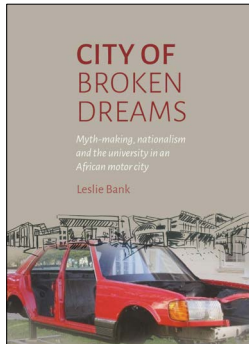




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**BOOK TITLE:**

City of broken dreams: Myth-making, nationalism and the university in an African motor city



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## The university and South Africa's 'Motor City'

Recent research and writing on economy, society and politics in South Africa's 'secondary' cities are scarce relative to the literature on Johannesburg and Cape Town, and to a slightly lesser extent Durban (Ethekekwini). The two other sizeable harbour cities, Port Elizabeth (Nelson Mandela Bay) and East London (Buffalo City), have been the subjects of a few PhD theses and occasionally books, but remain little explored. They therefore offer rich fields for scholarship.

East London – *iMonti* and its hinterland, including areas variously named 'Border', 'Ciskei', 'Transkei' – gained the attention of an earlier generation of scholars. Leslie Bank, who lived and worked for some decades in the region (he was Director of the Fort Hare Institute for Social and Economic Research) has, in previous books – *Home Spaces*, *Street Styles*<sup>1</sup> and *iMonti Modern*<sup>2</sup>, taken on some of the older directions. However, in *City of Broken Dreams*, his canvas expands to include the long-term histories of East London through colonialism, segregation, apartheid and democracy. Informed by archival, participant, media, and other sources, Bank sweeps through shifting ideologies, industrial development and decline, the patchy record of recent government, and deep social changes. His account portrays how both prosperity and broken dreams coexist today, offering fresh ideas on how to move beyond the present contrast between the global reach of an apparently successful car exporting economy and the deteriorating conditions that face the majority of citizens.

The text is organised in four parts, preceded by a powerful introduction that sets out the main challenges of the city and the questions of the book, and concludes with ideas on 'remapping the city'. Among the major themes, a key thread concerns the history of different regimes of power in East London, through segregation and the earlier growth machine, apartheid and its capture of many kinds of change in the Eastern Cape, and then democracy with its disappointments but also its triumphs. The book deals with the rise and decline of manufacturing, linking those developments with the shifting regimes. Moreover, and importantly, Bank argues a case for a new role for the university in making something better of this place of 'dreams'. The book concludes with a deep account of university power politics as well as student revolt, right up to the present, presenting readers with an argument as to how the concentration and enhancement of the university presence might lead to greater hope.

Bank also accounts for the significance of the car in East London life: from the appearance of the first vehicles, through local initiative in establishing car assembly plants many decades ago, to the enormous but difficult significance of a major German company continuing to produce for a global market. In this theme there are parallels between the experience of East London and Detroit. East London has been and remains a particularly motor oriented city – home of the South African Grand Prix for a generation, and the present centrality of cars to the weekend celebration that takes place along the beach and that could hardly have been imagined 30 years ago.

There are several new ways in which the city is occupied and used by its present population. Bank refers to 'occupy urbanism' in this context, touching on the double rootedness between the 'rural' and the city, with particular attention to the huge weekend gatherings known as *Ebuhlanti* on the beach front. There are certainly struggles on the part of newer, black African middle- and upper-class individuals to control existing and persistent elements of the city, including modes of production and distribution – yet an apparent lack of interest or recognition of possibilities towards creating something really new.

Some readers may find it surprising that relatively little attention is given to significant moments in the make-up of the city and its region. For example, there are numerous former 'homeland' civil servants and politicians who populate the bureaucracies of East London; the famous strikes at Wilson Rowntree and at Mercedes Benz have their place, but not the 1983 bus boycott. And Mdantsane, the major township of the region, central to the bus boycott and strikes and home to a majority of East London's people, is scarcely mentioned. This omission suggests that there are opportunities for further work.

However, the ultimate purpose of the book is to argue for a transformed role for universities in city development, a theme that Bank has previously explored,<sup>3</sup> and in particular for finding new pathways for building upon the combined presence of the University of Fort Hare, Walter Sisulu University and Unisa in East London. Through his review of student circumstances and protest, Bank points towards suggestions on how these major elements of urban society might more effectively contribute to redeveloping *iMonti* as a prosperous city that could offer a better life to a larger population than it does at present. In sum, Bank calls for a 'greater appreciation of the globalisation of higher education and its connection to city building and urban opportunity [which] might offer hope and insight for the future development of this and other struggling "rust belt" cities in South Africa'.

*City of Broken Dreams* is highly readable, based on very substantial knowledge and research, and original in its portrayal of a South African urban situation, but it may also resonate with many other struggling cities in the world. It is an important contribution and should be widely read.

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