Marie Grace Brown is Associate Professor and Associate Chair in the History Department at the University of Kansas. Her book *Khartoum at Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan* (Stanford University Press, 2017) traces gestures, intimacies, and adornment to give a history of northern Sudanese women's lives under imperial rule. Brown will deliver the first of two keynote addresses at the Space Between 2025 conference. She sat down with conference host Aimee Wilson to discuss three books that she's reading in preparation for that keynote.

Those books are:

- Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*
- Shannon Walsh and Jon Soske, eds., *Ties That Bind: Race and the Politics of Friendship in South Africa*
- Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self*

Wilson: I'm very excited that you are delivering the opening keynote for the conference. I'd like to start by asking you for a brief description of your research and what you plan to discuss in the keynote.

Brown: Thank you for this invitation and opportunity to showcase my work-in-progress. I am a cultural historian of Sudan, and my past work has focused on gender, fashion, and the body as historical text. In my current project, I've turned my attention to affective and sentimental relationships among British imperialists in Sudan. Britain held imperial control over Sudan from 1898 to 1956. For my upcoming keynote, I'm focusing on British men's relationships with their domestic servants, who also happened to be men. I'm trying to unpack these homosocial domestic spaces between male British imperialists, their male Sudanese servants, and the power dynamics that are moving through that space.

Wilson: That sounds fascinating. Can you tell me more about what you have planned for the keynote?

Brown: I've identified the kitchen as a primary space in which not only is colonial power exerted—Sudanese men are forced to produce meals for British imperialists—but power is also resisted or subverted. For example, Sudanese cooks are often tucking away a bit of flour and sugar for their own families, they often cook the meals that they want to cook, and they interpret British recipes in a particular way. So the kitchen also becomes a creative space where cooks resist imperialism but also demonstrate a specialized knowledge of British appetites and tastes. They have a highly developed skill set that they use to take local ingredients and transform into something that looks appropriate for a British table. There's a whole bunch of creativity that is happening in that space.

Wilson: I can see why Ann Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* would be a touchstone for the work that you're doing. Could you tell us about that book and how you're finding useful?

Brown: It's an oldie but a goodie! I'm returning primarily to her final chapter which is called "Memory Work in Java." Stoler collected oral histories from former Javanese servants, and she has a small section in that chapter on food practices. Stoler begins with the assertion that racial

and colonial categories are affirmed or reaffirmed by what one eats so that, in this case, Dutch people are perceived to eat bland food without much variety (like potatoes), while Javanese food is spiced and varied. She begins with that premise and then points out that these boundaries really aren't fixed. In Javanese eyes, Dutch families who eat rice were deemed to have acclimatized to Indonesia, or perhaps they have some mixed blood within them. Similarly, the back kitchens were deemed to be off-limits or a Javanese space in which the colonizer didn't enter. Yet Dutch children regularly go into kitchens for snacks or for a kind of maternal care and attention from the cooks. This got me thinking about the kitchen as a space that operates differently from the rest of the household. Certainly, in the Sudanese context, the kitchen is separate from the house proper. It is an entirely different unit. So physically it's different, but also figuratively or psychically different as this space that seems to be off-limits but perhaps also place where some people, like children, are crossing boundaries.

Wilson: Your point about children going into the kitchen for care makes me think about the edited collection that you have on the list, *Ties That Bind: Race and the Politics of Friendship in South Africa*. How does that work play a role in your thinking for the talk?

Brown: I came across this collection by happenstance. It's a powerful collection of essays, some of which are historical, some of which are contemporary and self-reflective. It introduces friendship as a political space, a site for understanding how power operates in everyday social relationships. The collection makes this important distinction between family and friendship in ways I hadn't considered. Kinship or familial relationships carry prescribed obligations, while friendship, as described in this collection, is mutually given affection. So unlike family, friendship is an open-ended commitment on the part of two individual people. In the colonial context or even a postcolonial context, there's a question as to who can equally and fully participate in such a commitment. Friendship also draws our attention to space: Where do friends encounter one another for the first time and form those bonds? Where is friendship allowed to exist or not exist? Again, thinking about the kitchen as an alternate space. You might also imagine private clubs as places where friendships can be formed.

What I like about this collection is the multiplicity of voices. Some authors are adamant that claims of friendship cover up violence or that they misdirect our attention away from the unequal power dynamic. But other authors suggest that friendship can clue us into moments of resistance or subversion. The identifier of "friend" might actually be something to investigate further in terms of how people interact: what are their obligations to each other? Are they mutually giving or exchanging affection in a way that is or is not condoned within a larger society?

Wilson: Or that may allow for subversion like stealing bits of flour under the cover of some sort of act of friendship.

Brown: Yeah, for sure. What we often see is the colonial voice suggesting, "so-and-so is like a friend," which obscures the violence that's happening. But you're absolutely right that the façade of friendship or the blurred lines between employer and servant—that very much happens again and again in homosocial, male-only households—allows for servants themselves to be playing on that friendship and taking advantage of it by taking flour or sugar back.

Wilson: Could you speak to why there were so many male homosocial domestic arrangements in Sudan? What it was about the governing structures in Sudan that made it so common?

Brown: This is due to Sudan's position as not a colony, or not quite a colony. The official governing structure was a "condominium" because Sudan was ruled by both Great Britain and Egypt. This was not intended to be a settler colonial project. Britain set up a program that identified young men, predominantly graduates from Oxford or Cambridge, who were looking for adventure. They were, interestingly, not looking for graduates who earned the highest marks but the ones who were, for example, really good on the varsity rugby team. They were actively looking for athletic, well-educated men for this adventure, and they sell it as such: a chance to do good while also participating in big-game hunting. But Sudan is also imagined by the British as a hardship post, a place that is inappropriate for white women, and so these men are given a very generous annual leave policy of *three months* at home. The imagined structure is that British imperial officials would spend nine months in Sudan, focused entirely on their work, undistracted by domestic issues. Then they would return home—sources talk about the "cool temperate winds of England"—and that is where they would engage in any sort of familial connections, sexual connections, courtship, and marital relationships. Those relationships are put on pause as the men return to Sudan. There's great discussion of loneliness, on the part of British imperialists, but also we have some Sudanese observers who are saying that they don't know how these men are managing. The British men come home at night, have a glass of whiskey, read until the light fades, and then they go to bed. Sudanese observers note that this doesn't seem like a life. Especially for men in rural areas, they are quite isolated and dependent upon a companionship, a friendship perhaps, with domestic servants who were almost exclusively men.

Wilson: It seems like Lupton's book, *Food, the Body and the Self*, encapsulates a lot of the ideas that you talked about so far.

Brown: This book brought so many of my disparate thoughts together. I was struggling to figure out a way to talk about affect or sentiment between colonizer and colonized. Using *Ties that Bind* as a guide, how do I think about power and sentiment, and how do I talk about them as a scholar responsibly? I firmly believe that we have to acknowledge the existence of affection between these men. We have to acknowledge Black men's capacity to care for other people. They can't be in a submissive, oppressed state perpetually. What Lupton, a sociologist, does is reframe this dynamic. Numerous sociologists have argued that affective connections develop between ourselves and the people who prepare our food. Lots of people say that. But Lupton, especially in her opening chapter, does something different by describing the process of cooking as transformative, almost magical. She writes that uncooked food is unclean, unstable, and ambivalent. I'll try to paraphrase: she says that food is only days or hours away from rotting. Cooking is this process the transforms raw matter from a state of nature into a state of culture. Cooking tames this raw, almost rotting thing. It domesticates food. That was the light bulb for me. What these Sudanese men are doing in kitchens is transforming food that is about to go bad…food that is in the state of nature—

Wilson: —because they were often cooking in remote spaces, spaces that are between two towns, they're cooking under tents, over live fire—

Brown: Right, they're absolutely cooking in rugged conditions. Even in urban, settled areas, they still might be cooking over a wood stove. There's no refrigeration. If you buy meat at the market in the morning, you have to cook it and serve it that day. It clicked for me that Sudanese cooks are alchemists. They're not just domestic help. They're doing something magical, in all kitchens but certainly colonial kitchens. They're taking raw goods and transforming them into a thing that matches British tastes and British appetites.

Wilson: There's a real intimacy in cooking in the sense that food is something you ingest, but also intimacy in the understanding of the people they were cooking for.

Brown: Exactly. There's a specialized knowledge needed here. How do you get certain spices, or tone down the spices, how do you prepare a cut of meat in a way so that one's employer recognizes it? One imperial family tested out new cooks by asking them to prepare a pork chop. If it didn't look right or taste right, they didn't hire the cook. The expectation that a Sudanese man would know how to prepare a pork chop also speaks to a new knowledge transmission that is passing through domestic servant networks. This became specialized, technical knowledge that could be passed around from servant to servant. In the sources I'm looking at, mentions of cooks are almost always tied to a recitation of a meal that was prepared, and that it was delicious. The satiation of these British imperialists is so clear and so evident as proof that they feel cared for, nourished, and perhaps even nurtured. Lupton ties together everything I was learning about food, kitchens, and sentiment in the texts authored by Stoler and Walsh, and Soske. Cooking is this magical thing that is passed between us, and I'm interested in the bonds that come out of that.

Wilson: This is interesting, complex, and important work. I'm really looking forward to your keynote. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Brown: Thinking about the conference and spaces in-between, the take away for me from all of this is that cooks and kitchens don't seem to play by the same rules or analytic categories that are set for other spaces, and that's really exciting to me.

Read the first chapter of Brown's Khartoum at Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan *or her blog post "History Stands Alongside the Woman in the White Tobe: The Legacy of Sudanese Fashion and Politics"*