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Framing identity : social practices of photography in Canada (1880-1920)

Close, S.M.

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Preface

The conceptual base for this study is an investigation of how women use photography as a social practice to establish identity. It developed in part from my research into the work of early twentieth-century, Canadian women photographers where I was repeatedly struck by the commonality of issues and themes that arose from their imagery. The study is also informed by my own photographic practice and my work as an independent curator. I had for some time been conscious of the prevalence of identity issues in my own work and that of many other women photographers, the most obvious example being a tendency toward self-portraiture. I decided to focus my attention upon four of the earliest recorded Canadian women photographers for whom significant bodies of work are available: Mattie Gunterman, Geraldine Moodie, Ruby Gordon Peterkin and Etta Sparks. I chose these women because they are representative of the ways in which women used photography in the early years of the twentieth century. Mattie Gunterman was a committed and talented amateur who explored identity through the creation of a visual narrative within the format of the family album. Geraldine Moodie was a career photographer whose work shows how women were able to establish identity through practice as a professional. Nursing sisters Ruby Gordon Peterkin and Etta Sparks represent those many women photographers whose work lies in attics and archives, to date unrecognized and often unseen. Both Sparks and Peterkin were amateurs who used photography both to create identity and, like contemporary tourists, to situate themselves in an alien environment.

Griselda Pollock (1988) points out that feminist theory gives women a new freedom to intervene in art history in a more personal, autobiographical way if it is called for. In this study, I take full advantage of that freedom. The choice of the photographers was also a personal one. Geraldine Moodie lived in Battleford; the capital of what was then Canada's North West Territories and between 1905 and 1906 ran a successful, commercial photography studio there. North Battleford, my birthplace and hometown, lies only a kilometer or two distant on the other side of the North Saskatchewan River. Fort Battleford, the North West Mounted Police post where John and Geraldine Moodie were stationed, was the first subject of my early studies in Canadian history. Mattie Gunterman was familiar to me as well through the Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon, where I was an active board member when the Gallery mounted the first exhibition of her work in the 1970s. I discovered the

First World War photograph albums of Ruby Gordon Peterkin and Etta Sparks while working as a researcher at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa in the mid 1990s.

As Mieke Bal (2002) warned, I had to “travel” to complete this study. I carried out extensive archival research at numerous cultural institutions including the National Archives of Canada, the National Gallery of Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Archives and the Canadian War Museum, all in Ottawa. In Saskatchewan I also visited the Canadian Mounted Police Museum in Regina, the Fred Light Museum in Battleford and the Photographers Gallery in Saskatoon. Several trips to England allowed me to visit related exhibitions and access collections at the British Museum, the Photographers Gallery, the Imperial War Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, all in London.

Much of my work as a scholar has centered on photography, its history and the theory that informs it. Over the past twenty-two years, I have taught numerous courses in photography and photographic history and theory at the University of Manitoba, the University of Ottawa, Carleton University and the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. My practice as an independent curator has also informed this research and my understanding of photography. Among other things, my experience includes the curating and production of two photographic exhibitions for the National Archives of Canada: *Reminiscences of a Royal Exile: The Dutch Royal Family in Wartime Ottawa* and *Underground Photographer: Liberation of Holland in Photographs by Kryn Taconis*. These exhibitions were featured as part of the Victory Spring celebrations in Ottawa and later toured in Europe.

My travels have taken me back and forth between research and practice, all informed by theory drawn from cultural analysis. I have sifted through boxes, read books, studied exhibitions, gone to conferences, given papers, asked questions and talked with photographers and theorists. While one destination, the completion of this study, has now been reached, my journey is far from over. My fascination with photography’s rich mine of cultural analysis continues to grow, fed as it is by a seemingly endless flow of images from both past and present, each of which, to varying degrees, offers sites of puzzlement, stimulation and challenge. As Susan Sontag (1978) so astutely observed, given enough time, all photographs become equally important.