

Living Traces – an archive of place: Parramatta Girls Home

Bonney Djuric

Back in 2005 I climbed on top of some rubbish bins and jumped over the fence into the front yard of what was then the Norma Parker Detention Centre. Peering up at its imposing façade, I remembered that this place had once been the Parramatta Girls Home, a place where at the age of 15 I had spent eight months as a resident.

Now it was deserted and silent. I entered the main building. I was terrified of being caught but resolved in my determination to capture as much of what remained as possible.

I needed answers. I needed to make sense of something that never made sense. To reclaim something of myself that had been taken from me in this place.

A year earlier, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee report, *Forgotten Australians*, had been handed down. This was the first national inquiry into Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children.

Pandora's box had been opened and there was no going back.

Now, in the last months of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Australia is only beginning to realise the extent of abuse experienced by children in this country.

Like the *Forgotten Australians* Inquiry, the Royal Commission has made and will continue to make recommendations, but what happens afterwards?

Given that they both fill a temporary cultural space, where do these histories go? As in the words of historian and academic Maria Tumarkin, 'where are those spaces in our culture that can keep these histories in the public imaginary, as open wounds, as provocations and calls to action, not covered up by the historical patina or by a psychologising language that invariably pathologises and atomises people who experienced such abuse'?¹

Now 12 years since the *Forgotten Australians* report, it is encouraging to see some of the 39 Recommendations actioned. But what strikes me most about these recommendations, as I suspect also those made by the Royal Commission, is that government and non-government agencies, universities, institutes, museums and libraries are always the ones funded to carry out research, oral histories and provide support services. Agency is never given to support or fund those who experienced these things to determine what they want.

How can anything change? This has been clear to me from the start when I climbed over the fence and re-entered the Parramatta Girls Home to record and document this site for Parragirls by Parragirls in the hope that one day we would have the opportunity to determine its memorialisation and future use.

It has been more than 10 years now, in which time I have seen the deterioration of this site and sadly the passing of so many Parragirls, each taking a part of their history irretrievably to the grave. While the NSW Government has plans well underway for Parramatta North



Figure 1. Jenny McNally, collagraph print 32.5 x 23.4, Living Traces 2016; photo Lily Hibberd.



Figure 2. Sandie Jessamine, collagraph print 32.5 x 23.4, Living Traces 2016; photo Lily Hibberd.

Urban Transformation, the question as to how the former institution will be utilised in the future remains unknown.

To gain some presence and recognition for Parragirls, I looked to international trends in memorialisation and came across the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives connecting past struggles to today's movements for human rights and social justice. This ethically charged model is a new approach to sites of memory and trauma where individuals who have a direct

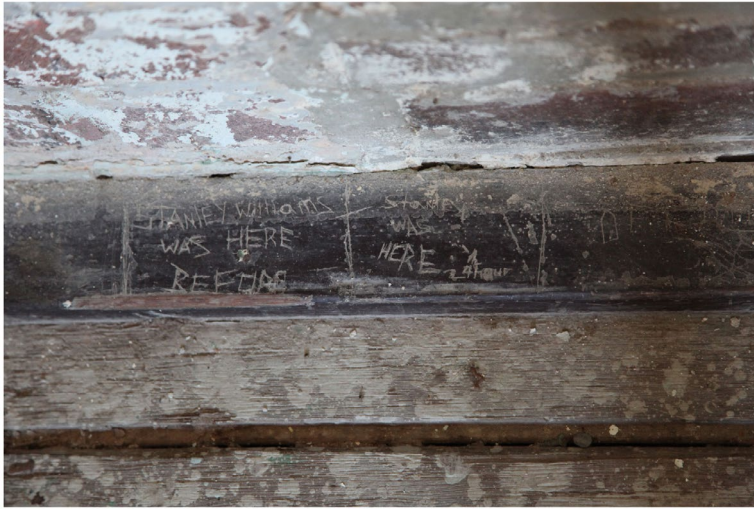


Figure 3. Graffiti in segregation room, Parramatta Girls Home; photo Lily Hibberd.

connection with a site can engage in the memorialisation of that site and determine how they want to be remembered.

A key principle of the Coalition is Memory to Action, one which every Parragirl voices as ‘Never Again’, and so in 2012 Dr Lily Hibberd and I co-founded the Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project.

Funded by Arts NSW and the Australia Council and now in its fourth year, the Memory Project has made significant gains in empowering former residents to tell their own stories, to interpret the site and to contribute to the historic narrative. It has given us presence and recognition as stakeholders in contributing ideas on how the site may be utilised in the future.

Based in the former instructional block at the former Parramatta Girls Home, the Memory Project has transformed this once-inaccessible site into a place of shared memory and belonging for Parragirls. It has extended the memory of the site and its earlier use as the first purpose-built orphanage for Catholic children in Australia. It has revealed the legacy of Australia’s first convict female factory as the birthplace of interventionist child welfare practice and the influence that these institutions exerted over the wider female population.

In the Memory Project’s latest initiative, *Living Traces*, former residents have produced unique collagraph prints that embody the marks the Home left on them, both physically and mentally, and transformed these into a series of artists’ books and limited-edition prints. Each print (Figures 1 and 3) incorporates traces of scratches left by young girls on surfaces (Figures 2, 4 and 5) in the institution and excerpts from state welfare records.

In the words of former Parramatta Girls Home resident Jenny McNally: At the stroke of a pen, my life changed forever. As children what was recorded about us affected our lives in profound ways. The only way we could express ourselves was to scratch words into the walls or onto our bodies. Now a lifetime later we revisit those marks, we read what was written about us and we are responding in our own ways to set the record straight.

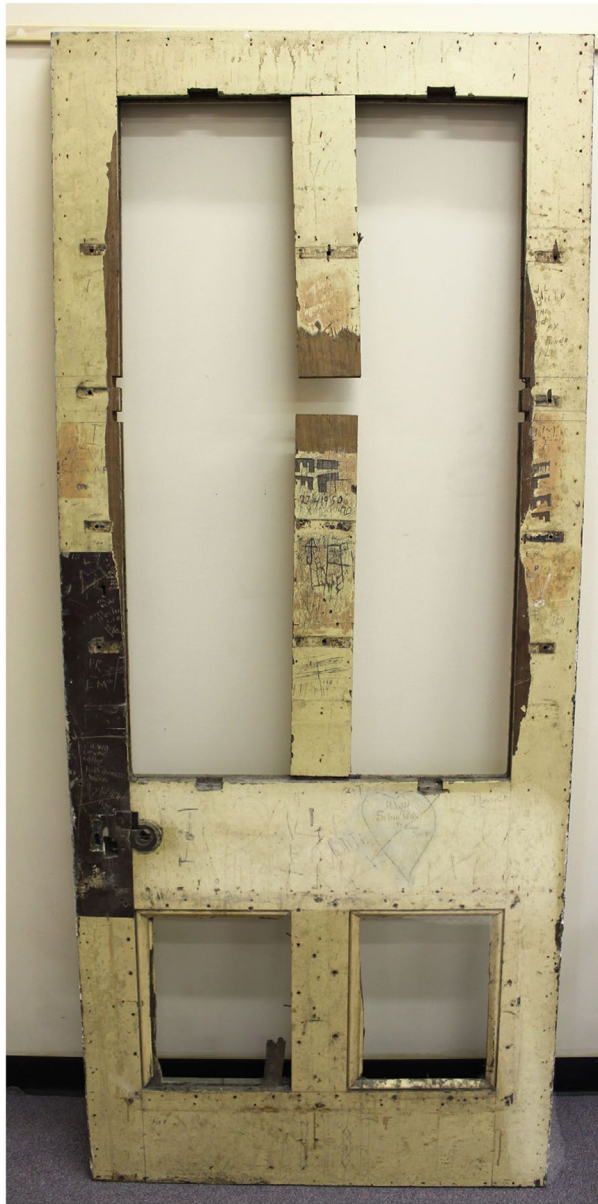


Figure 4. Segregation room door, Parramatta Girls Home; photo Bonney Djuric.

Today, graffiti at Parramatta Girls Home is only evident to former residents. Words and acronyms written in coded language ‘ILWA’ (I Love Worship Always) remain as a bond of friendship between them. *Living Traces* captures these unrecorded memories of the institution, buried under trauma and shame, that would be otherwise lost forever.

Living Traces interrogates and challenges conventional forms of recordkeeping in arguing that place is an archive as meaningful and relevant to the historic narrative as that which is written or recorded. Most importantly, it reveals the need for archivists to work alongside former occupants and indeed heritage archaeologists, to interpret the meaning and context



Figure 5. Graffiti on segregation room door, Parramatta Girls Home; photo Bonney Djuric.

of institutional ‘graffiti’ in documenting the institutional experience, and affirm the memory of former residents that indeed they were here and these things did happen to them, especially where no other ‘evidence’ of their time in an institution has been preserved.

I witnessed a striking illustration of the importance of graffiti as ‘archive’ some years ago when I was contacted by a legal firm seeking confirmation that their client had been in Parramatta Girls Home in the late 1940s. Unfortunately, the welfare file for their client had disappeared from official records held by State Archives of New South Wales and proof was required to support her claim. The client was able to name other girls who had been in the institution with her, among them Selina Patten, whose name had been inscribed on a door (Figures 4 and 5) to a former segregation cell. Given the closed nature of the institution, this ‘evidence’ was sufficient for the case to proceed.

Parragirl Jenny McNally incorporated Selina’s ‘mark’ in a collagraph print (Figure 1) she produced for the Living Traces exhibition because, like Selina, she had spent a great deal of time in the segregation cells some 20 years later in 1968.

Endnote

1. Bonney Djuric, Lily Hibberd and Maria Tumarkin, 'The Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project: From a heritage site to Australia's first Site of Conscience', paper presented at the National Trusts of Australia & Australia ICOMOS Conference. The People's Ground, Melbourne, 4–8 October 2016.

Notes on contributor

Bonney Djuric is an artist, author and historian, she founded Parragirls contact register and support network for former residents of Parramatta Girls Home in 2006. In 2012 she and Dr Lily Hibberd co-founded the Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project, bringing together artists, historians, academics and Parragirls in a contemporary art and social history project centred on the experience and legacy of individuals with a direct connection to the Parramatta Girls Home to determine how they will be remembered and to activate this historic precinct through memory to action as Australia's first Site of Conscience.