

Chapter 16

Giving Voice to the Survivors of Childhood Institutional Abuse

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on ways of giving voice to the survivors of institutional abuse and how their contribution can be capitalised in raising community awareness of this phenomenon. The collection of testimonies demonstrates that institutional abuse is a common and widespread phenomenon that in most cases remains unrevealed throughout the life course. The participatory research process we describe is part of an important social and clinical intervention developed in the framework of two projects. The chapter illustrates outputs and outcomes related to disclosure of institutional abuse and its long-term consequences, as well as the meaning and implications of collective trauma. Results confirm the need to promote the voice of survivors to build a new professional and community culture and sensitisation towards children's right to be heard as an essential instrument to prevent and detect institutional ill treatment. Participatory processes can overcome the resistance of individuals, professional communities and politicians to recognising the phenomenon, emphasising institutional responsibilities and the specific effects of a serious form of maltreatment that requires extraordinary and specific interventions in terms of intensity and flexibility. This chapter describes a fieldwork and research experience made possible thanks to a strong alliance with survivors who engaged in a process of reflection and theoretical elaboration that generated both social and clinical impacts.

Participatory Research on Child Maltreatment with Children and Adult Survivors, 263–276



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Introduction

Institutional abuse of children was first conceptualised in the 1980s, when a public enquiry was launched to focus on institutional abuse as a named social problem in the United States (Daly, 2014a; U.S. Department of Justice, 1979). Since 2000, many more national enquiries have been launched or completed in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, England, Wales, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Italy and many other countries (Roth et al., 2019). In addition, in 2012 and 2013, two large enquiries were launched in Northern Ireland and Australia (Wright, 2017; Wright et al., 2017).

The book *The Country of Celestini* (Serra & Santanera, 1973) described many cases of violence in orphanages in Italy and identified the relevance of external social and institutional settings, in which such violence was somehow facilitated by neglect of service interventions, social inequalities in the institutions and the fact that child victims had a lower social status.

Institutional abuse refers to ‘abuse occurring against children living in institutions or in out-of-home care (foster care and foster homes)’ (Daly, 2014a, p. 6). It has no single cause, and it is not only the responsibility of the direct perpetrator; it is often the result of the entire system, which colludes, covers, justifies and sometimes motivates violence against children. Gil (1982) identified three distinct forms of institutional child abuse: (1) direct institutional maltreatment: i.e. physical, sexual or emotional abuse committed by individuals directly responsible for the child’s care; (2) procedural maltreatment, i.e. programme abuse that occurs when programmes operate below acceptable standards or rely on aggressive or unacceptable methods to control the child’s behaviour and (3) system maltreatment, i.e. system abuse that is not committed by a single individual or agency but occurs when the childcare system is stretched beyond its limits and is also related to inadequate control by the agencies responsible for the care of children.

Survivors involved in this participatory research process shared experiences of abuse related to all three categories. They discussed the implications of being victims of violence in places that should have protected them. They faced the researchers with the dramatic powerlessness of being victimised by authoritative and affectionately significant adults in institutions with guardianship and protective responsibilities. The voice of survivors makes clear how institutional abuse is typically an ongoing process rather than an isolated incident in which an abuse of power and breach of trust occurs and which may involve severe physical, sexual or emotional maltreatment.

The survivors of institutional abuse involved in the framework of Project Oltre and the European project Support to Adult Survivors of Child Abuse in Institutional Settings (SASCA) clearly identified institutional abuse as an important social problem that has long been ignored, denied or minimised. Adults who spent

their childhoods in care have come forward through public enquiries, truth commissions and the media to allege physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect while in the care of governments, nongovernmental agencies, religious institutions and out-of-home care programmes. Their courage has forced society to face painful realities about trusted community leaders, established organisations and cherished institutions. Slowly, international concern has emerged about the trauma they endured and its significant lifelong impacts. Society has been – and still is – slow to acknowledge such acts of abuse (Wolfe et al., 2001).

Participatory Research With Adult Survivors of Institutional Abuse

This participatory research with adult survivors was developed by Associazione Artemisia using the framework of Project Oltre, which was implemented with the support of Regione Toscana to respond to the needs of the adult survivors to the violence suffered in the Forteto, and through the European SASCA Project. Forteto was a residential childcare community, close to Florence (SASCA, 2018). Hundreds of victims were directly or indirectly involved in this case of very serious institutional abuse: more than 80 out-of-home children and adolescents, their original families and about 60 adults with disabilities. The maltreating nature of the life rules adopted in ‘Il Forteto’ is proved by two final judgements of the Court of Florence of 1985 and 2020, which ascertained the repeated and systematic damaging acts that violated the fundamental human rights.

Both projects addressed events in which an institutional system ignored what happened, colluded or actively participated: Il Forteto and I Celestini in Italy (and single experiences of mistreatment not included in this group), the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland and the abuses in institutes in Greece and Romania.

In addressing this issue, the SASCA Project adopted the perspective of the victims, former boys and girls. The participatory research in SASCA involved 101 survivors of abuse and maltreatment in institutions. The data were collected by a self-administrated questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire gathered demographic data and used scales to measure the physical effects of the trauma. We recruited a sample based on the snowball method, mainly through contact with associations and informal groups of survivors, contact with local social services and advertisements. Institutional abuse was also analysed through a survey with 390 social and health workers and 40 judges and other legal operators at a European level. This chapter mainly focuses on the results of the interviews with 33 survivors of child protection institutions in Italy, as the first fundamental step in the process underway in our country to promote the leading role and participation of survivors of institutional abuses (Bucarelli & Filistrucchi, 2019) in a path of regaining awareness and promote change in the civic, professional and political community on the issue.

The interviews were realised with the following objectives: to (1) understand and address the problem of child abuse in institutional settings, particularly in residential care, from the perspective of adult survivors; (2) understand the

long-term effects of such events; (3) understand how and if the survivors of these crimes may find protection and compensation in the existing legal framework and (4) understand how their experience may enlighten prevention strategies for the protection of children in residential care today.

The interviews with adult survivors gave voice to their stories and pain, and by listening to their opinions, we confirmed the need to identify key characteristics of possible intervention and prevention efforts.

Brief Review of Characteristics of Survivors Interviewed in Italy

Most of these interviews occurred with the survivors of Il Forteto and I Celestini; however, the researchers also collected other experiences of institutional maltreatment that mainly involved religious institutions.

The respondents had an average age of 42 years, with a range from 24 to 65. Two-thirds were men. They entered into the institutional system when they were 8 years old on average. Most of them were forgotten and physically and psychologically segregated in the institution for many years; in the case of Il Forteto, 36% of the respondents remained there for more than 15 years.

They suffered a wide range of violence: serious relational and material negligence, physical and psychological abuse, exploitation in work activities, sexual violence and institutional neglect by social services after the placement of the children in the institutions. The responsibility of the system clearly emerged from the answers of some interviewees regarding to whom they attributed the greatest responsibility. Next to the direct perpetrators of the abuses, the survivors recognised both justice operators and social services, which should have monitored and supported them as children, as being responsible for the abuses they suffered.

In most cases, the violence they suffered was not reported when it occurred; only seven respondents disclosed the abuses while children. Some realised only many years later that what happened to them was wrong and that they were victims of violence; many were afraid of the consequences and not being believed and many others were not helped to understand that they could report the abuse. Awareness of the severity of the suffered abuses, therefore, is often a slow and difficult conquest in adulthood. For this reason, most of the survivors declared themselves against prescription of childhood abuses, considered a legal measure that makes it impossible to seek justice.

Lessons Learnt on Child Abuse and Neglect in Out-of-Home Care From the Perspectives of Survivors: Disclosure, Responsibility and Prevention

The participatory process allowed a focus on issues that sometimes are already known to professionals but lack the complexity that emerges from the voices of people directly involved. Sharing the burden of building a common understanding represents, for all the actors involved (survivors, researchers and professionals),

an extraordinary opportunity to gain access to new insights and information on the dynamics and impact of institutional maltreatment.

Disclosure

Most survivors disclosed their story many years after the abuse had taken place. The interviews confirmed the burden of disclosure; being abused in institutional settings is a severe and complex experience. How can they talk – and to whom – about the maltreatment and abuse they suffered in a place that should have protected and defended them? They had to face confusing, contradictory and destabilising messages. There was no adult to whom they could turn. No one could see or understand what was happening to them.

And the backdrop of all this was a paradoxical communication, on the verge of perversion, as if children were told: ‘I move you away from your family – with all that I know it involves – to protect you, and to do so, I put you in a new and often more serious maltreatment context’.

The child victims could only think that what happened was right, that it made sense that no one intervened to protect them. The thought of not being worthy of anything else, of not being worthy of love, was combined with the conviction that what happened was deserved.

First, I’ve been beaten by my parents, and then by the community leader. . . . I was a little bastard.

(SASCA, 2019, p. 13)

The frequent visits of outsiders never noticed any sign of abuse in these institutions. Thus, they contributed to the good fame and credit of the organisations and strengthened the pervasive experience of children’s helplessness and perception of not being credible.

I always hoped someone would notice something. . . . There were so many people coming to Il Forteto, I always hoped.

(SASCA, 2019, p. 13)

The disclosure of violence didn’t happen because they were threatened, ashamed or didn’t know to whom to disclose, or if it happened, children rarely were listened to or their situation became even worse after they complained. Many complaints of child victims of institutional abuse were not formally reported and as such, no measures were taken to address the situation, either because there was a conspiracy to keep allegations quiet or a ready acceptance of the denial by the alleged perpetrator.

One day, this boy in the classroom started saying what this priest was doing, and the teacher, instead of investigating if the problem existed, turned off the discussion by saying, “But what do you say?”

Do you think these are speeches to do?” And at that moment I thought, “Come on, now this thing will come out and finally I expose myself,” but I saw that instead the teacher had turned off everything and I saw the only hope I had disappeared. The teacher silenced him right away. What the fuck – the only person you talk to makes you shut up? Who do I go to?

(SASCA, 2019, p. 13)

With respect to the enormous difficulty of disclosing the violence that children suffered or witnessed every day, the survivors clearly told us about the powerful experiences that have prevented their revelation for years, for decades: fear, shame, sense of guilt and impotence.

They experienced shame and guilt, very often, about not being able to react. Disclosing also meant exposing them to the risk of ‘being pitied or making pity’. The words of these survivors indicated the depth of their sense of loneliness and insecurity, how total the loss of their trust in relationships and how pervasive the intensity of their anger.

More generally, for almost all interviewees, disclosure had been a long and tiring process that occurred almost always when they were out of the community – this means in adulthood. An important incentive was their relationship with peers; some survivors described how the comparison with peers, who shared the same experience, from a certain point onward was very important, not only to receive the support they needed to survive but also to become aware and gain courage.

Responsibility

In the institutional maltreatment of children in care, the issue of responsibilities, particularly that of prevention, is central.

Most respondents identified the great responsibilities of those who, in their childhood, first removed them from their family of origin, then placed and abandoned them in the residential care: These were social workers and judges.

The theme of responsibilities aroused in the survivors particularly intense waves of anger and sometimes distrust. Other feelings that emerged in the interviews were the sense of collusion, superficiality and indifference on the part of the child protection system, which did not want to see and understand their suffering.

I do not even feel anger. I feel disgust, because I think they were washing their hands and not giving a shit about each other’s ass. A negligence of the magistrates and of the social services that followed the minors in custody at Il Forteto, treated so lightly. ... They made decisions based on friendship. These were the

mistakes that led them, the members of Il Forteto, to be so powerful.

(SASCA, 2019, p. 14)

Social workers ... they took us, they put us there. ... We were granted as if we were goods to be unloaded from a truck.

(SASCA, 2019, p. 14)

The theme of collusion recurred dramatically in the interviews. This aspect was present even among survivors from religious institutes; they repeatedly underlined the precise and conscious will of the church to conceal the facts, and it seems that the repeated and late scandals relating to sexual abuse in ecclesiastical circles have received an objective confirmation. Many people told us about having suffered threats even years later.

Why didn't you say it before?" Look at the facts of today and give yourself an answer: Even now, many do not believe us. They continue to defend. ... Imagine before. Too many hook-ups.

(SASCA, 2019, p. 14)

In one interview, the respondent explicitly stated that children who have had such experiences should be qualified as 'system victims' (SASCA, 2019, p. 15).

Prevention

The difficulty of recognising and working constructively on professional responsibilities is inevitably a major limitation to prevention.

These survivors were very proactive in indicating possible strategies and tools for the prevention of institutional maltreatment. They agreed about the continuous relationship with an external social worker, educator and psychologist as a crucial factor to prevent maltreatment. The perception of the survivors is that once the placement has taken place, social services view the 'problem' as solved and the social worker does not care about how protection is implemented and the well-being of the child. In their stories, the social workers disappeared or sometimes there was a continuous turnover of them, one after the other.

Another recurrent and central aspect is that meetings with social workers in their office or residential care never had the character of confidentiality because a professional belonging to the community was always present. This also happened in the rarer but no less significant cases in which the victim had been involved in counselling, psychological support, listening with juvenile judges or more regular visits with social workers.

The most important protective factors related to the risk of institutional maltreatment seem to be the personalisation of the intervention, not delegating a periodic assessment of the situation and the existence of a real relationship

between those who protect and those who must be protected. For this reason, regular and continuous individual meetings with their social worker or other professional figures outside the community, such as a doctor or psychologist, are perceived as necessary protective factors. Nevertheless, monitoring of the process of bringing up children in institutional care can fulfil its objective – of surveying the safety and well-being of children – only if it surpasses the limits of bureaucratic routines.

Survivors almost always described not having felt seen or heard. Prevention relies on the ability to construct interventions in which children are protagonists and not only recipients, and the possibility that children are more active and aware of their rights through adequate information and authentic listening.

They should use different methods when they do community check-ups. Often when they come, they don't even talk to the children. They check if there's food in the fridge, if there are adequate clothes ... and that's all. I remember the questions: "So, how was your day? Are you fine, yes? Great, then." My social worker never asked me how I felt or asked me to really say something. ... He should have tried to make me talk, but he was not curious, not even a little!

(SASCA, 2019, p. 16)

In some interviews, participants explicitly referenced the spread of burnout among social workers, indicating insufficient training and professionalism.

The need for greater social and economic recognition of these professions was underlined, as was a greater awareness of their great responsibility and power to affect – positively and negatively – people's lives. Among the most effective prevention tools are adequate training, constant updating, improved supervision and the opportunity to collaborate in a work team. In this regard, it is important to underline that in December 2021, under the proposal of the Ministry of Welfare, the Italian Parliament adopted an act that introduces and finances the supervision of social workers as an obligation.

Almost all survivors recognised the need to have adequate time to devote to children in protection. Instead, most social workers find themselves working in solitude, with a disproportionate workload, constrained to facing continuous emergencies in a situation of progressive contraction of resources and tools at their disposal. All these elements, together with the structural deficiency of the service system, constitute a fertile ground for the occurrence of professional mistakes, for the repetition of similar stories.

Restorative Value and Power of Taking and Giving Voice

Being abused in institutional settings that were supposed to provide protection causes a sense of 'institutional betrayal' (Higgins, 2001; Morrison, 2005; Parkinson et al., 2009; Smith & Freyd, 2013), linked to the complicity of

institutions in allowing and not detecting abuse and making the victim accessible to the abuser. This amplifies the psychological and psychosocial impact on survivors and often finds yet another confirmation when the surviving child, adolescent or adult tries to disclose what happens.

At a broader systemic level, institutional abuse involves the failure of the system that is supposed to protect children (Bianchi et al., 2018). The abuse suffered by survivors could have been prevented if there were adequate legislation for the protection of children's rights, if supported by appropriate child protection policies and practices, if each social worker had correctly exercised their role and responsibilities, if the context were not influenced by the prestigious reputation of the institution in which the abuse occurred, etc. (Aversa et al., 2021). From the research available and these interviews, it seems particularly damaging to know that what was needed and could have been done to prevent abuse was not realised due to negligence (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

It could have been different . . . if only one had gotten in the way.
And instead . . . all these "I don't know," these slight – these "I
don't remember" to us, they ruined our lives.

(Survivor, personal communication, 2020)

Consequences of Institutional Abuse as Perceived by Survivors

As the persecutor does with the victim, in institutional abuse, the institution confirms the victim's feeling of being invisible. This institutional betrayal partly explains the more severe outcomes associated with trauma experienced in institutional settings. In many respects, victims of institutional abuse have to deal with the impact of the abuse and the betrayal of the social institution in which the abuse occurred. The result is a deep and powerful experience of betrayal and helplessness, which adds to the deep-rooted belief of an irreversible malfunction of their self and the world.

The scientific literature unanimously describes institutional abuse as more serious in its impact on victims than other forms of child abuse (Magalhães et al., 2009). The effects of neglect and abuse leading to protection and removal from the family of origin cumulate with those of institutional abuse and take on more severe characteristics. Research (Balkemore et al., 2017; Carr et al., 2010; Magalhães et al., 2009) has shown evidence of insecure and disorganised attachment in survivors of institutional abuse. Survivors of institutional abuse have described a global loss of trust and fear of intimacy, shame, guilt and humiliation, fear of or disrespect for authority, avoidance of reminders of their abusive experience and vicarious trauma. Survivors are confronted with coping with not only the devastating impact of the abuse but also the betrayal by the valued social institution and loss or impairment of its role in their lives. Institutional betrayal is defined as the wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution on which individuals depended, including failure to prevent or respond supportively

to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g. sexual assault) committed in the context of the institution (Gobin & Freyd, 2009).

Lessons Learnt From the Perspective of Child Abuse and Neglect

The results of the survey indicate the need to move along two complementary dimensions, one individual and another collective or communal. Damage caused by institutional maltreatment cannot be elaborated and repaired exclusively by victims on individual paths. Victims of institutional maltreatment are also, inevitably, victims of the state, which placed them in institutions that betrayed their original mandate and which the state did not adequately supervise.

Leaving aside in this description the specificity of the healing process and therapeutic elaboration, it is important to consider the reparative value of ‘giving a voice’ for the survivors as an experience of re-assumption of power and credibility and the construction of an opportunity to be heard in the professional, social and political context.

No less important is the transformative value of the process of ‘giving voice and listening’ that also involves institutions and professionals. In dealing with institutional abuse, all survivors, institutions and legal and social operators are seized by shame, helplessness and despair that sustains the belief that tomorrow will be identical to today.

Giving voice to survivors shows that looking, recognising, questioning, regaining awareness and going through helplessness and shame is the only way for all – survivors and social workers – to recover the power of change. Acknowledging that ‘it could have gone differently’ is very painful, yet that means it can go differently.

Developing a voice to disclose, tell and denounce, in alliance with professionals of the system to be changed, is a different level of the healing path, in which the individual story becomes part of a wider strategy for change and prevention. It is a more challenging step, different from courageous complaints or survivors’ participation in TV broadcasts, although they are important in the initial phase of disclosure for counteracting the negation and collective removal. These actions have often exposed survivors to attacks, blame and discredit for broken silence because when someone becomes a bearer of the testimony of crime, others share the responsibility of restoring justice (Herman, 1997).

Much of the general public’s current understanding of child abuse that occurs in institutions and organisations is derived from high-profile media reports of investigations, arrests and court outcomes. The public often is presented with an incomplete picture of the circumstances surrounding the institutional abuse reported. The result can be a backlash towards survivors, who may be seen as responsible for the troubles experienced by the institutions, rather than the institutions or perpetrators being held accountable (Daly, 2014b; Wolfe et al., 2001). They become traumatised people who have not conquered their demons, who make demands for money because they are unable to build a life for themselves (Aversa et al., 2021).

The path of participation that we offered has given the possibility of creating connections between survivors and the system of services, mainly social workers. It opens an alliance that leaves room for testimony and recognises the role of the interlocutor, forcing the professional to engage in authentic listening. It is a new alliance, a pact that recognises differences but shares the path and goal: that suffering can serve someone and prevention is possible.

Conclusions From the Perspective of Participatory Research

In the framework of this participatory research, the interview and its many questions have often been the first opportunity for survivors to experience being credible interlocutors, carriers of a practical and subjective competence that is necessary to understand what happened and draw new horizons. It is the first step of the possibility of building participation, trust and protagonism with the world of professionals (Herman, 1997).

With SASCA, the parallel journey of a scientific–professional community has started, too. The answers of survivors, indicating the gravity of institutional abuse, forced professionals to question their strategies and efficiency in addressing children who experienced abuse.

Sharing between professionals and survivors raised awareness of the phenomenon and its dynamics, expanding the possibility for breaking the silence around institutional abuse. The different settings and formats alternated among focus groups, conferences, training for social workers and consultation tables with professional bodies, allowing us to jointly face this issue, give voice to survivors and strengthen the capacity of professionals to listen and work together.

The valorisation of survivors as experts by experience and involvement, when possible, in the group has favoured the possibility of reasoning together about their experience and stimulated the passage from individual experience to the acquisition of an awareness of their transformative power as experts who can assume an active role as builders of collective knowledge, as bearers of not only suffering but also transformation and improvement in a professional community that can hopefully learn to listen and question itself. Survivors are no longer a social problem to be addressed, but a resource to be valorised. In this framework, the Committee of Children Abandoned at Forteto by the State took action. These survivors are among the more than 90 children, boys and girls, who have been placed in the II Forteto Children's Home by the juvenile court or social services during more than three decades. Their objective, above all, is to transform their lived experience into the starting point for reflections, doubts and changes, including legislative ones. This expresses the desire to bring the attention of the state back to the protection of children, who absolutely need more resources than they currently have (Aversa, 2020).

They are now an actor in collaboration with institutions to transform pain into hope. They are recognised as a stakeholder. Members of the committee were involved in a focus group aimed at collecting information and proposals on the

experience of being removed for a periodic report to the Parliament on the implementation of laws and norms related to the protection of children in need.

The integration between competence by experience and formal competence is also valuable with respect to the information and training activities of professionals. The ‘experts of experience’ help professionals recognise their enormous professional responsibility and impact on the life trajectories of victims.

Education and training need to be directed at institutions (e.g. staff, volunteers, board members) and community professionals who provide services to survivors. Many survivors describe the legacy of their abuse being compounded by lack of intervention and prevention programmes, despite their efforts to break the silence. Listening to survivors’ voices can be a way to enter the complexity and pervasiveness of institutional mistreatment and understand how much we have to learn to ensure effective protection of boys and girls when they are in conditions of vulnerability due to the fragility of their families of origin. This may allow a culture characterised by blame and moralistic judgement to be overthrown, leading to the development of a generative approach (Bertotti, 2020).

The effort to view what happened from a perspective of prevention and generous attention to children who are today at the centre of the removal and protection measures motivates enhancement of the protagonism and participation of survivors in contexts of reflection on professional practices. The search for connections between past and present, for example, creates a fertile link between these survivors and the experiences of the Care Leavers, which in the Italian and European network have created a movement capable of influencing public policies and advocacy.

Last, as the motto says, ‘the union makes strength’; thanks to shared work in Italy and at the European level, the experiences of these survivors led to a formal declaration on this issue by the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Council of Europe, 2007), which has recognised the institutional abuse that takes place in residential communities, particularly violence and sexual exploitation (Lanzarote Lanzarone Committee, 2019). In particular, the Lanzarote Committee asked state parties to ensure that all types of out-of-home care settings feature comprehensive screening procedures for all people taking care of children; specific measures to prevent abuse of children due to their increased vulnerability and dependence; adequate mechanisms for supporting children to disclose any sexual violence; protocols to ensure that in the event of disclosure, effective follow-up is given in terms of assistance to the alleged victims and investigation of the alleged offences by the appropriate authorities; clear procedures to allow for the possibility of removing the alleged perpetrator from the out-of-home care setting at the onset of the investigation; effective monitoring of practices and standards to prevent and combat child sexual abuse; provision of long-term assistance in terms of medical, psychological and social support and legal aid and compensation to victims of sexual abuse in out-of-home care settings; assurances that professionals working in the public, private or voluntary sectors who either commit or fail to report offences occurring in out-of-home care

settings are held liable; and guarantees that legal professionals who fail to protect children in their care are held liable.

At the same time in Italy, survivors and experts continue on a path that, starting from the story of Il Forteto, which is now the subject of a parliamentary commission, overcomes the specificity of and identification with the Forteto affair to strengthen and make concrete the possibility of influencing the community (political agenda, professional world, etc.) with a theme as uncomfortable as that of institutional mistreatment.

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