

Constructing an Alternative Language:  
Historical Revision in the Fiction  
of Bessie Head

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## ABSTRACT

Through consideration of Bessie Head's fiction and essays, the paper that follows investigates Head's use of fiction to challenge the hegemony of South African history, a history that fails to represent black South Africans except as "objects of abuse and exploitation" (Head, A Woman Alone 66). The absence of a subject position in history for black South Africans betokens a need for critical reevaluation of the structures and language of that history. History should document and create a people's identity; however, Head contends that South African historical discourse has obliterated the historical identity of black South Africans. The imaginative freedom that fiction allows provides Head with a radical means for reinscribing an alternative historical identity. Through four interrelated sections, then, this paper describes and evaluates the way in which Head's works challenge existing historical discourse by working through literature to establish an alternative set of historical structures.

The Botswana land, offers Head, a space for experimentation with writing styles that evade reproducing an account of historical oppression and also for the practical construction of a new world. This construction includes agricultural reform that would give power over the forces of production to the workers of the land and which would in turn provide these workers with both economic and spiritual independence. The novels,

however, display an incongruous duality wherein the construction of Head's new world is interfered with by the dominating voice of South African history. Hence, the subject and the problem of the novels becomes a conflict for the authority of history. Head's efforts towards constructing a new world also seek to implement women as a primary labor force in both material and creative production, thereby further challenging a history that has rendered women as sexual commodities.

The Collector of Treasures offers a culmination of this conflict. Here, Head offers a strategy of narrative fragmentation interrelated with a dialogic, multi-voiced discourse that dismantles the single-voiced structure of a history determined by the politics of repression. Fiction offers a freedom of structure and thought unavailable to the historian; therefore fiction transgresses the boundaries created by a repressive history and is able to establish an original and self-sustaining historical world.

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## Introduction

"How," asks Bessie Head speaking of her fiction in relation to the history of South Africa, "do we write about a world long since lost" (A Woman Alone 66)?<sup>1</sup> According to Head, South African history chronicles a past of "land-grabbing wars and diamond- and gold-rushes" (Between the Lines 11); consequently, black South Africans have no sense of their historical selves apart from being "objects of abuse and exploitation" (Head, AWA 66). Head's novels and stories confront her alienation from South African history by a practice of writing outside and against a narrative of history told in terms of imperialist interests. Her texts border this history in the same way that Botswana geographically borders South Africa: while topographically, economically and politically South Africa looms beside the smaller Botswana, according to Head, Botswana "has a past history that is unequalled anywhere in Africa" (66).<sup>2</sup>

The Batswana, as Head sees them, have maintained the traditions of ancient Africa; as such, their social and political structures present a sense of historical continuity unavailable to black South Africans. Head explains this historical continuity by way of imperialist disinterest in the barren landscape. The British, she writes, "left the land and the people intact and undisturbed. Botswana uniquely remained black man's country" (71). Because of its apparent lack of mineral

wealth as well as habitual drought conditions, the Botswana land and the people who lived on it were not plundered by the British settlers or by seekers of mineral wealth. The region was placed under British "protection" (the British Bechuanaland Protectorate, which gained independence in 1966) and found useful only as a conduit for a railway line to the interior of Africa. Imperialist disinterest in Botswana allowed it to retain its link with ancient Africa; that is, Botswana maintained a dominantly rural way of life that gradually and selectively adopted European ideas and customs.<sup>3</sup>

Head's position and her self-positioning in relation to Botswana and South Africa offers a basis from which to explore a project of revisionist history that underlies her fiction. In permanent exile from South Africa and denied Botswana citizenship until 1979 (15 years after her arrival), she was for most of her writing years a stateless subject, politically without nation.<sup>4</sup> Her works, particularly the first three novels, reflect this position; they depict a world on the border between two politically and socially disparate places, an "inter-land" shaped, peopled and governed by its author's visions of a new world even as it is haunted by an oppressive South African history. Her novels investigate the absence of roots, of not belonging to a time and place. In addition, however, her fiction exploits the freedom of being outside the structures of South African national and social history, that is, of not belonging to

any structured account of the past. In this light, Botswana's history as Head finds it, unwritten and hence, unappropriated, offers a world for imaginative possibility.<sup>5</sup>

The precise meaning of the term "history" remains unspecified and vague throughout Head's writing. Generally speaking, she writes in favor of a kind of pan-Africanism,<sup>6</sup> or what she calls, "all mankind's history" (BTL 11). Written history documents and also creates a people's identity; in the South Africa of her time, Head history used as a tool to suppress identity. In her works, she makes a distinction between the history of South African imperialism and the "ancient history" of Africa. The distinction here is perhaps comparable to the difference between the historian and the fiction writer in their relations of experience. The historian claims to record undeniable facts of experience while the literary artist participates in recording and creating the myths and themes by which <sup>history</sup> experiences itself. In "Getting Out of History" Hayden White comments on this difference:

Throughout all of those possible usages of term "history," however, there runs the thread of the distinction, drawn by Aristotle in the Poetics, between what can possibly happen and what actually did happen, between what can be known because it happened and what can only be imagined, and what, therefore, the historian

can legitimately assert as a truth of experience and what the poet might wish to entertain as a truth of thought or conceptualization. (5)

For Head, while South African historical texts, perhaps, indicate what happened to black South Africans, these texts lack an account of what "actually happened" for black South Africans. The space of absence left for black people in South African history can be filled, accounted for, only with that which can be imagined. Head does not try to extend South African history to include black people; instead, she offers an alternative historical world.<sup>7</sup> The imagination of the writer creates the experiences and myths that the imperialist account of history has destroyed.

The history of imperialism and apartheid destroyed in itself a subject position for the black South African. Head's fiction lends itself towards establishing a subject position, of recreating an identity and culture, for a people whose historical self-knowledge has been objectified by the effects of colonialism. Her novels and stories take place in Botswana but they are for South Africa. For her subject matter, she looks towards and imaginatively takes her place among the rural Batswana villagers: a people overlooked by colonization. Her fiction writes a story of the rural people, particularly the women, who work and live off the land--those who are literally "out" of history and ignored by its texts.

Hence, Head places herself in what is for her an alternative world, and thereby she attempts to inscribe a history of her own structuring.

However, in Head's novels an irreconcilable, dialogic conflict emerges between her construction of a new world and the history of Southern African imperialism.<sup>8</sup> The effects of an oppressive history are submerged, an unconscious layer in her texts; in her first three novels, an autobiographical trilogy of sorts, the conflict between an standard imperialist account of history and a fiction for the people reveals a central problem of her work.<sup>9</sup> In A Question of Power, the most striking example, this conflict surfaces and reveals two disparate concerns, the construction of a new world and a dominating racist and sexist history. The conflict threatens to destroy any sense of continuity to which the narrative may aspire. However conflict suggests the need for the post-colonial writer to negotiate a new world on the border of the old. The Collector of Treasures offers a sustained effort towards such negotiation.

In this paper, I intend to show how Bessie Head attempts in her novels and stories to evade a representation of South African historical determination. She renders the South African history she knows as a space and time of loss--loss of nation, of identity, of subjectivity--even while its dominating presence interrupts the continuity of her fiction. Botswana, as a setting, serves as an experimental location wherein she

investigates the possibility of being the subject and the agent of her own historical creations. I contend that she devises an alternative historical practice structured by the implementation of practical cooperative method, narrative fragmentation, and multiplicity of voice. Her revision of history requires the visionary capabilities of the artist integrated with a practical effort towards establishing a people's history based on a communal agrarian ideal.

When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru, and A Question of Power serve as an experimental field on which Head indirectly and directly counters the history of South Africa with a historical movement of her own design. In my first section, I shall explore Head's initial literary movement from South Africa to Botswana as it is made in When Rain Clouds Gather in so far as this move describes the nature of her efforts towards rewriting history. In doing so, I hope to point to the conflict that she herself establishes between writing styles informed by history and characteristic of fiction. Section two, then, will investigate her novel's narrative structure ruptured by an oppressive historical system that interferes with construction of a new world. The duality here engendered becomes both the subject and the problem of her works. The last sections will investigate the ways in which Head seeks in her novels and in The Collector of Treasures to position women in control of the forces of both material and historical production.

These sections will also consider the way in which The Collector of Treasures and peripherally Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind experiment with fragmentation and multi-voiced discourse to counter South African historical hegemony. Hence, my efforts are directed towards an investigation of the manner and ways in which Head's fiction looks towards a new space of writing and an alternative language for history. In the process, I hope to point to the possibility that Head's fiction displays pioneering effort in the field of revisionary post-colonial literature.

#### I.

In a 1979 article entitled "Social and political pressures that shape writing in southern Africa," Head contends that "literature is very functional in southern Africa and bound inextricably to human suffering; the death of South African literature is that it is almost blinded by pain; people hardly exist beside the pain" (AWA 67). According to Head, then, South African literature documents suffering and retells the results<sup>of</sup> a history of loss.<sup>a</sup> A literary work that merely represents oppression becomes a mimetic reproduction of the oppressive system and lacks creative autonomy--the capacity to establish an independent and internally cohesive fictional world. Head suggests that South African literature is itself bound by the same terms that

mark its history: both engender the alienation of black South Africans from a sense of self and both fail to represent black South Africans except as objects of exploitation. Under these terms, the fiction reveals creative imaginations crippled by their suffering.

Head's concerns, here, are similar to those Njabulu Ndebele expresses in his essay "Turkish Tales and some thoughts on South African fiction." Ndebele criticizes the general style of South African "protest" writing that relies on superficial oppositions of political good and evil, oppressor and victim, Boer and African; he suggests that with this style of fiction writing,

[The characters'] human anonymity becomes the dialectical equivalent of the anonymity to which the oppressive system consigns millions of oppressed Africans. Thus, instead of clarifying the tragic human experience of oppression, such fiction becomes grounded in the very negation it seeks to transcend. <sup>Turkish Tales</sup> (329)

Ndebele criticizes fiction whose subject reflects political oppression and whose artistic merit is decided primarily by its level of political engagement. Alternatively, he writes in favor of literature that offers methods of "redemptive transformation" ("Rediscovery of the Ordinary 151), that is, a literature that critically reevaluates political and social circumstances and which uses character and setting to challenge these circumstances. For Ndebele, a critical

literature offers a world in which characters have relevant lives and personalities that exist outside the binary oppositions associated with oppressor and victim.

Both Ndebele and Head write toward the creation of a literature that recognizes and finds its subject in the relevance and tradition of African culture and tradition. Such a literature would have within itself its own imaginative possibilities instead of merely reproducing an account of oppression. Ndebele notes "the often confusing paradox that art is an autonomous entity which, at the same time, derives its objective validity from and within society" (Turkish tales 328). I am suggesting that both Head and Ndebele make use of this paradox by creating fictions that exhibit their autonomy from political and historical structures, but which, because these fictions propose alternative structures, they more productively dismantle the hegemony of the existing structures.

South African history and politics pervade and overwhelm the writing of fiction. In a 1962 article, "Let me tell a story now. . ." published in New African, Head, then living in South Africa, notes her inability to write a story in which "people is people and not damn white, damn black" (AWA 6 emphasis in text); she accounts for the failure of her early attempts at stories by noting that they are constrained by a pattern of racial oppositions: "there was always a Coloured man here, an African man there and a white somewhere around the

corner. Always the same old pattern. . . I just bored myself to death<sup>(ibid)</sup>. In her novels, Head refuses to account for South African history or politics; instead she tries to deviate from a fictional representation of the effects of southern African imperialism and apartheid by offering a vision in an other world across the border.

Head uses fiction as a method of counteracting the human anonymity assigned to black South Africans in South African history and to search for a kind of self-knowledge that has no essential relationship to history or to politics in so much as political discourse is a historical gesture.<sup>11</sup> Head asserts that social and written exclusion from South African history has produced a lack of self-knowledge:

we [as black people] did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation. Each nation offers the world a little of its light . . . We had a land that offered the world only gold; no great men were needed to articulate the longings of the people. In a creative sense I found myself left only with questions. (AWA 66)

History should participate in the articulation of cultural identity and should contribute to the ways in which a culture expresses its individuality; in South African historical discourse the possibility of such articulation is, for black South Africans, silenced.

If the dominant historical narrative, the recorder

of past experience in South Africa, renders void the tradition and culture of the African, then literature, perhaps, offers a means by which to reinscribe that culture. Head's fiction can be seen as an exploration of manners of representation: South African historical texts represent black South Africans as objects effected by imperial and colonial expansion and as victims of apartheid; Head writes against a fiction that repeats this history and which therefore preserves and supports the portrayal of the African as a powerless victim. It is by an opposition, implicit in her fiction, to this manner of historical re-presentation in fiction that Head establishes her own political and social position--one that diverges from and relocates the object position historically assigned to the African.

Simply rendered, South Africa (as place and entity) becomes in Head's fiction a sign of historical betrayal--a selective and exclusive account for a nation. Botswana, on the other hand,--on the other side of the border--offers for Head a ground whereon a fiction for the people can flourish without being subsumed by the demands of history. Head's Botswana stories challenge the dominance of South Africa's historical text.

The opening chapter of Head's first novel, When Rain Clouds Gather, depicts a literal and symbolic leap from South Africa to Botswana. When the novel begins, Makhaya Maseko, the protagonist, is waiting in a safe-

house for nightfall so that he may cross the border to Botswana. Sirens of the South African border police sound at regular intervals as a sign of the patrols seeking to prevent any crossing over. This border offers a figure for Head's project in this novel and also for her future writings: it divides lifestyles, and it also distinguishes styles of writing,

For instance, on the South African side of the border Makhaya is described in terms of paranoia: "you could sense [his] inner discord . . . through a trick he had of averting his face as if no man was. . . worthy of his trust" (WRCG 7). Aiding this fugitive is an old man who, the reader is told, is a "good storyteller" (9). He "stored [stories] up against the day when he would be free to surprise his village with his vast fund of information on fugitives" (8). His stories will document Makhaya's paranoia and they will, it is implied, have the nature of the spectacular--they will relate tales of desperation and of constant confrontation with "the white man who was the only recognized enemy of everyone" (10). This description suggests that this story-teller's tales will retell a story of oppression; they will provide an account, a repetitive history, of those victimized by an oppressive system. As such, they will reinscribe the authority of the white regime and the victimization of the object of that authority. The kind of stories that this man tells will be limited to his view of suffering and remain unaware of a different kind of people on the

other side of the border.

Furthermore, under the shadow of the border patrol, on the Botswana side of the border, there lurks an old woman who prostitutes her ten-year old grand-daughter to incoming refugees. The woman, also paranoid, refuses Makhaya's polite greeting and accuses him of being a spy. The child has an ominous "unchildlike" look that startles and appals Makhaya. These people in near proximity to South Africa are corrupt and characterized by the absence of human dignity. The border area offers a scene of degradation and oppression--further inscription of victimization.

This initial jump over the border in Bessie Head's first novel marks the author's choice for the direction of her writing. Stories like the old man's and scenes of degradation like the old woman's camp are not the kinds of stories that Head is interested in writing. Through Makhaya, Head makes it clear that she will not participate in the old story-teller's recount. Makhaya, for instance, does not provide information to the storyteller; he chooses silence. Nor is Head interested in spectacularising a scene of corruption. Makhaya does not participate in the scene of corruption at the old woman's camp; this scene is abandoned, unequivocally fled from.

Furthermore, in its exposition of styles of writing, this first chapter denounces journalism as having a minimal association with reality. The local police

officer of Golema Mmidi reads a newspaper with a cover picture of Makhaya under the headline "DANGEROUS SABOTEUR FLEES BANNING ORDER." The headline and the picture are not accurate descriptions of Makhaya. In fact, the reader is informed Makhaya is not really a saboteur; he "just walks about with little pieces of paper describing how [he's] going to blow everything up" (19). The spectacular appeal of the newspaper is here indicated as a flaw in its authority and a failure of its responsibilities for social reportage. The newspaper indiscriminately fabricates exciting stories that have little to do with real people. Like the old man's stories, the newspaper article is based on the exposition of the spectacular. Ndebele denounces a fictional trend whose object is to represent the "spectacular ugliness of the South African situation" (Rediscovery of the Ordinary 145) as "the quintessence of obscene social exhibitionism" (143). "It is no wonder," writes Ndebele, "that the Black writer. . . should have his imagination almost totally engaged by the spectacle before him." Makhaya was himself a journalist in Johannesburg; he tells Gilbert, the agricultural volunteer, that it was "the sort of thing where black people could see their faces on the front page and read about their neighbours" (WRCG 33). Makhaya has left that work behind and Head, also, is here marking her project of diverging from the sensational stories that are the substance of journalism.

At the close of the first chapter, Makhaya announces

that he has reached a crossroads in his life: "One road might lead to fame and importance, and another might lead to peace of mind" (20). These paths suggest styles of writing. The first road follows history and tries to claim recognition in the existing historical narrative. For Makhaya this road would signify continued participation in the South African spectacle of oppression. Alternatively, the latter road renounces history and history's claims to validity, claims that, reify the oppression of a people. Makhaya chooses the latter road. It is the path of the ordinary, everyday world and as such it marks for Head a particular path of fiction: "To write about the poor and ordinary people with a kind of reverence is more or less up my alley" (Marquard 52).

With this first novel, then, Head makes an apparently deliberate break with South Africa as a site for her fiction. She is writing towards an alternative to history which necessitates an alternate site for fiction. Because it is relatively untouched and hence unappropriated by South African historical discourse, Botswana offers such a location. The border patrol suggests a figure for the author's project in that with this novel Head initiates what will become an increasingly significant rupture between the repressive history that she associates with South Africa and the history making possibilities of fiction that Botswana offers. Head's fiction seeks to evade the boundaries of

history recognizing in the history she struggles against only loss of identity and limitations. Her works enforce the separation between South Africa and Botswana to assure that an association between South African history and the fiction she is creating can be made only by an unauthorized breakthrough--a mental jump across the border.

In spite of the new directions for her writing that Head indicates in this first novel, it remains that by the comparison made between South Africa and Botswana, both worlds have been given voice. South African history lurks in the background and interferes with the smooth operation of Head's fictional Botswana. In the novels and stories that follow, the political and social structures of these two places are in conflict with each other. Head is obliged to meet the challenge of asserting the authority of her fiction as a valid and relevant act historical intervention--an act of establishing her own historical structures through fiction.

## II.

For Head and for the characters she has created, South Africa represents a wasteland, "mentally and spiritually dead" (WRCCG 16). As such it cannot encourage creative growth. Makhaya, for example, can find no sense of "home" in South Africa; he does not feel rooted in his

country or in the community of his parents. Although his name means "one who stays home" (9), he is in the novel a figure initially depicted as transient and specifically, here, as a transitional figure between South Africa's history and Head's new community in Botswana. Makhaya is seeking to fulfil the prophecy implied in his name--a name Head perhaps uses as a figure for her own hope of finding a fertile landscape wherein to establish personal and social roots. For Makhaya, Golema Mmidi offers such a place, and for Head, this fictional village harbors the beginning ~~of~~ for her new community.

In contrast to the desolation of creativity by which she describes South Africa, Head contends that in Botswana,

We have a situation where people never lost the land to a foreign invader and in the rural areas the ancient African land tenure system of communal ownership still operates . . . One has so many options and choices of study that are sure, steady and sane and simply another addition to mankind's history. (AWA 87)

Because it affords the possibility of independent and creative thought, Botswana becomes, as Head calls it, a singularly important prop for her fiction.<sup>12</sup> Functioning then as an ideological entity, the Botswana land becomes a locus of imaginative promise and also a means for innovative representation.

In "Social and political pressures that shape

writing in southern Africa," Head charges that South African history is replete with gaps concerning the presence of black South Africans:

A sense of history was totally absent in me and it was as if, far back in history, thieves had stolen the land and were so anxious to cover up all traces of the theft that correspondingly, all traces of the true history have been obliterated. We, as black people, could make no appraisal of our own worth. (AWA 66)

If fiction retells this version of history, then it repeats a theft and reproduces a space of lack. In her novels, Head tries to diverge from the South African historical narrative--to abandon it as Makhaya abandons South Africa. She uses fiction to build and to account for a historically relevant connection of Africans with the African landscape. Confronting the deliberate repression of blacks in South African history, her novels and essays demonstrate that fiction offers a way to transgress the bounds constructed by a history determined by the politics of repression.

In "Getting Out of History," Hayden White argues that historical and fictional texts operate on a similar level of rhetorical performance (5). History, as a rhetorical form, has no greater claim to representing the truth of experience than does literature. In an argument that questions the authority whereby history lays authoritative claim over cultural and national records

Hayden White notes:

The difficulty with the notion of a truth of past experience is that it can no longer be experienced, and this throws a specifically historical knowledge open to the charge that is a construction as much of imagination as of thought and that its authority is no greater than the power of the historian to persuade his readers that his account is true. (5)

Although working in and with a different context than White, Head nevertheless recognizes that the historical hegemony of apartheid South Africa is based on an oppressive rhetoric that selectively reports past experience and suppresses the relevance of the black South African's voice in history. Denied a voice in the past, black South Africans cannot establish an autonomous and continuous position in the present or future. Head's writings indicate her belief that South African imperialist history has distorted the truth of past experience and thereby destroyed temporal and spatial continuity for a majority of the country's people.

Fiction becomes the most practical and perhaps the most radical method of reconstructing a historical sense of selfhood. Fiction intervenes on the unquestioned authority of history and the creative imagination has unlimited possibilities outside the bounds of a repressive history. Head's stories confront the hegemony of a history guided by the discourse of colonial

occupation and racial oppression by offering an alternative style of self-knowledge.

As I have suggested in the first section of this paper, the opening scenes of When Rain Clouds Gather mark Head's intention to dissociate her fiction from South Africa and to diverge from a fictional representation of historical oppression. Her novels begin the construction of an alternative history; Head tries to create an environment for continuity by incorporating detailed plans for utilizing the country's agricultural resources and also by creating heroes and heroines who thrive when outside the bounds of South Africa. Despite these efforts, however, Head's first three novels are fraught with a constant confrontation between South Africa's history of social and political oppression and the imaginative freedom that Botswana inspires in her. When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru, and A Question of Power present within each individual text conflicting forces that disrupt the newly conceived continuity which the novels attempt to compose. These novels are charged with the responsibility of establishing a new historical order whose construction is impeded by the forces of colonial history.

The novels are marked by a precarious balance or perhaps more often an imbalance between the history Head attempts to leave behind and the fiction which she constructs to replace that history. They contain the seeds of a fictive project that confronts South African

history by establishing its own version of historical production. The South African spectacle of history is intended to be left on the other side of the border--a border both topographical and psychological. South African history is repressed in these novels however this repression is not completely successful: signs and voices of a history of oppression surface and disrupt.

In "Writing out of southern Africa" Head cites the influence of Bertolt Brecht on her own writing perspective:

Brecht applied his mind to creating a new social order. . . He had students of the University of Berlin research for him how a whole town could be re-shaped along Marxist lines. . . Ordinary people are full of ribald fun and humour and in Brecht this promise was always there -- that it would be fun to re-shape the world. (23)<sup>13</sup>

The Golema Mmidi of When Rain Clouds Gather is an experimental city: this village is not named after an important chief or event as is the usual custom of the country, but instead Golema Mmidi "acquired its name from the occupation the villagers followed, which was crop growing" (WRCCG 22). In addition, the village is the grounds for an experimental agricultural co-operative. Gilbert, a British agriculturalist, is using Golema Mmidi as a site where he can test the viability of new crops,

vegetation, improved techniques for tending livestock and so on. The co-operative offers a way of returning the means of production and of self-sustenance back to the people.

Furthermore, the superfluous position of the paramount chief in this novel suggests that agricultural self-sufficiency will also lead to political self-rule. For instance, Matenge, the younger brother of the chief and a "diehard traditionalist" for the oppressive rule of tribalism, continually strives to hinder Gilbert's work and thereby to regain his traditionally held economic and political control over the villagers. At the novel's end, the community of Golema Mmidi stands together against his tyrannical governance. Fearful of the crowd and realizing that his governance is without support, Matenge recognizes that he cannot control nor partake of these voices harkening a new historical era: he felt "what it must be like to face tomorrow without any future[.] That was what those upturned faces meant" (177).

The connection between Matenge and the colonial rule of southern Africa is obvious; his way of rule uses a practice intended to subdue the "unwieldy, incomprehensible population of 'natives' in its place" (45). This practice was, the reader is informed, "highly praised by the colonialists" (45). On the level of plot, repressive rule is conquered when the people of Golema Mmidi recognise their strength as a community and

their economic self-sufficiency. On another hand, however, Makhaya's deliberate repression of his South African past is more threatening to this narrative's continuity than Matenge's abusive presence. Makhaya is described as quiet and has having an air of "lonely self-containment" (29). This description is the sign of his strength; he is one who has suffered. Makhaya, however, hesitates to speak of his past or of politics because "every political discussion was a mockery, he felt, of his own helplessness" (82). His relation to South Africa is never resolved and as such it interferes with the success of the plot wherein the workers of the new world overcome a history of repressive politics. South Africa is out of the author's sight, but through Makhaya, its presence lurks in the text.

Establishing a local-industries project which includes an agricultural co-operative provides one side of the narrative action in A Question of Power. Elizabeth under the guidance of Eugene, a fellow South African refugee, begins to work on assembling and running an experimental village garden. Eugene writes pamphlets which hold the promise to the "minds of the poor and starving of a day when every table would overflow with good food" (AQP 57). His words outline methods and plans for fruitful production and for economic self-sufficiency while his language seeks to empower ordinary people with their own abilities: he uses words like "skill, work,

fullest development of personality and intellect" (57). Head's novel reflects the language of these pamphlets. Agriculture and agricultural work provide the possibility of wholeness, both material and spiritual. Elizabeth finds the beginning of the rainy season "a magical time" (59) because that is when the women go off to their lands to plough, and they return to the village miraculously laden with the products of their labor. Head's image of historical continuity depends upon a connection with the land--a way of knowing oneself and one's place in the world in the same way that crops extend their roots into the land.

However, Elizabeth's productive work in the communal garden is interfered with by the nightmare harassment of Sello and of Dan, figures of oppression that surface from Elizabeth's unconscious to interfere with her conscious, 'real' life. For example, one scene explicates the practical work of establishing a communal garden: "When you practice crop-rotation, there is a formula to follow: legumes such as beans follow a leaf-crop. . ." (123). In the next scene Elizabeth must watch while Dan demonstrates his virility by extended sexual intercourse with "Miss Sewing-Machine" (127). This jarring motion between the reality of the psyche and the reality of productive work mars the positivist texture of the novel. There is no connection between the two levels of the text--only a confused alternation between nightmare and reality.

Elizabeth says that she is "living with a strange 'other-self'" (58). Later, she comments that "one would go stark raving mad if a deep and endless endurance of suffering, such as one could encounter in Southern Africa were really brought to the surface" (83). She does of course "go mad" in the course of the novel and the figures of Dan and Sello, representative of a history of oppression, assume the dominant voice of the narrative. Dan and Sello are given life by the author of this account, Elizabeth, herself--they are figures which exist in her psyche--and so in the logic of A Question of Power, her "other-self" would appear to be herself as the object and victim of racial and sexual oppression. Elizabeth is made insane by her own duality: her need on the one hand to assert her subjectivity is opposed to her subjection as an object of socio-historical circumstance.

The reader is tossed between the production of narrative and the reproduction of a historical narrative of oppression. Dan, for instance, has a collection of records that he replays again and again. The records reinforce Elizabeth's inferiority and Dan's sexual prowess. Dan's records, historical accounts of a sort, assert control by an insistent repetition that forces Elizabeth to submit to the horror they reveal. Before her first admission to the hospital psychiatric ward, Elizabeth hears "the insistent hiss, hiss of horror. . . : 'You see,' it said. 'You don't really like Africans. You see his face? It's vacant and stupid. He's slow

moving'" (51). This voice that comes through her own repeats the voice of South African racial oppression from which she has fled. The influence of a specifically South African form of racialism, which Head suppressed in Maru by neatly concealing it behind a theme of universal oppression and a fairy tale ending, resurfaces in A Question of Power in all its particularity. The voices of Dan and Sello come to dominate the narrative.

Although Elizabeth begins various stories and people in the 'real' world of the novel are introduced but they are never fully developed. She begins to detail stories about Tom, Camilla, Brigette, Eugene, her son, Kenosi and so on but the narratives that include them are interrupted and made inaccessible by the imperative of Dan and Sello's voices. The lives of these characters, the builders of a new world, can only be told superficially in between the lines of Sello and Dan. Head's alternative world, here, fails to meet the challenge of history; instead it is consumed by history.

Critical study would, perhaps, recognize that the voices of oppression--Sello and Dan's histories-- are, in the time of the novel, a construction of Elizabeth's imagination. Thus, they are as much a fiction as the 'real' life of the novel. Fiction would then be asserted as the authoritative force in this novel--history subsumed by the fiction that the character, Elizabeth, is here writing. But this is not the case in any direct sense. Elizabeth is bound to repeat the nightmare and her

recovery in this text. The text is circular, beginning with the ending and then starting over so that it represents a historical trap of sorts.

A Question of Power has no narrative continuity or at best its narrative continuity is derived paradoxically from the very obscurity of continuity. It is a broken, split narrative, two narratives conflicting for dominant control. It is perhaps precisely this split narrative that suggests the most interesting aspect of A Question of Power. The circular structure marks a continuous duality, a structure that continually falls back into itself. As such it portrays the trap of history looking ever on the potential freedom of fiction. In Jean Marquard's interview with Head, she says of this novel: "I cannot help feeling that a type of book like mine has so much validity because it comes from southern Africa. The whole world is aware that the situation here is so awry" (53). Head defends her novel not so much as illustrative of a successful rewriting of history but rather as a document which validly accounts for the personal struggle for the post-colonial subject. The vision of a new world of ordinary people leading ordinary, productive lives is curtailed by the extraordinary imposition of an oppressive past. The object of her literary effort is perhaps to find a way to balance the two in her work so that she might escape from the repetitive trap of history.<sup>14</sup>

## III.

Head's novels are an attempt at constructing an alternative world structured to replace the terms of historical texts--texts that account for Botswana as a barren land and which also desolately deny black South Africans a role in the historical fabrication. Head's efforts towards establishing an alternative space in her narratives and her plans for constructing a new world are symbolically introduced in When Rain Clouds Gather; most notably so in the microcosmic world built by Paulina's daughter who "was in the process of building a model village all carved out of mud. . . a sanctuary of genius" (107). Makhaya is fascinated by the model village and later participates in its construction by adding trees and other vegetation to it. Created and structured by a female, the model village suggests Head's interests in emplacing women as a primary force in both creative and material production.

The productive versus the reproductive capabilities of women become a primary concern in Head's novels as well as in The Collector of Treasures. With the Olive Schreiner of Woman and Labour, Head seems to demand "new fields of labour and a reconstruction of our relationship with life" (Schreiner 74). In When Rain Clouds Gather, for instance, Gilbert plans to install the women of the village as the primary agricultural labor force: "Why start talking about development and food production

without taking into account who is really producing the food" (WRCCG 34)? Gilbert reasons that "[w]omen were on the land 365 days of the year while the men shuttled to and fro with the cattle. Perhaps all change in the long run would depend on the women of the country" (43). Furthermore, Makhaya is characterized as a new kind of man: he speaks to his sisters and to the women of the village as intellectual equals and thereby establishes himself as an effective instructor. Makhaya, it can be said, has already proved his deviation from the traditional phallically-centered man when he rejects the sexual advances of the child prostitute on the Botswana border. On learning of his refusal the old woman at the border exclaims in disbelief, "This is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God! He must be mad" (15). Makhaya's character presents a model character to work towards establishing a modern female labor force and also to dismantle the conception of a woman as a product for sexual use.

Not only is Head concerned with emplacing women as responsible laborers in the field of agriculture of women, but as suggested in Maru, she is also interested in developing their creative voices. In Maru, Margaret Cadmore explores her creative powers and the ways in which her paintings both create and document her world. Margaret, a member of the oppressed Masarwa tribe, emerges from the voicelessness imposed on that race of people to become involved in creating her own destiny:

"There was a striking vitality and vigour in her work and yet, who knew how long people like her had lived faceless, voiceless, almost nameless in the country" (M 108). The world of the novel provides a space for Margaret's creative powers. In turn, through her work, she gives face and voice to an oppressed, silenced people. On the occasion of her marriage to Maru, a member of the Batswana elite, the Masarwa find that "a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time" (126). In addition, Margaret's works depict her personal history; she both creates and is created by the world she documents.

However, Maru also raises several pertinent and unresolved questions concerning Margaret's creative ability. In the first instance, she is an experimental project of her guardian, the first Margaret Cadmore, who with this adopted child "had a real, living object for her experiment. Who knew what wonder would be created" (15)? The suggestion is that the young Margaret is herself created by the affluence and personality of the elder. The author bypasses this difficulty by contending that an education will give Margaret control of her "mind and soul" (16) when faced with a "cruel society."

Upon reaching Dilepe village, she is again subject to the machinations of characters who are in a position of authority. Moleka and Maru argue over her as if she is an object intended for their possession. Dikeledi,

Maru's sister, also becomes a pawn whose happiness is subject to the result of their argument. Maru decides what is best for all concerned without ever consulting any of the involved parties. He controls the event of the story. However, at the end of the novel, a certain ambiguity persists in that Maru is never sure of Margaret's love; she may at anytime leave him and perhaps go to Moleka. Maru is never certain that he actually possesses this possessed object. The implication that Margaret has the potential and the capacity to choose militates against an easy interpretation of her as a mere possessed object.

It seems evident that in Maru, Head subsumes the feminist issue under the concerns of racism. Margaret is clearly a symbol for the liberation of her race, and fulfilling the demands of this symbolism becomes the primary burden of her character. In "Writing out of southern Africa" Head writes, "I don't have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless" (22); there are, Head contends, other, more urgent, social problems to be addressed. Nevertheless, her fictional practice reveals her concern with woman's position in socio-historical structures.

A Question of Power examines, among other issues, the position of women as producers rather than merely as vehicles of reproduction on a sexual level and also on the level of literary creation. The novel's dual narrative structure figures Elizabeth's predicament of

being a possible producer of agricultural products on the one hand and being no more than the object of Dan's sexual perversions on the other. Head's personal struggle against such predicaments and her interest in inscribing women as a major force of production is suggested in the following excerpt from a letter to Randolph Vigne:

I am interested in botany with a view to doing plant research. I thought this could be useful knowledge for food production and if I were of use to a government my life wouldn't be at the mercy of every cheap Tom, Dick, Harry with a sex itch. It's pretty terrible I tell you for a woman to be alone in Africa. Men treat women as the cheapest commodity. (A Gesture of Belonging 11)

The image of woman as a sexual product pervades the history that creates her present society, and Head works towards a revision of this image by reevaluating the roles of women in her society.

In A Question of Power, Dan's primary interest in women is their sexual production and the pleasure and self-affirmation they can afford him. He asserts his sexual authority by parading his seventy-one "nice-time girls" before Elizabeth commenting on their various sexual accomplishments while deriding Elizabeth as being sexually defunct. The names of the "nice-time girls" reflect their objectification: "Body Beautiful," "The

Womb," "Miss Pink-Sugar Icing" and so on. They are named in so far as they fill a particular desire of Dan. Dan informs Elizabeth that, "[t]hey have been specially created for my desires. . . I have shown you all that they have, but you have nothing" (AQP 168). In Dan's world, Elizabeth is inferior both for being sexually impotent and also for being Coloured, a derivative of Dan's "pure black skin" (127). Categorized racism and historically codified sexism go hand in hand: they constitute texts for the control and imaginative limitation of a part of humanity. Both are discourses that in their rhetorical force obscure human continuity and disorder the oppressed object's connection with the world. Dan, as a maker of history (he knows the past and the future), maintains his power over Elizabeth by making her believe she is inadequate to manage a world on her own; the world, in this case, exists as his "records" play it.

Elizabeth is "the passive receiver of horror" (131). She is overwhelmed by his continual presence and on the verge of committing suicide and of giving up to the lack by which he renders her. Elizabeth's survival depends on her role as a productive member of the community; she is a producer of food, not a sexual product. Alternatively, in "A 'Nice-Time Girl' Strikes Back: An Essay on Bessie Head's A Question of Power" Margaret Tucker argues that "Elizabeth has been the text for Sello and Dan's hells . . . Living the nightmare was not enough; she must write it

and, thereby, cease to be a mere receptacle for the horrors of others" (172). Tucker argues that Elizabeth as writer of the text takes the power of history-making from Dan and Sello. Tucker suggests that the cooperative marks a clearing of the land and also a figurative clearing of a historical frontier: "This is a frontier that is not yet written; a present that is "unknown" (180). By controlling the land, coaxing it to produce, and earning a living from the product of her labor, Elizabeth will gain control over her history.

The result of this connection for Elizabeth is that she can partake in the construction of a world and assume a subject position as writer of her own narrative, an autobiography--a historical narrative of the self. In defining herself, she must continually redefine the terms of her oppressed position. Being involved in the means of production puts Elizabeth in a position to produce a self-image rather than merely be labelled and used by another. Elizabeth is both a material producer of food and a producer of language. At the end of the novel, she is no longer the object, a passive receiver, of Sello and Dan's history of horror. History, as a text told by a powerful few to oppress a people, is now in the hands and mouth of an ordinary person.

The story "Life," included in The Collector of Treasures, offers a reinscription of this conflict between woman as producer and woman as product without

the resolution provided in A Question of Power. This story sees Head placing the structures of her newly-formed world into an existing social milieu. In this story, Head explores the situation of a woman in village society. Life, the central character, has been relocated from Johannesburg to the Botswana village of her birth, because "when the borders were first set up between Botswana and South Africa, pending Botswana's independence in 1966, all Botswana-born citizens had to return home" (COT 37). Life had survived in Johannesburg through various occupations offered to her in that city, including prostitution. The rural village offers another world for which she has no experience so she makes use of her South African experience and sets up a business trading sex for money. She is a commodity frequently bought and used by the village men, and she is, of course, shunned by the "respectable" village women.

Life marries Lesego, by far the wealthiest <sup>among</sup> ~~of~~ ~~men~~ of the village men. By becoming a commodity possessed exclusively by this man, she can financially continue to live in the lifestyle to which she is accustomed. However, when Lesego threatens to kill her if she is ever unfaithful to him, Life "began to fall apart" (43). Life's response to Lesego's threat implies that she suddenly finds herself deprived of the barter system which she had heretofore controlled. No longer does she trade sex for money (in this story, an exchange even under the contract of marriage), but she has been made a

slave without choice, and her business has fallen under the authority of another.

The narration neither condones Life's behavior, nor is it particularly sympathetic towards her.<sup>15</sup> However, the circumstances of Life's placement in the village and the leniency accorded to her murderer offer a set of unresolved problems. In the first instance, this story suggests an uneasy transition between the rural village and the urban area; the popular song among the beer-brewers after Life's murder is called "That's What Happens When Two Worlds Collide" (46). The rural world offers no instantly utopian alternative ~~utopia~~ or moral elevation; Life could neither be instantly nor unilaterally reformed. Hence, in focusing on rural life, Head is not simplistically reinforcing binary oppositions between country and city.

Furthermore, the introduction to the story suggests that Life is the victim of historical circumstance: economic incentives compelled migrant laborers to move from impoverished rural areas towards South African mines and urban areas. Her life has been directed by the demands of the market economy. She has been an object for others in a marketplace she has substantiated by marketing herself. Resettlement procedures after Botswana's independence, it is here implied, took no account of the effect they would have on the resettled people. Life has always been defined as an object, a political entity or a sexual commodity. Finally, the

light sentence accorded to Lesego by the colonial judicial system consolidates her ultimate objectification. Lesego's strong rhetoric in his account of the murder convinces that judge that Life was his possession, found to be "corrupt" or morally defective and therefore justly disposed of. Even in death, then, she is a commodity accorded no human status. Unresolved and threatening in its impersonal tone, this story investigates how economic forces direct historical processes and consume people in the system.

The title story of the collection, "The Collector of Treasures," offers a similar yet diverging investigation of woman as producer and as sexual product. Abandoned by her husband and left to provide for her children, Dikeledi is both a material producer and one endowed with the gift of imaginative creation. "Works of a beautiful design grew from [her] hands" (90) but also as Dikeledi tells her fellow prisoners: "I fed and reared my children with these hands"(90). Dikeledi, unlike Life, refuses to sell her body to Garesego for money to pay their son's school fees. Instead, by castrating her husband, she destroys that which images her as sexual commodity. Here, she figuratively strips him of his position of controller of the market, a market which makes her body instead of the product of her hands a commodity. Dikeledi and Head--authors of this event--make a radical gesture towards taking a hand in the means of production.

In addition, Dikeledi is 'cutting off' the version

of history that Garesego represents. The introduction of the story categorizes "two kinds of men." One category of men, for which Garesego provides an exemplary instance, is "responsible for the complete breakdown of family life" (91); yet his character has a history that is in this story "analyzed" over three time-spans. Initially, tribal tradition elevated men to a position of power while regarding women as "an inferior form of life;" Secondly, the colonial period saw this type of man become "'the boy' of the white man and a machine-tool of the South African mines;" and thirdly, African independence found this man incapable of dealing with the need to rely on his "own inner resources" because those resources have been distorted and destroyed by authorities of the previous eras (92). Garesego is hence a man defined by historical patterns. When with the arrival of independence, the making of history is, at least nominally, in his own hands at last, he proves to be spiritually and intellectually barren.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas Garesego is the product of history, Paul Thebolo is Head's creation. In Between the Lines, Head comments,

. . .black women have long operated at a disadvantage. Now you as storyteller are going to shape the future. We have this majestic Paul Thebolo. There's very little concentration on Garesego Mokopi--he's submerged. To the forefront there are horrible details told about

him. . . But there's Paul Thebolo and he looks after everything. . .he gives so many people surrounding him this order and peace and happiness. (14-15)

Garesego and what he stands for are made ineffectual and replaced by a historical narrative whose contours are defined by a new historian.<sup>17</sup> Dikeledi's act, the story she tells the other prison inmates and the depiction of a man such as Paul Thebolo show Head (and Dikeledi) struggling to establish a new historical text and the beginnings of a alternative world. Dikeledi speaks this history; despite her imprisonment, she controls the narrative and as such she is the subject and producer of the story rather than its victim. History, like Garesego, impotent and without "inner resources," is emplaced by fiction.

#### IV.

The novels suggest a figure of a clearing of the land so that it suitable for new growth and also a clearing of historical space that dismantles the dominance of an oppressive South African history (a wilderness of sorts for the black South African seeking to locate a subjective selfhood) so that a new historical world might be emplaced. A figure such as this causes Cherry Clayton to remark of the ending of A Question of

the self. In collected form, they attest to the selfhood of a people.

The interrelated stories of The Collector of Treasures create a thematic continuity that refrains from imposing a master narrative--the parts of the collection are not subsumed by the whole. Head's collection is dialogic both within stories and between stories. Although Bessie Head is by no means a pioneer in publishing a collection of interrelated short stories, in her case and in terms of this paper, the genre has particular relevance towards her project of revisioning history. The collected story form, as used by Head, prevents the propagation of a singular narrative interpretation or the domination of one authoritative voice. The Collector of Treasures avoids resolutions, leaves questions and integrates traditional, colonial and contemporary facets of African life. As such, it refuses to be read on the same terms as the historical discourse that it opposes: the collection is integrative rather than exclusive.

Like the character Margaret Cadmore's paintings in Maru, the stories of The Collector of Treasures, as a collected whole, depict "the static, endless hour which moved neither forward nor backward" (115). In this collection, as in a painting, there is backgrounding and foregrounding that defers attention from any central object. In this way, the collection offers a temporal movement that deviates from the linearity of the

historical time line. The relationship between stories is not causal; instead, it is associative and integrative; their relationship notes the various perspectives which make up a history. Referring to A Question of Power, Margaret Tucker suggests that by writing a text whose structure is non-linear, Elizabeth, the textual author, disrupts "a time which sustains and supports the hegemony [of historical time]" (170). For instance, Tucker argues that "the book ends with the beginning, begins with the ending, and the past is shown to be never ending"(173); hence, it is a novel about beginnings not "some authoritative abstraction of history" (181). The fragmentary but associative relationship of the stories in The Collector of Treasures show the present to be never ending--it is continually subject to evaluation and reevaluation; between and within stories the collection reveals many voices that are continually in the process of making and revising history. The movement of time is rendered as variations and repetitions of similar themes that compose the daily lives of people in an African village community.

In Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind, Head introduces each speaker and the topic of each speaker. She controls the progress of the work. However, she defers her authority to the people who she interviews; they speak for themselves rather than being spoken for by Head and as such they can respond to Head's introductions. Introduction and interview are mutually evaluative. As

such, this work prefaces the narrative position that Head adopts in the fictions of The Collector of Treasures. She is both outside and inside the narrative action, a recorder and also a subject shaping and ordering the narratives. The footnote at the end of that collection's initial story demarcates her position. Head notes:

Some historical data was given to me by the old men of the tribe, but it was unreliable as their memories had tended to fail them. A reconstruction was made therefore in my own imagination. (COT 6)

This story and the stories are a mixture of history and imagination. They propose a multi-voiced discourse wherein the author polemicizes with the voices of the people who surround her and with the voice of colonial history.

For instance, the initial story of the collection, "A Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration," offers, as Head notes, "a romanticized and fictionalized version of the history of the Botalaote Tribe" (6). In this story the old men give accounts of their origins: "they say they lost their place of birth over a woman. They shake their heads and say that women have always caused alot of trouble in the world" (6). This story begins the collection and offers perhaps the question of the collection. The stories that follow provide various and also digressive responses to the accounts and the accusations spoken by these men.

For instance, "The Special One," shows Mrs. Maleboge telling the narrator how she lost the inheritance of a cattle ranch that her husband had left her "because women are just dogs in this society'" (81). This phrase, often repeated throughout the collection, translates the old men's accusation into current terms. The story moves towards an investigation of the meaning of this statement. Gaenametse, an acquaintance of Mrs. Maleboge and of the narrator, has been mistreated and her love abused by her unfaithful husband. Her erratic behaviour in the story is inspired by the way she has been treated by this husband and other men, that is, she behaves without respect for herself and without regard for her own dignity. She is restored to peace and self-respect by a love-affair in which she is genuinely cared for. Here, the reason why women have in the old men's opinion "caused a lot of trouble" reflects back on the words of the old men.

The majority of the stories finish without moral or political resolution indicating an authorial distance willing to allow for evaluation. In "Looking for a Rain God," a ritual murder of two children causes the court to sentence the children's parents to death because "all they had on the statute books was that ritual murder was against the law" (60). The courts speak with the voice of a colonial history that indiscriminately imposed its precepts on the African world. However, "all the people who live off crops" and who have known absolute poverty

understand the context that could have caused these people to murder their children: "They knew in their hearts that only a hair's breadth had saved them from sharing a similar fate" (60). Colonial history as it is reflected in the laws cannot account for the experience of Africans. Hence, although the issue of guilt is superficially resolved by the statutes of the judicial system, the story of starvation, hunger and desperation is left unresolved and at odds with the court's judgment.

The stories "Life" and "The Collector of Treasures," discussed in detail above, offer different treatments of the similar issue of woman as sexual commodity. As such they present two sides of a single coin. The authority of history as it asserts its dominance in "Life" is displaced by another voice that resists the dominating influence of history. Dikeledi in "The Collector of Treasures" responds to the objectification of Life and of herself by taking the telling of history into her own hands. Interrelated and dialogic in nature, these two fragments offer a larger, more varied picture. Head's narrative space is beyond the temporal boundaries of history, but it still acknowledges and responds to those boundaries.

Head is not offering a version of history to counter South African historical texts; by means of fiction, she is creating a space and a time wherein a people, who have been overlooked and whose voice has been suppressed by history, can speak for themselves or are, at least,

represented as having a voice.

Head's strategy in The Collector of Treasures is to focus on the particular rather than the general.

"Looking for a Rain God" indicates the need for such particularity. In this story, the general law, is disjointed from the lives of the people. The story takes issue with the significance of context--a context, for example, in which ritualistic witchcraft is a sign of desperation and poverty rather than mere superstitious illiteracy unilaterally punishable by colonial law. In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," an article which analyzes the textual production of the so-called 'third world woman' in western scholarship, Chandra Mohanty argues that when women are written of as a homogeneous group rather than as a heterogeneous and context-bound multiplicity, "they exist, as it were, outside history" (70); they have no individualized subject position in the discourse of history. Mohanty claims that, "it is only by understanding the contradictions inherent in women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised" (74).

Head emphasizes the relevance of the individual voice and the need to understand these voices in the context of a community. For instance, "Snapshots of a wedding" is replete with unresolved issues and questions concerning "modern" women's place in traditional society. The story, in accord with its title, offers a fragmented

scenario: Neo, educated and arrogant of her education, is disjoined from her community and out of place with their customs. However, she is given a traditional wedding, the performance of which relies on the replaying of traditional symbols of wifhood. For example,

an old woman suddenly dashed out and chopped at the ground with a hoe. It was all only a formality. Neo would never be the kind of wife who went to the lands to plough. She already had a well-paid job in an office as a secretary. (COT 80)

Neo's position in the community and the community's position in relation to her becomes the issue of this story. This dual context that both opposes and integrates traditional culture with new ways, offers a reevaluation of the African woman's position in traditional society without falling back on facile oppositions between old and new. Unresolved and fragmented, the story offers questions and ~~new~~ issues for consideration.

Mohanty's argument is echoed by Gayatri Spivak who contends that in order to recognize how heterogeneous the field of women is, one has "to focus on regulative psycho-biographies which are very situation/culture specific" (Criticism 9). Head's many voiced stories and her autobiographical novels are an attempt to find a place in the vastness of history in spite of the oppressive effects of South African historical discourse.

Her works are an effort to provide a context, a space, for individualized voice. The Collector of Treasures offers this space: the characters and themes participate in a historical dialogue that is itself a historical process. Like Head's "patchy clothing," her history is structured by many voices woven together in a narrative whole.

Referring back to the initial question posed in this paper, Head writes "about a world long since lost" through the language of fiction--history translated, interpreted and shaped by narrative. Head offers an alternative world that challenges the authority of a history shaped by the concerns of imperialism. She offers space to a people whose voices have been silenced by history's more dominant voice. As a post-colonial subject attempting to found a place of selfhood in the present, Head's challenge to history offers a pioneering gesture towards independence from the objectification to which South African history has rendered black southern Africans.

Hence, Head's fiction offers a tentative gesture towards establishing historical independence. She moves from the general to the particular--from South Africa to Botswana--and the particular to the general--from stories of the self to stories of the self in the multi-voiced logic of the community. Head's version of historical continuity is a story of the never-ending present, a time

that is past, present and future, under constant reevaluation.

The final story of The Collector of Treasures "Hunting" itself ends with Thato, whose gift it was to sort out all the calamities of life with the unerring heart of a good story-teller" (108-9), telling her husband stories about "the incredible muddle and nonsense people made of their lives each day." A narrating voice intervenes: "What could be done? Nothing could sort out the world. It would always be a painful muddle;" but the stories go on anyway beyond the end of this book and despite the boundaries constructed by a history which deliberately "lost" a part of its people.

## Notes

1. In this paper, I will use the following abbreviations for parenthetical reference of Head's works: WRCG for When Rain Clouds Gather; M for Maru; AOP for A Question of Power; COT for The Collector of Treasures; and Serowe for Serowe: Village of the Rain-wind; AWA for A Woman Alone; BTL for Between the Lines.

2. In "Bessie Head: A Question of Power and Identity" (1987), Charles Ponnuthurai notes:

If one includes Namibia which is presently occupied by South Africa, one could say that the country is almost surrounded by South Africa. On its north, Botswana was flanked by a white settler government until replaced by an independent Zimbabwe on 18 March 1980. Thus the Botswana of Bessie Head's novels is very much under the shadow of apartheid South Africa (84).

3. See the appendix to Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind. In this essay titled, "The founding of the British Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1885-95," Head provides her own account for Botswana history.

4. For a more detailed account on the circumstances of Head's departure from South Africa see Randolph Vigne's introduction to A Gesture of Belonging. See also Jean Marquard's interview, "Bessie Head: Exile and Community in Southern Africa."

In response to a query by Jean Marquard on renouncing her South African citizenship, Head claims,

I did not care. I didn't like the country. I have liked Botswana very much although I have got nothing out of loving a country that didn't want me. . .

What was important to me about Botswana was that there was a freer society here. . . Botswana's historical development is far greater than the nation itself. (Marquard 51-2)

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6. See Bessie Head, "Writing out of southern Africa" p.22.

7. In "A search for historical continuity and roots" Head writes,

The high clamour and violence of South African history dominates all the southern lands so that they are written of in the history book as mere appendages of South African history. Botswana is no mere extension of South African history . . . (AWA 87)

8. For a discussion of dialogics and dialogic relations within the novel form, see M.M. Bakhtin's "From

the prehistory of novelistic discourse."(*The Dialogic Imagination* 41-83).

9. In Between the Lines, Head emphasizes the autobiographical nature of these novels. For example, in response to a question concerning her motives in writing A Question of Power, Head responds that the book is "totally autobiographical" (24) and that it was done as "a kind of reportage, autobiography book" (25). She further notes of Maru that "[i]t's not acknowledged that the early part of Maru is an autobiographical account of my life in South Africa" (28).

10. In "Bessie Head in Gaborone, Botswana: An Interview" (1986) Head admits to Linda Beard that she has not kept in touch with South African literary trends. She notes of the literature to which she has had access:

I became aware that there's sort of a literary explosion in South Africa. . . The sense of vigour I attribute to something that's not of my generation, but belongs to the young people--that's the Black Consciousness Movement. (46)

11. In "Writing out of southern Africa" Head claims

I have worked outside all political and other ideologies, bowing to life here and there and absorbing all that I felt to be relevant, but always fighting for space and air. I needed this freedom and independence, in order that I retain clarity of thought. (22)

12. See Head in Between the Lines, pp. 11-12.

13. For additional commentary on Brecht's influence on her writing, see Head in Between the Lines pp. 8-9.

14. Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions offers an other example of this duality forming the subject and the problem of the narrative. Dangarembga narrates an division between rural and westernized lifestyles and ideologies. Her novel struggles to find balance and is consumed by an irreparable imbalance.

15. For a related discussion, see Dorothy Driver, pp. 162-3.

16. For a related discussion see Barbara Harlow on Bessie Head in Resistance Literature, pp. 134-137.

17. In "Reconstructing the Past, Shaping the Future: Bessie Head and the question of Feminism in a New South Africa," Dorothy Driver comments that "Thebalo functions in the story as a 'feminised' hero" (179) and she suggests that

the act of feminisation is the solution offered by the literary artist, pointing to a new world premised on what Head sees as the best of the old (task-sharing, barter, communal cohesion) and the best of the new (romantic love, nuclear family, monogamy, greater value and voice for women, men stripped of their phallic egos).

(180).

18. For a discussion of Head's final novel, A Bewitched Crossroad, see Cherry Clayton's "'A World Elsewhere:' Bessie Head as Historian."

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