BOOK REVIEWS

Rooms of Our Own by Susan Gubar (IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 241 pp., $ 40.00.

In the spirit of Cixous, Gubar weaves a narrative which like écriture féminine attempts to capture the story of women. Through the use of several key female characters including the main character, a female professor, Gubar examines the positioning of women in literature and society. This fictional tale of one year in the life of an English professor exposes and questions the current understanding of the roles of women as framed by theoretical approaches. Gubar opens with a short explanation of what led her to write the text (the character Mary Benton) and then seamlessly moves to elaborating the tale. This very accessible text which although at times is heavy with literary and feminist theory jargon is still readable for those who have not studied the references she uses to develop her critique.

Gubar's text is an enjoyable read even while still posing academic questions. At times, she is a bit heavy handed with the academic discourse as a means to press a point and it interferes with the cadence of the narrative, but overall her use of fiction to frame the text is successful. The one danger of writing in this style is the risk of becoming a roman à thèse, but Gubar avoids the predictability and redundancy typically found in works of this style. The beauty of a text like Gubar's is that it actively engages the reader's lens of situatedness; every reader finds a different experience.

One jarring element of the text is the jump in narrative between the opening chapter and the remaining text. It is as if the first chapter was written much earlier than the following chapters. Although published in 2006, Gubar uses imagery in reference to contemporary people/items that are a bit dated and reminiscent of the early 90's. This takes away from the immediacy of the text and is a time element that is not consistent with the later chapters. For instance, early in the text she references Janet Jackson and walkmans, but later in the text the references are more up to date with inclusion of IM language and technology such as a Palm Pilot. Nonetheless, the quality of the text is rich and layered with characters that capture the reader's attention.

Within the more academic purposes of the text also lies an engaging tale of a professor who observes a class and then follows the lives of several of the students in order to highlight feminist roles and critique female roles as a performance. One student she focuses on never actually appears in text and then becomes the subject of a police investigation after she disappears midpoint in the narrative. Other focus characters include a transgendered student (female to male), several colleagues, and the author's aunt. Gubar is careful not to portray her characters as flat stereotypes of female/gendered roles and instead develops characters which are realistic and complicated. Her balancing of

narrative style and character development is well played throughout most of the text although there are points of weakness. Her recounting of tenure struggles and department meetings are authentic and mirror the struggles which occur on campus across the country.

Gubar closes with the hope that she is able to engage the reader in feminist questioning and she succeeds. *Rooms of Our Own* leaves the reader with more questions than answers regarding the performance and roles we all play, as it should.

Kjersti VanSlyke-Briggs, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor, Secondary Education
SUNY Oneonta

The Virgin's Knot by Holly Payne (Plume Books, 2003), 320 pp., $14.00

The setting of Payne's debut novel is mid-twentieth-century Turkey, where strict patriarchal rule and the threat of poverty shape the lives of people in the remote village of Mavisu more than national politics. Crippled at the age of five by Polio, Nurdane's withered legs require her to use crutches, a fact of life that renders her unmarriageable in her culture. To protect his daughter, Ali claims that Allah has blessed his daughter's pure, virginal hands with divine creativity and power, which translates into the rugs that she weaves. Somewhat cruelly, Nurdane's rugs are prized as matrimonial dowries for young brides who believe the virgin's blessing through her work has the power to heal bodies and enhance fertility. Her rugs become legendary and absolutely essential for a successful and fruitful marriage. Nurdane's rugs are intricate and exquisite, so remarkably made and mythically powerful that her work becomes legendary, even to the outside world, and merchants and thieves compete with brides to obtain her rugs for the price they will bring at market.

Nurdane seems resigned to her life as an eternal virgin where weaving and teaching define her as those activities take up every waking moment. When Nurdane's doctor, Adam, brings along the American anthropologist Hennessey on a visit to Mavisu, the quiet security of Nurdane's life is disrupted. Nurdane is drawn to Hennessey and develops a longing for him that she knows is forbidden in her culture. At the same time, Adam, who has quietly fallen in love with the woman whose health he has tended for so many years, plans to ask Nurdane's father for her hand in marriage. Having enjoyed relative freedom and autonomy as a single woman in her village, Nurdane has no desire to be forced into marriage where she would necessarily have to become a submissive and obedient wife. Knowing she cannot have the man she loves and refusing to live

with a man she does not love, Nurdane chooses the only option that seems to be open to her and kills herself.

It seems that Payne attempts to weave the separate stories of Nurdane, Ali, Adam, Hennessey, and two Russian thieves into a narrative as intricate as the patterns woven into Nurdane's rugs but too often one story is dropped long enough for the reader to forget the details of that character. The story of Nurdane's determination to be self-defining is compelling but is interrupted far too often by exposition that complicates the story-telling and tends to de-rail the reader's focus. Reading the first half of the book is slow going and a bit tedious, but the construction of Nurdane's character and life is built with painstaking attention to detail, resulting in an intimate understanding of a beautifully complex character, one that evokes the reader's sympathy, admiration, respect and hope. The reader's investment in Nurdane and her life is shattered towards the end of the story because the writing becomes scattered as new concepts are suddenly introduced without the same detailed development of earlier characters and story elements. The reader is able to fully understand the undercurrents of misery in the lives of the women in the village because of the numerous details of everyday life that are embedded from the beginning of the story. Having grown used to such consistency, the concept of a never-before-mentioned secret place of worship where village women practice devotions to the Goddess that suddenly springs up at the end of the story seems ungrounded, an unnatural element thrown in an attempt to anchor the ending. Instead of inspiring hope, as one would hope a Goddess does, Nurdane's visit to the underground lake where the Goddess lives leads to her downward spiral into despair and she resorts to taking action over the only element she still has power over – her own life. Even the telling of her suicide is vague and unclear, almost dream-like, requiring the reader to re-read the ending to understand that the main character has died.

As in *The Awakening* and "*Thelma and Louise*," suicide as the only way for a woman to maintain control of her life in a world structured and controlled by strict patriarchal definitions of reality and women is extremely unsatisfying and seems to reinforce the message that women who cannot conform to patriarchal expectations of behavior must kill themselves to be free. Such an ending does not inspire hope or imagination.

Bambi Lobdell
Adjunct Lecturer
SUNY Oneonta

African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization by Neville Hoad. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 187 pp., $20.00, paper.

African Intimacies is a collection of essays in cultural studies that aims to challenge white western queer theory in order to center race and globalization in the growing field of sexuality studies. To do this Hoad begins by critiquing other anthologies and theoretical efforts in the area of African sexualities and homosexualities, e.g., Amadiume's *Male Daughters and Female Husbands* (1987), Murray and Roscoe's *Boy Wives and Female Husbands* (1998) and Arnfred's *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004), and finds each inadequate due to the instability of the categories of sexuality, homosexuality and "African." Thus Hoad eschews queer, sexuality, and homosexuality as words laden with imperialist meaning, and suggests "*intimacies* as a frame" to interrogate a "range of historical experiences and representations" of "sexuality and homosexuality." A Foucaultian, Hoad offers two moments in history as key to understanding the contest over the terms of African "sexuality" and African "modernity," that is, current political issues. The first (chapter one) event is the 1886 martyrdom of some thirty Ganda royal pages to *kabaka* (king) Mwanga of Baganda (Uganda) and the second (chapter three) is the 1998 World Conference of Anglican Bishops at Lambeth (UK) which produced a resolution stating that homosexuality was incompatible with scripture. Other chapters examine decolonizing black masculinity in Wole Soyinka's 1965 novel, *The Interpreters* and new black Atlantic modernity in Phaswane Mpe's 2001 novel, *Welcome To Our Hillbrow.* Chapters four and five, respectively, deal with southern African lesbian and gay human rights organizations' and President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa's response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These chapters assist Hoad's "intervention" into the "homosexuality as un-African" imaginary and construct a conversation with and between the discourses he describes as the sexual ideology of racism and imperialism, and the politics of sexual morality in Africa; the latter he identifies as a deeply embedded element in the impact of HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa.

By opening this volume with the martyrdom of the Bugandan Christian converts, young men who refused one day to obey the kabaka's command to submit to a physically intimate act, Hoad wants the reader to see how very different understandings of intimacy collide and reinfuse meaning. For the Victorian British, Mwanga was a sinful sodomite, whereas for the Bugandans, he may not have been "having sex," but enacting state power. Mwanga himself, Hoad says, may have seen it as anti-colonial resistance. Indeed, the execution of the pages produced a series of profound disruptions that Hoad argues unites the implementation of imperial/colonial power with the construction of the figure of the homosexual: a civil war between Muslim, Catholic and Protestant factions in

Baganda; direct British intervention in 1888 with a royal charter to "preserve law and order;" the Buganda Protectorate of 1894; the British Uganda Agreement of 1900; and the beatification of twenty-two Bugandan page-martyrs by Pope Benedict XV in 1920. Hoad then moves to the post-independence era, to tie homosexuality to decolonizing black masculinity by a (too) close reading of *The Interpreters* in which the central character, a gay African American is portrayed as a walking reminder of the colonized's loss—of virility and racial wholesomeness.

Examining the conflict over homosexuality, especially by African males—females are ignored—in the neoliberal present, Hoad details several key events: the 1998 Lambeth Conference where African bishops succeeded in getting a resolution passed on behalf of debt relief for poor nations while condemning homosexuality; President Robert Mugabe's 1995 banning of GALZ (Gays & Lesbians of Zimbabwe) from the Zimbabwe International Book Fair; the Book Fair incident 's incitement to other African leaders to public condemnations of homosexuality; and Thabo Mbeki's public positions on HIV/AIDS, especially his 2000 denial of HIV as the "cause" of AIDS. Despite South Africa's constitutional recognition of lesbian and gay rights, Hoad points repeatedly to the widespread "African" disbelief in or refusal of gay identity, labeling it as foreign and an import from the West and hence a stance denying l/g/b/t identities. As with other events discussed, Hoad argues that Mbeki's impulse to certify his anti-colonial credentials through an insistence on the African AIDS pandemic as unproved and a Western fiction, must be read through an anti-imperial lens and what Mbeki called the "sexual ideology of racism." This is the same lens political observers attribute to Mbeki's refusal to condemn the electoral corruption and violence of Zimbabwe's President Mugabe in Spring 2008.

Hoad's discussion of Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*, like his analysis of *The Interpreters*, identifies a history of suffering and loss as a shared background from which a new cosmopolitanism arises. This form of African modernity he contrasts to both a universalizing "gay identity" and forms of homosexual localism á la Murray and Roscoe. Mpe's novel is thus identified as the opening of a counter archive of texts that imagine and detail African sexuality or AIDS differently. Hoad argues for Africa as a major site for interrogating and imagining black Atlantic modernity, not simply as the place of loss and suffering; this is a point worth underscoring.

Some of Hoad's other efforts are less convincing. His title and opening gambit, the substitution of "intimacies" or bodily intimacies for sexual acts is unconvincing as a meaningful substitution. Analyses of sexuality by many, if not most theorists, certainly Foucault, entail a broader discussion of power and power relations which pervade sexual acts and sexual discourses. Hoad's discussions on African Anglican bishops' outrage about western acceptance of homosexuality, especially the ordination of Gene Robinson (USA) as bishop, does not just demonstrate that Christianity remains key to much antagonism to

homosexuality in Africa, but that metropolitan liberalism versus African conservatism on sexual matters has a history: the 1888 Lambeth Conference when the issue was polygamy and the African bishops were colonials! Hoad's use of "African" and "sexuality," indeed, make for unstable categories, especially since "Africa" includes those colonial bishops and is confined to Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda. Contradictorily, the purported nationalism, Hoad shows, of recent African Anglican bishops, Mugabe and other African heads of state as well as international human rights organizations, avoids recognizing their political roots in the colonial past. Perhaps his most valuable contribution is identifying the paradox of postcolonial African leaders/elites presenting themselves as "vehicles for economic progress," change agents of modernity, and at the same time as "custodians of fixed identities," of so-called "traditional life" while revealing that "traditional views" were deeply influenced by the missionaries' Christianity. If only he had further explored this subject of cultural amnesia, the "traditional" silence on female homosexuality, and the construct of the "traditional" African, this volume would make a greater contribution to African sexuality studies than it has.

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