Gender, Photography and Narrative: Reading the photographs of Mattie Gunterman
(Slide 1: Title)

Paper presented at the Narrating the Visual; Visualizing the Narrative Conference, History Dept., North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C., March 5, 2010
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Introduction:

In this paper, I argue that photography is a social practice used by women for the construction of personal narrative. As evidence, I read images from the photo album of the Canadian amateur photographer, Mattie Gunterman (1872-1945). (Slide 2 Mattie, Will and Henry, Allison Pass, B.C. Spring, 1902) My selection 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 their urban lives in Seattle, Washington.

This argument is part of a larger interdisciplinary research study that considers women’s photography as social practice. It draws on and extends my earlier research on gender and identity (Close 2007). Theoretically, this study adopts the cultural analysis perspective. The act of reading the image is the final act of a collaboration in which the photographer creates the image and the viewer decodes it (Bal 2004, Mitchell 2005). Currently there are a number of studies that include attention to gendered narratives in photo practice, particularly in relationship to the photo album, but only a limited few in Canada (Langford 2001). This research also builds on studies from archival and geographic analysis of photographs being considered as objects that carry social history and cultural memory (Schwartz and Ryan 2008).

(Slide 3: Image of woman and camera from Kodak ad)

Constructing Photo Narrative:

Women have pioneered forms of writing about the past that explore areas tangential to the mainstream of political and economic change.... Blurring the boundaries between personal reminiscence, cultural comment and social history, paying attention to the overlap between history and fantasy, using popular entertainment, reading official histories between the lines and against the grain,
these exploratory styles fit easily with the *bricolage* and the loose ends of the family album (Holland 1991: 9).

Questions we have all asked ourselves such as Why am I doing this? or even more basic What am I doing? suggest the way in which living forces us to look for and forces us to design within the primal stew of data that is our daily experience. There is a kind of arranging and choosing of detail - of narration, in short - which we must do so that one day will prepare for the next day, one week will prepare for the next week.... To the extent that we impose some narrative form unto our lives, each of us in the ordinary process of living is a fitful novelist ... (Rose 1984: 6).

Patricia Holland, a British photo historian, asserts that the creation of the family photograph album is a social practice, a practice providing women the opportunity to construct a personal history, a narrative that transcends the boundaries that traditionally separate the personal from the political. Phyllis Rose, a noted American literary scholar and biographer, contends that establishing identity is part of an ordering and understanding that assists us in the narration of our daily lives. These two comments by women writers are brought together as arguments in order to focus the discussion to follow on the existence of and necessity for alternative productions of personal narrative, such as the family photograph album. The creation of the family album, a popular turn-of-the-century activity, was primarily undertaken by women and recognized as part of their domestic duties to the family. As more women became interested in taking as well as collecting photographs, they began to use the camera to produce their own images for the family album. In this manner, women repositioned themselves, moving from consumer and subject of photographic imagery to the more active role of producer. Through the use of photographs, women were able to re-sign themselves as strong and independent.

Martha Langford, an art historian and founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, makes the argument that as repositories of memory, photo albums are significant because of their performative nature. She points out that the act of looking through a photo album is often a shared activity through the course of which, the album’s creator or owner explains or “reads” the images to the viewer as the pages are turned (2001: 21). In effect, photo albums function as a means of communication that carries a narrative to the viewer, an act of “showing and telling” that links the photo album to the oral tradition of storytelling. While the making of photograph albums may
have been a form of social practice, album makers cannot therefore be regarded as social historians seeking to express an “objective truth”. Instead, they are constructors of personal truths that may have social-historical implications.

**Photograph Albums (Slide 4 Photo album image)**

First, I want to direct attention to the albums themselves and define more precisely what Gunterman produced as her visual, autobiographical narrative. There are three existing Gunterman family photograph albums. The first, a commercially purchased album, is elaborately bound and contains thick, cardboard pages with pre-cut frames for the insertion of cabinet cards (4.5 x 6.5 inches) and the carte de visite (2.5 x 4.25 inches), both popular formats of the time (Robideau 1995:10). It contains Gunterman’s collection of studio portraits of her family and friends and covers the period 1875 to 1893. The images document Gunterman’s childhood in La Crosse, Wisconsin; the early years of her marriage to Will Gunterman in Seattle, Washington and include baby pictures of her only child, Henry. Her second photographic album is a small, 5-inch square, twenty-page book and includes for the first time, Gunterman’s own photographs. This album continues the narrative of Gunterman’s life and includes snapshots made in 1897 of family, friends in Seattle and records of her travels to eastern Washington State. The third album was described to me by photo-historian Henri Robideau as a “scrapbook”, because it contains approximately 147 photographs pasted by Gunterman into a book assembled from Chinese folded paper with a sewn binding. The photographs were primarily made between 1899 and 1901 with her 5”x 7” glass plate camera.

All three of these albums are held by the Gunterman family and were not accessible for research for this study. In 1927 Gunterman’s home in Beaton, British Columbia was destroyed and all her work was lost except for the three family albums mentioned above and approximately three hundred 5” x 7” glass plate negatives that had been stored in an outdoor shed that served as a darkroom. The Gunterman photographs were selected from modern prints in the permanent collections of the Photographers Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and the Vancouver Public Library.

*(Slides 5-12 Photographs selected from the Gunterman albums)*
Reading Gunterman’s photographs

To read a photograph, one accepts that an image can be considered as a visual text. The image must be examined closely and a detailed analysis made of the information or signs it contains. Then it can be considered in relationship to related concepts and theory. It is widely accepted that that this reading of photographic images is informed by Semiotics, the study of the use and social function of signs, both linguistic and visual (Silverman 1983). My necessarily brief readings of some of Gunterman’s images that follow employs concept-based semiotic analysis. The selection of these photographs foregrounds three different types of repeating photographic studies that relate her to her narrative construction, those featuring: self –portraits as personal narrative, her family and her community.

1. Self Portraits As Personal Narrative

The photographs and photographic albums that Gunterman made between 1899 and 1910 trace both her personal development and the close inner relationships between herself and the members of her family as they work, travel and share their lives together. Not coincidentally, this was also the period when Mattie and Will Gunterman were raising their son, Henry. This kind of photography has become a social ritual that is part of family life, which, as noted by Susan Sontag allows each family to construct “a portrait chronicle of itself - a portable kit of images that bear witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed as long as the photographs get taken and are cherished.” (1978:8). In Gunterman’s time, the photographing of children and the maintenance of family records, such as photograph albums and baby books, were considered some of the duties of a good mother.

While eschewing the soft-focus appearance of Pictorialism, Gunterman wholeheartedly embraced its penchant for staging tableaux vivant and metaphoric representation. This is most evident in her self-portraits through which she explores identity, often in highly theatrical poses staged to convey the heroic pioneer image that
she sought to portray. Her family portraits also share certain dramatic characteristics that establish her personal narrative about the family’s quest for a new life in Canada.

The heroic pose is evident in *Near Beaton/Mattie*, c. 1905, (Slide 13). Positioning herself as a lone figure standing on snowshoes and holding a rifle in one hand and a dead grouse in the other, Gunterman orchestrates a romantic image of herself as pioneer woman. Her gaze is directed outside of the frame to the right and she appears fully absorbed in a kind of introspection or reverie common to many of her self-portraits. At this time, mining operations were about to close near Beaton. Gunterman knew it would become increasingly difficult for her family to make a living. Her identity being closely tied to her lifestyle, she reacts to adversity by representing herself as a solid and self-reliant figure. She poses as the lone hunter able to live off the land, using as her props the snowshoes, a rifle and a dead bird to confirm her status. As in earlier self-portraits, she chooses the natural backdrop or “prop” of logged trees as a metaphor to symbolize, in this case, the difficult economic times the family is facing. A natural background serves as a metaphor for her state of being that weaves itself through Gunterman’s narrative. Here, however, the depth of field in the image is deeper and the wilderness backdrop has been thinned and cultivated. This cultivating or civilizing of the landscape signifies Gunterman’s view of herself as a conqueror or colonizer of her chosen frontier homeland. The formality of her dress, a lace collared suit, contrasts sharply with the snow-covered landscape within which she stands and contributes to the staged, tourist-like quality of the image.

2. The family

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* (Slide 14), made at the Japanese Garden in the Golden Gate Park, the kind of exotic tourist setting favoured even today by amateur photographers. Like the previous image, 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. Contrast is achieved by using a more complex compositional device than the staged informality of the tangled wilderness settings of the earlier photographs. While the props here 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.

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 and 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.

3. Images of her Community
Mattie Gunterman used her camera as a point of entry into her community, quickly establishing herself as the local photographer. As such she was often called upon to document events in the Lardeau district, giving her the opportunity to both represent and position herself and her family within her new community. Beside herself, many of Gunterman’s photographs record images of family or friends participating in community events or activities and often suggest the character of her subjects through the portrayal of interrelationships. In this respect, historian Naomi Rosenblum makes a comparison between Gunterman and the American photographer Alice Austen, who also “often inserted herself into the images depicting the milieu in which she felt most at home” (Rosenblum 1984:110). Austen, like Gunterman, used the camera to explore her own identity through staged self-portraits and often included herself in group-portraits with family and friends.

Gunterman’s community photographs show the range of possibilities available to women in her pioneer community. They provide insight into the multi-faceted life of the woman pioneer that includes friendship, motherhood and domestic labour. Workplace photographs are rare for a number of reasons. At this time, only about sixteen percent of Canadian women worked for wages, and of those who did, few had access to cameras or had sufficient training or knowledge to know how to use them (Denton & Ostry cited in Burt 1988:14). And then there was the cost; photography was expensive, meaning that for those at the lower end of the economic scale, photography was generally reserved for documenting special occasions, not the commonplace of the worksite. In *Nettie L. Mine, Rose Williams and Mattie (on the Stove) and Ann Williams, c. 1902 (Slide 15)* we see into a camp kitchen. Rose and Ann Williams are shown posing with Mattie Gunterman who sits astride the dining room heater. The short, flash-enabled exposure captures an artlessness of gesture and emotion that makes this photograph of three women enjoying themselves completely believable. Despite its apparent spontaneity though, the technical production, composition and structure of this image must also have been thoroughly pre-
planned. As there is no evidence in the image of a shutter release hose and as it would be entirely contrary to Gunterman’s usual practice to have someone else operate her equipment, it seems likely that she first opened the shutter upon the darkened room, then arranged herself and the Williams sisters before the camera before igniting the flash powder. The result is an image that convincingly reveals the companionship and playfulness possible amongst women, even in a workplace environment in which they were expected to be maintaining a domestic passivity.

Today, in an age overflowing with casual images of this kind, it is difficult to fully appreciate the significance of Gunterman’s achievement. Despite George Eastman’s introduction of the hand-holdable, No. 1 Kodak camera in 1887, photography in 1902 largely remained a highly ritualized and formal affair, neither films being sensitive enough, nor shutters fast enough to arrest any but the slowest action. For those using anything but the most highly specialized equipment, recording a clear image on film still required a static subject. “Snapshot” was a term still associated with of users firearms, not cameras. Gunterman’s purpose was the creation of her own narrative. Her chosen instrument was the camera and to achieve her goal she exploited the capacity of her available tools to their limit, in the process discovering for herself a form that has since become a commonplace of photographic syntax.

Over time, Gunterman and her camera appear to have become an accepted, almost expected part of community activities. In *Lux’s Ranch, Upper Arrow Lake, 1905* (Slide 16) a group of bathers stands in the lake posing for Gunterman’s camera. The town of Beaton is in the background. The flotsam of loose logs and wood scraps around the group are from the mill across the lake at Comaplix and indicate heavy activity in the forest industry (Robideau1995:109). To make this large, formal, group portrait, Gunterman has distributed the twenty individuals across the full width of the frame in the foreground, being careful to ensure that everyone and particularly their face, is clearly visible. With the exception of Henry Gunterman, the photograph includes only women and girls. As with her other images, this one is deliberately staged, Gunterman obviously having arranged the composition so that her son is the central figure. Unusual portraits of such large groups, although not, as we know, for Gunterman, is the special separation between the individuals. It is particularly strange to see an image featuring so separation
between the individuals. It is particularly strange to see an image featuring so many mothers and offspring in which there is so little physical contact, where all of the subjects, even the children appear isolated from each other, each in their own space. This photograph provides a symbolic view of Gunterman’s world; a world that revolves around her only child that radiates out to include her women friends and their children, all set against the background of her small, beloved community of Beaton. Gunterman has captured her “universe” in a single image.

**Conclusion**

In Canada at the end of the nineteenth century, women photographers were not only those from privileged backgrounds seeking a leisure activity. Mattie Gunterman and others like her used photography as a means of documenting their families and narrating their own stories. They were women seeking a voice at a time when few women had real control over their destinies. Some found in photography a medium through which they could represent their identities and subsequently used the family album as a gendered format within which they could author a coherent narrative from these representations.

My analysis in this paper shows how Gunterman used the representative discourse of the family album to situate herself both in nature and as a member of the Canadian frontier community to which she immigrated as a young woman. Her photographs, in particular her self portraits and her albums in which she structured her photo-narrative, show how she used her camera as an effective tool for re-signing herself as a pioneer woman. Gunterman was able to extend the potentials of both photography and the conventional photograph album by creating, and then photographing, carefully staged, metaphoric tableau outside of the domestic sphere. Effectively, she employed photography as a social practice through which she could pursue a personal identity, producing a body of work that traces her evolution from urban dweller and tourist to strong, self-sufficient, pioneer woman able to thrive in the wilderness of interior British Columbia. By rigorously controlling the various components of her photographs: framing, people, props and backgrounds she made of each image a framed scenario within which she could both create and play out drama of her life and, by implication, pass comment on its context.
References:


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