Chapter 23

Refugee Writing, Refugee History: Locating the Refugee Archive in the Making of a History of the Syrian War

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Only refugees can forever write the archive.
The camp owns the archive, not God.
For the archive not to fall apart, it weds the camp unceremoniously.
The question of a camp-archive is the question of the camp's survival
    beyond speech.
Circumcising the body can indicate the survival of the place.
Blessed are the pending places that are called camps. (Qasmiyeh 2017)

In 2011 five young men from Daraa, the birthplace of the Syrian uprising, took to the streets with hundreds of other protesters to march for freedom and social justice. Yadan Drajy, Uday al-Talab, and three cousins Masalmeh – Muhammad-Hourani, Hammoudeh-Shoukri and Rani – quickly realised the value of documenting their revolution for the world to see and hear. Initially, they had faith that a similar scenario would play out to that which had occurred in Tunis and Egypt. They imagined that Al-Jazeera and other mainstream channels would pick up their fight for social and political reform, that the Syrian revolution would garner worldwide support while the ruling regime would be put under pressure, and that President Bashar al-Assad would eventually step down, paving the way for the first democratic elections in decades. Over a period of eighteen months, the group of men filmed the peaceful protests in Daraa, which gave way to killing and then fighting. They managed to compile a collection comprising thousands of videos and images that attest to the transformation of the Syrian revolution from a peaceful movement to an Islamised and militarised conflict that quickly became a large-scale civil war.

A year and a half after their filming commenced, Muhammad-Hourani and Hammoudeh-Shoukri Masalmeh were killed by snipers in Daraa. Al-Talab was shot in the knee and fled to the UK for treatment. Rani Masalmeh took up arms and started fighting alongside Islamic factions, while Drajy crossed the

Jordanian border on foot. With him was a hard-drive containing the digital footage that he and his four fellow activists had shot in Daraa. The material is a raw digital record of a country's travails in a particular moment, attesting to the effort of those who were there and who recorded everyday life in crisis as they and those they recorded experienced it. As we have documented elsewhere (Saber and Long 2017), this footage currently sits in limbo, awaiting recognition, purposeful engagement and a permanent and sustained location – on or offline. Its precarious and refugee status thus echoes the fate of those who assembled it. At the time of writing, Drajy remains in Jordan and al-Talab is in London. The surviving Masalmeh managed to get to Turkey on a refugee boat, from where he travelled on to France and then to Germany, where he has applied for refugee status.

What is the fate of this representative group, the material they collected and the histories that might be made from it? This question resonates with Philip Marfleet's (2007; 2013; 2016) work on the relations between history, memory and population displacement. He notes that many major episodes of mass displacement are absent from official histories. As we discuss below, if the building of the nation-state is anchored to the establishment of the archive proper, its collapse leaves refugees not only stateless but without the historical record that affirms their origins and rights. In light of this absence, this chapter explores how records of refugees themselves are important sources for acts of retrieval – of individual and collective experience and perspectives on political and cultural disruptions. Informing our discussion, the Daraa material prompts a number of questions concerning the status and value of an assemblage of refugee accounts. In its case, for instance, should we defer to the claim of its creator-curators that their material constitutes an archive? What is at stake in applying the term to this material, and who determines whether this citizen-produced documentation of the early days of the uprising can be so called? Is this material a legitimate source for understanding the beginnings of the Syrian revolution in Daraa in 2011? Finally, its indeterminate status as an archive prompts the question of how such material is to be preserved so as to enable its use.

In the light of these questions, this chapter proceeds with a consideration of how the Daraa material emerged as a form of citizen-journalism, a witness to the Syrian uprising, and developed into historical record. Touching on the way in which displaced people have been dealt with in the historical record in the context of the relationship between the archive and the nation-state, we turn then to consider how the refugee figures in one supranational archive: that of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Here, we discuss the issues of representation and agency that UNHCR raises with regard to displaced peoples, before turning once more to the kinds of practices represented by the Daraa material and two further initiatives: *Qisetna: Talking Syria* and *SyriaUntold*. These records were enabled by digital technologies that have aided their collation but also signal their refugee status by virtue of their location in the dislocated geography of online space. Nonetheless, digital

platforms and online cultures allow for the creation of what we describe as vernacular histories and archives. As we suggest, such documents of displacement continue to foreground questions around the preservation and durability of the materials of the archive; their uncertain status a reflection of that of refugees themselves.

From news to archive: on the making of a refugee history of the Syrian war

In spite of – or perhaps because of – its origins in a moment of conflict, its fraught journey in the hands of refugees and its precarious status, the Daraa material offers a tangibly affective and partisan resource when measured against more conventional journalistic accounts from Syria. In this context, and as Alessandria Masi (2017) notes on the website of the Committee to Protect Journalists: 'obtaining your own eyewitness account can mean jail or a death sentence'. As a result, journalists reporting on the Syrian conflict censor themselves by omission, whether protecting sources by changing names, or avoiding images of the dead on ethical grounds. She writes: 'We walk on eggshells for the sake of balance and because the majority of us cannot go to Syria to see things for ourselves, we are forced to report only what we are told.' This scenario and reports from within Syria affirm the oft-cited aphorism that the first casualty of war is truth. While this may be a condition of the confusion and propagandist manipulation that surrounds conflict, it nonetheless matters that records are maintained, that witnesses exist to inform the accounts and interpretations that follow and to affirm evidence, even as truth struggles to emerge. As Masi's insight suggests, a reliance on the press to provide the 'first draft of history' may prove problematic when the authority of the journalist as witness is undermined by a lack of access to events as they happen (on this idea, see Bingham 2012).

While Masi is suspicious of information provided by the Assad regime, Russia or the US, whatever form mainstream media witness takes it is often reliant upon, and perforce expresses the perspective of, authority. Within war zones for instance, the cameras, microphones and reporters operating for global organisations such as Reuters, CNN or the BBC either see events from behind police lines or are 'embedded' among infantry (Fahmy and Johnson 2005). As such, claims to objectivity appear to be underwritten by the representatives of the rule of law, anchored to a show of strength and power. Resulting reports often disregard accounts of those identified as 'insurgents', 'protestors' and 'citizens'. Perspectives offered from such positions of power – and the practicalities of access and witness – are challenged by the availability of new information and personal communication technologies. These allow for the production and distribution of 'crowd-sourced' reportage from crisis zones from a diverse range of perspectives. As a result, citizen-journalists can

be as compelled as mainstream media to bear witness, and may even exceed that brief in the face of conflict, especially when war is taking place at home, and when walking away from events is not possible.

One such figure is Drajy who was conscious of the weight upon him and others, and who felt compelled to bear witness by recording events in Daraa: 'at the beginning, yes . . . I needed to record exactly what was happening'.[1] Recalling how he took to the streets in March 2011, Drajy says he very quickly comprehended that he was part of 'a very important and historic moment', and so sought to 'document this moment in the history' of his country and people in 'striving for freedom and social justice'. This was a form of citizen journalism; stepping into the breach of a situation in a highly censorious culture where international observers were not present from the outset. Thus, from the moment when Drajy and others began documenting the Syrian uprising, their activity was not pursued with the intention of creating material for posterity. As the situation escalated, however, a greater sense of mission emerged. As peaceful protests were punished by the regime, prompting the outbreak of civil war, Drajy and other activists began to reconceive of their documentary intent and its potential role beyond speaking of and to the present in appealing to the world for attention and aid. Consequently, footage shot on mobile phones or hand-held video was not merely a live mediation of the current moment as 'news' in which journalists were absent, but also acted as a mode of commemoration of the places shattered by bombardment and of the men, women and children killed in this war of the regime with its own people. As Drajy recalls: 'when the shelling started, I realised that some people will die, and some places will no longer exist, so I found myself in between two moments, the present and the future. I started shooting for history.' Reflecting further, Drajy noted that 'I was documenting so that a few years from now, we would be able to say this is how it all started, this is what happened in Daraa.'

The material captured by Drajy and his activist friends attests to the life-threatening conditions under which it was gathered; it is a document of suffering and a documentation of crimes committed by and against human beings. It is a testament to the impulse to share events as they are happening in the hope that someone would see, hear and *listen*, if not act and intervene in this situation. But the material also has a life and purpose beyond the moment in which it was captured. The preservation of this footage allows it to form part of the historical account of what happened: of Syrians left to their fate. For instance, the material would be invaluable to those gathering evidence of human rights violations or as part of post-war reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. Preserving past events captured in Daraa would thus serve as a means of imagining a future built on what was lost and addressing the cost of the conflict.

In an interview with Drajy in 2016, we asked him which one of the 12,756 videos that comprised his Daraa archive he thought was the most important then, five years into the uprising, after he had fled and become a refugee in

Jordan. His answer was 'Daraa el-Balad' – a tour of Daraa's streets, shot from his car with a secret camera hidden in a napkin box: 'it attests to the places that are no longer there, to the shops that were destroyed, to everyday life that was lost. And I often go back to it when I miss Daraa, the town, its shops and everyday life in it.' The distressing nature of this material and anxieties over what might befall it given that its creator-curators are now displaced draw attention to the status of the refugee in the archive and historical record of war. Peter Gatrell asks, 'What, then, should history and historians have to say about, and to, refugees?' (Gatrell 2016: 184). In his reflection on the major migrations and displacements of 2015 and how such events might be represented in the future, he notes the lack of attention afforded to the figure and experience of the refugee by historians. This analysis is amplified by the work of Marfleet, who complains that 'Many major episodes of mass displacement have [. . .] "disappeared" from official history – from accounts that constitute what the Indian historian Gyanendra Pandey calls "national memory"' (Marfleet 2016: 8). Michelle Caswell's description of the 'symbolic annihilation' of particular groups from the historical record resonates here too (Caswell, Cifor and Ramirez 2016), while Marfleet also references Tony Kushner's expression 'collective amnesia' as characteristic of the denial in national histories of all experiences of refugees (Kushner 2006: 234; Marfleet 2016). Marfleet explains, for example, how records of the First World War have silenced the refugees, expressing an absence and evaluation in which 'neither their experiences, nor those of millions of people with whom they came into contact had been judged worthy of interest by professional historians' (Marfleet 2016: 8).

Mike Featherstone summarises some of the reasons for this failure of historiography to deal adequately with the refugee, a failure that lies in the nature of archival practice. As he recounts, the great archives of the European powers are a feature of an emergent modernity, established in the eighteenth century as a means of underwriting the power of the nation-state. As a consequence, in the nineteenth century 'the archive became seen as the repository of the national history and national memory' (Featherstone 2006: 592). Here, then, we can understand the challenge posed by refugees to conceptions of history anchored in this way: by definition the refugee is a stateless person; stateless persons have either abandoned, or been abandoned by, their state and, as Marfleet and others show, by the archives of their national history. As is evidenced by the Daraa material and the other Syria-related initiatives we discuss below, conflict leaves many people in possession of little more than their lives and stories. It becomes a matter of urgency to account for and record the experience of being a refugee. Furthermore, and as the status of refugee is a label that no one inhabits intentionally, the expression of a desire for home or the establishment of new settlements need to be anchored to the collation of materials that attest to this experience, to narratives of origin, identity and explanation: of history. As Gatrell suggests: 'The past is

a resource for refugees seeking to locate themselves not just spatially but also temporally' (2016: 184).

Marfleet argues that modern social-political landscapes are marked by episodes of displacement. As a consequence, an indelible adjunct to understanding contemporary realities, and indeed histories, 'are the experiences and memories of refugees and those who empathize and solidarize with them' (Marfleet 2016: 15). Recognising the struggles over historical claims alongside other issues faced by displaced persons for recognition, respect and settlement, he suggests that a conversation is needed between historians and refugees. In this, the latter might contribute to debates about their self-representation and role in shaping their own destiny. Such an approach would set to rights historical accounts of the refugee experience; as Gatrell argues, 'Where refugees do make an appearance in the pages of history books, there is still a tendency to portray them [. . .] as inescapable "victims" of war or revolution, not as agents of change' (Gatrell 2016: 175). It is therefore important to recognise the experiences of refugees, which in turn have significance for expanding historical comprehension. Where, then, are the accounts, histories and archives of the refugee? What is at stake here in the rootlessness and precariousness of collections such as the Daraa archive? In the following section we examine an example of an institutional archive that does recognise the refugee before moving on to a discussion of the grassroots/crowd-sourced archives *Qisetna* and *SyriaUntold*.

Refugee-on-demand: UNHCR's archive and the dominant narrative of the refugee experience

UNHCR is a highly visible resource that does recognise refugees and has the potential to generate an 'official account' (Marfleet 2016) of displacement in the evolving historical record. UNHCR Archives and Records was established in 1996, although it contains material predating 1950, the year in which UNHCR was founded. Its main purpose is to archive UNHCR's administrative record as well as a history of field operations from around the world. As its website attests, archival material is contained in a Geneva basement and comprises over 10 million documents stored on around 10 kilometres of shelving space on two basement floors. This is material that documents a vital global organisation, which rivals some nation-states in scope and impact if not in its affective status in the hearts of those it serves and whose histories it records. As such, the nature of the 'globally and historically unique' archive authorises a self-reflexive sense of the role of UNHCR: 'They contain a trove of detail about important historical events, including, for example, records from the 1956 Hungarian uprising, the first major emergency in which [UNHCR] became operational, as well as emergencies in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s, and in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s'.[2]

Refugees Media is an archive service of UNHCR aimed at researchers and journalists, providing photos and videos of its operations and of refugees it has aided. At the time of writing, the front page of the Refugees Media site offered a number of highlighted features and resources, focusing, among other things, on Bangladesh, Nigeria, South Sudan, Yemen and Syria.[3] Alongside its laudable humanitarian purpose, Refugees Media nonetheless exhibits aspects of the political economy of the archive and the intellectual property determining its use and usefulness.

Registration is required to access the content of the online archive. By registering, one tacitly agrees to the 'Terms and Conditions' set out by UNHCR: 'images, moving footage, sound, graphics and other content on this website are copyright protected'.[4] On this site, guidelines for the use of photographs, graphics and videos are described at great length, and items may only be reproduced with permission: 'Use in a commercial or promotional context is not allowed. A credit is always required in the format "© UNHCR/Photographer" for photo images and "© UNHCR" for video, audio and multimedia unless stated otherwise'.[5] Entering a portal on 'Syria: Hope Amid the Destruction', one is presented with 33 virtual folders containing multimedia content, 562 videos and 23,439 images. Images are organised and thus searchable by country of origin (where the images were shot – from Syria itself to Lebanon, Greece, Germany, etc.), by status of those depicted (refugee, migrant, asylum seekers or 'unknown'), and by their gender, age and the number of people in the photos. For example, there are only two pictures of 'pre-teen boys' on Refugees Media, while one can find eight pictures of 'mid-adult women' and a sole picture of 'one teenage boy only'.

Images are also organised according to orientation (i.e. landscape or portrait), and by composition: where there is 'copy space' or where the individual is 'Looking at Camera', caught 'Full length' or offering an 'Over the Shoulder View'. Another filter is 'UNHCR visibility', whereby images with UNHCR tents, logos, food boxes and blankets could be found in 'refined searches'. Each selected picture is then presented with its own set of metadata: reference number, title, background information, photographer name, size and type. Users can add it to their 'cart' while continuing a 'shopping tour' of refugees' images. Once done, one is invited to 'place the order', requesting the right to use the images of Syrian refugees.

This arrangement suggests an audience for UNHCR's Refugees Media as consumable resource. The mediation and purposeful presentation of this archive is similar to that of a photo agency, and in both its form and content is quite dissimilar from the rawness and largely absent aesthetic *intent* of citizen-generated archives such as the Daraa material and other online sources discussed below. In all likelihood, Refugees Media is predominantly targeted at other UN agencies, at mainstream media outlets, and at NGOs and international organisations that make use of similar pictures in their fundraising and awareness-raising campaigns. The images of Syrian refugees, and by extension

Figure 23.1 UNHCR Refugees Media, screenshot by the authors, October 2017

Figure 23.2 UNHCR Refugees Media, screenshot by the authors, October 2017

the refugee experience, become aestheticised as tradable promotional items for the work of UNHCR or the organisations and individuals that reuse their images. These materials attest to UNHCR operations but also serve as promotional material for the agency's value. However, the history of the unfolding Syrian conflict as represented through Refugees Media becomes limited to narratives of food distribution in camps, of children playing barefoot in the snow and of entire families cramped in UNHCR tents. Every once in a while there is a moment of exception; Syrian refugees cheering, for example, during a football match (REF 2126267 Brazil. Sao Paulo hosts Refugees World Cup), or an interview with a Syrian refugee who 'despite living in a camp', is pursuing a degree-level history course (REF 2122402 Jordan. Syrian refugee pursues higher education dreams). In spite of such examples, much of this material serves to underline Gatrell's point that representations of refugees afford them little agency. Perhaps, as Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, the poet cited at the head of this chapter, writes, 'Only refugees can forever write the archive' (2017).

In addition to all the concerns that Refugees Media raises in terms of the possibility of representations *of* and *by* refugees themselves, this archive obviously prompts questions about ethical issues pertaining to the representation of vulnerable people in conflict situations, notably in terms of consent, protection of identity, avoidance of objectification and attendance to security. When asked whether permission had been requested from the people represented in Refugees Media images and videos, UNHCR confirmed the use of rights release forms and of 'different agreements signed with people who appear through the visual material. Those forms vary depending on the relationship to UNHCR, the language and the region.'[6] UNHCR also confirmed that its 'Protection Teams' give guidance and clearance on the use of images showing minors or people in vulnerable situations. Although beyond the remit of this discussion, the ethical issues that this archive raises in terms of image capture, consent, representation, security and, indeed, cultural translation merit further investigation.

While dealing with many of the tragedies of the modern era, and in particular contexts in which the status of refugee is forced upon populations, Refugees Media tends towards the dispassionate in its presentation of images of refugees. This is after all the acme of the *official* archive, organised along familiar principles and practices of access policy, cataloguing, regulations, request forms and citation rules. As Marika Cifor (2016) suggests in a summary of issues concerning the lack of attention afforded to affect in archive discourse, archiving is still largely constructed in terms of modernity as a 'science'. The aim of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' elides the power dynamics of knowledge production. Furthermore, this has a gendered inflection in validating a masculinised sense of reason at the expense of affective engagement and passion. Certainly, what UNHCR lacks in the presentation and organisation of its records is the affective intent of citizen-generated archival material, which in turn echoes the character of interactions and outputs generated in online social media.

RF2127825

SHOOT DATE:
20 September, 2017

LOCATION:
Arran

COUNTRY:
Syria

Syria. First winterization and nonfood item distribution in Arran

On 20 September, UNHCR with its partner Syrian Arab Red Crescent distributing winterization and non food items in Arran located in Aleppo Governorate.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Winter is at our doorsteps and UNHCR and its partner SARC started to distribute winterization and non-food items in rural Aleppo in Arran.

This comes as part of the Syria winterization plan that aims to distribute winter clothes and added supplies to millions of displaced and vulnerable Syrians so they can sustain the winter.
Most of the residents of Arran, which is located 7km south of Al-Bab in east rural Aleppo, fled their homes seeking safe refuge.

It was estimated that 69,300 people were living in Arran and its surrounding areas before the crises. Now after safe access, families started to return slowly, some 347 families returned and more are considering going back.

PHOTOGRAPHER
Antwan Chnkdji

CREDIT LINE:
© UNHCR/Antwan Chnkdji
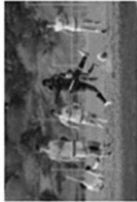
SIZE: 4221px × 2796px (~33 MB)

FILE TYPE:
jpg

Direct link to Image

Item 5 of 23439

Conceptually similar

RF2127813
Shot on 20 September, 2017

RF2127820
Shot on 20 September, 2017

RF2127821
Shot on 20 September, 2017

Figure 23.3 UNHCR Refugees Media, screenshot by the authors, October 2017

RF2126267

Brazil. Sao Paulo hosts Refugees World Cup

Syrian players celebrate their victory on penalties over Mali at the Refugees World Cup in CERET Park, Sao Paulo, Brazil.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:
The fourth edition of the Refugees World Cup, one of the largest sports events for the refugee community in Brazil, kicked off in São Paulo in mid-September. Refugee teams from 16 countries – Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Colombia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Tanzania and Togo – are competing for the trophy. A partnership between UNHCR, África do Coração, Cáritas São Paulo and SESC-SP, the Refugees World Cup unites the 9,552 refugees living in Brazil and helps them integrate into their new country's society.
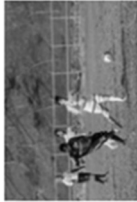
Direct link to Image

Item 28 of 23469

Conceptually similar

RF2126263
Shot on 16 September, 2017

RF2126259
Shot on 16 September, 2017

RF2126261
Shot on 16 September, 2017

Figure 23.4 UNHCR Refugees Media, screenshot by the authors, October 2017

'Vernacular' practices: histories, space, mobility and memory

As a potential remedy for the official history's 'sanitisation and ignoring' of the testimonies of refugees, Marfleet suggests that special attention to oral histories could lead to a 'cultural retrieval' (2016: 13) and a better engagement with history and memory. As such, some historians, archivists and academics have already engaged refugees in ways that challenge mainstream approaches – 'addressing them as social actors whose life stories, aspirations, and ambitions are of intrinsic value in understanding forced migration and wider aspects of modern society' (Marfleet 2016: 13). Marfleet illustrates his argument with reference to the important advances in oral history that have taken place in relation to survivors of the Holocaust. As awareness developed of fascist atrocities in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, he writes, 'there were sustained efforts to collect testimony, with projects focussed on "giving voice" to survivors' (Marfleet 2016: 13). This was achieved through the compilation of oral records, written memoirs as well as novels and poems. Such material created important historical records and served as constituents of collective memory-building efforts (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014). This plural approach to generating memory and historical resources can be usefully extended to encompass the practices that have emerged with digital cultures and that characterise individual, community and crowd-sourced activity.

The availability of digital tools on smartphones in tandem with social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest has contributed to a democratisation of cultural production and dissemination. This availability has allowed for the capturing of sounds and images of places and events – as in the Daraa material. Likewise, it has enabled their circulation across online spaces. This activity contributes to the proliferation of what Wolfgang Ernst labels the *An-archive* (Ernst 2013). The prefix evokes the apparent anarchy of online spaces like those mentioned or platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, where digitised materials and records are deposited with no necessary anchors for their organisation or continued identification and access. Furthermore, blogs, Facebook groups and pages generate communities of interest and describe their activity by deploying terms such as 'memory', 'heritage', 'history' and indeed 'archive'. In comparison with the resources and professional conventions of the repositories of nation-states or international ventures such as UNHCR, online community sites produce archives and histories formed from the vernacular cultures of the online world.

We would suggest that online interactions are archival in nature in the manner in which communities are convened where materials are shared and dialogue exchanged, thus building cultures and leaving material traces. Whether or not such sites would be recognised or approved of by archivists and historians proper is another matter (for a discussion, see Long et al. 2017). For instance, Ernst's term highlights the challenge to the security, accessibility

and authority of the material from which the online archive is made: after all, who assesses its utility or ensures its sustainability? Furthermore, the anarchy of the online world and its accretion of materials, relative to the formalities of the archive proper, is apparent in the manner in which vernacular practices evince a myriad of cultural codes and conventions in their expression and organisation. This is apparent when faced with the fact that among the online 'noise' are fragments, artefacts and extended articulations of refugee experiences, of accounts and records of conflict in locations to which, as described above, mainstream media institutions still have little access.

Two online initiatives illustrate the potential of these practices in generating and organising the record of contemporary conflicts, focused on the unfolding Syrian war. While *Qisetna: Talking Syria* and *SyriaUntold* are certainly not the only two initiatives of their kind, they allow us to develop insights into relations between refugee witness, issues of displacement and belonging and the making of a history of the continuing war and its legacy. Each pursues accounts from those based in Syria and abroad, shedding light on several elements of this struggle and reality that are ignored and overlooked by the mainstream media. Here, it is useful to label their work in terms of the practices described above for how they echo and extend existing practices. What is important is the value that these sites give to individual testimony and the informal, vernacular contribution of ordinary people. To overcome the potentially doubled dislocation of the online world identified by Ernst – the prodigiousness of information, its ephemeral, contingent nature – these sites create an anchor and order through the form of a durable space for eliciting and sustaining testimony. As Donatella Della Ratta, co-founder of *SyriaUntold*, explains, in the few months following the Syrian uprising in March 2011 the site's creators found themselves 'overwhelmed with a treasure trove of user-generated content produced by Syrian citizens trying to give their account of what was happening in Syria' (Della Ratta 2014). Information, data, videos, stories and pictures were being shared on the internet, she writes, 'mostly by anonymous users; a truly unprecedented phenomenon for a country where independent news reporting had always been a critical issue' (Della Ratta 2014). This demonstrates how for those with access and the requisite literacy, the affordances of digital culture have offered a voicing, recording and potential archive of experience and testimony.

Co-founded in 2014 by Syrian Dima Mekdad, Spaniard Juan del Gado and Scot Julia Rampen, *Qisetna* (Arabic for 'our story') is funded by the Arabic British Centre and is edited by a team of five Syrians. It announces to site visitors that it 'is a non-political social and cultural project aiming to engage Syrians and people with a connection to the country to share their stories. It provides a reminder of the humanity of ordinary Syrians through their relationship with arts, culture, sport and places.'[7] This enterprise has been described elsewhere as offering an inclusive space for narratives building upon a tradition of storytelling 'profoundly rooted within the Arab Culture',

aiming 'to preserve the Oral Heritage of Syrians displaced inside their country, on the move crossing borders, and resettling across Europe'.[8] *Qisetna* is an open-access platform, and with no requirement for prior registration, it asks potential contributors to share their stories on Syria. It asks: 'Is there something you love about Syria? A place you remember? A favourite food?'[9] Published in Arabic and English, it offers a wide array of stories: from old tales of Aleppo nightlife to accounts of music festivals in the city of Homs and personal narratives of first-time cycling experiences in Damascene streets. The site presents reflections on current affairs coupled with memories of home and is indicative of the affective dimensions of so much online interaction. For instance, a typical post is 'Morning Meditation' by Nazdar Youssef, in which a now disrupted habitual experience is recalled around the site of Bab Sharqi, Damascus's eastern gate. The author writes of the repeated experience of passing through the alleyways of Bab Sharqi en route to a shift in a hospital, a trajectory that 'contained some of the most precious and calm moments of my life'.[10] He recalls the detail from each day – passing smoking bank workers: 'I always felt I would run into someone I knew coming the other way. The feeling continued until I stepped through the gate out of Old Damascus, and woke up from my brief daydream.' The account is layered with nostalgia in which there is difficulty in describing the longing for this place, 'so rich with history, soul and heritage'. It is also an important account of a space that has been definitively altered by the war and social turmoil. As such, it is a loving memory of the old Damascus, made possible by the recounting of native longing for his home town.

Unlike *Qisetna* – which predominantly features stories and memories of past experiences about Syria – *SyriaUntold* also documents the current situation. According to the site's editor-in-chief Mohammad Dibo, inspiration for the platform came with the peaceful protests of 2011 when its main aim 'was to document the cultural and civic activities of the Syrian uprising which were disappearing from social media a few weeks after they happened, and are ignored by the mainstream media' (Alhayek 2016). The site is 'an independent digital media project exploring the storytelling of the Syrian struggle and the diverse forms of resistance'.[11] With contributions from Syrians predominantly in exile, and from others with connections to the country, *SyriaUntold* focuses on the daily struggles of men, women and children in conditions of ongoing violence. It also documents the work done by Syrian civil society organisations, artists, activists, citizen journalists and 'creative resistants' – as the website calls them – to advance a positive narrative of the country and its uprising:

> With mainstream media focusing increasingly on geostrategic and military aspects and less on internal dynamics developing on the ground, we believe there are many aspects of the Syrian struggle that remain uncovered, many stories that we would not like to see forgotten. Welcome to the stories of daily resistance and creativity. Welcome to SyriaUntold.[12]

In addition, *SyriaUntold* is building an archive that documents the 'Syrian revolution' in six different cities: Zabadani, Deir ez-Zor, Salamiyah, Baniyas, Daraa and Qamishli. The project is funded by the European Union and CFJ (Training Centre for Journalists – France) and offers users the opportunity to read, watch and listen to stories in both English and Arabic. Reports are mainly developed and curated by exiled Syrian researchers, writers, journalists and artists. Its objective is to 'fill the gap' in mainstream media coverage, offering an account of events as they happen '[t]hrough the use of innovative forms of storytelling mixing research-based written content, infographics and documentary videos'.[13]

Under the headline 'Looking inside the uprising', *SyriaUntold* features a further initiative called *Collective Memory*. It is based on a collaboration with the global media platform *openDemocracy* that brings together a multiplicity of voices with the aim of reflecting on various cultural, social and political issues related to the Syrian movement: 'the re-building of a collective memory; the creativity at the base of daily practices of resistance; the state and role of the media; the issue of sectarianism and its consequences, just to name a few main themes and discussions this initiative aims to promote'.[14] Indicative features are articles on the fight for past and current political prisoners in Syria, Baathist indoctrination in school textbooks, and the thirtieth anniversary of the 1982 Hama massacre entitled: 'The uprising and Syria's reconstituted collective memory'.[15]

These two initiatives act as a direct counter to the forgetting or symbolic annihilation of Syrian displacement from the record. Likewise, they create space for a generation of vernacular accounts, affording agency to the displaced. In the case of *SyriaUntold*, Mohammad Dibo sees the platform and its different initiatives as an 'invaluable archive and historic record of the cultural and creative uprising against tyranny in Syria' (Alhayek 2016). The main motivation for it was prompted by a moment of illumination, that '[u]nless we did something, we realised that ten years from now, the memory of the Syrian uprising, and the day-to-day struggles of Syrian citizens, activists and artists would just disappear' (Alhayek 2016).

Qisetna's contribution was recognised in summer 2017 when the Community Archive and Heritage Group (CAHG) awarded it 'Overall 2017 Winner' and 'Most Innovative' initiative of the year at its annual conference in London. In the words of the group's judges: 'Talking Syria is an extra-ordinary example of an archive both preserving the voices of displaced and fractured communities for the future and acting as an engine of community resilience in the present.'[16] They praised the archive for offering 'raw emotion', and capturing real lives and the impact of events on individuals, their communities and organisations. The judges appreciated how the archive offers a 'focus on tomorrow', with the website offering a valuable resource for engagement and as support for the refugee cause. As they commented: 'This archive will become an outstanding research tool for the future. But it is also – evidently – succeeding in its principal short-term goal of community building.'

When compared to these initiatives, the Daraa material raises questions about its status as an archive or as a disparate collection of audio and video files (Saber and Long 2017). While digital spaces may not be as durable as they appear (Chun 2011), *SyriaUntold* and *Qisetna* at least offer a location and ordering for the material they collate. It might be productive therefore to think of the Daraa material as a representative 'refugee archive'. It is a collection of records in the process of becoming something more fixed, official and usable. It is an archive 'in the making', an idea that alludes to its status as well as to the experience of those who compiled its materials and who transported it. In this, the makers and their materials share a condition with those it depicts, 'and who were forced to migrate, not in search of a better life, but simply in order to stay alive' (Saber and Long 2017: 96). The status of this refugee archive reminds us that there are untold records yet to account for from those displaced, or whose testimonials may lie somewhere in the online 'An-archive'.

Conclusion

As we have argued, *Qisetna*, *SyriaUntold* and the Daraa material prompt reflections on the status, authority and economy of the archive and the place therein of the refugee. While specifically concerned with the Syrian context, these examples illuminate issues around the status of the displaced in the official record and thus the writing of history. In each case, they have collated evidence of refugees speaking about their experiences, recognising their agency in so doing and in the actions of those who seek to form the archive. Each attests also to the affordances of the digital and how its vernacular cultures contribute to the generation of affect in accounts, and the archives and histories that might be produced from them. As the material collated by each of these enterprises moves from the status of contemporary reportage to historical record, questions arise regarding preservation and durability, especially when compared to the archives of the nation-state. Likewise, such records are properly subject to interrogation about the claims to truth of their material and on what grounds we might frame their legitimacy. However, it is important to recognise the democratic nature of vernacular practice and its capacity to address continued elisions of refugee experience in the historical record. Amid the contemporary attention economy of the online world and plural media sphere, these vernacular 'refugee archives' offer an implicit challenge. Each bears witness to tragedy as it happened and reminds us therefore of a general lack of will across the world to respond. Once this material becomes the archival record therefore – *if* it does – what kinds of response will the histories written from it demand?

Notes

1. This and subsequent quotations are derived from an interview with the authors in 2016.
2. unhcr.org/uk/archives-and-records.html (accessed 24 May 2019).
3. media.unhcr.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=Home (accessed 24 May 2019).
4. media.unhcr.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=Home (accessed 24 May 2019).
5. media.unhcr.org/terms (accessed 24 May 2019).
6. UNHCR Head of Video Unit, email to the authors, 3 October 2017.
7. Since the time of writing, the site has relaunched as https://www.qisetna.com. This founding statement is archived at https://talkingsyria.wordpress.com/about/ (accessed 18 June 2019).
8. https://whoareweproject.com/2017-programme/learning-labs-seminars-talks/talking-syria-storytelling-platform (accessed 18 June 2019).
9. Archived at https://talkingsyria.wordpress.com/contact-us-3/ (accessed 18 June 2019).
10. https://www.qisetna.com/morning-meditation/ (accessed 18 June 2019).
11. http://www.syriauntold.com/en/about-syria-untold/ (accessed 24 May 2019).
12. http://www.syriauntold.com/en/about-syria-untold/ (accessed 24 May 2019).
13. http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2016/07/cities-in-revolution/ (accessed 24 May 2019).
14. http://www.syriauntold.com/en/category/looking-inside-the-uprising/ (accessed 24 May 2019).
15. http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2014/09/the-uprising-and-syrias-reconstituted-collective-memory/ (accessed 24 May 2019).
16. Quoted at www.archives.org.uk/news/678-talking-syria-wins-national-award.html (accessed 24 May 2019).

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