erotic encounters and the anxiety of becoming ‘un-African’ if sexuality is detached from motherhood, wifehood and the prevailing gerontocratic gender order. For men, if their sexuality becomes ‘partner-oriented’ and ‘controllable’, it risks undermining their sense of masculinity, conventionally associated with notions such as ‘spontaneity’ and ‘virility’. Thus, both sexes in the Nairobi vanguard find themselves caught in Judit Butler’s paradox of subjectivation, according to the author.

*Ambiguous Pleasures* stands out as a seminal contribution advancing a bold and refreshing proposal for a new research epistemology for the study of sexuality in Africa. There are many take-away points from the richly textured ethnography as it effectively dismantles entrenched stereotypes and convincingly shows how these ‘hip’ and ‘sophisticated’ urbanites navigate between ‘Africanness’ writ large (gerontocratic authority structures, circumcision, bride wealth, traditional gender values) and ‘Westernisation’ (individualism, romantic notions of love, gender equality, chastity and fidelity) in their sexual lives. Moreover, the author shows how public debates about ‘good and bad sex’, gender, moral codes and their transgression are part and parcel of the social fabric that makes sexuality a privileged gateway to larger questions about social transformations, alternative modernities and postcoloniality. However, what exactly constitutes the alternative modernities of the emergent middle class in Nairobi, Kenya remains elusive and still seems a largely open research question. In her efforts to answer this question the author misses two contemporary sites that could have been productively mined. The first is marriage/inheritance law and the second is virtual worlds.

In the wake of the new Constitution of 2010, which promoted women’s rights, conspicuous public debates emerged about what will happen to the institution of marriage when the inheritance rights of women are recognised and accorded legal status. In a monograph that is so finely attuned to discursive registers, the omission of marital legalities and their public reception seems odd; and even more so if the interlocutors might have been silent on the issue. Secondly, it is strange that the penultimate chapter that opens with a quote from the author’s email correspondence with one of her interlocutors and deals with films, television, advertisements, music and magazines ignores social media, blogs and websites pertaining directly to Nairobi’s dating scene. These two institutional sites have gained even more visibility since the author did her ethnography in 2001, so the omission could be understandable. However, an inclusion of these sites could have rendered the analytic dialectic of ‘Westernisation’ versus ‘Africanness’ richer, because it seems that the legalities emanating from the new Constitution and the vernacular of on-line dating worlds are suggestive for the alternative modernities, which make up the crux of the author’s argument.

Reference


MARTIN SKRYDSTRUP

*University of Copenhagen (Denmark)*


In August 2005 a devastating disaster occurred on the US Golf Coast due to the force of a Category 5 hurricane known as Katrina and an interconnected social, institutional and infrastructural vulnerability. Besides killing thousands of people directly and indirectly, causing major economic losses and destroying some 300,000 homes, approximately 1.5 million people (an overwhelming majority African Americans) were forced to evacuate to other places in the country. The volume describes the experiences of those ‘internally displaced persons’ (IDPs) as a consequence of Katrina.
The case studies are mainly descriptive, aiming to give an account of the experiences of those displaced and the people receiving them in different locations around the country. The ethnography presented in the volume is the accumulated result of a research collaboration between twelve feminist social scientists ranging from graduate students to full professors. Two of them were disaster researchers before the storm. Among the other scholars, six of them lived in New Orleans and became involved in action-oriented research by being survivors and social scientists. The remaining scholars became involved by living and working in the receiving communities. This condition of simultaneously being victims, rescuers, activists and scholars is discussed in both methodological and ethical terms in Chapter 2, ‘The Research Network’, although their epistemological implications are not really addressed.

Unlike refugees, IDPs have not crossed any international borders to seek refuge from danger, but remain in their countries of residence. While armed conflict is the principal cause for internal displacement worldwide, natural disasters also produce resettlement. According to UNHCR figures, some 15 million people became internally displaced in 2011 due to natural disasters, a majority of them in the so-called developing countries, but also in wealthy countries. In fact, Katrina was not the first disaster to cause a process of internal displacement in the USA (cf. Oliver-Smith 2006). While the volume has a comparative scope, it is not aimed at comparing the Katrina diaspora with the displaced persons from other disasters, but focuses instead on the comparison between the different cases of displacement after Katrina. This rationale produces the order of the fourteen chapters in the volume, divided into three sections, each starting with a brief overview.

The chapters in the first section, ‘Receiving Communities’, focus on urban and rural communities in different states that received displaced persons, and describe both processes of solidarity with and discrimination of the resettled. Chapter 3, written by Lori Peek, is particularly interesting as she questions the notion of ‘disaster fatigue’, so widespread among disaster professionals, referring to the transition from solidarity with the victims to hostility in the surrounding and receiving communities. Instead of seeing this as an expression of the inability of people to sustain solidarity over time, Peek suggests that the solidarity displayed at the time of the disaster is a temporary disruption of the otherwise pervasive patterns of social inequality and discrimination in American society.

The chapters in the second section of the book, ‘Social Networks among Katrina’s Displaced’, deal with the significance of formal and informal networks for the women survivors in the process of evacuation and relocation. The stories told by the African American women and Garifuna immigrants give account of the historic conditions of vulnerability that these communities lived in and how the displacement exacerbated them. The third and final section, ‘Charting a Way Forward’, consists of a compelling case study of the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, a social justice movement coalition of poor African Americans that emerged in the wake of the disaster, aimed at achieving political mobilisation among survivors. The study gives account of the complex web of pre-existing and emergent ideas, relations and interests that pervade the post-disaster context, and sheds light on the possibilities and challenges inherent in the notion of the crisis as a window of opportunity for social change.

All the case studies in this volume are ethnographically rich and well written, giving a comprehensive picture of the experience of displacement post-Katrina. I now look forward to a follow up volume that draws upon these ethnographies to address theoretically relevant questions and engage with other existing studies on forced migration in the fields of development-induced displacement, refugee studies and disaster research.
West’s monograph contributes to the growing literature on the circulation and commodification of agricultural products. It examines the global commodity chain for coffee, from the rural growers living in a Gimi-speaking village of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea to the transporters, factory owners and exporters, the so-called ‘middlemen’ in Goroka and then in Lae and Port Moresby, to reach people who import, market, roast and consume coffee in places like Hamburg, Sydney, Brisbane and New York. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research and an impressive amount and variety of data, West reveals the ambivalences and depths of the economic processes and social relationships developed around the coffee industry.

One in every three people in Papua New Guinea is connected to the coffee industry in some way and coffee is the only source of income for 300,000–400,000 households. Between 86% and 89% of coffee grown in Papua New Guinea is ‘smallholder’ coffee, grown in small, family-owned gardens. Prices recorded by West on 6 August 2006 along the commodity chain show that one pound of origin marketed coffee costs $12.95 in a shop in the USA, while exporters in Goroka get paid between $1.00 and $1.41 per pound, and growers in Maimafu village (where West did most of her village-based fieldwork) received $0.33 per pound, which equals an hourly wage of about $0.15 when prices are high. However, despite the role coffee plays in their life, people in Maimafu don’t drink coffee and don’t exchange it among themselves. ‘Coffee is seen as their link to cash and the root of their claims to modernity’ (p. 111) West remarks, and in the growers’ imagination it carries the message that they are modern and developed. Although coffee is not part of the way Gimi people come to be in-the-world in the cosmological sense (such as West explains sweet potatoes are), it becomes valuable as a commodity through social exchanges entailed by transactions. And by the alienation of their labour products it slowly changes the Gimi world, turning them into individualised, self-possessed persons (p. 128). Yet, coffee is seen as relational. Christian missionaries fly ‘airstrip coffee’ out of Maimafu to Goroka and further along the chain are the buyers and factory processors from Goroka. Although coffee-based connections between growers and town-based businessmen are seen as meaningful and beneficial, often described as friendships, people on both sides are often suspicious about each other. On the one side, there is a nagging worry in the village that someone is making money off something that rightfully belongs to people from Maimafu. They believe that they produce the best coffee, which is afterwards blended with poorer quality coffee and therefore people in Maimafu are underpaid. On the other side, factory owners complain that village plantations are not well run, growers are not knowledgeable about production and storage is improper.

Following up this chain, West offers excellent insights into the issue of distribution. Drawing on interviews and insightful reflections on her fieldwork encounters, she describes expatriates working for transnational coffee import/export firms in Lae and Port Moresby and coffee traders in Hamburg, London and Brisbane. The latter share their uneasiness regarding the fantasy work they have to engage in to sell their coffee on today’s