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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

ROGAIA MUSTAFA ABUSHARAF, *Transforming Displaced Women in Sudan: politics and the body in a squatter settlement*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press (hb £38 – 978 0 22600 199 9; pb £14 – 978 0 22600 200 2). 2009, 208 pp.

WENDY JAMES, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: voices from the Blue Nile*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (hb £83 – 978 0 19929 867 9; pb £26 – 978 0 19957 226 7). 2007, 368 pp.

It is particularly timely to be reviewing these books in the lead-up to South Sudan's secession, for both books focus on communities whose position after the division of Sudan is far from secure. Rogaia Abusharaf explicitly describes *Transforming Displaced Women in Sudan* as 'urgent anthropology'. But like the vulnerability of southern displaced people around Khartoum, the uncertain future of the people of the 'Transitional Areas' between north and south also lends a sense of urgency to Wendy James's *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands*. The books share a great deal more; neither describes itself as conventional ethnography, and both seek to present the extended testimony of their informants directly. In doing so they reveal the evocative metaphors with which people describe displacement: becoming like wild animals (James), discarded tails of lizards, or flour scattered on thorny fields (Abusharaf). Suffering and loss is thus presented without sentimentality or pity, and is all the more powerful for it. Both authors describe their research sites as 'microcosms' of Sudan as a whole, and wrestle with the complexities and ambiguities of identity and power upon which this claim rests. The presence of death also pervades both books, as a constant companion on long migrations, as the loss of lives and ways of life, and even as a longed-for liberation from current suffering. Yet even more powerful is the will to live, and to create and recreate social and cultural lives in the face of their destruction.

Transforming Displaced Women examines the multiple marginality of southern Sudanese women displaced to the shanty-towns around Khartoum, and it argues that their social relations with and cultural adaptations to the 'host' societies around them reveal the complexity and dynamism of identities. Poverty and gender unite women from different backgrounds; indeed they view their gender as the source of their adaptability and inter-communal understanding: 'Women are more open in this way than men, who resist change', says one young woman in the shanty-town (p. 70). The Introduction and first two chapters are an extended discussion of the need to understand the transformations and individual agency inherent in displacement; at times the points feel repetitive, but given the prevailing international simplifications of Sudan's conflicts and depictions of both women and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as passive victims, these are important arguments to labour. The high point of the book is Chapter 3, which discusses southern women's adoption of northern cultural practices, including female circumcision and smoke-baths. Abusharaf sensitively explores understandings of these rituals among both northern and southern women, the complexity and variety of their decisions as to whether to practise them, and the questions they raise of power and cultural dominance. Chapter 4 turns to women's role in peace initiatives, forming an interesting counterpoint to the study of marginalized and impoverished women by focusing on women 'empowered' by feminist and rights initiatives to campaign at higher political levels. This chapter lacks some of the critical analysis of the rest of the book, slipping somewhat into the language of advocacy and celebration. But it too is revealing of women's own

notions of power, including a perceived historical role as peacemakers, and even their use of sexual politics to control the violence of men, a source of power that northern women also claim to gain through circumcision.

Abusharaf explains that her book is not a longitudinal study of the multiple displacements experienced by her informants, and suggests that no anthropologist could produce such a history without generalizing about the past (p. 3). Yet *War and Survival* defies this general assertion by providing a rich and detailed historical anthropology, the product of its author's unusually long and deeply committed engagement with a particular community, and repeated encounters with its members at various points on their long journeys of flight and displacement. Informed by a deep anthropological and linguistic understanding of a way of life that contemporary researchers will only learn of via the memories of informants, James is able to share in Uduk memories of where they came from, as the final moving sentence of the book demonstrates. She is also liberated from the need to produce a more conventional ethnography by her two previous books about the Uduk. This book is instead a riveting history of war and migration, told through the otherwise unheard voices of its principal informants. The first two parts tell the story of war and displacement in the Sudan–Ethiopia borderlands in the first decade of the SPLA war from 1983, providing a unique perspective on historical episodes like the 1991 SPLA split as well as insight into the lives of the displaced. The final part of the book examines the revival of cultural expression, notably dance and song, and a website of video footage is available to illustrate it. The book is a story of repeated border crossings, but it emphasizes that this entails no permanent severing of cultural belonging, and it shows the mobility and ambiguity of identity in polarized military and political contexts. With an important historical introduction, the book analyses the ambiguity of relations with the state; people both seek and avoid the government, and move in and out of the state itself.

Both books are powerful correctives to the black-and-white dichotomies made of Sudan in the international media – there is no straightforward divide between northerners and southerners, Christians and Muslims, hosts and IDPs, good and bad armies, victims and perpetrators. Everyone is caught up in the moral ambiguities generated by war, migration and cultural and economic adaptation. A sense of moral community is frequently produced by remembering long-lost homes and former ways of life; individual and collective compromises and adaptations are understood as survival mechanisms, a sustained but temporary suspension of an old life which may in reality never be regained. Yet the uneasiness of the moral ambiguities inherent in the 'survival' and 'transformation' of the two book titles pervades the books themselves, and is never entirely resolved.

Abusharaf wrestles with the adaptation of displaced southerners to the northern cultures they encounter in Khartoum. She squarely faces the power dynamics behind their adoption of aspects of the 'dominant' culture, and yet overall interprets this as an empowering process for the displaced women themselves, who 'increased their relative autonomy' (p. 142). She asserts that there is no one-way street travelled by southerners, yet while there are clearly interests and concerns shared with northern hosts, there is no evidence in the book of cultural influence travelling in the other direction. And while circumcision is understood by some northern women as an empowering act, displaced women explain their adoption of it more in terms of seeking to fit in or to please men. The reference to southern women 'shedding skin' (p. 78) is a powerful expression of the painful loss behind their adaptation, yet the liberating tone of its deployment belies the irony of a metaphor that also evokes the historical interplay of race with culture and power.

In James's book the core tension is in a sense the reverse: the articulation of a distinct Uduk culture and community has been strengthened through the experiences of war and displacement, the influence of ethnicity-based government and refugee policy, and the availability of new technologies of communication to mitigate the scattering of the community. The survival of vernacular language and revival of cultural expression is hailed as vital to the recreation of a sense of belonging and a place in the world, and yet the darker side of new ethnic consciousness and new dichotomies of good and evil also rears itself in the book, most vividly in the 'battle of Karmi' between Uduk and Nuer refugees.

That neither book resolves these tensions and moral ambiguities is not a failing, for they reflect the power and politics of culture with which their protagonists are also wrestling. What emerges most clearly from both books is the role of active agency and choice – be it individual or collective – in negotiating the dilemmas posed by war and displacement; people's decisions are not predetermined by their ethnic identity, religious or political affiliation, or even necessarily their family membership. Both authors criticize the international policies towards refugees and IDPs for their frequent denial of just this agency, not least in the assumption that the migrants must ultimately 'return', a process viewed by the subjects of these books with ambivalence, to say the least. Above all, the two books complicate notions of power and empowerment by demonstrating how people may mitigate their own marginality by appropriating and deploying resources from its very source. The result, as James puts it, is a 'consciously transformed, if recognizable, social world', a world that will continue to be transformed as such communities negotiate their place in the post-secession Sudans.

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DEREK PETERSON (ed.), *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press (pb $28.95 – 978 0 82141 902 1). 2010, 248 pp.

SEYMOUR DRESCHER and PIETER C. EMMER (eds), *Who Abolished Slavery? Slave Revolts and Abolitionism: a debate with João Pedro Marques*. New York NY and Oxford: Berghahn Books (hb £26.50 – 978 1 84545 636 8). 2010, 216 pp.

As the literature on the Atlantic slave trade has proliferated, so too have a series of debates. One of the sources of debate is the connection of the abolition movement to nineteenth-century imperialism, a topic linked to a 65-year exchange on Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery*. Another source of debate in recent years has been the desire of people of African descent to connect with their origins. Like Jews, Armenians and other victims, many of them have developed sites that symbolize the bitter memories of suffering in slavery. Though most academic historians, including all of the authors gathered in these two collections, would agree that the slave trade was a brutal and traumatic experience, some sites have become the subject of myth making, of tales that never happened, and of elaboration on what did happen. On the other side, there are official memories that celebrate abolition as a moral triumph, often touted by political leaders who would rather remember abolition and the good persons who produced it than the