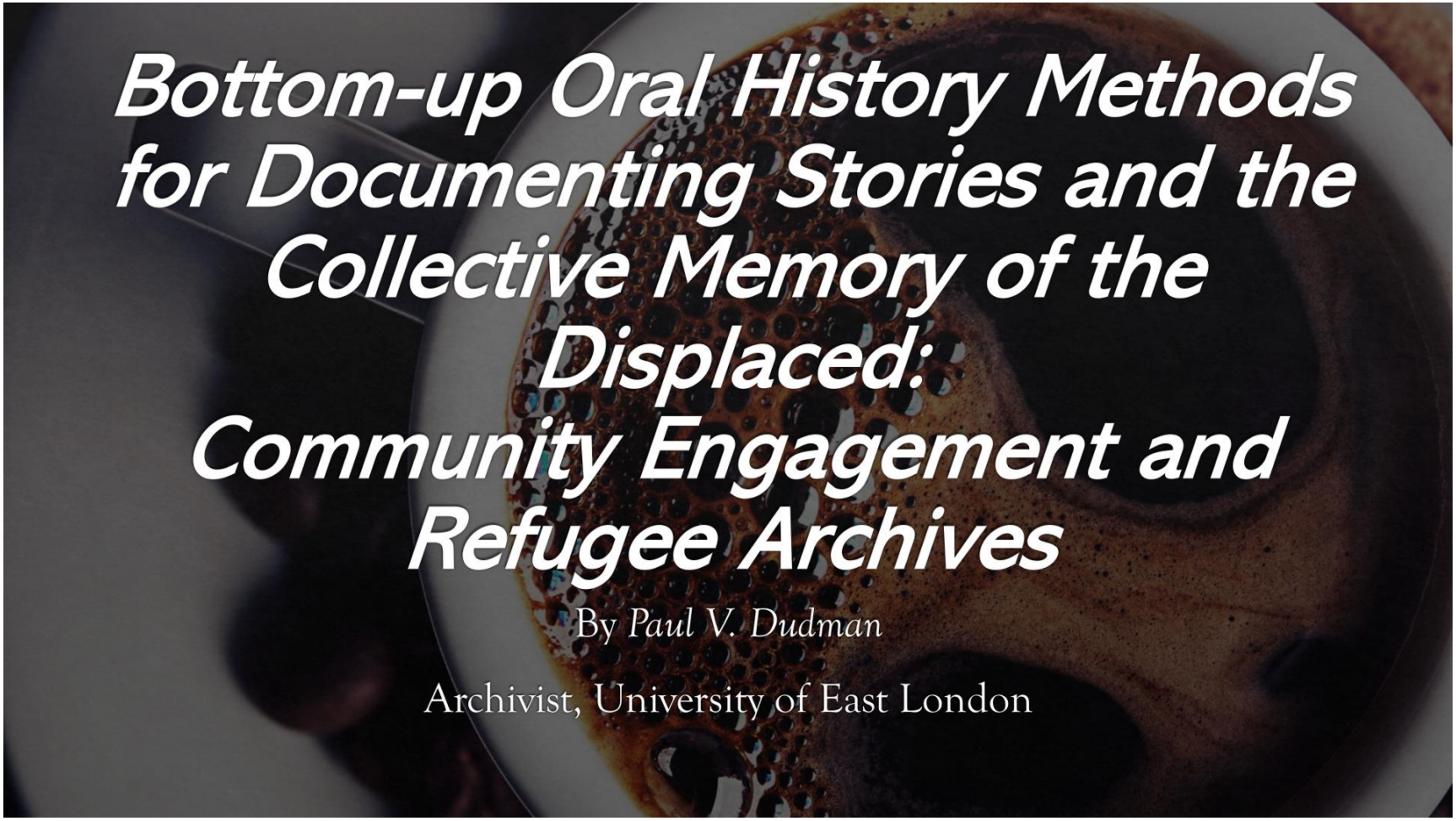


Bottom-up Oral History Methods for Documenting Stories and the Collective Memory of the Displaced: Community Engagement and Refugee Archives

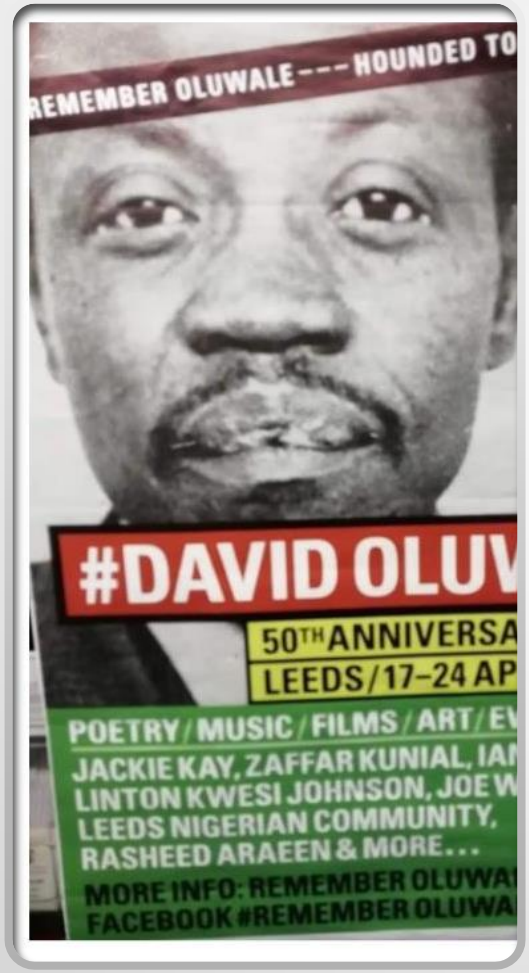
By *Paul V. Dudman*

Archivist, University of East London

Introduction 1

- For eighteen years the University of East London has been the home of the archives of the Refugee Council, perhaps the largest collections focusing on refugee and migration issues in the UK
- In recent years, we have been undertaking multiple civic and community engagement and outreach projects on beyond the academy seeking to work with local communities, third sector organisations and especially with refugees and asylum seekers themselves.
- This presentation will focus on the use of bottom-oral history methodologies as a means of breaking the barriers associated with accessing historical/archival information on refugee and migration issues as well as the (dis)continuities that appear over time in migration accounts, policy-making, research and practice and the impacts these have on our work.

Introduction 2



- *For the archive, there are important discussions to be had in relation to our processes of collecting (community) memories especially in relation to the interplay of power dynamics as to which communities and voices are present within the archive and which are under-represented. In responding to refugee crises, how can we as archivists actively engage in ethically documenting, preserving and making accessible reliable, accurate and trustworthy materials and collections which genuinely reflect the testimonies and life histories of refugees and asylum seekers.*

Refugee Archive Collections @ UEL

Our refugee and migration physical collections include:

The Refugee Council Archive

Council for Assisting At-Risk Academics (CARA) Archive

Northern Refugee Centre Archive

UNHCR (London Office) Audio-Visual Library

Information Centre for Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) Archive

Charter 87

Cambridge Refugee Support Group Archive

Association of Ukrainian Women Archive (forthcoming)

History of the Refugee Council Archive

- The Refugee Council originated from two independent organisations, British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) and the Standing Conference on Refugees (SCOR), which were both founded in 1951 following the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.
- The 70th Anniversary of the Refugee Council this year in conjunction with the creation of the UN Refugee Convention
- Thematic special collection of published books and journals, reports and grey literature incorporating working papers, conference papers, leaflets, newsletters, case studies, field reports, statistical data, press cuttings and audio-visual materials.
- Over 35,000 items have now been catalogued and we are still trying to add new materials to the collection.



Conceptual Framework: A Question of Narratives?

- Our work with the analogue physical collections of the Refugee Council Archive and related collections have raised a number of issues associated with how the narratives of the refugee experience are documented, preserved and subsequently made accessible for research.
- Refugee Council Archive:
  - A history of the Refugee Council as a third-sector organisation, documenting its working practices (e.g. minutes of meetings, correspondence, publicity, funding, internal research and reporting). A Narrative of the Organisation?
  - A special collection of grey literature encompassing research reports; conferences papers; press cuttings; magazines; and articles. Research on and about refugees and asylum seekers?
  - Where are the actual voices of and testimonies of the refugees themselves?

Archives, Collective Memory & Forced Displacement 1

- Archives can play a very important role in relation to identity formation and collective memory.
- Especially within the fields of migration and forced displacement within their broadest definitions.
- Archives can have a positive role to play in challenging the negative discourses on this issues within media and society; and can play a role in enabling refugees to have a voice in the social, legal and political empowerment of their communities?
- But also need to consider issues of ethics, trust and representation and how we as Archivists use the materials entrusted to us.
- Archives can also be a nexus of power relations where voices and narratives can be either heard or silenced.

Archives, Collective Memory & Forced Displacement 2

- Memories of refugees are 'moving', and digitalised oral history archives can be seen as 'a project of human rights'
- Social history and powerful political narratives are situated, memories are situated, and ideas about memories and identities can be challenged through oral history recording of contested lived experience of refugees. Complete new social history can be constructed with every single oral history.
- **The dilemma of accessibility of oral history**: how to make an archive accessible and powerful at a time without distorting the narratives and without affecting the participants and researchers' safety.

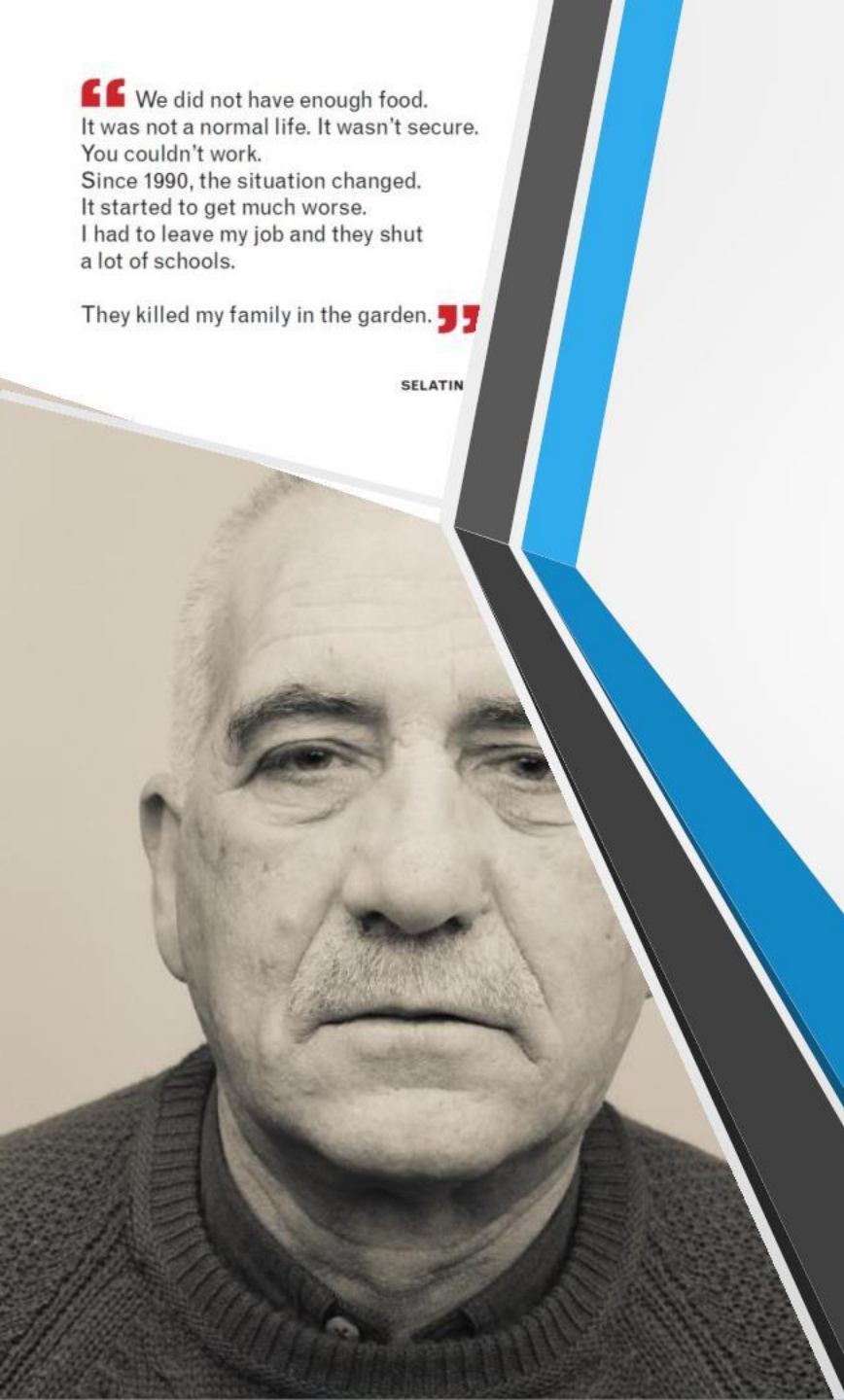
Narrative Engagement in the Archive

- Archives are home to a multitude of interacting stories, narratives and testimonies. Some rise to the surface easily, others are hidden.
- Opening the Archive to life histories of vulnerable communities raise a number of key issues:
  - Engagement: Engendering trust with communities and individuals to enable and facilitate life history work.
  - Representation: How do communities and individuals want their story to represented within the Archive?
  - Ethics: Ensuring that any life history work undertaken is ethical in its approach, ensuring participants are informed of the process from initial engagement through life history process and ending up with archiving and issues of accessibility.
  - The Archivist Researcher: An awareness of your own situated practice in relation to the Archive and the outreach work you are undertaking. Challenging yourself and the Archive.

Refugee Archives – Oral History

- Oral history-based collections:
- GujaratiYatra Oral History Collection. Exhibition held at the Museum of Croydon.
- VOKIM: Voices of Kosovo in Manchester Oral History Archive. Manchester Aid to Kosovo.
- Healing the Wounds. Irish Community Services Oral History Project documenting the Irish community in South East London.
- Crossing the Borders Oral History Archive. Documenting the Chinese community in Manchester.
  The WaiYin Society
- Eastside Community Heritage: Projects on Somali Seafarers ;
  Ugandan Asians; refugees from the Hungarian Revolution.





Voices of Kosovo in Manchester oral history testimonies and accompanying exhibition images.

How can archives approach the documenting of the life history narratives of refugees and migrants?

- Undertake your own life history project work on behalf of the Archive. Develop best practices for engaging with participants and develop a clear ethical policy.
- Work in collaboration to support work being undertaken by academic colleagues, e.g. Life History and Storytelling project undertaken by CMRB and CNR at UEL.
- Multi-modal approaches to collecting life histories. Think holistically – life histories are not just oral histories or written testimonies, they can be represented in other formats, e.g. theatre, dance, art, design, textiles and objects. Be creative!
- Be open to collaboration and be prepared to challenge hierarchies in support of projects that break the mode in terms of how often marginalised voices can be represented and showcased in new and different ways.

Narrative Engagement in the Archive: Representation

- How do communities and individuals want their story to represented within the Archive?
- Ongoing civic engagement and outreach projects looking at bottom-up oral history approaches towards exploring the "contradictory narratives of transcultural encounters of refugees and undocumented migrants in London" (Hashem and Dudman (2016) and beyond.
- **Community Gatekeepers:** Working with community gatekeepers has become a very important aspect of our work when working with local communities. Without their support, many of the projects we have undertaken would not have been possible.

Oral History Methodologies

- Pre-established oral history methodology and interview (semi-structured and qualitative)
- Critical anti-oppressive methodology, a bottom up approach to better balance power relations.
- Decolonising knowledge – dialogical, situated and reflexive – producing ethically accountable knowledge.
- Ethical challenges faced in the undertaking of oral history recordings with vulnerable communities

Refugee Storytelling - The Active Citizens Sound Archive, Athens

- *'A critical mass of articles and incendiaries, reflections and rallying cries, has skewered the notion that refugee storytelling is somehow inherently useful, and that 'giving voice' is a benevolent practice.'*
- *Through the recording of sound and production of the archive, Tom describes how people perform, protest and ultimately remake citizenship as something that is 'emergent and iterative' rather than the static and dominant tropes of 'refugee crisis,' enabling citizens, refugees and hosts alike, to reclaim storytelling as a 'craft that allows for the fullness and complexity of experience' and challenge hierarchical structures of power and inequality.*
- Western, T. (2020) 'The Active Citizens Sound Archive', *Refugee Hosts*, 2 April. Available at: https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/02/the-active-citizens-sound-archive / (Accessed: 24 May 2020).

CommunityEngagement

- "**Supporting Refugees into Higher Education: A Research Hub for London":** A project designed to create an online resource hub of higher education resources for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. This formed part of our wider Erasmus+ funded OLIve (Online Learning Initiative) course. Link: https://www.uel.ac.uk/schools/social-sciences/olive
- **"Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion: Civic Engagement through the Preservation and Access to Refugee Archives."** To engage with local communities to establish a Living Refugee Archive and to promote and enable accessibility and engagement through the collection of oral histories. Link: http://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/
- **Refugee Mental Health and Wellbeing Portal**: A project to develop an online resource portal specifically for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Health and Social Care Professionals. Link: https://www.uel.ac.uk/schools/psychology/research/refugee-mental-health-and-wellbeing-portal
- "***Performing the Archive*: Living Narratives and the Politics of Performance**." Working with undergraduate theatre studies students to create performance theatre based upon narratives discovered in the Archive. Link to full performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLjQvOZdnjo&t=18s

Community Engagement with Refugees and Asylum Seekers

- From 2015, we have been undertaking internally funded civic engagement projects in an attempt to engage with our local communities and develop new partnerships.
- Who can accesses these Refugee archives and how can we improve access to refugee research archives?
- How does the role of language within the documentary archive impact upon refugee and migrant representation?
- Are refugee archives well-represented in relation to the preservation of lived experience of refugees and migrants? If not, why is this?
- Who get excluded from refugee-archives, and in what ways?

Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion



- A six month project working with the Refugee Council Archive at UEL, in collaboration with academic colleagues from the UEL Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB).
- Aims:
  - To begin preserving and documenting the new refugee and migration testimonies using a bottom-up oral history methodology.
  - To engage with local communities to establish a Living Refugee Archive (www.livingrefugeearchive.org) and to promote and enable accessibility and engagement with our existing collections. This will be documented through the collection of oral histories.
  - To develop a network for continued discussion on the methodology and ethical considerations associated with attempting to documenting the testimonies of vulnerable communities.

Living Refugee Archive

- Living Refugee Archive online portal - https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/
- The Living Refugee Archive was established as a portal to help facilitate access to digital archive materials and existing archival collections including the Refugee Council Archive at the University of East London.
- To improve accessibility to archival materials documenting the lived experience of displacement.
- An independent space outside of the main University web structure designed to encourage engagement and collaboration

LRA Archives and Engagement

- Voices from the Jungle Digital Testimony Archive in conjunction with the Centre for Narrative Research at UEL – https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/voices-jungle-testimonies/
- Virtual Exhibition: In the Gaps – Experiences of Migrant Workers in the Pandemic Artwork by Sabba Khan for the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, (JCWI) – https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/virtual-exhibition-in-the-gaps-experiences-of-migrant-workers-in-the-pandemic/
- Amin Kamrani 20/20 Exhibition - https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/exhibitions/20-20-online-exhibiton/
- Global Justice Bloc Exhibition 2020 - https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/exhibitions/global-justice-bloc-2020/
- HopeTowns Poetry Archive - https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/archives/hopetowns-poetry-archive/

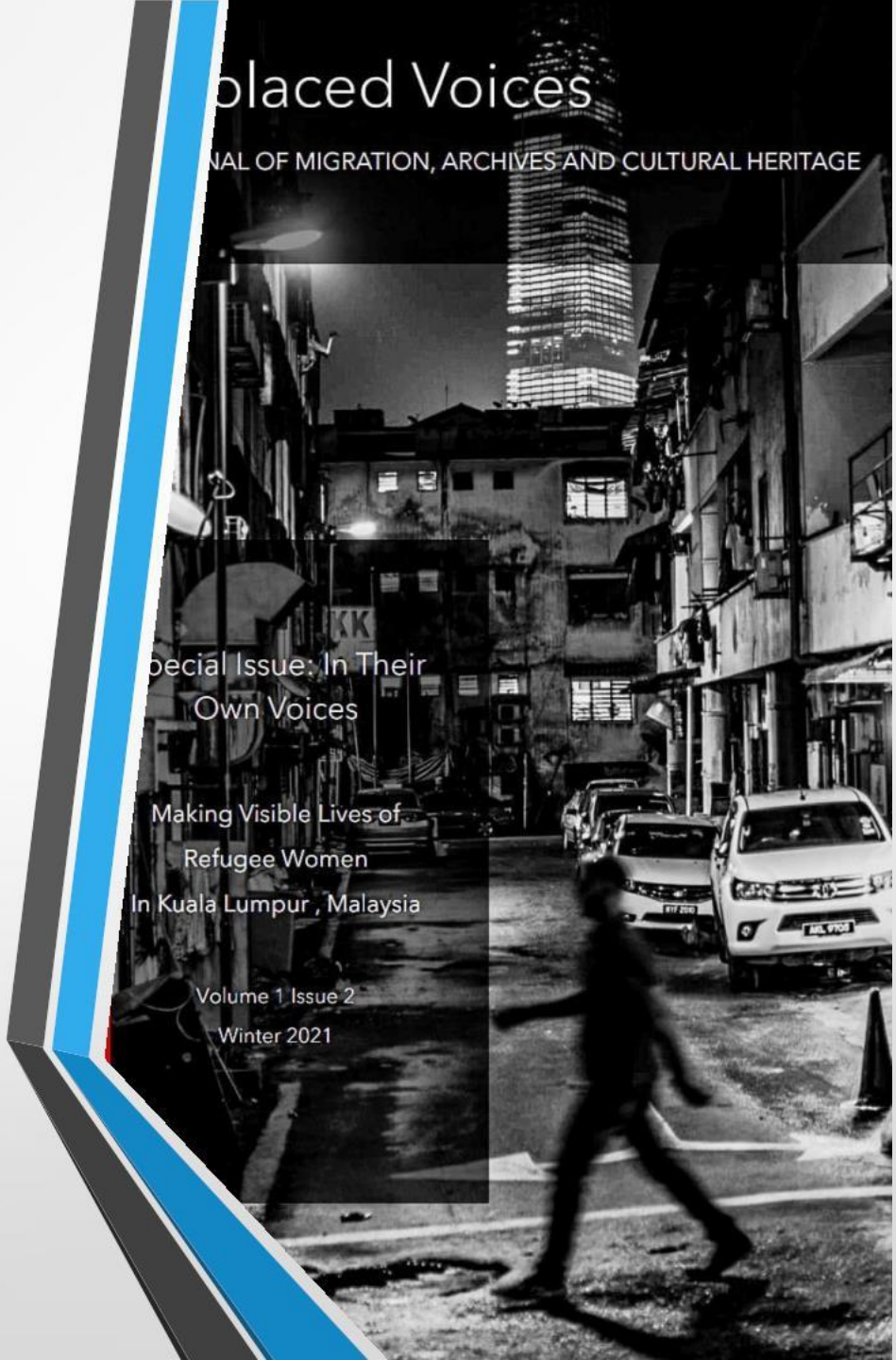
LRA Activities

- Digital Archives:
  - E.g. Voices from the Jungle Digital Testimony Archive - https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/voices-jungle-testimonies/
- Virtual Exhibitions:
  - E.g. Amin Kamrani's 20/20 - https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/exhibitions/20-20-virtual-exhibition/
- Displaced Voices: A Journal of Archives, Migration and Cultural Heritage - www.livingrefugeearchive.org/researchpublications/displaced_voices/
- Internal and External Collaborations

Displaced Voices: A Journal of Archives, Migration & Cultural Heritage

- We have just launched the second issue of our Displaced Voices journal this week.
- Volume 1 Issue 2 is a Special Issue focusing on: **In Their Own Voices: Making Visible Lives of Refugee Women In Kuala Lumpur**
- Available as a free open-access journal on the Living Refugee Archive at:

  https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/displaced-voices-volume-1-issue-2-winter-2021/

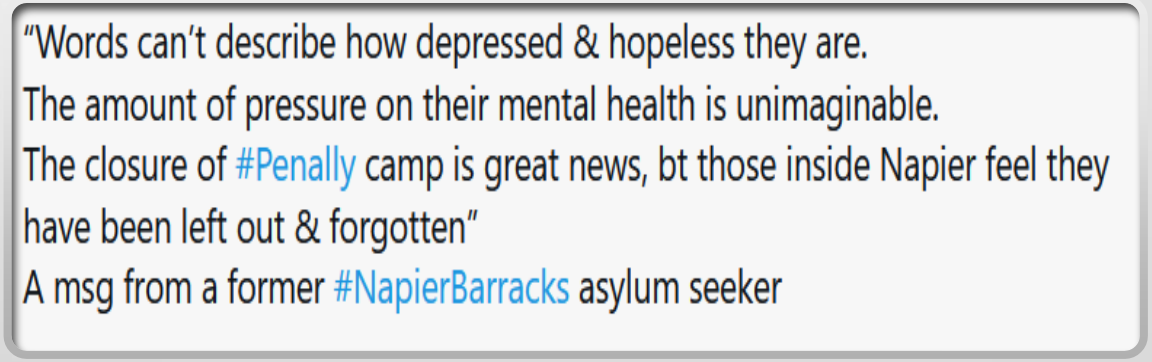


Collaboration; Co-production and Representation

- Continue to explore new opportunities for collaboration; co-production and partnership working; putting community engagement at the heart of the work that we do.
- Inter-disciplinary – collaboration across disciplines; archives are not just about history. Working across academic disciplinary lines including social sciences; graphic design; illustration; architecture; theatre studies; psychology; dance; Olympic history (BOA Archive) and local history (East London).
- Inter-connection of archival collections – drawing from different collections to showcase narratives
- Representation: being open to exploring new forms and approaches to documenting narratives for the archive and opening the archive to explore how archival narratives from our collections can be represented in different ways.

Current Projects & Collaboration 1

- 2021 marks the 70th anniversary of the Refugee Council and the Un Convention on the Status of Refugees. Exploring approaches to how we document this anniversary.
- Working on a project to document the lived experiences of asylum seekers housed at Napier Barracks and Penally Camp; responding to how can ethically document lived experiences in real time in collaboration with a journalist and a human rights campaigner…



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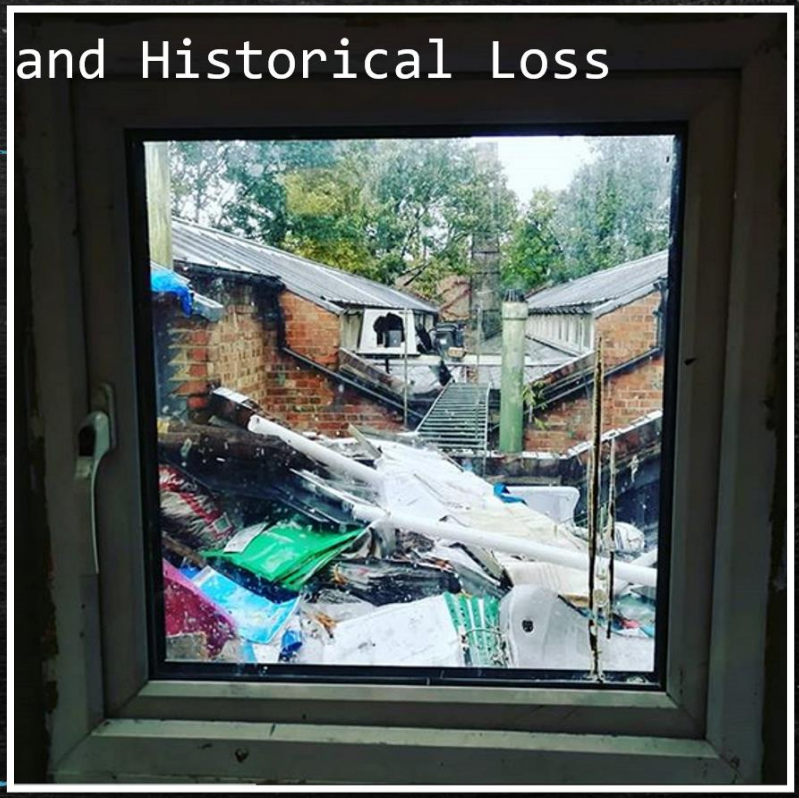
Current Projects & Collaboration 2



- Working with and supporting Hackney Archives and the Hackney Chinese Community Services to help rescue, conserve, preserve and make accessible the An Viet Foundation Archive.
- An Viet Foundation – over three decades of community history in London Borough of Hackney
- Awarded funding from UK National Archives COVID-19 Archives Fund to conserve the materials and create a community-focused steering group. See: https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/news/covid-19-archives-fund-grants-awarded/

Archival Challenges and Historical Loss

In the last week, Hackney Chinese Centre: "squatters at The Old Bath House have destroyed much of our precious Vietnamese archive. This represents the loss of 40 years+ of history of the Vietnamese in Hackney"



Archival Challenges and Historical Loss

hackneychinese: We managed to retrieve the An Viet Vietnamese archive that was thrown on the rooftop by squatters, but they remain in a dreadful state. We're now looking for advice on how to save these valuable documents. Can you help? #vietnamesecommunity #historicalsite #help #archive

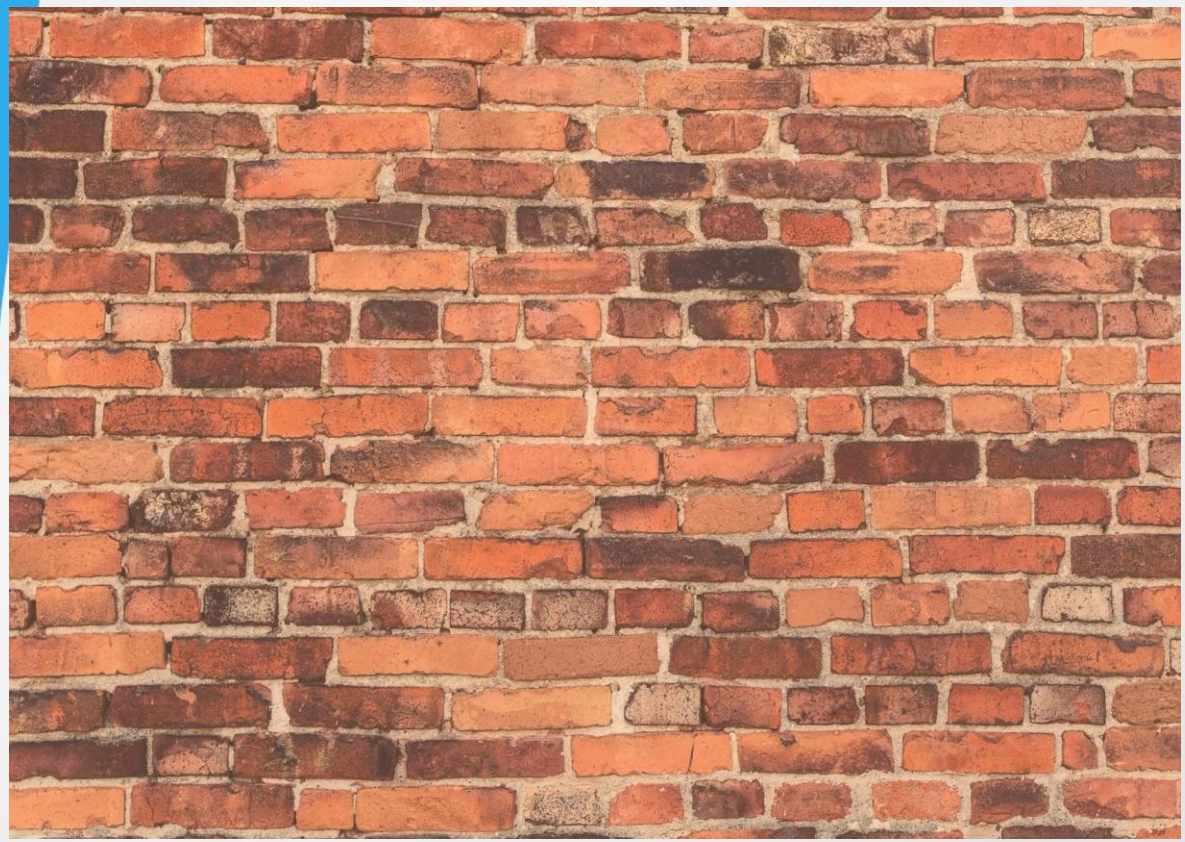
Campaign for Voluntary Sector Archives - https://www.voluntarysectorarchives.org.uk/



Current Projects & Collaboration 3

- Oral History Society Migration Special Interest Group, supporting oral history projects in the field of migration and on steering group for 2022 annual conference.
- International Association for the Study of Forced Migration Working Group on the History of Forced Migration and Refugees: An International Working Group for Archiving and Documentation
- International Federation of Theatre Research – exploring options of trying to establish a Working Group on intersection of theatre and refugee studies and exploring work with refugee theatre groups in the UK

Online Archive Examples

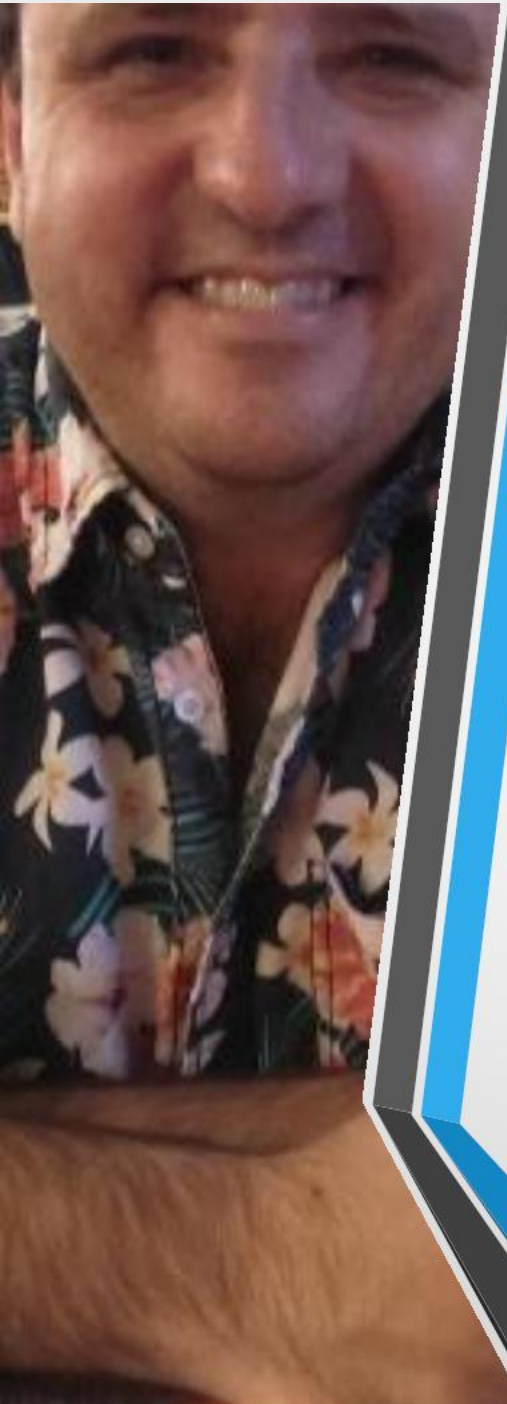


Link:

https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/collaboration/uel-collaboration/living-refugee-archive/

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