We are the stories we tell about ourselves
History and the construction of identity amongst Australians who, as children, experienced out-of-home 'care'

Recent enquiries into the prevalence of abuse amongst children who grew up in out-of-home 'care' provide both challenges and opportunities for historians of childhood. Over the past fifteen years three national enquiries have been undertaken in Australia. The first investigated the systematic removal of Indigenous children over more than a century, the second the experiences of child migrants sent from Malta and the United Kingdom, predominantly in the post-World War II era, and the third, the experiences of local children removed by state authorities or placed privately by guardians and relatives.[1] One of the first acts of the Labor Government elected in 2007 was to offer an apology to Indigenous survivors, followed two years later by a similar apology to the two other groups. The Federal Government has also put in place redress packages, although, significantly, making no commitment to financial recompense.[2] While each of these enquiries drew on the work of historians, primacy was given to survivor testimony taken both in written submissions and at public hearings held across the nation. This paper draws on the more than 500 written submissions presented to the third of the official enquiries. Recruited through 'care' leaver support groups and public advertisement, the voices in this valuable archive include Indigenous and non-Indigenous survivors and former child migrants, providing a powerful counter-narrative to the conventional history of child welfare in Australia.[3] The power of such testimony challenges the historian's 'right to speak'.[4] It also unsettles the assumption that we can build a boundary between the present and the past, for in this area as in many others where personal testimony comes into play, the two are, sometimes uncomfortably, intertwined.[5] This paper seeks to

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[1] Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: HREOC, 1997), Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record Report on Child Migration* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2001), ———, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or out-of-Home Care as Children* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2004).

[2] The two apologies can be found at: http://www.pm.gov.au/node/5952 and http://www.pm.gov.au/node/6321

[3] The submissions are available at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/submissions

[4] Bain Attwood, "In the Age of Testimony: The Stolen Generations Narrative, 'Distance,' and Public History," *Public Culture* 20, no. 1 (2008): 77-8.

[5] Ibid.: 80.

articulate a place for the historian in writing the history of child welfare in the post-apology age.

Survivor testimony is not uninformed by history. The 'care' leaver community includes scholars, and others who have developed impressive archival skills in their search for their own files, and many more of the submissions draw on an imagined construct of an idealised childhood, rooted to some degree in history, in order to articulate what they believe they were denied. [6] For Edgar Johnson, for example, the 'vision' of childhood was blurred. 'I don't remember happiness, laughter, nor do I remember birthdays. The years of my childhood seem to fold together like dough, as I was kneaded into shape. I am sad that I was not left with any fond memories as a child.'[7] Each of the enquiries also has a continuing place for historians, making recommendations about the need to include the experience of these children in the national history, and to make provision for preservation of and access to institutional records. The redress packages have responded to these recommendations providing funding for the commissioning of oral history projects, museum displays and archives access workshops, and the introduction of new information and support services for care-leavers.[8] The focus of this paper is on the last of these responses. It sets out to explore the role and responsibility of historians in facilitating access to personal records.

Narratives developed within families give children a sense of continuity, of belonging to a longer story which reaches back into the past.[9] For children who grow up within families, this narrative is preserved in oral history, photograph albums and family memorabilia, and reinforced at birthdays, anniversaries, christenings and other family occasions.[10] As Christine Horrocks and Jim Goddard have argued, such oft-repeated family stories 'have a psychological function, in that they bring order to our lives. They enable us to integrate and gain clearer understandings of our experiences, thus fostering an understanding of the self and who we understand ourselves to be.'[11]

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[6] See for example Frank Golding, *An Orphan's Escape* (Melbourne: Hachette, 2005), J. Penglase, *Orphans of the Living: Growing up in 'Care' in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005).
[7] Forgotten Australians submission 463. Edgar Johnson.
[8] The Federal Government response to the Bringing them Home enquiry is summarized at: http://www.racismnoway.com.au/classroom/factsheets/52.html. Responses to the other two enquiries are reported at: http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bn/sp/childmigrants.htm#_Toc245702532
[9] Suellen Murray et al., *After the Orphanage: Life Beyond the Children's Home* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 48, 52.
[10] Jim Goddard, Julia Feast and Derek Kirton, 'Memories, Childhood and Professional Power: Accessing the Care Files of Former Children in Care' in *Narrative and Memory*, p.24.
[11] Christine Horrocks and Jim Goddard, "Adults Who Grew up in Care: Constructing the Self and Accessing Care Files," *Child and Family Social Work* 11 (2006): 266.

When children are taken into care they lose those connections, and with them a core component of identity.[12] Many are left 'not knowing anyone who belonged to [them]', denied access to family stories.[13] Social identities are constructed through narrative, but 'care' leavers lack the key components needed for such a task.[14] Survivor narratives, Suellen Murray has argued, constitute 'narratives of lost origins' attempting to make sense of both a childhood and contemporary self in the absence of 'reliable markers about what happened, and why'.[15] In the construction of such narratives, institutional records replace family as the repository of personal histories.

Without a knowledge of family histories, 'care' leavers have struggled to understand 'who I was or where I belonged'.[16] As Leonie Sheedy, co-founder of the Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN), argues:

> Being a parentless person is a most difficult thing. I feel like a second class member of the community. I feel different, I have no sense of belonging to a long line of extended relatives, no parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins. My loss is also my children's loss as they have no extended relatives on their mother's side either. I feel that I have no past, that my life only began at 3 yrs old. The documents and family photos of a normal family life are missing.[17]

'When and how do you start telling your own children your childhood life stories?' asks Deborah Findlay. 'My children need to know my story and others who lived in state care so they can understand why they are a little different from other families.'[18] The telling of such stories, historian Bain Attwood has argued, 'is no longer simply the *acquisition of historical knowledge* about pasts poorly known ... instead it has become much more ... the *transmission of pasts* to future generations in a way that creates a sense of a strong transgenerational link between the faces and voices of witnesses and those who listen to them'.[19]

Despite recent legislative and procedural changes designed to facilitate access to personal records, issues around archiving practice, privacy and what one 'care' leaver described as bureaucratic self-preservation, continue to frustrate those who seek their files in

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[12] Forgotten Australians submission 360. Alan Sheridan.
[13] Forgotted Australians submission 153. John Brown.
[14] Margaret Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 6.
[15] Murray et al., *After the Orphanage*, 53.
[16] Forgotten Australians submissions 20. Ray Flett.
[17] Forgotten Australians submission 33. Leonie Sheedy.
[18] Forgotten Australians submission 449. Deborah Findlay.
[19] Attwood, "In the Age of Testimony," 86.

order to construct a coherent version of their lives.[20] After initially being surprised by the detailed files documenting his childhood, Frank Golding was 'staggered to find Departmental officials reluctant to give back all that was surely mine, the story of my life in their care. Having preserved the files of events going back fifty years, why continue to decide what we could and could not read?[21] Mary Brownlee found access blocked by an official who assured her that she 'would not like to see what had been written in my records, but don't say that I told you that'.[22] Some such barriers are idiosyncratic, but for privacy reasons, access to 'third party' information is almost routinely denied. Yet, in the case of 'care' leavers, the third party is often a parent or a sibling, and the information that is being withheld is a crucial part of their family story. In record keeping systems in which all information about siblings was concentrated on the oldest, or youngest, children's files, it is often part of their individual story as well.

In the struggle to navigate around such barriers in order 'to fill in the gaps' in personal histories, to find the '(Me) who I truly never quite knew as a whole person because I was missing the most important years of my life', survivors are forced to become 'historians of the self'.[23] Linda Eldridge moved frequently during her time in 'care'. 'With each new family came a new name, new friends and it was if the old ones did not exist. Years later I visited every home where I lived and took photos so that I could validate to myself that "yes, this place really does exist" and I remembered what my life was like when I lived there.'[24] Others look to the records of their time in care for self validation, but such records are frequently sketchy and disjointed, providing at best only partial, and often quite damaging answers to such questions as: 'why was I put into "care"'; 'what happened to me while I was there', and; 'why did "care" providers treat me in that way?'[25]

Coherence is central to identity development, but it is a need that surviving files are ill-equipped to meet.[26] 'Hidden ... from society, removed and stripped of all being. Many of these older ex-wards have no records of their lives in these institutions other than three sole lines: name, date of birth and parents.'[27] Kerry Blake's file contained 'no photos, nor anecdotes, just a slim green file, with a sentence devoted to Kerry, who was "a good girl"'

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[20] Forgotten Australians submission 73. Bernard Brady.
[21] Forgotten Australians submission 18. Frank Golding.
[22] Forgotten Australians submission no 57. Mary Brownlee.
[23] Murray et al., *After the Orphanage*, 52.
[24] Forgotten Australians submission 470. Linda Eldridge.
[25] Forgotten Australians submission 241. Melissa.
[26] Horrocks and Goddard, "Adults Who Grew up in Care," 268.
[27] Forgotten Australians submissions 369. Caron

and the information 'that at four years of age I was 2'6" tall, and weighted 2 stone 11 pounds'.[28] At many non-government institutions record-keeping was minimal, 'no memory, no photos, no medical, school reports nothing', whole childhoods contained within one or two sheets of paper.[29]

These archival records document 'care' leavers' lives, introducing a deeply personal element, missing in more conventional historical research. The case record that historians find so fascinating is for the 'care' leaver, a rare surviving fragment of their earlier self. Melissa found the process of accessing her files deeply satisfying. 'As an adult I like finding out the person I am now, as I was as a child, and where I was from.'[30] Others were buoyed, and at times angered, to discover that far from being unwanted or rejected as they had repeatedly been told, they had parents, or former foster parents, who had struggled in vain to retain or regain contact.[31] Recovered files also contained information about parents and siblings previously believed dead or denied, reinstating individuals as members of real rather than imagined families, even if contact was unable to be established.[32] However, for others, such discoveries only intensified their anger. Having been informed by a records access clerk that the brother she had been told was dead was still alive, and that she had another brother whom she had never met, Carol Ann May recalled only devastation and agony.[33] Her story is only one of many documenting the emotions and unmet expectations involved in records access. While Jody Ann Smith was excited to receive the 'present of my childhood' she found that she had 'forgotten how unbearable' that childhood had been. [34] 'When I started the search,' Lorna Manning wrote, 'I thought the ache in the corner of my heart would be erased only to find it has got larger.'[35] 'We are left with a sense of BEWILDERMENT to make sense of it all', observed Caron, 'and are forced to study the history and sociology of this era to understand our context.'[36]

'In traumatic memory,' Dominick Capra has argued, 'the past is not simply history as over and done with. It lives on experientially and haunts and possesses the self or the

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[28] Forgotten Australians submission 418. Kerry Blake.
[29] Forgotten Australians submission 314. Regina Stratti, submission no.3. Garry Harrison, submission 100. Ian Morwood.
[30] Forgotten Australians submission no 241. Melissa.
[31] Forgotten Australians submission 442. Elizabeth B. Submission 351. Rosalie Bridgland.
[32] Forgotten Australians submission 108. Margaret Bissett. Submission 172. Margaret Peterson.
[33] Forgotten Australians Submission 344. Carol Ann May.
[34] Forgotten Australians submission 504. Jody Anne Smith.
[35] Forgotten Australians submission 184 Lorna Manning.
[36] Forgotten Australians submission 369. Caron

community.'[37] It is part of the role of the historian to work alongside survivors as they navigate their way through records likely to revive or elicit such traumatic memories. 'Memories,' 'care' leaver, Regina Stratti observes, 'are part of our surviving; with knowledge we try and understand how to walk forward. We have survived in a world of judgment with little margin for error.'[38] To strengthen the sense of self 'care' leavers must reconcile their newly accessed records with their memories and with the larger public narratives which have been developed through the activities of survivor support groups and the public enquiries.[39] This is a complex task. Having grown up with what Caron describes as 'only a pseudo and fragile sense of self', many 'care' leavers struggle to reconcile a hoped for past with the reality they find in the files, and to make sense of the decisions by both authorities and family members which determined the shape of their childhood lives.[40]

Files were not designed to meet such needs. They were compiled for bureaucratic reasons and preserve forms and documents without making any attempt to tell the story of a life.[41] The files encode the views of the 'care' giver and the language is often alienating, leaving no space for the voice of the child to be heard. 'As a state ward I had no rights,' one 'care' leaver recalled.

> When I got access to my files I noticed everything written about me was done
> by other people, I was never asked a question or allowed to say what was
> happening to me ... I live with the memories of the treatment, I received, no
> matter what I do or how hard I try it never leaves me it's always just under the
> surface.[42]

Kimm Moore considers herself lucky to have found material that was 'really positive and affirming'.[43] More commonly what is recorded is negative, incident reports, punishment logs and justifications for decisions which disrupted the child's life. A negative impression once formed is often repeated 'over and over, like a broken record or perhaps copied from the page before'.[44] Particularly upsetting are the letters from family seeking to maintain some form of

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[37] Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 56.
[38] Forgotten Australians. Submission no 314. Regina Stratti
[39] Murray et al., *After the Orphanage*, 51. Horrocks and Goddard, "Adults Who Grew up in Care," 266.
[40] Forgotten Australians. Submission no 369. Caron, Submission no 96. Samilya Muller.
[41] Forgotten Australians. Submission 351. Rosalie Bridgland
[42] Forgotten Australians. Submission 476.
[43] Forgotten Australians. Submission 477. Kimm Moore.
[44] Forgotten Australians. Submission 245. Submission 464. Ella Street.

contact. For Linda Eldridge, 'the lack of compassion in the system was abundantly clear when my grandmother's heartfelt request for even a photo was denied'.[45]

It is at this point that historians have a particular role to play. They possess the tools to help make sense of the records of such troubled pasts, identifying the contextual material that can provide more answers to many of the questions that personal files fail to answer. Testimonies, Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey have argued, 'bring with them new obligations of witnessing'.[46] The Who Am I project is an attempt by Australian historians working with the archives of such testimonies created by the three national enquiries to honour such obligations. Drawing on the precedent established by Peter Read and Anna Haebich, whose research was central to the enquiry into Indigenous child removal, it employs a collaborative approach.[47] In the Who Am I research team historians work alongside archivists, social workers and representatives of 'care' leaver support organisations, current and former care providers and the Victorian Department of Human Services. The project has three interconnected strands. The first is concerned with improving standards of record-keeping for children in out of home 'care', raising awareness amongst contemporary social workers about the role which the records they are compiling will play in children's lives, both now and into the future, and attempting to develop standards that will ensure that such records will be constructive and accessible, and contain the information that 'care' leavers will need to conduct their adult lives. The second is concerned with archives, working with the partner organisations to raise standards of both preservation and cataloguing and to set in place systems that will ensure the survival of current records as they make their way along the archive continuum. The third is historical, drawing on existing and new research to compile an online database, Pathways, which aims to provide the contextual information that 'care' leavers need to locate and understand their personal records.[48]

Pathways is a public knowledge space, drawing on materials that are already in the public domain. While it cannot, and would not, provide people with access to information about their families it contains information about the institutions and organisations that were acting *in loco parentis*, and listings of the contents and location of their archival holdings.

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[45] Forgotten Australians. Submission 470. Linda Eldridge.
[46] Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, "Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction," *Cultural values* 5, no. 1 (2001): 1.
[47] Coral Edwards and Peter Read, *The Lost Children: Thirteen Australians Taken from Their Aboriginal Families Tell of the Struggle to Find Their Natural Parents* (Moorebank, N.S.W.: Doubleday, 1989), Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000), Doreen Mellor and Anna Haebich, eds., *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002).
[48] The website can be viewed at: http://www.pathwaysvictoria.info/index.html

Individual interlinked pages document the institutions, charities, government departments, key figures and key concepts in the history of child welfare in Victoria. We hope that such historical information, augmented by entries charting changing laws, policies and attitudes relating to child welfare, will help 'care' leavers to answer some of the 'Why' questions that arise from a reading of their individual records. We hope to achieve this by removing barriers to accessing information, presenting information in a way that is 'user friendly', raising public awareness of a long-silenced history, and providing people with materials to help them make sense of the past and to help them tell their own stories. The methodology employed builds upon the concept of shared authority, first expounded by Michael Frisch in relation to the practice of oral history.[49] It is not a top down or benevolent model but rather one of ceding authority in order to stand alongside and learn from each other, recognising complementary skills and knowledge sets.[50] Survivor support groups have been critical in helping us find the language in which to share our knowledge, while policy makers and practitioners contribute an understanding of contemporary record keeping and access provisions. The site does not claim to offer an objective of authoritative version of the past, rather each entry aims to present a range of viewpoints linking wherever possible to primary sources that access 'care' leavers' voices and complicate the received history of out of home 'care'.

Although the site is only one year into development it has been live since December 2009. It is already recognised as a key resource for workers providing supported access to records. They constitute its most regular users, and have already requested copies of a print version of the introductory exhibition 'What to expect when accessing your records'. More interesting, however, is the evidence of how 'care' leavers are using the site, with Google analytics suggesting a preference for the visual material. Given the absence of such materials in most surviving case records, it would seem that illustrations of buildings, residents and staff on Pathways are already beginning to function as a 'family album' for those who have none. 'Care' leavers who access records in order to gain some power over what Mary Brownlee describes as 'a profoundly sad part of my life' already testify to the importance of doing so within a peer support group who, in the absence of family, constitute the one group

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[49] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).
[50] Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, "A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry," *The Public Historian* 28, no. 1 (2006): 20.

of people who understand their lives.[51] Pathways has the potential to extend this sense of a shared consciousness into a virtual space not only for 'care' leavers engaged in the process of identity construction but also for their partners and children, and all others in the community wanting to understand their lived experience.

In an article in the latest edition of the *Journal for the History of Childhood and Youth* Barbara Beatty and Julia Grant lament the gap that exists between policy makers and historians with an interest in child welfare.[52] The Who Am I project illustrates one way in which that gap may be breached. At research workshops policy makers and practitioners sit alongside 'care' leavers, archivists and historians, with all the participants learning from the sharing of stories and experiences. Working collaboratively the research team is developing in Pathways a complex record of the history of child welfare on which scholars, campaigners, policy makers and practitioners are already beginning to draw.

Professor Shurlee Swain
School of Arts and Sciences (Vic)
Australian Catholic University

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[51] Forgotten Australians. Submission no 57. Mary Brownlee. Forgotten Australians submission no 258. Caroline Carroll.

[52] Barbara Beatty and Julia Grant, "Entering into the Fray: Historians of Childhood and Public Policy", *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 3, no. 1 (2010): pp. 107-26.