

Navigating Belonging: Exploring settlement for South Asians in Hong Kong through narratives and participatory photography

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Invited seminar at Department of Anthropology Seminar Series, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 21 April 2023

1. Introduction

Today we are introducing a new project aiming to understand how people in South Asian communities in Hong Kong define, find and negotiate their belonging. The project is called Navigating Belonging, and it asks: What does it mean to belong, for people from South Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong? The project combines linguistic ethnography and creative practice, with a focus on oral narratives and participatory photography using a technique called Photovoice, and Digital Storytelling.

1.1 Why belonging?

The study of belonging seems to have caught the academic imagination, certainly in my own field of applied linguistics. We consider it a relevant issue for people who are on the move, for diasporic communities, and for times of change and uncertainty.

Belonging has emerged as a major concern in recent years in public and political debate too, associated as it is with arguments about citizenship, social integration and immigration policy. For newcomers to a country, their belonging, their non-belonging and their not-yet-belonging are prominent as they navigate, successfully or unsuccessfully, political, public and employment systems, attempting to attain legitimacy as members of society. Such matters are well-rehearsed in applied linguistics research examining the discursive processes at play when language minoritized migrants steer a course through immigration and citizenship regimes (Extra, Spotti & Van Avermaet 2009, Shohamy & McNamara 2009), employment structures (Gumperz 1982, Duchêne, Moyer & Roberts 2013) and the learning of the dominant societal language (Simpson & Whiteside 2015). However, the question of what it is to belong relates to more than political belonging in a new place, finding a job, and attending language classes. The study of belonging recognises it as translocal, complex, dynamic and intersectional (Yuval-Davis 2011), requiring a broad focus of attention. People also express, represent and enact their belongings interactionally, through multiple means,

sometimes but not always including language. What is more, the salience of belonging is not restricted to new arrivals who might 'no longer' or 'not yet' belong – in an official sense – to a nation state. Belonging resonates as a metaphor with everyone who finds themselves in a new situation.

The understanding of belonging on which the research is based derives from sociolinguistic approaches to the study of narrative as interactional achievement, from critical language policy, and from decolonial perspectives on mobility in Asia. From these perspectives we gain insights into the complexity of belonging, and its dynamic, interactionally constructed nature.

1.2 Praxis, decoloniality and the rhizome

Building on the understanding of belonging as “translocal, complex, dynamic and intersectional” (Yuval-Davis 2011), something we’re beginning to explore is the idea of belonging as rhizomatic in the Deleuzian sense. It’s a structural metaphor they’ve used in their magnum opus, *A Thousand Plateaus*, from the field of botany that describes an underground mass of continuously growing horizontal roots which extend at certain intervals to grow and establish connections with other shoots. This is different from a non-rhizomatic root, which grows downwards into the earth through a one directional vertical tracing. That is, an understanding of belonging as a process with no beginning, no end, with no state of being, just a continuous state of becoming, a counter-narrative to belonging as chronological, hierarchical, or one that can be traced to a single starting point.

In studying the complexities of belonging, we as a research team were intentional in putting decoloniality into praxis. *Navigating Belonging* echoes the work of Latin American decolonial scholars who urge us to imagine alternate modes of thinking, doing, and being by honoring the non-linearity in the ways in which our participants tell their stories and decentralizing knowledge production through creative processes, specifically participatory photography.

Putting decoloniality into praxis also entails reckoning with our positionality as researchers and the intellectual capital we have access to. In today’s talk we’ll be drawing on examples from the process of the participatory research, sharing some initial observations and reflections from the perspective of researchers’ thinking and

doing alongside communities. In doing so, we hope to offer a critical interrogation of the ethical, methodological, and political possibilities and limits surrounding photovoice, and by and large, community-based participatory research.

1.3 Navigating belonging for South Asians in Hong Kong

South Asians in Hong Kong experience discrimination, unequal access to education, employment, and public services, and barriers to participation in civic activities. Established ideas of belonging in Hong Kong in terms of cultural and linguistic homogeneity have long been in need of challenge. The minoritisation faced by Hong Kong's South Asians has been brought into sharp relief though by the pandemic and by recent political upheaval.

There has been a groundswell of academic interest in South Asians – and especially in South Asian youth – in Hong Kong, in areas allied to belonging, its construction and its navigation. Particular concerns in applied linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociological research have been identity in relation to Hong Kong, the representation of South Asians in the media and online, and language-based minoritisation in education policy. One big question is what might constitute a Hong Kong identity for language minoritized people, with attention on how language learning and use – specifically the learning and use of Cantonese – are implicated in questions of identity. People's beliefs about language (i.e. their language ideologies) are also found to impinge on their identity construction in Hong Kong.

A further stream of inquiry focuses on the experiences of minoritisation and social exclusion of South Asian youth, and how they are subject to racial discrimination, in general terms. Work on young South Asians' own perceptions of discrimination establishes that South Asians can exercise agency to challenge their marginalisation. For example their negative representation in the mainstream media and new media is countered by young South Asians themselves through their own use of film and social media to represent their negotiations with the mainstream. This is something I've encountered and that I promote in my current work.

The racialised nature of the different valuing of languages is embedded in Hong Kong's official language policy. The top-down imposition of language policy is experienced by young South Asians primarily through education policy. Educational disadvantage is

typically attributed to lack of proficiency in Chinese, and progression to university in Hong Kong is hindered by a similar lack of proficiency. It is at least recognised in policy-making circles that deeply engrained structural inequalities impede South Asians' ability to gain adequate competence in the privileged varieties of Chinese, hence hindering their educational progress and consequently their employment prospects.

The focus on young people and their education eclipses the idea that belonging in Hong Kong is an intersectional concern, and indeed one that can be examined through the study of arts practice as well as language.

1.4 James' interest in Belonging

As we've noted, belonging is a person's experience and expression of identity in relation to affinity with a place, a space or a community. As such, it's becoming a central concern in the sociolinguistics of mobility, as well as for the lived experience of people who are or have been on the move. This includes myself: I moved to Hong Kong from Leeds in 2021, uprooting from a settled environment, mid-pandemic and in the aftermath of profound social and political upheaval in Hong Kong. My own belonging has been challenged as, in some ways, I both no longer belong to a place I have left, and do not yet belong to a new one.

The Navigating Belonging project brings together my interests in belonging, narrative, participatory collaborative research using creative methods, and a long-standing interest in the Indian diaspora, originally motivated by research into digital literacy practices that I carried out in Gujarat in the 2010s. When I moved to Hong Kong, I became interested in the history of Hong Kong's South Asians, and I also began to understand how the concerns of South Asians there are tied to the broader fate of Hong Kong.

1.5 Christine's interest in Belonging

To position myself vis-a-vis the research, I'd like to share a little bit about my background. I'm a 1.75th generation Filipino immigrant – I was born in Cebu, but virtually have no memory of it, having migrated to Hong Kong with my family when I was 2. Typically, other 1.75th gen immigrants like me learn the language or dialect of the country they immigrate to, but because of the lack of the standardized curriculum for learning Chinese as a second language, my school put me in French classes along

with my “ethnic minority” peers (for the lack of a better term) which is quite common, the alternative being learning subjects in the Cantonese as a native language stream which some of my other peers have done, too. These experiences – of being “in-between” places, cultures, languages, and homes, have led me to reflect on the complexities of my fluid and multiple identities while critically questioning how they shape my own experience of belonging. Not only have these experiences shaped my thoughts and research, but also my advocacy for racial equity in Hong Kong. In 2021 with Ericka Regalado, I co-founded be/longing, a community arts-for-education lab that harnesses the transformative power of storytelling to co-create cultures of inclusion in Hong Kong.

Something I want to be explicit about is the strong research element at the core of what we do at be/longing, because before it became a community-based organization, it was a proposal for a PhD project that didn’t sit well with me. I did my BA in English at CUHK, and my Master’s in Comparative Literature at HKU so my schooling and hence my research is heavily informed by literary and cultural theory. Theory gives us new lenses through which we can understand the world, but I can’t help but ask myself, what’s the point of studying theory if all we’re doing is “thinking.” There is a power dynamic that exists between us, as researchers, and the communities we work alongside. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith says in “Decolonizing Methodologies,” research is inherently colonial and extractive (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). I often think about how we can start building these alternate worlds Latin American scholars urge us to imagine, within academia. Then I recall what Audre Lorde wrote: in imagining these “alternate worlds” we cannot build them ‘with the conceptual tools inherited from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It cannot be built with the master’s tools, “for the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may enable us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (7). Decolonial thinkers Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon argue that what we need to do is transcend rather than dismantle Western ideas through building our own houses of thought. When enough houses are built, the hegemony of the master’s house—in fact—mastery itself—will cease to maintain its imperial status” (7)

And how exactly do we transcend? What does building our own houses of thought look like in our research? This is, I think, where storytelling and honouring our participants’

diverse experiences of belonging comes in because simply acknowledging the power dynamic does not make it go away. Instead, our research moves toward what Eve Tuck calls a “desire-centred” framework as opposed to a “damage-centered” one. One of the issues that lies at the center of engaging with ethnic minority communities, at least in the context of Hong Kong, is the framework through which stakeholders engage with them. Typically, these “DEI” initiatives that promise “inclusion” operate using “damage-centred narratives,” that look to historical exploitation to explain poverty, poor health, low literacy, and so on (O’Connor, 2018). While this is effective in leveraging resources to aid our communities, this framework is predicated on the notion that these communities are singularly defined by oppression. A desire-centred framework means carving out spaces of joy for our communities, spaces for us to celebrate each other and the art we’ve created, spaces that would spark long-term, continuous collaboration that shifts the balance of power and resources in a culture that glorifies competition, spaces where we could make our stories visible without making them palatable, or having to adjust to someone else’s “taste.”

1.6 Our research questions

Keeping this desire-centred framework in mind, our research asks: (1) How does belonging emerge in and through narrative and photography? (2) How can we develop innovative approaches to researching belonging? and (3) How can our understandings of belonging be used to inform policies, practices and debate on social integration?

In the rest of this session we describe the project’s methodology, and discuss emergent themes and early data. We finish by outlining the process of stakeholder engagement that informs our aims, and that have evolved into a vibrant research network.

2. Approach and methodology

We locate our work in the holistic traditions of linguistic, visual and collaborative ethnography.

Linguistic ethnography combines ethnographic and linguistic methodologies to study language use in a range of social settings. The term describes a broad area of shared interests rather than a distinctly bounded field. It refers to a body of research by scholars with overlapping interests and connections who share an orientation towards using ethnographic approaches to address linguistic and social questions.

The ethnographic approach is characterised by participant observation over time, in-depth systematic data collection from various sources such as field notes, open-ended interviews and inductive analysis initiated during data collection, a focus on patterns in situated practice, and on the whole ecology of a particular setting.

Our approach encompasses the visual. A *visual* linguistic ethnography attends to the visual and spatial dimension of meaning, bringing in attention to physical positioning and organisation, and the semiotic landscape beyond the written text.

Our approach combines sociolinguistics-informed narrative research, photovoice and digital storytelling. We're building on the methodology developed in a series of projects in Hong Kong associated with Christine's be/longing initiative, and in the UK associated with the TLang project, which generated a critical mass of work at the boundaries of applied linguistics and arts-based practice.

2.1 Phase 1 Participants and setting

Our project runs in three phases of fieldwork, comprising weekly workshops. Each phase is with a different group of participants.

Our first phase was at Christian Action's Centre for Refugees in Chungking Mansions, Nathan Road, TST, and has just ended. The CFR is our main project partner, and they helped us recruit five clients, all women who are forced migrants in Hong Kong, from a range of South Asian countries.

Gordon Mathews, at the outset of his classic anthropological study of Chungking Mansions, describes it thus:

Chungking Mansions is a dilapidated seventeen-story structure full of cheap guesthouses and cut-rate businesses in the midst of Hong Kong's tourist district.

[...] In Chungking Mansions, entrepreneurs and temporary workers from South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and across the globe come to seek their fortunes, along with asylum seekers looking for refuge and tourists in search of cheap lodging and adventure. People from an extraordinary array of societies sleep in its beds, jostle for seats in its food stalls, bargain at its mobile phone counters, and wander its corridors.

[It is, he notes,] perhaps the most globalised building in the world.

A fitting home then for the Centre for Refugees, and a good setting for the first phase of our research.

For the first five weeks of fieldwork, in January and February this year, we ran Photovoice Workshops, which I led with the support of Prof. Simpson and others in the team. These workshops were adapted from be/longing's workshops which are cantered on participatory storytelling. A thread of research I'm working on is participatory storytelling as a decolonial methodology. That is, how the very act of storytelling allows individuals and communities to participate in the very worlding of our experiences, opening up possibilities for alternative modes of knowing and being. We were intentional in the workshop design to prioritise creating safe spaces where participants can make their stories visible without making them palatable or adjusting to someone else's "taste."

The Navigating Belonging workshops were designed with these intentions in mind, with co-creation as a core value. Before we began our workshops, we conducted a team training and a workshop 0. The research team participated in a series of activities intended to make us reflect on our multiple positionalities and privileges as individuals and as researchers. Besides equipping ourselves with technical skills required to co-facilitate the workshops, a key intention of engaging ourselves in this exercise was to acknowledge and collectively navigate how keep in mind how these can affect how we move forward with this project, particularly how we conduct our workshops, the way we interact with our participants, as well as the way we interpret the data. Doing the activities, we had prepared for our participants, as a research team, also pointed us to the ethical and methodological concerns that may arise throughout the project such as the use of language (how do we encourage a multi-lingual space that doesn't assume native fluency, particularly in the case of our phase I participants who are users of English as a second, third or other language?), accessibility (avoiding academic jargon and making translating important concepts), and embedding Eve Tuck's notion of a desire-centred framework (how would these workshops benefit the participants, or do they benefit them to begin with? How can we continue to meaningfully engage with our participants beyond the workshop dates?)

The five Photovoice Workshops were focused on activities that provoked discussion about their developing understanding of belonging and ended with them crafting, through photography, a story of belonging they are comfortable sharing with a wider public audience. We began our series of workshops with an activity that allowed both the participants and research team to create a “community contract” with the values we would promise to adhere to throughout the next few workshops. This was to ensure a psychologically safe space for sharing, given the potentially heavy themes that may arise. Our participants learned some principles of photography (lighting, framing, composition), and were given prompts relating to their diverse experiences of belonging, to put those principles into practice within the workshops. An example of this is in workshops 3 and 4 where we did a “Photo Walk” in places close to the workshop venue. To facilitate discussion, we engaged the participants in a mix of introspective, reflective activities such as the Rivers of Live (developed by Joyce Mercer, a professor whose work focuses on practices of care in diverse contexts and situations), and letter writing. We found these effective in facilitating the collective discussions which took the form of “story circles,” wherein participants (and if time allowed, some members of the research team) described and talked about the photographs using the SHOWED method (Wang and Burris, 1997), and related them to their developing understanding of belonging, in carefully structured but quite informal discussions with the project team.

In the last three weeks of the phase, which finished a few weeks ago, the participants worked closely with another researcher, Michelle Pang, to develop Digital Stories based on the photographs and narratives from earlier. With the aim of archiving and displaying these stories online on the project website, the public-facing visual record of the research, these last three sessions looked at the elements of storytelling and how to deconstruct these (I.e., interrupting linearity), visual communication (how form, colour, font, symbols, and so on can be used to convey one’s message), culminating in a gallery walk where the participants shared, in a story circle, their pieces, the stories behind them, their creative decisions and artistic process, and final ruminations about the workshop as a whole.

3. Emergent Themes

Now we point to some important emergent themes, that suggest potential directions we might take in our analysis.

3.1 Engaging with belonging through photography

It can be difficult to express, perform and reflect upon one's belonging with referential language. *Where or how do you belong?* is a hard question for everyone, even when linguistic resources are shared. Arts practice is a site of creative encounter, where participants can come together and think together, where they might engage with belongings they already carry, and simultaneously make these anew. We find that arts practice provides an important space for critical reflection, 'offering a public site for the abstracted discussion of contentious issues' (Stupples & Teaiwa 2016:11), for example the issue of what it is to belong.

I'll illustrate how we do this through an example from phase one. I've chosen an episode in our third workshop, where we did a Photowalk – trying out the techniques we'd been learning, on a walk around Kowloon Park. Participant Rosy (I'm using the pseudonym she chose herself) took a photo of a waterfall there, and talked about it when we got back to the Centre.

Here are my own fieldnotes from the workshop alongside Christine's post-workshop notes:

Data 1 JS fieldnotes from Workshop 3

Rosy took a photo of a waterfall in the park, and **tells us of being at the same place 28 years ago, when she accompanied her husband to HK on a business trip. She took a photo there at the very same place with her son who was 3 years old at the time.**

Data 2 Christine's post-workshop notes from Workshop 3

Photowalk

Teaching them the photolock on the phone + lighting

- As we were walking to Kowloon Park, we noticed how Sam Bhai opened up a new store. A and D stopped by to see the pani puri stall.

- Suggestion that we do our next photowalk at CKM

- A agreed saying that there are things at CKM reminds us of home
- Rosy says she'd rather not think about Sri Lanka, home is where she is now. Home was painful for her, the kidnapping, the torture

R's photo of the waterfall and her story about her visiting Hong Kong with her son and husband in the 1980s

This is the actual photo that Rosy took on the Photowalk.

Data 3 R's photo of a waterfall

When we returned to the centre, we uploaded our photos so we could see them on the screen and talk about them. Here is an extract of what Rosy said when invited to talk about her photos.

Data 4 Post-walk discussion with Rosy from Workshop 3, 09:00

4a

R: **and one is very important one this one this this waterfall**
I remember for 28 years back (.) when I my son [was

J: [really really

R: yeah when my son elder son three years so we will come back
 to the Hong Kong to visit

J: yeah

R: **then that time same place I took the photo I have with me**
next time I will bring in show to you

She goes on to say how she took this photo when she and her son were on the trip to Hong Kong with her husband, many years ago.

4b

J: tell us more about the first time you saw this pho- this
 waterfall

R: waterfall really my son very loudly and he said mom I want take photo come come then yeah he's very young and small yeah three years old (.) that time

J: was this when you first arrived in Hong Kong

R: no no my son yeah 28 years back when my son was three years old so my husband take us visiting to Hong Kong

J: so you visited

[...]

R: visiting I went many times (xxx) yeah Singapore Malaysia Thailand India and China Hong Kong so er that time I carry with my son also because he's alone three years old so my husband always used to bring me and my son together when he was doing business

J: so he was working and you were with your son just to be tourists in Hong Kong

R: yes because my son er order goods from China you know there so many material and er textile we have shop also in [home country] so that time my son want to purch-

[...]

R: so he's ask me to okay let's go together three of us then visit Hong Kong and go China and

Finally she tells us how she liked Hong Kong and decided that it would be the place to come to when she had to leave her home country.

4c

J: and did you like it when you [visit it

R: [yeah yeah really

J: yeah

R: I I thought safe that's that's ri- that's the reason I came back to again

J: and that's why you came here

R: yeah came

J: you what you thought of [Hong Kong as a place to come

R: [yeah yeah yeah

J: when you left XXX

In the next workshop, Rosy brought the first photo she'd taken, on that much earlier visit, as I noted in my fieldnotes:

Data 5 James' fieldnotes from Workshop 4

Today's atmosphere in the workshop is very friendly, familiar. **Rosy brought in photos of her family in HK from 25 years ago**, when she came as a tourist/accompanying her husband on a business trip. She took photos of her little son, then aged three, in Kowloon Park. Last week, we took photos in precisely the same place, 25 years later. The photos she showed us were old, battered, water-damaged...

And here too is that original photo.

Data 6 R's original photo of a waterfall

3.2 A translanguaging space of belonging (JS)

Our participants in Phase 1 of the project are all migrants. All the participants in the phases to come are likely to experience some sense of translocal belonging, even if they were born in HK. So we engage with the well-established interest, in the sociolinguistics of migration and in narrative research, in orientations towards space and time.

We'll first turn to how our work on belonging in a context of migration foregrounds the relationship with space and place. Our workshops themselves prompt us to consider

how the space of the workshops is socially constructed. Borrowing from Lefebvre (1974/1991), and put very simply, we understand the produced social space of our workshops is an interplay of:

Spatial practice, spatial organisation and location, the *perceived* physical space;

Representation of space, the attachment of meaning to space, what we *conceive* when we talk about “the workshops”

Representational space, the space that is socially constructed, the *lived* space of the workshops themselves.

We have come to think of the workshops themselves as socially-constructed spaces of belonging. In the unfolding interaction over time, and in the same perceived space, we create a lived translanguaging space where belongings can be explored.

In the multilingual and multimodal environment of the workshops, we can relate this to Li Wei’s understanding of a translanguaging space, “a space for the act of translanguaging as well as a space created through translanguaging” (2011:1223).

Before I go on, I’ll explain briefly the sociolinguistic concept of translanguaging. The term is based on what we can think of as a user’s perspective on multilingualism, as opposed to a structuralist or ‘census’ view of languages as ‘countable institutions.’ From this perspective, languages are viewed as fluid, dynamic and socially constructed semiotic systems (Makoni & Pennycook 2007), and can be best thought of as part of a person’s repertoire of communicative resources that are deployed (successfully or otherwise) in meaning-making and communicating. A translanguaging perspective indicates a shift away from researching the relationship between languages towards a focus on how multilingual resources are deployed in a speaker’s repertoire (TLang 2014-2018; see Gumperz 1983).

A repertoire perspective on multilingualism helps us understand language practices locally, and connect these to wider social and ideological processes. People bring into interaction their different histories, biographies and repertoires as they communicate with one another in linguistically and culturally diverse places.

Trans ... Linguaging

Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei, pioneers of the concept of translanguaging in education, consider the 'trans' part of the word in terms of the following:

trans-system and trans-spaces;

its trans-formative nature;

its trans-disciplinary consequences.

Referring to a **trans-system and trans-spaces**; that is, to fluid practices that go between and beyond socially constructed language and educational systems, structures and practices to engage diverse students' multiple meaning-making systems and subjectivities.

Referring to its **trans-formative nature**; that is, as new configurations of language practices and education are generated, old understandings and structures are released, thus transforming not only subjectivities, but also cognitive and social structures. In so doing, orders of discourses shift and the voices of Others come to the forefront, relating then translanguaging to criticality, critical pedagogy, social justice and the linguistic human rights agenda.

Referring to the **trans-disciplinary** consequences of the languaging and education analysis, providing a tool for understanding not only language practices on the one hand and education on the other, but also human sociality, human cognition and learning, social relations and social structures.

Languaging

'Language is seen as an ongoing 'process' rather than a 'thing', a 'verb' rather than a 'noun,' as in the notion of 'languaging'.'

'The focus moves from how many languages an individual may have at their disposal to how they use all their language resources to achieve their purposes.'

(Conteh 2018)

Translanguaging – some definitions

In their well-known book on translanguaging, Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei define it as 'the fluid multilingualism characteristic of interaction in the world's superdiverse urban

areas' (García & Li Wei 2014)

Translanguaging – some definitions

Otheguy talks about transcending language boundaries: How a speaker might potentially use their 'full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages' (Otheguy et al 2015: 283).

The authors here note that languages don't respect national boundaries. I encountered another term a few days ago, describing a translanguaging pedagogy as softening the borders between languages (Cenoz & Gorter)

Translanguaging – some definitions

'Translanguaging is more than going across languages; it is going beyond named languages and taking the internal view of the speaker's language use.' (Garcia 2016)

Translanguaging – some definitions

Beyond language: Translanguaging reflects the fluidity and mobility of the resources that people use to engage in complex meaning-making processes.

In the study of new types of interaction in different domains of practice, views of translanguaging have extended to encompass interconnectedness beyond the spoken and written language, and the linguistic repertoire, to the multimodal and trans-semiotic (see Baynham & Lee 2019).

The relevance of the translanguaging orientation towards communicative practice is evident in the Digital Stories part of our activity. Our participants are developing a storyboard for their digital stories, drawing on the narratives and themes that they have already been discussing in the earlier part of the project. Here is what three of them have produced.

Laxmi makes effective use of colour, and foregrounds her religious identity as being inextricably intertwined with her sense of belonging.

Data 7 D's storyboard from DS1

U has engaged with her lack of political belonging, alongside notes about the inequities of being an asylum seeker in Hong Kong. She too makes interesting use of the visual.

Data 8 U's storyboard from DS1

KK has used Panjabi, the language in which she is literate, to develop her story board.

Data 9 K's storyboard from DS1

3.3 Narratives of (non-)belonging (JS)

So what of the exploration of what it is to belong, in the discursive, translanguaging space of the workshops? We turn now to how our participants orient towards space and time, in their narratives. We are beginning to think about this with reference to the chronotope – literally space time - the Bakhtinian concept that draws attention to the inseparability of space and time, and the way the entanglement of the two are constructed in different literary materials and genres. The chronotope is deployed by sociolinguists for the empirical analysis of time-space framing found in real-time oral narratives.

Our data are suffused with narratives of belonging and non-belonging in spaces and places and at different times.

For example, in the workshops participants will talk about their earlier belongings in other places, and about the challenges of belonging in Hong Kong, doubtless a problematic place in terms of its asylum policy.

So here is A, talking about what we might term her political non-belonging in Hong Kong. She's describing how she wanted to join a gym at a community centre near her home.

Data 10 Workshop 1 interview with A, 09:30

A: when you are starting to pull yourst- pull yourself er to what you want to do and **then you see oh my god I'm refugee I cannot because I don't have Hong Kong ID** (.) time step back (.) not forward

C: oh

A: because it's it is you don't lost that you are not refugee just your identity (.) you lost your your encouragement you're your thoughts

C: yeah

A: what being you so then then I feel so:: sad (.) I go I go ho::me and I think that oh:: I (.) because then li- I try to contact with my other friends who who join the gym or other (.) so they said they apply with the passport copy or something like that **so my passport has expired so so I feel that no way there is no way** because m- because many years I also f- er er searching for for erm study or some courses like I I I am interested but there is no [hh] so er:: **so that's why I'm no I'm just waiting I I still have hope I in the future I will do**

The political decisions at scales beyond the local restrict access to services only to those with the right documents, to those who are politically legitimate. A articulates how the lack of the correct documents – no ID card and an expired passport – relates in a clear and personal way to not being able to join the gym and beyond that to her sense of *just waiting*, albeit accompanied by a sense of hope.

The story has emerged dynamically in interaction between interviewer – Christine in this case, and the interviewee. Christine's encouragement prompts A to tell the story in a particular way: she plays an active role therefore in regulating and controlling how the story is told.

[this is why it is unreasonable to expect the same story to be told in the same way on separate occasions. This – as we note later – is the usual expectation of immigration authorities, who are on the look-out for inconsistencies in repeated re-tellings of migration narratives as they provide the rationale for deportation.]

And here is U, describing the challenges of navigating the asylum system, articulating the same sense of waiting and of being in limbo.

Data 11 Workshop 2 U 1:45:15

U: so well um life is still on um just like the sea it sometimes high and low tides (.) right now we're going to immigration cases we are going through challenges with housing and education um kids are growing older (.) spaces are getting smaller um no vacations no (xxx) **eight years in Hong Kong and**

still you're in the same situation the same living condition has have been so that is I am working on those ones

There are counter-discourses as well. Rosy regards Hong Kong as a place of sanctuary. In the same discussion she talks about how she moved to Hong Kong.

Data 12 Workshop 2 Rosy 1:47:33

R: because I am er facing problem about my case giving (xxx) every time (xxx) but they asked me but not satisfied argument fighting because keeping focusing talenting to my case it will be success otherwise cannot (.) so:: (.) that's what I got success so **I am happy and my children are (.) have good life in Hong Kong so really I am very satisfied for everything about my life** (.) thank you

Rosy also appears to be grateful to the HK government and in turn the people of Hong Kong for providing her with an immigration lawyer.

Data 13 Workshop 2 Rosy 15:08

R: yeah this is the one happening in Hong Kong government where's the money come from (.) **that's what government paying to us (.) finding lawyer** (.) that is the truth

Some of our participants also talk a good deal about their belongings in the countries they have left. Here, in this tiny extract, A is talking about how she had chapati in Hong Kong, and the emotion it released:

Data 14 Workshop 2 interview with A, 15:10

A: then we came here in Hong Kong and first time I eat er chapati again at er [xxx's] home and she give us you know like like a **I just take a one er piece of roti and I am crying** [hh]

The interaction that is contingent and locally produced is heavily influenced by the large-scale global processes and inequalities of forced migration and asylum, and also by the sense that belonging elsewhere – a translocal belonging – sits just beneath the surface.

3.4 Ethics and our collaborative research

Since the start of our project we've been talking about the ethics of collaborative community-based research with people subject to social exclusion, and about our own positionality as researchers. With this in mind, we have become aware of the relevance of – and the relationship between – research ethics and coloniality. Working as we are now with forced migrants from South Asian countries in Hong Kong, we are sensitive to how coloniality persists in the near-universal acceptance of the legitimacy of the nation state, a dominant discourse that can make one blind to the cruelty of the bordering practices involved in migration where people are forced to be on the move. The dynamics of bordering operate at an individual and very human level for people for whom belonging is neither “no more” nor “not yet”, for those for whom the politics of asylum is a daily and embodied concern.

We have also considered coloniality at a more micro scale, in research practice itself. How might we understand the place of epistemic decolonisation in the broader project of decoloniality? Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work is helping us to understand how – as she puts it (2013: 20) – ‘Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices.’

An example I'd like to draw on to illustrate the decolonial thrust of participatory storytelling, and how we've made conscious decisions to embed this as praxis is in the workshop's content and design. Although *Navigating Belonging* isn't a writing workshop per se, it is important to acknowledge the institutionalised origins of the workshop. As Matthew Saleesses points out in *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, he points to the institutionalized origins of the workshop and teaching craft which “date back to at least 1936 and the creation of the Iowa Writers' Workshop (IWW), the first MFA program.” Saleesses highlights how these workshops were funded on the claims that it would spread American values of “freedom” and “individualism” which appealed to post-WWII anti-Communist paranoia. How does this relate to our project? It's important to acknowledge how these workshops formalized the education of creative writing, while at the same time establishing the pyramid of literary craft. “At the base was syntax and grammar, then came character, then metaphor, and at the top symbolism, the fanciest of all,” Eric Bennett expands in his article in *The Chronicle for*

Higher Education. In designing these workshops, particularly the segments where we had to guide our participants in crafting their own narratives, we noticed how the sources we found pertaining to the different elements of storytelling followed this logic. We made an intentional decision to include segments on “interrupting linearity,” to disrupt these traditional, non-rhizomatic elements of storytelling, which indeed gave them room to think about the non-linearity of the stories we tell. This contrasts with the prescriptive mode of storytelling which they are used to, in the context of speaking to immigration officers or during appeals for refugee status where their stories are expected to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Creating spaces for them to select which parts of their stories to include and omit, as well as the ability to decide where to begin and end, has proven to be quite powerful. As we were explaining the concept of non-linearity in the digital storytelling workshops, one of our participants, U, nodded in agreement and exclaimed “You should tell that to our immigration officers. Sometimes they ask us the same questions and expect us to say the same answers.” U shared at the final workshops how sharing her stories with everyone and hearing the stories others shared shifted her perspective of belonging from “me” to “we.” She also mentioned the sense of agency she has in expanding her definition of belonging.

There lies a tension between the dominant narratives surrounding these communities, which erase and render invisible their multiple and mobile subjectivities, as well as the narratives these communities seek to create for themselves. Dominant narratives about asylum seeker and refugee communities are often co-opted into the discourse of development and made digestible or palatable at the sake of sanitizing narratives of trauma, pain, or loss. This is just one example of how storytelling “make[s] visible [...] distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence” (Walsh and Mignolo 17). In producing stories and photographs that are rooted in lived experience, the workshops and the cultural production from which it emerges constitute forms of knowledge transmitted through participatory storytelling and the creative arts, opening up possibilities of imagining alternate modes of understanding Hong Kong beyond its limited Cold War binaries of “East vs. West” or its glorified image as “Asia’s World City” or even as a “melting pot.”

This does not shield community-based participatory research from its limits. We recall a concern raised by our participants, which – in a nutshell – is that the well-meaning

people they meet continually ask them what they *want*, but never follow it through with action. How, then, with our participants and in the context of our research, can we begin to address social issues within the wider framework of decolonization and social justice? We reject “objectivity” which in our case would be read as emotional indifference to the participants with whom we’re working. Instead, we embrace reciprocity and when we’re able to, share own experiences in the story circles. It is unethical to expect vulnerability from the participants, when we aren’t being vulnerable with them. Emotional investment is our responsibility as researchers. We involve our participants as speakers in the public events we’re part of, in Hong Kong. One of our participants is recording a podcast interview with us where she talks of her experience of Hong Kong’s asylum system. We’ve also invited them to speak on a panel about community building at be/longing’s event that commemorated the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination held at Eaton Hotel Hong Kong. We also are intentional in allowing participants to contribute meaningfully to the production and authorship of outputs beyond their digital stories.

4. Stakeholder engagement

We have a commitment to making our research relevant in the broader public sphere. Our third research question reads: How can our theoretically-grounded understandings of belonging be used to inform policies, practices and public debate on social integration? While I’ve no appetite for engaging with the central Hong Kong government, at local level we’re discussing our research with District Officers, who have a community engagement brief. More productively perhaps we are involved with the active network of charities and NGOs of which the Centre for Refugees is a part. Tangential to the project, but important for our project team, is the way these connections work at different levels: for example members of the team volunteer with the Centre for Refugees on the ground to support refugees and also migrant domestic workers made homeless during the pandemic, distributing food parcels and so on. We’ve been instrumental too in setting up a sanctuary scholarship scheme: two clients of the CFR will be joining my institution, the University of Science & Technology, as undergraduate students in computer science later this year.

Finally let me talk for a minute about the Belonging Research Network. One piece of advice I can offer to those planning a new project is ‘get your stakeholder engagement

in early.' Soon after I arrived in HK, I held a stakeholder event to support the development of the bid for the Navigating Belonging project. The success of that event prompted me to set up the Belonging Research Network and to instigate a seminar series that explores the theme of belonging in Hong Kong from a range of perspectives at the intersection of language, arts practice, migration and education. We work with a core team of four other people from a range of backgrounds and a floating population of around another five. Our Nexus website is the online home of our activities, and we now have an Instagram account.