the *Brommtopp* players as for Mardi Gras participants, “the ritual consumption of alcohol serve[d] to loosen inhibitions, while the mask serve[d] as a sort of cocoon, providing a cover for the changes occurring in the real self underneath” (Ancelet 1989, 2).

The deviant, queering of hegemonic manhood, paired with the manifest anxiety of the transitional masculinity embodied by the *Brommtopp* players often scared young children. Consultants who remembered the tradition from their childhood often said they were very afraid of the *Brommtopp*’s strange sound and the weirdly costumed people, even when they recognised their parents’ friends and neighbours. In an interview, Eleanor Chornoboy talked about

"us kids sitting on the staircase and looking at these guys in awe because they didn't act as adults at all" (PG 2009-21, 22). In *Faspa With Jast*, she notes: "the noise and odd looking adult men scared... youngest daughter Anna. But not wanting to miss a thing, she hid behind the door and peered through a small crack to see big men acting as silly as her toddling brothers" (2007, 61). Clearly, men's roles were sufficiently restricted that children were disturbed to the point of being fearful at the idea that they were not fulfilling the scripts dictated to them by their communities. As they became older, however, fear could be replaced by excitement. One minister's daughter, a teenager at the time, followed the players through her community. She commented: "I remember that my dad wasn't home. My dad wouldn't have allowed us to go with him. My sister and I went with them from house to house....I'm sure that if he had been home, we wouldn't have been able to."

In a poignant overlap of traditional meaning and purpose, folklorist Richard Bauman, in his discussion of masculinity in the Nova Scotia belsnickling, argues that "in frightening and intimidating the youngsters of the household, [they] were gaining release from the time, just recently left behind, when they themselves were fearful children, terrified of the strange and the supernatural and subject to external mechanisms of moral control" (1972, 240). We also note that at a revival performance in the summer of 2010 in Steinbach, Manitoba, when the *Brommtopp* drum began to sound on stage, a young girl, approximately four years of age, climbed onto her father's lap, hid her face in his chest, and only apprehensively peeked at the stage for the rest of the performance.¹⁸

Ethnic Drag and Privilege

Many intersections of identity play are integral to the *Brommtopp* performance, as each verse of the associated song depicts a different archetype from a historical heteronormative extended family and household group. While the *Brommtopp* song has many melodic permutations, and like other traditional songs its texts vary, it follows a common overall structure. The general archetypes represented in all

18. See also Patricia Sawin's (2001) discussion of children's fear in contemporary Louisiana Mardi Gras.

versions brought to our attention have been, in order of their usual appearance: a patriarch known as master of the house; an elderly matriarch; a young daughter; an elderly female housekeeper; a young son with a sword and pistol set; a horse keeper boy; a pig herder/shepherd, usually wielding a whip or stick; and, in the last verse, three young girls of colour who come running out of a house. Historical photographs show that performers sometimes dressed in costumes not explicit in the song, such as clowns, animals, and First Nations, South or East Asian, and Jewish stereotypes, as well as wearing masks or using blackface or whiteface (see figure 13).

The song itself does not clearly call for gender cross-dressing. Indeed, we first recognised the link between costumes and song verses when we saw a revival performance in the seniors' home, Eastview Place in Altona, Manitoba, on December 31, 2009. And only the last verse implies any kind of cross-ethnic, or cross-racial identity:

We draw a golden band over the house
And three dark brown maidens rushed out (Toews 1977, 304).

We have few details about how the historical performances actually incorporated – if at all – the costumes and disguise evident in the astonishing number of posed pictures of *Brommtopp* groups we have encountered, dating from the second to the middle decades of the twentieth century. No photographs of actual performances appear to have survived. Further, we have encountered considerable difficulty in persuading most interviewees to give many details about gender or ethnic drag.

The programme published by the Mennonite Heritage Village for their “Singing In Time: Mennonites and Music” concert, which we attended, avoided the issue, rather than accurately translating into English the final verse, as the group sang it in German. Clearly, the greatest concern would be for the “English” (non-Mennonite) attendees to (mis)interpret the verse and its representation as racist. So instead of “three dark brown maidens,” “three pretty maidens” jump from the house. Avoiding the possibility that the song and practice could actually be racist, the decision to include, while excluding, the “three dark brown maidens” reinforces racism as a trivial and historically bound variable for which blame can be displaced for the sake of traditional continuity. The artifice implies that whatever such

words and representations might have meant then, now they reference the past only, and specifically the *Brommtopp* performance, not any contemporaneous or current attitudes and practices. But we find it entirely bizarre that, despite its obvious representations of ethnic stereotypes arguably much more offensive than any linguistic reference to skin colour, the photograph in figure 13 was deemed perfectly acceptable to be on the cover of the concert program. Representations cannot be divorced from what they (potentially) depict; in this case, the images in the photograph invoke the actual marginalisation of ethnoracial minorities in historic and present-day Manitoba.

However, racial and ethnic anxieties were indeed manifested through imitation in historical *Brommtopp* performances. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the tradition flourished in Manitoba, most Mennonites were – as discussed above – new immigrants, settling as members of an ethnoreligious minority whose identity was affected by a narrative of religious persecution in early modern Europe. The implications of identity crisis in the cross-ethnic dress and imitation found in *Brommtopp* make visible the construction of immigrant identity which “emerges out of the fragmentation of colonization, transportation, and migration of peoples, and cultural diaspora” (Clary Lemon 2010, 8). It complicates the construction of identity in the simplistic discourse of posturing the self as known in relation to the mysterious, even incomprehensible, Other. In a tremendous irony, the *Brommtopp* song itself is preserved in otherwise English language community histories and in books and articles on Mennonite folklore in High German. Indeed, there is some controversy as to whether or not the song was actually performed in Low German – the language of informal community – or in High German – the language of formal institutions and religion.¹⁹

The identity crises of Mennonite communities cannot be detached from the *Brommtopp*'s presentation of what cultural theorist Katrin Sieg calls “ethnic drag,” which “includes not only cross-racial casting on the stage, but, more generally, the performance of ‘race’ as a masquerade” (2005, 2). A lumpen functionalism argument would

19. When Greenhill asked ethnomusicologist Doreen Klassen why the *Brommtopp* song was not included in her *Singing Mennonite* (1989), she answered that it was because the song was in High German, and the book included only Low German songs.

make *Brommtoꝑꝑ* ethnic drag “a way of expressing and releasing tensions within a rapidly emerging culture” (Ackroyd 1979, 112). On one level, this racial masquerade offers a flattering view of a strong impression of exotic difference; on another it reflects appropriation and privilege. By “perform[ing] an ethnic identity in order to negotiate the rigid stereotypes of self and other” (Benbow 2007, 517), the white males in *Brommtoꝑꝑ* groups, then and now, may be working through their cultural anxieties of the gendered and/or ethnoracial Other. Clearly, in *Brommtoꝑꝑ*, “the impersonation of ethnic others by a subject that stages and conceals its dominance....in the form of a series of displacements” (Sieg 1998, 297) takes place at the expense of marginalized races and ethnicities.

Nevertheless, we argue that the essentialisation of race and ethnicity are not simply rehearsed but instead problematized in the practice of *Brommtoꝑꝑ*. As Sieg says, in ethnic drag, “Ethnicity [is] underscored as a drag performance in the sense that actors displayed its signs at a distance, rather than in the mimetic mode of merging actor and role. Its signs were shown to be attributed to bodies, rather than originating in them” (1998, 126). The performers’ white, male privilege to perform race as masquerade to construct, as well as preserve, their religious, ethnic and gender identities in crisis is indeed problematic. Yet *Brommtoꝑꝑ* also fractures the understanding of “the palpable, physical effects of ethnicity on bodies that are forced to identify” by race (Sieg 1998, 315). *Brommtoꝑꝑ* performances challenge the deterministic convergence and construction of race and ethnicity, and gender. Through the understanding of ethnicity and gender as socially constructed and embodied through performance, events like *Brommtoꝑꝑ* foreground the construction of, and consumption of, race, ethnicity and gender. Events which in performance cross socially vested lines need to be placed in the hierarchically structured systems of class, gender and ethnicity, and to account for radically unequal positions of access to representation and cultural exchange. But at the same time, a deeper understanding of the *Brommtoꝑꝑ*’s gender and ethnic drag implicates taken-for-granted notions of assimilation into Canadian ethnicity, adulthood, and hegemonic gender scripts, illuminating a disturbance of flourishing, and potentially even queer, identities.

Figure 1- *Brommtopp* players from near Plum Coulee, December 31, 1930. (Photo Courtesy Tammy Sutherland and David Dyck)



Figure 2 -*Brommtopp* players, Sommerfeld, 1914 (Toews and Klippenstein 1974, 304) photograph by Peter G. Hamm (1883-1965) (Photo Courtesy Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg [Peter G. Hamm Coll. 526.27.5])



Figure 3-Poster from a series of concerts organised by the Steinbach Mennonite Historic Village in 2010.

Choralbuch.

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Mennonites & Music**

**Concert and
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7:30 pm
The Knohn Barn
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Figure 4 - Marcie's paternal Grandmother, Mary Fehr, in traditional Old Colony Mennonite dress in front of the Fehr family home in Winnipeg, June, 1970. Mary's youngest son - Marcie's Uncle Gary - is standing on the steps. (Photo Courtesy Mary Fehr)



Figure 5 - (from left to right) Great-grandfather Fehr, Isaac Fehr (Marcie's paternal Grandfather), Great Aunt Nettie, and Great-grandmother Fehr in Hochfeld, Manitoba, 1931. (Photo Courtesy Mary Fehr)



Figure 6 - Girls who attended Hochfeld School, in Hochfeld, Manitoba, 1936. Back row center: the only teacher, who did not speak Low German. (Photo Courtesy Lena Rempel)



Figure 7 - An auction sale in front of the Rempel family house barn in Hochfeld, Manitoba, 1983. The house portion is to the left, the barn portion to the right. (Photo Courtesy Lena Rempel)



Figure 8 - Great uncle Peter with dog, showing house barn (house to the left, barn to the right). (Photo Courtesy Lena Rempel)



Figure 9 - Great Uncle Roland Dyck sitting between the meat smoking shack (left), and the summer kitchen (right), on the Rempel family farm, circa 1945. (Photo Courtesy Lena Rempel)



Figure 10 - From left: Great Uncle Peter Rempel, Great Uncle Henry, Grandfather Isaac Fehr, Great Uncle Roland Dyck lying in the grass in front of the summer kitchen at the Rempel farm in Hochfeld, Manitoba. Cooking in the summer kitchen helped to keep the temperature inside the house as low as possible during the hot prairie summers. Behind, right: Great Aunt Lena, and Grandmother Mary Fehr, exiting through the joint door between the house kitchen, and the barn. (Photo Courtesy Lena Rempel)



Figure 11- Great Aunt Lena Rempel plowing grass on Rempel family farm, (circa 1940). (Photo Courtesy Lena Rempel)



Figure 12 - from left: Great Aunt Tina, Great Aunt Lena, and Great Aunt Nettie Rempel picking corn on Rempel family farm (circa 1940). (Photo Courtesy Lena Rempel)



Figure 13 - *Brommtopp* Troupe from Amsterdam District near Rosenfeld, Manitoba, circa 1928. (Photo Courtesy Marge Friesen)



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