I am currently working at the National Museum of Australia as a curator of the pending exhibition *Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions* and I identify this exhibition as an example of a push for activism from former inmates of children’s institutions, evident in the online blog that we have developed in connection with the exhibition.

**Background**

The National Museum of Australia is located in Canberra, the capital of Australia and is the first social history museum in Australia resulting from a national inquiry in 1975. The subsequent National Museum of Australia Act, passed in 1980 initiated a significant collection. In 1996, the building of the National Museum was announced and it was opened in 2001. The Museum’s work is informed by three interrelated themes:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture
- Australia’s history and society since 1788 (the year that the first fleet of ships from Britain arrived in Botany Bay, Sydney)
- the interaction of people with the environment.

The National Museum Act states that there must be a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia – this is named the Gallery of First Australians. In fact 65 per cent of the gallery space within the National Museum is devoted to the representation of the social history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The exhibition *Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions* was initiated and funded by the Australian Government and marks the first occasion that the Australian Government has directed the National Museum to create a specific exhibition. This Government imperative is the result of a report of the Federal Senate inquiry into the Forgotten Australians. This marked the final of a trilogy of reports into Australian institutional care for children in the twentieth century. The first was the *Bringing them Home* report published in 1997, as a result of a push by Aboriginal organisations for a national enquiry into the historical removal of Aboriginal children from their families known as the Stolen Generations. Then, in June 2000 the Senate referred the issue of child migration to a Senate Committee for investigation and report. In August 2001 the committee published its report, *Lost*
innocents about the consequences for child migrants of the historical agreement between British and Australian Governments which resulted in the migration of British children to Australia and the subsequent lack of protection that these children suffered.

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that Australians are aware of the plight of members of the Stolen Generations and Child Migrants. These two groups have also been the subject of film and television dramas:

- *Australia* (2008)
- *The Leaving of Liverpool* (1992)
- *Oranges and Sunshine* (2010)

However, it seems the largest group of children in institutionalised care remain forgotten or ignored within Australia. The third Senate Inquiry in 2003 was therefore an attempt to draw attention to this largest group – the Forgotten Australians.

The following figures are a breakdown of the numbers of children from each group who were institutionalised in Australia in the twentieth century:

- 50,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, many of whom identify as members of the Stolen Generations
- 7,000 Child Migrants
- 500,000 Forgotten Australians

So who are the Forgotten Australians? From the Forgotten Australians Report:

Upwards of, and possibly more than 500,000 Australians experienced care in an orphanage, Home or other form of out-of-home care during the last century. As many of these people have had a family it is highly likely that every Australian either was, is related to, works with or knows someone who experienced childhood in an institution or out of home care environment.

Children were placed in care for a myriad of reasons including being orphaned; being born to a single mother; family dislocation from domestic violence, divorce or separation; family poverty and parents’ inability to cope with their children often as a result of some form of crisis or hardship. Many children were made wards of the state after being charged with being uncontrollable, neglected or in moral danger, not because they had done anything wrong, but because circumstances in which they found themselves resulted in them being status offenders. Others were placed in care through private arrangements
usually involving payment to the Home. Irrespective of how children were placed in care, it was not their fault.

Children were placed in a range of institutions including orphanages, Homes, industrial or training schools that were administered variously by the state, religious bodies and other charitable or welfare groups.

What did Forgotten Australians experience?
- Separation from and loss of family
- Deception (lied to about family members – dead, etc)
- Neglect and exploitation (food, child labour)
- Assault (criminal, not mere corporal punishment)
- Poor health care
- Lack of education (many FAs are illiterate)
- Loss of identity (name change)
- Medical testing
- No post-care support (no transition education)

So we were aware of hundreds of experiences of this living history. In addition to that understanding, this exhibition was a challenge to the National Museum of Australia, due to its emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The plight of the Forgotten Australians challenged what could be seen as the National Museum’s constructed binary which separates Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and positions the latter as the oppressed within Australian social history. The history of the Forgotten Australians problematises this binary especially given that they often describe themselves, quite controversially, as the White Stolen Generation. This label sits uncomfortably amidst the existence of contemporary white neo-fascist movements within the West which may fantasise about a return to pre-multicultural white nations. Therefore it understandable perhaps why the Forgotten Australians may be ignored because their predicament contests simplistic historical and human rights narratives. The 2004 Senate Inquiry revealed that Forgotten Australians – these non-Indigenous Australians, represent, within Australia, a disproportionately high percentage of the mentally ill, prison inmates, substance abusers, prostitutes and the homeless. This observation is not at the expense of the acknowledgement of the strength of Forgotten Australians evident in their establishment of supportive communities and advocacy organisations.
In addition to this demographic in Australia, there is also a significant number of Forgotten Australians, who reside overseas, having left Australia as adults, after being released from institutional care. They have chosen to live in exile of their home country, as it were, a country that failed in its duty of their care. So the existence of Forgotten Australians not only challenges a notion of human rights based on a cultural binary. The diaspora of Forgotten Australian also questions a parochial view of this social history.

So, as part of preparation for the exhibition, we developed a website, a blog specifically, because we were aware that we were representing a living history and we thought that an exhibition alone would not be able to fully represent the complexities that I have previously mentioned. We also wanted to provide an opportunity for Forgotten Australians to share their thoughts and personal histories, and to offer any objects, that relate to those narratives, to the exhibition. In the interests of maintaining a website that is safe and that Forgotten Australians will trust, the blog is moderated according to a series of simple guidelines which are published on the site. The guidelines relate to matters concerning privacy, copyright and respect for other contributors. The website has also been assisted by an experienced team of multi-media staff and legal advisors.

The website fulfilled our aims but it also surprisingly became a site of activism. Not only were the log-on statistics astounding – 18,000 visits to the site in the month of June, this year, alone. In addition, Forgotten Australian used the site to share artwork, poems, song writing, personal testimonies both written and digitally recorded, re-connect with family members from whom they were separated as a result of being institutionalised. They also met, online, former inmates of their former institutions and some as a result organised legal class actions against past providers of institutional care. Forgotten Australians use the website to post notices concerning pending protest actions. Also, many children who were institutionalised do not have photographs of themselves as children and so the site has been used by Forgotten Australians to share photographs. Some of those who grew up in the same institutions have recognised themselves in these.

Those Forgotten Australians who are not computer literate learnt about the website from the newsletters of advocacy organisations of which they are a member. They would then send me their handwritten contribution in the post. Others would ring me and dictate their personal history over the telephone to me as I wrote it down. I would then type these, ring them back read my written account over the phone for their approval before uploading them on the website.
The website has had its episodes of controversy. For example a former staff member of an institution with a record of horrific abuse, posted his experiences online. This is not a problem in itself – we already have a former staff member who has participated in the website without any drama. However, this particular website refused to abide by the website’s published guidelines and his posted responses were abusive of those former inmates. Of course these contributions were moderated accordingly. As a result I was the target of abusive emails. I understand this to be a predictable consequence of representing a living history of in which many survivors are currently being believed. This represents an historical shift in power which may challenge others.

As a result of the website, I have received queries from socially isolated Forgotten Australians who have asked for help regarding housing and legal aid. I have, as result, undertaken my own research of relevant support and provided referrals. There is a sense, then, that an exhibition is not enough. While it is expected that the exhibition may help to educate the general public about institutional care, we learned from our stakeholders that an exhibition was not enough to fulfil their needs of adequate post-care services and achieving justice, as many Forgotten Australians, as institutionalised children were the victims of crime and many perpetrators have not been brought to justice. As an employee of the Australian Public Service, I am bound by a code of conduct. These regulations had implications for the blog. Specifically, one of the legal firms that undertakes legal advocacy for Forgotten Australians has created an advertisement which asks for former staff of children’s Homes to come forward as witnesses of historical abuse. The code of conduct, however, prevented me from placing such an advertisement on the website because it could be perceived as a public servant organisation supporting a specific commercial firm. So while the website achieved much, there were limitations relating to the rules of the Australian Public Service.

Conversely, the National Museum also received correspondence from Forgotten Australians who were grateful for the website:

I am so happy to be able to contribute something that was important to me. As I read some of the stories on your site They are most certainly a talented bunch. And, so proud of them as most of them like mysef did not recieve an education So their efforts are even more significant after reading some of them I believe I had it quite good compared to the enormous, monstrous, times that they had to endure. And your words are so important to me as I am positive that you are extremly busy but you still took the time to read my story and Thank You is not adequate words to describe how happy you have made me. Because most of us as kids were made to feel very stupid, dumb & belong in the gutter & will never amount to anything. It is very special to us if someone as you would take the time to even read our stories so from the fbottom of my heart I graciously Thank You. The other one I sent you
called "Born To The State: is still a work in progress lol only taking me 10 years but this is my
dearest wish before my time comes that I could leave a book not for my ego but for my
children & others whom may have had the same or similiar situations happen to them. If I had
my time tommorrow then I would be more than content if I finish this long long Saga finished
and in print. If I had the money I would publish it myself but like everyone at the moment we
are all struggling so I'll just keep plugging away at it When I am nearly at the end of it I will be
annoying you to ask your opinion on whom or what I could do to get it published Your site is a
credit to you the other day I was on it for about 4 hours Every, time I tried to shut down I woud
read another story. I will end now & God Bless & keep up the fabulous work that you guys do
If it wasn't for people like yourself then we would continue to be left behind

And another:
You and this site is doing what the government has failed to do for us and that is bringing
families and well I guess family (other home kids) together and you should all get a pat on the
back. Thank you to all and keep up the good work

The history and current predicaments of the Forgotten Australians challenge the representation of
human rights within social history in terms of racially-informed, visibility politics. The Forgotten
Australians also challenge dominant cultural narratives of Australia as an egalitarian country.
Internationally, I suggest, without supporting a parochial or neo-conservative pre-intercultural
agenda, the Forgotten Australians also demonstrate how one culture can oppress its own members.
This then may have further implications for the representation of human rights within museums. I
believe that the National Museum’s exhibition blog created a safe site for Forgotten Australians and
as a result became a popular site which fulfilled some of the social and legal needs of the Forgotten
Australians. Contributions to the website may also been used to identify other opportunities for the
National Museum to further assist the achievement of social justice through human rights activism.