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COMMENT

Us and Them: Disability Ethics, Oral History and Inclusive Praxis in the Reuse of Asylum Photography

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Abstract

'Us and Them' is a community history project and artistic collaboration exploring physical and intellectual disability and mental illness, in the past and present. It is part of a broader initiative to open out wider conversations about the history of psychiatric care in Epsom (Surrey, UK) and to explore ways in which medical histories, creative engagement strategies and oral history praxis can illuminate the instability of contemporary understandings of 'healthy minds' and 'normative bodies'. This article charts our recent reuse of asylum photography and the restaging of wet-plate collodion portrait making, opening out key ethical questions about our complicity as consumers of historical sources, the role of re-enactment and empathy, and the place of the haptic and the ludic in exposing the porous and precarious boundaries between ableism and disability. Exploring our own vulnerabilities and solidarities in co-producing a public history project with our disabled artist collaborators, it offers insight into our evolving 'micro ethics', foregrounds lived experience perspectives, and offers some initial thoughts on ways to rethink critically some core tenets of oral history methodology.

Keywords: disability history; oral history; public history; visual sources; medical humanities

> I am famous for my sense of style; gotta be stylish, 'cool girl'. In the portrait, I am wearing my straw hat because it's summery, with my autumn dress. I have green and white ivy around my neck. I'm wearing my leopard-y shoes, but you can't see those. They remind me of a tiger: 'grrr'. In the portrait, I look beautiful. Memorise it! (Alice, 2023)[1]

In October 2023, the wet-plate collodion portrait photographer Emma Brown worked with a group of Surrey-based disabled artists, Freewheelers Theatre and Media

[1]Oral history conducted on 21 Nov. 2023, between Laura and Alice (with Jamie).

Figure 1. Alice, reproduced with permission of ©Emma Brown.

Company, to produce nine portraits. Alice (Figure 1) was one of those photographed and she reflected eloquently in her oral history on the nature of her dramatic self-presentation: adoption of a traditional straw hat; the choice of a modernist, patterned dress; and the draping of organic foliage – almost like a feather boa – around her neck.

What is unstated in this opening epigraph are Alice's unvoiced (and perhaps unconscious) reasons for such stylistic choices. All the Freewheelers producing portraits had engaged with a series of evocative early- twentieth-century glass-plate photographic negatives preserved in the Surrey History Centre (SHC) in Woking. After discovering more about the history of psychiatric treatment and disability diagnosis in their locality, the *Freewheelers* chose 'a friend from the archive' whose image would appear, alongside their own, in an exhibition entitled 'Us and Them' which ran from 1 to 14 December 2023. Alice identified Rosa (known as Edith) Harris as her visual pair (Figure 2)[2] – a London-born woman who was confined to the London County Council's

[2]The Freewheelers have chosen to use their first name within this research, alongside reproduction of their photographs, as a stigma-dispelling celebration of their identities and experiences – see Sheena Rolph, 'Ethical Dilemmas: Oral History Work with People with Learning Difficulties', *Oral History*, 26 (1998),

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Figure 2. Rosa (Edith) Harris (1879–1919), SHC 6317/3 Box 33 1958.

Manor Hospital in Epsom in 1910 and was buried seven years later in a pauper burial plot in Horton Cemetery.[3] Rosa was photographed on her admission to the asylum and this visual diagnostic tool, annexed to her medical record, presents a striking portrait of a 31-year-old woman who gazes directly at the camera and wears an elaborate lace collar over her hospital-issue dress.[4] Alice's echoing 'green and white ivy' scarf also evokes the copious foliage now growing over Rosa's burial spot. While we know that she lies in grave number 28b, there is no way of currently identifying her exact plot.[5] The property developer who bought the Horton Cemetery from the NHS in 1983 and removed thousands of metal grave markers (and some headstones) has prohibited

66–7. Moreover, we have refrained from de-identifying archived and publicly available patient material, agreeing with Julie Parle on the tacit reinforcement of silencing taboos through recourse to anonymity or the use of case numbers: 'The Voice of History? Patients, Privacy and Archival Research Ethics in Histories of Insanity', *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 24–25 (2006–7), 164–87.

[3]https://hortoncemetery.org/harris-rose-matilda-edith/ and SHC 6282/13/30.

[4]Vivienne Richmond, 'Stitching Women: Unpicking Histories of Victorian Clothes', in *Gender and Material Culture in Britain since 1600*, ed. Jane Hamlett, Hannah Greig and Leonie Hannan (2015), 90–103.

[5]Horton Cemetery burial register, 1899–c.1955, SHC 6336/1.

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access to the burial grounds for relatives and the public alike, pursuing a speculative path to planning permission across forty years during which the historically manicured cemetery grounds have run wild. Today there is no memorial on this seemingly abandoned five-acre site to alert the public to its currently unappreciated heritage value as a site of conscience and Europe's largest psychiatric cemetery.[6]

The 'Us and Them' exhibition, stemming from a public history project and artistic collaboration centred on Horton Cemetery, explored visual representations of physical and intellectual disability and mental illness – past and present. It sought to open out wider community conversations about discrimination and the shifting social and medical taxonomies of normative bodies, 'healthy minds' and learning disabilities. By restaging and provocatively 'pairing' our images with a tranche of mostly Edwardian photographs, we sought to re-present these heritage objects for stigma-dispelling and restorative justice purposes. Alongside its exploration of the ambiguous and conflicting ethical considerations raised by the reuse of asylum photography, the installation celebrated the Freewheelers' agency and experimental creativity in making and sharing audio-visual art which foregrounded their bodies and their voices. It reframed and destabilised historical representations of disability visually and aurally.

This article charts the genesis and implementation of an ongoing public history project co-produced with disabled creatives to make, interrogate and reimagine asylum portraiture. In presenting the co-productive strategies used within this community-engagement and consciousness-raising project, we interrogate histories of mental health, disability and oral history praxis in seeking to deploy memory, affect, sound and visual provocation for broader transitional justice purposes.[7] In answering these scholar-activist research questions, we firstly place the history and practice of medical photography in dialogue with critical, interdisciplinary scholarship to pose questions about voyeurism, abjection, the production of empathy, and our complicity as consumers of historical evidence. Secondly, we examine neglected theoretical and practical issues at the intersections of disability history and oral history praxis, diagnosing barriers in accessing the archive, negotiating university ethical policies, and calling for an embrace of 'crip time' to understand better the lived experiences of disabled and neurodiverse interviewees. As such, this local history and community engagement project offers insights into broader theoretical discussions of ethics and vulnerance in the use of medical photography and opens out reflections on the need for more inclusive practices in oral testimony methodologies and public history if we are to move from ableist assumptions in our academic practice.

[6]https://www.thehortonninethousand.org/ and https://eehe.org.uk/24725/hortoncemetery/.

[7]For an excellent survey of co-production principles and praxis, see Ann Fudge Schormans, '"Weightless?" Disrupting Relations of Power in/through Photographic Imagery of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities', *Disability and Society*, 29 (2014), 699–713; Katherine E. McDonald and Erin Stack, 'You say you Want a Revolution: An Empirical Study of Community-based Participation Research with People with Developmental Difficulties', *Disability and Health Journal*, 9 (2016), 201–7; Carla Rice, Eliza Chandler, Kirsty Liddiard, Jen Rinaldi and Elisabeth Harrison, 'Pedagogical Possibilities for Unruly Bodies', *Gender and Education*, 30 (2018), 663–82. On the nexus between oral history and the 'visual turn', see Alexander Freud and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *Oral History and Photography* (New York, 2011).

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A flash of recognition and divergence: background to the 'Us and Them' project

When Historic England launched their 'everyday heritage' scheme in early 2023, the Surrey-based community researchers campaigning to provide dignity and recognition to those buried in Horton Cemetery applied for and won a small grant.[8] Alana was the historical consultant on the year-long 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind' project and led a series of history-focused, art-therapy workshops with members of the public, orientated around the co-creation of a pop-up ceramic memorial garden of more than 1,500 hand painted flowers. Nearly thirty workshops were held with primary schools, churches, mental health charities (including at the headquarters of Mind), with refugee and asylum seekers, and in dialogue with palliative care support groups. These community history workshops sought to educate diverse audiences about Surrey's underexplored history as a critical hot-spot for the diagnosis and treatment of psychiatric illness and disability in twentieth-century Britain.[9] Moreover, they sought to raise awareness of the increasing risk of housing development on the Horton Cemetery land in Epsom, and to build a broad-based coalition to push for a compulsory purchase order to return the site to public ownership, with access to graves for relatives.

One such interactive, art-therapy workshop was held in January 2023 with the Freewheelers and while a bubbly young woman named Zena was reading a condensed life history of Sylvester Fury and his difficult life moving between workhouses and asylums,[10] she evocatively remarked: 'One hundred years ago, that could have been us.'[11] Karl (CEO of Freewheelers) was immediately struck by this insight and the historic patient photographs that undergirded the workshops, as they reminded him of his photographer friend Emma's portraits and their previous work together on other disability arts projects. It occurred to this emerging project collective that if the Freewheelers were to have their portraits taken using these same historic photographic processes, we could 'level the playing field, get beneath the superficial surface of things, and begin to explore the real differences between now and then and us and them'.[12] The 'Us and Them' initiative was born from this intuitive spark of empathetic

[8]https://historicengland.org.uk/campaigns/help-write-history/everyday-heritage-grants, Project Number 8672.

[9]There are some excellent studies of specific Surrey-based asylums: see David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum, 1847–1901* (Oxford, 2001) and Anna Shepherd, *Institutionalizing the Insane in Nineteenth-Century England* (2014) comparing Brookwood Asylum and Holloway Sanatorium. Classic synoptic studies tend to overlook the early-twentieth century institutions in Surrey however and concentrate on Bethlem, The Maudsley and to a lesser extend Hanwell and York Retreat, e.g.: Andrew Scull, *Desperate Remedies: Psychiatry's Turbulent Quest to Cure Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Jonathan Andrews, Roy Porter and Asa Briggs, *The History of Bethlem* (1997); Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Age of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac* (1997); and Hugh Freeman and German E. Berrios (eds.), *150 Years of British Psychiatry*, II: *The Aftermath* (1996). The startling concentration of asylums in this one County – including *five* institutions in Epsom alone – with its proximity to London, inter-exchange of patients and medical professionals, and pioneering experimentation with therapeutic treatments (especially arts-based and music therapies) awaits a synthetic history.

[10]Sylvester Fury (1861–1910), https://hortoncemetery.org/fury-sylvester/.

[11]An observation also made in other projects on historic institutions with disabled people, see Linda Steele, Phillippa Carnemolla, Rachel Spencer, Jack Kelly, Laura Naing and Leanne Dowse, 'Listening to People with Intellectual Disability about Institutions', *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*, 3 (2023), 49–71, at 58.

[12]Oral history conducted on 21 Nov. 2023 between Laura and Karl (hereafter Karl's interview).

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recognition and compassionate connection across more than a century. It has sought to harness the instinct of these disabled creatives in order that by exploring the points of connection – but also divergences – in the diagnosis and treatment of disability and mental illness across many decades, important conversations about self-expression, dignity, visibility and an ethics of care might be opened out.

Following ethics clearance, and with a small grant of enabling Impact funding from King's College London,[13] a creative co-participatory team was assembled in partnership with Julian Pooley (archivist, Surrey History Centre) and two preliminary sessions were held at the Freewheelers' premises, where participants explored how they might wish to represent themselves and their personalities through props, poses and costumes. Two further archival sessions were held at SHC where the Freewheelers explored the history of Surrey's psychiatric hospitals, including 'Royal Earlswood Asylum for Idiots and Mental Defectives' in Redhill as the first institute in Britain set up to cater for those with developmental disabilities in 1847.[14] These sessions pivoted around (recorded) discussions of shifting (and now offensive) terminologies, reading patient medical records, and studying maps of the asylums (including the establishment of photographic rooms).[15] Particular attention was given to the history and photographic records of the 'Epsom Cluster' – the five London County Council psychiatric institutions established in this historic market town between 1899 and 1924 – which in its geographical concentration and patient population (more than 10,000 residents) is remarkable as the largest complex of its kind in Europe.[16] Among the materials arrayed for consultation were some of the very first wet-plate collodion photographs taken in British psychiatric institutions, such as those from Surrey County Lunatic Asylum generated by the 'father of psychiatric photography' Hugh Diamond,[17] and the diagnostic and recruitment portraits produced between 1855 and 1868 by Earlswood's medical superintendent, John Langdon Down (after whom Down's syndrome was named).[18] As leading figures in the moral treatment movement,[19] the photographic 'specimens' they generated and publicly circulated embodied the paradox of the 'continued stigmatization of asylum patients by reducing them to their psychiatric diagnosis … [while also potentially] humanis[ing] the subjects to their

[13]King's College London, REMAS Ethical Clearance, HR/DP-23/24–40572 and AHRC IAA AH/X003485/1).

[14]Pamela Dale and Joseph Melling (eds.), *Mental Illness and Learning Disability since 1850: Finding a Place for Mental Disorder in the United Kingdom* (2006); Robert Ellis, *London and Its Asylums, 1888–1914: Politics and Madness* (Cham, 2020).

[15]Jan Walmsely, 'Healthy Minds and Intellectual Disability', in *Healthy Minds in the Twentieth Century: In and Beyond the Asylum*, ed. S. J. Taylor and Alice Brumby (2020), 95–111; Cheryl McGeachan, '"The Head Carver": Art Extraordinary and the Small Spaces of Asylum', *History of Psychiatry*, 28 (2016), 58–71.

[16]In order of foundation these were: Manor Hospital (1899), Horton Hospital (1902), The Ewell Epileptic Colony (St Ebba's, 1903), Long Grove Hospital (1907) and West Park Hospital (1924) – see https://eehe.org.uk/25027/hospitalcluster/, Ruth Valentine, *Asylum, Hospital, Haven: A History of Horton Hospital* (1996) and Kirsty Arnould, *The Epsom Cluster: Voices from Europe's Largest Psychiatric Hospital Complex* (Stroud, 2019).

[17]Sander Gilman (ed.), *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography* (New York, 1976); Sara Wetzler, 'Hugh Diamond, the Father of Psychiatric Photography – Psychiatry in Pictures', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 219 (2021), 460–1.

[18]Anne Lea, *Royal Earlswood: A History* (Redhill, 2005); David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Royal Earlswood Asylum 1847–1901* (Oxford, 2001).

[19]Sharrona Pearl, 'Through a Mediated Mirror: The Photographic Physiognomy of Dr Hugh Welch Diamond'. *History of Photography*, 33 (2009), 288–305.

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viewers, thereby conveying the humanity of suffering'.[20] As we discovered, the camera was and remains a powerful tool with a pivotal function in medico-psychiatric discourses but it also offered a means of producing highly expressive portraits that experimented with artistic techniques and evoked empathy.[21]

As the Freewheelers learnt more about the lives of people confined to these 'total institutions', including the ways in which medical diagnosis and treatment has changed (for example the shift in understandings of epilepsy from a psychiatric disorder to a disability),[22] we looked for a life story, or motor or neurological disability, echoing our own experiences.[23] In guided research through the medical histories in the archive, we were invited to ask questions (many of which could not be answered) about patients' lives before admission to the hospitals, their experiences and treatment there, and we tried to find out, or draw some 'empathetic inferences' through visitor records for example,[24] about their families, pathways to the asylum and survival strategies.[25] In some cases all the information we had about a person was their glass-plate negative photograph and a name, in others there were casebook records in which a medical officer noted patient symptoms and statements, and catalogued behaviour.[26] In some instances we could compare this 'medicalised gaze' with family admission statements, an occasional patient letter, or ask questions about a mismatched, even contradictory, visual 'voice' we might read from the photographs themselves.

The nine Freewheelers who participated in the pilot project also had open-ended recorded conversations about the historic person they had chosen, interwoven with reflections about their own lives. When it came time for their portraits to be taken – under a very strong white light and recognising the need to retain a pose for eight seconds – we all worked actively with Emma to make decisions about how to be photographed and presented. This included how to sit (and whether to use wheelchairs and physical aids or not), what attitudes to present to the camera, what clothing worked best with the special lighting and reactive chemicals, and what facial expressions could be sustained through the longer exposure period of this older form of photography.[27] These discussions and interactions were filmed by the Freewheelers'

[20]Sara Wetzler, 'What Faces Reveal: Hugh Diamond's Photographic Representations of Mental Illness', *Endeavour*, 46 (2022), 100812.

[21]Laurie Dahlberg, 'Dr Diamond's Day Off', *History of Photography*, 39 (2015), 3–17; Emily Godbey, 'Picture Me Sane: Photography and the Magic Lantern in a Nineteenth-Century Asylum', 41 (2000), 31–69.

[22]Andrew Scull, *Museums of Madness: The Social Organization of Insanity in Nineteenth Century England* (1979), 252.

[23]On the instability of the term 'disability', see Susan Burch and Michael Rembis (eds.), *Disability Histories* (Champaign, IL, 2014), 2–3.

[24]Jane Nicholas, 'A Debt to the Dead? Ethics, Photography, History and the Study of Freakery', *Social History*, 47 (2014), 154.

[25]Mark Finnane, 'Asylums, Families and the State', *History Workshop Journal*, 20 (1985), 134–48 and, building on John Walton's pioneering work: Leonard Smith, 'Pathways to the Asylum', in *Insanity, Race and Colonialism* (2014), 126–52.

[26]Guenter B. Rossie and John Harley Warner, 'Reconstructing Clinical Activities: Patient Records in Medical History', *Social History of Medicine*, 5 (1992), 183–205.

[27]Danielle Peers and Lindsay Eales, 'Moving Materiality: People, Tools, and This Thing Called Disability', *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2 (2017), 101–25.

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media team, audio-recorded by Laura, and presented in the form of a visual exhibition with audio-only documentary now available online.[28]

Extracts from these recordings, which chart the project co-production and shared responsibilities for historical framing and the creation of audio and visual materials, appear throughout the discussion that follows. These verbatim testimonies allow the Freewheelers to narrate, in their own words and on their own terms, their intentions in co-curating an exhibition celebrating difference, resilience, relationships and self-expression.[29] As the Freewheelers discovered, one hundred years ago, 'people like us were defined by what we could not do'.[30] In contrast, the Freewheelers understand and express themselves by what they can do, the things they proactively make, in how they choose to live, and whom they love and are loved by.[31] In trying to reframe these historical portraits through these lenses, and with these questions and provocations, we intend a restorative repurposing of artefacts undoubtedly originally designed to objectify, to classify, and to contain visually as instruments of a total (but in reality quite porous) institution.[32]

Assembling and interrogating the archive: medical photography as visual evidence

Medical photography is a rich, immediate, affective, yet problematic fragment or 'trace' of the past and a considerable and compelling body of literature has illuminated the ways in which psychiatric portraits – modelled on and influenced by the criminal mug shot and Galton-inspired physiognomic, anthropometric and eugenic analysis – must be situated within the discursive regimes and forms of knowledge production which engendered them.[33] As Susan Sontag reminds us generally, 'photographs were enrolled in the service of important institutions of control, notably the family and the police, as symbolic objects and as pieces of information'.[34] More than four decades ago in his pathbreaking *Seeing the Insane*, Sander Gilman cautioned against a 'naïve reading of madness' and offered strategies for parsing these issues through the various tropes of psychiatric photography.[35]

[28]https://on-the-record.org.uk/listen/us-and-them-2/. On applicable concepts in disability cinema, see Lawrence Carter-Long, 'Disability Cinema's Next Wave: Observational Agency Subverts the Ableist Gaze', *Film Quarterly*, 76 (2022), 55–60.

[29]Elizabeth Gagen, 'Facing Madness: The Ethics of Exhibiting Sensitive Historical Photographs', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 71 (2021), 39–50, at 44.

[30]Oral history interview conducted on 7 Nov. 2023 by Laura with Jamie (hereafter Jamie interview).

[31]See Lucy Series, 'The Post-carceral Landscape of Care', in *Deprivation of Liberty in the Shadows of the Institution* (Bristol, 2022), 53–83.

[32]Nuancing Goffman's famous designation of the asylum as a 'total institution'. See Seamus Mac Suibhne, 'Erving Goffman's *Asylums* 50 Years on', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 198 (2011), 1–2.

[33]E.g. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), 191; John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays of Photographs and Histories* (Amherst, 1988); Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca, 1996), 187–226.

[34]Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1979), 23.

[35]Sander Gilman, *Seeing the Insane* and *Illness and Image: Case Studies in the Medical Humanities* (New York, 1982).

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More recently, scholars such as Ludmilla Jordanova[36] and Susan Sidlauskas[37] have grappled with the alluring aesthetics and interpretative ambiguities of this genre. Both historians wrestle with the tension between the psychiatric portrait as a 'specimen' and a 'subject', recognising that medical portraits were tools for diagnosis yet also media for constrained expressions of subjectivity and self-presentation. A photograph such as Figure 3 carries two electrifying charges – the dazzle of aesthetics and the shock of coercive practice, which may or may not move us to a moral response.[38] When it is read alongside the medical casebook, we discover the contours of Kate Bailey's life history: domestic service in Oxford, her first hospitalisation aged seventeen, her marriage and care of a two-year-old and, as telling background to this photograph taken on her admission to the Manor Hospital in Epsom, her committal following the birth of her second child a mere few days earlier. We also see a uniformed nurse – a relatively rare occurrence within asylum photography – making visible the often-hidden human interactions and patient–staff (and nurse and doctor–photographer) dynamic in the production of these images.[39] Is the nurse captured on silver and collodion, with her seemingly benign gaze and light touch, offering comfort, or restraint, in supporting Kate's postpartum body through the long exposure? Such images prompt us to ask important ethical questions about voyeurism, abjection, and our own complicity as consumers of these material remnants and reminders of unequal power relations.[40] Confronted with this image of Kate in her vulnerability, registering her vacant stare and wrinkled brow, we are drawn into triangulated view lines – from the nurse to Kate, from Kate to the (unseen) photographer, and then as spectator inhabiting the photographer's view on these encounters. It is impossible to disentangle these imbricated lines of sight and to decode fully, using Allan Sekula's evocative description, these 'fragmentary and incomplete utterances'.[41]

In his early essay on the explanatory power of historical photographs, Eric Margolis chastened 'the impatient storyteller within every historian [to pose] a series of questions' of historical photographs, such as 'Who took the photograph and why? What are the assumptions of framing, timing, and focus? [and] Why was the photograph preserved?'[42] As Katherine Rawling has compellingly analysed across several pathbreaking studies considering the impossibility of answering many of these questions – including the nature of the dialogue between photographer and sitter (which is also often a doctor–patient power relationship) – asylum casebook photographs

[36]Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Portraits, Patients, Practitioners', *Medical Humanities*, 39 (2013), 1–2.

[37]Susan Sidlauskas, 'Inventing the Medical Portrait: Photography at the "Benevolent Asylum" of Holloway, c.1885–1889', *Medical Humanities*, 39 (2013), 29–37.

[38]Caroline Dahlquist and Peter Kinderman, "'Picture Imperfect": The Motives and Use of Patient Photography in the Asylum', *History of Psychiatry*, 32 (2023), 130–45.

[39]Dianna Gittins, 'Silences: The Case of a Psychiatric Hospital', in *Narrative and Genre*, ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (2002), 46–62; Dolly MacKinnon and Catharine Coleborne, 'Seeing and Not Seeing Psychiatry', in *Exhibiting Madness in Museums: Remembering Psychiatry through Collections and Display*, ed. Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon (2011), 3.

[40]Nicholas, 'A Debt to the Dead?', 153.

[41]Allan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital', in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (2003), 445.

[42]Eric Margolis, 'Mining Photographs: Unearthing the Meanings of Historical Photos', *Radical History Review*, 40 (1988), 34.

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Figure 3. Kate Bailey (1882–1914), SHC 6317/3/Box 34 2032.

are especially complex and 'their trickiness is a characteristic of the fractured and uneven record of patient experience in the past'.[43] It is therefore most instructive perhaps to start with the final question posed by Margolis when contextualising the medical records consulted within this project at SHC in Woking. As Julian explained:

[43]Katherine Rawling, 'Patient Photographs, Patient Voices: Recovering Patient Experience in the Nineteenth-Century Asylum', in *Voices in the History of Madness: Personal and Professional Perspectives on Mental Health and Illness*, ed. Robert Ellis, Sarah Kendal and S. J. Taylor (2021), 237–62, at 258; '"The Annexed Photos were Taken Today": Photographing Patients in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Asylum', *Social History of Medicine*, 34 (2019), 256–84.

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> My role in this project started three decades ago when, as an archivist for Surrey County Council, I was responsible for rescuing the historic records of Surrey's hospitals. As the 'care in the community' policy was rolled out and residential care [mostly disappeared], Surrey's psychiatric and learning disability institutions closed rapidly. Often working against the clock, we rescued thousands of medical case books, files, registers, and ledgers that recorded the lives, illnesses, and treatments of tens of thousands of people over more than a century.
>
> The records we saved had been kept in poor conditions. Damp, mouldy and infested with insects, it has taken thirty years to clean, conserve, and catalogue them so that they can continue to tell their story to us today and for generations to come.[44]

Throughout the archival sessions, Julian described driving around the derelict hospital complex of the 'Epsom cluster' and, with the tacit consent of security guards installed to deter other 'asylum urbexes' (urban explorers), he raided skips and sheds to salvage ledger books and discarded glass-plate photographic negatives from rodents and from squatters burning the records for fuel.[45] Julian reported, in fact, that the people he found sleeping in the abandoned asylums were often former patients, seeking sanctuary in the only place they knew.[46] Extending Jeffrey Mifflin's invitation (drawing on Paul Ricoeur) to defend the orphan archive, Julian and his team have created and curated this medical collection and work in close collaboration with researchers – chiefly family and social historians – around its interrogation and interpretation.[47]

Central to our project was the opportunity to discover more about the physical and material production of these photographs through our own embodied simulation of the mechanical and chemical processes involved in a portrait production. We learned about the diversity of the SHC collection, the idealised moral therapeutic regimes of the modern asylum and the varied socio-historical worlds of patient-inmates.[48] The county asylum records were 'effectively mug-shots', on Julian's assessment, taken on admittance for classification and identification. We can safely infer that these individuals were posed under some duress, wearing ill-fitting clothes which were randomly assigned through the asylum population after laundry day. This rather dehumanising fact also served a diagnostic purpose – if inmates protested that their tiny feet were swimming in enormous shoes or that their rough corduroy jacket was too tight, this indicated that they were 'becoming self-conscious', that is presumed curable.[49]

[44]Julian's presentation to the Freewheelers, 28 Mar. 2023.

[45]E. Higgs and J. Melling, 'Chasing the Ambulance: The Emerging Crisis in the Preservation of Modern Health Records', *Social History of Medicine*, 10 (1997), 127–36.

[46]On other closed and abandoned asylum complexes, and photographic projects to record them, Barbara Brookes, 'Pictures of People, Pictures of Places: Photography and the Asylum', in *Exhibiting Madness in Museums*, ed. Coleborne and MacKinnon, 30–47.

[47]Jeffrey Mifflin, 'Visual Archives in Perspective: Enlarging on Historical Medical Photography', *The American Archivist*, 70 (2007), 32–69.

[48]Madeline Bourque Kearin, '"A State of Conscious and Permanent Visibility": Sight as an Instrument of Cure and Control at the Worcester State Hospital for the Insane, 1833–1900', *The New England Quarterly*, 92 (2019), 431–76.

[49]Julian Pooley's interactive presentation, 13 Nov. 2023.

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Meanwhile the Holloway Sanatorium ledger books which Susan Sidlauskas used for her careful and suggestive analysis contained images of women in elaborate crinolines, reflecting their self-understanding (or their family's presentation of them) as gentlewomen in distress. We learnt, in practical terms, about the ways in which these sources can be read as a 'veiled but significant assertions of subjectivity',[50] especially through the signifiers of class as well as gender.

In contrast, photographers such as Langdon Down of the Earlswood asylum were seeking, through photographic technologies, to reify expressions as 'natural' indexes of the mind beneath – the Mongol type, the Aztek type, the cataleptic type – but to draw gesture, movement and affect into this diagnosis too.[51] Together with his peers, Down produced what Fraser described as the 'photographic code' or 'schema'[52] of madness and disease, but against a studio backdrop with bourgeois props and accoutrements such as writing desks, floral arrays, furs or jewellery. Nevertheless, the diversity of genres, styles and origins of such casebook photographs have led visual scholars like Rory du Plessis to argue that photographs can 'accrue meanings beyond any dominant clinical context or narrative' and need to be 'located precisely in terms of the individual sitters' acts of posing, constructions of self-presentation and connections to socio-cultural worlds beyond the asylum.'[53] In encountering this 1891 archived *carte de visite* of Florence Thornton (Figure 4), for example, a resident at Normansfield Hospital in Teddington, we contemplate an ambiguous counternarrative to the 'dark past' cast of many asylum histories. These histories are often predicated on a progress narrative celebrating a liberal, humane and inclusive present – which can mask new forms of present-day institutionalisation, current structural failures in care, and ubiquitous economic inequalities disproportionally affecting disabled people.[54] Dressed in her luxurious velvet smocked gown, surrounding by the accoutrements of middle-class domesticity (a side table and raffia basket with foliage), Florence looks well cared for and gazes confidently and contentedly at the camera in a manner and self-projected terms that amply exceed a Down's syndrome diagnosis. Her sparse medical records within the London Archive indicate that she arrived at the hospital aged seven with 'feeble circulation', is 'imitative and affectionate', and while she 'speaks very indistinctly … knows what is said to her'. In the ten months she spent in Teddington – if the cessation of the casebook entries is evidence of discharge – she 'knows most of her letters', was visited by her mother and aunt on several occasions, and despite a bout of whooping cough was 'in fair health' or 'quite well'. For Florence this was a temporary sojourn, and she was not completely cut off from the outside world, with an extended twenty-two-day absence explained as 'Gone to Sandown' (perhaps where her family lived or for a holiday to the races?) recorded in the ledger.[55]

[50]Sidlauskas, 'Inventing the Medical Portrait', 30.

[51]Beatriz Pichel, 'From Facial Expressions to Bodily Gestures: Passions, Photography and Movement in French 19th-century Sciences', *History of the Human Sciences*, 29 (2016), 27–48.

[52]Kathryn Fraser, 'The Photographic Insane'. *Journal of Film Studies*, 9 (1998), 139–151, at 141.

[53]Roy Du Plessis, 'Beyond a Clinical Narrative: Casebook Photographs from the Grahamson Lunatic Asylum, c.1890s', *Critical Arts*, 29 (2015), 88–103, at 89.

[54]Sheena Rolph and Jan Walmsley, 'Oral History and New Orthodoxies: Narrative Accounts in the History of Learning Disability', *Oral History*, 34 (2006), 85–91.

[55]The London Archives, H29/NF/B13/004 Medical Case Book. We would like to thank FOHC researcher Elizabeth Aumeer for this reference.

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Figure 4. Florence Thornton's portrait by Fred G. Smith of Kingston, SHC 4645/19/63.

Emma Brown drew our attention to unappreciated tactile, auratic details within such tintype images. The photographer, then as now, leaves their thumbprint or 'maker's mark' on the plate in the process of checking that the wet collodion chemistry has set like jelly on a plate, ready to be exposed to the light. As Emma continued: 'I love this idea that there's a bit of their personality in there ... as well as the personality of the person who's had their portrait made.'[56] We discovered that in the past, photographic plates were coated in pure silver, while later processes used silver halide grains – and as a result, the 'images are higher definition than modern HD', disrupting our standard, teleological expectations of technological progress. Other unexpected traces of production emerged as we immersively engaged with the technological medium of

[56]Oral History interview conducted on 27 Nov. 2023 by Laura with Emma Brown (hereafter Emma's interview).

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Figure 5. a & b Caroline Sophia Appleton (1831–1911), SHC 6317/3 Box 28 698, original and enlarged.

the photographic negatives and their development. High-resolution digitisation of the glass plates and their enlargement to A1 scale for an associated artistic project[57] revealed an unexpected secondary image sometimes captured – the silhouetted body of the medical photographer and his outdoor surroundings reflected within the pupil of the sitter (Figure 5).

One of the Freewheelers and a project co-lead, filmmaker Gary, commented: 'it's almost as if the patient's eye is a camera'.[58] This produces a vertiginous sense of *mise-en-abyme* (a picture inside a picture, a story inside a story). The patient was captive within the controlling medical gaze and institutional regimes but also captured that gaze in return – there is a play of subtexts mirroring each other. Engaging with these questions about the conditions of photographic production, the social relationships clustered around their creation, and the interplay of codes and conventions for presenting a 'healthy' mind and normative body, such are the seductions and frustrations of appraising how those photographed saw themselves and their confinement. As a project team we surrendered to the allure of intimacy and agreed with Brookes that with 'the elapse of time ... [such] photographs [might] be liberated from typology' and 'released ... back to individuality: to show us the humanity of people who perhaps did not usually get to pose for a camera'.[59]

[57]https://ericfong.com/works/apparitions-work-in-progress/.

[58]Gary Thomas, during a preparatory visit to the Surrey History Centre by the media group, 28 Mar. 2023.

[59]Brookes, 'Pictures of People, Pictures of Places', 31.

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We would agree that these are 'raw histories' that might 'spring leaks', in Elizabeth Edwards suggestive conceptual analysis.[60] Or perhaps they are better characterised as 'haunting presences', as Vora has conjectured through her creative project refashioning a daguerreotype series of enslaved people.[61] There are fraught ethical considerations to be addressed in deploying photographs from medical settings in exhibitions and even in reproducing them within this article – deanonymised and centring faces, and especially the eyes. Yet as Chrisine Slobogin contends, a customised microethics should, in the final analysis, guide decisions about publication and display and we have made our peace with our exhibition design decisions.[62]

Empathetic and embodied engagement with the archive: public history as gift or trespass?

The above raises questions as to who medical records and heritage archives are for and how we can best engage with them. As disabled scholar and 'institutional heckler' Lauren Pikó has observed, traditional methods of archival research are simply inaccessible to many of us.[63] They require high levels of literacy, sustained concentration, sitting for prolonged periods and the ability to handle awkward manuscripts, not to mention sufficient resources to travel and take time off on certain days around often constrained opening hours. Furthermore, the bureaucracy of the archive can feel oppressive to people with lived experience of institutions and care. Archive staff disappear 'off stage' into locked storerooms and reappear with white gloves and stern notices about security.[64] For all these reasons, we needed innovative methods so that barriers to archival access might be overcome. These included calibrated travel arrangements and hired minibuses to transport the Freewheelers collectively to the archive, wheelchair-accessible reading rooms, and the display of archival material at adjustable heights, break-out spaces for the portrait taking and talking, and a quiet room in which interviews were undertaken or emotions processed.[65] The SHC's friendly staff and the wider team anticipated all such adjustments and provided a warm and inclusive group setting where diverse individuals could discuss and perform their findings out loud.

Yet, simulation or 'restaging' in some scholarly quarters is regarded with scepticism as a historical method,[66] particularly if the researchers appear to privilege uncritically empathy as a mode of relating to their sources. Sarah Fox, in her insightful survey of

[60]Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photography, Anthropology and Museums* (2001).

[61]Bindi Vora, 'Tailoring Freedom', *British Journal of Photography*, 169 (2022), 68–81.

[62]Chrisine Slobogin, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: The Covering of Patients' Eyes and a Microethics of Medical Photography', *Medical Humanities*, 50 (2024), 770–8.

[63]Claire Wright and Yves Rees interview with Lauren Pikó, https://www.archivefeverpod.com/ep7-institutional-heckling (accessed 2 Jul. 2025).

[64]See Daniel Regan's Historical Royal Palaces project: *Creatively Minded and Heritage: Creativity and Mental Health Activity in Heritage Settings*, 11, https://cdn.baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BF_Creatively-minded-Heritage_WEB-lr.pdf.

[65]Sheena Rolph and Dorothy Atkinson, 'Emotion in Narrating the History of Learning Disability', *Oral History*, 38.2 (2010), 53–63.

[66]John Brewer, 'Reenactment and Neo-Realism', in *Historical Reenactment: Reenactment History*, ed. Iain McCalman and P. A. Pickering (2010), 79–89; Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular* Culture (2nd edn, 2016).

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the 'state-of-the-art' in an earlier issue of *Transactions*, pointed out that 'this sense of recognition and connection should be approached with caution, lest it close the gap between "now" and "then"'.[67] This echoes Silke Arnold-de Simine's criticism of the empathetic turn in public history and his scepticism that emotional responsiveness to imagery resulted in a more ethical or historically informed knowledge of past and present struggles.[68] We are acutely aware that a historian's empathy can be more akin to trespass than gift but for us 'restaging' became a 'labour of active and therefore critical thinking'.[69] We were informed throughout by historical analysis and abjured a projection of self-regard or self-pity onto nineteenth-century patients. It was precisely through the sensory, embodied, inductive and interactive occasions of engaging with archival material, and then sitting for our own portraits, that we were able to disaggregate clearly what belongs to 'us' and what pertained to 'them'.

The Freewheelers and their supporters learned about the history of asylum photography through our discomfort provoked by bright lights, our struggles to hold a pose, and the way we have personally internalised or rejected the gaze of others. We were mindful of historical and contextual differences. We posed for up to 10 seconds under stable LED lights in the comfort of the SHC teaching rooms, while our Victorian counterparts were forced to sit outside irrespective of the temperature, as natural light was required. Others were subjected to a fierce magnesium flare – the illuminating flash required by the developing process – which must have sounded like artillery fire. We gave enthusiastic and informed consent to be photographed and were able to ask for the care we needed from friends and support workers. As Anna described: 'I get seizures when I come to new places. Katie holding my hand and Minnie Mouse is in my lap. It really calmed me down.'[70] Katie's hand of reassurance is visible in Anna's portrait, in contrast to the nurse in Figure 2 or much more egregious examples in the archive of overly medicated or physically incapacitated patients, deemed dangerous or non-compliant.[71] In these highly disturbing historic photographs, disembodied hands might support a weak or tremulous head or prop-up a near comatose body. Looking at the portrait of her photographic pair who holds a tabby kitten on her lap,[72] Anna wondered whether she too needed a comfort object when being photographed (given the case book report of delusions) and about her relationship to her feline friend. Finally, within the project we were able to observe all the various stages of the photographic process, including the 'magical' moment when the negative emerges from the

[67]Sarah Fox, 'Archival Intimacies: Empathy and Historical Practice in 2023', *Transactions of the RHS*, 1 (2023), 241–64, at 244.

[68]Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (2013), 15, 44–53.

[69]R. G. Collingwood, 'Human Nature and Human History', in *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), 215, https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Collingwood/1946_1.html, and more recently, Ann Oakley, 'Interviewing Women Again: Power, Time and the Gift', *Sociology*, 50 (2015), 195–213.

[70]Oral history interview on 7 Nov. 2023 by Alana and Laura with Anna.

[71]Cora Salkovkis, '"Queer Mind and Body": Reflections on the Interpretation, Communication and Experience of the Body in the British Asylum, c.1840–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, Birkbeck University of London, 2022), 211, 316–7.

[72]Mary Anne Dearn (c. 1861–1910). SHC 6282/14/4. See Jane Hamlett and Lesley Hoskins, 'Comfort in Small Things? Clothing, Control and Agency in County Lunatic Asylums in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18 (2013), 93–114.

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developing fluid.[73] In contrast, our historic pairs, in all probability, never had a chance to see their likenesses. There remain therefore real issues of ethical complicity in our studying and displaying these images never meant to be seen or exhibited in public.[74]

The visible effects of decay and entropy on the SHC collection also reinforced a sense of temporal distance and cultivated for the project team a recognition of separation as much as identification. Given the precarious passage of this material to the archive, the casebooks and the glass plate negatives show palpable signs of wear and tear – cracked book bindings and spines, photographic fading, and chips or hairline fractures across the surface of the glass plate negatives. We discovered that this dual feeling of estrangement and familiarity is perhaps integral to the reproduction chemistry itself. Wet collodion photographic processes invert the image, producing a likeness that is more akin to what the sitter sees in the mirror than a modern, conventional photo. Logo brands on our contemporary clothing, for example, were reversed to comic effect! Yet, the way the process reads and reproduces colour and tonality is also profoundly different from modern visual apparatus. The action of time and heredity is more apparent in Emma's photos – a deepening of freckles and smile-lines, which enhance the character of the face. Blue and green are lightened, endowing people who have pale eyes with a limpid and penetrating gaze. We were reminded of Sontag's caution that the taking of a photograph might unsettle or violate a sitter 'by seeing them as they never see themselves'.[75] As Julian reflected, thinking about his own portrait:

> We assume a grandeur, a vividness that doesn't necessarily come over when you first meet us ... So, it's made me think differently about the photograph. They're not necessarily the portraits of the patients as they were. They're the way the cameras pick them up. So that's not necessarily what they looked like, just as it's not necessarily what we look like.[76]

Through our own crafting and making, new ways of knowing and revivified appreciations of historical and technological process have emerged, enhancing our 'visual literacy'.[77] In our sensory, embodied engagement with these historical artefacts, our research seeks to contribute to a creative and emerging field of public history in opening out questions of fixity in historical interpretations and demonstrating the benefits of bringing imagination, play, recreation and re-enactment into conversation with 'historical fact'.[78] Much as Lepecki has argued about the afterlife of dance and

[73]For footage of the Freewheelers viewing their photographs being developed, see https://youtu.be/dtXOYPgV2mA.

[74]Susan Sidlauskas, 'The Medical Portrait: Resisting the Shadow Archive', Article 26, 11 Nov. 2018, https://nonsite.org/the-medical-portrait/.

[75]Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

[76]Oral history interview on 1 Dec. 2023 by Laura with Julian Pooley (hereafter Julian's interview). See also Tim Schlak, 'Framing Photographs, Denying Archives: The Difficulty of Focusing on Archival Photographs', *Archival Science*, 8 (2008), 85–101.

[77]Joan M. Schwartz, 'Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic "Othering," and the Margins of Archivy', *Archivaria*, 54 (2002), 142–71.

[78]Mads Daugbjerg, Rivka Eisner and Britta Knudsen (eds.), *Re-Enacting the Past: Heritage, Materiality and Performance* (2017).

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the effect of researching and restaging historical choreography, we agree that in 're-enacting we turn back, and in this return we find in the past [artefact] a will to keep inventing'.[79]

Sontag and Barthes have also described the power and deathly *memento mori* quality of the photographic image. For Barthes, portraits have a 'unique capacity of animation, producing an immediate, "pricking" effect which surpasses narrative emplotment by inducing the viewer to feel despair, compassion, pity or empathy towards the depicted person'.[80] Sontag explored the 'scandalous effect' of the immediacy and seeming verisimilitude of the photograph in presenting 'a thin slice of space as well as time' in which the moments before and after fall off a precipice, along with their capacity truly to edify an audience.[81] We encountered these feelings of uncanny slippage, ghostly apparitions and time travel too – Emma confessed to an 'eerie feeling' in using the nineteenth-century glass plate negatives pairs chosen by the Freewheelers to create a 'positive' photographic image for exhibition. For her this was almost like reanimating past lives, producing photographs of people who had not posed for her and 'did not choose to sit in my studio'.[82] This is reminiscent of Sontag's warning: 'To photograph people is to violate them ... it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.'[83]

The Freewheelers, as shape-shifting performers themselves, complicated Sontag's iconoclasm through the process of composing their photographs and voicing their accompanying narratives. Influenced by Garland-Thomson's influential essay on the 'Politics of Staring', our photographs deployed the visual rhetoric of realism to minimise the differences between the viewer and the viewed – not only in the dialogic production (between Freewheeler and their historic pair) but also through the photographic exhibition afterwards (within the photographic diptych displayed and viewed by the gallery spectator). Nevertheless, within this realist framing, playful self-presentation strategies could draw upon diverse photographic repertoires encompassing the lucid, the wonderous and the sentimental to choreograph 'a social dynamic of looking' and illuminate 'the culturally fabricated narrative of the body'.[84]

Sonas, a dancer, gathered many 'slices' of his personal space-time into one portrait by precariously balancing nine hats on top of his head for his portrait. 'I am a man with many hats, each has their own story. All of my hats are my favourite, so I wore all of them', he explained (see Figure 6).[85] He paired his image with the enigmatic music hall personality Byron Pedley who was 'responsible for a great deal of merriment' during

[79]André Lepecki, 'The Body of Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances', *Dance Research Journal*, 42 (2010) 28–48, at 46.

[80]Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1993), cited in Niklas Altermark and Emil Edenborg, 'Visualising the Included Subject: Photography, Progress Narratives and Intellectual Disability', *Subjectivity*, 11 (2018), 287–302, at 290.

[81]Sontag, *On Photography*, 3–24.

[82]Emma's interview.

[83]Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

[84]Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability', in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (New York, 2002), 56–75, at 74.

[85]Interview on 21 Nov. 2023 by Laura with Sonas (hereafter Sonas's interview).

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Figure 6. Sonas, reproduced with permission of ©Emma Brown.

his stage career before he was eventually confined to Long Grove Asylum in Epsom .[86] Despite being a 'mere one hatted man',[87] as Karl jokingly observed, Byron Pedley with his bowler hat and jaunty cane captivated Sonas because it was reminiscent of his own stage role as the Ballet-Master in a Freewheelers' production. Whereas the history team had been scouring the archives to try to unearth a person of visibly discernible African extraction to correlate with Sonas's Ugandan family heritage – recognising too that the experiences of disabled people of colour are critically undertheorised in the existing literature[88] – Sonas disarmed our presumptions about identity categories

[86]Byron Pedley (1844–1910), https://hortoncemetery.org/pedley-byron/.

[87]Karl's interview.

[88]Caroline Bressey, 'The City of Others: Photographs from the City of London Asylum Archive', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 13 (2011), http://doi.org./10.16995/ntn.625; Angela Frederick and Dara Shifrer, 'Race and Disability: From Analogy to Intersectionality', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5 (2019), 200–14.

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and found a bowler-hatted entertainer who, like himself, was most himself when performing to the gallery. On seeing the 'KING'-brand on the last hat in his pile reversed in the image produced by the photographic process, Sonas quipped: 'I'm the GNIK of Freewheelers!'[89]

Peter, who is renowned as an expert wheelchair user, decided to climb out of his chair when photographed, drawing the viewer's attention instead to his bright blue eyes and his hands clasped (as he put it) 'like bird's wings'. Reacting to his portrait, he reflected: 'In the photo, I feel like an able-bodied person. If I got my way, I'd walk like everyone else. Still, I outpace most joggers with my wheelchair.'[90] By contrast, Anthony chose to wear markers of his physical impairments (high-tech hearing aids and spectacles) in one portrait, and to dispense with them altogether in another. In the first portrait co-created with Emma, Anthony's spectacles are blacked-out like sunglasses – another peculiarity of the wet collodion process – giving Anthony the cinematic allure of 'a mafia boss' in his sharp pin-striped suit, or perhaps a spy holding a blue-tooth conference with his associates.[91] Through their performances for the camera, both Anthony and Peter move away from a focus on 'disability' towards a tacit critique of 'ableism', which Kumari Campbell defined as 'the enforcement of a *constitutional divide* between perfected naturalized humanity and the aberrant, the unthinkable … and therefore non-human'.[92] Through their relationships with communications and adaptive devices, Anthony and Peter might present as hybridisable and cyborgical, pushing against the boundaries of ontological categories. Or, as another Freewheeler put it with elegant simplicity: 'That photograph shows who I can be, though it might not be who I am every day.'[93]

At other times, the Freewheelers asked for their diversity to be simply acknowledged. 'Sometimes people think it's nice to say to me, "You don't look disabled", or "I don't see you as disabled", but actually *[dramatic pause]* just let people self-identify.'[94] This chimes profoundly with recent critiques of an ableist gaze that views disabled people's achievements as heroic inspiration porn for the able-bodied, or as projections towards a new-eugenics future in which disability and disabled people have been abolished.[95] Our participants alluded to the unpredictable spectrum of talent, disability, self-sufficiency and interdependence that many of us sit within – or will do at some point in our lifespan.[96] As Jamie reflected, with characteristic humour:

[89]Sonas's interview.

[90]Oral history interview on 21 Nov. 2023 by Laura with Peter (hereafter Peter's interview).

[91]Oral history interview 21 Nov. 2023 by Laura and Alana with Anthony and Jamie.

[92]Fiona Kumari Campbell, 'Refusing Able(ness): A Preliminary Conversation about Ableism', *M/C Journal*, 11 (2008), http://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.46.

[93]Oral history interview on 21 Nov. 2023 by Laura and Alana with Gary.

[94]*Ibid.*

[95]Spencer James Schmid, 'The Ableist Stare: An Interdisciplinary, Narrative-driven Exploration of Staring at Disabled Bodies', *Medical Humanities*, 50 (2024), 466–74; James Sheldon and Kai Rands, 'Whatever Will Be Will Be: Queering Disabled Subjects' Temporality', *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 24 (2017), 395–431.

[96]One of the authors identifies as disabled, having formerly 'masked' a late diagnosis with ADHD and dyslexia. But we are also keenly aware that not all people are or will become disabled, and that disability intersects with many other identities, including educational background, gender, ethnicity, place and class.

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> I have good days and bad days. On bad days, I have a wheelchair and Flossie, my canine partner, helps me. When we go shopping, Flossie can lower cans from the shelves and hand them to me. And she helps me take off clothes: trousers, socks, tops. But she can't do the opposite way. I have to dress myself! We're learning together.[97]

From this perspective, it was a natural decision for Jamie to request that Flossie, as a sometimes extension of himself, also have her portrait taken along with other members of the group. But despite the things he listed that he 'can't do' such as reading, Jamie exists in his own field and on his own terms: 'I can sing, I can dance, I can perform in front of thousands of people, I can make films, I can work with young people.'

Once produced, we found the portraits of the Freewheelers company members 'revelatory' and 'more akin to paintings than photographs'.[98] Benjamin also noted this quality within the early photographic process, which obliged people to concentrate their very life and being as 'the procedure itself caused the models to live, not *out of* the instant, but *into* it; during the long exposure they grew, as it were, into the image'.[99] We want to relate this co-creative presentational act by the sitter to 'composure theory' – a methodological tenet of oral history praxis – and our experiences collecting the Freewheelers' oral narratives. Over three decades ago, Graham Dawson first drew attention to the double meaning of the word 'composure' (denoting both comfort and coherence) to explain how oral history narrators attempt to create a presentation of themselves that sits well within their social group.[100] Yet we suggest, contrariwise, that it is sometimes also psychologically desirable to strive for 'discomposure', that is, a narrative in which our subjective experience does not align with the dominant discourses surrounding us, or when we resist consistent self-presentation. Peter did this by consciously stepping out of his wheelchair and reflecting on the reasons why. This, in turn, made us look more closely at those early twentieth-century patients who had pointedly looked away from the camera, who refrained from compliant smiling, or who deployed a somewhat haughty, schoolmarmish 'up-from-under' gaze to register resistance or obscure the schema of disease or madness that was imposed upon them.[101] Unresolved questions remain about how we can perceptively 'read' the emotional registers of these expressions or movements.[102] There will always be an ambivalence about how deliberate or transgressive such acts of 'discomposure' really were. Freewheeler Rachel, whose family history has uncovered a great-great-grandmother within a Victorian psychiatric institution, had multiple vectors for her imaginative projections and connections. Discussing her historic pair Susan Burton,

[97]Oral history interview on 7 Nov. 2023 by Laura of Jamie, with Alana.

[98]Karl's interview.

[99]Walter Benjamin, 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' (1931), republished in full and English here: https://www.artforum.com/features/walter-benjamins-short-history-of-photography-209486/.

[100]For an overview, see Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 65–93.

[101]Katherine Rawling, '"She Sits all Day in the Attitude Depicted in the Photo": Photography and the Psychiatric Patient in the Late Nineteenth century', *Medical Humanities*, 43 (2017), 99–110, at 109.

[102]Pichel, 'From Facial Expressions to Bodily Gestures', 44.

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she pondered: 'You can see from the dark rings around her eyes that Susan really grafted. She was a domestic servant.'[103]

Adaptive and inclusive oral histories: addressing ableism and embracing 'crip time'

Since the 1960s, oral history has exerted a claim to be the method *par excellence* for uncovering and amplifying the voices of marginalised, oppressed and underrepresented outsiders, movements and collectives.[104] The praxis certainly has a strong appeal to us because of its emphasis on experience, subjectivity, reflections on positionality, and its aspiration to sharing authority between narrators/collaborators.[105] Yet the experience of working with the Freewheelers has also left us wondering whether certain oral history tenets, routinised ethics processes and related qualitative research shibboleths are unreflexively ableist and need greater interrogation to facilitate more inclusive co-production and public history activities.[106]

From the outset, Alana's negotiation of her university's 'high risk, full ethics clearance' procedures illuminated some sharp paradoxes, ambiguities and conundrums. Bureaucratic, tick-box ethics forms start from the presumption that self-definition as 'disabled' necessarily impairs capacity for informed consent – despite, for example, differences among the Freewheelers (and between the authors too) ranging across – or combining – cognitive and neurological conditions with physiological, age-related and mobility issues. The genesis of this project from the initial idea and through the initiative of the Freewheelers themselves, and their intimate co-production throughout as makers, viewers, sitters, interlocutors, researchers, recorders and interpreters, was occluded – and frustratingly discounted – in a process that assumed, paternalistically, academic authority, while essentialising vulnerability and underestimating and homogenising disabled people's capacities.[107] Paradoxically, as the flip side of this, the university information sheets and consent forms which were mandated and intended to safeguard 'informed consent' – lengthy, full of technical jargon, and sometimes bewilderingly legalistic in content – had quite the opposite effect. As we all know, but hardly ever confess, for most oral history interviewees such forms are completely impractical and highly alienating – not just for those with differing levels of literacy or learning disabilities, as Walmsley wryly observed![108] Moreover as Ristock and Pennell have underlined from a feminist social worker perspective, 'beyond the province of such [ethics] committees is a whole range of power issues that the researcher must

[103]Oral history interview on 21 Nov. 2023 by Alana with Rachel (hereafter Rachel's interview), reflecting on Susan Burton's (1845–1916) photograph, SHC 6317/3/Box 21 419 and case notes SHC 6282/14/5.

[104]Alistair Thomson, 'Oral History and Community History in Britain: Personal and Critical Reflections on Twenty-Five Years of Continuity and Change', *Oral History*, 36 (2008), 95–104.

[105]Malin Thor Tureby and Annika Olsson, 'Editorial Introduction: Revisiting Shared Authority', *Oral History*, 52 (2024), 2–6.

[106]Dorothy Atkinson and Jan Walmsley, 'History from the Inside: Towards an Inclusive History of Intellectual Disability', *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 12 (2010), 273–86.

[107]Sheena Rolph, 'Oral History Work with People with Learning Difficulties'. *Oral History*, 26 (1998), 65–72, at 68.

[108]Jan Walmsley, 'Life History Interviews with People with Learning Disabilities', *Oral History*, 23 (1995), 71.

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be attentive to'.[109] Drawing upon Laura's expertise working with younger people and diverse community groups, and following consultation with UEL's Rix Centre, we were able to mobilise (in addition to the formal consent form) an illustrated Easy Read guide.[110] Our ethical commitment to *actual* informed consent therefore required a duplication of processes and resulted in a blizzard of paperwork for further verbal explanations and signatures – which is far from ideal. It seems to us to be highly desirable that university ethics processes should be more tailored, customisable, and allow for such adjustments in the form and format of these permission rubrics to streamline and simplify processes. In this they would do well to draw on the insights of community-engagement practitioners who have experience with inclusive and affirming microethical practices, including verbal consents, that truly facilitate understanding and informed agreement, rather than counterproductively compounding incomprehension and creating further barriers to participation.

Many oral history primers, clustered around a life history methodology, encourage novice interviewers to adopt a chronological approach – starting with childhood (as if childhood were always innocent and easy!) – and then guiding interviewees through points of transition and key markers of attainment within the 'collective scripts' of a presumed standard life passage: education – paid employment – child-rearing – the accumulation of wealth for the next generation.[111] Those working intensively on memory and life writing would question such an organisational premise; agreeing with the author Eudora Welty that

> events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily – perhaps not possibly – chronological. The time as we know it subjectively … is the continuous thread of revelation.[112]

If this is true for most of us, we should then be especially wary of what Elizabeth Freeman calls 'chrononormativity' when creating life narratives with disabled or queer people. As she explains and expands, chrononormativity is 'the use of time to organise individual human bodies toward maximum [economic] productivity',[113] and privileges the able bodied, heterosexual and university educated. Waged work schedules, calendars and clocks are in fact 'a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces seem like somatic facts', and this process habituated and entrains entire populations into narratives of progress, acquisition and individual development that are sanctioned or regulated by the state.[114]

As Lucy Delap has perceptively illustrated by examining employment, for some disabled people these identity categories and life stages, with adjustments, might apply

[109]Janice L. Ristock and Joan Pennell, *Community Research as Empowerment* (Oxford, 1996), 65.

[110]Steele et al., 'Listening to People with Intellectual Disability about Institutions', 56.

[111]For this, we are indebted Amy Tooth Murphy's fantastic IHR talk on chrononormativity, linking Eudora Welty's writing to queered oral histories, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9M3Jjewg4Ow (accessed 27 Aug. 2025).

[112]Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 68–9.

[113]Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC, 2010), 3.

[114]*Ibid*.

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or translate.[115] But for many others, including most of the Freewheelers, other or alternative conversation starters and life markers, including their activities within the theatre company over the years, are more meaningful. Jamie observed of his archival pair, Walter Cartright, who left five children after dying from the syphilis and GPI that brought him to the Epsom cluster – 'that's pretty cool. It means his legacy is passed on.'[116] This led to questions about 'who is forgotten' and who has a safe place in our domestic photo albums or national museums. However, the conversation about Walter's children had pathos for Jamie, who was on an 'emotional rollercoaster' – coming to terms with personal bereavement and regaining his confidence through performing with his non-biological 'family'.

'Us and Them' sought to represent people whose lives were 'in excess' or outside commonly circulating narratives, and the lives of our Freewheeler collaboratives, in dialogue with their archival pairs, do not always follow chrononormativity.[117] So how might we facilitate the creation of life testimonies and stories that encourage and support deviation from seemingly predictable, taken-for-granted linear narratives (inciting incident, climax and ending) and 'species typical' life cycles?[118] How might 'crip time', abjuring chrononormativity in the ways outlined by Samuels, and other innovative adjustments to praxis accommodating neurodiversity, impact on oral history praxis?[119]

As experienced oral historians, both authors were on new territory with the Freewheelers – an ambitious and inventive company of media makers and performers – as we jointly shaped narratives and co-produced soundscapes from the portrait production process. Some of our (provisional) methodological learnings include:

- *A high supporter to participant ratio is necessary*. The unpredictability of life with a long-term condition, chronic pain or mobility issue meant that many Freewheelers missed at least one workshop session. We constantly needed to keep this in mind, to create flexible plans, and to meet individuals where and when they were available.
- *Choice and customisation of recording modes.* In our project, these included private one-to-ones, recording in pairs or small groups, as well as 'active tape' and soundscapes of the tintype photographic process. Varied styles of recording allowed people to reveal their character through their gestures, actions, jokes and interactions with each other, as well as more traditional sedentary life narratives. In the audio piece that was produced to accompany the exhibition, we hear Jamie gently cajoling his canine partner Flossie with a succession of 'low value'

[115]Lucy Delap, 'Slow Workers: Labelling and Labouring in Britain c.1909–1955', *Social History of Medicine*, 37 (2024), 160–82.

[116]Jamie's interview and his pair, Walter Cartwright (1858–1908), https://hortoncemetery.org/cartwright-walter/.

[117]Danielle Peers, Melisa Brittain and Robert McRuer, 'Crip Excess, Art and Politics: A Conversation with Robert McRuer', *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 34 (2012), 148–55.

[118]Fiona Kumari Campbell, 'Inciting Legal Fictions: Disability's Date with Ontology and the Ableist Body of the Law', *Griffith Law Review*, 10 (2001), 42–62.

[119]Ellen Samuels, 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37 (2017), doi: 10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824.

> and 'high value' treats. We hear Anthony's sense of mischief and his 'techieness' as he uses his own recording devices to capture and playfully intervene in Emma's photographic process. Participants often placed themselves within a broader 'Freewheelers' collective memory, forged through years of collaborative performance and art making together. For example, Jamie commented on his spectacular choice of outfit:
>
> I'm wearing a rhinestone studded suit and a neon bow tie for my portrait. I first wore this in our production 'Do not Disturb' ... I'm going to stand out because I like being me. I'm not showing off. What I'm trying to say is that if I stand out, then everyone else stands out.[120]

This is reminiscent of Barkley Brown's statement, 'There is no need to decentre anyone in order to centre someone else, one has only to constantly, appropriately, pivot the centre.'[121]

> By pivoting around the centre (like the Freewheelers' whirling wheelchair dances), we were mindful of the concerns voiced by Helen Graham that the oral history interview should avoid merely reproducing a model of personhood defined by neo-liberal, consumerist constructions of individual agency – for, as she observed, this same 'pedagogy of the self', built around 'agency' and 'independent living', has been used to close community day centres and other gathering places for disabled people.[122]

- *Adjust interviewing techniques.* This was particularly important around interviewee anxiety and fears about comprehension, fluency and the intelligibility of audio-recordings. Our participants know each other well and seamlessly offer peer support, reinforcing statements made by members with speech impairments to aid understanding (of the interviewer and intended documentary audience).[123] When someone was struggling with an open-ended question, the authors offered friendly prompts – these might be seen as 'closed or leading questions' and therefore discouraged by traditional oral history primers designed for neurotypical humans. The need to broaden out oral history methodologies to encompass a collectivist perspective and acknowledge inter-subjectivity has long been advocated by historians of gender.[124] In congruence with the findings of other

[120]Jamie's interview.

[121]Elsa Barkley Brown, 'African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History', *Signs*, 14 (1989), 921–9.

[122]Helen Graham, 'Oral History, "Learning Disability" and Pedagogies of Self', *Oral History*, 37 (2009), 85, 87.

[123]Tim Booth and Wendy Booth, 'Sounds of Silence: Narrative Research with Inarticulate Subjects', 11 (1996), 55–70.

[124]Karen Hirsch, 'Culture and Disability: The Role of Oral History.' *Oral History Review*, 22 (1995), 8; Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History', in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (2000), 91–106; Graham Smith, 'Remembering in Groups: Negotiating between "Individual" and "Collective" Memories', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (2nd edn, 2016), 193–211.

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disability scholars, we too discovered that loosely configured 'focus groups' can offer a supportive, conversational environment to enhance participation and offer validation for those whose voices are more difficult to hear in an individual or highly focused setting.[125]

- *Creatively experiment for co-ownership, co-authorship and joint interpretation*. We innovated with iterative feedback loops and collective research interpretation – pushing well beyond more standard techniques of the return and checking of transcripts or provision of the completed publication – to foster shared ownership and ongoing, active consent.[126] Reflecting on their experiences as researchers with learning difficulties, three members of Hackney People First wrote about self-advocacy and their introduction to research methods, analysis of the results, and co-authorship of an article through a process of assemblage of their own thoughts, words and illustrations with the help of a doctoral student collaborator.[127] In discussing their post-project learnings (captured as audio by On-the-Record), and filming each other, our Freewheelers collaborators offered important reflections, findings and historical interpretations, which we have interwoven – using their own words – into this analysis. These insights and testimonies also formed the basis of the exhibit labels displayed with their paired portraits, which were read to and signed off by everyone photographed before being exhibited. Laura compiled an audio-feature for the exhibition for those who might find reading text display labels difficult (or impossible) and the exhibition was hung in the middle of the wall – wheelchair height – inverting standard assumptions about 'eye level'. We also hosted a public roundtable event during the exhibition, featuring the Freewheelers in a Q&A, at which the project team spoke about their experiences of having their portraits taken, the historical surprises encountered and the reasons for choosing their 'friend in the archive'. This was also recorded and has intimately informed our evaluations.

More conceptually, we have also come to realise that we need to tune into 'crip time' in our oral histories, which, according to Alison Kafer, 'bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds'.[128] Disabled people may take more time (or less time) to get on the train, to articulate themselves, or to complete bureaucratic paperwork. We do things at a different pace, as one of the authors can attest. To give another example, Peter, an intelligent and reflective thinker diagnosed with cerebral palsy, used comedy to disarm:

> When I'm on stage and see all the audience, I get a real reward. But the Freewheelers don't know how much effort I put in to get my speech out. When we finish a show, I feel like I could flop down to go to sleep. That's how much effort I put in for a solo show. That's why I deserve a MBE!!

[125]Steele et al., 'Listening to People with Intellectual Disability', 56.

[126]Walmsley, 'Life History Interviews', 71–2.

[127]Justine March, Better Steingold, Susan Justice and Paula Mitchell, 'Follow the Yellow Brick Road! People with Learning Difficulties as Co-researchers', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25 (1997), 77–80.

[128]Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN, 2013), 27. 'Crip' used to be a derogatory word, which has been reclaimed by some, but by no means all, theorists, and disabled people themselves.

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As Peter confirms, stutter and disfluency can arise if we feel that there is 'temporal expectation' or pressure from someone else to get our words out. What we are advocating, drawing on the poet JJJJJerome Ellis and Peter from Freewheelers, is that unusual speech patterns are welcomed as a shared experience of temporal possibility – 'the disfluency' is held and nurtured between the interlocutors.[129] When we edited the audio piece accompanying the exhibition, we consciously did not edit or elide any of Peter's pauses, because slow listening is itself rewarding.

Additionally – as will be evident within this article itself – crip time destabilises some conventional ways of structuring and writing academic histories. As disabled scholar Ellen Samuels reflected, 'crip time is time travel'. Chronic illness can 'cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings'.[130] Without wishing to romanticise the real difficulties of living with fluctuating levels of pain and energy we, along with Samuels, welcome creative ways of working and the mental flexibility it can afford. We found that some of our participants were able to gather themes across the linear span of space and time. In her one-to-one interview, Rachel was shuttling back and forth in a novelistic fashion that is reminiscent of Eudora Welty's 'continuous thread of revelation'[131] or Saidiya Hartman's 'critical fabulation'.[132] Rachel said that she was 'so relaxed' in her portrait sitting with Emma that she 'drifted back in time' and described having reveries in institutional settings as a youngster herself, when she would imagine the mischief her great-great-grandmother had caused in the workhouses and asylums.[133] Rachel recalled speaking aloud in boring classes – 'I wonder what Gran's up to now?' It is telling that Rachel's great-great-grandmother was released from the asylum because her intellectual potential was seen and Rachel fluidly connected this family legacy to her pairing with Susan – who was described in her medical case notes as 'an articulate, eloquent and educated woman'.[134] Here the conjunctions and disjunctions in personal and familial narratives, alongside those of our friends in the archive, converge and diverge.

Conclusion: doubling, the double negative, and positives

Some time ago Alan Sekula observed that the rise in medical photography in the late nineteenth century coincided with the urge to 'separate self from other', echoing a wider societal fascination with doppelgängers, shadow selves and split personalities – the rejected parts of ourselves that we cast off as fearful or aberrant. Charting the 'honorific and repressive poles of portrait practice', he identified the asylum archive as 'the shadow archive' of the poor, the diseased, the insane, the criminal, the non-white, the female.[135] For Sekula, 'Us' and 'Them' were defined, dynamically reconstituted, and diametrically juxtaposed in opposition, antithesis and scapegoated othering.

[129]Sean Cole's interview with JJJJJerome Ellis, accessed 27 Aug. 2025, https://www.thirdcoastawards.org/timebandit.

[130]Samuels, 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time'.

[131]Welty, *One Writer's Beginning*, 69.

[132]Saidiya Hartman, 'Venue in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 12 (2008), 1–14, at 11.

[133]Rachel's interview.

[134]Susan Burton's (1845–1916), SHC 6282/14/5.

[135]Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, 39 (1986), 7, 10.

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Figure 7. Mabel Florence Dawson (1860–n.d.), SHC 4645/6/12.

Our project departs from this well-worn horror story of the double, by embracing our historical 'pairs' and the messages that they might carry. As we have shown, the Freewheelers' choice of a historic person related to shared passions, or points of differentiation, as much as a doubling of diagnoses, in an attempt to slip free of an unrelenting 'medicalising gaze' and imaginatively enable patients to 'stare back' while acknowledging spatial and temporal parallels, loops and double images.

Nevertheless, even when an unabashedly epidemiological lens was deployed by a disabled artist, a blurring of vision and an identification, *and* a distinction, would be held in tension. A good example was Sam, who had a complex relationship with Mabel Florence Dawson (Figure 7). Mabel was admitted to the Royal Earlswood institution at Redhill for those with developmental disabilities in 1863 at the age of 2½ years, and her case notes record that she measured 2 foot 4 inches and weighed a mere 25 pounds with a weak back. The medical registrar also noted her fondness for music and her improved health and capacity for some speech when she was discharged, three years

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Figure 8. Sam and Sonas, reproduced with permission of ©Emma Brown.

later, as a six-year-old child.[136] It was this common love of music that first caught Sam's attention: her family used to share their house with Ewan and Kirsty McColl, hosting as visitors Pete and Peggy Seager. Additionally, Sam was also able to diagnose Mabel retrospectively (described in her medical notes as a 'congenital idiot') as suffering from spina bifida. Sam confesses that some of her loved ones do not want to discuss the condition of her neural tubes and was fascinated by the changes in how her condition was described in nineteenth-century diagnoses compared to now. In her portrait, she made a point of displaying her Medic-alert bracelet bearing the words 'spina bifida and arrested hydrocephalus'. As she reflected: 'This is novel – not many people have these, and no-one had them in the Victorian times.'[137] On this same hand, in a second dual portrait she had taken with Sonas (Figure 8), it is also possible to see an engagement ring – for as Sonas explained to Emma, 'Sam's wearing my ring – she's my fiancée.'[138]

It was important to the Freewheelers to share stories about their romantic partners in the exhibition, countering the desexualisation of nineteenth-century patients and the still-prevalent narrative that disabled people are cared for, rather than being care-takers or lovers themselves.[139] In his oral history, Anthony also conjured himself as a pair/double with his girlfriend: 'I'm always there for Lily, whenever she wants

[136]Royal Earlswood case book, SHC 392/11/4/1.

[137]Oral history interview on 21 Nov. 2023 by Laura with Sam.

[138]Sonas's interview.

[139]Nina Mühlemann, 'Future Clinic for Critical Care: MOTHER – Exploring Crip Maternal Time in the Theatre', in *Out of Time? Temporality in Disability Performance*, ed. Elena Backhausen, Benjamin Wihstutz and Noa Winter (2023), ch. 12.

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to talk, no matter the time of night.' Unlike his archival pairing (George Frederick Gilbert whose short life was dominated by epilepsy),[140] Anthony (also epileptic) lives in supported housing and pursues his passions for Lily, bike-riding, digital technology, performing and horse-riding (with his regular horse so in-tune with its rider that the animal predicts the onset of a seizure).

In *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud suggested that the double might have another meaning; one that is pertinent for our project: 'There are all the possibilities, which had they been realised, might have shaped our destiny, and to which our imagination still clings, all the strivings of the ego that were frustrated by adverse circumstances, all the suppressed acts of volition that fostered the illusion of free will.'[141] This chimes with Peter discerning 'an alter-ego', as much as a historic predecessor, in his nineteenth-century pairing with Frederick Tarrant: 'Frederick shows the other side of me. It's as if, when I'm not at Freewheelers, I get all poshed-up in my dinner jacket to go out. No-one else knows this about me.'[142] One might assume that Peter was mistaking Frederick's pauper's garb for a fine suit – feeding Sontag's fears that spectatorship trumps scholarship. Yet alternatively, we feel that Peter saw something in Frederick's photograph: the luxurious moustache, jaunty raised eyebrows and wry smile; something more than the 'dull' 'imbecile' described in his Epsom asylum cluster medical records.[143]

We invite others to examine closely the images of 'Us' and 'Them', side by side; their tones and their orientations inverted by the photographic process. The physical and metaphorical multiplication of pairs or the 'doubling of negatives' invites, for us, a creative analogy to the syntactical use of a 'double negative' in the English language. Two negations in a sentence can lead to an affirmation, or an understatement, but they can also lead to ironic juxtaposition. The effect is to produce a lilting uncertainty about the meaning of the paired terms. It introduces doubt about meaning and categorisation; the rewarding and the worrying aspects of a lack of clarity. The 'Us and Them' project left us as authors, and our wider collaborating team too, wondering – what did we miss in the photographic archive and where are our blind spots? Which subtexts, 'muted channels' or visual cues did we fail to see or hear?

What we did learn in our partnership with disabled creatives in reimagining asylum portraiture resonates with an emerging strand of critical, community-engaged scholarship and arts-based public history. This growing consensus underlines the effectiveness of creative methods and co-production in challenging the medical model of disability and amplifying voice and visibility.[144] For us, this entailed revisiting and actively refashioning our freighted and fraught visual sources and exploring the public engagement possibilities of historical empathy and ludic re-enactment to counter ableism and social stigma. The need to move beyond 'normative ethics' through an embrace of crip time, exploration of the conceptual framework of 'discomposure',

[140]George Frederick Gilbert (1888–1912), https://hortoncemetery.org/gilbert-george-frederick/.

[141]Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (2003), 143.

[142]Peter's interview and Frederick Tarrant (1868–1921), SHC 6317/3 Box 14 232 (photograph).

[143]Manor Hospital case book, SHC 6282/14/2.

[144]Roxanne Mykitiuk, Andrea LaMarre and Carla Rice, 'Cripping the Ethics of Disability Arts Research', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethics in Critical Research*, ed. C. I. Macleod, Jacqueline Marx, Phindezwa Mnyaka and G. J. Treharne (2018), 257–72.

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and adapted methodological praxis around consent and sharing authority are fruitful preliminary insights applicable to other disability arts research projects.[145] Newly secured Heritage Lottery Funding will enable us to expand on and extend these findings through the creation of a further forty-five portraits, the production of a film and large-scale exhibition, and the generation of a tranche of in-depth oral history testimonies undertaken by the Freewheelers themselves.[146]

There remains so much more to see and hear. And more to learn and feel too. Our project, with its reclamation of asylum photographic processes and its products, feels like a black box of composites and contradictions. Light and dark. Subject and specimen. Conscious and unconscious motives. Memory and forgetting. Gift and trespass. Abled and disabled. A black box system that is now beginning to take flight and which holds the possibility, through the lens of Freewheelers Theatre and Media Company, of an aerial view on Surrey's vibrant network of long-standing mental health and disability-arts organisations, which are the present-day legacy of its understudied psychiatric past.[147]

Data availability statement. Historical materials cited are available at either the Surrey History Centre (Woking) or The London Archive (Clerkenwell). Project portraits can be viewed on Emma Brown's website. Oral history interview data are available from the corresponding authors on request and will, at the end of the project, be deposited at Surrey History Centre.

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[145]Roxanne Mykitiuk, A. Chaplick and Carla Rice, 'Beyond Normative Ethics: Ethics of Disability Arts Research', *Ethics, Medicine, and Public Health*, 1 (2015), 373–82.

[146]https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/projects/us-them.

[147]See the umbrella organisation DAISY for a mapping of some of these charities: https://daisy-arts.org/.

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