Beyond the Gates: An Arts-based Investigation into the 'Forgotten Australians'

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This paper asserts primacy of creative practice as a key method of enquiry and explores how fictional stories re-imagined from historical events of the mid-twentieth century may provide different ways of viewing a world which was inhabited by once silenced children, now known as the 'forgotten Australians'. Overwhelming evidence reveals a culture of endemic abuse within Australian child welfare organisations whereby harm was done to children in the context of policies and programmes that were designed to provide care and protection. During this era, ideologies underpinning community beliefs were patriarchal, conservative and insular. It was purported that children were 'committed' to imposing, regimentally run institutions 'for their own good'. Sources cross the boundaries of history, psychology, sociology, philosophy and literary studies. This paper exposes the blurred boundaries which exist between fiction and nonfiction; personal and social memory; official and unofficial narrative; knowing and not-knowing the past. In doing so, it acknowledges that although there can be no single narrative of history, fictional narratives provide another conduit into stories from the past and have the potential to act as agents for social change.

Fictional stories invite new ways of seeing. They have the capacity to 'disturb and disrupt the familiar and commonplace, to question that which seems to have been answered conclusively, and to redirect conversations regarding important social issues'.[1] This is a paper which draws from a broader qualitative arts-based research project claiming the power of fictional stories as vehicles for social transformation thus echoing the sentiments of human rights advocates Richard Hil and Elizabeth Branigan when they say 'we share a moral and political imperative that research and writing should be used to argue for social change'.[2] These researchers do not speak specifically of fiction but this discussion argues the collapse of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction and posits that fiction has the capacity to capture important meanings and truths about past historical events. Arts-based methodology asserts primacy of creative practice as a key method of enquiry and comprises a creative work plus an exegesis positioning the artefact contextually and theoretically.[3] Such research maintains that certain kinds of knowledge can be created only through practice; that 'symbolic data work performatively…[T]hey not only express the research, but in that expression become the research itself'.[4] Employing 'aesthetics,

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[1] T. Barone and E.W. Eisner, *Arts Based Research*, London, SAGE, 2012, p. 101.

[2] R. Hil and E. Branigan, (eds.), *Surviving Care: Achieving Justice and Healing for the Forgotten Australians*, Queensland, Bond University Press, 2010, p. ix.

[3] R. Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, New York, Palgrave McMillan, 2013, p. 8.

[4] B. Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Incorporating Culture and Policy,* vol. 118, 2006, p. 102.

methods, and practices of the literary, performance, and visual arts' to address issues of social inequity it may be considered as an activist approach to enquiry.[5] The choice of research methodology has relevance to the ethical agenda of this project, but the scope of this paper is limited to a discussion of contextual influences which inform the creative artefact. An underpinning tenet is the notion that all recollections of the past contain elements of invention: that all stories are 'fictional constructions emerging from novel arrangements of real-world facts'.[6]

By re-imaging the lives of Australian children who lived in orphanages, children's homes or other forms of out-of-home care during the mid-twentieth century, the creative component of this research takes the form of a collection of short stories entitled *No-One Was Watching*. The project does not claim to speak for the men and women, who as children, were hidden from public view behind high walls and locked gates. Nor does it claim to legitimatise or popularise care leavers' first-person accounts. Rather, it seeks to complement and provide another conduit for their many voices, who are finally being heard after decades of silence. The precise numbers may never be known, but the 2004 senate report, *Forgotten Australians*, estimates at least 500,000 children were institutionalised in more than 800 homes during the mid-twentieth century across Australia.[7] The group now known variously as 'Forgotten Australians', 'care leavers' or 'care survivors', were predominantly Anglo-Saxon and it was this cohort which made up the majority of institutionalised children. The other cohorts were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children known as the 'stolen generation' (estimated at 50,000) and the unaccompanied children who arrived from Britain and Malta known as 'child migrants' (numbered at approximately 7000).[8]

This paper provides background history before moving on to trace traditions of historical representation revealing a number of elements which influence how past events are remembered. Unravelled are concepts of oral history, testimony, archive, memory and trauma as this essay contests the binary of fact and fiction and exposes the blurred boundaries which exist between personal and social memory, official and unofficial narrative, knowing and not-knowing the past. The presumed objectivity of nonfiction is disrupted thus reinforcing the claim that fictional stories may capture meaningful historical truths and act as powerful cultural texts by persuading percipients of the creative work to revisit the world from a new direction: to listen for voices within the gaps and silences, both from the past and in the present. It advances that a re-imagined fictional account of historical events concerning 'forgotten Australians' enables a glimpse into past child welfare practices exposing human injustices and challenging complacent and at times complicit social attitudes. By exploring deeper into the complexities and nuances of the human condition it

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[5] N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th edn., London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011, p. 415.

[6] R. S. Liebet, 'Fact and Fiction in Plato's Ion', *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 131, no. 2, 2010, p. 179.

[7] J. McLucas, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or Out -of- home Care as Children*, 2004, p. xxvii, http://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/wopapub/senate/comittee/clac_ctte/compted_inquiries/2004_07/inst_care/report, (accessed 10 January 2015).

[8] National Museum of Australia, *Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions*, 2013, http://www.nam.gov.au/exhibitions/inside, (accessed 17 May 2013).

seeks to avoid replicating often voyeuristic media coverage regarding victims of violence. The research project also responds to the final recommendations of the *Forgotten Australians* report, which urge that this history be acknowledged and disseminated in a range of ways, including via university courses of study and research.[9]

A Culture Exposed

The events around which the stories are based took place many decades ago. Few would assume that historical wrongs could be addressed and then forgotten but in the past twenty- five years attempts to redress past wrongs have prevailed as 'leaders all over the world have been forced to come to terms with the gross injustices of their nations' past'.[10] Governments have apologised, offered compensation, promised adherence to the terms of old treaties, erected memorials, compiled exhibitions, revised historical accounts and redesigned educational programmes in response to such claims. Australia's past also contains a sorry trail of historical injustices with acts of oppression and violence evident throughout the short history of European settlement. Contemporary moral assumptions about what justice requires has led to a number of government actions including the *National Apology to Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants* delivered by the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2009. This apology provides solace for some but for others the words are empty: 'I cannot forget, will not forgive and no apologies accepted'.[11] In bringing these hidden histories into the light, the voices of victims, witnesses, victims' families and at times whole communities have had to be strident and strong in order to gain recognition and acknowledgement of unjust, inhumane and often criminal treatment. As Hil and Branigan remind us:

> The fact that the population in question was referred to as 'forgotten' is in itself a searing indictment of the politicians, bureaucrats, religious leaders and charity heads who knew about what went on under their watch, but chose to do nothing, or worse, actively obstructed processes of justice.[12]

As historical justice academics Klaus Neumann and Janna Thompson point out, identifying an action as an injustice demands an appropriate response. How a society deals with injustice often requires a 'legalist paradigm' where the memories of the victims and other witnesses are crucial and this process of 'remembering the mistakes of the past is supposed to be an important factor in preventing future injustice'.[13] The remembered testimonials which inform the many reports and enquiries uncovered in this research reveal previously unheard stories penetrating beyond the gates once incarcerating innocent children. They are stories about high

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[9] McLucas, *p. xxvii*

[10] K. Neumann and J. Thompson, (eds.), *Historical Justice and Memory*, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 2015, p. 6.

[11] Submission 330, cited in McLucas, p. 194.

[12] Hil and Branigan, *Surviving Care,* p. 40.

[13] Neumann and Thompson, *Historical Justice*, p. 10.

walls and imposing buildings which rendered these children invisible. They are about silenced voices and unspeakable cruelty. They are also about resilience and survival. The man largely responsible for the long overdue 2004 senate investigation into the plight of children in care was Senator Andrew Murray whose poignant conclusion reverberates reminding us of the long-term effects of harming children.

> Children who experienced life in an orphanage, children's home or other form of out-of-home care last century [bear]…the enduring legacy of institutionalised care [that] can only be described as tragic.[14]

A long trail of reports exposing endemic abuse whereby harm was done to children in the context of welfare policies and programmes has been revealed in this research, some of which dated back as far as 1855. Nearly 160 years later a *Royal Commission into Institutionalised Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* has been ratified.[15] The terms of reference are limited but as more and more evidence has been gathered, it is clear that not just sexual abuse was endemic within the child welfare system. As academic and past care leaver Joanna Penglase points out, 'children were violated in every sense in an institution and being used sexually was just one of those violations'.[16] The legacy for many of the adults who endured this trauma as children *is* tragic; it has meant a life of desperate struggle and deep mistrust. Homelessness, welfare dependency, substance abuse, dysfunctional relationships, mental health problems and premature death, often from suicide, are the outcomes for a great number of care leavers.[17] The bleak irony underlying the practices of 'child welfare' organisations has been raised by many of the care leavers who were taken away from their families because they were deemed neglected, exploited or abused only to suffer blatant abuse within a system purporting to provide care and protection.

This was an era when protecting and nurturing children was a societal expectation although historically, such protection had not always prevailed. Prior to the nineteenth century children were often valued merely as chattels, and if they survived their early years they required strict, often brutal discipline to rid them of their 'innate immorality'.[18] The dawn of the nineteenth century brought with it changes in how children were perceived; infancy and childhood were seen as stages of innocence and vulnerability although there was little done to enforce any form of protection and the prevailing religious perception was still of innate sinfulness. Abuses of all kinds were perpetrated and it was not until 1924 that the League of Nations introduced *The Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, which for the first time connected child welfare principles with child rights. Despite this breakthrough in

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[14] A. Murray and M. Rock, *The Enduring Legacy of Growing Up in Care in 20th Century Australia*, 2005, p. 1. http://www.andrewmurray.org.au, (accessed 22 February 2013).

[15] P. McClellan, *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, 2013, http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/policy-and-reserach/published-research, (accessed 25 May 2015).

[16] J. Penglase, *Orphans of the Living: Growing up in 'Care' in Twentieth Century Australia,* Western Australia, Curtin University Books, 2005, p. 145.

[17] Murray and Rock, p. 1.

[18] H. Boxall, A. M. Tomison, and S. Hume, *Historical Review of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Legislation in Australia: 1788-2013*, 2014, p. 4. http://www.aic.gov.au. (accessed 13 March 2014).

understandings about their vulnerability, children continued to be abused and 'most commentators agree that it was between the 1940s and 1960s that child abuse was "re-discovered" and that western democracies recognised child maltreatment as a societal-level concern rather than cases that occurred in isolation'.[19] Contemporary values and attitudes reflect abhorrence regarding the disturbing stories about 'forgotten Australians', yet an often cited response has been that standards were different 'back then'. Such comment fails to recognise the 'severity of the documented behaviours and provide any feasible explanation for when…the "standards of time" change[d] that condoned the perpetration of neglect, cruelty, psychological abuse, sadism, rape and sodomy'.[20] Attitudes and understandings of children's developmental needs have indeed changed over time and in a modern, democratic Australia of the mid-twentieth century laws *were* in place which were designed to protect children from exploitation and abuse. However, the evidence suggests that these regulations were seldom enforced behind the closed doors of child welfare institutions and that cruel, draconian methods of child management were the norm.

Two elements of these abusive practices have been revealed as a result of the current enquiries: firstly, that endemic abuse was an institutional 'culture' across all organisations whether state, church or private; and secondly, that repeated reports about such abuse were systematically ignored. For much of the twentieth century the common responses were 'when victims reported sexual [and other] abuse…disbelief, blame and minimisation'.[21] The moralising rules and regulations which rationalised the inhumane treatment that was so relentlessly meted out, declared that children must be 'broken' in order to make them into 'better citizens'.[22] In mid-twentieth century Australia, prevailing beliefs were that white, Christian, modest sized family units lived harmoniously in neat suburban houses. The parameters were narrow, and to be positioned outside these confines meant deficiency and marginalisation. Any families who failed to fit this model were 'pathologised as contaminating because they did not provide the "right" influences for children'.[23] This was time when 'mothers and fathers came appropriately paired…Social security didn't look after single-parent families. Married women were barred from many jobs…and adultery and cruelty were the [only] grounds for divorce'.[24] Unmarried mothers were deemed 'immoral', ostracised from society and, often from their own families. Mental illness was dealt with by locking patients in asylums and most disabled children were also locked away, often in the same asylums. A monoculture existed with the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, later known as the 'White Australia' policy, continuing to restrict entry (until 1958) of non-white immigrants. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were subjected to what can only be called apartheid. This discriminatory and punitive milieu meant that reasons for children going into care

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[19] Boxall, Tomison, and Hulme, p. 8.

[20] McLucas, *Forgotten Australians*, p. 141.

[21] S. A. Clancey, *The Trauma Myth: The Truth about Sexual Abuse of Children and its Aftermath*, New York, Basic Books, 2009, p. 86.

[22] Murray and Rock, *Enduring Legacy*, p. 11.

[23] Penglase, *Orphans of the Living*, p. 73.

[24] H. Townsend, *Baby Boomers: Growing up in Australia in the 1940s, 50s and 60s*, New South Wales, Simon Schuster, 1988, p. 9.

were seldom because a child was orphaned. Poverty, illness of one parent, death of one parent, illegitimate birth, divorce, family breakdown due to abandonment, violence, alcoholism or mental illness, and exposure to 'moral danger' were reasons for being committed to an institution.[25] The voices of the families were rarely officially acknowledged and the voices of the children were silenced.

Voices from the Margins

As qualitative researchers Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln suggest, 'telling the stories of marginalised people can help create a public space requiring others to hear what they don't want to hear'.[26] I concur with these authors when they declare that qualitative research can be used as a 'tool to create social change and advance social justice initiatives'.[27] They believe this process allows for the previously silenced to be heard. Narrative enquiry, another research framework complementing arts-based methodology, also advocates the power of storytelling. The empirical materials researchers may study include life history, life story, personal narrative, oral history and testimonials; human experiences are at the core of this type of enquiry. Although critics of this approach focus on its incapacity to capture facts, proponents of this framework remind us that narrative enquiry:

> signals a move away from traditional ways of knowing and telling…towards multiple ways of knowing and telling, away from traditional quests for objectivity towards a celebrated acceptance of subjectivity, away from grand narratives towards local narratives and away from facts and towards meanings.[28]

Indeed, it was an individual life story, which initially alerted me to the existence of 'forgotten Australians'. At a social gathering, I overheard a conversation from a woman aged about sixty. She was describing her long-awaited kitchen renovation which had been funded by a government 'payout'. She revealed this remuneration was because, between the ages of four and eighteen years, she had been institutionalised. Like most of the other residents, she was not an orphan; she was 'in care' because her mother had died. My response to her story was incredulity. I had lived my entire life in the same state and during the same era as this woman and had no knowledge of the existence of children who lived in places other than a conventional suburban home with a mum, a dad, siblings, chooks and a pet dog or cat. It was at this moment I resolved to find out more about this little-known history. When was this happening? How many children were institutionalised? Where were these Homes? So began my research journey into the past welfare policies and programmes intended to provide care and protection for children whose own families were deemed unable to do so. I proceeded cautiously as I recognised the risks of compounding past trauma by prying into troubled childhoods. I uncovered a

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[25] McLucas, *Forgotten Australians*, p. 65.

[26] Denzin and Lincoln, *SAGE Handbook*, p. 415.

[27] Denzin and Lincoln, p. 249.

[28] S. Thomas, 'Narrative Inquiry: Embracing the Possibilities', *Qualitative Research Journal*, vol. 22, iss. 2, 2012, p. 211.

vast body of damning evidence from the public domain compiled over many decades via various reports and enquiries. I recognised the immense courage required for care leavers to put their life stories on public record and although projects such as the on-line exhibition (*Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions*) curated by the National Museum of Australia is a readily accessible resource, many and varied ways of telling this history has been recommended by the *Forgotten Australians* report. According to Mary-Jo Morgan, former manager of *Find & Connect WA*, literary responses to the stories of 'forgotten Australians' are few despite this being the largest cohort of institutionalised children.[29] My own research also identified this gap. By creating a collection of short fiction, I determined to tell these once hidden stories by re-imagining a woman like the one I have described: her siblings, her family, and other people whose lives were entwined with hers. I named this woman Janet. She and the characters who inhabit her world are composites of real people whose testimonies I have read. The experiences my characters enact are based on real events and real locations. My creative and ethical decision is to capture a collective re-presentation of past events thus pledging anonymity to both individuals and organisations. The following creative excerpt, which functions as the prologue to the story collection, provides a glimpse into the childhood world of Janet, her sister Susie and her brother Billy.

Behind the Laundry

There are lots of us little kids down here. Some of us have got straighter bones than others. The crooked ones are usually boys.

This is a place of nothingness: no anxiety, no confusion, no fear, because once we've crossed over everything becomes still and clear. I'm talking about the view from the world of dead children. Even with dirt clogging our ears and our eyes, we hear and we see.

Everything.

My transmogrification was similar to lots of the others. I was sick; I was ignored. I cried; I was punished. I died. I was committed to the earth. Now here I am in an unmarked grave behind the laundry. I was only three years old but my sensibilities blossomed to full maturity before my dehydrated body had grown cold. This all-seeing, all-knowing capacity renders me a perfect narrator. The difficulty for those still living is telling stories that cannot be told.

My name is Susie and when I was alive I came to live here with my sister Janet and my brother Billy. Janet was five. She was clever. My brother was eight. He wasn't so clever, but he was funny. They never told their stories to anyone. Even if they had who would have believed them?

That's why I would like to tell them. So you know what really happened. It would provide a sense of cohesion to otherwise dislocated tales. I even thought it might make a wonderful fairy story. I would unmask villains. Rescue victims. Create a unified plot with points of tension, moments of conflict and close with a satisfying resolution. A simple rendering full of hope and redemption.

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[29] Mary-Jo Morgan, personal communication, 23 January, 2015. *Find & Connect* available at http://www.findandconnect.gov.au (accessed 23 January 2015).

But, lives broken into fragments refuse to be contained. The shards escape tidy telling. Voices, long silenced, begin to mutter, even shriek. No-one agrees on any one narrative. There are no neat endings. The muddled stories make you rage. And gasp. And cringe. And cry.

I will have to remain silent as corpses should and just listen with you. To the cacophony of voices attempting to say the unsayable.

Narrative as Being

This short narrative clearly belongs to an imaginary realm. Dead children cannot speak and there is dubious evidence of omniscient ghosts. However, it is anticipated that the text would do more than entertain: that it might instead raise questions about the circumstances surrounding this young child's death – and of the others buried with her. Rather than seeking a literal truth the purpose of this type of enquiry 'is not to "prove" or "disprove" anything, but rather question the notion of truth and, in doing so, expand notions of possibility'.[30] By entering and feeling part of a story, readers may experience a realm that seeks verisimilitude: a world that is lifelike, believable and possible. Even stories which are not strictly realistic have this potential. Narratives seek to make our present, imagined future and remembered past cohere. Creating stories as ways of explaining ourselves, our world and our relationship to that world has prevailed since earliest times and these narratives are what historiographer Hayden White perceives as a meta-code, 'a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality can be transmitted.'[31] The words of literary theorist Barbara Hardy capture the scope of how narratives inform us: 'we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.' [32] As literary critic Roland Barthes noted we recognise the ubiquity of narrative as present in every age, place and society.[33] Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner believed that 'we seem to have no other way of describing "lived time" save in the form of narrative'.[34]

Earliest narratives, whether verse or prose, were represented by myth, legend, tale, fable, parable, exemplum and allegory, and these forms often mingled historical and imaginary detail. In modern narratives, what is true and what appears to be true may still become entangled. Thus, differentiating between modes of fiction and nonfiction remains unresolved. In the broadest sense, narrative can be divided by these two genres: one is factual and the other is imaginative. It could be said that fiction is any narrative which is invented rather than an account of events that actually happened. Abrams and Harpham provide a more nuanced explanation: 'fictive sentences are meaningful according to the rules of ordinary, nonfictional

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[30] Thomas, *Narrative Inquiry*, p. 208.

[31] H. White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Maryland, The John Hopkins Press, 1990, p. 1.

[32] B. Hardy, 'Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach through Narrative', *Novel*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1968, p. 5

[33] R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, London, Fontana Press, 1987, p. 79.

[34] J .Bruner, 'Life as Narrative', *Social Research*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2004, p. 692.

discourse, but in accordance with assertions implicitly shared by the author and reader of a work of fiction, they are not put forward as assertions of fact, and therefore are not subject to the criterion of truth or falsity that applies to sentences in nonfictional discourse'.[35] What is of interest here is the 'implicit' agreement made between author and reader, a point that literary critic Northrop Frye reinforces: 'genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public'.[36] Australian author Amanda Curtin debates this issue at length in her doctoral dissertation as she unpicks what is 'real' and what is not in her own novel, which was later published as *The Sinkings* (2008*).*[37] She cautions against accepting simple binary distinctions between fiction and nonfiction as she points out the resemblance between historians and novelists. Historian David Lowenthal supports this view when he observes that 'each genre has encroached on the domain once exclusive to the other; history has grown more like fiction, fiction like history'.[38] In their book *Is History Fiction*? Ann Curthoy and John Docker do not reject the discrete discipline of history, but ponder long-standing questions about how historians tell the truth about the past. Included is the question as to whether histories shaped by narrative convention derive their meanings from their form rather than the past itself.[39] Ultimately, simplistic distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, which explain the categories as mutually exclusive, clear and unambiguous, are of no use. Ambiguity does exist and notions of 'fact' and 'invention' remain blurred. Many subgenres have been created in an effort to describe fiction which is based on biographical, historical or contemporary facts. Names like fictional biography, historical novel, nonfiction novel, fictional history, and documentary fiction abound. However, literary theorist Linda Hutcheon's term historiographic metafiction is one which may describe what my stories are attempting: a genre that is 'deeply involved in telling and rewriting history…[as it] often challenges hegemonic discourses by re-contextualising them and offering alternative versions'.[40]

Beyond Facts

The goal of my re-imagined stories is not so much to 'portray the facts of what happened…but instead to convey the meanings.'[41] Finally surfacing in the many testimonials are fragments of care leavers past lives which my stories strive to reassemble. This data, termed 'formal' testimony, is defined as a kind of evidence brought before a court of law or a commission of enquiry by persons referred to as 'witnesses'. We are invited to accept something as true because someone says it is,

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[35] M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th edn., Boston, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012, p. 128.

[36] N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 247.

[37] A. Curtin, 'Ellipses: A Novel and Exegesis', PhD Thesis, Edith Cowan University, 2006.

[38] D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 227.

[39] A. Curthoys and J. Docker, *Is History Fiction?* Sydney, University of NSW Press, 2010, p. 3. Available from E-Book Library, (accessed 21 January, 2017).

[40] A. Nunning, 'Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet: Towards an Applied Narratology', *Style,* vol. 38, no. 3, 2004, p. 360.

[41] C. Ellis and A. Bochner, 'Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject' in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, SAGE *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn., London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000, p. 751.

'where the someone in question is supposed to be in a position to speak authoritatively on the matter'.[42] Survivors who experienced abuse as children in various child welfare facilities have provided such evidence. This material has been recorded and archived, acknowledging these previously unheard voices with the hope that by addressing the human rights abuses of the past, a safe and nurturing environment can be provided for children in the future. Testimony is mostly an oral practice and as such is a type of oral history. An age-old tradition, oral history often crossed genre boundaries: a space where 'historical, poetic, and legendary narratives [could be] inextricably mixed up...[and where] personal "truth" may coincide with shared "imagination"'.[43] Historian Alessandro Portelli's seminal research around the stories relating to the death of a factory worker identified how over time recollections of this event were elaborated, changed and interpreted, resulting in many different versions of the occurrence. Portelli's conclusion was that oral sources are not always reliable but 'rather than being a weakness, this [was] their strength: errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning…the way people remember is as important as what they remember'.[44]

Survivors' testimonies may contain similar errors and elaborations but in archiving these life stories it could be assumed that there would be no place for further invention. However, research by Antjie Krog and Nosisi Mpolweni provides valuable insights into the process of archiving by examining the refiguring of witness testimonials presented to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a process of truth and amnesty initiated in 1996 after the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. This research reveals that the very process of archiving is 'figured': in other words, the material is gathered within a particular context and for a particular purpose. It warns that an archive can only be a small trace of a whole and that when retrieving archives we must pay attention to 'how the record has been altered over time; the gaps, omissions and excisions from the record'.[45] This figuring process is often shaped by power relations. Decisions about what and how to archive, remind us that archives are not simply sources, they are sites of contested knowledge, often official declarations of what is supposed to be true. The findings of Krog and Mpolweni uncover many refigurings: in translation, in transcription, who is telling, and how the narrating of an event leaves the central moments un-uttered. They find that even the testifiers themselves refigured the archives of their own memories in ways which enabled their need for answers, for peace or for reconciliation. Despite these slippages, Alan Wieder also refers to the lessons from the public hearings of the TRC as he argues that 'testimony as oral history is important as a public forum for people who have been historically invisible'.[46]

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[42] C.A. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 27, Available from E-Book Library, (accessed September, 2014).

[43] A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History,* New York, State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 49

[44] Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli,* p. 2.

[45] A. Krog and N. Mpolweni, 'Archived Voices: Refiguring Three Women's Testimonies Delivered to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2009, p. 358.

[46] A. Wieder, 'Testimony as Oral History: Lessons from South Africa', *Educational Researcher*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2004, p. 23.

From these findings, it is extrapolated that the official records which inform the creative work are already 'figured': that errors and inventions are already present and that gaps, omissions and un-uttered moments leave spaces throughout these archived testimonies. It appears that despite the historical and ethical significance of witness testimony, the boundary between fact and invention remains blurred. It must be emphasised that these stories as remembered childhood histories have been acknowledged and validated yet what 'actually happened' has been variously told and recorded according to interpretation and the conditions of telling. My project also acknowledges the validity of these first-person accounts but challenges the notion that only nonfiction, usually perceived as objective and absolute, can tell 'truthful' stories. The meanings beyond the facts are clear; children were isolated, neglected, violated and forgotten for many decades. My stories are committed to these truths.

Traumatic Memory

Care leavers' stories which have eventually found their way into the public domain rely on an individual's memory about what happened in their past. Many recount a range of abuses and most reflect on the absence of humanity: kindness, affection, respect, and compassion. Memory is not an 'objective' process and trauma further complicates this already flawed faculty. Historians Alice and Howard Hoffman define long-term memory as being either episodic or semantic where the former relates to remembering personal events over time and the latter to recalling learned material about the world. Social memory contains semantic elements because it depends on shared learned material in order to communicate meaning to others. This shared information is embedded in the culture of the subject so that:

> No oral history document is likely to be simply a reflection of a purely personal memory or a social memory. It will contain both, in that it will draw both episodic, purely personal descriptions of a unique perception of past experience and will also contain information that is grounded in the social, conversational, and cultural styles of the informants' background.[47]

It is this subjective process which reveals the speaker's relationship to their history and reminds us that 'memories are rarely "raw" but shaped in and by social and historical narrative'.[48] The investigation of memory has occupied the attention of scientists for more than a century and much research has focussed on its failures and distortions. The workings of the memory can be disrupted by such things as the passage of time, absentmindedness, failure to recall the source of the recollection, suggestibility and bias.[49] However, persistent, intrusive recollections of negative emotions can also interfere with how the memory functions. This phenomenon is of

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[47] A. Hoffman and H. Hoffman, 'Memory Theory: Personal and Social', in T. Charlton, L. Myers, & R. Sharpless, (eds.), *Handbook of Oral History*, Plymouth, UK, Altamira Press, 2008, p. 292.
[48] Hoffman and Hoffman, p. 292.
[49] D. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2001, p. 4.

particular relevance when considering the testimonies of adults who endured abuse as children. For those who have experienced trauma the process of creating meaning from the past is further dislocated due to the complex effects psychological wounding has on the mind. Many care leavers face this lifelong battle as they struggle to make sense of who they are and where they fit in the world. The word trauma, which can be traced back to the Greek word *trauma* or 'wound', originally referred to an injury inflicted on the body, although later usage has come to mean a wound inflicted upon the mind: 'a breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world'.[50] Contemporary mental health professionals agree that a traumatic event is 'an event that overwhelms one's perceptual-cognitive faculties, creating a situation in which the individual does not really experience the event as it happens'.[51] This means that the normal memory process is interrupted and this lack of reliable memory may be felt as a gaping absence, flashbacks, terrifying nightmares or severe anxiety attacks which recur in a struggle to re-present the past. It could be said that 'the traumatic event is too terrible for words, too horrifying to be integrated into our schemes for making sense of the world'.[52] For children exposed to ongoing psychological and physical abuse, feelings of intense fear, horror, helplessness and confusion were with them on a daily basis. Long-lasting harm was caused as a result of 'unnaturally high levels of neurobiological arousal…so extreme that it becomes toxic…leading to long-term emotional, behavioural, and cognitive dysfunction…[resulting in] changes in psychological arousal, emotion, cognition and memory'.[53] These are the outcomes reported by survivors of childhood abuse when they describe how their lives have been permanently shaped by what happened to them as children.

Not- knowing Knowledge

When writing about trauma, philosopher and historian Michael Roth introduces an ethical dimension with respect to both historical and literary consciousness as he ponders the problem of how traumatic events can be represented. As he says, 'the traumatic event draws one to it even as it demands acknowledgement that one can never comprehend what happened at that time in that place'.[54] Any representation of traumatic historical events will always be problematic; paradoxically, if a traumatic event cannot be forgotten it is precisely because it cannot be reliably remembered and therefore cannot be integrated with existing mental schemes and transformed into narrative language. [55] This notion is reinforced by Amos Goldberg when he speaks about a traumatic encounter leading to the eradication of the entire grid of meaning. At such a point he contests, 'the victim cannot speak or his/her speech has

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[50] C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 4.

[51] M.S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma and History: Essays on Living with the Past*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 91.

[52] Roth, p. 91.

[53] S. A. Clancey, *The Trauma Myth: The Truth about the Sexual Abuse of Children and its Aftermath*, New York, Basic Books, 2009, p. 9.

[54] Roth, p. 82.

[55] Roth, p. 83.

absolutely no meaning; the victim has been silenced'.[56] The specific point at which knowing and not knowing meets is the juncture where literature intervenes. Literary critic Geoffrey Hartman suggests that 'a theory emerges focusing on the relationship of words and trauma, and help[s] us "read the wound" with the aid of literature'.[57] The contradictory elements of traumatic knowledge are both the inability to forget and the inability to remember the actual event/s. Literary practice responds to this dichotomy literally and figuratively. A literal response may be to the registration of a traumatic event; a figurative response is more about the memory of experiencing that event. Figurative language largely explores and expresses the disjunction between experiencing and understanding. Thus, the literary construction of memory is not a literal retrieval. Language which seeks to capture the absent moments of traumatic experience opens a new space where the focus is on disclosing an unconscious or not-knowing knowledge (Hartman's term). Trauma theory 'throws a light on figurative or poetic language…as something other than an enhanced imaging or vicarious repetition of a prior (non) experience': rather, the role of literature is as an act of both witness and representation that transmits knowledge in forms that are not totally realistic, scientific or analytical.[58] Importantly, the potency of a traumatic past to remain an open wound creates a tension which writers as well as artists and historians must negotiate in their attempts to retell the past. This inability to fully retrieve past traumatic events, and the distortions which result in the effort to communicate what has happened in the past, reinforces the notion that knowledge which is 'certain' or 'true' is, and has always been, elusive.

Forms of writing which respond to traumatic events have raised vigorous debate among critics. Literary scholar Greg Forter reflects on the growth of trauma studies which stresses the power of texts seeking to transmit *directly* to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption rather than seeking to *represent* traumatising events.[59] A conflation of textually-induced disequilibrium with actual historical trauma is something Cathy Caruth views as trauma's capacity to be represented by those who haven't directly experienced it: 'the best kind of text is one that actually induces trauma in its readers'.[60] Recognising the psychological dislocation and fracturing which occurs as a result of trauma reveals the discrepancies between the repetitive and belated temporal structure of trauma versus the linear temporal structure of narrative. In seeking to capture the intrusive fragments of an unknown past, writing which is itself fractured in style may provide a sense of traumatic experience better than a lineal and literal description of this complex phenomenon. This has led me to engage with a style of writing which takes the form of a non-linear, disjointed narrative employing impressions, images, sketches, and imaginings in an endeavour to capture the troubling and sometimes unutterable experiences of my characters. The collection contains many voices thus disrupting any single

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[56] A. Goldberg, 'Trauma, Narrative and Two Forms of Death', *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2006, p. 134.

[57] G. Hartman, 'On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies', *New Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 3. 1995, p. 537.

[58] Hartman, p. 552.

[59] G. Forter, 'Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form', *Narrative*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2007, p. 260

[60] Forter, p. 262.

narrative. The stories seek to evoke feelings of loss, fear, confusion, unworthiness and isolation. Ultimately, my stories provide *a* version rather than *the* version of past events.

The attempt to capture a collective *re*-presentation of these past events demands a distancing from what could otherwise overwhelm in the endeavour to re-imagine such painful lives. Experiencing 'self as other' whilst maintaining a familiar sense of self is a challenge for creative writers. Over time, I have reflected on these devastating injustices, but in creating my own stories around these issues, I have created an internal space, distancing myself from myself so that I am both "inside" and "outside" myself simultaneously.[61] Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin used the term 'dialogic' when he discussed the possibility of hearing more than one point of view in the single narrator's voice. As Hunt and Sampson note, this allows a more 'fluid and flexible relationship with ourselves [to become] what Bakhtin calls "polyphonic", able to give all the voices of the self equal space'.[62] Despite this 'distancing', the process remains subjective, as is the selection of empirical 'data' from the given social, historical and political sources. As researcher, my personal circumstances provide gravitas to the choice of this particular cohort. I was an Anglo-Saxon child in this era of deeply conservative, patriarchal and insular values and during this time my own rather precarious nuclear family unit was in danger of collapsing. If it had, I may well have found myself as one of these institutionalised children. The testimonials informing the project come from the recollections of lived experience and intertwined throughout each story are my own memories of the period, people and places. This self-reflexive position as researcher foregrounds an awareness of my own present relation to the past; 'reflexivity…concerns not only reflecting on what is being achieved and how the specific work is taking shape but also being aware of where you stand ("where you are coming from") in respect of knowledge traditions'.[63] As a child and young woman of this era, I was informed and influenced by the prevailing ideologies, therefore I recognise the critical reflection required in order to dislocate habitual ways of seeing a 'benevolent' and 'charitable' society of mid-twentieth century Australia. By challenging the 'knowledge traditions', I question past perceptions about this land of opportunity where life in the perennial sunshine could be seen as democratic, tolerant and just. Elements of the personal and of the vicarious have been combined to create something new, resulting in an artefact which is many layered. This production of the new is tempered by the acknowledgement that there is no single history nor can there be a simple narrative of institutional life for the children known as 'forgotten Australians'. The settings and the quality of care varied considerably from one institution to another and there have been some care leavers who have triumphed over adversity, just as there were some sincere and humane carers. Yet, the overwhelming evidence remains that 'there was no surety that any child who passed through the gates of an institution would not suffer psychological, physical or sexual violence, because no-one was watching'.[64]

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[61] C. Hunt and F. Sampson, *Writing: Self and Reflexivity,* Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 4.

[62] Hunt and Sampson, p. 7.

[63] Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts*, p. 44.

[64] National Museum of Australia, *Inside.*

Conclusion

The findings of this paper conclude that in recollecting past events, errors, inventions and elaborations are embedded in the resulting narratives. Thus, there may be many versions of any one event. The discussion uncovers a number of elements which contribute to this process as it challenges the binary opposition of fiction and nonfiction. Along the way, it reveals a myriad of blurred boundaries. The act of storytelling, which is an ancient and continuing human endeavour, serves to make sense of the world by bridging the past and present yet this enduring form of narrative disrupts boundaries by informing both fiction and nonfiction, as well as crossing many disciplinary borders including literature, history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Testimony and oral history, which could be perceived as factual narratives, contain elements of invention. Both official and unofficial (not previously heard) narratives are distorted over time and are subject to 'refiguring'. The workings of memory are examined and found to be less than perfect and the legacy of trauma is recognised as a disjunction between experiencing and understanding, exemplifying the paradox which prevents victims truly comprehending what happened at a particular time, in a particular place. Thus, binaries such as fact and fiction, history and invention, official and unofficial, remembering and forgetting are exposed as being less than absolute. My re-imaging of these past events through a contemporary lens is yet another blurring, a refraction of the original events. Like any research, my creative enquiry involves the complex politics of representation: past events and experiences can never be captured directly.

Barbaric practices which were taking place behind the high walls of ironically named 'child welfare' institutions have been exposed in this investigation. Fear, shame, a sense of isolation and unworthiness are legacies of traumatic childhoods. Stigma, secrecy and silence are consequences. By breaking this silence and providing different ways of viewing a world which was inhabited by these once forgotten children, it is hoped that because of its journey into an imaginary realm the collection of stories *will* function as a significant cultural text and agent for social change. This paper concludes that there is no single, objective narrative of history: instead, a medley of voices bubble to the surface engaged in conversations, each struggling for cultural space, thus resulting in multiple layers of 'truth'. The many voices liberated in the fictional stories disrupt past official versions of what went on beyond the gates of child welfare institutions. It is hoped this work will allow readers to hear the voices within history's gaps and silences and to exercise their own moral and ethical imaginations particularly regarding the values and priorities society holds with respect to *all* of its children. By engaging in other than a literal rendering of lived experiences, fiction can disrupt and disturb the familiar and commonplace; it can invite the search for multiple solutions by remaining open to the unexpected through unusual expressions, metaphors and imaginings.

Academia has long purported to meet the desire to make things safe and secure by validating the truthfulness of knowledge.[65] Engaging in arts-based research implies a fundamental shift away from the assumption that all research is meant to bring us closer to 'proven' understandings about ourselves and the world in which

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[65] Barone and Eisner, *Arts Based Research*, p. 15.

we live. In fact, it could be said that arts-based research seeks to promote disequilibrium, thus challenging the single-minded quest for absolute certainty. In contemporary times, there is growing recognition that the reconstruction of past events is a subjective process often figured by gaps, omissions and inventions. As Lowenthal stresses, 'the truth in history is not the only truth about the past; every story is true in countless ways, ways that are more specific in history and more general in fiction'.[66] It is also his opinion that many people discover the past through a variety of fictional works rather than through any formal history scholarship. By choosing to engage in practice-led research I contribute to this process by fictionalising stories from history and by arguing that the 'arts in general teach us to see, to feel, and indeed to know…[by allowing individuals]…to participate empathetically in events that might otherwise be beyond their reach'.[67]

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[66] Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 229.
[67] Barone and Eisner, p. 8.