Sophiatown

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Sophiatown, close to the Johannesburg (South Africa) city centre is both historically and socially complicated. Like other inherently transnational spaces, it is not remarkable because it is exceptional, but because it is typical of a contemporary conjuncture of possibilities and refusals. It shares with other sites across the globe such as South-Central Los Angeles, Tianamen Square, Marikana, or even Detroit a power to invoke and evoke complexity and change and where we are, right now, because of the layers of meaning attached to them. At the same time, the signifier, Sophiatown, has condensed meaning so efficiently that it becomes difficult to parse out the different fragments which have helped to constitute it in a global imaginery in the early twenty-first century.

There are, though, important reasons for attempting to separate out the different fragments of Sophiatown, because of what they reveal about contemporary limits. These include a golden era of black urbanity become commodity in a literal sense; the uneven politics of heritage production, and the pursuit of profit; ennui with the present and a focused gaze on history's rear-view mirror, all of them contributing to a nostalgic distillation of the past; and call to mind a present in which apartheid South Africa was/ is a better place to be than South Africa in 2014. The even difficult task lies in imagining futures which do not draw their only power from these positions, but which allow us to think beyond the limits set by this gaze.

In recent work (2008), Ann Stoler has discussed how colonial processes endure in to the present in subterranean ways, describing these as the on-going effect of a process of ruination; she distinguishes between a ruin as a relic of the past, and ruin as the verb which connotes destruction immanent in continuing imperial formations. Stoler writes, following Nadia Abu El-Haj, "Ruins are not just found, they are made. They become repositories of public knowledge and new concentrations of public declaration. But the most enduring ruins in Israel are neither recognized as ruins nor as the ruination of colonialism; they are not acknowledged to be there at all (Stoler, 2008:201).

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Sophiatown and Westbury, its neighbouring suburb, are ruination that proceeded from apartheid's spatial planning and a reminder now, that apartheid's spatial planning persists into the present. However, while Sophiatown is a space of ruination, and Triomf the triumphant exemplar of the destruction of black resistance, it is also possible to see – switching register – that Triomf is the space never acknowledged. This leads to a new avenue of questioning, calling for an examination of even Triomf in Sophiatown's past. In this special issue we try, then, to acknowledge ruination, but to move beyond to, to what is suggested by a number of the authors references in this collection,

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Sophiatown was established as a freehold area in the early 20th century, as one of two spaces in Johannesburg where Africans could own land. During the 1940s and 1950s Sophiatown was both fractured by poverty and functioned as a site of political activism and cultural production. It is eponymous with the development of black urban culture across South Africa during this period. Together with its surrounding environment, it was subject to the apartheid state's policy of forced removals after the Group Areas Act of 1951, which reconfigured urban space in Johannesburg's western areas. Alongside a forced, physical remodelling of the landscape, residents of Sophiatown and its surrounding suburbs were redistributed to spaces far from the city centre like Soweto, Lenasia, and Eldorado Park. In a supreme act of hubris the National Party government renamed the new suburb Triomf (Triumph). During the 1960s, in an ironic replay of its former diversity, Triomf became home to communities of white South Africans and immigrants from across Europe, who foresaw a new life in South Africa. After 1990, Sophiatown desegregated rapidly. During the late-1990s Sophiatown was subject to a land restitution process, with former residents who could prove title being compensated at relatively low levels for their loss of property. In 2006 the City of Johannesburg changed the suburb's name back to Sophiatown.

The Sophiatown of the 1940s and 1950s is now commonly recalled, in academic writing, in popular memory and in popular culture, as a diverse and transcultural space, the site of critical black cultural production. A largely nostalgic memory of that

Sophiatown seeps into the present -- appearing in everything from textbooks, to the ANC-led government's commemoration of struggle, to restaurants appropriating icons of Sophiatown's cultural vibrancy. Indeed, 'Sophiatown' as a cultural repertoire features prominently in public imaginings of contemporary South Africa both domestically and abroad. Sophiatown is evoked in the iconic Drum poster of Dolly Rathebe on a mine dump, in Jurgen Schadeburg photographs reprinted as cushion covers, and in Sophiatown kitsch produced in multiple, global locations. Katharina Fink's doctorate, [Un/doing Sophiatown] Contemporary reverberations of a myth (Bayreuth, 2014) examines the reverberation of the idea of Sophiatown outward from South Africa, in popular cultural forms including novels, plays, performance, and fashion. Via the internet, images of Sophiatown, which are largely synonymous with a township culture associated with the 1950s, percolate throughout the globe, ensuring that contestations over the images of Sophiatown happen inside and without South Africa.

Recent work on nostalgia in the South African context provides weight to challenging Sophiatown's relegation to the nostalgic. Two key pieces, Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* (2009) and more recently the essay by Eric Worby and Shireen Ally (2013), point not only to the way in which the South African past is caught up in nostalgic impulses produced in the present, but also how these impulses act as a hobble to imaginings of the future. If South Africans have grappled with the issue of memory and reparation in the aftermath of apartheid, including as a result of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that attention has not especially focussed on the slippage which has taken place between memory as trauma and memory as nostalgia - and the lack of space between. Indeed, it is in the ongoing tension between what Svetlana Boym (2001) refers to as restorative nostalgia, where collective memory desires to restore what has passed, and reflective nostalgia, where memory is examined for how it can enlighten, that much of the work in this volume situates itself.

From this critical position about the productive use of nostalgia, the pieces in this volume share a common desire to transcend the ways in which Sophiatown has

previously been written. Through a range of writings and representations, the suburb has come to signify something distinctive in South African history, but it has only achieved this position through processes of isolation. Complex layers of context and relationships which might help to shed light on the phenomenon of Sophiatown have been trivialised through its construction by several hegemonic narratives.

In the first place, in many of its iterations, Sophiatown is constructed as spatially and geographically separate from the rest of Johannesburg; discussions of Sophiatown often pay little attention to how the suburb was embedded into Johannesburg's western areas and a greater urban politics throughout its history. Sophiatown originated as a space for both white and black, in a manner which owed more to the class status of its first stand-holders than any overt racial policy. Johannesburg's better-off white inhabitants did not want to take up residence in a place across the road from a noxious sewage works, as Paul Knevel describes in his article. Patterns of resettlement after 1990 reflect the intertwined history of Sophiatown and Western Native Township, later Westbury, on Sophiatown's south-western boundary, as Tom Chapman describes in his article.

In the second, Sophiatown's history is represented as having ended in the 1950s after forced removals, the unspoken shame of its later history either ignored or reinforced in the heart-wrenching novelised account of Triomf by Marlene van Niekerk. Indeed Triomf and old Sophiatown have been essentialised, set up as one another's opposite, in a binary construction marking old Sophiatown as good and Triomf as bad. But Sophiatown, all its multiple presences, had a history prior to the 1950s, and continues to act as a space in which it is possible for multiple histories to co-exist. Yavini Naidoo's article brings forward the texture of Triomf through her examination of the experiences of three Afrikaner women. She addresses directly the problems involved in seeing Triomf as anything but a shameful moment in South African history.

In a third narrative, Sophiatown is held up as a quintessential South African apartheid space. Sophiatown is imagined to have been wholly constituted by apartheid from its origins as a productive "rainbow nation" community that was forcibly removed to

be replaced by a homogenous, newly elite Afrikaner oppressor. All of the articles in this volume challenge this grand narrative of apartheid for Sophiatown and South Africa more broadly, questioning its monolithic construction through an attention to the complexity of what it obscures. To do so, many of the following articles focus on place-making and the everyday. By examining these tendencies in one location, Sophiatown, this volume's contributions help to show that many South Africans experience change in spaces where change is more intimate and slower, and which have a different temporality and cartography compared to those associated with grand theories of apartheid and resistance to apartheid.

What happens if we move away from some of the dominant discourses centred on economic performance indicators, land reform policy or service delivery protests in this moment of South Africa's history? The point here is not to trivialise either apartheid or service delivery protests, but rather to assert that a focus on these alone does not account for the complexities of everyday life in contemporary South Africa. Slowing down the intellectual gaze to the pace of daily life meant that, in several of the articles here, we were able to observe how people respond to change, and how they are able to make the difficult, though small, decisions that represent their agency.

While the articles in this special issue all deal with Sophiatown, and while they emerge from a joint project, they do so in different ways. The pieces by Chapman and Knevel are more historical, dealing with the origins of Sophiatown, one from the perspective of an urban planner in interested in social justice, one interested in following up on Pierre Nora's idea of a *lieux de memoire*. The article by Erlank looks to the historiography and theory of memory in South Africa, asking how we can make terms like 'history and 'the past' more relevant. Erlank, Naidoo, and Morgan all use material gathered in Sophiatown to consider how people make and interact with space and the everyday. Fink also looks at memory and representation, from a cultural studies vantage point, asking questions about Sophiatown's transnational reverberations. The articles may focus on Sophiatown, but they also speak to larger transnational issues around the politics of representation and popular history.

The work which these articles draw upon are the result of a process beginning five years ago. In 2009, Dave Thelen and Natasha Erlank began discussing the idea of a project in Sophiatown which might fuse ideas of history with greater civic activism. Inspired partly by Thelen's earlier work on public uses of the past (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998), and Erlank's work on citizenship and public participation in Johannesburg (Erlank et al, 2008); we put together a proposal which emphasised the problem of history in South Africa, how it prevented people coming together, and how we hoped to try to overcome its apparent failings in the context of Sophiatown. Over the course of the interdisciplinary project, the research team grew to include historians, Herman Belien and Paul Knevel, from the University of Amsterdam. Tragically, Herman died of cancer in 2012, and it is to him that we dedicate this volume. Through Jennifer van den Bussche, who worked as project manager for a large portion of the project's duration, we established links with the Wits Urban and Regional Planning Department, including crucially the Yeoville Studio project run by Naomi Roux and Claire Benit-Gbaffou (Benit-Gbaffou, 2011). This collaboration resulted in our co-hosting with Wits and IFAS the Memory and City conference in 2011. The project has also been a fertile research ground for students and postdoctoral fellows from the Universities of Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand, including Tom Chapman (urban planning); Karie Morgan (anthropology) and Yavini Naidoo (Heritage Studies). Several masters and doctoral students are still completing more historical work on Sophiatown, including on the history of St Joseph's Home, Indian residents who were removed to Lenasia, and the history of restitution in Sophiatown.

As part of the project we also worked closely with a number of different organisations based in Sophiatown, principally the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre. By working in tandem with leaders of the Sophiatown Residents' Association and the greater neighbourhood's Community Policing Forum, we aimed to engage with wider community initiatives and to help foster networks of active citizens. By 2010 we had established a steering committee for the project which reflected resident participation and co-creation in our activities. The project would not have been possible without the dedicated work and keen interest shown by Sophiatown residents including Clement Baai, Judi Bennett, Earl Bond, Elise Bond, Naomi Franks, Noeriena Hendricks, Jackey,

Dirk Kotze, Tshepo Letsoalo, René Lombardi, Angie Masemola, Cora Matthysen, Steven Motshiping, Sipho Ndlovu, Cathy Seefort, Lucky Seepe, Desmond Sheik, Kabelo Tselapedi, and Mbali Zwane. Over five years we maintained a regular presence in the suburb, which includes such diverse activities as organising a fun run, participating in Sophiatown Cooking Club, facilitating a youth group, participating in events at the THMC, attending the Sophiatown Resident's Association, taking part in meetings at the Sophiatown Police Station, attending church services at Christ the King, and hosting movie nights in one of the two local public spaces. This is in addition to work represented by the many hundreds of audio-hours of group meetings, family meetings and audio-interviews we conducted together with the residents who became part of the project. Some of the processes involved in the project are described in this volume.

Of the 40-50 residents who had involved themselves with us in 2009, about 20-25 continued into various sub-projects begun in 2010 and many others participated in events or conversations. A cooking club started out with a group of women who were interested in sharing recipes and meeting regular, the initial idea being to collect recipes and stories towards a Sophiatown Cookbook, which was published in 2013. The group began by meeting once a month on a Saturday. After some initial hiccups, the group began to function well, with elected representatives. In 2011 after several of the project groups had been running a year or more, including a youth group, it was decided that the best way to continue with the project was to produce a book reflecting resident engagements with their own history (Thelen and Morgan 2013). The articles by Morgan and Naidoo reflect in depth on some of the processes and methodologies followed in our work.

As introduced above, several of the articles also share, as a common starting point, a desire to challenge apartheid's meta-narratives and totalising gaze. Erlank addresses, in particular, the problems associated with apartheid's grand narrative, and the problems this poses for a new South Africa. She looks to the way situating history in its socially-produced spaces subverts monolithic constructions of South African history, drawing on the work of theorists like Henri Lefebvre (1991), Dolores Hayden (1995),

and Ed Soja (1996) to show how Sophiatown has always been and continues to be socially produced. She also looks to how attention to space works as a heuristic device, familiarising for many people the out-thereness and irrelevance of big story history.

Erlank's focus on space is shared in different ways by both Chapman and Naidoo. Chapman's work, using the idea of spatial justice as a lens, examines the urban history of Sophiatown as part of the western areas of Johannesburg, locating its development in tandem with the development of Western Native Township and later Westbury. His work draws attention to the way in which space is both socially and politically constructed, and in so doing demonstrates how apartheid spatial ideology was mostly imperfect in its execution. Despite apartheid's grand attempt, in its second phase, to separate people, people had ways of transcending their physical separation. Yavini Naidoo's article examines, amongst other issues, how place is constructed in the everyday and in people's everyday interactions. Using de Certeau's ideas (1984) about how the walker at street level subverts dominant constructions of the city, she looks at what people produce when they discuss their daily routes and practices in contemporary Sophiatown.

With both Chapman and Naidoo, words like focus and see are appropriate for their research methodologies. Naidoo's work makes extensive use of social, sometimes called memory, mapping, to trace how people lived and walked the fabric of their suburbs. Her maps demonstrate how people understand the space they occupy; more than this, they worked to engage people in the spaces they occupied. Discussions about maps became much more, as people were able to plot where their routes through Sophiatown intersected, and to recall other people, whose regular movement through the same space meant weekly sightings. Chapman's street layouts, a different order of map, trace the history of Westbury and Sophiatown in a much more compact fashion than would be achieved by narrative alone; at the same time his photographs provide texture to the street layouts which alternatively challenged and empowered the people who lived and worked in the two suburbs.

Karie Morgan's article is another that focuses its gaze on people and the relationships which challenge and sustain them. It explicitly takes up the cause of the

everyday, but as a site of uncertainty and change. She analyses residents' practice of greeting other neighbours to make visible the ordinary and very personal ways in which post-apartheid South Africa is experienced and to highlight greetings as a site of potentiality, both for changing relationships and the formation of new subjectivities.

Both Katharina Fink and Paul Knevel pick up on the notion of multiple Sophiatowns, providing from two different directions, a deconstruction of some of the myths surrounding old Sophiatown. Fink looks particularly to the way in which fragments of the suburb have been transnationally co-produced, and how these fragments gain a life of their own in different international settings. She also looks to how African immigrants have infused the history of Sophiatown with their own ideas, calling their shop Touba Triomf. The first performs a transnationalism, linking their shop with a site faraway Senegal, the second shows little awareness of Sophiatown's politics of nomenclature. Her brief vignette on Sophia Tobiansky (the suburb was named after her) and Madie Hall Xuma, who South African history has mostly reduced to being A.B. Xuma's wife also bring to light some of the gendered fragments of Sophiatown.

Knevel's article performs two actions for Sophiatown. Using Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire* as a starting point leads him to an important question: what did 'Sophiatown' mean to various people at a particular moment in their life and times. 'Nobody can write the real story of Sophiatown', Don Mattera once wrote (1987: 49). In his article he discusses three episodes, each illustrating a different character of Sophiatown: as an unknown place, as a place of conflict and as place of forgetting *and* nostalgia. At the same time he adds, through careful archival work, much texture to Sophiatown's early history, showing a history of booms and bangs from its inception right through to the 2000s. His article, like Fink's, covers the entire history of the place called Sophiatown, challenging through its very writing the mono-chronological focus of much historical writing on Sophiatown.

What many of us in this special issue have tried to suggest is that Sophiatown can be difficult to grasp, a bit like a piece of soap that keeps slipping through one's fingers. Part of the difficulty of grasping Sophiatown lies in the extensive literature which has developed around the suburb, its history, and its various faces. Tom Lodge's article,

'The Destruction of Sophiatown' more than thirty years after its writing is testimony to the fact that good historical work is timeless. Fink uses Ulf Hannerz's 'The view from Afar' (1994) and the cultural production Sophiatown as an organisational focus in her article. Deborah Hart and Gordon Pirie include, in their 'Sight and Soul of Sophiatown' a range of photographs which convey visually what the Drum writers of the 1950s conveyed in text the feel of the suburb in the 1950s. David Goodhew (2004) has written extensively about Sophiatown, though his *Sophiatown: A History* remains less about Sophiatown and more about the anxieties around race and respectability which confronted black South Africans confronting the rise of racist state ideology. While very little has been written about *Triomf* itself, the novel by Marlene van Niekerk has been productive several literary critiques, which all – directly and indirectly – have a bearing on how the suburb has been represented. Several of the articles in this special issue refer to the genre of autobiography, and also to self-writing in its various form: these include Don Mattera's *Memory is the Weapon (1987)*, Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History (1986)*, as well as several other accounts (including Trevor Huddleston's *Naught for your Comfort (1956)*). It was not possible, though, to have referenced everything written on Sophiatown in this special issue. In working on Sophiatown several of us confronted difficulties in what to include and what not to include; the extent of work on Sophiatown is probably disproportionate compared to other moments in South African history, because of Sophiatown's capture of the public imagination. As Fink notes, not even the subject of District Six has generated as much scholarship as Sophiatown has. Inevitably we will have missed key references but not through any deliberate oversight.

A final point: a methodological commonality draws together all the papers. This is a close attention to the literature and approaches to the social production of space, on neighbourhood practices and how people are willing to engage at the level of the everyday and of familiar spaces. There are different ways to write about the everyday. These approaches cast into relief another literature, that on communities and public participation, which does not always take into account interior spaces of where people's different narratives and capacities for speaking are taking seriously. Many of the articles here use empathy as their *locus standi*. The articles are also differently positioned in this respect, reflecting a variety of positions on the politics of

representation. But we do recognise that - while we worked with power differentials continually in the suburb and were involved in many contests over power and resources, our own work here may not reflect all of that. There is certainly another set of articles to be written about conflict in the suburb, especially over resources. The belief in 'community' which the prior position represents emerges from a particular epistemology: it may incline towards the romantic but can also provide fertile ground for examining the politics of the everyday.

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