

Composing: The Work of Geraldine Moodie

REBECCA LUCE-KAPLER

L'auteure étudie la vie des femmes artistes et des écrivaines et se rapporte à leur biographie pour en faire des poèmes ou des récits. Geraldine Moody, la première femme photographe dans l'Ouest canadien à la fin du 19e siècle, fait l'objet de son plus récent travail. Geraldine est la petite-fille de l'écrivaine emblématique la pionnière Suzanne Moody.

At sixteen I borrowed a reel-to-reel tape recorder and dragged it to Edmonton to interview my great-aunt Emily who remembered escaping from Russia and emigrating to Canada. I still have that afternoon's conversation, now digitized, where Emily's voice with its rich rolling accent recollects when she was no older than I at the time of the interview, describing the family's travels across the ocean and over half a country to live in the prairies—a landscape that was not yet a province. Before I heard the term “narrative research,” before I knew that fascination with learning from other's stories could be called “curriculum theory,” I was engaged in the work of understanding experience through the biographies and life histories of those around me. Now my studies often centre on story—how people understand their experience through literature and how they interpret those understandings through writing.

While much of my research has been with groups of women across all ages, exploring different forms and technologies of writing (e.g., Luce-Kapler 2004, 2007, 2008), it is in my biographical studies that I develop writing practices to bring to these collectives. I examine the lives of women artists and writers, developing responses to their biographies through poetry and narrative (e.g., Luce-Kapler 2003). The interview with great-aunt Emily signaled this nascent interest, which grew to include Emily

Carr, Margaret Bourke-White, Kate Chopin and others, the most recent being Geraldine Moodie, the first woman to have a photography studio in western Canada late in the nineteenth century. Geraldine was granddaughter to the iconic pioneer writer, Susanna Moodie.

Married at 24 to a distant cousin, John Douglas (J.D.) Moodie, Susanna had a peripatetic life as J.D.'s work in the Northwest Mounted Police took them from post to post across the Prairies and into northern Canada. Limited biographical information about Geraldine suggests that life with J.D. was challenging, the one constant being her camera. Only recently, thanks largely to the work of Donny White, has the full extent and quality of her photography become known. What follows are five poems from my collection that speculate about her emergence into photography.

References

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Bloodlines

(Brandon, 1880, 26 years old)

she searched the prairies for a trace
never having lived where the land
marks were unreadable
where the slight rise
of a hill did not remember
carriage rides and sunday strolls

a circle of smooth white stones
scorched patches of earth
the carcass of an animal
memory marked in rhythms
she could not hear

not England where she travelled
garden paths, walking the palimpsest
of ancestral footsteps, ancient voices
rising from old walls

not Ontario where gossamer threads
like the silk of a spider in morning frost
shone softly etching a history in stone

but here

buffeted by winds from unseen
mountains swirling grains of dust
dismantling the unattached
even the plentitude of stars
swallowed her in their bowl of light

Silhouette

(Calgary 1886)

Last light of the day she walks
toward the shadow of mountains
imagining a camera behind her
framing her journey across the field.

For the past month she has had visions
in the night, stronger than dreams
where she watches herself stumble
through hallways, opening doors
that lead nowhere, climbing stairs
that dissolve into air. She sees the edges
of her life, a narrow maze that closes

behind her. Whatever angle she chooses
there are walls around her, directing her.

This evening, she is composing her body
outside. She thinks
burst of light that pierces
a lens. She thinks
tonight the dreams will be of sky.

Intimacy

(Lakefield, 1890, 36 years old)

She read the thin book of instructions:

*Kodak, No. 2: You Press the Button,
We do the rest!*

She can decide the aperture, open the front of the
camera,
change the reflex viewfinder. The largest stop
would need
sun on her back. A good place to begin in the
spring brightness.

*hold the camera firmly against the body
pause the breath for a moment*

Just beyond the kitchen garden, she practiced.
The Kodak nested between her hands, right against
her belly
its nubbed body secured. The shoots of thyme
in the viewfinder, upside down, earth becoming sky.
She pulled the brass button up until the catgut
string cocked the shutter
pushed the pin down, then turned the silver key
one small twist
to roll the film forward, the next frame settling
into place.

the most beautiful instrument ever

She would learn to trust this black machine, no
bigger
than her recipe box, revealer of wave and refraction.
She carried it close, walked beyond the meadow
to begin as she did for sketching, a search
for the small delicate thing shining from a backdrop.
In a grove she saw the maple, no taller than her
Douglas,
leaves delicately green. She circled the tree,
wondering

how she might capture its breathless colour.
Remembered
to find the sun, turned away from mid-morning
glare, stared
at the subject until her eyes lost the distraction of
larger trees,
the spread of trillium, two chickadees dancing
through air.
Then she saw it: sapling maple branches showered
in an aura.

*hold the camera firmly against the body
pause the breath for a moment*

The sun moved overhead and beyond without
her notice
as frame by frame she found her pictures: last
year's wild
grapevine wound through a split rail fence, the
shreds
of an old beaver dam past the bend in the creek,
patches
of sweet white violets with heart-shaped leaves.
And the green—
fern, forest, lime and asparagus. Only when she
came upon the road
did she remember the slice of bread and butter
wrapped for her lunch.
She had lost the periphery, become the viewfinder
of calm.
The mark of her fingers imprinted on the body of
the camera.

Gesture

(Lakefield, July, 1890, 36 years old)

Every feeling waits upon its gesture.
—Eudora Welty

Nearly a year of letters

*My dear wife, I sit before a plate
of Eugenia's mediocre cooking. Yet again
tough beef and salty gravy. I miss
your sure hands about the house...*

And her replies

*With your stipend I keep a modest home
and tend to the children. Melly has a piano
and a teacher, Douglas is learning to sing*

George seems drawn to the violin...

She does not write about the camera, the
photographs
of the children next to hollyhocks, their summer
swimming
her dreams of the prairie in humid Ontario nights
the life she lives without him.

She pictures him at the boarding house, light gone
from the sky. One lamp on the table, just enough
to hold back darkness and no more. His hands

smooth the letters he reads while he has his tea
without her strawberry jam squares or thin
slices of toasted bread and clotted cream.

Sometimes she hears his slow precise sentences,
the certainty of opinion as he tidies his moustache
with the tip of an index finger. He brushes
imaginary

dust from the shoulders of his red serge but is silent
about missing her attention to laundry. There are
nights

she hears the whisper of his body next to hers
and wakes
startled by the solitude, wondering if this is a man

she still could live with.

Rejlander's Cat¹

(Battleford, 1895, 41 years old)

*Saskatchewan Herald, Friday, 15 July 1895: Mrs.
Moodie has opened her photograph gallery, which is
furnished with an outfit of the latest and most improved
kind. Open Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, and
at other times by appointment.*

According to the story, Rejlander
used his cat as an exposure meter
posing the accommodating tabby
on the sitter's chair and staring at her face.
If the eyes were green with small slits of black
he chose a quick click of the shutter.
As the pupils widened, he added extra
time with the lens and if he saw only dark coins
rimmed in the small paring of colour,

he would put on his cap, throw
the cat outside to catch a mouse
and take a walk before dinner.

What did Rejlander do to keep his cat still?
Did he slip a small morsel between her paws?
But I've never had a cat respond to such a bribe.
A dog, on the other hand, will sit still for hours
if you hold a liver treat to your cheek,
his long strings of drool dripping.
Perhaps the cat just wanted to watch
too full to mouse, too tired
to jump down from the chair. Perhaps
posing in the sun was her only quiet
moment in the day.

I don't know how Geraldine judged exposure
in her studio with blinds on the windows
a solid tripod for her camera and a steady hand
with magnesium powder. But I do know
she placed a blue vase of pink peonies
upon a table flooded in prairie light.

¹Oscar Gustave Rejlander born in Sweden in 1813
was a pioneering art photographer and an expert
in photo montage. He collaborated with Charles
Darwin on *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man
and Animals*. He died in London in 1875.

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Her research interests focus on the integral role of literary
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investigating how literary practices can deepen learning and
interpretation of experience. She published a collection of
poetry in 2003, The gardens where she dreams.*

SHEILA STEWART

Wash up as far as

*possible and
down as far as possible and give
possible a lick too,*

Mum and Aunt Ena chortled
in the hall between the bathroom
and bedrooms at Ena's house,

Ballyaughlis, Drumbo Road,
Country Antrim, Northern
Ireland. No time for a bath or

shower, stand at the sink, wash up.

Down the garden
with a bowl, pick raspberries, red

currants. Lunch of courgettes
fried in butter, wheaten and soda
bread from the oven. Whipped

cream sliding into berries, tart and tangy,
meets sweet and savage, everything
melts. As far as we can go in con-

versation, a poem, as far as the flight
from here to Belfast, as far as Ena
still alive,

giving possibility
a lick too.

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of a Throat (Signature Editions, 2012) and A Hat
to Stop a Train (Wolsak and Wynn, 2003). She co-
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