Mennonites at Play: Postmodern Aspects of Low German Drama

by

Lesley Glendinning

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

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Abstract

For those approaching Mennonite culture with little or no previous knowledge, the official definition involves accounts of the martyrdom of early Anabaptists (the Mennonites' forerunners), a history of persecution, and a rigid biblical doctrine that persevered into the twentieth century. However, these aspects are matched, and countered, by a tradition of humour that existed alongside the more serious nature of Mennonitism. My thesis explores one expression of this humourous side of the culture in the Low German drama created by Mennonites in Manitoba.

My study explores the characteristics of Low German drama in order to determine both how it functions within the Mennonite community, and its position in relation to English-speaking, mainstream culture. A number of theories aid in my examination of these comic plays, and these can be categorized under the broad term "postmodernism". My discussion investigates Low German drama's subversive qualities, as well as how it probes questions of identity, ethnicity, and the status of women in Mennonite society. Located at the margins of both Mennonite and English-speaking, secular culture in Canada, the Low German comedy in my study holds many important social and theoretical implications with regard to these larger, surrounding entities.

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Introduction – Why postmodern theory for this study?

This project began with my discovery of an entry in *Planting the Garden*, a record of the women's writing held in various archives in the province of Manitoba. The entry indicated the existence of unpublished plays in Low German by women, with the added tag: "often about rural Manitoba women both real and imaginary" (283). When I first came across these words, I felt the excitement that other women—whether writers, researchers or readers—have reported at their discovery of texts previously unknown to them and forgotten by critics. Such texts offered them an opportunity to see into the lives of other women, and spoke to their own experiences. These opportunities are less rare now than they were in the past, of course, but this particular medium struck me as an unrecognized type of literature that perhaps had new things to tell us. My research confirmed this suspicion, and I was excited to find I was able to identify and assess elements of the plays in relation to current literary theories that I believe are necessary to the understanding of literature, drama, ethnicity, and culture. For instance, my choice of subject material would not have been justified without the expanded vision of what constitutes value, which is one of postmodernism's attendant traits. Theorists make the case that it is not intrinsic value but social structures that govern the choice of literature in established canons. Aesthetic criteria that were held to be timeless and unwavering are now replaced with the view that these standards are dependent on social position. My project here is to test the validity of some of these theories when applied to Low German Drama (LGD), and to determine how postmodernism can shed light on LGD.

Here it must be noted that these theories can be helpful in identifying qualities in literature from periods in the past, and that the term "postmodern" then indicates these characteristics and how the literature operates rather than where it falls in time. The LGD in my study is produced by Mennonites in Manitoba, a people whose history reaches back to the Anabaptists of northern Europe. This group that emerged during the Reformation established their faith through a radical stance of nonconformity against powerful ideologies in their day, and these origins are pertinent to my discussion of Mennonite culture. One of the foundational beliefs of the Anabaptists is the idea of separation (Epp 32), which is commonly understood simply as living apart from mainstream culture; however, accompanying this idea is the more encompassing view that all elements of reality can be classified as belonging to one of two opposing symbolic categories represented by good and bad, sacred and profane, spiritual and physical, and heaven and earth. The Mennonites strove to separate themselves from 'the world', which falls on the lower or earthly pole, living apart from the rest of society both geographically and through strict adherence to the tenets of their biblical beliefs. In line with these divisions, Mennonite culture has had two distinct languages that correspond to the separate areas of existence: the "higher", spiritual activities of Mennonite life were conducted in High German, while for everyday interactions at home, at work, and "on the street", Low German was used.[1] And because the dualistic way of thinking entails value judgments that rank opposites through comparison and contrast, the language of domestic

[1] The use of High German in church services can be traced back to the eighteenth century in Prussia, when Dutch was officially given up in this setting. Because of its similarity to the Dutch dialects, Low German became the language of commonality among immigrants to Prussia, and here the language was standardized, according to Reuben Epp. Here I will add that the terms "low" and "high" in relation to the language do not indicate value, but elevation, the "low" dialect developing in the lowlands of northern Europe, and the "high" forms occurring in the area of southern Germany, in mountainous country.

or everyday affairs ranks lower than that of spiritual matters. This tendency to classify extends to the two genders as well, and critic Edna Froese notes the paradoxical nature of the Mennonite stance towards the sexes: the Anabaptists founded their movement upon the rejection of the principle of a hierarchy among believers, which was the Catholic model, but retained the dominant role for men (202). Having two distinct categories means that artistic and expressive elements of culture are also designated into these areas, and while aspects such as canonical literature, church sermons and choir performances are associated with higher ideals (Van Dyke 30), what is often now described as "folk" culture (Erb 204) falls into the category of lesser significance. LGD, along with arts such as quilt-making, preparing ethnic foods, woodworking, and storytelling, belongs in this latter category. Focusing on a marginal aspect of the culture like LGD retrieves an element of the Mennonite world, and exposes previously overlooked parts of the culture that accompany the drama, including women's interests and the experiences of everyday life.

Through these official and unofficial practices, and during their search for freedom from persecution, the Mennonites developed a unique religious and ethnic identity. This identity, however, was not necessarily uniform and is still subject to dispute within the community; some of the plays openly present attempts to define Mennonite identity. The articulation of who they were and were not, early in the movement's inception, is an important form of self-definition, and disagreement on the subject of what constitutes Mennonite identity has led to many divisions among them. The debates on this subject began with the Anabaptists in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Their theology was related to a wide-reaching movement of dissent against the Catholic

Church sparked by Martin Luther's teachings at the University of Wittenberg. This movement spread through the northern regions of Europe, taking a form that grew into Anabaptism in the Netherlands. Educated men such as brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips and Menno Simons were impelled to reform the abuses of the Catholic church, and inspired by the idea of a direct relationship between the individual and God without the need for an interpreter. In connection to this emphasis on individual understanding was their opposition to infant baptism. On this point the Dutch leaders differed from both the clergy aligned with Rome and the reformation leaders such as Luther, and their view put them violently at odds with the power structures of sixteenth-century Europe. Through the sacrament of infant baptism, membership in a system clearly ruled (and covertly exploited) by a religious hierarchy was not negotiable, but understood to be divined or given, and therefore unquestionable. To refuse automatic membership was to invite the persecution that Mennonites subsequently suffered, due to how closely religion was bound up with the politics of social control. On ideological grounds they insisted on the right of the individual to choose to be baptized at an age of discernment (Weigle 3). Their view defined faith as participatory, marked by the individual's decision to become part of the "community of believers" (Loewen and Reimer 9).

This participatory faith is analogous to more recent theories that see identity as dependent on the influence of the group to which the individual belongs. In some of the Low German plays, identity is presented clearly as a performance of certain accepted practices and gestures. Postmodern theory encourages the examination of LGD as an aspect of the culture that actively shapes identity, and highlights the performative element of identity. That is, rather than seeing identity as the reflection of a stable self,

performance theory works from the view that the self is created through one's exposure to social influences.

Anabaptist belief, then, emphasized commitment to the group over one's own interests, and this idea is underscored by the priority of humility or *Gelassenheit* in Mennonite culture. While the view that each believer must make a conscious choice appears to valorize the individual, the system of thought that he/she accepts by the act of choosing is precisely one that denies the importance of the self. The Mennonites' attempts to apply different interpretations of biblical passages to daily life, on these and other subjects, resulted in varying streams of Mennonitism. The Low German plays I examine show evidence of the ongoing dynamic and are a medium for the transference of Mennonite conceptions of identity.

In identifying themselves as the true followers of God's will, the Anabaptists broke with the religious authorities that had such a part in the political affairs of early modern Europe in the sixteenth century; however, by their insistence on another, often apocalyptic vision of the world, they reinforced their own version of reality that tied up all the details of existence. The idea of Judgment Day as real and imminent gave a definitive and climactic ending to the rigidly structured storyline of their outlook. Walter Klassen documents the central place of apocalyptic views in many of the early strains of Anabaptism and later in some Mennonite groups as well (41); with the Bible as the main source of knowledge, history was neatly framed by "In the beginning…" and predictions of the end times in the Book of Revelations, so that everything in between was required to fit into the progressive narrative that the Bible outlines. The depiction of the violent and punitive events in store for nonbelievers underscored the urgency of accepting the

correct view, and drew attention to the end of mortal life rather than everyday existence. Because they leave no questions unanswered, such firm and complete visions are difficult to refute; for this reason the Anabaptist/Mennonite belief system resembles not only much religious doctrine, but also the secular view that posits the outcome of modern thought and technology as an improved or even utopian society (which has been pervasive in Western culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). The various ways in which LGD resists these all-encompassing conceptions suggest that other interpretations of the world are possible, and that our behaviour need not be dictated by these authoritative narratives.

Postmodern theory begins with the recognition that the ideology that accompanies the canonical or "classic" literature of Western culture is supported by doctrine and powerful social structures, and that this literature reflects the prevailing order and organizing schemes of this culture. Jean-François Lyotard begins to lay out some of the developments of what he calls "the postmodern condition" in his book by that name, and offers a condensed definition of postmodernism as simply "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). The idea that history is progressive, for example, and that knowledge and technology will lead to global emancipation (*The Postmodern Condition* 32 and "Defining Postmodernism" 1613), are beginning to be seen as culturally-dependent rather than universal truths. Where the modernist literary tradition has come to be seen by postmodern theorists as a "totalizing" discourse that characteristically ties all details into an artistic unity, postmodern literature often presents its ideas and its meanings through fragmentation and the disruption of continuity. The rational structures and *a priori* reasoning used to determine and validate truth in modernist texts are

countered in postmodern texts with alternative, partial views and often playful methods (Küchler 1). Assumptions bound up with the modernist approach include the view that language is transparent, referring directly to the world in a one-to-one correspondence, and the related idea that the writer speaks from a position of authority and insight into the world she sees around her. A feature of modernism is also that the writer typically puts forward a central, authoritative point of view as a technique whereby she creates unity and convinces the reader/audience that the narrative presentation is "true". Postmodern literature typically works through alternative narrative strategies, allowing for multiple voices to become audible, for example, and often eschewing the need to convince the reader of the truth of the narrative. While there may be some disagreement among critics about the definition of "postmodernism", I will use the term in the way I understand Lyotard to use it, to refer to this group of features and their implications.

My thesis deals with specific theories, the first being that ideology is conveyed through dramatic and literary form. The modernist view of history as progressive is mirrored, in Mennonite belief, by the biblical perspective that sets out the idea of the afterlife (and the concept of Judgment Day) rather than the vision of a socialist society, for example, as the "end", or as the future goal of human life. Critic Ric Knowles outlines the background behind modern dramatic form that accompanies and reinforces these metanarratives, tying biblical structure to Aristotelian formulations and the dynamics of the male psyche as theorized by Freud. Foremost in Aristotle's list of attributes for the drama is the conveyance of a single action, and this idea is connected to the idea of a clearly-distinguished beginning, middle, and end (Knowles 31). Knowles describes the formula that ties all details of the play to a theme or underlying message through

character, plot and other aspects of the work, noting the similar patterns that are repeated and reproduced and that signify a continuity that supports the reigning political system. When he discusses the "politicization of form" and the "unconscious of the plays" (16), he refers to the ideology that is concomitant with the ways such dramatic works are written, performed, and received. To the extent that all metanarratives depend on hierarchical structures, cause and effect logic, and linear thinking, literary and dramatic form can either mirror and reinforce such ideology by displaying these characteristics or attempt to subvert these unified, hegemonic views through innovative approaches. I am using "form" to include all of the ways that the narrative presents; that is, not only the "what" but the "how" of the work. And the form that LGD takes often strays from conventional methods of presentation and so defies the vision of a unified whole that complies with and supports metanarratives, both those outside their culture and within the Mennonite community. In addition to the long-established ideologies of biblical and modernist tradition, the structures behind the early-twentieth-century political drive to make Canada a homogenous society, for example, are compromised by the disruptions presented through the dramatic form of the plays. While breaking from traditional form (through a fragmentary style or the incorporation of irrational elements) can in itself be an act of resistance to unifying or containing metanarratives in general, the plays also speak to specific ideologies; communicating in Low German, for instance, refutes the conception of Canadian society as uniformly English-speaking.

Also pertinent to my discussion is the school of thought known as social constructionism, as discussed by theorists such as Annette Kolodny and Carolyn J. Allen. My study deals with two of these formulations specifically, both connected to the recent

loss of surety in many areas of knowledge. The erosion of confidence in the origins and stability of identity leads, in one new articulation, to the view that the "decentered self" is no longer a self grounded in a timeless, individual soul, but that this self, or rather, the "subject", is created through social channels. As Allen explains, "In its loosest usage the term 'subject' dislodges the individual as a locus of meaning, denies the existence of an ahistorical transcendent self, and marks as ideologically created the myth of the Cartesian cogito, an essential being, a free individual freely choosing life's directions" (279). Following the disintegration of the modern concept of the unified, cohesive self, she expresses the idea of the subject as "a construction, a product of signifying practices which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious..." (279). My concern here is with the ways that identity can be formulated in terms of cultural products like LGD. As the Mennonites' view of identity is dependent on their own consensual definition, and therefore the self becomes a cultural product, LGD can be understood as a force through which this product is created. The plays do important work, then, in the formation and reinforcement of Mennonite identity, modeling behaviour and offering discussion about identity through dialogue, among other techniques.

A second application of social constructionism is in the identification of the artificiality of the aesthetic standards used to create the literary and dramatic canons. Annette Kolodny notes that feminist scholars have shown how canonical works conform to the tastes and perspectives of those in privileged social positions ("Dancing Through the Minefield", *Leitch* 2146). With this body of theory firmly established, critics can now look to the margins of canonical literature to find new works and assess them using different kinds of standards. These new approaches include considerations of how the

texts appeal to women, for example, which traditional criteria notoriously fail to do. The political element of so-called aesthetic standards, then, is significant as well, in that the exclusion of certain types of literature from the canon mirrors the marginalization of and attitudes towards women and the literature that concerns them. As Annette Kolodny asserts, "The power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance … reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large" (2149). Jonathan Cullers traces feminist theories that point out the tendency for conventional literature to privilege a "male" sensibility, characterized by an emphasis on intellectual, rational and hierarchical ways of apprehending the world. Where LGD incorporates elements of the sensory world, for example, this one-sided tradition is counterbalanced, and alternative ways of communicating are brought into view as valid. In the Mennonite culture, with its clearly differentiated classifications for all aspects of culture, the application of these views shines new light on the worth of the Low German skits and plays.

The recognition of worth in previously marginalized literatures corresponds to a movement that responds to the absence of everyday experience, particularly that of women, in other areas of study as well. Gloria Neufeld Redekop outlines the neglect of women generally in historical accounts, and the beginnings of 'social history' that seeks to remedy this absence. She explains the concepts behind the growth of this new approach to history:

> Since the rise of social history—a history focusing on ordinary people and one that claimed to be told "from the bottom up"—source material not previously considered valid, began to be accepted. These included archival materials;

> routinely generated records; oral histories; registers; artifacts; autobiographies; local historical records; letters and diaries; the organizational records of women's clubs and religious organizations. The acceptability of these sources for historiography meant that the documentation of the history of ordinary women began to be regarded as valuable and legitimate. (16)

Redekop's discussion of the "parallel church", in which she depicts the importance of women's groups as well as their consignment to the margins of Mennonite culture, speaks to these developments. Studies like Redekop's offer connections to LGD, which is so often created and produced by women. Many of the women's church groups were and are the ones who produce LGD, with women donning costumes to represent the male characters. This practice is particularly significant for the way it opens up the possibilities for women as comedians and satirists in the culture; as well, it has historical interest in being radically unusual in theatrical tradition. And just as the new sources for what makes history are legitimated, LGD's quality of being created from elemental building blocks drawn from everyday, "trivial" objects, can be seen in a new light, and one that shows its value as a cultural and artistic product.

Walda Katz-Fishman and Jerome Scott echo Redekop's observations with their discussion of the "bottom-up movement" in sociology; in their explanation of the roots of the change to this wider-reaching and more inclusive approach, they note the problem of theory's removal from the lived world (374). They detail the response to a growing awareness of this distance between theory and its real-world referents in the description of the social background of the shift, which connects LGD to larger movements outside Mennonite culture: "The movements of the 1960s and 1970s – black liberation, national

liberation and anti-imperialist/anti-colonial struggles, women's equality, sexual equality, environmental justice struggles, etc. – created the conditions for a radical sociology" (371). The developments in these fields attest to a change in perspective to a more democratic view; the shift signals an "increasing political and social inclusion" (Katz-Fishman and Scott 372), and my study takes these ideas into account by attempting to show how LGD includes some of the marginalized elements that these struggles involve. As these changes clearly cross disciplines, they affect the way we see and create the arts as well.

The "bottom-up" theory connotes the idea that the basic "things" of everyday, lived experience are significant, and that LGD has a political component in its focus on the everyday. The names of some of the plays are enough to denote their subject matter as belonging to the personal, domestic sphere: *Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a diet* (sic), *Christmas Clothing*, *What did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*, *The Hat*, and so on. The content of the plays comes directly from Mennonite community life; this material includes situations such as the comical events in N.H. Unruh's *A Wonderful Opportunity*, which depict the many requests for a ride and items to be bought for relatives, friends, and neighbours when Henry Janzen makes a plan to drive to Winnipeg from one of the Mennonite settlement communities in southern Manitoba. This premise is enough on which to build a full play, complete with numerous props and seven characters. In its ability to embody the elements of Mennonite material existence, LGD displays a vital connection to 'real-world' experience.

My thesis explores these theories with regard to LGD, and my first chapter suggests the work that these plays accomplish through form. With the help of Mikhail

Bakhtin's writing on carnival and Barbara C. Babcock's essay on ritual clowning, I explore the playful aspects of LGD as criticism. Where the plays disrupt the rational structures that support the metanarratives that constrain and limit meaning, they suggest alternative ways of thinking. In her discussion of the marginal or "ex-centric" position of Canadian writers (3), Linda Hutcheon confirms the insights of these critics when she points out that "...frequent use of verbal irony and word play ... is another way in which the ex-centrics, be they Canadians, women, or both, can subvert the authority of language, language seen as having a single and final meaning" (7). Kay Friesen's *Forgetful Jake* and Mary Pauls's *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* are especially good examples of formally subversive plays. As well as their style, their content deals with the issues surrounding language retention in the face of the pressure to conform to English-only culture. Doug Reimer's application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of "minor" literature to Mennonite writing is another concept to keep in mind when investigating LGD, where this theory helps to highlight how LGD appropriates English for its own use, and expresses itself in contrast to conventional modernist models and stylistic practices.

In my second chapter I examine the ways that identity can be seen as culturally controlled and shaped by the forces of both sanctioned and unofficial artistic creations. Sarah M. Corse's study of American and Canadian 'national' literatures implies that identity is not the foundation of expressive arts such as literature and drama, but that social forces create the idea of what a particular culture's identity should be, and employ all the arts in promoting this idea. Erin Hurley's particular articulation of identity as performative is also a useful theory through which to view Mennonite identity and LGD;

when we see identity as a practice rather than a stable category, we gain further understanding both of cultural identities and the assumptions that accompany these.[2] LGD can also be understood as a ritual that acts on the audience to reinforce identity. Barbara C. Myerhoff's paper on ritual and identity adds to my conclusions in this area. In light of these ideas, I find it useful to look at Margaret Tiessen's *The Right Christmas Gifts*, Arnold Dyck's *Four Mennonites Who All Agree on One Thing*, Elizabeth Peters's *The Cherry Hedge*, and Linda Ens's *I Want to Choose*. All show aspects of the instability of identity, even when they overtly direct the reader towards a distinct definition of Mennonite identity. The plays suggest and support the idea that (Mennonite) identity is a performance rather than a true reflection of the interior person.

My third chapter deals with the marginalization of LGD, examining the reasons for this position and suggesting the ways that LGD itself celebrates the overlooked aspects of Mennonite culture. LGD occupies a space on the edge or boundary of the official canon because of its content and style, and I argue that connections may be drawn between the plays and women's 'parallel' culture in traditional Mennonite society. When Elizabeth Peters's mother wanted to start a LGD group in the 1930s, for example, she had to contend with opposition from the church elders and convince them of the benefits to the community that this activity would bring (Peters 2005), and this initial withholding of approval illustrates the attitudes towards activities that fell outside official church-related categories. As a practice based so solidly in experience, LGD can be viewed with the 'bottom-up' perspective in mind. These connections strike a chord with feminist theory "with its commitment to material change" (Allen 279), and suggest the aptness of

[2] Although performance theory is put forward by a number of theorist, such as Judith Butler and Marvin Carlson , I selected Hurley's model because the idea of a theatrical "triad" struck me as especially relevant to my explorations of identity.

conducting a feminist analysis of the plays. Two plays about marriage, written at different points in time, invite a comparison of the ways women are represented; Elizabeth Peters's *One Must Marry*, a version of the Dutch *One Must Get Under the Hoof* (the dates of which are unknown) shows marked differences in attitudes towards women when viewed beside Linda Ens's *I Want to Choose*, written in 2004. While Ens uses some of the conventions of the drama to overturn stereotypical representations of women, other writers, female and male, use different approaches to theatrical presentation, putting objects from the everyday world on stage, for example, to convey their ideas. The study of marginal activities such as women's societies and LGD is a step towards breaking through the boundaries that segregate 'high' and 'low' culture. This crossing of borders is underscored by the crossing of the boundary between fiction (the abstract or ideal) and the actual world, and LGD carries out this crossing through theatrical devices, such as having the actors address the audience. These devices convey the close connection the two "worlds" have in Mennonite life. Where domestic, private, or intimate activities qualify for representation in artistic productions, the idea that art is not separate from experience comes across. This perspective is helpful when looking at Margaret Tiessen's *Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a diet* (sic) and Kay Friesen's *What did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*. Current theories that draw attention to the division between actual or 'lived' experience and representations of this experience are applicable to the investigation of LGD.

The connection between the world of experience and artistic expressions has another aspect as well; LGD is always presented on 'entertainment evenings' (Interview, Ens 2005) as a fundraiser either for projects within the community or for those in need

elsewhere, and this concern with social issues was part of my initial interest in the Mennonites. My experience with the culture began in the 1980s when I attended Westgate Mennonite Collegiate in Winnipeg, where I studied Mennonite history and was exposed to many of the ideas that inform the attitudes and practices of Mennonites on many fronts. For example, the Mennonites' nonconformity continues in their commitment to marginalized people both locally, with their involvement in such projects as Habitat for Humanity, and their highly organized and well-recognized efforts to build peace and relieve suffering internationally through institutions such as the Mennonite Central Committee. Since meeting my husband at Westgate, I have had the opportunity to be part of a Mennonite family although I am not of this heritage myself, and my interest has grown through knowing the people in his family, and learning about the cultural background that brought Mennonites from the northern regions of Europe, through multiple migrations to Eastern Europe and eventually to Manitoba. It is with a deep respect for these people that I approach this subject, with the goal of understanding more about the culture from which my husband comes.

The plays I have chosen come from a variety of sources, and so appear slightly different in form. I obtained copies of some from the archives at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, where I was directed by the entry in *Planting the Garden*. These were grouped together in one file, were type-written and generally short, and had no dates to indicate when they were written or performed. Accession dates for the plays in this collection between 1973 and 1978 gave some suggestion of their times of production. Among them are Margaret Tiessen's *Onkel Giesbrecht geht unnen Diet* [*Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a Diet*] and *De rechtje Wienachtsjeschentje* [*The right Christmas*

Gifts]. Mary Pauls's only play in this group is *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*. Also in this loose collection of unpublished material are Kay Friesen's *Veenachts Klida* [*Christmas Clothing*], *Dei Fiyaitzuma Jake Kaila* [*Forgetful Jake*], and *Voht Dreuch dei Yiesprachtshi em Shaldeuk?* [*What Did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*]. Included in this file were Elizabeth Peters's *Eena Mott Frei* [*One Must Marry*], which is a translation of the Dutch *Eena Mott Unjre Huw* [*One Must Get Under the Hoof*], and *The Cherry Hedge*, which was performed in 1981 at the anniversary celebration of her hometown of Winkler. At the Mennonite Heritage Centre I was directed by archivist Conrad Stoese to southern-Manitoba playwright Linda Ens, who sent me her unpublished works by e-mail, and I then printed them out; *Dee Tjnibbla em oolen Peetasch-Hüs* [*The Chiropractor in the Old Peter's House*] was produced in 2001, while the production of *Etj Well Waehlen* [*I Want to Choose*] is pending. Agnes Wall's work *Dee Hoot* [*The Hat*] was given to me by Elizabeth Enns, and was put on by her women's church group (also known as the "Ladies Auxiliary"), the Willing Helpers of North Kildonan Mennonite Church. Both plays by men are from published collections, and the dates suggest that Arnold Dyck's work from 1938 (and printed in gothic script) is the earliest in my study. His *Fea menische Mensche jen sitj enn eenem Schtetj eenijh* [*Four Mennonites Who All Agree on One Thing*] comes from the well-known and -loved *Koop enn Büa* series of sketches he wrote, named after the two naïve characters which they feature. *Dee Scheene Geläajenheit* [*A Wonderful Opportunity*] (1973) by N.H. Unruh is from a published collection as well, and adheres most closely to the appearance of contemporary scripts. Of the thirteen I studied, eleven are by women, and all are comedies. The genders of the playwrights in my chosen group of plays correspond, by all indications, to the general

tendency for women to write these plays rather than men. The overwhelming number of comedies (I eliminated only one play in the Mennonite Heritage collection, due to its serious nature) as well as verbal reports I have from audience members allow me to generalize that the comedic approach and structure typifies LGD. In addition, I noted immediately that the comedic aspect of the plays was a significant attribute that I wanted to investigate. Needing to limit my study to a manageable number of texts, I judged that the plays I have here comprise a good representation of LGD from early in its inception in Manitoba to the present day.

In addition to the diversity of sources, the languages used in the plays vary as well. One of the plays, Elizabeth Peters's *The Cherry Hedge,* is written exclusively in English. Some have a mixture of English and Low German words, such as *The Right Christmas Gifts* and *The Hat*, and some have High German words as well (*I Want to Choose*, for example). *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* is a combination of English, Low German and French. These works present other examples of border crossings that postmodern theory draws attention to.

The productions of the plays vary in style to some extent as well. They involve extensive props and fairly full costume, although these are often not full enough to be totally convincing; the women who dress as men go only so far as to make themselves laughable, painting on mustaches and stuffing their shirts with pillows. Low German theatre productions often take place in church basements, and they are attended by a high, festive spirit. My research made me aware of the LGD created and practiced in Winnipeg and rural Manitoba only, such as the theatre groups based in Landmark, Reinland, and other southern-Manitoba Mennonite communities, and I did not look into (nor did I find)

evidence of this kind of theatre elsewhere. While it may indeed occur, LGD appears to be a stronger force, or produced quite differently, in Manitoba than in Ontario, for instance (not being mentioned in Redekop's study of Mennonite women's societies and their work). The entertainment evenings are invariably well-attended, which attests to the continuation of the language at the present time.

Although I believe that some of my work here breaks new ground in calling attention to LGD for study, my thesis seeks a complementary place in relation to research that has been done in similar areas. I recognize Doreen Klassen's work *Singing Mennonite*, for example, as an important examination of aspects of Mennonite "folk" culture and its place in Mennonite society. Parallels can be drawn between the function of the Low German songs in Klassen's book, as she describes this function, and LGD; like the songs, Low German plays are not only "a vehicle for inter-ethnic differentiation" (as my study will show), but they also "convey Mennonite values by expressing ideals and tensions among Mennonites themselves" (10). Indeed, a Low German song that appears in Klassen's collection is featured in one of the plays (*Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*), and is sung in the context of the Mennonites' interaction with the French community. As an anthropologist, Klassen cites Victor Turner's terms "celebration[s] of disobedience" and "rituals of rebellion" (12) to describe how some songs operate. These observations are applicable to aspects of the drama that particularly interest me in this paper. My conclusions are involved with the "rebellious" nature of LGD, as well as the "criticism and elevation of pan-Mennonite ideals" (12) that the songs, according to Klassen, also demonstrate.

Low German playwright J.H. Janzen reports that "...if ever something out of the ordinary broke the monotony of our Mennonite village life in Russia, we would say, 'Why that is almost like a story'" (22). His remarks resonate with some of the ideas in my thesis, such as the speed and ease with which the experience of everyday events becomes associated with narrative, and the close connection between reality and fictional creations. The following study focuses on LGD as a marginalized literature, and attempts to analyze the place and function of LGD in Mennonite and majority English-speaking Canadian culture. With the help of theories regarding form and ideology, the contingency of identity, and the blurring of boundaries between reality and representation, my project attempts to disclose about LGD both 'what it is' and 'what it does' with regard to the surrounding culture/s. My conclusions suggest ways that LGD embodies subversive, material approaches to representation, which I hope might lead to further understanding of the continuing vitality of a minority language and culture in the face of ever-increasing pressures to conform to the dominant culture in Canada.

Chapter One - Theatrical Form and Meaning: LGD as a Subversive Activity

In this chapter I explore the ways that LGD enacts its resistance to the metanarratives that are conveyed metaphorically by theatrical form.[3] Five of the plays lend themselves particularly well to an examination with the view that theatre can act either to "construct or disrupt unities..." (Knowles 32); where the plays "disrupt", they protest totalizing narratives such as the fundamentalist or literal reading of the Bible. Kay Friesen's *Forgetful Jake* and Mary Pauls's *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* (both undated) illustrate LGD's playful and fragmentary form, and the way that presentation can fly against established codes. The alternating use of different languages such as English and Low German is one kind of disruption, refuting the pressure from mainstream culture to speak English only. In light of Barbara A. Babcock's study, an aspect of the critical work with which these plays are involved is in the undoing of the rational structures upon which the social order is based. *Trudeau* also opens up the issue of acculturation with its attendant risk of the loss of native languages, and the involvement of these questions with cultural power structures. Margaret Tiessen's *The Right Christmas Gifts* and Agnes Wall's *The Hat* bring into focus the erosion of Low German usage in the descendants of the first generations of Mennonites in Canada, suggesting the difficulties of maintaining Low German as a means of resistance against the forces of conformity. Through the play *Christmas Clothing*, Kay Friesen associates particular values with Low German and English, which is another technique whereby she conveys some of the complexities of

[3] My use of the term "metanarrative" is associated with a unifying ideology that suppresses any views that run counter to its vision; I do not include new ideas that accompany Canada's political goals, such as the view that promotes multiculturalism, for example, because these do not form a "monolithic" version in the same sense that traditional metanarratives do.

language transition and retention, and responds to pressures from the English-speaking world. Where these works differ from conventional form, they convey alternative ideas and values to the messages that accompany traditional form.

Traditional dramatic form is widely understood to be based on Aristotle's model of a complete whole. His idea of continuity in the narrative involves the pattern of a rising action leading to a climax, and where the play does not clearly follow and support the linear progression of this pattern, the drama undermines the containing power of the conventional model. All plays, of course, are continuous in the sense that they are performed in linear time, and because they have an internal continuity set up by the course of events in the action; however, my examination is of the ways in which they do not convey continuity, and so subvert the ideology inherent in traditional form.

The plays are presented through fragmentary methods in a number of ways, symbolically breaking up the unity of vision that supports the metanarratives of social control. First, the entertainment evenings use a revue format, offering a number of different "acts" on the same program. One such evening's entertainment at New Hope school in April 2005, for example, consisted of a tribute to Loretta Lynn, an Elvis impersonator, and a Low German play (Ens, Interview). The various acts in this mixture of presentations comprise a series of interruptions to the conventional linear pattern set out by Aristotle's model. But importantly, LGD's fragmented qualities lie perhaps more significantly in its form and content than in this diverse context in which it is presented. In addition to this format, the plays are often very short: Kay Friesen's *Forgetful Jake* and Mary Pauls's *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*, for example, are one and four pages long respectively, and must not last longer in production than a few minutes each. This

short form is suggestive of a fragmentary style, with each short skit often representing a moment or episode rather than an entire story. While their length does not necessarily make all of the short plays fragmentary, as some do follow the progressive pattern even within this short time period, there are additional disruptive characteristics within the plays as well, as highlighted by Babcock's model of clowning as critical work.

Babcock's definition of the clowning spirit conveys the essence of the practice that clowning and playful criticism both carry out. She explains, "[w]hether Kiekegaard or Nietzsche, Barthes or Derrida, Socrates or Zen masters, hierarchical and dialectical reasoning is displaced by playful, 'horizontal,' paralogical thought, and logical argument is eschewed in a paradoxical and paratactical discourse of fragments and aphorisms, dialogue and pastiche" (103). These types of activities differ from logical, analytical methods in order to escape the limits of established approaches, and with the aim of opening avenues to new possibilities for meaning. The clown in other times and cultures, according to Babcock, does not gain knowledge or go through a change but remains childlike (109), and this characteristic contrasts sharply with the convention of progress implicit in traditional form. In a seeming unawareness of social demands, the clown figure displays feelings and actions of the kind that are usually held in check (112), and acts out rebellious impulses, such as the desire not to conform to rational principles of communication. The clown draws attention to these usually-unacknowledged areas of experience. The figures in *Jake* and *Trudeau* match Babcock's description of the clown, and this comparison offers insight into the critical work these plays carry out.

The critical function of comedy and clowning as depicted in Babcock's discussion is active through *Jake's* structure and through the protagonist's performance. In a

disruption of the beginning-middle-end pattern, *Forgetful Jake* starts with what resembles the middle of a scene: the curtain opens on Jake "in a completely bewildered state". His comical, childlike nature can be seen immediately as stage directions indicate that he "scratches his head in concentration, gets up, paces [the] floor, sits down, [and] scratches [his] head etc, showing complete confusion". The reason for Jake's condition is finally made clear when his first visitor, having seen Jake's light on, stops in to see if there is something wrong. Henry Braun questions Jake about why he is up so late, and Jake admits to sitting up for the past two hours trying to remember something. Henry's suggestions of what it might be fail to jog Jake's memory until Henry gives up, saying he is going home to bed. "Dout es it!" ["That's it!"] Jake exclaims. "I was going to go to sleep. I had decided today to go to bed early" (translation mine, with the help of Reuben Funk).[4] This exchange demonstrates the inverted logic that clowning employs, and which acts against the forms used in discourses of the established order. A series of misunderstandings results from Jake's muddled logic when the second visitor arrives, and these small spurts of hilarity are characteristic of a style that, again, disrupts the continuity represented and embodied in traditional drama, as well as the linearity and progression that Mennonite faith relies on. Through the dialogue the audience understands that the stranger, Peter Hildebrandt, is looking for Jake, but because he pronounces Jake's last name incorrectly (not the Low German way), Jake does not recognize the name when he hears it, and so denies that Hildebrandt has found the right person. Next, Hildebrandt attempts to verify the address, but when he expresses the number as "one one three Water Street", Jake again declares him incorrect, replying,

[4] This play is completely in Low German, with the exception of the stage directions and the phrase "aw rite" (all right).

"No, this is one hundred thirteen Water Street." The visitor's apology for disturbing Jake so late at night is met with the convoluted response, "No, that's okay. I had to get up to answer the door [anyway]". This clowning employs the kind of turning upside-down of rational structures that Babcock's work points to, and thereby calls into question the version of the world through which order is maintained.

The ending comes more as a continuation of the "plot" or of the confused situation than as a conclusion. Jake's initial problem is solved with Henry Braun's visit, and he proceeds to change into pajamas in the next room, carrying his clothes back out when he returns. Upon the arrival of the second visitor, he puts on all these clothes before he answers the door, including his "shoes, coat and hat". When Hildebrandt leaves after the miscommunication with Jake, the scene is concluded as Jake gets into bed fully clothed, looks at the audience and, perplexed, says, "Well, it's as if I've forgotten something again." This kind of short, laughter-inducing scenario is an example of Babcock's idea of clowning as a form of defiance of the rational order through the rearrangement of logical elements. In Mennonite culture, the presentation of this unofficial side of Mennonite life suggests that the truth put forward through official doctrine is not the only one, and that there are other ways to apprehend the world than through the linear model of the Bible.

Babcock also draws attention to the festive nature of the activities that work successfully as playful criticism, and *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*, like *Jake*, fulfills this requirement. She quotes Harvey Cox to suggest the necessary elements of festivity: "(1) conscious excess, (2) celebrative affirmation, and (3) juxtaposition" (108).[5] Perhaps because in *Trudeau* there is more at stake in the action (Prime Minister Trudeau must

[5] From *The Feast of Fools* by Cox, (New York, 1969) p. 70.

land his plane before he runs out of fuel), and there is a greater complexity in terms of language and interaction, this play has an especially festive feel. There is constant interplay between three languages (English, French, and Low German), the seemingly random insertion (or "juxtaposition") of English words and "anglicized" Low German, and the absurd logic of the Mennonite air traffic authorities who insist that it is necessary to speak Low German in order to land in Steinbach. The first misunderstanding between cultures begins when the "Controller", responding to the request for clearance to land, asks the appropriate technical question regarding the pilot's coordinates in airspace. Despite the care that the "Controller" takes to be understood, inserting the English word "position" in his Low German sentence, the answer comes back through the translator/navigator: "He says he is the Prime Minister of Canada" (1). This kind of paratactical dialogue that places two disparate meanings of a word beside each other in the popular comedic "play on words" continues in an increasingly nonsensical vein to the end. The technique resembles the approach of clowns in the cultures that Babcock describes, and upsets the structures that metanarratives, which are limited to a single, logical version, typically use to communicate the immutability of their ideology.

The "excess" in Babcock's model is clearly expressed in several ways in these two plays, as is "celebrative affirmation". The behaviour of the main characters and the irrationality of their dialogue exceed the usual boundaries of containment. The exaggeration of types also enacts an element of excess. Stage directions seem to indicate that Jake is laughable in his confused demeanor, and instructions for *Trudeau* lay out a similarly comic figure in the air traffic controller: the "Controller comes in with a pitch fork and lays it beside the desk. He is fat, [and] dressed in old farmer coveralls or

overalls. He is wearing a farmer shirt (a big checkered one) and an old hat...". Whether it is this stereotypical 'country bumpkin' represented in the farmer/air traffic controller, a 'scatterbrain' like Jake, or any of the other often foolish characters that appear in the comedies, the extreme (and extremely funny) behaviour depicted speaks of an excess beyond the norm in everyday life. Laughter is the other element of excess here, signaling the presence of superfluous features. Festivity means, for both actor and audience, leaving behind one's usual modes of judgment to indulge in the pleasure of flouting rules of conduct, and taking part in the temporary dismantling of rational structures.

The principles of clowning in Babcock's study strike a chord with Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of carnival and the critical work that goes on through comedic channels. As far as LGD's subversive or "perversive" activity (Knowles 154), the significance of laughter must be noted as a potential tool for undermining governing rules. In traditional Mennonite culture, laughter belongs with the everyday world of common experience, which is separate from the serious business of political decision-making that was conducted for the community or *Gemeinde* through the institution of the church. The system of law that regulated behaviour traditionally involved the use of such measures as the ban or shunning (Friesen 31), which meant that an individual who did not comply with the rules as interpreted by the community's elders were cut off from social interaction with the rest of the community, including his/her own family members. Differences of opinion, even between the leaders of the community (usually over the interpretation of biblical directives), often resulted in one or the other of the disagreeing parties being banned, so that these procedures involved political power struggles (Friesen 31). As the potential for hypocrisy in this structure is clear, the plays' exposure of this

trait in the theatrical medium worked to criticize hypocrisy at higher levels. In Bakhtin's discussion of carnival, he explains the leveling nature of laughter: "Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people…it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity" (11). He notes the "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life" (15). Although LGD may not be strictly designated as "carnival" on all points, this description is accurate in some important respects when applied to Low German theatre. Authority figures are not exempt from the effects of laughter, and so laughter is a destabilizing force. Those who govern can be mocked, by association, through the foolish figures in the plays such as "Jake" and the air traffic controller in *Trudeau*. These comical/theatrical activities, Bakhtin says, "are opposed to the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology" (75), and while the "monolith" was more encompassing in the fifteenth-century European era of Bakhtin's study, a version of the ideology behind it is carried down in modern Christian models.

The ways that carnival or clowning enacts resistance to the controlling power of the Christian religion in Bakhtin's theory is helpful in an examination of LGD's relation to the structures of the Mennonite faith. Referring again to a social system enforced through a religious hierarchy, he says, "carnival celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order … It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). Bakhtin draws attention to the "official" and "unofficial" versions of reality represented by religious celebrations and the accompanying carnival activities; the figures represented in the carnival exploits

correspond to those in religious ritual enactments, posing an alternative way of seeing the world. In Mennonite culture, "official" truth was distinguished historically by its presentation through High German only, while Low German was designated for lower (unofficial) aspects of life. Perhaps it is even possible to read the comic figures featured in *Jake* and *Trudeau* as versions of the authoritative speakers who led the worship service and oversaw many of the decisions of the community. The "Controller's" character especially lends himself to this reading, with his authority that ranks above the highest human office (when he has power over the Prime Minister), his involvement with rules, and his governance of the skies. As an authority figure, he upsets the rules by which a leader maintains power in rational systems.

The place of critical laughter is a point of interest here when comparing Babcock's identification of laughter's function with Bakhtin's perspective. Bakhtin's theory has a "temporary" aspect, and his study identifies the function of carnival as one of "renewal" (10), which echoes Northrop Frye's theory of comedy as reinstating the old order. As conceptualized in modernist theory by critics like Frye, comedy derives from the same sources that tragedy comes from, representing structures of consciousness that mirror the cycles of nature. Quoting Frye, Ric Knowles shows the logical system into which the structuralists fit comedy: " 'Comedy...is based on the second half of the great cycle, moving from death to rebirth, decadence to renewal, winter to spring, darkness to a new dawn'" (qtd in Knowles 30). Knowles draws the following conclusions from his examination of this view: "The cultural work that [the comic structure] performs, like that of Aristotelian catharsis, is purgative in that it involves the expulsion of irrational or 'unnatural' legalism in order to reinstate rather than overthrow the old order (renewed)"

(30). Comedy, as theorized through traditional Aristotelian perspectives, is merely the other side of tragedy, operating in only a slightly different way to achieve the same ends. The idea of comedy's function as "purgative" (Knowles 30) corresponds to both Frye's and Bakhtin's views of comedy as a "vent" for the laughter that did not belong to the serious "official" truth of the church (Bakhtin 75). Frye and Bakhtin see comedy as a means of release for tensions that arise between people and the forces that control them, and an avenue through which disruptive tendencies are contained within the boundaries of a designated time and place. Babcock maintains, however, that the critical work of clowning persists as a force within the cultures she explores, such as those of the Hopi, Balinese, and Zuni peoples. She claims that "[c]omedy may be a spiritual shock therapy which breaks up the patterns of thought and rationality that hold us in bondage and in which the given and established order of things is deformed, reformed, and reformulated: a playful speculation on what was, is, or might be; a remark on the indignity of any closed system" (103). Babcock's theory expresses a more postmodern view in recognizing the abiding and persistent influence of laughter on systems of control. The comical element associated with Low German in its everyday use supports the idea that the critical aspect of LGD has a more integral place within Mennonite culture as well.

Importantly, even though LGD may carry out a kind of subversive activity within Mennonite communities, taking aim at Mennonites rather than representing people outside the community, the criticism enacted through LGD is relevant in relation to social structures that define that "outside" world as well. While the religious strictures that bear on Mennonite life allow for a comparison of LGD with Bakhtin's carnival, LGD also subverts the metanarratives specific to the 'majority' culture outside Mennonite

communities. In *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*, for example, the Prime Minister's power is undermined by the air traffic controller's nonsensical dialogue, and with it the directive to speak only English (or French). LGD, with its focus on "being in the moment" and on playful interaction rather than plot or outcome, in addition to the fragmentary form it takes, defies those metanarratives or "grand narratives" (Lyotard, *Condition* 38) that are tied up with unifying forces. The criticism performed by the activity of LGD works, then, both on strictures within the Mennonite belief and governing systems, and against the ideology behind the metanarratives of the wider, surrounding English-speaking culture.

The use of Low German is an element of form that adds to the plays' resistance against the pressures to conform to majority culture. Against English Canada's call (official and unofficial) for "English-only" communication and culture, and as a means of recuperation from the outlawed use of German in their schools in the early decades of the twentieth century, LGD is a way for Mennonites to assert the value of one of its native languages, especially as this language is one that threatens to disappear from lack of use. A number of the plays contain self-reflexive references to Low German, treating the subject in varying ways. *Trudeau*, for instance, is full of humour based on language, both self-mocking and touching on the general, contentious subject of acculturation in Canada. In the wonderful but problematic blending of three languages, this play brings into the foreground the power dynamics associated with language and culture. In particular, the incorporation of French calls up the debate over the issue of French language retention and use in Canada; this debate is marked by parliamentary action such as the Official Languages Act in 1969 ("Official", 1), which legislated bilingualism in Canada, but continues to the present day. In *Trudeau*, the French-speaker gets to make the first clever

play on words when he chooses to interpret the question regarding his "position" as a chance to indicate his status rather than his location in air space; after this interaction the Prime Minister gets the worst of ensuing puns and jokes. This structure could even by interpreted in a way that sees this initial bit of fun on the part of the French Prime Minister as a challenge to a battle of wordplay, to which the "Controller" responds eagerly and triumphantly (and could certainly be played that way). Besides the Canadian-Mennonites' certain awareness of the French language situation in Canada, Steinbach is located close to rural French communities, and so it is not surprising that these dynamics between French and Low German are of special interest to Mennonite playwrights. The subtext in this play involves the tendency for English to dominate other languages, but when the French- and Low German-speakers insert English words into their speech in their attempts to communicate, they relay the possibility that English could be a neutral ground as well, and a means of communicating for speakers of minority languages. The "Controller" extols the merits of bi- and trilingualism, suggesting that the Prime Minister can learn Low German, and saying through the navigator that, "It is always good to have a second language" (2); when informed that Trudeau is already bilingual, the "Controller" responds with, "Hie weit wie all 3 oder 4 Sprache" ["Here we all speak three or four languages"] (3). Compulsory English causing the obliteration of other tongues is being resisted, but the play can be interpreted as promoting the idea of a common language in conjunction with the continuation of diverse languages.

In addition to acting as a vehicle for humour, the mixture of Low German and English in LGD is a sign of the gradual integration of English and the values of secular society, as well as the Mennonite resistance to these influences. Because the stage

directions are always written in English, it is clear that LGD is always meant for a cast schooled in the language of the 'host' culture. The English words indicate Low German's position within this culture of the majority. In this predominantly English environment, the increasing number of words "borrowed" from English is evidence of the way English can take over, but perhaps, too, of the integration of the two languages.

The idea of integration comes through humour in the plays, such as the pun made on the word "position" in *Trudeau*. In this piece, part of the humour comes from the blurring of the lines between languages, as both the non-English-speakers begin to insert English words and phrases for the apparent purpose of making themselves clearer to the other minority language-speaker. Under pressure, "Je demande permission de descendre" (1) later becomes "Je demande permission to land" (3). In response to the Prime Minister's first protests about the language, the "Controller" conveys in Low German that he will ask his superior whether an "exception" (in English) might be made (2), so that Trudeau can land without knowing the language, even though, as he has explained through the navigator, "...Low German is important to the Steinbach people" (2). Perhaps his choice of an English word communicates the idea of compromise along with the sense of what he says. If English can be a neutral ground, and a site of shared understanding, then its 'majority' status is actually helpful to speakers of other languages.

The difficulties of compromise and language retention are complex in the play. The "Controller" seems to make a sincere effort to help Trudeau, and his "coming halfway", if that is what his mixed English and Low German may be called, is notable when he asks for "clearance" in English, in the midst of a Low German sentence (2). The "Controller" defends the language of his culture by insisting that Low German is

necessary for landing in Steinbach, but a short time later, he tries again to solve the matter, saying, "Oba ech hab ein 'solution'" ["But I have a solution"] (2). His stance shows his unwillingness to compromise on the issue of language when his "solution" turns out to be that Trudeau can quickly learn Low German. Elsewhere he is impervious to urgent requests by Trudeau for permission to land; he goes through a lengthy process of phoning people to ask for clearance, and at the point when he hears, "Mayday! Mayday!", he responds, "May, noh dot es doch November" (4). Attempts at communication mixed with consistent misunderstanding are the basis for the humour in this sketch and show, as well, the challenges of reconciling a number of different nationalities within the cultural landscape of Canada. The resistance to English-language use is perhaps misdirected at another minority language, and may express an element of competition between second languages.

The crash of the airplane is represented comically, of course, rather than as a serious consequence of the "Controller's" attitude towards language. The serious side of the event is not to be ignored entirely, however; if content is part of form as well, then what happens has implications beyond those of mere comic effect. If the "Controller" represents a hegemonic authority over language use that mirrors English-only forces, then his treatment of the French people and the ensuing destruction of the plane signify the serious danger of disappearance that faces languages other than English. The symbolic death of the only French-speakers in the piece enacts the end of their minority language at the hands of those who insist on one particular language as a mode of communication. The device can be symbolic of the chaos that ensues when cultures collide, but also highlights the power dynamics involved in language debates. Here the point is clear that

the one occupying the more advantageous position, whichever languages are involved, has the power to shut the other out, and to withhold a place in the community or society from non-conformists until they bend to the language of the majority around them (which in this case, being in the Mennonite community of Steinbach, is Low German). These dynamics are represented by the French-driven airplane suspended above the community, unable to touch down. The "Controller's" actions show an attitude of bull-headedness, and the resultant crash is due to the abuse of power by a speaker of the language of the majority, which is here Low German.

The denouement shows how it is possible to destroy other languages from this position of dominance. Interestingly, the Low German-speaker acts out the annihilation of the French contingent, which is an important statement about the closed nature that small communities such as Steinbach can have, and about the destructive potential of the attitude that accompanies narrow vision. The "Controller's" final mood is the reverse of remorse: "Vann he doht es, dann es he events doht. Dann mot wie am events begrove. Un daut wau wie ean Plautdietsch donne" ["If he's dead, then he's really dead. Then we must bury him. And that we will do in Low German"] (4) are his last lines. The Prime Minister has been on his way to speak at the Steinbach "Cradit Union", which adds both humour and complication to the dynamics; either those in the community have invited him or he is himself making a gesture to communicate with them. The meeting of cultures and points of view fails because of language. Importantly, however, the disparate languages *together* have made the comedy work, which is a different message, and more subtle than the obvious outcome of the play.

The loss of Low German in the younger generations compromises the ability of LGD to embody resistance to English-speaking society, and shows a lack of investment for the younger people in this kind of resistance. The erosion of the language reflects the situation of Mennonites in their move from isolated rural communities to urban centers as succeeding generations had to seek out more varied means of employment (Kauffman and Driedger 35). Through their schooling the children of Russian-Mennonite immigrants became fluent in English and able to function comfortably in urban environments, in contrast to their elders. The change from High German to English in worship services was cause for great upheaval in the Mennonite church; indeed, according to a detailed study by Gerald C. Ediger of the transition in Mennonite communities in Manitoba, the issue threatened to divide the Gemeinde, and resulted in much painful conflict among families and between generations. Ediger explains the complexities involved in making a move to English when bureaucratic form (from Mennonite bodies) had to be observed and personalities clashed. The impetus behind the transition was of course a response to modernization and greater contact with English-speaking society, so that English was put forward as necessary. The change took place over years of steady and passionate debate, as Ediger's book relates, with bilingualism finally being accepted by the majority. The fear that the language would be lost as an identifying aspect of culture and identity was evident as far back as the 1930s. Within the church Conference the debate involved the (painfully-made) separation of value and language, and the necessity of accepting that the truth contained in the Bible was not tied to the German language. While one form of authoritative discourse has completely given over to another (High German to English),

Low German remains an alternative to the standardization or single stream of meaning that comes with the widespread acceptance of one language.

The playwrights sometimes present a complication of the generational aspect of Low German use when they convey a cautionary message about being too close-minded towards English as well as the desire to keep up linguistic traditions. It is interesting to note, as Edna Froese points out, that the Low and High German languages have been presented as both a positive, binding force and one that alienates and cuts off the Mennonite community from its surrounding neighbours.[6] In Margaret Tiessen's play *The Right Christmas Gifts*, for instance, one of the three characters establishes that proper behaviour includes speaking Low German, but the message is mixed. Mrs. Greta Friesen is a character who epitomizes a bossy, self-righteous member of the community, but who "learns her lesson" about Christian charity and love – a lesson about tolerance that also involves her accepting English as a means of conversing. Like *Trudeau*, this play sets up the ambivalent situation in which the retention of native languages is associated with narrow-mindedness, but the idea is presented through plays clearly designed for the pleasure of hearing (and preserving) Low German. The generational element is represented in *The Right Christmas Gifts* through the different uses of language by older and younger Mennonites; in the otherwise consistently Low German work, the representatives of the younger set speak in English throughout the piece. The equivocal nature of the message seems to convey a desire, among younger Mennonites especially,

[6] In her Ph.D. thesis *To Write or to Belong* Froese points out this equivocal function of language in Mennonite literature. She cites Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, in which the young, forward-thinking minister comes under fire from church elders because he preaches in English so that the Metis children present will not be excluded, and the last scene of Wiebe's *Blue Mountains of China*, in which several of the characters, each representing a different type of Mennonite identity, find themselves together in a ditch, reunited from different locations, and begin speaking to each other in Low German, which is a sign of the bond between them.

to communicate with others in the larger, English-speaking society, while maintaining the importance of inherited cultural traditions like the Low German language.

The Right Christmas Gifts presents language use in a number of ways. The generational differences in attitude toward language is one aspect of the process of acculturation, as depicted in the play. The children in this play understand Low German perfectly well, as Walter shows when he repeatedly joins the conversation between his father, Jasch, and aunt, Greta Friesen. The father and son have come to help Mrs. Friesen deliver her Christmas presents, and when they discover the pettiness that has motivated her in her choice of gifts, they protest in different ways. Walter's first comment is innocent and conversational. When Mrs. Friesen speaks critically about a simple dish that a young wife in the community had made for her husband's supper, he breaks in with, "She made that at home sometimes. It was good. We all liked it" (2). Next he marvels at Mrs. Friesen's gift of an inadequate cake she has decided to give to a poor family, giving the reason for doing so that "poor folk can't be choosy". "But burnt cake?" he asks (3). At Walter's third English interjection, a direct question, Mrs. Friesen admonishes him about language use, saying in Low German, "Ask in German if you want an answer. In this house we speak Low-German..." (3). Interestingly, and possibly for added humour, the phrase she uses in the original script is not "Low" German, but the English (and High German) "real" German, and this term emphasizes the values of authenticity associated with the native language. Walter's English comments also express a view that is arguably more objective than Greta Friesen's; his view seems to come from "outside" the situation, perhaps because of his exposure to ideas beyond the small community that Mrs. Friesen has presumably grown up in, in its more insulated state. Here English is almost presented

as an antidote to hypocrisy; however, the play's performance in Low German undermines the idea that English is preferable, despite that all of Mrs. Friesen's boisterous proclamations are deflated.

Low German's traditional place in the Mennonite culture, as well as the positions of High German and English, was explained to me in interviews I had with Elizabeth Peters (*The Cherry Hedge* and *One Must Marry*) and Linda Ens (*The Chiropractor in the Old Peter's House* and *I Want to Choose*). High German is spoken in church, Low German in the home or, for Linda, "on the street" and English is around them in most other places. Low German has many borrowed words from High German and English, Ens says, and these come both from the need for new words when new concepts and objects are encountered that do not have corresponding Low German terms, and from times when speakers of Low German forget a word in this language and substitute the English word, which they hear so often in mainstream culture. In this way English words "fill the gaps" that occur for speakers of Low German (Interview, 2005). These playwrights choose Low German in their dramatic creations from a desire to retain the tradition and also because they recognize and take pleasure in the particular qualities of this language. The two come from different generations, Peters having arrived in the 1920s as one of the Russländer, and Ens being a descendent of these second-wave immigrants; still they share a common feeling for the language, along with other Mennonites. Because of its association with laughter, social activities, and feeling, Low German is a desirable language of expression. It is precisely because of these attributes that Low German is most worthy of examination. As noted above, this language is neither the sanctioned language of communication in majority culture nor, according to tradition,

important enough to use when discussing spiritual issues in Mennonite culture. To use the language, then, puts forward the notion that Low German and those characteristics and values that many Mennonites connect with it are legitimate and important, despite the language's unofficial status.

If Low German has no official status traditionally, then to use it to create artistic works is to produce *in excess* of allowable discourses, and this excess is a part of the idea behind the title of Doug Reimer's thesis on Mennonite writing, *Surplus at the Border*. Reimer takes up the model for a "minor literature" as theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as a starting point from which to assess Mennonite narrative art. Recognizing the aptness of this model for the study of Mennonite literature, Reimer pays particular attention to the ways that Mennonite literature can break with long-held conventions of English literature to foster a unique kind of writing (Reimer 41). The excessive aspect of the plays has to do with the behaviour of the characters when they use 'clowning' as entertainment, with the use of Low German, and the drawing on material elements of culture for presentation in the drama. Rather than seeing English as a powerful, infiltrating force that furthers the disintegration of Mennonite culture and the loss of Low German, Reimer's view provides a basis for seeing English as an instrument taken up by Mennonite writers and used in unconventional ways. With his study in mind, LGD may be viewed constructively through the model of a minor literature to show how the drama appropriates English for its own purposes, and so bends and plays with the conventions of English narrative art.

Reimer begins with a discussion of a minor literature as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *Anti-Oedipus*. The two French critics lay out the foundation for

a minor literature, which they derive from a careful consideration of Franz Kafka's writing. They point to the unusual German that Kafka uses, the linguistic result of his specifically Jewish community residing in Prague. The combination of cultural elements that occurs when a community of significant proportions exists inside the culture of an established majority makes for a situation in which a unique linguistic phenomenon occurs. As Deleuze and Guattari explain it, minor literature "doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16). In their formulations, the first characteristic of a minor literature is that the "language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (16). Whereas English-speaking culture uses literature and its conventions to define itself, language that defies those conventions erases the metaphorical lines around this cultural 'territory'. This trait is evident in the blending of English and Low German in LGD, which, in addition to the stylistic tendencies of this dramatic form, works as a method of "deterritorializing" the Standard English that surrounds Mennonite communities. That is, by asserting a different way of using English, such as for "token" words in a mainly Low German work, for example, the territory normally inscribed by English language conventions is no longer delimited. English is not at the service of one meaning alone, by people schooled in the culture of its origin, but used in other contexts as well. In modernist literature, the conventions of both language and form indicate the "territory" of English-language culture (Reimer 31), and LGD upsets these conventions with its unusual approach to dramatic expression. As discussed above, LGD often incorporates nonsensical elements, which aligns it with Kafka's approach according to Deleuze and Guattari. They maintain that Kafka "will abandon sense, render it no more than implicit; he will retain only the

skeleton of sense, or a paper cutout" (20-21). While this description is applicable to *Jake* and *Trudeau* for the way these two plays flout logic, LGD that incorporates English words and Canadian ideas but presents them in a decidedly unique way is especially interesting in view of the idea of a minor literature like Kafka's.

The English words that pepper the dialogue in many of these plays serve to convey elements of the process of becoming a part of Canadian society, which involves a sometimes painful negotiation of language and cultural values. The creative avenues taken with language in LGD differ from Kafka's in style, perhaps, but in effect they are similar; the treatment of English in LGD is a mode of deterritorialization characteristic of a minor literature. In *Trudeau*, the "Controller's" choice of English words affirms what Ens says about "filling gaps": the insertion of "Curling Club", and "Maritime Provinces" are two obvious examples in *Trudeau* (2) of Canadian concepts that would not have had Low German names. English is also used for objects that, though easily named with Low German terminology, may have been introduced on the Canadian prairies, or for objects possibly shared with non-Low German-speakers in the area, such as the "Water tower" in this play (4). At times German grammar is combined with English diction for humourous results, as when the "Controller" puts the English verb "to crash" into the past tense according to German rules, resulting in the hilarious phrase, "Oh, he is ye-crashed". Other times pronunciation is anglicized, such as when the "Controller" commands the navigator to "Zwitch to Emergency Channel 11" (3). This incorporation of English into Low German discourse by the playwrights, on their own terms, blurs the boundaries of "territory" as Deleuze and Guattari present the idea, and so these techniques works against imposed structures of meaning.

Other plays insert English words to emphasize the difference in values between the Mennonite and English communities, redefining Mennonite territory against English influences and pressures. In Kay Friesen's *Veenachts Klida* [*Christmas Clothing*] for example, a group of girls discuss the items of clothing they would like to have, and the more worldly and stylish of these seem to require the specialized English terminology. They insert the English words that describe their desires, and that perhaps do not fit in with traditional Mennonite styles of clothing, such as: "satin", "poka dot blous" (sic), "jumper", "snow pants", "blue jeans", "orlon sweata", "rayon crepe", "push up sleeves", "twin sweater set", "flared circle rook" (skirt), and "reversible plaid skirt" (2). The styles and terms are dated, but the idea behind the skit remains of interest in this study of language and its function. The girls use "Ladies wear" (sic) to indicate the department at the store where they will find their imagined choices, and the English term seems to lend the place an exotic air, likely to associate an element of worldliness with the desire to purchase clothing there. Their often-gratuitous English terminology for certain fabric and items of clothing, perhaps unusual or expensive, suggests that the playwright wants to associate luxury with secular society. The girls' decision, by the end, that they should not be so concerned with their clothes at Christmas is a facet of LGD's resistance to the values of the outside world that enter the Mennonite community, manifest in the girls' desire to acquire and wear the clothing that those outside the community wear. The play inscribes Mennonite territory as over against "English" or secular territory, even if in another sense resistance is compromised by the adoption of these English words into their Low German dialogue.

Other plays depict the way English and Mennonite territories overlap or clash. Agnes Wall's play *The Hat* depicts the misunderstandings that can occur due to the limitations of those not schooled in both the territorial codes of the city and in the language of the majority. "Daughter Dorothy" represents the younger generation, and she is shown to be competent and knowledgeable in these respects. Fluent in both English and Low German, Dorothy helps sort things out for her mother "Auntje Sachries". The aspects of the world that are confusing to the older woman must be discussed using Low German, and verified by Dorothy in English to be sure the daughter is getting the correct version of the story. Except for these "verifications", the play is consistently in Low German. The play opens as Auntje Sachries enters, visibly upset, and she soon explains to her daughter that she has been "faustjenome" (1). In disbelief, Dorothy repeats the term back to Auntje, but in English, asking, "*Arrested* meenst du?" [Do you mean *arrested*?"] (1, italics mine). As her mother explains further, Dorothy checks again with the English word to be sure she understands: "Säd hee *shoplifting*?" ["Did he say *shoplifting*?"] (1, italics mine). It is necessary to use the English again when Auntje tries to remember the term the police officer used to accuse her; she cannot finish the word, and gives up after "een Kle.... enn Klept .....". Dorothy immediately guesses what she means; "Säd hee Kleptomaniac?" (2). Interestingly, although Dorothy knows how to comfort her mother and translate what has happened to her, it is the father/husband who actually addresses the situation for his wife in the public realm. Not only does he go to the store to talk to the manager, but the two men are already acquainted, which suggests the networks that men are able to establish in the public world, and the way that they negotiate territory between each other as males.

In the scene between the two men, the Mennonites' own territorial codes are in evidence. Doft Schmett, the store manager, quickly understands that there was a mistake, and goes out of his way in the manner of a good businessperson to smooth over the injuries of Auntje Sachries (and any sustained by her husband). In a juxtaposition of the roles of knowledgeable figures, now it is the younger generation who has misunderstood the codes; Schmett explains that he was absent the previous day when the incident occurred and that "Howie", a new and over-zealous manager had temporarily taken his place (4). The two older men are able to clear up the misunderstanding through the codes of the public world and the codes between men. Isaak Sachries and the daughter both function comfortably in the world, Dorothy because of her exposure to the structures of this social world through her education, and Isaak Sachries due, presumably, to some experience of the public world and to his gender. The weight of authority (and the confidence that comes with it) lies predominantly with the male sex here, perhaps highlighting an important lingering aspect of the patriarchal tradition of the *Brethren.* The play shows that the uninitiated, to any system, are liable to misinterpret events, and that there are multiple, overlapping territories within society. Underlying this message, and against the exclusion implicit in "territory", is the communally understood language of Low German, a code to the group who watches and participates in the play.

Another way that LGD refuses to comply with English prose conventions is through the "flaws" or inconsistencies that are visible, and allowed, in the texts of LGD. Some of the plays were written before standardized dictionaries of Low German were published,[7] and none of the spelling systems match the others (making translation that

[7] Herman Rempel's *Kjenn Jie Noch Plautdietsche? A Mennonite Low German Dictionary* first came out in 1979, while Jack Thiessen's dictionary was published in 1977. However, the playwrights I interviewed say

much more challenging). In addition to the variations in spelling between different playwrights, there are also inconsistencies within some of the texts. In *Veenachts Klida*, for example, there are a number of words that are spelled differently each time they occur. As well, concerns with the spelling of English or anglicized words by these educated playwrights (Friesen is a teacher) seem to be put aside, with the obvious focus being on the more immediate aspects of the performance. In the theatrical production, no one would know or care how "Poka dot bloose" or "blous" is spelled, or notice whether the orlon item is a "svetta" or a "sweata". Even the indefinite article is given as "een" and "enn" in the same sentence (2). This evidence suggests a strong preoccupation with the sense of the language and on the experience of the theatre rather than the appearance and correctness of the text. In paying little respect to the consistency and logic that are the guiding principles of metanarratives, LGD subverts these controlling structures.

Through the analysis of its form, then, it is possible to see ways in which LGD succeeds in subverting the structures of meaning as they are "imposed" by traditional standards. Laughter represents the potential for disruption of grand narratives, as does the pastiche and paratactical elements of LGD as theorized by Babcock. The short, comical form and the irrational or "inversional" nature of the humour in this theatre may be compared to ritual clowning, which, for Babcock, enacts valuable work as criticism. The combination of languages and the use of Low German in the drama act as a form of resistance to dominant structures outside the Mennonite community. The language "refuses" to be designated a place of little or no value in the traditional hierarchy of languages within the community as well, and asserts its importance through LGD. As

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they did not use these, which may attest further to the preference of Low German-speakers for keeping the language primarily as an oral activity, and writing text according to sound rather than rules.

"neither this nor that" (neither English nor High German, nor a politically-backed language like French), but including elements of all these, LGD resists classification by language as well as genre. The form that LGD takes involves excess, and so goes beyond the boundaries of established form. Where postmodernism is "skeptic[al] towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, *Condition* xxiv), LGD, like other postmodern products, acts out this skepticism through the elements of form.

Lyotard's observation is relevant to LGD in another way as well. Mistrust of the categories implicit in the modernist view extends to the idea of the self as a stable entity. My next section examines the ways that LGD presents an ambivalent view of this concept through the plays.

Chapter Two - "I Want to Choose": Identity and Low German Drama

In this chapter I explore the relationship between identity and LGD in light of recent scholarship. For theorist Sarah M. Corse, literature has an integral connection to identity, but in ways that are sometimes misunderstood. In her book *Nationalism and Literature* (1997), she takes issue with the assumption that artistic works reflect the culture and character of the group from which they come. Her work shows that under close inspection it can be determined that works assumed to represent a particular cultural group are carefully selected by the authorities of that group, in order to project a certain image of their culture. Her research exposes the forces involved in the conclusions about identity that are drawn from literary (and by extension, dramatic) works, with her consideration of the social conditions under which these works are created and judged. Corse's view is strengthened by the work of Erin Hurley, who theorizes identity as performative rather than 'naturally-occurring'; Hurley's model involves the idea of identity as a practice, and she explores the implications of the way members of a minority group pass as members of the dominant majority when they perform the appropriate gestures.

To take this idea further, I will discuss the theories about Mennonite writing and identity put forward by Edna Froese, and scholarship on ritual and identity by Barbara G. Myerhoff. Froese points out the affinity between the Anabaptist ideology regarding identity and the postmodern deconstructionist theory of identity; as noted in the

introduction above, both contend that the self is dependant on a community for definition, as well as for survival. Her attention to the relative unimportance of individual identity in Mennonite belief aids in my argument regarding the performative nature of identity. Through the application of these theories to the plays, I examine the ways in which identity is not simply "shown" in dramatic works but how LGD acts as a ritual in which identity is modeled, enacted, and formed.

The social constructivist model of identity contrasts with the view that accompanies modern dramatic realism, which holds that drama and literature are mimetic representations of the world, that they copy reality, and that they present an accurate picture of the truth. These ideas constitute the Marxist "reflection theory" (qtd in *Norton* 1478), out of which comes the idea that identity is a component of the world that may be represented through the structures and devices of art. In comedy, characters are often understood to be exaggerated versions of real people, with greater faults than these 'true' people possess. The idea of exaggeration, however, involves the assumption that a true identity lies beneath the hyperbole, and that through caricature, something important about humanity is revealed. Comedy can take the form of satire, for example, which is guided by the idea that there is a proper way to behave according to 'universal' standards, and that those who stray from this path must be shown the error of their ways and guided back to their 'true' roles. Postmodernism exposes this model as flawed, by drawing attention to the hidden agendas, biases, and historically limited view of each writer. The identification of narrative structures as active in the creation of concepts about the world, such as the self, and the further implication that identity is actually dependant on these structures, poses a challenge to formulas such as "reflection theory".

Just as Canada, before its nation-building days that took place well into the twentieth century (and, some would argue, continue into the present), is described as a nation without a culture (Birbelsingh 24), so the Mennonites are sometimes called a culture without a nation, and here the argument about the origin of identity begins. The distinction must be made between the term 'nation' as the idea of a cohesive identity, and 'state', meaning the borders and laws that define a geo-political area. National identity may be interpreted as a fluid term, then, not necessarily anchored to place; with this perspective, Amy Kroeker notes, "the Mennonites are a nation unto themselves" (12). She selects elements of Edward Said's formulation of nationalism in her claim, and these particular aspects locate (national) identity in social structures; Said includes in the definition of nationalism a sense of " 'belonging to a place, a people, [and] a heritage'" and " 'a community of language, culture, and customs'" (qtd in Kroeker 12). The Mennonites' lack of a homeland combined with their clearly defined culture illustrates the way that identity is carried and formed through social networks rather than through the apparatus of the state.

Locating identity in culture highlights the way that identity is constructed through cultural products, and provides insight into the comments about Canada's unformed identity. The statement about Canada's lack of national identity can be read as saying that its distinctive character *could only come into existence* when its literature began to appear. Therefore, to say that Canada lacks a culture[8] because of its failure to express its character, values, and perspective through literature is to support the position that identity is produced and performed through cultural creations, and is not simply 'natural' or

[8] The idea that Canada had no identity or defining culture until well into the twentieth century discounts First Nations artistic and oral culture, and so is inaccurate; however, due to the limits of this paper and for the purposes of the debate and engagement with critics, I must overlook this neglect here.

innate. The selection process, as well, as far as what cultural products are considered "Canadian" or "Mennonite" plays into the ideas of these cultural identities, as scholarship like Corse's shows.

Corse undermines the view of narrative literature as mimetic and representational in her study of Canadian and American identity through their respective novels. She blows up the myth of literature as a reflection of national identity with her analysis of these novels, in which she searches for evidence of the disparate identity markers often associated with these two literatures; these include the idea that American literature valorizes the individual, autonomy, and non-conformity, for example, while Canadian literature places value on interpersonal connection, family, identity, and work. If literature reflects "the way things are", then the novels of both countries should consistently depict the differing traits that are associated with Canadians and Americans. Her project shows that this is not the case. These markers, she discovers, may be present in canonical or "high culture" literature, but are either absent or inconsistently present in widely-read literature of other genres. Her study disproves what earlier theorists of cultural identity have reported regarding the distinctiveness of American and Canadian literatures. The earlier assumptions, she reasons, are connected to the nation-building process and the attempts by "cultural elites" to establish unique identities for their countries (62). The bestsellers in both countries show a close similarity, in fact are often the same books, and fail to sharply display the factors that would prove Canada's literature (and identity) different from American. The authoritative bodies, primarily professors at universities, that established the early Canadian canon carefully chose the appropriate texts that express the traits that make Canada's national identity unique,

according to Corse. This research is supported by Carole Gerson's view that the neglect of women writers in this cannon, for example, requires that we "un-write" the literary history as compiled by F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith (56), critics whom Corse also cites in her work. Corse shows that while canonical literature (those literary works belonging to the "high-culture" genre) does express the defining characteristics of Canadian literature, Canadian-written works in genres such as popular fiction depict other values and ideas, and these values are often closer to the American models. The conclusions that are often drawn by critics about Canadian identity, then, are dependent on genre. So-called "national identities" represent ideals that the two nations held at the (separate) nation-building times. While this historical time for Canada took place in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century, the implication is that the process is ongoing, and that all conclusions about identity derived through literature must be considered with this information in mind.

Corse's conclusions highlight the artificiality of the cultural categories determined through national literatures:

> Cross-national literary differences show us the difference between what vision of "Canada" and of being "Canadian" is accepted and legitimated by Canadian national elites and what vision of "America" and of being "American" is accepted and legitimated by American national elites. National literatures are not reflections of the national character, but manifestations of the "invention" of the nation, of the strategies used to create national identities. (74)

Because Mennonites have a unique culture and literature, and because Said's (modified) definition of nationalism can include Mennonites, as Kroeker helpfully points out, Corse's conclusions can shed light on how Mennonite identity comes about through its authorized literature. She highlights the exercise of power in the selection of canonical texts. These texts are often cited by theorists (Corse quotes from Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood among others) as the identity-bearing texts of a nation, and this procedure may be identified in the selection of Mennonite texts as well. If the "cultural elites" of Mennonite society have chosen the literature in the Mennonite canon, then the kind of identity that is associated with this literature has been consciously created as well.

Where Corse shows that "reflection theory" is inadequate to explain the connection between the national identities of the Canadian and American nations and their literatures, then, her study suggests that an analysis of Mennonite literature and identity may yield the same sort of results. That those in power decide what texts express the important or essential aspects of character is particularly clear in Mennonite canonical literature; books in the canon were often the only reading material available and permitted in Mennonite households,[9] and this censure illustrates the deliberate construction of an idea of identity that is linked to literature. The canon refers to the books with which all members of the community are familiar, and in Mennonite communities this list contains the Bible, the Mennonite martyrologies, and related theological material. Whereas the literary canon in Canada, according to Corse's information, is established primarily by universities, Mennonite "elites" are the founders of the church and their representatives in the succeeding generations. To investigate

[9] As of Walter Schmiedehaus's article on the Old-Colony Mennonites in Mexico, published in 1985, this continues to be the case; textbooks are in short supply in this community, and the Bible, Schmiedehaus reports, "is indeed the Book of Books and in many families constitutes the only source of reading" (80).

identity in a more comprehensive way, it is necessary to look at the popular literature of culture as well as the artificially-designated texts that officially define national identity. And if prize-winning and popular novels in Canada are "avenue[s] for revisions to the legitimated vision of national experience presented in the canon" (126), then LGD can be understood as a similar alternative to the long-established canon in Mennonite culture. The non-canonical literature in both cases represents facets of "national" experience that are left out of the 'official' version, but which is an integral part of culture. And as a part of this literature, LGD offers another view of Mennonite identity.

Against the notion that ethnic identity is inherent in literature, my aim here is to make clear the ways in which identity can be understood to be created by cultural works, and acted upon by the influences received through the exposure to these. Through LGD, Mennonite audiences see the signs of Mennonite identity modeled for them. To be a Mennonite is to perform certain gestures and speak a certain language (in LGD of course it is Low German, but I mean to suggest the larger discourse particular to Mennonite culture, which includes knowledge about a shared history and familiarity with the Bible, among other things). Besides the canon of 'official' or 'sacred' texts relating to spiritual belief and cultural history, the 'unofficial' sources present ideas about Mennonite identity as well. The proverbial expressions used in daily life, for example, associate certain traits with the Mennonite character, and these are another way that the idea of a specific identity is conveyed through cultural products. The view that Mennonites endure through hardship, for instance, comes across in the expression, "Daut ging doch aus et goanich ging" – "It was possible even when it wasn't possible" (Enns 2005). A traditional attitude towards education is the subject of the phrase, "Je geliada, je vekiada" – "The more

learned, the more mixed up you get!" (Enns 2005). And a corrective to arrogance comes through "Den eenen Faehla hab eck mau, loat me den doch!" -- "I've only got one flaw, please let me keep it!" (Enns 2005). Mennonites share these "sayings" with their children and each other through oral transmission, which is an avenue for the transference of Mennonite values. These sayings are indicative of Mennonites' values, then, and of their response to their historical circumstances, perhaps more than they are a reflection of existing traits. The potential for these phrases to act on identity is easy to see, and illustrates how LGD can act in a similar way, setting out models that "Mennonite" identity conforms to.

Theatre theorist Erin Hurley's observations are helpful in assessing LGD and identity. Her insights stem from J.L. Austin's performance theory, in which he shows that "language produces things as well as simply reports on them" (qtd in *Norton*, 1944). Hurley's work takes up performance theory to explain identity as itself performative, and discusses the *pass* (172) as a way of analyzing identity. She examines the situation of Canadian celebrities who pass as Americans in the US; this analysis is applicable to the situation of Mennonites and their relation to English-speaking culture. The dominant culture becomes the "unmarked identity category" (172), the norm against which all other identities are highlighted. Because of its highly-visible and dominant position (which renders other cultural identities less-visible) this is also the default category, to which one is assumed to belong if one does not display characteristics placing one obviously outside this category. When one can present the identifying features of the dominant culture, one can pass as a member of this unmarked group, and this ability is of key interest here.

Just as the Caucasian Canadian celebrities Hurley is interested in pass in the US as quintessentially American (William Shatner, Pamela Anderson, and Peter Jennings are some examples), English-speaking Mennonites can and do pass as members of majority culture in Canada. Hurley explains Amy Robinson's theory of the pass as "a triangular theatre of identity" (171) in which each of three positions plays a part in our understanding of how identity "works". The triangle consists of the "passer" or performer, the "dupe" or the member of the dominant group who mistakes the passer for one of that same group, and the "in-group representative", a member of the passer's own group, who sees and understands this situation. In this way, Hurley says, "the pass is a site where national-realist and ... 'global-performative' reading strategies are brought to bear on a single object" (171). One reading is aligned with realism because, in this circumstance, the "dupe presumes mimesis" and believes the passer's identity coincides with her appearance. The "in-group representative" (IGR), on the other hand, who belongs to the passer's group, "presumes performance"; this witness gains an "alternate epistemology or way of seeing" (171) in which identity is perceived as performance. In this model, the IGR would recognize the aspects of Mennonite identity that coincide with that of the dominant group, as well as the ways in which the performer must change her behaviour to fit in. The IGR would also see the false assumptions that members of the majority group make about identity, by their misrecognition of the performer for a member of the dominant group. Because the Mennonites have been the minority in a number of different host societies due to their multiple migrations and resettlements since the sixteenth century, their situation is particularly interesting in terms of this performative model.

As a less-visible minority in their lands of settlement, Mennonites are well-versed in the area of both passing and expressing a distinct or separate identity. Hurley seems to give credence to the mimetic as much as to the performative readings of identity, saying: "In both reading formations, national identity becomes a matter of a way of seeing, a skill in reading, available to a community of people who share a certain cultural literacy" (172), with identity being, then, in Robinson's words, " 'a function of the lens through which it is viewed'" (qtd in Hurley, 172). But because her mapping out of positions leaves the member of the dominant culture more limited in perspective than the in-group representative, her argument promotes the understanding of identity as performative, and her conclusion points out that a certain kind of "lens" gives greater access to the nature of identity. Indeed, she ends her essay with comments that assert the advantages of the performative model of identity. "Reflection theory", to use Corse's term, calls up the mirror metaphor of mimesis, and Hurley challenges this with the notion that passing offers a "refracting mirror" which, instead of the interior world of the individual, "shows the world *around* itself, through itself" (172). Passing calls into question the authenticity of any group's identity, as Hurley's model implicitly puts forward the possibility that one could fool one's own cultural group through performance as well, in order to convince other Mennonites, for example, that one truly belongs. The ability to fool members of one's own or of another culture is, of course, not the whole point; the analysis of the pass exposes assumptions about ethnic or cultural identity and the similarities between different groups.

The pass looks a little different in LGD from Hurley's Canadian-American example, but has equally useful implications. In this case, the "unmarked identity

category" is the Canadian, English-speaking majority, the "default" category to which people are assumed to belong when they do not clearly identify as members of a minority. However, it must be noted here that this category is also created and artificial, as even within the "unmarked" group there is much diversity of belief and custom. In fact, this category functions to cover up diversity, as Hurley's model makes clear. The triangular configuration of the pass requires some reorganization in order to make sense in terms of Mennonite identity and LGD. Canadians that pass as American "speak" both "Canadian" and "American", as does the IGR. From their positions, both the passer and the IGR "read" the performance as both a mimicking of the other cultural identity and a presentation of the performer's own cultural identity where the two are indistinguishable. In this way the cross-culturally shared elements of identity are evident, and the mistaken assumptions about their differences may be recognizable as well. The dupe, however, does not see these things until and unless they are pointed out to her. At that point, she is also able to take advantage of the insights such passing brings, such as the realization that the two cultures have many elements in common, and that identity is more a practice than an individual trait. In LGD, the dynamic is similar because the audiences are mostly or entirely bilingual. The performer and the in-group representative speak both languages, but the dupe is most likely not a speaker of Low German. However, this circumstance does not prevent the dupe from becoming aware of the same insights about identity as the American dupe who eventually recognizes the performer for a Canadian. While LGD is not as widely seen as mainstream American media, the operative features of the triangular model are nevertheless in place. When a non-Low German-speaker views or reads LGD, he might recognize or mis-recognize the English-speaking actors as members

of majority culture, or identify with these characters because of their use of English. The presence and position of the dupe can also be implied; for example, when younger characters speak English fluently in the plays in contrast to their elders, it may be assumed that they could and can pass as members of the majority, fooling other members of this dominant group. The model may be transferred to the stage of the everyday world, where Mennonites pass. When a member of the majority culture sees an English-speaking Mennonite speaking Low German, for example, the same kind of recognition of biases and false assumptions occurs. The English words and phrases within the plays draw attention to the fact that English is spoken by Mennonites, and that Low German will not always distinguish them from majority culture. That being the case, they are not so different from members of majority culture, nor, perhaps, are non-Mennonites from Mennonites. And what differences there are may be less an indicator of cultural divisions than a sign of alternative performances.

Even within Mennonite culture, the characteristics that mark Mennonite identity are not fixed, and this ambiguity appears in LGD. In different approaches to the question of language, for instance, the playwrights experiment with the idea that Low German is the defining feature of Mennonite identity. Plays that include English words challenge the notion of a separate language as a mark of identity, but the overall presentation in Low German shows a persistence to include the language as a cultural indicator. Another way of presenting the issue in LGD is to depict characters who openly struggle with the problem. The cranky Mrs. Greta Friesen in *The Right Christmas Gifts*, for example, sternly insists on Low German, but the plot of this play is based on the come-uppence she receives to correct her attitudes. She snaps at her young relative, "Ask in German if you

want an answer. In this house we speak low german (sic)"; but because her character is less than sympathetic, her command actually undermines the appeal of continuing the linguistic tradition. Through the satirical presentation of a character like Greta Friesen, the characteristics that identify Mennonites are held up for inspection, allowing audience members to question the way their own real-life performances come across. If identity is created by how we see ourselves on stage, then these plays present conflicting messages about language and identity.

Those gestures that suggest or define Mennonite identity become a central focus of attention in Arnold Dyck's *Four Mennonites Who Agree on One Thing* (1938). The sketch consists of a humourous conversation between four men (Koop, Buhr, Bergen, and Toews), in which they discuss language as a binding factor among different types of Mennonites. The first time language comes up is in the discussion about the Mennonite Conference – an annual meeting of Mennonite leaders, representatives, and interested members from diverse communities across North America. Dyck sets up the structure of the skit using a common dramatic motif in which he conveys information by having a question and answer dialogue, as some of the men are not as familiar with the large, traditional meeting as the others. When Buhr asks what they do at the conferences, Bergen replies, "They talk about all kinds of matters. All things that concern us as Mennonites: Missions, Relief, Publication, and I don't know what else" (2). The eclectic gathering of the conference is a strategic background for Dyck's theme of what constitutes Mennonite identity. As a movement that brought together believers in the sixteenth century from places in Europe as distant from each other as the Netherlands and Switzerland, the Anabaptist tradition is one of active debate within and between the

various communities and frequent schisms. Because the conference joins together Mennonites with sometimes vastly different views, the question of what they have in common is an obvious one when the subject appears in the play, and quickly generates discussion.

In *Four Mennonites* the ensuing dialogue quickly touches on several lines of distinction among Mennonite groups that are taken for granted within Mennonite circles, although they may be invisible to the eyes of outsiders. The first is the mixture, just among the four men gathered, of *Kanadier* (the 'first wave' people who arrived in Canada in the 1870s) and *Russländer* Mennonites (the 'second wave' immigrants of the 1920s). Bergen, whose reading material has been the start of the conversation, mentions his reluctance to attend the conference because he is not sure he would "understand what's going on" (3). Their exchange highlights some attitudes about the two sub-groups, despite its good-natured tone:

> Buhr (laughs) Well now Bergen, the (you) Russlanda[10] are usually quite clever, and you read various books and papers, and you act as if you know it all.
>
> Bergen (laughs) Yes we Russlanda are clever, that's true, but when it comes to English, I can't seem to get much farther than the Eaton's catalogue, and the words for cream and hogs… and those things are not discussed at a Conference. (3)

These comments about the *Russländer* are clearly assumptions that Mennonites (in Manitoba) would be aware of. In the history of Mennonite migrations, the groups that tended to be the first to move were typically more conservative, placing a higher value on

[10] The translator has retained the Low German word as it is written in the original text. In critical writing about Mennonites, the High German word (and spelling) is used. The translator omits the umlaut over the 'a', which is likely either an oversight or a type of shorthand.

separation than did the groups who stayed when government policy changed with respect to their freedoms.[11] As a result of their deliberate isolation from 'the world', education was more limited among the *Kanadier* or 'first wave' communities, for instance, than it was for the new immigrants or *Russländer* of the 'second wave', and this trend is evident in the teasing banter between Bergen and Buhr. But however true this situation may be, even Bergen the 'Russlanda' is doubtful about his abilities in the English-speaking world, and admits his difficulties with the language. The Canadian agricultural way of life which has fostered Bergen's continued exclusive use of Low (and High) German blurs the boundaries between the traditionally more educated *Russländer* and their *Kanadier* brethren. A different line of distinction is made now, Bergen points out, between educated Mennonites at the conference and those who are primarily farmers, and these two groups are presumably made up of a blend of *Russländer* and *Kanadier*. New divisions between groups that seem to denote class distinctions come with the move to the new world, complicating ideas about Mennonite identity.

Next, Dyck's characters take on the differences between American and Canadian Mennonites, which appears to be another arena in which identity is contested. Perhaps because of the geographical limitations that prevent greater interaction between the two groups, in addition to the nature of their differences, this division seems the most contentious, in Dyck's play at least. Once again, language is the main issue. When Buhr is incredulous that the conference is conducted in English, Bergen responds, "Yes... It's the people from the States, they have the most say and they do it in English" (3). The Mennonite population in the US is the oldest of the North American groups as well as the

[11] This pattern is traced by scholars such as James Urry (40-41).

largest,[12] and these facts explain why its preferences may carry more weight than the Canadian Mennonites', according to Dyck's piece. Buhr's contempt for the increasingly common use of English in American-Mennonite culture is clear in his remarks, "...I suppose those are others, not our kind. What are things coming to? Call themselves Mennonites and what else!" (4). In spite of Bergen's gentle protests ("But they are the Mennonites to which we belong"), Buhr gets even more excited about the issue, and provokes one of Koops's rare comments: "Careful Jake what you say: English Mennonites is like blasphemy (sic)" (5). The men seem to ignore religion in favour of language as a common component of identity, but employ this religious element as a rhetorical device to support their argument. This passage provides yet more evidence of the cultural products at their (and at Dyck's) disposal that are put to work to actively shape identity.

These outbursts eventually get Bergen to side with the two men, and his argument for the maintenance of Low German involves a number of articulate approaches, including the continued indictment of American Mennonites. He begins with the contrast between the Mennonites from well-established communities, which the American Mennonites epitomize, and the ones who continue to move, with the goal of religious freedom. He lauds the efforts of the latter, saying, "...it's clear that these 'hardnecks' who are still searching, they are among the best of us Mennonites, even though they make less noise than many others" (10). He cites the role Low German has played in

[12] Driedger and Kauffman document the arrival of the first Mennonites in North America as early as 1683. Their study shows that most of the Mennonites in the initial wave of immigration between 1700 and 1830 came from Southern Europe settled in the United States. They also note that the area to which the first settlers came, in southeastern Pennsylvania "still has the largest concentration of Mennonites in North America" (47). Canadian Mennonite history, however, does not include this group when they talk about the 'first wave', which, in Canada, refers to the group who arrived in the 1870s.

keeping Mennonites in different countries and locations bound together; his argument is compelling, and his heartfelt sentiments surely resonate with his listeners, many of whom have experienced upheaval and separation from their extended families. Written in 1938, the play would have an audience which comprised a large number of people who were immigrants, and so the feelings attached to these ideas would have been especially strong. For the *Kanadier*, immigration would have been in the not-too-distant past, so this presentation would have been compelling for them as well. Bergen mentions the prosperous colonies in Russia, reminding his audience that "[n]ow all that is gone. Now we are getting poorer and poorer every day, and the only thing we have saved is our mother-tongue. That's what allowed us to find you brethren here, and that is it which gives us our hope for the future" (11). He ends with statements that are pointedly aimed at the American stance towards language: "But if we allow ourselves to get involved in a Babylonian language mixture in this world, when we speak only Russian, or English, or Spanish, or Portugese, or even Hottentot, we won't understand each other anymore, and we can bury our Mennonitism" (11). Dyck's play discriminates between American and Canadian Mennonites, outlining the reasons behind the division and why these are so significant to Mennonites. In order to define "what we are", then, this part of the argument makes clear "what we are not", although time would show that the Mennonites in Manitoba for whom Dyck wrote have inevitably adopted English as a language of everyday use. Thus, while his argument may have failed in the ultimate goal of keeping Low German as the main language in the community, the piece shows some strategies available by which writers could attempt to have an input in shaping cultural identity.

The title of Dyck's sketch points to both the tendency for Mennonites to argue and divide over semantic issues and their interest in maintaining elements of a shared identity. The "one thing" they agree on turns out to be, of course, that Low German is the binding factor among Mennonites and should continue to be spoken, but during their heated discussion about the language, Dyck conveys the divisions that occur among Mennonites for a variety of reasons. For example, Buhr reminds Bergen and the others of how strange and different the *Kanadier* had found the Mennonite immigrants from Russia when the newcomers first arrived in their community. The *Russländer* were dressed differently from the Canadian Mennonites and had different customs from the *Kanadier*, who had arrived fifty years earlier. Buhr remembers these differences, saying, "…you did look a bit funny with your peaked caps, your shirts hanging out of your pants and a short jacket and your mustaches and you said Your welcome and Thankyou, we thought you were different (sic). But when you began to speak, and it was nice Low German, almost exactly like ours, then we knew that you were our people" (6). The *Kanadier* balked at these new Mennonites because their appearance differed so much from Canadian Mennonites'. As the dialogue turns out, not only did Low German act as the mediating influence that won over the *Kanadier*, but to the apparent relief of the *Kanadier*, the new residents soon changed their style of dress to more suitable (and more suitably *Canadian* Mennonite) attire. Interestingly, not only does this piece show Mennonites how the first and then the second waves of immigrants adopted a new, more Canadian appearance, but the clearly Russian style that the new ones arrived with suggests an adaptation to the styles prevalent in their last adopted home on the Russian Steppe. The play draws attention to an ambivalence as to where Mennonite identity is located – whether in dress

or belief or language, and this is the kind of complicating or deconstructive work that passing can achieve, whether Mennonites are passing as Russian, Canadian, or as other (slightly different) Mennonites within these cultures. Mennonites' ability to pass in Russia and Canada is highlighted by the time lag in which the new immigrants had not yet identified the gestures they must perform, even among their own people, in order to pass. When these elements of Dyck's play are considered, Edna Froese's reductive dismissal of Dyck's work is shown to be limited when she says,

> As the popularity of the Koop und Bua sketches testifies, Mennonites welcomed a familiarly glossed picture of a separated people. The choice of Low German, a language specific to the Mennonites and rich with its evocation of the rituals of daily life, strengthened ethnic identity and set at a distance the threat of the worldly world. (110)

At the same time that Dyck's sketch reiterates the importance of cultural values like language, the dialogue foregrounds dissent and division among Mennonites, and what constitutes identity is called into question by the men's discussion.

Whereas Dyck's play takes place before the wide acceptance of English in Mennonite communities, Linda Ens's play *I Want to Choose* (2004) offers a more recent example of the complicated relationship between LGD and identity. Her full-length play enacts the plotting of a group of young people to get two of their unsuspecting members to become romantically interested in each other, with the final goal being that the two rather incorrigible young people will marry (and thereby no longer be nuisances to the rest of the group). The male members fear that whomever Leena chooses to marry will be helpless to refuse against her powers of persuasion. Seeing that she works in an

elementary school, where apparently there are no eligible men (and presumably they also live in a small Mennonite town such as Reinland, where Ens lives), the group reasons that Leena's choice of marriage partner must come from among their ranks.[13] After the elabourate attempts the others make to get them together, the humourous ending reveals that the two have already planned to marry. The way in which Ens takes up and incorporates some of the concepts that "define" Mennonite identity shows how LGD continues to present these concepts.

Ens carefully chooses the elements of Mennonite culture that she wishes to show, and the result is a mixture of familiar traditions in a contemporary situation. There is no debate about language, because in twenty-first-century southern Manitoba there is no question that Mennonites are fluent in English;[14] Low German is used to acknowledge tradition rather than to underscore the urgency of its continued use as the prime indicator of identity, as Dyck's early play does. Rather, language is used in interesting ways to invoke elements of tradition. For instance, in a (humourous) comparison of male-female relations to war, the character Isaak Ens, who is described in the list of *dramatis personae* as "sarcastic, [a] loudmouth, and perhaps a bit of a woman-hater", makes a reference to the *Selbstschutz* or self-defense movement that took place in Mennonite villages in Russia during the years of the Revolution. This High German word suggests the new

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[13] In their study of marriage patterns among Canadian Mennonites, J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger report that as of 1981, only 39 percent of Mennonites had married exogamously, a figure which differed very little in a census done in 1989. Driedger adds, from his analysis of the Canadian census, that "of 12 major religious bodies, only Jews, with 30 percent, had a lower proportion of exogamous marriages", and that "[o]f the 12 bodies, Mennonites were the most rural, a factor which minimizes exogamous marriage" (110).

[14] Ens points out that the recent influx of Mennonites from Mexico, South America, and Europe have brought Mennonites who do not speak English. However, this 'third wave' will inevitably learn the language of the majority culture, as functioning without it has become less feasible, and even an 'isolated' community does not mean its people are separated from the world in the same way they once were, especially in the densely populated area of southern Manitoba.

ways that young Mennonites approach their history and identity, with the insertion of a serious concept from the past to describe a more everyday, personal situation.

Both the use of the word *Selbstschutz* and the reactions of the other characters to it call up complicating factors in establishing identity. Isaak justifies the matchmaking plan to Jihaun ("John" in English), saying, "Well, this is just a bit of 'self-defense'. You know, like our people in Russia held out against the Machno bandits (sic)" (5). This rather flippant use of Mennonite history would have been completely out of place in Dyck's play; while the influences on identity are visible in *Four Mennonites* in a social constructionist analysis, Dyck writes with the realist notion that his character Toews expresses at the end: "One is to remain what one is" (14). In Dyck's play, a shared history is an important part of Mennonite identity, and therefore not something that can be joked about. Ens's work shows a more fluid conception of Mennonite identity, as we shall see. The reference to Machno and Mennonite history is instantly understood by the other young people who hear him; both Sara and Jihaun refute the logic of his remark, perhaps partially in admonishment of his application of this serious idea to a 'domestic' situation, but more importantly showing their intimate knowledge of a shared history of persecution. Machno, a Russian revolutionary who had once worked for Mennonites, led his group of anarchists against Mennonites with particular vengeance during the Revolution. The suffering of Mennonites at the hands of Machno and his men, and the violence of the assaults he led have been well documented, and this part of history is recent enough to retain a strong presence in the oral narratives of many Mennonite families. This mutual past and the shared experience of their people is reiterated here as a part of Mennonite consciousness, and so for younger generations who did not experience

the persecution in Russia, this part of Mennonite identity is created for them through Ens's play. Everyone in the Mennonite audience knows, with very little context given in the play, the events to which this interaction refers. Sara responds to Isaak by challenging his remark: "Do you what happened to the 'Self-Defense'? (sic)" (5). Jihaun answers the question for Isaak, as if from a textbook or much-repeated lesson: "In those villages where there was a 'Self-Defense' it turned out doubly bad" (6). In addition to the Low and High German languages, Ens calls up the common roots of the Mennonite experience as a recognizable element of the Mennonite identity that her play celebrates. In her work she invokes aspects of shared history, but their meaning must be brought to bear on the world of the current generation, and this is done with difficulty; the historical event becomes allegorical and even humourous. The Canadian-born descendants of those alive during the Russian revolution are removed from the experience, so that the once-familiar markers of the Mennonite world must be re-established through drama. But that is not all that Isaak's comment signals.

This High German word has some interesting indications about the shared elements of identity on which Ens bases her play. The addition of this third language is a testament to the multi-lingual world of the Mennonites, and the different strains of thought and imagination that each of the languages brings to their identity. High German is the language of the Church, and so it is associated with important subjects; *Selbstschutz* is clearly an important idea, both as a remembrance of the horrific persecution of their families and forebears, and because it calls up, however briefly, the contentious issue of pacifism in times of conflict. In Canada, in 2004, the stakes are obviously not so high. But times of peace, which are less frequent in Mennonite history than in some cultures,

offer opportunities to examine culture without the distraction that crises necessitate. The broad issues are not in the foreground, and instead the interpersonal dynamics of community life become the subject. The mention of the *Selbstschutz* is a light-hearted way of expressing that the 'young-people's' group should protect themselves from the overly-assertive people among them. This new use to which Ens puts an important Mennonite signal word attests both to its significance for older generations and the more flexible definition of words, and therefore concepts, that denote identity for subsequent generations. The openness to the equivocal nature of language allows for a less fixed view of identity. Such evidence speaks for the relevance of the theory of identity as socially constructed.

Edna Froese explains the way that theories of social constructionism are received in Mennonite circles. With the aid of critic Jeff Gundy's work, she asserts that, on one hand, the insecurity of the 'de-centred subject' finds little resonance in the Mennonite community "because it undermines Christian assumptions of absolute truth, objective reality, unwavering moral standards, and the meaningfulness of individual choice as these have been traditionally articulated" (41). She notes on the other hand, however, the "similarity between the Mennonite suspicion of the exalted individual and the deconstructionist insistence that such an individual does not exist" (41). Because of the high value placed on community, and the way the individual is played down, Mennonite ideology accords with postmodern theories that see identity as socially defined. The focus of a postmodern study of Mennonite identity is on the cultural factors that shape cultural identity, and the ways that culture is presented and experienced.

As a shaping element of culture, LGD works through more than the content of the plays. Barbara G. Myerhoff's examination of Jewish experience touches on other important factors that bind Mennonites together. In addition to efforts that keep cultural traditions visible, the Mennonites, like the Jews, also have educational institutions and highly developed aid agencies. In fact, as mentioned above, they are known internationally for their work in emergency and poverty-stricken zones. And this element of Mennonite life, the extending of financial aid to others and outreach beyond their communities, is an integral part of the format of entertainment evenings that feature LGD, and acts as a force for cohesiveness. This charitable and caring aspect of the dramatic presentations is part of a way in which LGD works as a ritual in Mennonite culture that preserves the group, and strengthens group identity.

LGD is ritualistic both because of the framework surrounding it, and because of some of the abiding themes in its content. I argued in my first chapter that LGD's form presents a challenge to the ideologies behind long-established traditions of narrative creations. However, I now want to draw attention to some of the aspects of Mennonite culture that do remain constant; in particular, I want to show how these blend with the imaginative processes of LGD. Working together, they contribute to the creation and preservation of identity. In his study of early modern Europe, Edward Muir formulates ritual's essence as "basically a social activity that is repetitive, standardized, [and] a model or a mirror", and adds that "its meaning is inherently ambiguous" (98). Barbara G. Myerhoff's work expands this definition, explaining some of the reasons for ritual's successful functioning:

> Ritual is prominent in all areas of uncertainty, anxiety, impotence, and disorder. By its repetitive character it provides a message of pattern and predictability. In requiring enactments involving symbols, it bids us to participate in its messages, even enacting meanings we cannot conceive or believe: our actions lull our critical faculties, persuading us with evidence from our own physiological experience until we are convinced. In ritual, doing is believing. (151)

These comments frame her study of ritual in the Jewish community in North America, but her comments can be applied to Mennonite culture with fruitful results.

Several observations that Myerhoff makes support the view that LGD is an important ritual in Mennonite culture, and thereby a formal influence on identity. First, the appearance of ritual in connection with times of social upheaval and cultural turmoil suggests that it is no coincidence that LGD was started soon after the diaspora of Russian Mennonites and the arrival of the Russländer in Canada.[15] Since their resettlement, the Mennonite community has continued to experience instability, and has had to adjust to the effects of modernization (Driedger and Kauffman). Cultural rituals are the symbolic activities in society that prevail or adapt to changing attitudes and circumstances and provide the continuity that enables Mennonites to express a shared identity. Repetitive elements of LGD include the specialized language, of course, but there are other significant elements as well. For instance, the fundraising that lies behind every production and entertainment evening conveys a message about the group assembled. Even for those who are Mennonite by birth but have left the church, giving is a gesture that can still be held in common with all types of Mennonites, regardless of how closely

[15] These origins were recounted to me by Elizabeth Peters, whose mother started a group in southern Manitoba in the 1920s "to bring people together" (Interview, March, 2005).

they follow the fundamentalist paradigm of past generations. The framework around LGD sets up a neutral ground on which to express similarity to other Mennonites, not just through a shared language but through charity.

Other symbols invoked in the space where LGD is produced add to this neutral ground. The gathering of the audience in one place signifies the existence of the group as a distinct cultural entity. Their physical presence shows their interest in the continuation of the culture. People taking the time to be involved in the event attests to the value they place on these undertakings. Each evening requires extensive organization, group decisions, arrangements among local institutions and bodies, tickets to be sold and purchased, often beforehand, and preparation of the site. Informal discussion of the events afterwards is often also part of the ritual. Further, the presence of younger generations offers evidence of the continued vitality of the community and the potential for its future (Myerhoff, 160). The location of the productions in church basements or other community buildings (built by Mennonites) also represents the foundations of the proceedings as the powerful tradition that kept Mennonites together over centuries and made their achievements in the new world possible. The laughter evoked by the plays becomes part of the ritual as well, showing the spiritedness of the culture and joining the group in a shared experience of positive feeling. The format, too, of audience and performance calls up the framework for religious worship that is so much a part of Mennonite tradition; here, however, discrepancies over doctrine are irrelevant, and the group can experience the play unencumbered by the problems that belief might hold for individuals. Lastly, the gathering for the sake of raising money for projects both within and outside their community strikes a chord with Myerhoff's analysis of similar Jewish

social rituals. Like the ones she cites, an evening of LGD is "an occasion for cultural celebration and an opportunity to perform good works in a form that express[es] the members' identity with the widest reaches of community..." (159). Besides the symbols offered in the content of the play, then, the formal elements surrounding the play's performance are worthwhile to note as well, and these things play a part in constructing a particular Mennonite identity.

In an interesting explanation of the work that ritual does, Myerhoff's comments could be understood as a defense of our desire to understand cultural products as reflections of identity. She notes that the consequence of *failed* rituals is the sudden visibility of the artificiality of our social arrangements and customs. She says, "If they fail, we may glimpse their basic artifice, and from this apprehend the fiction and invention underlying all culture" (152). I would extend this consequence to include the danger of exposing the self in addition to culture as unstable and contingent. Because we make and plan our rituals, the identity that they affirm is logically the product of our creation as well. Indeed, Myerhoff later acknowledges the connection of ritual to the verification of the self when she says: "Personal integration is achieved when the subject in a ritual retrieves his or her prior life experiences, not as past memories, but as events and feelings occurring in the present. Then the person is a child or youth once more, feeling one with earlier selves, who are recognized as familiar, still alive, coherent" (174).[16] The framework of the LGD evenings provides the repetition that calls up the

[16] In a telling remark about identity and cultural products, a guest on Jian Ghomeshi's CBC radio show "Fifty Tracks" argued for Stan Rogers's song "The Northwest Passage" to be included as a quintessentially Canadian song, saying that if you listen to this song, you instantly feel Canadian, and that it will give you memories you didn't even know you had (July, 2004).

same feelings one experiences on similar occasions, and so the self is reinforced. Her analysis of this process shows the social forces involved in the creation of the self.

The symbolic elements of the gathering's ritual structure or framework signal characteristics important in the Mennonite ethos, and some of these are also expressed in the content of the dramatic presentation; these latter aspects are more overtly symbolic because of their status as objects on stage. Elizabeth Peters's play *The Cherry Hedge* was written for the seventy-fifth anniversary of her small Mennonite hometown as a way, she explains in notes accompanying the play, of showing the world outside her community what Mennonites are like. Peters is paraphrased in the local newspaper saying that the piece "was written to both entertain and amuse the audience...while at the same time vividly portraying the frailties and strengths of the people of the Winkler community" (*Pembina Times*, May 6, 1981, 1). Her comments illustrate the careful process involved in the creation of the work; the play seems especially designed for the purpose of presenting certain elements of Mennonite life in small, southern-Manitoba villages, with the result that particular aspects of 'Mennonite identity' feature prominently.

The plot is structured around a disagreement between two cousins, Helen and Jessie, over a patch of land that grows between their houses. On this land a chokecherry hedge grows, which the more forthright Helen wants to cut down. Both parties secretly try to contact the aunt who owns the property, with part of the humour being that there are so many Mennonites with the same names that they end by finding no fewer than three Mary Hieberts, all from the same town in Saskatchewan. Not only are names repeated in Mennonite families, but the ability to trace one's heritage and find a common relative is a well-known pattern in Mennonite communities. Uncle John, who lives with

Helen and her husband and son, has a number of lines in the play that seem to confuse even as they try to straighten out the relationships between family members. Near the beginning he tells Helen about Aunt Mary: "You see, she was your mother's aunt, but your mother was a year older than she. When your mother married my younger brother your great aunt followed suit by marrying young, dashing Frank Hiebert from out of the province" (5). Mennonite critic Calvin Redekop playfully notes that "among Mennonites...the discovery of family relationship is itself a kind of in-joke; whenever two Mennonites are gathered together they will inevitably discover that their mother's father's aunt is their uncle's cousin" (qtd in Froese, 144-5). Both of these characteristics suggest, like the multi-generational audience at the LGD evenings, the connections between Mennonites and the continuation of successive generations of the culture. As the playwright admits, the play is a vehicle for the conveyance of cultural norms and values, and these are easily identified. In such circumstances it is especially clear that the presentation of identity is mediated by the decisions of playwrights.

In analyzing the relationship between identity and LGD, Mennonite attitudes and traditions must be taken into account. The title of Linda Ens's play *Etj Well Waehlen* [*I Want to Choose*] is a good expression of the potential way that this relationship may be viewed. Just as the young man Isaak uses the serious historical reference to the *Selbstschutz* when talking about a current, personal situation, I think it is valid to compare the serious attitudes of the first community of Anabaptist believers to modern-day Mennonites who want to shape their own paths as well. The Anabaptists went against authorities in asserting their right to "choose" to be one of God's people, and to make a conscious decision to belong to a community of believers. In choosing an identity for

themselves, the first Mennonites established a tradition of self-definition that can be applied to the creation of artistic creations today; the belief that one can and should be guided by literary documents is firmly in place in the Mennonite world historically, and attests to the relevance of social construction theories to LGD.

The social constructivist position offers a useful model through which to look at identity in LGD. Another application of this theory exposes the ways that the literary canon is artificially constructed, and where this line of inquiry indicates the absence of texts by and for women in the canon, an investigation may be made into these missing texts and interests. My study moves on to these questions in the next chapter.

Chapter Three – Language and Representation: Feminist Theory and Low German Drama

In this chapter I examine the relationship between representation and the everyday world of experience in LGD. The details of daily life, so often overlooked in what is termed art, are brought up to the level of visibility in these theatrical productions, as the playwrights draw on and represent the material conditions of Mennonite life. Through the attention shown to common experience that has consistently been a part of LGD, this drama corresponds to a wider movement; as Gloria Neufeld Redekop discusses in her study of Mennonite women's societies, 'new history' or 'social history' incorporates a 'bottom-up' approach, which refers to the recording and examining of elements of daily life rather than focusing on the "great" people and events in history. Her research comes out of the movement in history and sociology, among other disciplines, that took place in the 1960s and 70s in response to social and political developments. The practice that goes along with this view attempts to restore value to both the activities of men and women in daily life and their representations – value which has been lost or negated alongside traditional accounts. I connect the marginalization of women in Western culture, including Mennonite culture, with the neglect of everyday experience in literary tradition to show how the Low German plays address the gap between the lived world and representation. Frederic Jameson identifies the dissolution of the division between high and mass culture (1935) as a characteristic of postmodernism, and this observation speaks to my study of LGD as well; combining the components of everyday or 'mass' culture with the traditionally 'high' form of dramatic representation is an activity that defies the boundaries that divide and rank the areas of art and life. If breaching these divisions is

one aspect of postmodernism's revolutionary nature, then LGD is clearly postmodern and radical when it insists on the importance of pitchforks, garden utensils, and false teeth, for example, as central elements. While everyday objects such as tools may appear in conventional drama as part of the backdrop, rarely do they play more than a marginal role except to figure symbolically in the action (like the handkerchief in *Othello*, for instance). The foregrounding of these objects, then, subverts traditional expectations. Further, a postmodern theory of language as unstable adds to the investigation into the relationship between the world and representation in the plays. I argue that while acknowledging the elements of local culture, LGD escapes the modernist equation of language as a simple reflection of reality. John McCabe-Juhnke's work helps to define the ways LGD accomplishes this position.

Feminist theorists since the 1960s have noted the dearth, not only of woman-centred accounts and perspectives in literature, but also of representations of the very elements of women's worlds. Annette Kolodny points to a phrase in Susan Glaspell's story "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917) to suggest the status of the everyday objects of domestic life that made up women's worlds in the past: the " 'insignificance of kitchen things'" (qtd in Kolodny 2159) makes the works by women that feature these things seem "trivial and ... aesthetically wanting" in the traditional (male) view. More recent criticism, however, recognizes that this literature brings across how "symbolically rich" women's worlds are, Kolodny maintains. The re-evaluation of the significance of small details of the real world is a corrective to this view. As this largely practical world of the home, of the kitchen, and of the personal relationships within the community was women's realm, the attention paid to such matters in drama is in accordance with a fresh

perspective, as Neufeld Redekop documents, on the importance of women's lives in history. The focus on these elements of daily life in LGD shows how this drama and feminist theory share some of the same foci, both asserting the importance of everyday experience and of women's worlds.

Edna Froese's work echoes Kolodny's insights when she contrasts Mennonite writing by men and women, pointing out that women's written expression often takes an alternative approach to the "prophetic" voice of male writers. She discovers that women "place in the foreground, not the epic stories of Mennonites, not the major theological issues" of the community but the "everyday living" that forms the foundations of the community, and "on which men wrote their lives and stories" (204). Although she is not referring to LGD here, Froese's observation applies to the plays because they too focus on the experiences of daily life, and they resist intellectual and one-sided approaches to literary representation, whether these come from inside Mennonite culture or are modeled by mainstream culture.

The importance of women's work, in the church as elsewhere, has traditionally been overlooked. Neufeld Redekop's study *The Work of Their Hands* highlights the ways that Mennonite women's role has been relegated to a minor, supplementary one, and their work has been valued for its tangible, *visible* results – an emphasis which has limited their access to intellectual pursuits. She quotes numerous biblical passages that were used by women's groups as mottos and as the bases for conferences and meetings. As she notes, most of these underscore the necessity to serve, using such phrases as " 'stretcheth out her hand', 'reacheth forth her hands to the needy', 'do good', 'labourers', 'serve him', 'work or deed', 'well doing', 'work of the Lord', [and] 'your labour'" (73). This

emphasis on "doing" for the sake of others is a characteristic of the Mennonite woman's role, to which Froese's research also attests; she quotes Magdelene Redekop to explain that the ideal for women in this community is to be "'self-less ... without self'" (186). The emphasis on serving others through material means has a number of implications for my study.

The first suggestion of this research is that LGD, always produced as a method of fundraising, is thereby justified by traditional standards as an artistic outlet for women. Another implication of this scholarship is that the incorporation of tangible elements of daily life and the appeal to the senses rather than strictly to intellectual apprehension is a fitting approach to the artistic process for Mennonite women. In keeping with their association with the material aspects of community life, and the directive that they give of themselves rather than raising themselves above others through solitary, intellectual work, the creation of LGD fulfills the requirements of producing visible results (through both fundraising and live theatre) and celebrates the world of material things in its content.

Gelassenheit or humility was valued as an integral element of Mennonite culture since the first Anabaptists, as Neufeld Redekop's work illustrates, and this trait has an influence on women's approach to playwriting. If Froese's observations are correct that subservience and selflessness were enforced more emphatically for women in Mennonite culture than for men (201), then perhaps women's close familiarity with and awareness of this trait leads them to approach playwriting with an eye for the humbling potential of the drama. Whether their aim is purposely to satirize men especially, as a way of undermining men's relatively higher position and their power within the community, or

whether the playwrights merely include men in their general humourous depictions of Mennonites, female writers of LGD consistently make their characters the objects of laughter. Because these playwrights (the large majority of whom are women) are not afraid to show their community in a comical light, they counter the image of Mennonites as dogmatic followers of fundamentalist doctrine, and provide a view of the community that prevents its members from succumbing to the pride that an overly serious self-interpretation can lead to.

Mennonite writers of LGD employ a number of different strategies that, paradoxically, both disrupt and preserve tradition. In some plays, they turn over the hierarchical structure of Mennonite society by offering up the gender with traditionally higher status as fodder for humour. In their dramatic creations, women playwrights parody the serious role that men fulfill in Mennonite society through the comical representations of characters like Kay Friesen's "Forgetful Jake" and the air traffic controller in Mary Pauls's *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* who, with his silly antics, causes the Prime Minister's plane to crash. In the plays that have women portraying the male as well as the female characters, which are very common,[17] women's potential for subversion increases. The plays that feature a large cast, such as those that are about the spread of gossip in the community (*Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a Diet* and *What did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*, for example), disperse the focus onto a number of characters rather than centring on any one protagonist, which is another way that women writers stray from conventional (dramaturgical) form (Zimmerman 24). The plays are

[17] Plays put on by the North Kildonan group "The Willing Helpers" are always women-only casts, with the exception of token parts for men that are added for humour, and that are not major roles. Groups that gather strictly for theatrical recreation, such as the Reinland players, have mixed casts; however, putting on skits traditionally belongs largely to the women's auxiliary groups in connection with church fundraising.

also symbolically subversive because they are so often produced in the basement of a church rather than the upper-level sanctuary; the "sacred" space where official services take place is not considered appropriate for the humourous, irreverent performances, even though the sanctuary is far more suitable in terms of accommodating the large audiences that attend LGD events, providing comfortable seating, and offering a clear view of the action on "stage". In addition to the critical work they do through overturning traditional structures, however, these plays bring the community together for the event, and further the use of Low German.

Mennonite women playwrights fulfill a dual role, then, as bearers of culture and as challengers to that culture's structures. A comparison of the two plays about matchmaking shows the conventional way that women are represented, in Elizabeth Peters's translation of *One Must Marry* (from the Dutch *One Must Get Under the Hoof*, date unknown), in contrast to some important innovations playwright Linda Ens makes in the presentation of male/female relations in her play *I Want to Choose* (2004).

Peters's play centers on Wellum and Joakob, two "absentminded sociology professors" (1) whose Aunt Trudji insists that one of them must marry; this has been the order of their dead father. Neither man wants to marry, being caught up in intellectual pursuits, and the pressure their aunt puts on them seems to come from her frustration with having to do all the household labour herself; putting up with the "misfortune" (16) of a wife, for them, is just a necessity for practical purposes. These men are already fulfilled through other areas of their lives, taking for granted the work that goes into providing them with a clean home, clean clothes, food, and the other daily necessities of life. Trudji puts forward her niece (apparently unknown to the men although she is possibly their

cousin) as a potential candidate, and the two men argue privately about who must accept their aunt's proposal. After much argument, Joakob loses a draw and must agree to marry the niece, Trintji. By the end, when this young woman eventually proves herself to be a fitting intellectual companion as well as able to take on the upkeep of the household, she attracts the admiration and love of Wellum and she is finally recognized by both men as an asset.

There is some ambiguity as to how far this play privileges the male perspective. Trintji must earn her way into a life of servitude by showing herself to be more skilled in practical matters than her potential husband, and she also earns respect for her interest in the philosophical ideas that, presumably, he alone has the freedom to pursue. That she can fulfill all of his desires and requirements makes her and her aunt triumphant at the denouement, but the question lingers about what she actually gains for herself. Throughout the play Aunt Trudji makes comments that defend the position of women, but these seem to be undermined by the nature of women's role as labourers and by the men's smug responses. For instance, in the opening scene Aunt Trudji scolds her nephews for their preoccupation with books and knowledge, and their lack of consideration for her work. Concluding with the clause, "Without me you are nothing absolutely nothing! (sic)" (2). The "boys" (2) seem to speak as one, and patronizingly, when Wellum replies, "Auntie, we all know that very well, if only you wouldn't make such a hullabaloo about it" (2). These and other like comments continue throughout the work, and the men and their aunt dispute the worth of ideas in comparison to physical existence, firmly aligning these concepts with the two genders. Trudji has difficulty countering Wellum's words when he challenges her with "Do you call saving money,

eating, drinking and sleeping living? (sic). Most people don't know they are alive or why they are alive Auntie. What are you really living for? Tell me" (3). He gets the best of the argument that establishes the superiority of knowledge over everyday life. But although *One Must Marry* focuses primarily on male interests, Wellum's attraction to Trintji testifies to the importance of love and feeling, of "living" as opposed to the "invisible" realm of ideas, and so gestures towards some appreciation of the feminine. Joakob's mixed reaction in the last line can be read as compromising this idea, however, when he claims that although he is disappointed not to have seen Trintji's worth in time to marry her, he will remain single, for he is "happy to stay with [his] books" (30). While the play follows conventional representation closely, the use of the Low German language, in its close association with everyday life, may help to create sympathy in favour of the living rather than the abstract world.

The early play presents women as objects of exchange between men, while Ens's creation, on the other hand, represents the female characters as active agents in deciding their own fates. The titles of the two plays suggest the differences in perspectives that *One Must Marry* (from *One Must Get Under the Hoof*) and *I Want To Choose* express, although the first appears to apply its logic to men and women as equally as the second does. "Must" contrasts with "want" and "choose", and although marriage is presented as an unwelcome responsibility by the men in *One Must Marry*, reluctantly taken on, the social structures of Mennonite society depicted in the play clearly make being "under the hoof" a more fitting description of marriage for women. Ens plays with these ideas in her more contemporary work, while suggesting that some traditional attitudes towards women remain in Mennonite communities.

I Want To Choose begins with the young adults in a Mennonite youth group conspiring to make two of their members, Leena and Jasch, fall for each other and marry. They lay their plan so that Leena, the domineering young leader among them, will no longer be a threat to the marriageable young men, who fear they will not be able to resist her powers of persuasion if she chooses one of them to marry on her own. The ending shows Leena following through with her own plans, which happen to coincide with theirs. Marriage as an eventuality applies to both men and women relatively equally; their peers try to get Leena and Jasch together, agreeing that both should marry, and using similar strategies to attract them to each other. In some ways, then, the play subverts the traditional status of women in relation to marriage; the idea that young women must be "married off", and the urgency behind it, for example, no longer has relevance in a social system in which women have access to education and occupational opportunities as men do. However, the ideological necessity for women to marry and be "contained" seems to persist in Ens's play, in that Leena is more of a threat to the community than Jasch, and he is simply the "dupe" upon whom the obligation falls to marry her. Despite their independence in contemporary times, women are represented in ways that show a lingering bias towards their social position.

Through her presentation of a strong female lead who "has her way" in the end, however, Ens's play reverses stereotypes based on sex which accompanied the historically unbalanced structure of Mennonite culture, especially when compared with Peters's earlier play. Peters's version presents the need for marriage from a practical point of view: the two men need wives to do the labour of their household so that they can tend to their studies. In contrast to Ens's presentation of Leena as being able to

influence others, including the men, the play from Peters follows the conventions of the classic "two suitors" framework (Kolodny 2149), in which the only decision a woman can make is whom to marry, and her marriage at the end signals her conformity to the expectations of society. Ens's work, although it ends with the convention of the marriage, presents significantly different dynamics.

I Want To Choose upsets the expectations for the traditional gender roles. For example, the tendency for women to become objects of possession is turned around and applied to men when Leena asks Neeta for clarification of her comments about Jasch:

N Jasch is such a good boy, isn't he? And he doesn't look so bad either.

L I thought you would never let go of Hein.

N No, no, I didn't mean that – Jasch is not one for me, I only meant … um

L You mean you can look over a region without buying land? (6)

First, the women behave in ways that are conventionally reserved for men: they admire and express approval for members of the opposite sex, especially for their sex appeal. The agricultural metaphor is especially full of connotations about sexuality. Besides the notion of fertility, Leena's comment signals the idea that sexual fantasy is acceptable, and that sex/a sexual partner can be purchased; but the remark comes as a surprise out of the mouth of a young woman. Leena makes it clear here that women both take pleasure and feel justified in "looking over" the men. As part of a subservient position to men, and as a consequence of *Gelassenheit's* value in Mennonite culture, the expression of women's desires in all areas of life, especially those having to do with sexuality, was traditionally censured. Mennonite women, as Froese, Neufeld Redekop, Katie Funk Wiebe, and other critics claim, have occupied an ancillary position historically, but Ens's play illustrates

the overturning of this position. Although "land" has a more metaphorical connection to women's bodies than to men's, the reversal of this trope adds to the comedy. Perhaps Leena's inferred marriage at the conclusion may be seen as not so much "containing" as an expression of her will, since she has made her choice of partner without, or in spite of, the influence of her social group. So rather than being a critique of the culture through exposing sexual biases operative in traditional narrative, for example, Ens's work in theatre, such as her play *I Want To Choose*, is a type of practice that uses some of the conventions of the drama but overturns and corrects others. In terms of the play working as a shaping influence for social change, it is perhaps to her advantage that her target audience comes to support the fundraising cause, to laugh, and to hear Low German, and so may be accepting of new ideas and unconventional representations in this medium. And of course the subversion is still within accepted norms: Leena does not choose a marriage partner that goes counter to the wishes of the community, nor does she choose to remain single.

Where Leena does conform to a traditional female role in Ens's play, her character suggests ways that individual will is harnessed or channeled by the expectations of the community. As a forceful leader of the young people's group, she is able to exercise her abilities and turn her ideas into concrete results, but all of these accomplishments are directed to the benefit of the town. The community improvement projects she has led and her 'good works', such as helping her neighbours with their computer, show that she follows the expectations of her social group, and the extent to which she carries out this traditional role even more emphatically than her peers suggests that even though she is portrayed as an assertive young woman, her choices may be

shaped by the implicit will of the larger group around her. Even where Ens asserts a challenging model to male/female relations in this play, there remain questions about women's autonomy in the culture.

The reference to buying land is interesting for other reasons as well as those indicated by its association with sexuality. The Low German language is particularly evocative of everyday experience—the smells, tastes, sounds, and activities, many of which are connected with farm life. In addition to its status compared to High German, which associates it with "baser" concepts, the Low German language is characterized by a capacity to elicit the material, sensory elements of life. In her discussion of Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, for example, Froese points out that "Linguistic contexts are determined by unstated principles of exclusion and inclusion. High German elevates faith (and discourages realistic questioning) by excluding the everyday" (119). In contrast, Low German is a fitting medium for discussing the practical side of marriage and partnering.[18] The language is also especially conducive to earthy metaphors, and Leena's comparison is one such example. As much as choosing a marriage partner involves feeling, the similarity it bears to buying land attests to the need for practical considerations in this venture as well. Perhaps as Ens draws on the importance of land, and the buying of land, in Mennonite culture, she also shows that women have equally as much invested in such decisions, even where they have not traditionally been the primary decision-makers in these purchases.[19]

Besides the challenge to male-privileging points of view that LGD such as Ens's can enact, these Mennonite writers appeal to senses other than sight in their works, and so

[18] This characteristic of Low German is confirmed by Mennonites I have spoken with, including Elizabeth Peters, Henry Suderman, Elizabeth Enns, and Douglas Reimer.
[19] Traditionally, women could own land, but only acquired it through the death of their husbands (Enns).

create meaning through avenues other than intellectual understanding. As many Mennonites can affirm, Low German is a language particularly associated with emotion and sensation (Froese 145). Perhaps as a consequence of its use for daily activities and events while High German described more abstract ideas, Low German is connected to the body and material being through its ability to evoke physical experience and to appeal to the senses. Part of the humour of LGD is bound up with the sounds of words, and speakers of Low German seem to make the most of the comical sounds of their language. For instance, in *Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a Diet*, a discussion of Mennonite nicknames shows that the language is particularly conducive to being manipulated for the sake of aural enjoyment. The play centers on a married couple who decide to lose some weight. In a short time the whole community knows about their plan, and the visits the Giesbrechts subsequently receive set up a situation in which they talk about their neighbours after each one leaves, allowing the audience to enjoy some anecdotes typical of a small community. During one of the Giesbrechts' conversations, they discuss certain 'characters' whom they know, and the reasons for their nicknames. Mr. Giesbrecht has prefaced one neighbour's visit by saying "Here comes the cackler, Wiens [de Koakal Wiens, (orig. 3)]. But he will give no advice. He is so skinny..." (5). Later, Mrs. Giesbrecht asks her husband what he meant by this description and he replies, "He once told me he had pasted Tiles [Kachele] on the bathroom wall but he pronounced it cackles since then we called him cackle Wiens (sic)" (6).[20] The translator writes in the margin

[20] Here the translator's version shows some interesting deviations from Standard English conventions, and incorporates some German (Low and High) grammar rules. For example, the German form capitalizes nouns, as Elizabeth Enns has done, perhaps unconsciously, on 'Tiles'. As well, the structure of the phrase "...since then we called him cackle Wiens" uses the German-sounding simple past tense rather than the imperfect, as English prefers. Enns has tried to keep some of the German structure to preserve the rhythm of the Low German language in the translations.

that "Tiles are Koakele in Low German" (6). The verb "to cackle" in Low German is also "koakle" (Rempel 85) [21], and of course the double meaning is the source of the humour. The sound of this word is an element of its effect as well, as further examples will show. The moniker is clearly meant as an epithet to make fun of Wiens, in the tradition of the small Mennonite town, and the Giesbrechts justify this practice in their next conversation. This dialogue about the ethics of nicknaming cleverly allows for more humourous anecdotes about names:

> Mrs. G. I sometimes wonder if it is right to give people nicknames [orig. "Iachenomes"]. Is it not making fun of them (sic)
>
> Mr. G. You are possibly correct. We should be careful not to hurt people Yet among our people so many of us have the same names, that it seems practical to use nicknames. so we know who is who. My oldest sister married a Kroeker ["Krauja"]. IN their garden they had a lot of Kroekel (damson plums) trees So we called him Kroekel Kroega ["Kriechel Kreja"]. He himself answered the phone at times with that nickname (sic).
>
> (6)

There is a celebration of the mixture of idea and sound here for the sake of humour; it is possible, too, that with the new sounds of English around them to compare to their own language, Mennonites were yet more aware of the humourous potential of Low German.

N.H. Unruh's play *A Wonderful Opportunity* holds another example of how sound is used for humourous effect, again incorporating the tactile world in preference to intellectual approaches. The phrase that speaks to my topic here is a retort that "Janzen" makes to his neighbour in a style typical of the Mennonite propensity to exact humour

[21] I use Herman Rempel's Low German dictionary *Kjenn Jie Noch Plautdietsch?* as a reference.

from sound. "Penner" has heard through the village grapevine that the Janzens, who have one of the first cars in the community, are planning to go to Winnipeg the following day. Leading up to Janzen's comical-sounding words is a humourous exchange that bears quotation in full, as it attests to another kind of humour based on speech style; Penner's roundabout way of asking a favour seems to convey a mode of communication familiar to the community, and that illustrates the humour in these patterns:

> Janzen : Goodevening. Please sit down.
>
> Penner : I see your car is standing there ready to go somewhere.
>
> Janzen : We are going to Wpg in the morning.
>
> Penner : So Wall told me in the store. (2)

Expressing his annoyance at his neighbour's approach, and at the way personal news travels through the town, Janzen blurts out, "What does he know?" (2). In Low German this (rather gratuitous) phrase is "Waut weet Waul?" (55), and the sound, with its alliterative structure, comes as the equivalent of a string of expletives, with a satisfying (for "Janzen" and the audience) ring of vowels. This device, involving the senses rather than strictly intellectual apprehension, makes LGD an art that incorporates and appeals to the 'felt' world of the body, and addresses the neglect of the senses, along with the feminine in general, in Western discourses. I have associated this world with women here, not because of an essentialist agenda that places women closer to the physical body naturally, but because of the roles each of the genders plays in traditional Mennonite society. The large proportion of women writers of these dramas seems to affirm the appeal of this kind of approach for women.

The two plays, *A Wonderful Opportunity* and *Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a Diet*, are not the only ones that are structured around the tendency for news to travel quickly in small communities; *What Did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?* and *The Chiropractor in the Old Peter's House* also feature plots that revolve around the spread of information from mouth to mouth. This plotline touches on the idea of women's societies, suggesting certain attributes that Redekop's study highlights as the strengths of these societies. *Uncle Giesbrecht* presents the women's society or "ladies Auxiliary" (3) as a place where information (in this case about people in the community) is shared. Because the Giesbrechts' niece Shirley finds out about their diet as she is on her way to the meeting, the next day their neighbours start arriving with helpful devices and tips. The humour derives from the way that people tend to get involved in each others' business, and this tendency highlights points from Neufeld Redekop's study: first is the idea that through the meetings the women convey to each other their concerns for people in the community, and then proceed to act on this information; second is that their efforts can go unnoticed or otherwise unappreciated, and third that their involvement can sometimes simply be meddling. In the concluding scene, Uncle Giesbrecht declares all the advice useless after a visit to his doctor. When Mrs. Giesbrecht protests that "Sonya" has just "written up all our meals for the week" (9), he tells his wife to "throw it away" (10). Of course the point is that they really do not need their neighbours' help for this private endeavour, and perhaps the conclusion can be drawn that over-emphasis on giving makes one too quick to jump into other people's concerns, sometimes when help is not wanted. The drawbacks that can come from channeling women consistently into care for others are that the women can become too involved in the lives of others. The

marginal place of women's societies in the community is perhaps analogous to their place in the play; the "ladies Auxiliary" is mentioned only momentarily, but the work that these societies do, and their general caring for other members of the community comes across in the events that follow. The involvement of the women's group brings marginalized elements of Mennonite life into view.

The use of the basic elements of community life on which to found the plays resonates with Neufeld Redekop's work that looks to the margins to retrieve the overlooked aspects of culture. In *A Wonderful Opportunity*, the list of everyday items to be bought (at the point when Mrs. Janzen finally puts a cap on her kind-hearted husband's generosity) illustrates the familiar, practical nature of these things, and their capacity to become objects of artistic representation. Among the items he Janzens will buy for themselves and their neighbours are: winter underwear, boots and a coat, cloth to repair an old coat, a manure fork, a yoke for a horse, and a 'sweat cushion' (also for a horse). As well, they will take several neighbours, pieces of cow- and calf-leather and a can of cream to sell, and they will stop at the doctor and a dentist. As the list grows so does the Janzens' impatience; in frustration, "Janzen" reads his list to a neighbour he is refusing: "My head is churning. Now I just remembered I am to pick up Lieskie's dress from the drycleaners. I should not forget that because Kliewer's Marie is getting married on Saturday and the dress is to be worn there" (6). They turn down requests to buy a cheap car battery, "a bag of oystershells and a gallon of Sunshine [codliver oil]" (5), another bottle of the oil, and "a few pounds of coffee from Eaton's" (6). These necessary items are integral components of the play that propel the action and create the humour. Neufeld Redekop's work shows the absence of the elements of everyday living in the

official accounts and documents of Mennonite history, particularly the evidence having to do with women's lives; however, these plays are evidence of a willingness in Mennonite culture to celebrate the world of experience, and of the imaginative ways that the playwrights do assert themselves through the representation of this world.

There is, however, a difference between the use of the traces of lived experience in Neufeld Redekop's work and in LGD, and this distinction can be illustrated with a reading of *What Did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*. While Neufeld Redekop strives to uncover the missing aspects of the "truth" about Mennonite culture through the bottom-up approach to history, which looks at the details of everyday existence as the most significant evidence, LGD does not take on such a task. Although the plays restore validity to marginalized elements of culture, the emphasis is not on establishing the truth but stretching it. The events in *Mrs. Giesbrecht* show this quality of building something out of just the people, objects, and common activities of Mennonite village life. In this drama, the community spreads an elabourate story when Frank Doerksen and his wife (she is not given another name) notice Mrs. Giesbrecht walking down the street carrying something that they cannot identify. When the neighbour "Harder" arrives to borrow their wheelbarrow, the three run through some objects common to their world that the mystery in the apron might be, such as some knitting, "a few books, maybe a hymnal" (2), and food. In the next scene, Harder is telling Mr. and Mrs. Funk that "she may have been carrying money" (3). From here the story is embellished by each person it reaches until the final version holds that Mrs. Giesbrecht has dug up money from her neighbour's yard by moonlight, and carried an apron-full down the road. The conclusion reveals that it was an even more ordinary object – "only cucumbers" (8) – that she carried, and the

community is chastised for its behaviour. Like the characters in the play, the Low German playwrights build stories out of possible events, and the characters' different versions of the truth suggest the differences in the way individuals receive information, despite that they are proven wrong at the end. Even though their versions do not coincide with the truth, the tendency for each individual to interpret and embellish what he/she hears suggests that other types of information may be similarly treated, and this tendency could even be read as a suggestion that Mennonite belief is not, and cannot be, uniform. More clearly, however, as in *Uncle Giesbrecht*, this play indicates that the community can be over-involved in the lives of individuals, and that gossip is unreliable. If Neufeld Redekop's aims are to assert the truth of her findings about women's history, this reading of the play contrasts with her goals, and finds that LGD works against the establishment or reinforcement of one consistent truth.

The idea that fiction was "a lie" (Janzen 22), and therefore undeserving of a place in the Mennonite community, was held by many of the leaders and members of the *Gemeinde* in Canada as well as the United States. This belief explains the difficulties playwright Elizabeth Peters's mother had when trying to obtain permission to start her LGD group in the first decades of the century. Perhaps the association of the Low German language with the earthly realm in contrast with High German's direct connection to the word of God made this entertainment eventually acceptable to church elders; as Low German did not have access to the truth, the plays were not a threat to the higher, spiritual reality presented through High German. And perhaps, too, LGD's acceptance even had to do with its resemblance to 'real life', which made it not so much "a lie" as, for example, a novel. Interestingly, around the time that Peters's mother was

making her efforts to begin her drama group in southern Manitoba, a sermon was given in Hesston College and Bible School by Paul Erb, a Professor of English and Acting Dean, about the moral implications of the theatre; this speech both directed his listeners away from theatre and conceded its undeniable and integral role in everyday life. I reproduce part of his sermon here:

> To begin with, let it be clear that the Church does not look upon the dramatic instinct as being inherently bad. God put it within us, and it must have a rightful use. Dramatizing is natural to children; their play is full of it. It is useful to the speaker; every forceful preacher uses his whole body to help get across his thought. (76)

Although Erb builds his case against theatre with layers of invectives subsequent to these introductory comments, it is clear here that even the stricter elders allowed that fictionalizing and acting are part of social interaction. Whereas he admits that those performing the highest sacred duties (men) use theatrical devices when they present ideas, the (primarily) female playwrights appropriate this idea when they create LGD, applying the same devices to the presentation of everyday events.

Erb's argument highlights one reason LGD may have gained acceptance in Mennonite circles, and recasts the "bottom-up" method of the Low German playwrights. He decries the effects of theatre on religion, citing the medieval morality plays as having been particularly damaging to formal religion. Striving to make biblical wisdom accessible to the uneducated population, the early actors Erb points to unsettled religious leaders precisely because they breached the boundaries between the sacred and profane in their attempts to bring the mythical "down" to the level of the familiar. In contrast to

LGD's process, this drama may be seen as having been constructed with a "top-down" method. Like some of the Mennonite writers that Froese critiques,[22] the Low German playwrights I study here avoid contentious issues for the most part, and their approach is one that successfully brings the familiar world "up" to the level of the imagination.

The developments of postmodernism entail a blurring of boundaries in many areas, and this loss of distinctive categories presents an opportunity for further understanding of the relationship between language and experience in LGD. Frederic Jameson notes the "erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (qtd in *Norton* 1935), and along with a general fading of the clear division between areas such as the academic disciplines and artistic genres, LGD presents a blurring of the boundaries between everyday experience, storytelling, and performance. John McCabe-Juhnke's article on the oral tradition of his home community of Swiss Volhynian Mennonites in Kansas caught my attention because of the similarity of his aims to my own in this study; this community was one, he says, "... within which I could investigate the relationship between narrative performance and social experience" (4). McCabe-Juhnke's findings are helpful in the understanding of LGD and its relation to the social world as well.

McCabe-Juhnke's concern is with the structures and functions of the speech patterns rather than the particular dialect of the Mennonite group he studies in Moundridge. However, he notes that the uniqueness of their language, which distinguishes them clearly from surrounding groups, is nevertheless a reason for his attention to their oral tradition. In Manitoba, the Mennonites descend almost exclusively

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[22] She discusses Arnold Dyck's *Verloren in der Steppe* and Al Reimer's *My Harp is Turned to Mourning* as examples of this technique.

from the Anabaptists who originated in the northern European low countries such as the Netherlands, Flanders, and northern Germany, and who moved east to what was Prussia, and then to New Russia before coming to Canada (Rempel iv). Their Low German or Plautdietsch differs, then, from the Swiss-German dialect of McCabe-Juhnke's people, but there remain some important similarities between the two communities and their traditions.

McCabe-Juhnke observes the "verbal ingenuity" (4) of the Swiss Volhynians, paying particular attention to their practice of storytelling, and his explanation of how it relates to personal experience is my concern here. The relaying of stories about events within the community functions as a cohesive force for this group of historically persecuted people. Keeping their stories limited to their experiences within the boundaries of the community also allows the oral narrators to verify their cultural identities and their place in the world through the practice of a creative oral craft, while at the same time avoiding the disapprobation towards fiction that strict Mennonite belief upholds. Explaining the nature of the stories, McCabe-Juhnke expresses the success of the tradition in these areas:

> … storytelling in the Moundridge community is not associated with a stock repertoire of traditional folk tales. Rather, the oral narrator tells personal experience stories, family reminiscences, stories about unusual community events or personalities, and oral histories. Indeed, creating one's own story is a primary function of Swiss Volhynian oral narration. Drawing from personal experience, narrators not only can affirm their personal identities in oral narration, they can also adhere to the enduring Anabaptist expectation of truthfulness thereby

upholding the integrity of narrative discourse. (6)

As LGD uses the material objects and typical experiences in the lives of Canadian Mennonites as a starting point, McCabe-Juhnke's people use the common, ordinary elements of their lives as the basis for this storytelling practice. As noted above in the discussion of *What Did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*, the Mennonites in Manitoba build on their experience of everyday life to create imaginative presentations, and so McCabe-Juhnke's comments about the Mennonites in Moundridge apply equally well to both groups. He concludes, "Social involvement for the Swiss Mennonite [as for the 'Russian' Mennonite] breeds the 'stuff' of storytelling: everyday experience" (6). Stemming from their origins as a community of believers, the Mennonite ethos places special importance on communal and social interaction, and where McCabe-Juhnke's home community reinforces social connection through the recounting of shared experience, the Mennonites of southern Manitoba perform a similar activity through drama that is also based on shared experience.

For all the similarities between the two cultural practices, however, particularly with respect to their roots in everyday happenings, LGD embodies postmodern ideas in a way that the Swiss Volhynian oral narratives do not. In contrast to the sectarian group in Kansas that follows a strict, fundamentalist interpretation of the scriptural order to be truthful, the LGD playwrights and the actors and audiences that participate show a willingness to build imaginatively on actual and possible situations. They, too, work from a rich story-telling tradition, as Edna Froese's research shows; her remarks also emphasize the fictional element of these stories:

The Low German culture... had a strong tradition of story-telling... which, as Al

> Reimer explains, "consisted of never-ending streams of earthy, often humorous stories, everyday experiences *fancifully embroidered*, homely and pungent anecdotes, parodic wordplay, irreverent character sketches, and endlessly elaborated narratives passed on from generation to generation" (Literary Voices 13, italics [Froese's]). (qtd in Froese 55)

The way that the Moundridge community uses language is, for them, firmly tied to reality or truth. The language in LGD, however, is used primarily for entertainment and does not purport to truthfully represent reality.

While all fiction is based to varying degrees on reality, fiction that gives up its claim to represent or reflect a certain truth is considered postmodern by critics, and LGD falls into this category. One stream of postmodern thought derives from Ferdinand Saussure's lectures in linguistics in which he showed that meaning is connected only arbitrarily to words (961); from this observation, critics soon theorized that meaning, then, is dependent on social structures (on context, that is) rather than having a direct connection to reality. Indeed, this loss of confidence in language as referential is one source of the skepticism that made critics begin to doubt the metanarratives of the modern era. While the language in LGD does not conform to postmodern ideas of the text as a completely "free play of signifiers" (Allen 279), the aim of LGD is not primarily to "mean" but to produce laughter. Although many of the plays do convey a moral (*The Right Christmas Gifts*, for example, and *What Did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*), in most cases this idea is a secondary feature of the work, functioning merely as a backdrop or frame for the humour.

The spread of gossip in *What Did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?* implies that communication through language is not reliable, and the focus of the plays on humour rather than portraying a convincing scenario takes the emphasis off the meaning. While the themes of the plays may be accurately identified as "Mennonite", or as deriving from Mennonite culture, the outcome of the skits, for instance, is most often merely playful, and not meant to bear importantly on the audience in terms of a message. I do not mean to suggest that there are no ideas behind the skits; in fact, quite the opposite is the case, as I argued in my first chapter. However, the ideology implicit in LGD is conveyed more through elements of form than through plot or even content. The plays are a medium for humour and pleasure, and the ideas depicted overtly are secondary. Although the representation of familiar objects and situations in the plays brings to light aspects of Mennonite life not usually seen as artistic material, the specific events and people are not meant as factual evidence of these things. In the ways that LGD uses language as a way of conveying or calling up experience and yet does not try to persuade listeners of another, higher truth beyond what is presented, this drama strikes a chord with postmodern perspectives. Seeing language this way highlights its interest in the lived experience of the body, and therefore with the political and social world. If LGD does not attempt to disclose the truth, but nevertheless exposes something about the world, then in comparison with other forms of representation these plays blur the line that separates reality from fiction in a new and interesting way.

If the separation of reality from fiction can be seen as a classification, like others, based on hierarchical and patriarchal logic, the various approaches to dissolving the boundaries between them are disruptive of these limiting structures. Among the areas to

which postmodernism is relevant for Lyotard, for example, is in addressing the "splintering of culture and its separation from life" (Condition 72) that attends modernism. Regarding this distance between art and reality, Lyotard goes on to say that the goal of modern art is, "to present the fact that the unpresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible: that is what is at stake in modern painting" (78). Associating modernity with the "withdrawal of the real" (79), Lyotard makes clear that the focus of modern art was on the unseen rather than the visible, lived elements of the everyday world. The postmodern focus on language, on the other hand, calls into question the methods we use to verify reality or truth, and with this focus in mind it is particularly interesting to look at how narrative creations convince or do not attempt to convince the audience of their authenticity as worlds unto themselves. It is this close connection between performance and life that McCabe-Juhnke's article begins to examine, and which LGD displays more effectively than the narrators in his study.

One way LGD underscores the continuum between story and the world is by erasing the boundary between audience and performance, and so between reality and fiction. The traditional framework within which theatre is experienced separates the world of the actors from the observers. The elevated stage is testimony to this division. But when the actors disregard the boundaries between the created world of the play and the audience, they call into question the nature of reality and the stability of our categorical designations. In both *Forgetful Jake* and *A Wonderful Opportunity*, these boundaries are crossed when the actors make direct contact with the audience, dissolving the illusion that the created world of the drama is separate from those who are

experiencing it as observers.[23] At the end of *Jake*, for example, the stage directions indicate that "Forgetful Jake's" gestures are ones that bring him into intimate contact with the audience. During the short play, "Jake" changes into and out of his pajamas, and in the end gets into bed again fully clothed; the humour comes from his final actions and words: "He then gets into bed with all his clothes on, hat, shoes and all. after (sic) he has tucked himself into the bed, he raises his head, and looking at the audience says. 'I have the feeling I'm still forgetting something'" (1). *A Wonderful Opportunity* has a similar ending, but with a more sophisticated use of the device; after all the "Janzens'" neighbours have made their requests for items and errands in Winnipeg the following day, the audience is implicated in the opportunism of the community when "Janzen's" character "turns to [the] audience" and says, "If noone (sic) else wants to order something then goodnight to all" (6). The showcasing of intimate moments, too, enacts a crossing of borders between public and private areas of life. The audience has access to "Forgetful Jake" in his pajamas, to Annie Zacharius's humiliation after the "shoplifting" episode in *The Hat*, and to Uncle Giesbrecht's decision to go on a diet when he is unable to button his coat, among other incidents. Through these actions the actors underscore the close connection between fictional creations and the everyday world.

This crossing or blurring of boundaries, in a feminist context, involves ways of restoring attention and value to "lower" categories such as the everyday world and women's lives. LGD works in different ways to approach this historical division and

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[23] While modern experimental drama sometimes uses this device as well (like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example), modern plays typically employ self-reflexivity—through moments in which the actors address the audience, for example—for purposes that are significantly different from LGD's use of the device. *Godot* and other plays that fall under the umbrella term "the theatre of the absurd" (Esslin) are fed by an existentialist strain of thought (Knowles 24), and attempt to communicate the "absurdity" of the human condition. LGD does not share this description.

ranking of 'opposites'. Some playwrights, such as Linda Ens, use conventional artistic methods to present drama from a female perspective, overturning the hierarchical order and upsetting the dynamics of the culture. Others use alternative methods, such as appealing to sound for humour, as Margaret Tiessen does in *Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a Diet*, rather than, for example, relying on symbolic messages that indicate a higher, unseen reality. Another aspect of the plays through which they escape from 'reflection' models of art and language is in their focus on humour as an end in itself, without having to express any 'truth' about the world. A comparison of LGD with McCabe-Junkhe's study of Swiss Volhynian Mennonite narrative highlights the close connection between experience and imagination, and shows how the Manitoba playwrights eschew the requirement, or the possibility, that their work be truthful. The plays underscore the crossing over that occurs between the areas that McCabe-Junkhe's American Mennonites still insist on maintaining as distinct. In these ways LGD corresponds to postmodern ideas regarding presentation and language, and embodies a kind of artistic practice that resists traditional codes and suggests new ways of expressing and apprehending meaning.

Conclusion – Low German Drama and the Future of Mennonite Culture in Manitoba

My aim in this paper was to explore LGD in light of certain aspects of postmodernism that seem to describe our world in important ways, in order to gain understanding of this drama that comes from the Mennonite communities in Manitoba. It was not my goal, nor was it possible within the scope of this project, to exhaust any one point of postmodern theory. I hope to excuse some of the limitations of my study this way, and to use this paper as a starting point from which to explore many of these points further. In setting out to determine how postmodern theory can shed light on LGD, I have focused on particular aspects of this wide field of ideas. The ideas put forward by theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard, Mikhail Bakhtin, Ric Knowles, Barbara A. Babcock, Félix Guattari, and Gilles Deleuze help to show the ways that LGD embodies different kinds of resistance to the dominant strategies that create and enforce meaning in Western culture through literary and dramatic works. Looking at LGD from the point of view of social constructivism, with the work of Sarah M. Corse, Erin Hurley, and Edna Froese in mind, the aspects of identity that are represented in the plays can be understood as elements in the performance of Mennonite identity, as well as shaping influences on identity. Scholarship in the areas of sociology and history known as 'bottom-up' theories help to make available for criticism the literary works previously disregarded because of the criteria used to judge art; this scholarship, such as studies by Gloria Neufeld Redekop and Annette Kolodny, are useful in drawing attention to the significance of everyday

experience in new approaches to theory as well as artistic creation. The implications of this type of scholarship result in the fresh perspective regarding the worth of everyday objects and experience in the production of narrative art, and John McCabe-Juhnke helps to show the importance of these ordinary elements in the Mennonite artistic tradition. Feminist theory is also useful in explaining how the Low German playwrights approach expression, and the various strategies that writers employ that resist traditional conventions illustrate the radical nature of the plays as well. These are some of the streams of postmodern theory that are helpful in assessing LGD.

Postmodern theory recognizes the hierarchical ranking system necessary to the establishment of authority, and upon which this authority rests. Where dual aspects of an area can be separated and identified as oppositional, like meaning and form, soul and body, intellect and sense, or serious and non-serious, the term out of each pair that is associated with rationality or "logos" has been given priority at the expense of all that is associated with the second (Culler 93); my analysis has been, in part, an examination of these 'lesser' elements in terms of narrative art, many of which figure prominently in LGD. This kind of emphasis defies the structures by which systems restrict meaning and vision, defining truth by means of exclusion and domination.

I began the discussion about the subversive potential of LGD with the idea that a play's form, which comprises all the elements of representation including length, style, and structure, contains and conveys important messages in addition to the content. Conventional dramatic form adheres to a progressive beginning-middle-end model, which corresponds to the structure of larger, totalizing metanarratives that urge us to understand the world as being on the progressive course that it should be, and the continuation of current social

arrangements as inevitable. Alternative approaches to form communicate other, more elastic models of reality. One way that the plays (in Knowles's words) "disrupt" this model is through a fragmentary structure, conveyed both by the short, "incomplete" style of plays like Kay Friesen's *Forgetful Jake*, and through the format of the entertainment evenings that offer a mixture of widely varying acts. This type of "mixing up" also occurs in the plays in another way, with the inclusion of irrational elements in the dialogue: misunderstandings and puns in *Jake* and in Mary Pauls's *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*, for example, undermine the stability of language, and upset the rules of logic and rationality by which order is normally established. The characters in these two pieces who play with the language this way enact elements of what Barbara A. Babcock describes as clowning or playful criticism. Their performances incorporate juxtaposition, parataxis, the nonsensical, and of course humour, and so work against the idea of one single understanding of the world. The mixing of words from different languages is part of this juxtaposition and confounding of unified views. Mikhail Bakhtin's scholarship on carnival adds to Babcock's insights on clowning, and suggests the ways that the regular order is turned upside down through LGD. And while clowning can enact alternative approaches to the world in comparison with the linear, monolithic views presented by metanarratives in general, laughter also upsets the rational structures that hold in place the rules that control individuals in Mennonite society.

In LGD language is an important element of form because of how it is used, rather than just for what is being said; the characters' choice of either Low German, High German, English or French, for instance, constitutes a political statement that sometimes even runs counter to the information communicated through the words. The mixture of languages in LGD can, as Edna Froese notes about multi-lingual texts in her study of

Mennonite writing, "not only indicate the possibilities of varied perspectives... but foreground the impossibility of one ruling perspective" (205). Whereas the use of these languages other than English refutes the idea that Canada's culture must be English-only, the English that often creeps into the dialogue shows the influence that English-Canadian culture has on Mennonite traditions. The polyglot in *Trudeau* celebrates difference, for example, but the message that also comes through the play is that diversity is very difficult to maintain, and is bound up with issues of power both within and outside minority culture. Many of the plays deal directly or implicitly with the question of the Mennonite community's ability to retain its native languages, such as Margaret Tiessen's *The Right Christmas Gifts* and Agnes Wall's *The Hat.* These plays highlight the differences in attitudes held by the older and younger generations towards the use of native languages, and show how the use of Low German becomes compromised as a means of resistance to cultural erasure with lack of use. Although the younger set may use English comfortably and competently as opposed to the older people, the play's presentation in Low German (and High) asserts the will to keep up cultural traditions, perhaps, in the first play, with the idea that speaking Low German does not mean accepting hypocrisy along with the language. The second play shows that Low German is a code, and like other social codes such as the language between men only, can leave out those who are not educated or included in this language. The subject of territory, then, is a significant one in the plays. Just as the conventions of English prose delineate the metaphorical territory of English culture so that the audience must be educated in these conventions in order to understand its literature, LGD makes attempts to do the same, drawing lines of distinction around Mennonite culture; Kay Friesen's *Christmas*

Clothing, for example, associates values such as humility and spirituality with Low German, while suggesting by the use of English words exclusively for expensive, exotic items that English culture is tied to vanity and luxury. English words are used to accentuate the differences between the cultures here, but elsewhere the presence of English shows the language of the majority culture as integrating into Low German, creating a sometimes-uneasy relationship between the cultures. Where LGD inserts and adopts English words, it crosses over into the territory marked by English narrative conventions and appropriates majority language for other uses. This activity strikes a chord with Doug Reimer's ideas regarding material or minor literature; Reimer's insights show how the "flaws" in the text may be understood as signs of authenticity and of a focus on the human element in the text's construction rather than as the writer's inability to copy 'major' conventions. As part of form, the type of language used is important as well as its denotations, and the language in LGD is subversive in its refusal to 'be' English, to adhere to many of the standards of English literature, or to accept the boundaries of English 'territory'.

My analysis then moved on to how LGD can be viewed in relation to identity, particularly when identity is understood as socially constructed. Amy Kroeker's discussion of national identity provides a definition of nationalism, modified from Edward Said's scholarship, that includes Mennonites, and so acknowledges them as a distinct people. This recognition of their unique cultural identity makes the connections between Mennonite canonical literature and the national literatures in Sarah M. Corse's study easy to see, and her conclusions relevant to my thesis. Mennonites' deliberate separation from the majority culture around them in their areas of settlement has allowed

them to limit and control the influences on identity, and the officially sanctioned influences are the Bible and related materials. Corse's work suggests that the Mennonite canon is carefully selected, as are the canons assumed to represent American and Canadian national identity. She shows that a nation's literature is not uniform in the values that it depicts, contrary to what "cultural elites" would have us believe. There is great similarity between the popular novels of both countries and the ideals they present, and only the 'high culture' novels, which make up the canon, display the characteristics associated with Canadian and American 'national' identity. The idea of character (or identity) as visible in literary/ narrative art is shown to be false, as Corse determines that popular and prize-winning novels present different facets of these national identities. My investigation looked at how LGD provides the same kind of alternative view of Mennonite identity.

Next, in conjunction with this scholarship that shows the constructed nature of the canon, my analysis applied to LGD the social constructionist view that sees identity as performative rather than inherent and stable, and Erin Hurley's theory about *passing* was helpful in assessing Mennonite identity. Just as Canadian actors and celebrities can pass as quintessentially American, Mennonites can also pass as members of (English-speaking) majority culture. Amy Robinson's idea of the "triangular theatre" analyzes the views and assumptions about identity according to different positions in relation to the pass. The passer, the "in-group representative", and potentially also the "dupe", see the mistaken assumptions commonly made about identity as well as the gestures or characteristics necessary to *pass* in majority culture, and this model underscores the insights the performative view of identity can provide. In Arnold Dyck's play *Four*

Mennonites Who All Agree on One Thing, the dialogue between Koop, Buhr, Bergen, and Toews exposes the way Mennonites must behave or "perform" in order to pass in their own culture, despite the overt message, in Buhr's words, that "One must remain what one is". Their attempts to locate identity in language rather than religion, clothing, or other customs fail because of the eroding practice (already in this early play from 1938) of speaking Low German. The play may be read as a deconstructive activity, presenting the idea of identity as stable while simultaneously undermining this view by showing the many differences between Mennonites, the various influences on their identity, and how the outward signs of this identity can change according to where they live. Linda Ens's more recent work *I Want to Choose* (2004) shows a more flexible view of identity in comparison to Buhr's, using elements of traditional Mennonite heritage such as the *Selbstschutz* in new contexts to achieve a kind of continuity with the past, but with the attitude that words can mean different things at different times. When identity is viewed as performative and culturally produced, then, LGD is a shaping influence on Mennonite values and the way the community makes meaning. As such, LGD works as a ritual, reinforcing aspects of Mennonite identity through the elements that are repeated each time the plays are produced, and Barbara G. Myerhoff's study of ritual drama and ethnic culture suggests the ways in which the framework around the plays contribute to the success of the ritual. As further evidence of the way specific values and traits are chosen to represent Mennonite cultural identity in literary creations, I pointed to Elizabeth Peters's clear explanation of her intention to portray the Mennonite community for the benefit of the outside world in her play *The Cherry Hedge*. Her choices of which aspects of Mennonite culture to depict show the continuing tradition of "choosing" to define

themselves that the Anabaptists began at the movement's inception, establishing who they were by their choice to belong to the community of believers.

In my next area of discussion I showed how the world of daily experience is represented in LGD with politically revolutionary implications. Combining Neufeld Redekop's insights about the 'parallel church' or Mennonite women's societies and the marginalization of women with feminist theory that addresses "the connection between patriarchy and the privileging of the rational, the abstract, or the intellectual" (Culler 58) provides a view of the importance of LGD's incorporation of the everyday world. The fundraising aspect of LGD makes this drama an acceptable outlet for women's creative and artistic impulses because of the visible results that define this activity as labour, which is a traditional requirement for women in Mennonite culture. Froese's examination of Mennonite writing unearths the difficulties for women in particular against strictures that traditionally denied Mennonites access to artistic expression; from her research she shows the challenge for women: "whereas men needed to find a literary voice, women needed to find a voice" (179). The women writers I look at here use a number of techniques to combat their secondary or marginalized status; a comparison of *One Must Marry* (Elizabeth Peters) and Linda Ens's *I Want To Choose*, for example, shows how Ens uses the conventions of traditional drama but turns them around to support a female perspective. Whereas the woman, Trintje, is the object of male desire in Peters's play, Ens portrays female desire, and shows that her female characters are active agents in their own lives and the life of their community. Other innovative techniques include the spreading of focus onto a large number of characters rather than on only one "hero", as shown in plays like N.H. Unruh's *A Wonderful Opportunity* and *Uncle Giesbrecht goes*

on a Diet. The use of sound as comical, in contrast to intellectual humour, also addresses an imbalance in traditional representation.

The inclusion of the everyday world or "kitchen things" in literary works, which can be associated with feminist theories about women's literature, is significant in other ways as well. The expectations of the audience are subverted when they see the details of daily life with which they are familiar represented through artistic creations like LGD. Because the culture has a prominent agricultural base, which is not usually seen in cultural presentations, the elements of experience related to this area of Mennonite culture are surprising to see on stage, as are the marginal aspects of daily life related to women's lives and the community's interactions regarding everyday or "trivial" matters, and this type of approach is part of LGD's revolutionary quality. Postmodernism entails the crossing over or blurring of the lines between areas of the world previously seen as distinct from one another, and LGD enacts this feature in a number of ways. The division between the world of experience and the realm of art is crossed, in one sense, by the representation of common elements of local culture that feature in the plays. John McCabe-Juhnke's essay on the Moundridge Mennonite community's oral tradition shows the intertwining of narrative and reality, as in this group, he says, "creating one's own story" through relating personal experience in the community is the expectation. But just as postmodern theories see language's ability to represent truth as an impossibility, the Mennonite playwrights in Manitoba that I look at here do not adhere to the belief that they must tell the truth. Their works are for the purpose of entertainment and are thus purely "play". At the start of this project, the entry that caught my attention in *Planting the Garden* described the plays as being about women "both real and imaginary", and my

study reveals that the distinction is not important – indeed, that these women can be understood to be simultaneously real and imaginary. LGD exemplifies the idea that art is bound up with the world rather than something that transcends the world, which contrasts with Lyotard's explanation of the goal of modern art. Techniques that appeal to the senses, such as using the sound of words for humour in *Uncle Giesbrecht* and *A Wonderful Opportunity*, are one way a direct connection between the play and the living audience is made in the piece. Further, the technique whereby the playwrights erase the line between the stage and the audience also blurs the line separating the work from reality. As well as the border-crossings made by the speaking of the Low German language, there occur other inventive examples of such crossing in the presentation of LGD. The blending of story and reality in the presentations of the plays acknowledges the way these elements of the world interact in our lives as well as in the theatre.

The future of LGD is uncertain. The number of Low German speakers who descend from immigrants of the first and second waves from Russia to Manitoba is declining with the disappearance of the older generations and the move of many Mennonites from small communities to large urban centers. The language use decreases as the cultural makeup of these villages changes as well, with the populations of many formerly-Mennonite towns such as Niverville and Winkler now comprising people of other ethnic backgrounds in addition to Mennonite. However, the recent influx of Mennonite immigrants from colonies in South America, Mexico, and Germany continues to have a huge impact on the Mennonite population in Southern Manitoba, which is where these Low German speakers generally settle. This development guarantees the continuation of the LGD tradition for the next couple of decades at least. Time will tell

whether this new group is able to stay in the rural areas or whether they must move to cities in search of education and work. Although some LGD takes place in these larger centers, the eventual loss of the Low German language that comes with urban migration seems inevitable. Yet, Juergen Weigle reports a 'renaissance' of Low German in Germany (7), and perhaps such a resurgence of enthusiasm is possible in North America. Studies of LGD with regard to the Mennonites who have moved and are arriving from these other locations would be a relevant addition to the investigation I have made here.

Further study could also include the work of Elsie Reimer, another playwright from southern Manitoba whose work I heard about too late to include in my project; her plays include more English vocabulary, and so constitute a new, and more "hybrid" form worth examining (Interview, Ens 2005). Wilmer Penner is another playwright whose work I did not include, but who would be interesting to investigate. His work differs from the type I look at here because he presents topics of a more serious nature, and dramatizes historical events using a different sort of aesthetic. Low German drama that operates overtly as social critique and presents the shared past through the content of the plays would involve other theories that would be equally beneficial to explore as the ones I venture into here. These two writers could also be considered in addition to the ones I study for a further exploration of the differences between male and female Low German playwrights. In my project I have looked at LGD as primarily a women's art, but where and why there are different styles used by the different genders would be good questions to begin another discussion of LGD. For instance, how does the representation of the two genders differ, if at all, in the works of male and female writers? Are the subjects (or objects) they deal with different? And why might that

be? These issues all raise questions about the status of women in Mennonite culture, and the various approaches to artistic expression open to men and women.

The vitality and popularity of LGD parallels that of drama in the French community, and further study could involve the comparison of these two minority-language communities, and perhaps others as well. Investigations could include questions such as whether their theatre traditions perform the same kind of work as LGD, in what ways they differ, and how they respond to one another via the communicative channels of drama and theatre. Plays like *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* are a place to start in this endeavour. I have touched on the role that drama plays in keeping alive customs and language, but more answers might be determined with this type of comparative study.

LGD holds the potential for subverting the latest forms of globalization that accompany, and arguably help to define, the postmodern world, and which constitute a new kind of metanarrative. The potential for increased communication and understanding between peoples through the cross-cultural interaction that globalism entails (Ellwood 10) is shadowed by the tendency for the dominant culture, which for the moment is American, to take over and eliminate many other forms of ethnic culture. Where LGD is alive and active in Mennonite culture in Manitoba, there is resistance to these larger forces of cultural takeover.

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