

Book Reviews

James L. Conyers, Jr. *Black Lives: Essays in African American Biography.* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999). 210 pp., \$19.95 paper.

These biographical profiles of well-known and not so well-known African Americans are presented from an Afrocentric perspective. At least one essay is about a South African Black, "Bessie Head: The Idealist" by Owen G. Mordaunt. Drawing from the writings of Maulana Karenga, Conyers sets forth the Afrocentric framework as presented in this anthology:

The Afro-American national community is in fact a unity-in-itself, a community of people with a common and distinguishing history (kinship in time and space; a common and distinguishing culture (kinship in life changes and activities); and a common and distinguishing collective self-consciousness...(10).

The African Diaspora is at the same time a complex cultural mix drawn by circumstances across several continents and over a wide historical time frame.

Conyers' essay, "Maulana Karenga and Phenomenology—An Intellectual Study," seems to set the tone for the other authors' selections. Among the African Americans profiled are Toni Morrison, Daniel "Chappie" James, and Richard Allen,

founder and bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. One may question to what extent the other contributors embrace the Afrocentric framework assuming there is even a loose consensus on Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism for that matter. Setting aside the matter of that broad subject, this reviewer found the following selections highly informative: Calvin McClinton's "Vinnette Carroll: African American Director and Playwright"; Gloria T. Randle's "Ourlaw Women and Toni Morrison's Communities"; and Owen G. Mordaunt's "Bessie Head-The Idealist." The line between art and politics always has presented a myriad of issues for analysis. McClinton and Randle both treat this topic. Mordaunt focuses on one ideological approach to Pan-Africanism.

In talking about Carroll's career as a director and playwright McClinton observes

Carroll believed in three basic fundamentals: 1) the total picture, one that is perfect in design and execution; 2) the total artist, the performer who can present ideas physically, intellectually, and artistically through dance, music, and poetry; and 3) the total theatrical experience, which not only seeks to entertain but to inform, inspire, and elevate the human spirit (25).

Obviously political events serve as only one facet of the human experience; however they can impact or be impacted by what takes place within the total social environment. Depending on the playwright the circumstances in which a play is presented and the time frame, they can serve as a link between art and socio-political insight and entertain at the same time. Given such complex interconnections one needs to define the concept of what constitutes entertainment. The question then becomes which factors serve as a link between art and politics and which do not.

Overall I found this collection of essays interesting, provocative, and likely to stir some debate. I suspect that Conyers' opening essay also might stir controversy, another reason I recommend it to thoughtful readers.

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