BOOK REVIEWS

La Rebelde by Leonor Villegas de Magnón. Ed. and intro. by Clara Lomas (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2004), 219 pp., $12.95.

This publication in the original Spanish of *La Rebelde,* the "novelized memoir" of Leonor Villegas de Magnón, represents an important documentary contribution to the history of women along the Texas-Mexico border, and fills a gap in the general understanding of the role of women in the Mexican Revolution. The extensive introduction by Clara Lomas summarizes the text at length, clarifying dates and details that Villegas de Magnón left maddeningly vague, as well as giving a feminist reading of the work and bringing the literary theories of memoir writing to bear on the text. The short epilogue by Martha Rocha further clarifies the text's tortuous path to publication and other historical details.

Villegas de Magnón was born into a wealthy family based in the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo area, and in 1913 she founded the "Constitutional White Cross" (later the National White Cross), an organization mainly staffed by women that provided nurses and other support to Venustiano Carranza in his campaign for control of Mexico. The memoir begins with an account of her childhood, education, and family life, before going into particularly detailed reminiscences of the events in 1913 and 1914, during part of which time she and her "sanitary brigade" traveled with the troops of Carranza and other generals, tending to the wounded, setting up field hospitals, and establishing local branches of the White Cross in various cities as they went. Under Villegas de Magnón's leadership, the ladies of the White Cross also organized banquets and receptions and coordinated with like-minded newpapers to bolster popular support and give the various generals (Carranza in particular) heroic welcomes as they moved through the country on their way to Mexico City.

Villegas de Magnón's stated purpose in writing the memoir was to give credit to the women she served with -- naming many of her colleagues and praising their efforts, talents and virtues effusively. The author's other obvious agenda was to vindicate Carranza as a hero and a veritable god of the Revolution, and to extol those who fought on his side: "The Revolution had to succeed [… all the Carrancista officials] are educated, of distinguished ancestry, and this isn't a bunch of bandits, as the federales say" (109, trnsl. mine). Over and over, Villegas emphasizes that the ladies leading her organization were the cream of Mexican society, and describes her colleagues with the classic adjectives of the idealized image of a middle-class woman: self-sacrificing, generous, and virtuous. They had, of course, left their husbands and children to participate actively in an armed conflict!

Here lies the interest of this memoir as a literary work: though the florid Romantic writing style is hard to swallow, and the narrative only occasionally makes for gripping excitement, the complexities of Villegas de Magnón's narrative masks allow for a very nuanced appreciation of the ironies in the life of this very committed, idealistic, and revolutionary bourgeois wife, mother, and kindergarten teacher. As Clara Lomas discusses in her introduction, this autobiography is written entirely in the third person -- Villegas de Magnón constantly refers to herself as "La Rebelde." The one exception comes very late in the work, a passionate statement that the women of the Mexican Revolution not be forgotten: "I write this for precisely this reason, to glorify [these women],

patriotic, self-sacrificing, and good" (151, trnsl. mine). It is the only time she uses the first person in the whole memoir.

In sum, the very qualities that keep this book from being an easy read are precisely those that make it a valuable and intriguing document of the author's life and participation in the Mexican Revolution.

Elizabeth Small
Assistant Professor of Spanish
SUNY Oneonta

Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa. (Johannesburg: Jacana Media/IPG, 2005), 336 pp., $19.95.

This groundbreaking book is the first to focus exclusively on African women's same sex practices with data produced by African women as researchers. Ruth Morgan, an anthropologist who directs the Lesbian & Gay Archives in Johannesburg, and anthropologist Saskia Wieringa initiated the African Women's Life Story Project in 2002. They trained nine women activists from six different countries who identified as lesbians to conduct research using oral history interview techniques, participant observation methods, and triangulation with other tools such as the collection of secondary data. The activists also received some education on varied same sex social practices and possible tensions between sexual behaviors and identities.

The volume argues that same sex practices have existed in Africa for centuries and are not imported from the "depraved" West as a number of Southern and Eastern African politicians have publicly asserted. The Life Story Project also aims to create more regional networks to give lesbians in Southern and Eastern Africa a sense of community and identity. The former objective is largely achieved and hopefully the latter will be too. As the authors note, beyond South Africa there are no organized groups to support lesbians or offer legal advice other than in Namibia and Tanzania. Instead, state sponsored homophobia, Christianity/Islam, and African patriarchal practices intersect to foster conditions of isolation and silence for same sex loving women in these regions.

Eight of the chapters have been co-authored by six activist researchers and one of the editors. The last two chapters—an excellent historical "reflections" and one of conclusions by Morgan and Wieringa—are concise and appear after a collection of author interviews. A common theme emerges from the interview based chapters: homosexuality is illegal in several countries and engenders fear, silence, and psychic stress, e.g., Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. Some states deprive women of land and inheritance rights; where lesbians are "absent" in the law, other laws and religions are used to discriminate against and isolate more "visible" lesbians.

Some chapters are better developed, such as those on "ancestral wives" among South African *sangomas* (traditional healers) who are permitted an "ancestral wife" to help with healing work, and gender identity among Ovambo women in Namibia. In the latter, an interviewee named Siros elaborates on her complex identity as a modern woman, a lesbian, and a strong husband as well as a provider and father to her partner's children. To publicly exhibit female masculinity elsewhere, e.g., Tanzania and Kenya, community respondents claim is far too dangerous. Nonetheless, Marci, a Ugandan tommy boy

dresses and lives as a man in a country where she could be arrested and jailed. The economics of survival and hostility from family members dissuade most women from publicly proclaiming their desires and revealing their identities. This volume is informative about emerging identities, encouraging due to the brave efforts of the researchers and the indomitable women who struggle to be different, and significant in opening a conversation about same sex love and practice among women in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Kathleen O'Mara
Chair, Africana & Latino Studies
SUNY Oneonta

Self-Made Man : One Woman's Journey into Manhood and Back by Norah Vincent (New York: Viking, 2006), 290 pp., $24.95

Self-Made Man relays the tale of "one woman's journey into manhood and back," chronicling journalist Norah Vincent's eighteen month odyssey spent infiltrating traditional male spaces: a bowling league, strip clubs, a Roman Catholic monastery, and a men's therapy group. In the spirit of John Howard Griffin, the white journalist who colored his skin and lived as a black man in the South for his 1961 book *Black Like Me*, Vincent becomes Ned by adding fake beard-stubble, undergoing a body-building regimen to add bulk to her frame, getting a flat-top haircut, and wearing a sports bra to flatten her breasts. She also employs a Julliard voice coach to help her emulate male speech patterns, and for verisimilitude, acquires a flaccid prosthetic penis. Upon acting on a dare to dress as a man and walk through New York's East Village, Vincent began ruminating on the dynamics of male-female relationships, as well as "the unspoken codes of male experience." This incident became the inspiration for Vincent to delve into manhood as Ned, hoping that she would then be able to examine social disparity between the sexes more thoroughly.

Vincent situates herself as a privileged, middle-class lesbian, and at times a feminist, but many of her assertions throughout the book render the latter identification precarious at best. The group solidarity Ned finds within the bowling league, Vincent asserts, is something feminism could learn from. She writes, "This solidarity of sex was something … that men figured out and perfected a long time ago. On some level men didn't need to learn or remind themselves that brotherhood was powerful. It was just something they seemed to know." She contrasts this favorable portrait of innate male wisdom with that of women she has encountered, and notes that "most of the women I'd ever shaken hands with or even hugged had held something back, as if we were in constant competition with each other, or secretly suspicious…. In my view bra burning hadn't changed that much." The fact that most women *are* in constant competition with one another within the patriarchal and heteronormative structures of society seems to have eluded Vincent. Disappointingly, she allows these structures, and the hegemonic ideologies that inform and sustain them, to remain uninterrogated.

Although Vincent gives a caveat in the introduction, claiming that "What follows is just my view of things … a woman's eye view of one guy's approximated life," throughout the book she makes sweeping generalizations based on her isolated experiences as Ned, which are often at odds with her professed feminist consciousness. She portrays the behavior of men at sex clubs as "the opposite of misogyny," elucidating

that the objectification of women working within that context occurs simply because each woman there hardly resembles a real woman at all; this, apparently, allows men to mistreat women (and themselves, Vincent notes) enough to indulge in their impulses. Feeling the discomfort of masculinity and all of its trappings, and what it does not only to women but also to men, Vincent is left feeling profound sympathy for men. She underscores this notion by paralleling her previous experience as a doubly oppressed minority—as a woman and a lesbian—with what she experiences as Ned, "the equally heavy burden of being a double majority, a white man."

Vincent's account of working as a door-to door salesman portrays the crude hubris of Ned's co-workers, who continually advise him to "show your balls!" Vincent is astounded when, accoutered with one of Ned's power suits, she submits to this mentality and actually succeeds in bullying sales and thus earning her boss's praise. Ned's sojourn into manhood also includes a number of strained dates with women.

Vincent articulates the nuances of gender performance and what a toll this continual negotiation can take on one's psyche. She writes that, upon ending her experiment, she signed herself into a psychiatric institution. She writes, "All the guilt about being an imposter, the anxiety of getting caught at it, and the by then extreme discomfort of contravening my own gender identity came rushing in." While the book is replete with Vincent's reflections on the negotiation of gender identity, male-to-male and male-to-female relations, she does not fully engage with these issues. So it seems that, by the end of the eighteen months, Vincent is left only with more compassion for men.

Sarah E. Courtney
SUNY Oneonta