Up Top: a Sense of Place for Living and Lost Memories

Authors
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Abstract
This research project brings together two researchers to investigate a local historical site. The researchers come from complementary disciplines: theatre arts and history. Both have ways of approaching the emerging data that reflect those disciplinary backgrounds.

Mayday Hills Hospital, the former Beechworth mental asylum, referred to as ‘Up Top’ by the locals, has been an iconic presence in the North East Victorian community for more than 140 years. One of the central aims of the project, titled Bedlam, is to investigate senses of place, along with the living memories of those who have in some way experienced the site. Both researchers wish to explore alternative theoretical approaches that might help them to look at the data in new and creative ways. One approach that lends itself to a multidimensional way of considering data is crystallization.

This article will look at the possibilities and potential limitations of crystallization given the diverse aspects of this project. An example of one story that has emerged from the data will be examined as a demonstration of how crystallization might provide a way forward for future collaborative project analysis and creative works emerging from the project. Ultimately the researchers want to foreground the multidimensional aspects of each story in order to highlight nuance, question preconceptions about mental health, pay respect to the communities and individuals involved, and honour the dignity of those whose stories they are privileged to share.

Keywords: history research methods; arts-based research; crystallization; research methodologies

Up Top: Mayday Hills as a Site

Mayday Hills was a functioning mental asylum in Beechworth, Victoria for over one hundred and forty years closing in 1995. Although Mayday Hills has had a strong presence in the community up to the present, not much has been written about its physical or emotional effects on the residents of the town. Even after its closure as an asylum and mental hospital the stories from its history and its folklore continue to have an impact on how community members view and remember the physical space of Mayday Hills. Doug Craig, the former manager of the hospital, is the author of the only comprehensive history of the site and it is in reference to that history, along with Doug and his wife Vals’ continuing generosity and guidance that we have begun to unravel the multidimensional aspects of the lives that have been lived at Mayday Hills and the impact on members of the community (Craig, 2000).
The grounds of Mayday Hills have been accessible to the public for many years. A forward-thinking practitioner, Dr Eric Cunningham Dax, was appointed as the chairman of the Mental Hygiene Authority in 1952 (Craig, p.147) and among the many changes he introduced was an “Open Door” system whereby local residents and patients could enjoy the twenty-five acres of sweeping gardens. The grounds for Mayday Hills had been planned as an asylum from the outset and the impressive nature of its aspect is shown in this early description from the local newspaper, The Ovens and Murray Advertiser:

...the site selected, a better one could not be found in the colony for the purpose. Situated on the brow of a hill about a mile to the east of Beechworth and at an elevation of some hundreds of feet above the township, a view rarely to be equaled... The front faces to the south/west or thereabouts and commands a panoramic view of Beechworth... In a north easterly direction there is a gradual rise towards Stanley so that there is nothing to be seen but hills, thickly wooded ... The reserve on which the Asylum is situated consists of about 200 acres... (22nd December, 1866; cited in Craig, 2000, p.48).

The site retains the feel of the open door policy today, as visitors to the historic township can freely drive around the grounds that encircle the various buildings. Alternatively they can wander through the peaceful and well-kept gardens on foot. A sense of quiet permeates so that a visitor can’t help but let the mind wander to how things might have been, knowing their presence is one in a very long sequence of characters who have lived through their fair share of struggles in this place.
Previously, we, the researchers, have individually driven through or visited the site with nothing more than a passing interest in its history and beauty. Since the site has been de-commissioned, several new owners and residents have taken occupancy of some of the better-preserved buildings. One such occupant is the Ghost Tours business, which runs on a weekly basis:

For me, the theatre arts researcher, attending one of these performances first kindled my interest in the sense of place at the site and began the kernel of an idea for the current research project. It was not prompted by the overblown and exaggerated stories delivered to the audience through the tour of some of the old buildings, but the awareness of ‘dramatic potential’ about the place itself. Real stories could be drawn from these walls and surroundings that offered much more than the sensational material provided by the ghost tour guides. Two photographs taken on the night of the ghost tour were accepted into an International exhibition on “Women and Pain”, and the project had begun.

For me, the historian, talking to Jenni about what she knew about the place sparked that excitement about a history project with meaningful stories, difficult stories that promise to help us to understand the past in different ways. The project seemed to offer some insights on perspectives we may not have considered or imagined before. By investigating the history of this place over many decades, much can be discovered about the broader community, as well as the immediate community of patients and staff who spent their days within the confines of this environment.
Combining History and Theatre Arts as a Way of Exploring a Historical Site and the Memories Associated with that Site

There have been many other investigations exploring the outcomes and hidden stories of mental health institutions both nationally and internationally. For example, the ABC produced a series of radio programs along with an exhibition based on research about the history of the Goodna Mental Hospital in Queensland: radio host, Lynne Malcolm, referred to them as "recollections of madness, care and abuse" (2008). The Museum of the Mind in Bethlam, South London, similarly promotes community dialogue about the impact of asylum on patients and carers alike. In the Bedlam project we are also seeking to talk with a variety of people who have experienced Mayday Hills in a diversity of ways – from administrators to family members; former nurses to moviemakers; site owners to social workers. Many of the participants we have been talking to have living memories of Mayday Hills while it was still functioning ‘up top’.

As well as these past memories, there are those who are arriving at the site for the first time. There is something special about the environment and old buildings that draws them in and allows them to see potential to create new stories or revel in older ones. Some people would prefer that these stories accurately depict the lives that have been lived on this site, while others are more attracted to allegory and fictionalizing that past, or using it as a springboard for fantastical suggestions.

Another aspect of the ‘living memory’ of the site is the National Mental Health Policy 1992, to close mental hospitals. The implementation of the policy meant that alternative approaches to mental health services delivery became the
preferred option over institutionalised care. There are varied opinions about the effectiveness of the outcomes of the strategy over recent decades, but according to Pauline Savvy (2005) these opinions are not well voiced. She lists several that have already arisen in some of the conversations we have been engaged in: “accommodation and homelessness… fear of speaking out against service inadequacies… the rising incidence of depressive and anxiety disorders…” (p.212).

One of the most intriguing aspects of the research project is the combined interest of the researchers in all the data that we collect, juxtaposed with our diverse ways of thinking and dealing with what we discover. Very early on in the project both researchers resolved to keep a private blog to journal thoughts, reactions and ideas, with the understanding this could provide a rich duoethnography “in telling the story… without the need to privilege one voice over another” (Kidd & Finlayson, 2015, n.p.).

Theatre Arts and Visual Art are half of the equation in the backgrounds of the researchers and theatrical outcomes for historical events have been explored as examples of possible channels through which to present the data we are collecting. Theatre artists and playwrights have famously interviewed residents of Newcastle after the earthquakes (Brown, 1998), or gay police (Wolf, 2010) and transposed the words of the interviewees into stage performances or films. In following this trail for outcomes of the data we have been influenced by the processes of Ethnotheatre and particularly the work and writing of Johnny Saldana (2011). Several stories are emerging that lend themselves to a character-driven reading or performance.

In fact, an original intention of the project was to collect data and commission three women playwrights to write plays to be directed and performed on-site. This intention remains in the background and might become part of a series of culminating events for the project. In order to provide potential playwrights with a sense of the diversity of perspectives and experiences that have taken place at the site we now realize many stories need to be collected first in order to do justice to that diversity. This is not to say that a playwright might not choose to focus on something quite small and unique from that data collection, but the aim is to provide a rich source from which to work and also to promote a greater sense of context, given the complex nature of the project.

The difference in approaches to process and use of data in each of our own histories, disciplines, and research practice, has led us to seek a way to bring them together. A process and inquiry method that we think will “define the emerging reliability” of our findings is crystallization (O’Toole & Beckett, 2013). We will discuss this further in the Methodology section below. While seeking out possible approaches we have been impressed by other researchers’ work in cross disciplines, particularly when the publications and outcomes are varied. For example, Froggett et al (2014) used scenic composition as a methodological device, and each of the four researchers made a secondary and individual response to their data collection around a webcast about growing alcoholism in a neighbourhood in Liverpool, England. The researchers say;

…the use of four scenic compositions allowed us to see and triangulate the intersecting themes… they revealed the value of multiple expressions of affect to demonstrate a complex knowledge, which is often shared but can rarely be made explicit. They demonstrate the value of combining arts-based and social scientific perspectives when working with imagery, affect and researcher imagination (n.p.).

Helen Gregory’s project “I Will Tell You Something of My Own”, a performative social science project exploring the lives, selves and art of people with dementia, is similarly impressive for its various outcomes (2014). The researchers in this project created and displayed collaborative poems, photographs, songs and visual artworks through qualitative analysis of the interviews of their participants. Whilst the project is inspiring, the model cannot transpose to the Bedlam project since our participants are not from one specific community.

In addition, the essay, “An Intimate Ethnography”, by Anurima Banerji and Ilaria Distante (2009) consolidated the value of raising “questions and provocations about the ethnographic and creative processes subtending our project” (p.45).
In this article the authors present an essay and poems, which present the reader/viewer with questions of race, gender, and the "politics of the gaze." The thoughts of the reader rise through the enigmatic language of the poetry and the focus of the camera lens on the juxtaposition of isolated parts of the bodies of Indian classical dancers. This project encourages us to look at our own data collection in new ways and be courageous by “seeing the cognitive coherence emerging and growing like crystals from all the various data sources” (O’Toole & Beckett, 2013, p.170).

There are several things that make Mayday Hills and the Bedlam project different from other projects, including those cited above. Several other Australian sites of former mental asylums have been visited and since the transfer of use is more complete for these buildings and surrounds, the ‘sense of place’ is somewhat hidden. In many instances the ‘character’ of the new use is thorough and although the buildings retain their beauty, the complete renovations of the façade and internal walls makes it difficult to picture the past. For example, Fremantle Art Centre is now a vibrant gallery and café with very little sense of its mental asylum past as only the odd window high up in the old sandstone building, as you peer past the paintings, gives any hint that someone may have lived up there, staring out at that same view but with a personal history that is less visible behind the now dressed up façade. Visitors enjoy the gardens or fashionable food with barely a thought to the reason for the height of the wall or gate. Mayday Hills as a site is quite different; it has not yet been entirely re-purposed and retains quite distinct traces of its many uses over time. Not the least of these is a room that remains unchanged since the patients decorated it themselves with colourful carpet and black and red paint, or the linoleum lined consultancy rooms of the 60s and 70s that form another wing of the former hospital. The building itself is like a timeline of every decade since the hospital was opened; conjuring up a picture of many lives lived in its surrounds. Similarly the researchers see different things in the data, and the stories they have encountered elicit quite different responses. It is because of these divergences that we have sought to find an approach to the project that might simultaneously allow us to pursue our different research interests within the project, but also, when possible, look at combining our approaches for both the analysis and representation of the data to enable those representations to take on more multidimensional characteristics. As both of us are qualitative researchers, crystallization seems to provide a way to navigate the tensions between our different approaches and also to complement the potential associated with combining them.

**Crystallization as a Methodology and Framework**

Crystallization first became appealing for the metaphor it created.

*As an arts practitioner I had been drawn to the description of the bricoleur researcher, and reading the discussion Denzin & Lincoln reiterate around interpretive practices, I agreed that “qualitative research is inherently multimethod in focus” (2008, p.7). It was then I first considered the metaphor of the crystal for this project, since the authors go on to cite a dispute regarding the usefulness of triangulation in qualitative data analysis and argue that a crystal would be a more appropriate image for qualitative research because:*

> Crystals grow, change, alter… Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions (Richardson, 2000, p.934)

Likewise, Borkan (1999) uses the term crystallization concurrently with *Immersion*, a term used by Moustakis’ (1990) in his heuristic approach. For Moustakis, immersion means deep involvement in transcribing and listening to the data, analyzing and reading. Borkan also uses “crystallization during the data collection” to refer to insights that emerge when “immersed” in the data. This has already occurred more than once with the data already collected for the Bedlam project. As researchers, we have individually and together, immersed ourselves in reading and researching the project, and, we are open to “insights [that] may also crystallize while the first data are being collected…” (p.184).

Ellingson (2009) has further developed the crystallization metaphor and the description of processes initiated by Richardson (2000) in her chapter on “Writing: a Method of Enquiry”, into a methodology, where she encouraged
writers to break out of traditional constraints:

Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them (p.4).

In designing a research project, Ellingson tells us that crystallization has no formula and the researchers should “embrace an organic evolution of their projects” (p.73). She highly recommends journaling or free writing throughout the process. The first stage is of the Crystallization process is “Wondering”, and she provides guiding questions on the subjects of Data/Analysis;Topics; Audiences; Researcher Desire; and Genres. Whilst not as comprehensive a list, the researchers have been reflecting on a series of questions in order to help clarify the aspects of similarity and difference in discipline practices and approaches, as well as understand each other’s point of view – our collective ‘wondering’. For example, to the question: In an ideal world how would you approach research? Emma says of the Bedlam project: “…when I approach history it is about promoting understanding… how I represent others so that those who read about them can also gain understanding or empathy…” In response Jenni wrote: “…even if what you present is ugly and causes pain to witness, then you are aiming for a positive change – we hope that behaviours and outcomes from the past will not be repeated by understanding how they came about.” In responding to a question on whether her discipline background influenced the way she approached research for Bedlam, Emma reflected: “Essential to my practice though, is the professional ethics that are intrinsic to the history discipline… Without this you are not doing history… You can never make claims you can’t substantiate or wish for evidence that does not exist… what remains in the record allows that wonderful sleuthing experience that enables us to work out what we can say is knowable… Jenni’s response was: “I love this confidence in discipline method and approach… having always headed towards a process for practice… I have an approach, but it’s not quite a method… I’m looking forward to… crystallization…” (Personal communication, 25/2/15).

The second stage is “Weighing Your Options” in which Ellingson encourages researchers to “embrace crystallization as an opportunity to expand your repertoire of tools and techniques” (p.77). This stage of the process is also underway with Emma identifying aspects of stories that are emerging in the data collection as having ‘dramatic potential’ and Jenni refining her knowledge of the theoretical frameworks of research methods.

Stage three is “Reconsidering the Role of Theory” where “a discussion of theory… can serve the vital function of making clear the focus of the inquiry” (p.83). This needs to be a mindful stage for us because as researchers we have considered theoretical frames independently, discussed them verbally, but not scribed any in a way that establishes our combined perspectives.

The final stage is “Decide on a Design” where a “preliminary decision on the scope and form of your project” is made (p.90). Ellingson suggests the bare minimum is a thesis statement, genre selections, and a plan. A diagram of our early avenues for exploration and outcomes has been created and included below. The diagram provides a map to possible avenues for thinking, exploration and outcomes, and is necessary due to the magnitude of possible trails to be explored. We acknowledge that this map is “preliminary” since we have declared we are open to new directions and opportunities as they arise. We agree with Ellingson, that although there is a plan for the research, it may be put to one side once in the field (p.74). The plan includes various forms of ‘publications’ about early emergent topics acknowledging that the data collection and analysis will be a continuous process.
Ellingson goes on to describe approaches to crystallization in two main types: “integrated and dendritic”. Her metaphor for bringing together the results of Integrated Crystallization research is quilting. Integrated crystallization is “woven” and “patched”. In Woven Crystallization “we deliberately weave different genres into a single text…” (p.104) and she provides the stages of producing such a text. Patched Crystallization includes a succession of juxtaposed genres, with differently named stages to produce more than one text.

In Dendritic Crystallization Ellingson envisions “an ongoing and dispersed process of making meaning through multiple epistemologies and genres, constituted in a series of separate but related representations based on a data set” (p.126). She says that researchers can go through the same techniques as Integrated Crystallization but the difference with the dendritic approach is around three main characteristics: “conscious engagement with an ongoing (re)creative process, responsiveness to the research context(s), and development of distinct, often asymmetrical branches” (p.127). It appears that whilst some of the concluding outcomes of the research project may indeed fall into the Integrated Crystallization process, the type of crystallization that describes our current way of working is “dendritic”. We agree that our research fits with the “notion of crystallization as a journey and an ideal, not simply a standard or destination” (p.144).

One emerging story…

In the first oral history interviews conducted in the project we came across a story of a returned serviceman from World War One. Let’s call him Davey… We know Davey lived in the hospital from at least the 1950s until he died in 1976 of bronchial pneumonia at the age of 86. He is buried in the Beechworth cemetery in an unmarked grave and one of our participants expressed a desire to have a plaque made up for him, recognizing his war service. On this participant’s request a search was made in the archives to continue to trace his story. His birth date and death date are not matched in the record, which means he seems to disappear once he arrives at Mayday hills. We have not yet been able to establish when he arrived at the hospital, if he transferred from another asylum in Melbourne, or whether his admittance was voluntary or not. We know that he remained living in Melbourne until at least 1933 because he appears on the electoral roll, and he has a signed statutory declaration declaring his loss of war records around the same time. Davey’s war record indicates that he was married, and had two daughters. He went to war at the age of 28 and was injured at the battle of Moquet farm, Pozières, shot in the buttocks in late August 1916. From here Davey ended up in a hospital in England and was later dispatched to Australia in 1917 and declared medically unfit for service.
The staff who knew Davey during his time at Mayday hills remember him as a bit of a larrikin who seemed damaged by war, we cannot yet say that this was the reason for him being in the hospital, but trying to trace his story has raised questions about how many other people ended up in asylums damaged by war. Following these stories may help us to understand some alternative narratives to war service. Similarly in the correspondence records for the hospital there are many references to staff members who were ex-servicemen with available jobs going to these men as a matter of priority. There are letters from wives asking for understanding about husbands’ behavior, asking for second chances. The archives reveal how lives were irrevocably changed by such events and there is much more we might search for within them in order to piece together some of these stories of loss and change.

Jenni’s thoughts about how to approach this story: Well, as a researcher and as a practitioner, I want to present stories or information that will make people think, or look at things in a different way… With Davey… Well, we’ve heard about some of the injustices done to incarcerate people think, and look at things in a different way. We know that some of the treatment of patients by doctors and working staff was not always the best either… Other participants stories run counter to this – they present the humane view – and one of those stories about Davey show him to be a character… that even though as a patient he may have had colourful language, he is a human being with a story that includes some unfortunate circumstances.

In order to tell Davey’s story I’m still thinking of using the Hogarth prints as a structure. Davey’s story is bound to be completely different, but it is a story of a life. The Hogarth prints tell a story of a young man who abuses his circumstances, wasting his inheritance on wine, women and the high life, which eventually sees him incarcerated in the mental asylum, Bethlem, looked on by the wealthy who amuse themselves looking at the unfortunate folk. Hogarth presents this as the popular view of ‘madness’ and I think it would be good to follow each stage that Hogarth presents and talk about how Davey’s life was the same or different to the young man… The final print is the most famous – with the mad young man in the asylum observed by his former peers for amusement. Davey – who fought in the first world war, maybe twice, ends up buried in an unmarked grave. (Personal blog, 2/2/15)

Emma’s thoughts about how to approach this story: As a historian I worry about how to tell this story, how to give it form without overstating the case. Here is an intriguing character, with lots of the dramatic potential that Jen has been talking about, we can imagine what might have led him to Mayday hills and we are sad that he is forgotten in a cemetery in rural Victoria a long way from his original home. Those who remember him liked him, which makes me wonder as to his character. But how do we piece together his story? To find it out, do we need his medical records? Most of these are confidential, could we trace his story in other ways? Perhaps find any existing family, or sift through any of the available war diaries from Pozières, hoping for some reference to his character, or circumstance. I want to see if his story is repeated in other places, what it might tell us about the impact of war on people, there is so much we do not know yet. Jen is interested in Davey’s life in Mayday hills, I have been so focused on how he found himself there, I have almost forgotten to think about what his life in the asylum must have been like. It would be good to draw these things together…

Final thoughts…

Crystallization is an attractive methodology for this project because it simultaneously allows us to dialogue our different ways of knowing and understandings as individual researchers and creatives, whilst also tackling these points of tension and conflict in terms of our participant data. Both researchers come from qualitative backgrounds and share a common epistemological position, believing all knowledge to be partial and situated. Such an understanding is integral to a crystallization approach, and allows for recognition of the multiple ways in which meanings might be constructed and stories represented. When considering each story we dialogue any tensions we feel about representation, what our own limits as researchers are and what each might have to offer the other in terms of building alternative understandings of those stories. Crystallization offers us a way forward at this stage of the project, and promises to allow us to share these stories in ways that might help others to give them alternative readings as well.
References


About the Authors

**Dr Jennifer Munday** is Associate Head of School in the School of Education, Charles Sturt University. Jennifer’s research interests are the scholarship of teaching – writing and researching about embedded ePortfolios and student ‘sense of self’ carried into classroom practice; and, creative work – a theatre arts and history project called Bedlam, based on and around Mayday Hills, the former mental asylum in Beechworth.

**Dr Emma Kearney** is a research officer in education at Charles Sturt University. Emma has worked on a range of projects in early childhood transitions, including working with vulnerable families, children’s research rights and Indigenous education. Emma’s background training is in history. Her research interests cohere around the theory and philosophy of history, and how these intersect with public understandings of the role and purpose of history in contemporary global society. Emma’s PhD thesis explored the possibilities for developing historical understanding across epistemologies by considering how ideas of justice can and ought to inform contemporary historical praxis. Outside her other professional activities Emma is now pursuing research projects that aim to consider how the ideas developed in her thesis translate into practice, both in relation to specific history research projects, and in terms of how history education is promoted within our communities.
1. Many in the community of Beechworth simply refer to Mayday Hills as ‘Up Top’ a reference to its looming presence on the hill above the township.