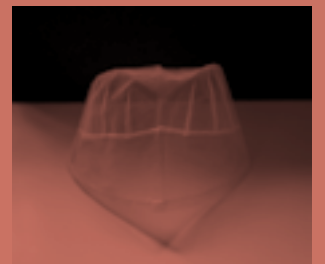
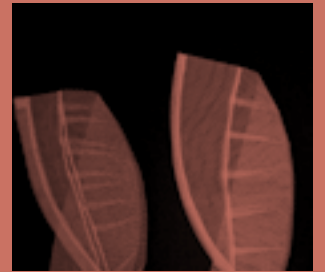


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Vanessa Kauffman

Reading Textile:
Vernaculars of Kinship in
Discourse and Dress

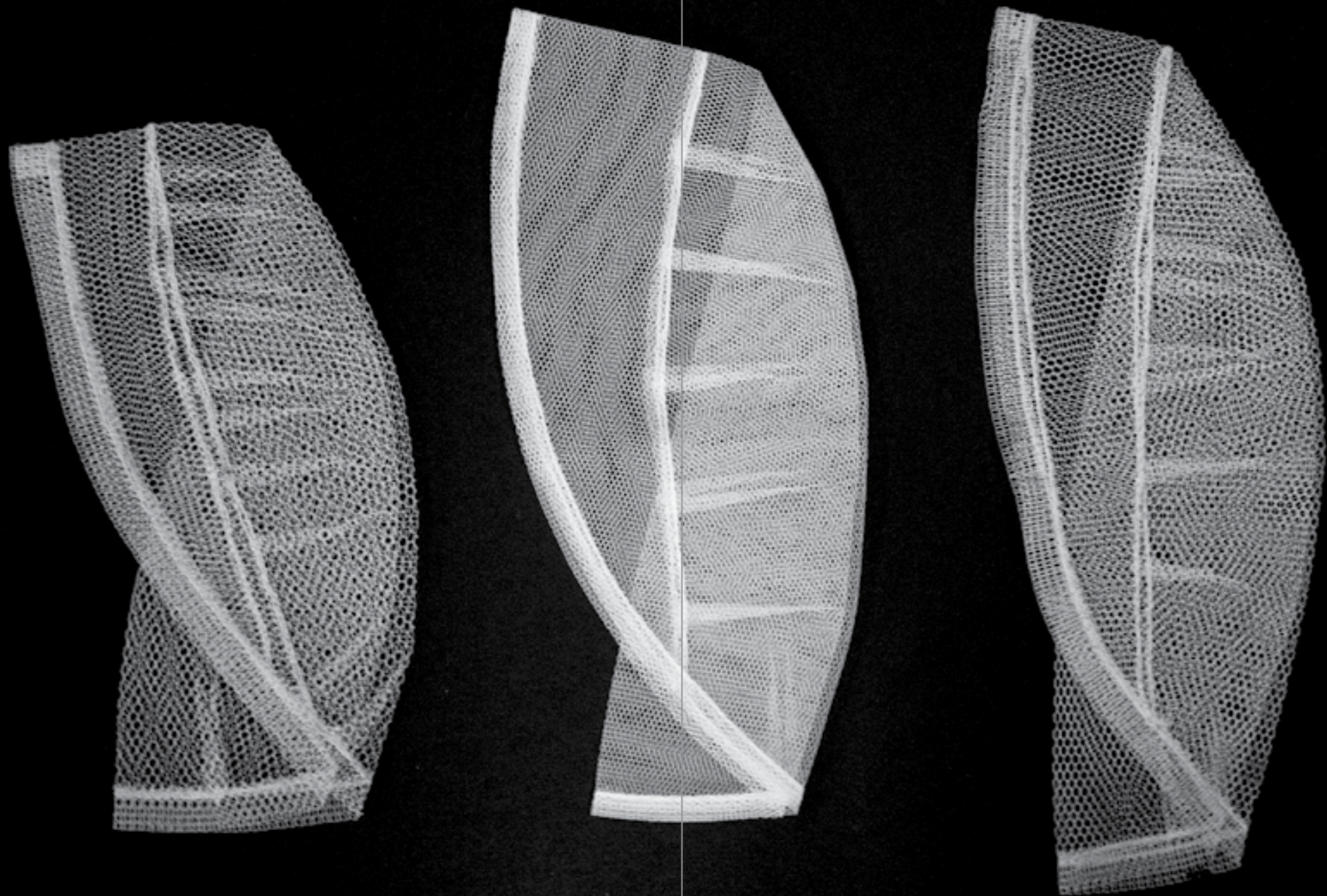




Figure 1.

Unknown, *Doris with Dale*, 1958;
2.75 x 4.5 in. Courtesy of the
King Family archive.

Four women and two children stand clustered together in front of a two-story farm home. Two of the women seem to be exchanging anecdotes, while a third stands quiet, gently holding a flower in one hand, her small purse in the other. The fourth woman, farthest to the right, is examining something, or perhaps calling out to someone, outside the frame. Lush plants—landscaped yet unruly—take over the house's shingled façade, visually competing with the women, the children, and a small hanging plant hidden in the dark shadow of the stoop. Candid, the expressions on the women's faces are spirited and varied. The alternating orientation of their heads as they look forward and back at one another, or toward whoever is yet to join, circumscribes my gaze to their conversational cycle. I am caught in a series of repetitions, of exchanges and discursions that do not rely on audible dialogue or peripheral hum. The women's gestures visually incant and chatter even in the photograph's still frame, stored as frozen animation and potential.

Reading horizontally across the visual field of the photograph (fig. 1), I return to the cluster of women and children, indeed the intended focal point of the composition. Four distinctly compelling marks appear—one upon each woman's head—as a white dotted line of information, making the chatter all the more voluminous. Placed precisely on the top of each mound of pinned-up hair is a white-mesh head covering. While these garments certainly punctuate the crown of each head, their understated, translucent quality makes them appear as though they are hovering slightly above each woman, while still being securely bound—they eclipse more than they cover. Any utilitarian service of the coverings seems implausible, thus making their luminosity all the more eye-catching. In their line, a sense of ubiquity transpires among the garments, now appearing undoubtedly in the service of description. Like the other light-attracting elements in the photo—the curtains on the windows, the foliage and grassy groundcover, and even the small snippets of sky above—the head coverings shine with a rhythmic narrative facility that precludes their gesture of concealment.

The head pieces on these women have been mysterious apparitions in my imagination since childhood. Were they cocoons? Nests? Ghost clothes? Off the body, they were fantastical objects with limitless utility. When these items were not sitting just out of my reach on top of my grandmother's dresser, and were instead on her body, the fantasy seemed to narrow: head coverings. This is the term by which I came to know and interpret these pieces of netted tulle, appendages of my heritage that bore no direct relationship to my physical body. Having rarely handled the head coverings that were worn regularly by women in my family for decades, I recently asked my aunt to pull them out of

storage so I could have a look at their unique and curious structures.

From an envelope, she retrieved and then handed me the head coverings that she and her two sisters once wore. Though they felt brittle and skeletal, they were still forgiving to my touch and still willing to speak as I placed them side by side, lining up like commas or quotation marks. While the coverings were not necessarily fragile, I was aware of them as encrypted materials, aged from both time and lack of light. The garments, once used ritualistically, suddenly felt to be another material altogether: the molted skin of a religious body. Assuming that my aunt folded them as they appear in figure 2 in order to save space in storage, I asked, “Why are the coverings folded and pressed with such deliberate precision?” My aunt answered that she and her sisters stored the garments in their Bibles when they weren’t wearing them.

I am interested in both the scriptural reference that indoctrinated these objects and the lived experience of the bodies that wore or still wear them, but mostly I am stuck in the lyrical proposition that my aunt unexpectedly articulated. The image of all of these components—words, garments, and bodies—fleshed together is immediately evocative; it intrigues me in a way that no other musing about the head covering has. Not a cocoon, a nest, or even necessarily a head covering, the piece is a textile that was used as a medium to communicate within and around a collective identity. A text. The word *text* comes from *textus*, Latin for “tissue,”¹ which foregrounds the word as both a physical and metaphysical apparatus that, functioning as a binding agent, communicates language. The social uniformity of the Mennonite body, and its eventual undressing, makes evident the poetic and political initiatives of a text, a porous and malleable form, exposing and committing itself to the material world. Rooted in object-study, the poetics of this textile launch a reading of language in which matter, meaning, and time work together to effect perceptual experiences of tangible, visible, and metaphorical modes of discourse.

Begun by Menno Simons in the sixteenth century, the Mennonites are a sect of Anabaptist Christianity, a denomination that proliferated during the Protestant Reformation. Simons was from the Netherlands, though he attracted many early followers of his new faith from Swiss, German, and Russian origins. The Mennonites identified with foundational commitments to adult baptism, social justice, pacifism, and an interpretation of scripture that was led through the spirit, not a hierarchy of clergy.² Their ethos was such an extreme divergence—not only from Latin Christendom, but also from other Protestant groups—that their reform became known as the Radical Reformation. In Europe the Mennonites’ pacifism required them to relocate from countries where their faith was in opposition to forceful military conscription,

making them largely a people of diaspora. With the various immigrations to North America, many mainstream influences began to fracture the Mennonite experience, the most notable being the loss of their original German language, which had been “the [Mennonite’s] most effective defense mechanism against assimilation into mainstream American culture,” according to Anabaptist historian Donald B. Kraybill.³

Nearly three hundred fifty years after the Mennonites’ initial assembly, the codification of dress—which included the head covering—“emerged as an ethnic symbol of resistance,”⁴ an intimate gesture of identity, and a language unto its own for a people now displaced to new countries (fig. 3). Conventionally, the Mennonite head coverings are understood to be a mandate of New Testament scripture, specifically 1 Corinthians 11:1–16, which states: “Every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head.” With Mennonite church members adhering to the verse, “the veiling provided symbolic representation for the subculture’s *raison d’être* since acceptance of biblical authority was the most rudimentary value of the subculture’s ideology,” Kraybill notes.⁵ However, biblical scripture has many verses that decree any number of laws, most of which are not practiced in daily life, even among devout believers, so the emphatic inclusion of the head coverings remains curious. Furthermore, despite Anabaptist Protestantism being an old and growing religion, the popular use of Mennonite dress was only sustained for a small fraction of time—from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. This brief appearance of the Mennonite body dressed in traditional “plain clothes” cannot be explained as a purely theological ritual. Instead, the garments were worn for the textile’s strength as a social tissue—as a way for members of a disparate community to connect to one another through intimate, embodied rituals and objects.

Any adornment of the body that serves as a visual mark of identity is an act of text-making, inasmuch as writing is a way to create a legible space for relationships with interior and exterior worlds. Rather than illustrating something static and fixed, or that abstractly controls its speakers in a realm outside the physical, the Mennonites’ visual language—written by bodies—makes clear that language’s transmission depends on human agency. Flexibility of signs may sound antithetical to what is necessary for building a stable language, but post-structuralist Roland Barthes writes that a system of signs should not be assessed for the virtue of how closely signifier can come to signified, but instead celebrated for an achieved “relation among signifiers themselves.” He writes, “It is [the sign’s] breadth which counts, the role it plays in relation to other signs. . . . [E]very sign takes its being from its surroundings, not its roots.”⁶ The ephemerality in the Mennonites’ “text

1. [Oxford English Dictionary Online](http://www.oed.com), s.v. “text,” accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.oed.com>. Multiple definitions of *text* have been recorded since the twelfth century, but I am drawn to the social implications of the Latin *textus*: the “tissue” of a literary work.

2. Palmer Becker, “What is an Anabaptist Christian?,” *Missio Dei* 18 (2008): 7–12.

3. Donald B. Kraybill, “Mennonite Women’s Veiling: The Rise and Fall of a Sacred Symbol,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61 (July 1987): 302.

4. *Ibid.*, 303.

5. *Ibid.*, 303.

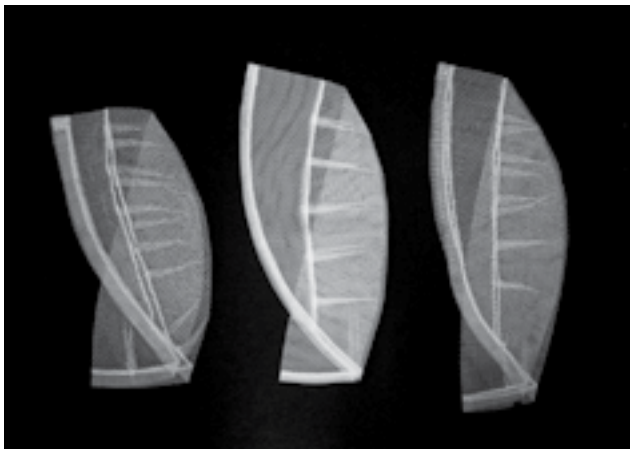


Figure 2.

Three Mennonite head coverings, worn in the United States by Mennonite women of Swiss-German descent, c. 1950. Courtesy of Eileen Bacon.

Photo: Vanessa Kauffman.



Figure 3.

Mennonite Women's Attire, 1903. Phoebe Mumaw Kolb Photographs, HM4-162, Box 2, Folder 3. Courtesy of the Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana.

6. Roland Barthes, "The Relation of Meaning," in *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 26.

7. *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Stauffer Mennonite Church," accessed January 9, 2014, <http://www.gameo.org>. Today the Mennonite faith recognizes several different divisions of the denomination, chronologically and conventionally ordered to include: Reformed Mennonites, Stauffer Mennonites, Holdeman Mennonites, Old Order Mennonites, Conservative Mennonites, Moderate Mennonites, and Progressive Mennonites. Another highly populated Mennonite sect, the Mennonite Brethren, is classified within the Moderate Mennonites. Further, the traditions of the Stauffer Mennonites are hard to account for, as the schism that resulted from the 1845 Lancaster Mennonite Conference in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, spawned continual divisions until the early 1950s, when "the descendants of the 1845 schism, now divided into six groups, numbered barely three hundred members."

8. Lisa Robertson, *Nilling: Prose* (Toronto: BookThug, 2012), 75.

9. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

10. *Latdict: Latin Dictionary and Grammar Resources*, s.v. "verna," accessed January 13, 2014, <http://www.latin-dictionary.net>.

of garments"—comprised of textiles that routinely rotate on and off the body—suggests that language, too, is something we put on, climb into, and express physically based on societal or spiritual needs.

There were multiple iterations of Mennonite coverings, each one defined by the location and the conservatism of its users.⁷ The white-net head coverings that beheld my fascination were the standard for many Mennonite women of Swiss-German descent living in the United States during the mid-twentieth century, though they differ greatly from the coverings of Mennonite women of Russian-Prussian descent, or of those who immigrated directly to Latin American countries (figs. 4 and 5). Like the resemblance among faces that belong to the same family tree, an ancestral likeness links the coverings to those within their immediate geographic vicinity; so instead of representing a universality of language, they more aptly reflect dialects that utilize the same vocabulary. If the head covering is a sign within the tissue of an intimate, energetic, and socially built language, the Mennonite codification of dress can be more specifically defined as a vernacular.

The custom-built specialization of vernacular is imperative to poet and literary theorist Lisa Robertson's claim of its ability to "express a complex temporality that includes coded information from the past as it moves always in the light of the polyvalent and self-inventing present."⁸ As a textile that has been both temporally inflected and formally permeable, the Mennonite head covering advances Robertson's theory of vernacular as a productive social space:

where poetics and politics circulate through one another to untie the gridded duality of ethics and aesthetics, a poetics of the citizen . . . a gestured co-improvisation, in deeply ingrained reference to the shared fact of embodiment, and historical continuity . . . the movement for which language is not the state, but the condition of emergence of the subject to and for others . . . a grammarless rhythm, a mobile, patterned regime of compromise: Something infinitely vulnerable.⁹

Here, the idea of vernacular—as a "condition of emergence"—is inalienable from its etymological roots: the Latin *vernaculus* means "domestic and native," but the prefix *verna-* also connotes "of spring, vernal."¹⁰ And if, as Robertson writes, the vernacular does not produce identity but instead nourishes, anticipates, and is vulnerable to it, then it is a radical form of communication that employs both the transience of language and its momentary, physical stabilizations.

Because a vernacular language is imbued with energy,

it must perform work. Similarly, text only “works” when it is read, rewritten, translated, orated, and embodied over time. Catalyzed by bodily gestures, the Mennonite codification of clothing has, at times, exemplified symbolic representation at its most precise—action, expression, and trace united in one item. However, because its legibility depends on the movements of a body over time, this precision does not ensure the symbol historical fluidity or stability. Kraybill gives a historical chronology of the Mennonite head covering according to four stages of symbol emergence. He writes of the time between the initial assembly of the Mennonite church and its first dress codification as “the ‘symptom stage’ [in which there was] not a single reference to the cap or veiling in any correspondence or formal Mennonite statements. Although [the head coverings’] use was common, the veiling apparently had no distinctive significance—at least not for religious or ethnic identity.”¹¹ Between 1865 and 1910, the veil became a stabilized sign, “frozen as a bona fide religious symbol,” until 1950, when mainstream social and political upheaval upended the traditional appearance of the Mennonites. At this time the garments began to endure steady “disintegrating legitimacy,”¹² and they now are used routinely only in conservative Mennonite congregations.

11. Kraybill, “Mennonite Women’s Veiling,” 301.

12. Ibid.

The Mennonites’ use of head coverings is impermanent, both in the chronological history of their use, and in the everyday routine of their being pinned onto and taken off of the head. Rather than vital necessities, the garments are instruments of language, not only in their object-ness, but also by the energy carried between them and the bodies they touch. The social tissue of their *textus/textile/* text is negotiated in the small, shadowed space between object and subject. As materials of vernacular language, the coverings must not be considered a starting or stopping point of Mennonite identification, but rather vestiges of textuality along the continuum of Mennonite history. The coverings themselves, even when popularly used, did not spark “Mennonitism,” but they certainly propelled the collective energy necessary in writing a social text.

A text needs a lexicon of words, or figures, that carry out the articulation and action of the narrative or message. I am hesitant to allow the head coverings to stand in for the chattering women who wore them, but this inclination is almost immediate, lingering as the coverings are on a vapid backdrop without referent (fig. 2). Each of the three covers is distinct, yes, but their symbolism is made legible through a repetitious, communal figuration, or lettering. Like letters in a word or words on a page, each covering articulates a body, but only when multiple bodies come together is a story, narrative, or history of the collective body told. A solitary letter or word encountered on any surface

can be understood, though without context its inflection is not often telling. Without being worn, the head coverings are peculiar objects that can hardly be seen. The garments do not stand up or appropriately billow open on their own; their posture necessitates touch from some part of the body, ideally the head, the portal of both spoken and nonverbal expression. It is almost impossible to see the covering’s form without imposing upon it a context or embodiment. Even within an open hand, the head covering is easily overwhelmed by the flesh that supports it and is hardly viable as an independent entity. It yearns for a body.

In addition to requiring words, figures, or bodies, texts need punctuation—visual marks—that elicit pause, inflection, and rhythm. The punctuation of the Mennonite social body, temporarily dressed in signs, need not be imagined while looking at large gatherings of Mennonites, particularly illustrative in the photograph from a Goshen College commencement ceremony in 1958 (fig. 6). Shot from a vantage point at the back of the auditorium, the photograph shows dozens of seated men and women facing a performing choir. Performers and audience members alike are dressed in unison. A horizon line jumps out in the composition, visually separating the spectators from the spectacle. Rather than fully partitioning the staged people from those seated in front of them, the horizon line seems to affirm reciprocity. The cool-hued rhythm of white, gray, and black is interloped positively and negatively throughout the image—among garments and postures, within the bricks of the wall, and in the lights overhead—so closely that repetition nearly asserts itself as a reflection.

Communication and media theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi calls the social economy of this punctuation the “refrain,” or the “obsessive ritual that allows the individual—the conscious organism in continuous variation—to find identification points, and to territorialize herself and to represent herself in relation to the surrounding world.”¹³ The idea of the refrain is not unfamiliar in religious discourse; refrains are practiced in public and private prayer, group worship, and song. Refrain embodies the melody and the tune—ultimately, the measurable carriage of the piece. Therein, it could be said that the refrain is the work of the chorus; it is the deadening of the singular “I” in exchange for the rhythm of the “we.”

Texts need context: placement in time around other information, with references to the histories that it hopes to either align with or subvert. In figure 7, two women sit side by side on a low, black midcentury bench. It is unclear whether either woman was aware that she was being photographed; however, the two couldn’t be more perfectly posed if sitting for a stylized photo shoot. Though the women are sharing the same small space, their worlds appear as

13. Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semio-text(e) Intervention Series, 2012), 130.



Figure 4.

Portrait of Russian-Prussian Mennonite woman, Altona, Canada, 1953. Courtesy of the Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba.



Figure 5.

Latin American Mennonite refugee, c. 1920s. Courtesy of the Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

though they couldn't be farther apart. The woman on the left wears a dark, high-necked, ankle-length dress. The woman on the right also wears a dress, or more accurately, a jumper, which is layered over a patterned blouse. The jumper is much lighter in color than the black dress to its side, cutting low against the wearer's waist and high across her thigh. No accessories embellish the appearance of the woman on the left, except for a wristwatch around her left wrist, the glasses on her face, and a white head covering that shrouds her pulled-up hair. In her hands she gently cradles a white booklet, on whose cover the symbol of the Christian cross is barely visible. Her eyes are averted downward, considering this material. The woman to her side holds only a cigarette, and her eyes look out, ready to dart in any direction.

Archived in the Mennonite Church USA photo collection, the image is annotated, "Contrasting dress of two women attending the 8th Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in 1967." The caption informs: "Persons (on left), a Mennonite, Fannie Peachey, Rosedale, Ohio, USA; (on right) non-Mennonite guest attending the conference and staying with a Mennonite couple in Amsterdam." While the woman on the right's body may seem more liberated, it is no less adorned with cultural markers and no less politically driven. Taking account of the other bodies, the other hemlines and ankles that fill the space behind the seated women, it is hard to tell which of these two women is a more appropriate Mennonite icon of the time, as increasing numbers of Mennonite women were adopting mainstream attire. In fact, the large majority of photos from this era show that a turn presents itself in the middle of the twentieth century where the dress code no longer signifies a communal figuration, and no longer determines what a Mennonite woman looked like. Shared language comes into focus in the social sphere when it is abutted, most commonly occurring at moments of ideological contrast. The generosity of this contrast is that it affords the context and signification that are needed to optimize meaning; a text without these elements may easily become inert.

Lastly—and perhaps most importantly, because there is more to be read in a text than just words—texts need a material host that can be physically encountered by readers at different times. The Mennonite coverings *are* "only" material artifacts of a text's energy, but as artifacts, they become illustrative of David Morgan and Sally M. Promey's claim that specimens of material culture are not things to be simply read or decoded and then discarded, but rather forms that continually "give words, stories, and ideas a place and a time to happen."¹⁴ I take this to mean: in every textile, a text—and in every text, a social tissue.

Looking at the Mennonite head coverings, my eye becomes aware of how each singular fiber, together with the others around it,

14. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, eds., "Introduction," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 17.



Figure 6.

Goshen College Commencement chorus, n.d. Goshen College Informational Services/Audio-visual Materials Photographs, 1958–74. V-4-11. Courtesy of the Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana.



Figure 7.

Tijn Olij-Spaan, *Two Women with Contrasting Dress*, 1967, from the Eighth Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Mennonite World Conference Records, 1925–2003. Courtesy of the Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Indiana.

plays an integral role in holding together the integrity of the textile's form (fig. 8). At first glance, the patterning of the loosely woven coverings appears to be created by a cross-hatching stitch, though upon further inspection, the weave more closely mimics a honeycomb: a textile of singular fibers drawn around interrelated and touching nodes. While it is clear that the head coverings function as a kind of distinguishable guard against the assimilation into mainstream culture, the permeability of the covering's textile must be recognized in accordance with the Mennonite ethos (that of its majority) against total separation from society at large. As a linguistic dermis, the coverings are a haven for an insular world, but not a confronting impasse against exteriority (an apt contrasting comparison is presented by the Amish head coverings, made with fully closed and opaque cotton weaves that mimic their rigid separatist ordinance, which is now infamous in popular culture). As I imagined as a child, there are many functions for which the same material is prized for its permeability. This textile rejects closure; it is emblematic of what poet Lyn Hejinian might describe as a "form that provides an opening."¹⁵

New languages, enunciations, and openings were needed to stay afloat in the radical politics of the 1960s and '70s, which saw social justice issues—domestic and global—that had always been canonical to Mennonite faith. The relatively fleeting use of the head covering is an affirmation of the symbolic head covering, "only plausible and effective as long as the symbolic universe [that] they represent is congruent with the realities of their particular social base."¹⁶ In the 1960s, half a century or more since the largest populations of Mennonites had arrived in North America, preservation of the dress code no longer necessitated Mennonite identity. The law read as a text without a *textus*, a skeleton without muscle, a body disembodied. Mennonite experience in North America continued to fracture, and while the need for a cohesive visual language could be argued either way, the scholarship of second-wave feminism, and many Mennonites' resonance with it, made clear that the symbolism of female head covering was no longer proving to be a language that was generous to the platforms of kinship, equality, and spiritual growth.

Shifts in language—in which category the traditional garments of the Mennonites must be seen—monumentally illustrate how intertwined language and power are, and the ways in which their correlation has become engrained within the dynamics of religious life. As Morgan writes, "Language . . . is a reliable and accurate way of representing things" that are known or accepted to exist. "The value of this assumption is considerable because it invested the use of language with confidence in the intelligibility of the world and the ability of language to name objects of experience."¹⁷ To keep alive an evolving

15. Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 41.

16. Kraybill, "Mennonite Woman's Veiling," 316. Kraybill paraphrases from Peter Berger's *Sacred Canopy* to reach this conclusion.

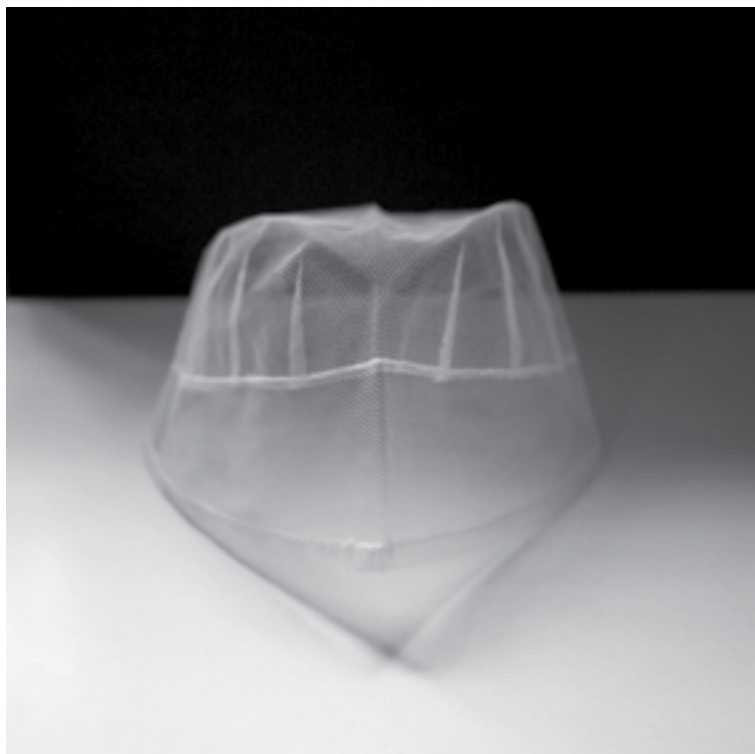


Figure 8.

Mennonite head covering, worn in the United States by Mennonite women of Swiss-German descent, c. 1950. Courtesy of Eileen Bacon. Photo: Vanessa Kauffman.

17. David Morgan, "For Christ and the Republic: Protestant Illustration and the History of Literacy in Nineteenth-Century America," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 51.

18. Robertson, *Nilling*, 76.

19. *Ibid.*, 73.

vernacular that speaks to any number of lived experiences is to boldly propagate the social tissue of text.

As embodied and indoctrinated objects, the Mennonite coverings do correlate to the scripture that has accorded their use, yet as they become apparent in the visual and material world, they transcend literal reference to written verse. Their objectivity becomes curiously bound—and therein vulnerable—to the actions of the subjects who wear them. Reciprocally, the subjectivity of these persons is vulnerable to the ways in which these objects mark their bodies. The covering and uncovering of the Mennonite body perpetuates a visual text that has proven itself to be written, "not structured according to a valuing hierarchy or an administration of history; [but] improvised in tandem with the rhythmic needs of and movements of a present-tense yet tradition-informed body among other bodies, each specific."¹⁸ The disrobing of the Mennonite body fascinates and complicates the understanding of traditional garments as crucial interlocutors of religious life, but it speaks emphatically of the understanding of language's power as both a barrier and a connective tissue for faith-building and social collectivity.

One could easily imagine that a kind of dismantling of Mennonite identity might have ensued when the majority of ritual attire was taken off individual bodies and left behind in storage chests, like quotations from another time. Words, too, change rapidly, at times becoming archaic or obsolete, but they are hardly ever buried entirely, especially after they've been recorded, materialized, and written into text. The trace left behind in the textile's material offers innumerable poetic and political interpretations, and the indeterminacy of these interpretations visually proclaims linguistic communities to be sustained only inasmuch as they are embodied organisms. This history of Mennonite dress code tells us that the evolution of linguistic forms should not cause a renounced faith in language, but rather a celebrated surrender to the illusion of a static and permanent control over it. Robertson writes that even "the most temporary membranes serve as shelter. Among these membranes, speaking begins . . . conditioned by profoundly ancient and constantly reinventing protocols—protocols we enliven, figure, and transform with our bodies and their words, by beginning."¹⁹ As with any hermeneutic specimen, the exegesis of the Mennonite head coverings will forever be evolving and subject to reinterpretation—always at a place of beginning. They are vestigial garments, but these head coverings—gauzy, ethereal, mysterious—will continually serve as incubators for new ideas: cocoons or nests after all.