

Book Review

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Narrating the heritage of psychiatry.

Edited by Punzi, Elisabeth., Wächter, Cornelia., & Singer, Christoph. 2024.
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ABSTRACT

The edited volume, *Narrating the heritage of psychiatry* (2024), introduces new insights, perspectives, approaches and methods to explore the history and heritage of psychiatry. The volume is valuable for decentring dominant heritage discourses and in demonstrating the richness of narratives arising from silenced voices, community and stakeholder perspectives, archival sources and oral testimonies. Every chapter offers original research and is set to contribute to scholarly debates in the field of heritage studies, as well as aid future scholars in thinking critically and creatively in investigating additional voices and narratives in the heritage of psychiatry.

Keywords: history of psychiatry, heritage of psychiatry, mad studies, mad activism, patient voices.

When we consider the heritage of psychiatry, we are confronted by two problems. First, owing to the deinstitutionalisation of psychiatry, many psychiatric facilities, sites and buildings have been repurposed for residential, business or university use. In doing so, the material and immaterial heritage of a psychiatric facility is very often “erased” or “forgotten”, as a means to keep the eyes of the new users of the site firmly on the present rather than on considering the heritage of the past. Second, when former psychiatric buildings have been transformed into museums and memorials, they are very often anchored to the dark heritage of psychiatry by displaying outdated treatment methods, and the abuse and confinement of patients.

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Consequently, the sites become hotspots for dark tourism and contribute to promoting and propagating a stigmatised view of madness that is filled with scandalous stories, abject suffering and dehumanised portraits of people living with mental anguish. Such sites also contribute to presenting a Whiggish narrative of psychiatry in which contemporary psychiatric practices are presented as more humane than that of the past; thus, leading to the silencing of critical voices from today's users/survivors of mental health services. The edited volume, *Narrating the heritage of psychiatry* (2024), seeks to confront these problems and counter the dominant heritage narratives of psychiatry by shedding light on how they exclude the perspectives and voices from individuals, communities and stakeholders. Thus, the volume asks:

Whose narratives become neglected or silenced? Whose narratives are perceived as important to preserve? Who is given the authority to speak 'truth' about the history and heritage of psychiatry and mental health care? And how are these heritage-discourses being constructed, which immaterial and material form of heritage do they employ to narrate the heritage of psychiatry? (Punzi *et al* 2024:1–2).

The volume opens with an introduction by the editors, Elisabeth Punzi, Cornelia Wächter and Christoph Singer, who provide a sophisticated scholastic support for 'reimagining and recontextualizing psychiatric heritage' by presenting counter-narratives and community narratives. One of the key strengths of the volume is the editors' care in selecting chapters that showcase the role of art, activism, community projects, participatory methodologies and a combination of research methods to add new narratives to psychiatry while simultaneously saluting the importance of the experiences of patients – both past and present – that have been silenced in traditional accounts of psychiatry. To underscore the value of patient voices, the volume includes artworks by the psychiatry user, Marta Wandt, whose works 'give voice and image' (Punzi *et al* 2024:5) to her life story, experiences of psychiatry, and aspects of her recovery and healing. The chapters that follow the introduction are richly detailed and immensely thought-provoking. They take up the editors' challenge to probe the dominant narratives of psychiatric heritage and successfully produce novel and nuanced readings of the history and heritage of psychiatry.

In the chapter, "Unsettling the past: Creating a multi-vocal heritage of Exminster Hospital through co-Production and performance", Nicole Baur (2024:16, 18) sought to learn about the hospital from the people who were directly affected by it. By bringing together former staff, patients, and the local community, Bauer generated 'intergenerational dialogue' of the hospital as a 'place of dichotomies', that holds 'different meanings for different people, and aroused different feelings and emotions'. A hallmark of the chapter is Bauer's (2024:30) adoption of a 'participatory approach and combining sources such as correspondence, oral histories, photovoice, photo-reminiscence, sound walks and art activities' to explore the multiple narratives of the hospital. The chapter, "Lillhagen is still elsewhere: Approaching a dismantled mental hospital", demonstrates how the authors, Elisabeth Punzi and Helena Lindbom (2024:35), provide an 'alternative approach to the heritage' of Lillhagen psychiatric hospital by combining 'personal accounts of memories surrounding Lillhagen with an academic

exploration'. The chapter provides a laudable study of how the authors worked together to 'learn from each other' and how they recognise the importance of remembrance for 'correcting the misrepresentations of history and for recognizing patients as individuals' (Punzi & Lindbom 2024:47, 50). Thus, for Punzi and Lindbom (2024:43), to 'remember places of oppression is a way of recognizing those who were incarcerated there'.

Rob Ellis and Rob Light (2030:57), in their chapter, "Narratives of de-institutionalisation: patient and community responses to mental hospital closures in England", draw upon an 'archive of oral histories, collected at a mental hospital in the north of England in the 1980s' – at the time in which it was earmarked for closure – to explore the patients' hopes and fears, how the patients' viewed their time at the hospital, and the impact of the hospital's closure on the patients. The chapter highlights the existence of 'multiple and disparate narratives' in the history of the hospital while also providing the broader historical discourses with 'a more representative view of the past' (Ellis & Light 2024:60).

In their chapter, "From paternalism to social inclusion? user organisations' narratives of psychiatric services in Sweden", Veikko Peltto-Piri and Jenny Wetterling (2024:79) explore the impact of user organisations in influencing the 'public opinion and policy makers, which resulted in the deinstitutionalisation and humanisation of psychiatry'. The authors highlight how there is much to learn from the history of the user organisations, and how in today's time, such organisations are needed more than ever to support social inclusion.

In the chapter, "Plaques, politics and preservation: Publicly memorialising mad people's labour history", Geoffrey Reaume (2024:98) highlights his efforts, and those of other activists, to 'publicly memorialise nineteenth century patient-built boundary walls at the former Toronto Asylum for the Insane'. Reaume's (2024:103) work shows how the 'wall of confinement' that was built by exploiting patients as unpaid labourers can be repurposed as a commemoration to the patients – their lives, perspectives and views. Thus, Reaume (2024:103) shows how the 'stones of oppression and exclusion' can be re-cast as 'stones whose stories can liberate forgotten histories and include people in our collective remembrances who had previously been forgotten'. The chapter closes by underscoring the importance of mad activists to advocate for the preservation of psychiatric sites that hold the potential to 'make mad people's history accessible and relevant to the wider community to whom it belongs' (Reaume 2024:119).

Cecilia Rodéhn (2024:131) in the chapter, "Street names and the narration of madness in a post-asylum landscape", investigates the streets named after poems by the Swedish poet, Gustaf Fröding, at Ulleråker, a former psychiatric hospital located in Sweden. Fröding was an inmate at Ulleråker but the street names 'do not memorialise the patient'; rather, they celebrate the Swedish literary canon. Rodéhn (2024:132) deconstructs the sanist discourses in the naming process by interpreting how the street names 'leak' Fröding's experiences of madness. Tomke Hinrichs's chapter, "Normality narrative in the context of the Lunatic Rights Movement", investigates institutionalised patients in

Germany who produced pamphlets to convince the public that they were sane. Hinrichs's investigation of the pamphlets also reveals how they provide insights into the lives and feelings of the patients, which are, absent in the medical case files of the hospital.

In “‘The small point through which time Passes’ – Art and artistic practices in former mental healthcare institutions”, Hedvig Mårdh explores the inclusion of contemporary art and artistic practices at sites of former psychiatric hospitals. Elena Demke's (2024:185) chapter, “‘Re-assembling the social in so called ‘mental illness’? reflections on the uses of material culture in the historiography of psychiatry and in Mad Studies’”, discusses the findings of a project based on ‘object-elicited interviews’ whereby ‘psychiatric survivors in Germany tell their stories of madness and recovery, focusing on things that acquired special meanings during experiences of crises’. The edited volume closes with a chapter by Verusca Calabria titled, “‘There was an awful lot that was good and that was necessary’: the hidden heritage of the old state mental hospitals”. Calabria's (2024:202, 206) research examines the ‘oral histories of former patients and retired staff and community collections of hospital artefacts’ to explore the role of hospitals as ‘places of safety and belonging’. Such accounts are missing or obscured in the prevailing discourses of deinstitutionalisation that uphold psychiatric hospitals to be total institutions and solely aligned to the abuse of patients and the misuse of psychiatric power. Calabria's (2024:203) study is significant for foregrounding the ‘positive therapeutic elements of residential care’ and thereby highlighting the contested histories and heritage of hospitals.

Narrating the heritage of psychiatry offers a masterful and sophisticated collection of chapters that illuminate the importance of studying psychiatry's heritage. The volume will be essential reading, and of great importance, for scholars seeking to further explore the multiple narratives of the history and heritage of psychiatry.

REFERENCES

Punzi, E, Wächter, C & Singer, C (eds). 2024. *Narrating the heritage of psychiatry*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.