Counter-Archiving Migration: Tracing the Records of Protests against UNHCR

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The archives of migration are piecemeal and scattered. This is both an epistemological problem, and a matter of political concern in an international order that forces people to migrate, racializes them, and renders them subject to violence. In response, we explore the potential of counter-archiving migration. First, we explain why archives matter politically, and consider which traces of migration are stored and which are absent or lost. Second, we develop a methodology for counter-archiving migration. Third, we illustrate a process of counter-archiving, taking protests and violent evictions outside the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) offices as an analytical lens. We begin with an "along the grain" reading of official archives; we then turn to ethnography to trace the memories, practices, and material remnants of migrants' struggles. Our analysis makes the case for counter-archival work in and beyond the field of migration. We argue that this approach serves to disrupt the epistemic violence of classification systems and categories associated with border violence; to chart the contestations and transformations of the global order from below; and to articulate new horizons of justice.

Les archives de la migration sont parcellaires et éparpillées. Il s'agit à la fois d'un problème épistémologique et d'une préoccupation politique au sein d'un ordre international qui force les gens à migrer, les racialise et les assujettit à la violence. En réponse, nous explorons le potentiel du contre-archivage de la migration. D'abord, nous expliquons pourquoi les archives importent sur le plan politique, et nous intéressons aux traces de migration stockées, et à celles qui sont absentes ou perdues. Ensuite, nous développons une méthodologie pour le contre-archivage de la migration. Enfin, nous illustrons un processus de contre-archivage, en adoptant l'angle d'analyse des manifestations et des expulsions violentes à l'extérieur des bureaux de l'UNHCR. Nous commençons par une lecture « dans le sens » des archives officielles pour ensuite nous tourner vers l'ethnographie pour retracer les mémoires, pratiques et vestiges matériels des épreuves des migrants. Notre analyse plaide en faveur du travail de contre-archivage dans le domaine de la migration et au-delà. Nous affirmons que cette approche sert à bouleverser la violence épistémique des systèmes de classification et des catégories associées à la violence aux frontières, mais aussi à retracer les contestations et transformations de l'ordre mondial par le bas et à articuler de nouveaux horizons de justice.

Los archivos en materia de migración son fragmentarios y dispersos. Se trata de un problema epistemológico y de preocupación política dentro de un orden internacional que obliga a las personas a migrar, las racializa y las somete a la violencia. En respuesta a esto, estudiamos el potencial

que tiene la migración de contra-archivo. En primer lugar, explicamos por qué los archivos tienen importancia política, y consideramos qué rastros de migración se almacenan y cuáles están ausentes o se han perdido. En segundo lugar, desarrollamos una metodología con el fin de contrarrestar la migración de contra-archivo. En tercer lugar, ilustramos un proceso de contra-archivo, tomando como lente analítica las protestas y los desalojos violentos que tuvieron lugar frente a las oficinas de ACNUR. Comenzamos con una lectura ≪en profundidad≫ de los archivos oficiales. A continuación, recurrimos a la etnografía con el fin de analizar las memorias, las prácticas y los vestigios materiales de las luchas de los migrantes. Nuestro análisis aboga por el trabajo de contra-archivo en el campo de la migración y más allá de este. Argumentamos que este enfoque sirve para: interrumpir la violencia epistémica de los sistemas de clasificación y de las categorías asociadas con la violencia fronteriza, esbozar desde abajo las impugnaciones y transformaciones del orden global, y articular nuevos horizontes de justicia.

Introduction

As the sheer politics of migration containment intensifies across Europe and Africa, it is a key political-theoretical interrogation to ask how the histories of struggles for mobility, and experiences of border violence, are documented and preserved, or erased. *What traces are left* of border violence, migrants' protests, and their temporary presence (materially and spatially); and *what is sedimented* in memories, practices and social relations? The journeys and border-crossings of people racialized as migrants are routinely tracked by states and international organizations generating abundant documentation for the purposes of control and criminalization. Migrants' experiences as victims of violations are also recorded in human rights and international humanitarian campaigns and occasionally mourned in subversive counter-memorials (Auchter 2013). However, the political actions of people who are either on the move or demand the right to move, are transitory—they have no place in official history and memory. Institutional archives impose an exclusionary classification of refugees,[1] and neglect the experiences of migrants—a term that, in line with critical migration scholar Bridget Anderson, we reclaim to describe "the way in which some mobilities are racialised, classed and seen as problematic" (cited in Sager 2018, 99).

Ordinarily, national archives sustain the idea of "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006) within borders, reproducing ways of seeing "like a state" (Scott 2020), and naturalizing violent policies of exclusion. In response, we take scattered fragments from the marginalized histories of migration as a resource for critical political sociology (Huysmans and Nogueira 2021) of migration containment and struggles for mobility. We seek to disrupt the epistemic violence of classification systems and categories in the field of migration but also international politics, more broadly, by proposing a couter-archiving method that reads official archives "along" and "against" the grain (Stoler 2010; Opondo 2017). By collecting memories and practices from the margins, we document the contestations and transformations of the global order from below while contributing to counter-archives *in-the-making*.

The meaning of "archives" is intuitively conceived as collections of material and buildings containing a "repository of traces of the past" (LaCapra 1985, 92). Yet, both concretely and metaphorically, archives are far from being mere repositories: they are political artifacts and interventions—"an active act of production that

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[1] They exclude many people fleeing social and structural violence. People themselves challenge this by claiming the refugee label regardless of their legal status, as we show.

prepares facts for historical intelligibility" (Trouillot 1995, 52). Seen in the "abstract," archives enclose the past (Azoulay 2017) through an imperial temporality that masks the relations between past violence and people, places and objects in the present (Azoulay 2019). Archives also have a foundational authority, producing and preserving sovereignty and law through selective practices of "archivization" (Derrida 2008, 17) and are intertwined with power/knowledge regimes that generate "the law of what can be said" (Foucault 2002, 145).

Consequently, archives inform social memory (to varying degrees in different societies), helping to "transfer information—and thereby sustain memory—from generation to generation" (Foote 1990, 378). Without memory, there is no archive, and without its preservation and concretisation in archives, there is no future collective memory. Archives represent a version and a sedimentation of the past, albeit less overtly than museums, commemorations, monuments and oral traditions—since the state's narrative of the past enshrined in the archives is not manifest there and needs to be reconstructed from heterogenous multiple records.

However, archives are entangled with other memory institutions and with sociopolitical pressures to forget, which suggests a possibility and an imperative for archivists to challenge selective memory, and to become a "countervailing force" (Foote 1990, 392). This critical task is already underway in practice, with some archives being constructed and contested "from below." Archivists increasingly recognize their power as "keepers" of memory and contributors to the social construction of identities through the selection, management, description and sharing of archives for public use (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 2). Meanwhile, civil society groups, activists and scholars create their own archives, including "human rights archives," collecting records of violations that reveal the silences of existing collections or expose abuses of power (Halilovich 2014). Furthermore, historians and cultural theorists deconstruct the meanings of official archives and show how people's interactions with these also shape their meaning: "archive documents are not items of a completed past, but rather active elements in a present" (Azoulay 2017).

Such archival work matters not only for putting in question the relations between people and the nation-state, but also for problematizing global governance. It holds the potential to "unravel and recompose" the order of things and transmit alternative ways of "being-together" in the world (Azoulay 2017). In this sense, archives may serve as a "collective tool," that is not exclusively under the purview of the state (Appadurai 2003, 16). Positioning these insights in concrete relation to migration, we propose that archives might be reconceptualized and repurposed to serve as tools for transversal alliances of solidarity and for struggling against racializing borders (Mezzadra 2020).

Accordingly, we investigate the scattered and partial records of migration and reflect upon their relevance to counteracting border violence and promoting migrant solidarity. Paying attention to the archives of migration means dealing with the fleeting character of migrants' spaces and presence, and with the violence of containment and evictions that states enforce. We find that, despite their ephemeral character, migrants' struggles leave traces to be revived in memory and political action. States, humanitarian organizations and migration agencies produce heterogenous records that are neither explicitly classified as archival material, nor stored in a single site. In addition, there are emerging archives created by activists and people acting in solidarity with migrants. More diffusely, there is a "common wind" of memories and traces generated by migrants' own collective mobilizations, consisting in the circulation of ideas, knowledge and tactics to be counter-archived.[2]

We develop the analysis in three sections: first, through a theoretical consideration of migration archives; second, through reading "along the grain" of UNHCR

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[2]J. S. Scott's (2018) concept of the common wind refers to the diffusion of political resistance among enslaved peoples across sea and land in the age of the Haitian Revolution.

archives; and third by taking migrant protests outside UNHCR offices as an analytical lens to consider the traces of protest that are stored or lost. This interrogation of archives is not (exclusively) epistemological. Rather we are interested in the implications for solidarity and justice. We accumulate records of state violence, humanitarian neglect, and growing solidarity among people on the move, reflecting their experiences and the political lexicon that they develop through their struggles for movement and contestations of the global order from below.

The Piecemeal Archives and Counter-Archives of Migration

The presence of migrants is usually visible in archives only from the perspective of authorities that seek to govern them—like other marginalized people, the fragments of their lives are retained because of an "encounter with power: without this collision, doubtless there would no longer be a single word to recall their fleeting passage" (Foucault 1991, 79). Thus, investigating the silences *of* and *in* the archives, what is left out, does not simply mean studying what is missing but, rather, unveiling the state's narratives and grasping which events have been kept under the threshold of history (Trouillot 1995). Similarly, the silences about migration in official archives reveal how states, international organizations and refugee agencies craft migration as a problem and as an object of government. As Ginzburg (2012) stresses, a critical approach to the archives requires reading the sources against the intentions of those who produced them.

Archives of Migration

The records of migration are scattered and piecemeal. Discovering who collects and stores data about migration, where and for which purpose is a tricky endeavor. A panoply of documents produced by states and non-state actors about migrants are stored across local, national and international repositories. Some of these are officially designated as sites for migration or refugee-related data, but most are used for other purposes. In some cases, collecting and storing information about migrants started as a non-intentional or secondary activity, such that the actors responsible, as well as the sites themselves, change over time and across spaces.

Archives are always the result of a selective process and characterized by silences, omissions, and partiality. For this reason, as Chakrabarty contends, archival records "can be read for both what they say and for their silence" (1989, 184). Yet, the instability and multiplicity of records of migration are distinctive. Records about migrants apprehended and identified at or within national borders can be found in police stations and government ministries, while those relating to migrants found and rescued at sea are stored by maritime authorities such as the Navy and the Coast Guard. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) systematically collect and store data from migrants. Dedicated migration agencies (like the International Organisation for Migration, IOM) produce extensive data, generating risk analyses, reports and statistics. Municipalities also share data on migration, some of which is shared between state and non-state actors. In fact, the archives of migration are mobile: they grow and change as data circulates and is shared among different actors.

The scattered character of migration archives recalls what Stoler has defined as "the archival forms," referring to the "prose style, repetitive refrain, the arts of persuasion, affective strains that shape 'rational' response, categories of confidentiality and classification, and not least, genres of documentation" (2010, 3). Investigating records of migration involves taking account of their heterogeneity, interrogating which data is (not) produced and (not) stored, and according to which archiving processes. It implies drawing attention to what is not there, and to the elusiveness of the archives of migration; "searching for the archive right where it slips away" (Derrida 2008, 93). The scarcity of records in official archives might appear in

contrast with the proliferation of data and statistics about migration and the centrality played by knowledge production in legitimizing policies of migration containment (Ruppert and Scheel 2021). However, these are not in opposition to each other; rather, the silence unveils the narrative that states and international agencies craft about migrants. The point is to discern which knowledge is produced about migration; what about migration is the object of state concerns; and which traces are considered irrelevant, dangerous, or not to be disclosed.

The knowledge that both state and non-state actors produce about migration is driven by a *governmental pursuit*—it counts numbers and imposes categories to control movement, administer populations, and sustain lives. To find relevant data, it is sometimes necessary to cross-check diverse databases. For instance, to discover how many migrants crossed a certain border might require combining data collected by rescuers (e.g., mountain rescue teams), by the police and by NGOs in shelters where migrants are hosted.[3] No trace is left of those who cross without being rescued or detected. And, apart from the data-content, the very way in which the records of migration are fragmented, and the silences in official archives, are suggestive of how migration has been rendered as a problem, and as a phenomenon to be governed. This is exemplified in a search for records about IOM in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canadian archives: "the views of migrants themselves and members of migrant-receiving communities. . . are almost entirely absent from these states' archival records" (Bradley 2023, 34). As Farge emphasizes, "the archives do not necessarily tell the truth, but [...] they tell of the truth" (2013, 29): they disclose which regime of truth is at stake and which discourse of truth is crafted about it.

Counter-Archiving Migration

To challenge the dominant "truths" about migration we propose a concept of counter-archives, and a method to construct them. In our definition, the meaning of "counter" depends on the political conjuncture, and the geographical context in which it is enacted, as Stoler observes: "That of which the act of 'countering' consists is neither self-evident nor a decided affair. To seek the inverse of what an institutional or colonial state archive demands is not enough" (2018, 47). This implies that migration counter-archives do not necessarily mirror standard archival practices— rather they must be partially discordant with them. They are irreducible to formalized archiving procedures. More precisely, counter-archiving refers to the act of assembling traces and records from both official and unofficial archives to reconstruct the entanglements of border violence and migrants' struggles for movement. It implies reading archival records beyond the intentions of those who produced them, and without seeing migration "like a State" (Ginzburg 2012; Scott 2020). It is a tool for international political sociology to disrupt state-based conceits of political struggles, paying attention to history and temporality, exposing dominant categorizations of migrants and drawing on alternative political imaginaries evolving from below.

Our concept of migration counter-archives somewhat echoes the definitions and practices associated with "human rights archives." Like these projects, it is underpinned by a concern to expose violations and might refer to any "collections documenting abuses of power" (rather than only those labeled as archives). It also problematizes the norms of archival description, incorporating critical readings of the materials and classification processes of state archives (Caswell 2014). Beyond this, it involves identifying records that put in question the norms of migration governance and statist assumptions about sovereignty and law—assumptions which underpin and constrain human rights regimes. Given the characteristics of migration

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[3]Based on Tazzioli's ongoing research on the heritage of migration in French and Italian national archives and at the French-Italian border.

containment, and the bureaucratic violence, as well as the material losses, trauma, and disruptions associated with mobility, we attend not only to testimonies and material evidence gathered from survivors but also to memory practices. The impetus that drives this and other similar initiatives is articulated succinctly in Rossipal's concept of the Noncitizen Archive: "the archival process may be deemed necessary when life is rendered invisible and cast out of the body politic of the nation-state" (2021, 42). Migration counter-archives promise to disrupt the "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Schiller 2003) that naturalizes the nation-state as the universal container of all social processes, constraining both studies of mobility, and of official archives.

We envisage that counter-archives may be generated from migrant practices of struggle, remembering, and knowledge production and circulation. While, in contrast to officials, migrants hold limited records of their encounters with authorities, and these are multilingual, dispersed and mostly neglected, geography plays a key role in their lives and memory processes: "for migrants, more than for others, the archive is a map" (Appadurai 2003, 23). They share knowledge of safe routes and tactics for crossing, and records of spatial claims, including their occupations of places and resistance to evictions. As such counter-archives must, to some extent, be enacted spatially through attempts to move and stay that inflect or disrupt the geographies of containment enforced by states (Tazzioli 2015). Counter-archives, in this sense, reflect journeys and multiple places of connection and belonging that cannot be confined to single locations and repositories: they are counter-maps in action.

Furthermore, migrants leave traces as they endeavor to expose and challenge border violence, twisting counter-archives towards practices for seeking rights and (mobility) justice (Sheller 2018). Potentially, counter-archives are *already there*, in the sense that they are constituted by the traces of resistance to border violence, the accumulation and circulation of migrants' mobility practices and knowledge, and the initiatives of those who act in solidarity with them. What is needed then, is to pay attention to records of struggles and claims that are often invisibilized and unheard; and to recognize migrants' own archiving practices. We consider the gesture of retracing and foregrounding refugees and migrants' struggles, and how these circulate across space and over time, as a contribution to the *making of counter-archives.*

Counter-Archiving as Methodology

Our methodology for counter-archiving migration proceeds *along* and *against* the archival grain in two steps: first through exploring UNHCR's archives, and second through a historical and ethnographic case study research focusing on two of the most visible and prolonged migrant struggles—outside UNHCR offices in Cairo in 2005 and Tripoli in 2021–22. This enables us to critically examine, and experiment with, various modes of conserving materials and memories of mobility.

Along the Grain

The first strand of our methodology reads *along the grain* of UNHCR's institutional archives. We adopt a methodological shift proposed by Stoler, moving "away from treating the archives as an extractive exercise to an ethnographic one" (Stoler 2010, 47): archives are not simply sites of knowledge to be found but also disclose the link between who has the authority to archive, and the regimes of truth produced. We selected the UNHCR archives as the only international public archive concerned with the experiences of people on the move. This forced a narrowing of our lens from migrants (defined broadly) to people that UNHCR classifies as refugees, and specifically to those it labels "urban refugees," a term which encompasses many of

the protagonists in the protests in Cairo and Tripoli, that are the focus of our case studies.

Established in 1996, UNHCR's physical archive spans the agency's founding in 1950 to the present day and contains material gathered from multiple field sites and its headquarters in Geneva. Additionally, UNHCR developed a web archive that began capturing information in 2015 and includes content from the agency's social media channels. Interrogating the role that the organization plays as a gatekeeper of the archival record (Gatrell 2021) is integral to a counter-archiving method. We therefore widened our search to look for related documents across multiple platforms. We made extensive use of Refworld, UNHCR's online research platform used by states when determining asylum claims. However, as Crawford notes, Refworld is not a "neutral storehouse either" but contains documents that are also carefully curated by UNHCR (Crawford 2021, 19–20). When we speak of "UNHCR archives," we mean it in this expanded sense: the multiple locations and platforms through which UNHCR's institutional memories are curated and stored.

Initially, we searched for records of protests outside UNHCR offices in urban settings, covering the years 2005–2022—starting with the sit-in in Cairo and ending with the sit-in in Tripoli. We searched according to locale, date, and specific topics, gathering data from country reports, letters, press releases, and (latterly) UNHCR's social media posts. The paucity of information about these protests in the "UNHCR archives" led us to track down key documents in external websites and repositories, including the Centre for Refugee and Migration Studies (CRMS) at the American University in Cairo, and to widen our remit. Our expanded search considered formal policies, discussion papers, and reports pertaining to the development and implementation of urban refugee policy. We bundled these related documents together to examine their forms, contents, and meanings, undertaking a genealogical reading. What we sought was not an authoritative source of truth about migrants, but a disclosure of what it means to "see like a refugee agency" (Glasman 2017). We read along "the archival grain," exploring the power relations which underpin the contemporary refugee regime and the shaping of a humanitarian common sense. Such a reading is *agentive* because, as Stoler observes, by examining "what we know and how we know it" there is a methodological commitment to how history's exclusions are secured and made (2010, 45).

Against the Grain

The second step in our counter-archiving methodology reads *against* the archival grain. This entails drawing together, re-arranging and writing new records to "construct. . . other archives and realities" (Opondo 2017, 262) through historical and ethnographic study of urban protest camps. We selected the sit-ins outside UNHCR in Cairo (2005) and Tripoli (2021–22) because other migrant struggles rarely reach this threshold of visibility or are often swiftly erased (Tazzioli 2020a). These protests made their mark in the public sphere, and as such were among those most likely to generate material and social traces. Furthermore, they matched our concern to question dominant narratives about migration and identify transversal alliances, since the protesters themselves sought to expose border violence and to challenge the classifications of humanitarian governance. Lastly, we chose them as exemplary of an emerging repertoire. Protests outside UNHCR offices have spiralled across the global South over the past twenty years not only in Egypt and Libya, but also in Sudan 2015, India 2021, Lebanon 2022, Indonesia 2022, Libya 2021–22 and Tunisia 2022 and 2023. The camps in Cairo (2005) and Libya (2021–22) were chosen as the most significant of these in terms of duration, scale and numbers.[4] We

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[4]These may be defined as cases of "intrinsic" interest (Stake 1995) for counter-archiving because they are unusually publicly visible and likely to generate traces of migrant agency.

identified them as ripe for counter-archiving because they made the "words and worlds" (Opondo 2017, 258–59) of people on-the-move visible, providing fertile grounds for the collection of records, artifacts and memories.

We employed elements of historical and ethnographic research, but we explicitly adopted an unconventional position of solidarity with migrant struggles. A similar stance has been taken by other scholars working with refugees and migrants to create archives, as well as by "militant" researchers. We learned from "living archives" that are "open and engaged" with refugee and migrant communities in London (Dudman 2019). We also heeded de Genova's argument that scholars of migration are caught up in the same socio-political processes that we analyze and therefore must position ourselves politically: "[t]here is no neutral ground' so one must 'take a side'" (2013, 252). As Halilovich (2022) observes, the notion of a distant ethnographic observer is "almost impossible, as well as ethically problematic" in a research field where violations of human rights violations proliferate, suggesting the need for a collaborative approach (Scharenberg 2023). It was not feasible to participate in the protest camps—since the Cairo sit-in preceded the study by almost two decades, while the Tripoli protest occurred at a time of serious political and military instability—therefore one researcher joined the UNFAIR campaign, a transnational network mobilizing in support of the Tripoli protesters demands and participated in protests in Geneva, while another visited the camp in Tunis and collaborated with people involved in, or affected by, protests in Cairo.

In other respects, the fieldwork comprised a blend of established methods. We convened a meeting of twelve survivors of the 2005 Cairo protest (August 2022) and interviewed twenty-five individual protesters and activists in support of them in Cairo (August 2022 and January 2023), Tunis (November 2022 and July 2023) and Bologna (December 2023), including Yambio David Oliver, a prominent organizer of the Libya protest. We drew upon findings from interviews and workshops with refugees in Cairo in 2018–20 (Ibreck and Seeka 2022). We also enriched the ethnography through the collection and analysis of digital and documentary sources, including legal documentation, websites, images, videos and online chats. Throughout the research, we invited participants to talk about their experiences in an open-ended fashion, pursuing a "relational" style (Fujii 2018) of interviewing—guided by reflexivity and humility—while following standard ethics principles and approvals. These methods elicited traces of the protest in memories and social relations; they generated materials for potential future counter-archives, through documentation of interviews and discussions; and they led us to other sorts of material traces such as documents, and physical scars. Lastly, they informed our "ethnographic" reading of the formal UNHCR archives.

Along the Grain of the UNHCR Archives

Archives reveal what sorts of records and modes of collection an organization finds relevant to its history. Scholars have demonstrated the value of the UNHCR archive to investigate the humanitarian principles that shape the work of the agency (Schöch 2008); its mandate and activities (Toscani 2008; Seet 2016); the role of UNHCR in supporting refugees during the Algerian war of independence (Rahal and White 2022); and the shifts that occurred in UNHCR's activities with the Bosnian war (Lecadet 2023). In contrast, few have made refugees' struggles their focus, and these scholars have found the archive marked by blind spots that silence voices and experiences (Lecadet 2019). Not least because, tellingly, the UNHCR archive adopts the familiar categories and procedures of a state archive, including establishing conditions upon access, and only opening for public view the records that are more than 20 years old, a governmental practice that Azoulay terms "unjustified sovereign violence" (2017, 3). As such, there are minimal records of the migrant mass protests outside UNHCR offices among the accessible documents, but the

archive does contain relevant documents concerning the organization's concept and treatment of urban refugees.

Urban Refugees: The Resistance to Resistance

The archive confirms that the UNHCR has historically identified urban refugees as a specific category, viewing them with suspicion. Cast as "irregular movers," they were seen to have failed to conform to a standard model of refugees, who were typically located in rural camps, cheap to manage and easy to monitor (Marfleet 2007). UNHCR became especially engaged with the issue in the 1990s, producing a discussion paper *UNHCR's Policy and Practice regarding Urban Refugees* in 1995, which starkly intertwines concerns about legitimacy, mental illness and violence, and links them to migrants. One particularly loaded section stated:

> Urban refugees and asylum seekers tend to include a wide variety of people, some, but by no means all, of whom have genuine asylum claims. They include opportunistic and dynamic individuals as well as those who failed to survive as part of the normal migration (or refugee) flow—the maladjusted [sic], the social outcasts etc—a factor which can make status determination difficult… since such movement is often stimulated, at least partially, by a desire to improve their economic potential… if not satisfied, [it] often leads to frustration and violence (UNHCR 1995, 2).

This 1995 paper informed the organization's first formal policy *UNHCR Comprehensive Policy on Urban Refugees* which was released in March 1997 but was quickly superseded the following December by the *UNHCR Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas* (1997). Both documents were the subject of much debate and criticism (see Marfleet 2007; Crisp 2017; Crawford 2021) largely because they disparaged urban refugees and their actions, both through their discursive articulation as a security concern and through the agency's "modes of ordering" (Glasman 2017, 4).

A critical reading of such sources reveals UNHCR's profound suspicion of migrant agencies, "irregular movement" and political organization. Transmitted over time are "epistemic habits": "ways of knowing that are available and "easy to think," called-upon, temporarily settled dispositions that can be challenged and that change" (Stoler 2010, 37). The identification of urban refugees as "dynamic individuals" echoes a UN High Commissioner for Refugee's description of them, over 30 years earlier, as "the élite of the African refugees" (quoted in Crisp 2017, 88). As Glasman observes, one of the primary functions of UNHCR is its propensity to "arrange populations according to its humanitarian mandate, distilling complex and multiple claims into classifications that are then assumed to be natural and universal" (2017, 2–3). It is this governmental pursuit that undermines the legitimacy of migrants' political demands. Their motivation to move is not seen to derive from a legitimate need for "protection" but from a supposedly illegitimate, even threatening, desire for economic security.

The UNHCR's warnings of violence betray the inflammatory rhetoric of the report. The policy conflates non-violent means of protest such as "demonstrations" and "hunger strikes" with more aggressive acts of "threatening behaviour against UNHCR or its partners' staff or property." Then it states that "[g]iving in to violent forms of protest does not pay, but, on the contrary exacerbates long-term problems" and so even if a "protest is in response to the *legitimate* denial of something (whether this be refugee status, assistance or resettlement) it is not appropriate for UNHCR to intervene" (UNHCR 1997, 20). The policy recommends that the organization responds to protests with "clear messages, such as closing the Branch Office and calling in the local police. . . [as] the most effective way in bringing it to an early and peaceful close (ibid, 20). Subsuming all forms of political action under the general rubric of "violence," the document delegitimates the claims of migrants and presents calling in the police as a rational response. Here we find the

"truth" of the archive as a "condensed site of epistemological and political anxiety" through which the power relations and technologies of government are revealed (Stoler 2010, 20).

The very existence of "mobile, self-directed" displaced people in urban spaces constitutes a challenge to UNHCR, at odds with the organization's depiction of refugees as "helpless and dependent," as Marfleet notes (2007, 42). "Urban refugees" tend to organize themselves effectively as a collective to contest forms of injustice. In so doing, they disrupt UNHCR's carefully crafted narrative that categorizes them as either lacking "genuine" reasons to move or as refugees who are individual passive recipients of rights rather than members of communities and active participants in processes of rights claiming (Bradley 2021).

The Silence in the Archive

When the 1997 *UNHCR Comprehensive Policy on Urban Refugees* was criticized for ignoring prior research (Marfleet 2007) and for its many "blanket assumptions" about urban refugees (Parker 2002), UNHCR commissioned its Evaluation and Policy Unit (EPAU) to review it. EPAU produced the 2003 "Protection, Solutions and Assistance for Refugees in Urban Areas: Guiding Principles and Good Practice" as a potential replacement (see Crawford 2021, 13). However, this report was never made public and ultimately rejected for being "too radical and rights-based," by many managers and staff members (Crisp 2017, 90). Over ten years later, in 2009, the organization finally shifted from this troubling stance, with a new *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas* (2009). This policy emphasized that refugees have rights regardless of their location: "urban areas are a legitimate place for refugees to reside and to enjoy their rights" (2009, 3) and UNHCR aims to "create an environment that is conducive for refugee protection and solutions in urban areas" (ibid, 4).

The 2009 policy was better received and more widely implemented than its predecessor. Yet, Crisp notes that it would be "misleading to suggest that implementation has been problem-free" (2017, 94). Many "epistemic habits" (Stoler 2010) inherent to UNHCR's conceptualization and treatment of urban refugees persisted: calling in local police, shutting down offices and creating divisions between so-called "legitimate" and "illegitimate" movers. Moreover, the reasons for its conduct lie partly in the behind-the-scenes role and influence of other actors including donor states, host countries, partner organizations including IGOs and NGOs, and UN bodies, including the UNHCR Executive Committee (Crisp 2017, 95). As Crisp argues, "many of the key documents and discussions relating to UNHCR's policy-making processes are not in the public domain, research of this nature would evidently require the cooperation of former and serving staff members" (2017, 96). It is precisely as it "slips away" (Derrida 2008, 93) that the archive speaks of the truth.

What are we to make of this silence? Crucially, UNHCR is not an autonomous actor but has a governing body consisting solely of states and is funded by a smaller number of rich nations. Not only is the refugee regime that UNHCR oversees predicated on a thin conception of universal rights, but it also reproduces "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Schiller 2003). This is manifest in the archives. For example, *The Ad Hoc Committee on the Draft Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* reveals how the refugee regime subordinated rights to sovereignty. It states that it is "desirable on the one hand not to draw up a draft which would set out merely the existing practice common to all states represented on the committee" but at the same time it is also "undesirable to formulate an ideal solution and thereby set out provisions which would not be likely to obtain the acceptance of many governments" (quoted in McFadyen 2015, 28). Rather than challenging the system of state sovereignty, the refugee regime depends on it to function. If "it goes without saying" that the UNHCR is integral to the contemporary nation-state political order, then

the implicit "what should not be said" (Stoler 2010, 28) is that this regime of truth radically circumscribes the kinds of justice claims that can be seen and heard. The nation-state form has multiple injustices hardwired into it, contributing to the construction of racialized minorities, a system of racial hierarchy and the production and continuation of forms of colonial dispossession (see Sharma 2020). As Bridget Anderson observes: "How could such injustices be remedied given the crucial role of the state in shaping mechanisms of justice?" (2020, 125)

In the "pulse" of the UNHCR archives we detect the hegemonic constellations of power that shape common sense around migrants and their political claims. The agency is anxious about the propensity of people on the move to politically organize and question the organization's strictly humanitarian and apolitical mandate. Since archives must be understood in relation to the institutions they serve (Stoler 2010), the UNHCR archives only make sense as a function of "a state-centric global body" where the "vast majority of the organization's funding is provided by a small number of prosperous countries" (Crisp 2018). Our counter-archiving methodology brings to light how the intelligibility of migrants' political claims is undermined—even "legitimate" protest is vilified and reduced to the terms established by a contemporary refugee regime that, at its core, is created, funded and ratified by nation-states. Reading along the grain of the UNHCR archive creates an urgency to identify new sources for counter-archives "from below." It exposes the organization's statist, governmental orientations, its impulse to regulate migrants in urban spaces, and its hostility to migrant-led activism, yet tells us little about the ways that the organization is "seen" and questioned by the people it aims to assist.

Against the Grain: Counter-Archiving Protests against UNHCR

We now proceed to the second step in our counter-archiving process, focusing on sit-ins outside UNHCR offices to identify and preserve records that are excluded from the official archive, and mostly obscured in other accounts of migration. In 2005, an estimated 3,000 Sudanese refugees occupied the Mustafa Mahmoud square near the UNHCR office in downtown Cairo until several thousand Egyptian police brutally evicted them, leading to the deaths of twenty-nine people and the arrest and disappearance of many more (according to official records, see Azzam 2006). In 2021–22, some 2,000 refugees of various nationalities mobilized outside the UNHCR Community Day Centre (CDC) in Tripoli and later (when the organization closed the center) at the UNHCR office in Sarraj until Libyan security forces forcibly dismantled the camps—hundreds of refugees were arrested and detained while an unconfirmed number died (Stierl and Tazzioli 2022).[5]

During these protests, in different times and places, migrants demanded rights, including resettlement, to escape unliveable conditions; and denounced UNHCR's failures and complicities in discrimination, racism and violence against them. They mobilized in their thousands to occupy prime urban sites and achieved high visibility for a period of almost three months in each case. However, both camps were the target of traumatic, violent evictions, fragmenting the temporary communities they had established. This strengthens the political imperative to collect any traces that remain of their aims, modalities and endings. On the surface, these and other migrant protests against UNHCR appear to be transient, disconnected episodes of dissent, with little left to show for them. Counter-archiving serves to reveal their particular impacts and the relations between them, showing how they have marked landscapes and shaped notions of rights and community among migrants.

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[5]Interviewees claim the actual number of dead in Cairo may reach three hundred, including many children. The Libyan government acknowledged that one refugee died at the protest camp outside UNHCR while IOM listed six, and refugees claimed that there were dozens (Refugees in Libya 2021).

Material Traces

The material traces of the protests are relatively sparse, although the protesters themselves took steps to document and conserve them. The Cairo protest leaders "kept meticulous records" during the sit-in (according to Rowe) but these were largely destroyed during and after the eviction; Mustafa Mahmoud square was strewn with papers and belongings which were "cleaned up" and disposed of (2006, 7). Additionally, some records initially retrieved were later lost—in one case seized from protesters by Egyptian national security, in another borrowed (but not returned) by an American journalist.[6] The records of the Tripoli protest are more extensive and durable, since participants built their own website, and recorded videos, images and other digital materials that remain accessible online for the time being, yet they too are selective and vulnerable to effacement.

The protest manifestos are a crucial exception since they testify to the aims and principles of the struggle and are still publicly available either in a university repository (CRMS, Cairo) or online (Tripoli). In these documents, we read how protesters conceptualized their collective as composed of refugees with rights, regardless of their various legal statuses—whether or not they individually held a UNHCR refugee card or asylum seeker certificate. As such, the manifestos show how migrants challenged exclusionary categories. At the same time, they illustrate that protesters articulated their claims in legalistic and non-violent terms, negating the epistemic violence of the UNHCR archive, with its disparaging definitions of "urban refugees" and "irregular movers."

The Cairo manifesto began with the declaration of a shared identity—"we the Sudanese refugees"—uniting people from different ethnicities and religions that had been divided by a civil war, and explicitly rejecting the differentiations imposed by the humanitarian policy of the time (see Moulin and Nyers 2007, 365). It went on to condemn a pattern of everyday discrimination and human rights violations in Egypt (Azzam 2006, appendix), about which humanitarians had remained quiet. Similarly, the Tripoli manifesto opened with the line "We are refugees and we live in Libya," discarding the alternative labels of asylum-seekers and migrants employed in UNCHR and media commentaries, and downplaying their multiple ethnic and national identities. It continued to boldly denounce the humanitarian system, making direct connections between the abuses they suffered and European policies: "a nightmare made of tortures, rapes, extortions, and arbitrary detentions under a system found and funded by European countries." Read together, the two manifestos reflect "dynamic" organizational capabilities, but far from threatening, they suggest a "culture of expectation" (UNHCR 1995, 2) that is based on human rights principles. The protesters in Cairo called for recognition and resettlement, while those in Libya denounced racism and appealed for mass evacuation to "lands of safety where our rights will be protected and respected" (Refugees in Libya 2021).

In addition to the manifestos, disparate records of the sit-ins are available in digital spaces established by protesters and people acting in solidarity with them. A *Sudanese Online Forum* created during the Mustafa Mahmoud camp is now preserved as a memorial, the *Library of the Massacre of the Sudanese Refugees in Cairo on 30 December 2005*. It contains 100 posts, mainly in Arabic, and links to videos and images, some of them uploaded by participants, recording the events of the protest and claims against UNHCR for violations of rights, and "behavior that humiliates and degrades the dignity of the Sudanese" (Sudanese Online forum 2005). It serves to confirm UNHCR's "hostile and confrontational" (Azzam 2006, 56) attitude to the 2005 sit-in; and to contradict the organization's efforts to discredit the demonstrators for "spreading false and misleading information" (ibid, 23). It also

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[6]Group discussion, Cairo, August 24, 2022; interview with lawyer August 22, 2022.

represents an autonomous initiative to build an informal community archive by a group striving to ensure that their stories are heard, and conscious that they would otherwise be neglected (see Gilliland and Flinn 2013).

The possibilities for the collection and preservation of archival sources had considerably expanded by the time of the Libya protests due to the accessibility of digital technology, generally through mobile phones. The *Refugees in Libya* group were able to record their demands, experiences and actions in several languages and forms including video, photographs and testimony and to share these on their website and other platforms (Twitter and Facebook). They used this documentation directly to campaign against UNHCR, charging the organization with "misleading and false statements," (Refugees in Libya Twitter 2022a), and complicity in violence: "the UNHCR ordered its armed militias to burn down tents belonging to the homeless refugees" (Refugees in Libya 2021)." These documentation practices were first and foremost integral to the protest repertoires. However, they hold a secondary value for knowledge production through counter-archiving, and potentially for future justice claims.

The potential for documentation to contribute to future legal action and to changing definitions of rights and justice is evident in the Cairo protest records gathered by human rights lawyers and activists—principally to support individual asylum claims or bring human rights complaints. Notably, Ashraf Ruxi, an Egyptian lawyer, collaborating with the human rights organization *Interights,* gathered extensive testimony to build a landmark case on behalf of eight victims of the Mustafa Mahmoud massacre against the Egyptian government. They took the complaint (George Iyanyori Kajikabi v Arab Republic of Egypt) to the African Commission for Human and People's Rights in 2007 and won recognition of multiple violations of the African Charter in 2020. While the victory was mainly symbolic—it is unlikely to be implemented any time soon—its historical value is incontrovertible. The judgment and the case records establish that there were at least a hundred and fifty-six victims (a number that far exceeds the twenty-nine dead claimed in government reports), as well as arrests, disappearances and based on testimony, photographic and documentary evidence. They also establish UNHCR's complicity in the eviction, based on an Egyptian government statement that there were "repeated requests from UNHCR to the State to end the protest to protect its Staff" (ACHPR 2021, 29).[7] In this way, counter-archiving leads us to interrogate the norms of migration governance and tell truths about humanitarian and governmental actions on the ground.

At the same time, the material traces are not only scattered and selective; they are also partial, reflecting inequalities in processes of collection, classification and destruction. Like official archives, they are prone to foreground certain stories and to perpetuate silences; they "concentrate power to a certain extent" (Rossipal 2021, 4), reminding us that inequalities stratify even the most marginalized. The sit-in records inevitably centralize the views and experiences of protest leaders, and literate and digitally savvy participants and observers, mainly men, eliding the class, ethnic and gender differences among the protesters."[8] Although they emerge from the margins and counteract dominant narratives and classifications, they still dictate "the limits of the sayable" (Hartman 2008, 12) by omitting the details of the most powerless or forgotten people, opinions and actions. This teaches us that counter-archives must always be deemed provisional and *in-the-making*; and they must rely not only upon tangible artifacts but upon what is embedded in memory and social relations.

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[7]Ibid.

[8]In Cairo, the protesters were mostly men but from different communities and backgrounds (Rowe 2009). In Libya, the protesters including women "[standing] up in great courage and shouting," interview with Oliver, Italy, December 17, 2022.

Social Traces

The migrant protests at UNHCR have taken root in memories and traveled transnationally, with durable spatial and social impacts. Both groups of protesters altered city maps, breaking out of their confinement at urban peripheries to occupy prime land in the heart of the Cairo and Tripoli, and forging vibrant (if transient) place-based communities where grievances were shared; and knowledge and tactics were advanced. They imprinted urban landscapes by altering the bureaucratic functioning of UNHCR headquarters and even changing their locations (permanently, in the case of Cairo). Furthermore, the Cairo protest inspired solidarity actions and emulation, with Egyptian activists mobilizing the day after the violent eviction to declare: "We are all Sudanese," establishing precedents that would later transform the "urban geographies" and repertoires of Egyptian street protest politics, including the 2011 revolution (Ramadan and Pascucci 2018, 8–9). The protesters' demands also reverberated in demonstrations, commemorations, cartoons and songs by Sudanese people at home and in the diaspora (Fadlalla 2009, 92). In turn, the Tripoli protesters replicated some of the Cairo protest practices (without making direct connections), by bringing together people of diverse ethnicities and situations in peaceful demonstrations, establishing administrative and democratic structures, formulating common demands; and nominating negotiators to deal with the local authorities and UNHCR.[9] Acting upon both the specificities of their situation and a shared practical knowledge, both groups, to varying extents, explicitly counteracted humanitarian discourses and their own "subaltern visibilities" (Fadlalla 2009, 112).

Certainly, many of the social legacies of the protests were negative or ambiguous. In the memories of Sudanese refugees in Cairo, the violent eviction was a trauma that devastated and fractured their community (Rowe 2006)—some retreated into hiding, others gave up on their asylum claims and returned to Sudan or fled elsewhere; some became mentally ill, and a few committed suicide (one of them while in prison). Only a few leaders achieved their demands of refugee status recognition or resettlement.[10] Recollections of the Mustafa Mahmoud massacre are shrouded in fear and tension, limiting counter-archiving to the collection of memories among the least vulnerable or risk-averse.[11] This history also cast a shadow over recent smaller-scale protests outside the new UNHCR office by refugees of various nationalities, including Sudanese, Eritrean and Ethiopian, which were more cautiously organized and have all been swiftly, and harshly repressed.[12]

Yet a handful of the surviving participants in the Mustafa Mahmoud protests drew on memories of the protests to foster enduring relations among themselves; they felt connected by the mental and physical scars of the violence which "united us more. . . to work together."[13] They established a new group "Refugee Voices" to deliberate on the issues affecting displaced people in Cairo and to raise lobby humanitarian organizations. They initially tried to organize a commemoration of the victims of the 2005 massacre at Mustafa Mahmoud square; when this was dispersed by the authorities, they convened an annual gathering with relatives and affected people in private spaces to grieve for those they lost, and to share testimonies about their suffering and abandonment. Furthermore, they collaborated to produce a shared narrative of the struggle and the massacre written in Arabic, and entitled "we will never forget," (our translation), describing this document as their own "archive"

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[9]According to documentary sources and interviews with refugees in Cairo and Italy.

[10]Eight members of the original organising committee of the protest in Cairo were said to have been resettled (group discussion, 24 August 2022). Concessions were also awarded to the most prominent refugee activists in the Lebanon protests many years later (Janmyr 2022, 131).

[11]Group meeting, Cairo, August 24, 2022; interview with chairman, Cairo, August 22, 2022.

[12]Interview with legal researcher Bologna, December 17, 2022.

[13]Group meeting, Cairo, August 24, 2022; interviews with victim of assault, Cairo, August 26, 2022 and community leader, Cairo, August 22, 2022.

of the struggle.[14] These various narratives and practices indicate the potential for migrants to engage in creative forms of memory work and community-building even under harsh conditions of displacement and repression and after traumatic experiences (also see Tošić and Palmberger 2016).

Correspondingly, migrants in Libya forged durable solidarities among themselves through the protests in Tripoli. They also made connections in digital spaces between refugees across different countries and situations (Refugees in Libya 2021; Refugees in Libya Twitter 2022b) and activists critical of migration policies across Europe and Africa. These networks remained active in organizing support and advocacy for migrants in Libya (including a hotline); and in mobilizing further smaller-scale protests in Tripoli.[15] Although the leader of the first mobilization only found safety by crossing the Mediterranean in a small boat, and migrants in Tripoli remain vulnerable to violence, the *Refugees in Libya* network contributed to restarting UNHCR-organized evacuation flights, closing down certain detention centers; and (in July 2023) securing the release of many of the original protesters from the notorious Ain Zara camp.[16]

Furthermore, the *Refugees in Libya* catalyzed a wider movement that expanded and diversified under the banner of the UNFAIR campaign. The campaigners held a sit-in and press conference outside the Geneva UNHCR office on Human Rights Day 2022 and a counter-summit and demonstration in Brussels June 30–July 1, 2023. On the campaign's website, they produced their own version of a counter-archive of these events and of prior UNHCR sit-ins in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia (UNFAIR 2022). In these ways, migrants themselves either directly or indirectly contributed to digital community archives that are multi-sited, multinational, multi-ethnic and border-crossing. Like anti-colonial archives, such records and repositories are concerned with "*movement* rather than *stasis*. . . [with] rhythmic interruptions of epistemological and geographical boundaries" (Opondo 2017, 263). Protesters have also connected and evolved their strategies over time. As Karen Zivi suggests "a failure on one front is actually quite productive on many others,"—protests may bring "a group of people together who would otherwise have had little reason to join forces" (2012, 38).

Our counter-archiving methodology identifies implicit relations between migrants in two dramatic episodes of dissent against UNHCR. It shows how protests are being "sedimented" in social memories, and hints that they might be "reactivated" in time (Tazzioli 2020b). Through this approach, struggles for rights and mobility that initially appear disconnected and futile emerge as the stirrings of a "common wind" of marginalized people communicating in multiple languages to challenge racism, violence and exclusion (Scott 2018).

Conclusion

Migrant struggles for movement rely upon an implicit "community of knowledge," as Mengiste argues (2018, 63–4). Counter-archiving promises to amplify this knowledge through the preservation and safeguarding of tangible records and memories of migrant experiences and agency, whose meaning and effects may only become significant in the long durée. We have proposed a methodology for this endeavor that involves moving along and against the archival grain. We have also illustrated our approach firstly by checking the "pulse" of UNHCR official archives, and secondly by assembling and analyzing traces of protests outside UNHCR offices.

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[14]We hold a copy on file.

[15]Observations in Geneva, December 10, 2022; interviews with Oliver and legal researcher, Bologna, December 17, 2022.

[16]Oliver escaped by boat and claimed asylum in Italy in 2022, interview, Bologna, December 17, 2022. *Refugees in Libya* WhatsApp group discussions, July 2023.

Our counter-archiving process is deliberately abstract and unfinished, in line with Rossipal's concept of a "counter-archive of non-closure" that is "necessarily performed and retraced" (2021, 47). The point is to open the way to the accumulation of more materials and alternative readings that counteract governmental perspectives. So far, we have contributed to unveiling UNHCR's persistently hostile stance on urban refugees and mobility—within and "at the interstices" (Stoler 2010) of the agency's policy documents. We also sketch an impression of the legacies of protest at UNHCR in Cairo and Tripoli, highlighting how collective action reveals the violence, dysfunctions and contradictions of migration governance. The records show that migrants remain subject to incessant violence and are stranded in a limbo. They appeal to UNHCR to address their rejected asylum claims and blocked resettlement applications, while denouncing the agency's complicity in, or neglect of, the statist exclusions and racist practices that threaten their everyday lives. In the process, they prefigure an inclusive refugee collective.

This migration counter-archive *in-the-making* illuminates how border violence operates in urban spaces; and how migrants mobilize resistance. They act to reject dominant classifications and segregations, claiming a collective refugee status; breaking with fixed spatialities, and articulating conceptions of justice that overflow the "regimes of truth" crafted by states and humanitarians (Moulin and Nyers 2007). In turn, migrants foster "new transnational social relations and identifications" (Tošić and Palmberger 2016, 2) when they testify against abuses and make claims for justice. Through such actions, they encourage new solidarities and inaugurate novel political communities and imaginaries among themselves, and with a growing number of allies.

The protests against UNHCR resonate with other acts of migrant resistance that "*diagnose*" the contingencies of the sovereign order (Stierl 2019, 7), and confront the humanitarian system (Harrell-Bond 2008). By collecting their traces, we identify historical continuities in terms of violence against migrants; the unrelenting need for people to move, and the profound deficiencies of UNHCR and the refugee regime. At a minimum, counter-archiving migration is a means to problematize the classifications, silences and epistemic violence of state archives, while foregrounding the agency of migrants and the contagious possibilities of their multinational networks and mobilizations. Ultimately, this approach—whether applied to the study of the experiences of migrants or to other marginalized people—is a means to chart the contestations and transformations of the global order from below. It contributes to the discovery and conservation of a sort of "transversal heritage" (Rossipal 2021, 45) reflecting ideas of political community and horizons of justice that cross the borders of nation-states.

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