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

Close, S.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)
FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

From 1899 to 1911, while employed as a mining camp cook in the rugged interior of British Columbia, Mattie Gunterman made narrative, diaristic photographs that construct the story of a pioneer woman’s life in Canada. She is an exemplary representative of the many amateur women photographers in Canada at the turn of the nineteenth century. Her photographic work, arranged in autobiographical albums, remains a personal, visual journal and archive that documents significant moments of her life and narrates her own version of this story.

In this chapter I examine how Gunterman’s photographs can be read as signs of identity in terms of gender. My analysis focuses on two central motifs that close reading reveals in Gunterman’s work: her understanding of her relationship to nature and the ubiquitous employment of theatrical means within her photographic practice. I argue that through photography, Gunterman gained limited control over the frontier of the Canadian wilderness, a landscape that was primarily the domain of the “other” — a “man’s world.” Photography became the agency through which she was able to create her own visual autobiography. By reading from her photographs, I analyze how Gunterman saw that world and how she positioned herself within it.

In her book The Threshold of the Visible World, Kaja Silverman cites Jean-Paul Sartre’s analysis of le regard in which he discusses two different acts of looking. The first, a primarily male fantasy of mastery, involves the voyeur at the keyhole completely engrossed in the act of looking at the spectacle in front of him. The second kind of looking, le regard, occurs when the voyeur is caught looking through the keyhole and thus becomes aware of
himself as spectacle (Silverman 1996: 164). Silverman moves on to focus her discussion on Lacan and the Field of Vision, pointing out how “Lacan metaphorizes the gaze as camera so as to characterize it as an ‘apparatus’ to ‘put us in the picture’ (168). The Lacanian gaze surrounds or frames the subject put in the picture by the outside world’s visual habits that confine her. To inform my reading of the photographs in the four chapters to follow, I reverse Silverman’s Lacanian analysis to use the camera as gaze. Mattie Gunterman, Geraldine Moodie, Ruby Gordon Peterkin and Etta Sparks all used the camera’s gaze to put themselves into the picture. I turn this into an arena where the subject, by framing herself, is able to negotiate her status as subject and object at the same time. I argue that these four women seized a limited kind of mastery by looking through the viewfinder of the camera, a device that functioned as their version of the “keyhole,” to peep at the world so dominated by men. Mattie Gunterman used the camera to create her own identity, “picturing” herself as a strong, heroic, pioneer woman. In this chapter, I examine a selection of Gunterman’s photographs that represent what she saw through the “keyhole” or viewfinder. Chapter Three will draw back from the “keyhole” to consider the framer herself, providing details of her history and discussing how Gunterman’s photography albums function as a shifting frame for the necessarily fragmented, self-aware spectacle through which she constructed her personal narrative.

Roland Barthes’ discussion of the power of the family photograph in Camera Lucida provides a theoretical framework that can be applied to an analysis of Gunterman’s work. Barthes’ reflections on the nature of photography conclude that the photograph elicits two responses, by means of what he calls studium or by punctum (1981: 26). Studium is the label Barthes applies to photographs that are studies of the ordinary that do little more than provide factual information (27). His particular interest, however, lies in that smaller number of powerful and emotive images that “break or punctuate” this studium and by so doing, disturb the ordinary and surprise the spectator. This effect, which he refers to as punctum, is the response created when images “prick,” “bruise” and “create a sense of the poignant”; the kind of images, Barthes argues, that are often found in family photograph albums (27). It is necessary to keep in mind that such an impact created by an image is not simply a found meaning read into an image by the viewer, but also a sign encoded by the producer of the image or sometimes, in the case of family photograph albums, by an editor. While the making of a family photograph album is undoubtedly a form of social practice and, as Alan Thomas argues, the results can certainly be read as a “living social document” which, through repeated reading, can yield much information about its owner, makers of such albums should not themselves be seen as a social historians searching for a kind of “truth” but rather, as constructors of personal truths (1981: 43). As Patricia Holland notes, “[o]ften guarded by a self-appointed archivist, albums construct their own versions of family history, in negotiation with the ideal” (1991: 9). Marianne Hirsch concurs:

![Figure 1.1](image-url)
Even more clearly than cinema, which has formed a central focus for theoretical critique and reappropriation during the past two decades, still photography reveals how cultural practices produce and reproduce dominant ideologies, whether of gender, of class, of sexuality, or of familiality. Unlike film, the still picture is focused by only the camera eye, whose point of view coincides with the perspective of the viewer, aiming to shape and determine the viewer’s position ... we perceive what we are prepared to perceive (1994:109).

Citing Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s position that “the specular mechanics of photography bear more than a coincidental resemblance to those of ideology” (1991: 274), Hirsch concludes that family photographs in particular “consolidate and perpetuate dominant familial myths and ideologies” (1994: 109).

Hirsch uses the visual images themselves as the “point of entry” into a theoretical analysis of the “power and constraints of familial mythologies” (109). This process of practicing theory or “stepping into the visual” is based on the writings of Mieke Bal. Bal argues that “if we understand theory in its etymological background (which is, after all visual) it ceases to be a dominating discourse and becomes rather a willingness to step into the visual, and to make discourse a partner, rather than a dominant opponent, of visuality” (1991: 228). Citing Barthes’ reading of the Winter Garden Photograph in his book, Camera Lucida, Hirsch further argues that for Barthes, identity is familial, not only in a sense of lineage but in the exchange of the familial gaze; the gaze not only between brother and sister, but also between the mother represented as a child in the photograph and her son who now reads that image (1994: 111). Creating and reading the family album, therefore, becomes an act of establishing identity both for the photographer and the viewer.

This linkage has particular relevance for the following examination of photographs from Mattie Gunterman’s family album through which she develops a narrative of her family’s heroic quest to establish themselves in what was a largely wilderness environment. Gunterman’s photo albums from the time contain numerous portraits of herself; her spouse, Will and son, Henry, as well as many photographs showing her interactions with family, friends and the environment. Apart from the subject matter though, it is Gunterman’s highly individual approach that makes these images especially interesting as indicators of how a woman could use photography to create her own identity.

POSITIONING OF SELF

In 1899, shortly after having obtained a 5" x 7" view camera, Mattie and her family were forced by health problems to move from their home in Seattle, Washington and establish themselves as part of the pioneer community at Thomson’s Landing (later known as Beaton) deep within the mountainous interior of British Columbia. Two of the images made with her new camera on the journey (Figs. 1.1 and 1.3) both position the family symbolically within the landscape and record a time of transition between their urban past and
the family’s identity as frontier pioneers. Beyond this obvious meaning though, a more detailed analysis shows them also to exemplify Gunterman’s use of the camera as a recorder of self-created, theatrical tableaux, carefully staged, peopled and, when necessary, accessorized with appropriate costumes and props. This approach to making photographs was common in the professional studios of the day as is evident in the commercial portrait work of Amy James, one of Gunterman’s contemporaries. However, quite apart from their having been made outdoors, as the following analysis will demonstrate, Gunterman’s images are far more complex, multi-layered and personal than the conventionalized studio fare produced by James and her ilk.

In Mattie by tree, somewhere along the Columbia River, 1899 (Fig. 1.1), made on the trip to their new home, Gunterman poses by a tree butt, the case of her plate camera leaning against the tree’s cut edge; an obviously conscious inclusion that identifies her as a photographer. John Tagg argues, “the portrait is ...a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of a social identity” (1993[1988]: 35). By choosing to photograph herself alone and apart from her family, this image confirms the importance Gunterman attributed to establishing a separate identity. By inserting herself into the image, Gunterman established her position on the other side of the keyhole or viewfinder, where she could be observed as the city dweller about to begin her journey into otherness — the wilderness landscape.

This representation of women is rare in early Canadian photography, where women are usually shown indoors or, if in the landscape at all, then only in parks or gardens, places that had been made “safe” through a careful application of civilization. William Notman’s images of women pictured at play in the lush, spa-like grounds of the luxurious Banff Springs Hotel in Alberta are typical (Fig.1.2). In contrast, Gunterman’s photograph is far more arresting, due in part to its contrariness. Ironically made not that far distant from Banff, her image suggests on the one hand its maker’s desire for a close relationship with nature while, on the other, it exemplifies the use of the camera’s gaze to appropriate or colonize the land. In addition, Gunterman’s photograph clearly shows how differently men and women manage the positioning of self in relation to the wilderness. Indeed, quite
apart from her handling of subject matter, the very act of creating her images is itself a powerful metaphor, contrasting the alienated man and the empathetic woman. Gunterman's self portrait presents herself as a woman who is comfortable in nature, not someone in conflict who is trying to "tame the wilderness."

In the photograph, Gunterman positions herself in the centre foreground, seated confidently and gazing directly into the camera, appearing comfortable and in full control despite the confusion of tangled branches that surround her. Her choice of a natural setting is significant as nature represented good health to Gunterman. She strongly associated the natural environment with the recovery and maintenance of her health, and her favourite saying became "Go out and get the good air, and you'll be all right, regardless of what's wrong with you" (Robideau 1995:12). Gunterman thus established self-in-nature as representing self-in-good-health-and-in-control, a primary stylistic marker throughout her personal, visual narratives. Other examples of this are Figs. 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 3.1 and 3.2.

FIGURE 1.3
Somewhere on the trail from Seattle to Beaton, 1899, gelatin silver print, PG 77.1.16
The juxtaposition of the formality of Gunterman's Victorian-style dress and pose with the organic confusion of the branches of the logged tree creates a form of visual tension. Her left hand reaches up to touch the cut tree, symbolizing her own feelings of exile and a desire to connect with the natural world. Her right hand is in her lap, fingers curled around the air bulb release that made it possible for her to trip the camera shutter from her position within the frame. This gesture literally establishes a connection between her camera, a tool of the technological world, and the tree, a symbol of the natural world, with herself as mediator. Cherry points out that in making self-portraits, nineteenth-century women wanted to be presented visually as professionals (1993: 83). In keeping with this, we see Gunterman positioned in conservative dress consisting of a long-sleeved, white blouse, a long, dark skirt and a small, straw hat. In 1899, feminine respectability was still very much signified through dress, hairstyling and “deportment,” and these clothes would have been considered entirely appropriate travel attire for a middle or working class woman at the time. The conservative formality of Gunterman’s attire indicates a gesture toward keeping up appearances and, despite the rugged surroundings in which she finds herself, presenting the appropriate “public self” for a respectable working class woman. Gunterman also appears healthy in the photograph, which reinforces the medical rationale for her having to leave Seattle and seek a location closer to nature. Robideau notes that the constant struggle to overcome health problems profoundly affected her attitude toward life; she became “a survivor whose strength came from within” (1995: 8).

For serious practitioners, photography en plein air at the turn of the nineteenth century still demanded they have a certain amount of physical strength to carry the necessary equipment and supplies. This restricted many women photographers to working in a fixed location such as the home or, for the wealthy or those few women professionals, a studio. Gunterman, however, despite her supposedly weak constitution, was able to carry her camera and its heavy case into the landscape, thereby moving herself beyond the boundaries of most amateur, women photographers of her time. Technically too, the images made with the large format camera represent a breakthrough for Gunterman. All of her photographs discussed in this chapter were made on 5" x 7" glass plates and exhibit the fine detail possible with this relatively large negative. The resulting high technical quality of her photographs is a testament to her choice of equipment and her skill in using it.

In addition to these issues related to gender and photography, I wish to bring to bear a few other concepts on looking at Gunterman's photographs, particularly her self-portraits. These are “woman as sign” and the “male gaze.” Groundbreaking studies on the idea of woman as sign were developed by British feminist art historian Griselda Pollock. In the essay “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite literature: the representation of Elizabeth Siddall,” Pollock and Deborah Cherry base their argument on the work of Elizabeth Cowie who analyzed the representation of women in cultural systems and proposed that images of women depict “pre-existent, real, or socially produced categories” (1988: 95).
Arguing that some nineteenth-century women artists and photographers were active in the re-signing of woman, Pollock and Cherry cite the collaboration between the celebrated British, pictorialist photographer Julia Margaret Cameron and the artist Marie Spartali during the 1860s and 1870s. Cameron and Spartali participated in the production of art works that successfully re-signed woman from visual icon to woman of culture (1988: 97). As Pollock and Cherry argue, “No longer limited to a signifier of masculine desire, woman as sign was re-signed around the pleasures invoked and invested in cultural exchanges between women” (1988: 99). Many of Mattie Gunterman’s self-portraits achieve a similar end within her experiential context, re-signing herself and, by implication, all women in her situation as independent, strong and heroic pioneers.

As one might expect at a time when the vast majority of photographers were men, the prevailing image of women from the period resulted from a male gaze. The photograph, Mrs. William Mackenzie, 1871 (Fig. 1.2), made by William Notman, Canada’s more prominent portraitist of the period, shows how completely this could objectify woman subjects. Mrs. Mackenzie, presented as she is in a long, lacy, white dress signifying her femininity, appears simply as one of a number of decorative objects within the frame. The dominating, high camera angle selected by Notman further contributes to making her appear vulnerable and unimportant. She seems unwilling or unable to meet the camera’s gaze. Hands folded meekly, passively awaiting direction for the next pose, she appears one with the surrounding collection of exotic flowers and birds, a similarly fragile creature whose continued existence can be maintained only within the controlled atmosphere of the conservatory in which she sits.

This portrait is an example of the attempted objectification of the women by what John Berger refers to as the “male gaze.” In this instance, the elevated perspective that makes the woman appear no more than part of the landscaped still life that surrounds and supports her emphasizes the colonizing power of that gaze. Mrs. Mackenzie looks up and out of the frame to the left. She does not confront the photographer and she does not smile. Instead, she is quietly resigned to her fate as an object — another flower in the conservatory where she is photographed. Her place is marked by a large needlepoint cushion of flowers that acts as a metaphor for her decorative role in the greenhouse.

She lounges back in a chair at the centre of the frame — resplendent in a long, white, ruffled dress, making her into “the woman in white” or “the angel in the house” that were such popular themes at the time. She is bedecked in numerous rings, necklaces and bracelets indicating her wealth and status. Her hair is elaborately styled and crowned with a lace butterfly and a feather plume. She is a decorative bird perched in a gilded cage. The cage — actually a lavish greenhouse — signifies the hothouse environment necessary for the maintenance of such a rare creature. Her fragile nature is evident in her slouching posture and the number of pillows required supporting her in her chair.

Mrs. Mackenzie’s passive pose, with her head bowed and her hands tightly folded,
underscores her lack of control within the frame. She appears meekly resigned to allowing herself to be surveyed by the camera. It is impossible not to draw a parallel between this living woman and the idealized woman in the Greek replica statue on the left side of the frame. Ironically, the statue appears more senuous than the living woman whose passive demeanor gives her little more substance than a lap dog. Mrs. Mackenzie shows no resistance to being placed in front of the camera. She, like the Greek idealization that is her silent companion, appears an object that her “husband” has acquired. The camera is merely taking stock — the photograph is part of an inventory of posessions. Mrs. Mackenzie is resigned to this, her body language and facial expression are frozen in a gesture of melancholy, sorrow comes with the loss of control over her own identity, at with being rendered a passive decorative object. Both she and the statue replicate an idealized femininity not of their own making.

Gunterman’s work offers a foil to this male gaze, presenting her own, woman’s gaze view through the keyhole that the viewfinder is. In the photograph, Somewhere on the trail from Seattle to Beaton, mid 1899 (Fig. 1.3), Will and Henry Gunterman and Nero, the dog, stand in front of a small, log shed which served travelers as a temporary shelter on the trail. The two, small and obviously vulnerable male figures are positioned in the centre of the frame. They and their ramshackle shelter appear in imminent danger of being ingested by the riotous anarchy of the encroaching wilderness. At first glance, the image appears to have been spontaneously made with both male figures leaning to the right as if they have just stepped from the building. Closer reading, however, indicates that their arrested gesture is in response to Mattie — “wife,” mother and clearly the authority behind the camera. Here Gunterman, like Notman, creates an image in which the human element appears entirely subject to forces beyond its control. The difference, however, is profound. While Mrs. Mackenzie is fully absorbed by her fate — a specimen pinned to a card in a Victorian butterfly collection — the two male figures in Gunterman’s photograph are captured at the point of resisting theirs, leaning at an odd, off-kilter angle, apparently under the direction of the woman making the picture, photographed just before they make a run for it. The fact that Gunterman’s partner, Will, has moved his head during the exposure, creating a blur, only adds to the slightly unbalanced effect of the photograph and further contributes to the sense of impending flight.

Just to the left of the two figures in the image, hanging from the end of a post, is a birdcage. This unusual addition is another of Gunterman’s props, further evidence, were it needed, that much, if not this entire photograph, was carefully staged. Obviously the family canary had to find its way to the new home in Canada somehow, yet it is ironic to see a caged bird in such surroundings. This banal, yet given the context somewhat bizarre, touch of domesticity contributes yet one more element to the punctum of the photograph. Based on the fact that Gunterman either included herself physically or referenced herself with props in the majority of her images, I read the bird as a symbol of Gunterman’s
ill health. As the bird is both confined and protected from a full engagement with the world by its cage, so has Gunterman’s illness confined and protected her. Thus, by adding this ironic metaphor for herself she seems to mock the notion of “woman as sign” by overdoing it. It is only by fleeing into nature that she can be free of her prison and yet in this particular nature, this mysterious and threatening wilderness, she is a creature out of place. In this regard, it is worth noting, too, the appearance of her partner and son in the photograph, both of whom are dressed in a fashion far more appropriate to the streets and living rooms of Seattle than a trek through the woods.

Contributing further to the symbolic purpose of the image is the curious, ornate frame mask that Gunterman chose to introduce between the negative and the photographic paper when making the print. This simple strategy causes the photograph to take on some of the quality of preciousness more usually associated with miniature painting and has the further effect of turning the figures into small, aesthetic objects. Framed in this manner, Will and Henry Gunterman appear less as specific human beings than as representations of the human creatures better suited to the purposes of allegory and metaphor than documentary subjects.

Seen through modern eyes, the photograph could be one taken by a tourist stopping to record their family’s presence in a picturesque, wilderness setting, although clearly, the experiential circumstances of Mattie Gunterman and a modern tourist could not have been more different. As far as the photographic act is concerned, however, there is a definite, motivational correspondence. While it is difficult to make a precise determination as to the relational chronology of photography and what we today call tourism, Susan Sontag’s assertion that the use of photography is integral to tourism because it helps people “to take possession of a space in which they are insecure” is essentially correct. Photography, or more precisely the act of photographing, does provide the illusion of safety to those surrounded by the exotic, which is certainly why the one has become so inextricably linked to the other (1978: 9). Thus, there can be little doubt that quite apart from any other reasons she may have had for doing so, the process of photographing her journey assisted Gunterman in assimilating the landscape that was to play such a large part in her life. By placing a frame around the landscape, Gunterman immediately gained a measure of control over it.

Halla Beloff defines tourism as “the use of leisure time to seek out new experiences in strange places for their own sake” and states that photography and photographs are a significant part of tourism, because photographs are used to document and validate the act (1985: 201). One of the most popular nineteenth-century photographic endeavors was the production of “concrete memories” that recorded the experiences of early travelers (201). While Gunterman’s trip to Lardeau and settlement there was far more purposeful than this, she certainly used her camera to document “concrete memories” of travel and work, integrating herself and her family by framing their new experience as pioneers in Canada.
Beloff argues that the motivation behind each tourist photograph is proof that we were actually there. A photograph is something we can share as a form of visual and tangible evidence that a certain affect or experience has included us:

In alliance with that worthy sight, we become worthy. The picture of ourselves there proves that we made the journey. Its interest value enhances our interest value (203).

In other words, such images contribute to the construction of both the public and private identities of their maker.

Jonathan Culler argues that the significance of this type of behaviour, the collecting of photographs, is actually a collecting of cultural symbols, making tourists agents of Semiotics (1988: 155). From this point of view, Gunterman’s image of the wilderness acquires significance as a marker, because she made a photograph of it (160). Like a tourist in the “quest for an authentic experience,” Gunterman used her camera to confront her environment, producing photographic souvenirs that not only record the progress of her journey but also function as coded signs of her family’s reaction to the challenges of the wilderness. Susan Stewart also comments on the significance or enhanced meaning of the photographic souvenir, likening it to a pressed flower, “the preservation of an instant” whose value is increased by its narrative value. Stewart argues that souvenirs such as photographs form a compendium that is autobiographical, because they are not kept singly but placed together in photo albums that create narratives (1984: 138).

Both Figs. 1.1 and 1.3 appear in the third of Gunterman’s existing albums. The narrative established in these family photographic albums is purely visual. Titles or other forms of text are not used, except for the addition of a few names to identify relatives in the first album of commercially made studio portraits. The identifying titles used today were latterly added by archivists and researchers based on information provided by family members. Gunterman appears to have arranged all three of her photo albums in chronological order, pasting in new images as they were printed. This is evident particularly in the portraits of Henry that document his progression through childhood to adolescence. In contrast to the visual narrative of Gunterman’s albums, the sequence of images presented in this dissertation is my own. It reflects my act of reading, engaging from a position of early twentyfirst century cultural analysis. My selection and isolation of a representative sample of portraits establish the narrative of Mattie Gunterman as a self-sufficient pioneer woman who positions herself as the dominant force in her family, leading them through the wilderness to a new and more productive life in the tiny frontier community of Beaton, British Columbia, far from the relative comfort and security of Seattle.

Later photographs, such as Mattie, Will and Henry, Allison Pass, BC Spring, 1902 (Fig. 1.4), present the Gunterman family as more rugged settlers who, if not having conquered the formerly threatening landscape, have at least learned to function within it. The family, together in the snowy landscape on the Dewdney trail to Thomson’s Landing, has been

5 Personal communication with Henri Robideau, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, June 1, 1995.
arranged in “one of [Gunterman’s] famous, classic, pioneer poses” (Robideau 1995:64). Gunterman presents a romantic image of a staged “quest” that would appeal to the nineteenth-century mind set. In what will become a leitmotiv of her family photographs, Mattie wastes no time in presenting herself as the leader, placing herself in the dominant position of power. Rifle in hand, she appears to lead the family forward out of the frame and into whatever future lies beyond its edge. Will Gunterman follows behind with their son, Henry, and their horse, Nellie. In fact, this image was made as the family returned from a trip to Seattle, Washington after the death of Will’s mother, Jane Gunterman. Mattie wastes no time in presenting herself in the leadership role as family matriarch. The two adult Guntermans are presented in profile, looking to the left, concentrating on the path ahead, and assuming the gaze of conquerors over the wilderness. Each member of the family appears quietly introspective, frozen in a symbolic tableau staged for the family album. There is no shared familial gaze, as each looks outward, either toward the dog

FIGURE 1.4
Mattie, Will and Henry, Allison Pass, BC Spring 1902, gelatin silver print, PG 77.1.2.4
or beyond the frame. This image, richly encoded with signs that symbolize their life as pioneers, again shows Gunterman’s predilection for the theatrical.

In 1905, the Guntermans travelled south to visit family and friends in the United States. She was particularly impressed with San Francisco and produced many photographs there, among which was a particularly striking family portrait, *Mattie, Henry and Will Gunterman* (Fig. 1.5), made at the Japanese Garden in Golden Gate Park, the kind of exotic tourist setting favoured even today by amateur photographers. Like the previous image (Fig. 1.4), this photograph is carefully staged, although here the effect is entirely different and stands in complete contrast to the image of the pioneer family represented earlier. This hauntingly beautiful photograph possesses an elegant, formal simplicity that makes it stand out even among the hundreds of remarkable images made by Gunterman during her lifetime. She has used a simple, triangular composition to link the three family members, yet the physical and psychological distance Gunterman establishes between them creates three solitudes. Gunterman has once again placed herself in a central position at the apex of the composition where she becomes the dominant figure, standing above the two, seated, male figures. Seated like his father, Henry Gunterman’s position in the background creates perspective through the diminution of size.

The relative darkness of the image gives it an ominous feeling, as does the gnarled tree trunk and stump to Mattie Gunterman’s left. The twisted shape of the claw-like tree branch directly above Henry Gunterman’s head is echoed in the position of Mattie’s gloved hand. The entire image has a somber, introspective quality, as if the family had just attended a funeral. The dark simplicity of their formal clothing, attributable to the fact that they are visitors to San Francisco, reinforces the formal quality of the Japanese Garden setting and Gunterman’s creation of a “public image” of her family. The image contrasts starkly with that portraying the immigrant family on the trail, see Figs. 1.1 and 1.3. Contrast is achieved by using a more complex compositional device than the staged informality of the tangled wilderness settings of the earlier photographs seen in Figs. 1.1 and 1.3. The props in Fig. 1.1 are both man-made — the camera case — and natural — the tree stump. In Fig. 1.3, the props are primarily man-made and include the canary cage and the small shelter. In Fig. 1.5, while the props appear to be all natural, this is, in fact, an illusion, because everything — the stump that Mattie leans on, the two rocks that Henry and Will sit on and the twisted branch that hangs over Henry’s head — exists within the carefully contrived confines of a Japanese garden.

The posing of the three photographs is also significantly different. In Figs. 1.1 and 1.3, both of which were made in 1899, Gunterman has emphasized distance between family members by making two separate images to document the family, rather than include them all in one frame. It is important to remember that at this point in her narrative, Gunterman had owned her 5" x 7" view camera for only a short time and was still learning how to use it, for the most part producing relatively simply, two-dimensional “pictures”
by placing her subjects in front of a backdrop, a strategy reminiscent of the positioning used in the earliest days of photography. By 1905, when she visited San Francisco, it is clear that Gunterman was not only comfortable with the operation of her camera but also, understanding far better as she did the unique picturing characteristics of photography, was capable of making far more complex images that layered a range of possible meanings within a meticulously constructed illusion of deep space.

After reading some of Gunterman's photographs, in particular her self-portraits, it becomes apparent that little within the frame exists by chance. Theatrical staging is an integral part of her photographic style. Gunterman planned her images with all the care of a director designing the setting and blocking the movement of actors upon a proscenium stage. She controlled each element of the image, including the characters, their position and their costume and carefully selected the appropriate background and props to stage her narratives. While there are numerous examples of others using photography in this way, from the classically contrived constructions of the nineteenth century Englishman, H.P. Robinson to the more artfully deceptive expressions of twenty-first century practitioners like Canadian Jeff Wall and, perhaps most especially, Québécoise photographer Raymonde April, from a number of points of view, Gunterman's photographs are unique. Not only does she use herself and her family as performers but, more significantly, because intended as they were for the family album and thus a small, private audience of family and friends, her photographs and especially her self-portraits offer surprising insight into her private aspirations and the need to balance these with an acceptable public image.

For example, in her self-portraits or images in which she appears as part of a family grouping, Gunterman often positions herself toward the edges of her compositions. In Figs. 1.4 and 1.5, she has placed herself to the side, looking out of the frame and away from the camera. While a superficial reading might suppose this to be a marginalizing gesture, more careful assessment leads to the conclusion that in her photography, Gunterman was always conscious of the implied audience and deeply aware of the implications of the interaction between the camera, herself and her positioning within the family group. In contriving her compositions, Gunterman was fully conscious of the fact that photography is fundamentally subtractive. Unlike other picturing media, a photograph is always an excision from a larger reality and thus a much more effective metaphor for a window or keyhole. While painting and drawing may employ a variety of trompe l'oeil methods to create a similar effect, a photograph is the real thing, and the viewer knows it. As such, the boundaries of any photograph challenge the viewer to peek around the edges of the frame and imagine the world beyond, a world that in Gunterman's case means one in which she marches steadfastly forward, leading her family away from poor health toward a reinvigorating, natural environment within which she can establish herself as a self-sufficient, pioneer woman. Thus, while Gunterman certainly cast herself as outsider, it is as the outsider as leader.
As we have observed, individually, Gunterman’s photographs of herself and her family are theatrical stagings for the camera — visual records of factual or fictionalized melodramas. Taken as a body of work, the images present a consistent, evolving and extraordinarily revealing narrative in which the creator is simultaneously author and protagonist. As such Gunterman’s work completely undermines the traditional, “male gaze” producer of the image as, “window on the world” (Alberti 1967 [1436]). Her photographs are personal constructions that are significant precursors of the mise-en-scène popularized in contemporary photographic practice by such postmodern camera artists as Cindy Sherman. Like Sherman’s Untitled Film Series (1979), Gunterman creates her own narrative within the frame, a vision that is free from the objectification of the male gaze. Both of these women do this by turning the camera on themselves as a means of exploring personal identity. Gunterman’s woman’s gaze and the camera’s gaze become one, subverting the male gaze of “a Notman” whose goal it was to show only the decorative and passive side of women. Instead, as we have seen, Gunterman’s photographs construct a narrative that “pictures” women as heroic pioneers who insist upon a dominant place for themselves within the frame. Her subjects are all theatrically posed in relation to their narrative setting. Theatricality is also heightened in Gunterman’s photographs by their seemingly intrinsic expression of woman as sign. Visual tension is increased by her juxtaposition of stereotypical femininity, and a new version of identity visualized or re-signed as a pioneer heroine. Gunterman’s photographic albums function as a sort of visual bildungsroman that chart her life from a hotel maid in Seattle to the strong, independent frontierswoman of her later self-portraits.

Equally staged and theatrical were many of the photographs that Gunterman made of her family’s involvement with the frontier community they had chosen as their home. Two images in particular are worthy of investigation. Both document Gunterman’s participation in local masquerade parties. Here, theatricality takes an even more explicit dimension as if to draw attention to photography’s inherent theatricality.

**MASQUERADE IMAGES**

Masquerade parties became a popular form of entertainment in Canada during this period, one of their great attractions being that they created a relaxed environment in which social class distinctions could be blurred by the anonymity of mask and costume. First popularized by the upper classes, in 1876 Lord and Lady Dufferin, Canada’s Governor General and his spouse hosted a masquerade ball at Rideau Hall in Ottawa for over fifteen hundred guests. Their popularity soon extended across the country, reaching into even the smallest communities where they offered a form of romantic escapism from the endless hard work of ordinary life and for women, a brief respite from the restrictive, Victorian code of behaviour that limited their range of self-expression, even in frontier British Columbia (Rowat 1990). As Stewart confirms:

---

6 The concept of mise-en-scène, is explored in more detail in ch. 5.

7 For an analysis of Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Series, see Silverman (1996: 207-227).

8 This is a literary form that shows the development of a main character into their “true self” and is evident in such novels as Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time. See also Tippet (1996) for a contemporary Canadian example of bildungsroman.
Thus the mask, the costume and the disguise find their proper context in carnival festivity, where there is little specialization of roles and where hierarchy is overturned (1984:107).

The New Year’s Night Masquerade Ball at Trout Lake City was front-page news in the January 9, 1902, edition of the Lardeau Eagle. The article listed the following types of fantasy personae in attendance:

...Japanese Lady; Mrs. Elliot; Japanese Girl; Miss Pearl Thompson; Indian Chief; William Strutt; Hospital Nurse; Miss Ehesley; Red Cross N. long, dark evening gloves; Mrs. Dafresne; Spring; Mrs. G.B. Batho; Sunflower; Miss Batho; Lemon and Oranges; Miss Ethel Batho; Britannia; Mrs. A.C. Cummins; Night; Miss Knowlton; Scotch Lassie; Mrs. Abrahamson; Folly; Alama Thomas; Trout Lake Topic; Mrs. Taylor; Lardeau Eagle; Miss Morgan; Queen of Hearts, Mabel Thompson; Knave of Hearts. Evans... (1902: 1).

The costume party was one of the few events that gave Mattie Gunterman the license to cross-dress, and she periodically photographed herself, her family and friends in costume as they prepared for similar events.

Two of these images from her family album pose significant questions about gender and identity. In Dressed for Masquerade Ball, Beaton/ Mattie and Henry c. 1907 (Fig. 1.6), Mattie Gunterman and her fifteen-year-old son, Henry, appear in a flurry of feminine frills. Mattie has dressed herself in a white dress covered in lacy butterflies. Henry Gunterman is presented as a girl “child” wearing a black dress; a white apron tied in bows at his shoulders; long, dark evening gloves; shiny black, laced women’s boots and on his head, a large, frilly bonnet tied under the chin. He presents himself frontally, his gaze directed into the lens while his mother turns slightly to the right. Her gaze, as is so often true of
Gunterman’s photographs of herself, is directed outside the frame although, in this case, unusually, toward some point beyond the camera itself. Neither figure dominates in this image; both are equally “decorative,” although in quite different ways. The attention to detail in Henry Gunterman’s costume and his refined facial features make it easy for him to pass as a girl and, taken together with the physical similarities between Mattie and Henry, from the elegant, arched eyebrows to the angular noses and thin lips, make for what superficially appears to be a portrait of a mother and daughter. Under more careful scrutiny, however, the charade is made obvious by the overall awkwardness of Henry’s gesture. His slumped appearance and rooted legs apart, feet slightly splayed stance, all betray his true gender and contribute to the uneasy balance between actuality and appearance that is the source of the punctum so characteristic of many of Gunterman’s images.

Despite the ambiguity though, the mask-like similarity between the two faces provides that quest for “likeness” so essential to the family album, the power of which Barthes argues, comes from what it orders and validates, a continuity: But more insidious, more penetrating than likeness: the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or a face reflected in the mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or a relative which comes from some ancestor (1981:103).

The image is set in a domestic environment that echoes the costumes. The patterned tin and stenciled wallpaper decorate the walls in the same way that the laces and frills adorn the masqueraders. This stereotypical, ultra-feminine form of dressing is uncharacteristic of the pragmatic Mattie Gunterman, and thus she appears to be almost as much an
impersonator of “womanliness” as her son. She appears to be masquerading as the kind of woman that in previous self-portraits she has taken great care to resist.

British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere notes in her article “Womanliness as Masquerade” that the social practice of “being” woman is learned through a series of codes (Apter 1992: 242). Riviere argues that “womanliness” is assumed like a mask and that there is therefore no difference between it and masquerade (1986: 38). Gender theorist Judith Butler takes a similar position, in line with the noted French existentialist feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir’s well-known claim that one is not born a woman but rather, becomes a woman. Butler sees gender construction as a “repeated stylization of the body” that over time develops into a natural state (1999 [1990]: 33). In producing an illusion of feminine identity for Henry within her photograph, Gunterman appears to be parodying this kind of woman as performance by using the costume and props of femininity.

As far as can be determined, there are only a few surviving photographs that show Gunterman alone with her son. This image was made the year prior to Henry Gunterman’s leaving home on his own for the first time. Henry had joined his parents in the camps and was now also working as an assistant to his mother (Robideau 1995: 120). Gunterman and her son had a very close relationship, and she was particularly jealous of anyone taking her only child’s attention. This image (Fig. 1.5) indicates a complex relationship between mother and son. Henry is passive in letting his mother dress him like a girl, yet resistant as he refuses to take up a parodic “feminine” stance. Instead he presents himself frontally to the camera with his feet planted wide apart in a decidedly unfeminine pose. His mother, posed in a conventional studio pose, presents a graceful quarter turn of her body and tilts her head to the camera. This combination of the poses of mother and son provides the image with a dramatic edge or tension that makes the photograph much more dynamic and sets up a clear struggle for control. From her position within the frame, Gunterman is unaware of the gesture of resistance that her son makes at the moment of exposure. This mother-son portrait is the site and record of a classic struggle between the domineering parent and the rebellious adolescent.

After her son left home, Gunterman was faced with the loss of one of the central characters of her photographic narrative and one of the motivating factors in the creation of her albums.

A second masquerade image that I will read presents Gunterman with two women coworkers from the mining camp where she worked as a cook. In Beaton, People dressed for the Masquerade Ball, 1903 (Fig. 1.7), Ann Williams (left), Mattie Gunterman (centre) and Rose Williams (right) appear in costume for a masquerade ball being held in the town of Ferguson on February 13, 1903, as a benefit for the miners’ hospital. Without this written documentation from the album, only the rough-hewn log wall behind the three figures provides any real clue as to when or in what environment the photograph was made. The image is otherwise timeless and, given the richness of its signage, goes well beyond being
just a visual document of a costume party. The fact that the creator and photographer is a woman and appears in the frame disguised as a man accompanied by other women in costume raises significant questions.

A similar concept is addressed by Pollock and Cherry in their analysis of the “reciprocal positioning of the masculine creator and the passive feminine object” in art historical texts on Pre-Raphaelitism (1988: 11). Gunterman, dressed in dark, formal man’s clothing and a full-face mask, has set out to deliberately take on another gender. Her costume is the antithesis of the feminine one chosen for the masquerade portrait with her son, Henry. She positions herself as the masculine creator, the photographer who is author of the image being made. This male costume also serves to heighten the contrast between herself and Ann and Rose Williams, who disguise themselves in archetypal flowing feminine dresses and wear their hair flowing loose down their backs. Their dresses are, however, very different. On the right, Rose Williams wears a workaday plaid with her identity further obscured by black face and a black paper or cloth tiara on her head. This may be an attempt to portray Williams in “black face,” as a mummer or play actor in a folk play, or as representative of the exotic other, a black woman. It is, however, more likely that she represented a black woman in the role of servant and this might also account for her costume of working clothes. This “blackening up” of one’s skin signifying servant or, in earlier years, slave, was not an uncommon practice and is also seen in photographs made of a British domestic, Hannah Cullwick, for her master and later spouse in the 1860s (Dawkins 1987: 175).

With her ruffled white dress, Ann Williams represents a more universal, that is, stereotypical, vision of woman “as a cipher of male dominance, the scene of male fantasy” (Pollock and Parker 1989: 132). Besides the costumes, both the Williams sisters have little specific characterization or identity. Ann Williams’ long flowing hair is reminiscent of the “Siddal” (Elizabeth Siddall), a woman who functioned as a muse for the Pre-Raphaelite movement (Pollock 1988: 92). The positioning of Williams’ head and the way in which her hand holds her hair is startlingly similar to Rossetti’s 1868 painting Lady Lilith, shown in Fig. 1.8. In her examination of Rossetti’s work, Pollock comments upon how Lilith was named a witch, the term invented for women who contest the patriarchal orders of theological or medical knowledge, and that her spells were thought to be worked by
a penetrating, castrating gaze (140). While there is nothing to suggest that Gunterman was making a direct reference to Rossetti’s painting, there can be little doubt that Ann Williams’ gesture is in itself a temporally specific, cultural artifact associated with visual representations of the archetypal femme fatale, the witch sorceress. The photograph goes much further, however, offering as well a range of other meanings in relation to the representation of women: woman as fantasy object, woman as slave, woman as exotic other or, in the case of Gunterman herself, woman as male alter-ego; all instances of woman as sign.

Gunterman’s cross-dressing may also be read as an attempt to escape the role of woman as decorative object as shown in Fig. 2.6. By representing women in a variety of roles, Gunterman re-signified them in a manner similar to that of Julia Margaret Cameron, who also played with “the masquerade of femininity and the making of appearance” (Cherry 1993: 197). In (Fig. 2.6), Gunterman engaged her friends and co-workers, Ann and Rose Williams, in a collaboration to create a tableau vivant, a photograph with invented characters. In this photograph, the tableau vivant presents many representations of women’s identity. This layering of meaning and masquerading of identity would have appealed to Gunterman’s theatrical sensibility.

The mask that Gunterman is wearing is vaguely unsettling because she faces the camera directly but shows no expression. Barthes makes reference to masks in his comparison of photography to theatre. He discusses the mask’s association with death and the cult of death while describing the Japanese Noh mask:

...however “lifelike” we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death). Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead (1981: 32).

In considering these images, it is hard to avoid thinking of The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater, a far more recent body of work by the American photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard,
Meatyard (1925-1972) that Hirsch analyses in her discussion of the familial look and gaze. Published in 1974, two years after the death of its creator, this haunting, enigmatic series of photographs also makes extensive use of masks to create a fictional family album.

There are certainly numerous parallels in the construction of Gunterman’s and Meatyard’s albums. Mattie Gunterman appears in many of the photographs in her album, as does Meatyard’s partner, Madelyn, who, like her spouse, poses as Lucybelle Crater. They are both presented as the heroines of their own story as narrated through the pages of the family album. In both cases, the family album was used as a personal narrative to establish identity through the representation of the family members in a variety of situations and events and relationships. Implicitly, each photograph provides a glimpse into the lives of the individuals represented and offers further insight into their identity. One of Meatyard’s images, Lucybelle Crater and Close Friend Lucybelle Crater in the Grape Arbor, 1971 (Fig. 1.9), is remarkably similar to Gunterman’s masquerade images and invites comparison. In the Meatyard photograph, the photographer and his partner have reversed gender. Ralph Meatyard wears the feminine mask and is dressed as a woman, his body appearing frail due to illness. His partner Madelyn is dressed in man’s clothing and appears the dominant character in the frame. Gunterman, who also depicted herself cross-dressed and masked, is similarly dominant in her photograph. In this kind of direct comparison with Gunterman’s work it is evident that the temporal, historical relationship to tradition works in both directions and that Meatyard’s apparent postmodernity is more historical than innovative.

Both the Meatyard and Gunterman family albums are visual documents that play with the process of the culturally determined nature of sexual identity. Ernst van Alphen concurs with earlier writers on cultural theory, such as Griselda Pollock (1988), who have defined gender positions, both masculinity as well as femininity, as primarily a social construction. In discussing masculinity, Van Alphen argues that “the foregrounding of the construction of masculinity as a theatrical masquerade” is the first step in the deconstruction of its traditional discourse (1993: 174). By assuming the appearance of masculinity through her masquerade, Gunterman is emphasizing that gender is constructed through signifiers like clothing while at the same time, by photographing herself in this manner, she deconstructs the tradition of the male mastery of the gaze.

Silverman takes this one step further into what she theorizes as an ethic of vision. She argues that the act of productive looking opens the unconsciousness to otherness. By the transgendering act of the masquerade self, Gunterman has displaced herself as woman and presented to the viewer-as-reader a theatrically created fantasy of the other. She is careful to code this other with the prop of her camera case slung over her arm, clearly signifying her identity as the photographer. This is a reminder that it is Gunterman who peeps into the viewfinder, the keyhole that gives her mastery of the moment.

This mastery extends to Gunterman’s landscape photographs through which she
signifies her conquest and colonization of the utopian Canadian landscape. I will conclude this chapter with an analysis of two examples of her landscape work that further substantiate Gunterman's assimilation into her new pioneer existence, record her development of a sense of her relationship to place and explore the issue of conquest.

A SENSE OF PLACE

To date, little has been published about Victorian women landscape photographers, and until relatively recently, the practice of landscape photography has been viewed as an almost exclusively male domain. One of a minority then, and especially in her own time, Gunterman's strong relationship to nature led her to make a significant body of landscape photographs that reveal her sense of place within the Canadian wilderness. The geographer D.W. Meininger describes "a sense of place" as an intimate connection to a definite area, a fixed location, where events have "taken place." Meininger argues that each of us "creates and accumulates" places from our experience of living (1979:3). I have selected two examples of Gunterman's landscape photographs that substantiate her assimilation into a new pioneer existence and document the development of her sense of place. The image *House in Nakusp* (Fig. 1.10) was made in 1899 and depicts the Genelle family home built in 1898 by Joseph Quielle. It is notable that this would be one of Gunterman's first photographs after she settled in the Lardeau region. Through the act of photographing, she was able to immediately position herself within the community as an individual having an identity separate from her spouse, who was employed at the local sawmill. She was a woman photographer, something unique in a frontier-mining town, and, as I have argued, the maintenance of such an autonomous identity was a significant issue for Gunterman.

This early landscape photograph is also coded with information about the process of immigrant appropriation of the forested wilderness of interior British Columbia, romanticized in Canadian history as a last frontier. The gaze that informs Gunterman's photography is that of a new arrival seeking security and advantage in an alien and therefore potentially hostile and dangerous land; in short, the gaze of a colonist imposing upon the land a colonial vision. In the image shown in Fig. 1.10, Gunterman has photographed a newly constructed house standing within a fence that protects it from the treed landscape that surrounds it — a tiny, fragile, safe island of order and domesticity amidst a chaos of arboreal anarchy. The irony, as Tagg observes, is that while the subdivision of the landscape into a number of orderly plots or yards certainly creates "private sites," simultaneously and unavoidably, these same sites also become sites of continuous surveillance (1993 [1988]: 191). Not quite a surveillance photograph, Gunterman's choice of camera position slightly above and to the side gives her image more the quality of a casual snapshot. From this point of view, Gunterman's image can be read as a statement about the process of conquering and settling the frontier.
The house in the photograph signifies the new start being made by pioneer families settling in the region and exemplifies the essential, dual function of architecture and site in this particular context: on the one hand, to provide a sense of security through the use of the familiar and, on the other, to establish in the wilderness a bridgehead from which it may be conquered. Even more telling than its urban vernacular form is the ornamentation. While the intricate repetitions of gingerbread detailing above the veranda and at the peak of the roof may seem merely whimsical and, given the grandeur of the natural surroundings, appear no more than a slightly pathetic gesture toward civilization, they are, nonetheless, just like the house itself and its surrounding, white picket fence: certain signs of the colonization of the land.

Within the fenced arena, a small group of people, probably the family, are scattered across the yard as actors upon a stage. They are safe within their controlled space,
seemingly “protected” by the fence from the wilderness beyond. By marking out their territory, these people are attempting to control their environment and order their new lives. Humanity is thus set in opposition to the wilderness. Beyond the fence are stumps and roughly cleared terrain, while further out is apparently untouched forest. Inside the fence is the carefully cultivated yard and domestic living space. The strong verticals of the fence boards echo those of the trees in the hills beyond, trees that not yet having been logged, milled, cut and painted maintain an alien allegiance.

Framing is, of course, a form of fencing, in a way making all photographs a kind of hortus conclusus. The photographic frame excises a manageable fragment from the overwhelmingly seamless continuity of experience and, using the assertive authority of the right angle, makes possible within its bounds the imposition of order through pictorial convention. The purpose of both the fence and the frame is fundamentally the same: to control nature, to neutralize its power as the unknown other, to make it safe. The image of the enclosed garden as a means to counter the terrors of wilderness is ubiquitous in agricultural societies and a recurring theme throughout their arts and literature. Neither the typical Canadian photograph nor painting from this period presents landscape as civilized “scenery” typical of such representations in European landscape work.
By 1911, Gunterman had clearly developed a sense of comfort and belonging in the mountain environment as the landscape in her photographs makes a transition from background to main subject. Having transformed from city dweller to pioneer, she now felt herself free to use the camera’s gaze to contemplate the wilderness directly as exemplified by an untitled, panoramic view she made of the mountains near Sheep Creek (Fig. 1.11). It is apparent that the advancing colonization of the British Columbia interior increasingly distanced Gunterman from nature, forcing her further back into the mountains to escape the encroachments of civilization and to maintain her physical and spiritual sense of place. She made this photograph at a time when she was employed as a cook at the Summit Mine south of Nelson, a position that for many months kept her separated from her family by over 100 miles of difficult mountain trail (Robideau 1995: 159).

Gunterman establishes her position as conqueror by selecting a high camera angle that records the mountain vista before her. The panoramic format, while unusual for her, was frequently employed by commercial photographers making picturesque “views” or, in North America particularly, by photographers employed by geographical surveys to produce topographic records. Typical of the latter is the work of W.H. Jackson, Timothy O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, all of whom, in making landscapes of the apparently empty American West, produced images that exhibit an air of banality and a seemingly vacant centre (Adams 1983: 9). Aesthetically, the effect of this was to democratize subject matter, subverting the authority of the frame to determine compositional structure by giving equal emphasis to all elements contained within it. Apart from introducing a new notion of what could constitute a picture, this uniquely photographic strategy was a clear acknowledgement of the subtractive nature of the medium, each image in effect irresistibly implying that what was portrayed was as might be seen through an open doorway, a doorway through which a viewer might walk into a larger world. Characteristic of most of these images too is the lack of people; human beings appear in only a few and, when they do, they are generally tiny figures, simultaneously providing scale and giving emphasis to the apparent emptiness and, by implication, availability of the landscape.

While Gunterman’s panorama shares the characteristics of arbitrary framing, the lack of any recognizable “centre of interest” and no evidence of human activity, it goes much further, so that the effect and meaning of those elements in her image are entirely different. For Gunterman, the vacant centre and seemingly unpopulated space leave room upon the stage for the real, even if only implied, subject, the photographer herself. The keyhole, or window, has become a mirror. Since making the photograph shown in Fig. 1.11, an image in which she positioned herself in relation to the cut off trunk of a tree, Gunterman’s understanding of her relationship to nature and her environment has changed. From someone who viewed and portrayed nature as a mysterious and frightening, sometimes benevolent otherness from which she could extract sustenance and health, she has reached a point in her life where nature seems no longer alien, where the boundaries

between her and it have blurred so as to be indiscernible.

Thus in this photograph, the winter becomes a metaphor for loss, the passing of relatives, friends and neighbours who had been steadily leaving the region since 1907 as employment opportunities faded with the end of the Lardeau mining boom and the decline of logging (Robideau 1995: 118). The trees, like Gunterman herself, are silent witnesses, survivors of the altitude, cold and fire of their environment just as Gunterman has survived and indeed even thriven in this diminishing wilderness, the site of her struggle to frame an identity of her own. Like many others whose attention the camera has focused upon a particular place, she felt a deep, almost mystical connection to it. The statement made by W.H. Jackson, the American Geographical Survey photographer who chose to stay in the West even after losing the job that took him there, could apply equally to Gunterman: “Whatever I might find for myself it must be in some great open country” (Jackson cited in Adams 1983: 7). Like Jackson, Gunterman made a commitment to stay in the West, despite its physical challenges. Unlike Jackson, however, Gunterman’s images were made for personal reasons, more to explore herself and her own sense of place than as a commercial enterprise."

The “stage,” so often before in Gunterman’s photographs full of characters, is now empty. Gunterman’s desire to photograph seemed to fade as the elements of her nuclear family slipped away. Her image making became more and more infrequent. The main component of her personal narrative completed, Gunterman’s use of the camera shifted from the documentary and allegorical to the introspective, reflecting increasingly upon the emptiness of the landscape. Here, the panorama is used to produce an expanded private view of nature, a reverie at a distance. From Gunterman’s isolated point of view, the arc of vision is transformed by the camera into a collective gaze that allows the viewer to share in her meditation on place.

**Mattie Gunterman’s photographs** are more than simple documents of pioneer life at the turn of the nineteenth century. Carefully created and edited, they construct a deeply personal and extraordinarily revealing narrative. Most Canadian women who became involved with photography at this time were similar to Gunterman: they used photography to document their families and, through that, to narrate their lives and to explore and even create their identities. By looking through the viewfinder of the camera and selecting a frame for her existence, Gunterman became, at least in her own photo albums, the author of her own narrative. These images illustrate Gunterman’s vision of her identity as an independent, pioneer woman. At a point in history when few women had real control over their own destinies, photography allowed women some limited control in representing their identities.

Following the French literary project of Montaigne, Barthes saw the “self as vocation, life as a reading of the self” (cited in Sontag 1982: xxxiii). Sontag concludes that as Barthes’
work inevitably came to an end in autobiography, his voice became more personal and his subjects more introspective. His final book, *Camera Lucida*, in which he addressed the nature of photography, reflects his adoption of the “warmest kind of realism: photographs fascinate because of what they are about” (1981: 3). This form of realism and fascination also permeates the photographs of Gunterman, which articulate her autobiography visually.

The family album exists outside the canon of photographic practice — it is a gendered form of social practice that allows women to author their own narrative. Mattie Gunterman was able to subvert the boundaries of the conventional photograph album because she photographed outside the domestic sphere. This chapter examined how she used the camera to look into, and position herself in, the frontier world dominated by the other — men and nature. In Chapter Three, I will examine how Gunterman used her photography albums as a frame to produce a self-aware spectacle.