

BOOK REVIEW

Julie Livingston. *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019. 176 pp. Photographs. Notes. Index. \$23.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1478006398.

Julie Livingston's new book is an unusual and special one, a book that is an outlier among many published in African Studies where specificity, place, detail, and nuance is prized. Livingston has dared to write a book that deviates from the micro and forces the reader to engage with an unsettling set of truths about development that apply to the world as a whole. She organizes this slim volume (only 176 pages, with 25 dedicated to a powerful photo essay) around the parable of self-devouring growth, as told through three metaphors. These metaphors are not just about Africa, but they highlight the interconnectedness between Africa and the rest of the world. She chooses not just to talk about Botswana, or Africans, but to engage with broader categories of "the poor" in ways meant to draw out the similarities in suffering. What distinguishes this work from so many others in African Studies is that while Botswana is where the author begins, it is never where she ends. The small, prosperous, well-governed African country is a place of reference, a place to be quickly oriented before being whisked off further afield. What makes this approach effective is the persuasive demonstration of how growth-related challenges—ecological, environmental, developmental, health—are shared globally.

The book is organized into four main sections which allow three metaphors to be explored, crudely summarized as being about the practice of rainmaking, the value and use of cows, and the production and function of roads. By focusing on these three basic topics, Livingston makes an overarching argument about the pitfalls of economic growth. She asks the reader to consider the problems inherent with considering growth as essential to development; the uncomfortable conclusion is that unfettered and unthoughtful growth begets more growth and greater consumption.

One of the book's most powerful examples focuses on radioactive cars exported from Japan, bound for Guyana. Livingston points out the sad irony, and overall injustice, in the movement of these poisonous objects from one country to the next. Harkening back to her earlier work about cancer and

oncology wards in Botswana, Livingston writes, “That these carcinogenic cars should arrive in places with no Geiger counters and limited oncology services is a diorama of the public health implications of self-devouring growth” (117). This instance typifies another lesson of the parable. The same countries where economic growth is preached as the solution to meet development indicators also bear the brunt of the double-edged impact of self-devouring growth—both losing resources that are needed to fuel the growth, and being buried in the byproducts generated by that same process.

A notable addition to this book is the 25-page photo essay, “Cattle to Beef: a Photo Essay of Abstraction,” set in the middle of the book. It is an informative and jarring examination of the process of turning cattle into ready-for-export beef at the Lobatse abattoir. It is rare to find a publisher and author willing to devote space to a full-length photo essay. Kudos to Duke’s series “Critical Global Health: Evidence, Efficacy, Ethnography” for taking the risk.

We finished this book certain that it would be of great value in the classroom with both undergraduate and graduate students, in classes as diverse as African studies, development studies, and global health. But we anticipate students moaning; there is plenty of space for great debate, but then the dreaded question, “What do we do?” The parable form provides no easy solutions. There are no prescriptive conclusions here, no pages of actions that development workers, global health practitioners, or concerned global citizens can take. Readers will inevitably wonder about the correct response to having read this book. How can we curb the insatiable appetite of self-devouring growth? Livingston never advocates for an anti-science approach, or pretends that a return to a pre-colonial past would solve today’s problems. She discusses the value of an “animated ecology” that would consider the moral value of the objects and spaces around us (126). This is not a detailed plan, but rather more a musing on how things could be, or should be, or might be, if we were to slow down, to think and consider. It seems to us the point of a parable, and the point of this book, is that readers should come away with a new understanding of the intertwined system of relationships in which they find themselves enmeshed, at both local and planetary levels.

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