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Editorial

Not-criminally responsible stories: Forensic inpatients story their in-hospital experience through essays, poems, lyrics, and song

Récits de personnes non criminellement responsables: des patients hospitalisés en psychiatrie légale racontent leur expérience à travers des essais, des poèmes, des paroles de chansons et des textes de chansons.

Greg Procknow, PhD(c)
Critical Disability Studies, York University
gregproc@yorku.ca

I toured the Asylum Point Cemetery alone on my lunch break one scorcher of an afternoon. The cemetery is wedged between the uber-modern Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care (Penetanguishene, Ontario) and the gneiss banks of Georgian Bay, themselves landlocked between buttressed, windswept pines and liquid turquoise. Waypoint is Ontario's singular high-secure forensic mental health hospital housing residents adjudicated by the courts as not criminally responsible (NCR) by reason of a mental disorder, unfit to stand trial, or on remand for fitness to stand trial assessment. Two months prior, I joined Waypoint's research team as a two-year MITACS student research intern, working with Dr. Christopher Canning (Director of Research & Academics), a service-user and stalwart of the psychiatric survivor and mad movements, collaborating on a forensic patient-oriented research (fPOR) project: researchers researching how to conduct research, involving forensic patients from project conceptualization to results dissemination. We cross-fertilized the criticality of Mad Studies with forensic psychiatry, a field in which service-user knowledge is treated

secondarily to clinicians, into a now-published manuscript in *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (Canning & Procknow, 2026).

Initially, having trouble tinkering with the wrought iron gate's swing-over latch, believing disuse and oxidation were the cause of its malfunction, I was enthusiastic and undeterred, and I scaled the double gates. Mid-ascension, the double gates' latch popped open with a sharp metallic clack, like a flintlock pan cover flying back; the portal parted – I clung on as a passenger on a pivoting hinge as I swung shoulder-wise into this ancient cemetery. I expected to see tombstones, some collapsed, others slanted against their neighbors. Instead, this final resting place of 300 or more long-term patients of the 'Asylum for the Insane' (and later Oak Ridge) interred here between 1904 and 1970, resembled a fenced-in green necropolis set in a black iron bezel; a peaceful park where the dead sleep under wildflowers, not stone. The verdure-covered surface was dotted with hundreds of flat, flush-to-the-ground slabs. Co-patients engraved the slabs with wood and brass stamps, impressing the deceased's names and inmate numbers. Thick mats of grassed earth or overgrown moss have leached over the slabs, making many of the names inset beneath illegible—unkempt edging, where earth and weathering of the lettering had eaten into their surnames. I escaped the enervating heat under a thick-bole weeping willow to dine on Skippy and strawberry Smucker's sandwiches. The low-profile stones gave the space a uniform look, like most park-like cemeteries, making this space easier to maintain. The idea of uniformity registered like a shot, that even in death, the 'misfits' interred were being maintained in a conformist, uniformist frame. I expected stories, interpretive panels, more than the forty-word commemorative stone that greeted me at the entryway. Tombstones are the quiet storytellers of a cemetery. The story I

surmised was the crude grave markers, possessing weight but no story. There was little to preserve their memory. There were missed opportunities to make these flat, nondescript, rectangular grave markers into monuments. Here, I imagined amplifying their presence, spatially visualizing the landscape upright, with the precision of a hyperphant[1], inverting these markers into vertical granite tombstones and ornate obelisks stretching heavenward on cast zinc calves, rather than slabs being swallowed up by turf seeking new roots to sow; stones we meander around or between, not over top of. Each imagined stone, in my mind, had wider real estate so more glyphs could be engraved into each quartzite flat, with inscriptions informing passersby if the cause of death was psychiatric disablement[2], unspecified illness, old age or wastage. My affinity for these patients' past was assured because I was incarcerated on this archipelago in 2002-2003, at the Central North Correctional Center (CNCC), the maximum-security penitentiary, a brief 12-minute walk from Waypoint. My prison sentence accounted for an earlier public mental health crisis where I racked up three indictable offenses, as my schizophrenia (later re-diagnosed as schizoaffective disorder) was undiagnosed and untreated. Reflecting on my proximal history with Waypoint's patients past prompted a deeper cogitation on NCR inmate-inpatients present. Realizing that grave markers were like posthumous stamps, acting as final, enduring impressions—a lasting 'stamp' of an inmate's life, identity, and legacy —was when I conceived this themed issue. I aspired to make the stories of patients present louder, so their words and legacies endure as monuments to lives lived, not

[1] …where imagined scenarios feel as real as perception
[2] Psychiatric care gone awry can induce iatrogenic harm, and that is when debility arises from medical treatment.

minimalist alternatives to one in mere grave markers, but as granite bookmarks in forensic hospitals' storied history of carceral harm.

NCR inpatients were invited to submit original works that speak to their in-hospital experience. The collection that follows is unique, as no other peer-reviewed journal, edited book collection, periodical, or activist publication has dedicated an entire themed issue to NCR inpatients, platforming their stories as sole authors and researchers of themes central to inpatient life. This curated issue is a critical corrective to address the absence of literature on NCR inpatients engaged in research on matters that matter most to them (Askola et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2025) and to center their needs and experiences (Okoroji et al., 2023). Forensic 'inmates', according to the editors of *Pheonix Rising* (1980) are the subset of psychiatrized people "most abused and discriminated against" (p. 2) and their opinions in comparison to service users in 'general' psychiatry, are far more under-researched because tiered security systems, power inequities, and "compulsory detention compound forensic and user involvement attempts" (Long et al., 2012, p. 568). Their vulnerability makes them exceptionally hard to engage in research, on research, or as equal research partners, because bureaucratic 'red tape' and strict ethical approval processes bind their stories like a straitjacket, silencing them like duct tape applied to a megaphone. Patients were once encouraged to write in the 1800s as a modality of moral therapy for the insane, supplying asylumized authors "intellectual stimulus" and gratification, seeing their writings in print and in circulation had "allowed their work to be read by 'civilised society' beyond the confines of the asylum" (Park & Hamilton, 2010, p. 105). Their efforts undercut "the notion that the capacity for personal expression was open only to those of sound mental health" (Park & Hamilton, 2010, p. 105).

There is a long-history of asylumized authors from the nineteenth century, who wrote for publication in asylum periodicals: Crichton Royal Institution of Scotland's *The New Moon*, its first edition released December 1844, impressively within one year of circulation, 3 women and 17 men had contributed a combined 119 articles, poems, letters, plays, and song lyrics (Park & Hamilton, 2010); New York State Lunatic Asylum's *The Opal* published by patients in 1851 (Reiss, 2004); and, Bromley's Bethlem Royal Hospital's magazine, *The Star of Bethlehem*, began circulation in 1875 (Andrews et al., 1997). As moral treatment as a psy-approach to mental health care waned by the 1890s, so did these periodicals, and the 'presses' moved out of the hospital into the community. Mad writers, ex-patients, survivors, and reformists, through letter writing campaigns, activist newsletters, and personal memoirs, shed light on the "inner workings" of asylum systems "to the reading public with the hope that it would bolster support for 'patients' rights and lasting change to the asylum system" (Rembis, 2024, p. 102). In-community, writings about inpatient experiences took a decidedly radical turn when anti-psychiatry was introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, theorizing mental health 'patients' as on par with 'prison inmates' (broadly applied, not a term reserved for the 'criminally insane'), 'mental health hospitals' as 'psycho-prisons,' exposing treatments through coercion, not choice, and disputed diagnostic reliability. This reform agenda inspired the following psychiatric inmates' liberation and anti-psychiatry magazines: *Madness Network News* in the United States (first issue, 1972), *Asylum* in the United Kingdom (first issue, 1986), and Canada's *Phoenix Rising* (first issue, 1980). The former two serials are still active. *Phoenix Rising: The Voice of the Psychiatrized* was a quarterly publication founded by two psychiatric survivors and headquartered in Toronto, branding itself the voice for psychiatric inmates

(Weitz, 1990). During Phoenix Rising's publication run, thirty-two issues were released between March 1980 and July 1990 (Reaume, 2026). Copies were made available free of charge to prisoners and inmates in confinement. Germane are Volume 1, Issue 2 (Summer, 1980) "*Prison Psychiatry*"; featuring two stories about 'criminally insane' inmates neither written by inmates themselves; and Volume 8, Issue 2 (May, 1989): "*Prison: Voices from the Inside*" featuring several stories from inmates broadly, but only Clifford Laurence's story emerged from lived experience in Oak Ridge, but refers to it as "Peneteng."[3] Involuntary is not the same as indefinite, and those held in 'general' psychiatric clinics experience throughput in mere months compared to the average length of an NCR patient stay, which spans seven years.

About the contributors

I distributed a 'seeking contributions' flyer to a few of my forensic hospital contacts (see end of this editorial). The call attracted 18 NCR inpatients who expressed interest in producing original pieces ranging from essays to podcasts to poems. They were given wide latitude to discuss whatever aspect of their in-hospital experience they wanted. There were no guiding research questions steering subject content. Storytelling was their research method to explore topics that mattered to them. This marked a rare instance of patient-directed research affirming these 'othered' authors as agentic, granting them total control over the research process, how they told their story, and what would be published, while retaining copyright over their contributions. Five withdrew on good terms, citing conflicting in-hospital duties or uncertainty if they could meaningfully add value. I lost

[3] Other CNCC prisoners and I also referred to our facility as 'Penetang' for short. I believe Clifford is using it in reference to Oak Ridge.

contact with two who were awaiting group home beds as set out in their disposition. Eleven contributions were submitted. One contributor was pulled by his treatment team because writing for publication upset him. All ten contributors reside in one of Ontario's ten geographically dispersed forensic mental health hospitals, including Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care (Penetanguishene), Southwest Centre for Forensic Mental Health Care (St. Thomas), Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre (Ottawa), and Brockville Mental Health Centre (Brockville), spanning minimum, medium, and high secure provision. The forenamed asylum periodicals featured works produced by their own 'patients.' This special issue marks the first known multi-site (multi-institutional) project featuring asylumized authors from more than one 'general' psy-facility; the sui generis quality of this issue is made all the starker, because these sites are 'forensic' hospitals. Submissions were majoritively from contributors of color; two touched on racialization in forensic care (e.g., Akira Guy-Gin), helping to redress the dearth in asylum histories where 'mad writers' authoring pieces for publication tend to be White, as so "few written accounts of the emotional distress and institutional experiences of … people of color, exist" (Rembis, 2024, p. 3). Only two authors were women (both White), the rest identified as male. Contributors were remunerated $150 immediately upon an 'accepted' decision. Two participants from Waypoint received deposits into their PIN money accounts through honoraria secured through York University; one received payment through bank draft, requiring me to go in-person to the bank to complete the account deposit; and the remaining seven were paid via Interac e-transfer from my private bank account.

No critical or anti-psychiatry frame was imposed on patients, nor was one imposed on their words or works. Regarding language, many contributors I have grown closest to

would not use the term ‘inmate’ to refer to themselves; they would use ‘patients’ in treatment. The anti-psychiatry vernacular equating the ‘euphemistic’ term patients (arguing how can they be patients when they are indefinitely detained against their will) with inmates, a lexical descriptor reserved for ‘criminals,’ indeed runs contrary to the phrasing of their ‘not criminally responsible’ finding. Lastly, all author drafts were subject to editorial guidance; however, no revisions were required to obtain an ‘accepted’ decision. For instance, I asked all authors to elaborate on their points to give readers a fuller picture of the matter.

About the contributions

This special issue is organized into four sections. In the first section titled “*Essays defining NCR and in-hospital privileges*,” M.C authored “*My Perspective on the NCR system*,” which discusses how substance relapses act as a reset button, extending the indefiniteness of his sentence. He ends his piece with a brief poem. Luke Robicheau’s “*My Brockville Mental Health Center Experience*” portrays unit life and programming (mostly) positively and explores how exercising privileges responsibly within the hospital extends his access outside it. A Voice Beyond the Verdict’s (pseudonym) “*Recovery Within Constraint: Agency and Relational Care Under NCR*” provides insight into the gendered dynamics of forensic life. She also touches on peer relations as foundational for resilience with an emphasis on recovery. In the second section, “*Contrasting perspectives at Southwest Center (Letters to the editor),*” Kan Janpor’s “*Letter to Southwest Center*” rebukes the legitimacy of psychiatry, his indefinite detention, and how a system not intended to be punitive is “the closest approximation of pure evil that [he has] experienced in [his] present incarnation.” Kan’s words were smuggled out of the

facility by his brother while he was in solitary confinement to be submitted to *Critical Disability Discourses* during the shrinking submission eligibility window. Contrarily, Eagle Eye's "*Letter to Greg Procknow*," received by letter mail and penned in cursive on 11x17 full scrap, considers the positive relational dynamics with staff and his "fellowship" with co-patients; however, he expresses concern for his co-patients when negativity consumes them. In the third section, "*Poetry and song about in-hospital feelings*," Marc Cook (alias) provides an institution-critical poem, entitled "*Everyday I feel the wrath*," and a line-by-line commentary that criticizes staff, medications, and recreational programming. Juan P's "*Raptured Creature*" is a collection of 4 poems covering his time as a prisoner in an unspecified pen to now being "held hostage" in his cell in high-secure care. Nicholas Gerald Jansen's downloadable song, "*Is this meant to be…*," waxes lyrically about his 15 years living under a detention disposition. Additionally, Jansen supplied the lyrics in writing, with insightful commentary. Lastly, Akira Guy-Gin's "*Tangible Delusions*" is an essay questioning the facility's definitions of delusion, decompensation, and risk, and lyricizes some experiences. This special issue concludes with the section "*Inpatient educational experiences*" featuring Coolio Pfiffer's (alias) essay entitled "*Difficulties with education resulting from my car accident*" that covers her car crash, enucleation, and how her symptoms of mental illness connect to traumatic head injury. She historicizes her educational journey leading up to her confinement, as well as the education she completed while an NCR resident, elegantly recounting it in a very engaging style that demonstrates her skill as an essayist.

Greg Procknow

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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Interested in writing, singing, poetry, painting, or storytelling?

Interested in sharing your experiences as a resident of a forensic facility?

We are looking for different forms of media to include in our next issue of Critical Disability Discourses, a special and unique journal that focuses on experiences of disability from a critical perspective.

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Authors will be compensated for their contribution upon successful publication. The managing editor of the journal, Greg Procknow, will be available to guide authors and offer advice on getting their piece ready for our July 2026 publication date. Drafts or completed pieces will need to be completed by May 05, 2026.

Interested? Inquiries and submissions should be directed to Greg

Procknow for more details at gregproc@yorku.ca or 647-877-8973.