

Garden-Variety Holiness:
Bessie Head’s “reverence for ordinary people”
in *A Question of Power*
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Abstract: To unfold the “reverence for ordinary people” that Bessie Head says animates her writings and to move beyond the dominant trend of treating Head’s work autobiographically, the present study considers *A Question of Power* in light of Njabulo S. Ndebele’s theories of the spectacular and the ordinary. For Ndebele, these categories correspond to the dramatic and the mundane, and they map a developmental history in South African fiction that uses the language of “redemptive transformation” to describe how representing ordinary things in ordinary ways critiques apartheid and imagines a new social order. This study argues that *A Question of Power* contains the spectacular in the dreams, nightmares, and visions that the main character, Elizabeth, suffers. Nevertheless, in the novel’s local industries garden, which gathers a cast of common individuals around the simple feat of growing vegetables, Elizabeth finds ordinary work marvellous and venerates the garden and its people. The garden thus becomes both mundane and blessed, and Elizabeth embodies an amalgam of sacred and profane that aligns her with the archetypal and prophetic figure of the holy fool. *A Question of Power* thus displays the play of serious and ludic elements in Head’s aesthetics as she creates a garden-variety holiness that questions apartheid and envisages a more just society.

Keywords: Bessie Head, *A Question of Power*, Njabulo S. Ndebele, ordinary, spectacular, holy fool, ludic, apartheid

From among the overwhelming number of legislative actions that incrementally built the Union of South Africa into an apartheid state, several have bearing on the life of Bessie Head and her third novel, *A Question of Power* (1974). Enacted in February 1937, the Aliens Act was put into place just before Head was born on 6 July 1937. Although the bill aimed to restrict the number of Jewish immigrants entering South Africa as a result of oppression in Nazi Germany, the Aliens Act codified Afrikaner ideas of racial purity and privilege even as it expressed these same ideas through the concept of citizenship (Bunting 59–60). This category of citizenship formed the raw material for the state’s racist construction and control of identity in the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950, the very legislation which came into force on 7 July, one day after Head’s thirteenth birthday. Where the first piece of legislation leveraged the ideas of assimilability and unassimilability to curtail Jewish migration to South Africa, the second act concretized another kind of Manicheanism, even though the document never uses the word “black.” Rather, by using the terms “white,” “native,” and “coloured,” the Population Registration Act turned all South African citizens into whites and non-whites, irrespective of its various categories for whites, natives, and coloureds (“Act No. 30 of 1950” 1.iii). Head died rather young on 17 April 1986, just before the Identification Act No. 72—enforced 1 July of that year—repealed much of the Population Registration Act, in particular, the obligation to connect identity numbers to race.

Although *A Question of Power* does not directly address these three legislative acts within the context of South Africa, the setting of Botswana places the novel, as Head indicates, merely “one door away from South Africa” (“Preface to ‘Witchcraft’” 27). Insofar as “one door” bespeaks contiguity, it recalls Rob Nixon’s admonition for postcolonialism to foreground bioregionalism rather than binaristic structures such as centre/margins (*Slow Violence* 238). From Botswana, Head counters the consequences of these acts by taking up the topics of exclusion, identity, delirium, evil, alienation, displacement, and emplacement. That Head’s life was to a significant extent defined by these topics makes *A Question of Power* a book that invites autobiographical treatment, a trend which forms, perhaps, the majority of critical responses to this novel. Indeed,

Head's work weaves together the personal and the political in ways that respond—from Botswana—to what she calls the “immense suffering” engendered by apartheid (“Some Notes” 63). Despite the gigantic proportions of this trauma, Head says that her response issues from her “reverence for ordinary people” (63).

In accordance with Head's joining of “reverence for ordinary people” and “immense suffering,” the ensuing argument examines *A Question of Power* in light of Njabulo S. Ndebele's “theoretical conclusions” (156) articulated in his essay “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,” conclusions which discuss the ordinary in relation to the spectacular.¹ Ndebele theorizes the spectacular by recourse to Roland Barthes' “The World of Wrestling,” “with its attention to the ‘Exhibition of Suffering’ that defines the wrestling match” (19). Adapting Barthes' essay, Ndebele makes “the aggressive Boer” into “the massive wrestler” who opposes “the Black writer,” whose imagination is overtaken by the “mind-bogglingly spectacular” injustice and oppression that defines the “South African social formation” (143). The “representation of spectacle,” a “highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation,” thus forms what Ndebele calls the history of Black South African literature (143). Writing in 1984, Ndebele reflects that “the culture of the spectacular” has “run its course” insofar as the aftermath of the 16 June 1976 Soweto Uprising saw a “new trend of writing which was more ‘life-sustaining’ in its focus on the ordinary” (150). Ndebele sees the ordinary as more fruitful than the spectacular because the latter lacks detail, forecloses analytic thought, and displaces conviction through an emphasis on emotion; in effect, the spectacular confirms injustice rather than challenges it (148–49). That *A Question of Power* was published in 1974 reveals that clear historical lines are hard to draw, for Head presciently mixes the spectacular with the ordinary throughout *A Question of Power* in order to create her challenging narrative.

Head's challenge to her reader involves not only her admixture of the spectacular and the ordinary but also the sheer number of characters in the novel and its two-part structure, all of which defy the compression of summary. Respectively entitled “Dan” and “Sello,” the novel's two parts name two male characters who live both within the

Botswanan village of Motabeng and within the dreams and hallucinations of Elizabeth, Head's principal character, who escapes with her son, Small-Boy, from South Africa's apartheid to Botswana. Head organizes the village of Motabeng around a multi-racial group of nationals and ex-patriots (South Africans, Americans, Asians, Danes, Germans, and others), all of whom play a role in Elizabeth's movement from torment to peace as she takes up a role working in a produce garden, which forms part of a local industries project aimed at creating economic independence in the village.

In the novel, ordinariness seemingly stands at odds with the spectacular horror that invests Elizabeth's nightmarish visions, yet the two co-reside in a manner that calls for critical attention.² This combination recalls Ndebele's enticing statement that Mongane Serote's *Every Birth its Blood* (1981) attempts an "infusion of the ordinary into the spectacle" (156). Although Ndebele finds Serote's efforts ultimately unavailing, Head brings together the spectacular and the ordinary in a profoundly engaging way. Notably, Ndebele does not reference Head's work; nevertheless, his threefold understanding of the ordinary usefully illumines *A Question of Power*. First, Ndebele states that a preoccupation with spectacle overlooks the "nooks and crannies"—that is, the details and complexities—of the ordinary (156). By extension, then, he draws attention to the aesthetic significance of the commonplace. Second, in contrast to the false hope of spectacular responses to injustice, the ordinary reveals that there is no single, simple, and dramatic solution to the "problems of the South African social formation" (156). Third, the "ordinary day-to-day lives of people" constitute political force because "the struggle involves people not abstractions" (156). Ndebele speaks of the struggle for a just society—a "civilization" (157) in the most literal sense of the word—as one involving "redemptive transformation" (151). By aligning Ndebele's religiously charged phrase with Head's use of "reverence," this essay argues that *A Question of Power* deploys at once spectacle—particularly in its guise of Elizabeth's madness—and ordinariness, a combination which manifests itself in the prophetic figure of the holy fool, the garden of Motabeng village, and the people whom the garden gathers together.

This imbrication of the spectacular and the ordinary promises to extract from the overlooked “nooks and crannies” of *A Question of Power* its emphatic playfulness. If the phrase “nooks and crannies” evokes the idea of odds and ends—a kind of placial miscellany—then it is an apt one, for though Head is no miscellanist, admixtures animate *A Question of Power*. As a figure of the holy fool, Elizabeth embodies a lucid madness. Similarly, the Motabeng garden is both “heavily manured” (73) and “hallowed ground” (203), and the novel interlards the mythic—Osiris, Medusa, Buddha, and Satan—with gardeners figured as avatars of the ordinary; Elizabeth notes this when she avers that “every man and woman is, in some way, an amateur gardener at heart and vegetables are really the central part of the daily diet” (72). *A Question of Power* thus displays Head’s ludic energy as she abuts and combines the sacred and profane to create a garden-variety holiness that emerges in the novel’s aesthetic elements and thereby asserts that there is no spectacular solution to apartheid.

To identify madness and the spectacular within Head’s aesthetic requires a reconsideration of the critical tradition that treats *A Question of Power* chiefly along autobiographical and psychoanalytic lines. Given Head’s own turbulent experiences, this tradition has validity, even though such reading strategies run the risk of restricting and containing the novel’s political and literary force. In this vein of reductive autobiographical criticism, Head serves as another example in the long line of women writers whose work is eclipsed, marginalized, or distorted by a nearly fetishistic fascination with their lives and, especially, their psychic equilibrium. Rukmini Vanamali typifies a hermeneutic of autobiography that posits the apparent difficulty of discerning between Head’s life and her writing: “The problem of receiving *A Question of Power* as exemplifying a particular genre, its categorical affiliation, claims attention at the outset, and it can be articulated as, how far can the reader regard the novel as autobiography?” (155). Vanamali suggests that the form, interpretive key, and meaning of *A Question of Power* reside solely in Head’s autobiography or in Head’s identity. However, more than a hundred years of critical and philosophical scepticism has thoroughly questioned the existence and autonomy of the self or subject as a unitary

entity. Likewise, the psychoanalytical framework so frequently applied to pursue the problem of Elizabeth's—and, by implication, Head's—madness emerges from dubious assumptions about what constitutes the normal. The absurd perversity of the apartheid legislation acts passed in South Africa further destabilizes ideas about what is sane or insane.

While autobiographical approaches focusing on Head's madness have the effect of reducing her and her work into embodiments of the spectacular, Head's aesthetics resist this reduction. As Zoë Wicomb observes, the prevailing reception of black women's writing as "autobiography" too often dismisses this writing as "artless record" ("To Hear" 42), a category which also calls to mind Ndebele's observation that the spectacular merely documents (149). By way of displacing such reductive autobiographical treatments, Randolph Vigne opens an alternative avenue for understanding Head's aesthetics, even as his comments still dwell on the autobiographical: "Bessie's own case seemed to fit none of the usual labels. She was neither paranoid nor schizophrenic, manic-depressive nor psychotic. In the simplest terms, she was in no proper sense 'mad'" (6). Rather than attempt to diagnose Head's condition, Vigne sympathetically attends to Head's pain; he notes that she suffered a "deeply disturbing, insecure childhood," was "tortured by her status as a 'Coloured' (while belonging to no community designated by that term in the evil system of apartheid)," and "constantly brooded on the story of her mother's mental illness and her own conception" at the same time that she was "haunted by an abiding sense of alienation and aloneness and the sense of a coming early death" (6). This compassionate, yet still autobiographical, emphasis on Head's person is tempered by Vigne's remark that Head also possessed "gaiety and sweetness[,] . . . childlike gravity[,] . . . seriousness of purpose," and a sense of her own "destiny as a writer" (6). On the one hand, Vigne's comments permit and even reinforce autobiographical approaches to Head's work. On the other hand, at the very least, words such as "gaiety and sweetness" and "childlike gravity" indicate that Head did more than suffer in her life and that surely her writing is more than a painful record of such suffering. By speaking of Head's "destiny as a writer," then, Vigne suggestively encourages inquiry into the aesthetic dimensions of Head's work.

Such dimensions include not simply the categories of the spectacular and the ordinary but, rather, their intensive imbrication. Further warrant for attending to the spectacular and ordinary lies in Head's own description of *A Question of Power* as "written at two levels" ("Letter 77" 165). Head speaks of an "everyday level" involving a "development project"—that is, the Motabeng garden—and a cast of characters who move "steadily and sanely throughout the book" (165). The other level concerns what Head calls "a journey inwards into the soul" that involves three characters—Dan, Sello, and Elizabeth (165). Head calls these three individuals "disembodied persons" who allow an examination of "power, good and evil" according to a "sort of logic of war" (165), a phrase which finds a resonant echo in Ndebele's description of the "monstrous war machine" that is the spectacular injustice of apartheid (143). This level of the narrative, however, does not define *A Question of Power* in the last instance. Rather, the mythic examination of "power, good and evil" meets another "logic"—one of seeming illogic embodied in a single figure, Elizabeth, who knits the narrative together. As the holy fool, Elizabeth portrays not mental lack but the deliberate choice of an unconventional and challenging aesthetic.

As deployed by Head, the figure of the holy fool constitutes an eclectic, prophetic, playful, and yet imperfect response to apartheid, one which paradoxically uses the concept of holiness to counter apartheid's ideology of separation. Although the word "holiness" appears perilously similar to apartheid insofar as it denotes a state of being set apart, Elizabeth redefines and embodies holiness as the condition of belonging to the mundane. Even though Elizabeth cannot return to South Africa or take up citizenship in Botswana, her statelessness does not mean that she fails to emplace herself. Rather, at Motabeng, Elizabeth plants herself, or, more properly, she moves from alienation to a position in which her status as exile becomes complicated and qualified by the rootedness she finds in Botswana.³ Elizabeth's inner turmoil, then, intertwines with the narrative of grounding herself.

This intertwining makes Caroline Brown's discussion of Elizabeth's madness as "a space of insight, of revelation, even as it is a form of haunting, of pain, conflict, and uncertainty" (95) worthy of further ex-

tension, namely to the nexus of the prophetic and the sacred and its redefinition via the figure of the holy fool. Calling Elizabeth's struggles "a sort of divine madness" (95), Brown implies that this madness invests Head's work with a visionary impulse. Indeed, the role of prophet fits Head very well: she herself describes her writing as a "preaching" that emerges from her "reverence for ordinary people" ("Some Notes" 62–63).⁴ One of Head's last essays—"Why Do I Write," originally published in 1985—positions this reverence as foundational to her aesthetic and ethical project. Head says that she has "built up a kind of people religion that is rooted in the African soil" (59). She proclaims, "I foresee a day when I will steal the title of God, the unseen Being in the sky, and offer it to mankind" (59). This is precisely the vision that Elizabeth articulates towards the close of *A Question of Power*: "There is no God but Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (205). Insofar as Elizabeth speaks of a realized state, she does not so much embody the prophet as future-teller as much as one who declares forth what should be enacted now. Far from parodying the Islamic *shaddha*, Head's statement hints at the amalgam of religious frameworks Elizabeth employs to convey the profundity of her esteem for ordinary human life. While the conflation of author and character seemingly reinforces an autobiographical understanding of Head's work, the sheer complexity of both author and character overturns the prospect that *A Question of Power*, and Head's larger oeuvre, can be located within a purely autobiographical framework.

The eclectic integration in Elizabeth's embodiment of the holy fool reflects Head's catalogue of the varied and idiosyncratic influences that animate her work, as outlined in "Writing out of Southern Africa": "the world of the intellect" (95), "a bit of Christianity" (96), "a bit of Pan-Africanism" (97), "Bertolt Brecht" (98), and "experiments with the new" and "a reverence for people" (99).⁵ Such variety is in keeping with the religious and secular figures that Dana Heller finds in the holy fool archetype. As Heller notes, this archetype includes early Christian saints, the philosopher fools of ancient Rome, the secular fools of Renaissance humanism, and the "divine idiot" of Romanticism (Heller and Volkova 155–57). Although Heller deals with only the Western tradition,

Head's eclecticism encompasses, at the very least, Islam, Christianity, classicism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, refusing to be contained by any single framework. Nevertheless, Heller and Head align insofar as both acknowledge the broken, even quixotic, nature of the holy fool. Heller calls the holy fools of literature "flawed explorers" of "the painful mysteries and vast dimensions of the human heart, mind, and spirit, with all its longing, striving, and imperfections" (177). This description resonates with Head's own admissions of the limitations of her writing projects; she confesses, "I have solved nothing. I am like everyone else—perplexed, bewildered, and desperate" ("For Serowe" 31). Head thus acknowledges that her work offers no utopic response to apartheid. At the same time, her insistence that she is "like everyone else" (31) underscores the ordinariness animating her use of the holy fool figure and displays the "growth of consciousness" that Ndebele prizes as part of the rediscovery of the ordinary (152).

Head's use of the holy fool thus problematizes the concept of purity—and by extension, impurity and unholiness—implicit in the state of apartheid. At the close of *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth concludes that political abuses emanate from a lack of reverence: "Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed" (205). Head counters this destructive tendency to categorize people as unholy by working as the holy fool to show that the concepts of holiness and unholiness, sacred and profane, and good and evil cannot be neatly segregated with respect to human beings. The blending of these categories directly pertains to the experience of evil that Head identifies as a crucial element of her life in South Africa. Remarking on the insidious nature of evil, she observes, "I found myself in a situation where there was no guarantee against the possibility that I might be evil too" ("Some Notes" 63). This moral complexity emerges within *A Question of Power* when Elizabeth asks Tom, an American working in the local industries project who swiftly becomes her friend, "What would you do if you were both God and Satan at the same time?" (161). Rather than discounting Elizabeth's question, Tom seriously considers the possibility before responding, "I hope I'd have the courage to admit it to myself" (161).⁶ Through this dialogue, Head

shows that her emphasis on ordinary citizenship does not simply pit good against evil but countenances both together—which may explain why she refers to herself as “an isolated goddam outsider trying to be an African of Africa” (“Letter 9” 24).⁷

Head further reinforces this uncanny positioning of good with evil by recasting Elizabeth as David of the biblical narrative, figured as both a champion for good and a conniving exerciser of power. Remarking on her inward battles, Elizabeth says, “It was David and Goliath all over again, only this time David had no sling, was hopelessly feminine, and faced a monster no one could imagine in their wildest dreams” (119). This characterization emphasizes the courageous, yet arguably foolish, nature of Elizabeth’s quest. The biblical allusion offers a form of what Ndebele calls “ritualistic enactment,” that is, the deployment of symbolic elements such as the David and Goliath story to “intensify the spectacle of meaning before us” (146). Ndebele posits that such enactments establish dramatic contrasts in their depiction of the “spectacular contest between the powerless and the powerful” (146) yet cautions that these displays risk an abstraction that obscures the particularities of the situation at hand.⁸ He ironically notes the limitations of the spectacular—which assumes that “the more the brutality of the system is dramatized, the better” (149)—by arguing that the spectacular “establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge” (150). For Ndebele, such intimate knowledge is necessary if literature is to envisage a new social order: “[N]o civilization worth the name will emerge without the payment of rigorous and disciplined attention to detail” (157). This imperative to depict particular details indicates the need to attend not only to the spectacular but also to the ordinary.

In *A Question of Power*, ritualistic enactments bridge the spectacular and the ordinary. For example, near the novel’s end Head again evokes David and Goliath when Elizabeth hears Sello affirm her as one who can “still topple giants with a stone sling” (199) and when she claims “David’s song”—Psalm 23—as her celebration of having come through great suffering (203). Elizabeth sounds a note of victory that rings somewhat of the spectacular, insofar as it makes her a giant-killer, yet as David’s song rises in her heart she moves increasingly into the

quotidian in the final paragraph's avowal that "everyone" would be "ordinary" (206). Head is not so simplistic, however, as to imagine that the ordinary is unequivocally good and that the spectacular is unequivocally wicked. This nuance on the ordinary emerges earlier as Head also remembers David's murderous actions. Early in the novel, Elizabeth evokes 2 Samuel 11.14–15: "David wrote a letter to Joab, *and sent it by the hand of Uriah*. And he wrote in the letter, saying 'Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die'" (34; emphasis in original). Elizabeth explains that she retells this story to illustrate that there are "no depths to which the soul could not sink" (34). Elizabeth's gloss underscores something dramatically base in David's action, yet such cunning involves not so much legerdemain as a brute and ordinary exercise of power that forces Joab to obey his king. Consequently, even as Head allows Elizabeth to attain a qualified victory over the giant of racism, she eschews easy and triumphalist answers to questions of evil and power, a refusal that constitutes a far more forceful achievement.

While Elizabeth does not resolve these problems surrounding the nature and presence of evil, as the holy fool she contributes to this endeavour by naming a crucial source of injustice: "the basic error" of relegating "all things holy to some unknown being in the sky" (205). To counter this relegation, Elizabeth reveres immediate realities. She tells Birgette, one of the Danes volunteering in the Motabeng development project, "God isn't a magical formula for me. . . . God isn't a switched-on, mysterious, unknown current I can turn to. . . . It's you I feel secure about" (85). By putting God and Birgette into apposition, Elizabeth implies that goodness resides not in transcendence but in immanence. She makes this transition more explicitly when she concludes that "[p]eople believe in tenderness, especially in tender heavens of compassion. These belonged to a God in the sky who would do everything for the poor in some magical way. It was quite another thing to be loved and cared for in a realistic way by other living people who came from London" (159). By grounding her novel in the garden of Motabeng and in tangible kindness, Head affirms that holiness is not a metaphysical abstraction but, rather, something concrete, embodied, emplaced, and quotidian.

Head's location of holiness in the Motabeng garden effectively revises the biblical myth of the Garden of Eden, a revision which displays her holy foolery insofar as its commingling of prelapsarian and postlapsarian elements reprises her contestation of purity. From its opening pages, *A Question of Power* reworks the concept of the primal fall. Head's epigram, adapted from D. H. Lawrence's poetry, evokes the descent from goodness to evil encoded in the Eden narrative:

*Only man can fall from God
Only man.
That awful and sickening endless, sinking
sinking through the slow, corruptive
levels of disintegrative knowledge . . .
the awful katabolism into the abyss!* (n. pag.; emphasis in original)⁹

Lawrence's lines about varying "levels of disintegrative knowledge" as one sinks towards "the abyss" foreshadow Elizabeth's inner torment. In the novel's final paragraph, however, Elizabeth revalues her descent. Retrospectively, she says that "[s]he had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man" (206). This accepting and inclusive "brotherhood of man" undoes the "exclusive brotherhoods"—whether the Broederbond or Black Power—for white or black people only (132). Such an inclusive brotherhood matches Head's most idealized vision, in which "a new race of people—not nations or national identity as such but rather people who are a blending of all the nations of the earth" become "God, in a practical way" ("Writing" 99–100). Elizabeth's words "from the very beginning" (206) recall the primal state of the Genesis story, yet she yokes good with evil to create a kind of *felix culpa*, or fortunate fall. Head effectively recasts the story of Eden, allowing Elizabeth to taste the fruit of the knowledge of both good and evil through her tortuous inner journey and her experience of apartheid even while she enjoys the bounty of the Motabeng garden. While *A Question of Power* does not diminish the horrors of Elizabeth's abyss, the fall makes possible Head's reverence for the ordinary by embedding—not banishing—Elizabeth in the garden.

Head further refashions the Eden myth by offering a renewed understanding of work, one that departs from the biblical tradition of identifying the labour of cultivation as part of the curse attending humankind's expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3.17–19). In this way, she anticipates the ordinary heroism of work that Ndebele finds in Joel Matlou's "Man against Himself" (155). Ndebele notes that such heroism values work for its human meaning and positive value for the future, even as the politics that create exploitative working conditions should be reviled (155). Head's commitment to social change is thus not a utopian humanism; rather, it is an essential and grassroots response to the economic necessities to which individuals find themselves exposed.¹⁰ Moreover, this effort is given substance because Elizabeth's cultivation of the garden depends on her hands and feet—that is, on her bodily presence in Motabeng.

The very corporeal nature of Elizabeth's interactions with the Motabeng garden melds holiness and ordinariness, and this melding militates against the way that the conclusion of *A Question of Power* is sometimes read as abstracted and idealized. For instance, Clare Counihan argues that the novel's culmination moves away from the physical world through "an explicit validation of the garden's disembodied subjectivity," which requires Elizabeth to "strip herself of her identity as either a raced and female-gendered subject as the condition of admission to this idealized future" (70). Counihan's reading of the garden as a utopic space "without nation or race or female gender, effectively prohibiting any identity more specific than 'human'" (77), however, obscures Head's emphasis on Elizabeth's embodiment and emplacement. Head concludes her novel by describing Elizabeth's posture: "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (206). Remarkling on this passage, Eleni Coundouriotis reads "land" as a euphemism for Elizabeth's genitalia and thus concludes that her gesture of belonging encompasses both her sexuality and her place geographically (19). Coundouriotis' treatment of these lines emphasizes that Elizabeth's role in the garden cannot be emptied of its physical weight: Elizabeth is a living body grounded in a specific place. In a similar manner, Elaine Campbell rightly draws attention to the physi-

cal, quotidian nature of the Motabeng garden by noting that the garden is Elizabeth's "link with the community" and the product of her "own hands" (83). Although Campbell creates tension in her argument—the garden is a communal project and not solely the product of Elizabeth's labour—she implicitly makes Elizabeth into a mere gardener and citizen. Such roles correspond to the existential goal "to be ordinary" that Elizabeth seeks (206). Insofar as the ordinary nests within itself the idea of order, the garden offers a way to arrange existence on a personal level at the same time that an individual such as Tom sees its emphasis on "rapid economic development" as a way to order economics (132)—to "become independent of the goods of the rich manufacturers in South Africa and Rhodesia," as Eugene, the chief architect of the local industries project, puts it (69).

As this ordering shows, the Motabeng garden arises from direct and local intervention that cannot be reduced to metaphysical abstraction. In addition to serving as what Anissa Talahite calls "a metaphor for finding a hybrid space for cross-cultural connections to take place" (144), Head's garden is also historical and thus particular and concrete.¹¹ Head thereby makes the garden a commonplace in which her reverence for the ordinary can flourish. In her description of the garden, Head emphasizes variety in both vegetable crops and human gardeners: "Here in the garden were crisp, juicy leaves of Swiss Chard, Collards from America and perpetual spinach beet. To Elizabeth's surprise, the English volunteers were just about as mad about vegetables as were the village ladies" (157). The garden, its vegetables, and gardeners form a mosaic of nationalities and transnationals. Thus, the garden becomes a parabolic site for the explication of Head's response to the segregated racism of South Africa. Her writing thereby takes up what Nixon calls "a transnational ethics of place" (*Slow Violence* 243), albeit place figured bioregionally.¹² Moreover, this place gathers together what Ndebele calls "the ordinary day-to-day lives of people," who become "the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions" (156; emphasis in original). For Ndebele, "the way people actually live" enjoins "a range of complex ethical issues involving man-man, man-woman, woman-woman, man-

nature, man-society relationships” (156), which take the place of a sole emphasis on spectacle.

The garden of *A Question of Power* opens up these complex relationships, for it forms the occasion of a partnership between Small-Boy, Dintle, Kepotho, Kenosi, Eugene, Tom, Elizabeth, and other Motabeng villagers that undermines social hierarchies. The vegetable garden thus becomes an antithesis to Elizabeth’s experience in South Africa and a site for negotiating different racial attitudes. Admittedly, Camilla and the anonymous Danes are racist, unlike Eugene, Gunner, and Tom. However, the garden provides the opportunity for Birgette and Elizabeth to define and marshal their feelings over Camilla’s racism:

She’s stone-deaf and blind. She takes the inferiority of the black man so much for granted that she thinks nothing of telling us straight to our faces that we are stupid and don’t know anything. There’s so many like her. They don’t see the shades and shadows of life on black people’s faces. She’s never stopped a minute, paused, stood back and watched the serious, concentrated expressions of the farm students. There’s a dismal life behind them of starvation and years and years of drought when there was no food, no hope, no anything. . . . Why must racialists make an exception of the black man? (82–83)

Elizabeth’s description of Camilla—“stone-deaf,” which recalls Medusa’s curse—characterizes racism as an obdurate counterpart to the fertile and porous deep bed gardens of the farm students. Moreover, this passage points at how first the Land Acts and then apartheid restricted the amount of farmland available to South African blacks. Elizabeth and Birgette close their discussion and evening together knowing that Birgette will confront Camilla about her racism. In what becomes a “short sequel to that lovely evening,” Elizabeth meets Camilla two days later and finds her “a totally changed woman with a soft subdued air” (86). Elizabeth’s recognition of Camilla as “a totally changed woman” shows an alternative to apartheid, for she apprehends her in a sympathetic light. Although Camilla may be unable to see the “shades and shadows of life on black people’s faces” (82), Elizabeth appreciates the

complexities of Camilla's character. Through the gardening and local industries project, then, Head brings together the people and economic development that apartheid sunders. She thereby invites her readers to venture commentary on her pointedly optimistic aesthetic and thus to engage the boldness of her writing, which recalls Ndebele's notice that to reclaim the ordinary involves an "uncompromisingly toughminded creative will" that risks offence in representing a "new society" (157).

Head creates a playful and arresting visual image of this inclusive societal ordinariness through the chromatic diversity of her vegetable garden: "Cabbages, tomatoes, cauliflower and peppers appeared as if from nowhere and grew with shimmering, green leaves in the intense heat. They were making the half-rotting orders of green vegetables from Johannesburg a thing of the past" (124). The rainbow of colours evoked by Elizabeth's vegetables contrasts with the cleverly denoted monochromatically "green" vegetables from South Africa. If "green" intends to suggest or describe the freshness of the South African produce, it surely is an ironic reference as they are "half-rotting." Similarly, if "green" is taken as a pigmentary adjective, it serves only to restrict the spectrum, whereas the produce from Elizabeth's garden, even if still green—that is, unripe—is suggestively multicoloured. Head's garden—with its Batswanians, Danes, Americans, Brits, South Africans, and its stateless Elizabeth—burgeons with produce from around the world, thereby multiplying cultural meanings and possibilities through its evocations of colour.¹³ By opposing the Motabeng market garden to the "green" vegetables of Johannesburg, then, Head creates a polychromatic and polysemous pun of the most literal and playful sort. Through the juxtaposition of colours, Head suggests both *χρωματος* (chromatos) and its cognate *χρος* (chros). The two terms condense, respectively, the ideas of colour and skin. Elizabeth's garden is a place where colours of skin and countries of origin proliferate; in contrast to the sweeping division of peoples into categories, Head acknowledges difference—what she calls "shades and shadows"—but envisages community rather than segregation when she does so (82).

This vision becomes intensified through Elizabeth's efforts to cultivate berries in Motabeng. With Kenosi's help, the experiment is a tremen-

dous success: the two women “harvested an enormous basket of berries, not only berries but a heavenly view of glistening autumn shades of brown, yellow-gold, green-tinted fruit” (152). Like the vegetables, the berries have a strong visual appeal; they offer a “heavenly view” of their multihued fruit, yet once again Head defines the divine in terms of immanence. Moreover, Elizabeth gains the eponym “Cape Gooseberry” as a result of her success in cultivating the berry in Motabeng. Indeed, the berry bushes produce so much fruit that Elizabeth produces leaflets for the village to suggest ways of using the abundant harvest before the berries spoil. Wryly called “propaganda leaflets” (152), these tracts are as numerous as the berries and thus the occasion for good humour: “The village women always passed by Elizabeth’s house to collect firewood in the bush. If they saw her in the yard, they stopped, laughed, and said: ‘Cape Gooseberry,’ to show how well they had picked up the propaganda. They did it so often that Elizabeth became known as ‘Cape Gooseberry’” (153). Through its conflation of identity and transplantation, this eponym recalls Jonathan Highfield’s observation that the Cape Gooseberry was introduced to South Africa from Peru and Chile in 1807 (116). Highfield goes on, however, to imply that such transplantation risks extinguishing native African fruits and languages (116). By appealing to the principle of indigeneity, he broaches the discourse of invasion biology, which itself depends on the idea of the foreign, in a manner not unlike the Aliens Act. Should this connection seem an overreach, Nixon’s remark that “[t]he environmentalist advocacy of an ethics of place has all too often morphed into hostility toward displaced people” (*Slow Violence* 239) must be kept in mind.¹⁴ In contrast to hostility, Head notes the laughter of the local women and offers another sort of polychromatic play, this time in an auditory register, that creates a euphonious melody and pun to further emphasize the need for inclusivity and adaptability (153).

Transformation and change, then, animate Head’s response to apartheid: given the “heavenly view” Kenosi and Elizabeth harvest, Ndebele’s words about “redemptive transformation” come to mind (151). Elizabeth and Kenosi’s achievements with the Cape Gooseberry display the inventiveness of the gardening project. More specifically, the Cape

Gooseberry becomes a symbol for Elizabeth's migration and transformation: "The work had a melody like that—a complete stranger like the Cape Gooseberry settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng. It loved the hot, dry Botswana summers as they were a replica of the Mediterranean summers of its home in the Cape" (153). Elizabeth's rootedness depends not on being native to the region but, rather, on transplantation, which however much it manifests the provincial, bioregional, and transnational remains remarkably mundane.

Put another way, the garden in its ordinariness metonymically figures the entire local industries project in its attempt to create a material culture that opposes the spectacular injustice of South African society:

It was a vast empire, built on almost nothing but voluntary labour of all kinds. They had dug out the thorn bushes and wild scrub-grass and replaced them with fruit trees, vegetable gardens, chicken houses and, in the distance, gently swaying fields of corn. It was a school where inventions and improvisations of all sorts appeared because someone from another land always had a new solution to offer to any problem which arose. Words like skill, work, fullest development of personality and intellect recurred again and again in the pamphlets the man Eugene wrote, but in those fluid, swiftly-written papers circulated among all the teachers they quivered on the pages with a life all their own. They conjured up in the minds of the poor and starving a day when every table would overflow with good food; roast chicken, roast potatoes, boiled carrots, rice and puddings. They felt in every way like food and clothes and opportunities for everyone. It wasn't like that in his country, South Africa. There they said the black man was naturally dull, stupid, inferior, but they made sure to deprive him of the type of education which developed personality, intellect, skill. (56–57)

This passage links empire, pioneering enterprise, and education in order to appropriate the Afrikaner discourse of colonization and its attendant myth of ownership of South Africa. Head's humour—hyperbolic

irony—works nicely here, for she pits a village and a local development project against something that is truly imperial: the Afrikaner notion of isolationism and racial purity. Eugene’s comment that “[t]oo much isolation isn’t a good thing for anyone” (56), which prefaces the narrator’s vision of a new empire, ironically undermines the embattled white position in South Africa as it calls etymological and compassionate attention to the ideology of apartheid—separation in Afrikaans. By creating this new “empire” out of a school (56), Head opens up the role of the ideological state apparatuses of South Africa.¹⁵ Her reference to the “naturally” lower state of the “black man,” who, in this instance, has access to food, opportunity, education, and dignity, exposes the treachery in the discourse of apartheid, which appeals to the supposedly innate superiority of the white race. Head’s connection between education and black opportunity struggles against the discourse of apartheid inasmuch as she offers her vision through Eugene’s pamphlets, written in English. These pamphlets demonstrate Head’s ability to deploy the hegemony of English without promulgating her own form of neocolonialism. Elizabeth’s later pamphlets on the Cape Gooseberry intensify this revisionary work insofar as they are written by a coloured woman, without the intervention of Eugene.

Eugene’s signifying practices—“fluid” and “swiftly-written”—find expansion in Elizabeth’s notebook on gardening (57). In addition to being physical, Elizabeth’s relationship to the garden is also textual: she keeps a notebook to record the garden’s conception and development, and she produces promotional material to help advertise the garden. When she hands her notebook to Tom, she nearly laughs out loud “with relief when he took it all so seriously” (112). Her laughter points towards the nexus of writing, gardening, friendship, and politics: “[H]er version of agriculture was so poetic and fanciful, she was so liable to fill in her gaps of knowledge with self-invented agriculture, she so obviously amused and irritated the English manager of the farm school that here was a friend indeed” (112–13). Head’s narrator thus gives voice to Elizabeth’s spontaneous declaration of Tom as a friend at the same time that the notebook is offered as the site of agricultural, economic, and cultural revisions that are poetic; likewise, Head’s novels and short stories offer

poetic visions that are agricultural, economic, and cultural. The adjective “fanciful” on the one hand suggests unrestrained imagination or an absence of reason and experience while on the other hand it evokes the visionary abilities Elizabeth possesses as the holy fool. “Fanciful,” then, points to the prophetic madness that has little to do with insanity and much to do with exploding the “small, narrow, shut-in worlds” of “power people” (38). Consequently, Elizabeth’s garden seeks to yield more than simple alimentary requirements: it aims to nourish and sustain her mind and soul.

In this way, the relation between Elizabeth’s garden and the prose of *A Question of Power* forms a beautiful complementarity. At the novel’s end, Elizabeth undertakes a writing project that appears to be different from her garden notebook: “At sunset, when work was over and everything was peaceful, slowly sipping a cup of tea, she began to jot down fragmentary notes such as a shipwrecked sailor might make on a warm sandy beach as he stared back at the stormy sea that had nearly taken his life” (204). Because *A Question of Power* is narrated post-eventum and has a frame structure, the notes that Elizabeth jots down—her Robinsonade—are ostensibly what later form the novel itself. This connection becomes all the more noteworthy given Camilla’s “way of grasping the notebook out Elizabeth’s hands and scribbling her own notes with sketches” (76): in place of Camilla’s imperious “scribbling,” Head’s complex narrative stands.

This garden notebook—produced not only by Elizabeth but also by Kenosi and Camilla—constitutes a composite object that evinces its own species of variety, one which privileges the demotic and the ordinary:

There in a shaky, painstaking handwriting was a meticulous record of all she had sold. The spelling, oh, the spelling was a fantastic combination of English and Setswana:

‘Ditamiti 30c,’ she wrote. ‘Pamkin 60c, Dibeetteruti 45c, Dionions 25c, Dibbeans 20c, Dispinach 15c, Dicarrots 25c, Ditamiti 45c.’ (203)

Elizabeth observes that these careful entries testify to the garden’s being “hallowed ground” to Kenosi (203). Her adjective “fantastic” offers

another piece of irony, for Kenosi's demotic language suggests not the fantastic but the ordinary—the vulgar, in its etymological sense of the common people's language. Kenosi's language thereby suggests the overall project of *A Question of Power*. However much it appears to be devoid of political specifics, it is a program rich in meaning and possibilities. Her writing emphasizes community, which in turn exposes apartheid's ability to fracture it. Instead of segregation, Head attempts to build communities with others, not in spite of them, by ennobling rather than exploiting work. Head's representation of what Ndebele calls "the ordinary day-to-day lives of people" as the "direct focus of political interest" thus comingles with her ability to place on view the spectacular without falling prey to the limitations Ndebele finds in the spectacular, which he characterizes as the "powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness" (156). Because the spectacular documents suffering but does not envision new possibilities for society, Ndebele says that it "confirms without necessarily offering a challenge" (150).

Moreover, Head confronts issues of injustice not only with alternative social models but also with a playful sense of humour, thus representing the range of affective and conceptual elements gathered together in her reverence for the ordinary. When Elizabeth reads Kenosi's ledger, with its "fantastic combination of English and Setswana," she laughs silently to herself (203). Elizabeth's sense of humour indicates Head's playful self-awareness of language's malleability and possibility. A similar instance occurs in the education of "Shorty," Elizabeth's son, who is also called "Small-Boy." On Shorty's return from school, Tom asks him about his lessons. When the "small boy" shows Tom his notebook, Tom attempts to point out an error: "Hey, wait a bit. You've spelt evaporation wrong. It's evaporation not ivaporation" (125). Despite Tom's recourse to a dictionary and his visit to the teacher at the Motabeng Secondary School, he has to "give up" his attempts to correct the teacher's spelling (125). He observes that the teacher is a "hell of a pretty girl" even though "she can't spell" (125). Tom goes on, however, to concede, "There's something right somewhere though. It's absolutely correct spelling if it's phonetics. It's phonetics she's using" (124–25). Tom's reluctant and qualified admission of correctness prompts Elizabeth to respond, laugh-

ing again: “It’s all right, Tom. . . . Wherever English travels, it’s adapted. That’s Setswana English. Setswana is an entirely phonetic language” (126). Elizabeth’s remarks about Setswana English adumbrate the willingness to adapt, accommodate, change, and diversify that characterizes her heterodox blending of not only of languages but also of good, evil, sacred, profane, spectacular, and ordinary.

As the incidents with Kenosi and Small-Boy indicate, Head pursues her aesthetic and political agenda in a rather gentle and ironically humorous way. This is hardly surprising considering her claim that she wrote *A Question of Power* when she got “her sense of humour back” (qtd. in Gardner 112). Furthermore, this narrative strategy offers yet one more manifestation of Head’s voice as holy fool, which is at once prophetic and playful. Her organizing jest is the Motabeng garden; in place of political abstraction she offers a pragmatic and even ludic response to apartheid. There is something exuberant and autotelic about Elizabeth’s work in the garden, for though the unabashed humanism of her holy foolery may seem quixotic or naïve, it is, nevertheless, a humanism of praxis. It has seeds, roots, ground, hands, feet, and community in place of the racialized other; if Head’s vision lacks theoretical sophistication it also lacks the sterility of abstraction. The text is, indeed, powerful as its gentle, even chiding, humour questions the metaphysical, abstracted discourse of purity and segregation.

Notes

- 1 Originally presented as the keynote address at the conference on New Writing in Africa held at the Commonwealth Institute in London (November 1984), Ndebele’s essay was published in the *Journal of African Studies* in 1986 and later included in the collection of essays published under the same title in 1991.
- 2 Although attention to the spectacular and traumatic aspects of *A Question of Power* prevails in criticism, the respective studies of Anthony O’Brien (52) and Susan Beard (578) observe that Head anticipates Ndebele’s aesthetic of the ordinary. Shannon Young, too, uses the word “ordinary” to describe the garden of *A Question of Power*, though without the theoretical precision that Ndebele offers (236). None of these analyses, however, makes Head’s combination of the ordinary and the spectacular the focus of study.
- 3 In *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*, Ibrahim advances the term “exilic consciousness” to examine the role of exile in Head’s work and life (2). See

- also Nixon on the “alternative forms of belonging” that Head’s fiction advances (“Border Country” 107).
- 4 Head’s reverence for the ordinary recurs throughout her writings. See also “Writing out of Southern Africa,” in which she talks about observing the “discipline” of “an attitude of love and reverence to people” (99).
 - 5 Within criticism on Head, there exists something of a habit—if not a tradition—of remarking the eclecticism of her work. For example, Johnson notes the “extraordinary layering of meaning” that characterizes *A Question of Power* and says that “Head’s method is . . . eclectic” (114). Similarly, Lewis uses “eclectic” as a descriptor of Head’s work in her commentary on the “multiple voices” that Head deploys (123).
 - 6 These passages underscore Nixon’s observation that “Head’s exaltation of the ordinary is intertwined with her fascination with everything impure and unsettled” (“Refugees” 160).
 - 7 Head’s use of “goddam” recalls the fact that within the biblical tradition, holy fools are just that: Hosea was damned to marry a prostitute and thereby lose his purity, while Jesus was damned to death without the possibility of justice.
 - 8 Ndebele illustrates this risk by reading Alex La Guma’s “Coffee for the Road” as evoking the gospel story of Mary and Joseph finding no welcome shelter on the eve of Jesus’ birth (146).
 - 9 Head’s epigram conflates two of Lawrence’s poems, “Only Man” and “The Hands of God,” both published in the posthumous collection *Last Poems* (1930). The first two lines of her epigram exactly reproduce the first two lines of “Only Man” while the remaining lines refashion lines 10–15 from “The Hands of God.”
 - 10 Highfield’s discussion of Head’s writing saliently foregrounds women’s labour, not the labour of man (103).
 - 11 Highfield draws a historical connection between the garden in *A Question of Power* and the “Swaneng Project,” a community initiative established by Patrick van Rensburg, a white South African refugee who became a Botswana citizen at Serowe in 1963 (113).
 - 12 This remark hints at Nixon’s larger project of bringing ecocriticism to bear on postcolonial literature.
 - 13 Head’s embrace of this visual and chromatic diversity shows her efforts to make ideas of colour meaningful. The polychromatic play of *A Question of Power* appears particularly resonant—yet admittedly utopian—in light of Wicomb’s observation that “to think of an achromatic writing is simply premature, if not altogether a mistake” (“Culture beyond Colour?” 28).
 - 14 David I. Theodoropoulos’ *Invasion Biology: Critique of a Pseudoscience* critiques biological nativism, albeit in ways that invite a critical reader to ask for more scholarly evidence in Theodoropoulos’ own references.
 - 15 Given Wicomb’s emphasis on the need for education in South African society, especially post-apartheid, Head’s vision is prescient (“Culture beyond Colour?” 27).

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