CHAPTER 2

Police Museums, the Naturalization of Colonial Conquests, and the Legitimation of Law Enforcement in Canada and France

Matthew Ferguson, Justin Piché, Gwénola Ricordeau, Carolina S. Boe, and Kevin Walby

As Stuart Hall (1997, 15) has argued, “representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture,” shaping what is visible or invisible, what can be said or not, as well as what is remembered or forgotten (Bonnes and Jacobs 2017). These depictions maintain institutional hegemony, particularly in times of crises of legitimacy, when alternative ways of acting in the world that challenge dominant relations gain credence (Hall et al. 1978). Crises are a regular feature in “criminal justice” (Foucault 1975), prompting near-constant calls for reforms, accompanied by equally pervasive forays in representational work (Mawby 2014) to legitimize the public police, judiciary, and “corrections.”

The latter has been the focus of much criminological research. Some working under the banner of “cultural criminology” have sought to demystify the naturalization of “criminal justice” to work toward other ways of conceptualizing and responding to criminalized acts (Brown 2009). Recognizing that images offer frames through which to make sense of phenomena, “visual criminology” has focused on how state and popular culture depictions of criminological issues (Brown and Carrabine 2017) structure ways of (not) seeing the material work of “criminal justice” (Schept 2014). Whereas much attention in criminology has been paid to cultural representations of
“crime” and “justice” in the news and entertainment media over the past half century (Doyle 2006), the study of depictions in museums and other penal tourism destinations is still developing (Wilson et al. 2017).

Our research examines the cultural work of police museums at a time when law enforcement work is more visible due to the rise of sousveillance and social media (Goldsmith 2010), and when police officers have again come under fire for longstanding practices such as use of force and the killing of residents (Lee et al. 2018), harassment of marginalized groups (Owusu-Bempah 2017), and corruption (Gutierrez-Garcia and Rodríguez 2016). Drawing on fieldwork done in Canada and France, this chapter explores narratives produced within national police force museums. The objective of this chapter is to examine these representations and explain what they tell us about how state agencies and related entities communicate about their past and present work. We compare sites in Canada and France because these museums are sites where the history of the police of two countries that are colonial powers—in one case related to state formation and the other related to the extension of power over other countries—are represented. As our analysis reveals, the similarities between the narratives in police museums from both countries are striking, which we argue reveals significant continuities in how law enforcement is legitimated, irrespective of jurisdictional focus.

Building on insights from penal tourism scholars, we argue that police museums attempt to quell crises of police legitimacy, foster solidarity between officers and citizens, and provide justifications for law enforcement work within the communities they claim to serve. We do so with an emphasis on how the museums’ content reifies colonial violence enacted in the past and present as part of nation building in both countries. The content in the museums communicate prominent themes: the threatening “other,” who is subject to control, and pacification meted out by heroic, mostly masculine figures. We conclude by proposing paths for the field of penal tourism to challenge the naturalization of “criminal justice” that legitimates insecurity and exclusion in the name of law and order.
The Criminological Significance of Penal Heritage Museums and Tourism

Museums emerged alongside other governance institutions, intended as nation building (Douglas 2017) and civilizing projects (Bennett 1995). Today, there is more substantive variation in museums as interest in heritage and tourism has grown (Harrison 2012), which some link to the technological and social changes of late modernity (Lennon and Foley 2000). While the viewpoints that inform and are conveyed through the content shared with visitors have also proliferated, museums tend to be conservative owing to their reliance on official narratives (Gordon 2008; Wilson 2008). Curating or staging content as authentic is a primary way of naturalizing the past into the present (MacCannell 1973).

The premises above apply to penal tourism sites, “where representations of those in conflict with the law and those employed to uphold it inform public understandings of ‘criminal justice’” (Piché and Walby 2016, 7). The content and displays in these settings—whether focused on policing, the judiciary, or confinement—are staged, like other tourism sites, to be authentic (Walby and Piché 2015). This sense of authenticity is amplified when the penal heritage venues are located in decommissioned or operational police stations and headquarters, courthouses, or carceral institutions through encounters with the architecture, spaces, and objects integral to the past, present, or future of criminalization and punishment.

Like other tourism destinations, one of the drivers of penal tourism sites is the need to generate funding, including through attracting new guests (DesRoches 2015), which can result in content being oriented more toward entertainment than education (Ricordeau and Bugnon 2017). Such pressures can generate distorted depictions of phenomena by advancing reductionist representations of past events (Mendenhall 2010), offering accounts that emphasize sensational cases and the violence of the criminalized while downplaying the brutalities of the penal system (Wilson 2008), which are normalized by official accounts of state agents of social control (Pemberton 2008). By doing so, these destinations encourage voyeuristic engagements with penalty (Ross 2015) that reproduce ideas about the necessity of imprisonment (Brown 2009). Like other cultural sites (Valverde 2006), these entities can thus serve to legitimize political and institutional
systems that reproduce existing power relations. It follows that representations are worth documenting, creating, and fighting for (Brown and Carrabine 2017), since they reflect and shape how people think (Brown 2009).

To date, most penal tourism research focuses on prison museums (Wilson et al. 2017) and the ways in which these settings make sense of punishment (Welch 2015). Yet there are also many other heritage sites where meanings of penalty circulate, such as police museums. Ayana McNair (2011, 19) defines these sites as “museums dedicated to the recounting of police history and the preservation and exhibition of artifacts relating to policing.” In these locales, visitors learn about past and present law enforcement, often encountering narratives that portray the work of police as heroic, legitimizing their role in society and assuring visitors of their competency, all without reference to scandals or corruption (McNair 2011). While these sites tend to disseminate pro-police narratives, of the many different types of museums around the world, some challenge such narratives by illuminating how police agencies participated in and carried out human rights abuses in previous eras. Numerous museums in Eastern European, Asian, and Central and Latin American countries are critical of authoritarian histories of the police under previous dictatorial regimes. For example, the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) in Santiago, Chile, draws attention to the atrocities committed by the Chilean state between 1973 and 1990 during the rule of General Augusto Pinochet (Opotow 2015). There are also museums that are critical of the history of policing under communism, such as the House of Terror in Budapest, Hungary, which is located at a former secret police headquarters, serving as a memorial to those who were interrogated, tortured, and killed in the building (Jones 2011).

Like prison museums, police museums have been described as “dark tourism” sites (McNair 2011). Dark tourism refers to sightseeing, vacations, and museums associated with macabre themes, such as death and suffering (Lennon and Foley 2000). McNair (2011, 4) suggests that police museums are sites of dark tourism because many use “implements of violence as a means of attracting visitors” and contain displays of weapons, holding cells, and shackles (also see Ferguson et al. 2019). McNair (2011) observes that many police museums are located inside police stations, which are often experienced by the criminalized as spaces of violence and suffering. Set
against the darkness of the past, such sites tend to be pro-police when they are affiliated with or founded by organizations that are currently in power (McNair 2011), which thus stand in contrast or opposed to defunct entities associated with the maintenance of authoritarian governments. Amy Chazkel (2012, 128) refers to police museums as “curious institutions [that] present the police and their contravention of illegal activity, past and present, to the public,” while Amy Tyson and Andy Urban (2012, 8) suggest they “desire to display the personnel and physical institutions of law enforcement and to make visible and validate their social function.” Chazkel (2012, 132) asserts that, “explicitly designed not to call the law into question,” these police museums often omit perspectives that would cast police in a negative light.

While police museums exist “on every continent except Antarctica” (McNair 2011, 20), research exploring the representations found within these sites remains rare (Ricordeau and Bugnon 2018). The only region where police museums have been the subject of concerted discussion is Latin America, where police museums opened following the removal of authoritarian regimes (Milton 2015). Chazkel (2012, 1) explains that many Latin America sites were created at the beginning of the twentieth century to acquaint recruits and officers with the history and world view of their organizations. For instance, the Museo de la Cátedra de Medicina Legal de la Universidad de la Habana (Museum of the Chair of Legal Medicine of the University of Havana) in Cuba was established in the early twentieth century to train police officers by showing them the “tangible products of illicit behavior” (Bronfman 2012, 135). They were taught how tattoos, skin colour, and African-derived beliefs might serve as markers for someone engaged in suspect practices. The museum “contributed to a self-justifying and self-perpetuating logic that legitimized an enduring association of blackness with criminality” among police officers (Bronfman 2012, 135), who were the primary audience and suppliers of objects to the site.

Some police museums opened to the public during a period of twentieth-century police reform and professionalization to enhance the image of law enforcement (Chazkel 2012). In the process, these sites became another form of commercialized public entertainment and education for those interested in “crime” (see also Huey 2011). Lila Caimari (2012) explains that the century-old Museo de la Policía Federal Argentina (Federal Police Museum of Argentina) in Buenos
Aires opened to the public when confidence in the police began to dwindle, providing visitors with a glimpse into the “hidden life” of officers so their actions could be seen favourably. Using staged relics of uniforms, guns, and illegal objects, the museum positions police officers as integral in the “triumph against the darkest forces” (Caimari 2012, 153) and fails to present “ways to understand deep sources [of ‘crimes’]” (Caimari 2012, 148). Similarly, three police museums in Mexico, established in 1985, 1991, and 2010 respectively, emerged to combat longstanding views held by the public that officers are corrupt, lazy, ignorant, and brutal (Buffington 2012). Rather than concern themselves with historical accuracy, the museums “seek to obliterate a too-well-remembered past that troubles the present and threatens to overwhelm official attempts to give birth to an unencumbered future” (Buffington 2012, 158) through multiple strategies, such as displays of institutional competence and officer sacrifice.

Among the few scholars who have studied police museums outside of Latin America, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2004) argue that the now-closed Pretoria Police Museum in South Africa exemplified a key technique used to produce social order and present the state as a legitimate entity. Opening in 1968 as a “haphazard collection of relics” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004, 811), the museum presented the history of “crime” and punishment to conjure up terror among visitors. In the 1990s, the museum created an event called Night Tours, which was “part amateur theater, part fairground haunted house” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004, 813), seeking to induce horror among patrons by sensationalizing “crime” and having the police “save” them from the dangerous people said to stalk Pretoria streets.

While existing research on police museums highlights the role these cultural institutions play in legitimizing law enforcement and nation building, little attention has been paid to depictions of internal and external colonialization involving land expropriation, displacement, resettlement, civilizing projects, the imposition of law and of economic orders, and criminalization and punishment (Ypi 2013) in these settings. By comparing police museums in Canada and France, we study cultural representations of policing relating to different colonial conquests. In Canada, colonization was integral to its founding as a nation and remains an ongoing process (Nettelbeck and Foster 2013), whereas France’s colonial conquests outside of its borders have diminished, though still having important consequences today.
Police Museums in Canada and France

There are at least forty-eight museums in Canada containing exhibits on police. Among these are seventeen museums located inside or nearby police stations that are fully dedicated to police history, such as the Toronto Police Museum and Discovery Centre (Ferguson et al. 2019). There are also at least thirty-one historic police outposts that have been transformed into small heritage sites, including the Rotary Museum of Police and Corrections in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, that also addresses the city’s history of confinement (Chen et al. 2016). Additionally, while not labelled as police museums, there are at least ten multidisciplinary museums and interpretive centres containing exhibits dedicated to law enforcement, such as the Duck Lake Regional Interpretive Centre in Saskatchewan where policing, imprisonment, and other themes are explored (Fiander et al. 2016).

The number of police museums in Canada is tied to the role law enforcement played in nation building. Over thirty of these sites showcase the history of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and its precursor, the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), founded in 1873, six years after Canada’s founding. The NWMP was integral to the expansion of the nation’s territory beyond its founding provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario), enforcing colonial order as new provinces and territories joined the confederation. Their “March West,” represented in historical sites across western Canada, is examined by Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster (2013), whose work highlights the emergence of a “critical historiography” gaining prominence in recent decades, which challenges the national narrative of the NWMP conquering the West through cooperation, rather than violence. This critical history emphasizes the role of the NWMP as a “colonial instrument of Aboriginal surveillance and containment” (Nettelbeck and Foster 2013, 77). The sites they explore include the RCMP Heritage Centre in Regina, Saskatchewan and Fort Dufferin in Emerson, Manitoba, along with many murals in public settings. Nettelbeck and Foster (2013, 87) found that in the vast majority of these locations, the history of Indigenous communities is shared together with the NWMP “as part of an enduring story of cross-cultural negotiation and mutual respect.” The only sites they studied that incorporated aspects of critical historiography were the Glenbow Museum (an art and history museum in Calgary, Alberta) and the
interpretive centre at the Fort Walsh National Historic site (in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan). The large number of police museums that “confirm rather than challenge the national mythology of gentle occupation” (Nettelbeck and Foster 2013, 89) suggests that most of these sites whitewash the harms of Canadian state formation and colonialism.

France has few police museums, in contrast to Canada and North America, as well as its neighbours in Europe (notably the United Kingdom). Although the country has many museums of all kinds, only a few sites are dedicated to memorializing the history of policing and the judiciary. Among these, one is the Musée de la Gendarmerie et du cinéma (Museum of the Gendarmerie and Cinema) in Saint-Tropez, which focuses more on cinema and the comedic movie series Le Gendarme, than policing itself. Another museum is dedicated to the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (Republican Security Companies), which is a specialized unit of the national police dedicated to the maintenance of security and public order. A few military museums also touch upon law enforcement, including the Musée de l’Armée (Army Museum) in Paris and the Musée des Transmissions (Signal Museum). However, only two museums in France can be truly labelled as police museums, as they are both fully dedicated to policing organizations: the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris (Paris Prefecture Police Museum) and the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale (Museum of the National Gendarmerie). To date, research on the former has been limited to a brief mention in one publication (Sinoquet 2014) and to a review of its collections (Fuligni 2015), while no studies have, so far, been conducted concerning the latter.

In studying French and Canadian police museums together, we identified, through a thematic analysis of the textual and visual exhibits observed during site visits, a few museums which are committed to showcasing how police contribute to the extension of their respective nation states and the safety of citizens. We selected two Canadian sites—the RCMP Musical Ride centre in Ottawa, Ontario, and the RCMP Heritage Centre in Regina, Saskatchewan—in addition to the two previously mentioned French sites—the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris, and the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale, in Melun—where themes of nationhood and colonialism are prominent. In so doing, we aim to demonstrate how police museum narratives and the aspects of law enforcement that they represent or obscure in fact echo how law enforcement is rooted in nationalism.
(In)visibility of Law Enforcement Harms in Police Museums across Canada and France

Below, we examine trends in four police museums or information centres in Canada and France, based on “walk-through” descriptions. Notably, public police are represented as national heroes, champions of citizens, and upstanding characters. However, just as important are the missing representations of colonial violence and state power.

The RCMP Musical Ride centre is situated on the grounds of the Canadian Police College, a large training academy and educational centre for members of the Canadian and international policing community operated by the RCMP in Ottawa. Short tours of the centre and grounds are available and often taken by tourists of all ages from Canada and abroad. Children and youth are a central audience at the site, and the numerous recruitment posters found in different sections of the centre that encourage applications to the force seem to be directed at this audience. The posters emphasize belonging to the storied tradition of the organization (e.g., “A uniform with your name on it is waiting for you”) and the many career specializations afforded to its officers. Tour guides also lead groups into the large indoor arena where training occurs for the Musical Ride, popularized as “ballet on horses” (Daro 2015), which involves RCMP officers performing routines meant to show off their cavalry skills. Performed for public audiences in many cities across Canada every year and occasionally elsewhere in the world for special events such as Queen Elizabeth II’s ninetieth birthday (Cotnam 2016), the Musical Ride further adds to the storied tradition.

Operating year-round with no charge for admission, visitors enter the centre through “The Mountie Shop,” which sells RCMP-themed items and Canadiana, including stuffed animals and other toys, clothing, figurines, and mugs. The kiosk in the centre of the room is emblazoned with an RCMP crest that is also the current regimental badge. A crown denoting Canada’s membership in the British Commonwealth is positioned at the top of the crest. Below, an oval shape frames the head of a buffalo, symbolizing the country’s “March West.” The RCMP’s motto, Maintiens le droit (Uphold the law), surrounds this central image, and the organization’s name is written across the bottom. Next, visitors come across a large stuffed toy caribou that is dressed in the forces ceremonial red serge, black pants, and brown boots; it sits on top of a large
stuffed horse. Beyond the gift shop is a room dedicated to discussing, as the signage reads, “The RCMP Today and Beyond.” Poster boards and photos line the sides and middle of the room, which also contains a few display cases with mannequins in operational and ceremonial police uniforms, as well as a bomb disposal suit made by a local manufacturer. Among the poster boards is content dedicated to “Air Services,” “Marine Services,” the “National DNA Data Bank of Canada,” “Crime Scene DNA,” “CBRNE [Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, Explosive] Operations,” “Protective Policing,” “Fingerprinting,” “Behavioural Sciences,” the “Police Dog Training Centre,” the “Emergency Response Team,” “Human Trafficking,” “Border Integrity,” “Drug Initiatives,” “Inside an RCMP Counterfeit Investigation,” “Technological Crime,” “National Aboriginal Policing Services,” “International Policing,” the “National Youth Strategy,” “National Security,” and “Organized Crime.” The displays convey that the world can be a dangerous place and that the RCMP has the means at its disposal to keep Canadians safe. Pasted all across the room on the bulkheads near the ceiling are the words “Responsibility,” “Honesty,” “Accountability,” “Respect,” and “Professionalism.” Nowhere in this exhibition room or elsewhere in the centre is there any mention of the many controversies that the RCMP have been or are currently embroiled in—such as recent revelations about its misogynist and toxic work culture (McKay 2014).

In the next room visitors are drawn to a television that plays a video of the RCMP Musical Ride in action. On either side of the television, computer screens roll out a slide presentation about the RCMP’s work and photos of a member on horseback with a Canadian parliament building in the background. Besides these focal points, there are also more poster boards, including one dedicated to the “Musical Ride Tour,” and a display about the “RCMP Foundation” that works with “youth at risk.” Two display cases work as dedications, one to Commissioner S. Z. T. Wood, who started the RCMP Musical Ride, and the other commemorating the life of Constable Bruce Denniston, who died of cancer in 1990 (this display notes that the Bruce Denniston Bone Marrow Society was founded to raise awareness and money to find matches for bone marrow transplants). Visitors entering this sparser exhibition space are surrounded by symbols of nationalism, while being exposed to the charitable work of RCMP members. This content works to soften the image of the organization, avoiding its more contentious history (Monaghan 2013a, 2013b) and camouflaging its paramilitary structure.
Displays about the RCMP Musical Ride continue in a fourth exhibition room. A timeline of the RCMP and the origins of the Musical Ride contain several pictures (one of Mounties working with horses) that convey the deep connections the organization has to the land, while obscuring its role in the often violent colonizati on of the territories that became part of Canada at the expense of Indigenous peoples. As with historic RCMP and NWMP sites in Western Canada studied by Nettelbeck and Foster (2013), the Ottawa information centre plays up Canadian nation building as a project of peace and cooperation rather than of force and violence. This is captured in a painting by an exit door of two Indigenous men and a male NWMP officer, all riding on horseback, seemingly in friendship, through a prairie field. Visitors also learn about “The Royal Connection” between the Musical Ride and Canada’s current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Tourists encounter the halter and replica of a horse named Burmese, which the RCMP gifted the Queen, and which she rode for a number of years. Horse-drawn carriages used for foreign dignitaries are also on display, including “The Landau” near the back of the building, which remains in use. Canada is rendered synonymous to its connection to the British Crown, just as Mounties on horseback are positioned as the quintessential symbol of the country (Sangster 2015). The collections within the Musical Ride centre connect the RCMP’s present role in protecting the nation-state and its citizens to its past role in settling “our home and native land” (or rather: “our home on Indigenous land”).

The RCMP Heritage Centre is located on the grounds of the RCMP Training Academy, “Depot” Division, established in 1885 in Regina, Saskatchewan. Like other museums tied to police academies that are meant to generate loyalty to the organization and solidarity between its members in training (see Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce 2010), the centre’s principal audience is made up of RCMP cadets, who are educated about the national police force’s legendary past and its present operations. The public has limited access to the site through a small bus tour showcasing select areas and the Heritage Centre, which is thus the main area where visitors engage with representations of RCMP officer work.

The main hall of the centre features a total of six exhibition spaces. The first gallery focuses on the establishment of Canada and (as the signage declares) “Creating a Mounted Police.” The second gallery addresses “Maintaining Law and Order in the West,” with a
focus on the NWMP, and Indigenous and Métis peoples on the prairies. One wall is dedicated to the Métis Resistance of 1885, while another addresses the relationship between Canada’s railway and the NWMP. The third gallery, titled “Protecting the North,” addresses the period of the gold rush era in the Northwest Territories (1890s to early 1900s), along with the role of the RCMP in the North in the latter half of the twentieth century. “Serving All of Canada,” as the fourth gallery is named, covers the years of the First and Second World Wars, as well as the changing nature of Canadian society and the RCMP throughout the twentieth century. The fifth gallery, “Preserving the Tradition,” focuses on the Musical Ride and the role of horses in the RCMP. The sixth gallery, titled “Cracking the Case,” invites visitors into a mock “crime scene” investigation and depicts how RCMP investigators use forensic techniques. At the end of the long hall, there is a virtual-reality training car, a mock depot bunk for the cadets, and a dressing room where people can try on Mountie coats and hats. In these final displays, visitors are invited to position themselves as RCMP officers and to take pride in doing so. There is also a gift shop near the entrance where visitors can purchase RCMP-themed sweaters, shirts, hats, and cups, as well as Mountie costumes, fake police badges, and plastic riot gear helmets for children.

The Heritage Centre is organized to preserve the legacy and boost the image of the RCMP. The first large mural visible when one enters the space is of a Mountie on horseback overlooking a great expanse. This image not only reproduces a pervasive colonial trope used to justify dispossession and violence perpetuated against Indigenous people: the idea of terra nullius (empty land) to be tamed and settled by newcomers. It also symbolically positions the red-coated Mountie as “standing on guard for thee”—perpetually vigilant to protect the nation. The signature red coat-on-horseback has long circulated through Canadian lore in multiple cultural forums, which romanticize and naturalize the colonial experiment and mindset, rather than focus on the colonial violence present in NWMP and RCMP control of Indigenous peoples. In a study of novels and other texts, Candida Rifkind (2011) asserts these materials are colonial and imperial in intent.

In the Heritage Centre, the pitfalls of the militaristic orientation of the RCMP are downplayed, mirroring other cultural, mythical representations of the Mountie, including movie posters and other relics on display in the museum. The narratives are almost entirely positive.
Even when controversial issues are addressed, the RCMP officers are portrayed as upstanding. For example, while the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) crisis is mentioned in one plaque, the RCMP’s involvement in political policing, infiltration, planting fake bombs, and other questionable practices is omitted (Brodeur 1983; Hewitt 2018). The dissolution of the RCMP Security Service is not described as such. The professionalism of the RCMP is never called into question. Similarly, when it comes to the 1885 Métis Resistance, the Mounties killed are described as heroic nationalist patriots, while the Métis are described as creating the uprising. There is no description of Indigenous and Métis rights, such as that of self-determination. RCMP officers are most often depicted as upstanding citizens, as keeping people safe, as impartial, or as fallen heroes.

According to the curator on site during our fieldwork, a goal of their heritage work is to imbue in new Mounties and their families—the primary audience of the museum—a sense of pride and esprit de corps. After a tour, cadets are tested via the “Blues Challenge” on their historic knowledge of the RCMP. The main audience of the museum, who are at the beginning of their careers in the RCMP, provides a core explanation of why the displays are overwhelmingly positive and devoid of any problematic details. These representations mirror longstanding depictions of Mounties that have international resonance. Sangster (2015) suggests that cultural productions such as movies and television shows reproduce Mountie myths, as well as notions of masculine bravery and order (see also Hewitt 1996). The RCMP have sometimes been involved in advising on these cultural productions and the messages that they convey (Sangster 2015). However, these productions tend to misconstrue colonialism, along with the violence and control that the RCMP have and continue to exert against Indigenous peoples. While the museum claims that the RCMP protects Canadians, many citizens—especially Indigenous communities—do not share this interpretation (Comack 2012). The myths depicted are as much to convince Mounties-in-the-making of the RCMP mission as they to convince the public of the organization’s legitimacy.

Stephen Perrott and Kevin Kelloway (2011, 120) argue the RCMP is “arguably the most revered and iconic of all Canadian institutions.” However, a crisis has befallen the RCMP because of a militaristic and authoritarian management structure, along with an identity crisis with respect to Mounties’ roles, including whether they are primarily
a national police force or an entity principally oriented around providing contract policing in certain municipalities, as well as provinces and territories.

The arrangement of the narratives at the RCMP Heritage Centre mirror those at other police museums. Officers are portrayed as upstanding heroic persons. There are no representations of any historical wrongdoing by the RCMP—the lawsuits against the force by its own members over sexual harassment and bullying (Houlihan and Seglins 2018), the questionable deaths that its officers have been involved in (Oriola et al. 2012), or the wrongful convictions that they have generated (Anderson and Anderson 2009). RCMP malpractices and crises are avoided as topics. From the pithy content at the RCMP Heritage Centre and the RCMP Musical Ride Centre one would never know that, in the twenty-first century, public trust in the RCMP is low (Sherlock 2011). Both centres fail to reveal the fuller story.

The two French police museums, like their Canadian counterparts, also focus on the histories of prestigious policing institutions through exhibits that silence controversies related to past and present policing practices. The origins of the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris can be traced back to the 1900 Paris World’s Fair, where the force shared its techniques with visitors. In 1909, the Lépine administration established a museum, which later came to include several new private collections assembled by former police officers. In 1974, the museum was housed in the headquarters of the Préfecture de police located in the centre of Paris. Today, access to the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris requires visitors to pass through the reception area of a police station, still in use and located in a precinct in the centre of Paris. The visitors are then directed toward a flight of stairs leading up to the collections in the rooms above the station. The site was renovated in 2013, following the move of the police archives to the Paris suburb of Le Pré-Saint-Gervais. In this period of transition, the museum itself became smaller, downsizing from two floors to one. As part of its public engagement efforts, the museum produces and distributes free brochures, a guide to “crime” novels centred in Paris, and a booklet for children. It also includes a small gift shop.

In contrast to the smaller and older site of the Paris police museum, the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale in Melun opened recently, in October 2015, and is located in large, newly renovated buildings. Priding itself on featuring the largest suspended showcase
Police Museums, the Naturalization of Colonial Conquests

in Europe that is publicly accessible, the museum is organized chronologically on two floors, one dedicated to the historical period from the Hundred Years War to the nineteenth century and the other from the nineteenth century to the present day.

In the first section, most objects on display were made later than the pre-nineteenth century period they are meant to illustrate (e.g., modern models of historical events, watercolours and lithographs from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century), and no original documents are on display, only photographs or other reproductions. By contrast, the objects found in the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris are mostly original pieces that were donated by former police officers, many of which are more unusual and sometimes even of a sordid kind—such as a paperweight made with debris from the anarchist attacks of the early twentieth century or a lock of hair taken from the head of Jules Bonnot, an anarchist killed in 1912 during a police raid at his home. Like the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale, the museum dedicated to the Parisian police also reaches back through history, but does so across five themes: “History of the Parisian police,” which traces the early history of the police to thirteenth-century urban militias, “Crime and punishment,” “Paris at war,” “Jobs at the police prefecture,” and “Police science and techniques.” Some parts of the museum address past facts with the implication that they are no longer relevant. For instance, the differentiated management of illegalisms (Foucault 1975) or the fact that the judicial system deals unequally with litigants is mentioned in the section dealing with justice under the old regime, which arguably continues to this day. Another example is content concerning the guillotine, which is exclusively associated with the revolutionary period despite its continued use in France until 1977 and the persistence of the death penalty in the country until 1981.

Both museums highlight individual and collective exploits. At the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris space is dedicated to the memorialization of police officers who proved honourable during the Nazi occupation and to the liberation of the police headquarters by its officers in August 1944. Similarly, the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale highlights the participation of gendarmes in the resistance and in the many battles they fought during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.

Both the French museums also highlight the scientific expertise of their respective forces. The Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale
focuses on assistance and rescue functions of its officers, and displays scenarios of mannequins dressed as gendarmes taking scientific samples at an accident scene or wearing gear that allows them to listen to emergency calls received by the Centre d’opérations et de renseignement de la Gendarmerie (Operations and Information Centre of the Gendarmerie), also known as the CORG. Museum staff place considerable emphasis on this mission of the Gendarmerie. During our fieldwork, a research team member was approached by a volunteer at the museum, a reservist constable, who repeated several times, “For us, it’s important to show that we don’t just give tickets.”

The Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris does delve into its participation in the ordering of the Parisian urban world through content dedicated to the less sensational aspects of police work, such as the harmonization of street signs. However, both sites highlight less mundane facets of the policing profession with displays dedicated to infamous cases or characters, whether they be officers, “criminals,” or “terrorists” who inspired many novels or film productions. The Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris also offers a section dedicated to the excellence of the technical and scientific aspects of policing dating back to Alphonse Bertillon and the development of judicial anthropometry at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet there is silence about the use of these techniques to identify and repress or deport certain populations (e.g., Roma and Jewish people).

As in the Canadian case, both museums in France tend to render invisible the repressive functions of police. When these are addressed in the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris, it is through sections dedicated to the repression of infamous “criminals” and anarchist groups of the nineteenth century, or, in the case of both the French museums, the civil unrest of May and June 1968, “establishment narratives” (Wilson 2008) justify police action. This is evident in the titles of two lists included in one of the exhibits at the Musée de la Préfecture focusing on the costs of political resistance, entitled “May ’68: The balance sheet and costs of depredation” and “Those wounded in the service of order during the demonstrations of May and June 1968.” While the costs of political insurgency are noted, the consequences of political repression by police stemming from three major episodes in France’s history—colonization, the Second World War and the Algerian War of Independence—are left unaddressed.

The Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale is characterized by an almost total absence of criticism of colonization, along with the
minimization of the force’s participation in it. Instead, the focus is on
the geographical areas—labelled simply “Asia” and “Africa”—in
which they operated. In the case of “Asia,” this minimization is clear
because of the two anecdotal stories shared with museum visitors. In
“Ursula and Camille: Love and the national interest,” reference is
made to Salima Machamba (1874–1964), also known as Ursule, Queen
of Mohéli, an island in the Comoros archipelago. While her story is
compared to those who “marked history with their mythical pas-
sion,” the fact that she was forced by French authorities to give up her
kingdom to be able to live with the Gendarme Camille Paulo and
never obtained the compensation she had been promised, ultimately
dying in poverty in the countryside of metropolitan France is omitted
(for her biography, see Nivois 1995).

The Gendarmerie’s participation in French colonization in Africa
and Algeria follows a similar storytelling pattern. One display is dedi-
cated to Gendarme Gilbert Godefrois, who died in 1958 in the south of
Barral as part of the war waged by the Algerians. The museum hon-
ours his dog, Gamin, the first animal decorated with the medal of the
Gendarmerie, thus evading the human responsibility for waging war
to quell political liberation efforts, while casting Algeri ans as “out-
laws” instead of people seeking their freedom and autonomy.

In addition to these individual stories, spaces devoted to the
colonial period dwell on the adaptation of clothing to the often tropi-
cal climate of colonized countries. For instance, when focusing on the
evolution of the kepi, there is no discussion on how this item symbol-
ized colonial power. Yet the evolution of outfits is presented as steps
forward and to the credit of the institution. The exhibited photo-
graphs often show gendarmes surrounded by locals or deputies,
peaceful scenes that do not overtly reveal colonial violence. The fact
that the white-skinned gendarmes were often given a seat while the
darker-skinned colonial subjects were required to stand for the pho-
tographs, goes unmentioned.

Overall, the exhibition documents lack critical contextualiza-
tion. The number of gendarmes who died during the Indochina War
is counted, but not the number of colonial subjects who lost their lives
fighting alongside them. Similarly, the “Indigenous supporters” and
other local collaborators of the gendarmes occasionally mentioned in
the texts featured at the museum are not the subject of biographies.
While the temporary exhibition “Gendarmes of the World,”
(October 2017–July 2018) clearly showed how the gendarmeries
operated in places subject to French colonization, such as Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Djibouti, and so on, there is no mention of the ways colonization contributed to the institution’s development of policing practices.

The two museums’ treatment of another historical period deserves special attention: the Nazi occupation of Paris during the Second World War. Several strategies are deployed by the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale to minimize the gendarmerie’s and its officers’ responsibility during this period. Indeed, the museum text downplays the gendarmerie’s active role in the deportation of Jews and other marginalized populations during the period by insisting that they merely complied with orders (e.g., “The gendarmes were ordered to search for resisters”). The only mention of their Nazi complicity in the museum is made through the mention of President Jacques Chirac’s speech on July 16, 1995, during the commemoration of the Vel d’Hiv arrests, when he acknowledged that French authorities were responsible for the deportation of Jews.

The museum offers little reflection on the incorporation of difference (in terms of class, gender, race, or sexuality) within the gendarmerie, apart from a section on the social mobility of the poor who were able to enter the force and the section that explains how colonial subjects were recruited to become gendarmes. The policing profession as presented seems predominantly male. Only a single small sign in the last dark corner of the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale recalls that women were incorporated into the organization starting in 1983— which is very little visibility for thirty-five years of official involvement. Disappeared from view, except through the story of Ursula, are the contributions of the wives of gendarmes, who also faced the hazards of a life in the barracks punctuated by regular moves. This contrasts with the exhibit of a Black female mannequin near the ticket office and entrance of the museum, who was dressed in the clothes of the Dutch gendarmes as part of the temporary exhibition Gendarmes of the World.

Like the RCMP museums discussed above, both French sites target young audiences. Not only is space made for children of police officers, including posters showcasing the works of the orphans of the prefecture, the staircase that leads from the Paris police station to the museum is decorated with children’s drawings of police in action. The iconography presented resembles that of American cinematographic representations of law enforcement, with a focus on their
uniforms and cars in the French policing context. These museums welcome and are popular with school groups; at the time of this research, there was a minimum three-month waiting period for school groups to access the Musée de la Préfecture de police de Paris. The gift shop at the Musée de la Gendarmerie nationale targets kids and adults alike, with items for sale that underscore the scientific aspect of the policing profession, through kits, games, and books. Sometimes these toys are presented alongside figurines of pink-clothed princesses targeted toward little girls in a way that suggests they are less likely to become gendarmes than boys, revealing the underlying and unproblematized gendering that policing organizations replicate. The orientation toward youth illustrates how police organizations use museums to secure their future by preserving selective aspects of their respective histories.

Resisting the Cultural Production of Insecurity and Exclusion

In our analysis of four national police museums in Canada and France, we observed an absence of representations that call into question the expansion of territory and the role of law enforcement in such violent and racist expropriation endeavours (Nettelbeck and Foster 2013). Likewise, the paramilitary structures of the organizations are revered despite their role in stifling police reforms (Deukmedjian 2008). These sites focus on changing police technologies, as if the integration of scientific discoveries necessarily translates into better policing outcomes for affected communities. Moreover, all the sites examined focus on public safety threats and how law enforcement works to neutralize them, attempting to establish legitimacy for policing while erasing the crises plaguing their respective police forces. For anyone aware of the many scandals facing these organizations, including the under-representation of women who endure discrimination and other abuses within the profession (Kringen 2014), the silence is deafening. In these cultural spaces where police officers are depicted as honourable there is little to no room made for individuals and marginalized groups victimized by law enforcement.

Given the representations made (in)visible in police museums, we echo Ian Taylor’s (1986) call to demythologize policing. We have done so by drawing attention to how these heritage sites attempt to build legitimacy and sympathy for law enforcement through museum displays. While descriptive work informed by cultural and visual
Criminology is necessary, criminologists studying cultural representations need to also find pathways to engage in critical punishment memorialization that privileges the voices of the criminalized and reveals the perils of punitive ways of responding to “crime” (Fiander et al. 2016). Criminology can contribute to activism against police brutality, such as many forms of cop-watching (e.g., Comité vérité et justice pour Abdoulaye Camara 2019), by broadening its focus to memorialize and commemorate victims of policing. Another way to achieve this is by supporting the creation or promotion of exhibits that privilege these critical perspectives. For example, an exhibition titled “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” is currently on a three-year national tour across Canada, which the curator referred to as the “dark side” of this country’s history (Hendra 2018). Among the text, objects, and artwork on display is a painting called The Scream by Cree artist Kent Monkman, which depicts Indigenous children being violently ripped away from their mothers by RCMP officers. This dark side of law enforcement, which police museums often ignore and therefore make disappear, require others to shine some light. In this way we can disrupt the forms of insecurity and exclusion all too evident in the lives of those targeted by police forces and their officers.

Notes

1 The reference to “Blues” references to police officers serving as the thin blue line between order and chaos.

2 We refer to content that was originally in French in the museum exhibitions in Paris and Melun. For the purposes of this paper, we have translated short passages into English.

Bibliography


*Radical History Review* 113, 134–42.


Page left blank intentionally