A Tomb for the Living': An Analysis of Late 19th-Century Reporting on the Insane Asylum

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Abstract
This study examines newspaper portrayals of the American insane asylum between 1887 and 1895. The focus is on the way the mental health system was represented to the public in the era of Nellie Bly, the stunt journalist who investigated a Manhattan insane asylum in 1887. The project reveals the ways in which the newspapers aggregated a variety of narratives around the insane asylum which ultimately presented the institution in such a way that served the needs of the press. For those without firsthand knowledge of the insane asylum, the newspaper was the primary source of information. In that medium, there was a system of knowledge created and disseminated, one that integrated and conflated the public answer to mental illness with other sociopolitical issues such as economics, crime, gender, and ethnicity. The content created a meaning in which the deteriorating asylum system was presented contradictorily as an ineffective yet permanent public reality. Furthermore, newspapers reinforced and augmented an existing shame around mental illness. Mental illness evolved from a private/family concern to one of public import over the course of the 19th century. Thus, mental affliction became more than a moral failing or a character flaw; it had been elevated to a social problem to be tended by the government. Therefore, the problem of the mentally ill fell under the jurisdiction of the metro newspaper, which often published articles relaying asylum expenses, investigations into the failing asylums themselves, or speculations as to the cause of a person's sickness.

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The Richardson Olmsted Complex in Buffalo, the United States, is a modern name for the Buffalo State Hospital, which itself was originally called the Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane. This large Medina red sandstone and brick hospital that stands on the grounds of the present day Buffalo Psychiatric Center in Buffalo was designed in 1870 by famed architect Henry Hobson Richardson, while the landscaping was done by another famous personality, Frederick Law Olmsted, a landscape architect who designed New York’s Central Park. The landscape was an integral part of the treatment at Buffalo State. These harrowing photos look inside mental asylums of the 19th and 20th centuries and reveal just how disturbing their conditions once were. Debris litters the floor at Maryland’s Crownsville State Hospital psychiatric hospital (formerly Hospital for the Negro Insane of Maryland) during the aftermath of a riot in 1949. Afro American Newspapers/Gado/Getty Images. A patient lies in bed at Ohio’s Cleveland State Mental Hospital in 1946. Mary Delaney Cooke/Corbis via Getty Images.