

# Rereading Evelyn Cameron's Photography and the "Exceptional Woman" Myth

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**Abstract:** This piece discusses the work of turn of the century photographer Evelyn Cameron, and the ways that her photos of early Montana ask us to rethink the myths and tropes of the American West using Medio-Materialist Historiography and ideas of critical imagination and social circulation. Cameron's work and the images of the work around her require new readings in order to reimagine the role of women and women's work in the West.

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A few years ago, our family trip for the summer involved a trek from New Jersey to Montana, in part to follow the "Montana Dinosaur Trail" from Billings 220 miles east through the towns of Miles City, Terry, and eventually Glendive, about a half hour from the border of North Dakota.<sup>1</sup> The southeastern area of Montana becomes increasingly rural; towns such as Terry and the Glendive have one main street running through the middle and populations hovering around 5,000 each. In each of these towns, we stopped at the local "prairie museum," including the Range Riders Museum in Miles City and the Frontier Museum in Glendive. In addition, we stopped in Terry to visit the Prairie County Museum and the Evelyn Cameron Gallery. I knew nothing about Cameron other than a brief (and rather unexciting) blurb in the travel guide that suggested stopping in Terry: "Evelyn Cameron, a pioneer photographer, took spectacular pictures of Terry and the surrounding area during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of her photos hang in the Evelyn Cameron gallery, next door to the museum" (Walker 315). We stopped for a tour<sup>2</sup>.

The Cameron Gallery was a surprise and a delight to me. First of all, as a devotee of the Progressive Era but knowing little about the settling of Montana during this period (most of my work has revolved around the East Coast, since that is where I live and work), her incredible photos revealed much about what early Montana looked like in the years just after their 1889 statehood. Second, I had never heard of this woman, who was minor British nobility and yet an immigrant to the Wild West. She sent away for a custom split skirt (and was nearly arrested for wearing

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1 Many thanks to Katie Ryan for earlier readings and input on this manuscript.

2 Since her rediscovery, scholars have increasingly begun publishing work about Cameron's life and photography, including Donna Lucey's *Photographing Montana*. PBS Montana created "Evelyn Cameron: Pictures from a Worthy Life," in 2005, which won an Emmy.

it) so that she could more safely and easily ride astride across the plains to explore, hunt, and shoot but also to photograph neighbors, workers on the railroad, and immigrants newly arriving in the area (Cameron 830). In addition to her skirt and copies of her photographs (the original glass plates have been sent to the University of Bozeman for preservation and digitization), many of her journals have also been copied and transcribed and are available for study. Overall, I was carried away by the story of Cameron herself, who was left to do the physical and financial work to maintain their ranch by herself as her husband, a self-proclaimed naturalist who was more interested in the local birds' nests than ranching, became increasingly ill and eventually died. While Cameron initially took up photography with the idea of assisting her husband's work in writing ornithological articles, eventually she used it to supplement the ranch's income.

In addition to the fact that her photos were stunning, I loved the romanticism of it—woman riding by herself across the sweeping plains to take photographs in order to increase her income! Rugged individualist! Story of exceptional woman doing exceptional things with great scenery for a backdrop! I was in. My Easterner's gaze, colored by popular depictions of the settling of the West (and even texts like Henry Nash's *Virgin Land*), would undergo significant revision as I learned more about Cameron and women's early work on the prairie. Indeed, much of what I learned as an outsider, many others, particularly those local to the area, may already know.

The more I learned about Cameron, the more intrigued I became. After marrying naturalist Ewen Cameron in 1889, the Camerons honeymooned in Montana. A half-sister of Lord Battersea, it was most likely a surprise to her family when Evelyn and Ewen permanently decamped to homestead in Montana in 1893 (Lucey 17). Initially, they hoped to tame wild horses to export to England as polo ponies; Evelyn herself did most of the work of capturing and taming them, but 40% of the horses they caught and trained died on the way to England (most from pneumonia), and the trip was a financial disaster (Lucey 41). Instead, they (mostly she) turned to raising a small herd of cattle, as well as farming and more female-gendered work. Ewen spent an increasing amount of time observing wildlife and writing poorly paid articles on his naturalist findings. Rhonda Sedgwick Stearns notes that, much like the polo horse adventure, Evelyn's initial work did not allow her to survive financially either: "She took in boarders, sold her garden vegetables to other ranchers, raised chickens, sold eggs, churned cream, and sold the butter. None of these met her financial needs" (7). While she continued to do all of those things (and many others), it was eventually her photography work that did the greatest dividend, work that both required and allowed her to take on greater agency and more diverse roles in order to meet an increasing financial exigence.

While I may never have heard of her, Evelyn Cameron was not a remote figure during her lifetime within her own community—Cameron's photography became well known, although mostly to the locals in Eastern Montana.<sup>3</sup> After her death in 1928, however, she seems to have faded into

3 Google and database searches revealed a few other female photographers in the West at this time, such as Jennie Ross Cobb (Chavez) and Lorna Webb Nichols ("Topics: Women Photographers"). However, Cameron and her work have received the most scholarly attention thus far.

oblivion, and the circulation of her work ceased.<sup>4</sup> In 1978, while researching women settlers in the area, historian Donna Lucey was shown Cameron's collection of nearly 2,000 glass plate photos by beloved Cameron family friend Janet Williams, who had stored them in her basement (where they were miraculously still intact, given that they were highly flammable and stored with Cameron's old guns and live ammunition) (Lucey x). Cameron took shots of railroad workers, day laborers, and new settlers who had just moved to the area and wanted to send photographs of their new life back to home. In addition, she took hundreds of photos of friends and neighbors, who, like Cameron, were often single women. Lucey was able to convince Williams to not only share the story but also to donate these valuable finds to the Montana Historical Society, where they are now housed.

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Lucey's work was part of a larger movement, beginning in the 1970s, to develop a body of work regarding the contributions of women to Western settlement (see Jordan, Jeffrey, Stoeltje, and Myres, for example). Scholars such as Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller, as early as 1980, encouraged historians to take a multicultural approach to this work in their essay "The Gentle Tamers Revisited." Despite this move (and much continued work in the decades after), scholars like Susan Lee Johnson noted that an "overdetermined" relationship between "that which is Western and that which is male" continues to persist (497). In part, Johnson explains, while a "small mountain" of research has been produced about women in the West, it has largely remained unincorporated into mainstream history, instead relegated to separate chapters in the Western history books or separate conference panels: "Most mainstream scholars...leave the questions of gender to women's historians, who are usually women historians" (497). Much in the same way that Victorian depictions of women keep the "angel in the house" alive at the expense of large bodies of working and working-class women, more popular depictions of women in the West continue to reinforce the notion, which I initially held as well, that they were rare and mythical creatures. This leaves scholars with the continual project of attempting to shift Western women's history from an essentialist project, where women are layered on top of extant history, to a more radical one, that continues to enforce and reinforce the notion that women are indeed embedded in that history.

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4 See Gries for more information on the ways in which circulation can be both ideological and physical.

The more I looked at Cameron's images, read her diaries, and read primary and secondary sources about the homesteading movement in Montana, the more my own vision of Cameron in her surroundings began to shift as I grappled with my own sense of the "exceptionality" of women in the West that I had been trained on versus the reality of their lived experience. I realized the multiple ways in which both Cameron's work as a photographer, as well as the images she produced, contribute to the more inclusive notions of gender and the settling of the American West that scholars have long called for. In particular, her photographs of life on the prairie in Montana between 1894 and 1928 do much to interrupt popular embedded concepts of gendered work by showing diverse work and life roles of women in "settling" and homesteading on the prairies.

## Framework

How do viewers "read" the work of a person such as Cameron, particularly if their gaze, like mine was initially, is focused on her as exceptional? Particularly, how do we read her photographs within a sense of the American West as a continually defined male space (what Brigit Georgi-Findlay terms the persistent "frontier myth" of "solitary, innocent (male) heroes" (5))? Cameron's work can be read most usefully through a trio of lenses: to start with, Jason Barrett-Fox's idea of cold *kairos*,<sup>5</sup> followed by his concept of Medio-Materialist Historiography (MMH), and then Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's theories of critical imagination and social circulation.

Cold *kairos* serves as an overall frame (as well as an explanation of her lack of circulation) instead of a direct method for focused reading. Barrett-Fox defines cold *kairos* as "the material ability to mediate feminist critiques, acts of consciousness-raising, or stories of survival that could—or, in many cases, had no choice but to—lay dormant for huge spans of time...resting in the uncertain hope that a future audience might be willing and able to receive them" (Barrett-Fox 41). Cameron's lack of social circulation for many years (a concept that will be explored in greater detail later) meant that there were no "readings" of her materials for nearly half a century. In addition, cold *kairos* now allows for reading of Cameron's work as what Barrett-Fox terms "survival-feminism"—agency that Cameron took on as a result of financial (and perhaps emotional) need (Barrett-Fox 31).

Barrett-Fox's concept of Medio-Materialist Historiography (MMH) and Royster and Kirsch's concepts of critical imagination and social circulation, however, provide a more focused method for the majority of my readings of her work. As part of an MMH reading, Barrett-Fox notes that several qualifications must exist, chief among them the original creator's use of some form of "inscriptional technology" and their "facility with a particular medium," (48) in this case defined through Cameron's photographs. Next, "another facet of a likely candidate would be the quality with which she manipulated her chosen media and how those manipulations coincided with particular messages, critiques, or other, less overt demonstrations of (distributed) rhetorical force" (48).

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5 Barrett-Fox italicizes *kairos* throughout his text.

Importantly, in Barrett-Fox's imagining of MMH, the material creator may not be intentionally creating feminist material, but instead is responding to the constructed circumstances (social, historical, economic) of their own lives (31).

MMH and critical imagination/social circulation may seem like an odd mashup; however, they each have features that allow them to converse with one another. Cameron's "demonstrations of (distributed) rhetorical force" are easily put into conversation with feminist rhetorical scholars of the American West as well as Royster and Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. In this case, Royster and Kirsch's concepts of strategic contemplation and social circulation are essential to reading Cameron's work as both repeating but also reframing the myths and archetypes of the American West. Strategic contemplation asks readers/viewers to think critically and contemplatively about sources. This, as Royster and Kirsch note, works well "when the ecologies of person, time, and space stretch beyond anointed assumptions about the ways and means of rhetorical performance" (21). Cameron can thus be read in terms of her images' rhetorical performance, one which moves beyond "anointed assumptions" about the West long before scholars attempted to record the roles of women from the area (21).

Kirsch and Royster's concept of social circulation, in turn, asks readers to make "connections among past, present, and future in the sense that overlapping social circles in which women travel, live, and work are carried on or modified from one generation to the next and can lead to changed rhetorical practices" (23). Cameron's images lend themselves to both of these. Women's work in the West was known by those women to be difficult, dirty, and non-gendered. It is, however, our reliance on the frameworks that came after these women that leads popular accounts to reflect largely gendered participation ("civilization" vs. "conquest") of women in the settling of the West. This piece will examine the oft repeated gendered mythology of the American West and the role of women in the newly developing field of photography before turning an eye to Cameron's photographs in order to understand the ways in which Cameron used "visual appropriation" (Fleckenstein) and the manipulation of expectations for her images to reinscribe our views of women in the West. Next, I will discuss the ways in which the depression of their social circulation (creating Barrett-Fox's "cold kairos") has contributed to this gendered mythology and the ways in which a rereading and closer contemplation can serve as a corrective.

## **The American West as Masculine/Masculinized Space**

Perhaps nowhere in history is the "exceptional woman" myth more prevalent than in long established histories and popular depictions of the settling of the Pacific Northwest and territories such as Montana. From the adventures of Lewis and Clark (and the token woman on the voyage, Sacagawea) to Custer's Last Stand and the Battle of Little Bighorn, the history of the "settling" of the Pacific Northwest and the ranching of cattle and roping of horses has been one that has involved images of men, conquest, colonial violence, and rugged individualism. Indeed, Cameron's

own role as a settler clearly participates in this colonialism while at the same time challenging its narrative as a masculinized pursuit.

Johnson observes that “the construction of a masculine West was part and parcel of a larger late nineteenth-century ‘crisis of manliness’ in the United States...” rather than a reflection of reality (497). Henry Nash’s 1950 *Virgin Land* continues this masculinized archetype of the West, where men were mythic and heroic and worked to “subdue the continent” (Nash 37). Nash adds to the notion that the conquering of the West involved strong men, conquering their surroundings in order to “civilize” them (both “taming” the land but also enacting colonial violence by destroying the buffalo and the Native American cultures they found). Readings such as Nash’s, taken as lore, have hardened that version of Western settlement for readers and remain difficult to dislodge, even when audiences are continually presented with contrary evidence. For example, despite their significant participation in activities such as hunting and exploration, Karen Jones notes in “Lady Wildcats and Wild Women” that many women involved in this Western history have continued to be written about as “reluctant pioneers and gentle tamers,” who were imagined to leave the hardest and most rugged work to their menfolk while they attempted to bring culture to their newly civilized surroundings (37-38). As a result of these frameworks, which have been repeated in history books and popular culture, stereotypes and embedded histories of the American West remain largely male and masculine. As Jordynn Jack points out in “Redefining Rhetorical Figures through Cognitive Ecologies,” tropes such as “The American West” are “ecological and embedded” ways of helping us to make meaning (2).

How do we then build on a body of extant scholarship but also continue to chip away at these tropes, to recognize settler colonialism, but also to mainstream a more comprehensive and inclusive view of the West? To start, the unique history of British social class behaviors disrupts some embedded ways of thinking about women in the West. In many ways, the Camerons’ background as minor nobility actually prepared them well for parts of living in the American West. Like many of the peerage, they had to be raised to ride and to shoot. While in general the British hunted for sport and not for food, the Camerons both grew up as accomplished horse people and were avid hunters (Lucey 10). In addition, by the time that the Camerons arrived in Montana for their honeymoon in 1889 with an English cook and a hired guide (Lucey 9), many British landed gentry had treated trips to the West as yet another site for safari and exploration, bringing with them varying degrees of servants and supplies (Pagnamenta 18; 97). And Evelyn Cameron’s class and “good breeding,” combined with her ability to ride and shoot, “conferred a sense of superiority on the female adventurer that often made the crossing of gender boundaries less problematic” (Jones 41). In addition, Cameron’s upbringing meant that she spoke French, German, and Italian, all of which later helped her navigate her way professionally as immigrants from those countries arrived in the area (Stearns 7).

Given the persistent paradigms of women in the West, it is still possible, especially for

those of us who grew up with the more popular masculinized version of the West, to fall into the trap of creating a “female frontier” for them, imagining them doing exceptional and difficult but still gendered work, the confines of which they did not breach (Jones 38). In this version, their presence continues to be the exception rather than the rule. This is another embedded ecology that requires intervention. Sarah Carter, in *Montana Women Homesteaders*, notes that women in the West were “everywhere.” For example, in addition to women who arrived with their spouses, her research found that in Yellowstone County, Montana, between 1909 and 1934, 18% of land patents were issued solely to women, “who together claimed more than 150,000 acres” (24)<sup>6</sup> Many came alone; others came to homestead with relatives or intended spouses, increasing their land holdings by filing singly but with other family members on adjoining plots, or with intended spouses prior to their marriages (Carter 32). They also had social room to behave in ways that violated social norms in other geographical areas. As Casey Ryan Kelly notes in “Women’s Rhetorical Agency in the American West: *The New Penelope*,” women saw moments where “material structures are open to restructuration and reinterpretation” (227) and used those moments to act. However, publications such as Nash’s (which are still taught in graduate programs in History and American Literature) reinforced the idea of women conforming to social norms, except perhaps for a few rugged individualists who did not conform to either gender or social norms and can be relegated as “exceptional” (such as Sacagawea, Annie Oakley, or Calamity Jane). Popular culture has assisted in this limited view. For example, while the Ingalls family never lived as far west as Montana, embedded tropes have led otherwise unfamiliar readers/viewers to imagine early Western women as figures like those depicted by “Ma” Ingalls—solitary, often isolated women, doing “women’s work,” such as milking, making butter, making bread from starter, gardening, raising children, and bringing a moral and civilizing force to the wilderness. Such images create a picture of solitary women on solitary ranches doing solitary (and certainly gendered) work.

This is not to say that women in the West did not perform such gendered work. Indeed, scholarship about women’s presence in the West shows the ways that many women both enacted versions of being a “taming force” while still breaking the confines of traditional behaviors. As Andrea Radke notes in “Redefining Rural Spaces,” while many of these women were living in the harshest of conditions, they still sought to bring culture and refinement to their domestic spaces. Their adaptive behaviors included “access to material goods and literary culture, and the performance of civilizing manners and behavior that represented ‘proper’ Euro-American civilization” (227). Photos taken of women in clean dresses, hair done and jewelry on, or photos of families near a piano or pump organ, were often seen as evidence that the Wild West was not so wild, and that women’s presence there contributed to this domestication (227). While men are described throughout the popular literature as “taming” the West, women are charged with then “domesticating” and “civilizing” it. Many, of course, did both.

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This embedded thinking can be and often is exclusionary and creates a “part-whole” think-

<sup>6</sup> While the Montana census does not break gender down by county, it shows that in 1900, 36% of residents in rural Montana were women. By 1920, that number had increased to 44% (26).

ing that can allow us, in cases like Cameron's, to continue to read her photographs as exceptions rather than commonplace because it better suits our popular cultural frameworks. Applegarth comments on the danger of exceptionalist discourse as having "limited the significance of women's performances of professional competence by treating even widespread performances, across myriad public and professional spaces, as aberrations, exceptions to a norm of absence, invisibility, and unsuitability" (533). This leaves readers still at risk of reading Cameron's images as exceptional, regardless of our training to do otherwise. Indeed, the few tropes typically presented and re-presented of women settling in the West (homesteaders' wives, for example), are present in many of Cameron's photos. But so too, are the multiple other roles that we may think of as exceptional instead of commonplace. Neighbors and dear friends to the Camerons, Janet and Mabel Williams, for example, arrived with their brother and parents in 1907, each staking a land claim in order to create large holdings for the family (Lucey x). The Buckley sisters, Mabel, May, and Myrtle, on the other hand, ran a ranch with their mother since their father was routinely away for "roundups and other ranch business" (Lucey 54). These working women, as Cameron's images will show below, do not fit popular tropes but were common rather than exceptional, and exemplify the gender-inclusive frameworks of Western history presented since the late 1970s.

Women's work in the West can't be imagined as a monolith either. The work of women in Montana did change, even in the years just after the Camerons arrived. While the Camerons settled after the landscape had been forcibly cleared of most native inhabitants, initially they were surrounded by other English-speaking immigrants (including other British) who had moved to the West. Most of them homesteaded and kept large gardens as well as horses or cattle. As time went on, though, the immigrants in the area included more Germans, Italians, Russians, and Irish. The way they made their living changed, and thus, women's work also changed. Cameron herself was aware of the ways in which this change had manifested itself. Writing "The 'Cowgirl' in Montana" for the generally British audience of *Country Life* in 1914, Cameron defined the cowgirl not as a dairy maid, but as the "feminine counterpart of cowboys—riding in similar saddles, on similar horses, for the purpose of similar duties, which they do, in fact, efficiently perform" (829). These women, according to her, were "accomplished in the incidental work of branding cattle, breaking horses, and throwing the lasso" (830). As time went on and the work in the area changed, the immigrants changed to include "Russo-Germans" and they began what Cameron terms "dry-farming" (cultivating crops without irrigation) (831). Her characterization of the women in particular conveys a sense for the difficult work that these women took on as well as her respect for them.

The female members of the Russo-Germans who have swarmed over the prairie like ants take outdoor work even more seriously than the cowgirls whom they replace. Russo-German girls in their teens successfully perform every kind of farm labour, and may be seen ploughing from daylight to dark, sacking and hauling grain, haymaking, or driving up the cows on their great draught colts, ridden bareback. (Cameron 831)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> While Cameron's photographs depict the work of an increasingly diverse geographic group of immigrants, of the approximately 180 photos in the Cameron gallery collection and the larger collection in the Montana Mem-



While the work in Montana changed as more people moved in to settle, the fact that women's work was gender diverse did not.

## Women in Photography

If women's typical work in the West has created conflicting moments in depictions of the West (or moments to ignore altogether), I wondered about the place of women in professional photography during this same time period. Since, as Lucaites and Hariman observe, photographs "shape and mediate understanding of specific events and periods," how is this transformed if women are involved (38)? While the women in Cameron's photographs might or might not be doing traditionally gendered female work, photography itself was seen as an acceptable realm for women to either "dabble" in or even to make a living from. While Cameron used dry glass plate photography methods instead of film, Kodak's photography marketing helped to usher in support for the female photographer. Their development in the 1880s of the "Kodak Girl" (similar to the Progressive Era Gibson Girl) also shows the melding of the independent woman and the angel of the house. Kodak's "Kodak Girl" imagined "the modern woman was fun-loving and independent. She now felt free to go out and explore the world—and she was taking her Kodak camera with her!" ("The Kodak Girl"). As the angel of her house, she also became responsible for making sure that as "responsible mothers and wives, they would ensure that all key moments were duly captured" ("The Kodak Girl"). Where women could not afford cameras and their associated costs, those with the means used photographers like Cameron to record such moments. Indeed, many of the photographs that Cameron took were meant to document such family life and were sent home by new immigrants to show family back home their new environs (Lucey 163).

Photography was seen as more than a hobby, though. An 1897 article in *Ladies Home Journal* by Frances Benjamin Johnston details the acceptability of photography as a new profession for women. In "What a Woman Can Do with a Camera," Johnston notes that under carefully planned circumstances such as understanding local supply and demand and advertising carefully, professional photography could be a lucrative profession for women. However, Nicole Hudgins' research, primarily in England and Europe, reveals that while photography was often seen as acceptable for women, it was often in the context of unskilled work—women were more likely to work as "relatively low-paid helpers in the studio (as retouchers, mounters, and receptionists" rather than as camera and/or darkroom operators (163). In reality, Evelyn Cameron was not concerned about whether or not society felt her photography was an acceptable practice. Early on, she discovered that she was a talented photographer and that it was an efficient and effective way to supplement her income. She also developed and refined her business acumen as she continued,

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ory project, I could only find one (Cameron Gallery, DEP 616) that depicted a person of color—a black cowboy with a white cowgirl. It's also difficult to interpret her comment relating the Russian workers to "swarming ants," although given her lighthearted tone and vivid descriptions in the rest of the piece, it is my sense that she meant more to describe their number and movement on the fields. However, it does read as potentially derogatory for contemporary readers.

leaving local advertisements for her photography services at the Fallon and Terry post offices, including a poster with sample prints and a price list (Lucey 160; 157). Cameron used the post office as a “nerve center” to collect and leave messages regarding her photography services (Lucey 156). While an initial attempt to set up a photography studio in town folded after six weeks, her communication system using the post office seemed to work well. She then used her kitchen for a darkroom, processing photos at night, which eliminated the need for a studio and darkroom space separate from the house (Lucey 122).

In the end, Johnston’s vision of the female photographer thus remains more conservative than what Cameron enacted. Johnston imagines a woman working in or even owning a studio with an accompanying darkroom. This would be a suitable locale, separate from her home sphere, for portraits taken with customers arranged in front of static backgrounds (Johnston). Carrying her photography supplies for miles while riding astride through the badlands, meeting transient workers at the railroad tracks, climbing out onto rock ledges and into canyons, and developing photos in her kitchen may not have been seen as the womanly work that Johnston imagined. Overall, though, the actual work of photography was deemed acceptable for women at this time. And photograph she did. While in many instances as we read history, we must critically imagine roles in ways that require us to extrapolate substantial information, Cameron’s photos instead provide proof for those moments.

### **Evelyn Cameron: Photographer**

Cameron began her photography in 1894, when a lodger, a Mr. Adams, offered to teach her amateur photography. She did not initially choose the popular Kodak film cameras available at the time. While there is no record of her first camera model, she chose instead to work with dry-plate glass photography (Lucey 122). By 1895, she wrote to her mother-in-law “It is very fascinating work but it requires a lot of practice” (Lucey 122). She was able to quickly get that practice as friends and neighbors requested photos. After experimenting briefly with a Kodak film camera and finding the tone and clarity disappointing, Cameron ordered a No. 5 Kodak that could be used with either plates or film. Lucey describes it as a “moderately priced folding camera, fitted with a Bausch & Lomb shutter” (123). It was also a heavy camera to transport—9 pounds without the tripod or the extra glass plates (Lucey 131). Eventually, she switched to a 5x7 “Graflex with a German-made Goerz lens” (Lucey xi). While initially she sustained some losses as she experimented with her methods, Cameron was eventually able to use her photography money to substantially contribute to her income. An undated sign with sample photos advertised her services at 25c each, \$1.75 per half dozen, and \$3.00 for a dozen. By 1904 she was charging \$5 for albums with two dozen pictures, which were often purchased as family keepsakes or to send back home (Lucey 160). While in 1899 she recorded a loss of \$4.92 in her diaries (Lucey 156), within five years she was successfully photographing locals and local work, including photographing work on the railroad (primarily by Italians). She had also come to the notice of railroad executives who bought

photos in order to advertise the local geography to potential homesteaders (Lucey 163). Lucey points out that as a photographer with facility in four languages, Cameron “was probably one of the few people who could always move freely from one immigrant group to another” (Lucey 164).

### **Cameron’s Photos and “Women’s Work”**

Cameron’s images can be divided into four major types—portraits, photobooks, naturalist photos (often used to illustrate her husband’s work), and depictions of everyday local life. Cameron certainly focused on many of the men in her world—ranchers, miners, and railroad crews. While her photos show many “typical” images of women inside (or outside) of their homes, upon closer examination, however, they do not simply reveal token women. Instead, working against the popular notion of “men taming the west,” Cameron’s photographs repeatedly show local women responding to, as Barrett-Fox notes, the social, historic, and economic needs in their lives through their work on the land (31). Indeed, Cowgirl scholars identify ranch women of the early West as falling into the categories of “trailblazing figureheads [and] resourceful adapters” (Henneman 155). Henneman’s “resourceful adapters” result in Barrett-Fox’s “survival feminists” (6). Cameron’s work to keep the ranch going and to attempt to turn a profit involved an impressive list of tasks: she “chopped wood, dug coal, tended a huge garden, raised chickens, milked the cow, branded, dehorned, and castrated cattle, broke colts, skinned and butchered animals both wild and domestic, cooked, baked, and scrubbed pots, pans, clothes, floors, and walls with no hired help and little to no help from her husband” (Hager 4). To this, of course, she added professional photography. Like Cameron, most settler women did not typically involve themselves in non-traditional ranch work out of a sense that they were blazing the trail for future women. Instead, it was a pragmatic matter of financial survival for many of them.

In addition, in a factor that would likely be a surprise to scholars such as Henry Nash, many of the women, including Cameron, truly enjoyed the work they did. One of the most often quoted passages from Cameron’s diaries in the secondary sources that I read was her description of such work. She wrote “Manual labour is about all I care about, and after all, is what will really make a strong woman. I like to break colts, brand calves, cut down trees, ride and work in a garden” (Lucey xii). And yet, even sources that talk about how much fulfillment she got from doing such work include pushbacks against it. In “Under the Big Sky,” for example, after listing the above daily entry from Evelyn’s diary, the authors comment “Ranch life was not all drudgery” (68). Yet nowhere from Cameron’s descriptions do we think that she viewed it that way. Hard, valuable work, yes. Drudgery, no.

Donna Lucey’s expectations of the difficult work that Cameron did were initially similar. She writes:

The fact that Evelyn was female, British, and well born led me to expect that her diaries

would be a chronicle of exasperation with the drudgery and boredom of the frontier, animated only by lofty contempt for the crude American frontiersman. I found the opposite: a woman who was thrilled by the independence, the rigors, and the dangers of pioneer life. (xii)

In reality, Lucey's initial perception is born from conscribed expectations of turn of the century American women as well as from embedded tropes of the American West.

As previously mentioned, it is worth noting that many of Cameron's photos *do* show women in typical and gendered roles. They wanted to show their families that they were succeeding, not making social waves, in their new environments. Much like any current photographs, they also wanted to show the best side of their new lives rather than the difficult and dirty parts. As a result, many of her subjects dressed well and showed either their belongings or their houses in the photographs that Cameron took of them. The image of Fanny Wright below shows exactly what people outside of the area typically expected to know about women in the West. She is well-dressed, and heavy textiles adorn the floor and the top of the piano. The fact that there is a piano shows that she is a woman of means and culture. She has pillows and curtains, and the walls are adorned with what the Montana library identifies as a painting of "Al Wright on horseback." Lastly, she is reading a book, showing her as both literate and cultured. The image reflects Jones' concept that many people considered women in the West as civilizing influences. The image of Wright conforms to this, and visually reassures viewers that women in the West were civilized and discerning—proper women, doing proper work.



Figure 1: Fanny Wright reading in her living room, 1905.

However, while many of Cameron's images show traditional home and family images with women in traditional roles, an additional group of them show work that viewers like myself, raised on pop culture notions of the West, would typically think of and associate with Montana—the work of roping cattle and working with horses. In Figure 2, Evelyn Cameron is on a horse and has captured a cow; Ewen Cameron is branding it. From my own perspective, this image didn't unsettle my expectations of Western history too much at first glance. Viewers like me might critically imagine that this is a photo of a wife helping a husband with typical ranch work. And yet, a closer look reveals that while Evelyn Cameron appears to be wearing a skirt, she is instead sitting fully astride her horse and her skirt is "split"—it looks like a skirt, but is instead really more of a gaucho. As well, while she is wearing a white top, the sleeves are rolled up and her arms are bare and tanned. Lastly, she is wearing work boots. Mentally, however, viewers with associations like my initial ones might dismiss the gendered nature of this by claiming that Ewen Cameron is clearly doing the "harder" work of branding the cow. While this photo piques our interest and begins the potential process of contemplation, we might be able to dismiss it as a potentially unique situation, and not really "that" different. As the MMH framework helps us to read, the rhetorical implications of this sends a specific message that is not particularly disruptive of many embedded ecologies of women in the West.



Figure 2: Ewen and Evelyn Cameron Branding Cow



Figure 3: Mabel and Janet Williams Branding Cow

Figure 3's image of the Williams sisters, in much the same pose as Evelyn and Ewen Cameron, however, forced my own strategic contemplation of women in the West to expand past stereotype and required me to at least begin to reject popular embedded notions of roles of women in the West. Both women are active in this photo. Both are gendered in the sense that they appear to be wearing skirts, but the rider reveals that this is also a split skirt. The rider's pose astride the horse is also "masculine" (like Cameron, the Williams found sidesaddle both inconvenient and dangerous for this type of ranch work). Both wear hats (to keep off the sun) and work boots. As well, one wears heavy work gloves. But the fact that both participants in this traditionally depicted male activity are female forced me to reimagine the roles of these women in Montana. While Cameron is simply intending to record her neighbors (and friends) at work, this manipulation of my thinking changed the message and its distributed rhetorical force as I tried to imagine this as a space for many women, and not just for a few (Barrett-Fox 48). This can be a jarring experience for the viewer, though, and one that they might reject. As Risa Applegarth comments, "the embodied occupation of spaces where women *haven't* been [or, as I would argue, we haven't imagined them being,] draws startling attention to unspoken prohibitions against women's bodies entering such spaces" (543, emphasis original). Or, if they do enter such spaces, viewers might try to make the reading safer for themselves and imagine that they do so in limited ways, as exceptional cases. Hariman and Lucaites follow this in visual rhetorical terms as the "individuated aggregate" "whereby the population as a whole is represented solely by specific individuals" (38). If viewers aren't used to seeing other individuals representing what popular culture has led us to believe is the "correct" representation, the experience can be jolting. Rhetorically speaking, Janice Rushing draws on Lloyd Bitzer's work as she prompts that this is an exigency to the myth of Western settlement, commenting, "Exigencies can be societal conditions or institutions that threaten one or more aspects of the myth" (17). In this case, the exigency does not change the myth, but

requires viewers to work harder to try to create a rereading, or even a new version of the myth, or to somehow excuse the presence of these women. And yet, photo after photo from Cameron shows women doing this type of work, further contributing to Johnson's "mountain of evidence" regarding women's roles in the West while simultaneously contributing to a framework that locals likely already know.

That does not mean that society at large accepted these women's place within the myth or read against the myth in any sustained way. For instance, word spread of the Buckley sisters, who were also frequent subjects of Cameron's photographs.



Figure 4: Buckley girls with roped cow



Figure 5: Mabel, May, and Myrtle Buckley Roping Horse

The work that the Buckley sisters completed was received as so unusual outside of their Montana community as to make them spectacle: “Carnival managers tried to hire the sisters, and they were invited to perform for Theodore Roosevelt, but they declined” (Lucey 54). While shows regarding the Wild West were popular at the time, the Buckley sisters considered their work part of their professional and personal lives, not a matter of show.

We can contrast the work of the Buckley girls and their sense of themselves in Figures 4 and 5 with the photographic work of Frances Benjamin Johnston, who was mentioned earlier. Johnston wrote extensively about the feminine qualities that women could bring to photography, and in particular, portraiture. Johnston, in seeing certain roles for women in photography, worked within Victorian virtues and argued for a space for herself within them. However, Cameron’s photos read well beyond this. She is not attempting to live within Johnston’s confines, but rather to document what she realistically saw and lived every day. Barrett-Fox’s MMH readings allow us to think about the rhetorical work of Cameron’s photography as a mediation of her world. Cameron strategically uses her chosen medium in order to manipulate her message: the very existence of her photographs shows her willingness to take on agency for herself and reimagine her role while she presented outside viewers reimagined roles of the women who lived and worked around her (Barrett-Fox 48). Her disruptive message of the popular myth of American women in the West is that women could and did do the work of men on the Montana prairies. They expanded their own roles far beyond “civilizing forces,” (or beyond Royster and Kirsch’s “anointed assumptions”) and they not only were good at such work but also enjoyed it. Cold *kairos* allows us to say that these



are feminist messages—women were participating in this world despite repeated attempts of scholars and historians (such as Nash) to write them out of it or of Wild West shows to write them in as spectacle. Viewing these photos through a mediated gaze allows viewers such as myself to move beyond the pop culture or even Nash’s reading of the West to create scholars’ desired multi-layered roles of women’s work in the West.

## The Erasure of Evelyn Cameron

Laurie Gries notes that the concept of circulation can be seen “in terms of spatiotemporal flow as well as a cultural-rhetorical process” (3). In part, the notion of actual physical social circulation explains why nobody recognized Cameron’s work, much less her inclusion as part of the women in the Western narrative, for many years. Kristi Hager notes that after Cameron’s death, her photos were really only seen in private family albums (10). In addition, Hager also observes that the circulation that most famous photographers achieve, with gallery showings, publicity, and reprints, was never a part of Cameron’s career (10). And, in 1928, the time of Cameron’s death, Hager points out that “the general public was not yet nostalgic for the ‘good old days’ of dry land farming” and other facets of early Montana life, making her images of less interest at the time (Hager 10). All of these factors contributed to the lack of social circulation and the development of cold *kairos* surrounding Cameron’s work.

In addition, Cameron’s photographs moved from being public and locally available for sale to private upon her death. Janet Williams, who inherited the Cameron’s ranch and all of the Cameron belongings, was particularly reluctant to share them. Donna Lucey, who initially put Cameron back into circulation in the late 1970s, only learned of Cameron by accident when she was researching the history of women pioneers. As Lucey recalls, “a curator at the Montana Historical Society in Helena mentioned that there was an old farm woman in the eastern part of the state who was hoarding a cache of glass-plate negatives made by a woman during the frontier days. . . . The owner had deflected all efforts by the historical society to view it” (Lucey ix). Eventually, Williams allowed Lucey to view the collection, and upon her death, it was donated to the Montana Historical Society. But by then, the photos had largely been out of circulation for approximately 50 years, waiting quietly for their kairotic moment.

The social circulation of these photos also explains, in part, their silence after Cameron’s death. Social circulation asks us to think about “where our research originates, where it travels, and how it connects communities, generations, and different locations” (Royster and Kirsch 105). Indeed, during her own life, Cameron’s collection of photographs circulated in conscribed ways. While she initially had photographed homesteaders, most of whom had moved from the East coast of the US, her work changed as immigration patterns changed; she began to photograph newcomers to the area, including Russian and German immigrants and Italian and sometimes Greek railroad workers (Lucey 163). But these photographs, while prized by the families, again

did not circulate where they might have gained Cameron notoriety and fame as a photographer. Instead, many of the photographs stayed local in family photobooks. Some of the photographs circulated away from Montana—but primarily to go back “home,” and home was often Germany, Russia, Italy, etc. They do not seem to have circulated outside of the Western US in ways that would create a large enough ripple, leave a lasting impact, or intervene in larger audiences’ thinking about the settling of the West.

It was only after Lucey’s discovery of the photographs in 1978 that Cameron’s work developed a more national circulation, and even that has taken some years to accomplish. Lucey’s books, as well as both popular and scholarly articles/books about Cameron, have helped to increase her circulation. The online collections of both The Montana Memory Project and the Evelyn Cameron gallery continue to increase this circulation, making access to some of her photos globally available. Lastly, the development of the Evelyn Cameron Gallery, opened to the public in 2005, has given Cameron a professional gallery space for exhibitions and sales of reprints. Digital technology has, of course, increased her circulation in ways that were not available to her in her lifetime. However, during her life, the rhetorical impact of Cameron’s photographs was limited not only by their locale but also the in the more private, family-based ways in which they circulated (either in Montana or overseas).

## Conclusion

Ann George, Elizabeth Weiser, and Janet Zepernick, writing about women between the World Wars, argue that “While a successful individual showed what *one* woman could do, multiple examples did not suggest what women in general could do, nor did they dislodge larger cultural beliefs about what women *should* do” (11, emphasis original). But the large groups of photographs indicating women’s work that Cameron provides also do not show what women *must* and *did* do, both in order to survive, and in order to simply do what needed to be done (and, perhaps, to safely do work that they enjoyed). In this sense, Cameron’s visual embodiment of 1900 Montana through her lens (literally), asks us to embrace the distributed rhetorical force of Cameron’s images and continue the work of feminist Western historians to emphasize the place for women’s bodies—as photographers, as ranchers, and as women doing independent work. If, as scholars like Johnson claim, we must continue to reinforce the idea of women in Montana at the turn of the century in order to disrupt popular conceptions that exclude them, we must read and reread them into the landscape. In order to continue the inclusive history of the West that scholars have been emphasizing since the late 1970s we must continue to reimagine our rhetorical interpretations of women’s presence. Particularly for outsiders raised on the popular culture myth of the masculine West, we must, instead of making them exceptional, reinforce that their active participation in the very historically male depiction of life on early homesteads and ranches was commonplace, and that they themselves rejected the notion that it was spectacle. In this case, however, the lack of social circulation of her images after Cameron’s death meant that her work was excluded from this

project—it did not help to “normalize” the space so that other women could participate in the life of ranching, cattle work, and horse work, without continuing to be portrayed in popular depictions of the West as exceptional.

Barrett-Fox’s concept of MMH is connected to ideas of women’s places and women’s work. Workplaces “provide women avenues to address and negotiate the ever-present production and negotiation of gender (among other kinds of power)” (13). Was the work of these women, and Cameron’s work in photographing them, exceptional? To my mind, of course. They did work that I could not imagine doing, in a landscape that was harsh and unforgiving. But to simply celebrate their individual exceptionalism is to ignore their story of community and the sharing of re-envisioned roles that is brought to life by Evelyn Cameron’s amazing photography.

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