

## Routes to Sophiatown

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What is Sophiatown? Is it vibrant black, urbanity, or a more tragic recollection: the suburb that was destroyed by the apartheid state's forced removals of black South Africans from areas proclaimed white from the 1950s onwards. Both of these representations have considerable contemporary traction. The former lends itself to a very nostalgic view of the suburb, the South African rainbow nation transported into a multi-cultural and cooperative past, while anti-apartheid commemorative initiatives highlight the removals beginning in February 1955. Neither of these representations, though, reflects the entirety of Sophiatown's histories, including of when it was called Triomf. This article brings together the different histories and representations of Sophiatown, showing their messy connection with one another, through a consideration of two linked sets of ideas: in the first place, space viewed as socially-produced draws attention to the multiply-constructed nature of the landscape known as Sophiatown. In the second, attention to the quotidian accounts which Sophiatown residents produce about their lives reveals the way in which space and place (house and home, daily travel routes) work to overlap the familiar with the unfamiliar. The first set of ideas looks to ideas of space as politically-contingent, the second to the processual role it plays in how people remember their everyday lives.

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Sophiatown is an unremarkable-looking suburb on the western edge of Johannesburg, its residential epicentre the local shopping centre which resembles a small-town American strip mall. The suburb's houses are typical of the single-storey brick and plaster, tin and tile roofed homes of the surrounding Johannesburg suburbs, most of them built after the 1960s. The most distinguishing feature of the area a multi-storey block of residential housing for the South African Police Service. There is almost nothing about the built landscape of the suburb to set it apart from the many other, similar suburbs which fringe South Africa's larger cities. There are no visual aides-mémoire to recall the vibrant suburb of the 1950s, reflected in the writing of people like Bloke Modisane, Can Themba or even Trevor Huddleston (Gready 1990). Their Sophiatown, recalled evocatively in a range of treatments, do not fit the current Sophiatown. When I walk through the suburb, or more likely drive, I sometimes feel a sense of out-of-bodyness as I move through the two disconnected spaces at the same time. Driving down Edward

Street, the wall of the Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre (SHCC) recalls the past with its slogan, 'We will not move', while a little further on signs in the gardens of ordinary houses advertise the all-hours services of plumbers and electricians.

**Figure 1: The SHCC wall and Sophiatown's past**

Credit: Natasha Erlank

What, indeed, is Sophiatown? Its name conjures up for just about anyone who is well read, or who is a denizen of hip South African culture, an image of vibrant black, urbanity. Alongside this commemorative refiguration of Sophiatown is a more tragic recollection: the suburb that was systematically and structurally destroyed by the forced removals played out in black South African residential areas from the 1950s onwards, by the authoritarian impulses of the white minority apartheid state. While international jazz lounges and clothing labels recall Sophiatown's urban edginess, the fractured landscape of 1950s Sophiatown is remembered through a number of initiatives which commemorate South Africa's anti-apartheid past.<sup>1</sup> The former lends itself to a very nostalgic view of the suburb, presented in current heritage initiatives, while struggle commemoration initiatives highlight the removals beginning in February 1955. Neither of these representations reflects the entirety of Sophiatown's histories. The complicated nature of these histories becomes apparent when writing about the suburb. Contemporary Sophiatown is not the same as Triomf, though some residents still refer to it as such. During apartheid, many people refused to call the suburb Triomf as an act of symbolic defiance. For the sake of clarity I use the following terms when referring to specific phases in its history: 'old Sophiatown' refers to the period before the removals of the suburb in 1955; 'Triomf' refers to the apartheid-era suburb from 1955 to 1994, and 'Sophiatown' to the suburb in the period after 1994 (although the suburb was only officially renamed in 2006). However, even this schematic is fraught, since it tends to separate out these different historical periods, emphasising discontinuity at the expense of continuity.

In this article I want to bring these different histories and representations of Sophiatown together, showing their messy connections with each other. One way to do this is through a consideration of two related ideas. In the first, viewing space as socially-produced draws attention to the many ways in which Sophiatown's landscape has been produced as a socially-

embedded location. In the second, close attention to people's stories about their everyday lives reveals the way in which space and place (house and home, daily travel routes) work to make the familiar and unfamiliar overlap. The first set of ideas looks to ideas of space as politically-contingent, where cartographic locations need to be understood as simultaneously overlapping fragments of what people want for and imagine as that particular space. In the second set, following the Dolores Hayden quote at the end of this section, I look to the processual role space plays in how people remember their everyday lives.

In present-day Sophiatown this is particularly evident, as residents reflect upon where they live and work in relation to what they know of the suburb's past. For some of them, this takes the form of empathy, for others, resentment. In order to understand how space refracts recollection I examine a series of conversations, loosely about history, with current residents of Sophiatown, whose individual memories of the suburb stretch back anything between five years and five decades. Some of the conversations are with people who moved in when the suburb was Triomf. I am not trying to make a contribution to the literature on collective memory here, which is itself contested and certainly requires a more robust engagement with theories of memory than is my intention in this article. I wanted to examine how ideas about practising memory, more properly about how and what people chose to recollect, are deeply invested in produced ideas about space; how sharing space can constitute a way for people to feel they have something in common; it is about what you can do with shared emotion rather than the chimera of shared experience.<sup>2</sup>

In thinking about some of these issues, I begin with two quotes. The first is from Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia*: 'In fact, to be nostalgic is to remember the social orders and networks of solidarity that made the struggle possible in the first place' (2009:17). Here Dlamini accords the feel of a relationship between people located in particular spaces a primacy in constituting what is important to remember. It is interesting to see how his views echo those of Dolores Hayden, working on the politics of space and remembering in the United States. In the second quote, Hayden refers to this as 'the power of place', where a consideration of landscape works to create and sustain shared memory and to 'encompass shared time in the form of shared territory' (1995:11).

## **Heritage, Nostalgia, Space**

The subject matter of this article is situated across, but also against, different literatures. While this article is more about history, and not so much about memory, the subject of Sophiatown calls forth attention to the nature of memory and commemoration in post-apartheid South Africa. Some of the more recent writing in this area includes a consideration of the place and nature of memory and remembering in post-apartheid South Africa (Nuttall & Coetzee 1998) as well as, more recently, a delving into the politics of nostalgia (Dlamini 2009; Worby & Ally 2013). It also needs to take into account how, in Sophiatown and for many South Africans, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was seen as sufficient introspection into the wounds of the past, and how the finalisation of the TRC marked a point at which people felt they could put the past behind them.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, people's knowledge of the TRC acts as an off-stage framing for how they consider questions of history. Likewise, while Sophiatown residents may be only peripherally involved in contemporary heritage politics in the suburb, the heritage politics of the various agencies working in the suburb help to shape how residents view Sophiatown's history and their own presence in Sophiatown. Many Sophiatown commemorative initiatives centre on a developmental heritage politics, where various actors approach the suburb's 'heritage' with a view to capitalizing on it, often by-passing current residents as I shall discuss further on in the article.

South African heritage work is a very broad field, both in practice and in the practice of the academics who comment upon and critique it (Rassool 2000; Saunders 2007). The heritage industry, those public and private organisations and elements of the state and local government which see themselves as responsible for the production of heritage, seems largely to gather around two poles: either the reification and re-enactment of indigenous cultures, or a politics of struggle and resistance centred on apartheid. Indeed, as Gary Minkley notes, these two elements come together as part of what he and others refer to as a South African heritage complex, a potent combination of heritage, tradition and resistance served up in a smorgasbord of heritage ventures and venues across the country. In the South African public discourse this means that 'real' heritage is that which reflects black resistance, is oral, performative and often intangible (Minkley 2008:25). Public heritage discourse and the legacy of the TRC shape and constrain

what counts as authentic and real, for the general public who are interested in the South African past.

Public commemorations of the struggle against apartheid have become a key feature of heritage initiatives which have come to fruition over the last 15 years, in sites as diverse as the District Six Museum in Cape Town, the Red Location Museum in Port Elizabeth, the Ncome Museum in rural KwaZulu-Natal, Freedom Park in Pretoria, and the Hector Peterson Memorial in Soweto. The events on which they are based include the forced removal of black South Africans from their homes, Zulu history, those who died in South Africa's wars of liberation, and the first victim of apartheid police fire in 1976, as well as the Soweto Uprising. Some of these events and processes commemorate the structural inequalities of apartheid, others the more direct and physical confrontations between black and white South Africans. While the legitimacy of these sites is largely drawn from a more recent history, apartheid since 1948, the fusion with indigenous and 'real' past is seen in the memorial erected in East London to the Duncan Village Massacre where a 19<sup>th</sup>-century generic African warrior figure has been used to commemorate a 20<sup>th</sup>-century apartheid incident (Marschall 2012). While much heritage discourse is about particular locales, it tends to consider spaces as pre-constituted by history alone, lacking relational ties to other spaces.

It is not my intention here to examine the constructions of heritage present in these sites; there is some very sophisticated and excellent work which does this already (Baines 2007, 2009; Rassool 2006; Kros 2008, 2010; Witz 2003, 2011; Marschall 2006, 2012). To flog a binary horse beyond expiration, work in South Africa which deals with the past tends to be identified – supposedly by people with money to pay for research or consultants – either as heritage, where heritage (or 'culture') is about black South Africans and real, and done by non-professionals (or professionals attempting to supplement their meagre academic salaries); or as history, often – again in the public view – seen as the territory of academics in history departments, and thus conducted by experts. Both, however, involved the contemporary production of memory. While I would agree with Leslie Witz and Ciraj Rassool (2008) in their assessment of a hierarchy of historical production in South Africa privileging the academy, the qualitative difference between history and heritage held by the academy is clearer to professional historians than to anyone else in South Africa, or anywhere else for that matter.<sup>4</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his incisive

account of how pasts are historically produced, refers to the ‘inherent ambivalence of the word “history”’ and the impossibility of pinning it down (1995:2).

Here, though, I am more interested in the rather dogmatic offspring of the coupling between heritage and the anti-apartheid struggle. Let me briefly examine the ‘how’, because this too has been the subject of much writing, mostly by academic and other public intellectuals interested in the evolution of nationalism, and nationalist thought, in South Africa. For some, this involves a mythologizing of the current state of affairs, for others it is about critique. It is possible to detect several currents at work in this critique.

Since 1994, the unequivocal hold by the African National Congress (ANC), as the ruling party, on the state has been accompanied by a nationalist drive to author a version of the past which reflects the party as the pre-eminent actor in the struggle against apartheid: the history of the ANC as synonymous with the history of the fight for freedom (Rassool 2000; Baines 2005; Bundy 2007). This is present as the theory in a range of government-sponsored initiatives and presentations. State-sponsored heritage initiatives echo this assumption, translated into what Minkley has described above. In particular township history is generally viewed as synonymous with the freedom struggle (Baines 2005). Public-funded heritage initiatives almost inevitably include some element of nationalist hagiography and an emphasis on the developmental function of heritage.

To be fair, the ANC positioning of itself as the instigator of (successful) acts of resistance in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century South African past has partly emerged as an antidote to a previous nationalist and hegemonic history. Much of this emphasis has to do with, and reiterates a previous – that is, pre-1994 – National Party narrative of ascendancy, where public history and heritage sites were almost all concerned with the history of South Africa’s white minority. While these sites and monuments were themselves not uncontested at the moment of their inception, as Witz (2003) has shown in his work on the Van Riebeeck Tercentenary, they remained, at the end of the apartheid era, visible reminders of a previous history of exclusion. Currently, much heritage work attempts to exchange the National Party commemorative landscape or to recast it in ways which acknowledge the struggle for freedom.

Perhaps most critically, this politics of struggle, or commemoration, is often partnered with notions of restitution and redress, the ‘miracle’ of South Africa (Rassool 2000) represented in the post-facto life of the TRC. Here, the authorised heritage discourse, a term used in the

literature, derives from a need to promote the values of the 1996 Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights: a 'national narrative of human rights' in post-apartheid South Africa. The narrative of human rights draws directly on the TRC and its proceedings, the TRC acting, as Deborah Posel, Annie Coombes, and others have noted, as an alternative historiography for the period between 1960 and 1994 (Coombes 2011; Posel & Simpson 2002). Indeed, Eric Worby and Shireen Ally (2013:462) view the TRC and its ideas as a way to thinking about South Africa's historical future.

But the TRC also feeds into popular and public debates on history because of how it was seen by many as a way to tidy up the past, to put it in a cupboard behind the winter coats. As Cynthia Kros noted:

It is clear, for one thing, that I have been underestimating the power of the 'discourse of reconciliation'. Perhaps it was only one of the discourses offered by the mid-1990s as Rousseau and Fullard (2008) have argued for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), but it appeared to make particularly strong inroads into the field of heritage with lingering effects. (2010:66)

The need to tidy away the past, for whatever reasons, has consequences for how people think about and imagine it.

Aligned with this way of thinking, the erasure of the past, is paradoxically another which views the past along the lines of a 'we must not forget' narrative. While these positions often map onto people's experiences of apartheid (at an individual level), they also constitute commemoration as the flip-side of restitution. In this sense, restitution is captured by its opposite, thus the need to commemorate events which have given rise to the need for restitution.

There have been many attempts subsequent to 1994 to overcome the absences and silences of apartheid history. In his piece on remembering New Brighton township in Port Elizabeth, Gary Baines (2005) sets up his argument with this view in mind. It is one shared by many other bodies of work, including that of the History Workshop based at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am particularly drawn to the work which looks to acknowledge gendered absences (Coombes 2011; Miller 2011), because gender issues are notoriously marginalised in official heritage discourse (Marschall 2010). However, in heritage work this has translated into the development or redevelopment of sites which have been put forward, often by municipal officials, as part of struggle tourism routes. However well-intentioned many of these initiatives,

many of them still remain locked in an analytical framework which continually recreates apartheid, Svetlana Boym's 'restorative nostalgia' (see below) in conjunction with an attraction which fits the characteristics of what various authors have termed 'dark tourism' (Walter 2009). Sites like District Six and the Red Location Museum are very different to those which commemorate a monumental version of the past, and it is possible to see, in recent exhibitions and brandings an attempt to move away from unilinear renderings of the past. Although in many respects a very sensitive rendering of a community lost under apartheid, the Red Location Museum in Port Elizabeth uses its website to position its intent according to this formula.

VISION: Red Location Museum of Struggle will focus on the memorialisation and depiction of the apartheid narrative. It will portray the horrors of Institutionalised Racism and the heroic struggles of the Anti-Apartheid movement aimed at liberating the oppressed people. Responsive to the developmental needs of the local community, the museum will be an integral component of initiatives and programmes associated with the empowerment, education and redress of the local community at large. The museum will be a locally responsive institution of international standing.<sup>5</sup>

This description pulls together many of the strands that currently feature in South African heritage discourse: the memorialisation of apartheid and its fallen heroes, a commitment to using heritage for development purposes, and a focus on local communities. But what does this tell us about pasts that were not determined by apartheid, the kinds of pasts that Jacob Dlamini has written about? What does this description tell us about Red Location, apart from its history under apartheid, as told from the vantage point of victimhood? It seems unfair that this space is externally represented as only synonymous with struggle. In another context, Trouillot refers to this as 'single-site historicity' (1995:14).

While heritage is an obvious trope for thinking about Sophiatown, it is also possible to see how ideas around nostalgia frame how people who experienced living in old Sophiatown remember it (or think they remember it), or how other people understand the history of Sophiatown. Nostalgia, understood most simply as a longing for the past, is the central trope in a project undertaken by the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre in the mid-2000s when former residents were encouraged to remember old Sophiatown; as living heritage resources many have now become stock interviewees for the history of Sophiatown. It is clear, though, that their memories gained traction in the crucible of the heritage project and land restitution processes in the late-1990s.<sup>6</sup> From Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia*, to the more recent work by Worby and Ally,



the way in which nostalgia sets up and delineates a way of thinking about the past has recently occupied much scholarly attention. Nostalgia taps into an enfolding of the South African past into the present; indeed Worby and Ally (2013:458) argue that nostalgia at the current moment is best understood as a way of comprehending the present, rather than being about the past:

‘[N]ostalgia has become the name for contemporary cultures of memory [understood by them very widely] in South Africa’. Indeed, nostalgia also encompasses cultures of aspiration, where nostalgia for spaces like Sophiatown reflects a failure of contemporary black cosmopolitanism.<sup>7</sup>

If, in the immediate aftermath of apartheid, it was difficult to imagine black South Africans experiences of it as anything other than traumatic, the passage of time has made it possible for people to remember certain elements of life under apartheid as better than they are at present, or – alternatively – to view apartheid as somehow better than the current moment. Dlamini (2009:7) writes about “‘ordinary” understandings of the past’, and how these reveal a nostalgic take on life under apartheid. Both these approaches reveal a complex understanding of how people today understand what apartheid meant and represented, which is very much at odds with an all-encompassing resistance narrative. Sophiatown constitutes an entire nostalgic node all on its own, both in terms of a contemporary commodity culture (Fink 2014; ExpressoPartners 2013) and as a short-hand for evocations of nostalgia in academic work (Baines 2005; Sapire 2013; Worby & Ally 2013).

Notwithstanding Worby and Ally’s sophisticated theorisation of nostalgia, it is Dlamini’s evocation of his township childhood, and its fragments of memory, which interest me here, and help to think about what Svetlana Boym (2001) would term the reflective politics of nostalgia, i.e. a politics which engages with but does not reproduce a sentimental view of the past. Dlamini uses his experience of growing up, moving from a consideration of home life to that of a broader space, to think about how a reflective politics changes our gaze on the past. Dlamini employs two elements of what Ed Soja (see below) puts forward in his tripartite theory, ‘Thirdspace’: space, history, and society (1996:2). Soja has critiqued much historical work, including work on memory and historical consciousness, for being oblivious to space as an organising social principal. Soja’s critique is possibly a bit harsh, but he does point to what is often a lack in historical work about experience later recounted as memory: a consciousness both of the theoretical dimensions of space as well as the constraints which space can impose on the range of human action. A focus on shared space and the everyday promotes an identification of common

experience, such as moving into a new house. For Soja, and indeed for many other theorists, the source of this critical view is Henri Lefebvre's (1991) ground-breaking work in the 1970s on the social production of space. Lefebvre, who inspired many later theorists including Dolores Hayden and Ed Soja, was keenly interested in how space could be understood as a social product, created through intersections of meaning and representation. While Lefebvre's thinking was revolutionary in planning and geographical theory, it has taken some time to filter into local productions of history (ironic given the omnipresence of migrant labour in South African history). This move, indeed, is highlighted in Noor Nieftagodien's 2010 assessment of the contribution of the History Workshop to building the 'local' in local history. As Nieftagodien (2010:56–7) noted at the time, this hybrid and contested idea of space has made inroads into the History Workshop's own successor projects, but there seems little take of these ideas beyond. Nieftagodien (2012), for instance, uses Lefebvre to argue for the production of alternative spaces of resistance in township politics, thus decentering the ANC as central actor.

Dlamini speaks to the production of space through reference to Gill Hart (2002), who writes about spaces as always formed and constituted in relationships, and always connected to flows of power. For Hart, 'power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life at different spatial scales, constantly rework places and identities' (2002:13). Hart's comments are important, because they establish the importance of connections, at different scales (the local, the regional), and how their interplay shapes both particular locales and the people who inhabit them.

Hart's observations bring attention to different ways of thinking about Sophiatown. What are the relationships of the multiple Sophiatowns with their different surrounds? And how does power figure in the constant remaking of Sophiatown? It – the congeries of associations linked to the designator – was and is a powerful space, exerting power in a diffuse manner over other spaces (temporally and geographically) around it. Sophiatown draws much of its power through being a site of struggle and nostalgia, the power of the representation drowning out the other spaces and memories which have a call on its generative capacity. One of nostalgia's characteristics, as Dlamini writes, is that it derives a special kind of potency from operating in the urban and the township. A similar point is made, indirectly, by Hilary Sapire (2013) in her insightful recent overview of township histories. What associations are evoked by referring to it as a township (for the period before the 1950s)? What is revealed when people no longer refer to

it as a township, but as a suburb?<sup>8</sup> What are its relationships to its surrounding areas, to Johannesburg, to flows of people along a south-western corridor between itself and Soweto, in the past and now, as a space into which people have moved since 1994? What is Sophiatown's relationship to Bloke Modisane's widow in Germany (Fink 2014)? And to students from the US who pick Sophiatown as a popular subject of study abroad programmes?

### **Doing History in Sophiatown**

The past seldom leaves Sophiatown alone for long. Witz reminds us, in *Apartheid's Festivals*, that 'the ability to configure public pasts is always limited by previous historical depictions and the ever-present conflicts that accompany any form of commemorative activity' (2003:246).

The first place to locate history in the suburb is through the ongoing efforts of a local not-for-profit, or non-governmental organisation, the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre (THMC).<sup>9</sup> Founded in 1999, the THMC takes its name from the Anglican father who worked in Sophiatown in the 1930s and 1940s, and after his return to the United Kingdom worked for the British anti-apartheid movement. The THMC sees itself, in its promotional activities and through its website, as promoting and reviving 'The Spirit of Sophiatown'. Working with little funding and in a laudable attempt to present Sophiatown's past in the present, the THMC has led historical (focusing on the pre-1955 period) tours through the suburb for the last ten years. It also participated in a large-scale oral history project in the suburb in the mid-2000s, to collect the memories and experiences of former Sophiatown residents, mostly those who were moved to Meadowlands in Soweto. The THMC is responsible for running the SHCC, in the house of former ANC president-general, Alfred Bitini Xuma, who practised as a doctor in Sophiatown from the 1930s until he was removed in the late 1950s. The house, on the corner of Toby and Edward streets, was one of the few buildings not demolished after the forced removals in the 1950s. By 2008, with the THMC as a driving force, the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) began the process of buying the house to be run by the THMC as a memorial centre or museum. The initial budget from the CoJ covered only the purchase and basic renovation of the house. The acquisition of the house was part of the THMC's heritage vision for the suburb, a vision which at the time was expressed in an exhibition at the THMC premises and their provision of walking tours through the suburb for people interested in Sophiatown before the removals. Since its

renovation, the SHCC has been the site of several exhibitions and jazz concerts, amongst other initiatives, all located in the idea of Sophiatown as a cultural hub.

Currently, the THMC is building a multi-purpose facility (construction has just begun at the date of writing in 2014) to be called Motswako – a local youth development and cultural hub.

To commemorate Huddleston's birth 99 years ago, and the 100th year of Sophiatown, THMC unveiled for public consultation, plans for the new Motswako Enterprise Hub and Cultural Centre. The Motswako (the 'mix') Hub will link youth in the historic western area neighbourhoods – all of which suffered from forced removals in the mid 1950s [sic] – to entrepreneurship opportunities including training and enterprise incubation. It aims to reach 1000 young people with enterprise and employment opportunities by Freedom Day 2014.<sup>10</sup>

Over the last few years, since 2009, work conducted by researchers linked to the University of Johannesburg (UJ), together with current residents of Sophiatown, has run parallel to the work of the THMC, though with different intentions. The project began with the intention of examining how people living in Sophiatown have understood their own history, as well as that of the suburb. The project explored ways to work with history, rather than being an exercise in the commemoration of Sophiatown. From the start, the UJ project team was quite explicit – and quite instrumental – in framing the history we wanted to achieve. Our conversations contrasted what we wanted to do in Sophiatown with history as grand narrative. Our approach emphasised that everybody has a history, and that often individual histories coincide. If people can find a basis for sharing, they may be able to overcome the racially-driven histories with form the staple of South Africa's past. Ideas about history and civic identity, and how to use history as a positive motor for civic engagement, were explicitly present in our various interventions (see the articles by Knevel, Fink, Chapman and Morgan in this Special Issue). On the one hand this view was romantic, on the other hand it was interested in exploring what a shared territory might do for how and what people remember of their pasts, especially when they are being asked to remember in anticipation of a future.

As part of our project, we wanted people to realise they had things in common, on the basis of shared life experience rather than shared racial category. This approach, which often takes as its starting point the history of a neighbourhood, is more common outside of South Africa, where public history initiatives don't have to contend with the cultural baggage of

apartheid (see for example Hayden 1995)<sup>11</sup> but is becoming more common locally (Roux & Didier 2011). The work we did, beginning in May 2009, was intended to tap into these ideas. During initial work, Dave Thelen and Tom Chapman brought the residents of several streets together in street meetings (we called them block groups). Initial meetings were about people getting to know their neighbours, while a project centred on residents taking photos of places of importance to them (what we called photo-voice) was about deepening their senses of themselves, their neighbours (in the broadest sense) and their suburb. Early on we broached with residents the idea of an organising committee, and subsequently constituted a group of willing residents to work as part of a Steering Committee on the project.

Of the 40 to 50 residents who had involved themselves with the UJ Sophiatown Project in 2009, about 20 to 25 continued into various other groups and projects, while a few additional people also joined. Some of these included a Cooking Club and a youth group. In 2011, work done with residents, the core of whom had joined the project during its initial phase, led us to begin work on a local history book. This work constituted, together with work done by the Steering Committee, the bulk of our efforts in 2011 and 2012. In 2013 a book which captures this process, *Experiencing Sophiatown: Conversations with Residents* (Thelen & Morgan 2013) was published.

Discussions around history and remembering emerged in the project work across a range of different structures. Some of what I reference below emerged in our initial block groups in 2009. Other references emerged from the three on-going structures: the Cooking Club, the Steering Committee and the History Book Group. Sometimes the comments are from group settings, sometimes they emerged in follow-up sessions with an individual group member. Discussion sessions, interviews and meetings were conducted with a combination of project workers, usually one of the UJ team together with a fieldworker.

Commentary is almost exclusively drawn from current residents, a term used to refer to those who live and work in and around Sophiatown.<sup>12</sup> Sophiatown today is a mixed suburb; its 5,000 or so householders are largely middle-class. Between the 2001 and 2011 national census, the population remained roughly constant, but the size of the white population decreased (66 to 41 per cent of the total); the coloured population rose from 15 to 26 per cent (Frith 2001, 2011). Whatever problems may exist in effective data collection or racial categorisation (both using these categories and how people represent themselves), this is a suburb that has seen tremendous

demographic shift since the late 1990s. Many current residents have moved to Sophiatown after 1994, though a handful of people who moved into the suburb when it was Triomf were also centrally involved in our project (see Naidoo, this Special Issue); more were peripherally involved. A majority of those who participated in the project would self-identify as coloured. Of these, many had grown up across the way in Westbury, before moving to Sophiatown with the ending of apartheid (see the discussion below on Westbury). Their parents had grown up in Sophiatown. We also had several residents become involved who had become acquainted with Sophiatown through working at the local shopping centre, while others were economic migrants from the rest of Africa. The residents who participated did so on a voluntary basis, mostly driven by a sense of civic commitment. However, working through and with local institutions like churches meant that people who were not civically-engaged also participated in the project. One of our most active participants was already the chair of the local Ratepayers' Association, and the proportional representation councillor for the municipal ward of which Sophiatown forms part. In what follows, I consider some of the ways in which people who participated in the project articulated, spoke to, or challenged, some of the manifestations of history I raised earlier.

### **Different Sophiatowns**

From the start of our work, it was clear that residents and others understood the space of Sophiatown, who it included and excluded, how it worked to include and exclude, in numerous different ways. In May-June 2009 residents from three streets and the police flats in Sophiatown used disposable cameras to take pictures of places and people of importance to them. In October 2009, they held a public exhibition of some of their work in the parking lot of the local shopping centre, Shoprite.

**Figure 2:** Saturday morning shoppers discussing the Photo-Voice exhibition.

Credit: Natasha Erlank

**Figure 3:** Cathy Seefort, local resident and activist, contemplates Earl Bond's photograph of children on swings at the Photo-Voice exhibition.

Credit: Natasha Erlank

Each exhibition board had a photograph and a caption, written by the resident who took the picture. One of the photographs showed three children on swings in a local park. The caption on the picture reads:

In my photo voice project I wanted to tell the story about the history of Sophiatown, and these pictures show my view on the history of Sophiatown. I called this picture 'Kids on the swing'. I took this picture to highlight that this playground was once a Whites-only playground [Earl would identify himself and his family as coloured]. Today, this park is multiracial, it is a place where kids of all races come together to play. (Earl Bond)

On a postcard put out by the residents to advertise the project, they wrote:

What you see today is part of a larger project, whose aim is to get to know each other in the community. This project is called Photo-Voice which involved members of the community. We took pictures of what best describes Sophiatown to us, its past and its future. In coming together to relate our stories we realised we had a lot of common memories, and we saw our suburb through somebody else's eyes. Now we have turned a small part of this experience into an exhibition which can bring us together and know each other better. At the end of the day if we know our community, we can overcome our challenges.

In late 2010, an exhibition (a loose term) took place at the SHCC. The exhibition, jointly put together by UJ researchers and the THMC, was opened on Heritage Day, 24 September. In planning the exhibition, we had much discussion about how to bring the stories of former and current Sophiatown residents together in the same space, because it was not immediately obvious how to do this. At the opening, attended by then mayor of Johannesburg, Amos Masondo, the dialogue was mostly about the removals of 1955 and how the visit to the exhibition by former residents emphasised reconciliation and a healing of wounds. It was noticeable how many former residents were in the small crowd awaiting the mayor; these had come in on a bus specially hired for the occasion from Soweto: it was probably not noticeable to many there, though, how few were the number of current residents who attended. After the exhibition I was told by some of our project participants that they did not feel welcome at the SHCC, or on an occasion, which did not draw them into the commemoration of Sophiatown. Current and former residents were present in the same physical location, but not in the same socially-produced space. The Sophiatowns present had multiple histories of social production.

What my impressions, and these vignettes, point to is the protean nature of history in Sophiatown, not only its representation, but also its production. Earl Bond's photograph and its caption reflect a history that crosses over from the past to the present, and his framing concerns itself with a local space; when his photograph was displayed in the parking lot of the local supermarket the discussion that followed was about the park where it was taken. The day of the parking lot exhibition I fielded questions about the making of the exhibition, and many people were interested in how and why the photographs were taken. Very little of the talk was about Sophiatown's more widely-known pasts. The mayor's presentation reinscribed Sophiatown as a product of the 1940s and 1950s. The contrast between the two exhibitions, one in the local shopping-centre parking lot and the other in a proclaimed heritage space, reveals the fault lines of this kind of commemorative work. For a variety of reasons, the continued production of Sophiatown as a centre of black urban culture, or as a locale of racial defiance, defers a consideration of the history of the people who, and the space which, currently constitute Sophiatown. While people currently living in Sophiatown have a multi-faceted take on their different pasts and the space they currently share, externally the overwhelming identification of Sophiatown is with black urbanity and apartheid destruction. Put differently, what might we lose if our grasp of Sophiatown rests only in the period before 1960, and if our understanding of this space is continually refracted through apartheid's politics of desolation? This is not just a question for Sophiatown, but is also about South African history more broadly.

In a sensitive and well-thought through treatment of socially-produced space in Sophiatown, Jennifer Beningfield (2006) represents Triomf as loss and absence in contrast to the space which went before. She excludes the kinds of detail which former Triomf residents felt constituted their lives, including the Westdene Dam disaster, when a school bus overturned on the dam wall of the suburb adjacent to Sophiatown, falling into the dam and killing 42 children.<sup>13</sup> Many of the children who drowned were from Triomf. Ironically, this is a loss and absence but not in the way meant by Beningfield. Today, many Sophiatown residents remember the tragedy, and feel bitter that it does not receive the attention accorded the Sophiatown removals.

Well I will tell you, you know about the bus that went into the dam? My son was in that bus. He came out ... He is also dead today, but he was in the bus. Blignaut, on the corner, you spoke to him that day at the meeting, his daughter lost her life in the bus. My son



escaped, my son in law got him out. He was buggered up, but he came right. But he still feels it today after all those years. (SvdB)

Similar treatments of the suburb underscore racial antipathy and ignorant whiteness, perhaps most notably so Marlene van Niekerk's novel, *Triomf*.<sup>14</sup>

Bedingfield's understanding of loss and absence is chronological, but some of the loss linked to Sophiatown is more spatial. Sophiatown is not often represented as part of the western areas of Johannesburg, nor for that matter is Triomf. Almost all of the project interviews reveal how people along southern and western corridors out of Johannesburg used and still use Sophiatown and its surrounding suburbs as part of their daily existence, including for shopping, or for going to school. Their links with Sophiatown are as both outsiders and insiders, viewing the suburb from their homes outside of it as well as seeing it as the space of their homes and houses. Some white residents of Triomf have links with the suburb that stretch back before the 1960s to when Sophiatown was unsegregated. Growing up they witnessed the Sophiatown removals as young adults. When Mr D (HD) moved into Triomf in 1963, paying R4,500 for his house, he moved one suburb across from where he had grown up. For Mr D, who was active on behalf of the Ratepayers' Association during the restitution process, Sophiatown today represents a loss of white privilege. But this is not an issue of colour alone, since several white residents of Sophiatown, who had moved into Triomf during the 1980s, were active in trying to suborn apartheid (see SH quote at the end of this section).

Sophiatown also shifts in perspective from where it was viewed. Westbury, which is the former Western Native Township recreated as a coloured-only suburb in the 1960s, is omnipresent in the narratives of current residents, as a space from which Sophiatown may be viewed, and also aspired to.

Yes then they broke down Sophiatown and we moved across to what used to be the native township. From there we stayed until they built the flats and all that, and then my father and them moved into the flats. We got married and all that, and so, my children started coming back, we said we wanted to come back to Sophiatown. (KW, see also below)

This multiplicity of perspective, which does address the issues of removals, does not, however, resonate with those for whom the commemoration of old Sophiatown is paramount.

One of the first issues which came before the Steering Committee, back in 2009, was the wish to comment on a proposed heritage route for Sophiatown, which the THMC was trying to have formalised through buy-in from the CoJ. The trail proposal, released for comment and almost immediately withdrawn, related to 17 sites of note to old Sophiatown. The Steering Committee was concerned about the fact that the route, and the sites it envisaged commemorating via heritage plaques and other markers, responded only to the history of Sophiatown prior to the removals. It also did not reflect on previous residents removed to spaces other than Meadowlands in Soweto. The proposed route did not think about how to incorporate the current fabric of the suburb which, as noted at the start, is architecturally pedestrian. The buildings suggested for inclusion reflected a view that, while old Sophiatown might possess heritage value, Triomf did not. Current residents felt excluded from the process. However, when the Steering Committee and others indicated a willingness to engage with plans for a heritage trail involving sites they considered important, the discussion document was withdrawn for comment.

In my notes from that and subsequent meetings, I remarked how it seemed that Sophiatown's history was over-determined by a discourse invested in a narrative characteristic of Boym's restorative nostalgia. This and other discussions show how historical Sophiatown is a produced space, its commemoration experiencing a continual and contemporary recreation by different contemporary interests. The point here concerns the act of producing Sophiatown, which shifts between contexts. While many of the participants in the discussion about a heritage trail had little idea of how to plan and execute a successful heritage strategy for the suburb (and their suggestions were probably not financially-viable), others were invested in the contemporary politics of heritage, and the business of making apartheid sell. This is not surprising since both political and financial interests are tied up with potential development in the suburb. Amongst those who have forgotten more than 60 years of the suburb's chronology, are various local government structures. In all my project notes detailing contact with the CoJ municipal governance structures, I have remarked upon the way in which it appears as if the CoJ is only willing to fund struggle-centred histories of Sophiatown. At one point, the CoJ pushed strongly the idea of turning Xuma house into a museum on the former ANC leader when, in fact, AB Xuma is interesting for much more than his role as president-general (Gish 2000; Limb 2012; Ndeyatlana 2012). The CoJ exercises power over what resources fall to the suburb, and it is also invested in producing heritage spaces which authorise current ruling-party nationalist triumph.

The idea of Sophiatown as inward-looking and coherent, rather than subject to fuzziness and contestation, is echoed in discussions in Sophiatown. The sentiments reflected below are not distinctive compared to similar ones expressed by other communities and groups with a stake in the history of South Africa; rather, the produced nature of Sophiatown provides a foil for these comments that is not present elsewhere. All South Africa carries the weight of history, few places carry it in the same way as Sophiatown with its history of removal, resettlement, renaming, un-naming and remaking.

Sophiatown's current residents are partially familiar with their suburb's history. Meetings often included mentions of the history of the old Sophiatown, often expressed as 'the history of Sophiatown', referring to the removals and Sophiatown as Africa's Harlem. A comment from a Good Street meeting is reflective of this, where a former Westbury resident remarked:

Look we know how Sophiatown happened. We know it was Sophiatown first, Triomf, then again Sophiatown, we know that the Miriam Makebas, the Desmond Tutus, we know that this was the area where we had all the races living, you understand, here. (DN)

But from the way people spoke, it was clear that this was learned history; events learned at school or from movies, or from being told as 'the history of Sophiatown'. This was particularly apparent in the case of an Indian family who had moved into Sophiatown from Durban.

You know the thing is we actually watched a movie. That's how we actually know the history about Sophiatown. That's what we understand it to be. The light at that stage, before they were driven out – that's how we understand. (Mr N, from G2N)

The family had also learnt about Sophiatown through Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. And so while the conversations about the history of Sophiatown were happening in Sophiatown, it was as if people were speaking about somewhere else. They had no sense of contiguity between the Sophiatown of which they had learnt and the space they were currently occupying.

This sense of displacement in the exchange above went further. A short while later, Mrs N, who mentioned the movie, went on to say:

When I think Sophiatown, I just get a sad image in mind, just driving the blacks out. That's all that comes to mind. No history. (G2N)

I have wondered what the speaker meant with this comment. Did she mean that the history of the area was so upsetting that it translates into a metaphysical state of the absence of history? Or did she mean 'No other history' could exist next, next to what was already known?

Shortly thereafter, though, the conversation became more personal, and some of the shift relates to the larger point I am making about the processes which make it easier for people to recollect their pasts: after listening to his wife speak about Sophiatown having a sad image, Mr N used his living in Sophiatown to identify with others who had lived there, an association with a particular space acting to anchor history, to draw through memory of different pasts into the present.

In terms of the history as well, a lot of the old white folk feel it's their history, their livelihood, they grew up here. As well, for them they're going to be victimised as well because of what happened in the apartheid era. We don't blame all of them or some of them, it's not everybody that contributed to it. They were fortunate enough to get a house or space here, the time that they took. It's also circumstances. (G2N)

And a short while later, Mr N had this to say about home:

I think no matter where you live, your home or house, you're proud of it because it's your home. In that instance, you're proud to have something of your own. You can give back to your family. You provide it to your family and your family is safe. That's the most important thing. (G2N)

Again and again in our conversations and interviews with people, house, home and family were listed as the most important features of people's lives. In a conversation in October 2012, this is how Miss Z, one of the Sophiatown residents described the difference between her rented room in Sophiatown and where she came from:

Every day when I come home [to Sophiatown] I feel I am somewhere, but when I go home Nelspruit, I feel I am at home immediately and I think 'Ai, the people, this is mine', and I like the smell of the food ... Very nice coming home, coming through the gate. I know what I make at home. It is love. (MZ)

This thread prompted its own 2012 workshop on the subject 'Making House into Home' while many of the other workshops also addressed this issue.

I want to return to the comment above about learning the history of the old Sophiatown through a movie, as these comments represent a progression we saw in other conversations. The comment reflected the experience of an Indian family that had moved from Durban to Sophiatown in the last ten years. For the mother and father, a discussion which began abstractly about Sophiatown (they had watched the movie, *Drum*) became more personal when it moved into a discussion about homes and space. The abstract conversation about history worked better when it became linked to personal environments. Shortly after the comments about safety and home, the family articulated a feeling of sympathy with white families who moved into Triomf, the sympathy arising from a recognition that such families must feel (and do feel, as our research shows) alienated from a space which has been renamed Sophiatown, and in which the physical traces of their suburb's former name have largely been erased. Mr N's comments are poignant because the interview had started off with the family discussing how racist their white neighbours were when the new family first moved into Sophiatown.

The texture provided by these and other conversations in Sophiatown, with former Triomf residents, people who had moved in after 1994, as well as immigrants from the rest of Africa, does not surface in either the better-known story of old Sophiatown, or in history which continually reiterates the interplay between resistance and collaboration which, over the last two decades, has become an increasingly prominent manifestation of South African history. The texture becomes apparent as people bring personal experience into contact with their experiences of particular spaces, where their personal experience is emplaced through the experience of space. As people rhetorically produced the spaces around them, they were able to connect other people occupying those spaces. If this needs to be understood as collective memory, it is a collective memory of emotion drawn from different experience and produced through narrativity, rather than a collective memory of shared experience (see Ricoeur 2009).

Indeed, many residents expressed an alienation from history writ large. Some of this was direct, through comments collected in a survey on the subject in 2012. 'History is just boring, I think. Why would you want to dig the past, instead of planning for the future?' This comment reflects a binary mapping many residents performed, equating history and that past with what is bad and redundant, and the future with what is good and desirous.<sup>15</sup> The wish for the future was

a strong presence in many of the project interviews, echoing in everyday terms people's tensions around and desire for a better future.

Within this category of larger history, people had an ambivalent relationship with apartheid. They reflected on apartheid in interesting ways, reflecting some of the processes they employed to think about the past. Some of this is apparent in discussions about 'apartheid', both as noun and as adjective. It is interesting to consider what these references index, because their meaning is portable and applies beyond Sophiatown. Often, apartheid was used as a general descriptor of a former era, or epoch, in a way which recognised the passing of something, and its replacement by something else: 'It was about the apartheid era at that time'. The imprecision here was echoed in other discussions, like when one of the residents talked about 'apartheid and all that'. Some of this imprecision and inability to disaggregate apartheid was linked to suffering, the sense that apartheid was too much to comprehend:

People are suffering, but still people are scared. A lot of people are complaining. Talking about blacks now. A lot of them are complaining about the government. The government is not producing what they offered. But yet they are still scared. They still vote for the ANC because they are scared that apartheid will reverse back again, which I don't think it will ever happen again. It doesn't matter who takes over the government. Apartheid will never go back to what it was. It will never go back. (NH)

And, in another iteration, apartheid became almost anthropomorphic, endowed with causative ability, 'just because of apartheid'.

The way in which apartheid is used, even if casually, in these conversations indicates how the term has become normalised in the imaginations of Sophiatown residents today. Daily use has rendered the term normative, but it also references something so large that South Africans and others find it difficult to disaggregate. In a 2002 piece, Achille Mbembe writes about the grand triumvirate of slavery, colonialism and apartheid which assume canonical meaning in the African self-imagination (2002:241). For Mbembe, this places limits on how people can self-imaginate and think about the future (Appadurai 2013; Worby & Ally 2013). The same is apparent with respect to 'Sophiatown' as a subsequently-constitutive narrative of apartheid (the narrative of Sophiatown was produced after the fact, but now stands as a moment in the explanation of apartheid). If Sophiatown is so interesting because its current residents do not appear to inhabit the same latitude and longitude of old Sophiatown, it is also poignant

because many current residents are aware of this. I wrote of the Heritage Day celebration at the SHCC earlier, where the majority of attendees consisted of older folk who had been bussed in from Meadowlands. When I asked colleagues on the UJ project, residents in present-day Sophiatown, why they had not attended, they replied that they did not feel welcome in that space. At the recent launch of the Motswako Cultural Hub at the SHCC in August 2014, we joked about how few people living in Sophiatown were actually present. And at the book launch of the popular history of Sophiatown that emerged from the UJ project in early 2014, someone from the floor was most indignant that the book had been titled *Experiencing Sophiatown, Conversations with Residents* (Thelen & Morgan 2013). According to him the book reflected a history of present-day race relations, but wasn't about 'Sophiatown'. What he meant was that it was not about the 'real' or old Sophiatown. These are the unseen ways in which daily speech and performance reinforces high theory.

Another way in which thinking about space opens up a more fruitful engagement with the past, in the example of Sophiatown, is through thinking about the spaces which present-day Sophiatown is not. Many people who now live in Sophiatown came originally from Westbury. In some instances, they are families whose parents were moved out of Sophiatown to Westbury in the 1950s, when the former Western Native Township became the coloured-only suburb of Westbury. *Experiencing Sophiatown* includes a section on the differences between the two suburbs. One current resident, who had been born in old Sophiatown, stated: 'My parents had no choice. They had to move across the street from Sophiatown to Western Native Township – that's what it was called then'. The two suburbs were physically separated by a multi-lane east-west highway, but this physical severing did not stop Westbury residents from thinking and dreaming about Sophiatown. In subsequent years, their memories of old Sophiatown (from where their families had been removed) were replaced by experiences of the space called Triomf, which represented orderliness and safety at the same time as its residents acted to exclude those of Westbury:

Growing up in Westbury, there was always that boundary. As youngsters, we always stood on the other side of Main Road from Triomf / Sophiatown. It was like a completely different world. We were born in the seventies and eighties, after the forced removals happened. So we were born into the apartheid system ... it was okay for the whiteys to block us from coming over that border ... in those days when you entered Triomf you could not have passed two houses before there would have been a confrontation. (SC)

Today, as Tom Chapman's article in this Special Issue shows, Westbury and Sophiatown are very different spaces. Westbury was built as a high-density coloured residential area, with minimal state funding. As Triomf prospered, Westbury went into social and economic decline. By the 1980s it was notorious as a space that was home to violence, drug dealing and gangsterism. In 2010, Westbury's thin claim to success lay in the person of Stephen Pienaar, one of the South African players in the 2010 Soccer World Cup (Pienaar 2010). In 2011, Westbury's population was almost 15,000, all living in a square kilometerage roughly the same as Sophiatown's (Frith 2011). By the 1990s Triomf, which was peaceful and better established by comparison, had become a destination of choice for upwardly-mobile families who retained memories of both Triomf and Sophiatown before the removals, looking in from the outside and out from the inside.

But in 1998 I decided to leave the environment of Westbury and move to Triomf. That happened because I had a choice ... Triomf looked like a beautiful place when you looked from the outside, comparing to Westbury where I was staying. (JK)

Others were explicit about the challenges posed by life in Westbury:

I think what made me move to Sophiatown was the fact that I wanted a better life for my kids to grow up in a better environment. Because where we grew up in Westbury, it was very much gangsterism, like you know. (SVR)

Discussions and comments about Westbury and its relationship to Sophiatown run throughout the conversations we had with current Sophiatown residents and others. People who currently live there are unable to see the two suburbs; indeed it is clear that over time both Sophiatown and Westbury have helped to produce notions of each suburb as different spaces to which people with different aspirations might belong. The point is that these areas (and others too) never managed to fulfil apartheid's grand aim of complete separation. As much as the spaces were separated, they were also joined, in literal and small ways which challenged apartheid's spatial designs and the intent of apartheid. Miss H, who moved in when the suburb was Triomf, remarked upon this in her discussion of bus routes:



Sometimes the buses went up Edward Street and those were white buses, but then, you see, we had buses going on along Main Road right at the bottom here and that was a catchment area for Westbury. So I think the drivers just got used to picking everybody up, so everybody just used to get on [any of the buses, regardless of whether they were 'white' buses or not]. That was my impression when I caught the buses that, you just, everybody got on those buses. (SH)

## **Conclusion**

While Sophiatown exists in many different forms, and at different levels, one of its determining avatars is a space bounded in time and place by the events of the 1950s, and by its suburban boundaries. The first – the events of the 1950s – severs Sophiatown from a dialogue with its earlier and later pasts; the second – the suburban boundaries – cuts Sophiatown off from the spaces which constitute it and which it helped to constitute. It is not that Sophiatown was unique as a place in which apartheid was challenged, however inadvertently, by both the people who lived in it and those who produced it. The same happened in countless other locales across South Africa. It is perhaps that the over-determination of Sophiatown makes it easier to perform this exercise than in other spaces in South Africa. One of the ways to challenge this, and space, is through taking old Sophiatown back into conversation with its others. An examination of how current Sophiatown residents feel about their space, and how they think about space and history as conjoined, is one way to accomplish this.

If this article is about Sophiatown, its premise can also be expanded outward, to show that a consideration of space and its connection to people and how they remember is also important in displacing apartheid as South Africa's ur-text, 20 years after democracy. What do we do with history in South Africa after apartheid? How do we work with spaces which echo apartheid, which bear the imprint of apartheid, without reinventing or reifying apartheid? How do we do the history of things other than apartheid in spaces so thoroughly saturated with apartheid? This article is an attempt to answer some of these questions. This is a very tricky and delicate exercise, in Sophiatown as in other places. On the one hand, it is important not to dismiss the suffering experienced by families who were uprooted and dislocated in a series of brutal raids, or the immense impact apartheid has had on South Africa's collective psyche; on the other, the task of imagining future selves undivided by race will not be possible if apartheid is the only story ever told about South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Sophiatown has even more commemorative locations and figurations in the virtual world: a keyword search in Google lists first its Wikipedia entry: 'Sophiatown was a legendary black cultural hub that was destroyed under apartheid, rebuilt under the name of Triomf, and in 2006 officially returned to its original name. Sophiatown was one of the oldest black areas in Johannesburg and its destruction represents some of the excesses of South Africa under apartheid. Despite the violence and poverty, it was the epicentre of politics, jazz and blues during the 1940s and 1950s. It produced some of South Africa's most famous writers, musicians, politicians and artists' <[www.wikipedia.org/wiki/sophiatown](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/sophiatown)>. The entries listed first in Google tend towards the nostalgic impulse described in this article – which, since this is an indication of frequency of viewing, says much about what people want to see when they look up virtual Sophiatown.

<sup>2</sup> For a critical discussion of collective memory see Paul Ricoeur (2009).

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<sup>3</sup> This is not a comment about the TRC processes, its challenges and its difficulties, but rather about one of its complicated consequences. Certainly in Sophiatown it provided a vocabulary for people to explain why they were no longer interested in the apartheid past (October 2012 Book Framing Discussions, T1 Street Meeting, PB follow up to G5 Street Meeting).

<sup>4</sup> Witz & Rassool (2008) were possibly overstating the case, in their assessment of South African professional historians as little aware of developments in popular understandings of history (for this, see for example, Kros 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Red Location Museum, 'Vision and Mission'.

<<http://www.freewebs.com/redlocationmuseum/visionandmission.htm>> (accessed July 2011 & again November 2012; currently there is a different statement).

<sup>6</sup> One of the students attached to the project which this article reflects is currently busy with a history of land restitution in Sophiatown, which was a fraught process, both in terms of improperly investigated claims on the part of former residents, and white flight from the suburb as a result of inadequate communication on the part of the Gauteng Land Claims Commission. Eventually, householders who could prove title to land in Sophiatown were compensated in the amount of R40,000 per title; the devolution of this money was further complicated by competing claims within the families and descendants of those who had been removed.

<sup>7</sup> Thank you Danai Mupotsa for this point.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the technical aspects of Sophiatown's establishment, see Knevel, this Special Issue.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.Sophiatown.net](http://www.Sophiatown.net).

<sup>10</sup> Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre, Sophiatown. 2012. 'Media Release. Sophiatown 100 years: Father Trevor Huddleston 99 years commemorating his birth and Sophiatown – Re-Newed, Re-Mixed and Re-Imagined – The First New Public Building since removals' <<http://www.trevorhuddleston.org/motswakoprojectlaunch.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> Also see [depjpinbeeld.blogspot.com](http://depjpinbeeld.blogspot.com).

<sup>12</sup> The project had much discussion about how to refer to its participants. 'Community' was not a term preferred because few people (including residents) felt that Sophiatown constituted a community. 'Residents' is an imperfect term, because it appears to exclude people who work in and use Sophiatown, including domestic workers and employees at the local supermarket. Moreover, several of our participants lived in Sophiatown during only a portion of the time that their contributions to the project were collected, others lived in neighbouring suburbs. Any attempt to confine this project to the municipal borders of Sophiatown would have been a reductive exercise, on many levels.

<sup>13</sup> See <<http://www.westdene1985.co.za>>

<sup>14</sup> For one discussion of the novel, including its situating of the urban, see O'Shaughnessy (2012).

<sup>15</sup> This is a sentiment that is also expressed by my first year history students at UJ.