

# Living Archives Built with Communities

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We hope you have found some time to read and engage with the narratives presented here as part of our Special Issue of Displaced Voices. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincerest thanks to Kirandeep Kaur for her hard work, perseverance and support in being the driving force for making this Special Issue a reality, and to our writers and contributors whose words and experiences we have the honour to share with you within the pages above.

We have all experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on all aspects of our lives over the course of 2020, and whilst 2021 has begun with the hope that the newly produced vaccines will help us return eventually to some semblance of 'normality,' it is unlikely that our lives will ever be quite the same as they were before. We have borne witness to the impact of the pandemic across our societies, the financial and practical impacts of Lockdowns and the uncertainties and mental health implications this brings, not to mention the tragic ongoing loss of life across the world. In the context of the refugee experience, the onrush of the pandemic has made an already life-changing situation much more difficult and challenging, and the narratives included within this Special Issue bare witness to these challenges in stark detail.

However, it is important we felt, that these narratives were not purely of trauma and loss, but to enable through the writing and sharing of their stories, an opportunity for advocacy and a sense of agency to be present within the contributions. An opportunity to present a rep-

resentation of experience in your own words, and by doing so, retaining ownership of the narrative and supporting notions of agency building through participatory collaboration. One of the key aspects behind the creation of the Living Refugee Archive back in 2015, and more recently the inception of this journal post lockdown in 2020, was to help facilitate a neutral space where narratives and stories of displacement could be shared and heard. To explore different forms of personal expression and narrative, facilitating access to non-traditional forms of archival record that are often overlooked with the pre-existing archival context. It was important to us to create a space which could bring together different modes of expression. This has taken shape in the form of written testimony to oral history; media representations through photography and artwork, and the role of performance theatre in representing a more visual and spoken word approach to documenting experiences. Amin Kamrani's work as a member of the Parastoo Theatre Team, an Afghan refugee-led theatre group, which highlights the experiences, emotions and lives of Afghan people living in exile, is a good example of this approach.

The articles included in this Special Issue are testament to the value and importance of life history writing. By eschewing the established notion of the academic-focused journal, we are hoping that Displaced Voices can open the door to the inclusion of such first-hand documented accounts of refugeehood, enabling genuine voices to be heard and supporting the agency that underpins these contributions. I

hope that through this participatory approach to sharing these experiences, we are developing a sense of community agency and solidarity. This is a journey of storytelling through which an alternative archive for marginalised narratives can be created. Through community participation we open the door to challenge traditional notions of archival structures and documentation, hoping to constitute a living history of refugeehood.

We were pleased to be able to support the participatory nature of Kirandeep Kaur's original doctoral fieldwork. Working with her and the contributors to formulate collaborative and inclusive methods in terms of the dialogue and dissemination of the narrative work that the contributors wanted to share. The writing of our four refugee women community leaders in Kuala Lumpur; Naima Ismail, Syedah Husain (translated by Sharifah Shakirah), Parisa Ally and Arifa Sultana highlight the importance of identity for refugee women in Kuala Lumpur and each of these contributions highlight the trauma and struggles associated with trying to re-establish a sense of self-identity, whilst wanting their voices to be heard. These articles reflect the value of empowerment through storytelling and the ability to help build 'authenticity in self-identity' through storytelling as a medium for social change. The articles document the experiences of refugeehood by women refugees in Kuala Lumpur, the difficulties but also the opportunities for activism and advocacy in support of their own rights and those of their communities. Amin Kamrani's photography uses a visual methodology to reflect upon the lack of visibility faced by refugees in the established media, which is touched upon also in Arifa's article reflecting on the role of the Rohingya media in documenting stories of genocide not reported in the mainstream media

channels - indicating the importance of self-representation in terms of how these stories are reported and the authenticity of the story itself.

Notions of authenticity, trust and the impartiality of records as evidence have traditionally been cornerstones of the archival profession. As we increasingly move into a digital world, and as records move from traditional mediums to digital ones, it becomes more important that ever for the Archive to be able to present its criteria as being an ethical and trustworthy carrier for stories of displacement and refugeehood. The Refugee Rights in Records (R3) Initiative at UCLA has been undertaking a lot of good work on issues surrounding how the rights of refugees can be managed within the archival context, and how archives can be better prepared to support refugees and displaced persons in accessing key documentation in support of accessing their legal rights through access to key documents and records.

Being separated from our physical archival collections at the University of East London, and working from home for the last ten months, has highlighted and reinforced the importance of the collaborative and participatory engagement work that we do. It has also been an opportunity to explore new forms of outreach and methods of collaboration. As Arifa reflects in her article, we must be open to how we can work with communities to support self-representation in the ways stories are presented, archived and made accessible. We endeavour to ensure that we continue to be open to reflecting upon and challenging our own academic and archival practices to ensure that we continue to uphold our ethical and participatory processes to community engagement.