

Refashioning *Kleine Gemeinde* Women's Dress in Kansas and Manitoba: A Textual Crazy Quilt

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Introduction

There has been little academic writing about conservative Dutch-Russian Mennonite women's dress to date.¹ The few studies about Mennonite women's dress, including their head coverings (also referred to as prayer coverings), that do exist are from branches of conservative Swiss-North American Mennonites. This paper is an autoethnographic and historical narrative of women's dress in the *Kleine Gemeinde*, one of the conservative Dutch-Russian church communities, including the Sommerfelder, Saskatchewan Bergthaler, Chortitzer and Old Colony (Reilaender) groups, that emphasized plain dress for women.² I use "dress" as defined by Beth Graybill and Linda Arthur: "all the ways in which the body expresses identity, including not only clothing, but accessories, grooming and the shaping of the body."³ This paper is part of a larger work that explores the imaginative use of sources and presentation forms to make ordinary women more visible in history, and in this instance more visible in conservative Mennonite history.⁴ The following narrative is based on memory,

diaries, pictures from family albums, stories passed down orally – one fragment at a time over many years, making a virtual “crazy quilt.”

In the fashion of a crazy quilt, I piece together scraps of information about women from different generations and place them alongside each other. There are four blocks (or sections) to my textual crazy quilt. The first block, “*Daatja*,” describes the head coverings (kerchiefs) of my *Kleine Gemeinde* mother and grandmothers by piecing together scraps of church history, oral family history, personal memories, and photographs from family albums. The second block, “Dress,” is an autoethnographic narrative that focuses on my childhood in a Mennonite farming community in the Interlake region of Manitoba.⁵ In the third block, “A Photo Essay on Dress,” I use photographs of myself as artifacts to show how a Mennonite girl’s dress changes with maturation and acculturation. The fourth block, “Crazy Quilt,” describes a crazy quilt of fabric remnants from years of my mother’s sewing projects. I conclude my paper with a discussion about the importance of alternative presentation formats for writing women’s history. Reading these pieces side-by-side may seem a little jarring. But when taken as a whole, the disparate pieces form a richer, fuller narrative of *Kleine Gemeinde* women’s dress over time.

Block One: *Däatja* (kerchiefs)

*...the hats themselves were fraught with temptation / according to the Bible women had to cover their hair for worship / a handy excuse for keeping one’s Sunday headwear up to date / though one of my aunts insisted it meant 100% cotton / handkerchiefs from Gladstone’s tied around the chin*⁶

Head coverings were a mandatory article of dress for a *Kleine Gemeinde* woman.⁷ At a 1937 ministerial meeting in Meade, Kansas, *Kleine Gemeinde* ministers encouraged – based on I Corinthians 11 – a uniform head covering for the women in the church.⁸ This was one of twenty-three points that the ministers agreed upon. The *Kleine Gemeinde* changed its name to the Evangelical Mennonite Church in 1952, and the Evangelical Mennonite Conference a few years later,⁹ but its subsequent Statement of Faith in 1956 did not refer to head coverings. It stated only that Christians should “refrain from all worldliness,” including “worldly dress.”¹⁰

It seems the ministers and brethren of individual congregations, and perhaps individual men for their wives, could determine the use of head coverings for a woman: A heavy black kerchief tucked in at the ears and tied under her chin; a gauzy black scarf pinned to her

hair or tied at the nape of her neck under her rolled hair; a tall white hat perched atop her head; a pillbox hat with netting covering her forehead. It all depended on the congregation.

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It was a very nice warm and windy day. I washed a big wash, including parkas and so forth for rags. Jake sowed our first grain 14 acres of barley. In the evening I went along to Washow Bay with Abe Reimers to a meeting for ministers & sisters, dealing about the "Head Covering."¹¹

Where I grew up the church sisters made their own head coverings: black velveteen covered with black netting attached to the crown of the head with bobby pins. Convertibles, my brothers called these signs of women's humility before God and man: convertibles because they were shaped like the fold-back convertible roofs of 1970s automobiles; convertibles because, upon baptism, women donned these coverings as a symbol of their conversion.

For the women in the church of my childhood wearing these coverings was mandatory when attending any church activities. Some women even wore these coverings every day. But my mother, I remem-



Artifact 1. My parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Vider, Manitoba, 1974. Photographer unknown. Personal collection. My mother, Marie Bartel Plett (front row), is wearing a blue pillbox hat that matches the colour of her dress.

ber, put hers on just before walking out the door for church and often she removed it in the car on the way home from church. And when we began attending another church not in the farming community where we lived, she soon traded her black “convertible” for pillbox hats with netting that covered her forehead.

Perhaps my mother’s new head coverings were no more stylish than the black convertible, but she bought them herself in colours that matched the dresses she wore. And then one Sunday she no longer took her turquoise blue pillbox head covering out of its box for Sunday church. Was that after we moved from the Mennonite farming community where I grew up to a Mennonite town in southeastern Manitoba?



“A girl will be visited (reprimanded) by the local ministry for failing to dress properly.”¹²

By the time I was baptized – upon the adult confession of my faith at the age of fourteen – we were attending a church that did not require women to cover their heads. I never had to struggle with wearing that black monstrosity of non-fashion, imagining myself folding it into a more and more narrow strip, trying in shame to make it disappear entirely, hoping no one would notice and reprimand me for my pride.



My aunts who attended churches in southeastern Manitoba wore tall hats to church. How I admired these comparatively fashionable head coverings. *Groosmame*, Dad’s mother, attended the same church, but being of an earlier generation she was more traditional. She covered her head, grey hair combed back and pinned into a bun, with a thick black kerchief. She always wore a kerchief to church and at home to say grace before meals. After she had hurriedly put a meal of fried potatoes and sausage on the table and *plumpst* into a chair, she draped her head with a kerchief, not bothering to tie it. Immediately after grace she tossed the kerchief into a corner.

I remember attending church with my mother’s parents in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. The *Kleine Gemeinde* church in Meade, Kansas had dissolved in the early 1940s. My grandparents attended the Emmanuel Mennonite Church that was formed in 1943. Most of the women in Grandma’s church did not wear head coverings at all. Their blue-tinted hair, styled in salons, glistened nakedly before God. Grandma, however, white hair combed back and pinned into a

bun, wore a black hat with netting over her forehead to church, but she never covered her head at home. Grandma was not nearly as old-fashioned as *Groosmame*. I couldn't imagine that she'd ever worn a heavy black kerchief.

But, like all women who grew up *Kleine Gemeinde*, Grandma at one time also wore the traditional print dress with long sleeves and



Artifact 2. My Plett grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary, Blumenort, Manitoba, 1970. Photographer unknown. Personal collection. *Groosmame*, Elizabeth Kornelsen Plett, is wearing a loosely fitting black dress with three-quarter length sleeves and a black kerchief.



Artifact 3. My Bartel grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary, Meade, Kansas, 1970. Photographer unknown. Personal collection. Grandma, Sarah Doerksen Bartel, is wearing a fitted sky-blue dress with sleeves above her elbows and a black pillbox hat with netting over her forehead.

mandatory heavy black kerchief. At my great grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration, Grandma and all her sisters, except the youngest, wore print dresses with long sleeves and heavy black kerchiefs with a fringe. In pictures of my great-grandmothers, they all wear roomy, long, black dresses, with long sleeves and thick black kerchiefs tucked in at their ears and tied under their chins.



Artifact 4. My Doerksen great-grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary, Satanta, Kansas, 1942. Photographer unknown. Personal collection. Grandma, at the far right, is wearing a heavy black kerchief with fringes and a light-coloured print dress with long sleeves.



Artifact 5. Three of my great-grandmothers: Elizabeth F. Reimer, Roblin, Manitoba, 1944; Maria B. Barkman, Meade, Kansas, before 1934; and Helena R. Plett, Satanta, Kansas, 1942. Photographers unknown. Personal collection. My great-grandmothers are all wearing heavy black kerchiefs, tucked in at their ears and tied under their chins.

My mother did not wear a kerchief when she was baptized by the pastor of the transitional church that was to become the Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Meade, Kansas.¹³ The young women who were baptized during this transitional time decided to wear pale blue dresses for their baptism – not black, as they would have worn had they been baptized in the *Kleine Gemeinde* church a few months earlier. The young women did not wear kerchiefs for their baptism (nor would they have worn them if they had been baptized by the *Kleine Gemeinde*).

When it had seemed as if my mother might be baptized in the *Kleine Gemeinde* church before it dissolved, Grandma had hurriedly ordered a black dress for my mother to wear – Mom's first store bought dress – but she didn't get to wear it then, and later she wore it with some sadness for the dramatic changes these church events had brought to her friendships, family and church life.

My mother joined the *Kleine Gemeinde* church in Blumenort, Manitoba in 1949, a few weeks before she married my father. When she married my father, she wore a kerchief. Once when I asked her why she began wearing a kerchief then, Mom remembered it beginning as a joke. As she was getting dressed for her *Velafnis* (betrothal) her future sisters-in-law teased her that as a married woman she too would have to wear a kerchief — and so she did!



Artifact 6. Baptism, Meade, Kansas, 25 September 1943. Photographer unknown. Marie and Jake Plett collection. My mother, Marie Bartel (first row far left), was one of the baptismal candidates. All the young women wore pale blue dresses. A sure sign they were no longer *Kleine Gemeinde*.



Artifact 7. Marie Bartel, Meade, Kansas, 1946. Photographer unknown. Marie and Jake Plett collection. My mother is wearing her first store-bought dress. Her mother had ordered it from a catalogue for her in 1943 when she was planning to be baptized in the Kleine Gemeinde church in Meade, Kansas.



Artifact 8. My parents' "wedding" picture, Meade, Kansas, 1949. Photographer unknown. Personal collection. My mother is wearing a gauzy black kerchief tied under her chin. Her wedding dress is pale blue, long-sleeved, and fitted at the waist.

Block Two: Dress

She is posing for a group photo that includes my oldest brother, but I am blind to him. All I see are her long, shapely legs, skirt hemmed a few inches above the knees. One knee is bent, thrusting out the opposite hip, causing the fitted skirt of her cotton dress to carelessly ride a little higher up her white thigh. Her long, blonde hair with bangs and neatly trimmed ends flows freely down past her shoulders. Sigh – I am twelve, hair tied into modest pigtails and wearing ugly home-sewn, Fortrel dresses. Could I dare hope ever to look like this cousin, ten years older than I?

*The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.*¹⁴

As an adult I am far removed from the world of my *Kleine Gemeinde* foremothers – geographically, culturally, religiously, and academically – but even now, when I look back at girls' and women's dress during my childhood years, it still raises my hackles. At the time, of course, as a young girl growing up in a community where we all followed the same unspoken rules, I chafed at times, but mostly I took the rules as "normal." The times when I chafed, when I questioned the normalcy of these unspoken rules, were when I had encountered "the world."

In most cases "the world" was the one inhabited by my cousins, who were also Mennonite but lived in communities and attended churches where issues of women's dress were interpreted more liberally. My girl cousins in south-eastern Manitoba, for example, were allowed to cut their hair and wear it "open." They were allowed to wear slacks and blue jeans. When they wore dresses, the skirts were hemmed well above the knees. And my girl cousins and aunts living in the States, attending various Mennonite and evangelical churches, were positively fashionable in comparison to the girls and women in my community. My American aunts wore their hair cut short, permed and coloured. They wore necklaces, earrings and rings. They wore pants and sleeveless dresses with short skirts.

But during the day-to-day of my childhood, I was sheltered from "the world" of my more liberal cousins. I was always in the midst of women and girls from our church community. On Sundays my family all piled into the car and drove a mile and a half to attend Sunday school and church with them. I wore *sinndoagsche Tjleeda* (Sunday dresses) to church, dresses sewn by my mother especially for Sunday wear. Weekdays, summer and winter, I walked to the private church-run school located beside the church. I wore *auldoagsche Tjleeda* (casual dresses) to school, dresses sewn by my mother for everyday use.

We were never allowed to wear pants to school. On cold winter days, to play outside, we girls pulled a pair of slacks up under our skirts. When we came inside from the cold we removed the pants along with our scarves and mitts and parkas.

Thus, I had little exposure to "the world" through human contact. But there were other routes into "the world." My sister and I spent countless hours playing with catalogue-cut-out and store-bought paper dolls. Sitting on the living room floor, we cut out male and female models from the Eaton's catalogue – enough to represent each of our uncles and aunts and their families. At some point we must have had well over one hundred carefully coded cutouts. When we got our

store-bought paper dolls, a gift from my mother's sister, we dressed and undressed them in fancy paper outfits that we would never have been allowed to wear.



Language of Vanity

*Hands seamed the sermon into
cross-stitched passions:
I designed delicate
underthings, pansy-
printed voile...
But conscience
clamped wool skirts
against my calves-
ankles locked, hair
knit into no-nonsense
plaits, the panty
fantasy by sermon's
end repressed. Naked
we stand before our
Lord, and leave him
fully dressed.¹⁵*

I knew from an early age that there was a godly way for girls to dress. I remember a time, likely before I had started school, when my mother fretted because the minister from our church was bringing another male guest to our house. This man was a speaker who had come from the States to lead “deeper life” meetings for our congregation. I was wearing red tights and this particular speaker was vociferously opposed to anyone wearing anything red. My mother debated whether to have me change into different coloured tights. In the end she didn't dress me in more godly coloured leotards, but this decision must have caused her great emotional stress – not because she necessarily espoused his beliefs, but because she anticipated his judgement. Would she be seen as an ungodly woman? An unfit mother?

Block Three: A Photo Essay on Dress

My mother took this picture (Artifact 9) of me in Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg.¹⁶ My parents, five older brothers and I were at a family outing. Just over a year old, I am already a little “Mennonite” girl. I



Artifact 9. One year old, Winnipeg, MB, 1963. Photo: Marie Bartel Plett. Personal collection.

am wearing a pink, gingham dress, proudly sewn by my mother a few months earlier. My untrimmed, uncut hair is drawn back from my face in a style that was to be mine for the next twelve years.



Artifact 10. Grade two school picture, Morweena, Manitoba, 1969. Photo: Menno Penner. Personal collection.

I am approximately seven years old and in grade two at the church-run school. I am wearing a dress sewn by my mother. The bodice and skirt of this dress were made of different fabric and there were little faux pockets at the waist. I wore few store-bought dresses before I was an adult.

My mother has neatly combed and braided my hair as she did every morning for many years. We lived in a busy and practical household. With five boisterous older brothers and a cute younger sister, there was little time or energy for individual attention from my parents. But every morning I would sit very still on a chair in the middle of the pink cup-boarded kitchen while my mother undid my long, thick braids. Gently and patiently, through all my fussing and tears, she combed out the tangles and tightly re-braided my hair: parted on the left side with a short braid woven into two long plaits that hung down my back. My sister was allowed to wear her curly hair in pigtails. Although the style was much the same as mine, I envied her that little bit of freedom.

When I was old enough to wash my own hair, I spent many minutes in front of the small bathroom mirror using the shampoo in my hair to arrange it into styles I could never wear. In accordance with church regulations the cutting of female hair was strictly *Verboten*. No fringes, no trims, no cutting. Period. And we were expected to wear our hair in modest, “unworldly” styles.



Artifact 11. *Sindoagsche Tjleeda*, 1972. Detail. Photographer unknown. Personal collection.

I am ten years old at my oldest brother's wedding. As usual, my sister and I are dressed identically in dresses sewn by my mother: blue fabric with a small white print, lace at the neck and on the edge of short, puffed sleeves; skirt hemmed just below the knees; a ribbon made out of the dress fabric attached at the waist. We are wearing brand new knee socks and shiny new shoes. A modest corsage pinned to our dresses shows that we are members of the bridal couple's family. Once again, my mother has neatly combed and braided my hair for the wedding.

I remember wearing that dress many times after the wedding. Sitting beside my mother in church on Sunday mornings, as the preacher droned his sermon, I would lay my head in Mom's lap with her soothing fingers gently stroking any stray hairs back into place.

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Artifact 12. Knitting, 1975. Photo: Sharon Plett. Personal collection.

I am in the back seat of our 1967 Chrysler New Yorker, returning home from a spring break Easter trip to Meade, Kansas, when my sister takes this picture of me. I am approximately thirteen years old. We (my parents, my sister and I) are returning from a visit to Grandpa. Grandma had died two years earlier in February, 1973. Grandpa has just given me

Grandma's watch for being named after her. I am wearing my youngest brother's denim jacket. On my lap (not in the picture) is one of my treasured hockey magazines. I am knitting a scarf with yarn I bought in Kansas. The colour is "tutti-frutti." I have matured past the age of

wearing my hair in braids, but it is still modestly pulled into pigtails. My ears are not pierced, and other than the watch I wear no jewellery.



Artifact 13. Grade nine school picture, Arborg, Manitoba, 1976. Photographer unknown. Personal collection.

I am fourteen years old and in grade nine. The relative normalcy of my hair and dress ended abruptly upon my leaving the private church-run school for public school. Now I am the only Mennonite girl in school. My clothes and hair indelibly mark me as “other.” Slowly I became acculturated.

I am wearing a store-bought t-shirt in my favourite hockey teams’ colours: red, white, and blue – the jerseys for both the Montreal Canadians and the Winnipeg Jets were red, white, and blue. My hair falls loose past my shoulders. It has still never been cut or trimmed. I wear new, fashionable (for 1976) glasses.

That was the same year my father took me to a Progressive Conservative Party constituency meeting in town. This meant that he was no longer attending the church of my childhood because Mennonite men were not supposed to take an active interest in politics. They were expected to pray for government leaders, not elect them. My father and I also watched the entire Progressive Conservative Party convention on television when Joe Clark was elected leader. If one was going to be a politically active Mennonite, surely one had to vote Conservative.



Artifact 14. Hockey fan, Morweena, Manitoba, 1977. Photographer unknown. Personal collection.

I pose for this photograph in the panelled living room of our farmhouse. I am fifteen years old. My hair, worn “open” with trimmed ends and bangs, indicates that my family is now attending a less prescriptive church. I am wearing one of my father’s farmer caps. I am dressed in fashionable,

store-bought blue jeans. I retrieved the t-shirt from a bag of donated clothes. As evidenced by the hockey paraphernalia around me, I am a fanatic. Unable to afford store bought memorabilia, I put my craft skills to use. I used fabric paints to create my own team logos. On the back of the t-shirt, conveniently trimmed in both Montreal Canadiens and Winnipeg Jets team colours, I painted the number thirteen. At the time, no professional hockey player had that unlucky jersey number.

Block Four: The Crazy Quilt

*Not all the quilts you love are beautiful ...
Not all the quilts you love are sane.¹⁷*

It seems Mom's life work is cleaning up scraps. When she has rid her cupboards of all the scraps, she says then she will buy all new fabrics for a quilt. Some years ago Mom gave a large stash of scraps to a Mennonite woman she knew in Mexico. She asked the woman to make them into crazy quilt tops. These scraps, left over from years of sewing projects, piece together three generations of women: Grandma,



Artifact 15. Crazy quilt (detail). Appliquéd and feather stitched by Mrs. Isaac (Katherina) Thiessen, n.d. Top: variety of fabrics. Backing: burgundy flannel with black and white stars. Tied. 66 x 82 in. Photo: Lynette Plett. Personal collection.

Mom, my sister and me. These fabrics from our past were appliquéd and painstakingly feather-stitched by a woman I've never met. Years earlier these same fabrics had been painstakingly and lovingly stitched into dresses.

This quilt blends our public and private lives, piecing side-by-side those fabrics made into housedresses and everyday clothes – *auldoagsche Tjleeda* – with the special fabrics from dresses worn to church, weddings, baptisms, and graduation – *sinndoagsche Tjleeda*. It is, without a doubt, one of the ugliest quilts I've ever seen. But these fabrics do hold memories.



Ah, were these our first long dresses? We must have changed churches by then. When maxi dresses were in fashion, we were not allowed to wear them. Anything fashionable was strictly verboten. Mini skirts I can understand, but maxis? We – my sister and I dressed alike until we were well into our teen years – we wore these dresses to our youngest brother's wedding. There's the one Mom wore to that wedding.

That fabric with the grey and pink circles? We wore those dresses to our grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary in Kansas. I was eight and my sister was five.

That crazy paisley in dark blues and purples? I remember Mom wearing that for everyday.

I love to touch the brown satiny fabric up here. I think it must have been Grandma's.

The pink fabric here? See it's here and here too. I made a dress of that fabric for my sister to wear to another brother's wedding. I was a bridesmaid – there's the blue fabric from my dress. My sister's dress had miles of fabric in the skirt; a fitted bodice with a white satin v-neck collar; spaghetti straps tied at the shoulder. Very daring. Of course, I sewed a lacy bolero style jacket to cover it all up! I wore that dress, sans jacket, to a wedding I attended with my first boyfriend. I felt feminine and sexy as I slow-danced in his arms all night. I had stopped attending church by then.

The blue fabric with raised white flowers was from the dress my sister wore to her baptism. I had the same one for my baptism – only in white. It's here somewhere too. I was fourteen – adult baptism at the age of fourteen?

Conclusion

*A Babel of textures!—coarse wool, fine wool,
Satin, lace, burlap, cotton, silk, brocade, hemp,
And fussy dolls' pleats!
Can you read it? Do you understand?*¹⁸

How do you discover and write an ordinary life? When it is lived as a woman? When it is lived in the background? When it is lived as a conservative Mennonite woman, *in* the world not of the world? When there are few sources to draw on?

Traditionally, historians have relied on public documents (papers and documents generated by churches and the state, for example), the published record (books, newspapers, and magazines), and papers from a wide range of organizations and institutions.¹⁹ In addition to reconsidering these sources (by asking fresh questions of familiar data and “squeezing every drop of information from every kind of source”) historians of women, Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman argue, “have had to explore some previously unused, even uncollected sources.”²⁰ Historians of women have utilized the diaries and letters and the oral testimony of ordinary women. The definition of what constitutes a historical source, Strong-Boag and Fellman argue, has broadened:

Historians are now beginning to use recipes, songs, and aspects of material culture such as cooking and cleaning equipment, quilts, and wearing apparel to make serious analyses of women’s positions in any given society. They look at the names women chose for their daughters – often those of their own sisters and of their close friends – to help them interpret a female culture and sense of family. Photographs and other visual materials are viewed with an increasingly sophisticated eye for the clues they provide for sense of self, and for patterns of interaction among family members, friends, and co-workers.²¹

While historians of women have been open to asking new questions of conventional sources and to drawing more on unconventional sources (as I have done for this paper), few have ventured into using new and unconventional forms for presenting historical data about women. Susan Trofimenkoff is an exception. She suggests that to write a feminist biography historians would have to consider reshaping the form of biography itself:

How does one fit a woman's life to the pattern of chronological, linear development so common in biographies of men....Most women do not have such a single direction to their lives; usually if they have become subjects of biographies at all they have been involved in hundreds of things at the same time...Is there some way of conveying that multifaceted activity in the style itself of the biography and hence of revealing the individual all the more?²²

Reaching a similar conclusion, Phyllis Rose suggests that if biographers believed in "the partial, tentative, and temporary creation of selves," their subjects could be revealed as people who make, unmake, and remake themselves over the years.²³ Reading and writing discontinuous and non-linear plots and selves would reveal the "messy, halting, contradictory, and imperfect ways" that lives are lived.²⁴

I turn to arts-informed inquiry in which researchers are encouraged to explore unconventional and multi-dimensional forms of representation to more fully reflect the lives they are studying. Educational researchers Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles define arts-informed inquiry as research that "brings together the systematic and rigorous qualities of scientific inquiry with the artistic and imaginative qualities of the arts."²⁵ The purposes of such an inquiry are to understand the complexity of people's experiences in context and to represent these experiences in a way that "draws in viewers or readers to the interpretive process and invites them to make meaning and form judgments based on their own reading of the 'text.'"²⁶ Representational form is a key element in arts-informed research. "The form, itself," write Cole and Knowles, "has power to inform."²⁷

I use quilts and quilting as processes and metaphors to recover, recreate, and represent ordinary women's lives in ways that reflect how these women lived their lives. Writing about her experience of quilt making, Radka Donnell-Vogt describes how parallel it is to the repetitive and fractured nature of her everyday life as a woman:

In part the quilts were a continuation of all the physical work of moving objects, tidying up, handling laundry, folding, stretching, smoothing cloth, dressing and undressing children, making beds, scheduling the days, keeping everything moving, and managing, making do with the time and the leisure left. There [by making a quilt] I was making an inventory, a permanent sign of what went unnoticed as an effort otherwise.²⁸

Quilt making, like so much of women's everyday work, is repetitive. It can be picked up and put down as other responsibilities beckon: "It reflects the fragmentation of women's time, the scrappiness and uncertainty of women's creative or solitary moments."²⁹

Quilt making, like the task of recovering and representing ordinary women's lives, is also about "making do and eking out," working with the pieces you are given and rearranging them into your own design.³⁰ Mary, a woman interviewed for an oral history of women and domestic arts in Texas and New Mexico, illustrates this aspect of quilting:

You can't always change things. Sometimes you don't have no control over the way things go. Hail ruins crops, or fire burns you out. And then you're just given so much to work with in life and you have to do the best you can with what you got. That's what piecing is. The materials is passed on to you or is all you can afford to buy . . . that's just what's given to you. Your fate. But the way you put them together is your business. You can put them in any order you like. Piecing is orderly.³¹

English literature scholar Judy Elsley describes artist Miriam Shapiro's concept of "*femmage*" as "the process of collecting and creatively assembling odd or seemingly disparate elements into a functional, integrated whole."³² *Femmage*, Elsley continues, "denotes an aesthetic of connection and relationships."³³

I am inspired to use unconventional forms of representation to more fully and authentically reflect and reveal conservative Mennonite women's lives. Quilts and quilting are my attempt to recover, recreate, and represent women's fragmented everyday lives and knowledges. Susan Behuniak-Long concludes, "every quilt, then, is more than fabric: It is the preservation of a woman's voice."³⁴ For this paper I have used the crazy quilt as a textual form to piece together scarce and often disparate information about *Kleine Gemeinde* women's dress. In so doing, I hope to reveal *Kleine Gemeinde* women's multi-faceted, nonlinear, and sometimes contradictory experiences of religiously prescribed dress.

Notes

¹ The obstacles for researching *Kleine Gemeinde* women's dress are likely the same as those faced by historians who search for women in Mennonite history more generally. Marlene Epp describes some of these obstacles: Mennonite women's insights and accomplishments are often not recorded; Mennonite women are often hesitant to be associated with a feminist cause; and sources about women from conservative Mennonite groups (like the *Kleine Gemeinde*) are less accessible. Marlene Epp,

- "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the "Underside," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 90-107.
- ² Educational researchers Cole and Knowles describe autoethnographic writing as that which "places the self within a sociocultural context" and "uses the self as a starting or vantage point from which to explore broader sociocultural elements, issues, or constructs." Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, eds., *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2001), 16.
 - ³ Beth Graybill and Linda B. Arthur, "The Social Control of Women's Bodies in Two Mennonite Communities," in *Religion, Dress and the Body*, ed., Linda B. Arthur (New York: Berg, 2000), 9.
 - ⁴ This paper is based on excerpts from my doctoral thesis. Lynette Sarah Plett, "Thinking Back Through Our Mothers: A Sampler Quilt of Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite Women and Country Homemakers," (Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 2006).
 - ⁵ This Interlake community was settled in the early 1960s as a "colony" of the Blumenort Evangelical Mennonite Conference church (what had been the *Kleine Gemeinde* until 1952). Most of these families had recently returned from living in Mexico during the 1950s. I describe the Interlake community and my family's move to and return from Mexico in Block Four of my thesis, "In the world not of the world: Community and separation," *Ibid.*, 62-84. In a 1962 church conference report, the minister explained that in 1960 a group of men searched for a place to start a new colony where "a witness was needed" and that this witness would be "both in work, and in practical everyday example." P. J. B. Reimer, ed., *The Sesquicentennial Jubilee of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1812-1962* (Steinbach, MB: The Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1962), 67. There were other than religious reasons for Mennonites' attraction to the area: "the land was cheap and plentiful, and this more remote place provided them with some isolation where they could adjust to the Canadian lifestyle." Royden Loewen, *Blumenort: A Community in Transition 1874-1982* (Blumenort, MB: Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1983), 611.
 - ⁶ Di Brandt, *Questions I Asked My Mother* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987), 9.
 - ⁷ Conservative Mennonite women have had a multitude of complex responses and attitudes to the prescribed wearing of head coverings. These responses have ranged from a personal belief in the biblical reference to cheerful compliance; from quiet resistance to outright defiance; to all the spaces in between. See for example: Beth E. Graybill, "'To Remind Us of Who We Are': Multiple Meanings of Conservative Women's Dress," in *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, ed. Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Steven D. Reschly (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002): 208-233; Julia Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life: Essays and Poems* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Kimberly D. Schmidt, "Schism: Where Women's Outside Work and Insider Dress Collided," in *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, ed. Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Steven D. Reschly (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). There are numerous visible differences between the Mennonite congregations discussed by these writers and the congregations of my *Kleine Gemeinde* mother and grandmothers and that of my childhood, including the styles of dress and head coverings prescribed, but the symbolism with which head coverings and dress were imbued appears to be much the same.
 - ⁸ Harvey Plett, *Seeking to Be Faithful: The Story of the Evangelical Mennonite Church* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1996), 174. A ministerial conference took place in Blumenort, Manitoba in 1889. The resolutions that came out of that meeting did not refer to women's head coverings or dress in any way. Historian, Henry Fast suggests, "Obviously the ministerial saw no threat

to their Gemeinde in this area. All the churches that were competing for their members were united in practicing a very conservative lifestyle. Therefore, no written statement seemed necessary to say what each group saw as an integral part of the Christian walk." Henry Fast, "The Nebraska Kleine Gemeinde," in *Profile of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde 1874*, ed. Delbert F. Plett (Steinbach, Manitoba: DFP Publications, 1987), 127.

- ⁹ Plett, *Seeking to Be Faithful*, 119. In 1960 the name was changed to the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Ibid.).
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 178.
- ¹¹ Marie Bartel Plett, diary, Monday, 27 May 1963.
- ¹² Graybill, "To Remind Us of Who We Are," 61.
- ¹³ Royden Loewen describes the dissolution of the *Kleine Gemeinde* church in Meade, Kansas in Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth-Century Rural Disjuncture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 87-91.
- ¹⁴ Deut. 22:5 (KJV)
- ¹⁵ Janzen, Rhoda. "Poems." *Mennonite Life* 57, no. 2 (2002): <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2002june/janzen.php>.
- ¹⁶ I use these photographs of myself as artifacts to show how a Mennonite girl's dress changes with maturation and acculturation. My photo essay is inspired by Laura Weaver who explains that in the past nineteen years of writing "personal-experience essays," she treated her cap and plain clothes as an artifact. As a "spectator" of her own life, Weaver demonstrated how changes in "cap/hair/clothing" indicated her "gradual acculturation." In this article, however, Weaver uses photographs of herself to illustrate how religiously prescribed dress, in her case the plain clothes of a conservative Mennonite, does not necessarily deter a woman's participation in the dominant culture. See Weaver, "Plain Clothes Revisited: Empathy for Muslim Women.", *Mennonite Life* 57(2002).
- ¹⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, "Celestial Timepiece." In *Celestial Timepiece: Poems by Joyce Carol Oates*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates (Dallas: Pressworks, 1980).
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Limited, 1991), 7.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 7 and 8.
- ²¹ Ibid., 8.
- ²² Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "Feminist Biography," *Atlantis* 10:2 (1985): 7.
- ²³ Phyllis Rose, "Fact and Fiction in Biography," in *Writing of Women: Essays in a Renaissance*, ed. Phyllis Rose (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), 71.
- ²⁴ Janice Fiamengo, "A Legacy of Ambivalence: Responses to Nellie McClung," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 34: 4 (1999/2000): 74. Fiamengo describes the polarized histories of Nellie McClung that characterize her either as a "heroic feminist foremother" or a "well-meaning, but often seriously misguided zealot" and suggests that a single, totalizing history of McClung is not necessary. Rather, Fiamengo argues, "an emphasis on the complex relationships between McClung's radicalism and her conservatism helps us think more usefully about the messy, halting, contradictory and imperfect ways that progressive social change often occurs." Ibid., 75.
- ²⁵ Cole and Knowles, eds., *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, 10.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 11.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 122. Also see the authors' chapter "Preparing to make sense of gathered life history information" (93-111).
- ²⁸ Radka Donnell-Vogt, "Memoir," in *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists*, ed. Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Incorporated, 1981), 50.

- ²⁹ Elaine Showalter, "Common Threads," in *Everyday Use*, ed. Barbara T. Christian (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 199.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art an Oral History* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1999), 20.
- ³² Judy Elsley, *Quilts as Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996), 13. Elsley is quoting Kay Turner. Elsley explains that the concept of *femmage* is based on Levi-Strauss' "masculinist model" of *bricoleur*: "a marginal figure [who] transforms the materials the world has rejected" (Ibid.).
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Susan Behuniak-Long, "Preserving the Social Fabric: Quilting in a Technological World," in *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, ed. Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (Columbia, Missouri: Missouri University Press, 1994), 167.