

Reflections on a continent torn between yesterday and tomorrow

Kevin Bloom and Richard Poplak, *Continental Shift: A Journey into Africa's Changing Fortunes*

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This book by two well-respected South African journalists is, in many ways, a coming-of-age retelling of an intricate and unexpected journey through a continent that is itself experiencing some growing pains. A write-up of a project that spans nine years and 10 countries (Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Central African Republic) this “biography” of an adolescent Africa has evidently battled through a number of existential crises before taking on the form that is presented to the reader in this publication almost a decade after its inception. Told with all the verve that one would expect of travel-writing, the authors invite the reader to join a confounding trip through a continent that is as much at odds with itself and its guests, as it is with the rest of the world. Yet, these identity crises – documented and preserved in this collection of stories, anecdotes and conversations that say more on one page than many academic theses – are also the book’s greatest contribution to an ever-expanding body of literature on Africa and its contested potential for growth in the near future.

As could be expected, the reader is confronted in the pages of the book by an Africa that is both rich in natural resources, languages and traditions, and poor in effective politicians and good governance. This is a continent with capital cities that have benefited from enormous (mostly Chinese?) investment in infrastructure development, while the roads that connect these cities are often in such poor condition that they cannot be travelled (pp 1–2). It is a continent where large-scale industrialisation and skills development in civil society have contributed to an increase in income per capita of nearly two-thirds since 1998, while almost half its people live below the internationally accepted poverty line of \$1.25 per day (p 3). Most importantly, perhaps, the authors present an Africa that is simultaneously trapped in stereotypes imposed on it by well-intentioned peers, and holds within its grasp a destiny that it alone can define. As they put it:

As we languished in Bakavu, willing but unable to drive to the Promised Land in Goma, we were overcome by a familiar sensation. Africa was at a crossroads, and the world – more than at any point in history – was depending on her sense of direction (pp 3–4).

However, the value of this contribution to literature on African political economy extends beyond the usual “panoply of Western editorial obsessions” (p 4). While the authors’ sketches of morphing African villages, cities and cultures are fascinating in their own right, it is the internal conflicts and substantive questions

that the authors encounter throughout the journey that really captivate the reader. In a continent of paradoxes, the authors themselves are aware of their “otherness” as white, English-speaking, middle-class Jewish South Africans on a journey through an Africa to which their homeland only just belongs. Their position as outsider-insiders, or insider-outsiders, then becomes a metaphor for the exceedingly stereotyped, yet remarkably undefined, Africa whose essence Bloom and Poplak attempt to capture in their writing. *Continental Shift* contains no shortage of illustrations of the contradictions this continent plays home to, however, the authors’ description of the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa best encapsulates this enigma:

The Addis on the ground belonged to a different era than the Addis in the sky; elevators doubled as time machines ... The new African Union headquarters, built at a reported cost of \$200 million by the Chinese government ... rose 99.9 metres into the Ethiopian sky (pp 229–233).

Understandably, an adequate retelling of the authors’ impressions documenting the difference between *growth* and *development* on a continent whose “trajectory appeared ... decoupled from history, unattached from any [identifiable] continuum” (p 7) is a daunting task, and it shows. Like the authors, it is difficult for the reader to “tell the structure from the form” of this book, which is articulated in the authors’ perplexed summary of the final product as “a limited set of snapshots [that] proposes an answer to the question of Africa’s *what?*” (p 9). Whereas, however, this lack of structure could be seen as a shortcoming of the book, the structure *fits* the form of the story. As the authors remark, Africa is a continent that is returning to its destiny amid “a propulsive energy [and] a slow creeping chaos” (p 356) that represent both challenges and opportunities.

Ultimately, as one could ask of the book what it means to lay bare, *Continental Shift* forces the reader to (re)consider what exactly we expect of Africa. Is Africa “a balkanised non-place on the brink of dissolution, a rent-a-country governed by masters and miners and bankers in foreign capitals” (p 308)? Or, is it possible for Africa to redefine its destiny to become “not a place that copies models, but a place that serves as one” (p 129)? These questions are intimately linked to differing notions of what exactly the developed African state should look like. As Bloom and Poplak imply, even Africans cannot agree on a suitable definition of “development”. While South Africans are flocking from their country *en masse* in search of a “better life” in the industrialised nations of the Occident, Congolese officials encountered in Gombe tend to paint South Africa as a paradise for governance and service delivery – the epitome of freedom (p 196). Conversely, career diplomat and unofficial ambassador of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), Lumumba Stanislaus-Kaw Di-Aping, rejects a developmental plan for South Sudan in the image of South Africa’s “scattered transformation plan”, arguing that “Lumumba wanted us to bear in mind ... the endemic kleptomania that had knocked South Africa’s own development vision off-course. Then, he wanted us to juxtapose it against ... the SPLM” (p 277).

These anecdotes from Bloom and Poplak's travels through the continent serve to reiterate what much of the outside world chooses to ignore: "Africa is not a country" (p 345). Africa is a continent of "binaries and paradoxes, [of] roads and borders, borders and roads" (p 356). It is also a continent that is torn between its own fortunes: between diverse ethnicities, boundless resources and vast landmasses; a continent torn between yesterday and tomorrow, uncertain about what exactly to do today. What is certain, to the authors, is that "Africa [is] returning to herself" – poised to welcome onto its soil "two billion souls, maybe more ... by the middle of the century" (p 356).

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