

Perspective

Fierce Compassion and Reflexivity: Transforming Practice at the University of Melbourne Archives

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, the University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) commenced a program of change with regard to its records about child welfare in Victoria. This was driven by a social justice imperative to repair past harms done to Care Leavers (people who grew up in orphanages, children's homes, or foster care) while in out-of-home care, and for whom records play an integral role. UMA worked with Care Leavers, advocacy groups and support services to review their policies, procedures and practices around archival documentation and access arrangements. In this article, the authors explore those efforts through the prism of radical empathy (or rather a compassionate response to empathy) and analyze what was achieved and the challenges that remain.

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INTRODUCTION

*We're talking about having a dynamic experience with our experience...there is a creativity in that energy...that ability to look with rigor and honesty, and it needs a lot of compassion cause it's not always easy what we see.*¹

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least 500,000 children throughout Australia were placed in government, church and mission institutions, or with other families in foster care, kinship care or adoption.² Many of the children, now adults, endured neglect and abuse in these institutions, and were disconnected from their family and culture. They suffer ongoing trauma from their experience. Following two Senate Inquiries into Children in Institutional Care in which people from all over Australia told their stories and experience of out-of-home care,³ in November 2009, the Federal Government delivered a National Apology to the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants.⁴ The University of Melbourne also apologized “to all the Forgotten Australians for the suffering their institutionalization has caused,” and expressed its deep regret that researchers linked to the University had taken part in vaccination research trials conducted after World War II using children in orphanages as subjects.⁵

Records, recordkeeping, and access to records have played a vital role in reparations work. Care Leavers have highlighted the lifelong importance of childhood

¹ Sharon Salzberg and Phoenix Soleil, “Fierce Compassion & Self Care | Sharon Salzberg + More | Talks at Google,” YouTube, August 11, 2016, <https://youtu.be/T2JllwUcRsc>.

² Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or Out-of-Home Care as Children*, Commonwealth of Australia, August 30, 2004, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/report/index.

³ The Senate Inquiries produced the following reports: *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or Out-of-Home Care as Children* (2004), and *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record—Inquiry into Child Migration* (2001). Prior to this, there was another key national inquiry and report related to Aboriginal children who were taken from their families, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997). In addition, some of the Australian states held their own inquiries. For more information, see: Find & Connect Web Resource, “Background,” 2011, <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/about/background/>.

⁴ “Apology to the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants (November 2009),” Australian Government Department of Social Services, last modified March 7, 2018, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/apology-to-the-forgotten-australians-and-former-child-migrants>.

⁵ Bridie Smith, “Melbourne Uni Says Sorry for Trials on Orphans,” *The Age*, November 18, 2009, <https://www.theage.com.au/education/melbourne-uni-says-sorry-for-trials-on-orphans-20091117-ikc9.html>.

records in order to develop and nurture their sense of identity and connectedness to family and community; to account for their care experiences; and to prevent, detect, report, investigate and take action against child neglect and abuse. Care Leavers have also described the difficulties they have faced in finding and accessing records. The records are dispersed across a vast number of organizations, including government archives, religious organizations, non-government organizations, and universities. This includes the collection managed by the University of Melbourne Archives (UMA).

In 2017, UMA undertook a comprehensive program to improve access to records in their custody related to Care Leavers.⁶ UMA adopted a holistic approach and all aspects of the recordkeeping landscape were reviewed including appraisal, documentation, provision of access, staff training and well-being. This was done in consultation with Care Leavers and Care Leaver support services⁷ and included a workshop with various stakeholders to open up dialogue and raise awareness about Care Leavers, vicarious trauma, and trauma-informed practice. The new initiatives reframed the way in which the UMA and other organizations work together to deliver a program of continuous improvement, with the ultimate goal of transforming the Archives into “an affective, user-oriented, community-centered service space.”⁸

In this paper, we describe and discuss why this work was crucial for UMA to undertake, and argue for this transformation through an approach based on conversation, participation, relationship building, reciprocity and trust involving all who encounter the archive(s). We discuss the background to child welfare and related records in Australia, and why it was so important for UMA to change its practice. We highlight projects which were instrumental in informing UMA’s new program of work, then outline

⁶ People who spent time in orphanages, children’s homes, missions, training schools, or foster care in Australia are sometimes known as Forgotten Australians, former Child Migrants, Stolen Generations, Care Leavers, or Homies. They include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children forcibly removed from family and culture in line with government policies of the time; Child Migrants brought from the UK for a so-called better life in Australia; and children who were neither Indigenous nor Child Migrants, who were removed from their families and also grew up in institutions. We know there is no single term that describes the wide and varied experiences—positive and negative—of people who spent time in children’s homes or foster care as children. In this article, we have used the term “Care Leavers.”

⁷ UMA worked with two organizations: Open Place, a support and advocacy service for people who grew up in Victorian orphanages and homes, and the Find & Connect Support Service in Victoria, Australia, and Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN), a national support and advocacy body for care survivors.

⁸ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 24, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557>.

the work undertaken by UMA and the outcomes already achieved. Finally, we reflect on what this means for archival practice both at UMA and archives as a whole.

BACKGROUND

In 1992, Joanna Penglase, researcher, writer and former resident of a children's home in Sydney, placed a small ad in newspapers all over New South Wales, Australia. It read, "Did you grow up in a children's home?"⁹ Penglase had been researching children's homes in New South Wales for her thesis, and information was scarce. She had gained permission to use the archives of the Children's Welfare Department in New South Wales but had only "located six little boxes, smaller than packing boxes that you get when you're packing to move."¹⁰ Joanna was looking at a tiny fraction of the kilometers of state and non-government records, "a sliver of a sliver of a sliver"¹¹ of barely documented records.¹²

⁹ Care Leavers Australasia Network (@CLAN_AU), "Thank you Joanna Penglase co-founder of CLAN JP put an ad in NSW papers "Did you grow up in a children's home?"" Twitter, June 30, 2018, 4:45 PM, https://twitter.com/CLAN_AU/status/1013206844855054336.

¹⁰ Museum of Australia, "Inside Children's Homes Forum Discussion with Joanna Penglase," National Museum Australia, last modified April 20, 2012, <http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/audio/inside-life-in-childrens-homes-series/transcripts/inside-childrens-homes-forum-discussion-with-dr-joanna-penglase>.

¹¹ Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2 (2001): 65. According to Harris: "the archival record is but a sliver of social memory. It is also but a sliver of the documentary record...Even if archivists in a particular country were to preserve every record generated throughout the land, they would still have only a sliver of a window into that country's experience. But of course, in practice, this record universum is substantially reduced through deliberate and inadvertent destruction by records creators and managers, leaving a sliver of a sliver from which archivists select what they will preserve. And they do not preserve much."

¹² We now know that there are kilometers of records about children's homes at the State Records Authority of New South Wales and the relevant government department. See "Child Care and Protection Guide," State Archives and Records NSW, last modified December 4, 2018, <https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/collections-and-research/guides-and-indexes/child-care-and-protection-guide>. It is not clear from the website exactly how many records there are. However, we do know that the state of NSW had the most homes out of any state in the country. There are four relevant sources on the NSW State Archives & Records and website: 1) *Child/Youth Migration in the 20th Century*, 2) *Child Care and Protection Guide*, 3) *Aboriginal Resources: A Guide to NSW State Archives*, and 4) an *Index* (a list of 22,000 "items"). The *Child Care and Protection Guide* has 298 series identified with the state government activity "child protection." Opening a few of the series at random, and descriptions include 25 boxes of children's register cards; 489 boxes of case files; 30 volumes of registers. Another description

Unable to initially find enough documentary evidence, she decided to speak directly to people with a shared lived experience, and after placing her ad, she was inundated with hundreds of responses. Through her research and growing network Penglase realized that there were many more records. Many Care Leavers did not know that these records existed in the first place,¹³ that they had been created while they were children, and that often they and their families had come under the documentary surveillance of welfare authorities even before they went into orphanages, children's homes, or adoption or foster care arrangements.¹⁴ Some of those people, including Penglase, became relentless advocates in pursuit of social justice for Care Leavers, dedicated to telling the story of children who grew up in institutional care in Australia and seeking reparations for past abuses. They demanded better documentation of and access to records from record holders, as well as transparency and accountability around historical and current recordkeeping practices.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECORDS

Multiple government inquiries in Australia have acknowledged that many people who have grown up in out-of-home care miss out on the rich history that is available to most people through family members with whom they have ongoing connections. The records kept by providers of out-of-home care about children and young people may be the only substitute that Care Leavers have for this family oral history and the photos and other records that families keep for their children. Aside from the detail these records may contain, they take on a symbolic importance representing the value that someone else has attributed to the identity of another.¹⁵ A number of studies and personal testimonies have focused on the experiences of Care Leavers in accessing their records, and on their motivations and support needs, highlighting the shortcomings of Care Leaver records, and gaining access to them.¹⁶ While the records may provide sought after details about family,

states that the series contains 6 boxes that "represents a 5% random sample of Child Care Centre License Files."

¹³ Frank Golding, "Telling Stories: Accessing Personal Records," in *Surviving Care: Achieving Justice and Healing for the Forgotten Australians*, eds. Richard Hill & Elizabeth Branigan (Robina, Queensland: Bond University Press, 2010): 79.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Frank Golding, "Latent Scrutiny: Personal Archives as Perpetual Mementos of the Official Gaze," *Archival Science* 16, no.1 (March 2016): 103-109. See also Eric Ketelaar, "Access: The Democratic Imperative," in *Made, Kept, & Used: Celebrating 30 Years of the Australian Society of Archivists* (Dickson: Australian Society of Archivists, 2007): 12.

¹⁵ Karen Winter & Olivia Cohen, "Identity Issues for Looked After Children with No Knowledge of Their Origins: Implications for Research and Practice," *Adoption & Fostering* 29 (2005): 44-52.

¹⁶ Frank Golding, "Problems in Accessing Personal Records" (presentation, *Who Am I? Current Practice Workshop 1*, April 24, 2009), <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/ref/vic/biogs>

reasons for care and time in care, and thus support a Care Leaver's journey towards understanding his or her life story, they may also contain information that is new or shocking to the Care Leaver such as the existence of siblings which they did not know about. In addition, much information contained in these records was written from the standpoint of the professionals who did the recording and rarely includes the child's perspective, resulting in narratives which bear little or no resemblance to the Care Leaver's own memories. As Horrocks and Goddard have noted: "accessing childcare files, with their mixture of new and forgotten personal information, can be a hugely significant event in the self-identity story-telling project of these adults".¹⁷

INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE RECORDS ACCESS

There have been numerous significant projects with Care Leavers in Australia¹⁸ and a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.¹⁹ There has also been recognition that these issues are not limited to Australia; inquiries have taken place

/E001029b.htm. See also Paper: Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-Home Care. Sydney, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia, March 2016.

<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Consultation%20Paper%20-%20Out%20of%20home%20care.pdf>.

¹⁷ 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): 265.

¹⁸ See for example, "Routes to the Past," Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/projects/routes-to-the-past>. The project explored the identity and well-being of Care Leavers through genealogical life story work, and found that a synthesis of narrative practice, family history, storytelling, and life story work had the potential for a new methodology that enables Care Leavers to "re-author" their life stories and connect to their past, present, and futures. See also "Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants Oral History Project (2010-2012)," National Library of Australia, accessed April 4, 2021, https://www.forgottenaustralianshistory.gov.au/oral_histories.html.

¹⁹ On Friday, January 11, 2013, the Governor-General appointed a six-member Royal Commission to inquire into how institutions with a responsibility for children have managed and responded to allegations and instances of child sexual abuse. The Royal Commission was tasked with investigating where systems have failed to protect children, and making recommendations on how to improve laws, policies, and practices to prevent and better respond to child sexual abuse in institutions. See *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, Commonwealth of Australia, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>; and *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Final Report*. Sydney, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>.

in the UK, New Zealand, Canada, Denmark, and Sweden, among others.²⁰ Three Australian initiatives in particular have profoundly influenced the authors and shaped the way in which the new program at UMA was conceived and implemented: Who Am I?, Find & Connect, and Setting the Record Straight.

The Who Am I? project (2008–2011)²¹ was developed in response to the three Australian government inquiries and the growing concerns within the Victorian out-of-home care sector about current and future recordkeeping practices. It investigated the role played by recordkeeping practices in the construction of identity for people who have experienced out-of-home care as children. With a focus on reparation and restorative practices,²² the multi-disciplinary research team from the fields of social work, history, and archival science conducted the project in partnership with eleven organizations and in consultation with consumer support and advocacy groups. The first author was a research archivist in the Archives strand of the project, and helped develop “Pathways,” a web resource about the history of child welfare in Victoria with links to information about records and resources to help Care Leavers find records and connect with support groups.²³ Importantly, it recorded the practices of record holders over time, so that those stories also became part of the historical record.

The Who Am I? project adopted an action research methodology based on the Knowledge Diamond,²⁴ which emphasizes the importance of the exchange of ideas

²⁰ Kirsten Wright, Shurlee Swain, and Johanna Sköld, *The Age of Inquiry: A Global Mapping of Institutional Abuse Inquiries* (Melbourne, Australia: La Trobe University, 2020), <http://doi.org/10.4225/22/591e1e3a36139>.

²¹ The Who Am I? project (full title: Who Am I? The Archive as Central to Quality Practice for Current and Past Care Leavers (Forgotten Australians) - LP0883232) was funded by the Australian Research Council and a consortium of eleven Victorian community sector organizations. The grant for the project was awarded in June 2008. This research project investigated the role played by archiving and recordkeeping practices in the construction of identity for people who experienced out-of-home care as children. See Cathy Humphreys and Margaret Kertesz, “‘Putting the Heart Back into the Record’: Personal Records to Support Young People in Care,” *Adoption and Fostering* 46, no. 1 (2012): 27-32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857591203600105>.

²² Marie Connolly, ed., *Beyond the Risk Paradigm in Child Protection*, (London, UK: Palgrave, 2017).

²³ See Who Am I? Project, *Pathways*, last modified December 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111118025103/http://www.pathwaysvictoria.info/>.

²⁴ Cathy Humphreys, Lesley Laing, and Kate Cavanagh, *Social Work and Domestic Violence: Developing Critical and Reflective Practice* (London, UK: Sage, 2013): 9. According to its creator Cathy Humphreys: “at the heart of any profession are claims to knowledge and hence to power....It is therefore unsurprising that what counts as evidence, or what counts as knowledge, is contested...it raises the question of whose knowledge counts and who is allowed to speak and be heard.”

between key stakeholder perspectives: Research Evidence, the Service User or Consumer Experience, Policy Perspectives, and Practitioner Wisdom. The Knowledge Diamond draws in these various strands of knowledge, acknowledging and legitimizing all experience and expertise, particularly the consumer/service user voice (in this case Care Leavers). The project's methodology centered on four workshops which were spaces for dialogue and conversation, and for building relationships and a resilient and enduring network.²⁵ The approach was akin to that described by Caswell in which "survivors and implicated communities are not just a target group of users, but the central focal points in all aspects of the archival endeavor."²⁶ Archivists, historians, Care Leavers, social workers, and public servants sat in groups and worked together to radically alter policy and practice.

As much as possible, the archival documentation, information sheets, and other contextual information were created with Care Leavers, advocates, and record holders, with particular attention to language and a focus on plain language statements. In one example of this, the first author worked collaboratively with the Department of Human Services in Victoria, Care Leaver Vlad Selakovic, and historians to review and change the Department's records access arrangements.²⁷ Working directly with Care Leavers (subjects and users of the records) had a profound effect on the Department's staff (archivists and custodians of the records). Two significant outcomes were that the Department redesigned the way they presented information with records, and replaced their "Freedom of Information (FOI) officers," whose job it was to prepare records for release (including undertaking redaction of information deemed sensitive under the FOI Act), with case workers who worked with individuals to meet their needs in accessing records. We can see here that the Department took seriously their affective responsibility towards Care Leavers who are in this case both subject and user, by "including them in decision-making processes regarding archival description and access policies,"²⁸ and that their actions were marked by radical empathy.

²⁵ Lynda Campbell, "Fragmentation or Coherence? Issues in Recordkeeping for Children in Out-of-Home 'Care,' Report on Workshop 1, 2009," (presentation, *Who Am I? Current Practice Workshop 1*, April 24, 2009), <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/ref/vic/biogs/E001029b.htm>.

²⁶ Michelle Caswell, "Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach," as quoted in Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "Radical Empathy in the Archives," 24.

²⁷ For more about this project, see Cate O'Neill, Vlad Selakovic, and Rachel Tropea, "Access to Records for People Who Were in Out-of-Home Care: Moving Beyond 'Third Dimension' Archival Practice," *Archives and Manuscripts* 40, no. 1 (2012): 29-41.

²⁸ Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 36.

In 2009, the Australian Government announced the establishment of a national initiative based on the Who Am I? model. The Find & Connect program²⁹ is made up of a national network of Find & Connect Support Services that provide specialist trauma-informed counseling; referral services; peer, education, and social support programs; assistance to locate and access records and reconnect with family members; and a national Find & Connect web resource.³⁰ The first author worked as National Program Manager for the web resource from 2011–2016. In addition to the social work, history, and archives researchers, two engagement roles were added which focused on building and maintaining constructive relationships with Care Leavers and other stakeholders.

Staff also participated in training workshops on vicarious trauma and trauma informed practice. The researchers had been reading hundreds of submissions by Care Leavers to the inquiries about abuse suffered while in institutional homes, and also hearing first-hand from Care Leavers, many of whom were traumatized. As a result, some researchers started suffering from the effects of vicarious trauma. This negatively affected their relationships to each other, to Care Leavers, and in their personal lives. The first author recalls when, about four years into the projects, she started having difficulty reading material necessary to do her job. She stopped going to the movies or watching the news in case she might accidentally see something disturbing, and felt unable to trust the staff at the childcare center where she left her daughter. One historian who also had a baby around the same time, left the project citing the “difficult subject matter” as a reason for leaving. This experience was formative for the first author, who used it to guide her future practice, including the program at UMA.

In 2017, both authors attended the Setting the Record Straight: for the Rights of the Child Summit³¹ to address the challenge of recordkeeping and archiving needs for Care Leavers. The second author had been aware of Find & Connect and had retrieved records for Care Leavers at UMA, but it was at this event where she heard directly from Care Leavers for the first time about the impacts that failings in recordkeeping and archiving systems have on people’s lives. Participating in this event was reassurance that UMA needed to place an urgency on the implementation of transforming practice.

²⁹ “Find and Connect Service and Projects,” Department of Social Services, Australian Government, last modified September 11, 2020, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/find-and-connect-services-and-projects>.

³⁰The foundation for the Find & Connect web resource was the Pathways website, which was developed for the Who Am I? project.

³¹ “Setting the Record Straight for the Rights of the Child, National Summit May 2017,” Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, May 8-9, 2017, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://rights-records.it.monash.edu>.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE ARCHIVES

The University of Melbourne Archives is one of only two major collecting institutions in Victoria (the other being the State Library of Victoria). While it is the custodian of official University records, it also collects records from University academics and alumni, and houses the collections of many Victorian businesses, trade unions, non-government organizations and community groups. There is no single collection at UMA containing all the records related to Victoria's child welfare history and children in out-of-home "care". Instead, records are contained in various collections across the archives. For example, there are children's case files in the papers of social work academics and researchers such as Leonard Tierney and Teresa Wardell.³² UMA's Access Management Framework outlines its obligations under Victorian legislation and provides ethical guidelines for exercising care, diligence, and equity in providing access to UMA collections.³³

UMA had been grappling with their obligations around Care Leaver records in their custody since the apology. The records of relevance to child welfare history are spread across multiple collections, and have varying access conditions and collection management requirements. As an archive based at a university, the focus at UMA had traditionally been on providing service to researchers and academics. Therefore, it was necessary to shift focus and to develop a project in improving procedures and practices around archival documentation and access that factored in an empathetic framework in response to the needs of the Care Leaver community. For some collections, UMA must negotiate with donors to develop and fund further projects and gain approval for permitting access for requests from Care Leavers and other researchers to restricted records. Because of these complexities, it was determined that a multi-pronged approach was required to best meet the needs of Care Leavers and enable UMA to examine all aspects of its processes. Key initiatives such as a Memorandum of Understanding, Child Welfare Subject guide, stakeholder workshop, staff training and the establishment of a Critical Archives Reading group are discussed below.

³² "Collections - Child Welfare Records Subject Guide," University of Melbourne Archives, accessed September 25, 2021, <https://archives.unimelb.edu.au/resources/child-welfare-records/collections>.

³³ "Access Management Framework for University of Melbourne Archives Collections," University of Melbourne, accessed April 4, 2021, https://archives.unimelb.edu.au/information/for_researchers/access-management-framework.

IMPLEMENTING A CARE MODEL AT UMA

On May 7, 2018, the University of Melbourne and Berry Street (auspicing agency of Open Place, the Find & Connect support service for Care Leavers in Victoria)³⁴ signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing their commitment to improving access for Care Leavers to University of Melbourne records. The MOU, the first of its kind, attempts to strengthen the bond between Care Leavers and the University. The MOU acknowledges the vital importance of records and information to Care Leavers and their families. It also acknowledges the University's role in the mistreatment of Care Leavers and its negligence in identifying and improving access to relevant records in the UMA's custody. It cements the responsibility the University has in improving recordkeeping and access in hope that Care Leavers can feel welcomed and trust that the University is working to right past wrongs. The MOU took two years to negotiate, with drafts going through the two organizations' legal services, Care Leaver Frank Golding, and UMA archivists. It is a living document, which undergoes review every three years, and is influenced by responses to Care Leavers' experiences of the Archives.

As well as establishing a formal relationship between the two organizations, the MOU provides a way for Open Place staff to assist Care Leavers and their families to access records held by UMA. As Caswell and Cifor state: "Our conception of empathy is radical in its openness and its call for a willingness to be affected, to be shaped by another's experiences, without blurring the lines between the self and the other."³⁵ The approach undertaken via the MOU extends on the affective relationships between archivists and user, and archivists and subject³⁶ by bringing in a third party, the "support service" (Open Place), to mediate and assist with the relationship. Rather than focusing on rights-based approach, UMA archivists have adopted "an affective responsibility toward radical empathy"³⁷ in their relationships with the subjects of records, users and records creators (including depositors and donors).

The MOU includes an undertaking by UMA to prioritize the documentation of child welfare records, particularly those that contain names of children and their families. It also outlines the conditions of a bespoke service whereby Care Leavers (who self-identify) and their families are entitled to a package free of charge which includes color print outs of all their records, a cover letter (explaining why the University has the records, the process of identifying the relevant records and what the package contains), as well as digital copies of all documents on USB. UMA staff also include photographs of the

³⁴ The MOU was co-authored by Katrina Dean and Suzanne Fairbanks (UMA), Rachel Tropea, and Cate O'Neill (University of Melbourne eScholarship Research Centre), Frank Golding, Eithne Donlon (Open Place), and the organizations' (signatories) legal teams.

³⁵ Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 31.

³⁶ Caswell and Cifor, 33-39.

³⁷ Caswell and Cifor, 33.

repository where the records are housed, the collection, the box or boxes where the records live, and show staff carefully packaging and labelling the records.³⁸ Archivists respect the sensitivities around records of this nature and the privacy of individuals, and only read as much information as they need to search and retrieve the records for the client.

UMA also resolved to be more transparent regarding its processes and introduced measures to try and encourage Care Leavers to engage with the Archives. UMA produced new versions of finding aids for each of the relevant collections that included documentation of the processes and decisions affecting the records. This included when and why the records were transferred to UMA; what the archivists did to them once they came into the archive; finding aid versioning and citation information; content and language warnings; and plain language documents to assist Care Leavers through the records release process, “What to Expect When Accessing Records About You”³⁹ and “Explainer: Deed of Undertaking.”⁴⁰ UMA archivists worked with Care Leavers to create a subject guide (finding aid) titled “Child Welfare Records” that provided historical context, and outlined the full program of work undertaken by UMA in collaboration with Care Leavers and support services.⁴¹ The Child Welfare subject guide is also a single portal to information on relevant records and access procedures, making for a far less overwhelming experience in search for records than the typical navigation of an archival catalogue system that uses language and systems for a predominantly academic user group.

Shortly after the MOU was ratified, the second author was contacted by support worker Siobhan McGuinness from Open Place with a request for records, giving all the opportunity to put into practice some of the tenets of the agreement. In this case, the

³⁸ Rachel Tropea and Georgina Ward, “Implementing a Care Model at the University of Melbourne Archives,” *Find & Connect Web Resource Blog* (blog), June 22, 2018, <https://www.findandconnectwrblog.info/2018/06/implementing-a-care-model-at-the-university-of-melbourne-archives/>.

³⁹ See, for example, University of Melbourne Archives, *What to Expect When Accessing Records About You*, accessed April 4, 2021, https://archives.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2955578/archives_uom_Whatoexpect_a5_4pp_WEB.pdf, an information sheet aimed at Care Leavers wishing to access records about them held by the University of Melbourne. Its purpose is to inform Care Leavers about what records they are likely to find, the reasons why they were collected in the first place, and where to request support. The pamphlet is based on the “What to Expect” document created by the Who Am I? project.

⁴⁰ University of Melbourne Archives, *Explainer: Deed of Undertaking*, accessed April 4, 2021, https://archives.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/2955125/UMArchives_2018-08-03_Deed_a5_WEB.pdf.

⁴¹ University of Melbourne Archives, *Child Welfare Records*, accessed September 25, 2021, https://archives.unimelb.edu.au/resources/subject_guides/child-welfare-records.

Care Leaver Geraldine Goldthorpe⁴² preferred to receive the records at the support service offices with her support worker present. The second author recalls:

We did not know whether Geraldine would open the package while we were present, so we offered to answer any questions at the meeting or at a later date, and we provided contact details on the cover letter for this purpose. Geraldine chose not to open the records while we were present and preferred to talk over morning tea. We spent an hour or so sitting with Geraldine and Siobhan, listening to Geraldine as she shared stories about her life, her experiences as a child, and what she remembered of being placed in foster care. It was a really special time for us.

Archivist Jarrett Drake has written about the surveillance, silence, and solitude of the reading room:

Silence is an important exercise of control and power. By preventing or discouraging verbal communication between people, the enforcers of said silence ... remove our human instincts to connect with other human beings as human beings. How oppressive it is of archivists to expect users to consult documentary records that chronicle the peaks and valleys of humanity—love, hate, war, abuse, joy, humor—and display no auditory or affective response.⁴³

Our experience at Open Place in contrast was unique and emotive. Meeting in a space that was comfortable to the service user, off-campus, and out of the restraints of a reading room, allowed the parties to take their time, talk freely and openly, and for the archivists to be wholly present and listen. Later that day, Siobhan sent us an email:

Thank you both very much for taking the time to come to Open Place today with records for Geraldine; she very much appreciated you doing this.

Thank you for your time and for the sensitivity you showed Geraldine during the visit also.

⁴² Geraldine Goldthorpe gave permission for her name to be included in this article.

⁴³ Jarrett M. Drake, "Liberatory Archives: Towards Belonging and Believing (Part 1)," *On Archivy* (blog), October 23, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/liberatory-archives-towards-belonging-and-believing-part-1-d26aaeb0edd1>. See also Jarrett M. Drake, "Liberatory Archives: Towards Belonging and Believing (Part 2)," *On Archivy* (blog), October 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/liberatory-archives-towards-belonging-and-believing-part-2-6f56c754eb17>.

We sometimes find that once people are faced with the records, they may not actually want to open them there and then; this appeared to be the case today and having spent more time with Geraldine in the afternoon, she was happy to take all records home to read in her own time and space. I will follow her up with a call next week to see how she's going with them and have let her know that she is welcome to come back another day if she would like to read through them together; thank you also for mentioning that you are available for her to call if she has questions about the records you located.⁴⁴

Although ultimately Goldthorpe learnt nothing new from the records, she took the opportunity to share her story with the archivists. As Joanna Penglase has said, "The histories of trauma are the ones possibly least likely to end up in the history books unless people outside the survivors take an interest. And people have not taken an interest in us, in the past." Having taken the first important steps, the challenge for UMA now is to systematically capture those stories and histories.

Another major undertaking by UMA was a stakeholder workshop and vicarious trauma training for Archives and Reading Room staff and launch of the new subject guide. About forty staff attended this mandatory professional training which went for four hours. The first part was dedicated to historical context, including the University's medical faculty experiments on state wards, the Royal Commission, and the National Apology. Also included was information about Care Leavers' experiences of accessing records about their time in care, with a focus on the lived experience and history as told by Care Leavers through oral testimony. The workshop opened with an acknowledgement of country,⁴⁵ and talks by Helen von Roehl (a Care Leaver),⁴⁶ staff from Open Place, the Find & Connect web resource, and UMA. After the talks, Helen von Roehl stayed for morning tea and chatted with staff. This was followed by training and a guided conversation facilitated by a clinical psychologist on trauma-informed approaches to service and managing vicarious trauma. The audience had been visibly moved during von Roehl's talk, and discussed the impact it had on them in the guided discussion. As Wood et al. have stated: "When one re-envision[s] archival activities...from a human rights framework, it becomes impossible to separate the record from the politics of its origins, as well as from

⁴⁴ Siobhan McGuinness, email to authors, dated January 10, 2018.

⁴⁵ An "Acknowledgement of Country" is an opportunity to show awareness and respect to the First Australians, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their culture, heritage, and the ongoing relationship they have to their country. Acknowledgements are often made at the commencement of an event, such as a meeting, speech, or formal occasion.

⁴⁶ Helen Von Roehl gave permission for her name to be included in this article.

its consequences, affects, or most importantly, the human life to which it is related.”⁴⁷ The participants were glad to have the opportunity to reflect on their practice and discuss their experience of affect in the archives.

Prior to this workshop, there had been little awareness amongst the participants about the cumulative effects of exposure to trauma on the archival profession. Referring to human rights archivists, Michelle Caswell has written about the “need to be reflexive about how their practice impacts their own physical and mental well-being, and seek out networks of support in the face of damaging materials.”⁴⁸ Many participants acknowledged that they had worked with traumatized people, and traumatic records,⁴⁹ however it had never been addressed at UMA.⁵⁰ Archivists and other staff had not been warned of traumatic content and potential vicarious trauma prior to processing records and providing access, nor were they aware of any existing support services at the workplace following such events. The training from Gordon provided insight into why we might experience trauma and offered guidance on how to process this trauma. Participants discussed the importance of compassion in archival work and of holding professional and personal boundaries. The clinical psychologist offered suggestions on embedding practices that support staff well-being including how staff can support each other through communicating their experiences at work and listening.

There are many challenges for the Archives and archivists who seek to embody a social justice imperative shaped by radical empathy. A recent request from a law firm representing a welfare institution to access historical records about the organization tested the boundaries of the second author’s role. She followed policy and provided access to the records, however, the fear that the lawyers findings could have a negative impact on a Care Leaver caused her to question her complicity in any flow-on effect. This was confronting and upsetting for her, and the issue highlights the complexities and challenges of enacting a feminist/archival ethics of care approach within or alongside an

⁴⁷ Stacy Wood, Kathy Carbone, Marika Cifor, Anne Gilliland, and Ricardo Punzalan, “Mobilizing Records: Reframing Archival Description to Support Human Rights,” *Archival Science* 14, no. 3-4 (2014): 98, <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/10.1007/s10502-014-9233-1>.

⁴⁸ Michelle Caswell, “Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Human Rights Archives: Lessons from Community-Based Archives,” *Archival Science* 14, no. 3-4 (2014): 307-322.

⁴⁹ Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle’: Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 6, Article 20, <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol6/iss1/20/>.

⁵⁰ Prior to the workshop, some UMA archivists had seen a conference presentation about the need to look after the people who are looking after the records, and the ongoing benefit of doing so for the individuals, users, and the archives they work with. See Michaela Hart and Nicola Laurent, with Cate O’Neill, “Session 4B: Addressing Separation Loss & Trauma: Emotional Labour and Archival Practice,” *Australian Society of Archivists Conference*, Melbourne, Australia, last modified November 29, 2017, <https://youtu.be/RWZNGrxGs44>.

existing legalistic, rights-based framework. One approach could be to invite lawyers and donors to participate in future stakeholder workshops.

Community engagement is also a key principle of the MOU. To further this aim, the second author joined a community practice forum as the UMA representative with state and non-government record holders, support services, and advocacy services, including Care Leavers. The forum meets regularly to share information, discuss topical issues, and improve practice, critical for UMA to better understand the rights and needs for Care Leavers in the current legal and social justice context. Firm commitments such as the MOU and UMA's membership of the community practice forum have bolstered the program's long-term sustainability and enabled collaborative work at UMA that would not have otherwise happened. Intersectionality is also part of this story, with Care Leavers who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. While not the focus of this article, UMA has also been engaged in dialogue with Aboriginal leaders, academics, archivists, and librarians about how to manage material in culturally sensitive ways.⁵¹

Another significant aspect of the program was the creation by the archivists of a UMA Critical Archives Reading Group, so that they could commit to reading archival literature and engaging with theory and in critical self-reflection with the aim of understanding their positionality, and ultimately transforming practice. At the reading group, archivists have discussed concepts such as neutrality, objectivity, radical empathy, decolonization, and the practical steps that could be taken to apply some of these new ideas into work processes, procedures, and policies. This article is a case in point and an attempt to engage with the theory, theorists, and researchers by relating some of the practices that have been transformed by theory, but also the difficulties in embodying or realizing some of that theory in an institutional archive. Kirsten Thorpe explores the concept of "transformative praxis," stating that "the complex questions that come into play in library and archive practice need to be considered in relation to theory, and vice versa; a transformation will not come without this dialogue in play."⁵² The group made it a priority to come up with at least one action from each reading group meeting. For example, after reading Caswell and Cifor's article on radical empathy, the group came up with the idea to make the list of material taken in or rejected by the Archives publicly available. Transparency and accountability were driving factors, but also the desire to genuinely engage the broader community in the Archives. As Thorpe has stated: "[R]eflexivity does not end with internal engagement, but rather, must result in a mutually

⁵¹ See also: University of Melbourne, *Reconciliation Action Plan, April 2018 – December 2022*, accessed April 4, 2021, https://about.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/69308/Unimelb-Reconciliation-Action-Plan.pdf

⁵² Kirsten Thorpe, "Transformative Praxis: Building Spaces for Indigenous Self-Determination in Libraries and Archives," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 23, 2019, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2019/transformative-praxis/>.

beneficial dialogue with community members to ensure that needs are being met, problems are addressed, and priorities are aligned. Personal reflexivity feeds into community reflexivity so that internal and external climates are continuously evaluated.”⁵³ Taking this approach further, we would like to expand the archival community, to include those from traditionally marginalized groups in future discussions on collection development policy.

CONCLUSION

Archives are a potential site for the activation of justice, reparation and healing, and archivists can be agents of social change. The future we imagine is one where UMA and other archives seek new audiences, make it a priority to empower and inspire their users, and actively support marginalized people such as survivors of human rights abuses in their efforts to manage their history and share knowledge. We imagine the archives “as a space of shared custody and trust,”⁵⁴ and a dynamic site for the burgeoning and preservation of stories and storytelling by myriad people and their communities. In this article, we reflected on the recent program of work at UMA with the Care Leaver community that embraced the tenets of radical empathy. The work undertaken by UMA has set a precedent there, shifting away from a rights-based framework towards a feminist ethics of care or compassionate model, inclusive of the records, events, and people who have been traditionally silenced and marginalized in the archives. This work has brought archivists and the communities they serve together and encouraged interaction, conversation and actions designed to promote healing. We hope that it is inspiration for the further transformation of UMA towards a participatory model that harnesses the potential of digital technologies and processes, and is driven by a social justice mandate, fierce compassion, and a desire to “share archiving with communities,”⁵⁵ both physical and virtual, to create a democratic and dynamic archives.

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⁵³ Thorpe, “Transformative Praxis.”

⁵⁴ Eric Ketelaar, “A Living Archive, Shared by Communities of Records,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, eds Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander (London, UK: Facet Publishing, 2009), 120.

⁵⁵ Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 2 (2013): 19.

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