

# Migrating memories: transdisciplinary pedagogical approaches to teaching about diasporic memory, identity and human rights in archival studies

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**Abstract** Despite a growing focus on human rights issues within the field of archival studies, education designed to prepare students to be practicing archivists, scholars and educators has rarely considered how best to address these considerations as they relate to the tens of millions of individuals and communities who have experienced or who are descendants of forced diaspora. This paper reflects on the genesis, development, implementation and emergent themes of an experimental transdisciplinary course, *Migrating Memories: Diaspora, Archives and Human Rights*, designed to address this educational gap in archival education. In addition to relevant scholarly work, the course integrated fiction, creative non-fiction and film in order to exercise issues of memory, documentation and archiving relating to forced diaspora. This enabled the subject to be approached in the spirit of research in contemporary cultural anthropology as well as archival studies that is addressing the human dimensions and dynamics of memory and identity, in particular those that are cultural, affective and generational.

**Keywords** Archival studies · Diaspora · Human rights · Memory · Pedagogy

All the lives I could live, all the people I will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is all the world is (Hemon 2008, p.2).

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## Introduction

Migration is fundamentally about movement and diaspora about dispersion. In December 2015 the UNHCR predicted that 2015 would likely exceed all previous records with the forced displacement of over 60 million people around the world (UNHCR 2015). What are the memory and recordkeeping needs, practices and exigencies associated with massive human losses, movement and dispersion? How, where and when do they take place? What are their implications for human rights and for the (re)construction of identity? What affects do they create or participate in? How do we raise awareness of these issues in, and what supportive interventions might be appropriate on the part of the archival field and others engaged in memory- and recordkeeping? In this paper we argue that preparing future archival professionals, scholars and educators to address such questions is essential in the face of continued mass migration and especially the humanitarian crises caused by forced displacements and their personal and societal legacies. Doing so, however, necessitates moving beyond the practical, epistemological and pedagogical approaches and content currently used in professional and research education. By recounting and reflecting upon the story of the genesis and implementation of an experimental interdisciplinary course on the archival and memory implications of forced diaspora, we highlight the need to address such questions directly. We also demonstrate how the personal experiences and affect of students and their instructors themselves are inevitably and necessarily engaged through such educational content and pedagogical approaches.

Mass population movements have been an integral part of the human story for as long as it has been recorded. People have moved as climate shifts and economic exigencies have made life in their homelands unsustainable; they have moved with conquests and colonialism; they have moved along trading routes across continents and around the world. We might think about such movements as voluntary migration, although the degree of real choice leading to such movement could certainly be debated in many situations. And then there is movement that is unqualifiedly involuntary. Moving might occur as a consequence of natural disasters, or to escape from conflict or repressive regimes. Removal might occur as an act of slavery, penal transportation, human trafficking, or ethnic cleansing and genocide. The course discussed in this article addressed all of these forms of movement, but focused particularly on those that result in human diasporas that scatter populations far from their homelands,<sup>1</sup> and on the parallel documentary diasporas that scatter material traces across many sites and jurisdictions (Punzalan 2014; Gilliland in press). It viewed the phenomenon of diaspora not only as a process of dispersion of people from their original homelands, regions and places—as it is usually defined—but also in terms of the human experiences associated with migration, resettlement and migrants' attempts to (re)create a sense of “home away from home” in often alien sociocultural, physical and bureaucratic environments.

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<sup>1</sup> In many instances, the term ‘homeland’ does not necessarily refer to or correspond with ‘objective’ points of reference such as a particular country or a modern nation state, but more to a subjective sense of belonging to a particular place, a way of life, and the memories and identities of places and the people who make them.

The notion of diaspora and the distribution, paucity and ephemerality of the documentary record of transnational communities and human experiences across different jurisdictions, agencies and cultures raise considerable and specific challenges for archival conceptualizations, theories, practices and institutions. For example, how are the human effects and affects of diasporic experiences manifested within and over generations, especially when migration was forced? To what extent are these represented in the record, in archives and other memory institutions, or in memorialization processes? Are all experiences equally well represented? What constitutes a record for a migrant or refugee? What values are ascribed to these records by different people and how are those values understood or appreciated over time? Most importantly for archivists to contemplate, perhaps, why is it important to address these experiences in archival ideas and practices and how might this be more systematically achieved? From the perspectives of those in forced diaspora, most fundamentally and immediately, absence or lack of awareness of and ready accessibility to official records in regions from which people have been forced to leave or have fled can significantly exacerbate problems in daily life and even survival (Halilovich 2013; Gilliland 2014a; Gilliland in press). These absences and gaps also have long-term consequences for those in diaspora across many generations. Forced diasporas invoke transnational and transgenerational ruptures and (mis)communications, and deep affect, including longings for what has been lost and imaginings about what will never be (Gilliland and Caswell 2015). At the same time, especially over the longer term, memories and documentation of forced diaspora, both tangible and intangible, can play instrumental roles in identity formation in all the locations involved. They can be instrumental in individual and community recovery, trans-generational transfer of experiences and understandings of events, and the impulses to commemorate, document or forget.

Many of the better-resourced national archives in countries such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA with major colonial, migration or settlement histories have put their holdings of official records relating to births, emigration, immigration, transportation and colonial administration online, increasingly with the assistance from “citizen archivists” in transcribing and indexing records. Another strategy being used, for example by the US National Archives and Library and Archives Canada, is to contract or partner with private sector organizations for the digitization and dissemination of such records, although this often results in putting digitally accessible copies behind a pay wall. However, while this approach might not discourage scholars and family historians, who indeed might welcome it as an improvement in access, it fails to take into account the exigencies of those in forced diaspora. The latter need ready and free or minimal cost access to official records relating to their own and their forebears’ citizenship status, property and other aspects of past lives held in government archives around the world and sometimes in locations to which it is impossible for them to return (Geist 2013; Gilliland in press).

Archives are also augmenting their holdings by means of oral histories, photodocumentation projects and social media—welcoming the digital uploading by the public of stories, photographs and other documentation of personal and community experiences. Some have supported projects that document specific

immigrant experiences, such as the National Archives of Australia's *Muslim Journeys* (Deen n.d.), or the flow of immigrants from former colonies into European colonial nations, such as the National Archives (UK)-led multi-institutional partnership project, *Moving Here* (2013). There are museums and living history sites dedicated to emigration and immigration, such as the Immigration Museum in Melbourne and the Ulster American Folk Park in Northern Ireland and its Mellon Centre for Migration Studies; and community-based archives and museums of varying ages and scope such as the Jewish American Historical Society, the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), and the Japanese American National Museum that document the experiences of immigrants and their descendants within a particular country or region. Forced Migration Online (FMO), based at the University of Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre, is an example of a digital library that provides diverse resources concerning the situation of forced migrants worldwide to all interested audiences, including forced migrants (FMO n.d.).

Such strategies by “official” archives, community archives and other memory, research and information institutions are insufficient, however, when one wishes to trace or document the trajectory, or more fully understand what occurred and the individual experiences of a particular migrant or group as they move *between* locations. Such movement might be between, for example, the originating location and sometimes the place to which the migrant returns (although often no home and sometimes no country still exists), or the location where the migrant finally settles and all the places through which the migrant passes in the process (Bald 2013; Gilliland 2014b). Traces may be scattered in their own diaspora across multiple government archives and the archives of international organizations such as aid agencies, but without robust articulation between these different sites. Additionally, significant issues of distrust/trust and vulnerabilities can arise in encounters between refugees, migrants and other diasporic groups and archives if those archives are perceived to be developers of dossiers that might at some point be used to identify and persecute them as often might have been the case in their previous experiences.

Documentation of lives led before migration is often destroyed, altered, missing or inaccessible in the migrants' place of origin. Fleeing a country in turmoil or living for years in a refugee camp in another country are not circumstances that lend themselves to carrying much documentation or non-essential objects. In some instances, the very identity documents containing one's name and ethnic affiliation can be used as the basis for persecution. In such situations, people may opt to destroy their personal documents as a way to avoid being identified as members of the “unwanted” group. In other instances, perpetrators destroy personal records and documents of those who they want to get rid of or whose identities they wish to erase (Halilovich 2014). Moreover, traveling on false documents is sometimes the only way for these persecuted individuals to escape from persecution. However, one can be sure that every item that is carried has its own associated story and personal meaning to the carrier, although for all sorts of reasons that story may not always be told to others. Such items may subsequently be difficult to authenticate as juridical evidence or to appraise for historical value because they do not carry sufficient legal weight, or because they have “lost their stories.” Consider, for example, a single, possibly ambiguous, entry in an intake list of a refugee camp or a passenger

manifest, an unidentified photograph in a community archive or a stained pair of jeans stored in a box in a locker or the back of a wardrobe. In other instances, the main body of knowledge about a particular diaspora and the exodus that led to its establishment, or the stories that allow those traces to be connected up or understood might be contained in less conventional forms such as songs and ballads (Chew Sánchez 2006), poetry, novels, paintings and various other artistic expressions that fall outside the purview of many archives.

Caswell (2014) has argued that community archives can provide useful lessons for a survivor-centered approach to records documenting human rights abuse because of their tendency to promote five key principles: participation, shared stewardship, multiplicity, archival activism and reflexivity (p. 307). Because of these stances, community-based archives and other independent documentation projects tend to be less bound by strict definitions of archives and records and are receptive to a range of documentary practices and community memory-keeping. They increasingly play a major role as sites to which people can donate the items that they have kept as their “personal archive,” contribute oral histories or other forms of testimony, and engage in performative expressions of memory such as dance, music and art-making and storytelling. Community archives are also more likely to be receptive to decontextualized items and to acknowledge their affect, gathering the stories that re-clothe those items in context. Flinn (2011) notes that some archivists are skeptical about assigning the term “archival” to such community endeavors or personal objects because they view them as ephemeral and without lasting value, but he argues that such dismissal misses the mark: “in fact the rarity of these ephemeral traces may give them significant emotional resonance and historical value ... (archivists should not be blind) to the symbolic significance and explicit value judgments being made when such collections are designated (“constituted”) by their custodians as archives” (p. 6). Like memorials and monuments, community archives may also be physically situated in locations [what psychiatrist Volkan (2006) has referred to as “hot places” (p. 49)] that invoke affect because they directly reference the experiences and struggles of that community.

## The genesis of a course

In 2013, students in the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Department of Information Studies’ introductory course on archives, records and memory were given an assignment to identify a particular record(s) or item(s) that they thought might be of archival interest or value. It might be something they had encountered in their lives, or specifically something that they or their family had in their possession. The objectives of the assignment were for students to become more aware of three aspects: (1) how value is ascribed to an object(s), by whom, why, and when; (2) which characteristics might make a given object(s) a record; and (3) what persons might implicitly be associated with or invoked by the object(s) and in what capacities. The students were also to consider whether the value and “recordness” ascribed to an object(s) by one person was primarily a personal assessment and,

therefore, possibly non-transferable, or whether the same object(s) might be considered to be of value by a community-based archive or museum, or a more mainstream collecting or institutional archive that did not have the same associative or affective connection with the object(s). One student wrote about an object so compellingly that the instructor asked her if she might bring it to class and recount its story and the questions it raised for her personally and as someone preparing for a professional career as an archivist. She agreed to do so.

At the front of the class she held up a single item, perhaps 1.5 by 2.5 inches. It was her father's South Vietnamese Army identity card. On the front were her father's photograph, name and other identification details, and on the back, his fingerprints. The student came from a Chinese (Hoa) family that had lived for several generations in Vietnam. Her father had been a soldier in the South Vietnamese Army, which was disbanded after the Americans evacuated with the fall of Saigon in 1975. Like so many of the former soldiers, he sought to escape falling into the hands of the North Vietnamese Communist forces that would have sent him to a "reeducation camp," or worse. With his wife and two children aged three and one (the student and her brother were born later in the USA), they paid a smuggler and left Vietnam illegally on a large fishing vessel. They sailed for about 2 weeks before landing in Thailand. During the trip, Thai pirates boarded and stole their valuables. They lived on the boat for a month at the dock, and then at a refugee camp for another month. A relative who was already in the USA sponsored the family who flew first to Hawaii, and then to Los Angeles. They finally arrived in 1979. For this assignment the student had asked her father if he might have anything she could use. She said he usually did not talk about the war, but he gave her this card and told her it was the only thing that he carried with him the entire time from the fall of Saigon until he settled in the USA. She asked him why he would carry this document that might have sealed his fate if he had been caught with it by the North Vietnamese? Why this document and not anything else? But he did not answer her.

This unanswered question was the one that also hung in the air in the classroom. The fact that the identity card held such power in and over the father's life unquestionably made the document valuable to him and his family, but did it make it collectable? Such cards are now collector's items for those interested in Vietnam War memorabilia, but was it something in which an archive might invest its precious resources? If so, how might an archive capture and represent the father's story of flight and why a single, small card was simultaneously so valuable and so dangerous to him?

Courses focusing on more canonical aspects of archival theory and practice and emphasizing the importance of context, collectivity and authenticity might well not spend much time mulling over such questions. Similarly courses addressing digitization and digital access often do not dwell on the semantics and affect of materiality and why viewing, even touching the physical object might supersede its utility and accessibility as a digitized object in terms of connecting certain archives users (for example, family or community members or schoolchildren) to the diasporic experience. Given Flinn's (2011) remarks about how community archives might approach such objects, one would assume that a course in community-based archiving would help students to answer such questions. Indeed in 2007, working in

collaboration with the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, the department implemented a course in Community-based Archives, possibly the first anywhere of its kind (Lau et al. 2012). The impetus for the course came from students who felt that issues of race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality were not being sufficiently addressed in archival theory and practice and also in the preparation of new archival professionals. The course also responded to the growing number of community archiving sites and initiatives in Los Angeles that were doing this work amid perceptions that more mainstream archival institutions were not interested or did not see the same values in the materials being archived as did community members. This has become a flagship elective course that works closely with local community archives and attracts students from several other departments on campus. Faculty and students have also undertaken a considerable amount of research and publishing expanding archival ideas about community archiving and its relationship to human rights objectives. Among the community archives initiatives featured in this course are the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA, [www.saada.org](http://www.saada.org)), which is distinctive in that it exists only in digital form and reaches out to the many diasporic South Asian communities in the USA, providing a place for them to share their stories and contribute digitized copies of materials in their personal archives (Caswell 2015); and the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine, and in particular its Vietnamese American Oral History Project led by Linda Trinh Vo and Thuy Vo Dang. Described in the local newspaper as “audacious,” the project seeks to capture the life stories of the different waves of Vietnamese Americans who settled in Southern California so that future generations will understand both the horrors of war and flight, and then the struggle to build new lives and identities as Americans (Kopetman 2015). This project, with its dynamic leaders and deep community participation and support is exemplary in the multifaceted and multidisciplinary ways in which it has approached both of these aspects that are so central to understanding the diasporic experience within and across generations.

The kinds of questions asked at the beginning of this paper, which emanate out of the authors’ own research and disciplinary and personal backgrounds with the experiences and trajectories of individuals and communities in the wake of violent conflicts, genocide and other human rights crises, and those so poignantly raised by the student who presented her father’s army identity card are not readily addressed through existing curricula, however. Not even by a course on community archiving. Like the growing community archiving movement, which in many ways has responded to inadequacies and inaction on the part of the mainstream archival field, and which increasingly challenges some of the field’s fundamental assumptions and structures, such research and experiences raise the need for new thinking and practices that will specifically address documentary, memory and identity issues associated with community and individual experiences—but in this case with emphases on the losses, movement and dispersal associated with forced migration, and on the multiple forms in which these are expressed and captured. Responding to the latter aspect as well as what we might individually bring to such a course, we decided that a team-taught transdisciplinary approach would work best. One of us is a cultural anthropologist and former Bosnian refugee who settled in Australia and



who researches politically motivated violence, forced migration, gendered displacement, memory studies, place-based identity politics and human rights. In his work he combines conventional, multisited and digital ethnography to identify how adults and young people in diaspora—as well as those who return to their original homeland—use narratives and digital technologies to build life stories about war, displacement, genocide, reconciliation and personal identity. The other, whose research is based in archival studies, is a Northern Irish native who moved to the USA during the Troubles. She uses a combination of ethnographic, metadata archeology and systems analysis and design approaches to examine recordkeeping and memory concerns in support of human rights and daily life in post-conflict settings, as well as to understand and support community-based archiving in migrant and immigrant communities.

### ***Migrating Memories: Diaspora, Archives and Human Rights***

From a pedagogical point of view, the course built upon our separate prior experiences with participative classroom approaches, experiential learning, field-based studies and action research as well as transdisciplinary education (Punzalan 2014; Halilovich et al. 2013). For several years Halilovich has brought Australian and other international students to a summer school in Srebrenica in Bosnia, while Gilliland had pioneered the community-based archives course and sends students to intern with archival and museum projects in many locations around the world with connections to communities in the USA. Seeking to expose as many as possible facets and manifestations of memory and identity and the role of different forms of documentation as they relate to diasporas resulting from conflicts, genocide and other human rights abuses and traumatic events, the course was consciously designed to integrate perspectives and methods across the social sciences, humanities and arts. It also aimed to build trust between, exploit the community knowledge, disciplinary backgrounds and personal experiences of and encourage engagement and reflexivity by all participants (including the instructors).

The course introduced students to the significance of memory in establishing diasporas. It explored the (re)construction of migrants' memories and identities as distinct transnational and trans-local practices taking place in both private and public domains, in reality and imagination, and in the realms of real and cyber space. It also explored various forms and practices, both tangible and intangible, of memory and memory work in migrant and refugee communities: from oral histories and testimonials to performative (re)enactments of memories (e.g., commemorations, exhibitions, art, literature, film) to the establishment of more formal memory structures such as archives, libraries, museums, monuments, and documentary, artistic and print production. The stated learning outcomes were that by the end of the course, students would be able to:

- Demonstrate understanding of the concept of diaspora and the dynamics involved in its formation;
- Demonstrate understanding of various forms of migration involving both voluntary and involuntary movements of people;



- Demonstrate understanding of the concept of genocide and how it affects the collective memory of survivors in diaspora;
- Demonstrate understanding of relationships between memory, diaspora and identity formation;
- Demonstrate understanding of multigenerational dimensions of diaspora communities and their dynamics;
- Demonstrate understandings of methodological, political and ethical challenges involved in working with diaspora communities, and appreciate community and grassroots work aimed at establishing various forms of archives and remembering after displacement; and,
- Discuss how archival and memory scholarship can assist in providing meaning, justice and healing in communities after violence and forced migration.

Twenty-two students completed the course,<sup>2</sup> 13 of whom were professional master's students in library and information science (LIS), 1 of whom was in a joint library and information studies and Latin American studies program, and the remaining 8 were doctoral students in anthropology, Chicana/o studies, English, education, gender studies, history and information studies. Such extensive cross-department enrollment is somewhat unusual for a UCLA postgraduate course and suggested that the course description had been informally circulated by faculty and students in other departments and that the topic was of disciplinary interest beyond archival studies. Indeed, several of the doctoral students stated that they had elected to take the course specifically because of its relevance to their dissertation research and that they had found nothing else similar available elsewhere. The multiple disciplines represented by students and faculty, as well as the mix of professional and doctoral students, contributed considerably to our original goal of opening up many different ways of, and reasons for understanding more about the topics covered by the course. What is more, several participants in the course also had direct personal experience with diasporic communities and forced migration that they increasingly brought into class discussion as the course progressed, thus contributing to the authenticity and immediacy of the course experience and also to our goal of creating a participative and shared learning environment.

## **Pedagogical and methodological approaches**

While we did not explicitly favor a single educational philosophy in the course delivery, or a particular set of methodological research approaches for research assignments, we did practice a combination of experiential, reflexive, action and peer-assisted learning in the classroom, thus fostering the social and emotional dimensions of learning. During the course, all students were required to undertake a fieldwork component involving a visit a community memory site or event, a local community repository, memorial or monument relevant to their individual research and disciplinary/professional interests. Sites or events that the students chose (they

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<sup>2</sup> A few doctoral students had to withdraw because of competing research commitments.

identified them themselves) included those addressing, either from an official or community perspective, legal aspects of immigration (e.g., Los Angeles Immigration Court, El Rescate—a legal aid and human rights facility for Salvadorean and other immigrant communities, and a legal aid facility in Oxnard County for migrant Mixteco field workers); community organizations (e.g., the Gabrielino/Tongva Cultural Center, and the Los Angeles Korean Youth Association); community memory and memorialization sites (e.g., the Armenian Genocide Martyrs Monument, and Little Tokyo and the Japanese American National Museum); community events (e.g., the celebration of a *quinceañera* of a young girl who had become a prominent figure in border communities' struggle against Arizona immigration politics after the government's attempted deportation of her parents, and *Día de Los Muertos* commemorations among a group of Chicana muralists who had been participants in the Chicana/o movement of the 1960s); and family gatherings (e.g., the memorial ceremony for a recently deceased grandmother within a Chinese-American family). Some students chose to conduct interviews or to otherwise participate at the site or event, while others observed and documented them through field notes and photography. As the students came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, we discussed the research methodologies and the challenges in the field with each of them in separate consultation sessions. The research approaches they employed ranged from auto-ethnography to participatory action research, to in-depth interviews, to conventional ethnography, testimonials and narrative analysis. The results were presented by the students in a variety of forms, genres and media.

Our aim was to highlight the importance of the spatial, social, experiential and emotional dimensions of learning and research. Broadly, we followed Kolb's (2015) model of experiential learning. In this model, the process begins with an experience ("concrete experience"), followed by reflection ("reflective observation"). The reflection is then assimilated into a theory ("abstract conceptualization") and finally these new (or reformulated) hypotheses are tested in new situations ("active experimentation"). The model is a recurring cycle within which the learner tests new concepts and modifies them as a result of the reflection and conceptualization (Kolb 2015). The attention is given to both external and internal experience; the first relating to material of learning (object, idea, concept, image, situation) and the latter to the experience that the learner brings to learning situation (prior knowledge, related ideas, feelings, meanings, beliefs). This brings us to reflexivity and the affective or emotional aspects of learning. We recognize that reflexivity and emotions do not come only at the end of a learning experience, but are involved in preparing for, learning from and giving meaning to experiences. As Jennifer Moon (2004) insists, emotions are integral part of learning and influence both the process of learning and the structure of knowledge. Hence the transformative dimension of experiential and reflexive learning methods leads to emotional insight where the emotional orientation of the person changes (Moon 2004).

To reinforce our commitment to this holistic approach of learning and multiple forms of expression, we gave students not only the choice of preparing a formal paper or developing a project or action plan addressing an issue encountered during fieldwork, but also encouraged them to choose a third option—to make a short film, audio essay, Web site or other multimedia form that related to one or more of the

themes covered in the course. Among the final assignments, in addition to written papers, we received two poems, one zine, one painting, video documentation of a community event, a community art exhibition and two digital action plan presentations.

The course met each Friday for 8 hours, over 5 weeks, rather than in the usual three and one half hour blocks over 10 weeks in which UCLA courses are usually offered. We had chosen the alternative format deliberately to allow us to create a more immersive and cohort-building classroom experience while still providing sufficient time for students to take on a mini-fieldwork component. We were also able to vary the tempo and emotional pitch of the classroom by moving between group discussions of assigned critical readings, watching and reacting to weekly film screenings, and reporting on fieldwork. The students had been given five works of fiction and creative non-fiction to read during their summer break prior to the commencement of the course (discussed below). They also had an additional 4 weeks beyond the actual class meetings to complete their assignments.

## Using fiction and film

We made the choice to integrate fiction, creative non-fiction and film in order to exercise issues of memory, documentation and archiving not just in terms of their political or demographic aspects, but, in the spirit of work in both contemporary cultural anthropology and archival studies that is addressing the human dimensions and dynamics of memory and identity, in particular those that are cultural, affective and generational. For students who might not have any firsthand connection with diasporic communities or the crises that precipitated such diasporas, we felt that this might prove to be a more effective way of conveying these dimensions and dynamics than focusing solely on critical readings, and would take advantage of other learning modes such as visual learning. Using fiction and film also allowed for certain aspects of the diasporic experience to be surfaced that are often submerged in more critical and theoretical work, as well as in professional practice, especially the affective and the spiritual (the following section provides specific detail on the kinds of themes that arose). This approach additionally acknowledged how creativity in literary, filmic and artistic productions emanating out of diasporic experiences can be both authentic expressions and archives of experiences in themselves and important commentary on and enriching augmentations to official archives where migrants and their lives are only captured to the extent that they interacted with bureaucratic processes (Gilliland 2014a).

While aiming to provide a variety of genres and formats as “reading material” to speak to the various disciplinary backgrounds of our student cohort, when selecting the “reading” and “viewing” sources for the class, we looked into what kind of memory work is found in and about different diaspora communities. These ranged from travel documents and photographs to memoirs, film and works of fiction to the more conventional scholarly and professional literature. Even though it would be hard to claim representativeness from every diaspora across the globe, the material selected did, in one way or another, refer to all continents as either places of

departure or destination (or both) as well as a variety of displacement and emplacement experiences. We also sought out material that specifically addressed intra-community dynamics and distinctions, such as gendered experiences and inter-generational relationships.

## Emergent themes

The students were given five works to read during their summer break prior to the beginning of the course. All the books were written by authors who were themselves refugees or children or grandchildren of those who came to the USA after escaping genocide and hostile political regimes in different regions of the world. *Native Speaker* (1995) by Chang-Rae Lee centers around a Korean American industrial spy and his struggles with generational differences within his own family and the unspoken effects on his parents of the Korean regime they left behind, his own interracial marriage, racism and local politics. Lee, a professor of creative writing at Princeton University, left Korea with his family in 1963 at the age of 3. Andrew Lam's *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (2005) is a collection of autobiographical essays. The son of a South Vietnamese Army general, Lam escaped Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and settled in California at the age of 11. Today he is one of the country's most prominent Vietnamese American authors. Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005) tells the story of a Polish Jew who escapes the Holocaust and comes to the USA to find the woman with whom he was in love as a teenager in Poland. His story moves backwards and forwards in time and place, and intertwines with that of a 15-year-old New York girl, "young Alma." Krauss is the granddaughter of German and Eastern European Jewish immigrants to England, Israel and New York. She dedicates her novel to her four grandparents who, she says, "taught me the opposite of disappearing." Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* (2008) tells the story of a writer, Brik, who, like Hemon himself, came to Chicago from Sarajevo as a young man on a visit and was unable to return when the Bosnian War broke out. Brik becomes obsessed with writing the story of Lazarus Averbuch, a young Jew who escaped the 1903 Kishinev pogrom in what is now Moldova and also came to Chicago. Chris Bohjalian is the grandson of survivors of the Armenian Genocide. His *The Sandcastle Girls* (2012) also depicts and intertwines both an historical and a contemporary story relating to the Genocide and its transgenerational and transnational legacy.

In the first class meeting we discussed the themes we saw emerging out of and across these five books, noting these as cues to be alert to in our critical readings, film screenings and fieldwork, and beginning to contemplate what these might mean for archival practices and other memory projects. Among the most prominent themes were the interweaving in the narrators' accountings of past and present, the overall prominence of narrative and storytelling, and their inverse—meaningful or multivalent silences. The intertwined narratives in each of the novels also illustrated how different people experienced and remembered the same event differently.

*Perfume Dreams* (2005) opens with a particularly evocative passage that highlighted an affective preoccupation with photographs lost, taken and unexpectedly discovered that featured in several of the novels:

When I was eleven years old, I did an unforgivable thing. I set my family photos on fire. We were living in Saigon at the time, and as Viet Cong tanks rolled toward the edge of the city, my mother, half-crazed with fear, ordered me to get rid of everything incriminating.

Obediently I removed pictures from the album pages, diplomas from their glass frames, film reels from metal cannisters, letters from desk drawers. I put them in a pile in the backyard and lit a match. When I was done, the mementos of three generations had turned into ashes.

Only years later in America did I begin to regret the act. A few pictures survived because my older brother, who was a foreign student, had taken them with him. But why didn't I save the rest the way I slipped my stamp collection in my backpack hours before we boarded the C-130 cargo plane and headed for Guam? For years I could not look at friends' family photo albums without feeling remorse (p.1).

Lam (2005) notes that he still has a recurring dream about rescuing the photographs.

Photographs are not the only documents featured in the books and archives often explicitly present. For example, Bohjalian's (2012) character, Laura, wishes to use her grandparents' papers to tell their story. Her husband and the Armenian curator of the Peabody disagree. What her grandmother had written for the Armenian Society was fair game as it was intended for public dissemination, but her grandparents had chosen to keep much else of what happened secret. Laura is, however, determined (p. 271). As she told her brother, who was concerned about inflaming political tensions, "my grandparents' story deserves to be told, regardless of their nationalities" (p.178). For Hemon's (2008) Brik, God is the ultimate rememberer or archive (p. 107), but for Krauss's (2005) Leo, the library is the definitive arbiter of who is known or not known or who exists and who does not. Krauss's (2005) contemporary girl character, young Alma, goes to the New York City (NYC) Department of Health in search of Leo's former love, also called Alma.

One thing that fiction can do very effectively, and better than most records and archives, is to provide a multidimensional rendering of individuals as they move in and across time and space. It can depict lives as they were before characters became victims and refugees and came to be represented primarily in official records in terms of this one characteristic or demographic. It can also jump with ease backward and forward thus facilitating particular connections being drawn between different moments and places in characters' lives. Speaking to this multidimensionality and the texture and individuality of recollection, Hemon's (2008) novel carefully emphasizes how everyone has little memories as well as war memories, and how those memories are also divided into before, during and post the war: "There is always a before and an after" (p. 46). It also notes how communities can be divided between those who lived through the war and especially through defining experiences such as the siege of Sarajevo, and those who did not. Time features

in his novel in other ways also, such as the unnaturalness of people dying out of birth order (p. 44) and the irrevocable changes that time and conflict effect on landscapes: “So many things had vanished that it was impossible to know what was missing” (p. 46).

Lam (2005), Lee (1995) and Krauss’s (2005) works all depict how highly competent, accomplished or high-status individuals can be culturally or socially incapacitated or rendered insignificant in a new country, unable to exercise their talents and qualifications, even though their children raised in the USA may go on to be recognized for theirs. A related theme is the inutility and inadequacy of migrants’ mother language in another country, as well as the distance and silences that exist between parents and children in the new country—subjects and experiences that cannot be broached, feelings and love that are not communicated, and concepts and cultural mores that may only be expressed in the parent language and not in the English that becomes the first language of the children.

The films that we selected to show in class were all documentaries that told a diaspora story of personal relevance to the filmmaker or narrator. Several captured journeys between lands, both leaving and returning home, and the memories and emotions involved although they took very different narrative and esthetic approaches. We followed each screening with a discussion of the themes we saw emerging and how these reinforced or diverged from those we had extracted from our readings. We also discussed the ways in which media, esthetics and directorial intent had influenced how those themes were conveyed.

*My Journey Home* (2004) followed Andrew Lam as he returned for the first time to his family’s former home in Vietnam and his struggles with his own sense of loss and identity. This documentary allowed students to relate Lam’s written reflections on coming to the USA as a teenager and taking on his American identity, with his on-screen reactions upon returning to Vietnam now as a successful author. *New Year Baby* (2006) recounts another child of diaspora’s trip back to Southeast Asia, in this case, filmmaker Socheata Poenv. Poenv was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and persuaded her family to make a visit back from Texas where they settled to their native Cambodia. In the course of this experience, significant silences are exposed and then family secrets uncovered related to what had happened to the family under the Pol Pot regime and how this had affected their subsequent lives and identity as a family in the USA. *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010) directed and narrated by prominent Chilean director Patricio Guzmán, examines seemingly parallel, but, as it is revealed, actually interacting activities of two different groups in the Atacama Desert. One is the community of scientists who are using the world’s most powerful telescopes to search the clear skies in the mountains for evidence of the distant past of the universe. The other are the Chilean women, now themselves growing old, who continue to search on foot across the desert floor for any traces of loved ones who disappeared under the Pinochet regime of the 1970s and 1980s. The film juxtaposes important differences in goals and emotions relating to the passage of time and the quest to uncover traces of the past, just as it juxtaposes the technology and excitement of big science with the excruciating, meticulous, never ending search of the women in a desert that is strewn not only with fragments of Pinochet’s victims, but also with mummified

remains from prior civilizations of much older migrants and travelers through the desert. *Sathima's Windsong* (2012) was directed by Daniel Yon, an ethnographer and filmmaker based in the departments of anthropology and education at York University in Canada. He traces the double diaspora experience of jazz singer Sathima Bea Benjamin from the South Atlantic island of Saint Helena, where he himself was born, to Cape Town and then to New York. Sathima's memories of and pining for Cape Town, which she was forced to leave because of the country's anti-Apartheid regime, are expressed through her song. However, the story of her career first in South Africa and subsequently in New York also surfaces, as do those of both Poeuv's mother and father in *New Year Baby*, a clearly gendered diasporic experience. *They Were Promised the Sea* (2012), directed and narrated by Kathy Wazana, looks at the complex identities of her own family and a community of Arab Jews who had lived together for thousands of years in Morocco and then moved to Israel. The documentary, with its evocative photography of the Moroccan landscape and use of Andalusian and Sephardic music performed in Arabic, Hebrew and Ladino, as CBC notes, unleashed "a complex web of questions about dual identity, political opportunism, and the challenges faced by those torn between Homeland and Promised Land" (n.d.).

The fact that the films employed a range of metaphors and media, for example, song, landscape and astronomy, and emphasized themes such as leaving, returning to and longings for homeland; gendered experiences in diaspora; and complicated relationships and secrets and silences between immigrant parents and children who grew up in the USA, emphasized the multifaceted ways in which diaspora, memory, and relationships with and recovery of the past are integrally woven through the lives of individuals and families in diaspora across both time and space. The films also especially reinforced the affect of this experience, and, in class discussions following screenings gradually also drew personal stories and connections from all the class participants.

## Conclusion

By challenging and encouraging our students to approach this class in an experiential and reflexive way, we also took some risks and challenged ourselves as instructors not only to adequately design and deliver the content of the course and assess its outcomes through a variety of different assignments, but also to create a safe learning space that permitted deep affective engagement with that content. The overwhelmingly positive feedback by the students confirmed that the risks were worthwhile. Many students confessed that this was the first time in years that that they had a "valid excuse" to read fiction and were surprised at how personally rewarding and professionally enriching they had found the experience to be. Viewing the films together in class proved to be particularly powerful and moving, and even after 8 hours, late on a Friday afternoon, students lingered in the classroom to talk about how they had been affected by that day's contents. It also helped to build a sense of cohort within a class of students with very different backgrounds and career objectives. In debriefing at the end of the course, the students emphasized



how much more nuanced and yet holistic their learning experience had been by being exposed to so many disciplinary perspectives and learning modes. Several indicated that this had been a personally and professionally transformative experience and that they would look at community memory and identity, their professional responsibilities, and their own positionality very differently in the future.

On a final note, an event occurred after the end of the course that brought us in some ways full circle. Following an interview about the course that was published by the School, we were contacted by Andrew Lam to tell us how gratified he was to see UCLA teaching a course like this and in particular, that we had chosen to integrate his writing into a course in archival studies. He offered to come to UCLA to meet with the students and talk further about his experiences. At the end of April 2015, he presented a colloquium that also marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fall of Saigon and the day when he, as a boy, had fled Vietnam. Augmenting his discussion in *Perfume Dreams* (2005) about how Vietnamese in refugee camps in Hong Kong would have to give testimony or tell “stories” about their experiences to officials who would decide whether or not they would be granted asylum or repatriated to Vietnam, he suggested an answer to the student’s question about why her father had carried with him his military identity card, and only that. Perhaps it was because the same document that would mean “reeducation,” imprisonment or death if he were returned to Vietnam was the one document that could convince those officials that he had a *bona fide* case that he would be persecuted if he returned and therefore should be granted asylum. That single small card, one item, literally held the power of life or death for him. Undoubtedly a record on its face as a military identity card, it is also a record both in terms of its power over the individual to which it relates and the refugee decision-making in which it participated. Now it has some of its story reattached, what should the archivist do with it?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that formal processes for granting asylum to refugees in the U.S. were not established until 1980, when the U.S. Refugee Act was passed. Prior to 1980, refugees were either admitted under special programs, or had to go through the regular immigration process. Refugees from Vietnam were admitted under the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, and subsequent acts. Although they did not have to go through the same process that asylum seekers have to go through today in terms of establishing a “well-founded fear” in order to be admitted to the U.S., Lam’s account in *Perfume Dreams* makes abundantly clear that Vietnamese in refugee camps were very likely to be sent back to Vietnam if their “stories” did not hold up to official scrutiny. Nevertheless, the student’s father’s identity card might carry even more weight in an asylum application today.

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