To Think Is To Experiment, Centre for Narrative Research (CNR), University of East London, 30 April 2014.

Siyanda Ndlovu Memorial Lecture:

Nicola Samson:
The road to subjective belonging: the travels, travails and realisation of a narrative PhD

Using my thesis as illustration, this paper focuses on the process of a narrative-based PhD, offering a retrospective reflection on the figurative journey, and mulling on the people, the support, the learning, the theorising, the writing, the ups and the downs. The paper is of course entirely partial, it is very much a story of my process, it does not presume to be *the* process of a narrative PhD.

As Siyanda was a close PhD friend, it seemed appropriate not merely to give a presentation in his name, but to recall the powerful and important presence he had for me. So, I first met Siyanda in November 2007.

He was at CNR on his first six-month Commonwealth scholarship stay, working on his PhD on 'race' and 'black identity', interviewing black people in Britain; I was in the early days of undertaking a masters degree in life history research at the University of Sussex, long before I had even considered doing a PhD. We both attended CNR's Ruthellen Josselson seminar discussing the hermeneutics of restoration and demystification - which some years later became central to my PhD. Siyanda and I met occasionally at seminars

but it was the following year when I began a PhD, and he returned for his second six months at CNR, that our friendship flowered as we found ourselves part of a CNR PhD group. In the following months, that group provided us with crucial sustenance. It was not simply that the social gatherings offered light relief, but that the support was critical in finding our way in the narrative process we had begun.

Siyanda wrote in a book he gave me of the, 'lonely journey we [had] freely chosen'. And, the paradox of the lonely journey in which we were all engaged, was clear.

Robert Bosch: Cerro Torro, Patagonia, Argentina

We were very much on our own, 'doing our own thing', seeking our singular holy grails that appeared so far from reach. Our routes were unidentified; we were heading into uncharted territory, but thankfully, at the time, we were doing it together. For it was not only our individual PhDs that seemed fuzzy, sometimes inexplicable, but also our engagement with narrative.

Narrative inquiry can be elusive in relation to definition, approach and application. As I wrote in my thesis, narrative is:

> …enriched (and possibly burdened) by the nature of [its] flexibility, fluidity and equivocality; [it has] no strict nor fixed parameters firmly guiding [its] application, providing freedom to follow one's research and create a path distinctive to its needs; an exciting, exploratory route to take (but which also brings fears and fantasies of failing to 'do it right'). Andrews et al. introduce their book, *Doing Narrative Research*, by stating that, '…narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing points. [...] Clear accounts of how to analyse the data … are rare' (2008, p. 1). Samson 2013, p.39

It was this very point that made our group, and of course CNR generally, so important; an arena where we could discuss our confusions and frustrations, share ideas and pose questions, and where we gained courage from each other to inch forward without clearly

mapped routes to guide us. In tackling his interview data, wondering how to make meaning of his transcriptions, Siyanda fervently queried how he was supposed to know whether he was 'doing it right'. However, in the narrative classes our group attended it was also Siyanda who invariably had the most insightful questions and ideas, challenging us all.

Had he lived, Siyanda would have appreciated hearing Maria Tamboukou's (2011) opening words to the CNR tenth anniversary conference. For 10 years, she said, '… [CNR had] been trying hard not to answer the question of 'what is narrative?'. She argued that pinning down narrative was 'futile' and that it should not be ontologically defined but be allowed to remain an open process 'about doing' (Tamboukou, 2011b, pp. 7-8). Her words were salutary and gave succour in encouraging me to continue feeling my way, without knowing quite where it might lead.

From the beginning I had known I wanted to explore subjective belonging through everyday aspects of women's lives. I was following a topic that I had begun in my undergraduate degree as a very late starter in higher education. I learned that the notion of belonging, which had puzzled me since my own childhood sense of not belonging, was a subject I could study, and it led me from undergraduate to master's degree and then PhD. I also knew that I wanted to employ narrative, both methodologically, as my epistemological approach for understanding social reality, and as my method (even if I had not in those very early days, quite realised it in those terms). The idea of using my street in North Newham as a multi-ethnic context in which to find interviewees came early in discussion with supervisors. There would be about 14 women both migrant and non-migrant with as wide an age-range as possible. Thus I would deliberately not be focusing on any particular ethnic, nationality, class or age group but would encompass the broadest possible diversity of self-selecting women. Actively engaging in the process of seeking interviewees was harder than I anticipated, not of course for want of knowing where to find them, since they were my neighbours, but precisely because they were my neighbours. This close proximity to my interviewees in some respect troubled me throughout the process of the PhD but thereby also led me to be as ethically caring as I could be in my interpretation of their stories. In the early days of my pilot project my positioning as neighbour seemed most pertinent in attracting those people who agreed to participate. The women who would not be drawn in were largely South Asian who make up a large part of the local population.

I interviewed all the women who agreed to be recorded: An Australian, a British Bengali, a British mixed-heritage Indian Scot, a Chinese Malaysian, five white British women including a Rhodesian, one Scot and one mixed-heritage English French, a Nepali, a Pole, a Trinidadian and a Ugandan. They ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-70s and had lived

in the street from just a few months to 30 years; two students, four full-time mothers, five in full- or part-time employment and three retired. I had little idea what stories and experiences of belonging and not belonging would be elicited from these interviews, but I was hoping the meaning of belonging for these women would emerge from them.

My concern was not simply whether people do, or do not belong, but *how* they belong and how their belonging alters with time, circumstance and experience in the process of their lives.

However, I wanted to retain as open an approach to belonging itself and therefore did not concretely define belonging. If asked, I explained my perception as relating to deeply felt attachments to people, groups or places that give meaning, self-assurance and security in people's lives, but I purposefully did not impose a rigid or restrictive characterisation. Rather, I used this explanation as a heuristic device to draw out women's experience of belonging. Specifically I wanted the women's meaning-making to develop from their reflexive considerations in the co-construction of the dialogic interviews (Riessman, 2008). For this reason Josselson's (2004) restorative hermeneutic approach was most apposite for my data analysis, in choosing to present the women's meanings whilst at times also questioning them, therefore also utilising to a lesser extent, her notion of demystification. And hence, I found the more objective structured hermeneutics as proposed for example by Juhasz (2011) following Rosenthal, was unprofitable. My approach was emphatically subjective. While rejecting a positivist definition of belonging to be hypothesised and proven, I was encouraging a phenomenological, unfolding of the women's sense of belonging understood through their own subjectivity.

The narrative process was undoubtedly also a journey for the interviewees themselves. Their reflections on their own lives was often both quite difficult for them but also illuminating. Their own sense of belonging was not a topic many had considered and its articulation was not easy. Samina summed this up when she related to me what she had explained to a relative:

> There's a woman Nicola, she lives in this street, she came with her research, it was a PhD, and she was doing research on people's lives, everything and people's feel[ings], the questions she asked me, do I belong to anything, [how] do I feel like? That is the question .. I was so, made me LAUGH but it's nothing to laugh about, it's something to think about. I never thought of this belonging [laugh]. It's a hard question. It's so straightforward, it's so hard to answer.

The women were often exploring issues of belonging they had never previously expressed and the dialogue illustrates how difficult that could be:

> I don't know, it's too hard . to explain, honestly. […] Yeah, it feels I would need few more days for this question [laugh], I'm thinking about it, now I will think about this all the time how important is this.   *Agnes*

> Oh gosh these are really, these are REALLY deep questions aren't they?   *Sarah*

> I think you've unearthed quite a lot […] you've allowed me to just talk and ramble so we've talked and extracted things that I wouldn't normally have . thought about.   *Angelique*

Meaning was thus elicited through the reflective self-questioning that a narrative approach both demands and enables; drawn out and articulated through the stories that the women tell of their lives (Andrews *et al.,* 2008; Riessman, 2008; Elliott, 2005). The challenge of narrative confronts us to make sense of ourselves in ways that are not readily available. Subjectivity, as Ludvig argues, becomes explicit through narration (Ludvig, 2006) which, according to Eakin, is not just about the self but is fundamentally part of the self (Eakin, 2008).

Perhaps I should say that I had once or twice met a couple of interviewees before my research but did not really know any of them. As part of my process within the street I invited my interviewees to a small summer garden party.

Whilst some of the women who came had lived in the street many years, most had never before met. Their interest in connecting prompted me impulsively in the winter to suggest we go carol singing in the street, and later still, a few of women spontaneously brought their families and joined my daughter and me as they saw us building a snow-woman in our front garden. Interestingly, as my transcription and analysis proceeded I generally withdrew more into myself. I did not try to avoid my interviewees but neither

did I actively seek them out. The more immersed I became in their stories the harder I found it to initiate being part of their lives.

I was continuing to discover the direction of my PhD as I went.

I never felt very secure that I knew where I was going. Apart from uphill. Not least in transcribing 40-plus hours of interviews which was probably the most arduous, challenging, frustrating and often mind-crunchingly-boring process ever.

And yet the transcription process was simultaneously immensely complex and hugely exciting; a consummate meaning-making task. For this was not simply transferring audio into written text, but engagement in a critical interpretative act. How, for example, I should represent spoken words, with or without pauses, their ums and errs, and repetitions (Samuel, 1998), and if, in a content led analysis, my words should be included, were both crucial questions in how the dialogue might eventually be understood. My interview questions were themed and the transcripts therefore provided a first level of coding. A distillation process using computer documents, but no coding software, began to clarify similarities and differences in the women's experiences. The

transcribing was a form of translation and the emergent understandings and insights led to the first palpable ideas of content structure. The substance of my sections and chapters gradually began to evolve.

The analysis was therefore difficult to separate from the transcribing. The connections and disparities that materialised resembled a long, flickering fuse, eventually lighting up the routes to follow. For example I had not specifically planned to write about childhood but opened my interviews asking about childhood, both to glean some family background and to offer hopefully, a gentle way in to the interview. However the distillation process showed that childhood could be pivotal in the thesis for it became clear that there were some very distinctive patterns in childhood, which I theorised as localities of belonging, and which could be traced to related patterns in adult ethnic belonging. That is, where their experiences of either stable lives with particular people in particular communities, or dislocated belonging in childhood, were threads that appeared as I pored over my transcriptions - I had no idea that I would use my data in this way, or that such findings would appear.

While belonging was fore-fronted in the interview questions within everyday themes such as religion, ethnicity, motherhood and food, it was only through the different stages of dialogic co-construction, transcription and analysis that meaning began to emerge organically and to shape the content and structure of the chapters. Of course I had a chapter plan that was formed in the earliest stages of the PHD. In those early days I looked on this structure askance, not really knowing what it meant or would be. It appeared to loom over me, creating rising fear that I would never be able to actualise it.

As such, throughout my PhD there was some sense of living in parallel universes - one in which deep down I instinctively knew this was a good way to go, I was doing something interesting and maybe important; and another, where I seemed to have no understanding of what I was doing - often feeling great fear, inability and inadequacy. What my PhD friends, supervisors and family all saw in me, was difficult for me to comprehend, but their encouragement and support were crucial.

An example of such support is the card below given to me by my daughter, hilarious because I would sit at our round wooden kitchen table surrounded by coffee pot and papers. And while I never had a rooster on my head, I often had our cat, nicknamed Chicken, sitting on my shoulders!

Bobby Baker: Day 526 , Diary Drawings: Mental illness and me, 1997-2008.

Fundamentally this narrative project was led by my data. It was only at the end of the whole process that I realised where the journey had led, and where I had arrived. Like a jigsaw puzzle, it is only once the pieces have been fitted together that one can see the whole picture.
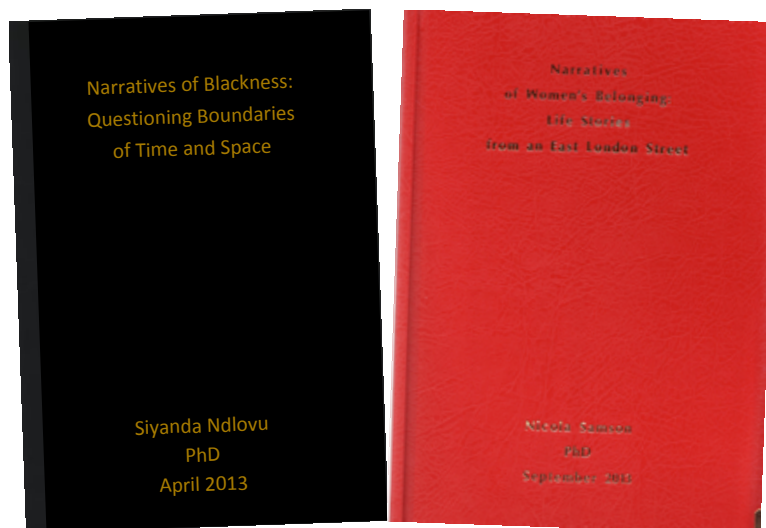
Some of the significant findings that emerged from this process include:
• The concept of localities of belonging, that is, the particular people in particular communities that can create a sense of belonging.
• The central importance of performativity in everyday subjective belonging, and in the differentiation of belonging from identification.
• The distinction between place-based and non-place-based belonging.
• The crucial role of intersectionality in understanding the women's belonging through their varying social locations.

And finally, in conclusion I stated that it was the women's positionalities through time, embedded in their performative emotional attachments, and articulated through the narrative meaning they made of their experiences as they reflected upon them, that enabled an understanding of their sense of belonging.

Though it took me five years, I completed my PhD while sadly, Siyanda died a few months before submitting his. However I am so delighted to be able to say that Siyanda's thesis was submitted by his supervisors, Jill Bradbury, now of the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and Corinne Squire of CNR, and that Siyanda posthumously graduated in April 2013, eight months before me.

Narratives of Blackness:
Questioning Boundaries
of Time and Space

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PhD
April 2013

Narratives
of Women's Belonging
Life Stories
from an East London Street

Nicola Samson
PhD
September 2013

It should be noted that I have created a 'mock-up' cover for Siyanda's thesis for the purposes of this paper.

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