CHAPTER 3

Democracy Is a Very Radical Idea

Lanny Beckman and Megan J. Davies

Radical historian Max Page (2001) tells us that "memory-work," and giving a voice to remembrance, is an essential democratic act (p. 116).[1] Oral histories are perhaps the most fundamental of primary documents, less constrained in form and less controlled by the researcher who sets out to collect them, for spoken memories resonate with life (Thompson, 1978). This chapter is the story of a collaborative project that has tried to share ownership of history, and in the process to address questions of voice, interpretation, responsibility, and audience (Borland, 1991; Kearns, 1997; Sangster, 1994). Scholars might present these as methodological concerns, but they are really issues of power, and they become particularly pertinent in projects that engage with narratives of suffering, discrimination, and social and economic marginalization (Kerr, 2003).

The Project

Megan: I am a social historian of British Columbia health practices. Over the past decade I have collected oral histories about counterculture homebirth and midwifery in the 1970s and 1980s and about home health in the pioneer Peace River country (Davies, 2011 and forthcoming). My recent research on mental health has been as a member of a pan-Canadian History of Madness in Canada/Histoire de la folie au Canada website (historyofmadness.ca) project on the history of deinstitutionalization. In June 2010, along with Geertje Borshma (University of British Columbia) and Marina Morrow (Simon Fraser University), two of my *After the Asylum/Après l'asile* colleagues, I was looking for stories of the Mental Patients Association (MPA), a radical self-help group that formed in Vancouver during the turbulent years of the early 1970s, when Greenpeace took a boat to Amchitka and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act. But most particularly, I was searching for Lanny Beckman, the reputedly reclusive and certainly elusive individual who appeared to have been at the heart of the organization over the first years of its existence.

Lanny: I was leading a quiet life as a semi-recluse when this Megan J. Davies person banged down my front door. She said she wanted to interview me about an

organization called the Mental Patients Association, which she claimed I founded in 1970. She said I had boxes of early MPA documents in my basement—how she knew this I have no idea, but she was right. The boxes touched off a sense memory and then the whole history of MPA flooded back in sensuous detail.

After a stint in Vancouver General Hospital's psychiatric ward in 1970, I founded the MPA rather than continue my PhD studies in psychology at UBC (I left with an MA). The tragic reason I started the organization was that three people in the day program I was attending after I was discharged from hospital committed suicide, all on the weekend when we didn't meet. These grim events were the kernel from which the organization grew. And it grew very quickly. The origins of the group were extremely exciting, but let's skip ahead to 1974 when I left. At that point MPA was a thriving community with hundreds of members, a paid staff of 25 ex-patients and allies, 50 beds in MPA accommodation, and an annual budget of $150,000. We garnered a lot of media attention in the early years, which we used to radically defend the rights of people called mental patients, something that really had not been done before.[2]

FIGURE 3.1: Megan, 1970

FIGURE 3.2: Lanny, 1970

Both the MPA documentary project and this chapter are illustrations of knowledge exchange, bringing together academic research and experiential understandings from the "lifeworld." In 1970, Lanny Beckman was founding the MPA and living in one of Vancouver's well-known alternative households—the left-wing York Street Commune in Kitsilano. Meanwhile, Megan Davies was an eleven-year-old bookworm already in love with the study of history. Forty years later, a shared regard for the craft of writing and a radical public history project resulted in this chapter.

Source: Megan Davies and Lanny Beckman

From 1975 to 1990, I was the publisher of New Star Books, a Vancouver socialist-feminist press. It seemed that every time we published a book, Ronald Reagan got more popular. Currently I am polishing the final draft of a manuscript, "What's Wrong with Psychology," that I have been writing for the past 40 years.[3]

Megan: I spent a lot of time over the summer months of 2010 thinking about the MPA, the 1970s, and the June interviews. The MPA

consumer/survivor advocates and allies that we had interviewed were the first in Canada—and among the first in the world—to form a politically active support network, providing work, homes, and a sense of belonging and empowerment to ex-patients (Chamberlin, 1978; Shimrat, 1997).[4] It felt important to convey to the MPA founders that they had created something brave and magnificent. And I wanted to tell other people about the early radicalism of MPA—its insistence on the merits of peer support, its use of participatory democracy for organizational decision-making, and the manner in which paid jobs were decided in open elections.

The MPA founders had expressed profound, experiential-based interpretations of the history of the mental health system. We couldn't ignore these insights and, in fact, the notion of "shared authority" rests at the heart of current thinking in the field of oral history (Frisch, 1990; High, 2009).[5] Marina and Geertje were of the same mind, agreeing that a collaborative project would mirror aspects of what MPA did for members and might result in a mutual or negotiated understanding of why and how the organization evolved, and a fresh appreciation for personal and collective achievements.[6]

Oral historians stress the shape-shifting pathways of their projects and this one was no exception. Arthur Rossignol, a 17-year-old summer visitor, enchanted by Lanny's radicalism, suggested that we work with his friend Nick Nausbaum to transform Lanny's interview audio into a short educational video.[7] I agreed, and found myself in new methodological realms. One Friday night Nick and Arthur polished off a dozen of my chocolate chip cookies, then left for a party, gently but firmly abandoning me to edit our iMovie solo. Telling Lanny's tale of the early MPA through images and sound brought his story into close personal relief and helped us become friends and allies. Lanny sent me his top-10 movie list and a literary doodle on the threat posed to the American Empire by gay marriage and the construction of a mosque two blocks from Ground Zero. I knit him a pair of socks while working my way through Bergman, Altman, and Allen. When the finished piece was uploaded to YouTube in December, I was inordinately proud of what we had produced and newly appreciative of the possibilities of making public history through a shared conversation that involved storytellers, scholars, and teenagers.[8] In other words, I saw participatory democracy as a model for working with the MPA founders on a historical project (Polletta, 2002).[9]

The MPA project group includes seven survivors, and two allies who worked for MPA in the 1970s.[10] In February 2011 we had our first meeting in Vancouver. Responding positively to the "Lanny & the MPA" video, the MPA founders decided to create a collaborative documentary about the organization's first decade of existence. We determined that participants would select the segments of their interviews, which in turn would comprise the basic building blocks for the documentary. When the project group gathered again in April I showed the participants a rough iMovie version of the selected interview clips grouped into topical baskets. During our May meeting the group placed interview "topics" on a documentary storyline that traced

the birth of the group in 1970, the flowering of the MPA community, and the changes of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the end of June, Marina led a discussion to refine a core project values statement that the two of us had roughed out.

Arthur Giovinazzo, a keen member of the documentary group, helped search out archival footage and photographs.[11] I commissioned Nick and the younger Arthur to create original music and hired Lily Ross-Millard, a high school film studies graduate, to begin editing interview footage over the summer. As the project developed, we retained Catherine Annau, a documentary filmmaker, to help shepherd what she referred to as "the violently underfunded documentary" to completion, and Craig Webster, a professional film editor, to mentor the project. In October 2011 Catalin Patrichi, a talented young film graduate from York University, joined the project and began editing in earnest to give the film its first shape. Illustrators Willie Willis and Jeffrey Ho added their talents to animate Lanny's audio sections of the production, and Catalin and I sifted through a B-roll of historical footage and stills for images strong enough to give punch to the powerful interview segments. In a fanciful yet commonsensical fashion, I found that Lanny's contributions to the documentary echoed what he had done for MPA 40 years ago. Strategist Lanny pushed Marina and me to set up a project meeting with the present MPA executive director, sensibly suggesting that we take Patty Gazzola (née Servant), an MPA founder, along for ballast. Organizer Lanny mapped out our first plans for launching the documentary. And in June 2011, Musician Lanny let me record him on the guitar for the documentary soundtrack, realizing a dream that Nick and I had been holding on to for months.

Lanny: The day before the "recording session," Megan and I and another friend went to a Vancouver Canadians baseball game. They are a lowly Class A team. Vancouver is a lousy sports city. The only major league sport it supports is hockey, and Canadian football, if that's a sport.

En route I stopped to pick up Megan at the current headquarters of MPA. I'd had no contact with the group for decades. Inside, I met David McIntyre, the executive director, who seemed happy to meet me and was eager to tell me about MPA's growth over those many years. The organization now has over 200 people on staff, an annual budget of $15 million, and is doing good on an impressive scale (Motivation, Power and Achievement Society, 2011).

Megan: What was nice about that moment was that it wasn't scripted. It just happened. Lanny's unexpected arrival at MPA caused a stir through the office, and the executive director was swiftly produced to meet this mythical figure. Lanny was plainly discomforted by the attention,[12] but in my remembrance the moment is equal parts tender and amusing: two earnest men, a decade on either side of me in age, one

dressed for the office and the other for the baseball game, discuss MPA and its practical role in reducing the obscene fact of homelessness.

The project evolved through a series of meetings held at Vancouver's Gallery Gachet, a Downtown Eastside social justice arts space just a few blocks from the MPA offices. Looking critically at the progress of the project, I believe that we did our best to let creative decisions rest with the group while we put into place the necessary logistical and professional scaffolding. But this was not a perfect process. Lanny and I have a standard joke about the need for redistribution of our unequal energy levels, but in fact this has a real impact on what each of us can contribute to the documentary. Similarly, there are great gaps in power, income, confidence, and in access to technology and funding between the academics on the project and the MPA founders whose lives have intersected with the mental health system. And if history were nonlinear, I would press rewind and have the group interview each other with Geertje, Marina, and myself there to share our questions. Perhaps it would be useful for us to be interviewed as well, but I don't think so. This is their story (Gondry, 2008).[13]

Systems of Knowledge and Historical Understandings

Megan: From the beginning of the *After the Asylum/Après l'asile* project there was an understanding that our work—and particularly the aspects that connected to the website—would transgress the academic/community divide. We wanted to encourage community participation and give equal value to experiential knowledge and knowledge traditionally defined as "expert." Like the pages created by members of the Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre (PARC), which will depict the history of the first drop-in centre in Toronto's psychiatric ghetto, the documentary project met our goal of creating inclusive research.

Within academia, embodied knowledge of the "lifeworld" is no longer the poor second cousin to textual knowledge that it was a decade ago. Current health literature demonstrates the effectiveness of involving community stakeholders, creating a research exchange rather than a one-way consultation process (Beal et al., 2007; Beresford et al., 2006; Dennis Jr. et al., 2009). This approach is always going to be more challenging when dealing with the past, but Keith Carlson's work with the Stó:lo Nation and Daniel Kerr's collaborative analysis of homelessness in Cleveland point to the richness of such endeavours (Carlson, 2009; Kerr, 2003).

Lanny: I usually don't like the concept of esoteric knowledge, but when it comes to "mental illness" it is all but impossible to understand the experiences if you haven't known them personally. The result is a brew that usually contains four bitter ingredients: the pain of the disorder, the loss of work, the threat of poverty, and the stigma of shame.

Alarming statistics on the current "epidemic of mental illness" abound, but let's use BC's Mood Disorders Association (MDA) as a lens to suggest the scope of the problem. Founded 25 years ago as a non-profit, non-professional self-help society, this struggling, underfunded organization now has groups in 52 cities and towns outside the Greater Vancouver and Victoria areas (Mood Disorders Association of British Columbia, n.d.). Imagine living in Vanderhoof, BC, population 4,064, and leaving your home only once a week to attend the MDA meeting.

Almost everyone with a mood disorder label has a spotty work record, often leading to long-term or permanent unemployment. What comes first is the attempt to hide the fact from one's boss and fellow workers. In almost all cases the person is ultimately forced to quit, take a leave of absence, or is fired. Next to homelessness, unemployment and the spectre of poverty are the biggest practical problems facing people with psychiatric labels.

"Mental illness is an illness like any other." This brave little slogan has been fighting the stigma of mental illness for eons. Sadly, it hasn't worked and is unlikely ever to because it's not true and everybody knows it. Aside from the fact that mental illness is the only illness for which you can be involuntarily incarcerated, it is obvious to all that something that goes very wrong with your mind falls into a naturally different category from something that goes very wrong with your pancreas. No one would say that pancreatic cancer is an excuse for bad behaviour, though 40 percent of respondents in a recent poll said mental illness often is (Canadian Medical Association, 2008, p. 4). And the synonym "sick," when spoken in anger ("You're *sick!*"—never used to refer to physical illness), is one of the strongest epithets of hate in the language. Also, unlike almost all other illnesses, there is not a single physical test for any psychiatric disorder.

Megan: Storytellers have an everyday knowledge of social places and situations and an ability to convey events as tactile and multi-faceted. They are content experts.[14] As Stacy Zembrzycki (2009) notes, their factual knowledge allows them to pick up on subtleties that the interviewer has not registered (p. 231). But there is something much stronger than simple factual knowledge happening with the MPA interviewees. They bring to the project a lived understanding of how the organization met the desperate need for shelter against stigma and prejudice, and thus hold content within an appreciation of systemic inequity. I relate this to the alarm I experience when I am cycling home at night and a man yells at me from a passing car that is suddenly 10 inches too close. What I am feeling is a woman's fear of rape, an awareness that is always present and is a measure of the bounded lives of women. But the incident is so much an aspect of my daily life that I don't even mention it when I arrive home.

Lanny: Moreover, because MPA was an explicitly political organization, most former members have an analysis of ways in which mental health is connected to discrimination,

marginalization, and proximity to poverty. People came to MPA—particularly those who had been hospitalized—as isolated individuals, but they brought with them their own knowledge of discrimination and stigma. And the little world of our organization opened up their, and my, understandings of issues of gender, sex, professionalism, health, poverty, class, and powerlessness. So the MPA founders bring this political analysis to the documentary project.

FIGURE 3.3: MPA at Work and Play, 1973

Although direct political action was a small part of the MPA's activities, the organization is noteworthy for having held North America's first antipsychiatry protest on March 30, 1973, at Riverview Hospital. In this image one documentary project team member holds a placard reading "Down With Sane Chauvinism."

Source: Eve Hamilton

When MPA started in the early 1970s, radical politics were in the air, so it was widely acknowledged, in the lingo of that time—people really did talk this way—that oppression existed and therefore so did oppressors and the oppressed. This feels very dated today, but at that moment MPA's politics seemed natural. The media were fascinated with us, and we took that opportunity to fight publicly against the oppression faced by mental health patients. Indeed, the name of the organization—the Mental Patients Association—was chosen as a conscious radical act—an inversion of language, think of "queer studies" today, that would be described now as *in your face*. Thus the name itself was an attack on stigma.

Megan: At the beginning of August, our teenage film editor confided that she had fallen in love with the people whose lives were moving across her computer screen. The interviewees had become her heroes. Lily, I surmised, understood much better than I that a documentary is powered by emotion. Because this was the story of their lives, the MPA founders shared Lily's affective response to the tale we were telling, but I came to appreciate that they also regard the history of their former organization in a functional fashion. They are interested in creating a public document that both preserves and presents the history of the MPA. From their perspective there is the possibility of telling the whole story as well as laying out the particulars of the past. On a personal level, my response to the MPA founders was not that far removed from Lily's, but as a scholar, I am located in a very different place from both other parties in the project.

Historians are empiricists who gather primary materials from the past to create a foundation and then build upwards and outwards by considering context and theoretical possibilities. In the end, we regard the historical edifice we have constructed as a careful arrangement of interwoven arguments and imaginative interpretations, rather than a set of emotions or definitive facts. As project historian, I was willing to revisit the way in which I use theory, analysis, and synthesis, but not to abandon these elements of my craft. That would be like not setting the table for supper. I think the historian will be present in our documentary, inserting relevant detail and situating the organization within the broader context of the period. Although concepts drawn from disability research and theories of therapeutic landscapes, third spaces, and radical social capital will not be used explicitly, they will be evoked to underscore the way in which the early MPA inverted the traditional power structure of the mental health system and created a Mad-positive space in the deinstitutionalization era (Oldenburg, 1989; Oliver, 1992; Putnam, 1995; Williams, 2007).[15]

And shared authority means learning about what intellectual tools are useful to non-academics. Over the winter I sent Lanny a short article from the *Radical History Review* about the democratic potential of radical public history. Framed in a discussion of the urban streetscape of Atlanta, Georgia, and written in plain language free of theoretical jargon, Max Page's piece (2001) is a succinct and powerful plea for a public history that speaks beyond the lecture halls of academia and aims, "to impact the present political situation through investigations into the past" (p. 115). Page's writing is as relevant to the history of MPA as two subsequent articles that I posted to Lanny, likely culled from the journal *Health & Place*, which employ the concept of therapeutic landscapes to interrogate the spatial aspects of madness. He was too kind to say so to me, but I heard through the Mad grapevine that Lanny hated these publications.[16]

Lanny: "Hated" might be too strong a word. I recall one article that dwelt on the "spatiality of therapeutic landscapes." Maybe it's not too strong a word. It is a common practice and failing in academia, which I experienced when I studied psychology, to use jargon to render intelligible ideas difficult to follow. Physicists talk about striving for "elegance" in their theories (Greene, 2000), meaning the briefest description of the broadest band of phenomena, e.g., $E=mc^2$.[17] I think of elegant language as being poetic. Both the language of psychology and of the two articles that Megan sent me are at poetry's opposite pole. I liked the Max Page article (2001) from the *Radical History Review* and found it interesting to read about how his ideas apply to Atlanta, a real place and one you do not associate with radicalism. Page reminded me again that there are good guys in every corner of society, and though we might not have much power now, the progressive ideas stay in circulation, incubating.

History, you might say, is the final draft of journalism, but actually historians do important work because they come along and make small stories part of the historical

record. Our documentary is an opportunity to make the past public and is revealing not just to an imagined viewer but to the participants themselves. There on the screen is Patty Gazzola, who came to MPA as a young single mother four decades ago, now explaining her role in negotiating mortgages with the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation for MPA-owned houses. This is MPA at its best—a place where members developed their intelligence to deal with the real and complicated world to promote the welfare of the community as a whole. Because of Patty, people who needed homes got them (not as halfway houses—halfway to what?) for as long as they wanted to stay.

Megan: As Lanny's response to Patty's videotape demonstrates, the kind of historical understanding I witnessed with the MPA documentary participants was sometimes political, but always intensely personal, linked to key individuals and events and underscored with strong feelings.[18] Asked why they agreed to help create a history of MPA, the founders stressed the profound importance of MPA, its ongoing relevance, and their distress with the way in which the organization had changed. Avi Dolgin, a former MPA housing coordinator, told the group that, "I want to tell the MPA story because it was one of the most exciting things I had done.... Lanny Beckman was a man with a vision, and I grabbed hold of his coat and said, 'Let me come along. I want to build with you'" (Notes, MPA Documentary Meeting, April 6, 2011).[19] Alex Verkade said, "Because the old MPA saved my life," and Ian Anderson continued by stressing the acceptance and the healing that characterized the organization and the treasured friendships he made there (Notes, MPA Documentary Meeting, April 6, 2011). John Hatfull added, "I have the vain hope that if we talk about it enough maybe we will find a way to recreate MPA the way it was. I always thought it was a great idea, I loved it, and I thought it helped more people than any other group" (Notes, MPA Documentary Meeting, April 6, 2011). When I visited Jackie Hooper in October 2011 and posed the same question, she replied, "I wanted to be part of the project. MPA meant so much to me at the time. I was very suicidal, and of course it helped" (Personal communication, October 29, 2011).

Encounters with this kind of "living history" are sometimes destabilizing for me, because, as British historian Raphael Samuel points out (1994), "It plays snakes and ladders with the evidence, assembling its artifacts as though they were counters in a board game. It treats the past as though it were an immediately accessible present, a series of exhibits which can be seen and felt and touched" (p. 197). But historians working with storytellers need to be open to non-academic ways of interpreting the past. This is particularly important when we work with stories of people who have been psychiatrized. Without due sensitivity to questions of ownership, we risk simply adding a new chapter to the categorization and disempowerment that characterize the life history of a person with mental health difficulties.

Lanny: I understand the distress the old timers feel about the conservative changes that MPA has undergone since the 1970s. But change was inevitable.

MPA was radical in two ways: it publicly criticized the policies and institutions that harmed psychiatric patients; and internally it was democratic to a fault (one wag suggested MPA's history could be titled *Met to Death*). At the same time, the organization provided services, which cost money, which came from government. For a while the grants came with few strings attached, but with the advent of neo-conservative governments, both types of radicalism were whittled away. At some point the name was changed to Motivation, Power and Achievement Society.

From a distance, I have no criticism of what MPA has become. The opposite, in fact. It provides very needed services to people who very much need them.

Mental patients' liberation, an idea that MPA pioneered in Canada, has been excluded from the broader history of 1970s social justice groups because it did not fit the same mould as feminist and gay rights organizations and therefore did not share the same (partly) successful emancipatory future. Unlike feminists and gay activists, and not to deny the existence of a small Mad movement (Shimrat, 1997), the great majority of people with mental health labels don't want to celebrate the experience that so defines them. With radical mental health groups like the early MPA left out of the historical record, it is easier for mainstream groups like the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Mental Health Commission to define the current mental health agenda.[20] In collecting, recording, and disseminating the story of MPA's early days, Megan's various projects might inspire radical action in an unforeseeable future; they will increase the likelihood of progressive changes in attitudes and policy. At worst, they'll have expanded the portrait of a hopeful and interesting moment in Canadian mental health history.

Megan: Lanny, who perhaps should entertain the notion of a third career as a Canadian historian, is pointing out an important gap in the historiography of 1970s social protest movements (Anastakis and Martel, 2008; Adamson et al., 1988; Aronsen, 2011; McKay, 2005; Owram, 1996; Palmer, 2009).[21] My daughter Mab agreed. Why did her English 12 teacher not talk about Mad liberation when he told his class about second-wave feminism? Surely people like Lanny, who hold a lifetime of experience negotiating a difficult world, Mab argued, should be regarded as Elders in the same way that they are in First Nations communities (Personal communication, August 25, 2011).

Other members of the documentary group shared the notion that our film should inspire and educate. Alex Verkade told the group that he wanted our film to be shown to mental health patients "so they can do things other ways," but cautioned that the film should be accessible to everyone (Notes, MPA Documentary Meeting, May 4, 2011). We all loved Arthur Giovinazzo's idea that, "Somewhere out there is today's Lanny Beckman ... a sixteen-, seventeen-, eighteen-year-old who is going to get inspired and start their own version of MPA" (Notes, MPA Documentary Meeting,

May 4, 2011).[22] A documentary that sends youth an envelope with the story of a once-upon-a time peer support group that inverted the power structures and created a Mad-positive space appeared delightfully revolutionary to the group.

Another set of people that the group thought could benefit from the teachable moments provided by the documentary are mental health workers. Ian Anderson asked if the film would be made available to non-profit organizations (Notes, MPA Documentary Meeting, May 4, 2011). John Hatfull regarded the service provision constituency as critical, arguing that, "Primarily I think we should aim it at professionals to show them what they are not doing that takes the soul out of mental health" (Notes, MPA Documentary Meeting, May 4, 2011).

The documentary project connects to several areas of scholarship that illuminate oppression and social injustice. Oral history is a field with its own progressive tradition of challenging centrally held beliefs and authoritative knowledge systems (Shopes, 2003). Similarly, ownership is a core value of path-breaking research being done by British psychiatric survivors, which builds on emancipatory disability methodology (Oliver, 1992). And there is also a link between this project and a new Canadian field being nurtured by a group of young historians. Like survivor researchers, ActiveHistory.ca present their field as one with public responsibilities to listen, to respond, and to foster change.[23] The MPA founders have made it clear that they are operating within a framework that links radical, activist history with a survivor sensibility. The experiential knowledge of group members, and the political understandings they gained from their tenure at MPA, means that if we can produce a documentary that the group considers authentic, it will inevitably challenge exclusion on individual and societal levels (Sweeney, 2009).

This kind of knowledge translation is common academic currency today, and programs that support this work have been a good source of funding for *After the Asylum/Après l'asile* projects. We have already used project research on two secondary education sites (Davies & Marshall, 2010; Davies & Purvey, 2010) and are currently creating a set of learning objects for post-secondary educators.[24] Along with the MPA documentary, these will be freely shared with educators and students via our website. Animated group discussions about how to market our film demonstrate that this is not just academic parlance and, indeed, the first time I met Lanny, he said that he agreed to speak with me because he liked the progressive teaching materials I had created for high school students.

Conclusion

Megan: I presented the workshop address on which this chapter is based in a celebratory manner, as if to suggest that these kinds of collaborations are easy. An observer at our February 2012 group screening of Catalin's first rough cut would have been right in reading pride and satisfaction on the faces of the MPA founders. But I would

have been wise to pay closer attention to Michael Frisch's assertion (2003) that shared authority is a "necessarily complex, demanding process of social and self discovery" (p. 112). A 2011 summertime snapshot brings this point into sharp focus. Geertje and I were visiting Dave Beamish, one of the MPA founders,[25] when his building manager, clearly concerned, asked me to persuade Dave to take his medication. To my mind the manager's request narrowed Dave's identity down to that of a "mental health patient." Of course I know about Dave's mental health history, but I regard Dave as a research partner, and in fact he was someone I had come to care about and fiercely admire over the course of the project, for Dave loved MPA and fought harder than anyone to try and stop it from changing. The manager's worry was undoubtedly genuine, but I was so frustrated at the seeming intractability of the stigma conveyed in that conversation, that writing about it months later still makes me cry.

Few historians who are passionate about connecting scholarship, community, and social justice have the opportunity to work alongside people who hold history, and I have been extraordinarily privileged in this regard. And I have learned to accept our chaotic project meetings with their limited organizational structure, persistent technical problems, and erratic attendance as characteristic of the organic nature of an oral history endeavour and charmingly reminiscent of the shape-shifting, crisis-ridden style of the early MPA. But it is the testing moment that I sketch out above that I believe is the most instructive. When historians engage directly with narratives of suffering and systematic inhumanity, every step they take needs be traced with an awareness of power and appreciation for the democratic potential of *memory-work*. The real responsibility is not just to get the story *right* in academic terms, but to facilitate both a process and a product that the MPA founders believe to be authentic.

Lanny: I was initially skeptical about the idea of collaboration between Historian Megan and early MPA people—and if the collaboration proved not to work that would have been okay with me. But my skepticism really proved to be wrong. I don't think Megan, Marina, and Geertje could have done this project without us, because they needed access to our *theories* (and the consultants' honorariums we received were not merely tokens), and of course it would not have happened without them. Beyond all of that, the project of revisiting our distant memories has been an unexpected pleasure.

MPA was an attempt to create a utopian community in an era when people had radical utopian dreams, but it is too easy to interpret calls for a return to the early MPA model as nostalgia. Rather, the radicalism of MPA should be seen as an idea that is still worth fighting for, even though we live in conservative times. We were self-consciously trying to change the world and saw ourselves as agents of history writ small. Equality, democracy, and social justice were bywords of the period, and at MPA we tried to give life to both the words and the ideas they represented, scripting them into the everyday life and activities of the group.

This is October 31, 2011. Since the economic crash of 2008 I've been asking the logical question: Why are there no demonstrations on Wall Street? I'd come to think the idea was futile and that the spirit of collective rebellion lay in a seemingly permanent coma (see above). Then, just like the Arab Spring, Wall Streets sprung up everywhere.

Depression has taught me that hopes, like bones, grow brittle with age. I'm habitually careful not to raise either of them too high. But here's a giddy exception. It's just possible that the spreading protests are early steps on a long road towards something the world has never known—democracy, which is a very radical idea.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank organizers of and participants in the May 2011 Storytelling and History: Encounters in Health graduate workshop at the University of Ottawa's AMS Nursing History Research Unit for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this paper, and the following groups and individuals for support and input: Colin Coates, Mab Coates-Davies, the York Gender History Group, and our colleagues on the Translating History/Shaping Practice Project. CIHR funding for *Open Doors/Closed Ranks: Mental Health after the Asylum* made the documentary project possible. Most of all, we would like to express our appreciation to the rest of the MPA documentary project team: Ian Anderson, Magdelanye Azrael, Dave Beamish, Geertje Borshma, Avi Dolgin, Patty Gazzola, Arthur Giovinazzo, John Hatfull, Jackie Hooper, Marina Morrow, Irit Shimrat, and Alex Verkade.

Notes

1 Radley's (1999) work on patient narratives also connects with this understanding of the power of owning stories, arguing that patient narratives can also be read as efforts to "de-colonialize" the body claimed by biomedicine, recover personal identity, or at least stand as testimony to the sense of personal alienation that the sick role creates.

2 Throughout this paper we variously refer to such people as psychiatric survivors/consumers/mental health patients/mental patients/ex-patients/the psychiatrized/the Mad/and people with mental health difficulties. This is because we don't have the right language; as someone said, everyone is searching for idiom of distress. So when we use one of these terms think of it as being in imaginary quotation marks.

3 Epistemic and related problems that call into question the findings of psychological research include: conscripted undergraduate subject bias; the many-membered cult of statistical significance; lying to subjects unpersuasively and not lying to subjects unpersuasively; experimenter bias and many other instances of broken microscopes; null-hypothesis publication bias; the "decline effect." These compounding problems, added to the elusive complexity of psychology's subject matter, have so far blocked the formulation of anything that could credibly be called a scientific theory—unless the bar is set extremely low.

4 Historical analysis of MPA is limited and there has not yet been scholarly work on the organization. For personal recollections of the MPA see Lanny Beckman's interview section in Shimrat (1997) and Judi Chamberlin's recollections of her time in Vancouver (1978). The organization's tabloid newspaper, *In a Nutshell*, is a good source of institutional history, but researchers should also note early MPA publications: *Madness Unmasked* (1974), *Anti-psychiatry Bibliography and Resource Guide* (1974), *Head On: A Self-Help Model* (1978), *Head On Into the Eighties* (1983). Among the many media sources on the early MPA are a 1973 CBC documentary and the 1977 National Film Board documentary, *Mental Patients' Association*. In 2001 the current MPA produced a documentary, *In a Nutshell: Stories of the MPA Society*.

5 Presented first in 1990 by American historian Michael Frisch (1990) in his seminal work, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Meaning and Craft of Oral and Public History*, as operating within the confines of the interview process, the concept has evolved and expanded in meaning to include the entire oral history process (High, 2009).

6 Fletcher and Cambre (2009) make this last point about creating digital stories (p. 115).

7 "Lanny & the MPA," is part of *More for the Mind: Histories of Mental Health for the Classroom* (Davies & Purvey, 2010).

8 Sharing authority involves opening up possibilities for a collective conversation and a project that allows all parties to expand their skill set and knowledge base. Oral historians now involve storytellers in determining project design, protocols, and products (Kerr, 2003).

9 Francesca Polletta (2002) took this approach in her oral history work with veteran community activists in the United States, modelling her research methods on the organizational methods that had been employed by her subjects in the 1960s. It was probably at this moment that Megan's fantasy of being elected documentary coordinator by the MPA founders—but just for six months!—was born.

10 The MPA founders are as follows: Ian Anderson, Dave Beamish, Lanny Beckman, Avi Dolgin, Patty Gazzola, Arthur Giovinazzo, John Hatfull, Jackie Hooper, and Alex Verkade. Magdelanye Azrael and Irit Shimrat have also participated in the documentary project.

11 Unfortunately, due to the high cost of obtaining archival footage from CBC Toronto and the National Film Board, the vast amount of media material about MPA is not available for community projects such as this. This is particularly unjust given the fact that many members of the documentary group freely gave their time for interviews in the 1970s.

12 Lanny, now 68, leads a quiet private life and is noticeably ill-at-ease with the publicity given to a chapter of his distant past. He insisted on being the junior author, so the published chapter will come as a surprise.

13 Michel Gondry's (2008) slim volume on community filmmaking is inspirational regarding shared authority in community filmmaking. Gondry's "utopian idea" includes a focus on the everyday, accessible ideas, community ownership, and emotional connection to the material. Gratification comes not from an external voice of assessment, but from the participants collectively admiring and appreciating what they have created (pp. 7–8).

14 We are not suggesting that the MPA founders hold "the truth" about the organization. Oral history, in particular, underscores the elusive attribute of truth itself, for the story is not just what happened, it is also what the respondent believed took place, and what the long line of memory has constructed as occurring.

15 We are making fleeting references to wide and important areas of scholarship here. Oldenburg, Oliver, Putnam, and Williams are major voices in their respective areas of research and theory,

but there are many rich secondary resources that will be useful in the interpretation of the history of MPA.

16 Megan found that her fourth-year students had much the same reaction to a set of academic articles about Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. They were able to fully engage with Dara Culhane's (2009) chapter recounting the life stories of three women of the Downtown Eastside, but they found two other assigned articles entirely inaccessible (Masuda & Crabtree, 2010; Robertson, 2007). In Megan's view, all of the readings were equally analytical, but Culhane had simply submerged theory and argument into a compelling set of personal histories.

17 Brian Greene uses this phrase in his book *The Elegant Universe* (2000).

18 Megan saw this highly personal and emotive perspective on the past on the fascinating BBC Capture Wales digital history website. Retrieved from www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/queries/capturewales.shtml.

19 Lanny says he is flattered by what Avi says but he still wants his coat back.

20 From a survivor research perspective our documentary should use history to challenge the current focus of mainstream Canadian mental health on stigma, treatment, and recovery (Sweeney, 2009).

21 Aronsen's (2011) book on alternative Vancouver in the period (ironically put out by the press that Lanny helped create) looks at Greenpeace, the anti-war movement, the Vancouver Free University, and the Four Seasons Park occupation. But Aronsen shows little interest in radical Vancouver community efforts that connected health and social justice and makes no mention of MPA. Similarly, McKay (2005) does not include Mad liberation in his analysis of the history of the Canadian left in the period when MPA was created, giving space to neo-Marxism in Quebec, the Waffle movement and the NDP, and variable elements of feminism.

22 Lanny particularly liked this notion since he was actually 27 when he started MPA.

23 ActiveHistory.ca. Retrieved from http://activehistory.ca/about/. There is an obvious link here as well to the work of activist ethnographers like Gary Kinsman (2006).

24 Post-secondary education webpages from the *Translating History/Shaping Practice: Community-Informed Teaching Resources on Mental Health* project are currently in development.

25 As I tried to explain to the building manager, Dave Beamish has had an illustrious career in the mental health world. He was a coordinator at MPA, then was involved with innovative MPA programming that brought MPA ideas and people into Riverview Mental Hospital, the provincial psychiatric facility. In the early 1980s he worked with Fran Phillips, his MPA friend and colleague, to found Pioneer House in New Westminster—a residential establishment run on MPA principles. In the same decade Dave also served on the Westcoast Mental Health Society and the national board of the Canadian Mental Health Association. Dave died in December 2011.