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“Found this [police museum] on Tripadvisor:”

A Critical Analysis of Reviews on a Social Media and Travel Network

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Abstract

No research has examined tourist views that follow visits to police museums, including those expressed on the Tripadvisor social media and travel network. Contributing to cultural criminology by engaging with literature on tourism, museums, and meaning-making, we explore trends in Tripadvisor comments concerning police museums in Canada. Our findings distilled from a thematic analysis of 1,148 reviews reveal how police museum visitors are primarily concerned with the characteristics of museum locations, the content and representations on display, the people present at the sites, and authenticity. Given that the Tripadvisor comments we examined tended to be positive and reiterate the pro-police views communicated in the content they encountered in museums, our findings indicate that the desired police museum experience is an up-close yet comfortable hyperreal experience facilitated through curatorial techniques of simulation and staged authenticity in which the lines between reality and fiction are blurred through a police voice that promotes policing as a necessary, honourable, and peaceful profession. To conclude, we reflect on what these findings mean for relevant literature and people concerned with racial injustice, brutality, and other harmful realities of policing work not touched on by police museum reviewers.

Keywords: police museums, visitor responses, staged authenticity, simulation, Tripadvisor, penal tourism, Canada

Introduction

Along with influencing “criminal justice” policies and practices, new media including social media and interactive displays are changing the museum and tourism landscape. This includes websites and web platforms that contain visitor reviews such as Tripadvisor, the world’s largest travel platform with 860 million reviews as of 2019. Founded in 2000, Tripadvisor has evolved from providing reviews and information into a full-scale social media and travel network. The platform has become a key form of social media that deserves research scrutiny (Molinillo, Fernández-Morales, Ximénez-de-Sandoval, & Coca-Stefaniak, 2016; Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008). Like Facebook, Instagram (Hurley, 2019), Twitter (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018), and other prominent social media platforms that can be accessed through a smartphone or tablet device, Tripadvisor reviewers have usernames and profile webpages. Here, they can share photos and personal details about themselves as travellers, construct wish lists of places to visit in the future, review destinations, pose questions and chat in travel forums, and add links to personal websites or blogs. They can also “follow” other travellers to see content they post, while other travellers can “follow” them. Accordingly, Tripadvisor as a popular social media and travel platform can serve as a proxy for public views of issues on display at tourism sites, including museums (Bornarel, Delacour, Liarte, & Virgili, 2021; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Carter, 2016).

As with other forms of traditional and new media (Gonzalez & Cavender, 2016), the user-generated content present on Tripadvisor deserves criminological investigation. These kinds of texts and cultural productions convey and construct ideas regarding transgression, law, policing, and punishment (Clevenger & Acquaviva, 2020; Steinmetz & Henderson, 2016), which is why research at the intersection of penalty and popular culture is so crucial. This is especially the case when it comes to commentary about police museums. Although museums are just one attraction among many available to be reviewed on Tripadvisor – alongside hotels, cafés, airlines, cruises, and so on – like social media technologies, museums are platforms for social engagement and discourse. The term ‘museum’ derives its origins from the Latin word ‘mouseion,’ which delineates a philosophical school or ‘place of contemplation’ (MacDonald, 2006), exemplified by the Mouseion at Alexandria founded in 3rd century BC. In contemporary times, as Latham and Simmons (2014) observe, there is no single accepted understanding of what a museum is and who it ought to serve. It is possible to find the museum label being applied in diverse social settings, including theme parks, art displays, digital exhibitions, roadside attractions and, as this study is concerned, even police stations (Walby, Piché, & Ferguson, 2021).

Khoo-Lattimore and Ekitz (2014), as well as Mayzlin, Dover, and Chevalier (2014), argue online comments from visitors provide useful feedback and can be analyzed to explore patterns in visitor perceptions. Tourism and museum sites do monitor online commentary about their services and displays (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). It follows that these digital communications merit scholarly inquiry. Marketing and curation in tourism settings raise ethical issues as they shape public memory, influencing how people remember societal issues and address social problems, a core responsibility of museums, including those located in police stations and elsewhere that collect, preserve, and exhibit policing heritage.

Sometimes referred to as police museums, these sites are growing in popularity worldwide with the assistance of social media platforms that twist the meaning of museum in the process. For example, museums are typically publicly accessible and operated for reasons other than profit, namely education, study, and enjoyment. However, the Crime Museum in London, England, and the Museo de Enervantes (the Museum of Narcotics) in Mexico City, Mexico (see Buffington, 2012), are two museums that are accessible to the police, but not to the public. Whether open to the public or not police museums are often dedicated to perpetuating pro-police images and stories (McNair, 2011), generating public support that can lead to more funding for the police institutions represented, who sometimes operate and manage them (Walby, Piché, & Ferguson, 2021). As argued elsewhere, cultural and critical criminologists should examine police museums given that these sites can legitimate criminalization and punishment by reproducing punitive ideologies (Pauls, Walby, & Piché, 2023).

To date, no research has examined online postings of police museum visitors shared on the TripAdvisor social media and travel platform. Such work contributes to emerging knowledge on meanings of policing communicated on social media platforms (e.g. Kudla & Parnaby, 2018). Like other museums, police museums have a responsibility to the public. Visitors may pick up on ethical breaches and report these in Tripadvisor comments, or use this platform in a myriad of other ways, such as to highlight what is important or memorable about their police museum experience.

Our purpose here is to explore trends in Tripadvisor comments vis-à-vis police museums in Canada, a world-leader in police museum design and practice. Indeed, Canada was the host of the International Conference of Police Museums in 2016 (Saskatchewan), 2018 (Manitoba), and 2019 (Alberta). First, we conceptualize police museums as a form of dark tourism and review relevant literature. Second, we provide a note on our research design. Third, we outline findings of a thematic analysis of 1,148 reviews. Our findings highlight how visitors are primarily concerned with the characteristics of museum locations, the content and representations on display, the people present at the sites, and authenticity. Given that the Tripadvisor comments we examined tended to reiterate the pro-police views communicated in the museum content they encountered, our findings indicate that what most reviewers desire is an up-close yet hyperreal experience facilitated through curatorial techniques of simulation and staged authenticity in which the lines between reality and fiction are blurred through a police voice that promotes policing as a necessary, honourable, and peaceful profession. We consider the implications of these findings for the literature on the role of Tripadvisor in tourism (Lee, Benjamin, & Childs, 2020; Safaaa, Housni, & Bédard, 2017; Carter, 2016; Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008), as well as cultural and critical criminologies of representations of social control. We also consider the implications of this analysis for thinking about resistance to police power in an era when calls to defund the police are prevalent across social media in response to police violence against Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour (BIPOC) (Buckler, Casas, & Gilmore, 2021; Maynard, 2020).

Dark Tourism, Authenticity, and the Visitor Experience

Tyson and Urban (2012) note that police museums are similar to prison museums, as both “desire to display the personnel and physical institution of law enforcement and to make visible and validate their social function” (p. 8). There is something about policing, punishment and detention that people find alluring (Knackmuhs, Farmer, & Knapp, 2020; Welch, 2015). Because police and prison museums address themes of suffering and pain, they have been conceived of as dark tourism sites (Wang, Shen, Zheng, Wu, & Cao, 2020; Kerr, Stone, & Price, 2020; Martini & Buda, 2020). Inside police museums, these elements manifest in arrangements of weapons, handcuffs, mock detention cells, mug shots and stories about criminalized individuals, their actions, as well as their capture by law enforcement (Ferguson, Piché, & Walby, 2019).

What dark tourism sites share in common with more extreme forms of tourism is the idea of an encounter with risk and the sublime (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009). In turn, operators of penal tourism sites, including police museums, may over-emphasize elements of risk and the sublime to sell more museum tickets and attract more people to gift shops (Luscombe, Walby, & Piché, 2018). Though these museum elements might over-emphasize risk, they may be advertised as authentic (Walby & Piché, 2015) and experienced as such (Ferguson, Piché, & Walby, 2015). More research is needed on why tourists decide to visit tourist sites and museums associated with death, disease, pain, and/or suffering (Kerr, Stone, & Price, 2020; Martini & Buda, 2020) as motivations and perceptions may vary by national and regional contexts. An analysis of tourist views expressed on Tripadvisor pertaining to police museums not only provides insights into tourist views of such settings and trends therein, but allows for an analysis of rationales for visiting dark tourism and heritage sites (Carter, 2016; Podoshen, 2013).

With tourism and museum sites, there are push and pull factors shaping their popularity and influence. Push factors are often understood as forces (e.g. motivations, social connections and peer influence) that push people to feel the need to visit a certain heritage or tourism site, while pull factors (e.g. marketing and word of mouth) attract people toward specific destinations (Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015). Tourism marketing trends may shift depending on political and economic developments (Forrest, 2013), so it is key to explore the tropes used in marketing for dark tourism and penal tourism sites, including police museums. The development of tourism requires boosting the perception of attractiveness of destinations (Korzeniewski & Kozlowski, 2019). Tourist sites may also partner with other museums or promote cultural products to enhance their reputation.

Authenticity is a crucial factor in tourism (Gordon, 2016; Martin, 2010) and encounters with authenticity are frequently staged (Edensor, 2001). It is important to examine how decisive authenticity is to attracting tourists to heritage sites and museums. The unique features of buildings are often indexed to authenticity in the context of tourism (Walby & Piché, 2015). Even in virtual and online museums and displays, depictions of the authentic are key (Mura, Tavakoli, & Sharif, 2017; Forrest, 2013). For instance, Zerva (2013) found that “Gang Tours” in Los Angeles are sold by invoking the idea that tourists will encounter an authentic experience of American gang life. Tourism and museums turn culture into a commodity. As with heritage tourism (Van Der Merwe, 2016), penal tourism sites, including police museums, rely on the idea of authenticity. From advertising to the content at sites, the focus is on creating the allure of an encounter with the authentic (McNair, 2011). As Safaaa and colleagues (2017) note, originality, singularity, and identity are the key dimensions of authenticity. Tripadvisor user comments frequently refer to these elements of authenticity. However, this sense of authenticity may be simulated or fantastical (Hurley, 2019) in ways we examine below. Further, the locale of the museum can also be a factor in this calculus of authenticity, as we also show below. If a museum is located in a less affluent, more distressed area of the city, this encounter with real poverty can dissuade tourists from visiting (also see Johanson & Olsen, 2010). Tourists tend to want safe contact (Welch, 2015; also see Mussell, Walby, & Piché, 2023) that does not bring them too close to actual transgression or violence (Oleson, 2020).

Encounters with authenticity are central to penal tourism. Welch (2013) examines prison tourism in museums across the world including in London, Sydney, Melbourne, and Buenos Aires. He explains how such museums give visitors a sense of “hands-on” power, suggesting they might be attracted to interactive displays, as well as those which allow them to assume the role of prisoners without experiencing the negative consequences and suffering associated with imprisonment. Welch (2015) concludes by noting that “visitors are likely to leave the exhibit pondering the postmodern futility – and inhumanity – of imprisonment” (p. 263). Conversely, Ross (2018) and others (e.g. Ferguson, Piché, & Walby, 2015) suggest such encounters might also reinforce prevailing attitudes and further normalize penalty. An issue raised by Welch (2013) and Ross (2018) is that penal tourists view imprisonment from a safe distance, a process Brown (2009) refers to as penal spectatorship. Penal spectatorship entails viewing imprisonment and punishment through movies, television, tourism, and other cultural products in ways that pushes the penal spectator further away from the realities of imprisonment and punishment. Penal spectatorship also involves mockery of people behind bars and in chains (Morris & Arford, 2019). This spectatorship can cross over into the realm of police museums, where visitors may be seeking an encounter with what Wilson (2008) calls “establishment narratives”, which in this case is the police voice – an authoritative positioning of police as a necessary, useful institution (Charman, 2011; Loader & Mulcahy, 2001). Examining Tripadvisor comments provides one means of assessing tourist interpretations of police voice in museums and whether their views reflect penal spectatorship being at work in these settings.

Tourists often arrive to tourism sites and museums with pre-conceived notions of what the issue on display is about (Kerr, Stone, & Price, 2020; Hoskins, 2002). With penal tourism, similar dynamics may be involved depending on how criminalized persons are depicted. It is crucial for cultural and critical criminologists to examine representations at tourism sites and in museums because these can shape public views of the issues being represented (McCabe, 2005). Representations at tourism destinations may also convey latent

messages about race, citizenship and belonging. Tourism sites and museums also represent constituents or locals, which in our case are often current and past police officers, along with the citizens that public police are meant to serve (Ferguson, Piché, & Walby, 2019). Finally, penal museums are marked by a number of haunting absences and silences that need to be investigated using tools from cultural studies and cultural criminology (Meyer, 2012). In penal history sites such as police museums, these could include missing voices of criminalized people, missing accounts of the violence of law and the state, and missing histories of colonialism (Ferguson, Piché, Ricordeau, Sanchez, & Walby, 2020; Nettelbeck & Foster, 2013; Buffington, 2012).

Beyond a desire to encounter authenticity or an interest in suffering, visitors may be more concerned about site facilities, which is why it is important to include a consideration of both authenticity (Gordon, 2016) and more practical concerns when examining tourism sites and visitor perceptions. Boccia, Di Gennaro, Sarnacciaro, & Sarno (2019) show that tourists have varied perspectives on the tourism sites they visit. We are likewise interested in the variation within Tripadvisor comments made by visitors to police museums.

Research Methods

This study uses thematic analysis as “a method for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun 2013, p. 120). It can be used to “produce sophisticated, interpretative analyses that go beyond the obvious content” (123). The method adopted here is mostly inductive. As Beuhler (2017) – who employs a thematic analysis to analyze 185 public Facebook posts – explains, an inductive approach to thematic analysis places the data, such as words and sentences, at the centre of the analysis. The data is labelled, compared, and organized in an analytic process known as coding (Gonzalez & Cavender, 2016). The aim is to identify and progressively refine themes, defined as a “coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question” (Clarke & Braun 2013, p. 121). Though our data coding and analysis is driven by what the data holds, concepts and ideas are also mobilized to interpret it.

This process began with identifying and selecting museums from which Tripadvisor data could be collected. As dozens of sites in Canada contain policing-related content and exhibits, we followed the basic definition suggested by McNair (2011), who defines police museums as being “dedicated to the recounting of police history and the preservation and exhibition of artifacts relating to policing” (p. 19). Ten police museums with the most Tripadvisor comments in Canada were selected for analysis (see *Table 1*). We collected these data in August 2020.

Table 1: Study Sample

Museum Name	Location	Tripadvisor Reviews
RCMP Heritage Centre	Regina, Saskatchewan	477
Vancouver Police Museum	Vancouver, British Columbia	218
The Fort Museum of the North-West Mounted Police and First Nations Interpretive Centre	Fort Macleod, Alberta	146
RCMP Musical Ride Centre	Ottawa, Ontario	111
The OPP Museum	Orillia, Ontario	80
Toronto Police Museum and Discovery Centre	Toronto, Ontario	60
Saint John Police Museum	Saint John, New Brunswick	25
YouthLink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre	Calgary, Alberta	18
Winnipeg Police Museum	Winnipeg, Manitoba	7
Rotary Museum of Police and Corrections	Prince Albert, Saskatchewan	6

The 1,148 Tripadvisor reviews were copy-and-pasted into an electronic document, which was divided into ten segments for each museum. A new column was inserted beside each review. The lead author proceeded to read them, familiarizing themselves with its contents and forming a basic impression of what the reviewer was trying to communicate. After reading a review, its key points (i.e. whether they enjoyed the visit and main aspects of the visit discussed) were jotted down in the column beside it before moving to the next one. Anything odd or interesting was highlighted with a marker. After all of the reviews for a museum were read, the same researcher wrote a 200- to 400-word overview based around the following: i) average rating and visitor impressions; ii) main reasons given for visiting; iii) common topics and aspects of the visit discussed; iv) negative reviews and what they focused on. The overviews assisted with the construction of themes (see *Table 2*) – which were generated based on similarities and repeated points in the reviews – and the production of a convincing story about the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Table 2: Tripadvisor reviews on police museums in Canada (as of August 2020)

Topic	Number and Percentage of Reviews (n = 1,148)
Ratings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent: 574 (50%) • Very Good: 391 (34%) • Average: 142 (12%) • Poor: 26 (2%) • Terrible: 15 (1%)
Aspects of Location (e.g. building, area of city, convenience, safety)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 750 (65%)
Interactive Experiences (e.g. dress up, puzzles, virtual reality)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 325 (28%)
People Encountered (e.g. staff, volunteers, police officers, cadets)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 382 (33%)

Themes were constructed by the lead author who read and coded the reviews, while consulting with the second and third authors on these categorizations. A small number of Tripadvisor reviews (<50) were excluded from analysis due to the possibility of misinterpreting them, as they were written in languages other than English or French (e.g., Spanish, German, Mandarin). We also did not analyze responses to comments made by representatives of the museums, as our focus here is strictly on visitors. Tripadvisor comments do not fully capture public opinion as these are short narratives based on what may be a brief experience at the site (Oliviera, 2020). Surveys are not always feasible at tourism sites either as these require additional research resources and time, as well as agreeable tourists. We have not explored how police museum visitors perceive the displays using surveys or interviews. However, online comments can be used as a proxy for tourist views (Khoo-Lattimore & Ekitz, 2014; Mayzlin, Dover, & Chevalier, 2014).

Findings and Analysis: Visitor Responses About Police Museum Encounters

In the Tripadvisor posts we examined, most reviewers labelled the police museums between “very good” and “excellent,” praising them for providing what was often described as unique, interactive, and educational experiences. The reviews varied in length from a single sentence to multiple paragraphs and tended to focus, along with frequent comments about the price of admission, on three connected themes. First, reviewers discussed where the site is located and whether it is safe, easy to spot and access, and has other enjoyable activities around the museum. Second, reviewers discussed the contents on display inside police museums, emphasizing if they were interesting, interactive, and suitable for children. Third, reviewers discussed people they encountered (or did not encounter), such as museum staff members, police officers, and other visitors, and the impact this had on the experience and perceptions of authenticity within the sites. In the following sections, we describe and interpret these themes in more detail.

Consistent with our previous finding that visits to penitentiary, prison, jail and lock-up museums in Canada rarely translate into humanizing conceptions of the criminalized or views that challenge punitiveness (Ferguson, Piché, & Walby, 2015), we highlight how the reviews of police museums tend to express an appreciation for policing with no concern of its links to colonialism, racial discrimination, or other social injustices explored in scholarly literature (e.g., Maynard, 2020). Words such as “brutality,” “racism,” and “colonialism” did not appear in the reviews, while comments describing police work as peaceful – such as, “The west was settled in Canada without firing a shot - quite a feat!” and “lots to learn about the important role the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] has had in maintaining the peace in Canada” – were common. Additionally, we highlight how negative comments often originate not from representations communicated, but rather from certain aspects of the visit disrupting the leisurely and hyperreal experience desired. We elaborate on these findings below, focusing on the three themes of location, content, and people.

“It is part of the Toronto Police Station, so expect to be searched and patted down”: *The Locations of Police Museums*

Our analysis uncovered that the location of police museums was a frequent discussion point in the social media discourse. This is in large part because the museums in our sample were located in a variety of places often described by visitors as interesting and unique, including police training facilities and stables (e.g., RCMP Heritage Centre, RCMP Musical Ride), municipal (e.g., Toronto Police Museum, Winnipeg Police Museum) and provincial police headquarters (Ontario Provincial Police Museum), as well as decommissioned court and police buildings which have been repurposed for historical and tourism purposes (e.g., Vancouver Police Museum, The Fort Museum). Buffington (2012) observes that the location of museums inside police facilities suggests they are aimed more at attracting officers than the general public. Our findings suggest that the general public is also attracted to such sites as noted by a Toronto Police Museum visitor quoted in the title of this section, who commented that being subject to security procedures upon entry to the site “is worth the visit.” This sentiment is also captured in a review of the Vancouver Police Museum that noted, “It’s housed in the former Coroner’s Court; the sort of building very few people ever enter. So that’s a novelty.” Many reviews also address topics such as whether the site is convenient to access, is safe for tourists, and has other enjoyable activities around it.

One police museum receiving many positive comments with respect to its location is the RCMP Heritage Centre, which is situated on the grounds of the RCMP Academy and Depot Division in Regina, Saskatchewan. Along with wanting to learn about the RCMP, visitors often dropped in as they attended police graduations or conferences at the site. Some describe bringing relatives and friends from other countries to the museum, which one review described as “a great history lesson on Canada.” Reviews also suggest the need to participate in other activities available on site, such as the Sergeant Major’s Parade, a drill exercise performed by cadets described by one reviewer as “quite the display” featuring “young cadets getting ready to protect us Canadians.” Also popular is the Sunset Retreat Ceremony, an event described by another reviewer as “moving and entertaining,” along with taking guided tours of the training grounds. These activities were often reviewed positively alongside the museum, which was praised in over a third of the reviews for its interactive exhibits. “You can take a try at a driving simulator, take a 3D ride on a horse in the Musical Ride or try your hand at solving a crime in the Forensic section,” one reviewer explained.

While the location of police museums can improve visitor experiences due to its association with authenticity, it can also have a negative effect, as seen at the Vancouver Police Museum in British Columbia. Located near a major police station and housed inside a former Coroner’s Court, many visitors describe the museum as small, yet interesting, creepy, eerie, and quirky. Going to this museum is frequently described as a good “rainy-day” activity for people of all ages, though some suggest children of a certain age should avoid the

“real morgue/autopsy room” which contains “real human organ parts,” as well as the “real crime scene photos” and the “real weapons” confiscated by police which were mostly described as fascinating. While many visitors praise the novelty of the building and the “realness” of the content inside, its location in the Downtown Eastside, which Burnett (2014, p. 157) refers to as “one of the poorest neighborhoods in Canada,” is widely seen as a drawback. The presence of poor and marginalized residents (e.g., sex workers, drug users, unhoused people) around the police museum is noted by dozens of reviewers to be a significant issue impacting the museum experience. Below are a few representative remarks from different tourists:

Main problem with this place is that it’s in an incredibly dodgy area, we felt a bit unsafe when we were walking there but were thankfully in a large group in the middle of the day.

My 6 ft. 2 policeman husband and I felt distinctly unsafe during our walk there from Waterfront metro station.

The location of this museum is the HORRIBLE downtown east side and the entire way there I felt on edge. Druggies, homeless people and crazies surround every corner of this area and I would not advise going alone.

Social media reviews of the Vancouver Police Museum suggest its location makes unaccompanied visitors feel unsafe. However, when led by a tour guide, visitors describe its location in a more positive sense, as gritty and authentic. This can be seen in reviews of the “Sins of the City Walking Tour” free with museum admission. “A very knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide led us around some of the ‘juiciest’ spots of Gastown and Chinatown,” noted one review. For most reviewers of the museum, however, the residents are an unwanted intrusion in an experience organized around representations and simulations of “real crimes” and other phenomena (Lovell & Hitchmough, 2020; Graburn, Gravari-Barbas, & Staszak, 2019; Ong & Jin, 2017). “Favorite part was playing with the software to recreate the face of a suspect I had just looked at. Not as easy as it sounds,” one reviewer noted. Some reviews recommend not walking there at night, while others suggest avoiding certain streets altogether. While several reviews take the opposing view, arguing that the area is safer than it appears, only one review emphasized its location as a positive attribute, observing how it meshes with the gruesome and macabre material in the museum. This review noted: “Lots of stories of gallant acts by police of yore, and also some grisly tales of murders & deaths, including a family axe killing...the museum is located in a dodgy part of town, so this adds to the experience!” In the next section, we discuss the content of police museums and the centrality that visitors place on authenticity as being key to their enjoyment of the sites.

“This place was so cool! Especially if you like CSI or murder investigation programmes!”: *Artifacts, Memorabilia, and Interactive Museum Activities*

While many reviews commended police museums for their collections of artifacts and memorabilia – including vehicles, uniforms, badges, and weapons – also frequently praised and discussed were the interactive and digital exhibits provided, particularly those suitable for children. Interactive experiences – which were noted in 325 reviews (28%) – are often sought after in museums and tourism spaces, but are no less ideological (Smith & Foote, 2017; Walby, Ferguson, & Piché, 2020). “The interactive prisoner transport makes for a nice little photo op with the kids,” noted one review of the Rotary Museum of Police and Corrections in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. A focus on interactivity could especially be seen, for example, at the Ontario Provincial Police Museum in Orillia, Ontario. This police museum has an interactive area known as the “Kidzone” (Ricordeau & Bugnon, 2018), which delighted many reviewers. “My 9-year-old daughter enjoyed the puppets, forensics and

trying on an OPP uniform the most, my 7-year-old son was glued to the Lego and the little guy enjoyed the puppets, cars, puzzles and potato head,” one reviewer noted. The site is also described as being fascinating for adults, with one reviewer commenting on the many “great photos of the bad guys from the olden days.”

Another police museum with numerous interactive displays is the Youthlink Calgary Police Interpretive Centre in Calgary, Alberta, a site designed for youth. While only receiving 18 reviews during the period examined, those who left a review overwhelmingly enjoyed their experience, writing that it is entertaining, interactive, and a great learning environment for children. “Help your teen unfold all their queries and questions about crime/the dark sides of life related issues in a fun atmosphere,” one reviewer wrote. Another reviewer explained that it is a “great way to expose kids to policing,” as the museum is “informative for kids and adults, with an awesome display of what policing is all about.” One review described attending a birthday party there, while other reviews note that the museum is up-to-date, containing interesting exhibits on forensics and internet safety. There are also opportunities to have your picture taken inside a police car and cell, the latter of which is a common activity in numerous police (Ferguson, Piché & Walby, 2019) and prison museums (Walby & Piché, 2015) across the country. “I took my 13 and 9-year-old boys. They loved it! Both want to become police officers now,” one reviewer wrote. Aimed at providing a fun and interactive learning environment for children, one of the only comments which could be interpreted as possibly negative about the Calgary site came when the museum content got a bit too close to the reality of death. “The lady in the cadaver room should maybe reconsider how enthusiastically she shows the dead body interactive to 3-year-olds,” the reviewer shared with a laughing emoji.

On some rare occasions, museums were criticized for being too interactive and too detached from the reality of the history police museums claim to preserve and represent. For example, this could be seen in some negative remarks about the contents of the RCMP Heritage Centre, which argued that the museum is inferior to the older, smaller museum it replaced in 2007. Below are a few representative remarks from different tourists:

For a police force with such a rich history, there isn't the collection here that there could be. The old museum seemed to have more to offer.

I did have the luxury of visiting the old museum by the chapel. Then progress came along and built the majestic building you see now. Unfortunately, the size and quality of the exhibits did not follow. I think you go to a museum to see original artifacts and collectables. There are far too many audio displays featuring an artists' renderings.

The RCMP Heritage Centre is a major disappointment. The old museum at Depot was far more informative and was organized better. There is so much wasted space and too much emphasis on hands-on activities.

A similar trend was identified at this museum concerning a movie shown called “Courage in Red,” which focuses on “the rigorous training program of the cadets,” as one reviewer put it. Most thought the movie was well-done and worth viewing. “The film ... is a great visual. Very eye opening into what it's like to be a cadet,” wrote one reviewer. A small minority expressed confusion and disappointment about the film, with one review stating, “A bit jingoistic for my taste. Skip the movie. RCMP without the warts.” “The history lasted about ten mins and the rest of the time was taken up with a make-up dramatization which one can see anytime on TV in CSI etc,” wrote another. Also of note were 11 reviews that mentioned how the police museums reminded them of the show “CSI,” with the aforementioned comment being the only one suggesting this was out of place.

Thus, museum content relaying fictional programs was not interpreted negatively for the most part. One review of the Fort Museum of the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) and First Nations Interpretive Centre –

located in Fort MacLeod, Alberta – described it as an “authentic reproduction of an early western fort: reminiscent of every cowboy movie you’ve ever seen.” The reviewer was “pleasantly surprised” by the visit that reminded them of the movies. Compared to the other police museums, this museum was described more often as dull and outdated. “The displays, although informative, need to be updated to have more impact,” wrote one person. “Historical info is good, fort is boring,” said another. Occasionally, visitors were displeased when the staged authenticity of the heritage site was compromised. For example, one visitor wrote:

The arena in which the ride is conducted suffers from utility taking precedence over atmosphere. Maybe financial considerations dictated a screened chain link fence enclosure, but it is like a small, unattractive, sudden intrusion of the modern world (Though much of the town of Fort MacLeod seems to have pleasantly gotten stuck in the 1950’s).

In this context, the reviewer is talking about an arena located beside the Fort Museum, in which a “musical ride” takes place for visitors. Reviewers often describe the musical ride as the highlight of the Fort Museum. For example, the above reviewer went on to note: “If nothing else was exceptional about the Fort, the riders and their mounts deserve praise.” Another reviewer noted, “The kids will enjoy meeting the riders and getting up close to the horses beforehand. A visit to the stables is also very well worthwhile.” Most social media reviewers enjoyed the ride and were unconcerned that it was not the more well-known ride performed around the world that is represented at the RCMP Musical Ride Centre in Ottawa, but rather a performance carried out by local high-school students dressed as NWMP officers, a precursor to the contemporary RCMP. However, not all reviewers felt this way. Below are a few examples of such comments:

They are skilled riders but I did cringe a little seeing that this performance carried the same name as the famed and fabled RCMP Musical Ride.

This is NOT the official Royal Canadian Mounted Police Musical Ride! The motley crew in red serge appear to be local students who dress up for this entertainment. It will probably amuse uncritical kiddies, but anyone who has seen professional dressage events will cringe.

Musical horse ride was dumb ... We paid for the musical ride which was done by junior high school students representing actual Mounted Police. I was reminded of Star Wars when Han Solo remarks to Luke in the Storm Trooper outfit.

The Fort Museum is commonly viewed as authentic not because it represents a historic fort, but because it is staged as one. “This is a small but authentic fort – not a re-creation, but the real thing,” noted one reviewer. In a sense, police museums exemplify the phenomenon underscored by the social theorist Baudrillard (1994), in which reality vanishes into hyperreality through simulated reproductions of it (also see Lovell & Hitchmough, 2020; Graburn, Gravari-Barbas, & Staszak, 2019; Ong & Jin, 2017). The authenticity often sought is a fantastical form (Hurley, 2019) that is misleading and mythical but nonetheless entertaining. Reviews that criticized the musical ride did so because it appeared hokey and fake-looking, suggesting there is a limit to the simulation museums can get away with before visitors begin to realize that what they are encountering is more fictional or artificial than real. Next, we examine how visitors interpreted encounters with people at police museums with authenticity again featuring prominently in the reviews.

“It’s great to meet some new Mounties in uniform”: *The People at Police Museums*

Over one-third of reviews (33%) we examined noted the people visitors encountered in police museums, such as staff, volunteers, police officers, and cadets. At all the museums in our sample, staff members and volunteers were usually said to be helpful, friendly, and knowledgeable. Reviewers tended to be particularly positive, however, when individuals they encountered inside the police museums were active or retired police officers. This was evident in reviews about the Winnipeg Police Museum in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the Saint John Police Museum in Saint John, New Brunswick, two police museums managed by retired police officers. Though the museums are not widely known and only have a small number of reviews, reviewers often refer to the museums as impressive and welcoming. “Had to wait downtown Winnipeg for several hours and came upon the Winnipeg Police Museum ... who knew there was one... Was greeted by the volunteers and got a private tour,” one reviewer noted. Below are additional representative remarks offered by different tourists:

The volunteers know their facts, as they once were on the force.

Guides are retired Saint John Police, so you get a personal and informative look at the history from those that actually were in the police service.

Please stop here they are wonderful people and a nice short stop. They are all volunteers and are passionate about their history.

Along with discussing the content on display, reviews of the Winnipeg Police Museum and the Saint John Police Museum frequently point out how enjoyable it is to speak with a police officer and learn about policing history from those with experience in the field. At these municipal locations, encountering a police officer inside the museum is depicted more as a pleasant surprise than a visitor requirement. When it comes to federal police museums, the latter appears closer to the truth. For example, several negative comments and reviews of the RCMP Heritage Centre and the RCMP Musical Ride Centre – the latter of which is located on the grounds of the Canadian Police College – focus on not seeing any Mounties in places where visitors expected they should be. These comments are perhaps influenced by other reviews of the sites. “A mountie wearing the red serge was on her horse near the entrance. You’ll need a camera,” noted one reviewer. “We don’t blow our own horn often as Canadians, but the Red Serge works every time!” wrote another. Below are a few representative comments made by displeased tourists:

All we really wanted to do was meet a Mountie and take a picture, but alas, there were not to be found anywhere.

Shame we didn’t get to see any real mounties either.

This tour was included on the group tour I was on. I don’t know if I would have done it if it hadn’t been. I may have because I love Mounties!! Problem was, there were no Mounties there, so I was a bit disappointed.

Some reviews recommended specific times visitors should attend the police museums to see the Mounties, along with the horses they are often depicted in museums, movies, and books as riding. “Make sure you call before you visit to find out what time the training rides are and when the horses will be away as they are touring across the country this year,” one reviewer wrote. Many reviews also suggested the importance of seeing police

wearing the uniform and a few voiced their displeasure when they did not see officers in them. Below are a few representative comments from visitors at the RCMP Heritage Centre and RCMP Musical Ride Centre.

The only thing that would make this even better is for the tour to be led by a fully uniformed officer, or one to be around during it.

The cadets are not even in the full uniform. REALLY BORING.

A little disappointed. Photos you see on the website are a little deceiving. We expected to see cadets in full uniform at the Sergeant Major’s parade however this was not the case.

At museums like the RCMP Heritage Centre and RCMP Musical Ride Centre, a Mountie dressed in red while sitting on a horse is something many visitors expect to see. Viewing the bright red serge is a crucial part of the hyperreal experience expected by most visitors at these sites. While encounters with authenticity are key museum attractions (Mura, Tavakoli, & Sharif, 2017), real policing environments and people are sometimes interpreted by visitors as boring or not good enough, clashing with visitor expectations. To satisfy visitor demand for the real, police museums are often encouraged to promote forged or phony artifacts and displays. Along with not seeing police officers as they expected, some reviews mention how the museum experience was negatively impacted by other tourists or school groups who got in their way. “We were really looking forward to this visit, but it was spoilt by coach tours,” noted one review of the RCMP Musical Ride Centre.

Discussion and Conclusion: Social Media and Establishment Narratives

Contributing to literature on dark tourism and police museums (Wang, Shen, Zheng, Wu, & Cao, 2020; Martini & Buda, 2020; Ferguson, Piché, & Walby, 2019; Collins-Kreiner, 2016) as forms of popular culture, and literature on the role of the social media and travel network Tripadvisor in tourism (Lee, Benjamin, & Childs, 2020; Safaaa, Housni, & Bédard, 2017; Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008), we have examined Tripadvisor comments made by visitors at ten police museums across Canada. Our findings highlight how police museum visitors are primarily concerned with the characteristics of museum locations, the content and representations on display, and the people present at the sites. The results of this study are valuable for critical scholars and educators who work in and/or with museums. Cultural and critical criminologists should also find this analysis of interest given the way that these museums appear to reproduce stereotypical views of transgression and policing. Our analysis also reveals that Tripadvisor comments reiterate the views communicated in the pro-police content encountered in museums. Seeking authenticity is an underlying element in these accounts. What reviewers desire most, however, are not authentic engagements with the realities of police work – including its dark and dangerous elements – so much as hyperreal experiences blurring the lines between reality and fiction (Gordon, 2016). These simulated and entertaining tourism experiences (Graburn, Gravari-Barbas, & Staszuk, 2019; Ong & Jin, 2017) are treated as preferable to the real details of penal system practices and are thus a fantastical form of authenticity (Hurley, 2019) based on stereotypes and policing myths.

While we have found that visitors to police museums tend to seek an authentic encounter, they prefer one that is staged and constricted. Negative remarks and comments were rare. The reviews expressed support and appreciation for police with no discussions about its links to colonialism, racial discrimination, or other dark historical and contemporary policing realities. We have therefore found Tripadvisor to be a significant purveyor of the police voice, which remains largely unchallenged on this social network. Museums shape public views of social issues, and the views of police museums we have analyzed show most visitors parrot the police view and voice conveyed in the museum displays. Police voice changes over time, but is a stable discursive

framework in Canada. Police voice entails an authoritative positioning of policing as a socially useful institution (Charman, 2011), which also relies on ideas such as honour and heroism (Loader & Mulcahy, 2001) that are linked to police work and policing as an institution. It excludes many views and stories on police violence frequently endured by BIPOC families and communities (Singh, 2020; also see Tracking (In)Justice, 2023) that have prompted mainstream calls for police demilitarization and defunding (e.g. Ipsos, 2020). It should be noted that our dataset does not include results from surveys or interviews with penal tourists, nor comparative data from other countries. Both could be considered limits of this study that present opportunities for future research.

The ability of penal tourism sites to manufacture consent around criminalization and punishment among visitors sheds light on why more police museums are being established in an era where policing is under scrutiny (Walby, Piché, & Ferguson, 2021). Policing is facing challenges to its existence from the growing number of people who see defunding the police as one of many paths that communities need to take to reduce violence inflicted by officers and demonstrate that BIPOC lives matter (Buckler, 2021; Maynard, 2020). However, most visitors to these sites seem to already hold positive views of police, which are then reiterated on Tripadvisor for others to consume. The commodification and simulation of human suffering in dark tourism and penal tourism sites raises ethical questions (Podoshen, 2013) that are not addressed when representations in museums are sanitized and skewed. We recommend that police and penal history museums incorporate a fuller picture of the violence of penalty and its role in reproducing domination. This may mean seeking out curators with different training, procuring new exhibits, and engaging more with communities to provide other views and reflections on policing practices. By challenging visitors who seek an encounter with establishment narratives, police museums – along with Tripadvisor – would become more inclusive spaces and encourage critical dialogue about the past, present, and future.

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