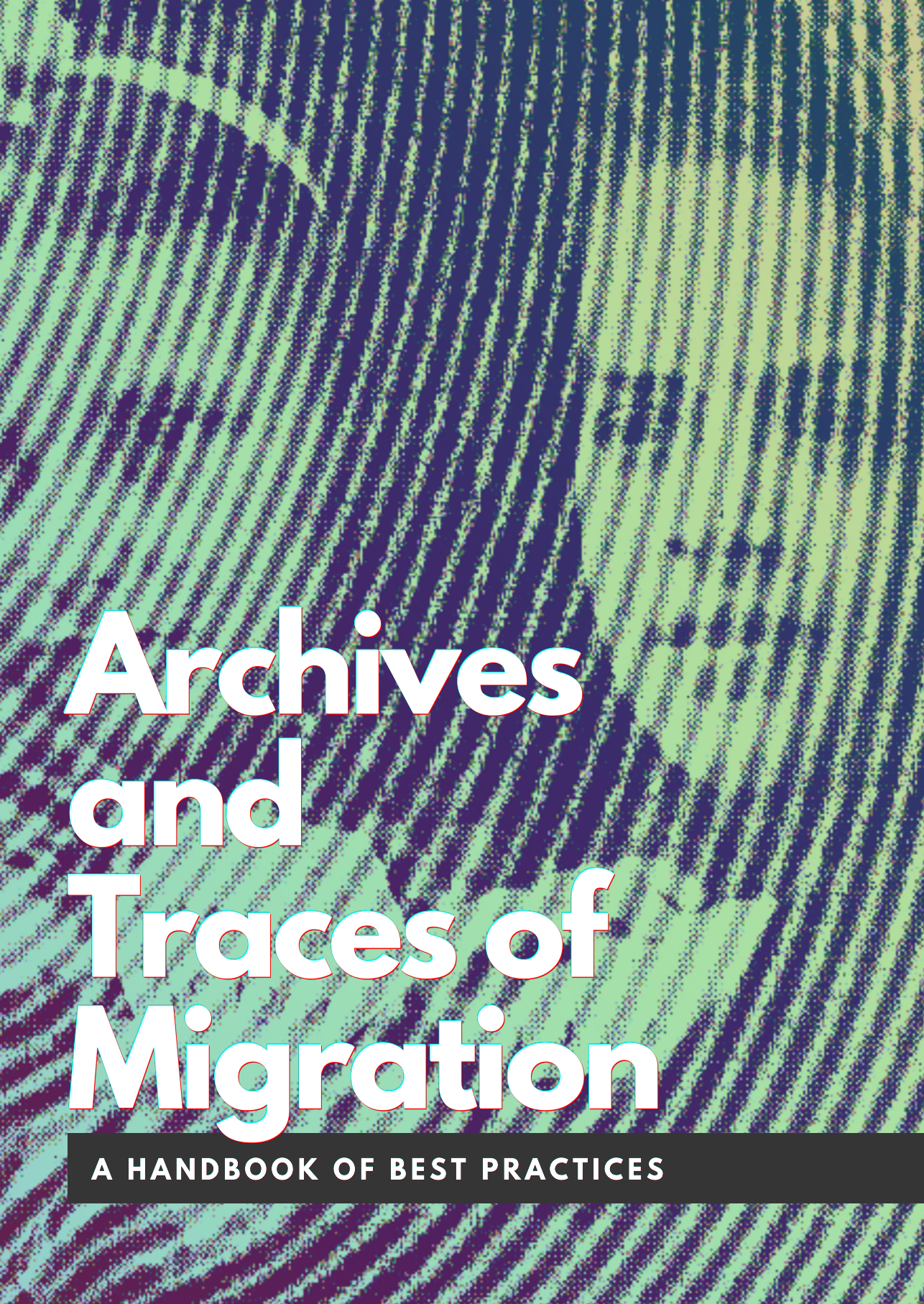
Archives
and
Traces of
Migration
A HANDBOOK OF BEST PRACTICES

# Archives and Traces of Migration

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Co-funded by the European Union

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# Archives and Traces of Migration

## A HANDBOOK OF BEST PRACTICES

Tamara Štefanac and Anne J. Gilliland,
compilers and editors

2025

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# Participatory Approaches to Archiving the Lived Experience of Migration: *The Living Refugee Archive Project*

**Paul V. Dudman**, *Archivist, University of East London / Living Refugee Archive, London, United Kingdom*
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## *Introduction*

This case study draws on our co-work with displaced communities and individual migrants in the UK, and explains our experience of establishing the *Living Refugee Archive*[1] virtual portal to help enable the preservation of, and access to, archival materials relating to the lived experiences of displaced communities in London. Awarded a UEL Civic Engagement Fund in 2015, the project "*Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion? Civic Engagement through the Preservation of and Access to Refugee Archives*," represented a collaboration between the University of East London (UEL) Archives and the UEL Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging, (CMRB).[2] The UEL Civic Engagement Fund scheme has supported the creation of collaborative inter-disciplinary projects that substantiate direct engagement with local communities whilst encouraging UEL students to actively participate within the process of the project. *Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion* was conceived as a collab ration between the three authors of this chapter,[3] the first and third author being situated within Library and Learning Services and the second author and lead researcher situated at the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB).[4] The project focused on the documentation and preservation of displaced life histories and the creation of a more authentic

1 The Living Refugee Archive virtual portal is accessible at https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/
2 Further information on the work of the CMRB is available at https://uel.ac.uk/our-research/research-institutes-centres-groups/centre-research-migration-refugees-belonging.
3 Paul Dudman, Archivist for the Refugee Council Archive, acted as the Principal Investigator; Rumana Hashem, post-doctoral associate at the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB), acted as the lead researcher and a Co-Investigator who represented the CMRB; and Thomas Shaw, former Head of Collections and the Digital Library at UEL, has acted as Overseer of the project.
4 The UEL Library and Learning Services were subsequently renamed Library, Archives and Learning Services. Further details available at: https://uel.ac.uk/study/student-life/library.

narrative of lived experiences of the displaced in London, a paradoxical city in the UK. One key objective of the project was to establish the *Living Refugee Archive* virtual portal "to help encourage interaction between archivists, historians, NGOs and the communities themselves as to how the refugee experience can be adequately collated, preserved and documented" (Hashem and Dudman 2016, 192). The other two key objectives were to make accessible the authentic narrative of lived experience of displaced people and the co-creation of the digital portal with the displaced as well as undocumented migrants through the use of an anti-oppressive oral history methodology. These latter objectives – the co-creation of the LRA and its digital aspect – are the ones that our co-creators, the displaced participants, have identified as "a human rights project" (Hashem and Dudman 2015).[5]

The creation of the LRA started from this centring of human rights and refugee rights, and the associated preservation, documentation and digitisation of authentic life stories that enable learning about the displaced people's experience and cultural heritage. Co-working with the displaced has led us to question existing archival paradigms, which in turn has shaped our move towards a new "living archive" paradigm. Once the Pandora's box of history was opened in this sense, questions began to emerge as to whose history is being preserved within the archival space, and perhaps just as importantly, whose history is being silenced. Are our existing archival paradigms still fit for purpose in terms of how we document and preserved the lived experiences of the displaced? Do we, as cultural heritage repositories, continue to wield our own power in terms of what is considered worthy of addition to archive, and do we still need to shake off the chains of our colonial pasts to be fully representative of the wider collective memory of our communities? We should be aware of how individuals and communities can shape their own notions of individual and collective belonging within society and how institutions can continue to "wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory and national identity, and how we know ourselves as individuals, groups and societies" (Dudman 2019, 35–36). These questions and points, therefore, have acted as the impetus for the creation of the Living Refugee Archive that we discuss in this case study.

For the sake of clarity, we use the term "the displaced" to include "people on the move" and "people in displacement," as well as "refugees" and "undocumented" and "irregular mi-

5 Hashem, Rumana and Paul V. Dudman. 2015. "Listening to moving memories and lived experiences of refugees: Briefing Report." Research report presented at the launch event of the project, *Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion? Civic Engagement through the Preservation of and Access to Refugee Archives*., London: University of East London. Report is available from the University of East London's Civic Engagement board (2015) and UEL library repository on request. A summary of the launch event and a brief report from the launch event, which was held on 13 July 2015, is available on the Living Refugee Archive at: https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/about/democratic-access-privileged-exclusion/

grants." All these terms have been used synonymously in this article. At the same time, we use the term "displaced life histories" to imply that the life histories of the displaced people are often "displaced" and not adequately preserved. This usage of the term "displaced" is deliberate. Refugees and irregular migrants are displaced people, and we use these terms in context to describe the status of the displaced persons with whom we worked during the pilot project, LRA.

## Archives at UEL

The University of East London (UEL) Archives were formally established in November 2002 with the arrival of the Refugee Council Archive. The Refugee Council is today "the leading charity working with refugee and asylum seekers in the UK" (Refugee Council n.d.). The Archive of the Refugee Council represents one of the largest thematic collections focusing on documenting the history of the refugee experience within the UK. The history of the organisation can be traced back to the end of the Second World War and the need to respond to the mass displacement of people across Europe. Following the end of the conflict and the formation of the United Nations, the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees delineated the legal definition of a refugee, the minimum standards for the treatment of refugees, and the legal obligations of signatory states to the Convention (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2021). Two organisations were subsequently established in the UK in response to the Convention--the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) and the Standing Conference on Refugees (SCOR). The two organisations merged in 1981 to form what is now the Refugee Council.

The rationale for the Refugee Council Archive moving to the University of East London in November 2002 was to ensure the continued preservation of the collection and to enable it to be accessible for research. The Refugee Council had been looking for a more permanent home for the Archive to safeguard it. UEL had previously established a postgraduate MA programme in Refugee Studies and academic colleagues advocated for the Refugee Council archive to be deposited at UEL since it would provide a "hugely valuable resource" (Staff 2003) for researchers at UEL. At the time of deposit, the Refugee Council Archive consisted of approximately thirteen thousand items including grey literature incorporating research reports, press cuttings, journals and community magazines, conference papers, articles, and both published and unpublished research. The collection was predominantly text based, with a small amount of accompanying audio-visual materials. It had been organised according to a specific in-house classification scheme devised by the Refugee Council staff, namely an alpha-numeric system dividing the collection first by region and country, and then by subject. It had been catalogued, but the original catalogue had been lost by the time it reached us at the UEL Archives.

The Refugee Council Archives was the first archival collection to be deposited within the UEL Library and Learning Services, and Paul Dudman was appointed as the first archivist responsible for this important collection. Since then, our core objectives have focused on the longer-term sustainability of the Archive and ensuring the preservation of the collection, whilst looking to enable access to the Archive for research. Our initial work involved the retrospective cataloguing of the Archive together with developing strategies for embedding the Archive within key academic courses and modules within the University curriculum, and "introducing archival methodologies to the existing academic library service and introducing the concept of the archive to our students" (Dudman 2019, 37).

Since its inception at UEL in late 2002, the Archive has continued to grow and expand. The Refugee Council continues to deposit materials into the Archive, including its own records as a working charity. These consist of a "series of fonds documenting the work of the Refugee Council as a working charity including traditional archival documentary evidence in the form of correspondence, minutes of minutes, financial records, publicity and fundraising materials, and related records documenting the running of the organisation" (Dudman 2019, 34). Developing alongside this has been other new archival deposits, both within the field of refugee and forced migration studies, and disciplines relating to theatre studies and Olympic history. By the summer of 2024, the UEL Archives held more than twenty distinct archival collections incorporating both analogue and born digital collections. The British Olympic Association Archive and Library and the Hackney Empire Theatre Archive represent substantive collections that relate to Olympianism and theatre studies respectively, whilst our refugee archives have expanded to include analogue, oral history and born-digital archives. Recent archival deposits have included the Association of Ukrainian Women Archive, which dates from 1948, and two oral history collections relating to the 50th anniversary of the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin in 1972 – the British Ugandan Asians at 50 Archive and the From East to West: The History of Ugandan Asians Archive respectively. UEL archives now encompass a breadth of materials such as oral history archives (including Voices of Kosovo in Manchester; Healing the Wounds documenting the Irish experience in London; and the Gujarati Yatra oral history archive); as well as charity and campaigning analogue collections (Cambridge Refugee Support Group; Charter 87; Northern Refugee Centre archive and the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) Archive) and born digital collections (including Refugee Rights Europe and Qiestna), all located on the *Living Refugee Archive* portal.

In this case study, we detail how our ongoing work with the Refugee Council Archive and related collections at UEL has helped inform our own situated archival practice. Our discussion demonstrates how "What began as the need to preserve; catalogue and make accessible the archives of the Refugee Council … [has] … over time became a more in-depth piece

of work exploring the very nature of what we mean by the concept of an `archive'" (Dudman 2019, 34). As we have discussed elsewhere, our work has raised questions in terms of how we "preserve the collective memory of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in way that enables their voices to be heard in a positive way" (Dudman 2019, 34). This has taken the form of an ongoing dialogue around the very nature of the "archive" as a space where cultural heritage is preserved for future generations. The archive is also a space for practicing and co-creating anti-oppressive collections with the displaced about their border struggles and subversion (Hashem, 2021)[6] as well as an anti-oppressive and decolonised digital portal with the displaced people who were then based in London and were either undergoing asylum processes or were undocumented in the UK.

## *Refugee history, refugee archives*

In his seminal text on *What is History?* Edward Hallet Carr reflects that the answer to this question will inevitable reflect "our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question [of] what view we take of the society in which we live" (Carr 1984, 8). Carr's belief that our view of the past is directly informed by our view of the present, or even the present we would like to believe exists, can directly impact on the types of history produced, and what therefore might be considered historical enough to be included within the archive. Present-day societal issues could therefore have an impact on the tropes of history we are willing to consider informing our own sense of personal identity and collective belonging. As Carr implies, it is for each of our inner historians to decide which historical facts to call on and "which facts to give the floor, and in which order or context" (Carr 1984, 11). Carr argues that archives appeal "to the nature and power in the past," and that "if want the nature of power in the present to be more equitably distributed than it historically has been," we need to appreciate "the process by which certain peoples have been excluded from history" (Carr and Lipscomb 2021, 13–14). In creating the LRA, we were very conscious of this exclusion and wanted to ensure that diverse voices and the presence of the displaced were assured through the inclusivity of the collections and co-creative archival practices.

Traditionally, Western notions of history and by default, colonialism, have been formed around the study of the great and the good--of leaders and kings, institutions and military men who have aspired to, and achieved, greatness in their chosen fields. The histories of the masses have often been consigned to the margins or to a brief footnote in these narratives. It is the history of those who belong, written to confirm a particular sense of identity and

6 For further insights see Hashem, Rumana. 2021. "Creating Space in the Archive for an Anti-oppressive Community Project: Recording Border Control and Subversion." *Displaced Voices: A Journal of Archives, Migration and Cultural Heritage* 2 (1): 74-81. https://doi.org/10.15123/uel.898y6

collective values, and to reinforce power. Such history too often overlooks, marginalizes or silences the contributions of those who do not "fit in" with the established narrative of history, those "others" who exist outside the national histories that dominant societies or élites wish to write and reproduce for themselves. When considering the history of immigration and emigration from the shores of the Great Britain, "the common understanding of this history as passed down by the education system as well as by museums, archives and heritage sites, has often glossed over or ignored this crucial aspect of our island history" (Stevens 2009, 5). We echo Stevens and other historians who have identified and discussed these issues of exclusionary practices in the field of migration studies and archive.

In his article for the *AAVAA Living Archive* papers published as a special edition of the journal *Third Text* in Spring 2001, Guy Brett critiques the British art establishment for being moulded to a particular attitude, namely the "mentality of the monolith, or more accurately, the club. You are either inside the club, or outside" (Brett 2001, 107). This notion of the monolith mentality could also be applied to traditionalist approaches to the study of history and by default, who should be documented as part of the archive "club" and who should be excluded, or "othered." In their prologue to the 2021 book *What is History, Now?*, Suzannah Lipscomb and Helen Carr reflect on the news reportage in the Daily Telegraph highlighting then Conservative Education Secretary Michelle Donelan discussing the "dangers" of decolonising the history curriculum in higher education and referring to how some Soviet-style universities are looking to "censor history" (2021, 5). Making an impassioned plea for decolonial approaches engaging with under-represented communities as well as the "importance of documenting the undocumented" (Awan and Musmar 2021, 164), Carr and Lipscomb also argue that:

> Advocating an end to commemorating those who authorised and benefitted from colonialism, oppression and enslavement of other human beings, while encouraging us to pay more attention to the stories of who were colonised, oppressed and enslaved is the very anthesis of erasing the past; it's about refusing to accept a censored version of history that glorifies certain people and erases others (Carr and Lipscomb 2021, 8).

By default, "monolithic" views of history look to weave a particular fabric of history that preserves an established view of the past in the present, thereby attempting to reinforce modern day societal values within the context of a certain historical gaze. "The problem of silences in the archives" (and we argue, indeed, any collections whether held in archives or museums) is particularly tenacious if we appreciate "that history is not only constructed in the present – our understanding of it also constructs the sort of present we live in" (Carr and Lipscomb 2021, 13). The LRA wants to overcome this silence in the archives and bring in and include diverse voices and authentic histories of the displaced.

## Refugee archives at UEL

Following the establishment of the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, the Refugee Council was founded in 1951, bringing together two separate organisations, the *British Council for Aid to Refugees* and the *Standing Committee on Refugees*. The Refugee Council Archive served as an organisational archive of the Refugee Council and its predecessor third-sector organisations and thus documented the history of these organisations as represented through minutes of meetings, financial records, correspondence, campaign and publicity materials together with policy and advocacy work that often was undertaken in collaboration with other organisations. In addition to the core archive, the Refugee Council had collected a substantial special collection, as already described (Dudman 2019, 37).

With the retrospective cataloguing of the Archive ongoing, new archival collections slowly started to arrive, including the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA); Northern Refugee Centre Archive and the Audio-Visual Archives of the United Nations High Commissioner (UNHCR) London Office. Our focus remained on making the Archives as accessible as possible for research and engagement use. From the outset, we were committed to "the archive not becoming just a collection of dusty old boxes locked away on a shelf in the archive with the occasional intrepid researcher braving" (Dudman 2019, 37) these conditions. Instead, we want to find ways to ensure that the Archive actively continues to grow and engage with the lived experiences of the communities that we serve. Through our work with these archival projects prior to our first civic engagement project in 2015, we several key concerns emerged about what we were doing.

We had developed a corpus of archival records that provided invaluable insights into the history of migratory movements to the United Kingdom and the policy work being undertaken by charities and third sector organisations in providing sanctuary and support to refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons. We were becoming acutely aware of the power dynamics associated with undertaking of this work including the importance of these collections in relation to notions of individual and community identity and the role of archives in supporting community and individual belonging. We were also increasingly aware of the potential risk of "othering" other communities if we did not also collect their narratives and cultural heritage. Whilst the charity and third-sector[7] archives we had amassed by 2015 provided an important institutional gaze onto national policies relating to immigration and forced displacement, the archives were grounded in how the charitable organisations had responded to, and advocated on behalf of, refugees and asylum under increasingly punitive Government policy and Home Office restrictions. What was lacking in

7 Non-governmental, not-for-profit, values driven organisations.

the archives were the voices and narratives, the histories and the testimonies, of those who had been directly impacted by these policies and who the organisations were trying to assist. Namely, where were the voices, the narratives, the testimonies of lived experiences from the communities and individuals who had the direct lived experiences of displacement?

## *Archival silences and living archives*

Brett (2001) has correctly noted that has archives have been poetically described as "a way of saving something from the flux of existence and preventing it sinking into oblivion" (Brett 2001, 107). However, the erasing, or silencing, of refugees from the historical record, as Gatrell (2017) notes, stands as a stark contrast to the long history of both immigration and emigration to and from British shores. Gatrell has highlighted how historians have often been slow to take this up as a challenge of writing the displaced ("refugees") "into modern history as active participants rather than merely the object of external intervention" (Gatrell et al. 2021, 71), thus excluding and silencing the "Other" in the histories they write. This is obviously not only a problem with the writing of history, but also with the availability of the records and accounts that serve as primary sources for many historians, ergo, it is a problem of archives.

The concept of archival silences has recently become a subject for considered research within the archival studies literature (Thomas, Fowler and Johnson 2017). The origins of the interest in what, and whom, has been silenced within the archival sphere can be traced back to the seminal work of Haitian American anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his seminal 1995 book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* focusing on the liberation struggle of slaves in Haiti. For Trouillot, the enabling of silences within archival and historical processes could occur in four key times, namely "the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in its final instance)" (Moss, and Thomas 2021, 10). Silences, therefore, have the potential to be written into, or out of our shared societal knowledge, at multiple stages in the archiving process, either unintentionally or by design. These silences, or omissions, could be due to the necessary evidence not being recorded at the time of the record creation; the records themselves not surviving to be archived or not being deemed to be of sufficient historical significance to be kept; alternately if they have survived, not being deemed important enough to be incorporated into accepted narratives, or even deliberately overlooked in favour of those narratives that reinforced a particular societal or political narrative framework. Whilst realism dictates that it is not possible for all of our documented history to have survived or to be given space in the archive, we have to acknowledge that there are factors that can actively predetermine what is recorded and

what is silenced. These might be the archivist whose appraisal actions (biased as they inevitably are) determine what is permitted to enter the archive; the institutional policies of archival repositories that delineate what can be collected; or societal and political biases that, as Michel Foucault has argued, determine "what counts as being alive, and by using exile, expulsion, proscription, non-recognition, social death, pre-emptive or retroactive nullification, … can reduce people to a state where it is if they never existed" (quoted in Moss and Thomas 2021, 16). We are reminded that the role of the archivist is not purely as the neutral guardian of records that are transferred to their care through the natural workings of the organisations that they serve. By their very roles as appraisers, describers and access providers, they are the gatekeepers to archival knowledge. Archivists, therefore, have their own power to direct and control the direction of history, including exercising that power to adapt to new histories and address the silences within their own collections. As archival theorists Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook have rightly argued, "Archives – as records – wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups and societies" (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 2).

This was a challenge that resonated with us as we were preparing our first funding application to the UEL Civic Engagement Fund in 2015. How could we approach challenging some of the silences and exclusions within our own archive? We wanted to consider why the diverse voices of refugees and migrants are often marginalised or left un-heard within the archive and to consider how we could establish a methodology that would facilitate a genuinely participatory and informed collaborative approach to working with the displaced and enabling the creation and preservation of their shared cultural heritage and lived experiences.

Through the application of decolonised, inclusive and anti-oppressive methodologies to the archiving of life histories we were drawn towards the `living archive' paradigm. The very notion that we were looking to collect and preserve life histories of the displaced signalled the idea that we were dealing with an experience that was inherently alive to the narrator, a phenomenon that challenges the prevalent conceptualization of the archive as a repository of past times, with its collections distanced from the present by their very inclusion within the archive. As Guy Brett observes, however, in his discussion on the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive's `Living Archives' papers for the *Third Text* journal, "an archive is supposedly a repository of dead things, so to propose it as living is already a paradox" (Brett 2001, 110). The living archive as paradox would prove to be an apt metaphor for our initial oral history work documenting the narratives of the displaced in London, as we were to discover that "lived experiences of refugees are paradoxical and situated" (Hashem and Dudman 2016, 195) within the context of the hostile environment policy established by the right-wing

Conservative government as a deterrence to refugees seeking a new home in the United Kingdom. Indeed, "despite refugees' willingness to share their positive resources with British residents in London, a random stereotyping of refugees as oriental, if not "other" is common" (Hashem and Dudman 2016, 195–96). From the oral history recordings that we undertook as part of this civic engagement project, both positive and negative experiences of London as a place of sanctuary were evident, as reflected in the words of Shahosh, one displaced participant of black indigenous Moroccan heritage who came to the UK:

> London is a better place for its diversity, its political dimension, its democratic value … [however] … sometime curiosity and fantasy of English people makes me feel like a monkey in a zoo. For example, when people in a high street or at a cafeteria stare at my curly hair and asks: `Is it real? Can I touch your hair? It is embarrassing … (Shahosh quoted in Hashem and Dudman 2016, 195).

The idea of co-creating a "living refugee archive" with the displaced is very similar to what Bailey and Boyce have discussed in their article on living archives about diaspora (Bailey and Boyce 2001, 87). That is, it drew upon the idea of exploring the notion of a counter-archive for the history of displaced communities that would allow us to engage with the silences that we felt existed within our own collections, and to explore ways in which we could challenge the existing hegemonic narrative of the traditional archive, and to consider alternative methodologies for engaging with under-represented communities. For this we built on the conceptualisations of Jamaican British sociologist Stuart Hall and his assertation that for an archive to be truly alive, "it should be, not an inert museum of dead works, but a `living archive' whose construction must be seen as an on-going, never completed project" (Hall 2001, 89). In the initial phase of the bid writing, the authors of this case study discussed these representational issues, exclusionary practices and migration discourse as well as the need for digitisation and oral histories as a way forward. Thinking through decolonised digitisation of the archive through co-working with the displaced and collating life stories to document the displaced narratives were central to our pilot project, LRA.

## *Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion*?

The *Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion* project was to the outcome of UEL's first proposal to the Civic Engagement Fund. It was a small amount of seed funding that enabled UEL to undertake a pilot project between February and July 2015. The project provided us with the first opportunity to bring together an inter-disciplinary collaborative team for research and engagement on The project took the form of a pilot study, first, of how to build the Living Refugee Archive as a means of promoting access to and engagement with our archival collections; and second, to together with undertake an oral history project with

refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons in London as a means of bringing their lived experience into the archive and enabling their history and their stories to be documented within a supportive archival space. We were looking at this project as the beginning of an ongoing work to help challenge the concept of the archive as "a narrative voiced by the white, western academy" (Almeida and Hoyer 2019, 2) in terms of whose histories are deemed worthy of preservation within the archival space. We were also aware that the methodologies used for archiving in the UK and the Western states needed to be challenged, especially during the so called 2014-2016 "refugee crisis" when the government in the UK had brought in drastic changes in immigration regulations that had negative political and socio-economic implications that affected displaced people, particularly those labelled as "asylum-seekers" and "refugees". Given the funding conditions, we had a very short time to develop a larger bid, but we responded with an ethically important project for breaking the archival silence and making the archive accessible to the displaced. The LRA work is ongoing today. Paul Dudman, as the curator of the LRA, in particular, is actively collaborating and co-working with a number of displaced and diaspora communities and pro-actively preserving and making the work and stories of the displaced available through the archive.

## *Applying decolonised and anti-oppressive methodologies to archive life histories*

Archiving life stories of the displaced in a hostile environment and working with and researching or narrating these people's lived experiences involve important ethical considerations, including sensitive representation, privacy, safety and trust on the part of the archivists, narrators and researchers involved (Hashem and Dudman 2016). The research team was aware of this. We held a series of meetings with experts, community advocates and activists, including the displaced people themselves before we started collecting data in spring 2015. We also consulted UEL's academics primarily social scientists and experts in migration and refugee history, including Giorgia Donna, Gargi Bhattacharya, Nira Yuval-Davis and Dr Georgie Wemyss and in oral history such as Toby Butler, and they have acted as advisors to the research team. Additionally, the lead researcher (the second author who was a new post-doctoral researcher at the time at the CMRB), specialises in social science ethics and anti-oppressive methodologies.[8] The team had deep discussions about the ethics of archiving displaced voices and how to make the best use of anti-oppressive methods to archive the lived experiences of the displaced, as well as how this approach would fit in the

8 The researcher has used critical anti-oppressive methodology for completing her PhD research with indigenous women in militarised remote areas in post-conflict situations in South-east Bangladesh. See for further information: Hashem, Rumana. 2014. "Empirical research on gender and armed conflict: Applying narratology, intersectionalityand anti-oppressive methods." In *SAGE Research Methods and SAGE Research Methods Cases, Part One*. SAGE Publications, Ltd., https://doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013520913.

civic engagement project. Prior to making final decisions, we also reviewed contemporary approaches to archives and historian and political theorist Joseph-Achille Mbembe and others' arguments for the need for decolonising the archives (Mbembe 2012, 2016). We were opposed to the archiving displaced lived experiences in the colonial archive by white archivists, so we consulted with communities and collaborated with the CMRB to borrow their post-doctoral researcher.

However, decolonising the archive and undertaking ethical research are not simple undertakings. The team was faced with a new challenge when we wanted to employ Rumana on this project as a paid researcher and Co-Investigator. It appeared that this qualified post-doctoral researcher – who was an international immigrant with Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) – was subject to new changes in UK immigration policy brought by Theresa May in 2014 and had lost her work permit despite ILR in the UK. Ethically, we could not have proceeded with this project with appropriate ethical authority without employing a researcher who came had themselves experienced displacement and would be in a position to approach the project with both first-hand knowledge and a shared empathy. It was also essential that the researcher and community participants would be acknowledged and receive equitable and appropriate support for their work on archiving displaced life histories. While the researcher was constrained by having to undergo a new biometric clearance to be able to apply for jobs in the UK as a result of her work permit being removed, she remained committed to the project. She offered her assistance pro bono for planning, designing, networking, collating and analysing the life narratives collected by the project. This support was a critical resource for the team and helped move along the project design and application for ethics approval in March 2015. We used a critical anti-oppressive methodology to reach out to potential participants (Hashem and Dudman 2016 cited in Hashem et al 2023) -- displaced people and community activists – to be involved in networking, consultations and interviews. This helped balance power relations between the all those who participated in the project and together co-produced the knowledge content and develop the LRA.

The design and ethical processed enhanced our understanding of the need for implementing the living archive paradigm to support decolonised knowledge production. Questions about how we can ensure trust and safety in and through the archive, and archive genuine voices or narrate stories of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants without distortion remain central. For example, how can a researcher avoid distorting a story or its essence when they are re-narrating a story told by someone else or analysing or disseminating the substance of that story? How can we archive original stories of undocumented migrants and those in situations of precarity without putting them in (further) danger? The team has undertaken extended consultations with community archivists and activists to search for answers for these questions, including consulting displaced activists - two of whom

have directly participated in the project and given spontaneous first hand testimonies that were recorded for the LRA. Through these consultations, the team has recognised that it is imperative to use bottom-up oral recording as a research tool since this preserves the authenticity of the narratives and ensures that the life stories remain undistorted even after they have undergone data analysis.

We worked directly with displaced individuals and community groups from Morocco, North Sudan, Iran, Latin America and Bangladesh. The ages of the displaced individuals who spoke to us ranged between 20 and 50 years old. Their genders, sexuality, race and ethnicity varied, three are women and all the others are men. During the establishment of the pilot project in 2015, we only interviewed two individuals – one 24-year-old young man of indigenous Morocco heritage and one 37-year-old Latin American woman who suffers from severe epilepsy but was forced to work for her survival and had no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Rumana already knew some of the participants through her activist network and advocacy work with migrants and minority women in the UK, which made it easier to seek consent, recruit and co-work with them. As an ethical requirement of working with vulnerable groups as refugees and individuals undergoing asylum processes, we ensured that all participants were offered compensation for their valuable time. Each displaced participant was provided with £20 voucher as compensation and also received reimbursement for their travel fare (paid through an Oyster card) when they travelled to give their life story interview to the LRA team.

The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, and the themes of our discussion were known to the participants before they arrived at the interview. In accordance with an anti-oppressive approach, the displaced interviewees were able to speak about anything they like, for as long as they like, and could withdraw their participation at any time without any negative consequences to them. The fact that Rumana, the lead researcher, was herself an immigrant without a work permit at that time helped build trust since the researcher was seen as "a displaced person of colour rather than an established scholar" (to quote Shahosh, 12 June 2015, cited in Hashem et al 2023, 59). The meetings lasted between one and three hours. All participants spoke in English, and none required an interpreter. Our reliance on a bottom-up oral methodology for recording life stories has enabled us to archive the stories without distortion. It also helped to engage the displaced communities in a way that built trust. Participants have referred to the project a "digital human rights project" and expressed the desire to co-work and co-author with the project researcher and archivist in the future.

We listened to the stories of the displaced, and we recorded and preserved them, but we did not publish them all because some contain sensitive data that could potentially result in harm to the speakers if disclosed online. Archivists have responsibilities to safeguard the

displaced and indeed any voice found in the archive. We have made some of these stories available in anonymised form through a launch event where our co-producers of knowledge (the displaced) were present, also anonymously. We had hoped to publish all the stories on the LRA website, but publication was put on hold after a long discussion about the ethical considerations involved in conducting research with the displaced and archiving sensitive materials. Interestingly, the displaced participants who provided their oral accounts for the LRA wanted their life histories to be published and be made accessible online, but experts and scholars of migration studies raised concerns and we have taken these very seriously. The oral histories have been placed within University of East London's Data Repository for secure storage until such point as all the interview participants experience safety in terms of refuge (Hashem et al. 2023, 59).

Our notion of decolonised knowledge, as we have noted elsewhere, "refuses, as Mbembe (2016) puts it, any pre-existing paradigm, to avoid shaping and reshaping of data" (Hashem and Dudman, 2016, 193). The LRA draws on "knowledge from below," a notion that considers the knowledge of the displaced as more relevant and substantial than the knowledge produced by archivists "and experts who reinterpret data following a preexisting paradigm" (Hashem and Dudman 2016, 193). In drawing on knowledge from below, we consider that the oral history told by the displaced in a particular socio-historical context to be an ultimate truth, "which should not be distorted, and which does not require to be reinterpreted by any means" (Hashem and Dudman 2016, 193). The LRA regards the perceptions, understandings, interpretations and explanations of the displaced, whether refugees or undocumented migrants, about their life events as authentic to their experiences. For example, when a Moroccan displaced participant said, "There's nothing called 'British values.' I have always done everything that British people do" (Shahosh, 28 years old, interviewed on 12 June 2015, quoted in Hashem and Dudman 2016, 193), we have considered this to be a valid assertion. Applying oral history to archive displaced voices and migrants' life stories was essential for a new living archive. In a nutshell, the LRA methodology comprises a decolonised archival and anti-oppressive oral history perspective to storytelling. We found this methodology useful as a living archive paradigm.

## *Archives and community engagement: Documenting Chile*

An example of the type of community-focused civic engagement projects that we are currently undertaking can be found with our Documenting Chile living archive. This project began with an email back in late 2017 asking whether the UEL Archives would be interested in hosting a community exhibition on the Chilean diaspora in the UK. The exhibition, *Crafting Resistance: The Art of Chilean Political Prisoners*, displayed over 150 hand-crafted artefacts that had been created by Chileans during their incarceration in military prisons

in Chile following the 1973 military coup by General Augusto Pinochet. These artefacts had subsequently been carried by the Chileans with them when they went into exile until their arrival in the UK. These artefacts, which artefacts represented their own history and agency in resisting the Pinochet regime, highlighted the importance of material culture to those who had been exiled "in helping to challenge of conceptions of political prisoners as `passive victims', which fail[ed] to recognise" (Dudman 2023, 52) the agency of those incarcerated, as these.

The success of this in-person exhibition in 2018 resulted in the subsequent creation of a virtual rendering of the physical exhibition within the online space of the Living Refugee Archive.[9] It also paved the way for a continuing open dialogue with the Chilean community in London, and with the anniversary of the coup in September 2023, we began working on what would become the Documenting Chile Archive.[10] We discussed how "an archive to document the lived experiences of Chileans in the UK should appear; the range and scope of archive materials we should collect; [and] the ethics of engagement as a continuous process of learning and from the community" (Dudman 2023, 53) about their shared inter-generational experiences of exile. As part of the 50th anniversary reflections of the coup, we supported another exhibition, this time held at the London School of Economics (LSE) library. The exhibition, *Resistance, Rights and Refuge: Britain and Chile 50 Years After the Coup*, was curated by Dr. Tanya Harmer and Chilean community member Gloria Miqueles.[11] It brought together archival materials reflecting the lived experiences of Chilean exiles and helped set the scene for a three-day conference at LSE that included several witness sessions where Chileans could share and discuss their experiences of trauma, loss and exile. These testimony sessions were recorded and will be made accessible on the Living Refugee Archive. We also worked closely with our Chilean community colleagues on a special issue of our open access journal *Displaced Voices: A Journal of Migration, Archives and Cultural Heritage*.[12] Entitled *Chile @50: A Special Issue of Displaced Voices to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the Coup d'etat in Chile,*[13] this volume brought together Chilean community members and activists, academics and archivists to remember how, for the Chileans forced into exile, "the trauma of displacement continues to shape families, friendships and everyday life" (Miqueles and Harmer 2023, 18). As guest editors, Gloria Miqueles and Tanya Harmer note in their editorial, this special issue "was compiled in the name of remembering, recording

9 Crafting Resistance Living Exhibition: https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/crafting-resistance-living-exhibition/

10 Documenting Chile Archive: https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/archives/documenting-chile-archive/

11 Resistance, Rights and Refuge official website: https://resistancerightsandrefuge.uk/

12 Displaced Voices Journal: https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/researchpublications/displaced_voices/

13 Chile @50: Special Issue of Displaced Voices on Chile available at: https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/researchpublications/displaced_voices/displaced-voices-special-issue-chile-at-50/

and preserving history of what happened in Chile half a century ago and to say: never again" (Miqueles and Harmer 2023, 18).

## Conclusions

In this case study we have focused on the importance of challenging pre-existing silences within our archival collections by focusing on anti-oppressive participatory methodologies (Hashem, Dudman, and Shaw 2022) that engage with displaced communities as a means of enabling their voices to be represented within the archive. This has been a transformative experience for the UEL Archives, both in terms of the collaborative opportunities this work has enabled and the development of the archival holdings.

Through this work we have come to believe very strongly "that genuinely informed collaborative and participatory archive projects are essential to preserving and safeguarding representative community cultural heritage projects" (Dudman 2023, 53). We have been able to employ technological methods to facilitate this work through the *Living Refugee Archive* and enhance the accessibility and dissemination of, and engagement with, the contents of the archive. As Stuart Hall argued, "The question of technology, of access and therefore inevitability of funding, are as central to a `living archive' as the aesthetic, artistic and interpretative practices" (Hall 2001, 91). Over the course of two decades working with the UEL Archives, we have seen virtual databases supporting the documentation of the refugee experience come and go due to a combination of continued technological advancements, making older technological infrastructures redundant. We have also experienced changes in funding models and institutional support. We must therefore continue to ensure the sustainability of our digital infrastructures and keep ourselves informed of the inherent inequalities associated with "globalised technological systems" (Almeida and Hoyer 2019, 9), especially with the growing encroachment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into our daily lives and work.

With the continued advent of born digital archives and the commitment of the living archive as a continuous work in progress, by its very nature of documenting the present in the present, always ongoing and never finite, artificial intelligence (AI) techniques appear to offer new ways to increase the accessibility and usability of archives (Jaillant and Rees 2023, 571)getting access to these archival materials is extremely complicated for many reasons—including data protection, sensitivity, national security, and copyright. Artificial Intelligence (AI. However, since such developments are still (Jaillant and Rees 2023, 571) getting access to these archival materials is extremely complicated for many reasons—including data protection, sensitivity, national security, and copyright. Artificial Intelligence (AI there remain considerable issues in relation to ethics of trust to overcome if AI is to be

considered as an effective and beneficial archival tool. Mistrust of and nervousness about the effects and capabilities of this technology will linger, we believe, until AI has been able to prove itself to be democratic and accountable in its handling of data, and can be accessed by all, not just those who have the budget and infrastructure to implement it.

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