

Creating Space in the Archive for an Anti-oppressive Community Project: Recording Border Control and Subversion

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Introduction

Archives exist to record and preserve documents on historical and contemporary events, official and unpublished reports, collective memories, political narratives, and personal and unofficial documents including letters and other materials that embrace memories that could be otherwise lost. Archives also have the power to present a narrative “determined by the evidence that has survived, and “to empower a certain representation through the use of language” (Dudman and Hashem, 2015). Most archives preserve documents, but not many archives could make available the recorded documents to their users. Refugee Council Archives are one of those that made available documents when needed.² However, the dilemma is, as notes the archivist Paul Dudman, that only some of us could access the archives. Most archives in the UK had failed the displaced in terms of representation when recording documents on immigration legislation, border control, resilience and subversion within the nation-state (Dudman, 2014).³ How can the displaced be “re-installed on the historical record”? Casba Szilagyi correctly notes when writing about the experiences of refugees globally and the role of archivists in the sector that the Refugee Archives have particularly important roles in recording, creating, disseminating, “managing, preserving, authenticating and making available records documenting historical and contemporary” experiences of the displaced people and those on the move (2020:150). According to the Archives Hub database, there are several other archives in addition to the Refugee Council Archives for documenting lives of the displaced which co-exists in London and beyond. But who accesses these archives? Are refugee archives well-represented as regards 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? How could we improve access to refugee research archives? Could archives be a creative space for undertaking anti-oppressive, accessible and representative research projects for and with the people in displacement?

The above are some questions that we explored at the Refugee Council Archives through the collaboration of and working on a community project with refugees and irregular migrants prior to Brexit, in 2015. The project entitled, “Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion? Civic Engagement through the Preservation of and Access to Refugee Archives,” was supported by

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² The University of East London’s Library and Learning Services at Docklands has been the home of the Refugee Council Archives for more than two decades, and the archives hold over 34, 000 documents offline, and more digitalised materials which can be accessed online. The archives has expanded over the years and currently facilitating new collections such as 1) Council for At-Risk Academics Archives; 2) Northern Refugee Centre Archive; 3) UNHCR London Office Audio-Visual Collection; 4) Cambridge Refugee Support Group Archive.

³ I use the term “the displaced” as a synonym to “people on the move”, “the displaced”, “people in displacement” and “refugees and irregular migrants”. All these terms have been used synonymously in this article. This is done by purpose.

the [Library, Archives and Learning Services](#) of the University of East London (UEL).⁴ In this article, I discuss how the project helped us to establish a successful collaboration with migrant communities in London, enabled the creation of an anti-oppressive space for documenting narratives of resilience and subversion, and made possible the development of a [Living Refugee Archive](#) which help preserve the narratives and make accessible the archives to all, including the displaced people globally. I also show how the project ensured representation of people in displacement within the archive.

Background

Hosted by the Refugee Council Archives, the project was a collaboration with the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB), the Oral History Society, and the Library, Archives and Learning Services at UEL. We used existing Archives held within the UEL Library as a basis to forge collaboration between the archivist, the displaced people, researcher and scholars and community groups who work with people on the move. Focusing on the preservation of lived experiences of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants in London, we co-worked for three months with those who experienced border controls during their journey from home to the UK. I conducted open-ended life history interviews with five subverted migrants, who during the research period were remaking home in the mega city of London and became the users of the newly created digital archives afterwards.

The archivist of the Refugee Council Archives, Paul Dudman, the former Head of Digital Services in UEL Library and Learning Services, Thomas Shaw, and I conducted a series of consultations with community organisations, practitioners, oral historians, academics and experts in the field. We consulted other archivists including Black Cultural Archives, Eastside Community Heritage, Islington Centre, Cambridge Borough, and several other organisations for assessing the needs for representative archives and communicating the research questions for building an accessible archive. In the end of the project, a workshop with all research participants, stakeholders, community activists, scholars in migration studies, and users of archives were held, and the Living Refugee Archive was launched, and key findings were shared with everyone in a room shared by both the participants (in this case, the people in displacement who gave oral accounts to preserve in the archive), archivists, and the experts in studies on border controls and migration.⁵

Creating an Anti-oppressive Space - the Methodology and Techniques Applied

Creating an anti-oppressive space within archives to preserve and document lived experiences and collective memories of border controls and immigration hostilities could be difficult as there are many challenges in collecting evidence that archivists have already highlighted (see for

⁴ The project was supported by the University of East London's internal fund under the Grant of Civic Engagement Fund 2015 [grant number 1214]. The research team include Paul Dudman - the archivist of UEL, Rumana Hashem - the researcher of the CMRB, and Thomas Shaw - the former Digital Head of UEL Library and Learning Services.

⁵ See a summary of the workshop and a brief report from the launch event which was held on 13 July 2015, available on the Living Refugee Archive here: <https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/about/democratic-access-privileged-exclusion/>

example, Dudman, 2014; Gilliland, 2018, Szilagyi, 2020). Our first step in this project was to engage in a dialogue with the institution that we were located in. We explained the urgency to build an archive that is open, accessible, representative and well-timed, and how this might also benefit the University as a Higher Education Institution in the UK, which is accessed by thousands of international students and many migrant researchers. Writing the bid, making it interesting for the institution, and presenting a strong ethical ground helped us to break through the initial institutional barriers. In the bid we outlined three-fold scopes of the project that interested the funder and the institution, in this case, UEL.

The three-fold scope were to: 1. engage with local communities in an attempt to establish a Living Refugee Archive and to promote and enable accessibility and engagement with existing collections; 2. incorporate digital content collected as part of UEL's Oral History Project which would ultimately help facilitate continued discussions and civic engagement activities on border control, resilience and subversion; and 3. help encourage interaction between archivists, historians, NGOs, and the communities themselves as to how the refugee experience can be adequately collated, preserved, and documented.

By taking a community approach to the collaboration we were able to establish our authentic positioning to the funder, while the activist-migrant approach of the researcher helped us to build the trust base and encouraged the displaced to join us and make active contributions. Our public engagement on social media (via Twitter and Facebook) also enabled direct messaging on the role of archives on issues of border controls and resilience, and helped connecting with people on the move. However, the key means for outreach and collecting life stories was activism and long-term collaboration in the field. Except one, all of the participants who told their moving narratives with "trust" in the archive are people that the key researchers knew from their previous work.

The past of the displaced and their long history in relation to homeland and the journey as a refugee are not recognised other than the painful part of the journey which often redefines the displaced as simply "vulnerable" and in constant need of economic and material support (see for example, UN Refugee Agency, 2018; USA for UNHCR, 2018). But we deliberated our efforts to deconstruct this narrative of vulnerability in the archive by taking a bottom-up approach to oral history. Life story interviews help to keep the authenticity of stories in any context (Hashem and Dudman, 2017) and the bottom-up technique to oral history empowers participants. This enables to preserve the original life histories, simultaneously keeping the original narrators' voice active, and make it representative through the engagement with the participants as an individual as well as community speaker. The use of bottom-up approach meant participants shared their transcultural encounters in London openly and they talked about how their hopes are gradually buried under immigration regulations, but none felt vulnerable in the research process.

An anti-oppressive methodology also advocates for engaging in decolonial methodologies as important tools for research. For the production of accountable knowledge on border control

and recording subversion of the displaced in the archive, we followed MbeMbe (2016)'s notion of decolonising the archive which suggests that we should reject any pre-existing paradigms in this field. This approach also implies that archives should only preserve documents that have been created in a space where refugees/the subverted are welcome and could co-work without fear the institutional boundaries and regulations. For this reason, participants were invited to share their stories in the archives as they wished to and suggest ideas for the deconstruction and decolonisation of the archives and help us producing creative narrative and true collective memories that did not exist in an archive in the past.

Participants were pleased to accept the invites and actively participated in the creation of the Living Refugee Archive. Overall, we followed a methodology of what we called a bottom-up oral history approach to research with the subverted.

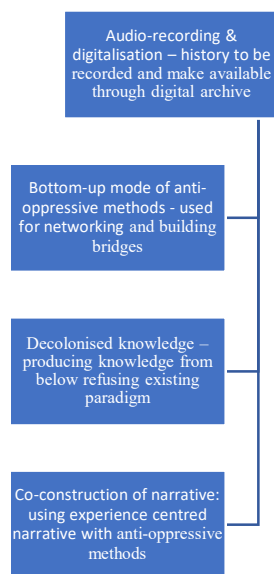


Chart 1. Bottom-up oral history methodology in chart.

The bottom-up oral history approach is essential for documenting authentic narratives because it enables the voices of the participant to be heard and ensure that the original narrator is active when preserving and documenting the stories, rather than making them passive storyteller.

Whose voices and which stories to archive

Participants belonged to three ethnicities and six nationalities. Two women and four men, aged between 20 to 50 years, narrated their life-histories. One of them was a 37-year old American-born Irish-Jewish woman who left home to avoid domestic violence; one 28-year old Bangladeshi-born (Sunni) Muslim man who became atheist after he came to study in the UK; one 24 year old Black Moroccan-born ex-Muslim man who fled home under religious persecution; one 42-year old Nigerian-born Muslim woman who escaped Nigeria in the face of gendered violence; one 25-year old South Sudanese-born (Sunni) Muslim man who moved over to the UK via Libya, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Greece, and Germany, and one 26-year old Syrian-born (Shia') Muslim man who came to the UK via Turkey, Greece, Germany and Belgium to survive from the ISIL war. All of them have experienced border controls during the journey from

home to the arrival in the UK, then re-victimised to the hostilities in the host country as they underwent complex immigration rules whilst seeking asylum to be “legal” residents.

Some of these stories about health, housing and work inequalities (Hashem, 2018), asylum process and right to education, and some transcultural encounters when they were trying to engage in human rights activism in the new place, London, have been as heart rendering as moving.⁶ Despite setbacks, their resilience is remarkable and they shaped “powerful forms of resistance to hostility, simultaneously negotiating uncertainties that can adequately be explored by the use of a bottom up oral history to traditional life history method and combining with experience-centred narrative methodology for analysing displaced narratives” (Hashem and Dudman, 2019:1).

During the interviews, four participants were going through asylum process, and one was an undocumented migrant who suffered from severe epilepsy but was denied basic well-being support. We collected these oral histories, analysed selected extracts of the oral accounts and checked back the meanings of various terms by going back to participants before documenting anything, then preserved and made accessible some of these accounts with consent of the participants through the Living Refugee Archive, and other online outlets and academic journals. Through the co-working with the displaced we have learned a number of lessons that could be useful for archivists in the sector.

The stories that our participants told are moving which, Shahosh, the 24-year-old black Moroccan man who was the first storyteller in this project and who was going through the asylum process described as “moving memories”. The term “moving memory” refers to both how the memories are powerful and how the oral history has made it even more moving. Some of these stories told by both the displaced and other participating community representative and researchers who actively participated in the project through their consultations and the engagement in a half-day workshop, have powerfully challenged the notion of nation and the state. Nation is for an undocumented migrant from Latin America: “a population that can exist and go beyond any place, any nation-state, and become undocumented “as herself. “It has little to do with the state”, said the undocumented migrant woman who had been fleeing home and travelling around the world for 17 years. During her journey she also experienced brutal border control but her tremendous resilience enabled her to keep going to back to countries.

These stories of lived experiences of participants of this project showed how the displaced, those who were going through asylum process, and those who could not (as undocumented migrants) and those featured as “vulnerable refugees” in the mainstream media and conventional scholarship of forced-migration and refugee studies have been subverted but

⁶ See a detailed discussion on these life narratives in Hashem, R. and Dudman, P. (2016) Paradoxical narratives of transcultural encounters of the “Other”: Civic engagement with refugees and migrants in London, *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal of Routledge*, 6 (1):192-199. Also see Immigrant, A. and Hashem, R. (2020) “Too black to be Moroccan”, and “too Afrikan to be Black-British”: A Conversation. *Displaced Voices, A Journal of Migration, Archives and Cultural Heritage*, 1 (1):17-26. Available from: <http://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Too-black-to-be-Moroccan-Hashem.pdf>

formed strong solidarity and powerful resistance too. Through their first-hand accounts and paradoxical narratives in the city of London that is known as a diverse place, participants challenged the meta-narrative of refugee crisis and vulnerability.

A Digital Human Rights Project

This is a project which an indigenous participant from Morocco called a “Digital Human Rights project”. The Refugee Council Archive was apparently an ideal space to talk about, learn from, and co-produce narratives about hostility towards and resilience of the displaced, as pointed out all participants who gave their powerful oral history for archiving and digitalising, and make available via the Living Refugee Archive.

“People do not simply believe that refugees have rich histories in relation to their culture, landscape and livelihood in their homeland which they bring along as they land in the host country for remaking home”, said a Syrian participant who loved the landscape of their homeland. It was our intention to co-construct authentic social history through our research and make available the genuine narratives of refugee lived experiences in London. The way that Refugee Council Archive has created a space for the undertaking of this collaborative project with the displaced people from the global south in London is unusual. It has enabled the recording, supporting, documenting, preservation and open access to invaluable life narratives and “moving memories” of subversion of those undergoing the brutality of border controls, immigration related hostilities, asylum seeking process, and health care and work regulations in the UK. The step to showcase the oral history of local communities and the displaced have helped to make accessible through the Living Refugee Archive.

Conclusion

It has been a challenging and experimental yet the most rewarding collaborative project that I have undertaken so far. Archivists need to come forward “to develop more inclusive descriptive practices that empower refugees, who are largely marginalised and under-represented, and acknowledge them as records creators” (Sazilagyi, 2020:3). The discussion above shows that it is possible to develop inclusive, representative and accessible archives as the Refugee Council Archive project has shown us. We had a good response, positive remarks, strong collaboration of a good team, and good outcome of the project.

The ideas were ours but these would be impossible to undertake unless the Refugee Council Archives hosted the project and had helped to bring our ideas to life. Throughout the duration of the project, we have also recognised that our understanding and teamwork have been a great resource for us. We have had a great team spirit with a sensible institutional supervision and with much needed expertise of the project leaders. This work is not a complete undertaken though we consider this as a good beginning of a new outreach. This work will continue and expand upon the project to build on future partnerships and community engagement with the displaced and subverted.



Image from the project launch event.

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