

## A Key to Home: Illuminating the Role of the SIM Card in Refugee Resettlement

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Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration

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Article abstract

This paper considers how creative research mediated by mobile devices might contribute to upending inherited notions of refugee powerlessness and passivity in galleries and museums. A collaborative project, undertaken in 2019, explored the significance of SIM cards in forging a sense of security, identity, and belonging for Syrian refugees on a resettlement program in the U.K. This “opening up” the “body” of the smartphone in the process of creating artworks reveals the urgent need for deeper appreciation of the meaning and materiality of personal digital ecosystems (Blanke & Pybus 2020) for refugees negotiating a sense of home.

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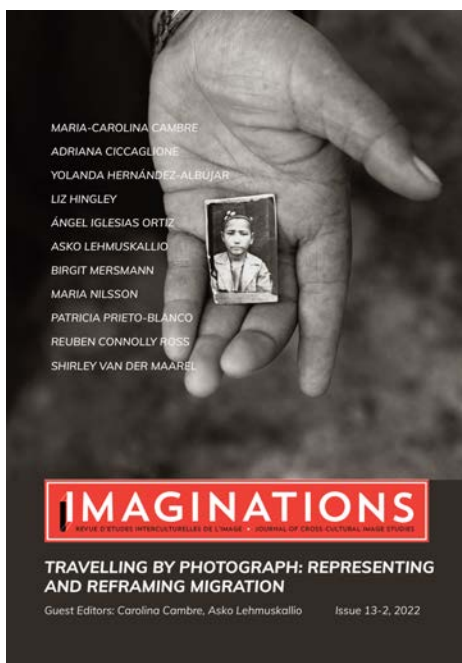
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## Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration

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Cover image: Fazal Sheikh's presentation of a  
portrait shown to him in 1997 at an Afghan  
refugee village in Ghazi, Northern Pakistan, of a  
child killed in Soviet bombardment © Fazal Sheikh

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## A KEY TO HOME: ILLUMINATING THE ROLE OF THE SIM CARD IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

LIZ HINGLEY

This paper considers how creative research mediated by mobile devices might contribute to upending inherited notions of refugee powerlessness and passivity in galleries and museums. A collaborative project, undertaken in 2019, explored the significance of SIM cards in forging a sense of security, identity, and belonging for Syrian refugees on a resettlement program in the U.K. This “opening up” the “body” of the smartphone in the process of creating artworks reveals the urgent need for deeper appreciation of the meaning and materiality of personal digital ecosystems (Blanke & Pybus 2020) for refugees negotiating a sense of home.

Cet article examine la manière dont une recherche créatrice réalisée à l'aide de smartphones peut contribuer à renverser dans les galeries d'art et les musées les notions d'impuissance et de passivité ressenties par les réfugiés. Un projet collaboratif, entrepris en 2019, a exploré le rôle des cartes SIM pour forger un sentiment de sécurité, d'identité, et d'appartenance parmi des réfugiés syriens participant à un programme de relocalisation au Royaume-Uni. Cette “ouverture” du “corps” du smartphone au cours du processus de création artistique révèle le besoin urgent d'une appréciation plus profonde de la signification et de la matérialité des écosystèmes numériques personnels (Blanke & Pybus 2020) pour les réfugiés qui tentent de reconstruire un sentiment d'appartenance.



Gold plated silver SIM artwork/ Key to Coventry Cathedral

## INTRODUCTION

The text and subsequent sequence of photographs in this essay must be viewed together; they are necessarily complementary, and of equal importance, in my material approach to investigating ways that the networked infrastructure of smartphones expand the meaning of home and identity for refugees.<sup>1</sup>

This creative research project was developed in 2019 with the aim of using visual ethnography to contextualize and better understand the experiences, values, needs, and aspirations of Syrian refugees settling in the United Kingdom. In response to an invitation from the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry to make portraits of individuals who had recently arrived from Syria, I proposed to co-create and exhibit artworks in response to the museum's existing collection and dialogue with local Syrians. I sought to subvert common constructions of difference and impersonal depictions of "vulnerability" and "powerlessness" in existing photography depicting migration (Chouliaraki & Stolić 2019), and instead offer a creative opportunity without a dictated course of action or outcome, the process of

which might contribute to both the experience and understanding of resettlement.

Coventry has the highest rate of population growth of any U.K. city outside of London, and migration is the main driver of this growth. Immigration has always been a part of Coventry's reality, and it has become a particularly important feature of the city's economic transformation in recent years (Griffith & Mackela 2017). At the time of this project, Coventry had welcomed hundreds of refugees on The Syrian Vulnerable People's Resettlement Scheme, a unique program designed by the local Citizens Advice Bureau, Coventry Law Centre, and the Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre (CRMC), facilitated in collaboration with The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Refugees are greeted at the airport by representatives of the city council and CRMC. Within four hours of their arrival, they are given a package with their name on; this contains a key to their new home, a library card, and a mobile phone SIM card charged with £20 credit. These items are carefully considered for their potential to make meaningful new connections, provide a sense of autonomy and mobility, as well as granting access (to one's home, to the library, to regional digital infrastructures). One man, who had a successful career as a lawyer in Syria, took a job supporting newly arrived refugees and shaping the program of welcome with the CRMC. He observed the "extreme happiness" at the moment they put the U.K. SIM card in their smartphones, "connection and communication is everything, the best gift." These small material artifacts are the site in which networked connectivity is enacted, setting off a chain of reactions that both augment the sociality and data memory of users. One young man I talked to described the experience:

"Receiving the package was like an incredible feeling of welcome and acknowledgement that someone was thinking of us... When I first arrived my SIM card from Jordan stopped working and I felt totally out of touch with the world. When I got a U.K. SIM card I began to feel part of this country... All my family and friends were waiting for news. The first thing I did was call them and send them pictures of my new bedroom."

## SMARTPHONE SUITCASES

**D**uring informal meetings at the CRMC, as well as the central City Library, I met and fostered relationships with Syrian refugees who had arrived to Coventry within the previous two years. In groups and individually, we discussed what material items they value in creating and maintaining a sense of home. Few mentioned or could recollect any belongings they retained on their journey to the U.K. from Syria, apart from their smartphone. All individuals had either their own smartphone or agreed access to one owned by family or friends. They noted their increased use of smartphones since arriving to the U.K. Such an observation is consistent with Gillespie et al.'s (2016, 2) characterization of the smartphone as, "an essential tool for refugees." In one meeting Abdul summed up his feelings: "The phone is life, the phone is the suitcase."

The SIM card gifted on arrival unlocks the "smartphone suitcase," connecting it to local carriers and thus enabling contact with scattered family and friends, personal data memories, as well as apps, which facilitate functioning in a new place. The SIM can be viewed as a unique key to access regional digital infrastructures, theorized as "signal territories" by media scholar Lisa Parks (2013). A signal territory is anchored within, yet not isomorphic with, state bounds; it connects with a digital global network, thus locating, orientating and transcending geographical borders. A SIM card activates a phone number, which provides a permanent location and secure contact base that works far better than a postal address today. Whereas earlier generations of migrants turned to photo studios, postcards and postal services to record and send images back home, now a quick snap on the phone camera, posted onto WhatsApp, immediately communicates everyday life. However, this channel of connection has limitations and is part of learning a new way of life, as one man described:

"It took me and the others (refugees arriving at the same time) around four months to work out where to go to top up our SIM cards with credit and how to communicate what we needed. We were very careful with our credit. The periods of connec-

tion were like windows onto a new life in Coventry between here, and family and friends not here.”

My conversations identified how refugees sought to maintain existing relationships and forge new ones, through what Blanke and Pybus (2020) call the fabric of the mobile phone ecosystem—the open infrastructures of the web and the enclosed walled environments of platforms, apps, and personal data. Most participants emphasized the vital role of Google Maps and Google Translate in navigating their new lives in Coventry. A few spoke of using the messaging app Next Door Neighbour to build relationships with their new local community by running errands for neighbours in need. Transnational emotional relationships were once mediated through letter writing and postal services (Thomas & Znaniecki 1996), more recent work notes the “vital role of the telephone” among asylum seekers (Leung et al. 2009, 7), and Uimonen (2013) discusses the role of place bound internet cafes for maintaining strong ties and keeping up to date with world news. Those I encountered in Coventry explained that they relied on the city library for public internet access when they lacked credit to connect their SIM card or wanted to stream Syrian films and cartoons, which a number of participants noted “transported” them to a feeling of “home.” However, this point of connection cannot compare to the critical sense of autonomy and physical intimacy afforded by the personal smartphone. One woman participant elaborated:

“It [the smartphone] is a part of myself and part of my personality—it is like a vital body part—it helps me mentally to feel alive [...] I can say that it gives me a much bigger feeling of freedom than a car or bike...”

The proliferation of accessible personal digital devices in recent years challenges us to consider the data communicated through and archived within mobile devices as tactile representations of shared emotional experiences, akin to physical letters or photographic prints. In linking Syrian networks of belonging to regional digital infrastructures, the networked infrastructure afforded by the SIM card

on mobile devices can extend the feeling of presence in a new place. This draws on the work of David Conradson and Deirdre McKay (2007), who insist that migrant subjects are multiply located, with strong senses of attachment and responsibility to family, friends, and place. They assert the importance of emotions and feelings in understanding both mobility and placement in social life. In McKay's study of a Filipino family, located in Hong Kong and the Philippines, she describes this as a "translocal field of intimacy [that] elaborates on previous co-present relations" (2007, 191). The immediacy of digital connection can enable an intense embodied *presencing* of others as near-perpetual companions in life (Frosh 2018). For the refugees I met in Coventry, the networked connection afforded by the SIM card represents contradictory feelings of both empowerment and fragility, proximity, and distance. It nourishes a sense of intimacy with scattered loved ones, as well as facilitating new experiences and knowledge that draws them apart. As one woman shared:

"In the first few weeks I took photographs of everything with my phone and shared them online until the credit ran out. It was all so new and exciting to try to understand and explain to my family and friends. But now I deliberately don't share because it hurts. It hurts me because I want them to be here, and it hurts them because they want to be here."

## METHODS IN MAKING

The project engaged approximately 30 people including a core group of ten who created the artworks, five women and five men between the ages of 15 and 60. The concept of the SIM card artwork developed in response to informal conversations with participants about the objects they most value in creating and maintaining a sense of home, as well as explorations of the Coventry City archives. As discussed above, the SIM card gifted on arrival to the city is seen to symbolize independence in a new place and understanding of self in relation to past, present, and future. A participant articulated, "The sim card is like the petrol in the car, the phone is the car. I would feel imprisoned without it."



The reflective and relational nature of art making informed and enriched our exchanges, understanding of each other, and outcomes. In most meetings an interpreter assisted when translation was required, but our non-verbal communications, mediated by mobile phones and drawings, proved the most engaged and insightful. In person and through WhatsApp messages, participants shared pictures of themselves, their friends, and locations in Syria, as well as photographs they had taken in the process of discovering and mapping Coventry. Photographs as repositories of history and memory acquired new dimensions when incorporated into descriptions of their new life in the city. The weather and terrain in Syria and the U.K. were compared through photographs of sun-bleached, semi-rural landscapes, and those of Coventry's famed post-war architecture set under rather greyer skies. Participants were also invited to share feelings and stories by drawing. This responsive process of making became vital to my perception of their current values, connections, and struggles.

The anthropologists of material culture Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam emphasize the role of learning by doing, ethnographic analysis of the embodied creativity and improvisation inherent in making is a mutual learning process (Ingold 2013). The participants' drawings illustrated ambitions for their lives in the U.K., they revealed family networks and professional skills. Our dialogue circled around their eager desires to tangibly contribute to the city of Coventry. These desires included, among many other things, setting up the city's first Syrian restaurant and cookery school, as well as offering their skills in the arts of calligraphy, music, and hairdressing.

A few Syrian women were keen to have portraits taken in their "Coventry clothes." Muna explained that she felt liberated from the more formal expectations of women's dress in Syria and wanted to promote this freedom within the Syrian community online. She dreamt of establishing a clothes design business for Muslim women in the U.K. fusing Middle Eastern and British styles. One man proudly asked me to photograph his daughter in her Taekwondo outfit, a sport she had taken up on arriving to Coventry, so that he could share it on WhatsApp. He explained how the networked smartphone is essential for his family to maintain and develop their "two selves":

“It is a way for my children to remember the faces, the places, the language of Syria, and for our family to build a secure future life here.”

I organized a group tour of the Herbert’s archives for the participants to consider how artifacts narrate the stories of people who have shaped the city’s story. We were particularly drawn to the stories emanating from the extensive collection of keys dating from the 12<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century. In medieval Coventry esteemed residents and visitors were presented with a “Key to the City,” as a symbolic gesture of welcome, empowerment, and connection. We decided to base our archival artworks on the design of the SIM card, the contemporary welcome gift, which acts as a key to unlocking a networked sense of identity and fostering feelings of “home,” emotions that are essential to imagined futures, as Yuval-Davis (2011, 9) describes in her investigative book on the politics of belonging. This precious SIM card also signifies the complexity of resettlement and conflicting feelings of attachment to their new lives in Coventry, and ties to loved ones who do not share the same spatiotemporality.

I commissioned a silversmith to make replica SIMs in solid silver. The participants’ designs based on their drawings were engraved onto the SIMs, as presented in the photographs below. To mirror the codes on the back of standard SIM cards, participants submitted meaningful numerical configurations, such as dates of arrival in Coventry, deaths of loved ones in Syria, and birth dates. The use of silver was symbolic; refined silver smithing is a craft with which the city of Coventry has long associations, and silver is also the most conductive metal—an emblem of connection. The sculptures were gold plated to replicate the layer of gold on actual SIM cards and to emphasize their treasured emotional and practical value today. In the exhibition the SIMs, engraved with the experiences, needs, and aspirations of recently arrived Syrian refugees, were presented alongside selected keys from the museum’s collection dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> through to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The new artifacts were also acquired by the Herbert collection.

Participants requested that the SIM artifacts be fashioned into pendants to wear around the neck, and that I make professional portraits of them. The SIM pendants that sit close to the skin draw attention to how meaning and matter entangle. Ideas arising in dialogue likened the smartphone to a limb, and the use of it akin to blinking or breathing. Deborah Lupton argues that materializations and extensions, alternative ways of knowing and enacting bodies and selves, are central to selfhood. Lupton (2016) sees our personal digital data as reliquaries of our humanity, testament to our lived experiences and unique identity. In this case, the SIM pendants, engraved with personal numbers and visual messages, materialize the sensitivity of this matter in an intimately worn item and highlight the ways that our digital data and devices are vulnerable to identification and control.

### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

**T**his investigation touched on the symbolic, emotional, and practical value of the SIM card as the overlooked backbone of modern mobile communication—a key to unlocking transnational as well as local networks, fabricating personal data and imagined futures. This preliminary creative research revealed a responsibility to better attend to the unfolding and generative ways that humans and smartphone infrastructures intermesh in academic research, resettlement programmes and museum collections.

The collaboration built on previous studies with refugee migrant groups that cite the fundamental role digital technology can play in building social capital, and hence social inclusion (Alam & Imran 2015). Our critical “opening-up” of the smartphone will contribute to ongoing investigations that seek ways to materially express the multidimensional agency and sense of belonging afforded by the SIM card. This minute overlooked artifact enables individuals to make connections across place and time, facilitating a sense of identity and belonging. The research participants and I view the SIM card as a precious and evolving storyboard of intimate relationships.

Following the amplified reliance on networked mobile devices during the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential for severe isolation has

been thrown into the spotlight, as well as questions over the tracking of private data by governments and tech companies. Recent literature on the ethics of data use questions whether and how it is possible to balance the right to privacy with the right to be protected from harm, and the right to be left alone with the right to be seen (Taylor 2016). From the moment of connection via the intimate mobile device, refugees are thrust forth from powerlessness to possibility and dependence. A number of U.K.-based migration charities (Bristol Refugee Rights, CMRC) and scholars (Felsberger & Subramanian 2021) are currently campaigning for mobile internet access to be addressed in relation to other human rights. This emerging discourse over the right to mobile internet access, also recognized by the World Health Organisation (2017), demonstrates a shift in global understanding of what makes us human and the contemporary meaning of home and belonging.

In response to Leurs's & Smets's (2018, 1) thoughtful call for "a reflexive politics of knowledge production," I will close by asking, how might we better include the networked materiality of digital data and smartphones in narrating and archiving contemporary stories of migration?





Keys of Coventry in chronological order, 11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century, from the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery Collection


I am a hairdresser. To me the  
Sound of scissors is like music.  
In Syria I made money with my  
Scissors to build my house and  
support my family.  
I am still waiting to be able to  
use my scissors here.

Fadi  
42  
Hame countryside



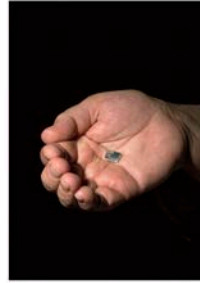


$\infty$   
This symbol is about the infinity of love.  
When the two lines are closed the love is together  
and complete.  
In this picture I drew the lines open because  
I am not allowed to marry my boyfriend.  
The birds represent freedom they take my  
love to him.  
My family is not together in this country.  
I am not able to marry until they are  
reconnected as my mother needs me.  
Lilaf Shekmanus.  
20 years old.  
Stria-Qameshie.









Installation of Keys, Sim Card artifacts, Light box photographs, The Herbert Gallery,  
Coventry 2019

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## NOTES

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