complex and conditional. It was in understanding the existence of this contra-
diction 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 fugi-
tives escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. The 30 photographic ob-
jects 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 – des-
cendants 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 Gal-
lery, where *Free Black North* was shown, visitors had to walk through the Ed-
mond G. Odette Family Gallery. Here, ethnographic portraits by French pho-
tographer 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 sit-
ter. 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

*   Jodi Aoki serves as a member of the City of Peterborough's Museum & Archives Advisory
      Committee. She had no involvement in organizing the *Arresting Images* exhibition.

ethnographic portraits: in the intimate exhibit, each sitter deflected the reifying gaze with an interiority not granted to racialized individuals within photography's racist past. Put in conversation with one another, these exhibits offer a critical inroad, reminding the viewer that photography did not emerge from a social or political vacuum, but was governed by prevailing attitudes toward race, gender, and nation.

Viewed within this context, *Free Black North* countered colonial objectification by positioning the studio portrait as a site of articulation of personal and social aspirations among racialized communities. This was reiterated in a caption for one of the photographs, which described how, for formerly enslaved individuals and their descendants, portraiture and the control of composition, pose, and backdrop are "critical acts of self-presentation." The displayed portraits adhered to the genre conventions of the era, the sitters positioned around parlour furniture, classical columns, and textured drapery, with backdrops depicting Victorian domesticity or idyllic forested landscapes. Repeated use of props, dress, and poses were codified signifiers of middle-class gentility and self-reliance – instrumental in reflecting interiority through external appearance. For instance, in a tintype titled "Man with Newspaper," the sitter poses cross-legged in front of a monotone-drapery backdrop, his only prop a folded newspaper held on his lap – a badge of his literacy and intellect. Similarly, in the tintype "Two Women with Niagara Falls Backdrop" (figure 1), a pair of meticulously dressed sitters, accessorized with hats, a parasol, and fans, and bearing a familial likeness, casually pose in front of a painted backdrop. Contesting the gendered stereotype of Black women as labourers or domestic workers, this photograph depicts sophisticated and genteel women, their elaborately layered costumes reflecting their social status and individuation. This portrait is a striking counter to the positioning of enslaved Black women as possessions in antebellum-era portraits of prominent white slave-owning families, where they are visual signifiers of their owner's rank within the propertied class. Within the context of delimiting and derogatory representations of Blackness – as a slave caricature, ethnographic object, savage, or criminal type – portraits like those displayed in *Free Black North* help to construct new racial epistemologies with carefully cultivated self-representations. Through the photographic archive, *Free Black North* illustrated how photography was used by the Afro-diasporic community as a constitutive tool, establishing historical agency over visual representation.

One of the successes of *Free Black North* was its interjection in the narrative of Black Canadians as newcomers to Canada, or what Crooks has previously described as "arrivant."[1] Not only does this narrative serve to deny belonging and

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1   Kenneth Montague and Julie Crooks, *Position as Desired: Exploring African Canadian Identity: Photographs from the Wedge Collection* (Toronto: Wedge Curatorial Projects, 2010), 22.

Figure 1: "Tintype of Two African American Ladies with Niagara Falls Backdrop." RG 63 Rick Bell Family Fonds, Brock University Archives, Brock University, St Catharines, ON.

citizenship, but it also distances Canada from the so-called American institutions of slavery and segregation. Furthermore, it essentializes Black Canadians into one diaspora – namely the migration to Canada of Caribbean and African peoples during the 1960s. Similar to the narratives that state-sanctioned multiculturalist discourse imposes on Black Canadian history, the arrivant narrative collapses complex categories of identity (such as nationality, gender, and class). Using the veracity or legibility of the photographic medium, *Free Black North* firmly situated a historical Black presence in Canada, establishing it alongside slavery, segregation, and pervasive anti-Black racism. For instance, in wall text headed "Amherstburg: Terminal Station," the community organization True Band was mentioned for its role in providing support to incoming refugees who faced increasing racism and resentment within Canada during the 1850s.

The exhibition further destabilized the notion of Canada as a sanctuary through multiple mentions of the return of free Blacks and self-emancipated former slaves to the United States. Whether their return was motivated by reunion with family or escape from the inhospitable social and material conditions of life in Canada is in most cases left unknown. However, in the text that accompanied a cabinet-card portrait by the Westlake Studio of Reverend Horace Hawkins, the sitter describes how he experienced more prejudice in Canada than in the United States, causing him to return to the United States after the Civil War. The fluidity of the border between Canada and the United States during the Civil War era complicates the use of diaspora as a unifying analytic tool, and of nation as a means of framing complicated histories. Though most of the sitters are unknown – "ghostly traces of dispersed relatives"[2] – the exhibition's didactic text explained that their anonymity is owing in part to being "orphaned on both sides of the border," perhaps as a result of several migrations. This exhibition did not present a linear narrative of Black history in Canada but rather highlighted for its audience the incommensurability of cultural identities within histories of migration.[3] *Free Black North* succeeded in positioning its archival objects within a diasporic framework that moved beyond conceptualizations of settled, stable categories and disrupted the power of national borders to determine identity.

In contrast to the pristine cased photographs displayed in the adjacent exhibition, the objects in *Free Black North* were marred with surface scratches and faded from light exposure, and all but one remained in its faux-gold mat. These imperfections were partially explained in the video that accompanies the "Meet the Collectors" section of the exhibit. In it, retired firefighter Richard Bell tells the story of stumbling upon a steamer trunk full of historical photo-

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2   Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2010), 177.
3   Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 2007), 2.

graphs in his grandmother's attic. Bell immediately understood the value of this find – describing the tintypes, cabinet cards, and family Bibles he found as a "treasure of Canadian Black history." The mounting of *Free Black North* and Bell's response to these photographs attests to the historical value of vernacular photography. Despite constituting the vast majority of photographs made, vernaculars have been marginalized by the medium's history in part because of their lack of aesthetic ambition – existing outside of a formalist art-historical narrative.[4] However, if we consider photographs to be social objects, dismissing vernaculars is akin to an archaeologist overlooking pottery shards: we lose crucial evidence in understanding the cultural practices that allow communities to claim presence.

As illustrated by *Free Black North*, in the case of histories dislocated by colonialism, vernacular photography can perform a recuperative role in mapping the development of diasporic identities and communal memory. By introducing the visitor to the archival collections of both Bell and McCurdy, Crooks addressed the important role that long-standing communities play in combating the erasure of their personal and collective histories. Within the Canadian context – with, for example, the razing of Africville in Nova Scotia during the 1960s and the renaming of Negro Creek Road as Moggie Road in Ontario in 1996 – the erasure of Black history is pervasive. Part of the success of this exhibit was its references to these historiographical challenges and how they are brought to bear on the archival record.

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4   Geoffrey Batchen. "Vernacular Photographies," *History of Photography* 24, no. 3 (2000): 262–71.