Sophiatown as *lieu de mémoire*[1]

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Sophiatown, the website of the Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre (SHCC) states,

> is an historic suburb in Johannesburg, established and populated by families of all races and backgrounds since 1900. It became a community around 1912, and by 1950 was celebrated freehold, non-racial area, and a hive of intellectual, artistic, religious and political activity.[2]

This vibrant interracial urban township is long gone, destroyed by the apartheid regime in the 1950s and replaced by what at first sight looks like a non-descript white suburb. Yet whoever makes the effort to visit the Centre, an initiative of the 1999 established Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre (THMC), can still experience some of the vibrancy, excitement and tragedy of the old Sophiatown. Situated in one of the few buildings that have remained from the original township, the house of former ANC president A.B. Xuma, the SHCC tries to restore a world has been lost.

The story of the rise and fall of Sophiatown, as told by the THMC and the SHCC, is important and emotionally moving, clearly embedded in the grand narrative of twentieth-century South African history as an ongoing struggle between various racial groups, and with the promise of a better future after the fall of apartheid. Sophiatown, the website of the SHCC continues, 'symbolises freedom devastated by racist oppression':

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[1] This is an elaborated version of a paper presented at the 23rd Biennial Conference of the Southern African Historical Society, 'The Past & its Possibilities. Perspectives of Southern Africa', Durban, 27–29 June 2010.

[2] http://sophiatown.net (last visited on 4 October 2014).

Today the Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre exists to promote the revival of Sophiatown as a place where all are welcome where learning and nurturing are everyday activities, and where people are inspired to build their dreams in peaceful ways. It is trough ways such as these that we believe the true transformation of our society lives. Our vision is for the spirit of old Sophiatown to be re-born in our contemporary times: a place where diversity is celebrated, where Ubuntu is practised, and where the future can be something we build together.[3]

The Centre matters and it needs to be encouraged in its heritage work. At the same time, however, this heritage centre is a perfect example of what the French historian Pierre Nora (1998: xvii) has dubbed a *lieu de mémoire*, 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by hint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of memorial heritage of any community'. Such a *lieu de mémoire*, as Nora's own work shows, is never a given, but by definition a construction, developed in a complex process of annexation, attaching meanings, articulation and forgetting. The activities of the THMC are, in other words, a perfect illustration of the way histories are remembered and used in new contexts, and they raise questions about who owns history, who attaches meaning to it, or who tries to forget what (Knevel 2012).

The specific lieu of the SHCC is a particularly artificial one. Although accommodated in a historical place, full of meaning and symbolism, the SHCC is physically located in the middle of a living suburb with a history of its own. The SHCC's immediate modern suburban surroundings are a constant reminder that the history of old Sophiatown is unlike that of other famous examples of forced removals by the apartheid regime. District Six in Cape Town, for example, was never rebuilt, while Alexandra in Johannesburg or the East Bank Location in East London partly still exist as vibrant communities.[4] On the ruins of the old Sophiatown, however, a completely new neighbourhood was built, firstly called Triomf and later, in 2006, renamed Sophiatown. Consequently, most of the current residents of Sophiatown have no natural connection to the older township or its history. For them, the 'Sophiatown' of the heritage centre is probably not a very important *lieu de mémoire*,

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[3] http://sophiatown.net/?page_id=59 (last visited on 4 October 2014).
[4] See Coombes (2004) and Bennett, Julius and Soudien (2008) on District Six; Bonner and Nieftagodien (2008) on Alexandra; and Bank (2001) on East London.

if indeed it is one at all. Present Sophiatown, it seems, is more about suburban life than about history. Just to quote one of these current residents:

> You get into your car and you drive somewhere else and when you get back you get inside and you lock everything down and that's it. So I don't think that we are any more dysfunctional than any other suburban life or for that matter high rise living.

To him, the ceremony of the renaming of the township was meant for others, and was irrelevant for the community currently living in the suburb:

> [They bussed] people in. That's what it was, it was really a party for the guys from the township [i.e. Meadowlands] and nobody else went there, because there were too many people hanging around and we stayed at home. Most of us didn't even go to the event. It wasn't a widely publicized event, and ja, there was nothing that sort of attracted the people that were in this particular community.[5]

This testimony reveals the importance of the meanings that individuals attach to their environment and to the role of urban identities. A 'place', as many psychologists, folklorists and geographers have argued, is never a given, but the outcome of the historical activity of 'placemaking', the dynamic process of establishing meanings for and identities within a space. These meanings are, as the above testimony illustrates, shaped not only by the social, economic, and political interests of the residents but also by their relationship with the outside world. We can, in other words, discern multiple perceptions of the same 'place' and investigate why and how some perceptions became more public than other ones (see Glassberg 2001). Since the forced removals of the 1950s, there have been least two 'Sophiatowns', one of the 'imagination' (that is, in popular culture, historiography and in the memories of the former residents), and one in 'real life', that is in the newly built suburb of Triomf.

We thus have to take for granted that Sophiatown as a place has more than one face: it is a series of living communities, whose meanings are not given or fixed, but have changed over time, due to the activities, agendas, mentalities and perspectives of the people involved. Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire* leads us to an important question: what did 'Sophiatown' mean to various people at a particular

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[5] Interview with Peter Brimson by Dave Thelen and Tom Chapman, 2008. CCLA, University of Johannesburg. The interview was part of a larger UJ Sophiatown Project.

moment in their lives and times? 'Nobody can write the real story of Sophiatown, the rise and fall of the township, the magic and wonderment of the place', Don Mattera (1987: 49) once wrote. Inspired by Nora's concept and the notion of 'placemaking', **this article, explores three episodes, each one illustrating a different facet of Sophiatown: as an unknown place, as a place of conflict, and as a place of forgetting *and* nostalgia. Although conflict is a dominant feature in Sophiatown's history, naming these episodes differently shows that Sophiatown has always been a highly contested area, in reality and imagination.**

Sophiatown as unknown place

Sophiatown began, like so much else in boomtown Johannesburg, as an object of speculation. In 1899 the Johannesburg businessman and former Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, Herman Tobiansky, bought a part of the farm Waterfall 79, some 237 hectares of farmland situated about five miles west from the city centre. Tobiansky was an opportunist, who had easily switched sides between the Boers and the British during the South African war, as he changed strategies to profit from his newly-bought land. At first, he tried to convince the Transvaal government of the good opportunities this land offered for the establishment of a coloured location, thus offering a way to deal with the disorderly situation in Vrededorp, just north-west of the fast expanding city centre of Johannesburg, where poor whites lived next door to Indians ('Coolies') and Africans. He almost succeeded. The Transvaal *Volksraad* embraced Tobiansky's suggestion; Waterfall 79 seemed a perfect solution to unwanted interracial intermingling. But the plan generated fierce opposition by the Africans and Indians living in these areas. The isolated situation of Tobiansky's land, far removed from city life, was of concern to them, as a young Mahatma Gandhi indicated on behalf of the Indian community. In his eyes, it was the distance to the city centre of Johannesburg that made the place unfit for residential and commercial activities, more so than a lack of amenities or the nasty smell from nearby sewage works. To force the Indians to move to such an isolated place would 'be practically asking them to leave the Transvaal'.[6] In Ghandi's opinion, Tobiansky's new-bought land was a godforsaken place, unfit for an urban and commercial lifestyle.

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[6] M. Gandhi to the British agent, 21 July 1899, in: Gandhi, *Collected Works II*, 282-287.

Supported by the British, the Indians succeeded with their protest. Tobiansky's original plan came to nothing and he decided to develop the property as a private leasehold township, divided into 1694 small stands, and named Sophia Town after his wife Sophia Miller. In 1905, Tobiansky presented the new township in an advertisement in *The Star* as an opportunity for ordinary whites to make their dreams come true; a freehold stand for the working man[7] 'within reach of the means of one and all', and only 'an easy thirty minutes' bicycle ride from Market Square in downtown Johannesburg (Smith 1971: 533-534). The original plan of the township, as mapped out by the surveyor James B. Tucker in 1903 and approved by the Surveyor-General in January 1905, indeed showed an attractive suburb, almost European in character, with well-laid out small stands and a well-organized grid of interconnected streets. The naming of the main streets underlined the European character of this new suburb in the north-western periphery of Johannesburg: Victoria Street, Edward Road and Milner Street. These gave Sophiatown an air of 'Britishness'.

But underneath these dreams lay the harsh reality of the Transvaal highveld and the social geography of the fast growing city. As the young Mahatma Gandhi had already indicated, Sophiatown was a hard place for an urban lifestyle. It lacked amenities, was situated next to a smelly municipal dump for night soil, waste and animal carcasses. Proclaiming and mapping out a proper township did not change that. Although the township was located within the newly-extended municipal boundaries of 1902, and its grounds were thus subject to municipal assessment rates, for a long time it did not have an urban look or feel. After 1903 the new Johannesburg City Council spent large sums of money on sanitation, sewerage, roads, storm water drainage, water supply, electric tramways and electric lighting in the city, but not in Sophiatown (Maud 1938: 70). In November 1906 a bitter Tobiansky complained that, notwithstanding the fact that he paid his municipal levies, the City Council omitted 'to make any improvements in the way of road making or in

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[7] 'Freehold' meant that whoever purchased a site or a stand gained immediate ownership of the ground and not simply the 'preferent right' that accompanied a lease. The first freehold townships were proclaimed in 1895 in the northern sector of Johannesburg. All the older townships were on a leasehold basis (Beavon 2004: 66).

any other way in or to' Sophiatown.[8] His complaints did not help. In 1917 the township still lacked any 'electric supply', and as late as 1928 none of its 10.4 miles of roads were paved. It was only in 1919 that the electric tramline to nearby Newlands came into operation and made a trip to downtown Johannesburg significantly easier than the thirty minutes' bicycle ride Tobiansky had advertised more than 10 years earlier (Beavon 2004: 90).[9]

Moreover, Sophiatown and Martindale, the neighbouring suburb also developed by Tobiansky, were associated for many with poor Afrikaners, and the 'Kaffir', 'Malay', and 'Coolie' locations. From its beginnings, the City Engineer predicted that Sophiatown was likely 'to be occupied for the most part by people of limited means' (Proctor 1979: 57). With its air of abandonment and poverty, this part of the city was geographically and socially miles away from the upper-class and fashionable northern suburbs like Parktown, where the white urban elites lived out their luxurious lives, or even from the more modest north-eastern suburbs of the mainly English-speaking middle class and comfortable working-class whites (Beavon 2004: 41-50, 56-68, 78-80; Ricci 1986: 90). Tobiansky's dream was, in other words, situated on the wrong side of town, as the first generation of white stand holders and inhabitants of Sophiatown was to find out.

Initially, Tobiansky succeeded in seducing approximately a hundred white purchasers, most of them Afrikaners of limited means, to Sophiatown from Vrededorp. Following his lack of success in attracting white purchasers, Tobiansky began actively to seek clients amongst more well-to-do Africans and Coloureds, who could afford an alternative to the overcrowded municipal locations. In a multilingual leaflet, Tobiansky presented Sophiatown as their chance of a lifetime: 'Freeholds stands, practically given away'.[10]

The move resulted in an outpouring of racial antipathy. In November 1907, 99 white residents of Sophiatown presented a formal petition to Jacob de Villiers, the new Attorney General of Transvaal. In stately, though grammatically flawed, Dutch

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[8] National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, Pretoria (NARS), Transvaal Archives Repisotory (TAB), Johannesburg Local Authority (MJB) 4/2/87, A 605, Tobiansky versus Johannesburg City Council, November 1906.

[9] See also *Johannesburg Municipality, Minute …1917*, 94; *Johannesburg Municipality, Minute…1928*, 4.

[10] NARS, TAB, MJB, 4/2/91, A 615.

they complained about the ongoing disposal of stands to, and occupation by, Africans and Coloured people ('*kleurlingen of anderen*'). They argued that the establishment of a 'Coloured Location' within the township and the daily intermixture of races were very real dangers that threatened the future of Sophiatown. Humbly, the petitioners begged the '*Edele Gestrenge*' Attorney General to help them realize the removal ('*wegruiming*') of these 'Natives' to the 'Kaffir Location' at Klipspruit.[11] With this request, the complaining residents went straight to the heart of the topic that would dominate twentieth century history of Sophiatown and South Africa: racial segregation.

In their petition the white residents of Sophiatown more than once referred to the forced removals of Africans from the area around Vrededorp in 1904 and 1906 and the subsequent establishment of Klipspruit Location, 16 kilometers to the south-west of downtown Johannesburg. Sophiatown, so they argued, could easily develop into a second Vrededorp, with the same conditions as had existed there before the destruction of the 'Kaffir Location', 'being in other words the mixing up of whites and coloured persons, by which the properties become worthless' ('*zijnde in andere woorden het doorelkander wonen van blanken en kleurlingen, waardoor de eigendommen feitelijk waardeloos worden gemaakt*').

Recalling the racial 'cleansing' of Vrededorp area was, however, more than a clever rhetorical trick. Many Sophiatown petitioners had actually lived in Vrededorp, and thus had first-hand experiences of its harsh environment.[12] From its beginning in the early 1890s, Vrededorp had been notorious for its poverty, population density and primitive living conditions (Stals 1978: 53). It was popularly called *Blikkiesdorp* (literary: village of tin, referring to the material from which most of the houses were made) or the '*Wit Lokasie*' (White Location), and its houses were clearly numbered according to their stand number, 'just like in the Kaffir Location; it is a great shame and insult to us Afrikaners' ('*zooals en de Kaffer Laucatie, het is een groote Schande of belediging voor ons Afrikaners*') (Stals 1978: 55).

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[11] NARS, TAB, Director of Local Government (TPB), 784 2993, 'Petitie aan Zed. Gestr. den Procureur Generaal voor het wegruimen van de kleurlingen uit Sophiatown naar de Municipaliteit Kaffir Locatie', 14 November 1907.

[12] See for instance NARS, TAB, TPB, 784 2993, Secretary Hildebrandt of the Sophiatown & Martindale Ratepayers Association to the Colonial Secretary, 29 December 1908: 'The great majority of these White standholders have purposely vacated Vrededorp to avoid their children's degradation…'. The names of the persons who undersigned the first petitions reveal a great variety of people of Afrikaner, English and German descent.

Many of the first generation Afrikaners in Vrededorp were poor, unskilled, or at best semi-skilled, having fled the poverty of the countryside. They now had to compete with Africans for unskilled work at a rate far below that for which they were prepared to work. As white men, however, they had to keep up appearances, especially in comparison to Africans and Coloureds. By virtue of being white in what was allegedly a white man's country, they were caught between white aspiration and reality. However, it proved almost impossible to maintain white standards of living. 'Most of them seemed starved, they live from the blood and guts discarded at the slaughtering-places, they exchange their clothes for food, children go naked' (Giliomee 2003: 316). Somehow, however, these poor Afrikaners survived and managed to adapt themselves to the tough Johannesburg realities, as cab or trolley drivers, uneducated railway workers or as the proverbial 'ignorant policeman' (Giliomee 2003: 324-325; van Onselen 2001: 309-367). But their situation remained uncertain and their existence shaky. 'Every white man was undersold', one witness to the Transvaal Indigency Commission (1906-1907) stated: 'The white man had got his rent to pay and had to wear a shirt of some sort and had far more expenses … and had to keep a family and consequently was undersold'. Consequently, the world of these working-man Afrikaners was a bitter one, full of resentment. 'Urban Afrikaners were working like black people, taking orders like black people, living in shabby residential streets adjacent to black shanty towns, and having to speak a foreign language – English – like a conquered race' (Giliomee 2003: 324). Despite the earlier removals, Vrededorp remained an interracial neighbourhood. 'At every corner', W.S. Cohn stated in 1906, 'there is a Chinaman or an Indian, which prevents any white trader from trading there' (Stals 1978: 55).

In the many petitions that would follow in the years to come, the Sophiatown residents referred time and again to their past in Vrededorp, and elaborated on their Vrededorp-syndrome of a broken future. It was this background that explained much of their sentiments and their indignation. The dream that Tobiansky had advertised, was their dream: a new beginning in a new freehold township. They still did not belong to the middle classes or the more established working classes living in the older residential neighbourhoods of Johannesburg, but Tobiansky's Sophiatown, at least seemed to put the possibility of respectability, of a home of their own on their

own piece of ground and a future for their children possible.[13] The influx of 'non-whites', however, endangered these dreams.

These 'intruders', of course, had their own ambitions, like the four Africans who had purchased their stands from Tobiansky through the auctioneer Arthur Meikle as far back as March 1906. They were ordinary but respectable people, dreaming of an unpretentious future for themselves and their families, not unlike the white Afrikaners who had fled Vrededorp and considered Sophiatown as a new beginning. Two of these Africans, Solomon Mtambo and James Mvoti, were selling 'snuff on own account', David William was working for the white bricklayer, P. Slabbert, and Ben Mattaneng had a job at the Auckland Park Race Course.[14] They were 'simple people' who had acquired their stands in the hope of living on their own property, and had invested a large amount of their small capital to make this dream come true. Their houses, some made of brick, others of wood and iron, were probably unimpressive, but they were built according to municipal regulations and under the direction of municipal building inspectors. 'It seems very hard on these natives', their representative Dr C. van Dyk Mathey wrote to the Medical Officer of Health, 'that they had first been allowed to purchase the stands, and build substantial houses thereon, under Municipal supervision, and now they had to leave their properties'. What did they do wrong? They were law-abiding persons, trying to make a decent living. 'The boys above mentioned', Van Dyk Mathey continued in the belittling language of the time, 'are very quiet, as the police were never necessitated to arrest them for any contravention or crime whatsoever, and they were peaceably following their respective vocations'.

However, to the white residents of Sophiatown, Mattaneng, Mvotti, Mtambo, Williams could only be dangerous intruders, not co-citizens sharing the same dreams and expectations. The white residents could only see their black neighbours as 'a menace', especially to their children. Emphasising the 'danger socially & morally to which our children are subject through such companionship', some 60 white Sophiatown residents appealed to Attorney General de Villiers once again in March 1908. 'Numerous stand holders who would build & reside here, are not doing so for

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[13] Compare NARS, TAB, MJB, 4/2/91, A 615, Joseph Bretheron to Town Clerk, 9 December 1910: [we] 'who are struggling to maintain respectability'.
[14] The quotes and information in this paragraph are from NARS, TAB, MJB, 4/2/91, A 615, Extract from the report of M.O.H. to the Public Health Committee, dated 9 January 1908.

the above reasons, & houses are at present empty whose former occupants have left owing to the distaste of the native proximity'.[15]

At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Sophiatown's population seems to have changed dramatically. New immigrants to Johannesburg regarded Sophiatown as a temporary 'island of security' (Bonner 1995: 126), a safe place where they could try to adjust to their new environment. Reliable figures are missing, but it is likely that, beginning in 1909, black occupation achieved a new momentum. Some of the newcomers purchased stands and built their own houses.[16] Many others, however, bought one or more rooms in already existing buildings, or rented a room from landlords like Mrs Mary Behl. A coloured widow, Behl owned four rooms on stand 1272 which she let to 'natives of good character'. The rent of these rooms was her only income.[17] Sometimes up to fifteen people might live in simple huts or rooms owned by poor landlords.[18]

From the fall of 1909 onwards, Sophiatown ratepayers started to complain about the 'large numbers of natives [who] are daily taking up their positions with Marquee Tents, who we understand come from Potchefstroom and other places'.[19] The presence of blacks in Sophiatown seemed to have reached a critical mass and, as a consequence, complaints by the white residents became more indignant and desperate: 'My association', the secretary of the newly formed Sophiatown & Martindale Ratepayers' Association wrote in the winter of 1909, 'cannot tolerate the present position any longer as the influx of natives is increasing to an alarming extent. It is now a matter of Europeans residing in a Kaffir Location and not that it is simply a few natives amongst whites'.[20] By this point, the conflict had evolved into a tragic story of indignation and petty behaviour, of opportunism and deceit, of conflicting opinions and contrasting dreams, of racism and far too rare moments of reason, and of competing authorities, postponements, indecisiveness and

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[15] NARS, TAB, Secretary of Mines (MM) 199 MM 828/08, Petition to Jacob de Villiers, 16 March 1908.
[16] NARS, TAB, MJB, 4/2/91, A 615, G. Bidwell to M.O.H., 19 April 1909: 'It will be noted that the numbers of natives living in this township has materially increased. I understand that quite a number of stands have been sold to natives within the last few months and a good few plans have been assessed by the Building Department which are not as yet built'.
[17] NARS, TAB, MJB, 4/2/91, A 616, M.O.H. to Public Health Committee, 13 January 1913.
[18] NARS, MJB, 4/2/91, A 615, Minutes General Purposes Committee, 5 April 1909.
[19] NARS, TAB, TPB, 784 2993, Secretary Hildebrandt of the Sophiatown & Martindale Ratepayers' Association to Colonial Secretary, 18 February 1909.
[20] Ibidem, Hildebrand to Town Clerk, 9 September 1909.

administrative opportunism. After five year worth of complaints, the white owners had to accept defeat. In November 1912 a common meeting of all Sophiatown stand owners — white, black and coloured — decided that the transformation of Sophiatown into a 'Coloured Township' would be the best solution to the existing problems. In a letter to the Provincial Secretary in Pretoria, the secretary of the white Ratepayers' Association for the last time expressed his members' frustrations, blaming the Johannesburg City Council for its ineffectiveness in establishing proper locations for non-whites and controlling the Africans.[21]

In most of the existing histories of Sophiatown this Tobiansky period is missing or only mentioned in passing.[22] There are, however, good reasons to tell this story in more detail. Apart from an insight into the activities of an opportunistic speculator around 1900, the conflict illustrates the petty world of white stand owners, the conflicting perspectives **of the players involved**, **and the contrasting** dreams and senses of place of ordinary black and white residents. However, t**he** marginality of the place meant **these conflicts never became an object of widespread public discussion**. To most officials and administrators the worries and concerns of the first generation of white Sophiatown stand holders were only on the fringe of their interests. The Sophiatown of 1912 wasn't the *lieu de mémoire* it would later become, but an unimportant freehold township on the edge of the city, where different people tried to live their lives and dream their dreams. 'The attention of the white press and public was', as André Proctor (1979: 59) concluded many years ago in one of the first analyses of this early history, 'focused on the more immediate problem of the densely populated slum areas nearer the city, and Sophiatown was left to grow quietly in the shadow'.

Sophiatown as place of conflict

Things changed quickly in the decades that followed. Already in January 1913, only three months after the dramatic meeting of all the Sophiatown standholders, Charles Porter, Johannesburg's dynamic Medical Officer of Health, informed the Public Health Committee that things had changed in the Western Areas of the city. 'Sophiatown has now, for better or worse, practically become a native and coloured

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[21] NARS, TAB, TPB, 784, 2993, Hildebrand to the Provincial Secretary, 16 November 1912.
[22] Exceptions (but with different perspectives) are Proctor (1985) and Nightingale (2012).The Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre even dates 1912 as the starting point of Sophiatown as a community.

township, and there are already over 700 native or coloured people living in it'. [23] In the years that followed, these numbers would grow steadily, due to the 1913 Natives Land Act, labour-shortages during the First World War, and South Africa's burgeoning industrial economy, much of it centred on Johannesburg. From a numerical perspective, nobody doubted that Sophiatown and the adjacent Martindale were in fact 'native' or 'coloured' townships — an impression that was only reinforced by the establishment in 1918 of a new location for Africans, Western Native Township, situated on the sewage farm that had generated so much concern for Herman Tobiansky. Martindale and Sophiatown 'are, without question, essentially native and coloured as regards their population and they adjoin the Council's Western Native Township', Porter stated once again in 1925.[24] Charles Rooks, a builder living in Gold Street, Sophiatown, around this time, agreed in his own way: 'There are a few white people staying in Sophiatown in between the other people'.[25]

The elite amongst these 'other people' had, of course, a different perspective. For them not the 'blackness' of Sophiatown mattered, but respectability and honour (Goodhew 2004). They presented themselves to the white authorities as a 'better class of Natives' who happened to live in Sophiatown, a place they wanted to make their home. Consequently, they defended property-rights, stressed their financial and emotional investments in the place, and complained about the inappropriate behaviour of the police, at any moment asking them to show their passes. 'One has to admit', A.W.G. Champion, the prominent leader of the Industrial and Commericial Workers' Union (ICU) who once lived in Sophiatown argued, 'that such practice, while in the interest of justice, … is a source of grave injustice to the intelligent class of the natives, more so to the people who have their own homes in Sophiatown, who forms a better class of Natives in this town to all intents and purposes'.[26] This 'better class' did not, as they wrote some years later, want to be subjected 'to control resembling location control, inquisitions into the relationships of the members of their households, and class indignities which as a community they had outgrown'.[27]

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[23] This quote and the information in this paragraph draw on NARS, TAB, MJB, 4/2/91, A 616, Charles Porter (MOH) to the Public Health Committee, 13 January 1913.
[24] NARS, TAB, MJB, A616, Town Clerk to the Parks and Estates Committee 30 April 1925.
[25] NARS, TAB, Martial Law Judicial Inquiry Commission (K4), 662.
[26] NARS, TAB, Government Native Labour Bureau (GNLB), 159, 362/14/80.
[27] NARS, TAB, Johannesburg (KJB), 499, N9/15/3, S. Myeza, Secretary Sophiatown Land-Owners Association, to Native Commissioner, November 1932.

According to the Director of Native Labour, Sophiatown in the 1920s was indeed home to a modest middle class of Africans, paternalistically described by him as people who had 'acquired a certain amount of education and adopted in part European ideas … Such natives have possessions in the way of decent clothes, beddings, etc., which are never safe from natives with criminal intent'.[28]

Later, in the 1930s, these middle-class members united into two residents' associations, the Sophiatown Land-Owners Association and the Sophiatown & Martindale Non-European Ratepayers' Association. These organisations were instrumental in urging the various authorities, from the Johannesburg Town Council to the Minister for Native Affairs, officially to recognise Sophiatown as a 'Non-European Township', in reaction to the planned proclamation of the Western Areas as a white area (see below). In these efforts they were supported by Herman Tobiansky, who as a businessman counted this class of owners, now his only clients, amongst his blessings. In their efforts to convince the authorities, the African elite of Sophiatown and Martindale even underlined the beauty of both townships: situated 'on a well-drained building slope, well-ventilated, and comparatively spacious', the townships were 'in effect the Native Park Town of Johannesburg'.[29] Their description seems to prefigure the humane and romantic history of the suburb that was to be made popular by Trevor Huddleston in the 1950s:

> Mr. Tobiansky bought a large plot of ground, and named it in gratitude and admiration after his wife, Sophia. As he pegged out the streets he named many of them after his children: Edith and Gerty and Bertha and Toby and Sol. So, from the very beginning, Sophiatown had a homely and "family" feel about it. There was nothing "up-stage" or snobbish about those names, just as there was nothing pretentious about the kind of houses which began to spring up. In fact, there was nothing very planned about it either. Still, the veld and the rock were more noticeable than the houses: the streets ran up and down the kopje and stopped short when the kopje became too steep. There was, on one side, a wide sweep of what you might call meadow-land: an empty plot of ground which provided clay for the bricks and a good playing-field for the children. There seemed to be no reason on earth why Sophiatown should not be as popular a suburb as Parktown itself: perhaps even more popular

[28] NARS, TAB, GNLB, 285, 52/18/42.
[29] NARS, TAB, KJB, 499, N9/15/3, S. Myeza, Secretary Sophiatown Land-Owners Association, to Native Commissioner, November 1932.

because it was more open, higher up on the six-thousand-foot plateau which
is Johannesburg. (Huddleston 1956: 118-119)

In legal terms, however, the position of Sophiatown was more complicated. According to the standing legal rules Sophiatown could not be defined as a 'non-European' township. As Porter had already argued in 1925, in responding to one of the earlier requests for Sophiatown officially to be declared a township, 'any such "native village" must be owned by the local authority' and should have an ethnically uniform population. Such was not the case. 'There are 98 Europeans living on 15 stands in Martindale', Porter reckoned, 'and 145 on 24 stands in Sophiatown, with a certain number of coloured people (including Indians and Chinese) in both'.[30] More importantly, the 1910s and early 1920s witnessed some profound changes in the ways the spatial geography of Johannesburg was perceived in white circles. The infamous armed rebellion of white mineworkers in 1922 is a case in point. The Rand Revolt, as it came to be called, had started as a classic labour conflict after the Chamber of Mines had declared its intention to cut costs by enlarging the ratio of cheaper African to white workers. But more was at stake. By undermining the existing colour bar in the mining industry, the Chamber threatened not only the economic and social position of ordinary white mineworkers, but undermined the whole concept of white supremacy so essential to their self-image. Consequently, the dispute and subsequent strike and violence were far more than an ordinary class struggle between workers and industry; they revealed the worst fears of the strikers, many of them poor Afrikaners (Krikler 2005).

Initially the spatial urban fabric of Johannesburg had reinforced the social distance between white and black workers. As long as most urban Africans were working in the mining industry, they could be regarded as migrants and sojourners, housed and fed in single-sex barracks situated far away from the more permanent neighbourhoods of the white working-classes. They were, as the propaganda of the white strikers would argue in 1922, bottled up in 'the slave labour system which is known as compounded Native Labour', and the mere fact 'that the Negro submits to be compounded is, in itself, sufficient to make it impossible for him ever to be an associate on equal terms of White men, whose ancestors have fought their way to freedom' (Herd 1966: 16). And even in those places where both groups lived in close

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[30] NARS, TAB, GNLB, 285, 52/18/42, Charles Porter, 10 March 1925.

physical proximity, as in Vrededorp or in Ferreiratown in the south-western part of Johannesburg, their social and mental worlds seemed miles apart. 'What kind of solidarity', the historian Krikler (2005: 31) asks rhetorically, 'could grow up between the members of a workforce who never drank together, who never followed the same sporting heroes, who never attended the same places of entertainment, and who might die together but whose families were never permitted to mourn together?'

But due to the almost exponential growth of African migration to Johannesburg in the 1910s, urban society and its spatial organisation changed quickly. Many of the African newcomers were no longer working in the mines, and thus no longer hidden away in dismal compounds. They were industrial and domestic workers who made their presence felt all over the place inn townships like Sophiatown and the newly established freehold Alexandra in the north-east, in private locations organized by employers, or in the inner-city slums; in short, their presence was felt in urban places that could easily be held or claimed to be white. Rooted African communities started to develop in these places, with schools, churches and other clearly visible institutions — which underlined that African urbanites had the same aspirations as the white working-class. What had happened earlier in Sophiatown, to the anger of the members of its white ratepayers' organisation, was now happening all over the place.

Around the time of the Rand Revolt of 1922, many white unskilled mineworkers thus saw themselves confronted with a twofold danger, both challenging their self-esteem and social standing. With its intention to enlarge the ratio of African mine-workers, the Chamber of Mines not only threatened to undermine the economic position of ordinary white employees, but it endangered their social status not only at work, but also at home. Degradation to the level of the Africans became a real danger in the eyes of the strikers. It was one of the main themes in the propaganda accompanying the strike and revolt of 1922, summarised in the slogan 'fighting for a White South Africa' (Krikler 2005: 115-129). This 'racial socialism' (Krikler 2005: 110) was not confined to words only. In the beginning of March 1922, at the moment the strike turned into a rebellion, groups of white strikers hunted black people through the streets, attacking and shooting the people they themselves most feared becoming. 'By liquidating the point of comparison — the rightless black people — in whom the whites now saw aspects of their own position, the enormity of what was felt to be

occurring [to themselves] could be denied', Krikler concluded in his study of these racial killings. 'In March 1922, given the twisted connection within white proletarian consciousness, black people had become a fearful mirror. The whites concerned could not abide what they saw in that mirror and they proceeded to smash it' (Krikler 2005: 150).

One of their targets was Sophiatown (Krikler 2005: 136-137). It was a clear sign of the ambivalent character that Tobiansky's township had in the minds of some whites: in population terms clearly African and coloured, but still belonging to what in an ideal world was an urban space for whites. These ideas were further underlined and elaborated by the Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923) that tried to regulate the complex urban 'native question'. The bill had a hotly debated prehistory, but in the end it largely followed the conclusions of the Transvaal Provincial Commission on Local Government (1922), chaired by Colonel C.F. Stallard, according to many the most prominent and outspoken English-speaking segregationist of that moment. Stallard and his commissioners had unanimously concluded and recommended 'that it should be a recognized principle of government that natives — men, women, and children — should only be permitted within the municipal areas in so far and for so long as their presence is demanded by wants of the white population'.[31] A total control of the ingress of Africans and a continual removal of masterless and jobless blacks was put forward as of utmost importance. In turn, it suggested that local authorities should be charged 'with the duty by statue of providing adequate and decent housing for all natives — men, women and children — in their midst'.

Racial segregation was thus clearly the leading principle of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act. From now on, the common urban area could be proclaimed white again, simply by denying Africans any rights to settle there and force them to live in special assigned places. Under Section 5 of the Act, the government even had the power to declare a move as compulsory for Africans. In turn, however, every town had to ensure proper accommodations for those Africans living in its jurisdiction, by establishing well-organized locations for the more settled ones and hostels for the newcomers. In the process they had to consult the newly established Native Advisory Boards, to make sure that Africans had a voice in their own affairs. In other words,

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[31] This and the next quote are taken from Province of Transvaal, *Report on the Local Government Commission (1921)* (Pretoria 1922) 47-48.

the Act clearly defined urban space as white, but at the same time made municipal authorities responsible for handling the 'native problem' and compelled them to spend more money and attention on African welfare than ever before.

Legally Sophiatown and the other townships of the Western Area had thus become 'white' again, not only in the eyes of the rebellious mineworkers, but also in those of most politicians and Johannesburg councillors and administrators. In 1924, the Johannesburg City Council proclaimed in a broad gesture that the entire city was white under the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, without providing new housing for blacks. The Supreme Court rejected the ploy, but council members found a receptive ear in the new Prime Minister, J.B.M. Hertzog. In 1930 he proposed an amendment to the Natives (Urban Areas) Act that weakened the liberal housing obligations of the original Act. Four years later he pushed the Slums Act through Parliament, allowing municipalities to expropriate slum land and clear buildings without the need to provide replacement housing. Together these acts allowed the Johannesburg City Council to proclaim the city as white, township by township, deliberately starting with the northern suburbs and working steadily towards the more mixed-race slums in the east and south of downtown Johannesburg (Beavon 2004: 95-109; Nightingale 2012: 365-366).

The old townships of Tobiansky in the Western Area, however, were a red herring in this new scheme, due to their original freehold character. Together with Alexandra, just outside the city limits to the north, they were the only places left in Johannesburg where Africans could be stand holders. In an early 1933 compromise between the state and the Johannesburg City Council, African property-owners in Sophiatown, Martindale, and Newclare were exempted from this proclamation. They could, in other words, continue to reside on their properties, would be allowed to accommodate other African people as tenants, and could still purchase property in these townships. The Western Areas, in short, became 'licensed' or 'exempted' areas within the proclaimed municipality, an important refuge for people evicted from the slums and the mixed-race townships elsewhere in the city (Beavon 2004: 108). When from 1933 onwards African people increasingly began to migrate from the countryside to urban areas in search of employment, because of dramatic economic growth after South Africa's abandonment of the gold standard, the emergent African middle-class of Sophiatown was quickly outnumbered by what Graham Ballenden,

the liberal-leaning manager of the Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department (Nightingale 2012: 366), described as a 'large landless wage-earning class', whose 'culture is different to ours, and who experience great difficulties in adjusting themselves to our social and economic conditions'. He foresaw 'grave social problems' if the steady influx of African people into the Western Area did not stop – and it did not.[32] Between 1936 and 1948 the black population of Sophiatown almost doubled, from 250 000 to an estimated 400 000. The large majority of newcomers tried to make a living in overcrowded and problematic conditions. Sophiatown was becoming a slum.

As a consequence of the fast expansion of white Johannesburg, the distance between Sophiatown and the city centre, previously measured as a thirty minute bicycle ride, had shrunk. Sophiatown was now considered close to the city. This proximity reintroduced Sophiatown and the Western Areas into public debate, with suggestions for slum clearance or even a redevelopment of the area for whites only (van Tonder 1990). Yet these discussions took place in a political situation and a mood that differed profoundly from the days of Tobiansky. In the first decade of the century, white, mostly Afrikaner Sophiatown residents were marginal figures, struggling to have their opposition and anxieties heard. The generation of Afrikaners of the 1930s and 1940s, however, was clearly 'on the move' (Giliomee 2003: 491), boasting a new-found self-complacency (or was it a new disguise of their fear of modernity?), indulging in an activist nationalism and, from 1948 onwards, being backed by the new National Party government that intended to realise racial segregation of the urban fabric as part of its apartheid program. For the new government and its opponents, Sophiatown was to become a *cause célèbre*.

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The outcome of this power struggle is well-known. The forced removals of the Western Areas from 9 February 1955 onwards and the opposition against it are classic topics in South African historiography. But, underlying the dramatic events, another conflict is discernible, one about the ways various people experienced, understood and evaluated urban life. The 1940s and 1950s generated a wide-spread collection of views of what urban society in general and Sophiatown in particular was or ought to be about. As a consequence, a 'Sophiatown' (or probably better: various

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[32] G. Ballenden, 'Annual Report 1935', 149.

'senses of a place' called 'Sophiatown') emerged that in hindsight contained the elements that allowed its transformation into an important *lieu de mémoire*. An important precondition for the process was the emergence of a critical mass of images, literary, visually and mentally. Until the 1930s, discussions about the circumstances in and the future of Sophiatown had been largely confined to the persons directly involved: to the 'owner' (the circle around Tobiansky), the 'ratepayer', the 'landlord', the 'tenant' and the 'official'. Their concerns, plans, frustrations, prejudices, and images of the place were uttered in street talk or translated into memoranda, requests, letters and reports, collected in the dossiers of the local and national bureaucracy and stored in their archives. They were, in other words, public in only a very limited manner. That all changed from the middle of the 1930s onwards. Due to changed urban circumstances and the political and mental climate of the decade, Sophiatown became a trendy topic, fiercely discussed and contested in public, foremost in newspapers and the local political arena, but later also in literature, film and other cultural media. Alan Paton's bestselling 1948 novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* and its 1951 film adaption were paramount in establishing an 'imaginary Sophiatown' in South African and international consciousness. Novel and film depicted for a large public the harsh realities of the dusty streets of Sophiatown and tried to 'give a voice' to the black experience of the city, although it was a voice that came from an 'anti-urban bias' (and saw the city as a disruptive force) and was mediated through a white South African Christian liberal humanist perspective and was filmed within a neo-realist European cinematic tradition (Baines 2003: 37-38, 41).

Many more imaginations followed, reaching what Mike Nocol has called 'that point where a city starts excisting in the mind as well as on the ground' (cited in Stotesbury 2004: 259). 'No place', Wallace Stegner once wrote, 'is a place until the things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends or monuments' (cited in Glassberg 2001: 19). Sophiatown, indeed, became such a 'place', to many a symbol of South African urban life.

The ideas about this place, however, differed immensely. Circles around the National Party government stressed time and again the severe slum conditions in Sophiatown. They presented the place as a *'swart kolle'* (black spot), the *'vuilste en liederlikste agterbuurte'* (the dirtiest and most indecent slum) on South African soil,

only comparable with overcrowded Indian cities (Scholz 1974: 271-272). More generally they argued that cities and the urban life style were European inventions and that the future of Africans thus lay elsewhere, in ethnic 'homelands' where they could undergo a process of re-tribalisation. In doing so, they, just like Alan Paton, fitted into the older and very strong literary tradition of a binary opposition between the country and the city, resulting in the all too familiar 'narrative of the city as a "cesspool" of evil and decadence, and a site of deculturation' (Baines 2003: 35-36). But whereas Paton was moved by the breakdown of the social fabric of traditional African society and accepted the necessity of living together, the Nationalists just reinforced this older tradition with their official discourse of 'Stallardism', according to which the city was defined as a 'white man's place' (Baines 2003: 35-36). In their perspective more was required than slum clearance. In 1938, at the centennial commemoration of the Battle of the Blood River, the nationalist leader D.F. Malan even compared the lure of the city to a 'second trek', one which would inevitably lead to a new battle.

> In that new Blood River [he meant, of course, the city], black and white meet together in much closer contact and much more binding struggle than when one hundred years ago the circle of white tented wagons protected the laager, and muzzle-loader clashed with assegai. Today black and white jostle together in the same labour market. (cited in Walsh 1983: 2-3)

The future of places like Sophiatown determined, in other words, the future of white Afrikaner existence and civilisation in South Africa.

Someone like Father Trevor Huddleston, on the contrary, stressed the humanity and liveliness of Sophiatown. Deeply involved in the community of Sophiatown as a member of the Anglican Community of the Resurrection since 1943, Huddleston argued, just like his missionary colleagues had done before him, that behind the slummy features of the place, a community of real people lay hidden, with dreams, ambitions, ideals and – yes, at times – bad manners. It made Sophiatown a living organism. Or, as he formulated it later in his *Naught for Your Comfort*:

> Sophiatown! It is not your physical beauty which makes you so loveable; not that soft line of colour which sometimes seems to strike across the greyness of your streets: not the splendour of the evening sky which turns your

drabness into gold – it is none of these things. It is your people. (Huddleston 1956: 134) [33]

His was a Christian and deeply human version of the more mundane views of the liberal opponents of apartheid, who stressed the importance of property and education for African urbanites. Instead of uprooting people from the place they knew as home, Sophiatown should be re-planned and rebuilt as a model African suburb (SAIRR 1953).

A far more outspoken voice was raised by the talented group of journalists around *Drum* magazine. Their world was miles away from the paternalistic world of the liberals, or from moderate black political leaders like Dr. Xuma, whose large house in Sophiatown ('bold and majestic, like the man inside it' [Modisane1986: 33]) symbolised for many Africans the hope of a better future. These young journalists and writers belonged to what one of them, Can Themba, later described as

> those sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilisation (at the highest levels that South Africa could offer) and had heard a gruff "No" or a "Yes" so shaky and insincere that we withdrew our snail horns at once. (Themba 2006: 57)

Consequently, the *Drum*-generation gave the all-too familiar literary theme of 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' a bravado that had been missing in the more paternalistic earlier examples (Chapman 1996: 228-229). Inspired by American popular culture, young writers and journalists like Themba, Bloke Modisane and Esk'ia Mphahlele accepted life in a shantytown (Chapman 1996: 237-243; Helgesson 2007). What others called crime, chaos or danger, they typified as characteristic traits of a new metropolitan lifestyle, as models of a modern vitality. In their short stories and reportages, written in a lively and new literary style, they tried to recreate the 'pretty tough place' of their dreams, a 'Chicago of Africa' (Hart and Pirie 1984: 41) Their Sophiatown was swarming, cacophonic, dazzling, vibrant, wild, exciting, raw, violent, low, dangerous and above all deeply human (Hart and Pirie 1984: 44). With every new short-story or reportage published in *Drum*, they seemed to refute the opinions of all those whites who thought that Africans were not fit for an urban life style. Who really knew urban life: the Afrikaner on his *plaas*, or the black urbanite living in places like Sophiatown?

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[33] Compare for an earlier 'voice' from the community, for instance, S.M.T. Ross on 'the Sophiatown Community' in the *Star*, 14 November 1944.

Most of these voices are well-known, but studied in more detail and presented together they reveal insights into the ways different people looked at the world around them, attached meaning to urbanity and modernity and sorted out what future they preferred. The conflicting representations of Sophiatown in the 1940s and 1950s reveal the turbulence, fracture and fragmentation of these decisive years; and they bring back alive the voices of the people involved, both those of the 'bulldozed' and their supporters, but also those of the 'bulldozers', the ministers, city planners and bureaucrats behind the demolition of Sophiatown. Most of latter voices are well-documented, but it remains one of the challenges to discern the voices of the people about whom all the others are judging and talking: the ordinary residents making a living in Sophiatown. Their voices seem lost for ever in a mud pool of ideological interpretations, literary representations, assumptions and anthropological and sociological facts proposed by a range of surveys that were conducted on Sophiatown in the early 1950s.

For the ordinary residents, Sophiatown was first and foremost a place to live their lives. Dr. Xuma once described the Western Areas as a community 'where there are nine registered schools, and old established missions, where our churches stand, where we have cinemas and shops and the only swimming bath for African children in the whole of Johannesburg' (cited in Karis and Carter 1977: 24). His was a description that was clearly inspired by the middle-class aspirations he dreamed of for ordinary Africans. But did it represent the imagined community of all those who rented a small room or a shack in one of the overcrowded yards for their families? Lionel Rogosin depicted a slightly different version of everyday Sophiatown in his film *Come Back, Africa* (1959). The film showed it foremost as 'a place where people return after a day's work, express their grievances and drown their sorrows in the shebeens, and eke out a daily existence' (Baines 2003: 40). It was, indeed, home, but a different kind of 'home' than that imagined by Xuma or even by the representatives of the *Drum* generation.

Sophiatown as place of forgetting *and* nostalgia

Around the time the forced removals started, the narrative ingredients were in existence for Sophiatown as a meaningful *lieu de mémoire* of a very special place that could have been. But its most outspoken spokesmen were soon to be found outside South Africa. In 1956, just after his recall to England, Trevor Huddleston

published *Naught for Your Comfort*, 'written from the Africa I love' (1956: 13), presenting the Sophiatown he had known and admired so much. In the same year, the former editor of *Drum*, Anthony Sampson, wrote his inside story of the magazine that had given a voice to the talented group of 'Sophiatown' writers and journalists: 'I have tried to depict this new, unknown and important Africa of towns and trousers, as I discovered it, watching and listening to people, conversations and reactions' (Sampson 2005: xi). It included the cacophony and attractions of Sophiatown, the resistance against the forthcoming removals: the meetings, the songs, the pamphlets, the slogans on the wall, and the hope and fears. But in the end there could only be the bitter conclusion that Sophiatown was a world lost:

> 'The Sophiatown move still continues. It will be three years before the township has finally disappeared. The slogans on the wall remain: WE WON'T MOVE… But what could they do?' (Sampson 2004: 206).

The consequence was clear: from then on Sophiatown could only exist in words, memories and images. One of the most moving testimonies of this fast vanishing world was written by Can Themba. In his 'Requiem for Sophiatown', published in 1959, he wandered through the remnants of the township that was, recalling the shebeens he used to visit, the people he used to know, and the discussions he used to have:

> And still I wander among the ruins, trying to find one or two of the shebeens that Dr Verwoerd has overlooked. But I do not like the dead eyes with which some of these ghost houses stare back at me. One of these days I, too, will get me out of here. Finish and clear! (Themba 2006: 55).

Soon afterwards Themba left Johannesburg for Swaziland.

The physical landscape of what once was Sophiatown was indeed changing fast. At the beginning of the 1960s, Sophiatown no longer existed. Its African residents had been removed to Meadowlands and Diepkloof, townships within the wider and fast expanding Soweto, its Coloureds to Westbury and later Eldorado Park and Indians to Lenasia. All that was left were memories, nourished and retold in different circumstances. For some the emotional prize was too high. 'Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sopiatown', Bloke Modisane (1963: 5) opened his autobiography *Blame me on history*, written and published in exile in

West-Germany. For others, old Sophiatown grew, especially from the 1980s onwards, to mythical proportions. 'Sophiatown', Hart and Pirie (1984: 47) write,

> was not just another urban slum and another black township: it was the "most lively, important and sophisticated" of South African townships. More than simply a physical entity, Sophiatown had become a state of mind that gave to the assertion: "when we talk about place, we are talking about life".

For many, it probably became a place of nostalgia.

Forgetting, however, was part of this larger process of remembering. In the dominant narrative of the Apartheid regime, the destruction of Sophiatown was part of the larger story of segregating South-African cities. Sophiatown was its first grand success. During the debates in the House of Assembly on the day the removals began (9 February 1955), Minister of Native Affairs Verwoerd downplayed the importance of any resistance and stressed the 'picnic mood' in the streets and the enthusiasm amongst the people who were removed to Meadowlands (Debates 1955: 887-888). Some months later, in a special issue of *Bantoe*, the house publication of the Native Affairs Department, the whole project was presented as a success-story and a new beginning:

> It was 8 a.m. on the morning of the 9th of February, 1955, when the first convoy of 22 lorries rumbled away from the squalor of Sophiatown to the modern new township of Meadowlands. It was a dull grey rainy morning, but there was sunshine in the hearts of the happy families who turned their faces towards a new and happy future.[34]

Instead of remembering Sophiatown, the officials involved presented Meadowlands and Soweto as the symbols of the new Apartheid policy. Ironically, for a new generation of black Africans, Soweto also became far more important than the memories of the Sophiatown of their parents and their childhood. It was Soweto that saw the shaping of a new urban culture, black consciousness and political protest, culminating in the uprising of 16 June 1976 that made Soweto a household name across the world (Bonner and Segal 1998: 56-75)

In the meantime the fabric of a new suburb of 'cheap but efficient houses' had emerged out of the ruins of Sophiatown.[35] On September 24, 1963, a bus conductor, N.B. Labuschagne became the owner of the first house to be completed in the new

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[34] *Bantoe*, April 1955, 4.
[35] *Vaderlander*, 10 October 1963.

township. 'It is so peaceful here', his wife told a reporter of the *Rand Daily Mail*. 'What a change to have an uninterrupted view of the countryside – instead of living right in the middle of other houses as we have been doing'.[36] Almost three weeks later, the Minister of Housing, P.W. Botha, publicly announced the new name of the township as 'Triomf', to the disgust of many. 'A horrible name', a Johannesburg city councillor told the *Star*, a name that 'only perpetuates old controversies', said another one, while a third asked 'Triumph over what?'.[37]

Yet, in its destruction, it was a triumph of what has been called urban 'racial' or 'middling' modernism (Bank 2001: 62-64, 67-68.). The uniformity of the new African township of Meadowlands was a clear example of what Philip Bonner (1995: 121) has described as apartheid's attempt 'to stabilise the existing urban population [necessary for the city's labour] in family accommodation'. For many city planners and bureaucrats, apartheid's spatial redefinition of urban problems proved to be a seductive way of seeing, matching perfectly with their love for 'zoning' and other international modernist solutions. Triomf could be seen as the all-white version of this urban ideology – a modernist suburbia that provided working-class whites (mostly Afrikaners) with a 'city-plan' and a 'life-plan' which were concentrated on housing and the establishment of stable, rational households and family life (Mabin 1992: 405-429; also see Maylam 1995 and Parnell and Mabin 1995). This was Tobiansky's original 'chance of a lifetime' revisited, in a new, modern guise.

Seen from another perspective, however, the new lay-out of Triomf not only robbed Sophiatown of its former residents but of life itself. Whereas Sophiatown had been a lively and chaotic shantytown in which most public interaction had occurred in the streets, on the corners and in the back yards, the new spatial ordering of Triomf stressed the function of living apart in a house of one's own. The houses and streets were clearly divided by empty, and mostly lifeless, front yards (Chapman 2008: 60). 'It's just once a year that all people in Martha Street come out of their houses and spend some time together', Marlene van Niekerk writes in her novel *Triomf* (1994: 254), on Guy Fawkes Day. 'Just once a year. People say hello even if they don't know you'. The new suburb was a perfect place to forget about the past.

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[36] *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 September 1963.
[37] *Star*, 12 October 1963.

Modernist planners have, indeed, been accused of being thieves of memory (Bank 2001: 60, 67). But in the case of Triomf they probably never succeeded in transforming the place into what the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiatong once described as an 'eternal present', a 'world without ghosts' (cited in Glassberg 2001: 120). In the minds of many former black and Coloured inhabitants of Sophiatown interviewed in the 2010s, memories and images of their former neighbourhood were still alive, nourished by the ongoing flood of published memories and photographs of Sophiatown before its destruction. It was especially in the 1980s that the memory of Sophiatown achieved new prominence, due to what Anthony Sampson (2005: 228) called 'a surge of nostalgia (…) for those carefree and optimistic days before apartheid had forced writers and artists into exile or total political engagement', for those days, when the future still seemed open-ended. One of the productions that became part of the Sophiatown 'memory boom' was the play 'Sophiatown', produced in 1985 by the non-racial Junction Avenue Theatre Company which specialized in reclaiming and popularizing the 'hidden history of struggle' in South Africa (Purkey and Stein 1993: xi). Inspired by a story told by Jim Baily in his account of the rise of *Drum* magazine, and informed by an oral history project, the company wanted to bring alive the spirit of Sophiatown of the mid-1950s as remembered by the journalists, writers, musicians and politicians who had lived there. The play ends in a bitter nostalgic mood with its main protagonist Jake, a *Drum* journalist and intellectual in his late twenties, lamenting the inevitable fate of a societal experiment that was not to be:

> This bitterness inside me wells up and chokes. We lost, and Sophiatown is rubble. The vision of the mad Boere smashed this hope, turned it to rubble. And out of this dust, like a carefully planned joke, Triomf rises. What triumph is this? Triumph over music? Triumph over meeting? Triumph over the future? Sophiatown was a cancer on a pure white city, moved out at gunpoint by madmen. With its going, the last common ground is gone. The war has been declared, the battle sides are drawn. Yeoville and Meadowlands, and a wasteland in-between. (Purkey and Stein 1993: 73)

All that rests are the 'tears of the people', forever robbed of their place: 'This destruction is called Triomf. I hope the dust of that triumph settles deep in the lungs like a disease and covers these purified suburbs with ash. Memory is a weapon. Only a long rain will clean away these tears' (Purkey and Stein 1993: 74).

The play premiered to great acclaim at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg on February 19, 1986, and generated new interest in the former 'Chicago of South Africa, not least thanks to a publication of the memories collected during the creation of 'Sophiatown' (Stein and Jacobson 1986). Memory, indeed, became a weapon. Or as Don Mattera formulated it in one of the many memoirs that were published in the 1980s:

> Memory is a weapon. I knew deep down inside of me, in that place where laws and guns cannot reach nor jackboots trample, that there had been no defeat. In another day, another time, we would emerge to reclaim our dignity and our land. It was only a matter of time and Sophiatown would be reborn (Don Mattera 1987: 151).

He was, however, longing for a place that never had been. The new 'Sophiatown' of memory was clearly in conflict with the much more complicated and harsher Sophiatown that once existed on the grounds where a new suburb was developing. This Sophiatown of nostalgic dreaming was, of course, never intended for the new people living in Triomf. But, as van Niekerk's novel suggests, at least on the eve of the 1994 democratic election, memory of the demolition was still alive in Triomf. Rumours about restitution cases and about former residents planning to come back to reclaim their stands and houses only acted to reinforce these memories during the years that followed. In the end history indeed came back, thanks to the activities of the THMC and the official renaming of Triomf in Sophiatown in 2006. The non-descript suburb of urban modernism once again became a meaningful *lieu de mémoire*, although not for everyone. In the end, the apartheid bulldozers had not succeeded in their attempt to erase Sophiatown, its history and its 'sense of place'.

Conclusion

The history of Sophiatown suggested so far is radically different from the more familiar linear formats that histories of cities and neighbourhoods generally take. It rather resembles a collection of short stories: Sophiatown seen from different angles and places. 'Short-story writers', according to Nadine Gordimer (2011: 170),

> see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure
> of – the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation
> of what went before, and what happens beyond this point. How the characters
> will appear, think, behave, comprehend, tomorrow or at any other time in their

lives, is irrelevant. A discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not *the* moment of truth, because the short story doesn't deal in cumulatives.

At first sight, such a perspective seems far away from the familiar mode of historical thinking. Historians are normally interested in the 'explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond'. But the perspective of the short-story writer reminds us of the open-endedness of history, of the importance of actions, dreams, expectations, ambitions, prejudices and illusions of real people who have no clue what tomorrow will bring them. By seeing Sophiatown as a *lieu de mémoire* it may be possible to write a local history that not only introduces the readers to different voices and experiences, but maybe, who knows, generates a dialogue between the past and the present, between former and current residents.

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