Exhibition Reviews

Arresting Images: Mug Shots from the OPP Museum. PETERBOROUGH MUSEUM & ARCHIVES, PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO, 17 December 2016–19 March 2017. Curated by KIM REID.

For the curious at heart, the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) Museum's *Arresting Images* exhibition was a draw from the moment one read the title. Mounted at the Peterborough Museum & Archives (PMA),[1] the display, which primarily comprised historical mug shots of criminals, was a powerful evocation of an errant past. The PMA, a state-of-the-art facility, is well equipped to accommodate such an exhibition. A softly lit gallery space allowed for close inspection of the 100 or so expertly reproduced cartes-de-visite,[2] which were strategically placed at eye level around the room on three of the walls. The two sides of each carte-de-visite had been mounted inside matted frames, one side showing the photographic mug shot of the accused and the other the data recorded by the arresting officer. Thanks to the high quality of the reproductions, visitors had complete access to the details recorded on both sides of the cartes-de-visite. Secure centre-room display cases housed additional cabinet-card samples and vintage cameras of the period.

The opportunity to view the faces of an assemblage of criminals holds a peculiar appeal. Though the legalities around protecting the individuals' privacy were not a concern, given that the cartes-de-visite are dated 1886–1908, the images were of a sort not normally accorded public scrutiny. Representing

1 Since 2009, *Arresting Images* has been hosted by several museums and galleries across Ontario. The exhibition is supported by the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) Commissioned Officers' Association and the Museum Assistance Program, Department of Canadian Heritage.

2 Cartes-de-visite are approximately 64 x 100 mm (2½ x 4 in). Relatively inexpensive to make, the small photographs were popular in the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century. Each carte-de-visite comprises a photograph, usually made of a thin albumen print, mounted on a thick paper card.

Lillie Williams, a housekeeper, was arrested on "suspicion" of an unidentified crime (*Lillie Williams alias Harrington*, 11 August 1901, OPP Museum, 2000.28.141).

a sampling of people arrested by police organizations across Ontario and the northern United States, each carte-de-visite was associated with an identifiable accession number assigned by the OPP Museum. The sombre facial expressions spoke not only to the seriousness of the occasion, but also to the capabilities of the camera and the need for the accused to hold his or her pose for a matter of seconds. From today's vantage point, the formal display of these contested lives is a great curiosity on any level, appealing to audiences young and old.

A feature exhibition for the PMA, *Arresting Images* included, besides the mounted cartes-de-visite, glassed cases that housed the period cameras and larger cabinet cards.[3] Near these cases, there was a low table where children could enjoy criminal-themed activity sheets. In a corner, visitors were invited to pose for their own mug shots next to a travel trunk labelled "Ontario Frontier Police Dept., Niagara Falls, Ontario." The exhibition was augmented by a display of local artifacts chosen from among the PMA holdings by curator Kim Reid;

3 Cabinet cards are similar to cartes-de-visite but are larger, normally measuring 108 x 165 mm (4¼ x 6½ in). Popular during the Victorian era, they commonly featured portraits of individuals and families.

items such as a ball and chain, a whip, a set of nightsticks, a fingerprint camera, a mug-shot camera, and photographs of Circus Day pickpockets pointed to the PMA's own efforts in preserving Ontario's judicial history.

As for its educational potential, *Arresting Images* was an exhibition with far-ranging appeal. While the interpretive signage (in both English and French) provided ample context, the cartes-de-visite were also able to stand alone, to be interpreted by the viewer. It is philosopher Roland Barthes' view that photographs generally elicit two co-existing readings; in his seminal work, *Camera Lucida – Reflections on Photography*,[4] he uses the terms *studium* and *punctum* to distinguish between the two. Kasia Houlihan, in her examination of Barthes' work, explains:

> The *studium* refers to the range of meanings available and obvious to everyone; it is unary and coded, the former term implying that the image is a unified and self-contained whole whose meaning can be taken in at a glance.… The *punctum* … on the other hand inspires an intensely private meaning, one that is suddenly, unexpectedly recognized and consequently remembered.[5]

The *punctum* range identified by Barthes may help to explain the momentary visceral angst felt by this reviewer upon viewing the poignant expressions of the accused.

Regarding the women portrayed in the mix – approximately eight of the 100 or so criminals – one wonders whether there would be any evidence of partiality in their treatment by the judicial system as some academic studies about women and the law suggest. Bernadine Dodge, for example, asserts, "Women falling outside the parameters of bourgeois femininity had few civil 'rights'.… The law is intertwined in complex ways with local mores, customs and accepted codes of behavior. They are mutually dependent and mutually constructive. There is nothing objective about it."[6] The caption for Lillie Williams (accession 2000.28.141), for example, suggested stringent mores in the elusive charge brought against her: "Lillie Williams (*alias* Harrington), a housekeeper, was arrested on 'suspicion' of an unidentified crime. The camera captured her evocative expression on August 11, 1901." That a charge such as "suspicion," without a qualifier, could find support in the law seems astounding given the serious

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).

5 Kasia Houlihan, annotation of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, written for Theories of Media, Winter 2004, University of Chicago, accessed 17 February 2017, http://csmt.uchicago.edu/annotations/barthescamera.htm.

6 Bernadine Dodge, "Policing 'Deviant' Women: Idle, Dissolute, Disorderly, and Scandalous Behaviour," in *Honouring Social Justice: Honouring Dianne Martin*, ed. Margaret E. Beare (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 143.

implications for the accused. This charge and the broad range of criminal charges associated with the cartes-de-visite, from the common (e.g., "thief) to the archaic (e.g., "elopement"), point to the regulatory norms of the day.

A number of salient questions emerge about the cartes-de-visite and the images portrayed. Should one consider, for example, the role of the photographer and the ideals and assumptions he or she may have brought to the creation of these seemingly transparent portrayals for the judicial record? As for the accused, how did they feel about being photographed and how did those feelings translate in their expressions, later to be examined and judged by the authorities in power? What are their stories? How many were convicted? Did their families visit them in jail? And as for the descendants, were they shocked at finding, all these decades later, their kith and kin on display because of aberrant behaviour?

Taken uniformly by arresting officers across various divisions, the mug shots suggest an orderly and controlled response by the judicial system to the vagaries of a disorderly world; the images served as tangible and indisputable representations and would have been fundamental to the identification of the arrested for the court proceedings that lay ahead. Taken at intensely personal moments in the lives of the arrested, the mug shots are testimony to the power relationship that existed between photographer and subject, an unequal relationship obscured by the photographic evidence at hand. Critical to any analyses of the photographs is the understanding that all were commissioned, crafted, consumed, and collected under historically specific social circumstances. Because of their documentary nature, 19th-century and early-20th-century photographs were honoured as sources of truth and verifiable evidence. In examining such photographs in 2017, one must ask, however, what conclusions are to be drawn about their meaning, their function, and their truthfulness. As early as 1990, Fred Ritchin warned, "It is necessary to at least acknowledge that photography is highly interpretive, ambiguous, culturally specific, and heavily dependent upon contextualization."[7] Since then, the historian Joan Schwartz has written extensively on the problem of seeing the photograph as an unmediated representation of truth.[8] Indeed, visitors to the exhibition also needed to acknowledge that their own values, assumptions, and experiences are embedded in their evaluation of photographs and all archival materials as they attempt to fill in any gaps and impose meaning. Photographic images, while seemingly irrefutable and transparent representations of a past reality, are, in fact, fraught with ambiguity and nuance, making any analysis of meaning through this medium

7 Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 81.

8 See, for example, Joan M. Schwartz, "'Records of Simple Truth and Precision': Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control," in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 61–83.

complex and conditional. It was in understanding the existence of this contradiction that viewers could begin to imagine the individuals represented in the *Arresting Images* exhibition and venture to uncover their stories.

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Free Black North. ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO, 29 April–1 October 2017. Curated by JULIE CROOKS.

Free Black North exhibited tintype, ambrotype, and cabinet-card portraiture of Black individuals in southwestern Ontario between 1860 and 1890, showcasing the role that photography played in the articulation of identity among these communities and complicating the narrative of Canada as a sanctuary for fugitives escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. The 30 photographic objects on display were pulled from two archival collections: the Alvin McCurdy Fonds at the Archives of Ontario, Toronto, and the Richard Bell Family Fonds at the Brock University Archives in St. Catharines. McCurdy and Bell – descendants of freemen and formerly enslaved individuals, respectively – collected and preserved photographic materials related to their family's genealogy and the larger Black community of southwestern Ontario. In her first exhibition as Assistant Curator of Photography with the Art Gallery of Ontario, Julie Crooks used the archival sourcing of these photographs to critically engage with the historiography of Afro-diasporic communities in Canada.

Rather symbolically, in order to get to the Robert and Cheryl McEwan Gallery, where *Free Black North* was shown, visitors had to walk through the Edmond G. Odette Family Gallery. Here, ethnographic portraits by French photographer Jacques-Philippe Potteau are featured prominently in a display of 19th-century photographic objects from Europe's colonial projects in India, Myanmar, and Egypt. Potteau's portraits typify anthropological photography of the time, in their mug shot–like front and profile views of sitters from North Africa and Asia. The original captions are reprinted alongside each portrait, listing the name, nationality, gender, and brief physical description of each sitter. Potteau's taxonomical series reminds viewers of the pervasiveness of visual representation as a tool that anthropologists and eugenicists use to construct narratives of criminality, exoticism, and inferiority among racialized peoples in order to justify colonial rule. *Free Black North* offered a corrective to these

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