



History, racism and the haunting of American psychiatry

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Abstract:

The session description for this Webinar on Neuroscience and Psychiatry explains neuropsychiatry as “engaged with understanding the link between mind, body and behavior.” My presentation reminds us that these connections of mind-body-behavior when understood out of the context of a broader engagement with history itself have occasioned the field’s worst abuses, including the current ones. As the greatest example, today in the United States ninety percent of state psychiatric beds are in jails and prisons, institutions that confine disproportionate numbers of African Americans—what author Michelle Alexander termed *The New Jim Crow*.

In December 1842, the Georgia State Lunatic Idiot and Epileptic Asylum was opened. A hundred years later, it had become at times the largest state hospital in the world with over ten thousand patients— an institution that was infamous as the worst of the worst in a post-War period when US state mental hospitals were recognized as “the shame of the states.” Today the largest mental institution in Baldwin County (its Georgia location) is the county jail. The largest such institution in Georgia is Atlanta’s Fulton County Jail system. The largest in the United States is Chicago’s Cook County Jail. It is a situation that in 2014 the US Sheriffs Association finally found an “incomprehensible” in the grotesquery of such public policy.

But of course comprehend it we can. Discovered archival accounts of historical characters admitted to the Georgia asylum show how modern US psychiatric practice in state asylums was forged in the traumas of settler colonialism: conquest and removal of Indigenous peoples, the transatlantic slave trade, the plantation system of the Deep South, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. It evolved in the 20th century along with eugenic practices encouraged by a global eugenics movement that climaxed in Nazi Germany.



Biography:

Mab Segrest is Fuller-Maathai Professor Emeritus of Gender and Women’s Studies at Connecticut College in New London, CT, USA. Segrest earned her PhD from Duke University in 1979. In addition to Connecticut College where she taught from 2002 to 2014, she had fellowships from Emory University (Atlanta, GA), Tulane University (New Orleans, LA), Georgia College and State University (Milledgeville, GA). She is author of *Administrations of Lunacy: Racism and the Haunting of American Psychiatry at the Milledgeville Asylum* (The New Press, 2020). She is a long-time student of and participant in US social movements from a transnational and intersectional feminist perspective. She is also the author of the award-winning *Memoir of a Race Traitor: Fighting Racism in the American South*, published in 1994 to become a classic of white anti-racist practice (released in a 25th anniversary edition in 2019).

Publication of speakers:

1. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.
2. Treatment Advocacy Center and the National Sheriffs’ Association Join Report, “The Treatment of Persons with Mental Illness in Prisons and Jails: A State Survey,” April 8, 2014.
3. “Severely Mentally Ill Persons More Likely to be in Jails than Hospitals, State Data Shows.” *Business Wire*. May 112, 2010.

Webinar on Neuroscience and Psychiatry | September 22, 2020 | London, UK

Citation: Dr Mab Segrest, History, racism and the haunting of American psychiatry, *Psychiatry* 2020; September 22, 2020 | London, UK