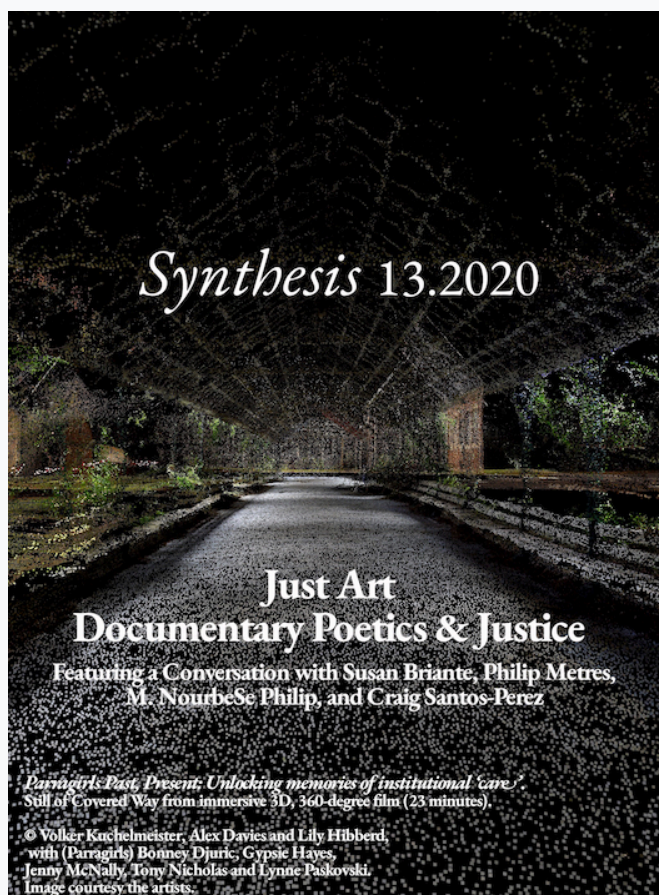


## Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

Ap. 13 (2020)

Just art. Documentary Poetics and Justice



**Parragirls Past, Present: Unlocking Memories of Institutional 'Care': Witnessing and Creative Reparation in the Aftermath of Parramatta Girls Home**

Naomi Toth, Lily Hibberd

doi: [10.12681/syn.27563](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.27563)

Copyright © 2021, Naomi Toth, Lily Hibberd



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Αναφορά 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

***Parragirls Past, Present: Unlocking Memories  
of Institutional ‘Care’:  
Witnessing and Creative Reparation  
in the Aftermath of Parramatta Girls Home***

Naomi Toth and Lily Hibberd

In Australia, as in many other British settler colonies, successive governments have undertaken large-scale inquiries to investigate injustices committed in state-run institutions—prisons, schools, child protection and welfare. These inquiries sought to shed light on past practices in the name of reconciling divided societies. Parallel to these investigations and the legal actions they were often associated with, a range of extra-judicial practices of witnessing have emerged, instigated by those who suffered from the injustices in question. Such practices may be understood both complementary to and critical of the form of witnessing admitted in the official inquiries as well as the justice system. As alternative forms of testimony, these accounts relate individual and collective trauma that could not find expression in the framework of government enquiries or the legal system, and pose the question of what exactly constitutes reparation.

This is the case for the immersive virtual reality film, *Parragirls Past, Present: Unlocking Memories of Institutional ‘Care.’* Five adults who were incarcerated as adolescents during the 1960s and 70s in the Australian government-operated child welfare institution Parramatta Girls Home, and who call themselves ‘Parragirls,’ came together to make this artwork. Created between 2016 and 2017, *Parragirls Past, Present* was made during the last two years of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which investigated more than twenty church or state institutions and private organisations, including Parramatta Girls Home.

Three of the creators of the film were also involved in the Royal Commission's investigation.

The present text is an exchange between Lily Hibberd, an artist who collaborated with members of the Parragirls survivors' group from 2011 to 2019, and Naomi Toth, critic. 'It explores the following questions: what motivated the Parragirls' recourse to art, and the choice of this artform in particular? What supplement to the official enquiry and the judicial system was deemed necessary? What critique of witnessing through official channels does it develop? And what kind of reparation does it seek to achieve?

### **Parramatta Girls home history (Lily Hibberd)**

In order to understand the urgency behind making *Parragirls Past, Present* and the politics of its form, it is important to understand some of the history of the institution whose systemic injustices the film seeks to address.

Parramatta Girls Home<sup>2</sup> is situated on the banks of the Parramatta River, west of Sydney. The first institution on the site was the Parramatta Female Factory, established in 1821 as a women's prison, asylum, workhouse, maternity ward, and accommodation for unmarried women, serving the first decades of New South Wales' colonial expansion. Twenty years later, a Roman Catholic Orphan School was built alongside the Factory to accommodate Catholic infants taken from female convicts and interns. This institutional complex initiated the disciplinary confinement of some of the most vulnerable members of the Australian population based on discriminatory and moralising attitudes to age, gender, class, physical, mental and cognitive norms, and their intersections, which became integral to the Australian welfare system thereafter.<sup>3</sup> Parramatta Girls Home replaced the Catholic Orphan School in 1887. As a government-operated reformatory, it acted both as a refuge and juvenile detention centre for teenage girls, with two distinct yet contradictory missions: the protection and the punishment of children (see Aitken, quoted in Sullivan, 94).<sup>4</sup> The state had only to observe that a young female had become "uncontrollable," were known for "bad frequentations," or had been "exposed to moral danger," in order to institutionalise the child without parental consent, for their own "good" (Royal Commission, 4). The child's welfare corresponded to conformity to moral and economic codes: Parramatta Girls Home produced a female working class destined for domestic labour, cleaning, or textile and other factory work.

In spite of Parramatta Girls Home's social welfare premise, the institution reproduced the social, gender and racial inequalities that

underpinned and arguably still characterise Australian society as part of its colonial heritage. The abusive treatment the children received within the institution underscores this injustice. Severe and humiliating punishments were administered, including solitary confinement in windowless cells, forced labour in the Home's laundries or punitive work including scrubbing floors or walls on hands and knees for hours. There were also invasive practices to determine the virginity or sexual health of girls, and numerous cases of sexual assault and rape (Royal Commission, case study n° 7).

Those incarcerated in the institution did not always passively accept their fate. The state archives of New South Wales records nine riots between 1887 and 1961 (Sullivan, 88). These uprisings alerted state authorities to problems in the institution and serial inquiries were conducted, often with damning conclusions. Although the closure of the institution was envisaged on several occasions, this did not take place until 1974 (*Forgotten Australians*, 83) primarily due to public pressure, chiefly from the Women's Liberation Movement.

### **Writing the record. The Parramatta Girls and government inquiries (Lily Hibberd)**

Thirty years after the institution's closure, extended survivor-led campaigns and serial news stories in the early 2000s forced the Australian government to commence taking responsibility for the injustices that had occurred in the child welfare system. By the time Parramatta Girls were invited to provide testimony for the Australian Senate inquiry focused on out-of-home care in 2001, eventually entitled *Forgotten Australians*, many of the survivors had endured decades of debilitating effects as a result of childhood abuse and lifelong trauma. Survivors had also lived with the reputation of Parramatta Girls as delinquents and criminals, and had buried both the trauma and shame under decades of silence. The *Forgotten Australians* inquiry opened up the past to public scrutiny and provided conventional forms of justice: the hearing, recording and publication of victims' testimonies, the identification of human rights violations and perpetrators, and the writing of recommendations for reparation and prevention of these injustices.

Many Parramatta Girls returned to the site between 2003 and 2008. This led to autonomous creative projects, such as quilt-making, poetry, song and other creative writing, which sprung up to fill the gap that government inquiry had left after reviving decades of suppressed memories and hopes for justice. They also sought contact and support from each other, attempting to comprehend and document the institution's history for themselves,

eventually forming the “Parragirls” network in 2006. Six years later, the Parragirls Memory Project was initiated in 2012,, bringing together a small group of Parramatta Girls and a small number of contemporary artists on the site in order to both document and interpret its history for themselves.<sup>5</sup> The artistic works produced in this context were both visual and written, arising from collective memory workshops, creative writing, site-responsive works such as performances, installations and group exhibitions in and around the neglected former Girls Home site.<sup>6</sup>

In 2014, a second chapter in the history of Parramatta Girls Home was opened with another government enquiry, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. When the first Royal Commission public hearings focused on Parramatta Girls Home took place in February 2014, sixteen women were invited to publicly testify about the sexual abuse they had suffered in the institution.<sup>7</sup> But it was through art that Parragirls found form for the articulation of their memories and established their power as witnesses. Indeed, it was during this enquiry that *Parragirls Past, Present*, one of the most emblematic works was generated by the Parragirls Memory Project, both for its collective narration and collaborative creation. It was crafted at Parramatta Girls Home over two years, working with five core members of Parragirls Memory Project, Bonney Djuric, Gypsie Hayes, Jenny McNally, Tony Nicholas<sup>8</sup> and Lynne Paskovski, with my collaboration and that of visualisation and sound artists Volker Kuchelmeister and Alex Davies. The film was commissioned for the 2017 Big Anxiety festival, premiered at UNSW Sydney’s EPICentre in 2017, and subsequently toured to a number of international film festivals across Australia, Israel, and the USA, as well as being exhibited at the ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Germany in 2018.



Figure 1. *Parragirls Past, Present: Unlocking memories of institutional 'care'*. Still of Covered Way from immersive 3D, 360-degree film (23 minutes). Created by Volker Kuchelmeister, Alex Davies and Lily Hibberd, with (Parragirls) Bonney Djuric, Gypsy Hayes, Jenny McNally, Tony Nicholas and Lynne Paskovski. Image courtesy the artists.

### **A different form of testimony (Naomi Toth)**

Giving testimony in the government enquiries was not straightforward for Parramatta Girls, as some of them were, naturally, dubious about the outcomes of the process, given their past experience. While accusations of rape or sexual abuse at Parramatta Girls Home had been recorded and investigated over the years, these crimes had never resulted in the prosecution of the perpetrators. This was due to a range of circumstances, from the plaintiff abandoning the case when faced with a costly and slow judicial system, to the plaintiff or the accused passing away. The most notable limitation was the 1969 Limitation Act, which meant that charges could only be pressed if the events had occurred six years earlier or less. Two women nonetheless managed to receive compensation through civil court proceedings (Royal Commission, 6). Following the publication of the Royal Commission's interim report in 2014, which included findings concerning Parramatta Girls Home, the state of New South Wales decided to abolish limitation in cases of sexual crimes against minors, and also came to agreements concerning compensation before the civil court in several cases concerning Parramatta Girls Home. The Royal Commission therefore created unprecedented conditions for the legal recognition of charges brought by former residents and for financial reparation.

Testifying before a government enquiry also meant, for many survivors, overcoming a lack of trust in institutional structures, a particularly significant obstacle for women who have spent a part of their childhood in Australian juvenile detention centres, and who have been the victims of illegal practices perpetrated by the very persons who were supposed to embody government and the law itself. The Royal Commission was aware of this problem, noting in its opening pages that many survivors from similar institutions simply did not complain at the time or subsequently press charges, either due to a sense of shame, a fear of not being believed or a fear of being punished once again (5, 6). But though the Royal Commission tried to provide a supportive environment, the very nature of the enquiry, with its aim to establish facts backed up by proof, meant that certain institutional frameworks were inevitably reproduced, and with them, the mistrust or fear of state institutions.

The difficulties of witnessing a personal account in the face of authority figures is directly broached in *Parragirls Past, Present*. Standing on the same spot where she last met with a state government welfare representative on a recent official visit to Parramatta Girls Home, Parragirl Jenny McNally relates the following incident:

I was so offended when the FaCS [Family and Community Services] worker stood up there and started reciting the history of the Parramatta Girls' Home. And how easy it fell, all this garbage fell out of her mouth that is so non-factual. And I just saw outrage. It was like ... actually it was very hard for me to bear. I just wanted to scream at her because she was lording over us. And the sad thing is she turned to me and said, 'Who are you?' And I went all regimented and said my name. What I should have told her is 'Go f\*\*k yourself my love.' I said my name because she was standing on the step and I just transformed into an insignificant nothing and responded to the expectation that a superintendent would expect me to respond. And oh, I was beside myself that that had happened. I was angry that someone could turn me so quickly with 'And who are you?' (*Parragirls Past, Present*, 00.05.06)

So ingrained was her reflex to submit that, decades after the event, she was still unable to speak not only her rage but also her truth in a context in which authority structures were reproduced. While this did not stop sixteen of the former occupants from testifying before the Royal Commission, including Jenny McNally herself, we can see how testimony produced the context of a supportive collective who were prepared to believe the stories that might allow for different aspects of a survivor's experience to emerge.

Two further issues hamper witnesses in the context of these state enquiries. Firstly, such enquiries privilege individual testimonies, delivered

when witnesses are alone and unaccompanied. Though the Royal Commission did attempt to create a “protected and supportive environment” for testifying in private sessions (Royal Commission, Final Report, vol 5, 2), interviewing victims separately necessarily means that collective experiences become singularised. Secondly, this individualisation does not only tend to sideline the collective nature of the abuse, it also affects the experience of the witness as she tells her story, alone. This difficulty is only deepened when the specific nature of the abuse is considered. Victims of physical and sexual violence often experience the retelling of their abuse as a newly traumatic experience, as if their bodies were once again exposed. In other words, the experience of testifying can be one which reopens wounds rather than empowering the person testifying (Classen, Gronskaia and Aggarwal; Quadara and Hunter). This problem, which the Royal Commission’s interim report also highlighted<sup>9</sup>, is exacerbated when the hearings are public or will be made public, even though the witness may request anonymity. These perceived shortcomings in the government enquiries contrast with the testimony provided in the film point for point: where the government enquiries interviewed witnesses alone, the film drew on testimony produced in a collective context; where the government enquiries singularise testimony, the film proposes a collective narrative; where the government enquiries, in spite of their efforts, expose the witnesses’ bodies in a public context, the film instead allowed Parragirls’ testimony to be heard without their bodies being seen. In other words, institutional violence is related in a form that both allows for its collective dimension to emerge while avoiding the reproduction of the frameworks that had allowed for such violence to take place.

### **Remembering trauma through virtual reality (Lily Hibberd)**

The process of walking the site and recording stories, video and sounds over one year enabled the Parragirl co-creators to establish a container for their memories. These remained embedded in the Girls Home, which some had not visited for 20 or 30 years. As such, there were often gaps in the story that Parragirls were actively working to piece back together as they related their stories. Narratives for the film script took shape in the same manner as these memories, with many missing pieces being composited or layered while remaining incoherent. The diegetic universe is that of Parramatta Girls Home, and the spectator is taken through the site as it is today, accompanied by the voices of the five Parragirls who relate their past experiences in the different buildings and rooms of the Home.

In order to reproduce the experience of this place as faithfully as possible, both the creative team and Parragirls were drawn to immersive, 3D technology. After several months of experimentation with different forms of immersive documentation (including 360-degree video, aerial and spatial scanning, and panoramic photography), Volker Kuchelmeister suggested a 3D rendering technique called point-cloud. This required photographing the open areas of the site as well as accessing areas that had been off-limits for Parragirls for decades. These photos were then used to generate a 3D model, in which all the visual data was transformed into points in three dimensions. The points were then recoloured to appear as small dots of light on a black background. Featuring broken fields of vision, black voids and constellations of data fragmentation, this aesthetic was well-suited to encapsulate a sense of remembering through the lens of trauma as Parragirls were experiencing in direct contact with the Home. Although the film was specifically realised for screening in a 360° 3D cinema, it can also be viewed on a VR headset. Regardless of format, the virtual environment plunges the viewer into a 3D world where they can move about at will, as what they see changes according to the position of their body.

The film commences in a fully enclosed, high sandstone walled space that has no real-world equivalent, but was digitally generated to replicate the shock of arriving for the first time in a carceral space, as so many children had experienced over the years at the Girls Home and Orphan School site. Spectators are then transported through the front gate, into the main yard of the Home, while Parragirls provide accounts of what it is like to recall their experiences in the present moment. Next, we are taken down a set of stairs into the first solitary confinement space, known as the dungeon, where Gypsie Hayes relates in graphic terms what it was like to be left alone there in the dark. The film plunges us into blackness, and in this moment of full immersion we feel that we are present with Gypsie in the dark.

Rising again to ground level, we find ourselves on the covered way, a long passage connecting the institution's buildings, which Bonney Djuric describes in the film as a kind of artery connecting many times, experiences and people, including us now with her in the present in that place. As we are taken along the covered way, Bonney and Jenny recount events and attempt to reconcile their different memories of the Home, both as teenagers and in their meetings over recent years through the Memory Project. As we reach the end of the passage, a series of memories connected to the adjacent marching grounds, toilets, isolation block, are recounted by Jenny McNally and Tony Nicholas, while Gypsie Hayes relates the mythical attempted

escape of another girl over the institutional wall. Her story segues into the adjacent laundry building, which turns out to be the site of punitive labour, according to Lynne, Gypsie and Bonney.

The final location is the Bethel Building, where Bonney and Jenny tell of their contrasting feelings: Bonney discusses a few weeks of ‘privilege’ prior to release; Jenny tells of being haunted by the punishments she suffered in the segregation cell:

I can't come to terms with how they tried to make me a victim in here. They put me in isolation. They put me in the dungeon. And they put me in here. And it was victimisation. Because they couldn't beat me, they put me away. You know. I never attacked anyone, I've never hurt anyone. I have never hurt anyone. I just had a mouth on me, you know. I could have shut up, but I felt if I'd ever shut up, I wouldn't be who I am today. (*Parragirls Past, Present*, 00.19.10)

### **Immersive media and embodiment (Lily Hibberd and Naomi Toth)**

The choice to create *Parragirls Past Present* in the form of a 3D immersive film was made for the potential of this medium to offer an embodied experience for viewers. However, it was also of critical importance for the Parragirls that voyeurism and fascination with violence be avoided, all the more so given that 3D technology is often associated with video games, whose marketability depend precisely on making violence pleasurable.<sup>10</sup> For this reason the artists decided to stage the experience from the point of view of the spectator instead of a Parragirl. For the Parragirls it was crucial that their bodies were not exposed to the gaze of others. As we travel through the spaces of the Home alongside them, the Parragirls narrate their memories and the narrators are never represented visually. The abuse they underwent is also only ever referred to verbally and moreover often indirectly. In Lynne Paskovski's account of an invasive genital examination, for example, the event, related to the spectator as they are transported downstairs into the 3D virtual reconstruction of the main building's basement, and is evoked in suggestive terms with no explicit detail:

When you go into any remand, you go in for internal examinations. Now you're virgins at this time. We don't even know what internal .... And I remember being held down by staff members, forcing internal was a silver duck thing or whatever and you're screaming and the police are standing there not doing a thing. And you were really scared about anything because after the brutal examination, what they did when you first come in, after that you are thinking what the hell else is going to happen to ya? (*Parragirls Past, Present*, 00.00.26)

This presentation not only avoids the re-exposition of the Parragirls' bodies, it also puts a stop to any illusion the spectator might entertain of being able to re-live what they themselves had experienced. The structural gap between the visual experience of the spectator in the present and the exclusively auditory account of the sounds, sensations and images of past abuse thus plays an important role in preserving the women's dignity while simultaneously creating a sensorial experience that allows the spectator to sense something of the Parragirls' experience that goes beyond the verbal—all that the government enquiries could record.

The film also differs from many virtual reality films and games created for headsets in that it unfolds along a firm narrative line that does not offer choices for spectators. This further erodes any temptation to appropriate the experience of the victim, while communicating, as Kit MacFarlane has noted, a certain feeling of powerlessness that comes with incarceration, as well as the feeling of being trapped in a bad dream.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2. *Parragirls Past, Present: unlocking memories of institutional 'care,'* screening at UNSW Epicentre for The Big Anxiety 2017. Created by Volker Kuchelmeister, Alex Davies and Lily Hibberd, with (Parragirls) Bonney Djuric, Gypsy Hayes, Jenny McNally, Tony Nicholas and Lynne Paskovski. Photo: Skyline Productions. Courtesy the artists and UNSW.

### **Combining objective reality and subjective memory of traumatic events (Naomi Toth)**

Point-cloud technology allows the film to navigate another double imperative. On the one hand, the Parragirls sought to document the site as accurately, as objectively and as exhaustively as possible. This might be understood as a way of shoring up the documentary status of the work: in a move characteristic of witness accounts,<sup>12</sup> it seeks to ensure that their testimony would be taken seriously. It also participates in the authors' ambition to create an archive: to record the site before it disappears. On the other hand, the authors wanted to be able to reproduce subjective and personal experiences of memory as part of the act of remembering as they were moving through the site. The gaps and black spaces play a key role here. Indeed, as the spectator approaches a reconstituted edifice, such as a wall or building, the points disassemble, such that a concrete object that seems solid at a distance appears close up as a constellation of floating dots. This aesthetic suggests an absent or fragmented state of mind or history (the black void that contains the points literally being the absence of photographic data) while recording the present with precision (with the points themselves). This allows the film to take place, in the words of Bonney Djuric, "between a past and a present." (*Parragirls Past, Present*, 00.04.50). As each wall decomposes onto a black background, the spectator approaches the zone where memories are buried—or resurrected.



Figure 3. *Parragirls Past, Present: Unlocking memories of institutional 'care,'* 2017. Production still, 3D 360-degree immersive film, 23 mins. Created by Volker Kuchelmeister, Alex Davies and Lily Hibberd, with (Parragirls) Bonney Djuric, Gypsy Hayes, Jenny McNally, Tony Nicholas and Lynne Paskovski. Image courtesy the artists.

The dissolution of the walls not only suggests the layers of an obscured past that line the present, it also gives an impression of unreality. The black space opens up a world beyond the concrete space of the institution, a world of memories, of dreams, or rather nightmares, where forms appear to be either too precise or insufficiently precise. “All of a sudden you start to remember things and that Pandora’s box is opened” says Lynne Paskovski at the beginning of the film. As these words are pronounced, the spectator descends, slowly, as if suspended, into a black hole that has opened up beneath his/her feet, into the floor below dropping down into a normally hidden layer beneath the surface. Though this movement evokes Lewis Carroll’s Alice falling down the rabbit hole, unlike Alice, the stories told here seem absurd or unbelievable not because they belong to a fantasy world, but because they are often too painful and unacceptable to be considered as real, particularly for the person who is remembering. The sense of the unreal that permeates the film therefore helps give form to the way memory of traumatic events function: as the consciousness seeks to repress as much as it revives these memories, the subject is torn between the desire to speak and the wish that such events hadn’t ever happened, an impression of unreality results. The difficulties involved in the effort of memory is also felt in the fragmentary, lapidary nature of the stories. Gypsie Hayes describes her experience of solitary confinement in a windowless basement thus:

The only way to survive there is to curl up and go to sleep. That’s all you could do to survive in that. It was nothingness. It was just a cold place, a dark place.

Both visually and in the narrative, then, the film consciously foregrounds the functioning of traumatic memory, treading the line between firm affirmation of the reality of the abuse, and the protective psychological mechanisms that make it still difficult for the victim themselves to believe it has happened to them, even decades later. Such features not only point to the limits of witness testimony, which is necessarily subjective, necessarily partial, they also, paradoxically, serve as a gage of authenticity.<sup>13</sup>

### **Collective narration and the transformation of shame (Naomi Toth)**

In order to counter the individualisation and separation of different experiences that occurred during witnessing in the official enquiries, and in order to preserve their individual privacy and dignity when relating events linked to child sexual abuse, the film relies on a form of collective narration.

Though the names of the five participants appear in the credits, none of the individual voices are identified for the spectators. Only two first names are mentioned, one of which designates someone other than the five women who participated in the film's creation, and whose surname is never revealed. While such collective narration might run the risk of erasing the differences between individuals' experiences, the multi-voiced, choral nature of the narrative allows for the distinctive nature of each person's individual experience to be heard nonetheless, and so avoids such a homogenising effect.

This collective narration allows for the solitary experiences of suffering, which the teenagers were often subjected to alone, to become recognisable as effects of institutional structures. By drawing out the shared and recurrent nature of abuse experienced individually, the collective narrative allows for each participant to realise that they were not the ones individually responsible for the suffering they underwent. As the collective dimension of the abuse suffered emerges through the aggregation of testimonies, the film plays a critical role in allowing the narrators themselves to recognise that the responsibility for their suffering lies not with themselves, but with the institution.

This process of shifting the onus of responsibility and guilt from the adolescents to the institution is essential in lifting the shame that weighs upon victims of abuse for which they have been made to feel responsible. The emotional work that this involves plays a central role in the collective mobilisation efforts of marginalised and/or dominated groups. It is therefore not surprising that the film bears a number of features that can be read in terms of what the sociologist Erving Goffman has described as "the reversal of stigma." "Stigma" here refers to signs which indicate a person belongs to a marginalised group. Such signs are seen as indicators of shameful difference by the majority. To reverse the value of such signs is to transfer the shame into pride. The adoption of the term "Parragirl," a negative label designating those who had been institutionalised at the Parramatta Girls Home, with connotations of a sexualised, dangerous, hardboiled rebel, one that the media at the time often reinforced, is in itself an indication of their determination to reverse the stigma that had marked their personal and collective histories.

Yet another incident related in the film is a clear example of such a phenomenon. Amongst Parragirls, it was a well-known practice to remove the heads of pins and insert the shaft under the skin (Royal Commission, 16). There are many ways such gesture could be interpreted, ranging from the

desire to avoid thinking of other forms of pain, which are covered over by this more immediate one, the desire to adopt the position of the one who inflicts pain rather than solely suffer passively, to the internal adoption of the moral codes of the institution to the point that one repeats its act of punishment upon a self considered unworthy of better treatment, to the desire to commit suicide. The pin was also, however, a sign of group belonging, with its link to the textile industry, which the Parragirls were being trained to enter. In the film, Gypsie Hayes recounts a recent x-ray she recently underwent for health reasons, during which a needle appears on the screen. Excited and delighted, she asks for it to be removed “to be put in a museum.” The headless pin was no longer an object of pain to be hidden, a shameful badge of Parragirl identity to be stuffed under the skin. The pin had become something Gypsie Hayes sought to bring to the surface and display with pride. This anecdote is emblematic of the emotional work the construction of a collective narrative in *Parragirls Past, Present* allowed.

The selection of stories for the visitor in the film also seems to have been made in order to affirm a resilient Parragirl identity. Jenny McNally opens the film with the following words: “They won by putting me in here, but they didn’t beat me. They were the winners, they got to shut the door. But I’m standing here, and it hasn’t beaten me.” While the abuse the girls suffered from is constantly present, the anecdotes they relate emphasise not passive suffering but moments of resistance, such as Lynne Paskovski’s tale of having filled the washing machines with detergent so that the laundry was overflowing with soap suds, leading to general confusion. Though the spectator learns she was punished with solitary confinement, the creative rebellion against the authority structures is what she emphasises.

The representation of the site in the film is also a tool for empowerment. As the spectator, accompanied by the voice of a Parragirl, approaches walls, floors and ceilings, these once-solid barriers dissolve, allowing for a transgression of spatial norms as the spectator sinks through the floor, walks through a wall, or rises through a ceiling. The real walls that bordered the world of the girls are represented, but their power to encircle and entrap is overcome. Such a gesture both recognises the reality of a painful past and translates the desire to traverse the mental obstacles and barriers that their time in the institution constructed.

**The importance of agency: a comparison with other artworks based on the experience of the Parramatta Girls (Naomi Toth)**

Granting Parragirls this level of agency in the narration of their story is perhaps where this film differs most clearly from previous efforts to broach their experience through art. Indeed, the other creative works that emerged around Parramatta Girls Home and Hay Girls Institution may be categorised according to the role the Parramatta Girls themselves played in their production: as passive subjects of a work, as collaborators in its creation, or as fully-fledged authors of their experience.

Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* adopts the first approach. Published by Allen and Unwin in 2015, this multiple prize-winning novel has often been compared to the dystopic fictional texts such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale*.<sup>14</sup> It relates the story of young women who have been drugged, kidnapped and incarcerated, who suffer violent treatment in a strict, moralising institution, and subsequently take revenge on their oppressors. Unlike Atwood's novel, however, Wood does not situate the text in a fictional future, but in a specific and identifiable historical setting: Hay Girls Institution, a former high security prison repurposed as an annex to Parramatta Girls Home for secondary punishment through hard labour and extended solitary confinement. Though Wood did do research on the institution as she prepared to write the novel, she did not meet with the Parragirls, and the plot, which concludes with a perpetrator's murder, is a pure invention with no historical equivalent. Given the obviously fictional nature of the work, this would not be in and of itself problematic if the novel did not project and renew a certain number of phantasms concerning Hay. The novel's characters come from a social background quite different from those of the Parragirls, as they have been institutionalised after having participated in sordid and potentially sensational sexual affairs with powerful men. This racy past precedes their incarceration, and they fight back against the violence they suffer from by killing in order to liberate themselves, a representation which reinforces the stereotypes of the sexualised, criminal and dangerous Parramatta Girl. It also erases the forms of domination other than gender—race and class—that characterised Parramatta Girls Home and Hay. Such a work, therefore, not only does not correct the public image of the Parragirls, it also fails to propose any form of analysis of the systemic nature of the abuse that historically characterised their experience.

The second approach is characterised by collaboration, in which the Parragirls' story, solicited by the artist, becomes the raw material for a work of art. Two documentary theatre plays, *Parramatta Girls* (2007) and *Eyes to the Floor* (2008), were written and staged by Alana Valentine based on testimony the playwright collected during many interviews with Parragirls. The characters in both plays are fictional composites of several real people, and were performed by professional actors, but the text itself is comprised of witness accounts reproduced "verbatim"—or rather, what she calls "massaged verbatim," as rewriting did occur<sup>15</sup>—the selection and composition of the extracts being made by Valentine. Both plays were performed to critical acclaim. Parragirls themselves participated willingly in the process and their reaction to the work was enthusiastic. However, they were not themselves the curators, the authors, the actors, or the directors of their own story.

It was their participation in the making of Valentine's plays that kindled in some survivors the desire to become the authors of their own story, to take control of the representations of their bodies and memories in a way that neither the government enquiries nor the art projects previously mentioned allowed them to do. Hence their decision to embark on work in their own voices in the Memory Project and the *Parragirls Past, Present* film, which allowed them also to experience a hitherto unknown feeling of agency.

### **Reparation (Lily Hibberd)**

Creating this film was therefore a way for the Parragirls to take control of their story, to analyse what happened to them and to transform the emotions that had been keeping the story repressed for so long, both in their individual memories and in the collective memory of Australian society. This also allowed Parragirls' demands for justice to be formulated collectively, based on a sense of legitimacy. The film itself both brought the stories out into the open and empowered Parragirls to share them with a much broader audience than a government report. This shift in agency was central to the film's creation.

In government reports, as in the judicial system, victim reparation is understood primarily in financial terms. Compensation is, moreover, meant to be administered to individuals based on the degree of damage they can prove to have had to bear. What does however emerge from the Royal Commission's final report is the inadequacy of measuring reparation principally in terms of financial compensation to individuals.<sup>16</sup> Some of the

cited witnesses stressed instead the need to receive concrete help that addressed their material living conditions in forms other than financial payouts. Others pointed to the importance of symbolic gestures, such as a state apology, even if these gestures were considered to be insufficient on their own. One of the former residents requested that the state pay for an inscription on her tombstone, specifying that she was “innocent,” not the “bad girl” that the state had made out she was (35). Permanent access to the site of the Parramatta Girls Home, abandoned since 2010, was also requested, as well as the creation of memorials or other works of memory (35).

Ultimately, *Parragirls Past, Present* sought to achieve something the judicial system and the state enquiries could not: to convey Parragirls’ lived experience and formulate their demands for justice on their own terms. With their emphasis on establishing the facts of a situation through verifiable proof, judicial enquiries exclude or relegate survivor subjectivity to secondary importance. This concerns in particular the emotional and sensorial nature of their experience as well as the upheaval provoked by the act of recollecting trauma in a public setting. It involves accounting for the caprices and gaps of memory when the events are traumatic. Such features were often minimised or set to one side in testimony produced during hearings as a potential threat to the objectivity or credibility of testimony, and yet for Parragirls they formed a central part of their experience, not only of past abuse but of its persistence in the present.

Drawing directly on witness testimony so as to upend authorial positions, *Parragirls Past, Present* contributes to the complexification of national narratives. Its effort to do justice is to denounce and explore the repercussions of forms of institutional violence upon which the former British penal colony was constructed. It also reclaims the form and power of justice from the state into the hands of survivors. The agency that comes with authorship, also allowed for the shifting of shame from the individual to the institution, and the exposure to their stories that the film allowed, reaching audiences beyond the readers of government reports, are both ways in which the authors were able to repair their image, both for themselves and in the eyes of a broader public.

For Parragirls, this required a work of collective memory that the government inquiries contributed to but did not, Parragirls believed, go far enough. The film wagers that the exposition of past wounds and the divisions they inscribe must be done in order to allow for any real change to take place, as conveyed in Jenny McNally’s call for recognition: “We can’t fix the

future if they don't recognize our past." While many Parramatta Girls have felt that their own repair was futile, they invested aspirations in ensuring a good future for Australian children. In the words of Lynne Paskovski: "We are hoping for the big change. That no other child will ever have to suffer again."

---

<sup>1</sup> This exchange began in 2018 during our joint presentation of *Parragirls Past, Present* at a conference in Pau, France, on truth and reconciliation practices in societies emerging from conflict. It has given rise to an article, published in French, 'Témoigner en dehors de la loi. Parragirls Past, Present' in Joana Etchart and Franck Miroux. Eds. *Les Pratiques de vérité et de réconciliation dans les sociétés émergentes de situations violentes*, Institut francophone pour la justice et la démocratie, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Though it bore several names over time, Parramatta Girls Home is the one which has remained in collective memory (Parry).

<sup>3</sup> Female convicts of British and Irish origin were the primary population of Parramatta Female Factories. As such, race was not an explicit discriminatory force in the first instance, as First Nations Australians were confined in racially segregated missions and children's homes. Nonetheless, the forced separation of First Nations children from their families was pivotal to the racial control and dispossession of Aboriginal peoples in colonial Australia during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Removed from their families and placed in church or state-run institutions, these practices created what are known as the *Stolen Generations* (see *Bringing them Home*, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Parramatta Girls Home was not initially designated to receive First Nations children. This changed from the mid-1960s when the mainstream and Aboriginal child welfare systems were merged. It has been difficult to establish reliable statistics. At Parramatta Girls Home, records were not kept on race or ethnic origin. Moreover, the practice of changing Aboriginal children's names upon institutionalisation makes tracing children's backgrounds difficult. However, more recent archival research has found that a certain number of Aboriginal girls removed from their families did end up at this home (*Bringing them Home* 40, 41, 47, 146, 149, 150, 195; Sullivan 87; Tynan).

<sup>5</sup> See the website dedicated to their activity: <https://www.pffpmemory.org.au/about>

<sup>6</sup> These different projects have been documented in Lily Hibberd and Bonney Djuric's 2019 edited book, *Parragirls: Reimagining Parramatta Girls Home through Art and Memory*.

<sup>7</sup> The enquiry's mission is formulated in the following terms: "To hear the experience of women who were sexually abused as children, between 1950-1974, while committed in The Parramatta Girls' Training School in Sydney; and/or Hay Institution for Girls'. Australian Government, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Report of Case Study No 7: Child sexual abuse at the Parramatta Training School for Girls and the Institution for Girls in Hay*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> During the making of the film Denise Nicholas officially changed gender, and also changed name to Tony Nicholas.

<sup>9</sup> See Australian Government, *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> See on this subject Martine Beugnet and Lily Hibberd, "Introduction", in the special issue of *Screen* intitled *Absorbed in Experience: New Perspectives on Immersive Media*.

<sup>11</sup> See Kit MacFarlane, "Cinema for Claustrophiles: Virtual Reality at the Adelaide Film Festival and Beyond".

<sup>12</sup> See the article by Frédérik Detue and Charlotte Lacoste in this issue of *Synthesis*.

<sup>13</sup> See, on such questions, Cathy Caruth. Ed. *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, "Introduction," pages 4-5 in particular. However, all the essays in this volume explore similar questions.

<sup>14</sup> See the report published in *The Economist* in July 2016, "The Way of the World" consulted August 17, 2019 online: <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2016/07/21/the-way-of-the-world> ; see also the author's webpage: <https://www.charlottewood.com.au/the-natural-way-of-things.html>. consulted August 17, 2019. Amongst the prizes Wood received for this work, the most notable are the Stella Prize and the Australian Prime Minister's Award for Fiction in 2016.

<sup>15</sup> See the interview with Alana Valentine published here: <https://www.currency.com.au/verbatim-theatre-alana-valentine/>, consulted March 23, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> The necessity and inadequacy of financial compensation recurs in debates concerning reparation for historical injustices, particularly those that concern crimes committed on a collective scale. While the situation of the Parragirls is very different from that concerning Holocaust victims, a clear overview of the kinds of problems posed by financial compensation may be found in Gideon Taylor, "Where morality meets money."

### Works Cited

- Australian Government, *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Report of Case Study No 7: Child sexual abuse at the Parramatta Training School for Girls and the Institution for Girls in Hay*. (2014, [www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-studies/case-study-07-parramatta-training-school-girls](http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-studies/case-study-07-parramatta-training-school-girls). Accessed 17 July 2019).
- Cameron, Michaela Ann. "Parramatta Female Factory." *The Dictionary of Sydney* (2015, [https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/parramatta\\_female\\_factory#r ef-uuid=bc3ff3ec-ffc6-ba34-8bbc-43cb98ee4dcf](https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/parramatta_female_factory#r ef-uuid=bc3ff3ec-ffc6-ba34-8bbc-43cb98ee4dcf)]. Accessed 14 August 2019).
- Beugnet, Martine and Lily Hibberd (eds). *Screen. Absorbed in Experience: New Perspectives on Immersive Media* 61.4 (Winter 2020): 586-593.
- Caruth, Cathy. Ed. *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, John Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Classen, C, O. Gronskeya Palesh et R. Aggarwal. « Sexual revictimisation: a review of the empirical literature » *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 6.2 (2005): 103-129.
- Commonwealth of Australia, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission. *Bringing them home, National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. (1997, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997>. Accessed 30 November 2020).

- Commonwealth of Australia, *Forgotten Australians. A report on Australians who received institutional or out-of-home care as children*. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Community\\_Affairs/Completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/inst\\_care/report/index](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/report/index). Accessed 30 November 2020.
- Detue, Frédérik and Charlotte Lacoste. "What Testimony Does to Literature." *Synthesis* 13(2020): 22-36.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, [1963]. London: Penguin, 1990.
- Hibberd, Lily with Bonney Djuric, *Parragirls: Reimagining Parramatta Girls Home through art and memory* Sydney: New South Press, 2019.
- Hibberd, Lily, and Naomi Toth, "Témoigner en dehors de la loi. Parragirls Past, Present" in Joana Etchart and Franck Miroux. Eds. *Les Pratiques de vérité et de réconciliation dans les sociétés émergent de situations violentes*. (Institut francophone pour la justice et la démocratie, 2020).
- Lacoste, Charlotte. *Séductions du bourreau, négation des victimes*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014).
- MacFarlane, Kit. "Cinema for Claustrophiles: Virtual Reality at the Adelaide Film Festival and Beyond", *Metro: Media and Education Magazine* 200 (2019): 128–135.
- Parry Naomi, "Parramatta Girls Home", in *The Dictionary of Sydney*. (2015, [https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/the\\_parramatta\\_girls\\_home](https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/the_parramatta_girls_home). Web. 17 July 2019.
- Quadara, A. and C. Hunter. *Principles of trauma-informed approaches to child sexual abuse: A discussion paper*. (Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016).
- Sullivan, Corrinne. "Aboriginal Inmate Experiences of Parramatta Girls home." (*Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (2017): 84-97.
- Taylor, Gideon. "Where morality meets money", in Michael J. Bayzler And Roger P. Alford. Eds. *Holocaust Restitution. Perspectives on the Litigation and its Legacy*. New York: New York UP, 2006. (Ch. 13).
- Tynan, Lauren. *Changing Places: Cootamundra to Parramatta Girls Home*. North Parramatta: Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Inc., 2018.

Valentine, Alana. *Parramatta Girls*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2007. Valentine, Alana. *Eyes to the Floor*. Sydney: Currency Press, 2008.

—. “Alana Valentine on Verbatim Theatre.” Currency Press, 2009, <https://www.currency.com.au/verbatim-theatre-alana-valentine/>. Web. 23 March 2021.

Wood, Charlotte, *The Natural Way of Things*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2016.