Doing Solidarity with the Displaced through Living Refugee Archive to Amplify Community Voices

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Introduction

Archives documenting the human history of migration are invaluable recorders of our shared cultural heritage, including memories and lived experience of refugees and displaced communities. Archives and archivists have vital responsibilities to both record and document authentic data, stories and objects relating to shared heritage, memories and lived experience. The Living Refugee Archive , of what was described by participants in our inaugural civic engagement project as a "Project of human rights" (Hashem, 2025, p. 27), is an archive that does not only record and preserve displaced cultural heritage and memories, but also document community voices and inform policies in solidarity with refugees and displaced communities. In this report I present a personal reflection on the Living Refugee Archive as a best practice methodology for the archiving and preservation of the lived experience of the displaced as the Living Refugee Archive continues to promote authentic recording, decolonise, and offer genuine solidarity with refugees and displaced communities whilst supporting the protection of the rights of the displaced through enabling a safe space to record, document and preserve their own history and cultural heritage.

Drawing on the work of Living Refugee Archive I discuss how we do archival solidarity, co-produce projects to help amplify community voices, and how archivists could promote protection and refugee rights through solidarity work with the displaced and. The article's central intervention lies in its rethinking of archiving methodologies under the age of digital and hostile environment. There is the requirement to reflect on the very nature of the archive itself and to reflect upon our own situated practice as archivists if we are to succeed in safeguarding the shared cultural history of the displaced. Rather than treating archives as static repositories of the past. My emphasis is on the need for direct and informed engagement with communities in the present to support archiving and documenting as an urgent practice rooted in the lived experience of communities today. As archiving is a way of maintaining memory, identity, history, cultural heritage and continuity, it is also a form of acting and action in solidarity.

The short essay illustrates how archivists could showcase alongside recording and preserving the important tangible and intangible records and objects that promote rights of refugees and displaced communities, and document their histories through the archival collections. Through illustrations of Refugee Week 2026 and the work of Living Refugee Archive, the discussion attest that an archivist can, as researchers and community advocates, engage with and co-work directly with communities as an effective way of supporting and promoting refugee rights. Drawing on the activities, including three exhibitions and a day long workshop by the Living Refugee Archive team during Refugee Day 2026 at the University of East London which was conducted with the City Lit College and community activists, the article offers a reflection on

the best practices including oral history, digitising and decolonising the archives through direct face-face engagement at 75th Geneva Convention.

The Context

As archivists, we are the custodians of history, the history of the past but also the history of the present which will inform how today's societies are represented and therefore understood in the future. We therefore have a responsibility to question, and challenge established archival practices and paradigms and to work towards the decolonisation of existing collections. Decolonising archives requires us to listen to, collaborate with, and record the experiences of people whose voices have historically been marginalised, overlooked, or excluded.

The history of migration is the history of humanity, a shared narrative of survival, resilience and shared human experience. Archives of migration and displacement represent an invaluable cultural heritage helping us to document and preserve these lived histories of resilience and solidarity, securing a lasting record of our shared humanity. However, the continued existence of refugee archives are still prone to political and budgetary threats that make institutional and community collections vulnerable around the 75th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Living Refugee Archive

The **Living Refugee Archive**[2] was established as a pilot project to listen to, record, and preserve authentic accounts of bordering, displacement, the asylum process, and the struggles experienced by people affected by racial, gender-based, and border inequalities in the UK. By documenting and sharing these experiences online, the project seeks to challenge dominant archival narratives and contribute to the decolonisation of histories relating to migration, identity, and racial justice.

The Living Refugee Archive is a curated digital archive which records, preserves, and makes accessible multiple archival collections, many of which have been the result of collaborative engagement with both organisations and communities. I have founded the Living Refugee Archive in 2015 by co-working with two other colleagues at the University of East London to emphasise that it is vital to prioritise both digitalising and decolonising the archives alongside decolonising the history of refugees and forced migrants. As Archivists of History, we ought to question and challenge the existing archives and decolonise all existing archives. Decolonising the archive is possible through listening to, recording authentic history, and researching with people whose voices are often unheard. Through piloting the Living Refugee Archive we record, listen to, and document the authentic history of bordering, displacement, asylum process and the struggles of people who underwent border struggles anywhere in the world. Living Refugee Archive attempts to document the lived experience and disseminate the stories and struggles online to challenge and decolonise the archive as part of the decolonising the history of migration and racial justice.

As UN 1951 Convention turns 75, the Living Refugee Archive team co-worked with Chilean community activists and colleagues at the City Lit College of Sanctuary in London, which

hosted a week-long exhibition and a day-long workshop on refugee history, refugee rights and protection in practice, and migrants' resistance movement. Following the mass displacement induced by the Second World War, the Convention was opened for signature by UN Member States on 28 July 1951 and it remains the legal cornerstone underpinning the refugee protection system. Article 1 of the 1951 Convention defines a refugee as someone who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themself] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021).

The foundation of the Geneva Convention represented the legal definition of a refugee and laid the groundwork for the establishment of national organisations including the British Council for Aid to Refugees, later to become the Refugee Council, to provide support to refugees. At the 75th anniversary of the Geneva Convention, the UNHCR reaffirmed that "The core principle of the 1951 Convention is non-refoulement, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom." (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 20 June 2021).

In this article I address both the importance of displaced communities and archival solidarity with the displaced communities through direct engagement to showcase their histories through the archival collections that exist with the University of East London (UEL), and simultaneously curating Living Refugee Archive (LRA) that promote and voice the displaced individuals and communities. Specifically, I reflect on how I have done archival solidarity with refugees and displaced communities, at the 75th anniversary of Geneva Convention during Refugee Week 2026 as part of a best practice to preserve refugee history and promote protection of refugee rights.

Archives documenting the human history of migration are invaluable recorders of our shared cultural heritage. Through the work we have been able to do with the diverse archival collections that we hold within the Archives at the University of East London, we are reminded that stories pertaining to the lived experience of migration and displacement can also be found within the files of archival collections, which on the surface, are not specifically migration focused. The opportunity also to be able to collaborate with academic and community-based colleagues within diverse inter-disciplinary fields including fashion, dance, textiles, and creative arts also helps to facilitate understandings of community intangible cultural heritage and the impact this can have on broadening the definition of what an archive is and what an archive can become.

Showcasing Histories of Refugees on World Refugee Week 2026

The Living Refugee Archive in partnership with our co-workers from Chilean political prisoners and the City Lit College of Sanctuary have organised a series of solidarity activities including three exhibitions during the Refugee Week, and a day-long workshop on the World

Refugee Day, funded by the Royal History Society workshop Grant 2026. The LRA's ethical standpoint recognises the significance of archival holdings in allowing us to build a collective history in support of displaced communities and the importance of supporting the preservation of, and access to, these materials to understand and build a more informed history of the refugee experience. The lived experience and histories of displaced communities and individuals who sought refuge in the UK and other countries are invaluable for global human struggles. LRA was founded in 2015 to recognise and preserve lived experience of individuals like Mardini.

For Refugee Week 2026, our work included a collaboration with the City Lit Adult Education College which included both an in-person workshop and an in-person exhibition focusing on *The Refugee Convention at 75*. On Saturday 20th June marking World Refugee Day, we held a workshop at City Lit entitled *`Solidarity, Oral History and Archives: Amplifying the Experiences of Displacement and Solidarity in Exile.'* Our aim for this workshop was to bring together historians, archivists, local community members and City Lit students to discuss and explore our "living refugee archive" paradigm, which builds upon the work of Stuart Hall (2001) and Archille Mbembe's (2015) notion of living archives and challenging dominant paradigms of knowledge production and how participatory anti-oppressive archival and oral history methodologies can be employed to help document living community histories of displacement.

We also wanted to open the floor for this workshop to community colleagues as well, as given our commitment through the Living Refugee Archive to participatory engagement, it would have been ethically difficult for us to talk about community engagement without giving space to communities to talk about their own archival journeys. It was with this intention that we initially reached out to our Chilean colleagues, Isabel Cortes and Stella Franceskides to talk about their ongoing ***El Piquete, 503 Days in Photos*** project. The project is focused on the preservation of over 3,000 photographs documenting the 503-day protest by the Chilean exile community in London between 1998 and 2000 in support of the extradition of General Augusto Pinochet to face charges of crimes against humanity.



Figure 1: Examples of some of the photographs from *El Piquete de Londres* mounted for display. Kindly donated to the Documenting Chile Archive by Stella Franceskides.

> During daily protests—El piquete de Londres was outside the High Court, at Belmarsh Prison, Parliament Square, Harley Street—ordinary spaces became sites of resistance. We took over 3,000 photographs, documenting how our community organised a high profile campaign and refused to be silent. These images have never been seen. Most remain undeveloped, undigitised, and at risk of being lost forever. (Cortes and Franceskides, 2026).

This presentation was complemented by a discussion led by Jimena Pardo on her work with the Bordando por la Memória collective whose work focuses on continuing the traditions of collaborative Chilean embroidery and textile making for supporting human rights and social justice. Bordando por la Memoria continue "the names of over 3,000 men, women and children disappeared and politically executed during the Chilean civic military dictatorship between 1973-1989." (*Bordando por la Memoria*, no date).



Figure 2: An example of an *Arpillera*, a traditional Chilean textile, which Jimena Pardo shared with the participants at the workshop.

Both projects foreground the notion of community solidarity. Equally, detail the importance of intangible cultural heritage for preserving the history and legacy of this solidarity, in forms that traditionally may not have been incorporated into the archive. The ethics of archiving and whose history is accepted into the archive were questions that we wanted to discuss during the workshop, along with the ethics of how we represent the history of displaced communities and the challenges of decolonising the archive to open the door to histories of the undocumented.

For this workshop, we wanted to attract a diverse audience that would encompass archivists, academics, historians, students and members of the community to encourage discussions around the key areas of how we preserve and make accessible archival heritage relating to displaced communities. We were aware that the discussions during the day would be challenging, and that different approaches and points of view would be raised. As an Archive repository that has a commitment to undertaking active community engagement work whilst being based within a University setting, we are very aware that we sit at an intersection between the requirements of supporting academic research and teaching; institutional focus on how we can use the archive to make "impact"; and the needs of the communities that we work with to ensure that our engagement is both ethical, sustainable and participatory.

The conversations we had during and after the workshop highlighted the importance of journey of counter-archiving in support of decolonising the archive to make the history we record more representative of our communities. Some of the feedback we received suggested that the event was still too academic in its focus whilst for others the expectation that the archive would still be representative of the "official" historical record. Through our archival journey with the Living Refugee Archive, it has become apparent that to move towards a more decolonial

understanding of refugee history, we need to be able to continually reflect upon our own archival methodologies and our own situated practice to develop ways of collecting that enables both traditional institutional archives to sit alongside community-focused cultural heritage collections and allow space for these archives to interact and engage with each other.

The Refugee Convention at 75 exhibitions drew on archival materials from across our archives at UEL with a particular emphasis on the history of the Refugee Council, which is also celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2026. The exhibition was designed to reflect the scope of the archive and introduce the shared histories of displaced communities within the UK. It also provided an opportunity for engagement and discussion on current debates on migration and the role of archives in supporting refugee history. The historian Edward Carr reflected that "our view of the past is directly informed by our view of the present, or even the present we would like to think exists." (Dudman, Hashem and Shaw, 2025, p. 313).

Marking the 75th anniversary of the Refugee Convention, required a consideration of which archives and whose voice we wanted to represent through the exhibits that we would present. As our planning developed, we were initially focusing on just the one exhibition would be situated as at the City Lit Adult Education College in support of the Refugee Day Workshop we were undertaking. This alone would prove a challenge to reflect the lived experience of displacement over a 75-year time-period.

For the City Lit exhibition, we drew extensively from the Archive of the Refugee Council which is also celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, alongside a collection od posters which we were offered as a new deposit for our UNHCR (London Office) Audio-Visual Archive. We drew upon documentary evidence from the Archives and designed the exhibition for an audience who might not have been familiar with refugee history to enable a way in to understanding more of what an archive is and how these histories of displacement can be represented in a positive way.

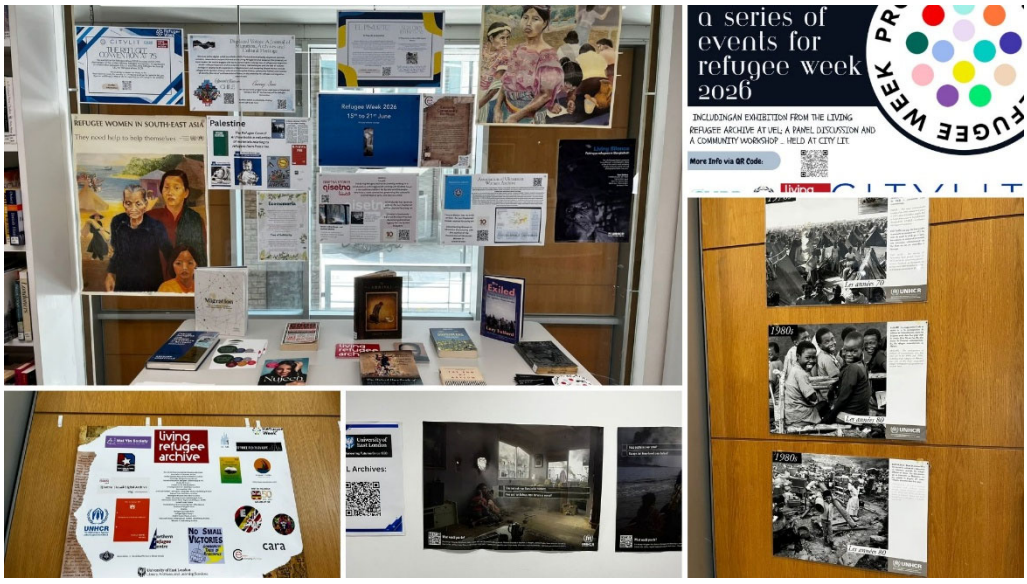


Figure 3: Montage of Photographs from Exhibition at City Lit.

Given the nature of the City Lit building and the desire to reach a larger audience, as the montage above indicates, we divided the exhibition between the main City Lit café area, inside the City Lit Library, and in the corridor outside of the rooms where we would be hosting our workshop. Additional materials where also saved for the workshop day itself, including posters from Gujarati Yatra and an exhibition on Somali Women loaned to us from Eastside Community Heritage.



Figure 4: Gujarati Yatra and Somali Women Exhibitions.

Exhibitions at the University of East London

It was during our initial planning for the exhibition that we were presented with the further opportunity to present exhibitions for Refugee Week at both of UEL Campus Libraries, one in Docklands and the other in Stratford. This is presented the opportunity for us to reach out to project partners who we had worked with on archival projects with the Living Refugee Archive to be able to share content for these exhibitions.



Figure 5: British Ugandan Asians at 50 Project Exhibition on Display at UEL Stratford Campus Library.

British Ugandan Asians at 50

For the fiftieth anniversary of the Ugandan Asian Exodus in 1972, the Living Refugee Archive had been approached to collaboratively support two oral history projects to in collaboration with the Ugandan Asian diaspora in the UK. These projects proved to be complementary as the From East to West: The History of Ugandan Asians project, run by the Faith Matters charity, focused on the experience of the Ugandan Asian diaspora in the UK, focusing on "the formative years of resettlement primarily those of 1972-74 in order to understand how Ugandan Asians adapted to live in Britain and dealt with issue such as racism, employment, housing and integration." (Faith Matters, no date). The British Ugandan Asians at 50 project chose to focus on the experiences of both Ugandan Asians and the many volunteers who sought to help their resettlement.

In our University of East London Stratford Campus Library, we showcased the British Ugandan Asian at 50 Exhibition travelling exhibition of the first time. Lucy Fulford's article in this issue explores the lived experience of Ugandan Asians in the UK in more detail.

Seafaring Histories of Empire Exhibition

Our exhibitions for Refugee Week 2026 in our Docklands Campus Library reflected the glocal nature of migration history.



Figure 6: The author with Asif Shakoor's Unearthing Invisible Seafaring Histories of Empire exhibition.

Curated by independent scholar, Asif Shakoor, the *Unearthing Invisible Seafaring Histories of Empire* exhibition explores the hidden histories of Muslim seafarers who worked on British ships that docked in the Royal Victoria Docks in East London during the First World War. East London has a long history as a place of refuge for displaced communities. Today, the London Borough of Newham is the most diverse borough in London so it is culturally significant that our archives of displacement should be located here. Asif's work resulting in this exhibition began with the search for the lost medals of his "Mahomed Gama, who enlisted in the Mercantile Marine and arriving on SS Khiva at the Royal Victoria Dock in December 1917 and his search for his grandfather's missing war medals." (*Missing Medals: Unearthing Invisible Seafaring Histories of Empire'*, no date). Through this work, Shakoor reflects upon how sailors from across the British empire and beyond built the culturally diverse local communities around the Royal Docks in Newham over a hundred years ago.

To complement Asif's exhibition, we were able to loan Somali Seafarers: Surviving the Sea[3] Exhibition curated by Eastside Community Heritage and the Somali Senior Citizens Club of Tower Hamlets. The exhibition draws on several key elements including reflections on life growing up in Somaliland, their journeys, and the impact of colonialism that saw many Somalis come to the UK to work. On arrival, the exhibition reflects on the seafarer's lives and their "living conditions in London's Docklands and features important seafaring landmarks such as the Shipping Federation Offices in Aldgate. The seafarers' experiences attest to the vibrancy of London's East End, through interactions with Jewish and Irish communities." (Eastisde Community Heritage, no date).



Figure 7: Somali Seafarers: Surviving the Sea Exhibition curated by Eastside Community Heritage.

We have been collaborating with Eastside Community Heritage for over a decade now, and we are a host repository for their Hidden Histories Archive preserving over 4,000 oral histories recording and documenting the community history of East London. The Somali Seafarers project archive contains three oral histories focusing on the recollections of Somali seafarers, including growing up in Somaliland, working at sea and coming to the UK.

Belongings Across Borders, Nation of Refuge and the Vulnerability of Refugee Archives

Following the workshop, we presented our ongoing work at the *"Belonging Across Borders: Refugee Rights, Experiences and Protection in the Twentieth Century"* symposium at Royal Holloway, University of London. We are currently collaborating with the Refugee Council on an upcoming event documenting their 75th anniversary, where we have a further opportunity to showcase archival materials from the collection. At the time of writing this paper, we have recently had the privilege to be invited to attend both the Nations of Refuge Symposium at the University of Reading and the Records of Human Experience: The Value & Vulnerability of Refugee Archives webinar hosted by the UK National Archives[4]. Both events raised important issues about whose history gets preserved as archives; the issue of language (preserving community histories in native languages beyond just English); the accessibility of archives

relating to issues of displacement, and the challenges faced by institutions in preserving these archives.

A Concluding Note

Throughout this essay I addressed the rationale behind our archival work for Refugee Week 2026 at the 75th anniversary of the Geneva Convention, alongside the rational of curating the Living Refugee Archive and engaging with displaced researchers and community advocates. The discussion demonstrates how our work through the LRA united the activists and communities amplifying displaced voices through solidarity and creative pedagogical activities. It is extremely important that archives that document the struggles of the forced migrants continue to be preserved and made accessible to both scholars and the displaced communities' themselves, to support both transparency and preserve the lasting legacies of communities who have witnessed displacement first hand and needed protection.

It is also crucial that archives are digitalised. Alongside digitising records and refugee history, we as archivists and researchers in the Living Refugee Archive continue to engage directly with refugees and displaced communities with respect and solidarity. Archives such as Living Refugee Archive was named by the displaced participants as a Human Rights Project which can exemplify a best practice for ethical and humanitarian archiving.

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Endnotes

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[2] The Living Refugee Archive is available at: https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/

[3] The Somali Seafarers: Surviving the Sea project website produced by Eastside Community Heritage is available online here https://somali-seafarers.wixsite.com/survivingthesea/

[4] A recording of this webinar is available on The National Archives' Youtube channel at Research Routes 2026/27 - Records of Human Experience: The Value & Vulnerability of Refugee Archives - YouTube