

Re-mixing Heritage, the Past and the Nation? The Sofiretown Cru & their Lifeworlds

Katharina Fink¹ and SoFIREtown Cru²

¹Universities of Bayreuth & Johannesburg, BIGSAS & CCLA, Bayreuth & Johannesburg, Germany, South Africa

²Johannesburg, South Africa

frl_fink@gmx.net

“Youth”, it seems when analyzing the masses of literature dealing with the flexible concept, is mostly investigated in terms of crisis – such as war, substance abuse (Tshabangu 2010), HIV/Aids (Campbell 2009) –, of self-formation as ‘style’ and ‘kulcha’ (Nuttall 2004) or their consumer behaviour (eg “Snapshot Africa” 2010). In spite, this paper focuses on the everyday lives and experiences of its co-authors from the youth group SoFIREtown Cru, who live in the über-represented suburb Sophiatown. While Sophiatown[1] is essential part of the master narrative of Post-Apartheid nation building – as violently destroyed former hotspot of creolization, cosmopolitanism, resistance and cultural production in the 1940s and 50s – the young people, mostly in their early 20s, have other stories to tell: About their ideas, concepts of freedom, (mis-)trust in politics, history, exclusion and tactics of participation, wrong notions of ‘coolness’, the global and the local, the future of their country and continent.

All members of the ‘SoFIREtown Cru’ face the traces of Apartheid in their everyday lives. They define themselves as being interested in “re-mixing” history and engage in PhotoVoice-projects, art practice, especially drama, networking and discover the ‘heritage meme’ Sophiatown they are living in in their meetings. Conversations and ‘hanging out’ with the ‘Cru’ allow insights in core questions: How does the so-called “Post-Apartheid” generation define and invent itself within the order of a post-traumatic state? Is there something that binds them? Does Apartheid as the grand (anti-)narrative matter? The struggle? Are ‘ghosts’ of the past (Avery, 1996) haunting their lifeworlds? Is history important, and what and who are the archives they use? Do they trust South Africa as a country? Drawing on field work[2] this paper listens to the SoFIREtown Cru – a generation *beyond* “Y” (Nuttall 2004). Their unruly voices add an important texture to the discussion of heritage and the legacy of the past in South Africa: “What is (Post-)Apartheid to me?” (Gqola 2010)

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[1] Sophiatown in 2011 drastically differs from the suburb famous both locally and globally as ‘the former Harlem of Johannesburg’ and the cultural images attached to it. Written into being as a stronghold of resistance, the hotspot of South African cultural production and a space of creolization (eg Hannerz 1994,) Sophiatown today is quiet, lacking the vibrant life described in testimonies and literature from the past. In the late 1950s, Sophiatown got destroyed and its inhabitants forcedly moved to other places following Apartheid urban planning; a massive, often traumatic cut for those affected. A community centre and museum (Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre), heritage actors and tourism remembers the narratives of this place within the suburb, at times in an exclusive way that does not consider the multilayered narratives. The THMC and the University of Johannesburg have a Memorandum Of Understanding to work towards a more complex way of remembering the history of the area, including narratives of Triomf and times in-between.

[2] My work as researcher and cultural worker is embedded in the community projects of the Centre for Culture and Languages in Africa (CCLA) at the University of Johannesburg,