SURVIVOR-CENTRED VISUAL NARRATIVES

WAR CHILDHOOD MUSEUM

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Survivor-Centred Archival Toolkit

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Introduction

This toolkit was developed from direct practice. It draws on the experience of the War Childhood Museum (WCM) and the Survivor-Centred Narratives (SCVN) project, specifically the Yugoslav Wars Research Cluster, in which a WCM researcher served as community liaison, facilitating collaboration between Almasa Salihović, a survivor of the Srebrenica genocide, and Anneli Furmark, a Swedish graphic novelist.

It serves as a record of what careful, ethical, survivor-centred work looked like in practice. As such, it is not exhaustive and does not claim to resolve every tension that arises in this kind of work. Future researchers should treat it as a living document and are encouraged to add to it, revise it where their experience differs, and share what they learn.

This toolkit is the third in a series produced by the Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives project. It assumes familiarity with the theoretical grounding covered in the *Trauma-Informed Research Toolkit* (Public Humanities Hub/University of Victoria, 2023) and the *Art and Testimony Toolkit* (Public Humanities Hub/University of Victoria, 2024). It focuses on practice: what does this work actually look like?

Core Principles

All decisions made throughout the process described in this toolkit are underpinned by the following principles.

Consent is an ongoing relationship. Informed consent in survivor-centred work is not a document signed at the beginning of a project. It is an ongoing conversation, revisited at each stage of the process. At each milestone, ask yourself: Does the survivor know what is happening with their material right now, and have they genuinely agreed to it?

Testimony is not a neutral event. Recollection of past events can re-activate trauma in ways that are not always foreseeable. Recognise when a session needs to slow down, pause, or end. Sit with what arises rather than attempting to resolve it.

Accurate rendering is a form of ethical work. Cultural specificities, names, places, and historical events are an important part of the record. When testimony travels into creative or public forms, take responsibility for the accuracy of the culturally specific references it carries. Verifying what you do not know is an act of care and respect for the survivor's authority over their own narrative.

Stewardship, not ownership. Archival materials — recordings, transcripts, testimonies, and the stories they contain — belong to the individuals and communities who created them. Our role is stewardship. Custody of their materials does not confer ownership. Every decision about how materials are held, described, and accessed must be made with this in mind.

The archive documents the process. What is collected as a result of documentation is only part of the record. How decisions were made, why certain materials were withheld, and how relationships shaped the work are also archival acts. Documenting the how and why behind what was collected is a commitment to accountability to the survivor, the communities whose histories are held in the archive, and to future researchers and archivists.

Acquisition

In survivor-centred projects, acquisition is part of the relational work, shaped by the same principles of care, participation, and survivor authority that govern everything else. Before any materials are gathered, establish a clear and documented scope: what kinds of materials will be collected, what falls outside scope, and how decisions about inclusion will be made. This typically includes session recordings and transcripts, creative drafts and final outputs, fact-check logs and cultural annotation notes, correspondence relating to consent decisions, and process documentation. It may also include personal materials shared by the survivor, such as photographs, if they choose to contribute them. Determine what to collect collaboratively with the survivor. Not everything produced in the course of a project needs to enter the permanent archive. Appraisal should be made transparently and with the survivor's involvement.

Provenance

In collaborative projects involving both a survivor and a creative collaborator, provenance becomes more complex. The creative outputs — sketches, drafts, the final artwork — are produced by the creative collaborator, but they draw directly on the survivor's testimony and memory. The recorded testimony belongs to the survivor; the artistic interpretation belongs to the artist; and some materials sit at the intersection of both. Address these distinctions explicitly in the acquisition documentation. The archive should be able to answer clearly what is testimony, what is creative interpretation, and where the two are intertwined.

Where a cluster's materials sit within a larger multi-partner project archive, provenance principles require that the cluster's identity be maintained. Yugoslav cluster materials should remain identifiable records produced through a specific collaboration, in a specific context, with a specific survivor, rather than being absorbed into an undifferentiated project collection, where their particularity may be lost.

Grounding the Work

Survivor-centred archival work begins with the community whose history is being documented. It relies, at every stage, on that community's knowledge, self-description, and authority over their own narrative.

The stories that enter the historical record, the language used to describe them, and the institutions that hold them have rarely been determined by the communities those records claim to represent. As a result, archival silences are a map of whose knowledge has been deemed legitimate, whose testimony has been considered worth preserving, and whose self-depiction has been trusted. Communities affected by genocide, mass violence, and forced displacement have too often been the subjects of archives rather than their authors: recorded, categorised, and interpreted by institutions that held neither their cultural knowledge nor their trust.

Work from the premise that the community holds knowledge you cannot access from the outside. The community and the survivor hold primary knowledge of language and its registers, of cultural specificities, of what silences in testimony signal and what disclosure costs. This knowledge shapes what materials can be collected, what descriptions are accurate, and what forms of access are appropriate.

Commit to a participatory approach, one in which community members are not simply the subjects of the archive but active participants in shaping it. Involve survivors in decisions about what is collected, how it is described, who may access it, and on what terms. Protect the survivor’s archival sovereignty: allow space for survivors to name their own experience, choose their own language, and determine what enters the record.

Before meeting the survivor, invest substantial time in historical context, cultural specificity, and community sensitivity. Know the specific events the survivor experienced, identify gaps in your knowledge of language, naming conventions, geography, religious and communal practices, and memory culture before they become gaps in the record. Understand the specific sensitivities around how this particular community's history is discussed, represented, and archived, and continue learning throughout.

Establishing the Relationship with the Survivor

Do not treat the first meeting as a preliminary interview. It is a space for the survivor to develop a sense of who you are, what the project is, and whether they feel safe enough to proceed.

Explain the project clearly, including its purpose, its outputs, who will have access to what, and what the survivor's rights are throughout. Ask what the survivor already knows about the project and address any misconceptions or concerns directly. Do not record early meetings unless the survivor has specifically agreed to this in advance. Be transparent about your own position: your institutional affiliation, your role in the project, and what you will and will not have control over. Leave time for the survivor to ask questions. Take all questions seriously, regardless of how they are framed.

Ongoing Consent

Before any recording begins, establish clearly how consent will work throughout the project. Ensure the survivor understands that they can stop a session at any point for any reason without explanation and that they will be consulted at each major milestone before anything is shared more widely.

Some survivors will express their wishes directly. Others may defer to the researcher's judgment, not wanting to cause difficulty, or may not anticipate how a particular disclosure could affect them later. Agreeableness is not the same as full, free consent. Develop an independent protective judgment — a conservative threshold for what gets shared or passed to creative collaborators — that does not depend entirely on whether the survivor has raised a concern.

If you are uncertain whether a piece of information could be misused, misinterpreted, or render the survivor unnecessarily vulnerable, do not share it. The default position is always protection, not disclosure. When the survivor asks for advice on how to proceed, recognise this as a signal of trust. Before passing any material forward, ask yourself: Does sharing this serve the survivor's interests in being represented accurately and with dignity, or does it primarily serve the

project's interests in completeness or detail? Document your reasoning whenever you make a protective decision, so future researchers and archivists can understand the logic behind what was and was not shared.

Legal Framework: Release Forms and Copyright

Consent as a relational practice must be accompanied by a formal legal document. This protects the survivor and the institution, and it determines what can legally be done with the material after the project ends. A person retains copyright over their own spoken testimony. Recordings of interviews and facilitated sessions cannot be published, reproduced, or shared beyond the agreed archival context without the survivor's explicit legal permission. A signed release form is the instrument through which this permission is granted. Draft it in consultation with your institution's legal counsel. Review it with the survivor with adequate time for questions. Do not ask survivors to sign something they do not fully understand.

Interview Facilitation

Preparation before each session matters as much as what happens during it. Before each joint session, hold a brief preparatory conversation with the survivor alone. The purpose of this session is to reaffirm their authority over the process and to surface anything that needs to be addressed before the session begins. Ask whether there are topics they do not want raised and communicate these to the creative collaborator beforehand. Ask whether anything from the previous session felt uncomfortable, or whether they would like to revisit or withdraw anything. Ask what has been working well. Reaffirm that you are there to advocate for them, that nothing will be passed forward without their knowledge, and that the process can be adjusted at any point. Survivors who trust your advocacy are more likely to raise concerns early.

Confirm the session with the survivor in advance and check in about how they are feeling. If they are unwell, stressed, or indicate any reluctance, offer to reschedule. Brief the creative collaborator beforehand on any topics that may be sensitive and on how to respond if the session becomes difficult.

Opening the session. Begin with a brief, informal exchange before moving into recorded territory. This allows the survivor the space to signal whether they are ready to proceed. Always ask the survivor to confirm their consent to being recorded before recording begins.

During the session. Follow the survivor's lead on pace. Do not rush silences. If the survivor becomes visibly distressed, pause the recording and check in simply: *We don't have to continue with this now. We can stop, take a break, or move to something else — whatever you would like.* Do not attempt to manage or redirect grief, anger, or distress in real time. Your role is to hold space, not to resolve emotional content. Take handwritten notes throughout to capture observations, uncertainties, and questions for follow-up that may not be visible in the recording.

Closing the session. Before stopping the recording, ask whether there is anything the survivor wanted to say that the conversation did not reach, and explain what will happen next: when they will receive the transcript, when the next session will take place, and what the creative collaborator will receive as follow-up material. After the recording ends, do not leave immediately. Leave time for informal conversation if the survivor wants it. The transition out of testimony is as important as the session itself.

Do not leave long gaps between sessions without contact. Even a short message to check in signals that the survivor is valued beyond the moments when a session is being recorded. Before any material moves from one stage to the next — from transcript to creative draft, from draft to review, from review to publication — inform the survivor and allow them to give feedback and raise concerns. When the creative collaborator requests something — additional detail about a sensitive point, access to material that has not been offered — ask yourself first: does sharing this serve the survivor's interests? If uncertain, pause and check with the survivor separately before responding.

Transcription

Wherever possible, the person who was present in the session should carry out the transcription or closely oversee it. Testimony contains nuances that can be missed or misrepresented by someone unfamiliar with the context. If a transcription assistant is used, brief them on confidentiality requirements and ensure they do not retain copies of the material.

Transcribe verbatim. Do not correct grammar, edit speech patterns, or paraphrase. The survivor's voice, including its non-standard features in any language, is part of the record. Mark pauses, inaudible or unclear passages, emotional responses where relevant, interruptions or crosstalk, and instances when recording quality affected comprehension. If testimony moves between languages, transcribe in the original language and provide a translation in brackets. Do not flatten multilingual speech into a single language.

Access to Transcripts

In collaborative projects involving creative partners, project managers, institutional staff, and others, make an active decision about who sees what and document it. Full transcripts typically contain a wide range of material: small talk, sensitive personal and family details, emotional exchanges, and project-relevant testimony, all mixed together because sessions are unstructured and follow the conversation wherever it naturally goes. While this unstructured quality allows the survivor to speak freely, it also means the full transcript is not appropriate for wide distribution.

Restrict full transcripts to the survivor and the creative collaborator only, treating them as a working document between those two parties. Prepare a separate, redacted version containing only content directly relevant to the project's scope, for wider sharing. Remove all content that does not directly relate to the subject matter of the creative work and remove sensitive personal and family details shared in passing rather than as deliberate testimony. Check the redacted version with the survivor before circulating it, even if they have already reviewed the full transcript. Document clearly that a redacted version exists and record the principle by which redactions were made.

Fact-Checking and Cultural Accuracy

After each session, prepare a written document addressing the culturally specific content that arose in conversation: terminology, place names, historical references, practices, and concepts that may be unfamiliar to the creative collaborator or require accurate rendering in the work. These notes include an explanation of the term or reference in plain language; links to reliable sources for further context; and correct spellings of names and terms in the relevant language, including diacritical marks. In the Yugoslav cluster, this meant BCS (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian). Make notes of where transliteration varies, and any clarification from the survivor about what a term meant to them specifically, as distinct from its general meaning.

Always include the survivor in the email thread when these notes are circulated. This keeps them visible and in control of what is being communicated about their context, allows them to correct or add to the notes, and prevents you from inadvertently becoming the sole interpreter of the survivor's cultural world to the creative collaborator. It also protects the survivor from being repeatedly asked to explain the same context across sessions.

On questions of the survivor's own experience, their account is the record. On questions of broader historical context, the survivor is not obligated to serve as a historical expert on the events they survived. Do this work independently and return to the survivor only for confirmation of details directly relating to their personal account.

Documenting the Process

Beyond the primary materials — recordings, transcripts, creative drafts — the archive should include documentation of the process itself: the fact-check log, cultural annotation notes, correspondence with the survivor and creative collaborator relating to consent decisions, records of creative decisions and key milestones, records of any content removed or modified at the survivor's request noting the general principle behind the change, and any moments of ethical difficulty and how they were resolved.

Access and restriction. Work with the survivor to establish access conditions for different categories of material. Raw recordings may be restricted entirely or available only under specific conditions; transcripts may be available in full or in edited form; creative materials may carry their own access conditions based on publication rights. Document these conditions clearly, attach them to the relevant materials, and revisit them with the survivor at agreed intervals.

Naming and description. Describe archived materials in language agreed with the survivor. The survivor should have input into how their materials are titled, described, and contextualised in the database entry. When working with records connected to genocide, mass violence, or forced displacement, descriptive language carries particular weight. Avoid clinical or distancing language in descriptions of traumatic content. Let respect and care guide every descriptive decision. This means choosing the terms the survivor and their communities use to describe themselves and their experiences.

After the Project Ends

A formal project ending does not mean the relationship with the survivor ends. In many survivor-centred projects, particularly when the survivor has an existing relationship with the hosting institution, the collaboration continues in many different forms. The survivor may remain a participant in other institutional programmes, attend public events, or simply remain in contact as a matter of ongoing trust and care.

At the close of the formal project phase, hold a meeting with all parties to acknowledge the end of the formal collaboration and to discuss how each will stay in touch. Make clear to the survivor how the archived materials are held, who has access to them, and that sections have been or will be redacted in line with what was agreed.

The goal is for the survivor to experience the end of the formal project not as an ending of the relationship, but as a change in its form.

References

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