Reflections on Identity in Four African Cities
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5.1 Introduction

An identity is a social construct. It refers not to a given reality but rather to a discourse which is intended to bring order to things. It is a narrative, ‘the function of which is to make normal, logical, necessary, and unavoidable the feeling of belonging to a group’ (Martin, 1994: 23, author’s translation). Identifying the origins of an identity discourse is not an easy task. With few exceptions, such discourses are not produced by a single actor. They occur in a diffuse manner within the society as a whole, having roots in political, religious, and scientific arenas, often in competitive mode. The role of an identity narrative is to construct a myth for individuals to accept as true, or untrue (as the case may be) – a myth, moreover, to be accepted at certain times of their lives (or of their day, depending on the time scale one refers to). This belief is a choice typically based upon interest, and, as such, the belief can be questioned at any time. Each individual moreover belongs to different identity communities and asserts his or her belonging to one or the other depending on circumstances. In addition, each such assertion not only identifies who one is but also simultaneously who one is not – an identity that one shares with some also sets one apart from others. Identity is therefore a complex concept. It refers both to the individual and to the collective. Does this in fact mean that an identity refers to an individual identification of who one is or to the feeling of belonging to a group with whom one shares this identity? Can one distinguish between the two?

Identity discourses often have a spatial dimension. If identity is a discourse which enables one to believe in an ordered world, it is an interpretation located in time and space. In other words, identity is ‘a geography’, an interpretation of spatial organisation. Conversely, living somewhere may contribute to the construction of an identity, and consequently we are able to conceive of ‘an identity of locality’
(Levy, 1999) derived from the place of residence. In the third instance, we may even ask whether places themselves carry identities. This question raises the issue of the scale of analysis, since it seeks to explore the existence of an identity of places rather than that of individuals and of groups.

This brings us to the notion of territory (territoire) in French geography, a notion that I will use here. The construction of territory is a form of identity construction. More specifically, it is one of the dimensions of identity narratives. Political discourse, in fact, is typically based on spatially delimited identity construction (at various spatial scales), on the construction of territories. South Africa offers an excellent case study of the construction of territorial identities both in the past (as apartheid territories) as well as in the present (as deliberate attempts to ‘undo’ these apartheid territorial identities). Spatial arrangements were aimed at fostering identities. Territorial identities were constructed in opposition or in reaction to such imposed territories. This country in fact is replete with spatial identity references. It is impossible to understand South Africa without resorting to this notion of territory, to the construction of territorial identities. And this in turn raises the question of whether South Africa represents a particular and unique case or, rather, a particularly clear case study of a more general phenomenon. I tend to believe the latter.

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the importance to geographical studies of the notion of identity by focusing on a few South African urban examples. The South African literature on identity studies is extensive and cannot comprehensively be surveyed here. References to studies in history (Harries, 1989 & 1994), in political studies (the ground-breaking works of Denis-Constant Martin (1998) on Cape Coloureds), in anthropology (Maré, 1992), in sociology (Bekker, 2001), and in geography (Mainet-Valleix, 2002) illustrate the range of research completed. It is apparent that the social sciences in South Africa share an interest in the notion. In fact, in a country where cultural identity appears to be the basis of much social organisation and where identities were manipulated, in the past, by a totalitarian regime (Meillassoux & Messiant, 1991), it seems normal that social science scholars persist in asserting that racial and ethnic identities were (and are) constructed rather than primordial. During apartheid, Marxist scholarship, which underlined this assertion, produced much of the best social science research on the period. This work revealed the manipulation of identities by the South African state in order to mask class cleavages and to foster cultural antagonisms that profited modern capitalism. While the thrust of this interpretation has been blunted by the demise of apartheid, its scholarly and activist value remains unblemished. A good illustration is found in work done on urban working-class unrest in the 1920s by historians who revealed that the white working class chose to defend its interest as a racial group rather than through
seeking solidarity with others of their class (Bonner, 1994).

Race, class, and culture are therefore the three most studied identities in South Africa. Most work singles out a specific ethnic, racial, or social group for attention. The approach in this chapter will be both more specific since attention will be given to the role space plays in identity construction, and more general since there will be no group pre-selected for analysis. Since I argue that the role of space in identity construction is essential to consider in South Africa, three dimensions of this issue will be explored here: first, an analysis of how the use of political power manipulates space to promote various identities (a South African-specific analysis); second, an analysis of how individual identities (in so far as they exist) are constituted; and third, an analysis of how places themselves acquire an identity (at a general level). The starting point of these analyses is the general hypothesis that territorial identities, beyond being simple political constructs, are the product of individual and collective processes taking place at different levels and converging to create the essence of a place, or of its territorial identity.

5.2 How politics uses space to create identities

The most common way in which politics uses space is found in the association attaching an identity to a spatial entity (and thereby establishing a territory). Politics proposes such attachments in order to convince individuals of their shared membership in a specific group. Society as a whole, together with those individuals, groups, and organisations that comprise it, conceptualises itself not only in spatial terms, but also in terms that reflect its interests. The spatial entities so established overlap, cut across each other, and often lead to ambivalent identities. This lies at the root of many spatial conflicts since territory is often both the basis for the construction of an identity as well as indicative of an interest. The function of political territory, according to Raffarin (1980), is control over both populations and resources (which are usually the real stakes). The main actor in this game, in its various guises, is the state, for it is the state that delineates external territorial limits and internal boundaries (such as provinces, counties, and municipalities). This, in turn, enables the state to diffuse and exercise its authority. The ideal from the state's point of view is that this imposition of territory on groups is experienced by these groups as constitutive of one of their salient collective identities. In the case of South Africa, in fact, apartheid (from 1948 to 1994) appears to have marked the society so deeply precisely because this ideology created sophisticated strategies of identity construction that were based on the belief that the manipulation of space would lead to the construction of pre-determined collective identities.

Before 1948, South Africans had experienced a classical colonial regime that
distinguished human groups mainly according to racial criteria, setting apart whites and ‘non-whites’ and conferring privileges on the former while exploiting the latter. This was done primarily in the service of an economic system of colonial exploitation. The advent to power of the National Party in 1948, however, led to the creation of numerous territorial identities which went far beyond simple racial distinctions and employed the manipulation of space as an essential tool of control.

At the national level, apartheid imposed upon the country four ‘white’ provinces and ten Bantustans, which the state defined as ‘ethnic’ territories. The artificiality of these ethnic groups has been well argued by scholars: as colonial constructs often supported by significant missionary contributions (Harries, 1989), these ethnic groups were born, as elsewhere in Africa, during the nineteenth century and had new life injected into them by apartheid ideologists. The Bantustans became an essential tool for the apartheid regime for they rendered credible the claim that each ethnic group belonged to its own separate territory. These apartheid ethnic constructs were paralleled by racial constructs. The four ‘racial’ groupings that flowed from this process of construction are well known. What is of interest here is the spatial dimension of this classification: residential mixing was declared unlawful and urban municipalities were obliged to designate residential space as separate Group Areas defining where residents were required to live according to their racial classification. Simultaneously, public space was also delimited according to its separate use for members of different racial groupings. In short, spatial separation was instituted at all levels, from the Bantustan level down to the use of a beach or a post office.

Residential separation based on racial classification led to the construction of townships – areas reserved for ‘non-white’ urban residents. The notion of a township exemplifies the imposition at the local level of a territorial identity ‘from above’. The township was invented in South Africa during the 1930s (Orlando, the first township of Johannesburg, was built in 1931–1932 according to Chipkin (1993) but only became the basic urban form of the apartheid city in the 1950s.) A township is a monotonous arrangement of small houses, lined up in straight streets, sometimes laid out in a star pattern. These vast housing schemes are surrounded by buffer zones that isolate them from neighbouring urban spaces. This residential urban strategy reflects both economic and security interests, but is first and foremost a device of identity construction. The urban form constituted by the township – associated, as it is, with European working-class suburbs (cités ouvrières) – may be thought of as a space of non-identity since accommodation is anonymous, landscapes are uniform and monotonous, and any indication of individuality is forbidden (as indeed were both private property and most commercial activities). The township differs fundamentally from the ‘location’ –
Space and identity

the ‘non-white’ residential space of the segregated city. Most locations were built at the beginning of the twentieth century and demolished in the 1950s or 1960s. They were characterised by their proximity to town centres, their significant degree of racial mixing, the possibility for ‘non-whites’ to be property owners, their very high levels of residential density, and their vibrant cultural life.

Two main sets of reasons explain the construction on scale of townships. In the first place, as industrialisation accelerated in the 1940s, a rapidly growing black urban population made it necessary to hasten the housing delivery process in the cities. Second, the apartheid regime needed an urban form that would facilitate control over the population while systematically imposing segregation in these cities. State security was ensured, particularly during periods of crisis, by the buffer zones which facilitated the encirclement of neighbourhoods by security forces, by the wide roads ensuring easy access by security force vehicles, and by the establishment of entry points of control that guaranteed the virtually complete isolation of the township when the need arose.

Townships were administered by central government bodies which entered into agreements with local authorities regarding service delivery and labour force matters. Accommodation was strictly on a rental base, thereby excluding blacks from property rights. Townships in this sense conformed to state ideology that defined Africans as rural dwellers and, accordingly, as temporary workers in the city. Forced population movement from location (where the Communist party had a strong presence, especially in the Witwatersrand) to township severely weakened communal structures and, more importantly, political structures. Finally, by keeping separate urban municipal and township budgets (which were financed by rents and taxes paid by residents and by municipal beer sales), the state established a financial system designed to offer cities cheap labour. By forbidding commercial activities to Africans in the townships, the system ensured a captive source of customers for shops in the white city. The township was therefore the key element in the political, social, and economic urban system of the time. But it was also a tool of identity construction: first, because it ensured the separation of racial groups as defined by the Population Registration Act of 1950 (which led to the creation of coloured and Indian townships as well) and second because of the laying out of ethnic neighbourhoods within township boundaries.

The township was, however, also the site of identity construction ‘from below’ since residents in these displaced populations recreated both territory and community in their township. Accordingly, social action in townships ended up being as strong and as dangerous for the regime as that of the former locations. In effect, the township was re-appropriated by urban residents.

Soweto is a case in point. On the morning of 16 June 1976, approximately 15 000 school students aged 10 to 20 were demonstrating against the imposition
of Afrikaans as the main medium of schooling in black schools when the police opened fire. This police action changed the meaning these students had given to the protest: in a few hours, all state symbols in Soweto were attacked (buses, beer-halls, schools and, of course, security forces), thereby enabling these youths to claim control over their township space. The Soweto revolt marked the beginning of a new form of urban struggle: the systematic boycott of the apartheid city. This struggle was based on residents’ resolution that the city itself, as the tool of their oppression, was to be rejected. Yet, at the same time, these ‘Soweto riots’ may be interpreted as a claim for recognition of the territorial identity of the township and for the right of its residents to control their own space. This explains why control over streets and other public spaces was symbolically so important, and why these actions may be viewed as a burst of joy as if to say ‘this place is ours’. Violent political events in Soweto – clashes between youth and security forces, a succession of states of emergency, numerous arrests, and protests – enabled the realisation of this ultimate goal of taking control of a space and thereby transforming it into a territory, into a space with an identity. The township’s identity imposed ‘from above’ and comprehensively rejected made way for a re-appropriated positive identity given it by its residents.²

Though it may appear that the apartheid regime produced identity discourses and constructed territories largely on its own, the state was rarely the only actor or the only vehicle of such discourses. Various political and economic elites revealed interest in adhering to, or promoting, apartheid social constructs. Ethnic divisions within the labour force coincided with ‘white’ business interests for a long time. Simultaneously, various ‘resistance’ identities were constructed in opposition to such identities imposed ‘from above’.

I believe, accordingly, that it is not possible fully to understand South Africa without turning to such a notion of identity, for it provides an interpretation of South African spatial structure that was shaped in order to freeze imposed identities and privileged ‘cultural’ identification over other forms of social identification. Apartheid has gone, and yet these imposed identities appear to persist, implying that the process of imposition is more general than solely during the period of apartheid, implying in fact that apartheid may simply be a particularly salient example of a more universal process of imposition.

Since 1994, the post-apartheid government has been trying to reshape spatial organisation at various levels in order to alter former identities. At the national level, the aim is to build a new nation, a ‘rainbow nation’, according to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a metaphor which points to South African society as comprising a number of communities that require mutual recognition. The metaphor of various tributaries flowing into a river is also used, where a tributary represents a community and the river the nation. (Alexander, 1998).
The new government has established new provincial and municipal boundaries. The country has been divided into nine new provinces, administratively reuniting former Bantustans and ‘white provinces’. Each province has embarked on a process of identity construction at the regional level through the manufacturing of regional symbols, the adoption of ‘official’ languages in accordance with local linguistic groups, and the selection and development of a provincial capital city. However, new political and administrative boundaries have not modified inherited spatial organisation – they have merely redefined its limits. Can these new boundaries serve as the basis for new forms of identification? This question is beyond the scope of this chapter but is explored in other works by the author (Gervais-Lambony, 2002 & 2003). What I have said so far is aimed at showing why investigating the relationship between politics and space requires the use of the notion of identity.

The argument so far flows from a classical approach to politically shaped identities. Studying identities in a spatial context, however, also implies going beyond such an approach so as to reveal life’s complexities and the unordered character of identity construction. Moreover, it is important to move beyond simple opposites: individual–collective, spatial–time-bound, past–present, social–cultural. Identity construction is a process that transcends such opposites and mixes various registers and markers. Such complexity comes to light when one investigates the identities constructed by individuals. I address this issue in the next section.

5.3 Space and individual identity

An issue related to ‘individual’ identities is whether such an identity can exist separately from a collective identity. One could easily side-step this question through claiming that individual identities do not exist since individual identities are always collective in nature. As an illustration, ‘[t]he individual is, according to sociology, a relational object’ (Vuarin, 1997: 48) and always belongs accordingly to a ‘social configuration’ (Elias, 1939) through which the individual is intrinsically linked to others. The individual can only be defined through the collective.

It may be argued, however, that identity always involves individual choice, leaving an important role for the individual to play as actor:

[I]n each case, the individual is, at the beginning, attached to a plurality of groups: choice is made more or less easily, riskily or painfully according to the situation within which the individual finds himself, by the events which occur successively in time; all these, however, never obstruct the possibility for some kind of choice. (Martin, 1994: 22, author’s translation)
Identity is never static, never fixed. One construction might indeed be replaced by another when the individual enters another age category, another social group, or another living space, or when he or she alters his or her identity choices. Identities are therefore multiple.

To illustrate this multiplicity, the migrant labour system implemented in Johannesburg during the second half of the twentieth century exacerbated the already fragmented nature of black urban residents’ identities. A domestic worker, a mine worker, or an industrial worker could very well have been an important person in her or his original rural community; in the city, however, this worker had to be anonymous, defined exclusively by her or his employment status (which was typically the single qualification legalising residence in the city). Accordingly, a married man, a father, would have been regarded in official eyes as barely adult – as a single man in the urban setting.

The questions I pose here are how an individual with an individual identity is taken up into a collective entity, and subsequently, how this transformation influences (and how is it influenced by) his or her relationship to space. In order to address these questions, one also needs to explore how individual choices lead to territorial identity construction, to the allocation of meaning to places. The account and analysis of two individuals’ life journeys below reveals how complex the discussion of these questions becomes and how important it is to embark upon such a line of questioning.3

S is the child of a mine worker, of a migrant. His father was a Mozambican citizen who came to work on the Witwatersrand’s gold mines. Upon his arrival in 1949, he was employed and given shelter by a mining company in the Benoni municipality (situated to the east of Johannesburg, in the East Rand). After having lived in a mine compound, he settled in Daveyton Township, following his marriage in 1953 to a Xhosa-speaking South African woman. S’s mother was an urban dweller throughout her life, she was born in the East Rand, but her Tswana-speaking father had emigrated from Botswana to work in Johannesburg in the 1920s, and her Xhosa-speaking mother had come from the Transkei.

Let us first consider the multiplicity of S’s father’s identities. Being black, he had to live in a specific area and was very strictly limited in his access to the labour market. Being ‘foreign’, he was not subjected to a South African Bantustan authority but belonged to that extraordinary category invented by apartheid: ‘native alien’. Being Shangaan, he belonged to an ethnic group originating from the north-west of South Africa and the south-east of Mozambique. Finally, as a mine worker, he belonged to a well-delimited social group in South Africa. These identities are not organised according to a hierarchical order, as the individual chooses one or the other according to circumstances, or has to refer to one or the other depending both on the place he finds himself in and the company he finds himself with.
Crucially, despite the imposition of apartheid-defined identities, this man made choices; he chose, for instance, not to marry within his ethnic group.

The Witwatersrand is in fact a cosmopolitan region where ethnic mixing is common. It attracted migrants from the whole of South Africa and from the Southern African region, as well as a variety of people from different regions of Europe. What real meaning then is attached to so-called ‘ethnic’ identities in such a context? Public meetings that are currently taking place in the Witwatersrand are characterised by what I would like to call ‘linguistic freedom’: Anyone may use the language of his or her choice (which is not always mother tongue, for there are tactical considerations that rule the choice of language depending on the context).

So who is S? A Shangaan-Xhosa-Tswana? A mine worker’s son? A black South African? An East Rander? The language spoken in his family is Xhosa. He lived in Daveyton, in a neighbourhood reserved for Xhosa speakers and was taught in this language at school. This was a choice made by his father who gave up his Mozambican-Shangaan identity to facilitate integration.

In 1984, S’s family bought a house in the Vosloorus Township, part of the Boksburg Municipality, where his parents passed away and were buried. S’s mother died in 1996 and his father three years later. The father left his children the following instructions: I want to be buried next to my wife in the Vosloorus cemetery and, since there is no room left in the vault, I wish to be cremated so that the urn may be placed next to my wife’s coffin. Cremation is unusual in the Dutch Reformed Church, the family church, and is almost unknown in rural South African traditions. The eldest son was obliged to carry out his father’s wishes against the traditions of the church, and, more importantly, the family. His late father had made a strong identity choice, privileging his identity as an urban dweller over all others since that was the identity that linked him forever to his beloved wife.

In 1984, when the family moved to Vosloorus, S was 24 and had ended his studies seven years earlier. While working as a ‘tea boy’ in the company club of East Rand Proprietary Mines (ERPM), he had tried to achieve his personal dream of becoming a musician and had taken music classes in Johannesburg, in a voluntary institution that was offering art training to ‘non-whites’. Involved in the youth protest movement that followed the Soweto unrest in 1976, he acquired a new identity, that of a township youth militant. He signed up to the ANC youth league, became involved in the civics movement and thus became a member of the ‘lost generation’, youth that sacrificed both education and personal future prospects for the struggle. As a result, S experienced all the facets of life of a young political activist, including protests, strikes, clashes with security forces, clandestine activity, conflict with hostel-based Inkatha militias, door-to-door mobilisation,
and the organisation of local networks. He describes this period of his life as his ‘twenty years in the wilderness’. Such a choice of words also refers to something else: the rejection of ethnic, familial, and socially ascribed identities. It led the little ‘boy’ of the ERPM to become the president of the civics in Vosloorus and subsequently to be elected an ANC municipal councillor in 1995, during the first free municipal elections in South Africa. He was re-elected in 2000. Now aged 42, S dreams of quitting political life and returning to music. He also dreams about how to complete his education while remaining politically active and earning a living sufficient to sustain his family (his wife and his three children). In addition, he is investigating the origins and ties of his mixed family background. But what is clear to him is the central importance of being an ‘East-Rander’. He expresses this in simple terms: ‘I have no other home’, an expression pointing to a primary territorial identity.

Other individuals make different choices. M hails from Giyani in the former Gazankulu Bantustan. His wife still lives there with four of their eight children; the four remaining children live with him in Johannesburg in a rented room in a former white suburb in the north of Johannesburg. He ‘chose’ to live ‘one foot inside, one foot outside’ in order to sustain his household in Giyani, which he visits over two weekends each month. But this choice is as contingent as the identity that flows from it. M came to work in Johannesburg for the first time in 1981. Having obtained a driver’s licence, he worked as a driver for white private companies and for foreign diplomatic missions. With this relatively good salary, he managed after seven years to save enough money to open, in 1988, a ‘general store’ in Giyani. His customers were mainly public servants of the ex-Bantustan of Gazankulu. The demise of the Bantustan in 1994 and a subsequent period of local settling of scores put an end to his business. In 1994, he returned to Johannesburg to take up employment once more as a driver. M has, therefore, had several successive identities: that of a rural dweller from Gazankulu, a migrant worker in Johannesburg, a small shop-owner, and a driver. But the use of the term ‘successive’ fails to capture the multiple nature of M’s identities. He is perhaps more aptly described as the resultant sum of this past.

These two individual trajectories reveal the complexity and fluidity in time and space of identities, as well as the often strong spatial dimension of these identifications. They also show the importance of individual choices, whether they are choices taken under strict structural constraints or otherwise. The sum of these choices make up the city and, in the case of the Witwatersrand, a common denominator is prominent: The city is made up of the personal histories of those migrants who came in search of jobs and in search of freedom. These multiple choices over a long period of time have created a territorial identity for the Witwatersrand, an identity for the city itself.
5.4 A territorial identity?

For each of us, the present contains the sum of our past. Our identities, however, are not chronologically layered but rather a mixture of our memories. Such influence of the past upon a personalised present holds true for places as well. This is what Marcel Roncayolo (2002) suggests when he refers to urban places developing territorial identities over time. Is it appropriate to apply the notion of identity to places as well as to people, or is this simply a geographer’s bias, a linguistic short-cut, or a literary metaphor? Julien Gracq (1990), for instance, when describing his feelings about the town of Nantes, reveals how individuals’ identities converge with those of the place where they live. Though each interpretation of a city is individual, the city may be viewed as a prism through which its residents see the world and from which residents are influenced by their urban space. The fact that writers and travellers often describe the city as a living object is not simply a question of style, since the city exists through the imaginations of those who live in it. The city, therefore, has its own unique identity. Augustin Berque (1993) refers to a process of ‘connivance with the place’ when he argues that urban society fuses with a built environment and thereby establishes a new identity.

It appears appropriate then to accept the existence of a territorial identity. But where does one look for its roots? In the first place, the answer is in the unique relationship that links residents to their place of residence. I hypothesise in fact that this relationship is formed by the past of individuals, of society, and of space. The weight of the past is what makes the identity of a place possible.

In a global context, urban studies currently focus on the fragmentation of urban forms, on the disappearance of city-wide social life, on the end of the city. Urban South Africa experiences similar processes. In Johannesburg, for instance, the development of local and neighbourhood identities is said to be directly related to deepening social inequalities, to criminal activities, and to feelings of fear among residents. Residents are fortifying themselves either in luxurious gated communities or in deprived informal settlements. On the other hand, Johannesburg exists. More than a century of being has enabled the growth of a specific territorial identity that has survived this socio-spatial fragmentation. South Africa is a country with a haunting if largely silent past; its history is built on displaced populations, on stolen lands, on altered names, and on manipulated spaces. The past of its cities appears in the landscapes, in individual memories, and in the collective representations of its residents. This past, moreover, is compressed since the national time scale is that of a young country and time scales at city level are those of very short cycles of development.
Rusty old iron, red trams with the appearance of fire-engines, mahogany bars with polished brass rails; brick-built warehouses in deserted streets, where there was only the wind to sweep away the rubbish; rustic parish churches standing at the foot of offices and stock-exchanges built in cathedral style; mazes of seedy buildings looming over intersecting valleys of trenches, swing-bridges and footbridges; a town being piled ever higher, since the vestiges of old buildings are constantly used as a basis for the new. Such was Chicago, the very image of the Americas. No wonder the New World cherishes in it the memory of the 1880s; the only antiquity to which it can lay claim in its thirst for renewal is this modest gap of half a century, too short to be a criterion for our ancient societies, but enough to give it, with its lack of temporal perspective, some little opportunity to sentimentalize about its transient youth.

(Levi-Strauss, 1973: 96)

The history of Johannesburg (van Onselen, 1982; Chipkin, 1993) is one, even more so than Chicago’s, of the successive demolition of neighbourhoods, the scars of which remain palpable. Johannesburg was one of the cities in the world where growth was extremely rapid since soon after its establishment it became an important centre of the global economy. Johannesburg is characterised by rapid changes and by a taste for modernity: posterity appears to be of little importance. Once gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand in 1886, a mining compound developed, a town of tents and ox-wagons emerged, and streams of gold prospectors arrived. Men were in the majority: Anglophone mine diggers from the United Kingdom, Australia, and other regions of the British Empire; a minority of Afrikaners arriving from rural areas to work in the brick or transport companies; African mine workers from Mozambique, the Transvaal, and the Cape, and Africans from Natal employed as domestic workers or launderers. The discovery of gold also led to a large influx of prospectors who worked the wider region to the east and the west of what is now Johannesburg.

The Witwatersrand (now renamed Gauteng) has retained the characteristics of a mining town, a frenetic and violent city where one comes primarily either to enrich oneself or to seek means to survive. There is also a deep shared sense of nostalgia for a time when Johannesburg embodied capitalist modernity at the tip of Africa. Johannesburg was connected from its beginnings to international finance centres, and especially to the City of London. Though its inner-city residential areas are today characterised by decay with entire buildings standing vacant of residents, the city continues to convey memories of a time when it aspired to be the New York of Africa.

Simultaneously, Johannesburg is populated by the ghosts of neighbourhoods demolished to suit successive segregation policies. The oldest of these, The Kaffir Location, to the west of the city centre, was razed to the ground at the beginning of
the century. It was at that time that private housing developments for ‘non-white’ residents emerged: Alexandra (from 1914), Sophiatown (from 1905), Martindale and Newclare (1912), while racially mixed slums were developing in the inner-city. Subsequently, residential access for ‘non-whites’ in Johannesburg was marked by the progressive demolition of old neighbourhoods in proximity to the city centre and the development of Soweto townships. The destruction of Sophiatown (from 1955 to 1959) was a most striking event in this history. The white neighbourhood of Triomf was subsequently built on the site. The symbolic value of Sophiatown – the nostalgia it conveys to Johannesburg residents – is both deep and enduring. This ‘myth of Sophiatown’ is, to my mind, an essential element of Johannesburg’s identity as a place, as a territory. It is worthy of a little more exploration.

Sophiatown is the symbol of an urban culture based on racial mixing, freedom, music, and alcohol consumption in the shebeens, an alternative black culture captured in Drum, an influential black magazine of the 1950s. All the former locations of the Witwatersrand, although physically demolished today, are kept alive by the image of Sophiatown in the memories of residents. One of the most famous paintings of Gerard Sekoto, a South African black painter, depicts a street of Sophiatown. At the beginning of the 1960s, Myriam Makeba was singing ‘the streets are sad and lonely, the old Sophia is gone...’ Almost 40 years later, publications praising the inventiveness of and feelings of joy aroused by Sophiatown abound, and Triomf has been renamed Sophiatown.

Sophiatown was overcrowded, dirty, and dilapidated, and many of its activities were controlled by criminal street gangs, but it embodied ‘The City’, an identity subsequently forbidden to Africans in Johannesburg and in South Africa. Hence, the urban myth that echoes far beyond Johannesburg. Moreover, the nostalgia associated with Sophiatown is anything but passive, since the myth has influenced the territorial identities of other urban neighbourhoods where different communities meet and mingle. Hillbrow, for instance, the first desegregated neighbourhood in Johannesburg, was for a time ‘another Sophiatown’, a place of freedom, of mixing, and of intellectual vitality. Yeoville then took over and continues to a certain extent to play this role. But these spaces are fragile – diminished by crime, redlined by the banks, often deserted by prominent residents who move to another neighbourhood when decay reaches, for them, a point of no return. Sophiatown, on the other hand, is indestructible because it embodies a way of city life, a way of life constantly reasserted and reconstructed. Guillaume (2001) has argued that, though Soweto inherited over time many of the functions of Sophiatown, some of these elements may be found everywhere in the city. The reality of a neighbourhood is one thing, but the myth and nostalgia it conveys remains alive through Sophiatown memories. Such a process relates to what Berque (1993) called an ‘arch-landscape’ (arché-paysage), which plays the role both
of myth and of identity narrative in the city. The process continuously identifies what the city should aspire to, and accordingly brings together urban space and those who inhabit it. It exemplifies the ways a territorial identity is constructed by uniting past memories and nostalgia with present ideals in a shared urban space.

5.5 Conclusion

Let me attempt to summarise the arguments I have made.

Identity is informed by time. ‘People look back for various reasons, but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity. I am more than what the thin present defines’ (Tuan, 1977: 186). And this applies to both individuals and places.

Identity is informed by choice. Offered a menu of identity choices, we make choices to assert ourselves as one or the other, either consciously or as a result of structural contingencies. These choices vary over time depending on circumstances, on the company we keep, and on the possibilities available.

Identity is informed by politics. Each human group is involved in power relationships, and each individual belongs to various groups. Political power proposes or imposes identity narratives which continuously influence the identities of individuals.

Does space inform identity? Yes, because time, choice, and politics are ‘spatialised’. Time is inscribed into space, in the natural environment for Australian aborigines, for example, or in the built environment in the metropolis for modern urban dwellers. In the case of South Africa’s former locations, it is the memory of a place that no longer exists that informs the construction of an identity. But time is also relevant on the scale of an individual’s lifetime, a lifetime marked by various places of residence and by various attachments to different places. Identity choices, moreover, are informed by space – by places known or imagined, by places where one has lived, which one has visited, or even dreamt of. And, to return to the issue of power, politics in its efforts to impose identity ‘from above’ often manipulates space, by defining and delimiting it.

The South African urban examples I have presented support these hypotheses. I conclude therefore that research on spatial organisation cannot avoid reference to the notion of identity and, conversely, that identity studies cannot avoid the spatial dimension.

Finally, it is useful to reflect on the way individual and collective identities that meet in the same space merge with this space and produce a unique and identifiable geographical object which is the constantly changing construction of the interaction between human beings and the place where they reside.
Notes

1 I say ‘in French geography’ because Anglo-Saxon geography does not need such a concept. This is an interesting question that goes beyond the scope of this chapter – why the term ‘territory’ as it is used by French geographers cannot be translated into English, the term ‘place’ being a poor substitute, referring rather to ‘lieu’ (see Tuan, 1977). In this text, ‘territory’ will be used in its French meaning.

2 Soweto, however, is far from homogeneous. Its two million residents have very diverse regional origins, speak different languages, and have different standards of living. A specific Sowetan identity did emerge during the 1976 unrest, typified by a process of crystallisation of all identities during a territorial crisis. It did not last; currently, there are a number of internal local identities in Soweto and territorial conflicts occur frequently (see Guillaume, 2001).

3 Case studies in this chapter are based on field research conducted by the author during the period 2000–2003. Interviews were organised with 25 residents of the East Rand (Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Area) and Johannesburg, and were repeated every year in order to obtain ‘life stories’, two of which are referred to directly in this chapter. Interviewing was as informal as possible so as to establish rapport with informants.

4 Built in 1955 to relocate residents of a squatter camp and of the former Benoni location, Daveyton was described by Verwoerd as a model for the rest of South Africa, presumably because of its strict ethnic separation of residents. The case of S’s father reveals the futility of such a project.

5 Political reforms in the 1980s allowed black urban residents to acquire property rights in the townships.