

**Ghosts Under the Marquee Lights:
Mummers in Alberta, England, and Newfoundland**

by

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Abstract

The word “mummer” has been used to describe many different people doing many kinds of things, ranging through both space and time, from at least the 18th century to modern days, from the Old World to the New World. In the past these have conventionally been treated as discrete practices or traditions, too varied to warrant comparison. Intertextual theory, however, suggests that these various instances, or texts, are related. The word “mummer” becomes an activating term, bringing all these texts into a forever occurring discourse. This discourse takes place in a world of made of multiple genres and multimedia; including performances both recorded and remembered, words both written and spoken, fiction, non-fiction, film, internet websites and videos, art and visual imagery. Across all of these, contestations and negotiations take place as ideas about tradition, innovation, identity, authority, and authenticity come into play.

This study has focused on three groups of mummers from three different places: The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective who perform in the Alberta Avenue neighbourhood in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; The Coventry Mummers from Coventry, West Midlands, England, who also perform in neighbouring villages such as Stoneleigh and Newbold; and Gerald Matthews, a mummer from Baie Verte, Newfoundland. The relationship of these mummers with the places they appear is integral to an understanding of the phenomenon as a whole, often displaying a substantiating affect where practice helps to make place and vice versa.

When considered as one phenomenon, the many diverse texts that make up the intertextual discourse explored here reveal traits of the phenomenon that might otherwise be missed or, at the very least, *dismissed*. For instance, in sites in Alberta, Newfoundland, and England, mumm[er]ing appears as a ritual meant to perpetuate, if nothing else, the ritual itself. There is also a remarkable tendency for *merry and scary* commentary to *stick* to mumm[er]ing, thus revealing an uncanniness related to ideas about home and death.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Mathew James Levitt. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “The Mummers' Play Tradition in Coventry, West Midlands, England, and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada”, Study ID Pro00029379, Renewed on 25 January 2016.

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Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Figures	vi
List of Plates	vii
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
A Story for You	1
Mummer’s the Word: Mumm[er]ing as an Intertextual Discursive Phenomenon.....	6
Methodology.....	24
On Interview Transcription	24
On Visual Anthropology	27
Chapter 2. The Good Ol’ Days.....	34
Alberta Avenue: A Small Town in the Big City	34
Dem Times in Baie Verte.....	50
Merry Old England	61
Chapter 3. Dead, Gone, and Disappearing.....	64
Alberta Avenue’s Decline.....	64
The Mummers Don’t Come Round No More in Baie Verte	70
The Disappearance of the English Mummers	74
Chapter 4. Revival and Resurrection.....	79
The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective	79
The Coventry Mummers	93
Merry Old England	97
Newfoundland’s <i>The Mummers Song</i>	102
Chapter 5. Doppelgangers and ‘real mummers’	110
Chapter 6. A Traditional Resurrection Ritual?	152
Chapter 7. Going Home.....	197
Chapter 8. Back to Baie Verte: Nightmares in Dreamland.....	243
The Uncanniness of Mumm[er]ing	256
Epilogue/Epitaph.....	281

References	285
Appendix	293

List of Figures

Figure 1. Klein Bottle	158
Figure 2. Mobius Strip	158

List of Plates

Plate 1. Streetcar at the edge of the city near Alberta Avenue, 1944	36
Plate 2. Milk wagon, Alberta Avenue, 1940.....	36
Plate 3. Borden Park, 1913	38
Plate 4. The Avenue Theatre during its heyday in 1938.....	43
Plate 5. Army recruits marching past the Avenue Theatre in 1942	43
Plate 6. The Avenue Theatre in 2014.....	44
Plate 7. Friendship Club “Oldsters” on Halloween, Alberta Avenue, 1950	45
Plate 8. Children in front of Safeway, 1937.....	47
Plate 9. Safeway on Alberta Avenue, 1941	47
Plate 10. 118 th Avenue and 95 th street, 1939.....	48
Plate 11. Mitchell’s Drug Store, 1939	48
Plate 12. Cromdale area, 115 avenue and 80 th street looking north, c. 1912.....	65
Plate 13. Cromdale Hotel, c. 1960	65
Plate 14. Cromdale Hotel, 2005.....	65
Plate 15. <i>The Edmonton Bulletin</i> , 2 December 1912	69
Plate 16. St. George and Sir Bob	133
Plate 17. Sir Bob and St. George with the Troll and Princess Terra.....	133
Plate 18. St. George and his audience.....	134
Plate 19. Sir Bob is (accidentally) slain	134
Plate 20. The Friar “awakens” Sir Bob.....	135
Plate 21. Randall watching the performance	135
Plate 22. Randall explains the performance to an audience member	136
Plate 23. Jon Patterson (as the Troll) and Mark Henderson (as St. George)	211
Plate 24. Mark Henderson (as St. George) and Caley Suliak (as Princess Terra)	211
Plate 25. The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective prepare to do a live reading	213
Plate 26. The crowd gathered around the performance circle, January 2014	216
Plate 27. Ronald Shuttleworth of the Coventry Mummers having a cider and a conversation ..	218
Plate 28. Gladys’ Flower Shop in 1941	234
Plate 29. The Carrot Community Arts Coffee Shop in 2016.....	235
Plate 30. The Carrot Community Arts Coffee Shop, Exterior, 2016.....	236
Plate 31. The Avenue Theatre in 2016.....	281
Plate 32. An Alberta Avenue back street in 2016.....	283
Plate 33. The Ave’s Mantra	284

Chapter 1. Introduction

A Story for You

We met by chance encounter.

It was late January. The Christmastide throngs no longer busied the streets and the novelty of the New Year was dissipating. By then my hand's body memory had adjusted to the new choreography required to produce a '2012' without needing a second pass, crossing out the '2011' that had automatically spilled out on the page. I was sitting in a café with Randall Fraser, a stilts maker, production designer and the director of a local theatre troupe, discussing a modest winter festival that had recently taken place in a neighbourhood north of the river. Randall's troupe had been performing in the festival for the past three years. Having started up in 2008, the Deep Freeze Byzantine Winter Festival was a relative fledgling in comparison to the many other festivals that festoon Edmonton's yearly round, but even still it was growing in attendance year by year. Sometime during Randall's and my chatting and coffee sipping, an older gentleman, somewhere between sixty and seventy years old, approached our table with a cautious sort of anticipation. He told us that he didn't wish to interrupt our conversation, but he couldn't help overhear a word we had been saying. This word, it's a word you don't hear very often. Not in this part of the country, in this part of the world. Actually, it's a word you don't hear often anywhere. Even in the places where this word is uttered most, it's still rare. And when you know the word, and you hear the word, you can't help but interrupt the conversation in which it appeared. When others say it, you want to say it with them. The word is Mummer.

What is a “mummer”? Of those I have spoken with, other than those who happen to be mummers, not many know what a mummer is. The word is thrown around quite a lot, and many definitions sit waiting, available, for those who are looking and willing to offer them some attention. So if you haven’t heard the word, or if you have heard it but are wondering what it means, a mummer is, in its most basic of definitions, a masked, costumed, or disguised performer. This essential quality, however, is usually accompanied by a Rabelaisian or boisterous attitude; a carnivalesque spirit. At the time of our meeting in the coffee shop, I had been working with two groups of mummers: The Coventry Mummers from England’s West Midlands and the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective from Edmonton’s Alberta Avenue. The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective is the name of Randall’s troupe. Alberta Avenue, as you might have guessed, is that neighbourhood north of the river that the Deep Freeze Byzantine Winter Festival grew up in and calls home. In Coventry and Edmonton, mummers perform in Mummers Plays. Mummers Plays are described as ‘calendar customs’ in that they appear at specific times of the year, such as Christmas, Easter and Halloween. They are traditionally performed in the streets, peoples’ homes, and neighbourhood pubs. In Edmonton, though, they had been put up on stage. A mummers play usually goes like this:

It’s a day or two after Christmas. All the celebratory hubbub has passed and you’re just gearing up for New Year’s Eve. Early one morning, you’re awoken by cacophony of banging pots and ringing bells coming from somewhere down the lane. You peer out your window to see a motley cast of characters such as Beelzebub, a fool, Father Christmas, an exotic villain, a familiar hero, a woman-played-by-a-man, someone dressed as a horse or a ram, and an oafish buffoon or two. You go out to greet them where they’ve stopped: on your front lawn, in the village square, or down at the local pub. They announce with great aplomb who they are and

what they are about to do: a mummers play, of course, and that it will no doubt be the best you've ever seen. After some instigative introductions, the hero—usually St. George, Prince George or King George—and the villain—usually the Turkish Knight or Bold Slasher—engage in sword combat. It is not unusual for these players to be unquestionably anachronistic; portraying quasi-medieval characters dressed in any manner of costume from rags to knightly armor to military uniform and referencing persons, places, and events from multiple and often contradictory points in literature, history or geography. After a relatively brief sword fight, one of them is slain with humorously dramatic brutality by the other. At this point it is normal for the woman to arrive on the scene—played by a man, of course—and exuberantly mourn the death of her beloved (son or mate). Enter the quack doctor—a man commonly dressed in a top hat and black suit jacket—who resurrects the fallen with some miracle cure he has discovered during his travels both far and wide. With the slain combatant revived, again the hero and the villain fight, die once again, and are promptly resurrected, sometimes over and over, as long as the audience is entertained. Some nonsense words or a funny song are provided by the fool, followed by the quête—a customary collection of coin, food, or drink. Bam, it's over, until next year, maybe. Or maybe you'll never see it again. You never know with mummers.

Talking about mummers can be tricky, for the word is indeed a nebulous one. It has been used to refer to any manner of masked or disguised performer across time, space, and cultures. Thus, there are many different kinds of mummers. In Newfoundland, for instance, mummers take part in house-visiting, also carried out in a rambunctious tone, much like caroling, wassailing, or trick-or-treating. In Philadelphia, they take part in a spectacular parade. Mummers can go mumming, as they do in England, and can be called tipteerers, Johnny Jacks, soulcakers, pace-egggers, guisers, or plough jags, amongst other things. In Newfoundland mummers go

nummering and are often referred to as janneys or janneyers. In Philadelphia, it's the shooters that go on parade.

Anyway, back to the coffee shop in late January. The older gentleman asked us if we were talking about mummers. We replied that yes, indeed we were talking about mummers. He introduced himself as Gerald Matthews. It seemed that Gerald, like Randall and me, was gleefully flabbergasted to hear someone else—anyone else—utter the word. Speaking proudly, he explained to us that he had been a mummer during his formative years growing up in outport Newfoundland. Randall introduced himself and what he did, and I told Gerald that, although I was not a mummer myself, I was working with mummers as part of my graduate studies. I asked him if he would like to meet, to talk about mummering and his experiences with it.¹ He said he would. I gave him my card and took out a notepad I always carry in my pocket with a small golf pencil. I wrote his name in the book and handed it to him so he could write down his phone number for me. He did, and handed it back. I looked down at the page, and smiled. Under his name and phone number, he had written, “Original Mummer.”

Gerald and I met again on a Sunday in late March. I arrived at his suite on the premises of the company for which he works as a security guard. Gerald was waiting for me, holding his front door open even as I drove up. When I got out of the car, he remarked on the cloudy, misty weather, saying, “It's like we're back in Newfoundland.”

We stepped into his home, modest and cozy. We sat at his kitchen table, which was not so much in the kitchen as in what could be called the living room. He thought this would be

¹ I have decided to use the term *mumm[er]ing* when referring to the phenomenon as a whole, or, put another way, to refer to what mummers—any mummers who call themselves “mummers”—do as part of their mummer activity. When, however, referring specifically to Newfoundland, I will use the term *mummering*, and *mumming* for the English folk performances.

appropriate for our conversation on Newfoundland mummering, which really is a kind of kitchen festivity. Gerald fetched us each a beer—Harp brand. And, we began.

But I'm glad I overheard ya

Conversation that day at the

The coffee shop

Ya

So I said, 'Boy!

Have I got a story for you! [He laughs]

Have I got a story for you!'

I was listenin to you

Listening to you guys

Talk along, it's too bad, it's too bad I didn't have a handkerchief or something, I woulda cut a couple of holes in it, right, and put it over my face so when you looked Rar! Rrrrrr!

[We laugh]

Well holy jeez, you woulda leaped right off, you probably come right off the stool, eh [he laughs]

You know, 'cause you're not expectin it, right

No kidding, ya

No kidding

Well that, I mean that was

Quite the coincidence

That

Ya

We happened to be in that coffee shop at the same time And I, I was there and, like I said mention, I said, "Boy, I'm not tryin to listen to your conversation but," I said, "I thought I heard somebody over here use the word 'mummer'"

[I laugh]

And there ya go

Mmhmm

And as dey say, the rest is history

[I laugh]

Eh

...

We happened to be in that coffee shop at the same time. Indeed we did, and I find that providential moment rather analogous to what I call ‘the mummer phenomenon’ in general. There are mummers in England, in Edmonton, and in Newfoundland—among many other places—and they all happen to inhabit the globe at the same time. As they do what they do, they also speak about what they do. They overhear one another. They speak to one another. And what they say is a part of the phenomenon, too. Mumm[er]ing is not just action, it is the words spoken that orbit around that action. And those words certainly do not happen in isolation. In the modern global world, media reaches from nearly everywhere to nearly everywhere else. Mummers, then, exist in a kind of constellation of ongoing conversations; an unfolding discourse. As they go on, they must navigate through this discourse. This discourse is composed of debates, disagreements, negotiations, and agreements. When we look at these, we begin to see what the phenomenon as a whole is made of. So what do the mummers, and those that talk about mummers, say? In a way, this is about that. This is about the discourse that arises when we talk about mummers.

Mummer’s the Word: Mumm[er]ing as an Intertextual Discursive Phenomenon

No one can deny that the word Mummer is really a gluttonous signifier. In common usage it refers to an incredible plethora of people and practices from around the globe,

throughout time.² Although some have tried to categorize the different kinds of mumm[er]ing (see Halpert and Story 1969), Creed (2004) points out that “despite significant similarities, the variety of practices included in the category limit the value of treating mumming as a discrete generic phenomenon,” and, like most, he uses the word “primarily for heuristic convenience” (59). While I see his point, I have come to the conclusion that, in order to proceed effectively, a study of mummers cannot ignore that the use of the word—by mummer, author, scholar, filmmaker, performer, artist, singer, etc.—engages one in a conversation; an active discourse spanning time, space, and media. Alan Dundes (1966) explains

...the term ‘folk’ can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. It does not really matter what that linking or isolating factor is—it could be a common occupation, a common language, or common religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own...A member of the group may not know all the other members of that group, but he probably will know the common core of traditions belonging to it, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity.

(232)

In terms of the mummer phenomenon, then, the shared common *linking* factor is the quite simply the word Mummer and, consequentially, all of the associations the word carries with it. This word engages a wide and varied group of people, media, and texts with one another. Whether they like it or not, that word pulls them into something. It turns them into a member of the ‘folk’. I’ll discuss this ‘turning’ more later, but for now let me say that, in some cases, it is not voluntary, but it is very real. By being referred to as a mummer, even if it is not a word you

² According to Ronald Shuttleworth, the keeper of the Folk Play Section of the Morris Ring Archive, “In discussing the word ‘Mummer’, it was my view that for a long time it was not the generic title. Its use was mainly confined to folklorists etca, who also used the other descriptive words. For instance, Chambers in *The English Folk Play* does not seem to recognise or even acknowledge Sword or Wooing Plays and many people did not classify Tup and Horse plays as Mumming. I recorded as significant, the appearance of the word in a crossword in *The Independent* newspaper of 29 Mar 1995 (Clue- ‘An actor in a folk play’. Answer-‘Mummer’) as showing that it had become the generic word in the general vocabulary” (personal correspondence, 20 July 2016).

yourself have ever used, others will then observe, evaluate, and discuss your goings on in relationship to other mummers. You have been recontextualized. You can't escape the gravity of the discursive constellation within which you have been pulled.

For example, if one were to Google the word “mummer,” he or she would be presented with links to pages that speak of traditional performances across the globe, particularly England, Newfoundland, and Philadelphia. One of the first sites to pop up, of course, is the Wikipedia page (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummers_Play). This page has a section titled, “Other kinds of mummers,” referencing England, Newfoundland, and Philadelphia together, thus uniting them in cyberspace at one site of encounter. In mummer research, we cannot ignore a source like Wikipedia, for, although much maligned academically, it is for many people the first point of contact and a popular authoritative source. Wikipedia is also a kind of vortex; a vibrating, living intersection, through which these “different kinds of mummers” become conceptually and intertextually linked. The word “mummer” thus becomes an activating word, and different sources reference each other in conversations about mumm[er]ing that take place across time, space, and media. As Gerald Matthews told me so aptly: “mummer is your linking word.”

Indeed, the mumm[er]ing phenomenon is larger than just the performance events; it includes each and every cluster of sound waves or light waves or particles of ink and paper appearing in time and space as a constellation that becomes the meaning of the ambiguous, intriguing, maddening word, Mummer. It was this realization that turned me toward my current approach: *intertextuality*. Borrowing from the theoretical approach developed in turn by Bakhtin, Kristeva, and Briggs and Bauman, I will consider this metafolklore³ as an intertextual

³ Alan Dundes (1966) explains, “There are a limited number of folkloristic commentaries on folklore. As there is a term 'metalanguage' to refer to linguistic statements about language, so we may suggest 'metafolklore' to refer to

discourse, composed of texts which include the performance events themselves. In his study of “the gardener’s story”—a local narrative of how the English town of Marshfield’s mummer tradition was revived by a gardener and a folklorist named Violet Alford in 1932—Simon Lichman (1982) realized that such “stories or myths of origin are the metafolklore, providing atmospheric context in which the play-tradition exists, extending its folkloristic energy way beyond the two hours of a Boxing Day morning” (106-107). Of course, performance events, too, are potent commentaries on what mumm[er]ing is and is not. They demonstrate quite clearly what a tradition *should be like* to those who observe it. Performance events become texts to be referenced by other texts, be they other performance events, paintings, video documentaries, internet forums and sources, written text, etc.

The formal concept of *intertextuality* was first articulated by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes (Irwin 2004, 227). Although Kristeva came up with the term itself in 1966, she was heavily influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikael Bakhtin (228). Bakhtin realized that just as no man is an island, no thing exists in isolation from that which surrounds it; indeed it is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the world in which it dwells. Speaking of the novel, Bakhtin explains,

The linguistic and stylistic profile of a given element (lexical, semantic, syntactic) is shaped by that subordinated unity to which it is most immediately proximate. At the same time this element, together with its most immediate unity, figures into the style of the whole, itself supports the accent of the whole and participates in the process whereby the unified meaning of the whole is structured and revealed.

(1981, 262)

folkloristic statements about folklore. Examples of metafolklore or the ‘folklore of folklore’ would be proverbs about proverbs, jokes about joke cycles, folksongs about folksongs and the like. Metafolklore is not necessarily intra-genre. There are proverbs about myths, for example” (509). Dundes reminds us that because “metafolklore is still, after all, folklore, it is necessary to elicit oral literary criticism of the metafolkloristic texts themselves.”

Because the novel is a part of the whole social world in which it exists, it is thus an expression of that whole world. A literal synecdoche, by delving into the part, we can glimpse upon the whole.

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases)—this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [*raznorečie*] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of the characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [*raznorečie*] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.

(262-263)

The various differing voices present within a dialogue—just as the novel in which they happen—express the world they belong to. On Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and dialogization, Pomorska writes,

Behind each reply in this dialogue stands a 'speaking man,' and therefore the word in the novel is always socially charged and thus necessarily polemical. There is no one-voiced novel, and, consequently, every novel by its very nature is polemical. Another of Bakhtin's outstanding ideas connecting him with modern semiotics is his discovery that *quoted speech* (*chuzhaiarech'*) permeates all our language activities in both practical and artistic communication... He points to the fact that we are actually with someone else's words more often than our own. Either we remember and respond to someone else's words (in the case of ethics); or we represent them in order to argue, disagree, or defend them (in the case of law); or, finally, we carry an inner dialogue, responding to someone's words (including our own). In each case some else's speech makes it possible to generate our own and thus becomes an indispensable factor in the creative power of language.

(1984, ix)

Kristeva (1980) writes that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations: any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (66). Irwin (2004) notes that “The central element of intertextual interpretation is to note and make connections between and among texts. Every text is potentially the intertext of every other text...” (235). It is significant, though, that Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality went beyond written text. Irwin (2004) writes, “In literature there are character types, themes, plot lines, and earlier stories. All of these come into play in the system that weaves the text, the mosaic of quotations. In fact, it is not just language and literature, but the social world—the social text—that provides fabric for the textual tapestry” (228). Manfred Pfister (1991) writes, “Everything—or at least, every cultural formation—counts as a text within this general semiotics of culture” (212).

Interestingly, and somewhat serendipitously when considering mumm[er]ing’s place in the carnivalesque, it was Bakhtin’s study of carnival that got the ball rolling. In his seminal work, *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the “popular festive form and image” of a king, who “is the clown...abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned...” (1984, 197). Bakhtin explains that “the clown was first disguised as a king, but once his reign had come to an end his costume was changed, ‘travestied,’ to turn him once more into a clown. The abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king’s uncrowning.” Bakhtin goes on to write, “Abuse is death, it is former youth transformed into old age, the living body turned into a corpse. It is the ‘mirror of comedy’ reflecting that which must

die a historic death. But in this system death is followed by regeneration, by the new year, new youth, and a new spring. Therefore, abuse is followed by praise; they are two aspects of one world, each with its own body” (197-198). For Bakhtin, carnival was much more than frivolous entertainment. In the foreword to Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, Krystyna Pomorska writes,

Bakhtin’s idea concerning folk culture, with carnival as its indispensable component, are integral to his theory of art. The inherent features of carnival that he underscores are its emphatic and purposeful ‘heteroglossia’ (*raznogolosost’*) and its multiplicity of styles (*mnogostil’nost’*). Thus, the carnival principle corresponds to and is indeed a part of the novelistic principle itself. One may say that just as dialogization is the *sine qua non* for the novel structure, so carnivalization is the condition for the ultimate ‘structure of life’ that is formed by ‘behavior and cognition.’ Since the novel represents the very essence of life, it includes the carnivalesque in its properly transformed shape.

(1984, x)

Building on the work of Bakhtin and Kristeva, Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman (1992) have effectively applied the theory of intertextuality to the study of language and discourse, ritual and tradition. Although Barthes argued that the author of texts is relatively powerless and albeit meaningless when it comes to the interpretation of said texts, Briggs and Bauman have cast the spotlight back on the author in their discussions of links, gaps, power and authority. In short, they have questioned *why* an author composes a text in the way that he or she does and what the intention might be behind the referential intertextual spacing—the link or gaps—the author has designed. But to answer this question, Briggs and Bauman put their attention onto the relationship that exists between texts; the intertextual discourse the texts form and of which they are a part. The authors point out that “structure, form, function, and meaning are seen not as immanent features of discourse but as products of an ongoing process of producing and receiving discourse...this process is not centered in the speech event or creation of a written text itself, but lies in its interface with at least one other utterance” (1992, 146). Their discussions on genre reveal the author—or “producer of discourse”—that other intertextual theorists may have

disregarded, and in so doing make an important stride in the study of both intertextuality and tradition:

Genre thus pertains crucially to negotiations of identity and power—by invoking a particular genre, producers of discourse assert (tacitly or explicitly) that they possess the authority needed to decontextualize discourse that bears these historical and social connections and to recontextualize it in the current discursive setting. When great authority is invested in texts associated with elders or ancestors, traditionalizing discourse by creating links with traditional genres is often the most powerful strategy for creating textual authority.

(1992, 148)

In this case, our “genre” is that of mumm[er]ing and the mummer phenomenon in general.

Briggs and Bauman’s ideas on tradition, power, authority and identity are crucial to an understanding of the discourse surrounding and penetrating—indeed enfolded within—the mumm[er]ing phenomenon. As the authors mention, part of any discourse relating to traditional genres is the use of intertextual *links* and *gaps*:

The process of linking particular utterances to generic models thus necessarily produces an intertextual *gap*. Although the creation of this hiatus is unavoidable, its relative suppression or foregrounding has important effects. On the one hand, texts framed in some genres attempt to achieve generic transparency by *minimizing* the distance between texts and genres, thus rendering the discourse maximally interpretable through the use of generic precedents. This approach sustains highly conservative, traditionalizing modes of creating textual authority. On the other hand, *maximizing* and highlighting these intertextual gaps underlies strategies for building authority through claims of individual creativity and innovation (such as are common in 20th-century Western literature), resistance to the hegemonic structures associated with established genres, and other motives for distancing oneself from textual precedents... Ritual specialists attempt to decrease the distance between the "words of the ancestors" and their invocation in ritual performances... Such strategies for minimizing intertextual gaps bear directly on recent discussions of the complex social processes involved in the construction of history, tradition, authenticity, ethnicity, and identity...

(1992, 150, italics in original)

Not surprisingly, mummies and those who talk about them will, too, minimize and maximize intertextual distance through links and gaps in order to negotiate or make claims on

authority, authenticity, and identity. Treating mumm[er]ing as an intertextual discourse, and holding a candle up to the links and gaps its specialists make, is admittedly risky business.

Briggs (1996) has explored at length why anthropologists “who lodge critiques that they see as progressive and anticolonialist have been accused of extending legitimations of white, postcolonial forms of discursive domination” (435). In effect, discussing the traditions of others, and making critical evaluations of those traditions as “‘invented,’ ‘imagined,’ ‘constructed,’ or ‘made’” is a good way for us to make “enemies.” He cautioned,

The complex intertextual links and gaps that are thereby generated provide crucial building blocks for imbuing scholarly works in this area with authority. So, while I would not say that in all cases talking about making culture is sure to make enemies, I would suggest that asserting such extensive rights to decontextualize highly politicized discourses and to recontextualize them in such far-reaching ways is likely to have some sort of impact on the authority of other people who claim rights over the circulation of these discourses.

(459)

Even affirming the authenticity of one tradition or another is seen—and I would argue rightly so—as a hegemonic exercise of power and authority on the part of the scholar. Some scholars will take efforts to avoid such critiques by avoiding objective evaluations of authenticity altogether. Even still, these texts assert power and authority over the others they refer to by the very act of doing so; putting them all together in the ring, so to speak, and watching from outside like some loud-mouthed announcer or lackadaisical referee. Following Briggs’ lead, I asked the following question in my Master of Arts thesis, *The laughing storyteller: metafolklore about the origins of mummings’ plays* (Levitt 2011):

The problem with mummings’ plays and the stories told about them is that the metafolklore of the layfolk directly can, and does in many instances, directly challenge the metafolklore—or scholarly theories—of the academic, and vice versa. It is, therefore,

the scholar's prerogative to intervene; to tell the origin story or creation myth as he understands it. But, in doing so, is he *interfering*?

(61)

Briggs approaches these problems by identifying “practices deployed in creating and legitimating authority in discourses that ‘invent’ cultural traditions as well as in those that deconstruct them” as metadiscursive, meaning they are “discursive practices that establish relationships with other discourses, such as those involved in typification, translation, criticism, historicization, and the like” (439). This is an effective tool in understanding how texts—scholarly, lay, or otherwise—relate to one another, whether positively or negatively; in the affirmative or in the negative. I therefore also treat scholarly commentary as metadiscursive; in direct relation to those others occurring within the phenomenon, all linked by the word “mummer.”

Things came to a head for me when I was interviewed by Nick Lees of *The Edmonton Journal*. The columnist asked me—as people always do—where mummies’ plays came from. I told him about my research and the different theories. I also told him about how it was done, where, and ideas as to why. A week or so after the paper went to print, I was interviewing audience members after one of the Alberta Avenue Mummies Collective’s performances. As I had done with all those I interviewed, I asked her where she believed mummies plays had come from (the “folk commentary” regarding origin stories was integral to my research, after all) and why they were done. I was taken aback when the young woman answered my questions by referencing—and sometimes quoting verbatim—the newspaper article that had just hit newsstands. She didn’t know—or at least she didn’t acknowledge—that she was referencing the paper. When I asked her how she knew all the things she did about mummies plays, she simply replied, “I just know it.”

This encounter planted a seed of realization; that information about mummers weaves in and out and back around to different media, different sources, different people, different conversations, different sites and moments. As I discussed in my MA thesis, each of these were, as metafolklore, a kind of performance in and of themselves. Randall Fraser and his team were reading these sources—and tapping me for information—as they composed their plays. Audience members were then watching these, learning about mumm[er]ing, and telling me about it in turn. My scholarship was a part of the phenomenon, with very real affects. According to Briggs, “these run-ins are inevitable” (461).

For anthropologists writing about other peoples’ traditions, there is a catch-22 at work: On the one hand, the text is produced to have a relationship with those that it references. On the other hand, the author has little control over what kinds of relationships are produced. Often, they are antagonistic and, at worst, directly polemical. Part of the problem, though, is the stance taken by scholars and their texts as distant or objective to that which they study. Briggs writes,

Nonnative scholars by definition have little or no basis in the lived experience that purportedly generates these cultural forms. Yet social class, race status, nationality, and education afford scholars substantial experience in the transnational circulation of discourse. Like the people who are characterized as “inventors of tradition,” these scholars claim discursive authority by virtue of the way that they construct their own distanced position with respect to tradition. Both the distance and the privilege that emanate from their position enable them to draw on a wide range of discourses, create new intertextual relations, and circulate their representations widely.

(460)

He continues,

Challenging essentialized notions of identity and visions of historical continuity removes restrictions on the circulation of discourse at the same time that it renders null and void claims to knowledge based on direct participation in processes of cultural transmission. Both overt racism and limitations on access to higher education make it difficult in most cases for indigenous performers and scholars to compete with nonindigenous anthropologists and other professionals over the circulation of cultural forms.

(461)

In response to Briggs' alerts, rather than seeking to mitigate or alleviate the scholarly presence within the mummer intertextual discourse, and the subsequent contestations of these metadiscursive practices over authenticity, invention, authority, etc., I proposed that we should instead include them as texts within the phenomenon:

...I would have to suggest that scholars who study mummers' plays are, in a sense, participants. We are participants in the body of metafolklore about the tradition; we tell and hear stories about mummers' plays and, from what I can gather, most of us care about the subject. No matter how removed we might feel—like some hovering zoologist... The scholar, as a performer of metafolklore, is a participant in a tradition; a member of the *folk*. According to Alan Dundes (1966), "Even folklorists themselves are a group and must in the strict theoretical sense be considered a 'folk' with its own in-group jokes and rituals" (232)...By talking about the tradition, the scholar becomes *involved*. It seems inevitable that scholars and writers will influence the metafolklore they become involved in for it encompasses them as well. The storytellers, whatever station they happen to inhabit, are constituents of the phenomenon; they are within it and influenced by it. Just as the death and resurrection milieu of the mummers' play phenomenon influenced Frazer who influenced Helm who influenced Brody who influenced Forbes who likely influenced at least some participants of the mummers' play phenomenon, a memetic trail of intertextuality and allegory can likely be traced from any story about the tradition to stories told before it, possibly leading to some academic who was no doubt influenced by his own socioculture's zeitgeist; his own *folk*. There is a dialogue in place, even if it exists primarily in print, about mummers, beggars, clergymen, noblemen, chapmen, and pagans. Whether these characters are, in the eyes of the storyteller, protagonists or antagonists, true theories or false theories, heroes or villains, they are stock characters none the less, and they do battle by our words. They die and are, inevitably, brought back to life by some other storyteller.

(Levitt 2011, 71-72)

Within my research, all these storytellers—mummers, scholars, painters, filmmakers, singers, whoever—were talking about mummers; where they came from, why they did what they did. In this sense, they were sharing ideas and stories. They were, in a sense, a common folk with a common interest. As I traced each origin narrative, I came to realize that they wound their

ways through different media as they went along in time and space. Academics, of course, were referencing one another—whether to agree or disagree—but they were also referencing popular writers, filmmakers, painters, audience members, mummers, news media, etc., and all these references were referencing each other as well, and in-so-doing engaging in discourses and negotiations about “real mummers.”⁴ To be sure, I include my own work here, too.

When I began to seriously study English mumming for my Master of Arts degree program, I noticed that there were a number of different theories of origin for the tradition. These theories were proposed and discussed not only by academics but by mummers themselves, as well as audience members, filmmakers, popular writers, lay researchers, etc. Randall had expressed to me his support of what I call the Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative—an origin story for mumm[er]ing that claims mummers plays are descended from pre-Christian fertility and solstice rituals belonging in most cases to the Celts and Druids. In recent years, real efforts had been made on the scholarly front to dissolve these theories as romantic notions hailing from the 19th century, heavily influenced and instituted by Survivalist and Ritualist proponents such as J.G. Frazer.⁵ I decided to ask Randall Fraser about the contestations that may arise between scholarly theories and his own. As Briggs (1996) reminds us,

The problem is hardly that native elites do not understand the scholars' project; rather, they understand it all too well. Their difficulty rather seems to emerge from the way that such scholarship undercuts the discursive authority that such writers claim on the basis of their lived experience and/or membership in the group in question.

(462)

⁴ See Chapter 5. Doppelgangers and ‘real mummers’.

⁵ In a section of his PhD thesis called “Farewell Survivalism,” Peter Millington (2002) describes the Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative as being based on “poor definitions, flawed methodologies, untested assumptions, etc.” and calls the shift away from the narrative in scholarship as “praiseworthy” (54).

I realize there may be some hesitancy to consider Randall a “native” when it comes to mumm[er]ing, but it cannot be denied that what he perceives as core elements in the tradition are held as significant and meaningful within his lived experiences as related by his oral history narrative.⁶ In response to my inquiry, Randall wrote the following in an email:

My first reaction is the scholars who assert that the Mummers tradition only began in the 18th and 19th centuries are often bound by the limitations of their field, in that only verifiable [sic] facts can be referred to and so get lost in the maze of quoting and re-quoting older sources. They haven't got a clear understanding of the interconnectedness and natural evolution of how something starts out as a community function, then a novelty, and slowly over time becomes a tradition.

I would say that it was in the 17th/18th centuries that a formally recorded tradition solidified enough and technology had progressed far enough that it could be documented and recorded. People who only believe what is written and think that what is written is law are the cause of a lot of misunderstanding due to the fact that many of the people writing about many of these subjects we [are] recording hearsay and word of mouth information to the best of their recollection at the time, along with their particular attitude towards the subject. The bible is a great example of this.

How's that, now I'm not calling anyone a narrow minded git, haha.

(Personal correspondence, 2 Feb 2011)

There is certainly tension there and perhaps such tensions are not to be avoided, not only because—as Brigg’s suggests—they are inevitable, but because to avoid them would be to neglect what is a part of the phenomenon. Despite these challenges, Randall and others have expressed that scholarly theories—although food for thought—do not necessarily carry the hegemonic gravity Briggs cautions us about. Or, put another way, they do not trump, veto, or restrict authoritative power from other specialists’ texts. Peter Millington, mummer scholar and webmaster of the *Master Mummers* website⁷, shared with me his experience of encountering mummers with views that opposed his own:

⁶ See Chapter 6. A Traditional Resurrection Ritual?

⁷ <http://www.mastermummers.org/>

Many of the people who still espouse ritual origins do so due to lack of up to date information. A typical scenario would be where a group is performing their local play, drawn from an old book from the time when these theories were the received wisdom. They often go no further than this source (why should they) and are therefore unaware of the latest research.

Another typical situation, in England, is where a group was established thirty or more years ago as a spin off from a folk club or morris dancing side. Again, this would be at a time when ritual origins held sway (doubly so for morris dancers), and the views have simply been passed on to new members of the team without question and/or without any feeling of the need for an update.

A third, rarer situation applies to some of the long standing "traditional groups," where visiting "expert" folklorists have told them that their custom comes from a pagan ritual. Who are they to question an expert? So they pass on that view to anyone who asks. I encounter the first two situations fairly often, and I tend to challenge their views in a low key sort of way. I might just respond "if you say so" or "I'll think we'll have to agree to differ on that one," which often elicits questions in response. Sometimes I will ask them "have you got any documentary evidence for that?" which again often leads to a discussion. When this happens, I usually find my interlocutor is receptive to information on the latest research, and we both go away happy.

There are some groups where the pagan rituals are integral to their act. They may well know that the theory has no foundation, but they are not about to let the truth get in the way of a good story. For instance, the Owd Oss Mummies, with whom I performed in Nottingham in the 1970s generally finished their performances with the tongue in cheek announcement "This play is an ancient fertility ritual, and if you put some money in the hat it will guarantee you fertility for the rest of the night." (Of course, being fertile for the rest of the night was the last thing that some audience members wanted!). At the present time, a good example of this integration of "pagan rituals" with the show are the Aughakillymaude Community Mummies of Derrylin, Northern Ireland, led by Jim Ledwith. Jim is very much into this and their performances have gradually been accreting every Celtic pre-Christian ritual going, however incongruous or anachronistic. (For instance, jumping over mid summer bonfires in straw costumes.) I guess you may have seen the "Mummies, Masks and Mischief" documentary on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxQ5BcY8feI>). The commentary and vox pops are full of this sort of thing, often contradicting each other, and often couched in tentative phraseology that should sound alarms. It is an academic nightmare, but, it is a good show, and that is primarily what it was intended to be. I don't think any amount of reasoned argument would steer Jim away from his path, but you know, I don't mind. For the last group of people who espouse ritual origins, their theory is quite literally a matter of religion. I am talking here of neo-Pagans, Wiccans, and other New Age groups. The Wiccans in particular have built mummies plays into their annual cycle of rituals, taken as they are by the symbolism of death and revival in the plays. Well it's as valid an artistic interpretation as any.

As with many religious people, they are not amenable to reasoned argument, as if they are afraid that the invalidation of one of their tenets would cause their whole belief system to collapse about their ears. Several times, when I have mentioned neo-Pagan views on folklore I have received feedback from adherents picking me up on arcane points that seem to be important to them. There is a limit to how much I am prepared to argue with them.

(Personal Email, 20 March 2011)⁸

There will no doubt be many different encounters of many different sorts as one text casts its light—or shadow—upon another. However, within mummer discourse, I would argue that texts are rarely *overshadowed*. Peter continued,

I remember once having a long discussion at a folk festival with a woman—possibly a story teller—who was very much into the religious significance of death and revival in the plays. When I pointed out to her that the symbolism of the hero-combat, and death/wounding and revival was so generic that it could apply to any superhero cartoon on children's Saturday morning TV (Batman, Superman, and the like), her triumphant "precisely!" told me that there would be no point in trying to argue further.

To Ronald Shuttleworth, founder of the Coventry Mummers⁹ and curator of the Morris Ring Folk-Play Archive, I posed the question: “What is your opinion regarding the consideration of the personal and meaningful beliefs of folk play participants when proposing academic theories about the origins and development of folk plays?” He responded,

I am not sure whether I can contribute much of value. I think that one needs to approach the reported 'beliefs' of so-called peasantry by 'educated' enquirers with extreme caution. From personal experience as a manual worker in a rural environment (forestry) and a village upbringing I can tell you that although such people may think a bit slower, there is nothing inferior about their conclusions. Country people can be just as wily and devious as any and may take a sly satisfaction in 'sending up' and misleading toffs and townees.

Ron concluded,

⁸ The term “morris” will make a number of appearances throughout, referring to both the dance and the dancers. The Morris dance is a choreographed English folk dance with steps and movements timed to rhythmic musical accompaniments. Dancers are, like English mummers, most commonly men, who will use various implements such as handkerchiefs, swords, antlers, and staffs in their performance.

⁹ See “The Coventry Mummers” in Chapter 4. Revival and Resurrection.

As an active mummer for over forty years I know that we come up with whatever fanciful explanation we think will enhance audience response. I suspect that traditional teams were little different. After all, it seems to be a begging custom and any association with 'luck' or whatever might improve the welcome.

When asked why we mummied at midwinter, I used to say 'You will have noticed that recently the sun has been growing weaker and appearing for a shorter and shorter time each day. If we did not do this now, it will finally go out altogether'.

I wish you luck.

Ron.

(Personal email, 23 March 2011)

To understand the mummer phenomenon, we must consider all that happens in and around it, just as we would any novelistic dialogue. That's a lofty task, and certainly one that would require a great deal more precise attention than any one person can offer. Every day, every moment, there are more pieces, more elements, more texts, appearing and contributing to the whole. There are more words being spoken, more performances being done, more mummies being made than I can keep up with. Instead, I'll take a modest ladleful from the wassail bowl, have a drink, and see what's there.

The study of the mummer phenomenon—one activated by the magic word, Mummer—is really a multi-sited one. To understand mummies, we need to try to understand the places they appear. Peter Harrop, a scholar of theatre and performance arts, has studied mummies extensively. Regarding one particular group of mummies, the Antrobus Soulcakiers, he wrote,

Artists can clearly construct performances that facilitate the reading of site, that embody connection with site, that change our relationship with site or convey meaning upon site. I think there is a fundamental yearning to celebrate our relationship with place and wonder whether the endless performative variants of the folkloric and fakeloric, the traditional and revived, the inherited and the imagined exist to do just that. Because when site is possessed of significance we lend weight to whatever is enacted there, the repetition of that action will lend further significance to site. When there is sufficient perception of duration—and the intergenerational always seems a powerful yardstick—there is a tendency to dignify further the interplay of site and action.

(2012, 269)

He goes on to say,

Calendar customs are performative palimpsests that reflect their history, thereby drawing together the ideas of site and time and rendering them inseparable. The performances of calendar customs harness the power of place and season in constructing and enhancing what I term comparative memory, affording the opportunity for self-reflection over lengthy periods. The performers of calendar customs repeat themselves, their roles, their characters, and their plays, songs, music and dances year in year out, performance in performance out, but I think of these repetitions simply as ‘triggers’.

(ibid)

Peter Harrop states that site and tradition are inherent to one another. He also says this relationship is dependent on a “sufficient perception of duration.” The Antrobus Soulcakers have been appearing for generations. The Coventry Mummers have been around for half a century. Mumm[er]ing in Newfoundland predates the Dominion of Canada. So what about Alberta Avenue, where mummers plays have only been appearing for a (comparatively meagre) handful of years? What about a tradition that isn’t, well, ‘traditional’ just yet? What about a custom that isn’t yet customary? What about a thing that hasn’t quite caught on, is still bobbing along the stream of time, trying to snag itself on a place in the streambed? A good question might be, and I suppose my real big flashing marquee question is: What does mumm[er]ing *do* to Alberta Avenue and what does Alberta Avenue *do* to mumm[er]ing? This story is my attempt to answer that question. This is a story about what happens to a tradition in the first years of its appearance. This is a story about mummers in three places. It is a story about what they do in those places, and how they do it, and why. It is a story about tradition, and home, and what becomes of those things.

Methodology

On Interview Transcription

I decided to transcribe my conversations with Randall Fraser, Gerald Matthews, Cathy Roy, and a few others in the ethnopoetic style in order to retain the rhythm, meter, and impact of their words. Major stylistic inspiration has come from Dennis Tedlock (1975, 1977). He states,

POETRY is oral HISTORY
and oral HISTORY
is POETRY.
(708)

Tedlock continues,

relatively casual
conversational narratives
which are the more ORDINARY business of the oral historian
are THEMSELVES highly poetical
and cannot be understood from prose transcripts.
the MEANING of SPOKEN narrative
is not only carried by the sheer words as transcribed by alphabetical writing
but by the placement of SILENCES
by TONES of VOICE
by whispers and SHOUTS.
(712)

He explains,

Even in an extended well-rehearsed discourse
the speaker of any language spends forty to fifty percent of his time
being silent.

The punctuation we use today is not an accurate guide to these silences

though it is true that people reading aloud usually stop at each period.

But in oral discourse a person may go right on from one sentence to

another without pausing, or else he may pause in a place

where there would ordinarily be no punctuation in writing.

(713)

Tedlock concludes,

If anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, and oral historians

are interested in the full meaning

of the spoken word then they must stop treating oral narratives

as if they were reading prose

when in fact they are listening to dramatic poetry.

(725)

While I don't necessarily comment on the characteristics and structure of the speech shared by my interviewees, I do attempt to preserve some of it for the reader's benefit; to give a sense of what the speech sounded like rather than merely what was said; what Tedlock refers to as "the emotional flavor" (717). Line breaks are therefore indicative of pauses in speech. Longer and pronounced pauses are indicated by multiple line breaks (one break = .25 to .5 second pause). Where a line ends with -, speech from the subsequent line was continuous, without noticeable pause, and the line break is merely due to document formatting. Transcribed text appears in Goudy Old Style font. Within the transcribed text, my voice appears in italics. Commas within a line of transcribed text have been used primarily for grammatical purposes rather than to indicate a verbal pause. The symbol ~ has been used to indicate 'mummer talk' or 'janny talk'; a traditional form of ingressive speech where words are spoken through inhalation rather than exhalation. In the transcribed text I have used brackets [] for explanatory purposes and to indicate sounds or actions accompanying the spoken word. Within the body of this paper,

I have arranged pieces of narrative into thematic episodes or stories followed by my own commentary or analysis. I have used ellipses to indicate dialogue not transcribed or included here. Where I have done so, the dialogue seemed to me to be outside of the thematic episode, so to speak, or outside of the topical scope of this work. Where I felt a summary of the non-transcribed dialogue was necessary, I have included one. Footnotes appear in the transcribed text when some explanation or discussion of terminology or subject matter is necessary.

The thematic episodes I have presented here, and my arrangement and analysis of them certainly derive from my own interpretation and understanding. Nowhere in our dialogue did the interviewees overtly suggest that these themes existed or that they related to one another in some particular, *coherent* manner. Just as my words and understandings contributed to the direction and coherence of presented narratives, so did the interviewees narratives provide the sensory verve to this paper.

I conducted both structured and unstructured interviews with performers and audience members. All interviewees were made aware of the focus and purpose of my work and provided their full permission for the inclusion of the interview data in this project. I also corresponded with other scholars on the subject and some of this data had been included here.

On Block Quotes

In addition to transcribed interviews, I have included a number of long block quotes through this work. While somewhat unconventional in both their length and frequency, these are intended to convey the intertextual nature of the phenomenon being explored. In order to perceive the intertextual discourse at work—and the many texts and voices that comprise it—it is important that the reader be presented with moments where this is made aesthetically visible. It is valuable for the reader to not only understand the information being provided by other authors

but the way—and the voice—in which it is provided. For this reason, rather than digesting the points made by other authors into my own text, delivered in my own voice, I have allowed them space of their own so that readers might have the opportunity to spend time with them.

On Visual Anthropology

During this project, I have worked with the Coventry Mummers, the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective, Gerald Matthews, and numerous audience members, collecting videographic and ethnographic data by attending performances and meetings as well as conducting interviews and email correspondence. It seems to me that my collaborators and I are co-authors of the footage I have collected, and so I have made all video taken of the Coventry Mummers, the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective, and Gerald Matthews available to them.

Throughout the course of my research I have presented short ethnographic videos edited from collected footage on a number of occasions: at symposiums, conferences, and at public and private lectures.¹⁰ I intend for the use of ethnographic video in communication of this topic to be ongoing. The ethnographic videography portion of my project has three aims: 1) to record visual and auditory data, 2) to facilitate access to said data, and, 3) to explore how visual anthropology can establish a dialogic relationship between members of an intertextual discursive phenomenon—including the researcher, the people he or she encounters, the performers and the audiences. I would like now to explore the theory behind my use of ethnographic video. Morphy (1994) writes:

Film has been an important medium for postmodernist anthropology precisely because it poses questions about the relationship between interpretation and reality, the nature of representational processes and the nature of ethnographic authority (see Banks 1990; Marcus & Fischer 1986). It appears on the surface to be one of the few forms of

¹⁰ The video I produced for the public presentation portion of my PhD Defense, “New Folk Old Lore,” can be downloaded from the University of Alberta Dataverse at <http://dx.doi.org/10.7939/DVN/10894>.

anthropological data that survive the translation process relatively intact, yet film is as much the subject of interpretative and representational processes as any other ‘data’. By its apparent readability and surface authority—the audience can see what happens because the camera was present—film appears to give people a more immediate access to other places and other times than does a written account.

(119)

It is important to note that the ethnographic works associated with my project—the raw video footage, the written data, and the edited products coming from each in the form of ethnographic dissertation and documentaries—are all to be considered “texts” within and in keeping with the theoretical framework of my project. They will have intertextual relationships with each other as well as the other texts—performance events or otherwise—that they reference through visual or textual representation. Morphy (1994, 125) comments on the “gap” that can exist between raw footage and the finished product and how this can compromise the experiential integrity of what is presented in that the film as finished product fails to convey what was actually experienced by the live participants. It will be my goal to reflexively present this reality within a future full-length documentary itself; to show that the video on the screen is just another text to be interpreted, like a piece of fiction, a painting, a scholarly monograph, or a live performance event, which, too, references and interprets other texts. There is no existentially prototypical mumm[er]ing event, but we can experience mumm[er]ing through the texts that talk about each other because those texts are, together, the mumm[er]ing phenomenon.

Ruby (2000) writes,

If we grant Susan Sontag’s (1977) notion that the apparent realism of photographic reproduction is its greatest achievement and gravest danger, it can be argued that the ethnographic filmmaker has to contextualize the realistic effect of film as merely an illusion by making overt the theoretical basis of the construction of the image—by being reflexive... Like Bateson’s notion of metacommunication (as in the example he gave of “This is play,” in which participants are made to realize the behavior is not to be taken

seriously), ethnographic filmmakers need to remind audiences that “This is a film,” not to substitute actuality

(278)

I hope that my audiences do realize that what they are viewing *is* a film and not a *substitute for* mumm[er]ing but, rather, a part of the living intertextual discourse that makes up the mumm[er]ing phenomenon; a dialogue in which they are now engaged. It would be impossible to substitute the mummer tradition because, as I have suggested, there is no prototypical tradition to substitute.

Before I remark on the experiential quality of ethnographic video, a short discussion on its primary critique is necessary. Certainly, there has been much debate over the nature of ethnographic video; its presence as objective, unedited data, and its presentation as a creative work (Pink 2007, 97). Should ethnographic film remain unedited and intended only for a scholarly audience for research purposes, or should it be allowed to undergo “creative” manipulation—ie. editing, soundtracking, etc.—for presentation to public audiences as entertainment, information, or, put somewhat grotesquely, as *edu-tainment*?

Ethnographic film theory once suggested that “ethnographic concerns should be prioritized above cinematic strategies” and that an ethnographer should seek to capture whole and wide spatial contexts of activity, avoiding close-ups, cinematic framing, and non-synchronous sounds (use of sounds not present at an event) (Pink 2007, 169). Ruby (1982) and MacDougall (1995, 1997) challenged this notion, suggesting that ethnographic video can and should be used to explore the reflexive, the intersubjective, the experiential, and that the art/science dichotomy might be necessarily challenged by these explorations (Pink 2007, 171). Pink writes that

the question of the ‘ethnographicness’ of video footage does not depend entirely on its content or on the intentionality of the video maker, but its ethnographicness is contextual. In the broadest sense a video is ‘ethnographic’ when its viewer(s) judge that it represents information of ethnographic interest. Therefore video footage can never be purely ‘ethnographic.’”

(98)

The author suggests that “ethnographic video does not need to conform to specific styles or conventions” (169). This is because the same video could be, for some, ethnographically informative—say in the case of researchers interested in the subject—and for others be considered as a virtual experience of an event; not so much informative as *transformative*.

Some have questioned the reductive nature of the camera’s gaze; what is being left outside the edges of the frame or on the cutting room floor? Morphy (1994) suggests that film is no more reductionist than ethnographic writing because both are guided paradigms of “cultural interpretation or explanation” (124). Likewise, he states that “the information conveyed by a film is complementary to and differs from that conveyed in a written work. Film allows for re-interpretation of different aspects of a particular event from those represented in written texts” (126).

At this point, for my project at least, I do not see ethnographic video replacing any portion of the written text, nor do I give more weight to one or the other. They are, as Morphy says, complementary, as are all the texts within the mummer discourse that take place across time and space and media. Words said and written, sights and sites created and conveyed, are difficult to differentiate within the memory of a phenomenon. Nachmanovitch (2009) writes,

Information flows in digital and analog forms. Text (whether ancient or modern) is digital: a letter of the alphabet is either a or b, not halfway between. Digital transmission is compact, easy to preserve. Gesture and tone are analog, exhibiting continuous

gradation and variation, of which any verbal or quantitative description will be sketchy and inadequate at best.

(4)

Text and video are digital, while movement and speech are analog. And yet we are able to portray spoken word as written text, and show movement on a screen of pixels. Nachmanovitch (2009) goes on to say,

Digital text takes on analog quality by evoking the physiological feelings of sounds and as each word mingles into the flow of personal and collective memory. Analog expression takes on some digital qualities when we put a label on it. This is sarcasm and This is not sarcasm are not either/or alternatives, but exist in subtle gradations in each individual interaction.

(4)

Film or video can offer as much, and in some cases more, than written ethnography. Certainly it is no better or worse, but different; supplementary, informative. As Nachmanovitch suggests, text, video, and the actions they reference can intermingle and illuminate one another. That is why I intend to produce both a written and filmed ethnography; each exhibiting and examining different aspects as per the abilities and limitations of each medium.

Getting back to ethnographic video's potential, there is another aspect I wish to explore: its ability to show, and be, ritual. Morphy (1994) writes,

The benefits of using film in this way should be apparent to any anthropologist who has attempted to document and analyse ritual. Ritual events tend to move too quickly to be recorded in detail, and participants are frequently too involved to provide information at the time of what is going on. Although it is possible to go some way towards reconstructing a ritual by using photographs and tape recordings, it is difficult to use them in the field in a co-ordinated way, and there is no substitute for the use of sound-synchronous film or video. Film allows a ceremony to be documented in great detail by a variety of different participants, giving the anthropologist multiple perspectives on the same event. It allows the detailed recording of dialogue and the observation of many aspects of the action that went unnoticed at the time.

(123)

But aside from the practical advantages that video offers, it also provides an experiential advantage:

The artefactuality of film as a methodological tool may have profound implications. It may go some way towards equalizing the relationship between the anthropologist and the ritual's participants in the process of the transmission of cultural knowledge. Film may give the anthropologist access to the quality of memory that the participants have gained through taking part in many rituals and receiving accounts of them. The participants have been part of a process of ritual transmission involving the development of intersubjective understandings and the replication of traditional forms. It is all too easy to dismiss both the effectiveness of these processes of transmission and the extent to which they reflect structured processes. It is possible to over-emphasize the fragility of oral transmission and the transactional nature of social process, perhaps because so little makes sense at the time from the participant anthropologist's viewpoint, because in his or her case so little of the past has been brought to the occasion... Continuities are a reflection of memories that people bring to particular occasions or events, and a history of discourse between individuals over ritual forms potentially exists, even if in the case of some ritual systems that discourse may seldom occur overtly. Through reflection on film the anthropologist has repeated access to ritual form and to memories of it as it existed at one point in time. The anthropologist thus has repeated access to one event while the participants have transient access to many events (together with oral accounts of those events). The anthropologist's experience (using film) is an analogue of the participants' and allows discourse with the participants at a level of detail that would not otherwise be possible, given the limitations imposed by the fleeting memory of the observed event.

(124)

Although Morphy centers his discussion on the anthropologist, I believe the same can be said for audiences of the ethnographic video, which acts as a ritual itself; allowing for repeated viewing and, in a sense, participation. By watching the images, hearing the words, and talking about mumm[er]ing amongst themselves, audiences of the ethnographic video, too, become participants in mummer discourse and, thus, members of the phenomenon.

The following is an excerpt from my PechaKucha presentation for the “Let’s Talk: Arts Research Goes Public” competition held by the Faculty of Arts in February of 2011. I present it here because I believe it summarizes my approach and my intent. It also, I might (humbly) add, seems to agree with local audiences, or at least a few judges, who announced me as one of the competition winners:

Visual anthropology is an important, growing practice. It is, in many ways, a new frontier, highly self-reflexive. Not only does it hold a mirror up to anthropology in general, it seeks to illuminate for its audience those areas of culture and society unknown to them.

Film is important to our socioculture because film is an exhibition of the mind. It brings multiple stories together as one narrative to be experienced by the audience. Visual anthropology, then, brings the audience into the minds of the researcher and the participant-collaborators who, together, are telling a story.

Film captures a performance in a way that text cannot. It is ritualistic and harkens to the cyclical and recurring nature of traditional performances. Film preserves the performance in a rich sensory medium and allows the audience to witness and experience the verve, vim, and potency of the spectacle.

Edmonton is becoming a film community with a growing number of film festivals, Edmonton is an Arts community, Edmonton is a Festival community. Edmonton is also a community of revival. It is a community that constantly seeks to remake itself as something better. The Alberta Avenue mummies play is, then, an axis of all these elements.

The film I am creating as part of my thesis research is about mummies’ plays but it is also about Edmonton, the people of Edmonton, the life-cycle of communities, the death of everything we don’t like about our city and the rebirth of what we want in a community. The mummies’ play captures this thematically and presents it to those who live it as something identifiable; something traditional and replayable.

In mummies’ plays, the audience are participants in the tradition. By showing a film about mummies’ plays, we broaden the audience. We allow people to participate in an old and alluring tradition; to experience the tradition as it is becoming in their community; a tradition of renewal. By allowing the people of Edmonton to live this tradition, they are participating in the revitalization of their community. In a sense, they get to learn about the topic but also experience it as it happens for real in their real lives.

The writer Geoff Dyer warns us that academic research can kill a subject of study by draining it of its living vigor. However, I believe that, with the participation of the public, research can enliven an otherwise waning tradition. The public are vital to the life of the mummies' play phenomenon. Only by bringing a community audience into the tradition can it hope to survive in that community. Anthropological film is a way to do this.

Chapter 2. The Good Ol' Days

Alberta Avenue: A Small Town in the Big City

My earliest memory of the Alberta Avenue neighbourhood¹¹ is embarrassingly recent. I may have—and probably did—venture into the area a number of times throughout my life. I grew up in and around Edmonton and I'd wager that I passed through the neighbourhood north of the river on more than one occasion. But I can't say for sure, and I can't summon up a single image, emotion, or sensation relating to the place before I began working with the Alberta Avenue Mummies Collective just six or seven years ago. The neighbourhood now, as I write this in 2016, is a very different place than it was back then. And what it was back then was a very different place than it was in its beginnings. And that's what I'd like to talk about first. Alberta Avenue's beginnings. The early days. *The good old days*.

I will rely here on oral histories, taken together to be considered as a collective memory of a neighbourhood; of a home. These stories are what make a place. They allow us to navigate its physical plane, to traverse its streets and see its buildings and know where we are. Whatever happens in that place—these days and those days—is folded into that knowing. We explore Alberta Avenue by listening to its stories. We feel the place by acquainting ourselves with what has passed through it; the things that have happened there and the people that have done those things.

¹¹ The Alberta Avenue neighbourhood runs east to west along 118 avenue— or “Alberta Avenue”—from 89 street NW to 97 street NW, and south to north from 112 avenue to 122 avenue.

As we do, hopefully we will come to understand that, through these encounters, the place stretches far and wide beyond its physical borders.

Around the turn of the 20th century, a space was carved out of some dense brush just north of the Town of Edmonton. This area belonged to the Village of North Edmonton, adjacent to but separate from the neighbouring town to the south with which the village shared its name.¹² For the first few years, the houses built in that brushy quarter remained relatively isolated. By 1908, however, the Town of Edmonton had swelled into a city and the Village of North Edmonton was brought into its fold. The scrubby square transformed from a conceptually rural to a technically urban space, although it still remained on the very outer edge of the growing metropolis. Over the next decade the neighbourhood (known alternatively as Fairview, Norwood and Alberta Avenue) grew rapidly, both residentially and commercially. In 1914 it was tethered to the rest of the city by a streetcar line. People flooded in and people flooded out. The once sparse streetscape was filled in. The place changed, as places do. But before I discuss those changes and what they meant for the neighbourhood, I want to explore the place that remains *despite* those changes.

A part of Alberta Avenue, made of memories and words, has nestled into a cozy little space of its own where it can reside “like those little nooks of still water, which border a rapid stream, where we may see the straw and bubble riding quietly at anchor, or slowly revolving in their mimic harbour, undisturbed by the rush of the passing current” (Irving, *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon*). This space is *The Ave We Had: A Living History*; a website dedicated to the Alberta Avenue of yesteryear (<http://avenuehistory.org/>). The *History* page begins with this passage:

¹² Alberta Avenue/Eastwood Area Redevelopment Plan, Bylaw 5748, Office Consolidation 2010:11.

Alberta Avenue is a place with a golden past, one where community was strong, businesses thrived and children were free to run and play. In the early 1900s Alberta Avenue was the edge of the city, it was where Edmonton proper met North Edmonton Village commonly called Packingtown because of the numerous meat packing plants...

(<http://avenuehistory.org/history-2/>)



Plate 1. Streetcar at the edge of the city near Alberta Avenue, 1944



Plate 2. Milk wagon, Alberta Avenue, 1940

The Alberta Avenue that lives here, at this site in cyberspace, is an idyllic place indeed. Along with informative paragraphs and evocative photographs, there are voices that come forward to help create it. The site provides a selection of oral histories collected as part of the

Avenue Oral History Project. Four professional actors spoke with senior members of the community and used the recorded material to compose a live theatre production in 2012 (<http://avenuehistory.org/about-us-2/>). One person, a Binnie Engley, said,

You know...it was a good area to grow up in.

You were never afraid.

You know if you were out at night

You didn't have to be afraid.

And nobody

Ever locked their doors.

Your doors were never locked.

And

You know we'd go out and we'd play until

Well not midnight because our parents would come looking for us

If it was midnight and you weren't home.

But uh

You know we could go out and play

In the fall especially when it got dark early

And uh

You'd be home by nine o'clock

But you never had to worry...

(<http://avenuehistory.org/projects/binnie-engley/>)

Ms. Engley tells of a place without fear or worry. A place where children play in the dark. Another story comes from Raelena Mellon. At the top of Ms. Mellon's page is a panoramic image of children playing, in 1913, on a roundabout in a playground surrounded by a sprawling wood.



Plate 3. Borden Park, 1913

This is Borden Park, at the far east side of Alberta Avenue, not far from Rat Creek; a significant waterway—named by trappers for its plentiful muskrat—that once ran along the neighbourhood but has now largely disappeared under urban development. Actually, Rat Creek was first used as a dump before being paved over to become Norwood Boulevard. The story Ms. Mellon shares tells of a place that, although a part of the city, exists at its fringes; a neighbourhood that seems much more a rural town than an urban environ, with bush and field at the doorstep:

There was no fences then

*Oh really*¹³

Mm-mm

There was no fence between our yard, this yard

Very few people had fences

So

But we played outside a lot...

The whole street

There was kids almost in every house

Right up to 118th avenue

The street

The city

Or

The end of

This street, 93rd street

Went down to 123rd avenue and that was it

It was all bush

After that, straight up

How far, I wouldn't

I don't know

But we were right on the edge of the city limits

¹³ The interviewer's speech is indicated here in italics

And that must have been fun when you were kids

Yeah, right [they laughs]

We went and played in the bushes

Went exploring and found some hobos there

Along the tracks

Oh like the rail tracks

Yeah

And

They lived in these box cars and

Us kids used to go there and

They'd give us baloney sandwiches and stuff and pick us up so we could run around inside the rail cars

And we kept telling my mom about the hobos and she said we were making up stories, she didn't

She said there was no such things as hobos

And, uh

Finally after us chattin about it and talking about it all summer long

She finally decided to listen so she went and took a look for herself

And

When she seen that there was

Homeless people living there

That was the end of our adventure

[She laughs]

(<http://avenuehistory.org/projects/raelena-mellon/>)

There is something somewhat Turner Classic Movies, almost Disney-ish, about this vignette: children having adventures with rail-riding hobos, sharing sandwiches in boxcars. It's a lovely scene, one I imagine in cinematic black & white. The past Alberta Avenue—a place of few fences—rolls on a film reel as trains slowly chug along, tramps dangling their legs above the rails. Ms. Mellon went to the theatre, too.

Once a month

If we'd been good all month we got a quarter

And it cost ten cents to get in and they played

They played children's

Movies

Like Walt Disney

Those type of movies

Every Saturday

And it was ten cents to get in and we had like fifteen cents to buy popcorn and whatever with

And it was like Saturday afternoon matinees

And we went once a month because that's all my parents could afford

They had red plush seats

But they were really close together, it's not like the new theatres now

It's not a very big theatre

But on Saturdays

For the afternoon matinee

It was packed with kids

Just packed

And there was a concession?

They had a concession inside, yes..."

The Avenue Theatre held its grand opening in 1934 with the hit film *Change of Heart*. Along with the main film there was a Mickey Mouse cartoon and the comedy *No More Bridge*. A ticket cost 25 cents for adults and, just as Ms. Mellon remembered, 10 cents for children. The Avenue Theatre was a reinvention of the Rose Picture Palace, which had been a hub of the community for the two decades prior. In the early 1950s the Avenue Theatre was moved to a new location a few blocks east, where it still stands today. Although the theatre's form and location in the streetscape has changed, its prominence as part of the neighbourhood's identity is a mainstay. When people talk about Alberta Avenue, the theatre is often a main attraction. Its bright neon marquee is a beacon that brings us back.



Plate 4. The Avenue Theatre during its heyday in 1938

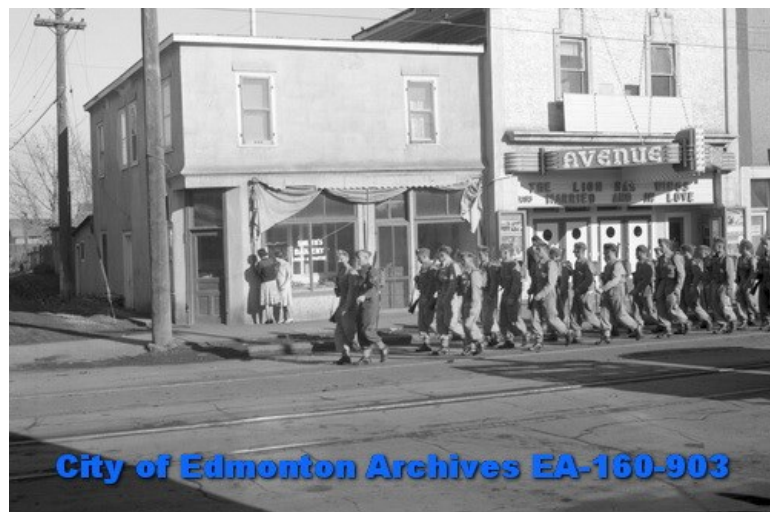


Plate 5. Army recruits marching past the Avenue Theatre in 1942



Plate 6. The Avenue Theatre in 2014

But it wasn't just the cinema. Live theatre was a fixture in the community, too. Cathy Roy grew up on Alberta Avenue—which she often refers to by its former name—Norwood. She was born in 1951 but her grandfather had been living in the area for years before that. Mrs. Roy told me,

It was that kind of thing

Like it's in our DNA or something, in Alberta, to do that

To make our own fun that way.

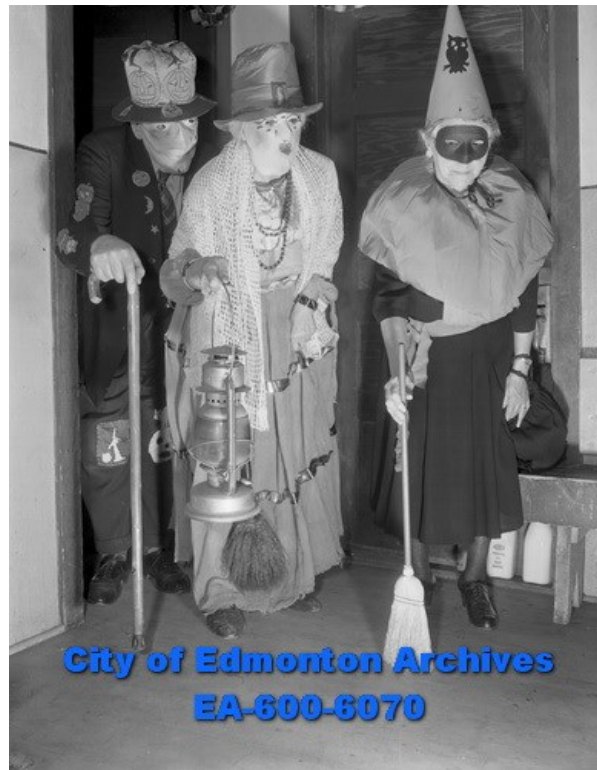


Plate 7. Friendship Club “Oldsters” on Halloween, Alberta Avenue, 1950

“What I want to tell you is” said Cathy,

“that theatre was so alive in those days. So in the thirties there wasn’t the money to have travelling theatre in Alberta anymore.

...

I think that Norwood was no different than anywhere else

Or Alberta Avenue was no different it was just a seething hotbed of little groups.

I had not heard of the Alberta Avenue Corps.

but I have heard of the St. Faith’s Young People

Who presented at the Alberta Avenue Hall.

So ‘young peoples’ groups at churches, from what I can gather

Were sort of like the, it’s like the

‘Tinder’ of the day, right?

It’s where you met people, and my parents met at McDougall United Young Peoples

'cause people met at the downtown church because that was more happening than the Norwood church, right?

...

And there was the Norwood Young Peoples Society who also had

That would be church-based

Who had a theatre group in the late thirties.

So

That's what was going on.

...

It certainly wasn't the kind of neighbourhood that

is recovering

It's recovering from now.

It was middle class. It was really nice, right?

There were little businesses

Jewelry shops

Restaurants

...

I asked Cathy, "What are your earliest memories of that neighbourhood?"

"Well

Playing outside

Probably my earliest memory is going

In the sleigh

One of those sleighs with the round back

Down to Safeway with my mother

In my snowsuit

She would pull me on the sleigh

You could just lean the sleigh up on the outside wall of Safeway because nobody would take it

And go grocery shopping with her and then on the way home

I'd have the bag of groceries between my legs

...



Plate 8. Children in front of Safeway, 1937



Plate 9. Safeway on Alberta Avenue, 1941

Everything was mom and pop in those days

Except for Safeway

And the Bank of Montreal, of course

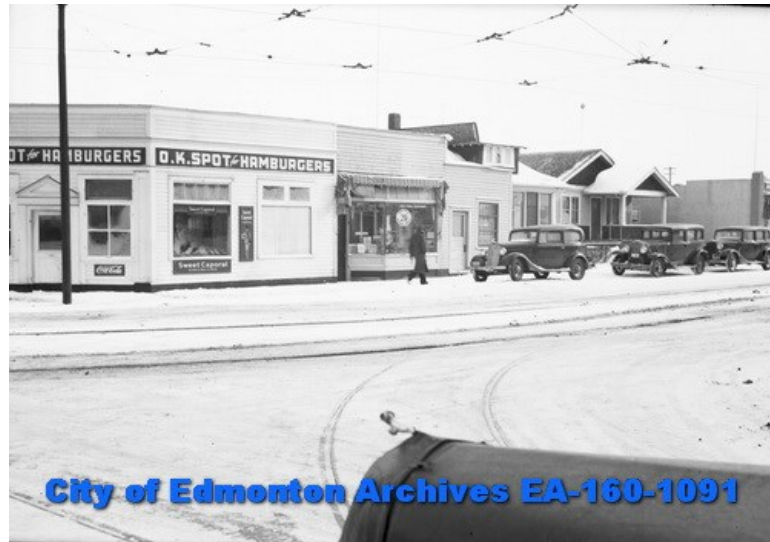


Plate 10. 118th Avenue and 95th street, 1939



Plate 11. Mitchell's Drug Store, 1939

...

We played all sorts of games in the spaces between the houses and in the back alley

I remember making mud pies in the spring

Because you could make them out of the mud in the back alley

And then you could put snow on top for the icing

Or you could make the snow cake with the mud on top for the icing

And you know

Like

All of that kind of stuff

Climbing the lilac tree that wasn't very high

And you know

Just

That kind of stuff

...

You could walk to church

You could buy penny candy at the corner store on your way

...

There were lots of kids to play with

You skipped on the front street"

(Personal interview, Edmonton, 29 January 2016)

Speaking of kids, an anonymous storyteller takes us back to the 1930s,

I grew up as a kid in what they called the Dirty 30's. The Depression. Nobody had any money. But we made our own fun. We played a lot of basketball and baseball, and in the winter time, making a circle in the snow, cut a couple of pathways, and played tag. Nearly all of our activities were in the Parkdale School yard. Everybody was in the same boat. I knew a couple of kids whose dads had good jobs. I don't think we had high expectations. We just accepted. Never was anyone hungry. Ever. Nearly everyone had a big garden. Fresh veggies and everything."

(<http://avenuehistory.org/projects/anonymous/>)

What was Alberta Avenue? What kind of place do we encounter when we take the passages people have built to get there? It is a place where children frolic without reservation, without fear, without hunger. It is a bucolic oasis woven into a cityscape, carved out of dense

bush¹⁴, where gardens grow unfenced and potato patches sprout into community halls, wading pools, tennis courts and bowling greens (<http://avenuehistory.org/history-2/>). On Alberta Avenue, neighbours dress up to put on plays and the smell of popcorn wafts below a glowing marquee.

Dem Times in Baie Verte

Gerald, the Last of the Mummers, told me about his home town. I'll let him speak.

But the times

The times were

The way

The way life was then, over half a century ago, like I say, you know

Everybody, as far as I know

Were happy

Appeared to be happy anyway

You always smiled

.....

A friend of mine said one time, he said, "Gerald," he said, "Baie Verte wasn't a bad place to grow up in," and I said, "Gosh, you're absolutely right, it wasn't."

'Cause we had it all

We had a little theatre there

You know you had a parlor

¹⁴ http://www.edmonton.ca/residential_neighbourhoods/PDF/Alberta_Ave_Eastwood_ARP_Consolidation.pdf, 11.

A restaurant

Where you could go and have ice-cream, a plate of french-fries, stuff like that

Everything

And maybe a lot more

Churches

And then everybody had a boat

Most everybody had a boat

You had the Atlantic Ocean there

You'd get in your boat and row down the bay

The bay would be about nine miles long in from the ocean

Not a fiord, but a bay, a harbor, eh

You could row down and go cod jiggin, do whatever you want

You didn't need a license for anything

You had to have a license, I guess, if you wanted to drive a truck, right

But if you wanted to go catch a trout, it was free, there was more free, right

You could go anywhere

I'd spend days and days and days and days and days

Down in the boat by me self

A little rowboat

No lifejacket

We didn't know what a lifejacket was back in those days

We knew what Lifesavers were

[I laugh]

“Got your Lifesavers with ya Gerald?!”

“Ya, mom, I got me Lifesavers.”

No

And nobody was ever drowned

Hardly anybody

And none of us could swim

Nobody could swim

The water was too cold, we didn't learn in saltwater, very very cold, right

But it was all, we went everywhere by boat

I think that's probably the reason why everybody was so careful

You know

If you were out there you were on your own

You know you couldn't mess around with it, right

If you rowed down, you had a row boat

And I'd row down, I don't know

Maybe, four, five, six miles

By myself

And catch all the codfish

Some as big as you are, Mat!

[I laugh]

I had a hell of job to haul em in

Biggest kind of cods

Ya

....

There was always something to do in Baie Verte, right

Ya, there was always work

Between mining

And logging

Copper mine

There was mines goin everywhere

Ya, you didn't have to leave

No, it had it all

Ya, now it's all, I think it's a little bit of mining done around there now, but

Not so much goin now

Not like it was in the heyday

...

~ Any mummings allowed in! ~¹⁵

That's the way we used to talk, you see

Because in the small community

¹⁵ Spoken in *ingressive speech*: words are spoken through inhalation rather than exhalation.

Everybody knew everybody

So you had to disguise your voice, right?

You gettin' all this, get my accent on tape, well anyway

You could type captions, you can put the words on the screen

Instead of saying 'voice,' I say 'vice'

.....

So you got the questions or anything there

Well

Or you want me just to start and hammer away at it?

Ya, I mean, I'm more just interested in hearing what you'd like to talk about

I mean, obviously I have some questions in mind

But if you want to just start by kind of telling me

I got to go back

I got to go back

I got to go back a long time

I got to go back fifty

Over fifty years or so

Back in outport Newfoundland¹⁶

So

I

¹⁶ An outport is a small, isolated coastal community.

Well, first of all

When I was a youngster

And I say around fifteen

Sixteen

Fourteen

Like, we were isolated

And what I mean by that was that

There's no roads

And in the winter time

The only way in or out of my community was by plane

Summer time we went around by boat, you know

Coastal boats, right?

But in the winter time everybody was stayed put where dey were

So

For all the people

Young and old

Christmas

Was quite a celebration

You know?

Usually that's when you got any treats

Especially for youngsters, toys

Or anything like that, right

You get 'em at Christmas

And some extra candy and apples and oranges, you know

That was the thing, right

There wasn't much money on the go but everybody was happy, right

But then when the school closed for the Christmas holidays

We had twelve days off

Everybody was

We were all excited about what we were calling

Dey call 'em 'mummers' now

But we called it 'jennying'¹⁷

Dressing up as a jenney

And maybe a

Week or so

And before the Christmas season began

You'd

Start

Using your imagination

And design stuff what you were gonna dress up like! (He laughs)

¹⁷ A variant of the more common "janneying." "Janney" also appears as "janny." For a discussion of etymology of the term, see Widdowson 1969,1990, 216-221, in Halpert and Story.

To frighten the devil out of people, you know

For Christmas

So

You had to make all your own

You couldn't go into costume shop and buy it

So

People used bed sheets

And pillow cases, you know

And you'd have

Guys dressed up like women and women dressed up like guys, you know

And they'd have

Mitts on their feet and their socks on their hands, you know

And stuff like that, right

Pillow case, you'd get it, and you'd cut a couple slits in it

And maybe use a bit of lipstick or charcoal to

Darken the eyes, you know

The cut out, right

And den you'd get together with your friends

And you see how many

Where you were gonna go what houses you were gonna go visit right in the town

And

Now you didn't want too many

In your own group

Otherwise people wouldn't let you in, it'd be too big a crowd, you see! (He laughs)

So, it was different groups

You might be going up to somebody's door, well, almost like trick-or-treating now

And you go up to somebody's door and den there was a crowd coming out, right

You wait till they came out and den you go in, eh

So we usually carried a

What we called in Newfoundland

Was a stick

But we called this a 'split'

And it was about that long (about a foot in length)

And maybe that big around (about two inches in diameter)

And we'd

There was no doorbells in those days

So you come up to the door and you'd

(knock knock knock knock knock knock)

~ Any mummings allowed in by? ~

(knock knock)

Change your voice, eh

People would sometimes be happy to see you, you know

Because it was a bit of special entertainment stuff

Den if you had a accordion

Or

Guitar

Or a mout organ or anyting like dat

You get in and in those days most everybody had large kitchens

Because that was the entertainment centre, right

Dey always had a big kitchen

That way you wanna have what we call a 'time'

Today you call it a 'party' but it was a 'time' back den

You had a little party in kitchen, you see

You didn't have to worry about messin up the carpets or the floor or anything

Because all back in dem days was all

Canvas

We call it canvas

Like linoleum

So, you know, you'd come in and you'd beat the snow off your boots outside as much as you could

(stomp stomp stomp stomp stomp)

Stamp it off, eh

Den you'd walk in and

You sit around and

They'd give you treats like

Drinks

Or

Cake

If you're old enough to drink or whatever

You could have some homebrew if people had homebrew on the go

There wasn't much comptroller beer¹⁸ at that time that we're having now, right

People made their own beer

Maybe if you were really really lucky you might get a drink of rum

Maybe somebody in the community had a bottle of rum for Christmas, you know

That was about it, right

So you sit around and ya

Everybody was tryin to guess who you are

'Well, I knows dat feller, well

He's a Matthews over dere'

'Well

I don't

I don't tink so'

'Are you sure?'

'Ya

¹⁸ As far as I can tell, "comptroller beer" refers to beer from regulated and licensed breweries.

I think he's a Matthews

'No

I think you're wrong

I don't think it

I can't remember seeing dat feller around before'

All Sort of Stuff went on like that, eh (he laughs)

Ya

And then

Usually

If somebody could dance you'd play if you had a accordion and stuff like dat you'd play

Some music

And people would get up in the kitchen and dance and everything, you know

Ya

Merry Old England

We've been to Alberta Avenue, where the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective roams, and we've visited Baie Verte, where the Last of the Mummers hails from, but what of England, the home of the Coventry Mummers? Like these other places, it's important to understand how England was remembered by those making the mumm[er]ing in order to understand what the mumm[er]ing was about.

In the closing years of the 19th century, J. Arthur Gibbs predicted in *A Cotswold Village: or, Country Life and Pursuits in Gloucestershire* that the Victorian era that he inhabited would “two hundred years hence” be seen as “the true days of merrie England” (1898, 409; quoted in Readman 2005, 194). But what is the significance of his statement? What is, or was, merry England?

Walter Scott coined the phrase in his poem, *Marmion* (1808): “England was merry England, when Old Christmas brought his sports again.” Steve Roud, an expert on English folklore and creator of the Roud Folk Song Index, explains, “Scott’s phrase ‘Merry England’ has been adopted by historians and folklorists to describe the notion that there was a golden age in the English past, when society functioned without conflict, our rulers were just and kindly, our clergy attentive and understanding, everyone was adequately clothed, fed, and happy in their station, and contentment ruled the land” (2006, 510). This notion of Merry England stood in stark contrast with the discontentment many felt with the progressive “urbanization and mechanization—in particular, the growth of factories, railways, and improved roads” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The golden age of England’s past was difficult to place in time, however, shifting from Feudal times to the Restoration to the Elizabethan period, depending on who was looking for it (511). Although Merry England was difficult to place, many were, nevertheless, certain that it was:

By mid-Victorian times, the past invoked by the demure revivals of maypoles and rush-bearing was too vague to be capable of any precise chronological location. But the attributes of Merry England were constant: a contented, revelling peasantry and a hierarchical order in which each one happily accepted his place and where the feast in the baronial hall symbolised the ideal social relationship.

(Thomas 1983, 22; quoted in Judge 1991, 131)

But modern scholars are quick to vanquish these antiquated notions. Oxford folklorist Roy Judge explains, “With Merrie England we are in the sphere of folklorism. . . It is a world that has never actually existed, a visionary, mythical landscape, where it is difficult to take normal historical bearings” (Judge 1991, 131). When faced with the rigors of academia, Merry England begins to slip away. What is significant about J. Arthur Gibbs’ implicitly tongue-in-cheek prediction is that Merry England can exist at any time, the only requisite being that it is far–unreachably so–behind us. It is therefore not historical but notional; nothing more than a dream masquerading as a memory. And although it begins to vanish under any kind of critical scrutiny, we needn’t tarry here for long to get a sense of Merry England. It, like the Alberta Avenue and Baie Verte we have explored through the reminiscent stories of others, was–is–an ideal place. Regardless of whatever it was or wasn’t in the history books, its state in story and memory remains longingly pleasant. And just as cosmic contentment is vital to its sense of place, equally so is its presence on the brink of oblivion.

Gerald’s story about Baie Verte in *Dem Times* parallels that of Alberta in the good old days. Although his is a tale of an innocently raucous maritime community rather than a dusty-road prairie town or a misty medieval village, the dream of all these places is the same. This dream is one made of sensations both remembered and imagined, for a Utopia is in its very nomenclature both a good place and no place. The Arcadia we paint upon the canvas of our pasts is, always, haunted by such a conceit; buried in the tomb on the hill. This conceit appears at first to be tragic, but upon closer examination it is revealed to be strangely necessary. Although it takes the form of ghosts and monsters, without the lurking spooks our good places would never feel as substantial. But how and why do these phantoms bestow us with the essential ingredients

for our remagined¹⁹ homes? Before lifting the veil, let us talk some more about where ghosts come from in the first place: things dead and gone.

Chapter 3. Dead, Gone, and Disappearing

Alberta Avenue's Decline

When the Cromdale Hotel opened on Alberta Avenue in 1954 it was the toast of the town. The 44-room, three story hotel was “smart” and “modern” (newspaper article, <http://www.vintageedmonton.com/2012/07/vintage-edmonton-cromdale-hotel.html>). It had a banquet room that could seat 100 and both men’s and women’s beverage rooms; each decorated with luxurious drapes, faux-mahogany trim, and colorful murals commissioned from local artists. The Grand Opening provided entertainment by actors, actresses, and performers. One man remembers Bob Hope flying in to do his comedy routine, but he couldn’t be certain he remembered that right (<http://avenuehistory.org/projects/946/>). It was cited as “the premier hotel” where “anybody who was anybody” stayed when they came to Edmonton (“A troubled and notorious Alberta Avenue building gets new life in Edmonton,” *Edmonton Sun* 15 June 2013; <http://www.edmontonsun.com/2013/06/15/a-troubled-and-notorious-alberta-avenue-building-gets-new-life-in-edmonton-neighbourhood>). Like the Avenue Theatre west of it, the Cromdale was a testament to the verve of the neighbourhood.

¹⁹ I use this term—a portmanteau of “remembered” and “imagined”—to convey the notion that our storied recollections of homeplaces are never one nor the other but dreamscapes made of both.



City of Edmonton Archives EA-10-1056

Plate 12. Cromdale area, 115 avenue and 80th street looking north, c. 1912



Plate 13. Cromdale Hotel, c. 1960

(<http://www.vintageedmonton.com/2012/07/vintage-edmonton-cromdale-hotel.html>)



City of Edmonton Archives EA-596-1171

Plate 14. Cromdale Hotel, 2005

Fifty years later, the building was condemned and closed for business. Over the past decades the Cromdale had grown into a different kind of testament; one that spoke of the troublesome times Alberta Avenue had slipped into. Although Alberta Avenue had been booming since its early days²⁰, after the Second World War the neighbourhood became increasingly inhabited by lower-income residents as middle-class families engaged in their suburban exodus. Houses were illegally subdivided into rental units, inviting a transient population to fill the gaps. In 1951 the streetcars that connected neighbourhood residents with the city at large stopped running, and, with the opening of the Yellowhead Highway seven blocks to the north, Alberta Avenue ceased to be the major thoroughfare it once was. Many flocked to department stores instead of the mom-and-pops they once did. Property values fell and the community became a place associated with drinking, gambling, prostitution, and drugs.

If some walls could speak, we might not want to hear their stories. After years as rental properties and the general decline of the neighbourhood many houses in the area deteriorated into places of violence and crime.

They were places of fear and desolation for many, but for those who lived there they were also a home and a shelter from the storm that was life. Despite the pain that those walls saw they remain willing and able to protect a new generation from the cold prairie winter.

(Norwood Historical Walking Tour brochure, 27)

Randall told me about when he first moved into the Alberta Avenue neighbourhood in 2005 or 2006:

When I moved into

I had my little stilt company

And we were looking for a rehearsal storage place

²⁰ In 1913 *The Edmonton Bulletin* touted Alberta Avenue as a “Fast Growing Portion of [the] City,” with a “large hotel”, “fine restaurant”, and a number of “fine” business blocks being erected up and down the avenue (*The Edmonton Bulletin*, 25 September 1913, p.7; Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ar00716).

And we moved into the Community League

And there was

Nobody there

It was an empty building

...

And the Community League before that

Had been a really nasty bingo hall

And there was

All kinds of [makes a look of disgust]

I mean it was

It was gross

It was gross

There was needles in the backyard, back garden area

Go upstairs, there's crap everywhere

Bottles, cans, broken glass, you name it, just really scuzzy

And all the bingo equipment was still there too

So we kind of took one storage room and cleared some space away

And made it

You know

Got in there

And we were paying like \$250 bucks a month

Pfff, easy peasy, no problem

But we really had to make sure we'd lock everything up

We had to make sure the doors were always locked, people were always trying to break in

I'd come in after a day and find the door open and the place had been rummaged

Just all that kind of stuff

You'd go to park your car and there was pimps on the corner

And hookers

And drug dealers

It was a crime zone

And it had been for a long time

Alberta Avenue was known as

You know

Crime city

It was the place where all that happened

The Cromdale was just down the road

One of the most violent bars in the city

The whole

That's what we moved into

...

Alberta Avenue was in a state of moral decline. Certainly, the unsavoury reputation that had developed throughout the 1970s and '80s was far more potent than it had ever been, but even the good old days had its share of the odd criminal activity.

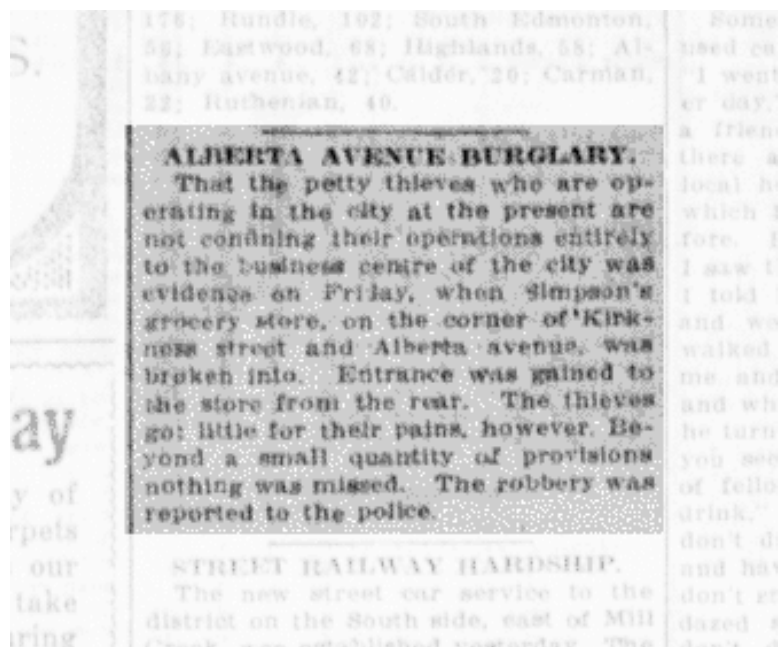


Plate 15. *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 2 December 1912

(p.10, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ar01016)

In the case of this burglary, however, what is noteworthy is the implication that the petty thieves came from “the business centre of the city”—outside the neighbourhood. These were intruders, invaders, not natives. The threat that the city brings to the country is a classic trope. Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, explores the development of this trope at length. He writes,

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city...reaches back into classical times.

(1973, 1)

There is an entire genre of English literature, going back to the nineteenth century and beyond, dedicated to—or preoccupied with—the disappearance of the country into the encroaching urban world (48-60). We aren’t talking about England here, but a British colony nonetheless, and so

these ideas are well at home on the streets of small neighbourhood in Canada. The idea of corruption, of loss, coming from beyond the community with the influx of strangers and outsiders is a trope we see in Gerald Matthews' telling of Baie Verte's transformation from 'dem times' to 'now'. Let's go back to Baie Verte.

The Mummers Don't Come Round No More in Baie Verte

About janneying, I asked Gerald,

Do you remember the first time that you went out?

He answered,

I can't I don't think I can, no, I can't remember the first time

So I asked him,

Do you remember the last time you went out?

By gollies

Probably in the early sixties maybe

Probably in the early sixties

Probably about sixty one or sixty two

Around there

Then after that things changed

We'd an asbestos mine came into town

And then it was a whole influx of people what we used to call in dem days 'mainlanders'

Was your people from mainland Canada

And they had different ways and then it all

They got in there and of course they weren't into the mummering thing, right

So different people from all over the place got in the community and I think that sort of killed er,
eh

Roads came in and it was opened up, people could get about and then

After a while

People sort of

I guess that's what caused its demise because

Before, when we were living in isolation everybody knew each other, right

So you knew if somebody was comin you let in, you'd open your door to your house if somebody
was comin dressed up, you knew they were probably from the community

You know

But after the mine started and people moved in from everywhere

Den you didn't feel comfortable opening your doors anymore, you know

You didn't know who was who, right

...

I don't know now

Like I said, the mindset of people are different, eh

So much crime and everything goin on now, you know what I mean

People don't need to put a mask on now, they're scary enough as is, right

You know

I think so, sort of sad that way but that's

That's the way it goes

But back in dem times

Different mindset

Gerald also said:

Maybe someday I'll get back again

One last trip

Go back and see it all

Reminisce

Most of the people I knew there, Mat, would be gone now

You know

If I went back there now

When referring to a CBC audio recording of Gerald and some of his family members mummering in 1961, he said,

So most of the people on that tape

Are gone

Dead and gone

Gerald's story conveys vivid affection for a particular time and place, expressed together and inseparable like a Bakhtinian *chronotope* ("time space"): Heyday Baie Verte, during his

early life, where and when times were hard and yet people were happy and content.²¹ Cod were big and plentiful, jobs were abundant, people were safe from harm, and the town—complete with staple images of little shops, churches, theatres, and eateries—offered all one could need or want. Gerald’s narrative associates “dem times” with safety, happiness, and contentment, while “now” is associated with strangers, a loss of friends and family, a loss of the familiar.

In Gerald’s narrative, the arrival of mainlanders in outport Newfoundland is associated with the metaphoric “death” of mummering. Gerald’s narrative demonstrates what Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) calls a “decline narrative” (17). Decline narratives include images of ideal pasts that are lost due to a downward historical “deterioration” (16). This kind of narrative is “often coupled with a deep sentimental attachment to ‘the good old days’” and nostalgically “presupposes a highly romanticized past” (16). Zerubavel writes,

This highly formulaic vision of the past represents a particular social tradition of remembering. Though we normally regard pessimism, like optimism, as a personal trait, actually it is also part of an unmistakably schematic style of remembering shared by entire mnemonic communities....And although the vision of our tragically irretrievable Edenic origins dates to ancient Judaism and our progressive *degeneration* from some idealized golden age was already recounted by Hesiod 2,700 years ago, many decline narratives are in fact a reaction to the overly optimistic modern belief in progress.

(18)

Heyday Baie Verte doesn’t exist anymore, as Gerald tells us: “not so much goin now.” The loss of heyday Baie Verte is haunted by another loss: that of mummering itself. The loss of mummering, as Gerald and I have already discussed, also begins with the arrival of stranger mainlanders into the outport community. As we shall see, Randall, too, strongly associates mumm[er]ing with community. They are symbiotic, co-facilitating and co-substantiating. In a

²¹ For the intrinsic connectedness and inseparability of given time spaces in art and literature, see Bakhtin’s “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas, 1981, 84-258.

sense, one creates the other. This relationship will be discussed in further detail in a later chapter²², but in the meantime, let us say that the loss of one also contributes to the loss of the other. In England, the loss of mumm[er]ing is, likewise, associated with a loss of its Merry past.

The Disappearance of the English Mummers

The centre of Coventry is a modern promenade surrounded by a ring road. Scattered here and there are little bits of the old city; an old church, an old cottage, and old storefront. But what is not immediately apparent is that the new, postwar cityscape is a signifier for what has been lost. And not gradually lost, either, but suddenly lost—during the bombings of the Second World War. And the Second World War brought with it a loss of another thing: a widespread mummers play tradition: “Up to the First World War,” Steve Roud tells us, “there were hundreds of local mummers’ teams up and down the country, but in the interwar years the majority of them faded away, leaving perhaps a dozen to continue after the Second World War” (Roud 2006, 547). But this was hardly a recent trend.

By the late 19th century, folklorists such as Thomas Fairman Ordish were urging the Folklore Society to engage in an active collection of what perceived to be a once omnipresent but now rapidly disappearing tradition:

I may say at once that this will be the burden of my remarks—the value of folk-drama as a vehicle of tradition; the bearing and influence—undoubted in my mind—of folk-drama upon the evolution of the drama of our nation; the very incomplete collection which has been made of the various forms or phases of folk-drama; their present alarmingly rapid decay. I am convinced that if a systematic collection had been made after Mr Udal gave us his very interesting paper on the Mumming-Plays of Dorsetshire in 1880, much that is now irretrievably lost would have been on record. It is not only that the traditions have utterly died out in so many districts, but in other places where they have survived they have become attenuated, and show an altogether feeble existence compared with what they were only a few years ago. What I shall have to urge is that the Society spread its

²² See Chapter 7. Going Home.

net—which it can effectively do by means of its local organization—all over the country, and collect together all the fragments of folk-drama and dramatic custom which remain to us.

(Ordish 1893, 149-50; quoted in Cass 2010, 5).

Nearly a decade later, Ordish wrote:

The Council of the Folklore Society have decided that it is desirable to bring together the scattered material bearing on this subject without further delay, and I have undertaken to edit the collection, which will form one of the issues of the Society. Members who have collected notes and versions are invited to send them either to the Secretary or to me direct, and they may rest assured that their contributions will receive careful attention and in every case will be suitably acknowledged in the work which is now in active preparation.

(Ordish 1902, 296-7)

Despite their efforts, mummers plays remained an ephemeral thing. When I was perambulating with the Coventry Mummers in December 2010, many of the non-mummers I spoke with had never seen or heard of the thing before the Coventry Mummers came to town. I spoke with John, who had been hosting the Coventry Mummers in his home every year for the past twenty seven. I asked him,

Before the Coventry Mummers started coming around, did you know about mumming?

No

No

No

No

They were the ones that told us all about it, really

Bryan, a village local, had been watching the Coventry Mummers for over twenty years. I asked,

Before the Coventry Mummers started performing, had you seen mummers plays before?

No, I'd seen similar sorts of things on the television

Historical plays and things like that

But, no, it's a just a great

Community event, really

I spoke with a husband and wife. When they first saw the Coventry Mummers perform, they invited them in for something to eat and a bit to drink. They've been doing the same for the past thirty years. I asked,

Had you seen

Mummers plays before these guys?

The wife answered,

No I don't think so

Not at all

No

Standing outside in the snow, Mike told me he had been watching the Coventry Mummings for “the better part of fifteen or plus years.” Before the Coventry Mummings, he had never seen mummings before.

No, no, we were very suspicious of what these mummings were up to

[we laugh]

Joe, “from round the corner at number eleven,” had been watching the Coventry Mummings for “bout twenty odd years I suppose.” Before them, he had never seen mummings either.

These were the first ones we’ve seen

The Vicar at a church in Newbold where the Coventry Mummings perform every year said,

I mean, I didn’t know anything about it

It was a complete...

I mean, I’d heard of it but I didn’t quite know what it was

But um

This was my introduction to it

What were your first impressions?

Um, well

When we came here, our eldest daughter was only two and she was frightened to death

[laughs]

Nowadays, although mummers have reappeared throughout England, the tradition remains surprisingly unknown. One of the Coventry Mummers' many stops at village pubs yielded an interesting conversation. After the mummers' performance, I was speaking with a couple—probably in their late 40s or early 50s, about what had just taken place. When I asked them if they knew what they had just seen and what they thought of it, they told me that not only did they have no idea that the Coventry Mummers had been performing in this pub every Christmastide for decades, but they had never even heard of mummers at all. The man and woman lived down the street and frequented the pub often, making this unawareness even more astonishing. During my stay, people I met along the way would ask me why I was there. When I told them I was there to study mummers plays, I was often presented with bemused bewilderment. They were, more often than not, nonplussed. And it was no different when I went back in 2014. Randall Fraser had a similar experience when he went to England:

That may have been

The

Most

Surprising aspect of it

That it was

They did it

Some people knew about it

But what I discovered is

It's not actually

You know, you go to England and say

“Hey, do you know about mummers?”

Maybe two in five people go, “Oh ya”

But there’s tons of people who go,

“Huh?”

Just like here

(Personal interview, January 2016)

It is difficult to say why mummers are cursed to—or allowed to—play under the zeitgeist radar. But in any case, as mummer scholar Peter Harrop has jested, whether plays are performed in the country or the city, “...the disinterest from the public is palpable” (from my personal notes, Gloucester, 2014). Even still, like Mr. Ordish and Mr. Udal, there are and have been a select few overcome by a strange devotion, a peculiar desire, to revive the fallen (or *falling*); like Quack Doctors with Miracle Cures.

Chapter 4. Revival and Resurrection

The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective

We saw at Norwood Church the Norwood Players being resurrected in the 1960s

By

I was just figuring it out

My dad and his friends

Who were in their 40s

And so

I think now their families

The war's over

They're married

They're settled down

And they start doing this again

...

I think they were thinking back

That this is the good old days, right?

And maybe they were even anticipating how things were sort of

“Morally declining” in Alberta

With the

More money in the 50s and then

Little twinges of the youth movement and so let's

Let's bring back the old values, I don't know if that's what they were into but

It was certainly in the “good clean fun” realm, right?

...

By the time the Norwood Players were resurrecting their theatrical practices in the 1960s, the neighbourhood was already headed for the ill-repute that would flare during the two decades to come. During the 1970s and 80s Alberta Avenue became firmly situated in the City's collective mindscape as a haven for criminal activity, no matter what scale any factual statistics might have indicated. Reputation needs only the smallest germ of fact to grow a teeming culture.

But there certainly was trouble, and residents, along with the City, began to stage resistant efforts to create, or re-create, a healthy neighbourhood like they remembered. This community spirit, although faced with a foe of novel proportions, was one that had roots in the earliest days of the neighbourhood.

On 19 March 1908, in the same year that the Village of North Edmonton-of which Norwood/Alberta Avenue was a part-would be annexed by the city proper²³, the “citizens of Norwood” met at the Norwood Methodist Church to discuss the “houses of ill fame” that were having a “baneful effect” in the neighbourhood (“Demand Eradication of Red Light District,” *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 20 March 1908, p.2 [Peel’s Prairie Provinces Item Ar00202]). These houses of prostitution were viewed as a “menace to the physical and moral welfare of the public.” This church meeting and the petition to city council that would come out of it was seen as “an awakening of the city to the curse of these ill-fame houses.” It was hoped that this awakening would make the north-end neighbourhood “as respectable as the west end” and “as desirable a place to live in as [the Mayor] would want it to be if he were living there himself” (*The Edmonton Bulletin*, 24 April 1908, p. 2 [Peel’s Prairie Provinces Item Ar00203]). One W.D. McPhail “expressed the opinion that it was not the men who live in Norwood who supported the ill-famed traffic” to the applause of those gathered there. According to McPhail, the mayor had told him that “if it was the wish of the people that the houses of ill fame should be driven out of the city they would be driven out.” McPhail appealed to his fellow citizens “to rid themselves of this curse.” Again, the danger was perceived to have come from outside the neighbourhood, not from within. And by the will and deed of the good citizens that lived there, that danger might be

²³ *Alberta Avenue/Eastwood Area Redevelopment Plan Bylaw 5748 Adopted on August 15, 1979*. Office Consolidation Edition September 2010, 11; http://www.edmonton.ca/residential_neighbourhoods/PDF/Alberta_Ave_Eastwood_ARP_Consolidation.pdf

removed. The citizens of Norwood delivered a petition to city council calling for the effective enforcement of law and the eradication of this cancerous menace.

The city's answer to the petition, however, was not satisfactory. Just over a month after the petition was submitted, officials were reporting "successful raids" of houses of ill-fame and assuring the citizenry that police were "closely watching the district" ("The Norwood Trouble," *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 22 April 1908, p.4 [Peel's Prairie Provinces Item Ar00417]). But, according to one I. Norman of the Norwood Club, "Members of the Norwood Vigilance Committee have been doing real detective work in that district during the past ten days, and have conclusive evidence that all these houses are wide open and doing business every night." The Norwood Club claimed to possess evidence proving "that the police are not 'watching the district' at all." Even more, they suggested that the police were operating under either "incompetence or collusion" (*The Edmonton Bulletin*, 22 April 1908, p.1 [Peel's Prairie Provinces Item Ar00122]).²⁴ The people of Norwood were "fighting for the sanctity of their homes" and their impatient desperation was giving rise to a perceived necessity for vigilance. In fact, the Norwood Club requested formal deputation so they could take the matter into their own hands. Nearly a month later, a solution seems to have been reached: "The houses of ill fame, which have been a source of annoyance for some time in Norwood, are being hauled to the district in the vicinity of the Swift packing plant" (*The Edmonton Bulletin*, 18 May 1908, p. 8 [Peel's Prairie Provinces Item Ar00802]). Through the tenacity of the Norwood neighbours, the thorn had been plucked from the neighbourhood's side.

²⁴ In fact, one of the detectives that had been participating in the raids was later accused of warning the tenants beforehand ("Resignation of Chief of Police is Accepted", *The Edmonton Bulletin*, 3 November 1908, p.3 [Peel's Prairie Provinces Item Ar00302]). Police chief Major W. Beale would later resign over the matter of the mishandling of Detective Griffith's charges, dismissal, and acquittal. Time would reveal that the suspicions of The Norwood Club were not entirely unfounded.

But the significance of this saga is perhaps not so much in its occurrence as in its remembrance. In an article written for *The Ave We Had*, Jon Weller remarks, “It is compelling though to believe that the legacy of [the Norwood Vigilance Committee’s] action lives on in the houses and neighbourhood they helped to *build, spurring on new generations of citizens to keep fighting*” (Weller’s italics, <http://avenuehistory.org/2013/01/fighting-for-the-sanctity-of-our-homes-a-story-of-ill-fame/>). The visage of the vigilant citizen, fighting for the sanctity of the neighbourhood, acts as a new flag under which to rally. Old newspaper articles become myths to live by-templates for present meaning and action. Through these old stories we are able to understand what our own stories should be. Maurice Halbwachs tells us, “It suffices that we cannot consider [our most intimate remembrances] except from the outside—that is, by putting ourselves in the position of others—and that in order to retrieve these remembrances we must tread the same path that others would have followed had they been in our position” (1992: 53) The citizens of Alberta Avenue once fought for their neighbourhood. And in their stories about their home, they still do.

In 2004, nearly a century after the houses of ill-fame were sent packing, another “awakening” took place in the neighbourhood: The Avenue Initiative, “Edmonton’s pioneer neighbourhood revitalization project” (http://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/projects_redevelopment/avenue-initiative-revitalization.aspx). In the words of our Mr. Weller, the initiative “brought improvements to streetscapes and security while combating social ills and deterioration of infrastructure” and is one in which “residents work diligently to create the community’s sense of place and small town feel” (<http://avenuehistory.org/history-2/>). The City webpage for the project explains, “The Avenue will become a picturesque community with a ‘village’ feel”

(http://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/projects_redevelopment/avenue-initiative-revitalization.aspx).

Although its fresh ambition gives the appearance of a new endeavor, one might say the roots of the current initiative stretch back as far as 1976. In that year, the Edmonton City Council identified Alberta Avenue as a “high priority older neighbourhood in need of preservation and improvement.”²⁵ \$1.65 million in Federal and Provincial funds were allocated to the area for operations such as parkland acquisition, community facility improvements, social-service programs, and various infrastructural improvements. Evident in the vernacular of its proponents, the village that once disappeared when annexed by the city to the south still declares, and actively seeks, its former identity. The countryside that Alberta Avenue was built upon, once swallowed by urban sprawl, is being re-made in small, discrete pockets of parkland. Old houses, old storefronts, old stomping grounds are remembered and revisited. Then and now, the old neighbourhood—both its physicality and its “feel”—is ever present in the minds of those seeking to make the neighbourhood anew but harkening to something past. This sentiment is palpable in one of the most visible expressions of the Avenue Initiative: The Deep Freeze Byzantine Winter Festival.

The festival is just one of the grassroots efforts of the Arts on the Ave Edmonton Society (AOTA) to revitalize Alberta Avenue and develop it as a community arts district. The AOTA started in 2005 in response to the state of the neighbourhood—not only its more concerning elements (which we’ve already discussed) but its as-of-yet unrecognized and unrealized potential. Because of the relatively low property values in the area, a large number of artists had made their way into the affordable neighbourhood. Over time it was realized that an organized

²⁵ Alberta Avenue/Eastwood Area Redevelopment Plan, Bylaw 5748, Office Consolidation 2010, 7.

and concerted effort could be made to transform the community through artistic endeavors—festivals, art shows, education, theatre, etc. The basic premise was this: If the AOTA could bring people and families out of their homes and back into the streets, the criminal element that currently inhabited them would move along. A number of people have pointed out that as far as purveyors of illicit products and services are concerned, family-fun activity is “bad for business.” In 2008 AOTA launched the Deep Freeze Byzantine Winter Festival. As the website explains,

This winter adventure...embraces the cold northern climate by melding artistic panache with authentic cultural and heritage winter games and fun.

The Deep Freeze Winter Festival is a free family event that brings together the Ukrainian, Franco-Albertan, Franco-African, First Nations, and Acadian/East Coast communities to revel in the magic and beauty of winter.

(<http://deepfreezefest.ca/about/>; accessed 3 June 2016)

A celebration defined by vibrant social and cultural activity held at the coldest and darkest time of the year, Deep Freeze sought out activities that gave its participants a connection to the Canadian experience as well as the old world heritages of its diverse citizenry. In the words of 2016 Artistic Director Allison-Burgess, “It's like an Old World European fair in the wintertime. You walk the streets and there's flags blowing in the wind and tents and all kinds of animation and activity on the avenue — and it's wintertime”

(<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-s-deep-freeze-festival-returns-for-9th-year-1.3390765>). From ice sculpting to ice hockey, folk music to freezer races, heritage food to hotdog stands, the festival was truly a flurry of nostalgic traditions, Canadiana, and a characteristically local approach to the carnivalesque. Leading up to the second season, the festival's producer/director Christy Morin had a friend suggest to her that there might be a qualified tradition lacking from the previous year's frivolities: the mummers play. Morin's friend was under the impression that mummers plays were a Ukrainian tradition and, because Alberta

Avenue has a strong Ukrainian population and the festival was, in a sense, trying to evoke an “Old World” feel, it seemed only suitable that mummers become a part of the scene.

Morin first asked Mark Henderson, a local Shakespeare theatre’s artistic director, to put something together. Henderson wasn’t able to take on the task so he recommended one of his colleagues instead; one Randall Fraser. Fraser begrudgingly accepted on the condition that Henderson be one of his mummers. Henderson agreed and Randall Fraser became the director of the Edmonton mummer troupe, now known as the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective. For Randall, it was an opportunity to affect real change in the neighbourhood through a living, breathing artistic creation. Randall explains,

About the same time we moved into it [the Community League building], into there

Arts on the Avenue was getting started

And I got approached eventually

Because, you know, ‘Oh hey, there’s arty people over there’

Well, you end up talking

And I ended up on the board of Arts on the Avenue

And we started all talking

‘Well, how do you change a neighbourhood?

How do you get involved in something?’

Well

You know

You get to know your neighbours

You find out who’s like minded

You talk to people

And then eventually, you know, you
 Start a festival
 'Cause that's a great way to
 Bring public awareness
 And to create some sort of flagship around which
 People can muster
 (Personal interview, Edmonton, January 2016)

While researching the tradition of English mummers and their plays Fraser's fascination
 grew more substantial. He told me,

I mean, it started with,

You know

Google

"mummers"

And the first that came up, actually, one of the very first things was

The reference to

This being the history, the root, of 'mum's the word.'

So I went, 'Ah,

That's funny'

So, of course, originally, mummering was

A panto; was totally silent, or, you, with sound effects and things, but there was no dialogue, no-
 text

And that kind of made sense

But I realized it moved on and, you know, I was looking at all the different names that came up

For it

Japers

I'd have to go online now or get my stuff out to figure out all the names

Again. But it was

Yeah, it started online

I got some references

Went to the library

Dug through

Talked to people, said, 'Well, what do you know about it?'

'Well I know that my Newfoundland friends are always talking about it,'

'Well I know there's something they do in Philadelphia,'

'I know that...' So it really was

Just

Every little lead

It was one of those funny situations where, you know, as soon as you start on something

It's like, or, as soon as you buy a car, you see that car everywhere. So it was like

As soon as I sort of put mummings in my brain, suddenly I was coming across

References

And

Sources

And information

How did I get to the

The kernel of that, was,
Just looking at the thing...how many times certain elements were repeated, like
Death and resurrection
Well, in all the references, that I read
Death and resurrection was a core element
So I went, Okay, that's
The thematic seed
Boom, that's
That's the thing that everything turns around.
That it's always
Community based
Well, it's always, everywhere that I was able to find it
It wasn't being
Done by a professional theatre company, so it wasn't being done by anybody that that's
Their "job,"
It's always something they just did.
You know,
'Oh, it's Christmas! Must be mummers time
Oh, it's Easter. Must be time to pull out the closet
You know, the decorations for the mummers' play,' you know.
And I thought, oh, okay, so the next element is that it's community driven; it's people
Just doing it...And then,

When I found the comparison to

Carolling,

That just sort of...

What that gave me was the hook

To decipher it for people when I was talking to them,

Because they'd say, 'Ah, what's a mummery? I don't know. What does that...

How does that make any..."

It's like a funny word, to begin with, and when people hear things they can't

Reference immediately they just...[stares blankly]... stare at you funny.

But when I was able to say, 'Well, you know going carolling

At Christmas?'

And they go, 'Oh yeah! That's great! I love that. We used to do that at Grandma's. Don't do it -
anymore...'

'It's like that, except you do a skit or a play.' 'Oh,

Okay.

I get it.' You know, suddenly I was able to

Get it across to people and

Then that opened it up into...we made it

Something we could talk about

Then, once they had a frame of reference. And, for myself, too, I guess, when I look back at it, you-
know, until I sort of had that

Seed of that idea,

I was sort of like, ‘Well,

How does this land?’

You know, so...

So I guess that’s really where it all

Came from for me. It was

A little bit of everything, everywhere, you know. But

It started online and then

It started unfolding

People said, ‘Oh, I heard you were interested in...I got this funny little book, na na na.’ ‘Oh, hey, - cool, cool. Can I keep it?’ ‘Nooo!’ [Laughs]

You know,

That kind of thing. And then, you had given me some literature to read and I read all that stuff, - too.

So there

Yeah.

(Personal interview, Edmonton, 12 January 2011)

For Fraser, mumm[er]ing transformed from ‘work’ into something else; something more impassioned in nature, although he could not yet conceive of what his project would become over the following years. In addition to Henderson, three other actors were gathered together – Caley Suliak, Jon Patterson, and Calvin Malaka—and the collective would spend the week leading up to that year’s festival writing their own mummies play: “Knighty Knight: A Mummies Play.” Novel dialogue, action, and characters were modelled after pre-existing forms and commentaries. The play was narrated by Tom Fool, played by Jon Patterson. Comic

supernumerary characters such as Beelzebub, Big Head Little Wit, and Humpty Jack are conventional to English mummers plays and the bumbling nature of Patterson's Tom Fool aligns well with the traditional comic formula. The AAMC's plot centered on two rival knights—Sir Bob and St. George, played by Henderson and Malaka—attempting to rescue Suliak's Princess Terra from the evil Troll, also played by Patterson. The inclusion of two combatants is another conventional element of Hero-Combat plays while the love interest is a common inclusion in what are referred to as Wooing Plays. Traditional approaches were imbued with modern social commentary, humour, and a definitively local personality; a process that Fraser considers “true to the tradition.”²⁶ The team performed at the festival, and, in Fraser's words, “It was pretty incredible.” Although the audience was small, they seemed to enjoy it, and so it was decided that a mummers' play would be performed again the next year.

(Levitt 2011, 14-15)

Considering the themes that Fraser witnesses as being apparent within the tradition, there is a remarkable symmetry between the play itself and the Alberta Avenue story.²⁷ According to the AAMC's publication, *The Albertavia Mummers Trilogy: A Deep Freeze Festival Mummery* by Rama Caljocalica²⁸ AKA The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective, “[mummers play] performances were almost always in rhyme and involved set elements such as the theme of death and resurrection,” (see “Afterward—How to Make a Mummers Play” written by Randall Fraser). Fraser goes on to note that “Your story must include the themes of Death and Resurrection—that means someone has to die and be reborn with the help of a quack doctor, wizard, monk, or other such character.” A play about resurrection contributes to the resurrection of a community. Years

²⁶ More on this in Ch. 6. A Traditional Resurrection Ritual?

²⁷ The Hero-Combat Play style is perhaps the most common-or at least commonly utilized-of the three types of English mummers play, beating out Plough Plays and Sword Dance Plays (<http://www.folkplay.info/Texts.htm>; accessed 6 June 2016).

²⁸ An amalgam of the names of the team members.

before the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective and the resurrection of their neighbourhood, another mass resurrection took place on the other side of the pond. It was around the same time that the Norwood Players were reappearing in the 1960s, in fact, that Ronald Shuttleworth was bringing life to a troupe of his own.

The Coventry Mummers

The story of the Coventry Mummer starts with Ronald Shuttleworth in the height of the 1960s. Ron had been hanging around with a strange crowd. And now he was building a beast.

Ron had succumbed to the scene of all things folk—music, drama, festivals. While attending a festival, Ron had become greatly intrigued by something he had witnessed there—the appearance of a “masked beast, which is basically an animal head on a stick and a man under a cloth” (Ronald Shuttleworth, Personal interview). After seeing it, as well as some others, Ron decided he wanted to make one of his own. The crafted beasts were all in the likeness of horses, and Ron assumed that the horse, therefore, must be particular to the Morris tradition that was employing them. So he decided to construct a different species. Hailing from Derbyshire, Ron settled on an animal that carried a special significance in his home county. The tall-tale folk song *As I was going to Derby* or *The Derby Ram* tells of a fantastically massive ram that seems to grow in size with each passing verse. The folk song has made the ram a kind of mascot for Derbyshire and Ron figured it would make for a good hooded beast. After the beast was done, Ron took it along on a camping trip with some friends—other folk enthusiasts. One of them, a Morris dancer, informed Ron that the creature which he had unwittingly made—a Derby Tup²⁹—was a character in a folk drama called a ‘mummers play’. The campers figured they’d put on a

²⁹ Tup is a British term meaning “ram” (a male sheep).

rendition of the play for a laugh, and it seems the rest is history.³⁰ After the camping trip was done, Ron dug deeper into the Derby Tup and its mummers play. Once he did, he decided that a formal performance was in order. He was helping to run a folksong club at the time and started asking around to see if anyone would be interested in putting together a team—or *side* as it is called within the vernacular—of mummers. Eventually enough chaps came forward and, in 1966, the Coventry Mummers were born. According to Ron, he started the Coventry Mummers “before I knew anything about mummers, basically” (Personal interview, Coventry, 11 December 2010). But that changed, and oh how it did. Ron began amassing any materials he could find about folk plays. His collection eventually grew into one of the most extensive and comprehensive in the world—the Folk Play Section of the Morris Ring Archive.³¹

After nearly a decade of mumming, the Coventry Mummers discovered that an old surviving play text had been collected from a local village, Stoneleigh, back in 1925.³² The play had not been done in years so the team decided to revive it by performing it in the village that Boxing Day. According to Tim Chatham, they sought to preserve the play for the village. They hoped that, once it caught on, the village would take over the performance for themselves, effectively bringing back to life what had faded into obscurity.

When I saw a photograph of that original Stoneleigh performance back in 1975, I was surprised to find myself somewhat awestruck, not by what was in the photo but by what the photo *was*: a visual documentation of an origin; a beginning. I was unexpectedly spellbound to

³⁰ At the Coventry Mummers’ 50th year anniversary celebration, Ron pointed out to the guests “how a trivial decision can have far-reaching consequences,” reminding them that “if I had made a horse there would have been no Coventry Mummers, no Collection and none of us would have been there that weekend” (personal correspondence, 20 July 2016).

³¹ The Paper Collection is now safely housed in the Special Collections Department at the University of Sheffield. Ron continues to develop and expand the Digital Collection and its all-important database. (latest version available)

³² The text was found in *Notes & Queries*, 17 January 1925, 148 (03): 42-43.

gaze upon the first instance of something that has grown into what could be considered a tradition in its own right. Of course, the Coventry Mummers might argue that it wasn't that at all. They weren't beginning a tradition, they were continuing one. Theirs was a revival performance, but it was one that has now become the foundation for a repeating practice that, in living memory, began that day on the 26th of December in 1975. The photograph was, for me, a signifier for the thread of continuity that wove the years, the people and the place together. It was a powerful tether to some feeling or experience that was both enriching and insatiable. Maintaining a relationship with the past and fostering a sense of perpetuity into the future are powerful impulses. Would the villagers of Stoneleigh be led by such impulses to take over the play for themselves; to become the custodians of their own tradition? Forty years after the Coventry Mummers' first performance, that still hasn't happened and the burden of the tradition remains with the Coventry Mummers. But the village is supportive of the side and what they're trying to do. For years the side met and performed on the front lawn of one Nettie Ball. She never watched them herself ("she was never that stupid," Tim said³³), but she provided them with the customary food and drink and insisted they come back every year. They did. And although Nettie no longer lives in that house—she is buried in the village churchyard—the Coventry Mummers still meet with her when they go to Stoneleigh for their annual Christmastide visit. Frosty breath wafting through morning air, they toast her with a round of whisky, remembering their other loved ones that have passed on, too. When I followed the Coventry Mummers during their 2010 season I stood at Nettie's grave with them, and they kindly toasted

³³ After reading a draft of this passage and noticing my quotation, Tim said, "I suspect that must be what I actually said since its in inverted commas and he recorded a lot of stuff. If that is the case then I apologise for the loose use of language because I didn't mean to imply in any way that she was stupid, merely that she was wise enough at her age not to leave the house and stand outside on a street corner for 10 minutes whilst we did the play!" (Personal Correspondence, 9 June 2016). I believe Tim's original quote speaks for itself, but his additional commentary does help to set the scene even better.

my recently passed grandmother. Sipping whisky in a church graveyard early on that winter morning, surrounded by men in unapologetically outlandish costumes, remembering what has gone from us, I think I felt what being a mummer is, or what I imagine it to be anyway.

After putting on Stoneleigh's play in the village it came from, the team "got a taste for that" and eventually developed a repertoire of plays from local villages and the surrounding areas. To this day, the Coventry Mummers still perform these extant plays in the villages they once regularly appeared in, and proclaim themselves to be England's longest-running side to specialize exclusively in mumming (<http://www.coventrymummers.org.uk/>; accessed 7 June 2016). But they are not alone. Through the late 1960s and into the 70s, other folk clubs sought to revive waning customs and crafts, too (Boyes 2010, 240-241). As Georgina Boyes explains, these efforts became an entire way of life for the new folk:

...a major source of a Revival sub-culture expressed in vaguely historical styles of dress and vernacular artefacts, in performances among a close and known community with shared identity, beliefs, rituals and values. Clubs ran concerts and ceilidhs, organised trips to Revival and 'traditional' events and published songs and magazines—even made their own records. Members formed associated bands, dance teams and mummers' groups... Festivals proliferated, offering club members the chance to live the Revival lifestyle for days at a time and acquire approved technical skills through workshops and contact with professional performers. In pursuit of more authentic traditional material, club members researched and photographed and taped, and as they did so they became increasingly aware of the theoretical writings of the nineteenth-century folklorists and their modern counterparts. Survival theory was given a new lease of life in pamphlets on local mumming plays and public announcements before performances of 'ritual' dances. The movement had never been as widespread and active.

(Boyes 2010, 240-241)

This particular Revival may have peaked in the latter half of the 20th century, but it was preceded by a very similar phenomenon less than a century prior. Eighty years before the Coventry

Mummers were inspired by a curious handcrafted beast, various personalities were doing their best to bring back what had since passed: the days of Merry Old England.

Merry Old England

In 1844, after attending a local May Day festival, Reverend J.F. Russell was pleased to see that Merry England had not completely washed away under the deluge of change brought on by the progress of the 19th century:

[It] afforded a good proof that there still remains some of the spirit which stirred in the days of ‘Merrie England’; and that the joviality of the national character has not been entirely crushed by steam carriages, or spun into cloth, or blown up by Captain Warner... There was running in sacks, and running blindfold, jingling, racing, and dancing round the May-pole, while the band played old national airs that our forefathers loved...

(Rev. J.F. Russell, *English Churchman*, 28 August 1844, 528; quoted in Judge 1991, 134).

But why do his remarks ring wistful, revealing some amount of nostalgia for the very kind of activity he had just witnessed a few months prior? It was because the May Day festival had been largely lost, no longer a customary appearance in the yearly round. What the Reverend had witnessed was a revival. This May Day was a bringing back of ways passed, a re-enactment of what was once a celebration of spring but was now a commemoration of itself. Revivals like these were aimed at, if not *re-creating*, then at least *reminding* participants of the good old days. Revivals and recreations were modelled on texts, just as the Coventry Mummers Stoneleigh performance was, which were themselves secondary or tertiary sources seeking to relay the ways of past times. These texts were seen as authoritative and, by extension, authentic accesses to past and tradition; to, as the Reverend put it, “national character.” In 1886, for instance, the Knutsford maypole was modelled after London’s maypole of 1880, which was itself modelled “from an old drawing.” By the 1880s, “these recreations of the past were being accepted as eyewitness

likenesses, as real images of Merrie England” (Judge 1991, 138). It was believed that the malignant present could be injected with just enough substance from the past to render it, if not restorative, then at least benign. P.H. Ditchfield (1896), a scholar of English customs, wrote, “We remember that our land once rejoiced in the name of ‘Merry England’...Our nation has become grave and serious, and likes not the simple joys which diversified the lives of our forefathers, and made England ‘merry’...Let us try to revive the spirit which animated their festivals” (quoted in Judge 1991, 139). In 1886, the *Daily Telegraph* commented “There is no reason why the very charming revels which once won our country the title of ‘merry’, and which did so much to bind together the rich and rural poor, should not again find favour” (*Daily Telegraph*, 31 August 1885, 5; quoted in Judge 1991, 139). And these efforts weren’t fleeting—they went on for decades. This passage from an address given at a May Day festival held by the Oxford branch of the Independent Labour Party in 1906 delivers the sentiment succinctly: “The idea of a May-day festival took us a long way back, to the days when men and women led simpler and more natural lives, when the air was purer and food was unadulterated, when the people had pride and pleasure in their work and felt glad to be alive...” (*Oxford Chronicle*, 4 May 1906, 2; quoted in Judge 1991, 141).

Steve Roud (2006) describes the revival phenomenon:

A key characteristic of the genre was that the re-inventions were always billed as true English traditions, despite the fact that they had been concocted a short while before. The ‘revivers’ decided what was traditional and what was not, and it seemed that everyone was willing to be fooled. Although a few critics were not keen on all this rusticity, hardly anyone questioned its authenticity or cared to expose it, and there was no ‘campaign for real traditions’. Little children dressed in white, demure May Queens, controlled processions, and tea on the village green were infinitely more acceptable than drunken morris men, or youths parading the streets throwing squibs, or farm labourers and maidservants mixing indiscriminately in unsupervised dancing booths or local pubs. Such activities were purged of their ‘unsavoury’ aspects, sanitized, and re-presented to a public eager for the rediscovery of its traditional heritage. In countless fêtes and May Day

gatherings, and in our underlying notions of a ‘real English Christmas’, the spirit of the Merrie Englander lives on.

(512)

I must admit that I, too, succumbed to the spirit of the Merry Englander. In 2010 I spent my first Christmas away from home, staying in Coventry with Ronald while I conducted my field work with the Coventry Mummings. On Christmas Eve, pitiful and listless, I wandered the residential streets of Ronald’s neighbourhood, glancing through Georgian windows into the amber-hued living rooms of the homes I passed by: trees alit and snuggled near the hearth, babes and their loving parents no doubt sleeping tight up the stairs. Oh my aching heart! The next day, however, we drove to the rural manor of one of the Coventry Mummings, Michael, to gather for what I perceived as a “real English Christmas.” With friends and family of multiple generations all gathered tightly around an arrangement of tables, the elaborate feast spread out before us, we let hours pass through conversation, song, drink, and hearty gastronomic indulgence.³⁴ With this visit to Merry England, my heart was warmed, a copy of Crayon’s Sketchbook in my suitcase back at Ron’s.

Speaking of mummings, the revivals of the late 19th century certainly weren’t exclusive to May Day celebrations. Like those to follow in the 1960s, they concerned all things folk. In 1880, J.S. Udal started writing about mummings as a means of “preserving one of the most interesting forms of our national folk-lore–folk-lore, indeed, which before the rapid march of education and beneath the iron hand of the School Board bids fair to rank ere long amongst the things of the past” (87). For some dedicated individuals, mummings were a touchstone for the precious substance of Merry England. P.H. Ditchfield, in his *Old English Customs, Extant at the Present*

³⁴ I am tempted to remark on the traditional English Christmas breakfast I enjoyed there one morning, too, of rum milk, thick bacon, toast and eggs...but that may have been another day altogether. As far as idyllic reimagining’s go, however, it might as well have been the same day!

Time, An Account of Local Observances, Festival Customs, and Ancient Ceremonies yet

Surviving in Great Britain, first published in 1896, wrote of his lament at the disappearance of the pastoral customs of the English countryside (1968, 3):

Many writers have mourned over the decay of our ancient customs, which restlessness of modern life has effectually killed. New manners are ever pushing out the old, and the lover of antiquity may perhaps be pardoned if he prefers the more ancient modes. The death of the old social customs, which added such diversity to lives of our forefathers, has not tended to promote a reign of happiness and contentment in our village communities, but rather to render rustic life one continuous round of labour unrelieved by pleasant pastime. The causes of the decline and fall of many old customs are not far to seek. Agricultural depression has killed many. The deserted farmsteads no longer echo with the sounds of rural revelry; the cheerful log-fires no longer glow in the farmer's kitchen; the harvest-home song has died away, and 'largess' no longer rewards the mummers and morrice dancers.

(1-2)

If the loss of mumm[er]ing represented the decline of modern society, perhaps its revival could, like the May Day celebrations, make the world more livable, even enjoyable.

By 1925, these mummers play revivals were considered vogue, perpetuated by the efforts of scholarly enthusiasts like Brand, Hone, Chambers, Alford, Udal, and Tiddy. Professor Arnold Wall (1925) remarked on a play he witnessed that seemed more like the old, traditional style of performance—"mechanical and lifeless...loud, graceless monotone..."—than the "comic" modified performances styled after scholarly preservative collections (11). The interwar years, however, introduced a serious disruption to the trend. With so many young men—the very kind that would traditionally fill the roles of the mummers—gone to war, and attentions understandably focused elsewhere, mumm[er]ing once again grew silent on the sonar. But that would change. In the years following the end of the Second World War, yet another "folk revival" emerged when "many new groups became interested in mumming plays, and there were numerous revivals

across the country. At first, the impetus mainly came from morris dancers and folk clubs looking for a different kind of performance to learn, but schools, community groups and others soon picked up on the idea and sought out plays to perform” (Roud 2014, 10-11). Eventually, there were numerous sides performing mummings plays across the country (Roud 2006, 547-548).

This year, 2016, the Coventry Mummings turned fifty. Fifty years is a relatively long time for anyone to do anything. Their antics have preceded my own life by almost twenty years, and hopefully will outlive me by many more. How much longer they’ll go is anyone’s guess, although I’d wager on the long term myself. The advantage the Coventry Mummings have is that their continuity doesn’t rest with any one individual. They are a multigenerational team, made up of men of various ages from different places, with different occupations, backgrounds, and perspectives—even on mumm[er]ing itself (see Levitt 2011). Over the past five decades the Coventry Mummings has had over 60 members on its roster. Old members leave and new members join. And as I consider the miscellany of men (and women—their wives and significant others are equally vital to the side as they are!) I’ve had the good fortune of knowing, I notice that there is a serendipity that has graced me in my work with all these mummings. I have had the fortune to get acquainted with a wonderfully diverse group of people who, as different as they are, share a fondness for mumm[er]ing that is difficult to explain. Whatever this fondness is, I believe it is what has led me to them in the first place for I share it, too. The irony is that it is not for mumm[er]ing. Well, it is, of course, but it goes well beyond that. Mumm[er]ing is, if I may, a finger pointing to the moon. And whatever it is that this “moon” offers us, it is only made substantial by the notion that it goes away. And it comes back, too. Away and back. Back and away. It is gratifying to be the first of something, just as it is to bring back something that has been lost. To be acknowledged for reviving what is dying—or dead—is to be branded a miracle

worker. Just ask the Coventry Mummers, remembering back to that Boxing Day in Stoneleigh. That photograph I saw, it is of a bunch of alchemists who managed to outstep the mortality of mad practices. To be the last of something, however, is just as potent and intoxicating an experience. Just ask Gerald Matthews, the self-labelled Last of the Mummers. He has seen a tradition wax and wane. He knows what it was, what it meant, why it was done. He knows why it went away. When that thing comes back, changed, it is difficult not to see it as an imposter. Thankful for its reappearance as one might be, there remains an underlying suspicion that the returned kin standing before us is some kind of doppelganger, Frankensteined to life by Quack Doctors.

Newfoundland's The Mummers Song

Correct me if I'm wrong, the way I feel about it

They'll do it today like for show, like, you know, like a revival thing, you know what I mean

But when we did it

It was real

I mean

Christmas came every year

Mummers came every year

That was a given

There was no rehearsing

There was no nothing

And the whole community was wide open to it, right

It's nice

I think a lot of it now

They'll have the theatre down there and they'll put on concerts and stuff for visitors and that's good too

Revitalize

The memory's better than let it die out altogether, you know

Put on concerts

And other people can see the costumes and everything like that

And you can go to the costume store now and some wicked costumes, I don't know if they make any specifically for mummers

I think the best ones were the ones people made

Havin the old bedsheets

Old Stanfield underwear

Them old fashioned underwear with the trap door on em and everything like that

Real old time stuff, you know

The old country stuff, that was the best, right

You could make it up

Use your imagination, make it all up

And then like I say

I'm glad that I was

I was able to participate in it

You know

I lived it, eh

A part of me

Mummer

The last of the mummers

One of the last of the mummers

Earlier, Gerald had remarked,

And I guess some places

Like we said

I think some places they're

They're reviving it now but it's more like a

It's more like a

A theatre

Sort of a thing

Back in my day

It was real time

It was no acting (he laughs)

It was no acting at all

Probably could a been

If somebody would a had a camera back den you woulda got some footage

No rehearsals, it was just live

And everybody was just natural, right

It'd just come to ya

(Gerald Matthews, 15 March 2012)

Near the end of our time together, Gerald played his accordion for me. The song he played was called *The Mummers Song*; a song that, according to him, could be heard on every jukebox in town. Released originally in 1982 by the band duo Simani, the song's near instant popularity was due not only to its catchy tune but to its content, the combination of which articulated some underlying yet unspoken sensation amongst the general public. Gerald L. Pocius (1988) explains that Simani's *The Mummers Song* came out of and responded to a nativistic movement in Newfoundland that coalesced during the 1970s; a movement focused on the revival and perpetuation of certain distinctive parts of Newfoundland's cultural past unique to the area and thus acting as symbols of collective identity (58, 76).

By the 1970s, other than in a few places throughout the province, mummering had ceased to be a common pastime in Newfoundland. In 1969, though, Herbert Halpert and George Morley Story published an edited collection of essays titled *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*. The text was a varied study of the tradition in general; its history, its symbolism, its place in Newfoundland culture and psyche. Both professors at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Halpert had founded the *Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive* the year prior and Story was at that time president of the Newfoundland History Trust. In collaboration with anthropologist Melvin Firestone, their work on the topic of mummers revived interest in the tradition amongst their students and fellow scholars. They also inspired artists. Raymond Cox, a sculptor and pewtersmith, moved from his home in Connecticut to Newfoundland in the mid-1970s to work on a Masters in folklore (Tye 2008, paragraph 11).

While there, Cox was influenced by Halpert and, years later, his stylized mummer pieces came to embody the ominous and violent aspects of mummering Halpert espoused in his research.

Although mummering had stirred mostly within the academic sphere, it was the performances of the Mummers Troupe, however, that brought mummering out of text and memory and back onto the Newfoundland soil, stage, and living room floor. In 1972, Chris Brookes and Lynn Lunde formed their own side –aptly called the Mummers Troupe– and performed plays that, although very similar to the English variety, were inspired by those once readily found throughout the province.³⁵

A decade later, Simani came out with their nostalgic hit. Pocius explains that *The Mummers Song* “in a sense, is a rallying anthem that assuages any doubts about why traditions should continue; it validates by saying that, as in the song, the past *can* become part of the present” (77). Likewise, however, the song’s

success was equally profound amongst those Newfoundlanders who had moved beyond their past, who now looked at Newfoundland culture with nostalgia, as a series of fragments that had to be preserved before they disappeared forever. Images in the song brought back memories of glowing—and selective—aspects of past lives: the warm kitchen stove (with its sound and smell of burning wood); the small kitchen with the flickering kerosene lamp, crowded with friends dancing and drinking homebrew.

When the song was first released, it was greeted with “enormous enthusiasm” (79). Whether it acted as “an affirmation of cultural continuity” or was listened to with “pure nostalgia,” *The Mummers Song*³⁶ spoke to a potent desire in the Newfoundlander; a desire that, for many, was answered by a revivalist spirit and a re-creation of mummering for modern audiences. For some nativists, however, the song was *inauthentic*, incorporating commercial sounds and produced by

³⁵ There is some debate about which came first in Newfoundland, the mummers play or the house-visit (see Pocius 1988, 62). In any event, mumm[er]ing—or janneying—in either form was well established in the province by the 19th century (see Jarvis 2014, 2).

³⁶ Originally recorded as *Any Mummers Allowed In?*

the educated elite (79). The song ignores “the occasional fighting and violence...the fear of mummers by some members of the household such as children” (77). This new memory—or imagining—of mummering was a sutured and sanitized double. Even so, for many it was close enough, and for many others who had never personally experienced the thrill of a janney’s visit, there was no way to tell the difference.

Since then, mummers have made their way back into Newfoundland’s popular culture in a number of forms and through various media. In 1986, an episode of the Canadian documentary television series *Land and Sea* featured a segment where Simani’s tune was paired with footage of a mummer house visit. For many, re-watching the segment has become a staple ingredient of the Newfoundland Christmas season. The sentimental value of the video is made clear in the comments sections of its various postings on Youtube:

“Been away from home over 15 years, and this song is a go to every year. “

“i love being a newfie now my children sings it at age 17 and age 4”

“NOW we can have Christmas!!!”

“Homesick big time after seeing this, Merry Christmas, Happy New year to everyone.”

“Cripes, my Nanny had the same pattern canvas on the floor. I miss being home, stuck here in the DPRQ like I am.”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8OPy7De3bk>; accessed 10 June 2016)

“> . < i hate being in the uk i miss this”

“no christmas like a newfoundland christmas.”

“Missing my home, Nothing like a Newfie Christmas. Merry Christmas, Winter Solstice, Yule from ONTARIO.”

“Nothin' says Newfoundland more than Mummers, a shot of Screech (or George Street Rum), and a dozen Blue Star”

“I love mummering my town is only populated about 100 and everyone knows everyone! I love it we go mummering on Tibbs eve and on the last day of school we dress as mummers and all go to the gym and guess who's who and eat tourneys and drink purity syrup! I love newfoundland”

“I miss home now lol I want to go back home ... I hate Niagara falls Ontario. Its never gonna be the same here as it is down home mummers all the way ...lmao”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzJW65XwKPY>; accessed 10 June 2016)

In 2009, the Intangible Cultural Heritage division of the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador worked in collaboration with Memorial University’s Folklore Department to bring mumm[er]ing back once and for all. They launched The Mummers Festival. According to the website,

The Mummers Festival is a participant-focused, community-based festival that encourages the celebration of mummering traditions. Each year, the Mummers Festival hosts events over the first two weeks of December leading up to its crowning event, the Mummers Parade. Workshops, public forums with mummer experts, lectures and school programming act as educational and momentum-building events for the big Parade Day. Participants can build a jaw-snapping hobby horse or learn how to play their own homemade ugly stick. Audiences meet mummer experts (those long-term, experienced locals who have been mummering for decades) and receive first-hand knowledge about the many intricacies of this tradition.

(www.mummersfestvial.ca/#!/about/z5q3x; accessed 9 June 2016).

The festival is mandated toward the

advancement of the public's understanding and appreciation of Newfoundland and Labrador folk traditions related to mummering and Christmastime practices; and to assist in the transmission of these folk traditions through participation by the public and tradition-bearers in such festivals and related forums, lectures, workshops, performances and public events.

The website continues,

The Mummers Festival aims to promote the continuance and evolution of traditional arts and performance by encouraging active participation in mummering activities. All events are designed to equip the public with skills and knowledge about mummering so that they can better participate in our Parade day events and, it is hoped, the house-visiting traditions that occur during the twelve days of Christmas.

Two years after the festival was launched, the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador designated mummering as a "Distinctive Cultural Tradition or Practice" (Jarvis 2014, 170). A year after that, I met Gerald.

Gerald's narrative suggests a demarcation between the mummering he participated in as a young person and the mummering of today or "now." The mummering of outport Newfoundland back in "dem times" was, as he states, "real," whereas current mummering can be characterized as a "revival." Although this is only an excerpt, throughout the course of our conversation, Gerald referred to his mummering in Baie Verte as "real time", "live", "no acting", "natural," etc., whereas current St. John's mummering is "revival", "revitalized", "theatre", "rehearsed," "concert", "acting", and a "memory" which, as Gerald later concedes, is "better than let[ting] it die out altogether." As Pocius suggests, perhaps the song "indicates that modernity can co-exist alongside indigenous practices" (80). For some, the song might alleviate the estrangement between past and present, between 'now' and 'dem times.' The song, like the mummer revival it helped to inspire, is perhaps both familiar and strange, known and unknown, recognizable yet masked, masked yet recognizable.

Chapter 5. Doppelgangers and ‘real mummers’

I have at home a copy of Davidge and Wallace’s book, *The Mummer’s Song*, sitting on my bookcase. The illustrations convey the nighttime visit of some mummers to a family home. Children, already in bed, awaken to the mummers’ arrival. Granny sits in a rocking chair, quietly knitting in the kitchen. The mummers burst in through the door and, with children now up and awake, an impromptu party ensues. The words that scroll across the pages are the familiar lyrics from Simani’s song. The lyrics themselves directly link the book to the song; one is the successor of the other, or a relative in any case. Davidge, as one half of Simani, lends the book his authority over the material. Just as the mummers are, the book is “allowed in”, not only in a legal sense but an artistic one, too. As I look over the book, perhaps I play the *Land and Sea* segment on the television mounted to the wall next to the book case. The video, too, is set to the Simani lyrics, but they are sung and accompanied by music. The illustrations in the book are reminiscent of the moving images I see before me. They follow a similar plot, a line of action, directed by the lyrics. In this way the book and the video share their material; they have things in common and are both connected to the song that inspired them. But they are markedly different, too. Although the book illustrations are similar in action to the video, they are also more eerie and unsettling in their style; almost grotesque in some places. The book carries a spookiness absent from the video segment and, I would argue, the song. So, having never been visited by the janneys myself, I am left to wonder: which is closer to the real thing? Were mummers scary or were they merry? Was the book styled after the video, or did it rely solely on the lyrics for its direction? Did Wallace ever see mummers personally? Does he know what they were really like? Did the producers of *Land and Sea*? For that matter, did Davidge? Is Simani’s song a true delivery of the experience? Our final question becomes, Where can we find the real mummers?!

One can see that song, video and book exist together in some kind of relationship. They are interconnected, and they speak to one another through those connections. They exist in a dialogue, even if only within the paragraph I have just written. But what do they say to each other, and to us, as we say things about them?

What we are dealing with here are the links and gaps that make up the relationship—or intertextuality—between texts (Briggs and Bauman 1992).³⁷ This “intertextual distance” between texts can be maximized or minimized according to whatever motives might be at play (149-150). If one wishes to emphasize individual creativity or innovativeness, a gap between texts might be underlined; the distance between inspiration and innovation widened. In order to declare his individual creativity, Wallace might say that he was in no way influenced by the *Land and Sea* segment. However, if conservative authority is desired, the intertextual distance between texts might be minimized so that any gaps are downplayed and links made instead. The producers of *Land and Sea* might reveal that they filmed a live jannev visit—mummers in their natural environment—and therefore their segment is a faithful depiction of the real thing. If it was discovered that Wallace had never witnessed mummers for himself then the video segment might gain more authority or authenticity than the book. If, however, it was then revealed that Wallace’s illustrations were indeed based on the video footage, his book might gain a higher standing in any evaluations of its connection to the Newfoundland tradition. It gains *power*, but this power exists not within the individual text itself but in its relationship—its discourse or interface—with others. If the book gains authenticity from its being based on the video segment, the mummer visit caught on camera by the television producers is not the final, absolute authority either. Its power of authenticity comes only from its connection to other texts—past

³⁷ I discuss the concept of intertextuality on pages 6-14 here

mumm[er]ing events or scholarly works or stories from old janneys—that are themselves seen as authentic or authoritative.

Along these lines, Gerald's narrative draws a line—and therefore an intertextual relationship—between what is authentic and inauthentic mummering; or, in his words, heyday mummering which is "real", "live", "no acting", "natural," as opposed to the mummering of "now" which is "revival", "revitalized", "theatre", "concert", "acting", and a "memory". He underscores his authority to make such claims with statements like "I was able to participate in it" or "I lived it" and referring to himself as "the original mummer" or "the last of the mumm[er]s." It seems that Gerald's dualism—established by a notable intertextual distance—between tradition and revival is not exclusive to his Newfoundlander experience of mumm[er]ing. Even Thomas Hardy, who wrote about mumm[er]s a hundred years before the Coventry Mumm[er]s brought the play back to Stoneleigh and Gerald was lamentably becoming the last of his kind in Baie Verte, remarks on the gap between tradition and revival in his novel *Return of the Native*. Hardy writes:

For mumm[er]s and mumm[er]ing Eustacia had the greatest contempt. The mumm[er]s themselves were not afflicted with any such feeling for their art, though at the same time they were not enthusiastic. A traditional pastime is to be distinguished from a mere revival in no more striking feature than in this, that while in the revival all is excitement and fervour, the survival is carried on with a stolidity and absence of stir which sets one wondering why a thing that is done so perfunctorily should be kept up at all. Like an inner compulsion to say and do their allotted parts whether they will or no. This unweeting manner of performance is the true ring by which, in this refurbishing age, a fossilized survival may be known from a spurious reproduction.

(2001, 124)

Hardy goes on to comment on doubles and reproductions when Eustacia repeats a passage of dialogue following a mummer's delivery: "It was the same thing, yet how

different...while faithfully reproducing the original subject, entirely distances the original art” (127). While there is some question regarding just how familiar with mummers plays Hardy actually was, his sentiments do indicate an awareness of revivals and that these—even if only under a realist-romanticist’s critique—were seen as different from what the plays used to be (see Squillace 1986, 179).³⁸

Other mummers—albeit modern ones—from across the pond, too, express this sense of dualism between the old and the new. Likewise, their sense of authority and the authenticity of their craft springs from their ability to nimbly navigate the links and gaps that might become apparent. In regards to English mummers, Simon Lichman explains,

The mummers do not discuss their concept of tradition; rather, they show what is of significance, and what is not, according to what may be changed. The mummers must, at all times, be the sole arbitrators of the rules governing their medium of communication. It is the capacity to do this that gives them the social, rather than the formal, mandate to be spokespeople for their community. It enables them to make the changes necessary for the mumming play to be of value to the community, despite the tradition’s apparent low tolerance for any change at all. The discrepancy revolves around the fact that people say that nothing changes, that the play is an exact replica of the past (which authenticates the play, giving credibility to public-troupe performance); however, in order for the tradition to be dynamic, anything can change. This discrepancy is maintained so that one thing can be said while another is done, and the tradition does not lose its significance to the community.

(1981, 216).

These navigations—and negotiations—come particularly into play when, like Gerald’s, talk turns to revivals. Lichman explains:

The idea of not changing became synonymous with adherence to the model of the former tradition, and a symbol of the authenticity of the revived tradition. Even where change

³⁸ Hardy appears to be describing the St. George Play of Dorsetshire (the archaic name for his home county, Dorset). The lines he presents in his novel, although sparse, do appear to be relatively accurate when compared to other sources (see Squillace 1986, 183, 185; Udal 1880, 87-116).

involved making the tradition, in fact, more 'authentic' (as allowing boys to perform would have done), the mummers would not accept it. The intellectual point underlying Miss Alford's teaching was never grasped, but the rule became part of their belief system and aesthetic. The mummers say that the tradition remains unaltered over the forty-nine years since the revival, despite being conscious of the changes that have occurred. As Jesse Andrews says, 'Oh them, they're no changes at all, no.' (Lichman 1982, 109)

One of the Coventry Mummers touched on this in conversation about their play that includes St. George as the one of the combatants: "I think the St George play we do, for instance, is a compilation of a lot of plays; a lot of St George plays...Although it's a traditional play and all the words are traditional, it comes from a compilation of a lot of old plays. And one or two plays we do have been penned by the mummers themselves, so they're not tradition plays, they are new mummers plays..." (Personal interview, Coventry, 17 December 2010). Although the St. George play is a compilation—an admitted change or alteration from what preceded it—it is made from "old plays" and therefore is "a traditional play and all the words are traditional." For modern mummers, adhering to tradition is vital in maintaining a sense of authenticity and living relationship with the past, but so is innovation for survival in modern contexts. There is a perceived necessity to keep the plays current; to add new jokes, new characters, new references. This can happen on the fly, too, as performers are tempted to improvise in response to the idiosyncratic happenings of a particular performance event. An audience member might call out, and you might call back. One of your fellow mummers might miss a line, and the rest of the side might jeer him in response. The Mummers Festival organizers, for instance, are well-aware of the potential critiques they might receive questioning the authenticity of their brand of mummering in light of the fact that they have pragmatically structured their mummers performance as a public parade rather than the conventional private house-visit. Ryan Davis, founding festival coordinator, writes, "Some heritage endeavours have been rightly criticized for

their fragmented approach to cultural representation, removing traditions from their appropriate context only to offer up homogenous versions of culture that diminish their effective use by community members” (2011, 44). He goes on to describe the Mummers Festival as a “staging ground for the transmission and reinvention of the tradition”, however, and admits that although the structure or form of mummering may change, the festival seeks to “shift value toward mummering as a social symbolic tool for the grassroots expression of community values” rather than a “static, fetishized object for consumption” (44, 46). Davis goes on to say that “as communities face new challenges, so too will their traditions adapt to meet these new conditions.” There appears to be an acknowledgment that innovation is not only a conceit but a necessity for the continuance of the tradition, and that change need not sacrifice the fundamentals.

This balance between conservative adherence to preceding texts and innovation—be it pragmatic or creative—is the mummer’s ongoing “dual anxiety”:

This dual anxiety is at all times part of the mummers’ responsibility. The fact that they are prepared to perform, in spite of the community’s negative attitude towards exhibitionism, shows how seriously they care about the mumming and its message. Nevertheless, they do not aggressively assume performance itself to be ‘enough’ for an audience. The mummers must be able to feel that they maintain an adherence to ‘the way it has always been done,’ the past, ‘tradition,’ while at the same time making it accessible to their contemporary audience on all its levels. However, they cannot deviate too far from the former tradition for fear of alienating the villager-audience and themselves.

(Lichman 1981, 217)

All these elements—the dual anxiety, links and gaps, authorship, authority and authenticity—were all expressed in conversations I had with Randall Fraser and Demmi Dupree regarding the mummer performances on Alberta Avenue in 2014. That year’s Deep Freeze Winter Festival saw the addition of a new troupe of mummers to its roster—the Happy Accidents.

This crew of clowns took over for the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective that January, performing the AAMC play *Knighly Knight* on the busy and festive streets. Demmi Dupree, the Happy Accidents' director, grew up outside of Edmonton, near Busby. There weren't any mummers around there and she didn't really know of mumm[er]ing until she got into it quite by accident (The Happy Accidents...). Demmi was volunteering with a seniors' theatre group and found out about a contest that was being held, asking members of the community to put together mummers troupes and put on plays. This was the competition that Randall organized in 2013. The plan was to have various groups create their own plays and perform them at Deep Freeze. A panel of judges—made partly up of AAMC members—would decide on a winner. Audience members could also choose their favourite by awarding competitors with “mummers bucks”—plastic gold coins handed out prior to the performances. Three groups entered—The Tutankhamun Mummers of Mummington (a group made up of me and some of my friends/acquaintances), The Virginia Village Mummers (a group of young children), and A Brilliant Mummer's Play by Something Brilliant! (Demmi's group). Demmi recalls that there wasn't time to put anything together for the seniors' theatre group, but she was in a clowning class at university. She approached her professor—who had experience with Newfoundland mummers—for her opinion:

Do you think that clowns could be mummers? And she said

'Do you?'

I was like, 'I think they can'

And she said, 'Well yes, I think so too'

Demmi started to do some research. She found a description of mummers plays in the library and began to form her own criteria for what makes a mummers play a mummers play.

She also remembers a Google search, a Wikipedia entry, and a possible email, perhaps from Randall. I asked her,

To you, what was a mummer? What did you have to do, performatively, to be a mummer?

Demmi replied,

I think that I didn't really have any

Idea in my head of what a "mummer" had to be

Just that the play form had to be 'this' with these characters

So we could just be clowns following this play form

And then we were being mummers as well

I think that my idea of the mummers was

They were the people

Who went around

To the houses on Christmas

Or Christmas Eve or

Winter time

And

Knocked on the doors and did these shows in the kitchens

And those were the mummers, doing these shows

And we were taking

The idea of the mummers and we were

Begging for the gold coins [part of the contest]

So we were taking some of the concepts from the mummers and the concepts from the mummer play

Um

But we were clowns doing that

Demmi's description fits with both the English play form and the Newfoundland house-visiting custom. The "kitchens" reference ties directly to the Newfoundland style, with kitchens being the traditional setting for the event, while the "doing these shows" comment implies a structured play performance. With her professor being familiar with Newfoundland mummering, it is very possible Demmi's concept was informed by texts related to that discursive area, which includes both house-visits and plays. Generic internet searches, on the other hand, often yield English textual references. In any event, even for Demmi, it's impossible to say for sure just where her ideas about mumm[er]ing came from. I can confirm, however, that Randall was a definite authority, contributing his own directions for making a mummers play a mummers play so that contestants could be sure that they were, after all, correctly crafting something they were otherwise unfamiliar with. But more on that later. After the contest, Demmi didn't look much more into mumm[er]ing and continued to focus on her clowning studies at school. The next September, Demmi contacted Randall to see if he wanted her to put anything together for the next Deep Freeze festival coming in January.

So what ended up happening was

We did a version of one of his

Plays that he had written and that his group had written

A few years ago and

Sort of transformed it

To do it in clown on the street

This time I was working with

A different group, also called The Happy Accidents, and it was

Some people who had been in that class with me

As well as some other people who had just sort of

Stuck with clown a bit longer

And

Were still doing it so I

We rallied together

I

changed

the

play

Randall's play, and made it

Just

A bit less wordy

Mostly

And just a bit more physical

Okay

And then Randall helped us with the

With some elements of it

Like the costumes, he did the

Best costumes

Yeah, yeah

Yeah

And so we did it

But that time in a different way and with like

Advice from Randall and help from him

Right, okay

Yeah

Me: I'm interested in knowing

Um

You know, when you

When you're doing Randall's play

And I guess you can ask the same question when you're doing anybody's material

What did you feel like you had to

Retain

Or maintain

And what did you feel like you could change?

Um

I wanted to maintain like the main

Story and the main message

Of the show, I wanted to keep

It as true to that as possible

And I think my biggest concern was making it

Um

A little less, like, word-heavy

So a little less heady and more physical

Because a lot of the

Clown elements of it are being

More physical and just

Taking that, so

More about transforming it into being a bit more physical theatre than

Um

Ah

Words

But not that his was just words but like

Just having a bit more elements of the physicality in it and the

The clown

In it

Transforming it that way, so I think that mostly what I took out were

Words, I didn't change any of the plot

Or characters

Right, okay, so why was it

Uh

Why was it important to you to

Maintain the plot and characters?

Um

Actually I

I did take out characters

[We laugh]

Or *why*

You said it was important to maintain

Um

I can't remember the words

The truth of thing or the essence of the thing

Or *what have you*

So

You know

Why

Why was that important to you?

Um

Because I think it was

We

Were

Interpreting his play

We weren't writing our own thing so if

I changed a bunch of things it wouldn't be

A clown interpretation of a mummers play, it would just be

My

Idea of

Changing someone else's words, it wouldn't be the same thing, I think it would be something different, I think it would be a new project rather than

An interpretation of

Something that already existed

Right, right, okay

I asked Demi if, in addition to keeping with Randall's play, she felt obliged to remain faithful to the "larger tradition or pedigree of plays that had come before Randall's." She answered,

I think

The main thing was to keep Randall's material

Like truthful to that

With

The knowledge that

Randall

Like, is a mummer

Um, and

The assumption that

He

Knows what he was doing and

Keeping with all of that stuff, so I felt like all that

Research, kind of like dramaturgy work was done

So as long as I kept

True to

Randall's stuff I was also keeping true to all that stuff

Demmi asserts that Randall “is a mummer” and “knows what he was doing.” He has authority. He has power. Therefore, in order to maintain “the main story and the main message” Demmi followed Randall’s advice and adhered to his authored material “to keep it as true to that as possible.” Even still, Demmi desired to make changes; to adapt the material to her own group’s dynamic as well as the environment in which they were performing—on the streets, like buskers, trying to keep a crowd.

I had asked Randall about all this, too, a couple of years earlier. Randall and I met on a windy, warm day in January 2014 at his National Stiltwalkers of Canada studio in Edmonton, Alberta. When I arrived around 1 pm, he was working on a stilt bag for a friend/customer. When

Randall was done speaking with a customer in Hawaii, we went upstairs with our tea to talk about mummies. A copy of *Knighly Knight* sat on the coffee table beside my cup of Orange Pekoe. There were masks on the shelf to my right—tribal, carnival, animals like birds and lions, masquerade, skulls, goblins, etc. I asked Randall to tell me about that year’s festival that had just passed; the plans leading up, complications, what happened and why and how it all went. I asked him to tell me about the Happy Accidents and their performance of his play.

It is part of the evolution of any project

So uh

This year

After last year, which felt like this huge sort of culmination

This five year arc

From, ‘what?’

To

‘The Trilogy’

Which is the icon of epic traditionalness

You’re up there with Lord of the Rings and da da da

All the

Once you hit trilogy, you become iconic

You become actually epic

And we poured a shitload of resources into that

Got good grants for it, everything, like it got really pushed

And

It worked really well

As you saw, it was a great show

Tons of fun, and I thought, I was so amazed by how perfect it was

This year

Two things happened

One, we didn't get a bunch of our grants

Two of the grants we applied for didn't actually come through

And then the other thing that happened was

Strangely enough

After such a long steady push from the dedicated focused group of people

We all had other things to do this year

We got new projects to work on

You know, one person's touring northern BC

Schools

One person's

Actually in Japan right now on her way to Indonesia

Another one is doing a play

Two of them are doing a play, of their own, their own company

And on and on it goes, right?

One just had another baby

And is in the middle of renovating their house and he's a stay at home dad

Right?

So

And it's natural for these things

To happen, that these things have arcs, they don't all just

Continually build build build build build like to some

Amazing crescendo, I think we had that and now it's

Not surprising there's a big lull here

But

In a way

It was perfect

So we only had a little tiny bit of money

That was in the budget

And then all these people were gone

And I got a call from

This young lady named Demi

Demi Connelly

And she is one the contestants

Her team were the clown mummies of

Not last year but the previous year

Two years ago

And

They won second place

And she actually called me up in about August, September and said

'Is there anything happening with the mummies this year? 'Cause we're interested'

And I was like, 'Okay I'm just gonna file that in my back pocket'

And then as things progressed and became more and more realization that

None of the old team or the budget or any of that was available

I thought

'This is a young group

Who is actually just plain out keen and would probably do it for free again

Why don't I just give them

The budget I have?'

Just pass the money along

And then we talked about it some more

And it just became what it was, and I said 'So why don't you do

One of our plays

Like, and our first one, Knighty Knight

So, why start in the middle? Just, why don't you do Knighty Knight

And do it your own way?'

So they said, 'Do we have to follow the script exactly?' I says, 'No

But I would like it if you actually tell the story

And there's certain beats that you need to hit'

You know, and we talked about those

And then I said, 'But after that, really, do your own thing'

And that was

And so

I intentionally didn't participate in their rehearsals or anything like that

I gave them costumes

I gave them a place to rehearse

Here

I just encouraged and supported them

And then I kind of stayed out of their hair intentionally

The only thing I told them

And this was a funny moment actually, I told them

'Okay you guys

Um

Something you may not understand

Is that a lot of what mummings

Where they come from and where the root foundation of them is

Is

In using

Allegorical stories from mythic

They're hanging their stories on mythic tales
That's why there's dragons
And knights
And evil Saracens
And doctors and wizards and
You know
It's
Those stock characters come from
Traditions
Old old old stories
And that's what you use to cloak
To say what you want to say
About whatever's going on in your world
And that was the other function, social commentary'
So one of the things I said to them was
'The jokes from this play
Refer to the time that we wrote it
So it is historical now
'Cause the references are historical'
So I said, 'Make up new references'
And they made up some brilliant new references

They contemporized the references

They

Um

And they just did it their own way

But I told them, 'So what you have to understand is you may have been wondering why the story ends the way it does, right. The ménage a trois

With the two knights and the queen, or the princess'

And I says, 'Okay, so she's Princess Terra

Terra, terra firma

Earth

She is the earth

Gold Knight, sun

Blue Knight, moon

Gold sun moon, the sun and the moon chase the earth

This is the story of how the sun and the moon came to chase circle the earth

At a time when everybody believed that the stars revolved around

Right?

At one point we all believed the stars of the world

Everything revolved around us

And one of those, two of those things were our closest neighbours

The sun and the moon

Who we personify

And so our personification is

Two knights and a princess in the middle

How they end up all sharing each other'

So that's why, and they were, they just looked at me and went

'Ohhhh!' and they had this big revelation, 'Oh I get it!'³⁹

And so I think it helped them

Feel more comfortable with

The direction that it went and the culmination you end up at

And also deepened their understanding that they weren't just

Flopping about

That there's some underpinnings here of stories that you're tapping into

That the audience will recognize whether you

Spell it out or not

We can read in both Demmi's and Randall's narratives a number of examples of links and gaps, requirements for constancy as well as authoritative allowances for innovation offered to the clowns by Randall. After the performance, I recorded my impressions of it:

I saw the mummings perform

Or the clowns perform as mummings

³⁹ To be honest, I had never realized this allegory until it was pointed out to me here.

And it was entertaining

They were funny

I think I actually laughed more at them than I do at the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective

They had a pretty good crowd, they performed out on the street so it was nice

Lots of exposure

And I got some good photos I think to kind of document it



Plate 16. St. George and Sir Bob



Plate 17. Sir Bob and St. George with the Troll and Princess Terra



Plate 18. St. George and his audience



Plate 19. Sir Bob is (accidentally) slain



Plate 20. The Friar “awakens” Sir Bob



Plate 21. Randall watching the performance



Plate 22. Randall explains the performance to an audience member

After the performance was over

Randall

Randall was there, he was filming

After it was over

A guy came up to Randall and I think

I didn't catch the beginning of the conversation but he asked him about what was going on or what the mummers were all about

And so Randall kind of gave him a little bit of a history and

Told him about what mummers are and stuff like that

And then

And I remember he was saying

I did catch that he said something to the effect of, you know, there's things that a mummers play has to have

And I did hear him say one of the things that it has to have is

A death and resurrection

So, you know, you get Randall telling

People from the community

What a mummers play is and

So they're learning from him what a mummers play is

But of course his idea of what a mummers play is dependent on the information he's gotten and his interpretation and that sort of thing, so he's kind of disseminating that information into the community

Not only through his conversations but through the play itself

And how he's composed it

And also

During the mummers play

Kind of

When it was getting the near end, I have pictures of this

When the maiden was, they kind of froze and the maiden explained

You know

According to mummer tradition we collect money after

And so after the performance was over

They started going around the crowd collecting money

And um

According to Randall they did get about forty to fifty bucks so uh

They did get money

And, uh, the crowd was fairly generous with them

So

Anyway, that's it

Although his plays could be categorized as revivals, in order to maintain their authenticity Randall repeatedly claimed that what the AAMC were doing was traditional; that they had all the ingredients of *what makes a mummings play a mummings play*: the stock characters, the death and resurrection, the social satire. But as Demmi said, change and innovation are perceivably unavoidable obstacles in presenting the plays for modern audiences. One strategy for retaining authenticity while allowing for adaptation is to enfold the ideas of change and innovation right *into* the tradition itself. Dick, who has been performing with the Coventry Mummings for 33 years, told me:

But we do also understand that that script was only what was recorded on that performance on that day at that very time and, as you know, a mummings' play you'll perform in the morning at nine o'clock with the same people, and by three o'clock in the afternoon you're doing the plays and they've completely changed, or a lot of it has actually changed. So saying just because you've recorded that sequence, and that becomes tradition, and you have to keep to that script is a little bit...I mean you've got to be a little bit relaxed with that because it's an oral tradition...it changes, and even if you change the characters [performers], you'll still change it because each character [performer] has got his own emphasis and his own little ways of saying the same line, he'd still say a couple of words in a different way, you know. So it's the oral tradition, I think, you've got to understand that it changes. But you wouldn't go in and actually sit down, "I'm going to re-write it," but if somebody's performing and if they put an extra line in during that performance, that's what normally happens. But you wouldn't actually sit down and say, "Right, we're going to re-write this, and we're going to change it," because, you know, it has to develop as you perform. And I think you're still keeping the tradition that way...That is how the tradition always went. If you were doing this play a hundred years ago, the same thing was happening. They'd get out in the morning and in the afternoon or the next day the play would be slightly different.

(Personal interview, Coventry, 18 December 2010)

To claim that the tradition itself is, to a certain extent, about incremental changes—evolution and adaptation—is to establish a clause that can be appealed to in all future negotiations. It sets a precedent for the allowance of change. In some cases, it goes further than that. The concept of a tradition that traditionally changes not only allows for innovation but calls for it. There is a noticable irony, however, in claims of innovation being traditional. This irony is not lost on some, however. Roud (2006, 2014) and Harrop (2012) bring this to our attention. The assertion of innovation being part of the tradition seems to be largely apocryphal and an innovation in itself and not traditional of pre-revival sides (see Steve Roud, *The English Year*).

Harrop writes,

I have been surprised over the course of my own years of spectating by the consistency of the performances, performance locations, acting and performance styles, virtually unchanged costumes, timings of performances, the most minimal changes to route, even the positioning of performances within specific rooms of specific public houses. There really is very little change. This in itself is interesting, since a common folklorists' trope of the 1970s was 'the only thing folklorists know for sure is that traditions change'. The fact that the formal characteristics of these performances apparently have not changed may be indicative of more accurate record keeping via, for example, digital technology, as well as selfregulating conservatism.

(2012, 271)

Steve Roud discusses the links and gaps between modern revived mumming and pre-revival customs:

As is to be expected, the custom was changed dramatically with this new interest. Even if the new team stuck rigidly to an old text, the types of people taking part, their motives for performance, the venues, reactions of the audiences, and so on, were radically different to how it used to be, and had little in common with the previous generations. It was the style of performance which usually changed most, with the new groups often unconsciously modelling their performance on pantomime, or melodrama, and introducing ad-libbing, audience participation, slapstick and verbal by-play. This is not to criticise these developments, as each team can do whatever it wishes, but to emphasise that this is not how the plays were done in the past and to highlight the scale of the changes which occurred with the Revival. It is also a warning to those who wish to claim that their

custom goes back centuries—it does, but only in the loosest sense and no particular element of modern performance can be used as evidence of origin or past practice. Many of the post-war revival teams lasted just a few seasons, but some have now been going for decades and, it could be argued, have built up traditions of their own. There is also a handful of teams, such as the Marshfield Paper Boys, the Antrobus Soulcakkers and the Midgley Pace-egggers, who can claim a longer history, and who have not dramatically altered their styles in living memory.

(2014, 10-11)

Within the intertextual discourse that forms the phenomenon of mumm[er]ing, scholars clearly have power, too. “This is not how the plays were done in the past” is a gap, to be sure, that wedges a hefty intertextual distance between the revival and pre-revival performances. Despite the authority Randall carries in Demmi’s view and whatever authenticity he may claim for his productions, when placed in a confrontation discourse with Roud and Harrop’s texts, the traditionality of AAMC’s plays, and therefore the Happy Accident’s, is challenged. Roud writes,

Modern descriptions, and revivals, of mumming plays routinely misunderstand and misrepresent what the mummers did and how they did it, mostly by using inappropriate models such as amateur dramatics, pantomime, and melodrama. A traditional mummers’ performance was not played for laughs (except for certain well-defined sections); they were not hammed up; the audiences were not expected join in to cheer the hero or boo the villain; the plays were not adlibbed; and the presence of St George was not used to engender overt patriotism or nationalism. What evidence there is about performance style all points the same way: little ‘acting’ was involved, and no attempt was made to portray character. The players’ stance was woodenly upright, gestures were stylized, and speech was monotonously declamatory, especially in the boast and challenge sequences. The two characters involved in these sequences counter-marched across the stage, clashing their swords once each time they met and passed, declaiming their lines as they walked. When it was time for the ‘fight’, they simply met, clashed swords twice, and one fell, or even simply dropped to one knee. The section with the Doctor is the only part that was regularly played for comic effect, but even here it used verbal humour, using topsy-turvy language, for example, rather than physical...”

(Roud 2006, 545-546).

And on the Antrobus Soulcakkers, Peter Harrop writes:

Ian tells me ‘there are four views—it’s a play; it’s a dramatic spectacle; it’s a night on the piss; it’s a tradition’. Chris agrees it is the latter that is important. Both make separation between traditional and revival teams of Soulcakers, and are keenly aware to make distinction between unbroken local traditions as opposed to actively revived customs. They make comparison between amateur dramatics—where they believe the performers possess a degree of narcissism summarised by the phrase ‘it’s for them’ rather than their audiences, and revival teams concerned with ‘how good are we?’ rather than the holistic well-being of a...performance tradition. With a traditional gang, Chris and Ian suggest, It’s always done for the village, beating the bounds for good luck, keeping the evil spirits away, but it’s a piss up, it’s a few bob, it’s harvest time, it’s passed on father to son, it’s money, it’s for the village. This may seem a random mix, but all are considered central to the meaning of the performance. Other sets of performances, which may not appear so different to the passer-by, are viewed differently by Chris and Ian: With revival it’s different. A revival group seek the pub out in advance and move on if it’s empty. Not worth it for their collection [of money]. That’s why Antrobus is different, it has continuity, families are important in the tradition, but it’s also passed to people who aren’t family but are right for the play. Ian and Chris were ‘the youngest, now the senior performers, not the oldest but the longest serving’. In citing these performer’s perceptions there is a parallel to be made with Diana Taylor’s now well-known distinction between archive and repertoire. Newly revived performances are seen by the performers as emerging from the folkloric archive, whereas longer standing strands of performance are viewed as part of an authentic repertoire, possessed of particular qualities.

(2012, 271-272)

Revivals often claim their authenticity through connections to archived materials.

Although the veracity of certain archives compared to others is of course a topic for argument, Demmi did her research on the internet, and the Coventry Mummers found their Stoneleigh script in *Notes and Queries*. Threads are tied from one text to another, and the tensile strength of those threads can depend on the authority of the one holding the threads. What remains apparent is that even though revivals seek to establish themselves as traditional, the threads they tie are continually plucked, pulled, quite often by scholars. Ironically, it was scholars who made a number of these ties in the first place during the early days of the first Revival, asserting their authority over what was traditional and what was not as they directed the resurrection of fallen

plays. Clearly, scholars, like mummers themselves, are players within the phenomenon (Levitt 2011).⁴⁰

And sometimes the players within the phenomenon are both mummer and scholar. Ronald Shuttleworth, for instance, is one of the world's foremost authorities on mumm[er]ing not only because he has been a mummer for five decades but because he has been studying them for just as long and is the keeper of one of the largest and most comprehensive archives of mummer literature. There are other mummer/scholars, too. In fact, it is unusual to find a mummer who isn't also interested in the scholarly side of the thing. I consider all mummers, and those who talk about them or write about them or sing about them or paint them or sculpt them to be engaged with one another in a single, interactive discourse. Any distinctions between the media of texts destabilizes when we acknowledge that performances have been based on words and words [fictional and nonfictional] have been based on performances, just as performances have been based on other performances and words have been based on other words (and paintings, drawings, and any combination thereof). What distinguishes texts from one another, rather, is the "authority" each of these items carries within the discourse. This authority not only emerges from a text's (and its author's) ability to establish "links" (the minimizing of intertextual distance) or "gaps" (the maximizing of intertextual distance) with other texts but also determines whether other texts will seek to establish "links" or "gaps" with it. These texts, whether they are about England or Alberta or Newfoundland, and whether they consider themselves "linked" or "gapped" with one another in tradition, custom, genre, etc. (participants have various motives and thus there will be much contention regarding these links and gaps), all are nevertheless linked by one word: mummer. By using this word, performers, authors, painters, or participants

⁴⁰ See also "Mummer's the Word" section in Chapter 1.

enter into a discourse with all other items that do the same. Just as there is, for some, a conspicuous gap between performances from different times—traditional and revived texts—so too is there a gap between performances from different places. The implication of this gap is that the mumm[er]ing that comes out of certain places may be more “real” than others.

During a telephone conversation, Gerald Matthews and I were discussing the Philadelphia Mummers Parade. He likened it to Mardi Gras or some other type of carnival. I asked him what he thought the relationship might be between English mummers plays, Newfoundland mummering, and the Philadelphia Mummers Parade. Gerald said that it seemed to him that the common *link* was the word “mummer.” He also mentioned, as a way of further distancing or gapping Newfoundland mummering from the Philadelphia Mummers Parade, that he didn’t think any of the people he grew up with in Outport Newfoundland in “Dem Times” had ever even heard the word “parade.”

In January, 2013, I asked Ronald:

How would you describe the relationship between English mumming, Newfoundland mummering/jannyng, the Philadelphia Mummers Parade, and those groups that perform mummers plays in communities (in North America or other parts of the world) where they have not been performed before (with some of these groups adapting mummers' plays by writing their own scripts based on the traditional structure and themes of mummers plays and performing said scripts in their own communities)? I ask because I am interested in your perspective as a scholar and a mummer on how all these are connected (or not connected...)

Ron replied:

You really can pick ‘em. To me this seems a non-question—but I’ll have a go.

I don’t think that there is any real connection so to take them separately.

NEWFOUNDLAND. *There are two disparate customs here.* It is likely that Christmas visiting was once widespread in Britain but faded and probably got absorbed by carol singing. The Mumming play lasted better because it involved a specific team and a

specific activity. The Janneying survived in Newfoundland because of the isolation of the communities and its development into a specific custom with its association with ‘strangers’ and *its own rules*.

The P.M.P. It seems that the Play was known in the area but *whatever connection with the Parade has long gone—if indeed it ever existed. All that is left is the name*. Philly was not the only place to have a “Mummers’ Parade” but it seems to be the only one that stuck.

As to the rest, *there is no certain record of any traditional play having crossed the Atlantic*. The current fashion seems to be quite recent, probably fuelled by the interest in Morris and also the fashion (amongst some universities in particular) for elaborate ‘*Olde Englyshe Christmas Revels*’. The idea spreads to schools and church groups as something for the kids to do.

OWN SCRIPTS. Where a group have a local text there is an incentive to stay with it and stay ‘traditional’. When there is no local or traditional connection there is no such constraint. Performance groups seem to attract would-be playwrights—we’ve got two in the Mummers—who turn out stuff they try to persuade you to perform. Also the basic hero-combat plot lends itself to adaptation to suit many diverse situations.

There is a feeling amongst some groups that you have to keep doing something new in order to hold the public’s interest. This is manifestly untrue as Coventry Mummers have demonstrated.

That’s about it.

(29 Jan 2013, my italics)

Ronald seems to agree with Gerald that Newfoundland mummering and English mumming are “two disparate customs” and, with the PMP, are linked only and essentially by the word “mummer.” It is interesting to note the language Ron uses to establish gaps between English mumm[er]ing and the rest, which I have italicized. It is also interesting to note Ron’s use of the term “the Mumming Play” or “the Play,” which appears to indicate his consideration of all mummers play texts as one coherent, cohesive tradition (or discourse, genre, etc.)

I posed a similar question to Randall Fraser:

I was wondering if you would be willing to share your thoughts on something. Actually, I'll phrase it as a question for you to answer: How would you describe the relationship (or degree of relationship) between English mummers plays, Newfoundland mummering, the Philadelphia Mummers Parade, and your own Albertavia Mummers Trilogy?

(30 Jan 2013)

Randall replied:

Sorry for not getting back sooner, but I have been pretty busy, and I wanted to give the topic some thought.

That is a tricky question.

I would have to say that at the beginning of my research process, back in 2008, I studied *all three styles*, as well as other historical information, in an effort to understand *the wide variety of forms the tradition had taken on*. I was interested in the way *it* has been shaped by the communities that have embraced *it*, as well as how it has affected those communities. I was also confirming *the universal elements* for myself, to be sure of the core essentials required, and where there was space for creative licence. *I would say that what has developed here in Edmonton with the Alberta Avenue Mummers draws most heavily on the English mummers tradition of rhyming verse and "staged" mythical story with a current social conscience. It seemed the best fit for our theatre savvy community and the talents of the contributing members. Although I expect that in the years to come we may be open to more exploration and experimentation with other forms, especially as the movement gets more traction and more community members choose to participate.*

How's that?

All the best

(31 Jan 2013, my italics)

Randall seems to consider a tradition as a whole that has “been shaped” by various communities. He commonly refers to “it”, indicating a single tradition with “universal elements,” although he does acknowledge “a wide variety of forms the tradition has taken on.” He links the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective with “the English mummers tradition,” but foreshadows *gapping* in the years to come via “exploration and experimentation.”

Prior to their performances in the Avenue Theatre on Alberta Avenue, Randall and the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective have used expository framing, relying on an introductory explanation to the audience of what mumm[er]ing is. While this serves to acquaint audiences with the spectacle they are about to observe, it also establishes a sense of authority and authenticity for the performance. Essentially, the AAMC frame their performance as a traditional mummers play; a play that belongs to the traditional corpus, with stock characters (naming their own characters as stock characters), a death and resurrection, social and political commentary, and the structure of the interaction that takes place between mummers and audience members. The unfamiliarity of the audience with mumm[er]ing permits this establishment of authority and authenticity with relative ease and without much challenging or resistance. The AAMC are the relative experts there, so their claims are accepted. But, did the Coventry Mummers ever do this? I never saw them do this myself, so I emailed Ron to ask him.

Hello Ron,

How are you? I hope all is well. I've been following along with your emails so I do have some idea of how you, your archive, and the Coventry Mummers are doing. I am doing well, particularly because on September 27th my son—Mickey Richard Levitt—was born! I am also in the final year of my PhD studies and I am hoping to finish my dissertation and defense this summer.

Along those lines, I have a question for you: In your years of performing, have the Coventry Mummers ever felt the need or desire to 'explain' what you are doing or provide some kind of exposition prior to or following a performance? (ie. "We are the Coventry Mummers and this is a mummers play. A mummers play is...") When I was with you, I don't remember you ever doing such a thing. But, if you have provided explanation/exposition for your audiences, when and where have you, and why? Not sure what I'm getting at with this question, but for some reason my brain at around 1:30 am last night thought it was important, so I'm asking.

Best regards,

Mat

(4 November 2015)

Ave dad,

Congratulations to you and double to the lady who's had all the hard work.

Basically, the answer to your question is 'No', although there may be a few exceptions. Sometimes, if we line up and take a bow rather than just processing off, someone will shout "Coventry Mummers". This, I think occurs at the end of the Sword Play. Also at the end of the Tup Play, which ends with a final verse of the 'calling-on song' which started the play, on the chorus of which we have a choreographed exit and bow.

Of course, at many of our performances we will have been announced, but otherwise we usually just go on and do it. Circumstances vary and we would do what seemed appropriate. There have been occasions when we have been booked to give a talk about Mumming which we have illustrated with a performance.

As for explanations, we normally just answer whatever questions are asked. My booklet *Introducing the Folk Plays of England* was produced as way of providing the curious with all the basics a[s] cheaply as possible. When I wrote it, CM were booked to do a series of workshops and performances at the week-long folk festival at Sidmouth and I was surprised and concerned that there was nothing like it available. It was produced* absolutely as cheaply as possible by Xeroxing and priced just to cover my costs. (*I had time as I was in hospital recovering from a minor op) I made a small profit on the second printing as I had already recovered my fixed costs. At the time, 1984, the advantage of this over printing was that although the unit cost was higher, you did not have to commit to a thousand copies and end up with a shed-full of remainders, In fact I wrote a piece about it for *English Dance and Song*.

Hope this helps.

Thrive,
Ron.

(5 Nov 2015)

For both the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective and the Coventry Mummers, the authority they carry means that any links they establish to traditional texts goes relatively unchallenged by audiences. Using “mummer” as their linking word proves to be an advantage. However, the word can also pull people unwillingly into the discourse and, therefore, the authenticity of their performance is put at stake.

In 2015, the Alberta Avenue Mumpers Collective did not perform at Deep Freeze. Instead, a Ukrainian folk performance group called Arts of Life performed the *Koza*, a Ukrainian seasonal house-visiting play. Although Arts of Life formed in 2010, its members had been performing together for ten years. According to Nataliya Grytsiv, the director of Arts of Life, they are people with an interest in Ukrainian folk celebrations, seasonal festivals, stories, songs, dance and costumes. Most of their performances are what they describe as a mix of Christian and Pagan elements. They are, in effect, trying to make Ukrainian traditional celebrations “live.”

The *Koza* is a Ukrainian winter tradition, with song, dance, and “traditional lines that are the same in every village” (Grytsiv, Personal interview, 2 February 2015). The *Koza* story and performance is based on a simple premise: “Goat go, wheat grow.” The visitation of the main character—a goat, or *Koza*—to farms in the community brings blessings for the harvest. In the story, *Koza*—and the troupe accompanying her—visits a farmer and says, “Good evening, let us in.” The farmer replies, “No, your goat will make a mess.” Despite his protests, the troupe eventually makes its way inside. Trailing along is the horned “Evil”, who, with the goat, makes an awful, silly mess in the house. This part of the action is done for great laughs from the audience: “it has to be funny.” But out of the mess comes a fruitful harvest. *Koza* dances so hard that she falls dead to the floor. The farmer offers her sausage but she doesn’t get up. One by one, every member of the troupe tries to revive her: a Jewish merchant or pedlar, a horse-handler, a gypsy, a cat even offers her bacon. The joke is that the goat won’t get up until she has been offered everything she wants and is sufficiently satisfied. Finally, along comes the bear—the one character *Koza* is very afraid of. When the doctor tries to treat the goat, she gets up and runs away—not because the doctor’s method is effective, but because she is scared of the bear (in Arts of Life’s 2015 performance, the bear and the doctor were one in the same). Although the

performance always adheres to the same basic plot— “we throw wheat, dress as animals, go everywhere caroling and wishing ‘Happy New Year’” —the performers “choose to make every year different...Every year we change it a bit so it’s not the same every year.” In a previous performance to the one I saw, for instance, the cat was the doctor.

According to Grytsiv, at the time Arts of Life had a couple of members that were university students in the Folklore department at the University of Alberta. The group uses history books about Ukrainian traditions that provide the lines spoken in the *Koza*. The play is based on university research so it is close to what was practiced in the past. Arts of Life has also gone to the Ukraine to see how they do it there, bringing resources such as lines, songs, dances, and costumes back to the Ukrainian community in Edmonton. Arts of Life seeks authenticity and authority through “links” in both time (to the Ukrainian past) and space (modern Ukraine) via historic texts and contemporary encounters and, thus, establishes an authority in Edmonton.

After the 2015 performance was finished, I spoke with a couple of audience members—a young man in a bright red coat and ushanka hat named James and a young woman, bundled snugly up in a parka, named Mia. I had approached them quite randomly but it appeared that Mia had been quite intentionally seeking out the mummers. James told me,

This whole Christmas

All she talked about was mummering

When I asked Mia about the performance she had just witnessed, her response revealed that, despite all of Arts of Life’s efforts to produce something authentically traditional, Mia was unconvinced.

Well, I think it's supposed to be like mummering

But it's not exactly what I interpret mummering to be 'cause

I always

Thought that you would like go in fishermen's outfits and like

Go and sing at the house until they guessed who you were

And if they didn't guess who you were

You would just stay there

And

That's what I

Anyways

I guess this is a different type of mummering

To what I think of as mummering

But I don't really know

Mia first heard about mummering from her Scottish mother. Her mother grew up in Nova Scotia and been a mummer herself when she was a kid. Mia felt compelled to pursue the tradition, saying "I need to mummer, but no one mummerts in Edmonton...But I might." She learned more about mummering from a CBC program, where the host travelled back to his native province of Newfoundland to explore the tradition of his youth. When Mia looked through the Deep Freeze program booklet, she was prompted by the word. James said, She flipped through the book and the first word she saw was 'mummering' and said, 'We have to find the mummerts' because

You know

She's just very interested in mummering

I wonder, if the word mummer had not been mentioned, could any question of authenticity have taken place? In claiming a performance to be an authentic text within a traditional corpus, in claiming to belong to a tradition, what is at stake? What is gained if successful, or lost if unsuccessful? What do they stand to gain or risk to lose? A few weeks after Deep Freeze, I spoke with Nataliya Grytsiv to ask her. She said, "At Deep Freeze everybody was called 'mummers' but we don't call ourselves that. We dress ourselves in special ways and perform in the streets." Nataliya had never seen the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective perform and wasn't aware of them. For Nataliya, 'mummers' was a term for people at Deep Freeze who were dressed up "like the Vikings." I did, however, ask her about the noticeable similarity between the Koza and English mummers plays (and, by extension, the AAMC plays): the death and resurrection motif. She said, "Europe is a small place" and she wasn't surprised by the commonality.

The performance of the Koza at the New Year, meant to bless the crops and bring good fortune, is thematically congruent with the plot itself. A character expires, exhausted and spent, and is revived through the efforts of her entourage. Similarly, the plot of the Hero-Combat mummers play lends itself to the time of year it usually appears—around the winter solstice, when the diminishing days tip over their darkest crest and begin to lengthen once again. There is an undeniably ritual aspect to the plays given their form and its place in the seasonal round. Some have suggested that this thematic congruency is no coincidence, believing that mummers plays are descended from ancient pagan rituals meant to ensure the perpetuation of the crops, the seasons, and the world itself. Few today would venture to claim that this ritual efficacy still

holds. Surely mummers plays, if they do belong to such a pedigree, are no longer meant to influence the direction of the cosmos. Such intentions, such potencies, must since have faded. Still, there are reasons to believe that mumm[er]ing, in the ways and reasons it is done, does have a part to play in the unfolding of the material world. Indeed, although the orbits of the heavenly globes may not depend on a bunch of mummers for their momentum, those who dedicate their time and passion to the tradition do so to keep one ball or another rolling on.

Chapter 6. A Traditional Resurrection Ritual?

And, whatever his shortcomings as actor and playmonger, let this be his epitaph: He was a man first and a mummer afterwards—thus reversing the customary procedure of stage celebrities.

(Hesketh Pearson. *Modern Men and Mummers*. 1921, 101)

When I stayed with Ronald Shuttleworth during the month of December in 2010, we would often sit together at a small card table in his living room. Both of us would have a petite pot of tea sitting before us—his with cream and sugar, mine black—and the grey smoke from English cigarettes would waft up towards the ceiling. Our tea-and-tobacco-fueled conversations would carry on, sometimes for hours at a time, as Ron tried to orient me within the phenomenon I had only recently discovered but that he had inhabited for decades. Time and time again, peppered throughout our conversations, Ron would mention—sometimes subtly, sometimes sternly—that mummers were not actors and that mumming, to be sure, was not acting. At first I took this for granted. A relative novice, I was preoccupied with scribbling down every morsel Ron would offer me, far too busy recording to stop and question what seemed like such an absolute declaration. Ron explained to me also that, every once in a while, he would observe one

of his fellow Coventry Mummers' performances begin to stray into acting, and he and the rest of them would take action to correct it. This was to be expected, Ron told me, as some of the Coventry Mummers came from a theatre background. Indeed, some of them *were* thespians. So, there was the temptation to bring the drama and delivery of the stage to the mummers play circle. But, nevertheless, the border remained bold and stark: Mumming is not acting. *Okay*, I thought. *I'll jot that down in my notebook*. And I did. It was only after my return to Canada and an embarrassingly long amount of time had passed that it occurred to me that I might want to investigate this claim. What did Ronald mean? Why was he so adamant about this point? And what did the point mean to mumm[er]ing in general?

A year went by, and then some more time, before I met Gerald Matthews. Sitting at the card table in his living room, a can of Harp beer sitting before each of us, he told me,

Back in my day

It was real time

It was no acting (he laughs)

It was no acting at all

(Gerald Matthews, 15 March 2012)

There it was again, the same resolute claim: that “real” mumm[er]ing is not acting (albeit made by a Newfoundland mummer about Newfoundland mummering instead of an English mummer about English mumming). It appeared elsewhere, too. Steve Roud, describing pre-revival English mummering, wrote that there was “little ‘acting’ involved, and no attempt was made to portray character” (Roud 2006, 545). In another work, he explains further,

The performance style of the old traditional teams varied with each type of play, but also by region and over time. As with the costume, there was a discernible drift from the earlier 'stylized' action to a more 'representational' style, in which the 'acting' was more life-like and more like what one would expect from a 'play'. This was especially true when people who came from an 'amateur dramatics' background began to get involved.

To take the Hero/Combat or St. George play first, these were not performed like pantomime, nor played for laughs, or like melodrama. There was no ad libbing, chasing around, or appeals to the audience, and even the sword fight and death were underplayed. Gestures were minimal and stylised—as one old mummer said, 'There's no acting in it'. They walked up and down a lot—as the two knights were challenging each other, for example, they would counter-march across the room, clashing swords as they passed. Visually, they were upright, stiff, formal.

(2014, 17)

I began to consider and reconsider this idea. After dipping my toes into performance theory, I decided to get it straight from the (hobby) horse's mouth. In one of our many email exchanges, I wrote to Ronald:

...I am also thinking of more modern/experimental theatre, where the boundaries between "performance" and "reality" are blurred so that the actors are not portraying any character at all but merely themselves, or at least a characterization of themselves, so that the audience does not consider the actor to be "acting" but, rather, "interacting", and thus not a performer but an authentic person; someone who is *with* the audience rather than *apart from* the audience...

The next, Ronald responded:

It is important to note that, however it may have started, the title of my contention is now "MummING is not ActING" not "Mummers are not Actors" or vice versa.

It is not in any way concerned with the theories or actions of theatrical people but only with the general public's subliminal response to mummers, based on their concept of actors and 'theatre' gained mainly or solely through cinema or TV.

The fact that some actors are using it themselves is irrelevant, though it might be interesting to find out whether they are doing so for the reasons we are exploring.

I just had the thought that I might subtitle my Paper: "Gaining the Public's Trust" ??

(Personal email, 14 June 2013)

In subsequent emails, Ron and I discussed that we might search for a source that may have explored this topic in the past. Eventually, Ronald sent me Michael Kirby's "On Acting and Not-Acting," (1972). First, Kirby provides us with a definition of just what acting is:

They may be either physical or emotional. If the performer does something to simulate, represent, impersonate and so forth, he is acting. It does not matter what style he uses or whether the action is part of a complete characterization or in-formational presentation. No emotion needs to be involved. The definition can depend solely on the character of what is done. (Value judgments, of course, are not involved. Acting is acting whether or not it is done "well" or accurately.) Thus a person who, as in the game of charades, pretends to put on a jacket that does not exist or feigns being ill is acting. Acting can be said to exist in the smallest and simplest action that involves pretense.

(Kirby 1972, 6)

He goes on to say that "It may be merely the 'use' and projection of emotion that distinguishes acting from not-acting" (7). So perhaps it is a lack of projected emotion that makes a mummer different than an actor. Certainly, some of the mummies that I have seen do not put much effort into conveying an emotional state for their character. On the other hand, some do, however farcically and over-the-top. We likely have to look elsewhere for some illumination. So, Kirby also offers this: "Even 'abstract' movements may be personified and made into a character of sorts through the performer's attitude. If he seems to indicate 'I am this thing' rather than merely 'I am doing these movements,' we accept him as the 'thing': He is acting" (ibid). As Ronald has explained to me, the Coventry Mummer is dressed as, speaks as, and moves as his character, but he is not pretending to be his character, nor is he asking the audience to pretend that he is that character. Rather, he is only himself, although he is dressed and moving and speaking as that character. Perhaps he is not acting because he is only saying, "I am *doing* St. George" and not "I *am* St. George." What we have here, perhaps, is a matter of belief, and the suspension thereof. However, as Kirby states, "Belief may exist in either the spectator or the performer, but it does

not affect objective classification according to our acting/not-acting scale. Whether an actor feels what he is doing to be ‘real,’ or a spectator really ‘believes’ what he sees, does not change the classification of the performance; it merely suggests another area or parameter” (10). He goes on to say, “In almost all performances, we see the ‘real’ person and also that which he is representing or pretending. The actor is visible within the character.” So belief and its suspension may not matter when it comes to objectively classifying mumm[er]ing as either acting or not acting. But must we be so binary? Must mumm[er]ing be either or, or neither nor? Kirby suggests that acting does not need to be either “on-off” or “all-or-nothing” (8). Rather, there can be “small ‘amounts’ of acting.” Could it be, then, that there is a small amount of acting in mumm[er]ing?

After Kirby, I still didn’t fully understand what was meant by ‘mumm[er]ing is not acting,’ but I decided to stoke the fire by presenting it at conferences and symposiums. It was difficult to articulate into a paper a concept that still evaded me, but the gist of my argument was this: Rather than consider mumm[er]ing as theatre or acting, we might instead consider it as “play,” and so the term “mummers play” becomes quite literal. This argument takes us into a discussion on metacommunication and frames. This conversation begins with Gregory Bateson. Bateson identified the “This is Play” metacommunication, used by both humans and animals, wherein one player communicates to another that “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote” (1972, 180). A playful dog, for instance, playfully nips at its owners hands, and while the nip stands for a bite, it does not signify what the bite would outside of a play context or “frame.” Likewise, a doting father may nudge his son’s chin with a closed fist, representing a punch, but the nudge does not carry with it the violence, anger, or hostility that a punch to the face normally would. In the Batesonian

sense of the word 'play', what may be taking place in mumm[er]ing is paradoxical metacommunication: *I, the mummer, am performing for you, but not really. In a sense, I am pretending to perform for you. I am pretending to pretend to be the King of Egypt. I drink your beer, I flirt with your girlfriend, but **'these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would normally denote.'** So, you, as an audience, will not be mad at me when I drink your beer or make fun of you, because we are just playing.*

Nachmanovitch (2009) discusses the complexity of the play frame:

Artists, as they play, are simultaneously bidding for approval and sometimes begging for survival. The archetype of the creative artist in a tangle of mixed contexts may be found in Scheherazade, who had to tell an enchanting story every night, or her head would be cut off. In daily life, the messages, This is play, This is practice, This is performance, This is professional, loop around each other in recursive knots of feedback—logical layers with a twist. Is this play? Dare we play? Where are the lines that separate play, acting, storytelling, and lying? How far can we push play before it becomes something else? Levels of communication connect over, under, around, and through each other. It may be more accurate to say pretzels rather than levels. The knotted loops of contexts, and contexts of contexts, are not random, not merely complicated: the complexity itself has recursive form. Perhaps the best image is a transdimensional shape like a Möbius strip with its half-twist that flips up and out into the third dimension, or its big brother the Klein bottle, which loops up and out between three and four dimensions—a closed surface that doubles back on itself, with no inside and no outside.

(7)

The *This is Play* message (or context or frame) is not so easily distinguished (or punctuated) from all other concurrent contexts or frames (and words and signs and actions) as we may imagine. In one sense we may believe, at any one moment, that this is play, but other parallel (and perhaps paradoxical) contexts (and words and signs and actions) could be occurring simultaneously. One frame may establish that "this is a performance," creating a dichotomous relationship between the mummers and the audience. Another frame may say, "this is play,"

making kinsmen of them all. These frames are not layered like an onion, but, as Nachmanovitch suggests, fold into one another like a Klein Bottle or Mobius Strip.

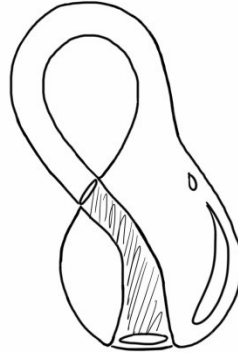


Figure 1. Klein Bottle

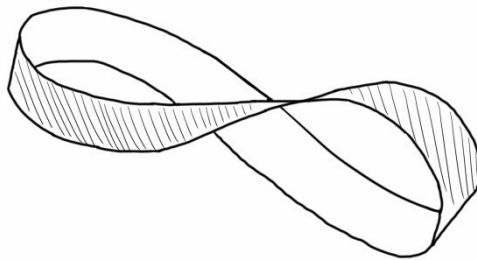


Figure 2. Mobius Strip

Speaking of Klein Bottles or Mobius Strips, Schechner (1993) agrees about contextualizing activity with spatial or object metaphors, but he suggests: “But if one needs a metaphor to localize and (temporarily) stabilize playing, ‘frame’ is the wrong one—it’s too stiff, too impermeable, too ‘on/off,’ ‘inside/outside.’ ‘Net’ is better: a porous, flexible gatherer; a three-dimensional, dynamic, flow-through container” (41).

But isn’t theatre play, too? Nachmanovitch (2009) writes that “The theater or stage is a context-marker for a separate play-space—we don’t call the police when people are murdered

before our eyes in Hamlet,” (Nachmanovitch 2009, 9). For decades, theatre has been pushing boundaries, challenging convention, and re-establishing “frames” and relationships between actors, characters, and audiences. We can no doubt agree that many forms of theatre do, like mumm[er]ing, establish dialogic encounters between performers and audiences and unravel the shroud of the “character” to reveal a responsive, active agent rather than some predisposed thespian stuck on the monorail of traditional script and plot.

With all these confusions and confluences, it is perhaps more effective to consider *why* Ronald and Gerald say that mumm[er]ing is not acting/theatre. Ron and Gerald’s commentaries are dialogic; they are negotiations with other texts within an intertextual mummer discourse. Many texts refer to mummers as performers, as theatrical, and liken them to *commedia del arte*, etc. These texts establish links between the performance events Ron and Gerald have participated in and a gargantuan amorphous nebula of others over time and space, with endless meanings, identities, etc. Ron and Gerald may, in providing their commentaries, wish to respond to these links with gaps; they wish to distance themselves from those texts they see as diluting their group identities. By distancing mumm[er]ing from acting/theatre, they specialize their crafts and refine their group identities, not only proactively but retroactively.

For both men, mummers who “act” are not, well, mummers—or they may be “mummers” who are not “mumm[er]ing” as they should be in order for what they are doing to be considered “real” mumm[er]ing. This idea seems to refer to the nature of the activity; the motive, intent, and method. For both men, mumm[er]ing is not theatre; mummers are not actors playing characters and there is no presence (or at least not a stable one) of a “fourth wall” between performers and audiences; indeed all participants exist within the same frame (see Bateson 1972; Nachmanovitch 2009). For Ronald, many contemporary mummer groups are theatrical in nature;

they are actors rather than mummers, and so they are inauthentic. For Gerald, modern revivals are re-enactments; they are memories of mumm[er]ing but are not “real.” Ronald’s intertextual authority to make such claims stems from his participation in the widespread folk revival of the 1960s, his foundation of the Coventry Mummers at that time, and his participation in the group ever since. Furthermore, Ronald, although having no formal scholarly training, is an excellent scholar on the subject and is the keeper of the largest English folkplay archive in the world. Likewise, Gerald declares his authority to make such claims with statements like “I was able to participate in it” or “I lived it” and referring to himself as “the original mummer” or “the last of the mummers.”

In contrast to the Coventry Mummers and Newfoundland mummers, the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective is comprised entirely of actors, and their mummers’ plays are not only theatrical in form and method but are also written by them. Although they are largely innovative in content, they do contain what Randall, the group’s founder and director, considers “traditional elements” such as a death and resurrection, a hero and villain, combat, and social satire. Thus, for the AAMC, although they write their own scripts, the inclusion of these elements establishes “links” between their items and those they consider “traditional” or authoritative and authentic, resulting in the authenticity of their own plays. It is interesting to note that Randall has expressed the desire that his plays become “traditional” on Alberta Avenue, and he hopes that one day they will become, in a sense, local folklore, performed year after year and thought of by local residents with the same affection and loyalty felt by English villagers toward the plays that have existed in their villages for decades, if not centuries. It is clear that authenticity and authority are relative concepts and terms, as is revival, all of which serve the negotiations and navigations of

texts within the mummer discourse. I asked Randall if he thought that mumm[er]ing is or is not acting, and he had this to say:

I think the answer, at least for us is that they are different, but similar. They are different because theatre is about the story and the writing and the acting and how all those elements come together to create a reflection of the world in some way. Mumming is about connecting to the community and bringing them together to celebrate a particular time of year and to reflect on tradition and our current place in the world. The Alberta Ave Mummers Collective happens to use a lot of theatre elements because that is the background and strength of most of the players, but we are always looking to make sure we are meeting the original drive and direction of the mummers tradition.

Randall seems to agree that mumm[er]ing and acting are “different, but similar;” theatre is a “reflection of the world,” whereas mumm[er]ing is about community connection and is a reflection on “tradition and our current place in the world.” For Randall, mumm[er]ing is not theatre because it is about tradition, community, and the celebration of season.

Although the ‘mumm[er]ing is not acting/theatre’ assertions came from an English mummer, an Edmonton mummer, and a Newfoundland mummer, and their ways of mumm[er]ing are quite different, I believe that their commentaries do share a common sensation that, as Randall subtly implied, has to do with ritual. I would suggest that we begin to unpack all this with some help from Antonin Artaud. By Artaud, I’ve come to understand that art, and theatre, should not be seen as things to entertain—things to see and consider at the gallery or the theatre before returning home for real life—but as practical action; as performative communication; as real life (1958). Theatre, like, perhaps, a totem pole, is in its performative creation not a frivolous decorative object but a cause of effects in the world. In short, it does not comment on the world but, rather, creates the world. He writes, “We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theatre, a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being. And everything that has not been born can still be

brought to life if we are not satisfied to remain mere recording organisms” (1958, 13). I would suggest that mumm[er]ing, seen in this light, might be considered *ritual* rather than *acting* or *theatre*. In his book, *Introducing the Folk Plays of England*, Ronald Shuttleworth tells us:

Speculation about the origins of the plays no longer seems fashionable in academic circles, but this is an area which still greatly interests the general public. Unfortunately it also involves the fewest facts and most guesswork.

Since earliest times death and regeneration has been apparent to man in his surroundings. The cycles of the Sun, the Moon, the Calendar, vegetation, animals and Man himself were so clearly important, that re-birth or resurrection has had a central place in many religions and ceremonies the world over. Its presence in the Folk Play, together with the seasonal nature of the custom leads to the conclusion that the origins of the ceremony are ritualistic and ‘religious’ in so far as the participants believed that they were influencing forces normally beyond their control. Even today people have the vague feeling that there is some ‘luck’ involved in which they can share by contribution to the collection.

(10)

As I mentioned in my introduction, Ronald Shuttleworth also offered me this:

As an active mummer for over forty years I know that we come up with whatever fanciful explanation we think will enhance audience response. I suspect that traditional teams were little different. After all, it seems to be a begging custom and any association with ‘luck’ or whatever might improve the welcome.

When asked why we mummied at midwinter, I used to say ‘You will have noticed that recently the sun has been growing weaker and appearing for a shorter and shorter time each day. If we did not do this now, it will finally go out altogether’.

I wish you luck.

Ron.

(Personal email, 23 March 2011)

Although he was certainly being facetious, his statements illustrate the intertextual background of mumm[er]ing as ritual. Another Coventry Mummer, Paul, had this to say:

Paul: What drew me to the mumming plays when I first saw them was that it was good fun. And what held me to mummers’ plays was when I found out that, not only was it good fun, it was our heritage, our tradition. *And it also had meaning; the folkplay had a*

meaning [my italics]. And this I became interested in. So first of all it was the entertainment value and the good fun and the camaraderie that drew me to the mummers, and, secondly, the thing that hooked me with the mummers was this was a worthwhile thing to do; that it was important; that our traditions be carried on.

Mat: What is the meaning of the mummers' play?

Paul: The meaning of the mummers' plays, in England, is the...it's the celebration of the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new year. So it's about the death of the old year and the birth of the new year. So mumming plays will have a death and resurrection. So you'll have an antagonist, a protagonist, who fight, and when one is slain, a doctor is called on to cure. And so that symbolizes the bringing on of the new year. And traditionally, they were done, of course, around the new year and also at Easter time with the Pace Eggers. And they were done by workers who, seasonal workers, who had no work at the winter time in England. People worked on the land and their work wasn't so much...And they had to go and get money, basically, to survive. And so the mummers' tradition came about that they used to do these plays, and at the end of the play they'd take a collection and also get refreshments from the people of the tour they were on.

Mat: So is it, in your opinion, is it a begging tradition or is it a seasonal ritual, is it both?

Paul: I think it's both. To me, the tradition of the mumming play is both a tradition of seeing out the [old] year and bringing the new one in, and, also, conveniently at the time, it's a tradition of getting reward for that; a way of getting a reward so that...to sustain you through the winter months, basically.

Mat: How long do you think people have been doing these plays for?

Paul: I think mumming plays in England have been...have pre-Christian roots. So they are of pagan origin. And, of course, throughout the many years they've been performed in England, influences, Christian influences, have altered the plays. So you cannot say they're Christian mystery plays, certainly not. That is a completely different tradition. But they are...they have been influenced by peoples' beliefs, as everything is influenced by peoples' beliefs. So, in a play you would have the death and resurrection, of course. The death and resurrection, of course, in a mumming play could be symbolized as the death and resurrection of Jesus and redemption. And also the personalities of the play would be changed to St George, who fought the dragon, so it would be the battle fought over evil. And, of course, other plays you'd have Prince George or King George, who was probably an English hero, to be the protagonist. And the antagonist would be the traditional what we would see as the enemies in England at the time.

(Personal interview, Coventry, 26 December 2010)

I also spoke with Brian and his wife, Rita.

Mat: Where do you believe mummers' plays came from?

Brian: I don't really...from pagan ritual...you know, I suppose is the main thing. It's got to go back to that sort of thing...sort of like a midwinter pagan tradition, I would say. Nobody really knows, but to me that seems to be the obvious place where it originated from.

Mat: Rita, do you have any different thoughts?

Rita: No, I agree with Brian. The death and resurrection around the Christmas plays is the...the death of the winter and the resurrection of the spring. It goes back...who knows?

(Personal interview, 16 December 2010)

To be fair, not all the Coventry Mummers entirely agree.

Gary: I've heard narrators and I've heard mummers and I've heard morris dancers go and create this air of mystique behind what they're doing to talk it up, perhaps some of them actually believe it, but I'm sure some do it to talk it up and create this air of mystique around..."the performance"...but whether they actually believe it or...there's a mixture I would guess. It certainly makes good viewing on the DVD if you've got that sort of spin on it, really. I think some people may be worried about it if they thought it was an actual extension to a pagan festival. I generally don't. When people ask me I just say it goes back hundreds of years and that it's a begging tradition, really. But I do point out that it is people dying and being brought to life again. There's a lot more being brought to life than actually remaining dead, should we say, in the plays.

(Personal interview, Coventry, 10 December 2010)

Although he remains cautious, Gary does permit the connection between mummers plays and ritual to be made. This connection is, in many ways, a traditional part of mumm[er]ing itself. The idea that mumm[er]ing's beginnings lie in pagan ritual is a very old one and to deny it outright would be, in a sense, somewhat wet-blankety. The connection provides, as we shall see, a certain profundity to what might, at first glance, seem rather silly. I have provided a lengthy tour of this idea before, tracing it through time and media (see Levitt 2011, 23-48), but I'll provide a brief overview here as well.

The metafolklore that I refer to as the “Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative” appears first as a kind of phantom harbinger in Sir Walter Scott’s 1808 epic poem *Marmion*, where the author waxes, “Who lists may in their mummers see, traces of ancient mystery...” William Hone’s verbosely titled 1827 work, *The Every Day Book: or, Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastimes, Ceremonies, Manners, Customs, and Events, Incident to Each of the Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Days, in Past and Present Times; Forming a Complete History of the Year, Months, & Seasons, and a Perpetual Key to the Almanack; Including Accounts of the Weather, Rules for Health and Conduct, Remarkable and Important Anecdotes, Facts, and Notices, in Chronology, Antiquities, Topography, Biography, Natural History, Art, Science, and General Literature; Derived from the Most Authentic Sources, and Valuable Original Communications, with Poetical Elucidations, for Daily Use and Diversion*, comments on the Scottish Guisards’ play performed at Hogmanay: “The performance of religious mysteries, which continued for a long period, seems to have been accompanied by much licentiousness, and undoubtedly was grafted upon the stock of pagan observances” (Vol. II-Part II: column 14). Half a century later, the English novelist and dramatist Charles Reade espoused the idea in his 1870 work, *Put Yourself in His Place*. He writes,

It was old Christmas Eve, and the Mummers were come. Now, of all the old customs Mr. Raby had promised her, this was the pearl. Accordingly, her curiosity took for the time another turn, and she was soon seated in the dining-room, with Mr. Raby and Mr. Coventry, awaiting the Mummers. The servants then came in, and, when all were ready, the sound of fiddle was heard, and a fiddler, grotesquely dressed, entered along with two clowns, one called Tommy, dressed in chintz and a fox’s skin over his shoulders and a fox’s head for a cap; and one, called the Bessy, in a woman’s gown and beaver hat.

(1870, 88)

Reade then informs his readers that the performance is of pre-Christian elements:

‘King George!’ said he. ‘Bosh! This is the old story of St. George and the Dragon, overburdened with modern additions.’ As to the dance, he assured her that, though

danced in honour of old Christmas, it was older than Christianity, and came from the Goths and Swedes. These comments were interrupted by a man, with a white face, who burst into the assembly crying, ‘Will ye believe me now? Cairnhope old church is all afire!’

(ibid)

Ten years later, J.S. Udal started writing about mummers as a means of “preserving one of the most interesting forms of our national folk-lore—folk-lore, indeed, which before the rapid march of education and beneath the iron hand of the School Board bids fair to rank ere long amongst the things of the past” (87). He referenced Strutt (1831), Brand (1841), and Fosbroke (1843). Brand and Fosbroke both maintained that the mummers plays derives from the “ancient Saturnalia” (Udal 1880, 87-88).

It was Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, that effectively perpetuated the Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative into popular culture. As Roy Judge (1979) points out,

It is difficult to overstate the influence of *The Golden Bough*. It offered a pattern which was immediately and attractively available, and it proceeded to dominate attitudes and thinking to a remarkable extent. The vegetation drama, ritual death and resurrection, the sacred tree, became accepted elements in the standard works produced by, for example, E.O. James, Violet Alford, and Douglas Kennedy.

(71)

In the abridgement of his classic work *The New Golden Bough*, Frazer opens his section on “The Mummers’ Play” by writing, “The custom of periodically killing the human representatives of the tree-spirit has left unmistakable traces in the rural festivals of the peasantry in Northern Europe” (1959, 249). Frazer and his contemporaries—the Survivalists and the Ritualists, together known as The Cambridge School— “concluded that drama evolved from certain magical fertility rituals performed in the worship of a deity who died and was reborn” (Ackerman 1991, xi). Henry Glassie (1975) tells us that when the Survivalists “came upon an

abstract piece of theater like the mumming it was natural for them to imagine that it might once have been a fuller work, portraying not only a death and rebirth, but—in order to accomplish its magical mission more efficiently—the entire human life cycle laid out in neat sequence like an eighteenth century biographical novel. Viewed from the tower of their taste, mumming did look like a fragment” (59). Glassie sums it up succinctly:

Once upon a time, we are told, there was a fertility ritual that efficiently structured the agricultural year by means of magical mimicry. Latter day mumming is but an irrational fragment of this ritual, having drifted into modern times through the inertia of the peasant mentality.

(56).

One year after the publication of *The Golden Bough*, T. Fairman Ordish (1891) wrote, “the obvious direction of inquiry will be into the condition of things amid which they [medieval Christian miracle-plays and mysteries] were introduced, into those pagan performances of a dramatic character which they were devised to supplant” (318). Ordish continued,

And may we not conclude that had it not been for the introduction of Christianity we should have had in the North a drama corresponding to that of Greece, a direct outcome of the mythology of the Eddas and the rites and the worship of Odin? The constituents existed: the combination was wanting. Now it is the survivals of those elements in the folk-lore and traditionary customs of our country that I venture to call English folk-drama.

(319)

In a later work, Ordish (1893) articulated the Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative even more explicitly: “We should then have in St. George and Slasher the renamed representatives of the two champions, Summer and Winter, whose contest was a principal feature in the Spring festival” (158). Not trying to conceal his notions of authenticity and power, he wrote, “It seems to me that this is to give our drama a more illustrious lineage, and a more natural origin...”

(1891, 322-329). P.H. Ditchfield, in his *Old English Customs, Extant at the Present Time, An*

Account of Local Observances, Festival Customs, and Ancient Ceremonies yet Surviving in Great Britain, first published in 1896, wrote,

In Pagan institutions we must ground many old customs and rites, which, traveling to us through an infinite succession of years, have been sadly distorted and disfigured in their progress. Old Paganism died hard, and fought long and stubbornly in its struggle with Christianity. How often do we find the incorporation of some ancient cult and Pagan custom in many observances sanctioned by years of Christian practice?...Nor is it uncommon to find survivals of old forms of nature-worship, of various cults of hero or demigod, of propitiatory offerings to the spirits of woods and streams...

(4-5)

R.J.E. Tiddy (1923), too, tells a rendition of the narrative. He writes,

Yet the Mummers' Play, degenerate and undeveloped though it may be, bears distinct traces of a ritual origin, and also enables us to draw certain conclusions as to the taste of the peasantry in the drama. At a very early period English literature, like all literature, was entirely of the folk and entirely communal. Like the literature of the Greeks, it originated in religious ceremonies. In the Norse mythology vegetation gods can clearly be descried behind the splendid panoply of heroism with which a later and nobler imagination has invested them, and the agricultural religion of England was no doubt a primitive form of the Norse mythology. In the ceremony of primitive religion various means were used to secure the fertility of earth and flocks and tribe; and in England at least two separate means of attaining this end were practiced.

(70)

Tiddy describes how the English Sword Dance and Morris Dance are “survivals” of “primitive” rites involving the destruction of an enemy by the destruction of his representation, the battle between “between the old year and the new, between the waxing and waning life of the earth,” and “means of securing fertility” by means of (gastronomic) contact with “the spirit of life” (71). Tiddy explains that there is evidence of ritual origins in the characters themselves, including the King, the Bold Slasher, the Doctor, Moll Finney/Dame Jane, and the Fool or Beelzebub (74-77). Charles Read Baskerville (1924) describes the “mummers’ play” as “surviving from ancient

pagan rituals” of Europe and England (225, 226). He writes that “the plays are almost certainly survivals of pagan rites” (226).

The metafolklore concretizes into definition with Gertrude Jobes’ *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (1962). Jobes defines the “Mumming Play” as:

A play with masked figures containing a dance with a mock fight; originally a fertility ritual. Origin probably the same as that of the Sword Dance. In Christian countries performed at Christmas time. Father Christmas is stage manager and introduces the characters, chief of whom is Saint George. Other characters are Beelzebub, Big-Headand-Little-Wit, Doctor, Humpty Jack, a Turkish Knight and his mother Moll Finney. The action is a symbolic representation of the death and rebirth of the year, and the object of the ceremony is to restore the spirit of vegetation to life. Compare Morris Dance.

(1136)

In their influential work of folkplay scholarship, *English Ritual Drama: A Geographical Index*, Cawte, Helm and Peacock (1967) establish a direct link to Frazer’s authoritative text: “By the term ‘English Folk Play’ we mean one or other of three types of Play in the English language, defined later (37), which we believe to be a form of the ceremony of revitalization discussed by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, and by others” (11). The authors write, “The Balkan performers first enacted fertilization in front of the houses, then they represented death and resurrection. When they followed this by sowing seed and invoking a bumper harvest, they were clearly using sympathetic magic. This seems to be very near the original religious rite” (24). The authors surmise that “It seems entirely reasonable not only to regard our British plays as the remnants of a magical fertility ritual ceremony, but also to think that they once resembled the Balkan performances even more closely than they do know” (24). According to the authors,

...people working close to the land realise more clearly than most the need for fertility of crops and animals, although it is not suggested for one moment that towards the close of the nineteenth century—or even much earlier—the performers seriously considered or understood the primitive ritual they were continuing.

(25).

And then we arrive at Brody's *The English Mummers and their Plays; Traces of Ancient Mystery*:

With the passage of time, however, the edges blur. Christianity replaces paganism in the religious consciousness. The church takes over the responsibility for the spiritual health of the community and the concept of the men's ceremonial as effective, magical, and necessary recedes. The people grow sophisticated and the procession and performance that once brought fertility to the land and the tribe become simply a luck-bringing perambulation. In the farms and fields it still retains traces of its ancient mysterious source. In the court it evolves into pure entertainment with the lyricism and splendor of the masque. Communication grows between villages once virtually isolated from one another. The Sword Play takes on figures of the Hero-Combat. The Hero-Combat borrows action from the Wooing Ceremony. The Combat of the Wooing Ceremony gradually follows the shape of the Hero-Combat. A sense of nationalism grows along with religious consciousness and the mythic *daimons* and heroes melt into legendary historical figures and near-contemporary heroes. Industry replaces agriculture as the major support of the community. The factories do not look to the land and the change of the seasons to thrive. Whole communities fragment. Wars take away the men who perform the plays... What is so extraordinary is that the process has taken so long; for it is almost a thousand years since there was any reason for the men of the town to meet on one night of the year, to hide their faces, to move from station to station through the town and, in the centre of the magic circle, to re-enact the death and resurrection of their earth, the eternal pattern of the seasons.

(1970, 126-127)

In 1988, Chris Brookes, one of the founding members of the Newfoundland Mummers Troupe, published his memoirs in *A Public Nuisance: A History of the Mummers Troupe*. In his account, he links Newfoundland mummering, too, with the Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative,

When the Mummers Play arrived in Newfoundland in the sixteenth century, it was already ancient. It may have evolved from early solstice ritual. If so, then its original practitioners, feeling the days grow colder and shorter, and seeing the sun growing weaker and weaker in the sky at the time of the winter solstice, conceived the event as a cosmic battle between light and darkness—a battle which the sun was clearly losing. So, in order to give the sun a helping hand, they performed a ritual with characters representing light and darkness. Light was killed by darkness, but miraculously rose back up to life again. The idea, of course, was that the sun in the sky would follow this example and renew itself too. For in this theatre, performers did not *symbolise* light; they

were light. A modern Western concept of character representation did not exist...while some of the dramatic imagery of earlier beliefs was co-opted by mainstream Christianity, other ceremonial elements of those beliefs continued as 'folk tradition' long after their official religious status had been supplanted. Slowly, their original meanings became forgotten, and they were practiced 'for good luck,' or simply because 'that's what we always done, boy.' Ritual became custom.

(16-17)

Although Brookes does suggest the narrative as a possibility rather than a certainty, the link—however probably it might be—does offer a meaningful potential:

Suppose for the sake of argument that the Newfoundland Mummers Play was an evolutionary hand-me-down from this kind of ritual theatre. Then what interests me is this: politically speaking, its premise lies in the collective belief that reality is transformable...that the extra-theatrical reality actually can be transformed by collective effort of will. The whole purpose of its theatre is to mobilize and focus that collective will.

(17)

The narrative describing ancient ritual origins empowers mummers' plays, for Brookes at least, as a performance that has the ability and the purpose to create change; cosmically or politically, and in this way his argument follows very similar lines to Randall's. I asked him,

Is there a theory that you gravitate towards?

And, if so, why do you think?

Randall answered,

Well

I've...

I think the way I...what I've been thinking about, and this has been

You know, as

I've started discovering this, you know, people saying

'It started da da da da da!' And I'm sort of like

'Okay, that's, yeah, hmm....' And then

Discovering that there was all these theories was sort of leading me to think, well

They're probably all true within their
Perspective; within their paradigm of thinking. So
Scholars tend to go for
What is written down
Right. Extant plays. So in terms of extant plays
Yes it started in the seventeenth century, thereabouts
In terms of
Thematic roots and the evolution of it as a particular form, I think it probably, in the
The forms that it exists now, I mean, when you look at the form that it exists now, you see people
Like us doing it
At a festival
Now, we have people coming to us in this case
But essentially it's still
A bunch of community members - because we all either live or work in that neighborhood-
Are...we're presenting for our friends, you know. That's
So it's still keeping with that. Whereas you go to Philadelphia,
Or Cincinnati...I think...wherever...Philadelphia I think it is...
To them it's more of a parade
Like they
And it's a big parade! I mean, oh my gosh!
It's amazing what they do. They've taken it to the level of Carnivale
Or Mardi Gras,
You know. It's extraordinary.
But it has
Almost nothing to with
What we originally perceived. But it came out of some root
And then you go back, 'Well, okay, so did it all go all the way back to the pagans and the druids-
and all that stuff?' and I think
I think they're all right within their perspective of learning, because they come from a particular-
group of people doing a particular kind of study

And
You know, if you're partial to a particular era,
You're always going to
Say that this is where this is from,
You know
To pinpoint it
You know, it's hard to say
The fact that it almost always appears around
Easter
Or
The Winter Solstice, so
Those are both times of transition, right?
And they're times of
Rebirth transition, specifically. So the new year
The end of the nights getting shorter
Or the nights getting longer, the beginning of days getting longer
Easter of course is the beginning of spring
And then all of those elements
And so those make me think that they go
As far back
As
Our celebration of
Those transitions
And so, if you want to go...how far back have we been acknowledging...aware of
And acknowledging and celebrating
Those
Times of the year and those transitions in our
World
I would say that they go back that far
Because that's

That's what the makes the germ really...that's where the seed of transformation of life into death-
or death into life, something dies, something's reborn

And the fact that it's tied to those

You don't really see them happening in, you know, at the Summer Solstice

You don't seem them happening at the fall

The fall equinox

You see them

At times of

Major

Celestial change, I guess, for lack of a better word. So I thought

Those two elements together kind of make me think that they go

Quite a long way back, and probably even further back than the morality plays

Of the medievals and back to the pagan times,

In terms of its roots. In terms of its actual form,

I think the

The morality plays and the...

The mystery plays

Of, you know, medieval Europe really

Kind of

Hold that. Although I

Had this

Harebrained idea in my mind that if you could probably find some equivalent to it

In

Egyptian

Mesopotamian, all those ancient worlds. I'm sure that if you go back to studying Greek history-
there's an element of that being presented then. If you go back to

Roman history, there's probably an element that you could find if you went looking. If you go-
back to

Mesopotamians, and the

Babylonians, if you go looking

I'd bet you you would find seeds or
Other versions of that same idea of
Community sharing, of a particular time of year, and a particular
Psychological stage of tran...you know, where you'd have to
Let go of something to get the new thing. It's something has to die
Some form has to die, so that a new form can take its place
And
You know
I think they've...
Just to some that up
Within their own spheres they're all
Correct, but I think it's actually larger. I think if somebody really wanted to go really far with the-
roots
They could go back to
Every culture that's ever existed
You know.
Getting into like that human archetype...
That this is something archetypical, yeah
That this is...And it's
Tied very strongly
To
The fact that we
Are an earth
Circling a sun
With a moon
Circling us
You know?
And it was particularly auspicious and became one of the central turning points of our play that
This year
We had a

Lunar eclipse

On the solstice

Full moon

You know? It's not going to happen again for...and this is...here's an interesting thing...

[Randall discusses different projections for another similar astronomical occurrence]

Either way you look at it

None of us are going to be alive the next time that happens, so that was, like

Awesome

And then

It was attached, that it happened at that time

Surrounding that particular turning point was like

Well

It's kind of got to be in the play, you know.

And it becomes the centre point for our little story

Or

A specific

A turning point for our story.

(Personal Interview, Edmonton, January 12, 2011)

And it is a good story. Eli Rozik (2002), in his *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*, writes,

What is behind the spell cast on both scholars and layfolk alike by the ritual theory of origins? There is probably a deep reason for its widespread acceptance. I believe that in general people are inclined to adopt answers willingly, even for questions for which there are no ready answers, if these fire their imagination. A preliminary solution could well be that the charm of this theory lies in its metaphorical value: deriving theatre from ancient ritual, particularly from magic religious practices, lends the theatre a magic, *uncanny*, and numinous aura, which seems to correspond to the spellbound fascination that people experience in the theatre.

(x)

But here's the rub. When put under scholarly scrutiny, the Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative becomes tenuous indeed. In 1971, E.T. Kirby stated that the "Cambridge school" theory is "no more than a fiction, a romanticization and, in method and its application, an egregious error of considerable consequence" (276). With the formation of groups such as the Traditional Drama Research Group—which came together in 1981—skepticism about pre-Christian origins grew increasingly mainstream (Millington 2002, 49). This "New Folk Drama Studies" school of thought stuck to hard evidence—ink and paper traceable to a reliable source—and re-examined the texts that had been accumulated during decades of folkplay research. The development of technologies that allowed for computer analysis of texts has provided what some believe to be further evidence for the new origin story. Thus, researchers like Peter Millington (2002) offer this kind of origin story for mummers plays:

Although more historical research is needed, concerted effort over the past thirty years...has failed to find any records of Quack Doctor plays [a type of mummers' play] or similar precursors before the 18th century. This lack of records contrasts strongly with records for other customs, such as morris dancing and Mayday, where abundant pre-18th-century records have been found. This is enough to show that the historical continuity required by the survivalist theories of origin does not exist. They are therefore disproved.

(284)

The Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative necessarily assumes continuity with ancient peoples and practices; the usual suspects being the Celts and Druids of Britain. Ronald Hutton, however, explains in his book *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (2009), how the ancient Druids of Britain are ultimately the imaginings of later sociocultures; namely, the Romans and the post-medieval Europeans (see pp.1-49). Hutton says,

The Druids may well have been the most prominent magico-religious specialists of some of the peoples of north-western Europe just over a couple of thousand years ago; and that is all we can say of them with reasonable certainty. They left no accounts of their beliefs and practices, and so our impressions of them depend ultimately on images produced in

other cultures or at later periods...the basic material from which later concepts of Druidry were constructed. They are vivid and compelling, which is why their effect has been so enduring. They are also, without exception, problematic, controversial and probably fallacious, and there is no sure way out of the problems that they present to a historian.

(1)

If we stick to hard, historical, ink and paper evidence, mummers plays as we currently recognize them aren't nearly as old as the Ancient Pagan Ritual Narrative would suggest. A few lines taken from a mummers play performed around Exeter crop up in 1738 (Hutton 1996, 75). The earliest full-text mummers play appears a couple of decades later in a chapbook dated from 1746 to 1769 (75). The chapbook was somewhat instructional, meant for people who wanted to arrange some kind of Christmastide performance and providing them with the characters, plot, and dialogue to do so.

But no matter where or when mumm[er]ing came from, I suggest that it does, now, hold ritual significance. My point here is not to definitively state that, objectively speaking, mumm[er]ing is ritual. Rather, I mean to point out that, for many, mumm[er]ing is *linked* with ritual, not only by those who participate in it, but by those scholars who talk about it. For my purposes, mumm[er]ing enters the ritual genre not by analysis of form or function, by structure or content, but by intertextual relationship; by how it is thought and talked about. For instance, Don Handelman (1981), in his article, "The Ritual Clown: Attributes and Affinities," equates the mummer with the ritual clown; a category which, for him, includes the "clowns" of the Hopi and the Zuni solstice rituals (347, 363). He writes,

Furthermore, given the intimation of the clown as a kind of rural fool, it is not surprising to find that, in medieval Europe, the fool was present at folk-festivals associated with seasonal changes in the agricultural cycle, particularly those of the vernal equinox. As Welsford (1935:72) notes, "the festival fool is essentially a ritual character... and there is no connection at all between him and the fool who blusters about the royal court...." The festival-fool was associated with the English mummer's plays, the Sword-Dance ritual,

morris dances, the Plough Monday plays, and the Swiss-German Fastnachtsspiele (cf. Welsford 1935: 70-73; Willeford 1969: 85, 90; and Swain 1932: 66-69). All of these were connected apparently with the transition from winter through the vernal equinox. In many of these rites or 'plays' the folk-fool, although often in a peripheral role, frequently was the person who was killed and who was brought back to life.

(329)

Swain (1932) writes that:

In most of these game-narratives of the cycle of life the fool is present, sometimes as protagonist, sometimes as hanger-on. Sometimes he is frankly lecherous; sometimes he is distinguished only by his childish babble and the animal attributes of his costume, but he is evidently considered indispensable, and he seems to bear witness to the fact that life itself must exist.

(1932, 66)

Life itself must exist. Artaud (1958) tells us that “We need to live first of all; to believe in what makes us live and that something *makes* us live—to believe that whatever is produced from the mysterious depths of ourselves need not forever haunt us as an exclusively digestive concern” (7). Artaud suggests that we need to believe there is something more than the mere physicality of things. The sun does not just come up over the horizon, winter does not just pass into summer, by the inevitability of material physical equations independent of our actions. Mumm[er]ing is ritualistic, and there are some who imply that it does indeed replenish the globe; ensuring the arrival of Spring or a bountiful harvest in the New Year. I would suggest, however, that as a modern intertextually-discursive-phenomenon-turned-ritual, mumm[er]ing is not *meant* to do this; to perpetuate the physical world. On the contrary, mumm[er]ing is meant to perpetuate the tradition of mumm[er]ing itself. It is done so that it continues to be. For over a century, many have dismayed that mumm[er]ing is on the event horizon of disappearance. In turn, they have taken steps to keep it around, if not in practice, then at least in record. We often still find this kind of metafolklore. The Coventry Mummers, after all, consider themselves “custodians of

tradition” —a phrase a number of them used to describe the side and its responsibilities—and are devoted to “keeping the tradition alive”:

Mat: Okay. Do you have any idea of how far back exactly it goes?

Max: No...

Mat: Do you just not...

Max: I just don't know any further. See, I'm not really an expert on the history of it.

Mat: Does it matter to you where they came from?

Max: No, not really. It's just something that we enjoy doing and *we try to keep the tradition alive*.

(Personal interview, Coventry, 17 December 2010, my italics)

This title, *Custodian*. It appears often in mummer talk, and I asked Ron about it.

Hello Ron,

How are you? Another question for you: When I was hanging around with you and the other Coventry Mummings, I heard the phrase "Custodians of Tradition" a number of times. Can you tell me your thoughts on this?

Thanks,

Mat

He responded,

Ave Mat,

No problem. In the repertory that we use for most of the year, we effectively ignore strict 'tradition'. Our texts are collated, we don't observe traditional dates and we use spectacular costumes and props.

Around Christmas this all changes. We perform texts collected locally, and usually only in the venues from which they came. The exception to this is Bishop's Tachbrook where, because of an abysmal lack of interest from the village, we also perform in nearby locations such as Warwick in order to make a viable outing.

We try to copy costume details where known, and stick closely to the collected text (although a few extra add-libs have crept in over the years)

This is where we consider ourselves to be 'custodians of the tradition' and if a group from the village wanted to perform the play, we would willingly cede it to them, happy that we had been instrumental in its revival. (At Newbold-on-Avon we include locals in the cast)

Hope this is what you want

Thrive,

Ron.

(Personal correspondence, 30 March 2016)

Peter Harrop (2012) spoke with a mummer who performed in the Antrobus Soulcaking play for over thirty years. Ian McCormack said,

People think it—the tradition—more important than the people in it. You become like a custodian. People come and go like the play, you can get a bit mystical, but the ghosts of the people who did it before, we remember. Every year people talk about it, and they probably did in 1850, in their hearts and mind too, a chance at immortality [laughs]. We're custodians of the tradition.

(269)

In Gloucester for the 2014 International Mummers Festival, when discussing the natural setting of the mummers play and how this may or may not affect audience turnout, Peter Harrop said, “It’s not rural. It’s urban. And the disinterest from the public is palpable. And when it is rural, still, nobody cares” (quote taken from my notes). Matt Fletcher, a mummer himself, spoke about his own team—the Southampton Urban Mummers—“performing to nobody” in the rain on a housing estate. He said that they performed because they had to, no matter there was no audience. After all, Matt said, the play wasn’t for them anyway. He described the sense of obligation his team felt: “Once we performed it once, we had to again and again; the audience, too, came back, pulled by obligation.” On this idea, Harrop wrote:

When asked of Soulcaking at Antrobus ‘who’s it for?’ Ian McCormack responds that ‘you’re doing it to do it’. But in the act of ‘being done to be done’, traditional performance is using site and time, repetition and return, to construct a portal where the here of place and when of calendar can intersect to invite the invasion of the present by shafts of involuntary and unexpected memory. I suggest this underpins the efficacy and popularity of calendar customs.

(273)

Randall has agreed. Speaking about the time in which the AAMC performed a reading of one of their plays to an audience of English mummers, Randall said,

So that was just for us

Us performing for ourselves

As a collective

So yeah

The idea that we do it for ourselves

And the memory of what it means

Is as valid as

Whether there’s an audience or not

During Matt Fletcher’s presentation, I recorded the following line in my notes. I can’t be sure who said, but I do think it offers a useful insight: “Mumming is always on the brink. Of what, who knows?” As we’ve already discussed, within mummer discourse, mumm[er]ing is always on the brink of its own death and disappearance. In *Downhome magazine*, a publication focused on life in Newfoundland and Labrador, Geraldine Glover’s poem “Keeping a Tradition Alive” (2012) includes the following verse:

We’ve had a laugh, it was lots of fun

To some houses we'd walk,
 Sometimes run
 No matter if we had someone to drive
Each year, we try to keep a tradition alive
 Mumming has been part
 Of my life for so long
To let a tradition die would
Be totally wrong
 So yes I'll keep it up if I'm the only one
 Without mummies at Christmas
 There'd be no fun

(38, my italics)

On an internet blog, *Delaney's Rant*, Delaney writes: "*Mumming was disappearing in the 1990's and 2000's with the exception of pockets of rural Newfoundland and Labrador communities. The movement got a shot in the arm with the formation of the Mummies Festival in St. John's*" (December 14, 2011, my italics). On their website, *Hunting the Wren*, visual artists Gráinne Tynan and Eimear Tynan present art pieces meant to explore the phenomenon and keep it around:

The ongoing project *Hunting The Wren* looks at the relevance of historical objects and rituals to the construction of meanings in the contemporary world. The starting point for this work was shared childhood memories of Mumming in Fingal, Co. Dublin. Mumming is a centuries-old tradition involving the performance of a short play by stock characters, spoken in rhyming couplets and performed in colloquial settings (e.g. pub, house, street). The custom of mumming occurs internationally and is part of a wider tradition of mid-

winter masking. It incorporates a plenitude of art forms, including: story-telling, dance, music, costume making, and weaving. *The tradition is at risk of dying out and requires annual performances to remain vibrant and relevant to a rapidly changing culture.*

(www.huntingthewren.tumblr.com/about; accessed on 22 August 2013, my italics)

All this doomsaying isn't necessarily surprising, either. E.C. Cawte (1993) writes that "Dying out' is one of the main qualifications for any traditional custom," the other qualification being "Unknown origin and handing on added to antiquity." This might appear to be a paradoxical set of qualifications—dying out and being handed on. But Cawte is correct, for we do witness from mumm[er]ing's early appearance in texts the simultaneous cry of lamentation (of its disappearance) and fortitude (to carry it on). Boyes (2010) writes,

Their [the Folk] existence as a source of 'otherness', of a better and more natural state, offers a powerfully attractive rationale for their acceptance as fact. The way of life inherent in the concepts of the Folk and folk culture presented by the Revival did not exist in the English countryside of the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries. *For a variety of ideological purposes, however, their fragile, threatened presence was a structural necessity. Theirs was the culture which had to be revived through reperformance. And without the notional existence of the rapidly disappearing Folk, there would be no rationale for a Folk Revival.*

(17-18, my italics)

Briggs (1996) tells us of another *custodian of tradition*:

Ms. Medina reports that she felt that preserving Warao culture by presenting dance and musical performances was her duty. Drawing on a discourse of nostalgia, she sees Warao culture as moving toward extinction, and its future lies in her hands: "And from that time [I founded Dehe Hido], since that time, thank God I haven't dropped all this; because if I drop all this, okay, I can see that it is disappearing, being lost. Because the youth don't know it.

(442)

Briggs discusses Ms. Medina's discourse of nostalgia:

Nostalgic rhetorics regarding the disappearance of tradition convey a sense of particular forms as being quite real but distantly embodied in the past, as being only partially and problematically real and accessible in the present, and as being both unreal and inaccessible in the future. Second, these practices are metadiscursive not only in the sense

that they represent nonpresent discourses; by creating gaps and links, and sense of presence and absence, they also construct their own positionality as well. They are accordingly crucial means of creating discursive authority.

(449)

As *custodians of tradition*, mummers (and perhaps those who talk about them) become authorities of tradition and ritual, their performances being “the gestures made to last” that Artaud speaks of (1958, 59). Doing mumm[er]ing keeps it around. Every instance, every text, becomes a revival; a resurrection of some dying comrade by a miracle-working Quack Doctor. But if mummers (and those who talk about them) are trying to keep the tradition around, while at the same time declaring what they are doing as *part of that tradition*, the question then is *why*? Just what is tradition and what does it offer? Furthermore, what happens when we dip our feet in tradition’s stream, let alone try to steer its course? Handler and Linnekin (1984) presented a discussion on tradition, what it is, and what problems it poses for those who seek to define it: “One of the major paradoxes of the ideology of tradition is that attempts at cultural preservation inevitably alter, reconstruct, or invent the traditions that they are intended to fix” (288). As a sort of antidote to this paradox, they argue “that tradition resembles less an artifactual assemblage than a process of thought—an ongoing interpretation of the past” (274). As an ongoing interpretation, tradition is, according to Talal Asad, a discourse that has as much to do with the future as it does with the past and the present:

A tradition consists essentially of discourses, that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to *a past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and *a future* (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through *a present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)...For even where traditional practices appear to the anthropologist to be imitative of what has gone before, it will be the practitioners’ conceptions of what is *apt performance*, and of how the past is related

to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form.

(1996, 398)

Tradition is not simply the repetition of what has gone before. It is an attempt to secure for the future what has been felt before. In Gloucester, Mark, one of the mummers, when referring to tradition, mentioned the “the richness of repetition” (personal notes). He explained, “We don’t just look back on tradition. We look forward to it.”⁴¹ For Randall, looking forward was always a part of what he was doing with his mummers on Alberta Avenue:

And then the other thing we were doing this year was

Going really raw and taking it back to the street

So we almost went back to the beginning

We have a new young group of people

Doing

Going back out into the street like we started the first time

Doing our first play

And we have essentially passed the gauntlet

Or passed the torch

The first leg of that has now happened

So that’s significant for me

⁴¹ At the 2010 convention in Gloucester, David Lock organized an impromptu performance of his John Barleycorn play. He recruited members of the audience—made up primarily of mummers and academics—to play his cast of characters: the Mower, the Thresher, the Miller, the Brewer, Jack Finney, and, of course, the eponymous lead. After the play was done, remarking on the confusion of the players when trying to keep track of who was who, Peter Harrop said, “The line which best captured mumming was ‘Which of you is John Barleycorn!?’” In this case, I can’t recall whether it was Mark Gowers or Mark Henderson who provided the quote above as both were in attendance and I failed to record just which Mark it was. To both of you, in the spirit of John Barleycorn, I apologize.

It went from being

You know at the beginning of November I was feeling pretty trepidatious about the whole thing

And how it was going to work out, that it was going to become a big shemozzle and, oh God

I'm gonna be frantic

And then it just

Turned not that way at all

You know the

Path of least resistance

Ended up being exactly

What was needed in terms of

Building tradition

Building culture

Building history

Building momentum for the future

'cause

After the second year, once I realized

That I was gonna keep getting pestered for this, I was now the mummer guy

The other mummer guy [motioning to me], sorry!

[we laugh]

That

Um

[here he loses his train of thought]

...

They're the first group

To step into a body of knowledge

And that's the thing is, that

Now

As we begin this next cycle

What looks like the beginning of another cycle here, is we have

A small, young, keen group

Who are already kind of in their own thing

Who want to try

Working in the medium

And they took our first play, so they are stepping into a known now

So they didn't have to write their own play again

They got to

Re-write, essentially, the old

Our play

So yeah, that just really is intriguing, and then to see what they did with it, and I

I saw it for the first time

I didn't even say, 'Okay show me before you put it out on the street'

Like I really just left it

Left it alone

And uh

So the first time I saw it was

On the street with the audience

And

I was really impressed with what they did

You know

I would love to see them

I'm hoping maybe they'll come back and do it again next year

And do Fool Tom Fool

Or some combination

So in terms of where I want it to go next

That's where I want it to go next

I want either them or another group

To do Fool Tom Fool

And then the next year after that

So we're getting our year six, year seven, year eight, we're building to our year ten here, right?

So we get

Or actually it ends up being a year nine cycle, unfortunately

But um

So we did six

Fool Tom Fool

For Fifteen

And then

Uh

This Bell Trolls for Thee

And another group altogether again, you know maybe they're

A bunch of mimes

Or they're a bunch of ballet dancers or jazz dancers or they're

Hip hop or they're

Whatever, some group

That's willing to take

Or they're the Geriactors [a local seniors' drama group]

Right? It's whoever that's

So we get a different group or some group each year

Do the three

And then

In 2016

Seventeen

We get the old original crew together again

All together

To do

The Trilogy one more time

...

The thing I haven't figured out

Is how to make that

Is to spread the work in the interim, between shows so that people

Start

Like I think they've already associated Deep Freeze mummings

Deep Freeze mummings

It's the only place in Edmonton you see mummings other than in

You know

Newfie [Newfoundlander] communities

Just out, going house to house

'Cause it's really, that's the way it is there, right?

They go to the bars and they go to the houses

They don't

Do a show

A festival show, like that's totally not what they do

...

this has to

As this becomes

Cultural and historical

It needs to affect the larger community, it needs to be driven by the larger community

It can't always come from

One small group of people that just keep doing the same thing over and over again

It's like, if the festival only was the same every year and had the same people in it

Every year

And never grew, and never changed

It would get old really fast

But the fact that it does keep evolving and becoming more and more inclusive

That's part of how something becomes

A phenomenon in the culture

Becomes a meme or becomes a root

So when you think of Alberta Avenue and you think of

Of winter

When you think of Alberta Avenue, you think of festivals

You think of winter festivals, you think of mummings

You can have everybody in Edmonton thinking that

You know

You start to actually

Maybe then it spreads

Maybe it's not just that festival

Maybe it ends up with its own

The mummers begin, at some point, to offshoot into their own festival

And it's

Mummersfest

And it's people coming from all

It becomes one of the new places to come

If you're a mummer

Wherever you are in the world

Right?

So that's the thing to me is, there was a point in the development

When I realized

That this isn't just a one-off

This is

Something

This is not

Um

This isn't a piece of art that I'm sticking in the ground and saying 'Look at that, isn't that nice?' It's not like an ice sculpture

I'm building a stone

That's gonna stand

For

Once I started thinking that way I started thinking, 'Okay'

And part of it's my involvement with Arts on the Ave

Is about

Building community

Building a foundation

That can support growth

And

Inclusiveness and sharingness

And compatibility

And a space to feel welcome

That is ongoing and self-perpetuating

Right?

And that's

There's no point in doing something that's only going to last

Five years or ten years

When you're talking about that kind of

You're talking about changing a community

You want it to change and then

Keep growing in that direction

You don't want to just go,

'Oh yeah, there was ten years where

118th Avenue was a great place to be

And then all the hookers and druggies came back and the pawn shops opened up again

And everything was blah blah blah blah' You don't want that

And this is the same thing

I mean this is sort of like 'Okay if you're gonna build

'Cause I've watched traditions get built and die

You know, First Night festival

Is a great example

Of a festival that an arc and then died

And there's all kinds of reasons why that one did the way it did, but...

It's the same with this company

My company here

I'm trying to build a company that I can eventually

You know, when I'm sixty or seventy or eighty or and kind of bored with it or my body just won't do it anymore or whatever the case may be

You know I want to go and live in Hawaii with Margaret

Or surf or whatever or start a new company somewhere or

Whatever

I don't want to just wrap it up and put it in a box and call it done

I want it to keep going

I want the National Stiltwalkers of Canada⁴² to be larger than me

⁴² See <http://www.nationalstiltwalkersofcanada.ca/>

Right now if I left everything would implode on itself, very quickly

It's very close to being

It's starting to

People are starting to have

Ownership

And so back to the mummies again

I'm trying to create something that's larger than me

Larger than the five or six or seven people that originally started it

You know, larger than all of that

You know what I'd love to see?

I would love to see next year

The kids, the little kids that did the contest, they got third prize?

They were all nine, ten, two years ago

So they're

Twelve, thirteen now, next year they're thirteen, fourteen

Years old

So they're junior high kids

They're that much more knowledgeable

They're that much more

Self-aware, they're that much more, you know, all that, everything

I would love

Them

To do Fool Tom Fool, and Fool Tom Fool would be a perfect one for that age actually

When you think about the play itself and

Really, wouldn't that just be awesome?

That would be

That'd be really neat

So

Okay, so

[he laughs]

...

In another conversation, Randall said “Those first four years were about creating myth, creating tradition, creating new identity for the community... This is yours now. You can do this now.” He said he was trying to create something larger than himself; that will go on without him. Randall’s hope is that the tradition will carry on and that, as part of that tradition, the mummers on Alberta Avenue can continue to contribute to the community’s revitalization. For Randall, mumm[er]ing as a ritual might be meant to perpetuate more than just the tradition itself but something else for which it stands: Community. Home.

Chapter 7. Going Home

It was strange to think that the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective would meet the Coventry Mummers. For me, two worlds were colliding, and I couldn't be sure what the spectacle would look like when they did. These had always been two very different teams, separated by an ocean and the better (*bigger, not better) part of a continent. But that chasm would begin to shrink with the approach of the 2014 International Mummers Festival, that year being held in Gloucester, England. The festival is made up of two parts: the symposium and the performances. Attendees—including academics, mummers, and really just anyone interested in the topic—meet to both discuss mumm[er]ing and to do mumm[er]ing. It wasn't surprising that some of the Coventry Mummers would be there—they usually made it a point to attend—but Randall and the AAMC had never been. Neither had I, actually. This year, however, the stars aligned, funding became available, and the founding members of the troupe were all able to make the journey. When I asked Randall about taking his team to England and why he felt it was important to do so, he said, “Every Muslim has to go to Mecca; Every Jew has to go the Wailing Wall.” He explained that, if we are going to use the name and the form, we have to have the connections with the roots. Randall sees the AAMC as a story and, if they can become legit with the larger community, then that is the primary story arc. So how did the story go?

I asked Randall,

When you went to Gloucester

Were you

Seeking something, or hoping for something?

Or wanting something?

That's an interesting question

Yeah

I mean

I was wanting a lot of things

Actually

I was

Wanting to

Go to the font, so to speak

To return to the source, that kind of idea

Having

Read

Various things online

I had all kinds of preconceptions , I want those preconceptions to either be

Validated or

Corrected

So I was very curious to get

“The word” [he literally does air quotes]

In a way

I was also looking for

For

I guess

I guess you'd call it validation

That, yes we were on the right track

That we were

That we got it

That what we thought we were interpreting

Was actually a true understanding

So those were things on my mind

We were also, I mean

Quite honestly

We were looking to just go for a lark

'What?

We get to do this?

Are you kidding me?

Yeah, let's go!

It was my first time to England

Really just looking for the experience

But

I did have those kind of

Expectations

Hopes

I guess some nervousness, but not really

Like there wasn't

I wasn't walking around being any kind of anxious or fearful that we were

Gonna be turned away, anything like that

More just

You know

'Okay

You know

Going to the mother land

We gotta find out from the real thing'

So there was all kinds of aspects of that

We've already talked about

Rewarding and just exactly what I was hoping for and more

And

Completely not

A complete readjustment of my expectations

Which was also educational

And properly

Framing it

I have a much clearer understanding

Of just how hard it is to keep a tradition going

Even something that old

You know

In the modern day

...

What was it like going to Gloucester?

In some ways it was way more than we expected

And in some ways it was way less than we expected

It was definitely worth going

And

As a group

For that core group of people

Who had started back in

2009 or whatever it was

And followed the whole path along

The whole journey of what we created

To go there

And go to the

Land of Mumming

Essentially [he laughs]

And then be brought up into

What

The way it's really played there

In a contemporary setting

Was really, really interesting

So we got there

We went out

The first night we got there we went out and met everybody

You know it was all just folksy and easy going and then

And, you know, we had no real idea what to expect

And I think there was a little bit of that going on both sides, they were like

[in a growly voice] “Who are these Canadians [grumbles]? What do they know about mumming [grumbles]?”

And we were like, “Ooh, what’s this really going to be like?”

‘Cause, you know, this is the Land of the Land

But we really clearly very quickly figured out

It’s just a really interesting bunch of folks

Who

Have this background

And what I discovered was

One of the things I discovered was

For them

It’s like, you know

Some people curl

Some people play hockey

It's just a thing that they do

And most of them

They do it because it's been in their family

Or

They dated somebody who did it

Or

You know, they got dragged into it and then thought, 'Hey, this is pretty fun'

...

But it's not

Nobody there was an actor

Or a theatrical person

Certainly not in a professional sense

Whereas we had come at it from a very specifically

You know

We're all actors, theatre people

And we created this thing

As a theatrical thing that was in owed to this history, but

Was very clearly

A theatrical endeavor

And so when the two met

Of course

It was very surprising and very

There was some

What was interesting was the adjustment we had to make

So

They were very generous

In that

When we went out the first night

They didn't make us go first

So they said,

"We're going to go to a bar and we're gonna do one here

And then we're gonna go to another bar and we're gonna do

Yours and yours

And then we're gonna go to another bar and do yours, yours, and [points to himself] Ours"

So we were

You know

At the back of the pack

So we got a chance to see

How it's done

Which was really

Really

Interesting

And I'll tell ya

After the first one we were

All of us

Kind of going

[looks around with wide eyes] "Really?"

Okay..." [he laughs]

So in what way?

Well

Because literally they just, they didn't, it's not like

We sort of thought

Oh this is a thing where you've got a tour

The bars know we're coming and everybody knows this

It's like a

Like a theatre tour

Like a mini theatre tour

This is something that's very formal

At this time of year, everybody knows it's happening, da da da

That's not the case at all

They just

Pick a bar route

They don't announce

The bar owners maybe know

They're coming

...

The patrons knew nothing

So when we arrived

All in costume

All dressed up

And the only people dressed up

At all

Came into this bar

Literally pushed the audience back

Just literally took space

Yelling and screaming and blowing our horns and banging our gongs and

Took space

And then

Did the show

And then

Hit the audience up for money and drinks

Literally

Just like that

And then hung around for a while

Visited, drank, had a few, you know, socialized

And then [crumples his hands together], and out

On to the next one

...

When our turn came

And then there's this

Of course, we're in our costumes, they're in their costumes

And we've all been tromping along and having beers and getting all to know each other

But there's still this unknown factor

They know what they do

They all know each other

They're the in crowd, they've been doing this for

Decades, if not longer

And we're the new unknown

We're the new kids from the colony

[he laughs]

So when it was our turn, of course

We go in

And we take our space

And there's this kind of extra level of kind of

[gasp] What's going to happen?

Is it gonna be good?

Are they gonna suck?

Do they know what mumming is for real?

There was just this little extra tension, and you could see it

Not in the patrons

'Cause for them it was all just wild and crazy

But

Within the group of us, who had been travelling all evening together, it was like

Okay now, it's time, let's see if they really know what they're doing

And we set up

And we went

And

We

Had

A blast

And it was [snap]

Over like that

And the next thing you know, we're being patted on the back

And, 'Can I buy you a drink? That was the funniest thing' and

And, 'Here, punch me with those fists!'

All this stuff

And this sudden

'Oh

They get it

They're family'

And then it was this whole

The whole ambience changed after that

It was a very subtle shift

It goes from being

You know

The neighbour that you wave to

To drinking buddy

That change

...

And that was also the time

We really felt like

As a

As a crew

Our group plus the other mummings groups that we travelled with

That's when we really bonded

You know, it was that day

The night time was thing

That was sort of like the proving ground

But the next day was when we really got on and, 'Okay let's have some fun'

...



Plate 23. Jon Patterson (as the Troll) and Mark Henderson (as St. George) parading with other mummers down the streets of Gloucester, 2014



Plate 24. Mark Henderson (as St. George) and Caley Suliak (as Princess Terra) escorting a charcoal-faced Doctor from another team

That's the thing is

As a group

We like it

We enjoy it, we get it

And

We like sharing it with ourselves

Like

You know, the wrap-up night when everybody wanted to share something new and we said

'Well

We could

You know

Do our other play for you, it only takes fifteen minutes,' and they were like 'Yeah yeah yeah, bring it, bring it!'

Nobody else will ever see that

Necessarily

Certainly that performance especially

That was just

And that was after many beers, right?

So that was just for us

Us performing for ourselves

As a collective

So yeah

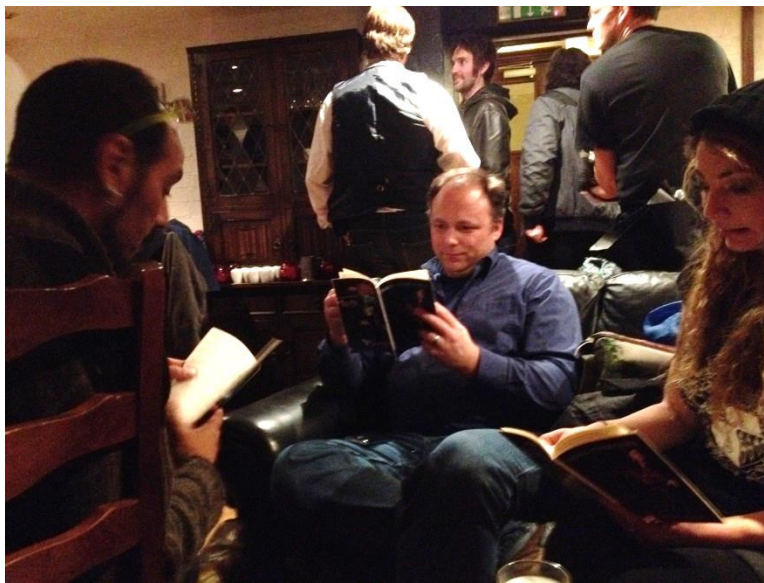
The idea that we do it for ourselves

And the memory of what it means

Is as valid as

Whether there's an audience or not

...



**Plate 25. The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective prepare to do a live reading of their play to
the English mummers**

Those things you were hoping for

Would you say that you found them there?

Oh yeah

We got such a great

Steeping

In

The culture that

Gave rise to this tradition

First of all

Getting to go to those cathedrals and those churches and those places and just walk around

Places that

Where

You know

That's been going on

In these streets and in these bars and in these communities

For hundreds of years

Whether the mass populace knows about it or not

It's been going on

Continuously

Which is really cool

And then also at the symposium

You know

See the people that have charted the thread

And have a very clear

Understanding of

Permutations and ways that it's evolved

Over the years, how it's responded

How the tradition itself has responded to different adversities and challenges

At different times in history

You know

So it just sort of

It was just sort of like

'Oh yeah

Okay'

That kind of soaking up

And kind of feeling like, 'Okay now we are part of that'

Now that we've really gone back there

You don't want to

I don't necessarily want to say 'We're now anointed' or anything like that

But

Kinda'

You know what I mean, it's kind of like

We get it

It was very

Yeah

We came away with feeling

That is was really, really worth it

It did make a difference

...

(Personal Interview, January 2016)

So what does Alberta Avenue do to mumm[er]ing? To help answer that question, let me go back, if I may, before Gloucester.

For their first two seasons, the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective performed their plays out on the streets, as is the convention of the wider English tradition. This presented some problems, however. When the crowd is thick and deep, it makes it difficult for audience members to see the action at the centre of the performance circle.



Plate 26. The crowd gathered around the performance circle, January 2014

Likewise, even when up on a stage, performing outdoors can make weather a formidable foe. In 2011, a blizzard rolled through during one of the AAMC's evening performances. The show went on as the mummers and audience valiantly endured the frosty lambast, but the howling winds and cutting snow did hamper the flow of things. For the 2013 season, the AAMC decided it best to hold the performances in the Alberta Avenue Theatre. This was for largely pragmatic reasons. Performing indoors, on a stage, makes weather no worry at all and allows all audience

members to see the plays clearly. One ironically warm afternoon, waiting for their play to begin, Randall wandered into the Avenue Theatre's lobby eloquently reciting—almost singing—words I hadn't heard uttered since my time with the Coventry Mummers in England: *Room, room, pray give us room, give us room to rhyme...* This is the opening plea of many mummers plays; the Presenter announcing the performance and calling for space and attention. When Randall spoke those words, no matter how off-the-cuff they might have been, I experienced a moment I can only describe as providential. Hearing those English mummer words in Edmonton's Avenue Theatre was both disorienting and, at the same time, well, *orienting*. Different places, different times, different mummers, brought into sudden conjunction with each other. What else but a miracle incantation could bring about such a wonder of time and space? That place of meeting, though, that momentary nexus, was a comfortable and strangely familiar thing to inhabit. Despite all the gaps, it was the links that shone.

In Gloucester, the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective were, as Randall so whimsically put it, anointed as drinking buddies; as family. Steve, one of the English mummers, said “Randall looked up some stuff about mumming, and saw to it to create something in the spirit of mumming, and to us it looks like mumming.” As unremarkable as it may sound, in one afternoon's “Canada session”, Peter Harrop mentioned in his introduction to my and Randall's presentations that Randall and I are both from Edmonton. When he said that, I couldn't help but be stirred by the realization that Edmonton, now, was present in the mummer phenomenon, both from a scholarly side and a performance one. Who knew that Edmonton would become a part of it? That tradition. That story.

At the symposium, I had shown a short documentary put together from the video I've collected during my time with the Coventry Mummers and the Alberta Avenue Mummers

Collective. One segment compared the Coventry Mummers hobby horse play with the one the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective performed on the streets of Edmonton. After returning home, Ron emailed me. To be honest, I was worried. What would he think of the AAMC? What would he think of my comparison of them to his Coventry Mummers? He wrote,

...One thing—I was impressed by the hobby horse—so inventive. Is there any chance of getting a/some still(s) of it? Does it have its own play?

All else aside, the notion that Ron was impressed by the AAMC's hobby horse—the same beast that lured him into his own mummer story way back when—was one that sat with me in just the right way and made me believe even more in the links than the gaps.



Plate 27. Ronald Shuttleworth of the Coventry Mummers having a cider and a conversation with Calvin Malaka of the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective

What does Alberta Avenue do to mumm[er]ing? For Randall, the plays that have appeared on Alberta Avenue are stories of the place. They are local centric archives of the things that have happened there.⁴³ Randall explained,

And our stories

The three plays that we wrote

And even the plays that were written by our contestants in the contest

Are very local centric

They're full of local references

Both about famous people, about political situations, about

All kinds of things

They also become

Now that time has passed

They're somewhat archival

Because they do refer back to things that were happening

At that time

Likewise, mummers from across the pond are considering what the AAMC are doing as mumm[er]ing indeed. Edmonton has become a player in the intertextual discourse that makes up the mummer phenomenon. The annals of mumm[er]ing, made up of all the texts that speak to one another by and through the word “mummer”, will now also say “Alberta Avenue.” But being accepted by the larger mummer community—and therefore the tradition itself—was only half of

⁴³ See appendix for the mummers play my team wrote, including all of our local references.

the story for Randall. The other half involves successfully perpetuating the tradition within his own home community. These two halves are inextricable and inseparable because, in his story about the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective and their home, tradition is essentially synonymous—and symbiotic—with community; one creates the other. Randall said,

It gets under your skin

And you want it to succeed, you want it to go forward, you want to keep perpetuating it

And I think that's

That's the thing about something that becomes a tradition

Is

It's something that gets under your skin that you want to keep

Happening, because it

It has value for you

And you can see

The shared value

As people take it on

You know

It was really fun for me

By the time we got to where we were doing the trilogy as a whole

Most of our audience

People in the audience

Had in fact seen all three

Like a lot of people in that audience had been coming to the festival

Repeatedly

And that they were already primed for the jokes

I remember a couple of times in the show where

People already knew “This is the part where

You know

We chant along

Or we do this

Or we call back or

That there were moments of participation

...

So I would like to keep that going forward

...

Will the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective perform again?

Yyyesss [he says cautiously]

Hopefully

That is certainly the intention

Everybody that’s been involved has expressed an interest in

Doing it again...

...

So

You know

The Alberta Avenue Mimmers Collective was created

Because of Deep Freeze

And Deep Freeze was created

Because of Arts on the Ave as an effort to

Sort of

Revive the neighbourhood

Yeah

How do you see

Or what is the relationship between

The mummer tradition and Alberta Avenue

Going forward?

Well

Ultimately

Hmm, that's an interesting question

I think what's gonna happen is

That

The collective is

Something that is right now a very small group of people

That are loosely associated...

Alberta mummers exist because of Deep Freeze which exists because of Arts on the Avenue's initiative

And that's fine

That's a good thing

I think

Where do they go forward from here?

Ultimately all of this is about community building

That's what Arts on the Avenue does

It's trying to build and strengthen community

So that they become a place where you can feel

Safe, supported

And able to

Be respected and enjoyed

And give respect and enjoy

And that's what their mandate is, ultimately

And

If

The Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective

Can be a tool in that toolbox

Of enabling that to happen

That's

That'll be awesome

You know, if we can keep it going forward so that it keeps doing that

'Cause what happened was

It started

It's still mainly a community thing

But, like anything it always has, as these things grow

You know

The first year, maybe five hundred people came out

The next year, five thousand people came out

Next year, seven thousand

Eight thousand

Fifteen thousand

Twenty thousand

Twenty four thousand

This year I think it was twenty five or twenty eight thousand, it broke

Broke last year's record

Wow

Mainly 'cause Sunday was so beautiful

But, you know

So the numbers are growing which means that it's not just Alberta Avenue anymore

And that's important because if it's just Alberta Avenue

It's not gonna sustain itself, it can't sustain itself, and it becomes very

Insular

It becomes a thing there just doing around in a closet, essentially

And then it has a potential to die

Because it doesn't have enough

You can only feed on yourself for so long

But now

Alberta Avenue

Is recognized

As a place where arts and culture happen

So the larger community comes

And the larger community participates

In building that community up

People move in

People come there to shop

To go to the theatre, to go to the art, go to the galleries

To take in the festivals, all that stuff

And they're coming from outside

And that builds Edmonton up

And people come from outside Edmonton

And Edmonton and Alberta Avenue are recognized as

Places of culture

And that's the thing

So that's partly why going to Gloucester

Was important

For the Mummers Collective

Because we connect ourselves with that larger community

We've now connected to

That tradition

There

And they know about us and we know about them

And if they ever come to Canada

They're gonna know that they can come to Edmonton and there's gonna be a place where they're gonna be

They're gonna have peeps, where they're gonna be welcome, where they know they can find good culture

So it's all about

The larger impact

And the continuing expansion of

Of influence

...

Since you've been with Deep Freeze

How has Alberta Avenue changed?

Oh!

So here's an example

When I moved into

I had my little stilt company

And we were looking for a rehearsal storage place

And we moved into the Community League [in 2005 or 2006]

And there was

Nobody there

It was an empty building

...

And the Community League before that

Had been a really nasty bingo hall

And there was

All kinds of [makes a look of disgust]

I mean it was

It was gross

It was gross

There was needles in the backyard, back garden area

Go upstairs, there's crap everywhere

Bottles, cans, broken glass, you name it, just really scuzzy

And all the bingo equipment was still there too

So we kind of took one storage room and cleared some space away

And made it

You know

Got in there

And we were paying like \$250 bucks a month

Pfff, easy peasy, no problem

But we really had to make sure we'd lock everything up

We had to make sure the doors were always locked, people were always trying to break in

I'd come in after a day and find the door open and the place had been rummaged

Just all that kind of stuff

You'd go to park your car and there was pimps on the corner

And hookers

And drug dealers

It was a crime zone

And it had been for a long time

Alberta Avenue was known as

You know

Crime city

It was the place where all that happened

The Cromdale was just down the road

One of the most violent bars in the city

The whole

That's what we moved into

About the same time we moved into it, into there

Arts on the Avenue was getting started

And I got approached eventually

Because, you know, 'Oh hey, there's arty people over there'

Well, you end up talking

And I ended up on the board of Arts on the Avenue

And we started all talking

'Well, how do you change a neighbourhood?

How do you get involved in something?'

Well

You know

You get to know your neighbours

You find out who's like minded

You talk to people

And then eventually, you know, you

Start a festival

'Cause that's a great way to

Bring public awareness

And to create some sort of flagship around which

People can muster

...

And so now, zip forward

Eleven years

Or twelve years or whatever it is

Eleven years I guess

You can

Kids are playing in the playground

The back garden area is actually a garden

People with strollers, families walk down the streets

There's a piano outside the Carrot coffeehouse which is a

Community-run, volunteer-run

Coffeehouse

...

They have

People that used it as their community hub

There's, you know

All the pregnant moms meet on Monday mornings

Chat about what it's like to be pregnant

And then there's the

All the moms who have their one and two-year-olds, they get together

And then there's the knitters who get together and they call their group the Stitch'n'bitch

And so there's all these things around which

Community has grown

And because people are on the streets and walking around and they're there with their kids and they're watching and they're looking and they're reporting and they're taking up space

The crime has had to move because crime doesn't like

An audience

You know

And it's really simple, it's not that you have to push them away

Or shove them or anything

But I'll tell you

If you've got a family sitting on a street corner

And a hooker sitting across on the other street corner

A john is not going to stop his truck

To pick up the girl

He's gonna drive on

So she's gonna move on

So then the pimps move on

And the drugs move on

And yes, there is that thing that they do move somewhere else

I'm sorry

But then your community can take its initiative and do the same thing

And ultimately, eventually

If every community does this

They're gonna have to rally and do their own thing

Create their own culture somewhere

And that's a whole completely different story

But this story

Of taking a community back for the citizens that actually live there

And want to feel safe in their neighbourhood

And want to have a culture around that safety and an identity of what that is

That's what Arts on the Avenue has helped create

...

It's so different

You look at the

Even at just the most pragmatic level

You look at the store fronts

In two thousand six, seven, eight, and nine

Most of those store fronts, lots of store fronts were empty

What you had mostly was

Pawn shops

And

Bar

And, you know, a couple of other things

And everybody's struggling

Now you've got almost no vacancy

For space on the Avenue

Everything's renting

Property values are going up

Everybody's prospering

People can walk down the street and feel safe at night

Mothers and babies with their strollers can cruise down the street any time of day

Like

That's significantly different

It really is amazing

It's astounding

You know that you can go to the Carrot

And run into somebody you know

Or

Make friends

You know, if you don't know anybody and you just moved to the neighbourhood

That's where you go to find out what's happening

...

A link with the larger mummer tradition is meaningful for the story of Alberta Avenue and its Mummers Collective because it helps to substantiate the community, the place they call home. Alberta Avenue becomes a place where meaningful connections can be made, arts and culture can be sought, and community can be felt. The idea that Alberta Avenue shares in a tradition that spans the globe and stretches blurrily back into the mists of time gives the place a dose of miracle cure; supplying it with some needed gumption and allowing it to go on a while longer. In my introduction I asked the question: What does mumm[er]ing *do* to Alberta Avenue? We find our answer by going there, as Randall said, *to find out what's happening*. So what is happening to Alberta Avenue? Cathy Roy hadn't been on Alberta Avenue—the place she grew up—in years. In 2016, she decided to attend the Deep Freeze Festival and once again stroll the streets of her old neighbourhood. This is her story about going back.

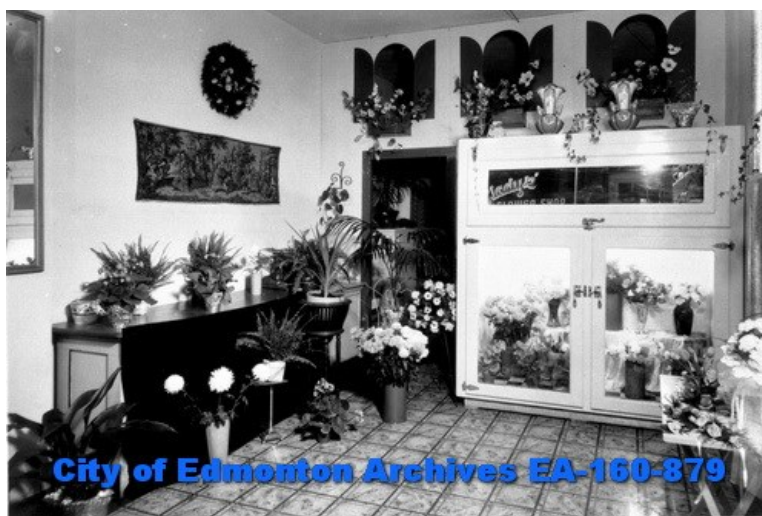


Plate 28. Gladys' Flower Shop in 1941



Plate 29. The Carrot Community Arts Coffee Shop in 2016

There was Stan's Barber Shop on the corner

And I think The Carrot [Community Arts Coffee Shop] is Stan's Barber Shop and Gladys's Flower Shop combined

'Cause I was in there on that

Festival weekend, that winter festival thing

I went down there with my kid

Oh you did?

Yeah

'Cause I was out with my kid and he's always up for something new

And I said, do you want to

go?

And he said, yeah, I'm dying to, and we went and we really liked it

Because it was oh so cold out that day, it was like minus twenty five. We went on the Saturday

And I think the Sunday was the nice day

So we were there and we were just freezing but he insisted on walking the whole way down and the whole way back

...



Plate 30. The Carrot Community Arts Coffee Shop, Exterior, 2016

And then we were so damn cold we went into The Carrot

And I recognized [she closes her eyes here]

There's a door that goes into the back with two

Like, stainless steel crossbars on it [opens her eyes]

Like an old sort of deco style door and I think that was the door that went into the back where Gladys made the flower arrangements

That's what looked familiar

And to tell you the truth

I wanted to move back

Oh really?

Yeah

It was so nice [she gets choked up here, tears swelling as shallow pools in her eyes]

Like so

Earthy feeling, you know?

Like sort of really

Great

'Cause I live in Riverdale now which sort of has that rep of being

Arty and stuff

But it's quite bourgeois now, I must say

That's interesting because my next question was going to be

You know

Well, before the holidays

When you and I had talked last

How much had you been on

In that neighbourhood?

Oh hardly at all

My mother moved out in 2000

And so I hadn't gone very often, sometimes I drive by the old house to see

What's going on with it or if it's still there or whatever

But I hadn't

Stopped and done anything, and a couple of times I'd gone to the, is it called Paradiso? The Mexican food store that's down...

Yeah, it's great

Yeah

So I'd gone there a couple of times but otherwise I didn't really have business there, and I knew that The Carrot was there and I always thought, oh I should go

But

I never did

So it was the festival that brought me there

And talking to you, and me thinking that

Yeah I should sort of get in touch with what's going on

So that's really neat that you say that

So

You

You go back to this

You know

Neighbourhood

This festival's going on

Kind of just take me back there again, like what were some of

You know, you were talking about how it just

It had like a grounded feeling to it

But tell me a little bit more about what it was like to go back to the neighbourhood recently

Well

Well

Going back

I

I don't know if I can even talk about it [she gets choked up here again]

Like I'm shocked by how emotional it makes me

'Cause

Well, I lived there for twenty years

And I was part of it

And it's three generations of my family

Or is it four?

Four generations of my family lived there

So I don't know

I just love it

It feels good

...

So I just felt really proud of Norwood because

When I lived in Norwood it was all really church oriented, right?

...[Here Cathy went on to talk about her parents' church-centered lives even though they were relaxed in their devotion vs the more dogmatic, devout Catholic devotion of her husband's family]...

You were in the choir

You were in the drama group

You were in the ladies group

It was sort of social group, right?

It's a social centre

It's a social hub, right?

Yeah, yeah

And so that's

That's what it felt like to me now

There was still all this social hub happening

In Norwood

And it was in the places that I remembered.

(Personal interview, Edmonton, 29 January 2016)

Others see the neighbourhood returning to its former state, too; summoning the vocabulary, vernacular, and slogans that now seem to belong to this localized genre, this novelization, of Alberta Avenue. In an interview posted on YouTube, one woman remarked,

We're just about there

[she laughs]

Yes

We have a few things to accomplish yet

No community is perfect

But we see a lot of young families in the community, which is so healthy and vibrant

Yes we have seniors

But the community itself now seems like a

A little town

Within the city

And people in the community watch out for one another, we know

I've never known so many people in a city before

But there all in this community

It's more like a town

You know where so-and-so lives

If you don't know anything else about them

You look out, people look out for one another

("Now and Then 118 Avenue", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghSDZFFPF5Y>)

What does mumm[er]ing do to Alberta Avenue? As the people I've spoken with have said, and as I've attested to in my own words, the neighbourhood has changed. Even in the short time that I've known it, it has changed. Although the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective's performances are admittedly only a modest part of that change, it cannot be denied that they have contributed in some fashion to the current way of things. As people walk the carnival-dressed

streets of a neighbourhood they might once have avoided, some expect to find mummers there. That expectation—to find a certain thing in a certain place—should not be trivialized. Mummers have become a part of Alberta Avenue. In the future, when that place is remagined in someone’s stories and old photographs, or their aging digital video and audio, the mummers might appear there, too, in that dream. When I watched the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective perform at the Avenue Theatre, speaking mummer words and doing mummer things, I was in that dream. Waiting for the mummers beneath that old marquee, I remember the smell of popcorn wafting through the foyer. After our talk, Gerald played Simani’s *The Mummer Song* on his accordion for me. At one point he stopped playing and lowered his accordion. He said,

I’m putting me self right into it now

When I’m playin dat now

My mind

Has left me and has gone right back there when I was a mummer

And I’m wit em (his voice quiets)

And they’re all sittin around

And they’re watchin us

They’re wavin their sticks

And they’re dancing, they’re doin everything

And he began to play once again. He took me back there, too, the both of us dreaming of home.

We all do, I think. Mummers, perambulating by, parading down the lane, one by one, are the sheep we count as we drift off into dreamland.

Chapter 8. Back to Baie Verte: Nightmares in Dreamland

The neophyte may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of customary burial, may be stained black, or may be forced to live for a while in the company of masked and monstrous mummers representing, *inter alia*, the dead, or worse still, the undead.”

Victor Turner, 1967.

I began my Master of Arts thesis (Levitt 2011) with a ghost story. Rather, I presented a series of ghost stories I had spotted throughout my research, all of them hovering over what I called the “macabre discourse” of mummer metafolklore. I shall recount some of them here.

Steve Tillis (1999), for instance, writes of the “ghosts” of mummers’ plays that might “send shivers up one’s spine” (194). He was referring not only to the characters of the plays, who, according to one performer, are “the ghosts of our forefathers,” but also to the impressions that audience members have of the folkplays as something mysterious, solemn, unsettling (190, 193). E.T. Kirby (1971) tells a mummer story about ancient shamans being driven mad by ghosts, conducting séances, having out-of-body experiences, and escorting spirits to the underworld. Gash (1998) also writes of the ghostly characters of the Mummers Play. He writes, “[the old woman] conforms to the archetype of winter and of death and is thus the representation of the old year, and she therefore has a very definite connection to the fertility rite” (8). Gash writes of the old traditional costumes as being representative of the “spirit of vegetation” (19). Peter Millington (2002) has said of outdated theories on mummer origins: “it has become clear to me that there is still a need to lay old skeletons to rest, otherwise the old theories will continue to return to haunt us” (12). In Thomas Hardy’s *Return of the Native*, the author describes a mummer performance (1878, 122-149). He writes, “They sang the plaintive chant that follows the play, during which all the dead men rise to their feet in a silent and awful manner, like the

ghosts of Napoleon's soldiers in *Midnight Review*" (141). In his 19th century pseudo-autobiographical work of fiction, *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, Washington Irving writes of his eponymous protagonist's visit to a rural manor owned by "The Squire," a man who is devoted to preserving the "traditions" of old. He writes,

When I returned to the drawing room, I found the company seated round the fire, listening to the parson, who was deeply ensconced in a high backed oaken chair, the work of some cunning artificer of yore, which had been brought back from the library for his particular accommodation. From this venerable piece of furniture, with which his shadowy figure and dark weazen face so admirably accorded, he was dealing forth strange accounts of the popular superstitions, and legends of the surrounding country, with which he had become acquainted in the course of his antiquarian researches... He gave us several anecdotes of the fancies of the neighbouring peasantry... These tales were often laughed at by some of the sturdier among the rustics, yet when night came on, there were many of the stoutest unbelievers that were shy of venturing alone in the footpath that led across the church yard.

(1978, 957-958)

Irving continues,

All these superstitions I found had been very much countenanced by the Squire, who, though not so superstitious himself, was very fond of seeing others so. He listened to every goblin tale of the neighbouring gossips with infinite gravity, and held the porter's wife in high favour on account of her talent for the marvelous. He was himself a great reader of old legends and romances, and often lamented that he could not believe in them, for a superstitious person, he thought, must live in a kind of fairy land.

(958-959)

So where are the mummers? Well, once the ghost stories had been told, "That indefatigable spirit, Master Simon, in the faithful discharge of his duties, as lord of misrule, had conceived the idea of a Christmas mummary, or masqueing..." (959). A perambulation of little mummers proceeds, the children charging through the chamber in their motley disguises to the delight of their observers. Kenneth Grahame (1899) tells a tale of visiting mummers in his memoir of childhood, *The Golden Age*. He writes,

Twelfth-Night had come and gone, and life next morning seemed a trifle flat and

purposeless. But yester-eve and the mummers were here! They had come striding into the old kitchen, powdering the red brick floor with snow from their barbaric bedizenments; and stamping, and crossing, and declaiming, till all was whirl and riot and shout. Harold was frankly afraid: unabashed, he buried himself in the cook's ample bosom. Edward feigned a manly superiority to illusion, and greeted these awful apparitions familiarly, as Dick and Harry and Joe. As for me, I was too big to run, too rapt to resist the magic and surprise. Whence came these outlanders, breaking in on us with song and ordered masque and a terrible clashing of wooden swords? And after these, what strange visitants might we not look for any quiet night, when the chestnuts popped in the ashes, and the old ghost stories drew the awestricken circle close? Old Merlin, perhaps, "all furred in black sheep-skins, and a russet gown, with a bow and arrows, and bearing wild geese in his hand!" Or stately Ogier the Dane, recalled from Faëry, asking his way to the land that once had need of him! Or even, on some white night, the Snow-Queen herself, with a chime of sleigh-bells and the patter of reindeer's feet, halting of a sudden at the door flung wide, while aloft the Northern Lights went shaking attendant spears among the quiet stars!

(59)

Not only are the mummers themselves frightening, but their visit is contextualized within a paragraph that summons other phantoms, too. The mummers, for Grahame, were right at home with a sylvan Merlin, a spectral Snow-Queen, and ghost stories told by the hearth. This frightening imagery appears in other media too. David Blackwood is an artist who has created a number of pieces devoted to mummering in Newfoundland. His mummers are most always in dark, drawn in black and white but for the hushed colors of their glowing lanterns. Over snowy wastes, veils waft in the winter wind like enlivened shrouds. Under starry skies, grotesque masks conceal the similarly grotesque and aged countenances beneath. These mummers are ghosts, to be sure. Discourse about Blackwood's images play with the same tropes. In *The Art of David Blackwood* (1988), Gough writes, "The lace, become a veil, would hide the shaded face, would sometimes hold phantom eyes and mouth painted upon them" (p.3). Gough evokes with his text what Blackwood does with his etchings of phantasmal mummers. Gough reveals another scene from Blackwood's repertoire:

But underneath all this a shadow stirs. Once, one of the mummers died—died outdoors, on a lake between friendly homes—and the men, still in disguise, laid the body out upon the ice. They waited for the sled of death to take the man away. The moon shone over the scene—and under the other prints of mummers, the detail, the mystery, under the deepest shadow—look and you will see this man. Look, and you will see what David Blackwood is watching.

(3)

Diane Tye (2008) describes Blackwood's brand of mummer: "As is characteristic of Blackwood's printmaking, his mummers are dark; one can feel the cold of the winter night as these mysterious figures move from house to house. There is no visible camaraderie binding Blackwood's mummers even when they travel in groups" (paragraph 14).

Incidentally, I have encountered phantoms in my own conversations about mummers. A friend of mine revealed to me once that she found the word "mummer" to be a little ominous, although she could offer no explanation as to why other than perhaps because it sounded like "mummy." I wonder if she is right. One time a friend of my mother's asked me, "How is your research about zombies coming along?" I stared at her blankly. "Oh, not zombies," she said, "I mean mummies." A few years ago I was in a museum café and got to chatting with the woman at the counter while I waited for my food. I was telling her about my research and she pointed out to me that the zombie walkers that have been gaining popularity over the recent years are "mummers too."

If we can consider the mummer phenomenon as a kind of genre, Bakhtin tells us there will inevitably be speech styles congruent to that genre. There will be ways of speaking, slogans, vocabulary, emphases that belong to it (1981, 262). Back in 2011 I asked the question, why has mumm[er]ing "become haunted by a ghastly metafolklore? Why do so many who speak of mummers' plays wax Poe-etic as they spin their tales?" One possibility is that "mummers' plays

are folkplays, after all, which is to say they are folktales...and tales told at Christmastide are sometimes blessed with a spectre or two” (2011, 4-5). According to Eve M. Lynch (2004),

Christmas editions of magazines from the 1850s through the end of the century carried the obligatory and much-anticipated yuletide ghost story to chill the soul on an evening around the fire. Early leaders in publishing the genre were Dickens’ *Household Words*, begun in 1850, and its successor *All the Year Round*. *The Cornhill Magazine*, *St James’s Magazine*, *Belgravia*, *Temple Bar*, *Saturday Review*, *Tinsley’s*, *Argosy* and *St Paul’s* all contributed their share to a readership addicted to the thrill of momentarily losing rational control over the ordered Victorian world

(68)

In Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), his narrator recalls, “The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as, on Christmas Eve in an old house, a strange tale should essentially be...” (283). Charles Dickens’ 1843 work, *A Christmas Carol*, is simultaneously a Christmas tale and a ghost story, and perhaps amongst the most well-known of each. Dickens also wrote, *The Haunted Man*, *The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton*, and *The Chimes*, among others, in this vein.

There are, of course, other obvious reasons for this kind of spooky speech. Perhaps it is merely an aesthetic cue that makes people treat mummers as ghosts and monsters. Faces painted with black soot, loud banging of pots and pans⁴⁴, Beelzebub’s growls and sneers. The white “veils” worn by many Newfoundland mummers certainly bring to mind the cartoony sheet ghosts of many childhoods and as Gerald points out, the even more menacing hoods of the Ku Klux Klan. Horse and chicken heads, the snapping teeth of the hooded beasts. The frightening visage is not surprising. Something that looks weird invites weird words. Although mummers most always embody a jovial attitude, across the United Kingdom and Newfoundland mummers are not only disguised-their identities hidden behind sometimes grotesque masks-but their

⁴⁴ Poltergeist means “noisy ghost”, after all

boisterous goings on often take place at night, adding to a chilling and thrilling experience for audiences.

When the Alberta Avenue Mummers Collective brought out their hobby horse during one Deep Freeze festival, the intimidating visual and performative elements—mostly unintentional and so often forgotten—became clear. One small girl—perhaps around 2 or 3 years old—emerged from the crowded sidewalks to get a closer look at the bucket-headed beast as it whinnied and trotted about, comically lamenting its station by crying out the play’s eponymous phrase, “poor horse, poor horse.” She appeared to be fascinated by the creature, but when the horse’s trainer invited her to approach it, her look of awe twisted into a grimace. An older woman—perhaps her mother or sister—encouragingly nudged the young child toward the hobby horse. The terrified girl quite literally dug in her heels. She was not getting an inch closer to the mysterious monster. This kind of interaction is evidently all too common. In his instructional booklet, *Constructing a Hobby Animal—mainly for Morris Dancers*, Ronald Shuttleworth uncannily warned,

At a certain age, (circa 1-3) small children are both fascinated and terrified by animals, particularly 2-legged mast beasts. Well-meaning parents often try to reassure the child—“See the nice horsey”—but this will be unavailing. You should recognise the symptoms—the crumpling face etc.—and move away at once. Anything else only makes things worse. Never chase a child into a corner from which there is no escape.

(1994, 24)

And remember the vicar from Newbold:

When we came here, our eldest daughter was only two and she was frightened to death

[he laughs]

And wanted to go home

The husband and wife who had been hosting the Coventry Mummers for thirty years told me something similar. I asked them what their first impressions of the play were. They told me,

Well we had small children there

And they found it quite scary

But when they came into the house I think they thought they were

They were okay then

(Personal interview, Newbold, 2010)

In the video documentary, *Mummers, Masks and Mischief*, one interviewee says, "...we were scared, actually. That's my first memory of mumming. That's the one memory I have. It was a scary thing" (06:46). In my interview with Gerald, he told me something along these same lines.

Now, as a small boy

I think I told you before

I was scared of em, right

When dey come round the house at Christmastime

Oh ya dem big sheets and dem slits in the eyes and big sticks in their hand and different voice talkin different stuff and

Man

They'd see you lookin at em they'd

Shake their stick at you, you know

Ohhh

Terrorize ya

You wouldn't (he laughs)

You'd stay right where you are you were petrified

They Were Scary

They were scary

...

As far as I can remember

I think up around St. John's they used to do it up around there too

And they had cut it all out because a lot of people would dress up and then they'd

They'd get into peoples' homes and then they'd

Start a racket, eh

Beat up the house, stuff like that

So they cut it out, right

Ya

But before that

In isolation

And, oh ya

You had a good atmosphere, of course, eh

Well, like, we didn't have electricity

You had coal oil lamps, we called em kerosene lamps

And of course, you know, that provides the perfect props, right

You know you'd let a big crowd of

Ku Klux Klan members come into your house all dressed up as sheets and everything

Wild!

And you with the ol' lamp turned up and then the shadows on the wall and everything like that,
right

I even gets a bit of a chill now (laughs)

When I'm talkin about it, right!

I tell ya

It was good

Ya

The stage was set, you know

The stage was set

Some places in town had lights

But in the early part of the days in the fifties when I was small we didn't have lights

We figured we had light enough

We had lamp

And then with the mummers

Right now I guess they call it 'shadow theatre', right

In dem days it was

The ol' lamp

Give it the classic setting, Mat

The classic background

Black and white

Too bad somebody didn't have a camera back den

Well there was cameras on the go but usually what we called

Affluent people I suppose

Had the cameras, very rare

You wouldn't find the ordinary person, eh

You know, back then with a camera

Makes you sort of sad in a way

...

We find this kind of account in other commentaries about mummering in Newfoundland.

According to an eighty-one-year-old man from Catalina, a community on the eastern coast of Newfoundland:

Mummers were really something when I was a boy. If you wasn't afraid of them, you wasn't afraid of nothing when you was four or five. They used to dress up fierce like Eskimaws and Heathens, and bawl and carry on with a lot of crazy stunts. When we watched them comin' down past the cemetery we could have sworn it was the Second Coming. I can still hear 'em moaning and roaring.

(Quoted in Widdowson and Halpert 1969/1990, 161)

Sprinkled throughout the comments sections for The Mummers Song videos on YouTube we find similar evaluations:

"this creeps me the hell out. sorry."

"I remember two Mummers came in when I was visiting my grandmother in Bay Roberts, God rest her soul. I was 10 and scared to death of them; there was no way I'd come out of the living room even when one saw me and tried to coax me out. My mom finally got me out in the kitchen and the Mummer that originally saw me asked me to sing him a song. So I did and the two of them

tapped their feet while I sang. Turns out that Mummer was one of my uncles. Boy, was I embarrassed when I found out. Lol”

“You can't have Christmas without the mummers! Merry Christmas b'ys!”

“Mummers brought great tradition and holiday cheer to the doorsteps of many people! We still go mummering to friends and families houses! Merry Christmas to all my fellow Newfoundlanders wherever ye may be <3”

“OH MY GOD WHAT IN THE HELL KILL THEM WITH FIRE”

“I thought the KKK was comin! LOL Jokin :) I love mummers <3 Makes me wanna cry! I'm so homesick :(“

“ok I know this sounds odd but Mummers kinda creep me out.”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8OPy7De3bk>)

Perhaps this spooky speech has to do with the reputation of mummers of the past.

Beginning in early 1830s, mummering in Newfoundland became increasingly associated with fear and violence (Fraser 2009, 75-76). Although mummers in outport communities like Gerald's were commonly seen as 'frightening figures,' in urban areas like Conception Bay and St. John's they were downright dangerous. In December 1860, a fisherman named Isaac Mercer was on his way home from tea at his mother-in-laws. The fisherman and his two companions were attacked by six mummers who beat the trio with sticks (Dr. Paul Smith, Memorial University of Newfoundland, personal correspondence, 18 September 2016). Mercer later succumbed to his injuries, dying in his home from a fractured skull. It is likely that this murder was motivated by local political and/or religious violence, but it was nevertheless facilitated by the disguised and unruly behaviour common to that time of year (Jarvis 2014, 46-48). Because of this and similar incidents, in addition to the overall sense that this was somewhat of a treacherous tradition, an act was passed on 25 June 1861 which stated that “any Person who shall be found... without a written Licence from a Magistrate, dressed as a Mummer, masked, or otherwise disguised, shall

be deemed guilty of a Public Nuisance” and sentenced to “a Fine not exceeding Twenty Shillings” or “a maximum of seven days’ imprisonment” (Consolidated Acts of Newfoundland, 1861, 10; quoted in Fraser 2009, 75-76). During the Christmas 1861-62 Christmas season, two other “high-profile disturbances” took place in the Conception Bay towns of Harbour Grace and Carbonear. The following 27 March 1862, an amendment was made to the 1861 act banning mummering for over a hundred years.

The act may have dissuaded mummering to some degree as approximately 150 people are said to have applied for a mummer’s license (Jarvis 2014, 48-49). By Christmas 1863, the kind of mummer-related disturbance witnessed in previous years did seem to have been somewhat assuaged (Dr. Paul Smith, Memorial University of Newfoundland, personal correspondence, 18 September 2016). However, the act was ultimately negligible as many other mummers “failed to comply with the new legislation” (Fraser 2009, 75-76). Over the coming decades, mummers continued to go out and get into trouble.⁴⁵ Another account of mummering from 1949 says,

The mummers are out on their rounds again. They beat on our doors, tramp through our kitchens, sit in our rocking chairs, giggling behind their masks; and altogether make so much commotion that old and sober folk are inclined to grumble at having their quiet evenings disturbed [by people who] disguise themselves in a couple of flour-sacks and an old night-gown... Quite recently in some parts of the country, there have been rumours of masked men lurking in dark corners to scare the passersby.

(Quoted in Story 1969/1990, 183)

The Act was eventually repealed on the 8th of July 1988, but the mummer ban continued on as part of the metafolklore of mummering in Newfoundland (Dr. Paul Smith, Memorial University of Newfoundland, personal correspondence, 18 September 2016). Various authors have reported the ban to still be in effect, contributing to the sense of subversiveness and danger

⁴⁵ Jarvis (2014) presents accounts of such trouble from 1889, 1890, 1903, 1907, and 1955 (49-53).

entangled with the tradition. Indeed, such sensibilities have become expected when mummer talk happens.

We are not only asking why the mummer genre provokes a ghastly style of talk, but why spooky stories seem *to stick to it*. In short, why do these deranged dialogues *fit* within the larger mummer discourse? Dale Jarvis, a folklorist, storyteller, author, and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Officer for the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, points out that “their history of violence, their hidden faces, their weird shapes—all of these lend and unearthly or otherworldly air to mummers and janneys (2014, 54). Mummers’ behavior has often been described as “rough” or rowdy, not to mention aggressive, nasty, mean, and threatening (Palmer 2005, 152). For having “raised hell” one mummer reportedly explained, “the devil is in me now” (ibid). Over time, mummers became known as frightening figures, bogeymen to scare unruly children, or at times even slightly supernatural creatures” (Jarvis 2014, 54). I agree. But is there more? The answer might only emerge if we recognize that the spooky speech doesn’t haunt by its lonesome. As we can see in the YouTube comments included above, there is a remarkable tendency in mummer discourse to portray mummers as *both* merry and scary. This dichotomous character was described succinctly by Gerald M. Sider (1986), who wrote that mummering “hovers at times on the edge of the far too fearful...[but then] it slithered from the fearful to the jocular” (76; quoted in Palmer 2005, 153). For this reason I would suggest that the spookiness of mummers is more substantial than the superficial appearances of their costumes and activities. Robert Darnton, in his study of the French Old Regime, suggests that we might begin to understand a way of thinking by entering into it where it is most perplexing. He writes, “When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an

alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view” (1984, 5). Whatever system of meaning we are dealing with here may only appear as alien because it rings closer to home than we expect. Too close, perhaps. Like the juxtapositional custom of telling ghost stories at Christmas, the two faces of mumm[er]ing—its merriness and scariness—may be telling of something deep.

The Uncanniness of Mumm[er]ing

On David Blackwood’s art, William Gough (1988) writes: “For youngsters it was a time of fear, of awe, and a chance, when all the scary part was over, to have a laugh at the adults. But before the laugh there was a mystery” (2). So we have fear, awe, mystery, and laughter: The merry and the scary. Gough continues,

The laughs would die, the sound of singing fade, and the windows of ice would hold only one echo of the mummers. Outside the night would be so still that the moon would lie in frozen milk across the road. The graveyard creaked into the dead of winter. The mummers, from a distance, were spirits—no longer people that David knew from everyday—they’d become magic... And even though the frocks were carefully put away after the twelve days of Christmas... the ghost of them stayed, lighting the back of eyes to show the mystery of the ordinary... All this magic was accomplished with the everyday...

(3)

Dying laughs, fading singing, creaking graveyards, the dead of winter, mummers as magical mystery spirits, and the mystery of the ordinary: here we have the merry and the scary language so often used to describe mummers. This is the language of *the uncanny*. Before plunging into the uncanny, however, let’s tarry on the edge a bit longer.

I asked Gerald,

So I’m really interested in the

In the aspect of it being

Kind of a spooky

A spooky thing because it seems interesting to me that, you know, normally Christmastime

You wouldn't necessarily have

Sort of spooky stuff going on

At least not now

Ah, no

So I'm could you tell me a little bit about that?

Well

How shall I phrase that?

Ah

Well to see people, you know

Not having the exposure we have today like watchin

Stuff on T.V. right

And costumes and all this kind of stuff and costume shops

Back then

As a youngster

You didn't see scary things

Might of heard scary things, right

But to see people going around with all sorts of

Weird

Weird imagination run berserk! (he laughs)

That was quite

That was quite something

I think it was anyway

Like I say, I was, I used to be scared of em

Comin in da house

That's before I started dressin up myself, right

'Cause they could scare you

Ya, especially with youngsters you'd do it just for badness, right

Shake there stick at ya or something like that, right

Man!

You just

You just

Sat down you never smiled, whatever was on your face when you got there glance, that's the way you stayed

You were petrified

(We laugh)

But that was the

That was the scary part that made it attractive, right

At the Christmas

It was always a little bit of the unknown, eh

Children like that

The Unknown, you know, what's beyond

What's Beyond da Mask, right

That was a long time ago there before Jason⁴⁶ and those guys, eh

Ya know

Oh ya

Ya, that was quite the contrast, come to think of it now

The scary part of it and then you'd have all the songs

And the dancin and everything all mixed up together, see

It was a real potpourri

If you wanted to break it down and analyze it I guess, ya, you would

Christmastime, why would you be

Almost like having Halloween at Christmas, but we didn't

Celebrate Halloween very much

Just about in school

But the mummers were the thing, jenneying

The jenneys, let the jenneys in

Ya

⁴⁶ The hockey-masked antagonist from the *Friday the 13th* horror movie series.

That was a big entertainment

That was like a, you could have a

I guess another way to look at it, Mat, you could have a

You could have a different concert every night

And you wouldn't have to leave your home

(He laughs), You know

A different concert every night

Without leaving your home

Later, he went on to say,

You know

I think that's why in a lot of places it had such an impact, you know

Because it was

Something could be almost like so Scary

And yet so

Humorous at the same time, eh

And it's hard to get that

Get that

Balance or whatever it is

It wasn't the intent, there was no intent

That's just the way I turned out, eh

You know

Ya, you wouldn't want to

You wouldn't want to do something get a jenney, get a mummer mad at ya

Whew!

Man!

Why not?

What?

Why not?

Man, you'd never know

What world they came from, right

(I laugh)

No way, sir

Jenneyin, ya

"But the times

The times were

The way

The way life was then, over half a century ago, like I say, you know

Everybody, as far as I know

Were happy

Appeared to be happy anyway

You always smiled

And, like I say

You didn't need too much costumes, I should say, in any way

Because the settings were there, you know

A lot of old people were livin back then, right

Older than I am now, right

They were spooky just the way they dressed

Even in the best of times, eh

They didn't have to put a sheet or a veil over their face or

One boot on and one boot off, you know

They sort of spooky lookin anyway, big ol' whiskers and everything like that, right

Scoffin around

I tell ya

(He laughs)

Oh ya

Especially in Newfoundland I think because we were steeped into history from our background,
Irish and the French and the Scottish and the

English and all the folklore, eh

And then so long, I suppose what they would refer to now as 'isolation', we didn't think we were
isolated

You wanted something you'd go to the post office, you wanted to get a letter from somebody,
you'd write em, they'd write you one back

But we had the real

We had the great

Real breeding ground for it

You know

It was like I say, there was no

My hometown

Once

Once winter came

...

So why the stark contrast, and what does it tell us about the phenomenon and its place in our world? Within Gerald's narrative, it is telling that his spooky tropes appear after he speaks about the loss of mummering at home. In Newfoundland mummering discourse, a number of scholars have suggested that mummers embody strangerhood and that the tradition is meant to confront or address the tension between neighbor and stranger, the familiar and the fearful, in isolated outport communities (Firestone 1969; Handelman 1984).

Gerald's narrative associates the fear of mummers with "the unknown" and "what's beyond"; in essence, with the strange. Melvin M. Firestone (1969) wrote that, "in becoming mummers people temporarily make themselves strangers in their own society" (75). By knocking and asking permission to enter the homes of their neighbors, friends, and family, mummers act as how a stranger might because kith and kin would certainly enter without restraint (70). Likewise, the disguises mummers wear, along with their use of ingressive speech, are designed to hide their identities from people who otherwise know them very well. Strangers, according to Firestone,

are figures of apprehension and even fear in the isolated outport community (70-72). Although these sentiments are somewhat covert, strangers are thought of as unknown and therefore untrustworthy, often blamed for the occurrence of criminal acts in an otherwise safe community (as in Alberta Avenue, too). Parents associate both strangers and mummers with other 'boogeyman' characters in tales told to their children. This, then, explains the sense of menace felt by those who happen across a group of mummers or janneys. Firestone suggests that, although mummering does not necessarily consciously symbolize the behavior of strangers, the activity serves the functional purpose of "displacing hostility" (73). This is done by enabling "parents to turn away from themselves the hostility that their children feel when disciplined" and allowing adults to act out their common aggressions and frustrations with one another in a playful manner (73-75). Craig T. Palmer (2005) argues that, rather than displacing hostility, the "threatening play" of mummers might better be considered as a demonstration of trust between community members (153). By responding to the aggressive behaviour of mummers calmly and non-violently, hosts communicate their trust that "what could happen would not happen." By acting aggressively without engaging in real aggression and violence, mummers prove they are worthy of said trust.

Don Handelman (1984) suggests that the relationship between the familiar and the strange in mummering is perhaps more complicated. According to him, members of the outport community perceive one another as having both a "private self" and "social person" (252). The private or "authentic" self is concealed by the social or "inauthentic" person; the identity built on formal social relationships, expectations, and community values. The private self of others, on the other hand, is a source of suspicion as it no doubt exhibits covert sentiments, desires, and motivations. The authentic private self is, therefore, interpreted as dangerous and unknown:

untrustworthy, malevolent, and frightening. This duality between private self and social person is associated with the boundary between the interior and exterior of the entire group, or “community” and “strangerhood” (253). Where community represents morality, strangerhood is thought of as inherently amoral. Thus, the interior and private self is associated with the exterior stranger and the external and social person with the interior social community. In fellow community members, then, the familiar masks the strange. Mumming, says Handelman, is the inversion of this as familiar social persons disguise themselves as frightening strangers. The internal and external are reversed with the strange masking the familiar. For Handelman, the revelation of a mummers’ true identity is the necessary counterpart to his initial concealment. The “authentic” person is discovered as the “inauthentic” mask is shucked away. In the act of ritual concealment and revelation, the anxious tensions between private self, public person, moral community and amoral strangerhood are emphasized and therefore relieved, resulting in a solidarity underscored by a confrontation—albeit a controlled and playful one—with the potential lack thereof.⁴⁷

We see here a congruency with Gerald’s narrative themes. Stranger and danger are met in the mummer’s mask, mainland, and current times or “now” as opposed to “dem times.” Craig T. Palmer (1992) rounds out the argument initiated by Firestone in 1969, suggesting that, with the coming of “real strangers” into the outport community, mumming declined because the hostile and frightening behavior of mummers could no longer be trusted as “non-threatening play” by familiar community members. Indeed, Gerald’s narrative seems to agree with this interpretation as he theorizes that mumming’s “demise” came with the influx of mainlanders into Baie Verte:

⁴⁷ For a more in-depth discussion on ritual solidarity, see Victor W. Turner’s (1969) theory of *communitas*, liminality, structure and anti-structure in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*.

Den you didn't feel comfortable opening your doors anymore, you know

You didn't know who was who, right

With the coming of mainlanders and industrial modernity into the outport community, mummering not only disappears but is replaced by revivals, which are, for Gerald, only memories of the real thing; theatre meant to remind, as commemorations of something past; something lost. The good old days of Alberta Avenue, too, disappeared with the arrival of strangers in the form of itinerants, renters, and non-local criminals. The recent revival of carnival and theatre in the neighbourhood is meant to bring the good old days back again. But some might argue that the Carrot is no longer Gladys' Flower Shop, and an impersonal corporate drugstore sits where the swinging toast-of-the-town Cromdale once did before it crumbled.

Before proceeding, let us take pause. With all these notions of strangeness, might we be flicking on the film projector, casting shimmering shades upon something that, in reality, is not so spooky after all? According to Diane Tye (2008), these may be the sentiments of an outsider, which I certainly am, and so not entirely authentic. She writes,

Academics emphasized the mummer's strangeness: for example, the mummer was a threatening bogey-man-like figure that could be used by parents as a form of social control over children (Firestone 1969; Widdowson 1973)...Just as the cockfight was Clifford Geertz's key text to understanding Balinese culture (Geertz 1971), mummering became central to folklorists and anthropologists in their study of Newfoundland. They embraced it as a metaphor for the Redfieldian "folk community" (Redfield 1960) they sought in rural Newfoundland; yet, it also spoke loudly of the social distance separating non-Newfoundland academics from their subjects.

(paragraph 9)

By expounding upon the uncanniness of mumm[er]ing, am I getting into a cockfight? Tye continues,

The mummer's success as a symbol for Newfoundland culture is due, in no small measure, to its appeal to the many Newfoundlanders living away from home... On the other hand, rural Newfoundlanders for whom mummering is still a part of their Christmas season have no need to surround themselves with reminders in the form of wrapping paper and tree ornaments when the real thing is at the door. If mummering is not ongoing, they are willing to let it be replaced by other more evocative markers of their life. They do not require an objectified reminder of their place because they are there.

Consequently, mummies and mummering seem to speak most loudly of homeplace to the Newfoundlander who is away from home, in need of images and objects to construct a sense of belonging. For those born in rural Newfoundland and Labrador who were forced to leave the small isolated communities of their birth for growth centres during Premier Joey Smallwood's resettlement programs of the 1960s and 70s, or for the thousands who have left the province in search of employment in the decades since, the papier mâché ornament or doll dressed as a mummer mediates displacement and belonging. *It symbolizes home as both a place and time existing only in memory for those away from home who yearn not just for the place, but also for that moment in time they left behind. Like the academic discussions that celebrated the 1960s as the golden age of traditional culture, expatriates look back to the years of their childhood as golden. Popular depictions of mummies and kitchen parties embody the specialness of Newfoundland culture and way of life.* They draw from, and build on, underlying assumptions of the Newfoundland cultural revival of the last thirty years that the distinctiveness of Newfoundland culture lies in its rural communities.

(19, my italics)

Finally Tye adds,

The mummer on a tote bag or beer bottle label mediates between the displaced Newfoundlander's childhood home and his present one; between the (partly) imagined simplicity of the traditional past and complexities of modern life. Time and space are compressed as the mummer brings an idealized past forward and gives abstract ideals concrete form.

(22)

Scholars undoubtedly do their fair share of talking about the strangeness of mummies (myself included!) and not everyone perceives mummies as being spooky.⁴⁸ Brenda Temple was born in Daniel's Point, a small town on the southern shore of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula in 1953. Of her childhood mummering, she told me,

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that one year after Tye made her arguments, the Intangible Cultural Heritage division of the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador established The Mummies Festival.

We only mummered in our own community. I remember mummers from when I was very young say 5 or 6 years old. I think the children (me included) probably started mummering when we were around 10 or 11ish. When we were old enough to go outside with our friends . We would go out on "fine" nights, vs snowy nights and I remember full moons and stars. We didn't have electricity in our town then, and we carried flashlights with us but we were out and back early. WE did that till into our teen years then we kinda hung out at home and watched the mummers come to our house and sing and dance and have a drink and we would try and guess who they were and if you guessed who the person was they had to remove their disguise. What is interesting tho in our community was, *we always knew everyone's clothes!!* They would only have one winter coat so that would be turned inside out or loaned to someone else but then *it was easy to guess who the group were.* When we were little kids at it, people would give us Christmas cake and syrup. Are you from NI by the way?? If so you know what syrup is if not, it's a sweet exactly as the name implies, syrupy drink. Sometimes they would give us candy but that was it. We would go from house to house and just stand up till they guessed who we were, get a treat and move on. The adults would visit and sing and dance and have a drink of rum and hang around maybe half hour or so but then they would tell everyone not to say who they were cause they would be moving on to the next house. We didn't call it mummering as such we would say we were going out in the mummers.

(Personal email, 8 October 2013, my italics)

In Brenda's account, the notion of mummers' strangeness is missing and identities were somewhat obvious. Perhaps leadingly, I asked her point blank: "did you ever find mummers scary or spooky?" Brenda replied, "Never scared of the mummers, they were so much fun!!"

(Personal email, 4 November 2013, my italics).⁴⁹ So is the notion of strange mummers some kind of guilty pleasure; a wicked delicacy cooked up by romantic outsiders? In her study of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001) tells us that

It is not surprising that national awareness comes from outside the community rather than from within. It is the romantic traveler who sees from a distance the wholeness of the vanishing world. The journey gives him perspective. The vantage point of a stranger informs the native idyll. The nostalgic is never a native but a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal.

⁴⁹ Brenda also added, "I haven't lived in Daniel's Point for 43 years, few people left there but some may still do it, but it wouldn't be like it was when we were young. Now it would in all likelihood be the younger generation whereas it was the older generation when I was growing up. You must know of course that it is technically 'illegal' LOL ." Her sentiments express a loss of her childhood's brand of mummering, somewhat in keeping with Gerald's narrative.

(12)

Championed by scholars and expats it may be, but while the strangeness of mummers is not a universally held sentiment, it is common enough to be noticeable, and notable. The fact, too, that it appears as a generic trait of the phenomenon rather than being idiosyncratic to Newfoundland's mumm[er]ing demands a closer look at the hooded beast. But why was the eeriness of mumm[er]ing so attractive for Gerald? Was it because it was, as Handelman and Palmer propose, a kind of unconscious cathartic activity toward the function of group solidarity? Perhaps, but what might also be at work in mumm[er]ing in general is a sense of the *uncanny*; the familiar yet strange, the known yet unknown (see Freud 1919; Ivy 1995, 106-108). Rather than being repulsive or undesirable, the uncanny in this context is intriguing; alluring even. Marilyn Ivy (1995), in her study of Japanese folklore, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*, may have an explanation for this allure in what she refers to as the "two horizons of desire" (105). I have included her explanation here, but I have taken the liberty of replacing "Japan" with "Newfoundland" so as to demonstrate the aptness of the analogue. Ivy writes,

First, the desire to encounter the unexpected, the peripheral unknown, even (and even especially) the frightening—a desire that repeatedly reveals itself under the controlled and predictable conditions of everyday life...and second, the countervailing desire, pushed by an opposite longing, to return to a stable point of origin, to discover an [authentic Newfoundland] that is disappearing yet still present, to encounter the always already *known* as coincident with one's [Newfoundlander] self. The desire for the different and unknown...is framed within the boundaries of a return to pastoral hominess, security, and (not the least significant) identity.

(ibid)

It is perhaps *uncanny* that we might find some commonality between the people and traditions of Japan and outport Newfoundland; that we might find some sense of the familiar in the strange. But the uncanny idea, as much as it has to do with place, is not limited to a particular location. It

has to do, rather, with things “suspended on the threshold of vanishing (not gone, not quite)” (143). One could just as easily replace “Newfoundland” in the passage above with “Alberta Avenue” or “Merry England” and still be on point. All three places have undergone the same kind of recession Japan has; that of the present into the past. Ivy states,

National culturalism and its relationship to the uncanny; the contradictory longing for superseded forms of being—the premodern, the “traditional,” the irrational—and the recurrence of those forms in commodified guises; the desire for origins and for unmediated practices of the voice: all bespeak a condition of modernity-in-common (of common modernity)...The varieties of cultural self-obsession [of Japan] that I have discussed...can be read as a longing for a premodernity, a time before the West, before the catastrophic imprint of westernization. Yet the very search to find authentic survivals of premodern, prewestern Japanese authenticity is inescapably a modern endeavor, essentially enfolded within the historical condition that it would seek to escape.

(241)

Instead of the West, Outport Newfoundland suffered the catastrophic imprint of mainlanders and strangerhood. England underwent the industrialized disappearance of the folk. Alberta Avenue was distorted by its envelopment into the city from a bucolic neighbourhood into something pejoratively urban. All of these transformations act as markers between the past and the modern; Dem times and Now. The discontent experienced by these places’ natives becomes, in a sense, a genre of discourse in and of itself; about modernity and what it does to us; what it makes us do.

To explore this idea, Ivy draws on Freud’s (1919) theory of the uncanny; the familiar and the strange, or, perhaps a more direct translation, the homelike and the unhomelike. Caron Lipman (2015) explains,

The ‘uncanny’ is intimately entwined with but in opposition to, home, derived from the German ‘*unheimlich*’ (‘*un*’ is ‘not’; ‘*heim*’ is ‘home’; ‘*heimlich*’ is ‘secretly’ or ‘secretive’). The origins of *unheimlich*, indeed, developed semantically from ‘home’ as defined as a safe place, of privacy, or a place to keep secrets; it evolved to mean something unfamiliar, indeterminate: where there are secret, hidden things. Although Freud, in his essay, defined the uncanny as ‘that class of frightening which leads back to

what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud, 2001 [1919]: 220), it is commonly denoted as the strange *within* the familiar, an intermingling of opposites which should not share the same space, or a confusing but familiar memory or sensation which one cannot quite grasp, just out of reach.

(8)

Although one must tread lightly when dealing with something as precarious as Freudian psychoanalysis, I believe we can apply it usefully here. In Freud's analysis, the homelike—or the familiar—and the unhomelike—or the strange—although at first appearing as opposites, eventually merge when we consider that our deepest sense of home also contains those sensations which have now become foreign to us. Primarily, this sensation is a sense of death; suppressed, and enfolded within our sense of home, birth, origin or creation. Freud (1919) writes,

Thus heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich.

(4)

He continues,

In the first place, if psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something re-pressed which recurs. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is uncanny, irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect. In the second place, if this is indeed the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why the usage of speech has extended das Heimliche into its opposite das Unheimliche; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression...something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light...

Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. As we have seen, many languages in use today can only render the German expression "an unheimliches house" by "a haunted house." We might indeed have begun our investigation with this example, perhaps the most striking of all, of something uncanny, but we refrained from doing so

because the uncanny in it is too much mingled with and in part covered by what is purely gruesome. There is scarcely any other matter, however, upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as that of our relation to death. Two things account for our conservatism: the strength of our original emotional reaction to it, and the insufficiency of our scientific knowledge about it. Biology has not yet been able to decide whether death is the inevitable fate of every living being or whether it is only a regular but yet perhaps avoidable event in life.

(13)

The awareness that our home—our origins—are always distant and disappearing from us results in a sense of loss that is inextricable from our nostalgic sense of home. L.P Hartley's now proverbial statement, "The past is foreign country" illustrates this idea. The place-time from where we come has become unknown to us, and embodies sensations of the unhomelike; a conception demonstrated no better than by those remigned homeplaces that mummers allow us access to: Gerald's Outport in Dem Times, Merry Old England, the good old Alberta Avenue neighbourhood and the traditional Old World embodied by its Byzantine Deep Freeze festival, or the "imagined village" that folk revivals seek to tap (see Boyes 2010). In all these cases the reappearance of home—our deepest and oldest home—is always coupled by its disappearance. To remagine it—to summon it through story or by the mummers play—is to acknowledge that it has passed away. Nicolas Poussin's painting, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, speaks to this. His scene depicts a group of shepherds in the pastoral utopia of Arcadia. They have come across a tombstone inscribed with the words that provide us with the painting's title. Whether the sentence in Poussin's painting is interpreted as "a present happiness menaced by death" (Panofsky 1955, 296), "the tomb is found even in Arcadia and that Death takes place in the midst of felicity" (Bellori 464, quoted in Heehs 1995, 217), "death may be encountered amidst the greatest joys" (Félibien 131, quoted in Heehs 1995, 217), "some unsurpassable happiness, enjoyed in the past, unattainable ever after, yet enduringly alive in the memory; a bygone happiness ended by death"

(Panofsky 1955, 296), or “the awareness of the inevitability of death even by those who have known the joys of life” (Heehs 1995, 228), the painting is in any case about the co-occurrence—whether tense or complementary—of death and happiness, dread and utopia, nostalgia and loss. Pearce (1975) writes,

The stark reality of the graveyard is, of course, the most extreme contrast possible to the locus amoenus. And when it emerges from the pastoral scene itself, it is fundamentally like the symbol that arose in painting to demonstrate the necessary concomitance of the ideal and its opposite. According to Erwin Panofsky, the tomb and death's head in the Arcadian setting are reminders and warnings from a personified spokesman for Death: Et in Arcadia ego—"Even in Arcady there am I.

(835)

In Gerald's narrative, he speaks of “the old spooky people” he encountered in his youth, as well as the ghosts they used to encounter and the ghost stories they told. These are terrifying figures enfolded within an affectionately told narrative about an ideal past and place. They are the tombstone in Arcady; the speaking Death's Head (Panofsky 1955, 308). But death and doom are hardly ever present in Dem Times, only something past or something coming. No one dies in Dem Times but people are remembered to have died. In remaginations of home death is relegated to the margins, suppressed, and manifests as ghosts and scary folks; memories and forecasts of death, just as Poussin's painting depicts a memory and foreshadowing of death in the form of a tombstone rather than death in real time. Indeed, there are tombstones in Dem Times. For some, Alberta Avenue's good old days were lived throughout an era known history has so audaciously labelled as “The Great Depression”. Remember our anonymous story:

I grew up as a kid in what they called the Dirty 30's. The Depression. Nobody had any money. But we made our own fun. We played a lot of basketball and baseball, and in the winter time, making a circle in the snow, cut a couple of pathways, and played tag. Nearly all of our activities were in the Parkdale School yard. Everybody was in the same boat. I knew a couple of kids whose dads had good jobs. I don't think we had high

expectations. We just accepted. Never was anyone hungry. Ever. Nearly everyone had a big garden. Fresh veggies and everything.

(<http://avenuehistory.org/projects/anonymous/>)

No one was hungry, but it was the Depression. There were houses of ill-repute on the corner and unknown hobos shared sandwiches with the children. Coupled with imagery both fond and familiar are notions of peril, never realized but always looming. We also see this disparity demonstrated in the common assertion within mummer discourse that mumm[er]ing and mummings plays originated as pagan sacrificial fertility rituals (see Levitt 2011). In this narrative, the pre-Christian British Isles are remigned as a pastoral time-scape, embodying fundamental virtues such as simplicity, rusticity, quaintness, and community with the natural-world virtues that the English Folk Revival sought to unearth and reinvigorate into modern society. These pagan virtues, however, are accompanied by a haunting presence of and necessity for blood and human sacrifice (see Hutton 2009). The pagan sacrificial fertility ritual narrative places danger and death in its pastoral dreamland; a danger and death meant to perpetuate that world by its very destructiveness. Hidden behind the green rolling hills we find a wicker man. Whether it is desired by humanity or the natural world, death and sacrifice is what sustains life. In all of these homes we find strange bedfellows.

The tomb in arcadia might also be thought of considering the Japanese concept of *the furusato*. Ivy (1995) describes the furusato as “one’s hometown, one’s native place—the place where one was born and raised, a place where one used to live and with which one is deeply familiar, or simply the place one identifies as home. Other meanings refer to historic ruins, ancient sites of human habitation, old and dilapidated villages” (103). Ivy discusses “the complexities that arise when the very site of return—the identitarian home itself—turns out to be

doubled, deferred, and haunted” and mentions Kamishima Jirō’s statement that “those who are living continuously in the place where they were born don’t usually call that place ‘furusato’” (104). This is because “the furusato resides in memory” (104). The furusato provides us with an apt analogy for Alberta Avenue in the good old days, Outport in Dem Times, Merry Old England, or any other remagined “substitute homeland” (see Kamishima’s *daiyōfurusato*, Ivy 1995, 104). The furusato conveys nostalgic desires, familiarity, but also estrangement; a sense of loss, disappearance, and a hauntedness. In short, the furusato is an unhomelike home, an Arcadia with a tomb, a pleasant place where calamity lurks under the lilacs. Ivy goes on to write, “The furusato is, then, properly uncanny, because it indicates a return of something estranged under the guise of the familiar” (107). I feel compelled to include her footnote here: “As James Boon commented on reading my analysis of Tōno as an uncanny homeland, ‘*Home is the place there’s no place like*’” (107, footnote 16, my italics).

In a conversation with Dr. Michael O’Driscoll, a scholar of Freud’s uncanny in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, Dr. O’Driscoll pointed out to me that, in the uncanny, the distinction between the original and double becomes unstable. The doppelganger, or a person’s double, is so unsettling because the line between authentic and inauthentic becomes challenged and uncertain. The same might be said of mummer discourse, for within mummer discourse lines are contested, negotiated, relative, and uncertain: real and revived, traditional and innovative, scary and merry, familiar and strange. When the mummer removes his veil, is the familiar face beneath masking a stranger? According to Freud, the doppelganger, like the revival, is meant as insurance against death but instead becomes the harbinger of death in that it threatens the identity of the original. A fallen combatant is raised to life, but is he the person he was before? A tradition disappears for a time, and is revived, but is it

the same as it once was? A community struggles, and dies to its old self, re-created, but what does it become and is it still “home”? If we succeed in making a home, is it “real” or is it a doppelganger of something only *remagined*?

The uncanny refers to—or, put another way, *has to do with*—the return, the repressed, the double and the repeated. In mummer discourse we deal with resurrection, revival, and revitalization. Ironically, or perhaps suitably, we have a return and repetition of the prefix “re.” The recurrence of the “re” becomes all the more meaningful when we consider what mummings provide us. Georgina Boyes (2010) writes,

To some extent, the range of appeal of the Folk Revival movement lies within the Janus-faced concept of revival itself. A revival is inherently both revolutionary and conservative. It simultaneously comprehends a demand for a change in an existing situation and a requirement of reversion to an older form.

(3)

She goes on to say,

Inherent in the Revival of folksong and dance is the intention that the values and characteristics of the past are not merely being re-asserted but are actually capable of attainment again through their ‘return’ to and re-incorporation in contemporary living culture. The prospect the Revival offers is not simply a world as it had been but a world as it could be again.

(4)

Considering the word “revolution,” we not only mean—as many would think—the creation of something new, but also a cyclical return to something prior (see Calinescu 1987, 22). Moving forward is moving backward. The homelike and the unhomelike meet. Whether aptly or coincidentally, “re” might provide us with an understanding of mummer discourse and the themes it embodies. “Re” is, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, “a word-forming element meaning ‘back to the original place; again, anew, once more,’ also with a sense of

‘undoing,’ c.1200, from Old French and directly from Latin *re-* ‘again, back, anew, against,’...”
 (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=re-&allowed_in_frame=0; accessed 18 August 2016).

Going back to the original place, with a sense of undoing. We’ve already discussed the possibility of mumm[er]ing acting as a ritual of revival and perpetuation for some who participate in it, and perhaps so too is it a ritual of undoing and reversal. It may be useful to take a moment to unpack this idea using the preeminent anthropologist Victor Turner’s approach to the theory of liminality. Turner’s theory sprung from his examination of Arnold Van Gennep’s *Rites de Passage*, or rites of passage. Turner (1967) writes that

the most prominent type of *rites de passage* tends to accompany what Lloyd Warner (1959, 303) has called ‘the movement of a man through his lifetime, from a fixed placental placement within his mother’s womb to his death and ultimate fixed point of his tombstone and final containment in his grave as a dead organism—punctuated by a number of critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of the community. These are the important times of birth, puberty, marriage, and death.’

(94)

Van Gennep conceptualized rites of passage as having three stages: 1) separation, in which the initiate-neophyte is symbolically removed or detached from regular society; 2) margin (or limen), where the initiate-neophyte enters an interstructural realm of ambiguity that is neither before or after, here nor there, one thing or another; and, 3) aggregation, where the initiate-neophyte re-enters society with a newly ascribed status and the accompanying knowledge, responsibilities, expectations, etc. Elaborating on the liminal stage, Turner explains how “certain liminal processes are regarded as analogous to those of gestation, parturition, and suckling.

Undoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements into new patterns” (99). He continues,

It is interesting to note how, by the principle of the economy (or parsimony) of symbolic reference, logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, for example, by huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs, by lunar symbolism (for the same moon waxes and wanes), by snake symbolism (for the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one), by bear symbolism (for the bear ‘dies’ in autumn and is ‘reborn’ in spring), by nakedness (which is at once the mark of a newborn infant and a corpse in the ground prepared for burial), and by innumerable other symbolic formations and actions. This coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both.

Perhaps the uncanniness of mumm[er]ing is a feature of its liminalism; a ‘betwixt and between’-ness. The mummer’s uncanny—this palpable pastiche of death and rebirth, beginnings and endings, familiarity and strangeness, hominess and unhominess—may be meant as a reminder, a reflection. Turner writes,

During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. In it those ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents. These constituents are isolated and made into objects of reflection for the neophytes by such processes as componental exaggeration and dissociation by varying concomitants.

(105)

Mumm[er]ing takes apart our world and presents it back to us in a topsy-turvy, helter-skelter procession of pieces. Merry scary familiar strangers dress as women and animals. Kings act as clowns and fools as masters of ceremony. Anachronistic combatants are killed and resurrected, and the whole thing disappears even as it reappears. Turner explains,

From this standpoint, much of the grotesqueness and monstrosity of liminal *sacra* may be seen to be aimed not so much at terrorizing or bemusing neophytes into submission or out of their wits as at making them vividly and rapidly aware of what may be called the “factors” of their culture...Elements are withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration, the monster or the dragon. Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted.

(ibid)

But who is the neophyte here—the mummer or the audience who watches the mummer? I would argue that the answer may very well be all of us, together. As we have discussed, mummers are known to perform even when no audience is present just for the sake of doing so; for keeping things going. Maybe there are no ritual specialists in mumm[er]ing—we are all walking through the passage hand in hand—because there is no conscious intention behind the scenes meaning to teach us about our world. Rather, the uncanniness buried in the intertextual phenomenon of mumm[er]ing is covertly self-retained as a convention that surfaces again and again simply because it is a part of the thing. In this way—as a kind of accidental ritual—mumm[er]ing reflects back to us our own ongoing *rites de passage*: the movement from birth to death, but reminds us that what comes before birth is perhaps the same as what comes after death. Julia Kristeva might offer some more help here (is it a coincidence that the same person who appeared at the start of our exploration with her theory of intertextuality appears again here, at the end?) In Kristeva’s theory of abjection, captivating horror stems from the disruption of our discrete selves (1982). Our identities are our egos, and so the destabilization of what we perceive as being “me”—separate and definable from the world—is so threatening as to become abjectional; cast off, reviled, rejected. At the same time, though, we are compelled to explore such destabilizations. Kristeva explains,

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself... The object has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I... A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.

(1982:1-2)

For Kristeva, the abject comes in the form of expelled bodily fluids, severed limbs, and any pieces of our bodies that are no longer attached to our bodies. Kristeva theorizes that these pieces make us cringe because they represent two ideas that are really one idea: The creation of the human body from foreign maternal materials and the disintegration of the body into the foreign material world. Becoming foodstuffs for creepy crawlers and consuming foodstuffs from other bodies both equate to the loss of self. What scares us away and what draws us in, being dead in the ground and growing in utero, are really one impulse. Our beginnings and ends, just like the *Heimlich* and *unheimlich*, look quite the same. Do not forget what Bakhtin told us about carnival: The King must be uncrowned, unmasked, “just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned...” (1984, 197). The mirror of comedy is the necessary death; the transformation of the living body into the corpse. But, as Bakhtin reminds us, “death is followed by regeneration, by the new year, new youth, and a new spring. Therefore, abuse is followed by praise; they are two aspects of one world, each with its own body” (197-198). Two aspects of one world.

We have in mummer discourse, then, an ongoing thought: Going back to the original place, and the undoing of us in doing so. A tomb in Arcadia, a ghost in Dem Times, a mummer in a mask. Mumm[er]ing then—as an intertextual discourse of texts—is perhaps a ritual meant to make the world go on; to keep things from disappearing. It may not make the sun appear or crops grow, but it constantly performs the work of resurrecting arcadias, revitalizing communities, propping up identities and advancing academic careers. In its performance of the Uncanny, though, it is also a reminder that things do disappear, always.

Epilogue/Epitaph

Just as I was putting the finishing touches on this dissertation, I went back to Alberta Avenue for one more look. Really, I wanted to see if the neighbourhood had anything to say or show me before I “finished” my work. After stopping in at the lively Carrot, I made my way down the sunny street to the Avenue Theatre.



Plate 31. The Avenue Theatre in 2016

Back in 2014 the Avenue Theatre closed its doors, and now there were plywood boards nailed up beneath the marquees. According to a post from 8 May 2014 on the Theatre's Facebook page,

Avenue Theatre will be closing its doors middle of June [2014]. A few reasons led to this decision by the owners, but it's primarily a decision to make personal changes for the investment group, and sell the land to interested developers...All good things must come to an end, but this room will have a special place in the hearts of the arts community, especially the all ages one which is continuously sorely lacking in this city. Thanks personally from me to all the bands, renters, program and fundraising organizers, and every staff member for their devotion and passion, and to the managing partner in particular who made it possible for this room to exist and supported it more than most will ever know.

Let's send it out in proper style.

Thanks

(<https://www.facebook.com/AvenueTheatreED/>; accessed on 5 August 2016)

I wondered if the marquee lights would ever glow again. Perhaps the theatre would disappear to make way for something else, as did the Cromdale Hotel or Gladys' Flower Shop before it. Would mummies ever again stomp upon that stage? If not the stage, the streets, then? The Alberta Avenue Mummies Collective didn't appear at the Deep Freeze Festival in 2016. There were Scandinavian Vikings and Ukrainian Dancers, Wajjo African Drummers and an Aboriginal Village, Knights and Warriors and Maidens even, but the program speaks nothing of mummies. I wasn't able to attend and see for myself, so I emailed the festival's producer to be sure. She replied,

We did not have Mummies last year, and we have not booked anything for the coming winter festival as yet.

We hope to have the Arts of Life Ukrainian Troupe roaming the site...acting out folk tales and singing traditional songs and dancing...they seem to be a derivation of the Mummer tradition.

I will let you know more when the Fall comes along and we are doing final bookings for Deep Freeze. If you don't hear from me by mid-October, send me a reminder email.

(Personal email, 5 August 2016)

What will come, come the Fall? Will mummings be on Alberta Avenue this winter? If not, who will ensure the sun rises in the Springtime? As I made my way back to my car from the boarded-up theatre, I passed a large shipping container on the side of the road, across from a sprawling grassy lot. The container sat there like some kind of steel monolith. I don't know who put it there, and I don't know if it was empty or had something inside. Painted across it was what must be a commissioned piece of art. The graffiti-style piece depicts a city skyline with the sun peaking over one of its streets, fixed in place, neither rising nor setting, both setting and rising. The buildings of the silhouette city each have two sides: One glistening white, one shadowed in darkness.



Plate 32. An Alberta Avenue back street in 2016

In large graphic font, hovering in the sky, is the phrase, “We Believe in 118.” This is the declaration that appears on signs in windows up and down the avenue.



Plate 33. The Ave's Mantra

I watched an elderly woman pass by the shipping container-turned-monolith. She was on her way to a nearby church. As she strolled by, I noticed that hunched against the painting, barely visible in its shadow, was someone else. It was impossible to tell from where I was if the person was a male or female, young or old. The person's hooded head hung down, resting perhaps. The monolith gave them shade in the hot afternoon and a place to lean on, looking out onto the big green lot that might once have been inhabited by some building or another. Piled beside the person were various sundry things, bagged, and no doubt precious to them. I wondered if they called Alberta Avenue “home,” and if they, too, believed in 118. Were they awake, or were they dreaming?

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Appendix

The History of Edmonton and Calgary, as a Mummers' Play by *The Tutankhamun Mummers of Mummington*

Characters

Joulupukki the Finnish Christmas Goat (the Father Christmas/Beelzebub/Hobby-Beast)

Sir Gretsky of Waynington, Founder of Edmonton (the Hero)

Darth McHitlerstein, Founder of Calgary (the Villain)

Klondike Kate (the Man-Woman)

Sir John A. MacDonald (the Doctor)

Play

Joulupukki the Goat's Intro:

Attend thee guests of the Deep Freeze Festival
we are but humble players, perhaps the best of all

that grace the stage here on the Ave
Please give us all the attention you have

We are the Tutankhamen Mummers of Mummington
We'll show you a play about Cal'gry and Edmonton

They have been foes since their inception
incase you have a preconception
Twas Calgary who through grave deception
thwarted our heros without exception...
BUT, this shant meet a good recpetion,
unless we first guide your perception:

I present myself as Yodle, Yolu- Yoloopukey "Really? What is this..oh finnish? oh..." The
Christmas Goat.

A finnish sprite whos sometimes spooky..."wears a fur coat"

I bring you now our tale of glory,

And some goat cheese...but mainly the story

Tis truly a tales like from olden day
So now turn off your cellphones and clear the way,

For I call in our Edmonton Hero,
Sir Gretzky of Waynington please draw near-

Sir Gretzky's Intro:

O' I am Sir Gretzky of Waynington
Inventor of hockey and founder of Edmonton.

I've travelled the country where the buffalo roam,
Tamed the wilderness and made a home,

I fought off a cougar with my bear hands,
Started my own hockey skate brands,

Ground my wheat to make my bread,
I'm an Edmontonian, born and-bread.

So others have come to settle here
In Edmonton, Alberta, this place so dear.

But I must lament this town to the south,
It is called Cal'gry, the word stings my mouth.

Why refer to it with such disdain?
Well truth be told, it's 'cause it has a train.

A railway promised to my town in the north,
But instead it was given to those gluttons in the south who just like money and eating things and
grease and they don't even know how to play hockey at all. They're not good at it.
They lack passion, heart and grit.
Even pylons score on them a bit.

But I digress for I want to impress that in Calgary they oppress and I'm going to address that
evilness, send it to the press I'm winning the girl who's the pretties-t.

But look, here's the founder of Calgary now,
Probably greasy, rich and eating a cow.

Darth McHitlerstein's Intro:

Darth Mchitlerstien is the name
They call me and perfection one in the same

Calgary is mine, I founded it out of love
For the cow and the lions and the penguin and dove

My horse may pollute but it leads the stampede
My Perfection at life comes from all of my greed

I enjoy the view of the mountains nearby
If only I could claim them as creation by darth hitlerstien

I am fond of the animals especially from behind
Which one tastes best, I can't make up my mind

The cows sure make my profits loyal
Especially when they are swimming in oil.

Oil yes oil, What a lovely short word
It warms me inside like the taste of this bird

And this delicious Chicken in a bucket- said KFC
It's almost as good as a pile of money

It's true I once had Children that would carry my names
But I could not handle their need for love so I sold them for flames

Yes the flames of fortune are of my empire
And the city of Calgary has been dubbed my shire

The ladys are fond of my very large tower
And this has given me oh so much power

The likings I've earned are for those of Kate
Her dowry of gold has lead me to master the cowbell.

Here she comes now, with those golden hips
Just wait till she gets this grease to her lips

The Goat:

And so arriveth Klondike Kate,
the one they **both** would like to date.

Klondike Kate is a beautiful lass,
loved especially for her huge golden...

Klondike Kate's Intro:

Dowry!

I'm Klondike Kate and I'm really great
Who would like to be my date?

In fact all the boys treat me the best,
I know it's because of my giant chest
of gold!

Yes its true I am quite rich
People say it makes me a bit
childish about who I like
but if I don't, they can take a hike!

I'll take a man with equal wealth,
especially if he's in poor health.

The peasants would all run and cower
from my man, with so much power

To the man with the largest tower,
I would give a golden shower; of gold!

I know they say that size doesn't matter,

but his I would want to climb with a ladder!

The man who fits all these expectations
Would have the best city in all of the nation

But I won't dally with any old rubes,
So prove yourself to win my dowry.

(Edmonton tries to woo Kate)

Sir Gretsky:

Oh my darling Klondike Kate
You're the girl I think is great

Come to Edmonton and live the champion way,
We drafted Taylor Hall and traded Ricky Ray.

There are superb things in our city so true
Such as public transit and our mediocre zoo.

Kate you're a woman who I can please without talk,
Come to Edmonton because I have a giant mall.

And shopping is a thing I know you find awesome,
Come and get lost in south Edmonton Common.

Darling Kate, if I may be so bold,
I can bring you more than just gold.

I truly think you're a wonderful girl,
Come to Edmonton, I'll give you the world.

(Calgary and Edmonton try to woo Kate)

K.K.:

I cannot choose I want them all
I want the tower, I want the mall.

(Edmonton and Calgary challenge one another and engage in battle)

(Calgary dies)

K.K.:

Oh no he's dead it can't be true
 He was the man I sought to woo.

How can I have such awful luck,
 When all I wanted was to marry.

Is there nothing to do to save my love,
 no cure for death from up above?

Perhaps I'll go to hellish lengths
 to help restore his health and strength

Can anyone save my love so true?
 Oh look a doctor right on cue.

(MACDONALD TAKES A DRUNKEN WHILE TO GET ON STAGE, KATE REPEATS HER LINES)

MacDonald's Intro:

Greetings, greetings, ladies and beaus
 Sir John A. MacDonald shall cure all your woes

I've been to Red River and turned it blue
 I nursed a sasquatch with the flu

I've defended beavers from polar bears
 And booted senators out of their chairs

I straightened the CN Tower when it was bent
 I even unoccupied the ninety nine percent

Now, what's this, you say, this poor town is dead?
 Not an ounce of spirit from his toe to his head?

I've a magic elixir of barley and hops
 It'll dazzle his tongue with fizzes and pops

As it swoons from his brain to his belly
Up he'll rise, all fine and welly

(MacDonald goes to pour the bottle into Calgary's mouth but it is empty)

Oh my, what a shame, the bottle is dry
And nary a pub or a tavern nearby

But tis no matter, for what this town needs
Is not a liquid from grasses or seeds

He needs a liquid from under the soil
Something thick, something rich...what he needs is OIL!

The Goat: Castor oil?

Calgary: Nee!

Gretsky: Crude oil?

Calgary: Nee!

Klondike Kate: Oil of Olay?

Calgary: Nee!

MacDonald:

Ah! What this man craves is a delicacy
He requires oil of chicken, from some good KFC

(MacDonald brings out bucket of KFC and feeds some chicken to Calgary)

Calgary:

You cannot defeat a man with my such power
Have you not noticed my incredibly large tower

I possess the skill of an olympian
Especially with the grease of this wonderful chicken

You are jealous of my mountain view
 Take this you elephant lacking want of a zoo!

(Edmonton and Calgary engage in battle and Calgary dies again)

(Klondike Kate calls for MacDonalds again)

MacDonald:

Again! This man's life is totally spent
 His body as broken as my Scottish accent

Tsk, tsk, Sir Gretsky, If I had it my way
 I'd send you in exile to the king of LA

His bones are broke, his joints all dry
 What this man needs is a nice juicy thigh

(MacDonald feeds a chicken thigh to Calgary)

Feel the chicken grease course through your veins
 Livestock and oil will cure all your pains

Rise up, my good man, up on your feet
 Fix yourself up, all tidy and neat

(Calgary gets up, revived)

Now, you two towns, don't be a bother
 Be more like siblings, with I as your Father

Back, away, to the East I must go
 And I don't want to hear of the West anymo!

Calgary:

Alas, I must attract the eyes of this fair Kate
 For I must calm the stampede that has brought us to fate

Kate:

While you were fighting I met a man with greater power,
 And he has a BIGGER tower,
 I'll go east and marry pronto,
 The finest city is Toronto! (everyone BOOS)

Edmonton:

What does she see in that big polluted city,
 When Alberta cities are much more pretty!

Calgary:

Whatever! this Kate is missing out on my tower
 We'll fight Toronto together...

Edmonton: Right after I shower!

(ALL PAUSE AND TURN TO LOOK AT EDMONTON)

Calgary: What, really? I thought we had kind of an alliance going?

Edmonton: Well, y'know, I'm kind of sweaty from all the fighting...I just wanted to freshen up
 if we're going to see Kate again

Calgary, and everyone: Well, I mean, fair enough, it's just kind of weird timing, etc.

Edmonton: No, I thought rhyme worked well...

The Goat, et al: True, there's no arguing that....but it doesn't really fit within the framework of
 the play, etc. Well, carry on!

Edmonton: my bath shouldn't take much more than an hour,
 in the meantime, why don't you find food to devour,

Calgary:

Now earlier I spotted a tantalizing goat
 His oil and flesh will be smooth down my throat

The Goat:

Well that's a frightening thing to say,
 We must conclude without delay! (screams as Calgary tries to eat him)
 This cheese cannot subdue his appetite,

and if this play—i beg—did you delight,
Please give us GOLD, and drink and meat,
especially something else for him to eat...perhaps a tasty deep fried treat...or something made of
Alberta wheat.... a carrot or a bright red beet?...something savory? Something sweet!...we hope
not to be indiscreet, but gold is best, we have receipts. And now we bow as we retreat!!!

(THE END)