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## **Close-Up Sophiatown: Transnational Perspectives on Past, Present and Future of an iconic suburb**

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(...) And Mabeni's, where the great Dolly Rathebe once sang the blues to me. I didn't ask her. She just sidled over to me on the couch and broke into song. It was delicious. But now Dolly is in Port Elizabeth, and Mabeni, God knows where. Can Themba: Requiem for Sophiatown

Good close-ups are lyrical; it is the heart, not the eye, that has perceived them. Béla Balázs

In 1994, people stood waiting around a rugby field in order to cast their vote in South Africa's first democratic elections, in what had been and what, more than a decade later, was to be Sophiatown again, a suburb which by then had become and continues to be iconic: Sophiatown. The unimposing field had formerly been used by residents as a gathering space for protest in a racially-segregated Johannesburg. The election aroused mixed feelings in the suburb with its multilayered history; ranging from fear of a future to welcoming the promise of change.

Sophiatown, the former 'city within a city,' stands today as synecdoche for a core experiences in the life of many South African the first half of the 20th century: forced removals. Yet Sophiatown, beyond being a frozen metaphor in the sense of its past as a 'foreign country' (Lowenthal 1985) based mostly on fabricated nostalgia from today's perspective, has a contemporary global life: both as a suburb in Johannesburg, as well as an archive of fragments, continuously

activated in different contexts by South Africans and others alike. These performances of fragments of the mythologized 'Sophiatown TM' appear in the form of stories, images, and songlines. In wallpapers, dress designs, play scripts, and other forms, some of these can be traced easily, as they use the power of the brand Sophiatown for heritage purposes or tourism. But these narratives also keep the community of former residents connected to their place of origin. Others traces of Sophiatown are harder to find and have to be searched for carefully, as they have been made invisible, fragments dismembered by official discourse, not part of the rehearsed narratives which 'make' Sophiatown.

In this article I shall pursue these harder-to-find fragments. I propose a different view on Sophiatown's existence, both in terms of it standing as mythical icon and as a suburb. Instead of continuing the look 'from afar (Hannerz 2004), the view taken in his seminal 1994 article, and which positions Sophiatown within the category of desirable 'global icons' (Haustein 2008), I turn my gaze deeper into Sophiatown, both as a suburb and an icon: as a complementary yet urgently necessary perspective on the matter. Staying with the metaphor of photography and film, I use the lens of transnationalism to zoom into three situations in Sophiatown's in order to examine what has been ignored and overlooked in previous narratives. I conclude the paper with a final point about the 'unrepresentability' of a diverse history in the current ways of narrating history in Sophiatown; and the necessity of extending spaces of representation for other, alternative perspectives.

### **Sophiatown: where it's at**

Google maps, fed with the keyword 'Sophiatown,' shows a set of streets – parallel roads sliced between the suburbs of Westbury, turned notorious by the media for its rates of crime and drug abuse, and Westdene to the south-east.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years after Hannerz wrote his text, Sophiatown celebrated 102 years of challenging, violent, resilient and joyful being, having been home to diverse communities since its streets first were laid out. Sophiatown is omnipresent in contemporary South African popular culture but it is also visible globally. There is an interesting dynamic

here between visibility and presence on the one hand, and invisibility and absence on the other. This is of course due to Sophiatown's condition of being a palimpsest affair (Samuelson 2008, Fink 2014a). Sophiatown lived under its original name – given by the proprietor Hermann Tobiansky in order to immortalise his wife, Sophia – until 1955.<sup>2</sup> To mark its eradication, the sum of which is more than the destruction of nearly all houses and buildings in Sophiatown and the subsequent rebuilding of residential houses in their place achieved, the suburb was given the new name, Triomf, the Afrikaans word for 'triumph.'

When Hannerz used the term 'the view from afar', an expression borrowed from Lévi-Strauss (cited in Hannerz 1984: 1), he meant that Sophiatown remained distant — both in a spatial and a temporal sense. In his writing, he focused on a Sophiatown which had been physically destroyed, but continued to exist as a 'mythical community.' When I spoke to Hannerz in Stockholm, he confirmed that he had never engaged Sophiatown as a contemporary suburb. While by no means discrediting Hannerz's argument and his focus on representation, I prefer Don Mattera, poet and writer's claim for Sophiatown remaining an 'unwritten manuscript' (Mattera 2010, Chapter 1). The present paper aims to shift perspective in the sense of contributing other aspects which should be as relevant for Cultural Studies as the 'representative' side: it aims both to update Hannerz's writing and to provide a complementary outlook to it: close-up view of the entanglements and intermingled strands of present lives and popular cultures of and in Sophiatown, and an academic self-reflection on the modes of producing sites and sights.<sup>3</sup>

For many contemporary residents, Sophiatown is an average place in which to live, work and play. At the same time, however, it represents a dislocated story from 'the past'. For many decades the small suburb existed only in the imagination, a memory particularly of the 1940s and 1950s when the cultural production in the then pluri-cultural freehold area was thriving. A melange of key historical moments, fiction, drama and music, located in and around, in relation to and in opposition to Sophiatown, this production – named memory – has created a matrix of representations singular to South Africa's visual culture. It is 'afar' in both a temporal and a spatial sense, 'afar' in the sense that it is located elsewhere, but

also 'afar' in the sense of being out of reach. King Kong, the musical which Hannerz saw in London, is an example of this displacement.<sup>4</sup>

Not much of the myth, though, of Sophiatown is visible when one encounters the suburb today. This is largely because of the architectural style which dominates the suburb (see Chapman, this volume), homes that were built as starter housing for whites moving into Triomf under apartheid. Their anonymous original texture has, though, acquired different layers of historical intervention. Some houses, like their residents, have not changed over decades; others archive the change of owners and their tastes in exterior decoration. Thus, a close up (as the lens zooms in) to the present-day suburb has the potential to reveal not only the narrative pattern of the myths but also the texture of an ordinary suburb that shows the myth's cracks of which Walcott talks so fondly (1992). This contemporary 'close-up' is a 'lyrical' approach to 're-membering' (Morrison 1987, Ngugi 2009) the strictly transnational realities of Sophiatown in its different moments. As such, it is one that also occupied Hannerz' work as an anthropologist: transnational dynamics, as the generation of meaning by referring to more than one place, indeed: by encapsulating the possibility to always be else-where.

### **From afar vs close up**

In 'The View from Afar', Hannerz was particularly interested in an analysis of cultural production in the former freehold area. When he encountered the representations of Sophiatown, its physical form had already vanished and its residents had been forcefully removed, as had occurred in many other places in the country. Yet its career in terms of its post-production (Bourriaud 2002) is remarkable, even overtaking the symbolic capital of District Six. Interestingly, the [objects/ narratives?] which stand as its icons of resistance in the global collective imagination merge into one. This is what von Gehlen (2011) refers to as the 'Messidonna'-phenomenon: in the fusing of two icons into one, in Sophiatown's case a mash-up in created where the individual character of each one does not count anymore. In this sense, Sophiatown stands for more than itself, more than its own history: it becomes the symbolic currency of all forced removals. The tragic

glamour of each falls into one and details don't matter; rather they would hinder the flow of pathos<sup>5</sup>.

If Sophiatown has been remembered as it was before its destruction, what aspects of its transnational practice allow us to tease the suburb further out of these rememberings?

[Transnationalism] is a marker of the criss-crossing transnational circuits of communication and cross-cutting local, translocal and transnational social practices that 'come together' in particular places at particular times and enter into the contested politics of place-making, the social construction of power differentials, and the making of individual, group, national, and transnational identities, and their corresponding fields of difference (Smith quoted in Brown-Rose 2009:5).

Levin (2002: 3) also stresses the localized nature of transnational processes, even when they are in flux: 'Transnational processes are not worldwide, but are anchored in places.' The transnational nature of the 1940s and 1950s is exemplified in a specific South African place: a space against, in spite of, the national ideology of the time: resistance by existence. Here it is useful to look at the meaning of the Greek prefix 'trans' in the concept of transnational: semantically it indicates both 'on the other side of' and 'beyond.' In this perspective, 'transnational' indeed dares the 'nation': Sophiatown represents a fractal potentiality in the framework of politically-enforced racial and ethnic purity of the apartheid-state of the late 1940s and 1950s.

These complexities do not feature in what I describe - borrowing from Foucault's concepts — as the 'heritage dispositive' (Fink 2014). As such, cultural practices of framing and creating a past entangle ways of knowing, speaking and acting out in networks which are held together by flexible nodes of power. This dispositive becomes visible by zooming into the practices within and around the idea of transnationalism, as which the old Sophiatown could be described. Whereas the cultural productivity of a cosmopolitan 'then' is celebrated in the form of myth and continuously re-produced through fashion, literature, heritage

'experiences' and tourist routes, the everyday Sophiatown - in its past and its present - contradicts this.

Levin (2002: 6) puts the relevance of the 'localized' practice on connections established between places: '(i)t is place, the local practice of custom, and the connections made between places, that distinguishes transnationalism from globalization,' he points out. While I do not consider the term 'custom' helpful here, Levin's quote emphasizes the double bind of stability and dynamic which is important to the concept of transnationalism. Sophiatown's past and present mark a space of transnationalism, by the repeated „making of homes“. Transnationalism is a "more humble and ... more adequate label' for relationships and phenomena which are variable in scale and distribution and cross state boundaries' (Levin 2002: 3).

In the present, these poetics of a transnational Sophiatown, its language of possibility and constraint with a utopian take on the 'real', is continued and re-arranged in a number of ways. The words by South African rock band BLKJKS introducing their mixtape 'The Sounds of Johannesburg' points in a similar direction:

There is a lot of talk about what Johannesburg is, what it was and what it is becoming. It is a city in, perhaps eternal, transition. This is a privilege for us, the people who call it ours. We can make Johannesburg whatever we want it to be. The city is here, asking us to shape it. While some look to European cities and envy their long established routines, venues and structures in the arts, there are those of us who see the blank canvas and embrace it. We see what we want our city to be, we see its place in the world, and we see the importance of our contributions. We have a dream and we want to make it reality. (BLK JKS SNDSYSTEM 2011).

We hear the literary voice of Can Themba (1959), his invocation of Sophiatown relating of the 1940s and 1950s, reverberating in the young artists' description of a place they make. Themba refers to the productive capacity of Sophiatown, as a city and a space in the making, when he wrote:

among a thousand more individualistic things, it is the magic of Sophiatown. It is different and itself. You don't just find your place here, you make it and you find yourself. There is a tang about it. You might now and then have to give way to others making their ways of life by methods which are not in the book, but you can't be bored. You have the right to listen to the latest jazz records at Ah Sing's over the road. You can walk a Coloured girl of an evening down to Odin Cinema, and no questions asked. You can try out Rhugubar's curry with your bare fingers without embarrassment. All this with no sense of heresy. (Themba 1959: 53)

This 'tang' is appealing to academics as well, in particular authors from the global North who were stimulated by different analyses of cultural patterns in the former freehold area affectively dubbed 'Kofifi' by its residents in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of these accounts reside in their perspective of being 'view(s) from afar,' in parallel to Hannerz (1994). Glocal connections in terms of culture and politics have been in the focus, contributing to an 'archival cloud' of images, fragments and narrative patterns that are constantly re-enacted and activated in diverse ways, ranging from commercialised pop culture to nostalgic re-erectations of Sophiatown in personal narratives.

In the sections below, I discuss three ways of being transnational in relation to Sophiatown, three ways which currently do not feature in the 'heritage dispositive' which reproduces the 'View from Afar' on Sophiatown. As a way of concluding, I provide one example of how to re-member these ways into the larger story, returning to my departure point in which I argue against a sole 'afariness'.

### **Being transnationalism within: Women of Sophiatown<sup>6</sup>**

A recent exhibition in Sophiatown tried to capture the transnational routes of some of Sophiatown's inhabitants, past and present.<sup>7</sup> It also moves beyond the the mostly masculine figures who are also invoked, refigured, embodied, when narrating Sophiatown's iconic figures. Entitled 'Sophiatown Heroines,' it portrayed the life worlds of women who lived in Sophiatown for various periods and at different times. While elsewhere South African women are often conventionally



portrayed through the frame of difference, e.g. in terms of 'Black' and 'White,' the exhibition attempted to challenge this pattern of thinking.

The richness and strength of this approach is exemplified by one of the biographies on display, the one of Regina Brooks<sup>8</sup>. Her story speaks to the 'unexpected agency' (Butler 1999: ix) of a South African woman — the first woman to win a case against the South African state when she and her lover, Sergeant Khumalo, were accused of immorality (Fink 2011, 2012; Khumalo 2001). In the court case she refused to perform in the expected role of whiteness, she resisted by passivity and therefore un-did whiteness by self-inscribing herself as a 'Black' South African woman. At the time, Brooks' case was discussed among Black communities worldwide – as an article in the *Washington Negro Post* from 1955 ('European woman') shows European women prefers being a Zulu, goes to jail". In: "Washington Afro-American" of 25.1. 1955 .

Regina Brooks has the potential to stand out as an icon, as her story challenges us, to view heritage not as uniform, univocal and uni-cultural but as a pluri-cultural and difficult affair which does not present sleek stories but opens up spaces for new traditions of non-racialism. The exhibition in Sophiatown shows the potential for new histories of creolité to unfold in the space of Sophiatown, particularly because Regina Brooks decision was not an overtly political project but a human tale of love and the simple desire to long and to belong; regardless of the surrounding system; it is a tale which needs a 'lyrical' approach. Brooks, now in her Eighties and staying in Eldorado Park, says that: 'Then, I was too black to be white, but now I am too white to be black. I am a person without colour. All I ever wanted, then and now, was just to be Regina, a human being and be happy (Khumalo 2001).' Her words articulate the desire for a non-prescriptive politics of identification rather than a uniform and unchanging identity. She transgressed the logic of the Apartheid nation in her refusal to conform to a 'white' script.

Regina Brooks' confusing life reverberates productively with the life story of a former occupant of the house in which Brook's story was displayed during the 'Sophiatown heroines' exhibition. The intersections between Brooks' life and that

of Madie Beatrice Hall (Fink 2014b) speak to transnationalism and the interruption of linear temporalities. Hall, an American educationalist, met and agreed to marry A.B. Xuma when he was on a teaching stint in the US in the late 1930s (Berger 2001: 548; Karis and Gerhard 1977). She was fiercely independent and wrote to A.B. Xuma in 1938:

I am indeed very grateful for all the things you have offered me for a prolonged stay in South Africa but you see I am only interested in a career, not marriage. When I told you I was interested in your country I meant that I would like to come over and work in some way that would be helpful to your people there. There are several reasons why I cannot marry now. If you still think there is something that I can do in South Africa please let me know - what, how and when.<sup>9</sup>

A convinced Christian, she headed the South African branch of the Young Women's Christian Association while at the same time trying to raise money via performances at the Bantu Men' Social Club in Johannesburg. Hall's concept of emancipation was grounded on freedom and self-responsibility: she wrote to her future husband in 1939 that 'to be free mentally and otherwise is the greatest part of my personality'.<sup>10</sup> As in her home town, Salem, she encouraged young women in Johannesburg to develop tactics for the improvement of their own situations. Her upbringing – her father had been the first black doctor in their home town – is likely to have influenced her commitment and the force with which she worked for her agenda. After the family's relocation to Dube, when Sophiatown was cleared in 1956, and the death of her husband in 1962, Hall returned to the USA, where she died in 1982.<sup>11</sup> She is, in some respects, an embodied transnationalism which challenges the gendered order not only of male Sophiatown but women in South Africa's ascription to the margins. Mrs Hall-Xuma's life puts the human being at the centre of attention. In her demand for a focus on shared experiences rather than dividing markers.

A third woman is of importance here, who is critical to the representation of the suburb and the myth of Sophiatown in all its facets, but she is present more by

her absence: Sophia Tobiansky. Not much is known about her, beyond the fact that she was the daughter of the affluent English family of Wolf Miller, had married Hermann Tobiansky, was the mother to children whose names are immortalised in the city space of contemporary Johannesburg in the street grid of Sophiatown. She and her husband 'were Jews who lived and worked in Johannesburg at the beginning of [the twentieth] century' (Norwich 1991).<sup>12</sup> The texture of her life – her hopes and ambitions, her (racial) understandings of self and others conceptualisations can only be imagined and evoked sensually – a task for post-colonial museology which acknowledges the impossibility of historical accuracy.

### **Enclaves and nostalgia – the Greek community & Touba Triomf**

Opposite Sophiatown's most popular, public space, the Shoprite Mall complex on Edward Street, stands a small church. The oversized advert of the recently erected fast food outlet, a red-and white box with a laughing old man, overshadows its blue roof. Surrounded by a palisade fence, the Greek Orthodox Church has gazed outwards on to the space of both Triomf and the new Sophiatown since 1969 (de Kock, 2008). In the context of early Greek migration to South Africa, Mantzaris writes that 'the first Greek immigrants soon realised that communal unity was of paramount importance to their cultural and social survival in the host society.' Consequently, 'associations, Greek nationalism, the Orthodox religion and Greek education' were destined as guarantors to keep Greekness alive in the historical context. The establishment of the Sophiatown Greek orthodox church is to be regarded in this context. Quite appropriately in terms of its Greek etymology, the church represents a heterotopia: a place that transgresses the real surroundings of its location. From within the orthodox space, Sophiatown looks different, tinted in the blue and gold of the sacred space's interior and outer decorations.

E., a Greek lady and resident of Sophiatown, has seen the passing of all of these years in the suburb. She lives alone in her quiet house with a courtyard between her and the street. Visitors have to shout their 'hello' and wait until the old woman comes walking towards the gate, opening it after fiddling for a while with a key. When I visited her, which I occasionally did when working in Sophiatown, we sit at

her small table which is the focus of her little kitchen. She is happy, she says, that someone is coming to visit her and tells, in heavily accented English, the history of the Greek community of Triomf. As she speaks, E. pours the boiled coffee in small cups. The ritual of making coffee reminds her of a time described by her as “normal”. This, she continues, was “before”. With the temporal evocation she refers to a time and space in which she had been able to buy Greek products right here in Sophiatown, which in her narrative serves as a marker of belonging. Since the local Greek shop closed down, she has to go to Linden, about five kilometres away, or to one of the bigger supermarkets in other suburbs which sell Greek products. E. has been living in Triomf, as she calls the place, for over 45 years. Her husband ‘has been dead,’ she says, for 17 years.<sup>13</sup> When she recalls the ‘good times’ in Triomf, she talks about how the newly established suburb had been ‘very nice, [with] children everywhere,’ a place for families, in which the goods of her home country were available around the corner and in which people met after work to play cards. She describes the ending of apartheid politics and the transition into a new South Africa as ‘slowly, slowly going down,’ manifested – in her description – of the increasing security features that residents have added to their houses in the suburb.

Stories like the one of E. are not overtly prominent in South African historiography<sup>14</sup>. After World War Two a large number of Greek and other European immigrants came into the country, looking for work and ways to provide a better living for their families. In the 1960s, Triomf was home to as many as 200 Greek families, most of whom had come from Cyprus (de Kock, 2008). People from the time of Triomf tell about their existence as a proof of the ‘diversity’ within Triomf – even in the early times from the 1960s onwards. While this is justified in terms of nationality and/or holistic understandings of ‘culture’; it represents especially the “nostalgic” version of the entanglement in racist readings of space and time. The home which many of them imagine(d) is a nostalgic space rather than an actual place left behind. Nostalgia here emerges as not only a longing for a by-gone time, in the logic of the speaker a ‘lost’ time, but also as a tactic to make home in the present; while living in another reality and ‘making home’ there. Boym

(2001) describes nostalgia correctly as “a sentiment of loss and displacement, but (it is) also a romance with one’s own phantasy.’ The difficulty of acknowledging this transnational dimension and its temporal character lies in the complexity of the situation. Migrants like E. are neither ‘kwerekwere,’ a derogatory word for foreigners in South African, usually from the rest of Africa) nor ‘tourists’, and don’t fit into what Mngxitama (2010) had dubbed as the two distinctive attitudes towards foreigners in South Africa.

The situation of E’s neighbours is different. The businessmen from Senegal who run their shops at the local mall have other stories to tell about South Africa; though their experiences in Sophiatown are, in contrast to her narrative, framed as a success story. In this, they share Johannesburg’s marketing experts’ euphoria who claim the city be a bizarrely catachretic ‘world class African city.’<sup>15</sup> Indeed, its cosmopolitanism is extensive: people from all over the world, but particularly from Africa, meet in Johannesburg. In Sophiatown, though, the routes that people and migrants have taken seem less classy. South African handbag sellers crisscross the suburb; Chinese businessmen offer textiles that could likewise be found in Berlin or London, global nomads fry food at its fast food restaurants. While being ‘here’, they are also ‘there’, in their places of origin – or wherever they were before – performing a quotidian transnationalism which is largely expressed in language, and everyday rituals around coffee or tea, and religion.

The Senegalese shop in Sophiatown, ‘Touba Triomf’ is most telling: while offering goods similar to the Chinese shop next door (and what is ‘Chinese’ about a Chinese shop), the name of their enterprise speaks both to the country they consider home, as well as local conditions. In the multi-layered suburb of Sophiatown this has a special flavour. When the shop opened, the place where it was located was still named Triomf. When the suburb’s name changed back to Sophiatown, the business owners were not caught in the discourse of local memories around this. The significance of the name-change was not theirs; in fact, in their understanding of Sophiatown as a space of opportunity the history of the place does not matter. Rather, the ‘Triomf’ in the title evokes the inherent possibilities it points towards. It evokes a space of hope – for the growth of their

business in the local economy. But importantly, 'Touba' leads in the title: it refers to the holy town of Touba in Senegal, indicating the owners' rootedness in a religion and home far away (viewing Senegal, their 'view from afar' is grounded in Sophiatown). In contrast to E., the manner in which this home is evoked is not a nostalgic 'looking backward' (thus nostalgia is not necessarily orientated towards a past or something lying behind), but future-orientated: the planting of the holy tree of paradise right into the concrete of – then – Triomf's parking lot, which is today Sophiatown's most public space.

### **Routes: Bloke Modisane and the question of exile in the postcolony**

As indicated by referring to brightly patterned wallpaper and Drum-styled jewellery; Sophiatown continues to reverberate in popular culture. Many of these reverberations are recounted in the rhetorical genus *grande style*, evoking strong emotions and pathos, as well as identification with the affected person, the reader or listener. Njabulo Ndebele (1991, 2006) has critiqued this style in South African literary production as focusing on excess and the extra-ordinary. In this approach, a person is of interest only when persecuted by the apartheid (or colonial) state, but loses attraction once the person goes into exile. The life of a person, once he or she has left, or has been cut off from the context identified as home, is no longer thought to matter, unless the person 'returns' home in a politically significant manner.

Bloke Modisane's case illustrates Ndebele's critique. Modisane was part of the generation of journalists, photographers and writers who worked for Drum magazine and who, through their work, pushed at boundaries of what, according to the hegemonic racist apartheid ideology, should have been possible for black people. Yet, at the same time as creating the space for black creativity and expression, Drum was nevertheless caught within, and reproduced, the nature of colonial privilege by having a white editorial office, and white staff who earned differently black staff. Through his writing, Modisane provided many people with the keywords for thinking about the destruction of Sophiatown, its significance for its removed residents, but also for society more largely. Some of his lines about the destruction became seminal: 'Something in me died, something died with the

dying of Sophiatown' became a Sophiatown and Sophiatowners mantra. His words helped to constitute the myth of Sophiatown that arose after its destruction. Yet, when he penned this line, Modisane had left South Africa already and was writing in London, with a Merriam-Webster dictionary on his desk and his jazz record collection with him. Modisane left South Africa in the late 1950s, and in London followed a multifaceted career as author, critic, and theatre and movie actor. It was here that he published *Blame Me On History* in 1963, his autobiography from which the line above is taken (the book was banned by apartheid South Africa in 1966). A few years later he moved to Germany where he tried to get into broadcasting, attempted to learn the German language, though with faint success, began a family and lived on.

Modisane's marginalised status once he had left South Africa is exemplified in the fact that he — a critical writer of the 20th century and of core importance to the crafting of the story of Sophiatown — was not even invited by local authorities and cultural institutions, when Nadine Gordimer received the Nelly-Sachs-Prize in Dortmund 1985, even though he lived in that very town. This might be subsumed under West Germany's tendency to introspection and continued ignorance towards life considered 'other' in a stressful time. More generally, though, the neglect of Modisane's story after the end of Apartheid is revealing. Modisane's life and work is widely seen as limited to one literary production, the abovementioned *Blame Me on History*.

Even if South Africa lost sight of Modisane, Modisane never lost sight of South Africa. During his travels, he kept up with the conditions of his home country while strongly questioning the notion of 'home.' In April 1968, Enoch Powell, the English fascist politician, gave a speech in which he critiqued the British government's aims of a more relaxed immigration regime and better anti-discrimination legislation. In response, Modisane wrote a piece entitled 'Repatriate Me,' which in his distinctive piercing manner portrayed the dilemma that faced exiles in the racialized and racist societies of Europe: 'Since I don't particularly enjoy living in a country where I'm not wanted, I accepted Mr Powell's solution of repatriation. Unfortunately I don't have a country I could go to.'<sup>16</sup>

Modisane's later works and thoughts always dealt with larger issues than the South African case alone. He was preoccupied with black experiences of exile and alienation. In the note books he left behind, his interest in the discourse around black people in Germany up to 1945 becomes visible: the Maji-Maji-uprising of 1905-1907; the Pan-African question where he critiques the role of culture in liberation when describing Algerians 'who gave their life for the liberation of their culture.'<sup>17</sup> Critically for the argument here is the fact that these facets of Modisane, which span the whole world, are not considered at all when he is evoked and used in present day South African cultural politics. I see two sources for this: firstly, the politics of heritage, the focus of which is introspective in order to foreground the South African nation of today as a place which has succeeded in achieving 'unity in diversity'. Secondly, it lies in what I call the politics of arrival that celebrates the return of exiled South Africans (whether in person or in the form of their physical or material remains), but shows complete disinterest for their more complicated transnational biographies. Thus figures such as Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, or Nat Nakasa, all three who died in exile, are taken seriously in South Africa cultural politics of the present; when the possibility of a politically orchestrated 'homecoming' is possible, yet a thorough investigation of their lives, which illuminates the critical role of the transnational, how they created transnational narratives not centred on any one place, in their work and thinking, is ignored within South Africa and performed mostly elsewhere.

A first attempt of approaching the transnational lives of Sophiatown's residents and artists and the effect on their works was exhibited by the SoFireTown Crew in 2014, young people who work on the question of what legacy the myth of Sophiatown poses for the contemporary. Ironically, the so-called 'born frees', young people born after 1994, are caught in the inner stratifications of South Africa. Exploring the networks of past work, their exhibition, entitled '(In) A Way Back Home,' examined the transnational existence of Modisane. It tried to question the notion of 'home' which is far too easily conjured up in publications by government and national heritage programs. The show opened in early September 2014 in the



Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre. In their invitation to the exhibition, the curators wrote:

Welcome home. What you are invited to today is a celebration: Bloke Modisane's work is returning to South Africa. A homecoming?

You are invited to a beginning[,] re-connection and critical investigation: What does Bloke Modisane have say to our time? How do his works and thoughts matter for the questions of today? Are the questions still the same? How to translate the anger of a writer known mostly for his work in the 1950s into critical energy for today? How to acknowledge his 'situation' and seriously confront it? And, while talking about a 'homecoming': What is a 'home'? The SoFireTown Crew invites you to this conversation.

(<http://blokeishome.com/about/>)

With their approach, the organizers insisted on the necessity of focusing on the transnational complexities that made up the difficult lives of artists and ordinary people alike in Sophiatown.

### **Wrapping up: Sophiatown and cultural theory**

As the three sections above showed, Sophiatown has been, in all its stages, a transnational suburb. The close-ups above – of a court case and illegitimate love in Sophiatown, of a coffee ritual and a clothing store in Triomf, and of exile and isolation – have revealed the complexity of Sophiatown. The examples cited have shown that while the transnational link has always been present, its real meaning has largely been dismembered. So what do the close-ups above offer – and, by implication, what has Sophiatown to offer in terms of cultural theory?

Hannerz himself wrote about the concept of 'flows': 'To keep culture going, people as actors and networks of actors have to invent culture, reflect on it, experiment with it, remember it (or store it in some other way), debate it, and pass it on' (Hannerz 1997: 5). His suggested model of 'flows' links time and space. It

talks of a direction – no water flows to nowhere. The concept of flow is useful in the work of describing and analysing the dynamics of memory-related activities, as it allows seeing the memory-practices in time and space. A second concept of the trade cycle adds to this. It hints to the existence of a market demand for memory-practices that can be understood in a cultural and political context. It is the interaction of a multitude of factors that make commemorative activities attractive; make their ‘pastness’ an investment into the future. Hannerz (1997: 6) alludes to this, staying in his metaphorical field, by stating:

Not only does the idea of flow stand in opposition to static thought. It implies, moreover, that we may think of mighty rivers and tiny rivulets, separate currents as well as confluences, ‘whirlpools’ ..., even leaks and viscosity in the flow of meaning.

The concept of transnational flows is particularly evocative in relation to the case of Sophiatown today. As the close-ups above have shown, transnational practices have structured Sophiatown, past and present; and unfolded a possibility of futures. At times, these futures are dis-membered from its past. The cases have also shown the difficulties of integrating these phenomena into the stories told about the suburb. Critically, I argue that they cannot be captured if the view on them stays one from ‘afar.’ A ‘close-up’ is necessary to extend this view; as only in this perspective it is possible to acknowledge the temporal and spatial dimension of transnationalism, which is a necessary effect of the extended perspective on the practices of Sophiatown. In the examples from within the suburb of Sophiatown, as well as in the example of young people dealing with the icon, doing and thereby undoing it, the transnational aspects of the story become visible.

As key consequences of this shift in perspective are the different dimensions of time which arise from there. E’s time is one that lives the present as a necessity; but her real life is a retrospective one, living in the past. The transnational life of the Senegalese merchants is futuristic in the sense of its progress-orientation, likewise it is simultaneously at two sites at the same time; Toubba and (and the now departed) Triomf coexist. And the last example of the

young curators shows that the translation of a life and works conventionally communicated as past, as part of the glamorous bygone era of Sophiatown into their present lives unleashes the potential of taking the works of artist - in this case Bloke Modisane - seriously. The time established by the focus on the transnational lives - in Modisane's case his life in Germany, England and South Africa, his lecture tours to the US, is a time of presence. In curating - in itself a technique of re-establishing temporal orders, the young people take Modisane, who stands as a synecdoche for an iconic Sophiatown to their time - the time of being young and not born without the luggage of the past - in South Africa. The close-up therefore forms the necessary complimentary piece to Hannerz' suggested „view from afar“, in order to go beyond representation.

One more note to conclude may be allowed: In his „view from afar“ on Sophiatown, Ulf Hannerz was self-referentially critical about the use of metaphors in Cultural Studies, insisting that '[w]hen you take an intellectual ride on a metaphor, it is important that you know where to get off' (Hannerz 1997:6). I suggest that the metaphor used in this paper, the close-up, one more 'lyrical' than Hannerz's 'view from afar', will hold – at least for a while – because it is appropriate to the ordinary lives of the people in the space which Sophiatown creates, extraordinarily by (invented) tradition.

### **Note on Contributor**

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<sup>1</sup> (Phyllis Dannhausers' (2006) work gives a good account of how these texts tie in with a „Coloured identity“ which is constructed by them),

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<sup>22</sup> I have discussed the dialectics of invisibility of women and the simultaneous over-presence in heritage discourse in the text which borrows Nina Simone's iconic line „Four Women“. Fink, K: „Four Women in Sophiatown. Dreaming a Track of Connection“. Fort Hare Press, in print.

<sup>3</sup> Here I would like to suggest an understanding of cultural scripts as requiring updating, as suggested by von Gehlen (2012 and 2013).

<sup>4</sup> The musical tells the story the famous boxer, legendary King Kong (aka Ezekiel Dlamini), a legendary figure of the Sophiatown of *tsotsi*-criminals, jazz singers and prolific writers such as Can Themba and Bloke Modisane. King Kong killed his girlfriend and was sentenced to jail and who finally committed suicide in prison.

<sup>5</sup> This does account particularly for two argumentations - firstly, the commodification of the past in order to transform a complex human experience into a mediated consumable product - as in the „heritage industry“ and its various, individualized outlets; secondly for the process of narration itself: Flattening an experience which once had been ‚experience‘.

<sup>6</sup> My article: „Four Women in Sophiatown: Dreaming a Track of Connection“ published in 2014 with Fort Hare Press, talks about their biographies as well.

<sup>7</sup> Exhibition „Sophiatown Heroines“, held at the Sophiatown Heritage & Cultural Centre at 73 Toby Street, Sophiatown. The show opened on Saturday, 10 August 2013 and ran until Monday, 9 September 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Regina Brooks' life story also features in the permanent exhibition of the SHCC. Normally, her life is presented in a 'memory box'.

<sup>9</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers, AD843, Xuma Papers, Madie Hall to A.B. Xuma, 8 August 1938.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 21 April 1939.

<sup>11</sup> Attempts to track down the Xuma family in the US have been unsuccessful (Natasha Erlank, personal communication, based on a conversation with Bob Edgar and Iris Berger).

<sup>12</sup> My thanks go to the Jewish board for this information.

<sup>13</sup> Quotes taken from interviews by author with E., Sophiatown, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Their role in and relationship towards the apartheid state is hardly defined and worked on.

<sup>15</sup> This invocation is wrong on many layers. Most questionable is why „World Class“ does not include „African Cities“, why the distinction is necessary.

<sup>16</sup> Literary Estate of Bloke Modisane, Sophiatown Heritage Centre, Sophiatown (LEBM): B. Modisane, 1968, 'Repatriate Me.'

<sup>17</sup> LEBM: B. Modisane, undated, 'Culture in Crisis.'