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Coreen Brown. *The Creative Vision of Bessie Head.* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and London: Associated University Press, 2003. 244 pp. $47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8386-3982-5.

Maxine Sample, ed. *Critical Essays on Bessie Head.* Westport: Praeger, 2003. 150 pp. $61.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-31557-2.

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Bessie Head is Alive and Well in the Western Academy

It was with great delight that I turned to read two more books published in the same year, 2003, on Bessie Head, the eminent South African writer. One is a complete study and the second is a collection of essays.

The first book, *The Creative Vision of Bessie Head* by Coreen Brown, reads very much like a dissertation by an avid admirer of the writer in question. Hence, even though this reviewer found the work gratifying to read, it failed to engage in ways that perhaps it could have. Brown claims that she had gone to read the Bessie Head letters stored in Serowe and was going to chart her analysis through her findings, which would have been a very useful scholarly task since it has not quite been done before. Indeed the appendix, which has selections of Head's letters, is very useful for scholars and students who have neither the resources nor the time to go to the Khama Memorial Museum in Serowe. The extracts are well chosen and illuminate Head's opinions, sometimes unpopular, but always sensational and cogent.

What is most dismaying about this critique is that it almost stubbornly refuses to take Bessie Head criticism further than it has already reached. Indeed it tends to hark back to Head's older critics and doggedly tries to place Bessie Head in the august company of Eurocentric canonized critics who would perhaps be reluctant to regard Head's writing as literature, for a variety of reasons. Here I am thinking of Brown's constant references to Northrop Frye, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and even Richard Rorty. It seems to me that they do not help illuminate Head at all in this study but rather tend to introduce vague possibilities in the Head canon.

There seem to be two equally powerful desires at work in this study: the first is to authenticate Head in the canon of world literature by using a group of early-twentieth century critics and thinkers; and the second is to disentangle Head from postcolonial critiques, some feminist, of the last two decades, by dismissing them offhandedly rather than engaging with them. Brown writes that Head "never suggests that emancipation for women can be achieved by their remaining single, free, or otherwise liberated" (p. 26). This seems to me a terribly Eurocentric approach to feminism, which has been challenged by a whole host of women critics of color, and is not really relevant to Head at all. Head's feminism was minute in its detail as we can see in the collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures.*[1] Later, without recognizing the struggle that Ellen Kuzwayo underlines about black women, which the author herself quotes, Brown suggests that "these problems became peripheral in Third World writing, where matters relating to national politics, religion, and economics were prioritized over sexism"–and, she adds superciliously–"real or imagined" (p. 27).

It seems to me that this new book on a very important African woman writer tends to be repetitive and in essence does not add anything new to the growing canon of Bessie Head criticism. The author tends to generalize in at times rather irresponsible ways such as "A feminist may well express ...," as if all feminists, western or post-

colonial, think alike. She tends to merely narrate events in the novels, often shying away from analysis or neglecting to give her opinions while talking about Head's take on Botswana history.

It must however be acknowledged in the final analysis that the value of this book resides in the author's inclusion of extracts from Head's letters to friends, agents, and people from the Apartheid university system and is thus quite useful for the Head scholar.

Critical essays on Bessie Head, edited by Maxine Sample, represents quite a different and specific interest in Head's oeuvre. It covers new ground and is a useful addition to Head scholarship. Maureen Fielding's essay "Agriculture and Healing: Transforming Space, Transforming Trauma in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*" is interesting because it engages not only with the process of healing in Head's first novel but it also provides links to problems in South Africa today such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's attempt to understand the trauma of Apartheid. Fielding's argument is a compelling one because Head is trying to negotiate a space out of her South African trauma into the tranquility of Botswana just as her protagonist Makhaya does.

Sample's essay "Space: An Experiential Perspective" is an important addition to the understanding of Head's feminism. She writes: "Examining the spatiality of the novel metaphorically, one can see that Head depicts female as center and male as periphery and reveals a symbolic movement of males from periphery to center as the events in the novel unfold" (p. 39). Her claim is that the character Gilbert in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is the one who is bringing the men back from the periphery of the cattle posts to the center of the village so that they can participate in the life at the center.

Colette Guildmann's essay links Head's earlier career as a romance writer to her novel *Maru.* Guildmann claims an agency for Margaret Cadmore within the structure of Head's romance novel by claiming that Head changed the structure of the romances during her time as a journalist at the *Golden City Post*; for in the novel she "encourages her male, and female, readers to pursue careers" (p. 51). This approach, Guildmann states, was radically different from that before Head joined the staff of the newspaper. Guildmann's second essay in the same anthology, on *The Cardinals*,[2] is very informative in terms of Head's early journalist days. Guildmann is quite lucid on the analysis of the incest taboo and the resulting psychosis. Her conclusion is interesting: "while escape is impossible from language, which has no exterior, in *The Cardinals* Head finds that way to cheat speech where, like the psychotic's use of language, the distinction between self and other is not stable and fixed. Head thus reclaims patriarchal language through what Barthes called a " 'permanent revolution of language ... literature' " (p. 119).

Helen Kapstein's essay, " 'A Peculiar Shuttling Movement': Madness, Passing, and Trespassing in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*," talks about madness in relationship to colonial space and what she calls "border crossings" and "boundaries." It is an interesting essay because it intelligently negotiates Head's psychology with her exile or, as Head herself described, her "peculiar shuttling movement between two lands" (p. 71).

Finally, Loretta Stec's essay "The Didactic Judgement of a Woman Writer: Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*" links orality to Head's role as an elder telling these village tales. She writes: "Head's moral position is both one of her great strengths as a writer and a potential danger to her literary reputation" (p. 124). I believe this is part of the same argument about mixing literature and politics in the Western academy. However, African literature made this issue of art and politics moot.

Notes

[1]. Bessie Head, *The Collector of Treasures, and Other Botswana Village Tales* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1977).

[2]. Bessie Head, *The Cardinals, with Meditations and Stories.* Introduction by M. J. Daymond (Cape Town: David Philip, 1993).

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