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Jabavu's journey

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SECTION 1:
REFLEXIVE AND THEORETICAL ESSAY

1. THE WINDING ROAD: RECONSTRUCTING A NOMADIC LITERARY LIFE

This introductory essay blends the theoretical and reflexive approaches to writing. These approaches are necessary to capture assumptions upon which the creative work - its process and product - are based, as well as surfacing the biographer's processes while engaging with the subject's texts and life. The essay attempts to illuminate the complex and layered relationship the biographer has with her subject and how this produces the "reconstructed life" of the subject.

In this essay's ten sections I present and discuss: (1) the background to this feminist biography writing project; (2) a literature review; (3) a brief discussion on the challenges of representing multiple identities in biography, (4) the overall structure of the project; (5) methodology and process; (6) gaps and limitations; (7) the processes of reconstructing a life and crafting the narrative; (9) a comment on the chronology of Noni's life; (10) the target readership of the biography; and (10) the conclusion.

The three biographical chapters that follow are based on distinct periods of Helen Nontando (Noni) Jabavu's life: when she was forty-two; later when she was fifty-eight years old; and the current period, her elderly years starting in 2002 when she was eighty-three years of age. The three biographical chapters are titled: "So Unlikely an Editor: 1961-1962"; "A peripatetic columnist: 1977" and "23 Allenby Road: 2002 – present".

1.1. Background

The road to these chapters - biographical fragments - has been long and winding. Let me take a few steps back on this road in order to contextualise the chapters that follow.

It began in a bookstore in 2001 when I stumbled upon Noni Jabavu's first book *Drawn in Colour*, a book by a South African writer, daughter of a distinguished writing family who had left the country at an early age and grown up abroad. What began as a chance encounter, turned into a deep curiosity. The book, though filled with interesting facts and eye opening experiences of that period, left me with a number of questions about her personal life. Why did Noni leave South Africa at the age of thirteen, in 1933? Who was the family that fostered her? Why was this family willing to take on this responsibility? Who else were they fostering? Did they have biological children? It seemed very unusual for a black child to have left home in the early thirties, to be cared for by a white family in England. Most of the departures as far as I was aware had begun much later, at least post 1948. What kind of a woman was she? How did she feel about politics and how involved was she in the anti-apartheid struggle? How political was her other writing? Was she a feminist? How feminist was her writing? What were her views on feminism? As the questions grew in number and the lack of answers seemed like brick walls, my curiosity turned into a fascination.

A year later Noni bobbed on my computer screen as a request from a friend: "Noni Jabavu is returning home. I have drafted the attached funding proposal to the Department of Arts and Culture. Please read it and comment." I was so surprised when I read this e-mail because a year earlier I had simply assumed Noni had died. I commented enthusiastically on the proposal but was disappointed to note I would be travelling on the day of her ceremonial arrival.

In that e-mail I also learned two curious facts. Firstly that Noni had written a second book called *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life.* (Secondly that Virginia Phiri was a Zimbabwean writer who had been planning her return home and was asking for assistance in tracing her relatives in the Eastern Cape who would receive her in true African style.) Arrangements had been made for her to stay in an old age home in East London. I thought then, an elderly woman, writer of two books is coming home after sixty-nine years and her blood relatives cannot be found! More and more questions flooded my mind. Some of

these questions were answered after I purchased and read her second book. The book read like an extension of the first one, an elaborated memoir. But still, not much information on her personal life abroad.

Two years later in 2004 I had to decide on a subject for an MA in Creative Writing assignment. It sounded like an easy assignment, a "biographical fragment". We were to decide on one event of our subject's life, do some research and write a chapter (3 000 - 4 000 words) on that event. I had no doubts in my mind about my subject. I also knew which fragment to choose.

Little did I know just how difficult and confusing it would be to do research on Noni. Difficult because most sources on her cannot be found in South Africa. Confusing because sources are replete with information on her father D.D.T. and her grandfather J.T. Many promising leads resulted in additional information about her family but little about Noni. However, 2 370 words later I managed to write a fragment called "Noni Jabavu Returns Home". During this research and afterwards I was convinced it was my task to write her biography. I experienced the feeling as "a calling" strange as it sounds. It was at this time that I developed an outline of the book I would later write and began discussion with a publisher. The feeling was sustained and it led me to take the biography course in 2005.

As part of this course I wrote another biographical fragment called "The Beginnings", focussing on her family background. I wrote the family tree based on numerous and disparate sources using evidence I found after a 'fierce struggle' (Backscheider 2001: 80). Research on this chapter led me to the rich history of black writers and leaders from then Cape Colony. I learned about interconnecting strands of history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period: the history of missionaries who brought Christianity to the region and some of the Quaker actors; the educational history of black people, and in particular the roles played by John Tengo (Noni's grandfather) and D.D.T. (Noni's father), in setting up in 1916 what is now known as Fort Hare University; the politics of the press, again with Noni's grandfather as a pioneer journalist, editor and owner of the first

newspaper in isiXhosa *Imvo Zabantsundu* 1884; the vibrancy of writing by black intellectuals; and the intricate nature of party politics and the struggles for land ownership and the right to vote.

I learned that D.D.T. had written a biography on his father called *The Life of John Tengo Jabavu: Editor of Imvo Zabantsundu 1884 - 1921*.[1] And, that Catherine Higgs, an academic in America wrote a biography of D.D.T. called. *The Ghost of Equality*: *The public Lives of D.D.T. Jabavu of South Africa, 1885 – 1959*, published in 1977.[2] I became more convinced of the need to write a biography on Noni after reading these two biographies.

It seemed to me then that Noni's journey had begun so much earlier than her lived life. It seemed to have been initially charted by her grandfather J.T. in his sixty-two years of life, smoothened out by her parents D.D.T. who lived for seventy-four years and Florence who lived for fifty-five years. Her family of pioneers, politicians, writers, achievers, musicians and journalists laid down historical foundations for her own journey.

Exile-life was, however, a different form of journey, where she was to make choices that moulded her individual identity. After leaving South Africa Noni began to start her own life's journey, geographically apart from her Jabavu heritage and socially, drastically different from them. It is this journey that I felt the compulsion to chart.

I wanted to write a biography that would answer the numerous questions I had in my mind through this early period of my journey with her. I wanted to write a biography that would achieve a few things: open her to the readers, to the worlds of her travels and her experiences; make her visible as a writer, a pioneer writer, and journalist; expose the complexity of her life - a black woman whose childhood was spent in a foreign country, a woman whose adult life was seemingly one of constant movement; show her to be a descendent and product of history makers; and appeal to lovers of literature and lovers of women's history alike both in South

Africa and internationally. Noni is a citizen of the world. I wanted to write a biography that would resonate with later generations of world citizens. She was a pioneer. When D.D.T. was reflecting on his life in a letter to his daughters, Noni and Lexi, he wrote, "…I am busy recollecting and writing down the records of things likely to be forgotten if I do not rescue them from oblivion."[3] To use his words, I wanted to write a biography that would "rescue her (Noni) from oblivion".

The desire to write this biography has now become an ongoing commitment. Backscheider notes in her chapter, "Living with the subject" that:

> The reasons for choosing a particular person as a subject for a biography can be deep, even unreachably deep in the psyche, utterly pragmatic, idealistic, romantic, blatantly ambitious, carried over from childhood, born in a chance encounter – the range is infinite. In fact the choice is far less personal than it seems, but regardless of how ambitious, crass or financial the decision is, it becomes *very* personal and the movement from choice to ongoing commitment is a major factor in how the life story and its meaning begin to be perceived. (Backscheider 2001: 41)[4]

When I began research for the three chapters below in September 2005 I had been 'living with my subject' for four years. I was clear about one burning desire, to place Noni on a visible historical pedestal alongside her pioneer grandfather and father. The facts I had on her life convinced me that she was a woman who, it seemed to me, was being overshadowed by her larger looming male family members and her extended absence from South Africa. My 'living' with her turned into my feminist commitment. Our 'life' together was to become more intense in September 2005, than at any time in the preceding four years because then, research became my major preoccupation. It became '*very* personal' and I find myself now committed (on an ongoing basis) to writing this biography that I have no doubt is of a unique life.

Noni's life journey is winding, layered, and intriguing; and it has now come full circle. Her return, on May 5, 2002, to the province of her birth completes this journey. What follows is an elaboration on my engagement with research and the writing of her biography. I start with finding facts on her life.

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. Biography, the genre

> […] biography has always been viewed with some degree of suspicion among the academic disciplines – too fictional to be viewed as history and too historical to be viewed as literature – not quite a social science and not quite part of the humanities. Cursed and blessed, biography was "a disease of English literature" to George Elliot while being "the most delicate and humane of the branches of the art of writing "to Lytton Strachey.[5]

I am not an historian, a social scientist, or a scholar of English literature but a feminist and a writer-in-the-making whose interests in history, social science, and African literature lie in rendering women visible. Women's lives provide a window to a nation's history. South Africa is now at that historical moment when undertaking this task forms part of political, historical, and feminist agendas. Biography, "delicate and humane", is a genre well suited for that function. I propose therefore briefly to survey the field of black South African women's biography in order to position my study in relation to broader literary trends in this field. Lenta, quoting Head, noted that:

> Literature is very functional in South Africa and bound inextricably to human suffering; the death of South African literature is that it is almost blinded by pain, people hardly exist besides the pain.[6]

In life writing, "pain" is prevalent. Two compilations *Paulina Dlamini: a servant of Two Kings*[7] and *"not Either an experimental doll": the separate lives of three South African women*[8] also sketch women's lives. The first memoir is of an individual compiled by her colleague Reverend Heinrich Filter, a missionary. The second is a collection of correspondence between three women, Lily Moya being the dominant of the three. Shula Marks, an historian, compiled this correspondence thus reconstructing three lives. These are significant compilations that bring to life the circumstance of women's lives, and what they had to overcome to reach their goals, in the case of Dlamini doing missionary work while staying with her traditional ways and for Moya, a young woman, getting an education despite active discouragement from her family.

Autobiographies by Phyllis Ntantala, *A Life's Mosaic: The Autobiography of Phyllis Ntantala*[9] and Mamphele Ramphele's *Mamphele Ramphele*[10] and the memoir *Remembrances*[11] by Frieda Matthews are books by women telling their stories alongside those of their famous husbands/partners. While it is hard, if not impossible, to think of these women's significant others A.C. Jordan (prolific writer), Steven Bantu Biko (political black consciousness activist) and Z.K. Matthews (academic and politician) respectively, it is commendable that through these books women have gained individual agency. They write about the complexity of their lives, bringing to life their own ideas and contributions to society.

Wilson writing about autobiography noted, "I did not enter the women's movement in search of an identity. Political activity simply presented itself to me as an imperative…"[12] The next two categories of life writers had the South African political struggle "present" itself to them.

Prison memoirs by Ceasarina Mokhoere (*No Child's Play: in Prison under Apartheid)*[13] and Fatima Meer (*Prison Diary. One Hundred and Thirteen Days 1976)*[14] tell the stories of women's incarceration in apartheid prisons from their own perspectives.

Struggle/political autobiographies by Emma Mashinini (*Strikes have followed me all my life*)[15], Maggie Resha (*My life in the struggle*),[16] Ellen Khuzwayo (*Call Me Woman*)[17] and the more recent autobiographies *Our Generation*[18] by Zubeida Jaffer (2003) and *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*[19] in conversation with Nomsa Mwamuka by Miriam Makeba (2004) all tell stories of women's lives under apartheid. Most importantly these stories are of black women speaking for themselves. Makeba and Resha's books also carry the theme of exile. Makeba a world-renowned musician was also an anti-apartheid activist whose music was deeply immersed in liberation politics.

Two most recent memoir/autobiographies by much younger black women Motsei's *Seeing Voices Hearing Visions,*[20] (2004) and Khumalo's *Never been at Home*[21] (2004) are distinct in that, while they also probe the complex issues of womanhood, the stories are current and the woman are younger. This is an emerging trajectory, in the history of women's life writing.

Sindiwe Magona (*To my Children's Children*[22] and *Forced to Grow*[23]) and Noni Jabavu (*Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts*[24] and *The Ochre People*[25]*)* are memoirs and autobiographies of exiled black women writers. These add a shade of variety to black women's writing in that they are writers' memoirs. Magona is also a novelist while Noni was a journalist and editor.

While autobiographies and memoirs require an individual to want to tell their own story. A biography requires someone else to think that a life is important enough to write about. This raises complex issues of representation, agency, and motives. It also raises pertinent questions of reconstructing a life, choices and decisions a biographer needs to make in the process of re-enacting someone else's life.

A look at the preliminary list of biographies of black women in Table 1 below is worthy of analysis. Notably there is only one biography of a black writer, Head.

Table 1: A preliminary list of biographies of Black South African Women

No	Subject & her profession	Book title	Author	Year published
1.	Winnie Mandela social worker & politician	*Winnie Mandela: Mother of the Nation*[26]	Nancy Harrison	1985
2.	Winnie Mandela	*Winnie Mandela: a Life* [27]	Anne Marie du Preez Bezdrop	2003
3.	Winnie & Nelson Mandela social worker & politician	*Nelson and Winnie Mandela*[28]	Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler	1987
4.	Nokukhanya Luthuli teacher and activist	*Nokukhanya: Mother of Light*[29]	Peter Rule	1993
5.	Katie Makhanya interpreter & lay nurse	*The Calling of Katie Makhanya: a Memoir of South Africa*[30]	Margaret McCord	1995
6.	Bessie Head writer	*Bessie Head: Thunder behind her ears*[31]	Eilersen G. Stead	1995
7.	Christina Sibiya primary school teacher	*Zulu Woman: The Life Story of Christina Dlamini*[32]	Rebecca Hourwich Reyher	1999
8.	Walter & Albertina Sisulu nurse & politician	*Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In our Lifetime* [33]	Elinor Sisulu	2002
9.	Patricia de Lille trade unionist & politician	*Patricia de Lille*[34]	Charlene Smith	2002

This preliminary list throws up interesting observations. A glance at the biographies shows two as joint biographies of politician (struggle) couples. Winnie and Albertina's lives are seen as co-joined lives. Their individual identities: Winnie as a social worker and politician in her own right and Albertina while well known, are tightly bound with those of their husbands. It is only the more recent biography published in 2003 (and after she and Nelson divorced) that focuses on Winnie as separate from Nelson. One biography is that of a wife of a famous politician and winner of the Nobel price for peace Albert Luthuli. Although Nokukhanya is portrayed as having her own identity she is cast in the mould of a "mother", a traditional role women are often expected to play. In Winnie's individual biography she is also adorned with the traditional role of women as mothers.

Katie Makhanya's biography takes on an interesting slant, although it is Makhanya's story being told, it is mediated by her biographer, whose "memoir of South Africa" Makhanya's story really is. Christina Sibiya's story is one that illuminates the life of a woman within the kingdom of KwaZulu during King Solomon ka Dinizulu's reign. Both of these biographies have historical significance

in that they speak about women who lived in the earlier periods of South African history when black women's lives were less visible than in the latter part of the century. They show women's tenacity and strength in the pit of entrenched Zulu patriarchy, the growing influence of missionaries on blacks, and the rudiments of apartheid.

The remaining biographies Head (writer) and de Lille's (politician) are the only biographies that seem to value, in their titles and content, women for themselves, for their contributions in society. Noni's biography is planned as this kind of biography, one that honours and celebrates her, her life as a writer and individual, and her contributions to society and the literary world.

Two recently published anthologies *Women Writing Africa*[35] (2003) and *The Closet of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*[36] (2004) document writings by women in southern Africa and South Africa respectively. In both anthologies the compilers and authors attempted to go as far back in history as they could. The earliest writings from Lesotho are dated 1842 in the first anthology and the earliest South African entry is dated 1895. From *The Closet of Strangers* the earliest entry dates from 1895. What these show is that there is a growing interest in women writers. Noni's biography will be a direct contribution to this growing pool of literature on black women writers.

1.2.2. Noni as a subject of biography

McDowell argues for a contextual approach to writing about Black women writers:

> Its limitations notwithstanding, I firmly believe that the contextual approach to Black women's literature exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published and reviewed.
>
> To those working with Black women writers prior to 1940, the contextual approach is especially useful. In researching Jessie Fausset, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, for example, it is useful to determine the prevalent attitudes about Black women during the time that they wrote.[37]

The contextual approach is particularly interesting in Noni's case because even though she wrote her first book in 1960, (twenty years later than McDowell's cut off point) she wrote and published it in England, in exile. The social and political conditions of England and South Africa in 1960 were very different. Institutionalised racism was gaining momentum in South Africa leading to an exodus of many anti-apartheid activists and in particular writers whose work was seen as threatening to the apartheid state. It was in this context that Noni became the first black woman to publish an autobiography/memoir. Her first book *Drawn in Colour* was first published in London in 1960 by John Murray, then in New York in 1962 by St Martins Press. In 1961 it was translated into Italian and published by *Mondarori Editore in* Milan. Noni was a publishing success far ahead of black South African women.

In England, however, the first black woman to publish a book was Phyllis Wheatley in 1773.[38;39] She was originally a slave from West Africa and later freed and lived in Boston, USA. Her book of poetry was published in England and brought her international attention. She became the first African American to publish a volume of literature.[40] This context of "exile" or "diaspora writers" settled in or transiting through England is a crucial one in that it forms a backdrop for writing Noni's biography and discussing her writings. I return to this idea later in the text.

Noni, like novelists Sindiwe Magona and Lauretta Ngcobo and published poets Lindiwe Mabuza and Sankie Nkondo **is** bound by the concept of "exiled writers". All are now back in South Africa. Magona returned in 2004 and lives and works from Cape Town. Essays critiquing her prolific writings have recently been compiled into a book. Ngcobo is a Member of Parliament in KwaZulu-Natal. Mabuza works in the South African foreign mission and Nkondo, the former Minister of Housing, works as the Deputy Secretary General of the African National Congress. Unlike Noni,all four women have come back to South Africa with public profiles, the latter two being known more for their political and public roles rather than as writers. Noni's case is different. She left as a child and returned to relative anonymity in old age, after six decades of exile.

1.2.3. Noni's biography as a feminist project

Noni is listed in the book, *Who's Who in Contemporary Women's Writing* published by Routledge in 2001. It is a biographical and bibliographical guide to contemporary women writers from around the world. It deals primarily with fiction writers, poets and playwrights, but some writers of literary non-fiction, such as biographers, memoirists and literary critics have also been included.[41] It is an impressive volume because of its international and contemporary character. It covers the last four decades, carries 1 049 biographical profiles of women in 110 countries. In the introduction, Miller, the editor, explains its objective thus:

> […] I would like to comment on the book's exclusive focus on women writers. This guide makes no claims about women's writing as separate category or distinct tradition. In addition there was no requirement that the writers included define themselves as feminists or write on feminist or women oriented themes and subjects. The decision to include only women was born out of *the frustration with the fact that woman have consistently been given less coverage than men in reference works that include both women and men.* (emphasis mine). It became clear to me that the only way to compensate for this past neglect and provide adequate representation of important contemporary women writers from around the world was to give them a volume of their own. That said I would like to acknowledge *the fact that women's writing has been and continues to be vital to feminism and the expansion of women's rights* (emphasis mine).[42]

Writing a biography on Noni thus becomes a feminist project. The frustrations Miller mentions, I share. They are frustrations borne of a feminist concern, women's invisibility in the public sphere. As Backscheider asserts in her assessment on the state of women's biography "…it has become unacceptable to ignore them (women)[43] As the social position of women has improved over the years and society's attitudes have changed it has indeed become impossible to ignore them. Noni is one of the few women whose social status changed in the early 1900s by virtue of her family background; the sub-theme of class is crucial to understanding Noni and I return to this later in the text.

In addition Noni's literary contributions made her a "respectable" subject for investigation. Driver notes the distinct nature of Noni's pioneer writings in this way:

> While the 50s and 60s offer a number of examples of male autobiographers in pursuit of a place in a white-defined world. The only autobiography written by a woman at that time - Jabavu's *The Ochre People* (1963) – reveals a desire to separate from the white-defined (and self-defining) world to enter, again, an African community.[44]

Noni's less publicized journalistic contributions make her a deserving and remarkable subject for biography. Noni's journalism career is noteworthy because she practiced at a time when international travel and 'commuting' was rare for women, certainly for black South African women it was unheard of. As early as 1961 Noni was writing her editorials on boats as she travelled through the West Indies and regularly crossing between England and the West Indies. "The career of journalism, […] began to open up to *a few rare women* (emphasis mine) in England fairly early in the eighteenth century, perhaps because it was so ill paid."[45] Noni was indeed a "rare" woman.

What criteria would a biography on Noni have to meet in order to be regarded as a feminist biography? Discussing these criteria Register suggests that:

> To earn feminist approval, literature must perform one or more of the following functions: (1) serve as a forum for women; (2) help to achieve cultural androgyny; (3) provide role models; (4) promote sisterhood; and (5) augment consciousness-raising.[46]

Noni's two books - *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People* and her journalism together and individually meet all these criteria. Let me briefly discuss each function in relation to Noni's own writings. Firstly, to serve as a forum. "Virginia Woolf's first directive to female writers was: Above all, you must illuminate your own soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generosities, and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness."[47] As will be seen in the creative sections where numerous samples of Noni's writings are shown, Noni

performed this function to the full. She performed it as a memoirist, an editor, a columnist. At, times she performed it to her readers' shock.

Secondly, to bring about cultural androgyny is to "assist in humanizing and equilibrating the culture's value system, which has historically serves dominant male interests."[48] Again, Noni does this with her writing and in her professional roles, in particular when she became the first ever, black woman editor of *The New Strand* magazine in 1961.

Thirdly, to be a role model is concerned with positive female identity that is "independent of a male identity". It means to "self-actualize". Again Noni did not only "self-actualize", she wrote about her process of self-actualization. She discussed openly what it meant for her and her position in society.

Fourthly, to create a feeling of sisterhood, Noni's writings performed this function. She wrote extensively about her woman relatives and her sister in her books, analyzing the bonds of womanhood that keep them together. Most notable is the story she tells in *Drawn in Colour* about her sister Alexandra who was in an unhappy marriage in Uganda and how she moved from England to Uganda so that she could provide support to her sister. The story had a good ending. Alexandra eventually divorced her husband. The value of creating a sisterhood is, Register notes: "[…] to overcome group self-hatred, the animosity that many women feel for others of their sex as a result of isolation, competition for male attention, and belief in female inferiority."[49]

Lastly, augmenting consciousness-raising aims to "[…] provide realistic insights into female personality development, self perception, interpersonal relationships, and other 'private' or 'internal' consequences of sexism."[50] In her editorials and her columns Noni performed this function to great detail using herself as the subject. She used a reflexive and introspective style to provide insights about her own development and growth.

The genre of my work then is very clearly a feminist biography as defined by Register.

1.2.4. The 'Black and British' identity

Noni grew to maturity in Britain and lived some of her adult life there. This poses to the writer the question of how we understand her identity, one which was both black and British.

The history of black people arriving in Britain dates back to the middle of the 16th century. "In 1555 five Africans were brought into Britain. Over the next century more and more Africans were imported. By the middle of the seventeenth century at least, a thriving black community had been established, and Britain had ceased to be a white man's country."[51] The two main centres from which black people came was the West coast of Africa and the West Indies.

Over the centuries and with Britain's involvement in the slave trade, their numbers grew steadily. "The black community of this period (18th century) was divided into three classes: the slaves, the free, and those who occupied the halfway house between bondage and freedom." […] "There was a small privileged caste, the foreman of the gangs, coachmen, cooks, butlers, maids, nurses, female companions and other house servants."[52]

The anti-slave trade movement emerged as a political movement that led to the eventual abolition of the British slave trade in 1807.[53] The Quakers played a big role in the movement to abolish slavery, "many pioneers, on both sides of the Atlantic, were Quakers"[54]. Borne of this movement and sheer growth of numbers, a political movement concerned with citizenship rights and the ambiguous identity of being "Black and British" grew, culminating in the first All African Convention in 1900 held in London.[55]

There was another category of blacks that were also adding to the growing numbers of blacks in Europe. Shyllon dedicates a chapter, "Princes, Students and Scholars" in his discussion of the intersection between slave trade and education of Africans during the 18th century.[56] Shyllon comments, "Of course, it was in the interest and to the advantage of Britain to have children of African kings and chiefs educated in England. For they were hostages for security of Englishmen trading in Africa."[57]

Shyllon further notes:

> Africans took a gamble when they sent their children to Europe for education. On the one hand, they earnestly looked forward to the improvement in life and thought which the education of the sons and daughters of Africa in Europe would mean for their countries and countrymen. On the other hand, there was a real possibility that the young men of Africa might never return to make the expected improvement a reality. From time to time, here and there in Africa, Africans reacted sharply to the craven conduct of Europeans who betrayed their trust."[58]

These princes, students and scholars ranged in age from ten to seventeen.[59] In the main, they were boys. When Noni arrived in England in 1933, six years before the onset of World War Two, she was thirteen years old. By this time there was a well-established history of black children, often from middle and upper class or royal families, arriving in Britain. Most of them hoped to return home. Noni writes that her parents had hoped that she would study medicine in England and return home and "make the expected improvement a reality."

Like most of the "princes, scholars and students", she was safe with her adoptive Quaker family, far from the political activities of black intellectuals and politicians who were, amongst other things, asserting their identities as Black Britons and campaigning against racism and theorizing about the politics of being black in Britain. This is the crucial broad context to take into account when writing about Noni's settlement in England.

When World War Two ended it was to be followed by another wave, the biggest thus far, of emigration of blacks from Britain's numerous colonies, to the Empire

starting in 1948. Britain needed labour to rebuild after the war. Immigrants were viewed as a solution to the shortage of labour and were encouraged through government policies to enter Britain. On the other hand Black people were seeking better opportunities. "The 1948 Nationality Act granted United Kingdom citizenship to citizens of Britain's colonies and former colonies. Their British passports gave them the right to come to Britain and stay here for the rest of their lives." [60]

Noni's plans to return to South Africa were crushed by the war. During the war Noni had married and had her daughter Thembi in 1942. In a sense then, the war had helped seal her Black Briton identity. The Nationality Act of 1948 allowed her to become a citizen. Years later in 1960 she was to declare in her book, "I belong to two worlds with two loyalties; South Africa where I was born and England where I was educated."[61] However, the development of this identity, comfortable as she was with it, was not of her making. Introducing her second book she explains why she lived away from home for so many years, "The reasons […] are to do with the unexpected vicissitudes of anybody's life."[62] Her chosen identity was that of a writer.

Perhaps the group that has contributed the most in exposing to the world the life of blacks in Britain and their experiences and understanding of the accompanying social and political environment is the writers.

1.2.5. Writers of the Black Diaspora in Britain

The first black person to publish a book in Britain was Ukawsaw Gronniosawa, a native of the current Nigeria, then known as Bornu. *"A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, as related by himself*, published in Bath in about 1770, is the only extant account of trials and tribulations of a poor Black and his family."[63]

It was over two hundred years since the arrival of the first black people in Britain that their voices began to be heard, in the written and published format.

Gronniosaw's text as the title suggests was autobiographical. By the end of the eighteenth century Phyllis Wheatly, Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano and Oladaudah Equiano had also published books. The genres ranged from poetry, (Wheatly's *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral,* 1773)[64] and letters, (Sancho's *Letters* 1783)[65;66] and anti-slavery campaigning in Cugoano's (*Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of the slavery and commerce of the human species'* 1791)[67] and autobiography, (Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African,* 1789).[68]

These were the beginnings of writing and publishing in Britain by black people either living there, like most, or merely passing through, like Wheatly. Towards the end of the nineteenth century in 1892 Celestine Edwards became the first black to become an editor.[69] He edited two magazines: *Lux* "a weekly Christian Evidence Newspaper which appeared from 1892 to 1895 and *Fraternity,* published from 1893 to 1897."[70]

As the Pan-African movement began to rise in the wake of the twentieth century as marked by the first Pan-African conference held in 1900[71], with the slow death of slavery, so did the writing and publishing by blacks increase. Three years later W.E.B. du Bois published his canonical book, *The Souls of Black Folk.*[72] In this book he articulated amongst other concepts, "double consciousness"[73] that black people of the diaspora have had to live with and understand for themselves in order to locate themselves and their roles within the diaspora. Gilroy writing much later about the same issue, spoke about "the peculiarities of the black English"[74] and argued that: "The black experience in England is increasingly revealed to possess a certain uniqueness – a particularity and peculiarity that distinguish it from the history of black populations elsewhere in the diaspora."[75] This is an important context to remember when writing a biography on Noni. It provides a background to understanding her better when she wrote in her columns in the *Daily Dispatch* that she is a "Black European"[76] and was brought up "as an Englishwoman"[77]. Echoing this idea sixteen years later, Gilroy asserts that "Striving to be both European and black requires some specific form of double consciousness."[78]

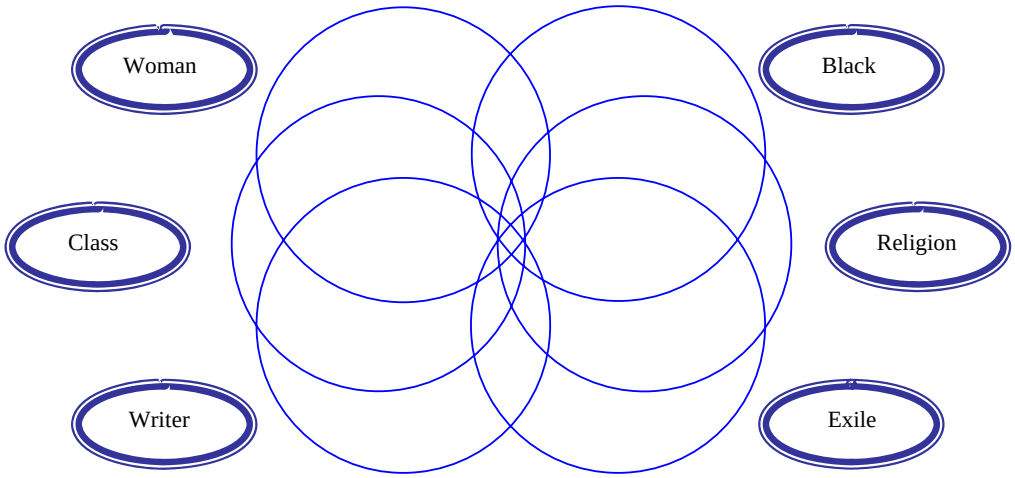
The numbers of distinguished African and Indian diaspora writers has been increasing steadily since the World War Two within British literature. Our understanding of what it means to live and be a writer within this context had been enriched by this community of writers. Noni was a proud member of this community.

1.3. Representing Multiple Identities

No life can be easily packaged into circles and sub-circles and their intersections, as most lives are far too complex for that. However, for purposes of planning this biography it helps to think about the main themes of her life. The figure below shows how I am thinking about Noni Jabavu's life. Noni was aware of the role her class position played in her life and how it cuts across being a woman, being black, and a foreigner in many of the countries she lived in as a writer.

Noni's class status distinguishes her from the other women who in comparison rose from nowhere and struggled their way through to becoming writers. Although the Quakers, had an influence on the lives of both her family of origin (in particular, her grandfather, J.T.) and her adoptive family (in particular, her adoptive mother, Margaret Clark), it is unclear at this stage the degree to which she herself embraced that identity or lived and worked within it.

Diagram 1: Noni's identity themes

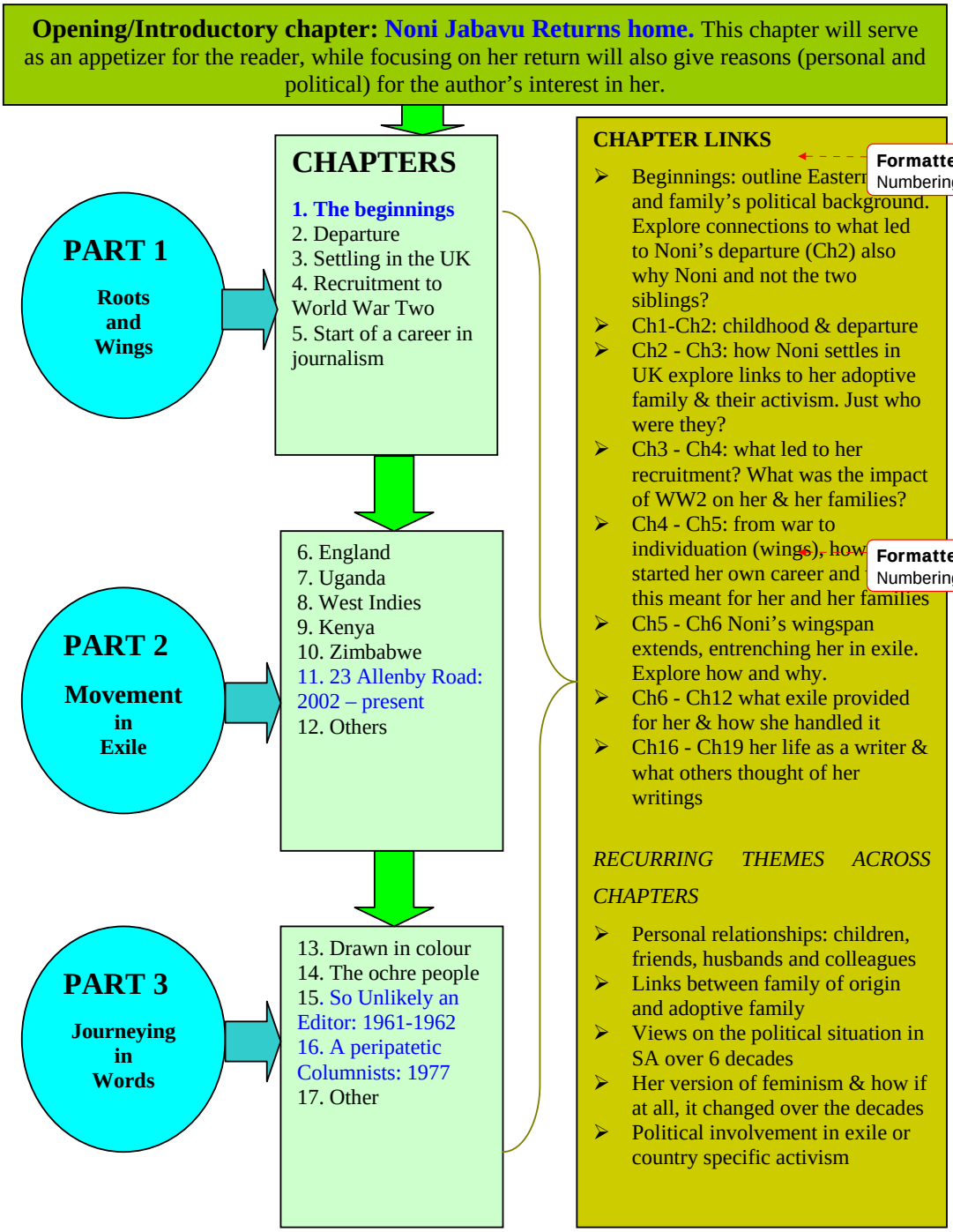


The challenge of this biography project then lies in writing in such a way that it best approximates the unity of her multiple identities whether they be natural, inherited, imposed or chosen .

1.4. Overall Structure

What follows below is a graphic representation of the planned book. It provides a visual sense of how the three new chapters fit into the broader book project. The two old chapters "Noni Jabavu Returns Home" and "The Beginnings" and the three chapters that this research period covers are in **blue font.** I have conceptualized the book in three main parts "Roots and Wings", "Movement in Exile" and "Journeying in Words." (See diagram 2 below for details).

Diagram 2: The overall book structure: "Jabavu's Journey"



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1.5. Methodology and Process

In this section I address the question of how I went about researching Noni's story. The three biographical chapters comprise findings from the Johannesburg Library; two museums – the King Williamstown Museum and the National English Literature Museum (NELM); three key informant interviewees – Virginia Phiri (Noni's writer friend from Zimbabwe who accompanied her back home), Siyabonga Jabavu (a male relative), and Lynette Elliot (the owner of the frail care home where Noni resides); and my observations during the data collection trip. The process was, however, not linear. It involved many twists and turns, as well as continuous decision making about changing and adjusting plans. Following below is an account of the road I followed, in as close a chronological order as possible.

Using my book structure above I began by looking for information on her childhood. There are a number of fragmentary comments on Noni's childhood in both her books *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People.* The biography of her father is centred on his public life and thus offered no starting points. I had hoped to craft the narrative of her childhood using a father's perspective in addition to other facts. I wanted to write a narrative built on as many sources as possible rather than piecing together sprinklings of Noni's references from her writings.

I imagined at the beginning that Noni's family would be a crucial source of information. My engagement with the family reminded me of Backscheider's elaboration on the multiple roles of a biographer:

> The biographer is explorer, inquirer, hypothesizer, compiler, researcher, Researcher Extraordinaire, selector, and writer. Today the biographer is seen benignly as guide, companion, interpreter, analyzer (not necessarily analyst), literary critic, classifier, and artist. Or else as manipulator, propagandist, exploiter, critic, and competitor with the subject for being the site of truth and genuine understanding. (Backscheider 2001: xxi)

Most importantly, it was the mix in roles of "exploiter", "critic" and "competitor" that I felt Siyabonga Jabavu, Noni's relative in the Eastern Cape, had put me in as my explanations below will demonstrate. Interestingly, I began to sound like a "propagandist" as I engaged with him in defence of my project. During further and latter discussions with Siyabonga's mother and one member of the maternal side of the family I realized just how easy it is to slide into the role of "manipulator". My objective was to verify information but I recognized just how thin and slippery the line is.

Understandably family members would be wary of and even reject a biographer's intrusion and try as much as possible to preserve their privacy. Sisulu notes in her prologue to the joint Sisulu biography, "It turned out that one or two writers had approached them [the family] for permission to write their life stories. Their response was cautious, mostly because they were concerned about the invasion of privacy that such an exercise would involve."[79] Having been in telephonic communication with Siyabonga I felt very positive when I undertook my first trip to the Eastern Cape during which I was to meet him and other members of the family.

The one week data collection trip to the Eastern Cape province in September was meant to achieve the following: an interview with Siyabonga Jabavu; an interview with Lynette Elliot who owns and manages the frail and elderly home where Noni lives; a visit with Noni whom I had learned from Lynette I would not be able to interview; and visits to the Fort Hare library, the King Williamstown Museum, and the NELM.

Having had intermittent telephonic conversations since 2004 with Siyabonga Jabavu, I planned to work with him as my way into the sources and evidence I hoped to collect. I assumed that during this period we had built a rapport sufficient to facilitate the next stage of my research. I made arrangements with him and travelled to East London. Our first face-to-face meeting in September proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated.

Siyabonga opened our meeting by interrogating me: "*Who* are you?" and "What are you going to do with the money you get from the book?" Thus began a convoluted journey of engagement with the family. It also led me to understand their fears and anxieties about "writers" and "outsiders". I realized that I had to work with their mistrust of my motives and of me as an individual. I did this while sharing my enthusiasm for the project and how I value it for its historical significance. I learned that Noni had designated Siyabonga's brother, a twenty-one year old who is a journalism student, to write her biography. Siyabonga informed me that they wanted to keep the writing of this biography in the family. He could not grant me an interview as he was too busy. However, I managed to have a lengthy conversation with his mother that opened a small window to family dynamics. The most vital piece of information I gained was Siyabonga's mother's firm opinion that her younger son (the person designated to write the biography) was not capable, ready, or interested in writing it. This piece of information was to prove very useful in my later engagements with the family.

I realized after these two meetings that I would need a lot more time and many more meetings with various members of the family before I would be granted access to key family members. This was a moment of immense personal torment: firstly because I had naively not expected rejection that bordered on hostility. Secondly, the knowledge that I could forge ahead and write an unauthorised biography was tempered by my desire to have this 'caretaker' side of the family on my side. The main reason I wanted them on my side has less to do with my need to access information and sources than my sense that they needed to gain a greater understanding of how Noni's life history and status had grown beyond that of 'family property' – for want of a better word; that she is a national and international figure with a literary persona of historical importance. And, that if I did not write this biography someone else outside the family would, sooner or later.

I also hoped to use her letters kept by the NELM in Grahamstown. I encountered two obstacles. Firstly, there were far more letters than I had anticipated. Time was

too short to read, grasp and be able to effectively use the 413 letters in a narrative. Secondly, I learned that the originator of the letters, Noni, rather than the person who donated them, Mrs. Keenan-Smith, holds copyright over them. Getting permission to quote them meant working through her lawyers in Zimbabwe; however, I have still not heard back from them since I made initial enquiries. Again, time was of the essence.

I learned that the King Williamstown Museum had information on John Tengo, Noni's grandfather, as it was his base and hometown. I already had the whole sample of articles they kept, having obtained them from NELM a month earlier. I was shocked to find that neither the library at Fort Hare University nor the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS) have any records on Noni or on D.D. T., who with Alexandra Kerr started Fort Hare in 1916. D.D.T had remained at Fort Hare for decades! Noni's mother was a matron at the women's boarding house in those early years. I learned that there were no records on her either. Interestingly I was given these answers categorically because Siyabonga had been there months before me, looking for documents in his quest to trace his family. I wondered to what extent this lack of record keeping was a legacy of apartheid? I also wondered if in fact these records were available somewhere and the staff just had no information. I became curious about the organisation of archives in South Africa, current and past.

By the end of this trip I had interviewed Lynette, met with five members of the family, met Noni at her home, learned that there were no documents to collect from the places I visited. Additionally, I had taken in the geographical context of Noni's life. I had walked on the grounds of Fort Hare where Noni was born; visited Noni's childhood home in Middledrift; seen the Amatole mountain range that Noni wrote about; and driven through the towns of Alice, Healdtown and King Williamstown, towns which Noni also wrote about. I went to the Biko Memorial, the East London harbour, the *Daily Dispatch* offices and the Lovedale Press offices. At these last four places I did not speak to people, but I gained tangible knowledge of these places that I know will stay in my memory as I write the biography.

In October in Pretoria I met with two members from Noni's maternal side of the family whose approach can be summarized simply: the more biographies the merrier, Noni would love that. According to them I was as free as any "intellectual" (the actual word used by one of them) is free to write this biography.

My distinct impressions were that the Pretoria based family members did not see themselves as Noni's caretakers while the Eastern Cape based ones, embodied in Siyabonga, did. As the chapter on Noni's stay at the frail care home shows, Siyabonga has been most involved in Noni's life since her return. His gatekeeper role with regard to this project is understandable.

In October I also began to research what I had hoped would be the next chapter, Noni's settling in England. This proved very difficult at that time as I had very few leads to work with.

After the East London trip and my meeting with two relatives from the maternal side, I decided that I would shape my narrative around Noni's lesser-known writings. I knew I had to leave key informant interviews for a later stage. That said, I still wanted, at this stage at least, to avoid her two books *Drawn in Colour* and *The Ochre People* because compared to her journalistic writings, these books have enjoyed greater exposure through a range of critical analyses by a number of scholars. None of these scholars wrote about Noni's journalistic work.

At that point I had already collected five of her *New Strand* magazine editorials. I then began the pursuit of the rest, believing there would have been more. After enquiries I confirmed with the staff at NELM that I had a complete set. The question of why she did this job for such a short period was uppermost in my mind. This is how the title of this chapter was born.

The next step was then to collect Noni's *Daily Dispatch* columns from the Johannesburg library. At this stage I had only the January columns. Surprisingly

the attitude of staff at the library was so different from that of staff at NELM. I was seen as a "burden", someone who wanted too much. The attitude at NELM was more like "thank goodness someone is going to use this". I did not help my situation at the library when I wanted to photocopy what I considered to be contextual readings on the Biko murder and Woods ban. To collect forty-nine of Noni's columns and about twenty contextual ones took so much longer than it should have. A staff member who was assisting me with photocopying was dismissed from his job during this two-week period.

I wondered about the training of staff at the library. I was disappointed that I was so close to demanding to talk to the manager before I received reluctant assistance. As I kept going back to that library the Backscheider's idea of "living with your subject" kept coming back to me. The family situation in East London and the Johannesburg library made me realize that sometimes a biographer has to beg, persuade, and even fight with gatekeepers in order to be let in 'to live with the subject'.

My collection was two columns short. The first article in the first week of January was one introducing Noni's columns so I expected to have a total of fifty-one, not forty-nine. Thus followed another visit back to the library when I checked every single page of every single day of third week of September and the last week of December, just in case I had missed the columns. When I was sure I had not missed it I verified my information with a staff member at NELM who is responsible for this collection. He confirmed that there were indeed forty-nine columns by Noni in that year.

1.6. Gaps and Limitations

The time-bound nature of this research and writing project has meant that I could not wait indefinitely for answers to questions I have on the specific chapters below. At the time of writing, I have been awarded a year long writing fellowship by the Witwatersrand Institute for Economic and Social Research (WISER). This will allow me the opportunity to research with greater time, finish this project, and

hopefully answer most if not all of the outstanding questions. Gaps I would have really wanted to fill in the current chapters I have discussed in the relevant sections below.

What follows below is a discussion on the process of reconstructing a narrative of Noni's life.

1.7. Reconstructing a Life: Crafting a Narrative

The overall approach I took when I was reconstructing Noni's life is captured in Garrison's words, "Despite the differences in the personal stories of unique women, feminist biographers of women mould their life histories to address the common external framework that determines any single woman's place in the world."[80]

Much as the choice of chapters was based on the practicalities of available documented information and a limited time frame, I still wanted to write a chapter that tells the story of a life. Noting from Backscheider that:

> The lives of literary people provide a good test for narrative skill. As all biographers do, the work – writing a novel, composing a symphony, choosing a political office to run for - must be related to the events and responses to experiences, but the biographer is also expected to point out when and how the life is infused in the work. Unfortunately too many biographical narratives come to a complete halt and a section of literary criticism is inserted, but others help keep the focus on the life and the works smoothly become a part of life. (Backscheider 2001: 12)

Selecting material from these writings turned out be an intricate process. The desire to write about everything was tempered with the need to structure a self-contained, logical and interesting narrative that would help the reader to understand Noni (the person and the professional) and her context. The two chapters that focus on her writings are therefore constructed to achieve two major objectives: allow her writings to speak for themselves and to access her life through these writings. The main approach I used was allowing the material to guide how I constructed the narrative.

I discuss specifics of each chapter in depth below. I grappled constantly with this selection process and wondered about the degree to which my selections approximated her life then.

> The best biographers know that they are inventing through their selection and arrangement of materials; they are establishing cause-effect and other relationships, and they are determining what was most formative and important for someone else, someone they do not know. They must choose what to include, leave out, emphasize and subordinate, and when they do, they have constructed a narrative that, whether they are aware of it or not, partakes of cultural stories with expectations for resolutions and interpretations built in. (Backscheider 2001: 18)

I now turn to discussions specific to individual chapters.

1.7.1. So unlikely an editor: 1961-1962

This chapter focuses on Noni's role as the editor of *The New Strand* magazine, the monthly popular fiction magazine started in 1891. It was an initiative of a British publisher George Newnes. After fifty-nine years of 710 issues it closed down in 1950.

Noni was recruited to revive the magazine in 1961. She started her duties on Fleet Street in September and the first issue was published in December. The major gap in this chapter is about the events that led to Noni's recruitment. The most immediate questions I needed answered I still have not answered. What events led to the resuscitation of *The New Strand* magazine? Who was behind this project? We learn that the reason the magazine closed down in 1950 was the lack of finances. Who then, was financing the revival of the magazine and why did they care, eleven years later? Why was Noni the best choice for this job? Who were her colleagues during this period? And, most importantly, why did she do this job for such a short while? And, of further interest, why did the magazine close down again? How long after Noni's departure did it close?

An English writer Chris Willis wrote the history of *The Strand* magazine in 1998. He did not mention this 'Noni period'. Introducing the re-emergence of *The Strand* magazine in December 1998 Willis wrote:

> Not many magazines can count Queen Victoria and Winston Churchill among their former contributors. However, both contributed to the *Strand* at different times during its history. It was after all, one of the best and most popular magazines of its time.
>
> For sixty years (1891-1950) The *Strand Magazine* was a popular source for the best in fiction, featuring the works of some of the greatest authors of the 20th century including Graham Greene, Agatha Christie, Rudyard Kipling, G.K.Chesterton, Leo Tolstoy, Georges Simenon and, of course, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.[81]

This is the same history Noni mentioned in some of her editorials. These are some of the same 'great authors' she commented on. Willis ends this long and detailed history in this way:

> By 1950, the magazine needed a quarter of a million pounds to put it back on its feet. The owners saw no hope of raising the money, so in March 1950 The *Strand* was forced to stop publication.
>
> After nearly half a century the *Strand* has returned. Contributors to this first issue include distinguished crime writers as well as lesser-known authors. With its distinguished tradition behind us, we hope to live up to the high standards set by the original *Strand*, providing a source for some of the best writing of the twenty-first century.[82]

During Noni's editorship the magazine was renamed *The <u>New</u> Strand*. When Willies wrote this history he did not even mention this name change. My search has so far not yielded any results.

The five editorials Noni wrote from December 1961 to April 1962 give the reader a window into the world of literature. This led me to seek out the writers she spoke of and read the books she named as a way to try and 'read' her mind. This chapter,

above the other two, heightened my need to read more about the context of Noni's life in England. My knowledge of England and in particular the literature and writers Noni had either mentioned or quoted was limited.

I was curious about historical questions that kept visiting me in the 'dead of night'. When did black people start going to England, under what circumstances? Who was the first black person to publish a book in England and how did they come about? Who was the first woman to publish a book in England and how did that come about? What was England like in 1933 when Noni first arrived? When did Africans from the colonies start sending their children to study in England and respective colonial empires? What is the history of the women's movement in England and how did Noni and her mother fit into that? As Martin notes, "To write accurate biography, one has to acquire vast amounts of collateral historical knowledge and then know that 90% of it is collateral, and be ready to jettison it…"[83]

I now have this 'collateral historical knowledge' numerous history books later, which may come in handy when I write subsequent chapters, but it is just as valuable to me in its collateral status. I wrote the second draft of this chapter after this extensive reading. I reviewed and revised the chapter with this newly acquired information and found that I became more confident with the story I was telling confirming the idea that, "The most obvious and important part of the contract biographers have with the readers is simply that the biographer must know what he or she is talking about. And tell it accurately, fairly, and with comprehension of related contexts." (Backscheider 2001: 10)

1.7.2. A peripatetic columnist: 1977

The focus of this chapter is Noni's weekly columns that she wrote for the *Daily Dispatch*, a newspaper based in East London in the Eastern Cape Province. She wrote under the editorship of Donald Woods.

The travelling theme is very loud in Noni's columns. She wrote passionately about how immigration laws made it impossible for her to stay in one place in South Africa during her extended visit. I decided to shape my narrative around this theme. In deciding on a title for this chapter I recalled one of her editorials. In 1962 Noni wrote, "The month of March makes a halt in my current life of travel – the peripatetic print of my feet." This is how the title of this chapter was born.

Writing this chapter felt easier than the first one because it is based in South Africa. I am confident about my knowledge of the political and social context of that period, in particular the *Daily Dispatch* because of the watershed historical events of Biko's death in September and editor Woods' ban in October of the same year.

Could I write a narrative about Noni writing for the *Daily Dispatch* in 1977 and *not*, mention these two events? No! The main challenge became if I were to insert and acknowledge this background, how would I do it smoothly while I focused on Noni? If my approach was to allow the material to speak and guide me how was I to do this when Noni made no mention in the forty-nine columns of these events? After reading each column, sentence for sentence, countless times looking for clues, I finally found the answer in the absence of her column in the third week of September and the appearance of her column on a Thursday for the very first time. Normally, her columns appeared on Wednesdays. That provided me with a logical entry point for the context I thought belonged fully with this narrative. The very last three words of the very last her column in December were "'leaves them cold'", the only indirect reference to the Biko case that I could also use.

From reading these columns I was led to 'collateral historical knowledge' by a column in February 9, entitled "Smuts and I". General Jan Christiaan Smuts who was a Prime Minister for fourteen years in South Africa was a friend to Margaret Clark, the woman who became Noni's foster mother in 1933 when she went to live in England. Beukes, the biographer, wrote a book called *The Romantic Smuts Women And Love In His Life.* Writing about their friendship he noted, "To one of his women friends, Margaret Clark-Gillett, he wrote more than 2 000 private letters

over a period of forty years.[84] Further down the text he provides the history "He [Smuts] met her in 1905 when she was only twenty-four and he thirty-five. Up to his death in 1950 they wrote more than 2 000 letters to each other. Most of these dealt with spiritual, ethical and philosophical issues." [85]

The chapter, "Margaret Clark-Gillett: The woman who knew Smuts' soul" is thirteen pages long. In a separate chapter twenty-two pages long where he compares three women in Smuts' life called "Isie, Margaret and Emily: Three women rivalry", Beukes returns to Margaret. Smuts was also friendly with Margaret's sisters, Alice and Lydia. Noni's name does not make it to any of these pages, not even as a footnote.

But, for the biographer this is invaluable information because it led me to the Smuts Museum in Irene just outside Pretoria, a home Margaret visited repeatedly over the forty-five years of their friendship. I have read two biographies of Smuts and one of his books on philosophy. I have gained some insight into the character of the woman who 'adopted' Noni although I am yet to uncover the exact details of their 'mother-daughter' relationship. When I wrote the chapter on Noni's family background I read all the writings by D.D.T. that were available. Admittedly these writings do not purport to be personal, they addressed the land issue, literature, culture and education problems of that time, no mention of personal matters appeared in these. As mentioned above, even the biography on D.D.T. takes a 'public life' angle. These connections raise fascinating questions for the biographer. Most notably, I have numerous leads for further research.

1.7.3. 23 Allenby Road: 2002 – present

This chapter focuses on Noni's current home, a home for the elderly and frail in East London. This has been her home since she returned to South Africa. It is owned and managed by Lynette Elliot.

When I interviewed Virginia Phiri, the woman who accompanied Noni back home she mentioned that Noni had repeatedly spoken about her desire to own "a

rondavel" back home. The home on 23 Allenby Road is not just a geographical location, it has become her grounding place. It made sense then to give this chapter a title that would ground Noni the way she dreamt of being grounded when she was still in Zimbabwe.

The four pillars of this chapter are my three interviewees with Virginia Phiri, Lynette Elliot, and Siyabonga Jabavu, and my observations made during a visit to the Home in the last week of September. Oates as quoted by Backscheider made the following point:

> It is with evidence that the biographer must, through graphic scenes, the telling quotation, the revealing detail, through character development and the depiction of interpersonal relationships, the power of suggestion and dramatic narrative sweep, bring someone's life into focus.[86]

While Virginia and Lynette were extremely responsive and were willing to give me additional information over the phone and via email after the personal interviews, Siyabonga presented me with a challenge, as mentioned earlier. Having agreed before my departure to East London that we would meet on Tuesday September 27, 2005 for the interview, this did not materialize. Countless telephone calls, email communications and three months later, I was finally able to secure a meeting with him on 4 January 2006. During these interactions, which were mostly about the documentary on Noni that the family is working on, he asked me repeatedly, in various permutations, who I am.

Probably because of all the communication before the interview Siyabonga finally took me into his confidence. The interview went reasonably well. The greatest challenge during this interview was in verifying facts. I keep written records of events related to this project while he is relying on his memory. I found that I had to go over more than once on facts and events I needed to confirm. Surprisingly his closing remark was "Maybe you can teach me how to write. I would also like to become a writer."

1.8. A Note on 'A Preliminary Chronology of Noni's Life'.

After writing the three chapters I felt an urgent need to see *in writing* what I had carried, often fuzzily, in my head throughout this process: a written chronology of Noni's life. Similar to the family tree I mention above, creating just this one page chronology became 'a fierce struggle'. I trust that this chronology works as an effective snapshot introduction to the reader and ably conceptualises the three chapters.

1.9. Projected Readership

Noni's biography will be like a small piece on a large, mutli-textured, multi-layered and colourful South African quilt that is beginning to emerge. Six decades of exile from South Africa certainly contributed to relative silence about Noni in the country of her birth. Her writings and her upper class position may have added layers to her identity resulting in all those labels. Nonetheless, to me she is a piece crying to be sewn on its rightful place on the quilt.

The projected readership includes both South Africans and non-South Africans (particularly in countries where Noni lived and worked for extended periods). Through the biography I hope to make her writing accessible as I believe that her writing of mixed genres – autobiographical, memoir, travelogue and journalism – does an interesting job of bringing alive the Eastern Cape of her times and the times of her life across the world. Anyone with a particular interest in history, women's lives, literature, exile and the reintegration of South African society is the projected audience for this biography.

Noni's desire was to spend her last days in the country of her birth. This biography is one other way of returning her home. Scholars and individuals interested in the history of the Eastern Cape and may have read biographies of her grandfather, *The Life of John Tengo Jabavu, Editor of Imvo Zabantsundu 1884-1921* (1922) and her father's. D.D.T. *The Ghost of Equality. The Public Lives of D.D.T. Jabavu of South*

Africa, 1885- 1959 (1997) will be excited to read yet another, third generation Jabavu biography.

1.10. Conclusion

What I have demonstrated above is the background that led me to undertaking this biography project, how I have gone about it to date and how I plan to proceed. The background to this project illuminates my personal journey of choices and decisions that were guided by my own history of political activism and feminism. It also shows the role of chance and coincidence in one's journey to a biography project.

In the literature review and methodology sections I have engaged the vexing questions of how to reconstruct a person's life, in particular the importance of understanding subjects within their historical, social, and political context as well as he complexity of their multiple identities. I have also outlined the winding path I took to get to the three biographical chapters that follow.

The section on how I have written the biographical chapters attempts to be upfront about the choices I made when selecting data around which to construct Noni's life. It also speaks to the gaps I would have preferred to fill. Markedly, the first chapter, "So Unlikely an Editor" has the largest contextual gap that I had hoped to fill.

What I trust that I have done is represent Noni the best way I could in the light of the evidence available to me at this point. The following biographical chapters I hope tell a story of a life while they share Noni's journalistic and editorial writings. Her non-journalistic writings are what drew me to her life in the first place.

Three biographical chapters: "So Unlikely an Editor: 1961-1962"; "A Peripatetic Columnist: 1977" and "23 Allenby Road: 2002 – present" now follow, preceded by the chronology of Noni's life..