Composing: The Work of Geraldine Moodie

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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 others’ 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 has become known. What follows are five poems from my collection that speculate about her emergence into photography.

References

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*
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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