1 Introduction

In 1910 Maurice Evans sat thoughtfully on the veranda of his suburban home in Durban. Evans was a businessman, plant collector and erstwhile member of the Natal Legislative Assembly and Native Affairs Commission. His house, on the verdant Berea Ridge, commanded a magnificent view of the town centre and harbour below.

In Evans’ opinion, the buildings he saw might have been anywhere in the British Empire. They expressed the ‘taste and aspiration’ of Western Europe. The large town hall, completed in 1885, was ‘no whit different to what the final flowering of municipal life would be in Europe or America’. There were also broad streets, electric trams, huge department stores full of ‘the products of European skill’ and a harbour ‘equipped with all the recent inventions of European science’. Durban’s built environment was ‘overwhelmingly European’.

As if to reinforce this perception, Evans could hear a youthful voice nearby singing from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. But there were two other sounds that suggested Durban was not quite so European after all: ‘the monotone of Abantu singing . . . accompanied by the rhythmic beat of heavy feet stamping in unison’ and, further away, ‘the lighter reiteration of the Indian tom-tom’.1 These three snatches of music brought to Evans’ mind the existence of different ‘races’ in Durban: ‘Whites’ (or ‘Europeans’); ‘Abantu’ (‘Natives’ or ‘Africans’); and ‘Indians’ (‘Asians’).2

For Evans, thinking about a city in South Africa was synonymous with thinking about race. The origins, functions or symbolic significance of

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2 In using these terms, I do not wish to suggest that they are anything other than historically constructed ethnic labels or racialised categories. Capitalisation of initial letters when using such terms in the course of the book is intended to suggest as much. This will cut down on the need to use inverted commas. When not citing contemporary sources, I will use the term ‘African’ as a synonym for Native as the former is of course more acceptably used today. I use Black as a collective noun for people described by Whites or themselves, for instance and at times, as African, Coloured, Malay or Indian or as a synonym for ‘Non-White’, though Black was seldom a self-description in South Africa until the late 1960s.
town halls, broad streets, trams, harbours and department stores were soon forgotten as he devoted the more than three hundred pages of *Black and White in South East Africa* to pondering South Africa’s race ‘problem’. By 1910, most White opinion makers called this the ‘Native Question’, whose conundrum has been neatly summarised as follows:

how to organize society to provide for the mutual access of black labourers and white employers in the coming industrial age without having to pay the heavy social costs of urbanization or losing the dominance of white over black.3

Matters of race have dominated writing about South African cities ever since, not least within the historical academy. The resulting literature has numerous strengths, especially the thorough way in which it has explored and explained the history of urban racial segregation, ‘Native’ administration, popular culture, consciousness and resistance. Such work has greatly aided the task of writing this book.4 A lacuna, though, is that there is seldom any direct discussion of what people thought about urbanisation, cities or urban life beyond the racial matter of how mine owners and municipalities of White municipal ratepayers saw segregation as solving urban ‘problems’ or serving their material self-interests, or both.5 Much of this historiography is also confined to a focus on only one racial or ethnic group within a single city.

Consequently two historical geographers have said that writing about South African cities has displayed ‘racial fetishism’; studying ‘urban society does not begin with race – rather it reflects the creation of race as part of the intricate development of modern society’.6 Their argument

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5 For an excellent summary of this work that contains fine insights of its own, including the comment on the predominance of ‘history-in-the-city’, see Paul Maylam, ‘Explaining the Apartheid City: 20 Years of Urban Historiography’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, 1 (March 1995), 19–38.

was that focusing on racial matters led to an over-emphasis on South African urban exceptionalism that made enlightening comparative studies less likely. Academic particularism of this kind concealed international influence and global commonalities in the evolution of South African cities as well as in the experience, culture and consciousness of their inhabitants. The same observation holds true for contemporary perceptions of urban achievements, problems and solutions, of how the desire of elites for ‘improvement’ as well as power helped shape South African cities. Even when the intention has been to explain segregation, a focus on race alone can obscure parallels with other forms of exclusion based on class or gender, and their influence on devices like separate entrances or seating or complete exclusion in public and private facilities.7

The premise behind the writing of this book is that a study of perceptions and experiences of South African cities not focused solely on race, or on a single racial group or city, is overdue, even though race remains central to the story. There are numerous scholarly explorations of what Europeans and Americans have thought about the rise of big cities and the nature of city life in the past and the consequences of their judgements.8 Yet, although there are now more people living in African cities than in those of North America, no equivalent study exists for any part of Africa.9 For South Africa, with a few notable exceptions, most writing can still be described as ‘history-in-the-city’, the history of events or processes that have happened in cities.10 ‘History-of-the-city’, in which the distinct

7 The class dimension in particular informed V. Bickford-Smith, Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
9 Bill Freund, The African City (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), provides a very useful overview and synthesis of the origins, functions, spatial orderings and economic underpinnings of his subject as well as suggested further reading. The latter includes two other broad takes on urbanisation and African urban experience: David Anderson and Richard Rathbone (eds), Africa’s Urban Past (Oxford and Portsmouth, NH: James Currey and Heinemann, 2000) and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Histoires des villes d’Afrique noire dès origines à la colonisation (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993). But none of these books focuses on the perception, and consequences of perceptions, of African urbanity in the past, though Freund, both in his monograph and in the chapter he contributed to the Anderson and Rathbone collection, provides useful insights on pessimist and optimist views about the post-colonial city of recent decades.
10 Maylam, ‘Explaining the Apartheid City’, 20.
urbanism or ‘whole’ history of individual cities takes centre stage, remains rare; work of this kind that has substantial comparative dimensions is rarer still.11

The intention is to begin to fill this gap by exploring what both insiders and outsiders thought about three of Africa’s largest cities, Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Wherever it has occurred, urbanisation has had enormous social, political, cultural and intellectual impact. Equally, perceptions of problems and possibilities of particular cities have had historical significance. They have influenced urban policies, planning, popular culture and the experience of urban belonging or alienation. Indeed, as suggested by Raymond Williams, debates about cities have generally been debates about the future because in most industrial societies a common image of the future is an image of cities.12 Debates about South African cities frequently focused on the extent and nature of urban ‘progress’, sometimes thereby on the future of ‘civilisation’ itself.

My aim is to offer some answers to several overlapping and pre-eminently ‘history-of-the-city’ questions. How and according to what criteria were our three South African cities fashioned, perceived, experienced, promoted and judged? How and why did residents develop attachments to particular cities, or parts of cities, and what did this mean in terms of their self-identities? And why were cities or parts of cities perceived as having particular characteristics, and how were such senses of place created? The objective is also of course to demonstrate how such opinions and attachments may have mattered over time.

The Union of South Africa was a country created in 1910, the year of Evans’ contemplation, out of two British colonies, the Cape of Good Hope and Natal, and two Boer republics, the South African Republic or Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Big cities arose early in this region because South Africa was the first part of sub-Saharan Africa to experience substantial industrialisation. The sizeable cities that emerged with this development were already attracting considerable comment, judgment and speculation in a wide variety of literary and visual forms by the time of Union.

The very number and nature of these sources bear witness to the early extent of economic and technological growth below the Limpopo, as well

11 Attempts at whole city histories that have much to say about the urbanity of an individual city but not a great deal in terms of comparative observations are: Nigel Worden, Elizabeth Van Heyningen and Vivian Bickford-Smith, Cape Town: The Making of a City (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998); Vivian Bickford-Smith, Elizabeth Van Heyningen and Nigel Worden, Cape Town in the Twentieth Century (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999); Keith Beavon, Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of a City (Pretoria and Leiden: University of South Africa Press, 2004).

12 Williams, The Country and the City, 297.
as to the novelty of African and European urban encounter on such a significant scale. There are travellers’ accounts, newspapers, government commissions, oral histories, popular ‘city’ songs and autobiographies as there would be for many other large African towns. But there are also, and in prolific numbers, local city histories, guides, novels, poetry and books about the ‘state of the nation’. Additionally, there are numerous local as well as foreign newsreels, documentaries and feature films, because a domestic film industry was already established in South Africa before the First World War. Many of these sources have hitherto been little used by historians. Hence a further purpose of this book is to demonstrate that they provide rich evidence about South Africa’s urban past.

In combination, and understood as providing mutually informing ideological debate, these sources facilitate an understanding of what residents and visitors alike thought about urbanisation and city life. This is the first of three main themes of this book. These thoughts, whether positive or negative or somewhere in between, were the product both of actual experience and the local, national and transnational circulation of ideas. Debate about the nature of acceptable or unacceptable urban life was not confined by national boundaries. One significant and enduring question for visitors as well as those in political and economic control of South Africa’s cities – a question inevitably informed by international comparisons – was whether these places were truly metropolitan. In other words, were South African cities great not only in size but in cultural and social achievement; if not, what changes were needed to achieve such status; or if less impressive in some respects than their European or North American counterparts, were South African metropolises nonetheless more impressive in others?

Answers to such questions affected the ways in which South African cities were built and rebuilt and the nature of their architecture, amenities and spatial arrangement. Thus an early middle-class defence of South African cities against their British counterparts was that residents enjoyed more space and a decidedly rus-in-urbe existence, and that this was desirable. One example of such opinion was a poem first published in 1873 and republished in a Readers’ Digest-style South African publication three-quarters of a century later. It argued that even relatively privileged inhabitants of London endured cramped living conditions compared to those experienced by middle-class South African city dwellers. The poem went in part:

Your people are crubb’d and cabin’d,
Like sprats in a sardine-tin –
Each head on the tail of a neighbour,
No room to wag a fin;
We live in cities of gardens,
Where the air is still serene,
And lines of oaks and acacias
Fringe open streets with green.\textsuperscript{13} [Emphasis added]

The perceived desirability of ‘our’ urban existence was enduringly reflected in the way in which White middle-class South African urban life developed from the late nineteenth century onwards, as with the relatively large size of suburban plots. Lewis Mumford wrote that ‘the cities and mansions that people dream of are those in which they finally live’.\textsuperscript{14} In reality, material factors such as land values, levels of wealth and technology have been crucial not only in determining how or whether aspirations are realised but also what they may consist of in the first place. Yet aspirations, ideas or perceptions are not readily reducible to material factors. Ideological and material factors frequently interact, and ideas also have had a degree of autonomous agency in affecting the precise ways in which cities have been built, ordered and experienced.

A second major theme of this book is how perceptions of cities or discrete areas within cities contributed to creating or reinforcing social identities like nationality, ethnicity, race and class. Senses of urban territoriality and belonging have powerfully reinforced such identities, even if the circulation of ideas and different cultural traditions, as well as human mobility across cities for work or social purposes, was also a key part of South African urban existence, one usually ignored both in apartheid propaganda and much academic urban history. Senses of living in what was identifiably one’s ‘own’ urban district while ‘others’ lived in theirs, whether this was through compulsion or volition, powerfully underpinned social identity.\textsuperscript{15} Urban boundaries had to be imagined, and they could be frequently crossed, but there was constant interaction between imagined and experienced kinship networks, occupations, institutions and built or topographical features that could be associated with particular areas.\textsuperscript{16} In the persuasive language of urban geographers, this interaction transformed spaces into places; and senses of belonging to particular places informed social identities.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Lewis Mumford, The Story of Utopias (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 19.
The argument then is that South African national, ethnic and racial identities were less imagined, more material, than Benedict Anderson’s work on national identity might have us believe. Such identities, whether advocated in print by ethnic mobilisers or nationalists, or informed by divisions of labour, were maintained and bolstered by parochial patriotism, or attachment to lived-in places with both real and imagined communal and territorial components. In the twentieth century, national and municipal governments both destroyed as well as created places in South Africa, and both processes affected people’s self-identities. As Bloke Modisane, author and ex-resident of Sophiatown – a Johannesburg suburb destroyed by the Afrikaner Nationalist government in the 1950s – put it: ‘Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown.’

If particular attention is given to anglophile South African identity in the chapters that follow, this is because, compared to Afrikaner or African identity, British South African identity and twentieth-century social experience have been relatively neglected in existing historiography; completely so in terms of their relationship to urban place. This is surprising, given

that Britishness was the ‘prime nationalism of South Africa, against which all subsequent ones . . . reacted’; and unlike Afrikaner or African identity, this nationalism could and did embrace both Black and White South Africans.21 A focus on British South African identity that had both a civic and ethnic dimension also stems from the fact that all three cities by 1910 were places whose municipal governments, businesses and institutions were largely controlled by immigrants from Britain, or their progeny.22 With the assistance of colonial and Imperial governments, and all the multimedia possibilities available to them in an urban environment, these immigrant elites set about fashioning Cape Town, Durban – and in time Johannesburg – as British cities, through the use of appropriate urban territorial naming, architecture, institutions, associations, recreation and traditions. Consequently it was in the major cities that British national identity and related values, and on occasion overt nationalism, was most successfully maintained across racial and ethnic divides. It was in these cities that Britishness had the majority of its adherents, even if their numbers and proportion of the urban population declined in the course of the twentieth century.

This process was aided by the history of individual cities, their suburbs and institutions provided in a variety of publications, radio programmes, documentaries and newsreels that emphasised their British South African elements. For White English-speaking South Africans in particular, this helped inculcate a sense of urban contribution and belonging, even as Britishness was giving way to a more purely ethnic anglophone South African identity. History could teach such South Africans, irrespective of class divides, that cities were ‘our’ places, explaining the local architecture, monuments, civic ceremonies and naming of streets and particular suburbs. Once understood in this way, they reinforced a sense of belonging. To explain how this happened, some historical explanation of such suburbs, explanation hitherto confined in most academic urban history to Black residential areas more commonly termed ‘locations’ or ‘townships’, is required.23

22 My understanding of these terms is that whereas members of an ethnic group will assume that they have common ancestry or descent, those of a national group may do so but in some circumstances they might also believe that nationality is defined by citizenship that can be acquired, perhaps through naturalisation, birth or residence in the territory of the nation state. For similar understandings, see for instance Liah Greenfeld, Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11–13; Steven Grosby, Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14, 33–5.
23 One path-breaking paper that makes the academically neglected history of South African suburbs its subject is Alan Mabin, ‘Suburbs on the Veld: Modern and Postmodern’ (Unpublished paper, University of Witwatersrand, 2005).
Local history was also a significant conveyor of ideas about the identities of particular cities or parts of cities, so this identity of cities and their component parts, closely related to how inhabitants identify with them, is the third major theme of this book. Explaining the identity of individual cities has exercised the minds of many leading practitioners of urban history from its emergence as a subdiscipline in the 1960s. Yet what Jim Dyos, one of the founders of British urban history, called the ‘individual characteristics’ of cities remain little explored in South African historiography. This may be a matter of complexity. City identities have objective and subjective components. Both components, as well as the relationship between them, need to be understood.  

Objective components may include a city’s or space within a city’s geographical position, topographical features, economic, military, sacred or administrative functions, architecture, monuments, institutions, spatial arrangement, wealth, amenities, physical and demographic size. Yet subjectivity clearly also comes into play in how all of these factors are imagined, promoted or rejected. Major cities were places where opinions about urban life were on offer in greatest profusion and in the widest variety of aural, visual and literary forms. This was not simply because city life was the focus of discussion, but because cities also played host to the greatest array of opportunities and formats for the expression of opinions. By the early twentieth century, these included newspaper articles, novels, short stories, songs, travellers’ accounts, photography, city histories, newsreels and stage and cinematic dramas. Equally, the intention of many of those who produced them was to explore urban spaces, conditions and lifestyles in ‘experiential realist’ fashion, by providing ‘moment-by-moment experience – sensory, visceral, and mental’.  

A further intention of some was to attempt an overall ‘sense-of-place’. In 1957 the British writer James (later Jan) Morris described Johannesburg as ‘Steely hardness … gaunt power’; Durban as ‘A conjunction of the tomtom and the Tatler; and Cape Town as ‘A little of San Francisco . . . and a whisper of France’. Likewise Peter Abrahams, a ‘Coloured’ writer who grew up in and around several working-class areas of Johannesburg, described one of them in 1946: ‘The pulsating motion of Malay Camp at night was everywhere. Warm and intense and throbbing.’ Studying the construction and transmission of such senses of particular urban places, and the sensory and emotional experiences

27 Peter Abrahams, Mine Boy (London: Faber & Faber, 1946), 49.
involved, is now a burgeoning field of scholarship, even if much of the existing work has concentrated on the very recent past or on representations in one medium only, most often either novels or cinema.28

Giuliana Bruno’s work has been more ambitious than most in this respect. She has demonstrated that both travelogues and fiction films draw on a long European tradition of representing cities in which literary depictions were giving way to visual forms such as photography or magic lantern shows by the end of the nineteenth century. Bruno argues that cinema, whose development coincided with rapid advances in travel technology, provided a virtual form of tourism with a mixture of spectacle, exotic ‘otherness’ and education.29 Cinema’s depiction of particular places has been ‘both an extension and an effect of the tourist’s gaze’.30

Individual cities and city spaces have been represented in fictional formats like novels, feature films and poetry as well as ostensibly non-fiction social surveys, guidebooks, travel writing, city histories, select committee reports and documentaries. The divide between these fictional and non-fictional forms in terms of accuracy of information provided has not always been readily discernible. Equally, representations of any kind generally reflect contemporary social attitudes to a particular urban place or to the urban in general.31 They might in turn help shape or maintain those attitudes, and thereby contribute to conveying the place’s identity to both visitors and residents. Creating and conveying the identity of a city

28 Path-breaking general accounts of how novels have represented the city included Williams, *The Country and the City* and Pike, *The Image of the City*. Since then there have been numerous accounts of how particular individual cities have been imagined in literature, albeit many have focused on the near present. For a recent work that has looked at how a number of significant novelists like Flaubert, Joyce and Dickens have portrayed different cities see Alter, *Imagined Cities*. On sensory history and the history of emotions, see Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan, ‘Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing Emotional Geographies’, *Social and Cultural Geography* 5, 4 (December 2004), 523–32 and Mark M. Smith, ‘Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History’, *Journal of Social History* 40, 4 (Summer 2007), 841–58. Some key works that each examines how a range of cities have been represented in film are D.B. Clarke (ed.), *The Cinematic City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); M. Shiel and T. Fitzmaurice (eds), *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*. Krause and P. Petro (eds), *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture and Urbanism in a Digital Age* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003).


30 Giuliana Bruno, ‘City Views: The Voyage of Film Images’, in Clarke (ed.), *The Cinematic City*, 47.

31 Lees, *Cities Perceived* was a pioneering and monumental demonstration of how this happened in Britain, Germany and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.