

Review

Rob Pattman and Sultan Khan (eds) (2007) *Undressing Durban*. Durban: Madiba Publishers

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This collection of more than 40 short readings was originally prepared for the World Sociology Conference held in Durban in 2006. Editors were struck at the way the conference related to Durban. Dominated by European delegates who were mainly interested in interacting with specific, familiar professional networks and generally extremely nervous at the notoriety of crime in South Africa (and a few delegates were indeed mugged), the visitors largely kept themselves out of harm's way and minimised contact with their environment. A fine lot of sociologists, you may say.

A grouping of Durban sociologists known as the Writing Initiative to Support Academics (WISA) decided to respond with some in-your-face writing and here we have it or perhaps, more accurately, we have a cross between a range of essays that are effectively a riposte to the conference and an attempt to showcase the writing of Durban university students, many of them foreign. Many of the author's self-descriptions show considerable affection for this sometimes unlovely but fascinating South African port city, but not much of that affection comes out in the content. The Durban in the WISA volume is replete with grunge, crime and what one might think of as an obsessive concern with race (one is tempted to say Not the Rainbow Nation) although some reference to class and gender also exists some of the time. There even is a play by Durban writer and sociologist Ari Sitas.

This city is dominated by the marginal, the victimised and the alienated, the HIV-positive, the squatters, those whose ethnic background creates definitional contradictions for the bearer amidst a population that still understands the world in terms of the four apartheid racial categories. Several authors deplore the virtual absence of whites from the book – the

people who 'lack' ethnicity and define the rest. Perhaps more to the point is the absence of the rich, the ruling class, the business elite, of whatever colour. Also absent – for once – is the state, local and otherwise, with its point presentation response to problems. There are many articles by foreigners looking in, revealing how large a role they play now in the intellectual life of the university, some mawkish bits of self-reflection that read like high school essays from locals but also some pieces which sketch what could become sustainable academic articles.

Some of the better pieces bring out some of the complexities of race as the defining motif in Durban society. In fact, of course, as all South Africans more or less understand, apartheid was not the beginning or end of racial segregation in the broad sense: it codified, or rigidified what was the common sense understanding of most people. These racial boundaries are only beginning to give way and early reactions are often negative. Another striking absence in this collection is history; few participants want to evoke the past in order to understand the present. Still another is the virtual absence of the work situation, a marked change to the sociology of the previous generation. This is a sociology minus critical theory which might empower some but through abandoning the structural imperatives of social science. In these respects, *Undressing Durban* evokes (albeit with little scholarly apparatus) post-modernism as does its indecisive if at times 'rich' text, and breaks almost entirely with the class based critique of South African society typical of the powerful statements of the pre-1990 era.