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Julie Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable As Told From Southern Africa*. Publisher: Duke University, Durham, 2019. pp176. ISBN # 978-1-4780-0639-8.

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Livingston is a master storyteller. One can only attribute the perceptive and witty style of this book to her fairly long stay in Botswana and ability to bring an interdisciplinary lens to everyday lived experience. The broad strokes evoke an anthropologist's pen, a historian's brush, an ethnographer's eye, and a political analyst's sharp mind. With over twenty-five years of research working in Botswana, Livingston's account is an authentic story of Botswana's coming to age. The author ably navigates events and sensibilities which are so quintessentially Botswana. As a Motswana intellectual who has carried out archaeological and development research in Botswana for almost four decades, I am all too familiar with the parables so eloquently narrated in this book. I am perhaps also guilty of being a willing accomplice in some of the 'sins of the fathers' which are threaded across the four chapters. Livingston does what many would like to do in scholarly writing – to appeal to the critical thinker while also attracting lay readers.

The writing style adopted by the author interweaves creative writing with a scientific lens which draws on rich content without sacrificing detail. The conversational tone enables the reader to engage with the issues presented and to get close to the author who manages to slip in and out of the text without being overly obtrusive. The book draws on several disciplines to deliver a punchy critique of development which could easily be the story of any country across the world. Livingston chose Botswana which has all the trappings of a Cinderella story. The book speaks to a Botswana I know as intimately as I know my own body, mind, and soul. The book comes across as an auto-ethnographic account of Livingston's lived experience in Botswana which resonates with one's own lived experience.

The subtitle "Self-devouring Growth", read in the wake of a devastating global pandemic, is an apt descriptor of what the book addresses – the paradox of development. Livingston unpacks the concept of development and its multi-dimensionality. Livingston, as a medical historian could have given us more food

for thought in respect to the Covid-19 pandemic as a devouring experience had the book been penned during the pandemic. The subtitle “A Planetary parable” is a fitting description of the pandemic in respect to how it affected our humanity over the last two years. Current anxieties over a fifth wave, the changing world order resulting from the war in Europe, and climate change, have taken their toll on all. As Livingston notes, parables “reveal urgent and sometimes uncomfortable truths that are hiding in plain sight” (p.2). Livingston draws on metaphors to illustrate the devastation “growth” can have. Describing self-devouring growth as akin to cancer, Livingston aptly captures the complexity of development which mimics growth but can lead to death (p.5). The global death from famine, natural disasters, diseases, and conflicts have shown how development cannot be imagined as a good for all phenomena. The four chapters which present the core thesis are introduced through a prologue which is a connecting thread for the chapters and sets the context for the chapters. Each chapter carries a metaphoric title which combines creative artistry and a witty critique of various facets of development. As noted by the author, the story is about Botswana but resonates with development studies across the world.

Chapter 1 borrows from the fiction writer and liberation struggle activist Bessie Head’s title *When rain clouds gather* to highlight the crisis of water as a development deal breaker. Drawing on historical anthropology, Livingston interweaves the discourse of coloniality, modernity, and development to highlight how ordinary people have been affected by political decisions over the management of water resources. By positing rain as technology which was disrupted and eventually destroyed in the quest for modernity, Livingston highlights the flaws of development trajectories which do not attempt to contextualise technologies which colonial rulers found (p.15). The chapter deftly navigates time and space to condense past and present to interrogate Botswana’s development paradoxes. The metaphor of “thirst” ably captures what Botswana has experienced over five decades of post-independence development which was predicated on the availability of water. The discussions reminded me of environmental impact assessment projects we undertook for dam and road projects which gave us powerful insights into the intricacies and machinations of community participatory systems.

Communities, often blamed for “resisting development”; were often not well included in the processes even when they simply wanted to better understand the long-term impacts of development initiatives which politicians and public servants presented. Livingston’s critique brings forth the limitations of research in informing policymaking (p.27). The author highlights the failure to tap into a wealth of knowledge and archival data to explicate the flaws of Botswana’s

efforts in water resources development. Modernising technologies to extract water resources created more problems for ecology management.

Chapter 2 focuses on Botswana's economic mainstay – the beef industry. Livingston notes that for Botswana and their cosmology, “cattle as a total social fact” (p.39) was indeed the *raison d'être* of human identity for Botswana past, present and possibly in the future. Titled “*In the time of beef*” the chapter condenses deep analytical tools with artistic notes to speak to a national paradox – the adoration of the cow. Using multiple data sources, Livingston provokes an intense discussion on dependency, subjugation and trauma all woven around the idea of “the God with a wet nose” in the poetics of pastoralist cultures of Botswana. The chapter empathetically captures the processes through which modernity dehumanises human-ecology relations including human-cow relations. The transformation of a cow from a valued sacred object to a “mass-produced pub fare like steak and pie” (p.52) packaged and scattered across the world is a powerful and evocative reminder of the fallacies of development when people separate their worldviews and value of things to the vagaries of capitalism.

Chapter 3 explores the impact of transformed communication systems symbolised by road development in Botswana. The chapter demonstrates how road development projects threatened the water resources of the country while creating an allure of rapid and total development. Roads enabled explosion of wealth as cars and rapid transport could now be afforded by many. Cars replaced cows as object of desire and quickly accelerated “self-devouring tendencies” (p.86). New transport and communications technologies fed new forms of corruption. Neither the MDGs, SDGs or global governance measures could stem the haemorrhage of resources as corruption, which continues to date evidenced by state capture practices and covid-related corruption across the world. A constant through the chapter is the ubiquitous death wrought by motor vehicle accidents. Livingston's research on disability and debility is worth cross referencing here. Over-consumption, new technologies and the allure of development are complex and intertwined narratives in the region's development trajectory (pp.100–110).

Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa continue to rank high in respect to inequality despite their ranking as Middle-Income Countries. Despite good road networks, death on the roads due to vehicular accidents remain very high. The deluge of “used cars” as the waste shedding culture of the global north to feed the hunger for car ownership in Botswana and neighbouring countries (pp.111-117) can only be likened to the pervasive load-shedding now common in the lexicon of South Africa's woes with power supply from the state entity Eskom. In this

cryptic analysis, Livingston highlights the flaws of a development agenda which is predatory and fraught with double standards. People incur heavy debts in pursuit of an elusive “good life” and their vulnerability inevitably leads to a slow death and ecological destruction as natural resources are relentlessly devoured .

The last chapter comes across as a prayer for hope. A typical Botswana demeanour when great disaster befell people – “*go tlaa siama*” (lit. it shall be well) came to mind. Botswana can absorb tragedy and hardship whilst in the same breath conjuring hope. I attribute this to the imprint of colonial violence on the people who would have had to, over centuries, endure dispossession and disruption. These twin misfortunes visited many African people either through colonial encounters or natural disasters. The refrain of deference to divine intervention became conjoined to acceptance of ill-fated or ill-conceived post-colonial development projects.

Livingston teases the idea of a futuristic development agenda which is liberatory, inclusive and humane (p.124). This “what if” in my view has been upended by the covid pandemic which brought into sharp relief inequalities of people globally and highlighted the vulnerabilities of human ecologies especially for the world’s first people (p.124). The “hope” that some amongst the human race would reach a “Damascus” moment and somehow feel the urge to share more equitably has been negated by data revealing that the rich got even richer during the worst pandemic in human history and those charged with looking after public resources pillaged the public purse as millions buckled under the burden of disease and want.

The question is not whether we have choices in respect to saving planet earth but what lessons we can draw from the story of a country like Botswana. With the wars, a fifth wave of the covid pandemic, natural disasters, and famine, there is no consensus on how best we can avert the planetary catastrophes nor how we re-humanise our world to find common ground. What is clear from the Botswana story is that diamonds will not be forever.

As a scholar activist, Livingston has been able to provide an eloquent narrative of the challenge of development. The author selected a model country on the African continent and the global south. Botswana “ticks all the boxes” depending on which analytical lens one uses. For many, Botswana is still revered as a fine example of development. There will always be conflicting views of where to peg the country but the most telling indicator for me has always been the country’s ranking in the Global Happiness Index.

For a country so endowed by nature, which has escaped the worst atrocities of the colonial experience, Botswana remains marred by morbid unhappiness, inequality, and other social ills. Perhaps the tools to dig deeper to find out what ills the nation are yet to be invoked. If there is a good time to introspect to search for answers, the time is now as we contemplate post-covid realities. More can be said of this thought-provoking book but for now it is to appreciate Livingston's candid and brutally honest analysis of development for a middle-income country caught in the quagmire of a development crisis as local as it is global. It needs to be more widely read especially for students of development and social policy. It definitely sheds an interesting light on Botswana's development trajectory.

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