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Bloke Modisane in East Germany

“It’s a long way from Johannesburg, although East German[y] conjures up several memories of Sophiatown. It’s terribly depressing.” William ‘Bloke’ Modisane wrote these words in May 1966, in a letter to a friend, the London-based South African journalist Colin Legum.¹ It was a subject he took up at greater length in a letter to Legum’s wife Margaret the following month, which is reproduced below.

Bloke Modisane was a leading member of the “*Drum* generation” of black South African writers, which also included Arthur Maimane, Es’kia Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, and Can Themba. During the “fabulous decade” of the 1950s it was this close-knit group of writers and journalists who made *Drum* magazine, as Paul Gready puts it, “the symbol of a new urban South Africa, centred on and epitomised by Sophiatown.”² Sophiatown – “the most cosmopolitan of South Africa’s black social igloos,” as Modisane himself characterized it – was a freehold “suburb” west of Johannesburg that was, until its destruction, one of the few areas of apartheid South Africa where Africans had legal property rights.³

Like most of the other members of the *Drum* generation, Modisane both published short fiction in the magazine and worked for it as a journalist, writing regular social and entertainment columns. Nkosi remembered him “dark-suited, bow-tied, the dandiest writer on the paper; to the delight of other members of the staff he signed his articles Bloke ‘Debonair’ Modisane.”⁴ In addition to writing, Modisane participated in late 1950s in the non-racial “African Theatre Workshop.” In

¹ Bloke [Modisane] to Colin [Legum], letter, 28 May 1966, File B13.43, Colin Legum Papers (Collection BC1329), Manuscripts and Archives Department, University of Cape Town Libraries, Cape Town, South Africa.

² Paul Gready. “The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties: The Unreal Reality of their World,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16 (March 1990): 144. See also Lewis Nkosi, “The Fabulous Decade: the fifties,” in Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (New York: Longman, 1983), 3-25; Michael Chapman (ed.), *The ‘Drum’ Decade: Stories from the 1950s* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1989).

³ Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me On History* (London: Panther, 1965), 18.

⁴ Nkosi, “The Fabulous Decade,” 8.

1957–58 he and Nkosi worked with the visiting American director Lionel Rogosin, co-writing the script for Rogosin’s film *Come Back, Africa*, and also appearing in it. For Modisane the film was “the first authentic cinematic record of the system of apartheid in South Africa.”⁵ *Come Back, Africa* became a staple of anti-apartheid meetings around the world in the 1960s: in 1966 student activists arranged for it to be shown in West Berlin as part of an informational evening opposing the gruesome Italian documentary about postcolonial Africa, *Africa Addio*.⁶

Modisane would later describe himself as “an alien situated between the scorn and the hatred of both the white and the black world”: the one-room Sophiatown shack he lived in in the 1950s was “a fly-over which connected the two worlds,” filled with books, art, and sound recordings from Europe and North America. He was a voracious reader: before being recruited to *Drum* he had worked at the radical Vanguard Bookshop, owned and run by a “fierce and fanatical Trotskyist.”⁷ There Modisane had first encountered Kafka, who would be a major influence on his writing. Kafka’s attraction, he later explained, was that “this man could create a nightmare.”⁸ Nkosi recalled spending hours in Modisane’s room, “holding intense discussions, listening to his formidable collection of jazz and classical records of Mozart, Beethoven, B artok, and Stravinsky, and listening spellbound to the recorded monologues of Olivier’s Richard III and Brando’s Mark Anthony,” much as Modisane would later seek to improve his German by listening to a recording of Goethe’s *Faust*.⁹

Modisane had also “arranged and furnished [his Sophiatown room] for the purposes of seduction.” Sex for him was a form of escapism and his exploits were legendary among his friends.

⁵ Bloke Modisane, untitled contribution to Lionel Rogosin, *Come Back Africa* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 133.

⁶ On the opposition to *Africa Addio*, see Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 137-46.

⁷ Sylvester Stein, *Who Killed Mr Drum?* (Cape Town: Mayibuye Books, 1999), 80; Modisane, *Blame Me On History*, 83-89.

⁸ Liz Gunner, “Exile and the Diasporic Voice: Bloke Modisane’s BBC Radio Plays, 1969–1987,” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 15 (2003): 53, 55.

⁹ Lewis Nkosi, “Bloke Modisane: *Blame Me On History*,” in *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*, eds. Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 300.

In his efforts “to effect a quick and successful seduction,” it became – he recalled – “a most important challenge to set records, to actually work within a time limit, setting the clock and proceeding to operate on the reluctant Miss. I became inconsolately depressed and frustrated by the presence of an immovable blouse, it was an affront to my ego, and as a last resort I would fall back on the ‘I love you’ hypocrisy. If this did not work then there was something decidedly wrong with the woman.”¹⁰

The fact that freehold Sophiatown lacked the regimented control that characterized townships built and owned by the government made it a target for the apartheid regime in the 1950s. In the course of the decade Sophiatown’s residents were removed to townships elsewhere and it was eventually bulldozed to make way for a new all-white suburb. Modisane refused to leave Sophiatown until the last possible moment, and did not wish to stay in South Africa after its destruction. His autobiography opened with the declaration that “Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown.” The South African government, however, refused to issue Modisane a passport to enable him to leave the country: the South African security police sought to blackmail him to inform against his *Drum* colleagues in return for one. Eventually in March 1959 he left South Africa illegally on a train to Bechuanaland (now Botswana) dressed not in his usual debonair attire but as a migrant laborer. Having made his way north to Dar es Salaam in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) he cabled Lionel Rogosin, then editing *Come Back, Africa* in New York, who arranged a plane ticket for him to London.¹¹

Modisane spent the next few years as a “struggling artist” in London. In 1960 he wrote to the African-American writer Langston Hughes that he was “drift[ing] from job to job, working my

¹⁰ Modisane, *Blame Me On History*, 215-16.

¹¹ Modisane, *Blame Me On History*, 7, 272-285, 294-95, 299-301, 306-318; Stein, *Who Killed Mr Drum?*, 146; Rogosin, *Come Back, Africa*, 126.

guts out by day and writing by night.”¹² Increasingly he took acting parts on the stage, on radio, and on television; he also wrote TV and radio plays and programs himself. He remained close to other members of the small South African exile community in Britain. Back in South Africa, Modisane had been a member of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League in the early 1950s before becoming alienated from the Congress movement. At the end of decade he had decade found himself in “mental accord” with – but did not join – the breakaway Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), which was critical of what PAC leaders perceived to be the domination of the ANC by white communists. In London Modisane appears to have interacted with a diverse range of South African exiles: he played poker with the leading white communist Joe Slovo, for instance, and was close to Colin and Margaret Legum, white South Africans known in anti-apartheid circles for their anti-communism.¹³

In September 1963 *Blame Me on History*, Modisane’s autobiography, was published to considerable acclaim. He subsequently began applying to various foundations for funding to continue his writing. It was this that ultimately brought Modisane to East Germany, after the self-described “bum writer with pretensions about writing books on history” received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to research and write a book on the Maji Maji resistance against German rule in East Africa in 1905-07. Modisane spent most of 1965 in Tanzania, conducting archival research and oral history interviews and visiting the places where fighting had taken place.¹⁴ In late 1965 or early 1966 he traveled to Germany and spent four months intensively studying German in Bavaria in West Germany before continuing his archival research. In the 1920s the records of German colonial administration had been transferred to the Reich Archive in Potsdam, and they

¹² Shane Graham and John Walters (eds.), *Langston Hughes and the South African Drum Generation: The Correspondence*, 113.

¹³ Gready. “The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties,” 152; Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, 255; Michael Chapman, “More than Telling a Story: Drum and its Significance in Black South African Writing,” in Chapman (ed.), *The Drum Decade*, 202-206; Stein, *Who Killed Mr Drum?*, 167; Dennis Herbstein, “Margaret Legum: Exiled economist who returned to help shape the new South Africa,” *Guardian*, 15 November 2007, 41.

¹⁴ Graham and Walters (eds.), *Langston Hughes and the South African Drum Generation*, 169, 173, 176-77, 181.

remained there, under East German control, after the division of Germany. In May 1966, therefore, Modisane crossed through Checkpoint Charlie and spent several weeks researching in Potsdam.

Modisane visited East Germany at a time of increasing ties between the GDR and South Africans opposed to apartheid. The ANC had established an 'External Mission' immediately after the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, and quickly expanded its international presence and activities. There were already longstanding links between the SED and the South African Communist Party (SACP); in the 1960s the increasingly close alliance and overlapping memberships of the SACP and the ANC ensured that the ANC too became a recipient of GDR support. In July 1960 the SED had established a Committee for Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa (later renamed the Solidarity Committee of the GDR), which was responsible for maintaining relations and support for the ANC and other liberation movements. The Solidarity Committee also mobilized anti-apartheid campaigns inside East Germany, organizing rallies and other protests, for instance, during the Rivonia Trial of Nelson Mandela and his co-accused in 1963-64, and during the trial of SACP chairman Bram Fischer in April-June 1966, around the time of Modisane's visit. In addition, the Solidarity Committee provided scholarships for South African students to study in East German educational institutions: there were five ANC students studying in the GDR in 1962, a number which increased over the subsequent decades to around a hundred South African students at any one time by the late 1980s.¹⁵

The first major ANC delegation to the GDR, led by Duma Nokwe (Secretary-General of the ANC and a member of the SACP Central Committee) and Moses Kotane (Secretary-General of the SACP and Treasurer of the ANC), had visited in December 1963. They received a pledge of

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Schleicher, "The German Democratic Republic and the South African Liberation Struggle," in SADET, *Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 3, *International Solidarity*, pt. 2, 1092-1094, 1110-1117, 1126; Hans-Georg Schleicher and Ilona Schleicher, *Special Flights to Southern Africa: The GDR and Liberation Movements in Southern Africa* (Harare: SAPES, 1998), 41-50. On the posters produced by the Solidarity Committee to express and mobilize solidarity with the struggle against apartheid, see Heike Hartmann and Susann Lewerenz, "Campaigning against Apartheid in East and West Germany," *Radical History Review* 119 (Spring 2014): 191-204.

goods worth 100,000 GDR Marks, the first installment of material aid from the Solidarity Committee to the ANC that would continue at substantial levels until the end of the GDR. (Material rather than financial aid was provided, due to the GDR's persistent shortage of hard currency). From 1967 onwards, *Sechaba*, the new "official organ" of the ANC, was printed in the GDR at the Solidarity Committee's expense. East Germany also provided training. In 1961-62 SACP member Mac Maharaj – who subsequently played a leading role in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the ANC's armed wing – had spent nearly a year being trained in the GDR, first in printing, and then in sabotage. From 1969 individuals and small groups of MK cadres underwent training in the GDR in propaganda and underground work before attempting to infiltrate back into South Africa.¹⁶ Around the same time, as the historian Stephen Ellis has recently emphasized, the Stasi began to provide security training to the ANC's newly established department of intelligence and security, which would later be responsible for the notorious abuses of dissidents and suspected spies in the ANC's camps in Angola in the 1980s. Stasi instructors, Ellis records, taught ANC trainees that "security depended on respect for 'states of real socialism.'"¹⁷

Bloke Modisane's position in East Germany in 1966 as a South African who was not aligned with the ANC or the SACP was thus an unusual one. His account of his time there hints at themes that have so far received little attention in the historiography of East German relations with opponents of white minority rule in southern Africa. The great strength and the great limitation of the literature on international solidarity with the struggle against apartheid is that until very recently it has been written primarily by former participants. The monumental series on *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* produced by the South African Democracy Education Trust, for instance, which

¹⁶ Schleicher, "The German Democratic Republic and the South African Liberation Struggle," 1103-1104, 1118-1121, 1123-1132; Schleicher and Schleicher, *Special Flights to Southern Africa*, 34, 50-55, 61-62; Pádraig O'Malley, *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa* (New York: Viking, 2007), 87-92.

¹⁷ Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960-1990* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2012), 78, 152, 159, 184-185, 216-217. See also Schleicher and Schleicher, *Special Flights to Southern Africa*, 62-63.

includes a two-part 1,300 page volume on *International Solidarity*, proclaims that the chapters of that volume are “written by activist scholars with deep roots in the movements and organisations they are writing about.”¹⁸ For communist countries this means primarily former diplomats or members of state-sponsored solidarity committees: the chapter on the GDR and the South African liberation struggle is by Hans-Georg Schleicher, a former GDR diplomat in Africa and at the UN, who is also the co-author (with his wife Ilona Schleicher) of the only book-length study of the subject in English.¹⁹

Schleicher frames his chapter in *The Road to Democracy* as an effort “to do justice to the real achievements of GDR solidarity.”²⁰ Just as one instrumental purpose of East German solidarity with the struggle against apartheid was, as Toni Weis argues, “to reflect back on the GDR and shed a favorable light on it in the eyes of its population,” there is a sense in which much of what has been written on this topic since the end of both apartheid and of East German communism is intended to shed a more favorable light on the GDR in the eyes of history.²¹ The achievements of GDR solidarity with opponents of apartheid were of course very real, and present a stark contrast to the policies of most western governments towards South Africa. But generally absent from a literature that has, understandably, focused on the *activities* of the struggle against apartheid, wherever that struggle took place, are the kinds of tensions hinted at in Modisane’s letter. As Hugh Macmillan has pointed out in his recent work on the ANC in exile in Zambia, there has been remarkably little scholarly study of “the ANC and the South African *experience* of exile.”²² In the East German case,

¹⁸ South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 3, *International Solidarity and Support* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), pts. 1 & 2, back cover.

¹⁹ Schleicher, “The German Democratic Republic and the South African Liberation Struggle,” 1069-1153; Schleicher and Schleicher, *Special Flights to Southern Africa*.

²⁰ Schleicher, “The German Democratic Republic and the South African Liberation Struggle,” 1070.

²¹ Toni Weis, “The Politics Machine: On the Concept of ‘Solidarity’ in East German Support for SWAPO,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37 (June 2011): 363, 353-355.

²² Hugh Macmillan, “The African National Congress of South Africa in Zambia: The Culture of Exile and the Changing Relationship with Home, 1964–1990,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35 (June 2009): 303-305 (emphasis added); Hugh Macmillan, *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia, 1963–1994* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2013).

the “solidarity” actions on which the historiography has focused did not generally involve official encouragement of personal contacts between East Germans and southern Africans: in Weis’ words, the GDR government emphasized “solidarity between peoples at the cost of solidarity between people.”²³ The nature of the personal contacts that occurred nevertheless, and of South Africans’ experiences and perceptions of the actually existing socialism in East Germany remain topics for further research.

Modisane’s fearful account of the “overwhelming presence” of the East German police contrasts starkly, for example, with Maharaj’s recollection that during his training in the GDR in 1961-62 “There was no sign... at the level of ordinary people’s lives that the state was a repressive force; there was no sign of a secret police spying on people. To the extent that it existed or was noticed, it was seen as a benign defensive force.” Indeed, for Maharaj, “In 1961, the GDR was on the march. Reconstruction of the economy was taking place side by side with social and medical services, and free education for everybody. Unlike London [where Maharaj had previously been studying] where if you couldn’t afford it you were left behind.” Whereas Modisane’s time in the East Germany left him feeling depressed, Maharaj’s experiences there served to reinforce his unconditional commitment to Communism.²⁴

Writing to Langston Hughes from Berlin in May 1966, Modisane compared the experience of being black in a small town in East Germany to “being caged in a zoo with children giggling at one and having parents drawing their children’s attention to you saying Nieger [sic] – which sounds dangerously like Nigger.”²⁵ But in Modisane’s letter to Margaret Legum, it is not such racial

²³ Weis, “The Politics Machine,” 366.

²⁴ O’Malley, *Shades of Difference*, 90-92; Mac Maharaj, interview by Padraig O’Malley, 4 November 2002, <http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv03445/04lv03689/05lv03714/06lv03742.htm>.

²⁵ Graham and Walters (eds.), *Langston Hughes and the South African Drum Generation*, 182. Maharaj recalled similar “curiosity” about his color in the small East German village where he trained in printing, but he also remembered the GDR as “the first country where I did not feel I was being discriminated against because I was a black man,” unlike both South Africa and Britain. See O’Malley, *Shades of Difference*, 90-91; Mac Maharaj, interview by Padraig O’Malley, 18 September 2002,

microaggressions that he stresses, but rather the privileged position in which his foreign citizenship placed him relative to ordinary East Germans. One theme that had run through his 1963 autobiography was how – amidst the numerous restrictions placed upon African life under apartheid – “prohibition places a high premium on restricted goods,” whether those “goods” were interracial sex (prohibited in apartheid South Africa by the “Immorality Act”), the home brews illegally sold by Modisane’s mother in her shebeen (speakeasy), or the martinis, wine, or the after-dinner drinks that Modisane had served to guests at the elaborate dinner parties he hosted in his Sophiatown room, despite the illegality of Africans consuming “European” liquor.²⁶ In East Germany, it was the “signs of prohibition” that stood out to him and that led him to draw parallels with South Africa. His letter to Margaret Legum focuses above all on his experiences arising from two forms of prohibition: first, the prohibition on East German citizens possessing foreign currency and shopping in the *Intershops*, the stores that sold western-produced or western-quality products to foreign visitors in order to earn hard currency for the state,²⁷ and, second, the prohibition on citizens leaving the country, a restriction that perhaps recalled Modisane’s own difficulties escaping South Africa.

Whether Bloke Modisane ever returned to the GDR after his “terribly depressing” experiences there in 1966 is unclear: we know very little about his life in exile.²⁸ His research on German East Africa was never published, but he maintained links with Germany. During his 1966 visit he appears to have made connections that enabled him subsequently to write for West German television.²⁹ In the context of rising anti-immigration sentiment in Britain, Modisane wrote in the early 1970s that his “sense of rejection is waxing, and the search for another country to live in is on

<http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv03445/04lv03689/05lv03714/06lv03731.htm>.

²⁶ Modisane, *Blame Me On History*, 219, 37, 260.

²⁷ On the history of Intershops in East Germany, see Jonathan R. Zatin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany*, 243-285.

²⁸ Gunner, “Exile and the Diasporic Voice,” 49-50; André Landman, “Serendipitous Discoveries: The Elusive Bloke Modisane in the Colin Legum Papers,” *Social Dynamics* 36 (September 2010): 453-56.

²⁹ On Modisane’s connections with “German TV people” during the period he was back living in London in the 1970s, see Stein, *Who Killed Mr Drum?*, 211, 202-03.

the way up.”³⁰ He subsequently married a German woman, and moved with her first to Rome and then to Dortmund in West Germany. He continued to live in Dortmund after his wife left him, and it was there that he died in 1986, aged sixty-two. It was, as his former editor at *Drum* wrote, “a sorrowfully miserable end, for by this time he was living quite on his own in that cold, cold room in that cold German city, with only his bottles of whisky for company.”³¹

³⁰ Landman, “Serendipitous Discoveries,” 455.

³¹ Stein, *Who Killed Mr Drum?*, 231.