Gestures of Belonging: Disability and Postcoloniality in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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The essay that follows has two overlapping but distinct aims. The first and more modest is to respond to Elizabeth J. Donaldson's 2011 essay "Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman," which traces the theorization of disability in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) through their handling of Bertha Mason, the paradigmatic madwoman in the attic. Donaldson identifies a biomedical, eugenicist model of disability in *Jane Eyre* that *Wide Sargasso Sea,* a postcolonial revision of Brontë's novel, responds to with a deeply social model of disability. Donaldson responds in turn by recuperating the value of the medical model to posit a sociomedical model in *Jane Eyre*, on the basis that "theories that pay attention exclusively to the social causes and construction of mad identity while overlooking the material conditions of the body . . . have a limited political scope" (95). I would suggest, somewhat anachronistically, that Bessie Head's 1973 novel *A Question of Power* can be read as a fourth term in that conversation running from Brontë to Rhys to Donaldson; Head demonstrates, at least in the context of the postcolony, that the

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distinction between social and medical models of disability ceases to be meaningful in situations of extreme precarity—that is, of multiple exclusions from the political or social sphere on such bases as race, nationality, class, and/or gender expression, among others. Donaldson gestures to the possibility of such a reading when she describes "the impossible task of reconciling medical discourses of mental illness, which describe the symbolic failure of the self-determined individual, and the competing discourses of democratic citizenship, in which will and self are imagined as inviolable—a tension that lies at the heart of both liberal individualism and the impairment-disability system" (107). Head's novel offers an example of how mental illness and disability might be theorized without recourse to the self-determined individual's symbolic failure.

My second aim is more ambitious: I examine Head's treatment of madness in *A Question of Power* before proceeding to a generalized discussion of disability in postcolonial literature and scholarship. This novel features a mixed-race single mother refugee who appears to be suffering from a "mental breakdown" (13)—to use Head's term—in a colonial and postcolonial context wherein categories of race, gender, sex, class, and ability are heavily policed. In such a novel, I ask, is madness a subjective symptom of colonial oppression, a tool of systemic social exclusion under the colonial state apparatus, a somatically contingent mental impairment that is particularly heavily policed in the colony and postcolony, some combination of the above, or something else entirely? I'm particularly invested in how postcolonial literature demonstrates the limitations of either the social or medical models of disability in the postcolonial context. I suggest that these limitations reveal the failures of both the social and medical models more generally. Further, the contexts that demonstrate these limitations are not specific to the postcolony. Rather, as the hegemonic West enacts the neoliberal process that Achille Mbembe understands as "capitalism set[ting] about recolonizing its own center" (179), it generates within itself states of exclusion that were previously particular to the colony and postcolony. As a result, the limitations of the social and medical models of disability continue to become increasingly more pronounced. Neoliberalism erodes material, legal, and communal structures of support everywhere (if not everywhere at the same rate) in its ongoing process of redistributing wealth into the hands of those who already have it. As such, the failures of both the social and medical models of disability to apprehend adequately the experience of madness as articulated by Head's and her protagonist's exceptional precarity indicate how

those models might continue to fail if that precarity continues to be globally distributed by the multiple dispossessions of finance capital.

The failure of the medical and social models to apprehend precarity can be understood as a consequence of the extent to which both models posit disability as a deficit. The medical model posits a deficit insofar as a given individual would be normate, autonomous, and able were it not for a particular embodied impairment, whereas the social model suggests that contingent social and material conditions prevent specifically impaired individuals from autonomous ableness, which they would be granted in differently structured contexts. Head offers a gentle corrective to such readings. While norms do circulate in this novel, they are inconsistently and indifferently enforced, without any sense of an ideal or fully autonomous way of being that her protagonist, Elizabeth, departs from or returns to. Regardless of whether she is suffering from her madness or enmeshed within the collective, at no point is Head's protagonist entirely autonomous or safe. As a result, the novel provokes precisely those anxieties that Margrit Schildrick describes as being occasioned by "any compromise of control over one's own body, any indication of interdependency or connectivity, or of corporeal instability" (2). Further, *A Question of Power* so persistently resists any etiological reading of madness that it is unclear whether Elizabeth's madness precedes (and so partially causes) her social alienation or vice versa (such that the two precarious positions collapse into one another).

A Question of Power was published in 1973, nine years after Head permanently fled apartheid South Africa to settle in Botswana, which had become an independent republic in 1966. The novel's plot is fairly schematic. The protagonist, Elizabeth, is a South African Coloured woman living in the small village of Motabeng, Botswana, with her son.[1] As a refugee from the neighboring apartheid state, Elizabeth feels estranged from her Tswana neighbors because of her linguistic, racial, and national identities; she is also tormented by vivid, confusing, and sexually violent hallucinations, which she attempts to self-medicate with sedatives and alcohol. This results in two "mental breakdowns." The first causes Elizabeth to lose her job as an elementary school teacher, forcing her to find work at a farming cooperative run by an Afrikaner refugee and staffed by a mixture of local and foreign volunteers. The second briefly lands her in a mental asylum, from which she is released when the white warden is convinced that she shares his "racialist" views of the black asylum staff (47). On Elizabeth's return to the cooperative, her son, who speaks fluent Tswana and has developed friendships in the village,

helps her to immerse herself gradually into the village's network of relations; at around the same time, her hallucinations come to what appears to be a definitive end.

Despite its relatively straightforward narrative of cure and assimilation, the novel devotes considerable attention to Elizabeth's hallucinations, her reflections on these hallucinations, and the narrator's interpretation thereof. Where several weeks of farm work might be described in two lines of text, a single night's visions can extend for thirty pages. This uneven dilation of time alone would seem to trouble any straightforward reading of *A Question of Power* as a linear novel of recovery or reconciliation (although the novel at times also lends itself to such a reading). The novel closes with Elizabeth ostensibly cured and finding some rootedness in her adoptive community and in her own body. The final line reads, "as she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (206). Because this moment takes place with Elizabeth indoors, in her bed, scholars like Eleni Coundouriotis read "her land" euphemistically. Such a reading posits that Head overtly draws a relationship between embodiment and nation, suggesting that there is a correlation between Elizabeth finding a way to belong in Botswana and getting through her gauntlet of hallucinations, many of which center explicitly on her ambivalence toward her gender, race, and sexual anatomy. Moreover, Head inverts the standard colonial—and indeed postcolonial—metaphor of land as feminine body or motherland by instead recasting Elizabeth's body as the land in which she finally finds her place.

Most criticism on *A Question of Power* has discussed how, given Head's multiple dispossessions by race, gender, geography, nation, language, mental illness, and class, she narrates the creation of a community at communal, regional, or universal levels. Because of the extreme precarity of both Elizabeth's and Head's subject positions, scholarship tends to focus on the extent to which *A Question of Power* fulfills or attempts to fulfill the imperative toward assimilation and overcoming deeply fragmented subjectivities.[2] Previous scholarship generally pairs this imperative toward assimilation with an investment in the overlaps between Head's biography and Elizabeth's narrative. Scholars focus especially on the fact that Elizabeth shares Head's experience of childhood abandonment, exile, and mental impairment. Jacqueline Rose, for instance, writes:

> Head, like the character Elizabeth, was born in a mental hospital [in South Africa] to a white mother put away because she was pregnant by a native. Sent first to a nursing home and then to a Boer family, both of which returned her because she was black, Head, again

> like Elizabeth in the novel, was finally taken in by a Coloured foster mother whom she believed to be her real mother until the age of thirteen. (409)

Head's account of Elizabeth's two mental breakdowns and subsequent cure has its own parallels in her autobiographical renderings of her time in Botswana. Criticism's investment in the overlap among Head's biography, Elizabeth's madness, and Head and Elizabeth's political state is in part justified. Head's precarious refugee status in Botswana and her mental health designation were contingent on one another: "As pressures mounted, she began to fear that the Botswanans might certify her as insane in order to deport her to South Africa where she would be forced to reenact her mother's institutional history. The specter of Sammy Peterson, a fellow refugee, exacerbated her apprehension: the Botswanans had turned him over to the South African regime, who had incarcerated him on trumped-up charges of dementia" (Nixon 116). The extent to which madness operates as a tool of social exclusion or control under the colonial state apparatus—even, as in this case, beyond the borders of the settler-colonial apartheid state that maintained considerable influence over the neighboring Botswana—encourages a reading that conflates Head's and Elizabeth's fugitive states with mental illness.

This reading, beyond even conflating the biographical with the fictional, falls into the trap of equating Elizabeth's madness with what Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell identify as "narrative prosthesis" (49), in which disability becomes the "crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight." In this way, the critical tendency is consistent with what Clare Barker perceives as a particular congruity between postcoloniality and disability and between postcolonial literature and disability in literature:

> disability lends postcolonial fiction some of its most potent and pervasive images and metaphors: dismembered nation-states; silenced subaltern subjects; economies crippled by international debt; healing through decolonization and the reclamation of indigenous knowledge. As a trope, a narrative device, disability enables postcolonial writers to tell vivid stories about colonialism and its aftermath, stories that resonate outward from a character's disabled body to address "damage," inequality, and power and its abuses in the postcolonial world. (100)

What this analytical leaning cannot account for, however, is that Elizabeth's madness is not a consistently theorized condition in *A*

Question of Power. That is, Head offers no stable etiology of madness that would allow for a straightforward reading of madness. The unstable and untheorized nature of Elizabeth's mental illness, whose etiologies vacillate between the social, medical, and supernatural, along with the fact that no obvious reason for her cure is explicitly stated, seems to me to be precisely the point; any tropic reading of disability is consistently subverted. As a prosthesis, whether narrative or analytic, madness in this novel is remarkably unreliable.[3]

Elizabeth's madness primarily manifests in regular, lengthy hallucinatory episodes in which three, maybe four, personalities—Sello the monk, Sello in the brown suit, Dan, and Medusa—variously lecture, console, harangue, and torment her, with Dan in particular frequently inflicting visions of sexual violence on Elizabeth. Her interactions with these personalities typically feature some discussion of gender, sex, race, and morality, with Sello in the brown suit, Dan, and Medusa regularly attacking Elizabeth for deficiencies in these arenas.

Head deploys third-person past tense without any clear stylistic or visual markers to indicate a shift from the hallucinations to the novel's reality (save for occasional dilations between the time of the narrative and the time of the narration), and the hallucinations do seem to have some real-world effects. Early in the novel, a friend of Elizabeth's overhears a comment by Sello the monk, though by this point Elizabeth has resigned herself to being the victim of "intangible form[s]" discernible only to her (23); after a vision of being attacked by Medusa with "lightning bolts," Elizabeth awakens to find scorched patches on the floor of her hut (92); a nightmarish vision of Sello's face transforming into that of an owl is complemented by the appearance of a dead owl on Elizabeth's doorstep the following morning. The ontological status of a given described event, then, is always in question, and the reader is made to share in Elizabeth's uncertainty. Following an extended and presumably internal monologue about the impossibility of communicating her hallucinatory experiences to Eugene, the Afrikaner manager of the farming cooperative, Elizabeth discovers, alongside the reader, that the monologue has been external:

> She couldn't even begin to say: "Well, you know Sello, don't you? He isn't all he seems to be on the surface—the progressive Botswana farmer, eager to discuss the latest agricultural techniques. He's really Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And he confided some extraordinary things to me, so I'm not sure I'm quite normal any more. I don't think people who conduct telepathic relationships with other people are normal anyway, but I never thought it would happen to me . . ." She started a little; she had said her last thoughts out loud. (57–58)

What's crucial to note here is how the final sentence retroactively shifts the significance of the preceding chain of thoughts by calling into question how much of it—the entire paragraph or just the last sentence—she conveyed "out loud." The reader experiences Elizabeth's uncertainty as she attempts to interpret her own experiences. This experience would fall in line precisely with received ideas about canonical or hegemonic metropolitan literary modernism along the lines of Conrad, Woolf, or James if the novel were about that interpretation, but it doesn't seem to be, or at least not entirely.[4] We're left, then, with a porous text that is uncommonly uninterested in its own lacunae.

Head's depiction of madness here operates through the indefinitely deferred resolution of ambiguities; the reader, along with Elizabeth, is never entirely sure which norms can be taken as givens and which cannot. Within this passage, we see at least three somewhat distinct kinds of normality that are each determined by behaviors or ways of being that fail to conform to those norms. First is that norm violated by Sello, who is at once a farmer in the community and a figure who taunts Elizabeth during her hallucinatory episodes; Sello is remarkable for being, at least as far as Elizabeth is concerned, other than what he seems to be. Elizabeth herself is in violation of another norm because she believes that she has been contaminated by Sello. That is, simply by having "extraordinary things" confided to her, she ceases to be certain that she's "quite normal." Finally, both Sello and Elizabeth are described as being in violation of the norm of not "conduct[ing] telepathic relationships with other people." This phrasing leaves open the possibility that telepathic relationships are possible but simply abnormal. The grounds that constitute normality here are persistently shifting, and there are no guarantees that they will remain consistent from one moment to the next. The passage begins with Elizabeth (or the narrator) doubtful that she will be able to communicate her affliction to Eugene; it concludes with her having communicated too much and the reader never finding out exactly how much is too much. At the level of the text and interpretation, the reader experiences the same persistently shifting parameters as Elizabeth seems to be experiencing here. In formalist terms, the syuzhet undermines the stability of any given fabula we might choose to extrapolate from it, rendering this text—and the madness it addresses—porous, unstable, and protean.[5]

In addition to the text's porousness, an additional pair of problems—or multiplicity of problems deriving from two disciplines—emerge: the burden of signification for both the postcolonial novel

and disability in the context of literary production. The postcolonial text is made to do the work of representing the texture of the postcolonial experience to a typically Western or Western-facing audience, which comes with risks for both the writer and the place in question. As Nirvana Tanoukhi summarizes, "no sooner do writers accomplish the task of making a convincing or compelling depiction of a *particular* people and place than they must immediately confront the possibility that their story will be so *generalized* as to become the sanctioned representation of the life of a country" (670). The text that features disability, which is also usually aimed at or accessible to a normate audience, runs the risk of excessive signification. We think here, for instance, of the "sanctioned representation[s]" of disability suggested by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's assertion that "by its very presence, the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation" (1). This is not to conflate the conditions of postcolonial subjectivity or disability, nor postcolonial art and artistic depictions of disability, but to suggest that the vexed nature of signification in either of the two latter fields renders the process of interpretation a fraught one; indeed, interpretation is a freight that multiplies in the context of a postcolonial novel that, like *A Question of Power*, features a disabled protagonist.

A literary treatment of disability in general and madness in particular need not signify anything more than itself, especially in a context where an author draws on embodied experiences of disability to generate her work. However, such treatments are often made to do more work either in popular reception or in criticism. Let me, therefore, attempt to delineate how madness operates in Head's text and context. The decision to work from madness outward to the postcolonial context, rather than inward from the postcolonial context to how madness operates within it, is a consequence of both the text's relationship to coloniality and madness and the slightly vexed nature of theorizing mental disability in the context of the postcolony.

Head's novel seems to be clearly aware of the constructedness of race and gender as social categories that are designed to generate controllable subjects. Explicitly articulating that racism precedes race, that racial categories structurally produce inequality in a settler-colonial context rather than descriptively reflect reality, the narrator observes, "There [in South Africa] they said the black man was naturally dull, stupid, inferior, but they made sure to deprive him of the education which developed personality, intellect, skill" (57). Head treats gender somewhat less critically, since the Medusa that torments Elizabeth seems to operate as a substitute for African femininity, or at

least is largely engaged in attacking Elizabeth on the grounds of her failure to be entirely African or entirely feminine. Even so, an early encounter with the Peace Corps volunteer Tom offers the following:

> She was later to depend on Tom heavily for the return of her sanity, but that night, just as he was about to leave, he laughed and turned towards her and said: "You're a strange woman, Elizabeth. The things *you* draw out of a man! You know, men don't really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that, but their deepest feelings they reserve for other men." (24)

The novel is not so univocal in its critique of Western imperialism that everything the white, male, American Peace Corps volunteer says ought to be read as sarcastic, as the proleptic first clause signals; but there is a critique of, or at least ambivalence toward, an essentializing, binary construction of gender here. After Tom leaves, Elizabeth reflects on her ostensibly hallucinatory relationship with Sello: "The base of it was masculine. Right from the start, Sello had the air of one who was simply picking up the threads of a long friendship." Elizabeth will repeat this ambivalence to her assigned gender identity elsewhere in the novel. Thus, while race and gender categories are subject to more or less explicit critique and theorization, the categories of sanity and insanity are not explicitly dealt with. As the above passage demonstrates, "sanity" is a term that Head (or her narrator) uses without needing to query it, however regular and frictionless the slippages between lucid and hallucinated scenes might be.

The objection may reasonably be raised that I am critiquing a thoroughly critiqued, if persistent, notion of liberal individualism without theorizing or accounting for alternative models of subjectivity, which is a glaring omission in a postcolonial text that appears to be at least partially in conversation with such models. The model of the liberal subject remains important in the postcolonial context because of colonization's profound epistemic impact on its victims; the evasion and undermining of the model of the liberal subject in postcolonial studies is an important and fruitful one, but we should not lose sight of the fact that, as Tejumola Olaniyan observes, "to evade something . . . is to *wish* it does not exist, or that it is no longer useful" (49). Hence, I am hesitant to answer Clare Barker and Stuart Murray's call for disability theorists "to take particular, situated experiences as the starting point for disability analysis, enabling acts of criticism *emerging from and informed by* (rather than applied to) 'cultural locatedness'" (228), rather than "imposing a hegemonic

model of disability." This gesture risks ignoring the fact that these hegemonic models of disability are already imposed on the colonial and postcolonial contexts, where the state apparatus for evaluating madness is precisely a leftover of—an imposition by—the colonial period. This is not to assert the totalizing force of Western hegemony, which is not evenly spread or evenly accepted, but to concede its profound influence in the case of postcolonial, or indeed neocolonial, Botswana. One consequence of Western imperialism in Africa has been to impose a normate identity that need not be coextensive with the statistical norms of any given subjected society. While that imposition has not been absolute, its impact is still strongly felt. This impact, taken alongside Head's ambivalent cultural inheritance (writing in English without any access to African languages), would incline me toward using the hegemonic, Western-facing disabilities discourse (however provisionally) while attempting to adjust for contextual frameworks of knowledge where applicable, all while exploring how madness operates in *A Question of Power*.

One clear limit for such Western-facing discourse would be the novel's suggestions that Elizabeth's madness might be a consequence of witchcraft, which obviously doesn't fit neatly into either the social or medical models of disability. I confess to being uncertain of precisely how to accommodate it. Elizabeth speaks about witchcraft more than once. Although she generally jokes about it, witchcraft also appears during her hallucinations, which makes it difficult to determine their sincerity. Still, the sequence in which Elizabeth discovers the dead owl on her doorstep after seeing Sello with an owl's face is unsettling because it either indicates that the hallucination has bled into the world or that the owl being left on her doorstep caused the hallucination. As a result, we are never certain about which way causality flows. I mention this in the context of Elizabeth's social exclusion because Elizabeth's first mental breakdown immediately follows the discovery of the owl. This sequence of events also leads to her first interview with Eugene:

> "You don't seem to get along with the local people," he observed.
>
> "It's not that," Elizabeth said, anxiously. "People don't care here whether foreigners get along with them or not. They are deeply absorbed in each other." She paused and laughed. "They have a saying that Batswana witchcraft only works on a Motswana, not an outsider. I like the general atmosphere because I don't care whether people like me or not. I am used to isolation."
>
> "Too much isolation isn't a good thing for anyone," he said. (56)

If this is an instance of the novel offering a magical etiology for Elizabeth's madness, it does so in the obliquest possible manner. Unprompted, Elizabeth offers a non sequitur about Batswana witchcraft that is pertinent only insofar as she is discussing a local indifference to outsiders, which extends to local witchcraft being effective only on members of the community, a category from which Elizabeth and Eugene implicitly exclude themselves. Eugene ignores this and instead offers a bromide on the level of "you should get out more." The fact that this utterance takes place so shortly after the discovery of the dead owl, is so utterly unprompted, and is a singular instance of the supernatural being referred to in what is clearly the real world of the novel is about as much evidence for a magical etiology of madness as the novel offers. I mention this scene because, if taken seriously, it suggests that Elizabeth's madness is at once a mechanism of social exclusion, a consequence of social exclusion, and a mechanism of social inclusion insofar as the madness leads her to Eugene's cooperative, where she begins to establish connections with the local community, becomes retroactively susceptible to the Batswana witchcraft that leads her there, and subsequently appears to be cured.[6] Even here, demonstrably, I am inclined toward a social interpretation wherein witchcraft operates as a social mechanism that is at first disabling for Elizabeth but eventually leads to her assimilation into the village community and apparent cure. This fits fairly neatly with Barker's suggestion that, within the postcolonial novel, "'[i]mpairment' does not necessarily 'diminish personhood,' but can instead provide a focal point for emphasizing communal strength, inclusivity, and solidarity" (100). More to the point, the possibility of a supernatural etiology for Elizabeth's hallucinations looms in this text, never firmly advanced or firmly rebutted, and thus prevents any stable investment in either the social or medical model of disability.

That said, the novel appears more invested in the social model of disability insofar as the postcolonial context in which Elizabeth operates generates her "mental breakdown." This generation takes two forms, however: the sense that madness is a constructed category of exclusion deployed strategically by the apartheid regime in South Africa and the sense that the oppressions encountered in the contexts of either South Africa or neighboring Botswana lead to Elizabeth's mental breakdown. We see the former most explicitly in the narrative of Elizabeth's mother. A gaunt mission school principal relates this narrative to Elizabeth at the novel's opening: "We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was

a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native" (16). Elizabeth's mother, then, has her sanity defined solely in terms of her conformity to South Africa's Immorality Amendment Act of 1957, which prohibited sexual intercourse between individuals of different taxonomized racial categories; here, however, the simultaneous deployment of the medical or biological and social models is borne out by the suggestion that Elizabeth might inherit this "insanity" (16). Indeed, under the social model and apartheid South Africa's strict policing of alterity, Elizabeth must inevitably inherit this insanity if we take insanity to mean deviation from the prescribed norm; after all, she is embodied evidence of nonconformity to the 1957 Act. This medicosocial model operates in a feedback loop in this context: "The other children soon noticed something unusual about Elizabeth's isolation periods. They could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up. They took to kicking at her with deliberate malice as she sat in a corner reading a book" (16). This instance testifies that the category of madness is self-reinforcing insofar as the neglect inflicted on a child identified as being potentially insane solicits precisely the behavior that would support such a diagnosis.

The problem here is that Elizabeth only begins to suffer from her hallucinations and breakdowns—or at least, only reports them—after she permanently leaves South Africa. One line of interpretation suggests that the newly independent Botswanan context is one from which a white imperialist hegemony had only recently retreated; even so, the same cultural nationalism that had recently been used to support Botswana's nation-statehood also risked drawing sharp lines around what was and was not African. Elizabeth, however, is once again excluded, albeit under somewhat less militarized conditions. The novel's own interpretive heuristic supports this:

> She had been so intensely drawn inwards over a certain period that her mind dwelt entirely at the intangible level of shifting images and strange arguments. She lay quietly staring in the dark. Why was everything so pointed, so absorbingly profound? The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power-worship running through it, and power people needed small, narrow, shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide flexible universe where there were too many cross-currents of opposing thought. (38)

The relationship between Elizabeth's mental health and the social context in which she lives is made explicit here. Medusa, Elizabeth's hallucination, articulates the reality of African society; Elizabeth is

not so much "drawn inwards" as forced by that society's "shut in and exclusive" nature. At other times, however, Medusa is described to us as "Buddha's wife" (43) and "seven thousand towering vaginas" (45), and it isn't clear if these appellations are meant to be accretive or if they shift with the uncertain ontologies of the novel. In this moment at least, Elizabeth's madness seems to come as a response to an overdetermined and internally contradictory social environment, which resonates with Sander Gilman's recognition of the Renaissance conceit that "one's mad actions are a sign of sanity in a world gone mad" (116) or Phyllis Chesler's more pointed assertion that "many [women] may be reacting to or trying to escape . . . repression and the powerlessness it signifies by 'going mad'" (37). This is precisely the model that Jean Rhys extends in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "a threnody for the defeat of the feminine as the only tragic indictment of the masculine available" (Patke 191), and it is precisely the limited possibility of meaningful rebellion from this mad subjectivity that Donaldson attempts to warn against in "Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman" when she cites Shoshana Felman's point that "depressed and terrified women are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction" (Felman qtd. in Donaldson 93). Donaldson's intervention is to return to *Jane Eyre* by "thinking through a new feminist theory of embodiment and mental illness" (95), remaining sensitive to the overdetermined social structures that Rhys is critiquing, but alive, too, to Bertha Mason's physical embodiment, so as to contextualize her madness as "a matrilineal legacy of national, ethnic identity, and physical disorder" (99).

Head is at least as ambivalent as Donaldson about any purely social model of disability, although her estrangement from any kind of matrilineal, national, or ethnic identities would highlight the constructedness of even these terms.[7] A naturalized social model of disability is voiced by Eugene, the exiled Afrikaner who encounters Elizabeth during her first breakdown, has her hospitalized, and later offers to help her after inadvertently disclosing her hallucinations: "She had to choke back a rush of words. . . . [S]he could see that he was working on the simple theory that South Africans usually suffered from some form of mental aberration, so she only nodded her head in agreement to his offer of assistance" (58). I use the admittedly contradictory construction "naturalized social model" to indicate the ambivalence of Eugene's "simple theory." Does the mental aberration follow from being a South African forced to live under the inequities of the apartheid regime? Is the "form" of "mental aberration" contingent on particular South Africans—hardly a unified identity category, now as then—given how seriously race, gender, and class

determine relationships to power? What is the norm against which this aberration is measured? And does such aberration follow even South Africans in exile, who—like Eugene and Elizabeth—have renounced or challenged their national identity? Neither Head nor Eugene answer these questions; they only leave us with a formula: if one is South African, then likely one experiences some form of mental aberration. This "simple theory" offers as natural or naturalized law a correlation between mental impairment and South Africanness (of whatever kind) that remains unelaborated in the text. As such, in this moment, and I'd suggest in the text at large, social and so-called natural models of disability are not read as contradictory but rather as coextensive, and both are equally subject to revision.

Eugene is, like Tom, an ambiguous figure who is neither a subject for immediate, sarcastic dismissal nor intrinsically laudable; he's a well-intentioned white liberal patriarchal refugee. I would read Eugene's implied "simple theory," then, in addition to Elizabeth's silence, as a gentle rebuke to Frantz Fanon's overinvestment in a model of pathology, which is fundamentally a social model of cognitive disability. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* argues that the overriding psychological disability afflicting the subjects of colonialism is the denial of subjectivity or agency under colonialism. Fanon implies that colonial subjects could only overcome this debility through anticolonial struggle: "After years of unreality, after wallowing in the most extraordinary phantasms, the colonized subject, machine gun at the ready, finally confronts the only force which challenges his very being: colonialism. . . . The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation" (20–21). The proposition that colonial melancholia is socially contingent and could be resolved through collective social action—that "liberation . . . [was] a way out of, if not an actual cure for, a melancholia typically read as largely debilitating" (Flaugh 299)—runs the risk of eliding such cognitive impairments or deviations from neurotypicality that are not results of the colonial context. For Fanon, the originary alienation of colonialism overrides any other etiology—even etiologies stemming from similarly wholesale social inequity such as institutionalized misogyny. Similarly, Eugene assumes that colonialism generates pathology, which stunningly elides South African as a coherent identity category and ignores the racial stratification that generates that pathology; Eugene therefore assumes that all mental disabilities in the colony are a result of that social structure. In so doing, he renders the particulars of Elizabeth's experience meaningless or inaccessible to him, much

as Rhys obscures the possibility of Bertha's madness outside of her marriage to Rochester.

Moreover, the Fanonian solution to that pathology—collective resistance against the colonizer—does not necessarily serve Elizabeth since the black cultural nationalism through which that resistance was primarily articulated excludes her as a Coloured woman as thoroughly as the white supremacist regime in South Africa would.[8] That being said, Elizabeth's madness would seem to be at least in part a result of Elizabeth's own racist indoctrination. It's telling that during her first breakdown, she becomes agitated when a Tswana shopkeeper completes paperwork slowly: Elizabeth "sprang to her feet, slamming the chair back against the wall and shouted: 'Oh you bloody bastard Batswana!! Oh you bloody bastard Batswana!!' Then she simply opened her mouth in one, long, high, piercing scream" (51). This scene would suggest that Elizabeth's cure at the end of the novel—achieved after she works on Eugene's farming cooperative and establishes friendships with some of the local laborers—is at least partially related to Elizabeth's overcoming her estrangement from her African context and identity. However, even this reading of Elizabeth's cure is subverted somewhat by the fact that her release from a mental ward at the novel's close is a consequence of Elizabeth being interpreted as holding racist views:

> A wild alarm-bell sounded off inside her. [The doctor] pushed the cup of tea towards her as though she were an old friend. She had to fight an impulse to jump up and run out of his office. He was stark raving mad too. He really hated black people . . . the shock of being thought of as a comrade racialist had abruptly restored a portion of her sanity. But she made no effort to convince him they were not on the same track.
>
> "Ah," said the doctor. "You are better already. You are helping. You set the table for lunch. You will soon go home. You are cured." (184)

There are three distinct notions of cure and madness being deployed here: first, Elizabeth identifies racial hatred in the white doctor, which she articulates as madness; second, the doctor pronounces her as "cured" by the vested authority of the medical institution, drawing the conclusion from Elizabeth's successful performance of minor gendered tasks; and, third, Elizabeth has a "portion of her sanity" restored in being hailed by the doctor in a discourse that she does not want to participate. Elizabeth, then, is at once officially "cured" by tacitly acquiescing to being interpellated as a racist and marginally "cured"

within her own rubric by silently resisting that interpellation. Again, we are not at any point given any solid ground on which to stand.

The novel's ambivalent investments in the social model of disability would suggest that any unambiguous reading of the novel through the medical model of disability is out of the question; Elizabeth's scorn for the "quack" in the mental ward makes this clear (182). This said, Elizabeth does at times seem to accept the possibility that she's inherited her mother's insanity directly: Elizabeth "wondered if the persecution had been so much the outcome of the principal's twisted version of life, as the silent appeal of her dead mother: 'Now you know. Do you think I can bear the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me'" (17). What's left ambiguous here is whether the dead mother means to share insanity or the stigma of insanity with Elizabeth. Still, after her first breakdown Elizabeth's hallucinations return only after she has been hospitalized and sedated, which would suggest some relationship between Elizabeth's body and her mental state. However, the failure of the sedative and of Elizabeth's subsequent self-medication with alcohol and unnamed "tablets" (13) would again seem to undermine any straightforward application of the medical model to Elizabeth's situation. Rather, if the novel posits an etiology for madness other than the social model, it appears to be something else entirely. Vexingly for the reader looking to find some evidence of the inherited colonial structures policing mental health as one more criterion for exclusion or surveillance, Elizabeth talks her way out of her hospital bed within fifteen hours of arriving there. Subsequently, when she's told by her principal at the Motabeng Primary School that she needs to submit a "certificate of sanity from a medical officer" (66) to retain her position, Elizabeth refuses, to the distress of the principal, who imagines it would be "no trouble to get the certificate." Elizabeth is only dismissed when her colleagues articulate their disdain for her as a foreigner; within the medical and educational context, the medically determined condition of "insanity," which comes with paperwork signed by an authority figure, has less cache than the tacit social exclusion of an individual, which doesn't.

Brontë says madness is in the body, Rhys says madness is in society, and Donaldson says madness is in the body, which is in society. I'd suggest that Head says madness is in the body, which is in society, but she also understands that the body and society are so contingently constructed in cases of extreme precarity—their borders so fluid—as to make meaningful distinctions moot. While neither Brontë nor Rhys offers solutions to their madwomen in attics, they

offer clear sources: Brontë's Bertha Mason carries her madness inside of her like a disease, where Rhys's Antoinette Cosway has madness forced on her by the confinements of a colonial, patriarchal marriage from which she cannot physically escape. Head never tells us where madness comes from; indeed, she never seems to ask where it comes from. Ultimately, I suggest, the litany of dispossessions that Elizabeth endures as well as her inability to find a secure foothold in any identity category (embodiment, gender, race, class, language, nation, ability) make the idea of picking one—of resolving the tangled ambiguity—ludicrous.

A caveat here would have to be that, whereas Brontë and Rhys are fairly thoroughly canonized writers such that Donaldson intervenes as much in their texts as she does in their texts' impact on discourses around madness, Head is a marginal writer's marginal writer. There's some irony in the fact that her novel ends as it does, with a gesture of belonging when we don't really know where the novel belongs. Any attempt to coordinate her position in the already peripheral postcolonial canon tends to run as a sequence of negations; she can be neither comfortably positioned within the Black Consciousness movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was predominantly urban and masculine, nor, because of her geographical and cultural estrangement from the Coloured community in the Cape, comfortably placed in conversation with the prominent voices from that tradition, such as Alex La Guma, Zoe Wicomb, or Richard Rive. Her pattern of emigration also does not correspond neatly with South Africa's writers in exile, who typically lit out for London, Berlin, or Paris rather than moving one border over from the apartheid state and settling in a rural outpost, as Head did. Further, she offers ambivalent narratives about her experience of mental illness in both her fiction and autobiography. To suggest that Head's work is incomparable to anything else is both to risk sounding like a blurb and to undermine the comparative discipline that undergirds this essay. However, to derive a critical dividend from Head's repeatedly marginal status seems to me to enact the interpretive violence regularly brought to bear on postcolonial literature and on literature with disability in it; after all, this is clearly neither a straightforward story of individual cure standing in for a healing from the wounds of colonialism or of colonialism straightforwardly generating disability. This could just be the story of one individual's disability in a post-and-colonial context. Nonetheless, we typically need fiction to mean more than itself, and my task here is specifically invested in making this text mean more than itself. Let me offer this. First, the

extremely fractured, repeatedly alienated nature of Head's biography and fiction demonstrates some of the short circuits of the social, and to a somewhat lesser extent the medical, models of disability in the contexts of extreme precarity. Second, the conditions of extreme precarity that have historically been concentrated in the Global South (and cohered exceptionally in Head's own life) are now being opened up on a global scale by the ceaseless demands of capital. This being the case, do disability studies' models for thinking about disability still belong? And if so, how?

Notes

1. "Coloured" in the South African context, while derived from apartheid-era racial taxonomies, describes and has largely been claimed by people of mixed racial and ethnic heritage, though not without some ambivalence.

2. For more on how Head forges affiliation at the communal and regional level, see Nixon. See Rose for more on how Head forges affiliation by way of universalist humanism. Finally, Patke discusses how Head forges a universalist affiliation that exceeds the human.

3. I am grateful to Andrew Thomas and Elinor Hayden for furnishing me with this and other timely insights.

4. By contrast, James's stories persistently concern themselves with such interpretation. According to Todorov in *The Structural Analysis of Literature*, "the motive force of Henry James's stories, that which determines their structure, is the essential secret . . . [that] consists precisely in the existence of a secret as such, of an absolute and absent cause, and in the effort to discover this secret, to make the absence present" (99). Head exerts no such effort; in fact, she strains in every direction but toward such a discovery.

5. Todorov's "Narrative Transformations" is useful in its discussion of the Russian formalist terms fabula, the order or events referred to be a narrative, and syuzhet, the order of events as they are presented in a narrative. Brooks is instructive in his renovation of these terms for thinking through the modern novel.

6. Fanon identifies precisely this mechanism of initiation into indigenous, occult traditions as an anticolonial, liberatory practice in "On Violence": "The atmosphere of myth and magic frightens me and so takes on an undoubted reality. By terrifying me, it integrates me in the traditions and the history of my district or of my tribe, and at the same time it reassures me, it gives me a status, as it were an identification paper" (43).

7. Scholars have pointed out that Elizabeth is also estranged from her own body. In fact, much has been made, critically, of the passage in which Elizabeth reflects, following another attack by Medusa, that "it was not maddening to her to be told she hadn't a vagina. She might have had but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then if necessary" (44). See particularly Kim for more on Head's complication of subjectivity in the context of liberation politics. Frankly, I'm not sure how to read Medusa. She is described as a kind of unassimilable, monolithic representative of a "surface reality of African society . . . shut in and exclusive" (38); but that she should be named by a classical referent for an orientalized, monstrous, feminine Other sits uncomfortably with me. Hélène Cixous's 1980 refurbishment of that referent in "Laugh of the Medusa," which posits an écriture feminine not far removed from that which Head deploys here, further complicates that uncertainty.

8. Another caveat here in that the Black Consciousness Movement of the 70s was pushing to redefine the term "black" as a label to describe anybody oppressed by white supremacy, though the success of that campaign was not universal. We may read this exclusion, then, as deriving from a mixture of Elizabeth's racist indoctrination and the strategically essentializing logic of anticolonial racial rhetoric.

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