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Queering African Studies

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QUEERING AFRICAN STUDIES Keguro Macharia

African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization by Neville Hoad. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Pp. 187. \$60.00 cloth, \$20.00 paper.

Neville Hoad offers a refreshing approach to a question that has plagued studies of African sexuality: Is homosexuality African? Over the past three decades, a range of African politicians and clergy, including Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Bishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria have answered with a resounding no. They have argued that homosexuality is a “perversion” that was introduced into Africa. In response, queer-friendly Africanist academics and activists have claimed that homosexual acts existed and were, in some cases, valued by a range of communities across the continent.¹ In addition to documenting the presence of homosexual practices, this affirmative wave of scholarship has argued that colonialism introduced homophobia into Africa, not homosexuality.² In these debates, precolonial Africa becomes a foundational point of reference in adjudicating the status of contemporary attitudes and policies toward homosexuality.

Instead of adopting a position on the precolonial existence of homosexuality, *African Intimacies* “investigates the place of an entity that comes to be called ‘homosexuality’ in the production (discursive, material, imaginary) of a place called ‘Africa’” (xvi). This lucid thesis ties together the various strands of Africanist, postcolonial, queer, and globalization discourses that Hoad navigates with great acuity. In what is sure to become a landmark

statement in the emerging subfield of queer African studies, Hoad argues that “homosexuality” is “one of the many imaginary contents, fantasies, or significations . . . that circulate in the production of African sovereignties and identities in their representation by Africans and others” (xvi). This claim revises V. Y. Mudimbe’s classic argument on the “invention” of Africa by emphasizing the foundational role of embodied, intimate practices. This argument is both timely and convincing, especially at a time when, to offer two examples, both Nigeria and Kenya have passed or have pending legislation that defines marriage, and by implication African-ness, as exclusively heterosexual—legislation that responds, in part, to the global reach of gay marriage advocacy.

African Intimacies is divided into six main chapters, which range from historical and cultural analyses to close readings of literary texts. Although not arranged this way, the chapters also line up into neat thematic units. Chapters 1 and 3 focus on the very important role of religion in its nineteenth-century imperial and late-twentieth-century neo-imperial configurations, specifically as these produce African-ness as a form of intimate practice. Chapters 2 and 6 focus on close readings of literary texts: Wole Soyinka’s dystopic postindependence *The Interpreters* (1965) and Phaswane Mpe’s no less dystopic postglobalization, post-AIDS *Welcome to Our*

Hillbrow (2001). And, finally, chapters 4 and 5 take South Africa’s contradictory sexual politics—the most progressive gay-rights legislation on the continent and some of the most regressive official policies on HIV/AIDS—as particular case studies on the intersection between queer affirmative constitutional rights and the quotidian experiences of South African queers.

Chapter 1, “African Sodomy in the Missionary Position: Corporeal Intimacies and Signifying Regimes,” is a methodologically innovative case study on how to read the intimate resonances of the colonial archive. Hoad returns to one of the best-known and, as he demonstrates, perhaps least-known, accounts in African history: the 1886 martyrdom of Ugandan Catholic pages by Kabaka Mwanga, the leader of the Baganda. Standard historical accounts in African textbooks claim that the pages refused to submit to Mwanga’s homosexual advances. As a result, he ordered them burned alive and simultaneously expelled missionaries from Baganda. This action led to direct intervention from the British government, which culminated in Buganda becoming a protectorate in 1894.

Through close readings of archival church documents and imaginative reconstructions of what unvoiced Baganda might have thought, Hoad scrutinizes this historical event to elaborate how sexuality is produced under new

discursive regimes. As Hoad points out, the historical record does not explain what specific actions Mwanga might have demanded from the pages (7, 13–14). Terms found in archives, such as “unnatural desires” and “private vice,” fail to communicate intimate specificity and demonstrate, instead, how “in certain historical moments, certain corporeal practices come to be represented as *sexual*, and move into identitarian sexuality, as their meanings are transfigured under new discursive regimes” (2). Although Hoad does not dwell on this point, he also advances a crucial argument on how “African homosexuality” is located at the intersection between Orientalist and Africanist discourses: within East African archives, Arabs are often described as introducing “the vice” to black African populations, who may be hypersexual in colonial discourse but tend not to be homosexual.

Chapter 1 intervenes in studies of African and colonial sexualities more broadly. Although scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler, Philippa Levine, and Marc Epprecht have explored the sexual underpinnings of colonialism, none have questioned how exactly bodily practices come to be understood as sexual.³ Instead, the sexual has been taken to be self-evident. Yet, as Hoad convincingly argues, the sexual is itself a deeply ideological category that does valuable labor during colonial modernity: “[B]odily practices

signified as sexual acts or acts signifying as sexual may have been instrumental in the instigation of colonial rule and were certainly an important part of its implementation” (7). While this claim is utterly convincing, Hoad’s later contention that “sodomy” might be considered an act of “anti-colonial resistance” (15) by Mwanga and his followers, because it engendered sanctions from missionaries and colonial officers, is audacious but unconvincing. Equally unconvincing is Hoad’s attempt to restage Mwanga as “heroic, as someone who fucked . . . both Christianity and imperialism and ultimately lost” (19). Apart from these too-speculative leaps, this one chapter alone makes *African Intimacies* worth reading. It demonstrates that we need not look to the familiar archives of a U.S.-based queer studies (psychology, sexology, and legal cases) to trace a conceptually rich account of African intimacies.

While chapter 1 is rich and powerful, chapter 2, a reading of Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, is disappointingly thin. *The Interpreters* has become a, if not *the*, seminal novel in queer African studies, following seminal essays by Chris Dunton and Gaurav Desai.⁴ Where as Hoad’s chapter promises to explore how “diasporic homosexuality in the person of Joe Golder inform[s] the novel’s struggle to imagine the sexuality of black masculinity under decolonization” (21), what ensues are a series of

short, interesting, but disconnected vignettes, character sketches at best. One is left wondering how to figure the relationship between diasporic homosexuality and African masculinity. Two observations are worth making here. One, diaspora is often constructed as heterocentric, a project in which kinfolk reconnect across time and space: brothers meet brothers, sisters meet sisters, sons and daughters meet parents, and so on. Often, as in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902–3), diasporic reconnection is confirmed through heterosexual marriage. Hopkins's U.S.-born male protagonist marries an African-born woman when he travels to continental Africa, thus affirming diasporic reconnection. Golder's sexuality troubles this heterocentric model of diasporic reconnection. In place of a heterocentric model, Soyinka offers an aesthetic model of diasporic reconnection; Golder is inserted into a group portrait of the other Nigerian-born protagonists. "Artistic production," Hoad writes, functions as a "powerful affiliative force" (47). How, then, does Soyinka's novel critique a biological, heterocentric model of diasporic reconnection by advocating an aesthetic model? This tantalizing question remains implicit and unanswered.

The rest of the chapters in *African Intimacies* more than compensate for the thinness of chapter 2. Chapter 3, a reading of the 1998 World Conference of Anglican Bishops at

Lambeth, UK, continues the religious thematic elaborated in chapter 1. During the conference, African and Asian bishops rejected attempts by liberal U.S. and European bishops to support the ordination of homosexual clergy and the admission of homosexuals into the body of the church. Rather than dismiss African bishops as homophobic, Hoad embeds their actions within broader imperial and neo-imperial frameworks. He argues that the African bishops' resistance to queer-affirmative actions might be read as a form of anti-imperial action, especially given that those bishops advocating for it were predominantly from Europe and the United States. Hoad does not exculpate the bishops, but nuances their stance. This reading strategy is one of the hallmarks of *African Intimacies*. Hoad continually resists what he aptly describes as "[t]he Euro-American politics of moral outrage that only lingers long enough to establish shared 'gayness' and does not care enough to learn the worldings of those it purports to help" (xiii). Not only does this chapter provide a valuable model for how to move past "the politics of moral outrage." It also extends valuable scholarship on African Christianities that has demonstrated how colonial subjects adopted and refashioned Christianity in innovative ways that were often anticolonial in their implications.⁵

Chapters 4–6 take South Africa as an extended case study and,

cumulatively, demonstrate the benefits of focusing on a single location. Chapter 4 examines the place of queer activism in South Africa, torn as it is between its embedding within transnational discourses and practices and national and local structures. Hoad asks, "Is it possible to speak of a lesbian or gay national subject at all under the discourses of anticolonial and postcolonial nationalisms, given the transnational character of these subject positions?" (75)⁶ Within South Africa, he argues, this question is even more complex, given the raced and classed positions of its most visible queer population: gay white affluent men. Hoad is, of course, aware of the extent to which this "visibility" is predicated on his own subject position as a gay white man. The archives of black and brown gay South Africa tend to be more inchoate, located on Web pages that disappear rapidly, in e-mails sent to private Listservs, and in "less" or even "un"-academic spaces.

Chapter 5, "The Intellectual, the Academic, and the Archive: Thabo Mbeki's AIDS Blues," is a beautifully conceived, counterintuitive meditation on former South African president Thabo Mbeki's stances on AIDS. Mbeki caused both titters and consternation across the world when he declared that he did not believe the HIV virus led to AIDS. This idiosyncratic belief had important policy implications: millions of South Africans were denied access to lifesaving

contraceptives and antiretroviral drugs. Hoad does not dismiss Mbeki's claims as yet more evidence of African folly. Instead, Hoad demonstrates that Mbeki is aware of and responsive to the vexed histories of black sexuality. HIV/AIDS marks a tangled nexus where modes of transmission collide with racist accusations of black hypersexuality. In two speeches Hoad analyzes, Mbeki invokes these histories of black hypersexuality to contest the Africanization of HIV/AIDS. As Hoad argues,

The problem becomes how to imagine and discuss African sexuality without forgetting the continuing power of Enlightenment racism's stigmatizing vocabulary, without internalizing its norms in such a way that the slide from sexuality to depravity is fast and short, the link between disease and sexuality becomes some kind of racial inevitability. (102)

Turning to two recent South African novels, K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001) and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Hoad argues that "Pan-African aesthetic production" can be an "intellectual resource in the fight against both AIDS and racism" (105). This turn to the aesthetic draws on two intellectual legacies that are worth noting. On the one hand, scholars in queer

studies, including Leo Bersani, Tim Dean, Judith Halberstam, and Lee Edelman, have privileged aesthetics as a mode to access and forge ethical relations. Crucially, African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ken Saro Wiwa, Yvonne Vera, and Yvonne Owour similarly use aesthetics to reimagine Africa, to suggest possibilities foreclosed or absent in official political discourses. Hoard's turn to aesthetics implicitly articulates these two bodies of work that often look past each other.

Finally, chapter 6, a meditation on Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), returns us to one of Hoard's major themes: the role of the imagination in forging ethical relationships and creating tools for political action. Moving into a psychoanalytic register, Hoard reads Mpe's novel as an elegy that is also a form of "African cosmopolitanism." This chapter reminds us that African-ness is an intimate structure, and takes the occasion of that intimate structure to imagine a rooted cosmopolitanism that is also an intimate structure, albeit one irreducible to heterokinship. Hoard has many balls in the air in this short chapter, and, inevitably, some crash to the ground. For instance, although his argument about the frottage between African-ness and cosmopolitanism as intimate structures is compelling, the turn to political action seems foreclosed. Given Africa's status as the continent of death, where from colonialism through globalization the claim

remains that one may die or get sick elsewhere in the world, but Africa kills faster and with more agony, it becomes difficult to imagine what a necropolitics accomplishes. Hoard acknowledges this problem by noting that whether mourning and melancholia can lead to political action remains a "question" (126). Yet, he argues, Mpe's HIV/AIDS-focused novel allows the question to emerge, and this is an important step in imagining an intimate African cosmopolitanism.

Although *African Intimacies* is bold and groundbreaking, I often find myself wishing Hoard would elaborate his insights. He has mastered the brilliant aside that offers tantalizing glimpses of other projects. In fact, this book is a veritable treasure trove for scholars in search of queer African projects. However, *African Intimacies* is often frustrating in its dash from topic to topic and space to space. In privileging geographic and historical breadth, Hoard sacrifices nuance. Most regrettably, the vast and increasing scholarship on African intimacies, to use his coinage, is left unacknowledged. Hoard engages obliquely, if at all, with the rich body of work by scholars such as Janet Bujra, Luise White, Jock McCulloch, Diane Jeater, and Sylvia Tamale.⁷ And, here, I should confess that my notes attempt to embed Hoard's work within an Africanist archive. Given that *African Intimacies* will most likely circulate in the U.S. academy, and probably among queer

scholars, many of whom may not be Africanists, Hoad's disengagement with Africanist scholarship might foreclose the possible conversations that queer scholars could and should have with Africanist scholarship.

Despite these quibbles, *African Intimacies* is provocative and original and astonishingly readable. Hoad's writing seems deliberately calculated to introduce queer studies to African studies and vice versa. Africanists who are novices in queer studies need not fear that infamous obscurantism of queer studies. Simultaneously, queer scholars who know nothing about Africa need not fear that they will be disoriented. *African Intimacies* bridges fields and conceptual ideas with a grace and seeming effortlessness that is all the more impressive because of the élan with which it is accomplished. It should find ready readers among generalists and specialists, ranging from young undergraduates to queer-friendly activists to senior scholars. *African Intimacies* leaves one wanting more. In so doing, it effectively, if slyly, midwifes the subfield of queer African studies.

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NOTES

1. For examples of this affirmative work, see Wayne R. Dynes, "Homosexuality

in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Unnecessary Controversy," in *Ethnographic Studies of Homosexuality*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson (New York: Garland, 1992), 166–67; and John Mburu, "Awakenings: Dreams and Delusions of an Incipient Lesbian and Gay Movement in Kenya," in *Different Rainbows*, ed. Peter Drucker (London: Gay Men's Press, 2000), 179–91.

2. Given the thinness of many precolonial African archives, this optimism regarding the place of homosexuality in precolonial societies should be regarded with skepticism. As Heather Love has recently argued, we should be aware of how our desires for affirmative queer histories color our methodologies and arguments (*Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007]).
3. Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race & Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); and Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).
4. Chris Dunton, "'Wheytin Be Dat?' The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature," *Research in African Literatures* 20, no. 3 (1989): 422–48; and Gaurav Desai, "Out in Africa," in *Sex Positives? The Cultural Politics of Dissident Sexualities*, ed. Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 120–40.
5. See, for instance, Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1: *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); John Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities," *Journal of Religion in*

- Africa*, 29, no. 2 (1999): 206–29; and Derek R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).
6. For a nuanced consideration of this question, see Deborah Amory, “‘Mashoga, Mabasha, and Magai’: Homosexuality on the East African Coast,” in *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Sexualities*, ed. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 67–90.
 7. Janet M. Bujra, “Women ‘Entrepreneurs’ of Early Nairobi,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 9, no. 2 (1975): 213–34; Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Jock McCulloch, *Black Peril, White Virtue: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902–1935* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Diane Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion, and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia 1894–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); and Sylvia Tamale, “Eroticism, Sensuality and ‘Women’s Secrets’ among the Baganda: A Critical Analysis,” *Feminist Africa* 5 (2005): 9–36. Tamale is currently editing an important collection on African sexualities scheduled for publication in 2010.