

Documenting Chile Archive: Living Archives of the Chilean Community in the United Kingdom.

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Introduction

Our journey towards the creation of The Documenting Chile Archive and Project began in 2017 with an email enquiry about whether we as the University of East London (UEL) Archives would be interested in hosting an exhibition documenting the agency of Chilean political prisoners. By this time, we had been the host archival repository for the Refugee Council Archive and a growing collection of archives relating to refugee and forced migration issues. Our work with these Archival collections had by 2015, raised an awareness of both the challenges associated with managing a collection which at its core, reflected the histories and stories of communities which were often left under-represented within the wider historical narratives.

We had the realisation that the Archive, whilst representing an important resource for understanding the issues faced by refugees, was not as representative and inclusive as we believed it could, and should, be, and it was a responsibility of our role as archival custodians to consider how we could challenge this status quo in order to better reflect the shared histories of the communities that we represent.

Living Archive Methodologies

In 2015 the University of East London launched its Civic Engagement Fund offering small pots of internal funding to support projects that contained a strong commitment and focus to active engagement with local communities. We had by this time come to realise that it was imperative for us to build an Archive service with a commitment to documenting refugee and migration history; that it was not enough just to be a passive collector of archival materials, we need to have an active engagement strategy focused towards working with communities to help ensure we collected materials that actively represented these communities.

Our first civic engagement project, *Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion: Civic Engagement through the Preservation of and Access to Refugee Archives* represented a pilot oral history project working with displaced communities both within East London and further afield. Through this project, we “considered how traditional archival paradigms could be re-conceptualised to better document and represent the narratives and knowledge of displaced persons.” (Hashem, Dudman and Shaw, 2022, p. 55). Archives can play a vital role in supporting issues of belonging, self- and community identity and through this civic engagement

work, and we wanted to develop an approach to our community-focused work that was genuinely decolonial and which would place ethical considerations at the forefront of the archive. For this project, “we used a critical anti-oppressive methodology (Dominguez, 2008 cited in (Hashem, 2014) to reach out to the participants, for networking, consultations, interviews and to balance power relations between researcher and the participants.” (Hashem, Dudman and Shaw, 2022).

This helped resonant the importance of enabling a “living archive” methodology in support of our ongoing community engagement work. We took the lead from Mbembe (2015) to actively work towards decolonising knowledge within the archive through transparent and participatory engagement with displaced and exiled communities. Our “living archive” methodology looks to challenge existing archival paradigms and the underlying colonial notions or archival collection, by looking to re-situate the “Archive” as a transparent and collaborative space in which communities can feel a sense of ownership and control over how the archival records pertaining to their community are collected, preserved and represented to a wider audience. The living archive also reflects the notion that archives are intrinsically linked to the lived experiences and histories of the communities that they represent, and their significance and importance evolve over time as the community itself evolves. We need to be open to the understanding that communities are not hegemonic but are representative of many different perspectives. We, as archival repositories, need to be respectful of these differences and learn to be both transparent and inclusive in the ways in which we undertake our engagement, above all, we must be fully transparent with our commitment to genuine community-focused participatory approaches to archiving, and to open to moving behind “decolonialism” as the latest buzzword to incorporating decolonial approaches to working with knowledge from below to help inform our archival work and to learn from our communities about the importance of their history and how this knowledge informs and directs the archival process. This reflects the importance of committing to decolonialised archival approaches and enabling communities to be the co-producers of knowledge. Our belief in the importance of knowledge from below considers that community knowledge is of greater historical value “than the knowledge produced by researchers and experts who reinterpret data following a pre-existing paradigm.” (Hashem and Dudman, 2016, p. 3).

“Archival practices are situated in ever-evolving social, political, economic and technological contexts.” (Betancur Roldán, 2022, p. 483). We are reminded that it is not possible to consider the archive in isolation from the action of archiving and the people and processes associated with the creation and management of archives (Betancur Roldán, 2022, p. 483). Over time, these processes and procedures have developed into archival traditions developed situated in response to local conditions and communities. Such traditions also exist within archival paradigms. When we as archivists look to engage and work with communities, we need to consider these paradigms and traditions to help support us in reflecting upon our own processes and archival work to help ensure we are maintaining an archive which is responsive to understanding community needs in enabling a decolonised, participatory community history to

be enabled. And where necessary, challenging and adapting these paradigms in looking to new methodologies for understanding the nature of the collections and the communities whose living histories are represented therein.

One such example of the potential to reconceptualise archival paradigms in response to working with the shared histories of displaced communities is the idea of “ethnicity as provenance” outlined by Joel Wurl in his article of the same name. The notion of provenance as one of the founding principles of the archival discipline representing the “conceptual framework buttressing archival decisions.” (Wurl, 2005) reflecting the very nature of how we as archival professionals choose to record the history of the archival collections within our care. The idea of provenance lies at the centre of our archiving pantheon representing “notions of origin, context and integrity.” (Wurl, 2005). The traditional notions of provenance developed within Western academic frameworks have tended to be rigid and reactive, focusing on established entities of discreet materials limited to governmental, organisation or family frameworks (Wurl, 2005, p.67). However, Wurl presents ethnicity as provenance as representing a challenge to this existing approach to established ideas of the custody and ownership of community archives. This approach “requires archivists to traverse some of the boundaries they tend to place on what constitutes archival evidence and to look more closely instead at the ways ethnic communities actually convey information.” (Wurl, 2005).

Communities do not exist in isolation from their host societies, neither are they homogeneous identities which can be “represented” by a rigid notion of what the archive is, but equally how the community itself contests its own history over time. “As the case of Chile demonstrates, communities construct different memories of the same event or period in time [additionally] preservation, restriction of access and / or destruction of records directly affects memory construction and accountability.” (Blanco-Rivera, 2009). In looking to develop an Archive that can be representative of the lived and living experiences of the Chilean community, looking at both the events of the past and of the present, we need to understand what Blanco-Rivera terms the “fragmented memory” (2009) of the Chilean experience. In their book chapter on *Truth Commissions and the construction of collective memory: the Chile experience*, Joel A. Blanco-Rivera draws on several sources to reflect on the ongoing divisions with the collective memory of Chileans in relation to the history and legacy of the 1973 military coup. For the Archive, we need to be open to listening to these divisions and finding ways to work with communities in an informed and ethical way which allows for the opportunities to be able to traverse these narratives in a thoughtful and engaged fashion, and not looking to install pre-defined methodologies for what the eventual archive will become.

Crafting Resistance

It was this commitment to a community-informed narrative approach that provided the bedrock to our work hosting the *Crafting Resistance: The Art of Chilean Political Prisoners* exhibition being co-curated by Jasmine Gideon, Birkbeck, University of London, and Gloria Miqueles, a

Chilean ex-political prisoner. Held between the 26 January and the 16 February 2018, *Crafting Resistance* highlighted the importance of material culture and the role of artefacts in representing the shared history of former Chilean political prisoners now living abroad. The original focus of the exhibition was to help challenge the notion of political prisoners as ‘passive victims’ of the military regime in Chile post the 1973 coup, and to take the opportunity to bring to the surface the degree of agency they retained despite the horrific circumstances they endured. The physical artefacts represented in the *Crafting Resistance* exhibition not only formed a lasting testimony to their mental endurance, but it also highlighted the importance of re-conceptualising the notion the anachronism of the traditional archive as a collection of dusty old documents lying dormant in some long-disremembered room, passive records to some long-forgotten history, gently marking the time with each new particle of dust towards some undetermined future. The importance of these hand-crafted artefacts, as both active resistance to a punitive military regime, but also as examples of personal and shared community identities that represent a history of oppression, but also of exile, as these were deemed important artefacts for Chileans to bring with them on leaving their home country, often into exile.



Crafting Resistance Exhibition, University of East London Archives, February 2018.

These artefacts represent both a narrative and tactile legacy of these shared experiences. Through the showing of these artefacts in the exhibition and the two crafting workshops that accompanied the in-person exhibition, there was a clear realisation as to the importance of these artefacts in the lived experiences of Chileans.

The *Crafting Resistance* exhibition laid the foundation for our current Documenting Chile Archive. We were able to make and build connections with members of the Chilean diaspora community and to begin to develop conversations around the importance of documenting the cultural heritage and lived experience of the Chilean diaspora in the United Kingdom. We also began to consider how such an Archive might work and the scope of the materials it may

contain. It was important to take this process slowly to begin the process of building trust with the community and to be open about the work we do with the Refugee Archives here at the University of East London and how we could bring our expertise to the table to be able to support an informed project working with the Chilean community. To help empower “communities with the co-management of archives through research, outreach, and co-curation puts value on their status of expert by lived experience.” (Theti, 2018).

The *Documenting Chile* Archive



Through ongoing conversations with members of the Chilean community, we agreed to begin our *Documenting Chile Archive* project with the aim of fully engaging with the Chilean community to explore how an Archive to document the lived experiences of Chileans in the United Kingdom might appear. We have been very fortunate to be able to work closely with colleagues within the Chilean community, including Gloria Miqueles, to be able to build trust and support for the work we are doing. It was through this community building work that Gloria was able to reach out to a colleague in Chile, Matías Salvador, to create the logo for the project.

As part of our continuing community-focused archiving remit with both the UEL Archives and the Living Refugee Archive virtual portal, we wanted to ensure that this would be a collaborative and participatory project to work with Chileans to help us better understand how such an Archive could be developed to represent the living experiences of the community, both in terms of the range of scope of archival materials we might collect and also the ethics of engagement as a continuous process of learning from the community about their history and how we as an archive organisation can help facilitate the safeguarding, preservation and access to these histories.

We already had a small collection of reports and publications on Chile as a part of the Refugee Council Archive that we hold here at UEL. The Refugee Council helped in supporting some of the Chilean exiles arriving in the UK and was also one of the charitable organisations that helped to establish the *Joint Working Group for Refugees from Chile* as a partnership with the UK government alongside the Christian Aid charity. The British Council for Aid to Refugees, as the Refugee Council was then known, helped with the resettlement of over a hundred Chileans. By the end of 1979, the Working Group had been expanded to cover support work for refugees from across Latin America (Refugee Council, no date).



Working Group for Latin America Minute Book.

Through the experience of working on the *Crafting Resistance* exhibition, we were aware of the importance of looking beyond traditional mediums of storytelling and to understand the importance and role of creative mediums in the rich legacy of narrative expression within the Chilean community. We are therefore opening the archive up to all forms of narrative expression in reflecting the shared experiences of the Chilean community. We want the *Documenting Chile Archive* to reflect the lived experiences of the Chilean experiences and the different modes of expression this can take, whether this be through textiles, music, photography, artwork, song or performance. We are currently working on creating a dedicated digital archive of materials for the *Documenting Chile Archive* which will be accessible through the Omeka digital repository platform installed within the Living Refugee Archive.

Documenting Chile - Collaboration and Contribution.

If you would like further information on the Documenting Chile Archive, please do contact us for further information. We also have an online form available on the Living Refugee Archive if you would be interested in submitting your own story for inclusion within the Documenting Chile Archive. The attached QR code will link directly to the form.

So far, our *Documenting Chile Archive* has already received several deposits of new materials from Chileans in the form of photographs, press cuttings, posters, written accounts, poetry, music, DVDs, reports, and books. These resources provide a lasting documentary mark on the lived experiences of Chileans, their



resilience in the face of exile and the solidarity movements that were established within the UK. *Documenting Chile* will not just represent one narrative, but a representation of many narratives and histories reflected in the range and scope of materials that may eventually form a part of the Archive.

Our commitment to the “living archive” methodology which challenges traditional archival collecting models which reflect a more colonised model of collecting in favour of a more decolonised approach supporting participation in all aspects of the archival process, encouraging the reconnection with the tangible and intangible cultural heritages associated with communities and which supports active engagement with both the archives and the processes that underpin them. Archives should not exist in isolation from the communities that they represent and through this project we hope to engage with the Chilean community to create a genuinely participatory and collaborative archive for engaged with the shared history and empowerment through ‘informed custody.’

We have also been looking at collecting a range of materials both in the form of documents and artefacts, textiles, solidarity posters, badges, photographs, audio-visual materials, etc. These includes histories of the Chilean communities in exiles and solidarity movements.

We very much want this to be a collaborative project which has been underpinned by issues of empowerment and giving voice at the heart of what we would like to achieve in this project. Our exhibition and events in 2018 highlighted the importance of documenting the collective memory of the Chilean diaspora and we want to be able to work with you to be able to achieve this in an ethical way. The UEL Archives has a long history of community and civic engagement, and we are very interested in exploring how this project can help to engage with the Chilean community and beyond.

***Mayapi* Archive**

The *Mayapi* Archive was one of the first collections to be deposited with us after we had launched our engagement work for the *Documenting Chile* project. The Archive was donated by the Chilean musical artist Patricia Pons along with a selection of her personal papers on the recommendation of Gloria Miqueles. *Mayapi* were a folk music group established in London in 1976 by a group of exiled Chileans living in the city alongside British musicians and a Mexican dancer. The name *Mayapi* was chosen by the group as it is the word for ‘unity’ in the indigenous Quechua language of the high Andes.

Mayapi were an amateur group and regularly performed in London and across South-East England. The group’s aim was to “keep alive the musical traditions of Chile in exile, and to present the problems and the current situation in Chile to the British people.” (*Mayapi*, no date). *Mayapi*’s musical repertoire focused on both traditional Chilean musical heritage, augmented by the use of traditional musical instruments and costumes, alongside contemporary musical compositions, encompassing political and/or social messages.



Mayapi Banner. Mayapi Archive, part of the Documenting Chile Archive. 2023.

Through their work, *Mayapi*, was involved in the Chile solidarity movement and often used their performances to help raise funds for organisations working in Chile, including Amnesty International and the Church in Chile. This included the Popular Dining-Rooms, which helped “to provide regular meals for the many children suffering from malnutrition [in Chile].” (Mayapi, no date). The *Mayapi Archive* itself contains correspondence and other paperwork; cancioneros (song books); lanigrafias (embroidery with wool that uses a variety of stitches to achieve a kind of needle painting); press cuttings and flyers; photographs and miscellaneous materials.

Conclusions

Our work with the Chilean communities and with the Documenting Chile Archive has only just begun. Our aim is to continue this work after the 50th anniversary events are over as we believe in the importance of continuing this project for the longer term. We are looking at the potential for exploring funding opportunities for an oral history project and through this we will be engaging with the Chilean community to help shape the parameters of such a project

with a view to helping to ensure that it will incorporate informed knowledge from the Chilean community in the design, goals and potential project outputs. We will also be working with community members and organisations on projects to help safeguard both analogue and born digital archives relating to the Chilean experience. We will also be looking to build relationships with other cultural heritage organisations in both the United Kingdom and abroad, to help build a network whereby we can better understand the range and scope of cultural heritage materials that survive in relation to the Chilean community and help to make these more visible and accessible.

To help mark the 50th anniversary in September 2023, we organised a Documenting Chile Archive Open Day and Film Screening held on Saturday, 23rd September 2023 between 10am and 5pm. This was designed as an informal event where we have items on display from the Archive and a chance to talk to members of the *Documenting Chile* and learn more about the work that we are doing. We also hosted a film screening of the documentary film *Chileans of the North* followed by a Question-and-Answer session with the film's director, Chris Paul. The open day was very attended and marked an important point in the journey of the Documenting Chile Archive project. We look forward to continuing to work closely with the Chilean community both in London and across the United Kingdom. To help with continuing this project we are considering the possibility of looking to apply for funding to enable the project to expand, with an emphasis of looking towards the potential of undertaking oral history work and to work closely with the community to help us in developing the direction in which this ongoing work will take.

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