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

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MAP\$ING: CONCEPTS AND CAMERAS

Not only do we have to grasp that art is a part of social production, but we also have to realize that it is itself productive, that it actively produces meanings. Art is constitutive of ideology; it is not merely an illustration of it. It is one of the social practices through which particular views of the world, definitions and identities for us to live are constructed, reproduced, and even redefined (Pollock 1988: 30).

Photography has become a household word and a household want: it is used alike by art and science, by love, business, and justice; is found in the most sumptuous saloon, and in the dingiest attic — in the solitude of the Highland cottage, and in the glare of the London gin-palace — in the pocket of the detective, in the cell of the convict, in the portfolio of the painter and architect, among the papers and patterns of the mill owner and manufacturer, and on the brave breast of the battlefield (Eastlake 1857 cited in Newhall 1980: 81).

ALTHOUGH SOME REVISIONIST WORK has been done in Britain and the United States to explain the role of women in the history of photography, little has been published about the role of women in photography in Canada at the turn of the twentieth century. To date, the early photographic canon in Canada described by photo historians Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell (1979) is a mainly patriarchal overview dominated by the exploits of explorers photographing in the public domain. It also includes photo archivist Stanley Triggs’ examination (1985) of the studio practice of the icon of early Canadian photography, William Notman. Many of the images made during this period also feature what are now problematic representations of “the Natives” as other.  

In contrast, this study examines how women as photographic practitioners created a narrative through their visual images, despite the hegemonic discourses by which they were surrounded. I develop the argument that photographs by women at the turn of the twentieth century were more than simply pictorial studies. Their images can be seen as a gendered social practice that explores and establishes identity. This study provides a revisionist presentation of women’s contribution to the history of photography in Canada. I argue that despite their marginalization, women played a significant role in the development of photography in Canada and that through revisionist intervention in the histories of art, their work can be analyzed as social practice. My research examines how Canadian

1 The terminology used to address Indigenous people in this study will effect contemporary usage that interchanges the following terms: Aboriginal, Native people, Indigenous people and First Nations people. The term Indian will be used in historical context to reflect the image of Native people by non-Native people. I here acknowledge the direction of Dr. Ruth Phillips, Canada Research Chair in Modern Culture, Carleton University. See Phillips (1997) (1999); Berlo and Phillips (1998:18-19). See also Francis (1992: 9).

2 Social practice is defined as an activity or ritual of society reflective of social history and used in this study to describe the process of photography rather than elevating the end product, the photograph, to the status of an art object. Ritual is defined by the Oxford English Reference Dictionary (1996) as a prescribed order of performing rites and a procedure that is regularly followed.
women used photography as a social practice to establish identity. It uses theories and practices drawn from cultural analysis and deals with issues related to gender, identity, post colonialism, tourism and travel.

After compiling a list of professional and amateur women photographers working in Canada from 1880 to 1920, I have chosen to examine the work of a representative four: Mattie Gunterman (1854–1945), Geraldine Moodie (1872–1945), Ruby Gordon Peterkin (1887–1961) and Etta Sparks (1879–1917). These women serve as case studies to illustrate aspects of the role of women in the development of photography in Canada. Gunterman is considered as an amateur practitioner, while Moodie is repositioned as a professional. Both Peterkin and Sparks represent how photography can be used as tool for the situating of self; specifically, they pictured themselves as professional nursing sisters while serving overseas. They also signify the traveller and tourist who use the camera to create picturesque views for their photo albums.

My methodology is informed by the practice of cultural analysis as defined by Mieke Bal. First, I analyze by completing close reading of each photograph selected and then consider concepts and theories that can be related to it. In other words, I first examine what is framed and then pull back to examine the framer in relationship to theoretical discourse. To further inform my readings of the images in the chapters ahead I have also considered Kaja Silverman’s Lacanian analysis of the gaze as camera that “puts us in the picture” (1996:168). This I have reversed to use the camera as gaze. Gunterman, Moodie, Peterkin and Sparks all used the camera’s gaze to put themselves in the picture. I argue that these four women gained a limited kind of control by framing the world through the viewfinder. My analysis of photographs also includes consideration of concepts such woman as sign, the male gaze, album as representative discourse, the colonizing gaze, mise-en-scène and the picturesque.

In Chapter One, I position Mattie Gunterman’s photographs as a form of representational discourse within the context of the family album and the practice of amateur women photographers. Gunterman’s relationship to Nature is explored, as well as the theatricality of her images. I also examine the existence of and the necessity for alternative productions of personal narrative such as the family photograph album. Marianne Hirsch’s Family Frames, related to self-portraiture and the creation of family albums, informs the analysis of the photographs. The concepts of “male gaze” and “woman as sign” are significant in the reading of Gunterman’s visual narratives. In his book Ways of Seeing, John Berger presented the gaze as masculine, arguing that there is a gender difference between the “surveyor and the surveyed ... one might simplify this by saying men act and women appear”(1972: 46). Feminist film theory presents a theoretical analysis of gaze and spectatorship beginning with Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which depicts patriarchal society as being “split between active/male and passive/female” (1975: 366). Mulvey’s study points out the role of women as spectacle rather
than as the spectator. Elizabeth Cowie’s founding theorization of the concept “woman as sign,” developed in 1978, illustrates how women have been reduced to visual icons or signifiers of masculine desire.6

Chapter Two analyzes the photographs made by Geraldine Moodie, a professional photographer with a privileged point of entry to the community of Indigenous people at the beginning of the twentieth century. I explore the relationship between self and other, using as subject the photographing of a colonized group of Indigenous peoples by Moodie, a Euro-Canadian woman, herself, simultaneously, a representative of both other and self. Here I focus the reading of images on Moodie’s powerful portraits of Inuit, particularly her mother and child images, made between 1904 and 1909 in what is now the Canadian territory of Nunavut.7 Chapter Three examines the construction of photo-narrative and how Gunterman used her photography albums as a frame to produce a self-aware spectacle.8 I read a selection of Gunterman’s self-portraits to establish how she re-signed herself as a self-sufficient pioneer woman.

Chapter Four considers issues related the way in which Canada’s First Peoples were represented. Here I return again to Moodies’ photographs and further explore the concept of the colonizing camera. Her work is compared to that of other so-called “shadowcatchers,” including Edward Curtis. I also consider her images in relationship to other women photographers who made portraits of Aboriginal people including Gertrude Kasebier and me. Reading National Geographic (1993), by the sociologist Jane Collins and the anthropologist Catherine Lutz, informs the reading of Moodie’s photographs of Native people.9 Concerned with examining how “lines of sight” are evident in photographs of non-Western and non-dominant cultures, Lutz and Collins argue that these images are not merely representations of the exotic other but are important sites at which many gazes intersect. Their chapter “The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes” is relevant to this study as it explores the significance of “gaze” for intercultural relations. According to Lutz and Collins: This intersection creates a complex, multi-dimensional object; it allows viewers of the photo to negotiate a number of different identities both for themselves and for those pictured; and it is one route by which the photograph threatens to break the frame and reveal its social context (187).

Chapter Five analyzes the photographic albums of Ruby Gordon Peterkin and Etta Sparks, two Canadian army nurses stationed overseas during the First World War. I examine how identity is created and sustained by the photographic documentation of their war-time service and its contrast to their picturesque tourist snapshots. It also considers the album as representational discourse and the framing of the picturesque by the tourist and traveller. Chapter Six examines the positioning, representation and contextualization of women in photography in Canada during the period from 1880-1920. This discussion focuses on the change from amateur to professional photographer and outlines the
factors of resistance or marginalization, which women photographers faced. The chapter is divided into two basic elements: amateurs and their entrance to photography, support systems and areas of production; and professionals and their context and production." Concepts of the “male gaze” and “women as sign” are related to the photographs that are read.

ART AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

My study examines how Mattie Gunterman, Geraldine Moodie, Ruby Gordon Peterkin and Etta Sparks used photography as social practice. It compares and contrasts the photographic practices of these four women while positioning them within a larger framework that examines the relationship between women and photography in Canada. First, I want to frame the idea of art, and specifically photography, as social practice. The significance of visual literacy and the reading of photographs will follow.

British art historians Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry are among the “second generation” of feminist art historians who have moved beyond the collection of data to the application of new methodologies in analyzing women's art and to a deconstruction of structures used in mainstream art history. Pollock states that historical recovery in itself is insufficient (1988: 55). Both Pollock and her colleague, art historian Rozsika Parker, argue that historical recovery must be part of a complete process that is accompanied by the deconstruction of existing discourses and practices of art history (1989: 49). This study goes beyond the historical recovery of photographs made by women at the turn of the twentieth century to analyze and examine their work as a form of gendered social practice.

Central to Pollock and Parker's argument, and to those of other theorists such as Wolff, is the view that art is a social practice. As one of the early arguments for the social nature of the arts which deconstructed the myth of artistic genius, The Social Production of Art (1981) Wolff argues for a more sociological perspective: “against the romantic and mystical notion of art as the creation of ‘genius,’ transcending existence, society and time, and argues that it is rather the complex construction of a number of real, historical factors” (1). In addition to this view, another of Wolff’s key issues is the marginalization of women, both in the arts and their broader social life. She observes that the work of women and men is significantly different; a fact that is gaining increasing attention as part of the study of the sociology of art (43).

In Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art (1988), Pollock presents a series of influential yet controversial essays in which she draws from Marxist, psychoanalytic and deconstructionist theories to present “feminist interventions” in mainstream art history. Pollock traces the development of feminist art history and argues that simply adding women to art history is not the same as producing a feminist art history. Pollock contends that sexual difference results from social conditioning. She therefore rejects the traditional art historical methodology, instead suggesting a
feminist approach where issues such as woman as sign are analyzed as reflective of their social historical context. In keeping with these ideas, this study employs four central themes: identity, personal narrative, situating or locating self and the relationship between self and other, to examine photography as social practice and explore the framing of self. These four themes are interwoven throughout the chapters to follow.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

In addition to cultural theorists such as Pollock, my study looks to the writings of a group of photo-theorists, many of whom, like Abigail Solomon-Godeau, work from a revisionist position. Solomon-Godeau, one of the few, second generation, feminist critics writing directly about photography, echoes Pollock’s assertion that traditional art history adheres to a patriarchal system. She states that the canon of photography “unsurprisingly, [is] officially (his) story. It must therefore be the task of the feminist photography critic to revise it” (1991: xxxiv). In Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices (1991), Solomon-Godeau critiques the representation of the photographic image as art object or document. Her argument utilizes postmodern and poststructuralist theory to challenge traditional notions of the documentary nature of photography and its elevation to High Art. A final section of her book, titled Photography and Sexual Difference, brings together three key essays on women and photography.15 This series of essays has been cited by the noted art historian Linda Nochlin as being seminal in its contribution to the ongoing cultural critique of photography. Solomon-Godeau raises a fundamental question, “that a gendering of photographic discourse suggests: what, if anything, changes when it is a woman who wields the camera?” (257). This question is considered in the textual readings in my study of the photographs of Gunterman in Chapter Two and Moodie in Chapter Three.

Gunterman’s construction of family albums is the creation of a personal, visual narrative. Photographer Jo Spence and film-maker Patricia Holland bring together a number of essays dealing with the construction of such personal narrative in Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography. In this collection they argue that photographs in family albums are double-coded, that while to the outsider they function as social document, to the family member they are frozen memories. Holland explains:

Family photography can operate at this juncture between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memories are never fully ‘ours,’ nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a ‘real’ one (1991: 14).

This notion of the construction of identity and a search for a real or true identity infiltrates all the chapters in this study.

The idea of photography as social practice rather than art object challenges the traditional photographic canon and its commitment to standards of connoisseurship. Writer and curator Carol Squier (1990) points out that until the 1970s, the debate on photography focused on the question of raising its status to that of an art form. Squier provides context arguing that photographers who sought to express a "private vision, either by making visual metaphors for their emotions and psychology or by seeking to reveal in pictures truths about the state of mankind, assiduously distanced themselves from the image makers who trafficked primarily in commercial rather than the pure realms of personal photography" (9). Critics, gatekeepers and the media shared this vision of the medium and used their considerable influence to assist in positioning these practitioners in the photographic canon.

European thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, whose ideas began to influence a variety of theoretical writings on arts, culture and politics, further fuelled the debate. Benjamin produced a number of seminal works on photographic theory between the two world wars. In the widely cited essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," first published in 1936, he set the stage for the medium to be seen as a democratized art form that moved away from the aura of the art object. Benjamin and Barthes inspired the contemporary American thinker and writer Susan Sontag. Profoundly influential, Barthes' reflections on the power of the family photograph in his book Camera Lucida (1981) are based on the identification of two elements or themes, studium and punctum, which he claims may be present in a photograph (26). Sontag introduced the ideas of these European intellectuals to North America through a series of essays in which she re-presented them in language more accessible to the general public. In her book, On Photography, Sontag outlines Benjamin's reflections upon the relationship between the mass reproduction of imagery and its spiritual effect. Benjamin states that the changes brought about to art through mass visual reproduction link it to revolutionary and social movements. He goes on to argue that it would be easier to convey messages about social concerns advocating change if a less elite art form such as photography was used. As established in the opening quotation by the British writer, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, photography was an accessible and versatile medium of communication that was more than just "a vehicle for artists but also a tool with endless potential uses — for commemoration, information-gathering, surveillance, and profit " (Squier 1990: 9).

Squier also points out that photographic history was slow to be influenced; in the past twenty years, however, there has been a movement by a growing number of writers — Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin and John Tagg among others — toward re-assessing the medium in relationship to social history, gender, identity and post-colonialism issues raised by Semiotics, Structuralism, Marxism, Psychoanalytic theory and Post-Structuralist thought (12).

Like Sontag, writer Allan Sekula was also influenced by the writings of Barthes,
and his essay “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning” was published in *Artforum* in 1975. Sekula, in common with Barthes, thought that photographs should be read as cultural images, not merely aesthetic objects or documentary pictures. He argued for a photographic discourse that would provide “a system within which culture harnesses photographs to various representational tasks” (1975: 455). Sekula’s article presented a significant challenge to the photographic canon and became a key reference in the reconsideration of the status of the photograph. Squiers concurs:

By making Stieglitz, the high priest of artistic aspiration, a major target of his essay, Sekula issued a challenge to the entrenched ideas of generations of artist photographers and their supporters, from Stieglitz and his Camera Work to John Szarkowski and the Museum of Modern Art (1990: 10).

Citing weddings as an example, Tagg examines how photographic practice has become part of many of the social rituals that it records. Arguing that the social function of the photograph is its value, or currency, he writes:

What I am trying to stress here is the absolute continuity of the photographs’ ideological existence with their existence as material objects whose “currency” and “value” arise in certain distinct and historically specific social practices and are ultimately a function of the state (1988: 165).

American art historian Rosalind Krauss also considers photography as social practice and cites sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who published his own examination of these ideas, *Un art moyen*, in 1965.

Bourdieu begins his analysis by defining photography as *art moyen*, a practice carried out by the ordinary person that must be defined in terms of its social practice. Bourdieu defines these functions as relating to the structure of the family in the modern world, with the family photograph serving as an index or evidence of its unity, that is, the family’s but that at the same time is also a tool in the production of that unity. Rosalind Krauss expands this argument:

The photographic record is part of the point of these family gatherings; it is an agent in the collective fantasy of family cohesion, and in that sense the camera is a projective tool, part of the theatre that the family constructs to convince itself that it is together and whole (19).

This examination of family photography as social practice informs both Chapters One and Three in which I consider the personal narratives of Gunterman as representational discourse.

The concept of photography as social practice that emphasizes photography as a tool rather than an art form is an appropriate one to use for this study. Neither Gunterman,
Moodie, Peterkin, nor Sparks sought to be artists, nor did any of them consider themselves to be one. Instead they used the camera for other purposes. All four women used photography to explore identity and personal narrative, to situate themselves or to examine the relationship between self and other. Their images will be read as evidence in the chapters to follow.

PLAYING THE VISUAL LITERACY GAME

What does it mean to “read” a photograph? Because of its representational and documentary qualities, photography has been a controversial medium since its earliest days. My interest in photography relates to the belief that photography is a social practice that can be read like a text to provide, among other things, information about the social and historical context in which an image was made. The act of reading a photograph is the final act of a collaboration in which the photographer creates the image and the viewer decodes it. To read a photograph, one accepts that an image can be viewed as a visual text. The image must be examined closely, and a detailed analysis made of the information or signs it contains. It can then be considered in relationship to related concepts and theory. It must be stressed here that the image must be allowed to have its voice as part of the interaction with the theory that is used to analyze it. This is a significant step in the practice of cultural analysis as described by Mieke Bal, who explains:

As a professional theorist, it is my belief that theory can be meaningful only when deployed in close interaction with the objects of study to which the theory pertains. Close, detailed analysis established a kind of intersubjectivity, not only between the analyst and the audience, but between the analyst and the “object.” The rule that I have imposed on myself, and which has been the most exciting productive constraint I have ever experienced, is never to just “theorize” but always allow the object “to speak back” (2001: 261).

This quotation has been a key guide for me. Throughout my writing of this study, I have taken care always to be mindful of “allow[ing] the object to speak back.”

The reading of photographic images is informed by Semiotics, the study of the use and social function of signs, both linguistic and visual. Photography is of particular interest to semioticians because of its indexical nature. Semiotics allows for the consideration of texts resulting from combinations of signs that yield meaning. Barthes’ semiotic analysis (1981) of the impact of the family photograph, in which he discusses his own emotional reaction to the reading of domestic images, provides a theoretical perspective that can be applied to the analysis of reading of photographs. He first reflects on the nature of photography, concluding that it elicits two responses: by studium or by punctum.


18 See Silverman (1983) for a seminal study on Semiotics.
This impact of an image is not only a found meaning that can be read from the image by the viewer, but also a coded sign constructed by the photographer or the editor of any form of photographic collection.

It is in the unassuming images — the family photographs, the images of domestic objects and interiors and daily life — that we can find clues to the identity of their makers and the society in which they function. Whether we are looking at photographs made at the beginning of the twentieth century by Mattie Gunterman or at the beginning of the twenty-first century by Jeff Thomas or Cindy Sherman, it is only by a careful and considered reading of the images that we can come to an understanding of them and reflect upon their significance.

The opening quotations from the contemporary feminist theorist Griselda Pollock and the nineteenth-century writer Lady Elizabeth Eastlake contribute to the argument for photography as social practice. Lady Eastlake, writing only 20 years after the invention of photography, confirms that nineteenth-century women recognized its importance "as a tool with endless potential uses" (Squier 1990: 9). Griselda Pollock establishes the revisionist position that art is social practice that allows us to construct, reproduce and define identity (1988: 30). These two quotations are key to the development of the primary argument presented in this study, that as photographic practitioners, women created a feminine voice or narrative through their visual images and established photography as a form of social practice.