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**TRANSITIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN LITERATURES:
BESSIE HEAD**

Tesis

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A final note to the next generation and any grandchildren who may chance upon this printed text: do read it, if you are that way inclined, but I suspect you will probably want to bin it. If this is the case, please plant a couple of trees. That is what the UNAM would propose, as would the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, to which I owe an enormous debt of gratitude.

Phoenix

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled,
made nothing?

Are you willing to be made nothing?
dipped into oblivion?

If not, you will never really change.

The phoenix renews her youth
only when she is burnt, burnt alive, burnt down
to hot and flocculent ash.

Then the small stirring of a new small bub in the nest
with strands of down like floating ash
shows that she is renewing her youth like the eagle,
immortal bird.

D.H. Lawrence

‘Your letters are the most beautiful and thick-with-thought letters I think I’ve ever received’.

Letter from Alice Walker to Bessie Head, December 6, 1974.

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Introduction

Many Africans who are not Bechuanas,
and have nothing whatever to do with
the people of Bechuanaland, have on their
walls a picture of Ruth and Seretse Khama.
N. Gordimer, 'Where Do Whites Fit In?'

This study contends mainly from a feminist and postcolonial approach that the major transition in Anglophone Southern African writing since the 1960s has been the recognition and acceptance of women writers, coinciding with similar cultural upheavals in other parts of the African continent. Generally considered by Anglo-American scholars to have emerged in the 1980s, this counter-cultural movement seems to have taken root in African literatures decades before the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 or the so-called multi-racial elections in South Africa in 1994, for example. In other words, this study argues that the acceptance of women's postcolonial writing in Southern Africa was not dictated by History, that is, the History perpetrated by (white) neo-colonial historians and literary scholars, although it might seem so in certain cases, but by the women's histories and their personal creative quests. It proposes, moreover, to explore the background to the transitions in Southern African women's writing by focusing on the oeuvre of Bessie Head, who is regarded as a pioneer in the circles of African women writers of the 1960s and who took the audacious step of leaving South Africa, the country of her birth, and set most of her novels and stories in Botswana, the country to which she emigrated and eventually became a resident. This exploration of Head's writing uses but challenges Njabulo Ndebele's "masculinist" premise of 1984 that South African writers' political strength should come, in the severely difficult circumstances of the period, from affirmation in their literary texts rather than protest, from the extraordinary wrought from the ordinary experiences of ordinary people, as I shall explain later. His examples come almost exclusively from male writers, but I sustain that Bessie

Head is, among other African women writers, one of the first to pose this argument in her southern African context, at least two decades before Ndebele published his study. If a book remains unread, it is, so to speak, a house of leaves. Thus, this study also extends its branches beyond creation to exclusivist practices in literary criticism, publication and distribution, which were particularly grasping in Bessie Head's case. Franco Moretti has demonstrated that there are, at least, two ways of exploring literary geography: the space without literature, or the 'real, historical space' which deals with these issues, and space within literature where 'the dominant is a fictional one' (3). Just as Virginia Woolf discovered so long ago when she argued that women write about different themes from men and, thus, must shape a different sentence, so African women have, in the last sixty years, largely centred on local (and intertextual) spaces in the works they have battled to publish.

Once I have explored several theoretical issues and put Bessie Head's work in context in the first two Parts of this study, I will finally explore her oeuvre, bearing in mind its autobiographical tendency, before narrowing the lens to focus on *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, in which she confirms a sense of identity and belonging, after years of spiritual wandering and imaginings of village spaces. This complex work, seldom studied in the depth it deserves, challenges the models of village narratives published in the United Kingdom that her agents/publishers suggested she should read. Moreover, Serowe, a real place that can be found on the map, provides the inspiration for many of her stories – whether this be an image, a space, an event, a sign, a gesture or a situation. The subsequent concerns arise from the text itself: its spatialisation, the question of translation and the translated self, as well as the significance of intertextuality, which challenges those models suggested by her agents and publishers.

Let us now take a closer look at the principal interests of this study. An early contributor

to the multiple transitions in Southern African literatures, Head decided that, as a 'coloured' woman, she could no longer live in South Africa, and eventually obtained a one-way exit permit in 1964 in order to teach in Serowe, a large village in the former British Protectorate of Bechuanaland, now Botswana.¹ It was in this country that she became one of the first major African women writers to challenge the African and western/colonial patriarchal regimes. Some might consider this a contentious statement, because she seemingly searches for the 'ideal African man' (inexistent, of course) and demonstrates disinterest in gender and political questions, as her early critics argue. For example, the South African Lewis Nkosi expresses his effective disavowal of her work. As we shall see, Nkosi insists that Head is 'not a political novelist in any sense we can recognize' and her 'lack of political commitment weakens rather than aids (her) grasp of character' (1981, 102). We should remember, however, the context of this experiential criticism expressed by a so-called non-citizen of a country divided by apartheid: it is often directed to those who would/could not provide a roof, food and protection for dissidents who had succeeded in crossing the borders, and were, moreover, reluctant, for a variety of reasons, to write protest literature. Although I am simplifying matters, in the circumstances from the late 1960s to the late 1970s 'artistic merit or relevance', that is to say, 'the artist's choice of subject-matter and handling of subject-matter', was, very generally speaking, determined, as the South African critic and writer Njabulo Ndebele explains, 'by the work's displaying a high level of political preoccupation', an approach he abhorred because it fell in line with the dictates of the apartheid regime (1984, 44). Few South African intellectuals of the time were prepared to counter

¹ In her 'Introduction' to Zoë Wicomb's *You can't get lost in cape town*, Marcia Wright explains that the term coloured woman 'denotes the specific apartheid classification named in the Population Registration Act of 1950' and is generally capitalised, in accordance with and in resistance to this act. In general terms, I have chosen not to capitalise it in order to dissociate myself from any possible connection with apartheid policy, but in certain cases it may be capitalised for reasons of context (2000, xii).

his argument.

It took scholars of women's literatures, particularly those in South Africa because Head had achieved fame overseas, some time to counter the arguments proposed by Nkosi, among others, and to broaden the scope of the study of her work, engaging in more rewarding and constructive discussions. One of the latest studies that sets out 'to reassess the ways in which Head's writing represents and responds to 'the political'' is Desiree Lewis's *Living on a Horizon* (2007), which also quotes the above scholars in order to introduce her interest in how 'Head confronts many of the political relationships and situations other South African writers explore' (3). Like the African-American Linda Beard, Lewis, a South African scholar, wishes to avoid the homogenizing trends so common to Head criticism, in which 'the preoccupation with a single voice or absolutist 'reading'' displaces the ways that Head 'problematizes the unitary 'political' reading, the feminist analysis, the anthropological or allegorical critique, and so forth' (Beard 1991, 575-89). As Head once told the South African Mary Benson, with her delightful touch of irony, she wrote for graduate thesis students, stimulating them to join her on her terms in her defiance of boundaries, cultural expectations and univocality.

Some studies taking on the daunting task of deconstructing Head's work seem so captivated by her exploration of racial, sexist and class differences that they are drawn into that typical either/or discourse, often posing essentialist arguments. However controversial the either/or debate may be, many agree, for example, that essentialist formulations are fundamental to struggles for liberation from the effects of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. As Gayatri Spivak said in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz: 'I think it's absolutely on target (...) to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism, universalism as it comes in terms of the universal (...). But *strategically* we cannot'. Even as we talk about feminist practice, or about privileging

practice over theory, ‘we are universalising – not only generalising, but universalising’ (Spivak and Harasym 11). The caveats in this study demonstrate that it attempts to be as self-critical and as aware of the many pitfalls as possible, but we have to remember that this strategy is often significant to Southern African writers. Any mention of female identity and male oppression, concepts that do challenge essentialism, raise questions of generalisation, but they are, as Spivak said in this interview when speaking of psychobiographies, ‘very situation/culture-specific indeed’ (9). Or, as Judith Butler suggests, they are not based on a shared epistemological standpoint, nor do they claim that the category of ‘women’ is normative, exclusionary, and ‘invoked with the unmarked dimensions of class and racial privilege intact’ (19). Insistence upon coherence and unity effectively denies multiplicity in any form. Certainly, I would not wish to place myself in the position of those feminists, mainly of the French school of thought, whom Toril Moi has accused, at times, of choosing between equality (Simone de Beauvoir) and difference (some of the later French feminists): women find themselves placed in the position where they are faced with the choice between ‘being imprisoned in their femininity and being obliged to masquerade as an abstract genderless subject’ (Moi 13).² In an article on Beauvoir, Moi recalls that this French intellectual and writer warned that if this choice takes place in ‘a society that casts man as the One and woman as the Other, it is not a choice, but an insoluble dilemma’. All those years ago, *The Second Sex* (1949) provided a strong alternative to identity politics, especially for Europeans. For Beauvoir, identity is an effect of choices and actions in specific

² Simone de Beauvoir gives an example. In the middle of an abstract conversation, a man once said to her that ‘you say that because you are a woman’. If she were to answer ‘I say it because it is true’, she would be eliminating her own subjectivity. If she were to say ‘I say it because I am a woman’, she would be imprisoned by her gender. In the former case, she has to renounce her claim to say something of general validity; in the latter, she has to give up her lived experience (Moi 13). The first English translation of *The Second Sex* was done by the zoologist H.M. Parshley and is seriously defective. Finally, Random House has commissioned a new translation. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, best known as cookery book writers, are the translators, as Moi tells us.

situations: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman’, to quote Moi’s translation of this famous quotation from *The Second Sex*. Living under very different conditions, ‘women are unlikely to develop the same political interests. Women often have stronger allegiances to their race, religion, social class or nationality than to their own sex, Beauvoir writes’ (qtd. in Moi 13). I am fully aware of ‘the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections’ that constructs the concrete array of ‘women’ (Butler 20). It is, of course, impossible to put the pieces together in order to create a complete image of this so-called category: in this mosaic, there will always be pieces missing or ill-fitting. The assumption of its incompleteness permits that category to serve ‘as a permanently available site for contested meanings’ (Butler 21). This statement provides a stimulating starting-point for my discussion of the above-mentioned issues in Head’s fiction, always remembering that she is a writer in and of transition.

The Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta argues: ‘Being a woman, and African born, I see things through African eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know’. If this stance has made some think of her as a feminist, she stresses that she is an African feminist with a small ‘f’, often concerned with issues that her western sisters may find difficult to understand (175-6). One outstanding feature of Bessie Head’s oeuvre is the way it challenges, and yet confirms, the extraordinary of these ‘little happenings’ through a Southern African woman’s eyes, as she chronicles the ordinary events in the lives of African women and men she has known. This is demonstrated most succinctly in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), the object of study throughout this dissertation. Seemingly taking as its model *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969), a local history of a fictitious village in Suffolk written by the Englishman Ronald Blythe, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* does bear certain similarities with

this work from the metropolis.³ As Andrew Motion wrote of *Akenfield* on March 11, 2006 in *The Guardian*: ‘As a piece of oral history, it set new standards of authority and popularity; as a picture of rural life in turmoil, it had exceptional social interest; and as a witness to “ordinary lives”, it had unforgettable pathos’. The same might well apply to Serowe. *Village of the Rain Wind*, if it were not for the underlying tone of challenge, for example, as well as the totally different experience of the village informants. Rather than soldiers or politicians, it is most often ‘the ordinary people – and the artists and writers, through whom a transformative vision of the world has been conceived’ – who have done the most to ‘resist’ the cultural pressures upon them (Ashcroft 2001, 20), as Blythe, Head and their interviewees might well argue, if from very different perspectives. Head’s text foregrounds, in its transcribed version, the dominant colonial language to express the most deeply felt local experiences. This partial yielding to her publisher’s desire to ‘imitate’ the original becomes ‘a key to transforming not only the imitator but the imitation’ (Ashcroft 2001, 5). One might go so far as to argue that each story is narrated in such a different way that each text proposes a more contemporary model for future artists, within their totally distinctive contexts. Indeed, Elspeth Huxley’s review in *New Society* predicted that just as Blythe’s *Akenfield* had become a classic in English social history, so Serowe. *Village of the Rain Wind* would become a classic in the literature of post-independent Africa: ‘Here is the warp of tradition and the woof of change (...). As for the book, every word rings true’ (qtd. in Eilersen 2007, 290). Unlike Blythe, whose experience as a self-proclaimed insider is as important as it has been to many of the former authors of works on local history in England, the in/outsider Head

³ As we shall see later, these authors approach their subject from a literary perspective; that is to say, neither is an ethnographer, an anthropologist or a social scientist. Blythe makes this point rather obviously by introducing each of his sections with a quotation from one of his favourite poets. Among so many others, the well-known writer Louis de Bernières returned to this perennial British genre in 2009 when he published *Notwithstanding: Stories from an English Village*. It focuses on characters that live or have lived in the fictional village Notwithstanding and is based on the writer’s former experience of life in Surrey.

writes a narrative of Serowe, which tells us of her eventual reconciliation with this community. The most hybrid of her works, it creates different spaces in which she can explore her sense of belonging. As I will repeat, Head writes about the things she has loved: ‘These small joys were all I had, with nothing beyond them, they were indulged in over and over again, like my favourite books’ (Head 1981, 179).

This study originally proposed to compare the ways in which several Southern African writers have represented transition in their literary texts, but it has undergone many a change. When Nelson Mandela was released unconditionally from prison on February 2, 1990, I wondered, as did others, whether dissident writers would feel freer to explore their imaginative possibilities, especially those writing in English and publishing their works overseas, such as Nadine Gordimer. Once apartheid had been ‘officially’ dismantled and dissolved, the multi-racial democratic elections of April 27, 1994 had taken place, what would these politically engaged writers do? J.M. Coetzee writes of Gordimer, for example, that she was liberated from self-laceration imposed by the ideologies of the former regime (2008, 256). Her fiction of the new century ‘shows a welcome readiness to pursue new avenues and a new sense of the world’. However, it is difficult to sustain that postcolonial strategies only appeared in South African literatures after their emancipation, as I have argued elsewhere.⁴ After much reading and research, I still contend that the major transition in Anglophone African writing over the last sixty years has been the entry of women writers to the formerly almost exclusive male literary circles, which has led to their recognition, despite the reluctance on the part of their male contemporaries and of the publishing houses.

Despite the revolution in African literatures during this period, this study mainly explores

4 Cf. Charlotte Broad (2000).

the writing of Bessie Head, who paved the way for later Southern African women writers, from her particular perspective as an émigré. There are certain unresolved questions in her work, particularly in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, her stories and finally her letters, which are gradually being published in order to understand the significance of this writer, not only as the novelist and short story writer we all know, but as a reviewer and correspondent, two aspects so essential to the understanding of an author's work. As Linda-Susan Beard remarks, from her privileged position as a person who acquired the financial backing to photocopy Head's papers: 'Available to an extraordinarily limited audience outside South Africa and Botswana, these texts—which pass along a continuum from bookkeeping and royalty inquiries to articulations of personal struggles and intellectual discovery—are integral to the study of Head's life, her artistic experimentation, and her ongoing iconoclastic explosion of genre categories and expectation' (2007, 1). In her opinion, these letters come close to 'an unmediated autobiographical voice', so distant from 'the biographical voice over and quasi-psychological ventriloquism of too much Head criticism'. As a possible 'unconscious antidote to the persistent attempts at a mental autopsy in the guise of literary criticism, the letters offer a window on the developing mystical sensibility of a world soul'. Bell hooks epitomises this writing of the self, if not as a world soul, in its different forms, when she suggests that diary writing as a female experience has closeted black women away from the act of writing as authorship. Despite this, it has most assuredly been 'a writing act that intimately connects the art of expressing one's feeling on the written page with the construction of self and identity, with the effort to be fully actualized' (1999, 4). This powerful sense of writing as a healing place, 'where our souls can speak and unfold (,) has been crucial to women's development of a counter-hegemonic experience of creativity within patriarchal culture'. Head did not keep a diary, but she did leave carbon copies of almost every

letter she wrote, bill paid, struggle gained, lost or left in abeyance: what I would call a living diary, since it does not follow events day by day or provide any sense of closure. There is no doubt, however, that her informal and formal writing created a space of healing in which her soul could speak and express views contrary to those proposed by the patriarchal figures she envisaged, heard, or encountered. But as she explained in a letter to Pat and Wendy Cullinan of September 28th, 1964, there were other reasons: ‘the most important being writer’s vanity – I have to direct my ideas somewhere and have an audience’ (*Imaginative Trespasser* 23).

Whatever the complexities of this autobiographical experience, to which we shall return later, there is only one extensive literary biography of Head’s work that is recognised by all scholars as the authority on Bessie Head’s work and life: *Thunder Behind Her Ears. Bessie Head: Her Life and Writing* (1995) by Gillian Stead Eilersen. Now living in Denmark, Eilersen is one of many South African/European scholars who have dedicated their life’s work to the literary *oeuvre* of an African writer. What distinguishes her from many others is that she was, firstly, brought up in South Africa and, secondly, has engaged an exceedingly difficult topic: that of an orphaned coloured woman writer from South Africa. Kenneth Birch, Head’s uncle on her (white) mother’s side, eventually decided to break the silence that reigned over the events of Bessie’s early life. This meant that Eilersen had to make some corrections and she republished the biography in 2007. Since Head’s mother, Bessie Amelia Emery, then a divorced woman, gave birth to her daughter out of wedlock in an asylum in Pietermaritzburg, there has been endless speculation about the father of this baby, especially when her white foster parents returned ‘the goods’ because she looked ‘strange’ – she had very curly hair, they claimed. Later, the family solicitor stated: ‘The child is coloured, in fact quite black and native in appearance’ (qtd. in Eilersen 2007, 9). Young Bessie was thus sent to live with Nellie and George Heathcote, a

coloured couple who had other foster children, and was eventually told she was an orphan while at St. Monica's Diocesan Home for Coloured Girls in Hillary, then a little village outside Durban. Her grandmother paid for all her studies, until she became a qualified teacher.

Informed principally by postcolonial and African scholars, this study is divided into three parts. Part I provides a theoretical framework that discusses the concept of transition, debates concerning postcolonialism, the position of the reader, whether it be a western feminist or Head, and the representations of space in and around Southern African women's literatures, all of which dispute power relations within a postcolonial Southern African context throughout this study.⁵ Part II takes this to a more practical level by exploring several issues associated with Anglophone African women's writing, which are pertinent to my study of Head's oeuvre. I refer mainly to Southern African writers, but I cannot dull my hearing to narrative voices from other parts of English-speaking Africa in this general overview. Running throughout are my interests concerning the ways in which they evoke the extraordinary of the ordinary and explore the postcolonial questions of displacement and relocation, as well as those of gendered politics and aesthetics, all of which have their immediate source of conflict in British colonialism. I locate Bessie Head in more specific terms after a general contextual introduction at the beginning of Part III, thereby providing a link to the study of Serowe. *Village of the Rain Wind*, which eventually expresses, as I shall mention later, her sense of belongingness to a community she had formerly considered hostile towards her. Upon her arrival in Serowe in the Protectorate of Bechuanaland, a "free" African country in that it had never been colonised *per se*, she certainly did not act like an imposing settler; instead, she felt imprisoned by 'all forms of communal

⁵ I shall not discuss the possible interrelations of postmodernism and postcolonialism, as it is too contentious an issue, although some scholars mentioned will inevitably work within the framework of this European mode of thought.

living' (*Imaginary Trespasser* 19-20). In this 'dreary prison' she experienced not only the 'white elite' of cocktail parties but also 'a kind of suppressed cry from an equally right prison – poverty'. This letter of July 28, 1964, written four months after her departure from South Africa, expresses, moreover, her opinion that 'the prisons have enclosed themselves in such a tight circle that it would be a miracle if anything could break through – some new way of life and liberation'.⁶ Head's correspondence at that time would pursue her throughout her writing career: 'I am poor but my mind is free. I don't think I have any obligation to my fellow men, except to love them – and I haven't yet learnt how to do that'.

My approach is, as I shall argue later, hybrid in its genealogy and address. The interests in this study have characteristics in common and it is thus difficult to separate them in different sections. This is particularly true of Part III, in which my discussion of Head's *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* is divided into three chapters. Crossing those borders between autobiography and fiction, I firstly place this work within the context of the rest of her *oeuvre*. Secondly, I discuss the issues of space in literature and literature in space, which are, in general terms, so significant for African women writers, as we have observed. Geography, as Moretti argues, 'is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history 'happens', but an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth'(3).⁷ Via his maps, Moretti makes the connections between

6 Prison was on the South African mind: Nelson Rohlhlala Mandela and his seven comrades were convicted to life imprisonment on June 12, 1964. Only Lionel 'Rusty' Bernstein and James Kantor were released after the Rivonia Trial, having endured the various torture techniques of the South African secret service, or the BOSS. Some South Africans might claim, as they have in the past, to have had the most effective Bureau of State Security during the National Party's regime. This acronym was particularly effective because most black South Africans would call their master *baas*. Oliver Tambo said in a speech in 1982: 'Despite the heroic resistance of our forebears, from the Cape of Good Hope to the north of Africa, the colonialists succeeded to transform us from a free people into a subject people. They became our masters and made us respond to their commands with "Ja baas, Ja baas"'. <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=anecdotes/history/or/or82-3.html> (14/05/2010)

7 Franco Moretti also discusses space in the colonial novel; hence, the importance of his study to this text, even if it is mostly a source of inspiration on account of his approach to the novel.

space and literature explicit and thereby tries to shed light upon meaningful relationships that would otherwise remain hidden. Besides studying textual spaces, I shall thus discuss, as does Moretti with his vantage of hindsight, the difficult relations between author and publishers, in this case also including Head's tumultuous relations with her different agents, the impossibility of finding her texts before 2006 when the publishers began to bring one or two of them out again. However, my approach to space in this chapter also includes a reflection on intertextual relations in Serowe. *Village of the Rain Wind*. Head transforms the conventions of local 'village' writing in the metropolis. In this sense, this reflection centres on Head's challenge to the books she was asked to use as models and on the notion of intertextuality, understood as a dialogue among various texts. Although the question of gendered aesthetics is discussed throughout this study, here it takes centre stage. In relation to the question of models, her agent recommended that she should read two works before writing her own village narrative: *Akenfield* by Ronald Blythe and *Report from a Chinese Village* by Jan Myrdal, but never did her agent mention the enormous difference between them. However different, these published texts were written by European men, who inevitably "knew" what they were doing. Blythe, an insider, ambiguously challenges the English tradition. In turn, Jan Myrdal, an outsider who, as the son of a former Swedish Secretary of State Professor Gunnar Myrdal, grew up in Stockholm, Geneva and New York, writes a text classified under Anthropology/Sociology. Living in a village in Botswana and creating her narrative as a Southern African woman writer, Head was apparently expected to produce a work that would somehow follow the rather homogeneous model of 'village narratives' written in English by such different writers. In the 1970s, there seemed to be little consciousness on the part of her potential (British) publishers that her work would fall outside the formerly established frame of European 'village narratives', whether it be that of a village in Norfolk or of

a Chinese village. Throughout the history of the village narrative written in England, Wales or Scotland, the conventions had been quite strict, whether dictated and narrated by the local vicar, priest, doctor or another important person.⁸ What is significant is that both models challenge the conventions of village narrative. Since they had transgressed, in their different ways, the ingrained tradition, Head had to take their transgressions into account, if she wanted to get her work published. My proposal is that she took Blythe's text as her model, on account of its enormous success upon publication, and discovered earlier texts within this tradition, which were not written by specialists, such as Myrdal's anthropological text, set in a country so far from her experience. Indeed, other African women writers, such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa were writing narratives about particular communities during this period, not to mention Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

An interesting overlap between the second and third chapters in Part III is the interview with the informant, recorded in one space, translated and transcribed in another and sent to a publisher who has a totally different audience in mind, when the original transcribers were principally thinking of the interviewees as their primary audience. The third chapter, under the title of 'Translating and Writing Cultures', concerns the significance of translation, a term I use both metaphorically and literally in relation to this narrative. It depends on Head's research of other sources and her interviews with local inhabitants, some of whom only speak Setswana, the official local language in Botswana. It explores not only the transcription of oral to print text but also the complications of approaching a text from another culture. This involves Head in multiple tasks as a cultural intermediary. The great mystery underlying her endeavour concerns the

⁸ These texts are quite different from, for example, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford*, first published in 1851 in the magazine *Household Words* edited by Charles Dickens. Nonetheless, it is worth bearing this novelistic tradition in mind.

translator. Who helps her with this task of transcribing and typewriting the gestures, tones of voice, atmosphere and so on arising from a cultural perspective so different from her own? The final manuscript is the result of various linguistic and cultural negotiations. Head has to write in English, the English of Lawrence and Joyce, two of her favourite writers, but she is writing a book about a village in and of Botswana, in which English is a foreign/colonial language with its own intonations, lexicon, etc., as Head had learned English in the same way, but with other intonations, lexicon, etc.⁹ For all these reasons, the translation of the self moves in many, often indescribable, directions. Could Head accomplish all the tasks involved in this culturally complex process? Her published book demonstrates that she has achieved the seemingly impossible.

Before embarking on my study, I should point out that I make no distinction between African and European scholars, writers, critics or intellectuals, other than mentioning, wherever relevant, their place of birth or critical tendency. Not only do writers, at times, invite us to enter a new imaginary universe, but they challenge us in many exciting ways. Some may fall into the trap of explanation, which obviously detracts from the aesthetic experience, but the political and literary stance of most African writers is that there is no need to condescend to readers. They rightly realise that western readers can infer just as well as they can; equally, we all misread texts now and then.

A final point concerns my position as a reader, anticipating my discussion in Part I. Who is responsible for a text's meaning? Is it the author, the text itself, the reader, or some more complex combination of two or three of these positions? 'Negotiating a position for oneself within this complicated set of author/text/reader relations is (...) one of the key methodological

⁹ The term 'English' is used by Ashcroft, *et al* in their *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) to mark a distinction between the Queen's English and the various ways in which English has been beautifully transformed in other countries, for example, James Joyce. Bear with me, if I am inconsistent with capitalisation.

concerns that besets the textual critic every time she embarks upon the analysis of (a verbal) text' (Pearce 1995, 81). For the non-African white woman reader of Southern African literatures, there are many challenges. Even 'the word 'universality'' often seems merely to function as a code-word meaning for 'comprehensibility for the European reader' (Snead 1990, 237). My familiarity with the novel form should not, as Snead warns when speaking of Achebe's writing, make me complacent:

The European reader, feeling at the outset at home in a literary form that Europe has developed, is made to assume, without warning, the vulnerable position of the African in a European culture which he or she is expected to understand and absorb. Whites, perhaps for the first time, see themselves as Africans see them: 'It is like the story of white men who, they say, are white like this piece of chalk, (...) And these white men, they say, have no toes'. (1990, 241)

As I mentioned earlier, interpretation is a thorny issue inevitably governed by my background, however much I respect the African writers and critics' claim to lived experience and try to understand their literary renderings of these experiences. Head argues in one of her essays that Gabriel García Márquez 'captured the whole soul of ancient Southern African history in a few casual throw-away lines in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*' (1990, 65) by quoting a passage from the beginning of the novel:

... In the small separate room, where the walls were gradually being covered by strange maps and fabulous drawings, he taught them to read and write and do sums, and he spoke to them about the wonders of the world, not only where his learning had extended, but forcing the limits of his imagination to extremes.

It was in that way that the boys ended up learning that in the southern extremes of Africa there were men so intelligent and peaceful that their only pastime was to sit and think ... (García Márquez 20).

This has, she says, little to do with the novel's themes and preoccupations: '(w)hat is so astonishing is the accuracy of the observation. African history is associated with so many horrors – police states, detentions, sudden and violent mass protests and death, exploitation and

degrading political systems. Any thought that it could have once been one of ‘the wonders of the world’ seems unreal’. And yet it was, as Head writes, and still is. In its long history, it has passed through that shameful European scramble and has been embroiled, besides other imperialistic interventions, in internal conflicts on many a front. Head is not the only Southern African who expresses an affinity with Latin American writers. Nadine Gordimer has also spoken of the myth of ‘the lost continent Gondwana, sundered by cosmic cataclysms and seas’ that persists as a metaphorical explanation for the similarities writers find between the non-English speaking peoples of the Americas and the Africans (1999, 27-28). Just as the two continents have so much in common, so little is known, our African writers would say, of South American writers’ work and life, ‘with whom we have more *existential* ties than with writers in Europe and North America’. In light of this, Gordimer goes on to ask: ‘why are we, as writers, not looking South-South in a new freedom to choose which world, whose world, beyond our own with which we could create a wider one for ourselves?’ The delicacies of the act of interpretation are often a theme in Southern African writers’ texts, as they are of so many others. Perhaps the freedom of imagination expressed by García Márquez, Bessie Head or Nadine Gordimer, who make implicit and explicit comparisons between the two continents, no less, is encouraging. Our strangeness to one body of literature or another may be similar – ‘strange maps and fabulous drawings’ – but we are not in the same position. Power of the word can never represent the same urge to make with words, as Gordimer has said in relation to her fiction. However, freedom, as Rosa Luxemburg puts it, ‘means freedom to those who think differently’ and for this reason, above all, Gordimer makes the following appeal to African writers:

Let our chosen status in the world be that of writers who seek exchanges of the creative imagination, ways of thinking and writing, of fulfilling the role of repository of the people’s ethos, by opening it out, bringing to it a vital mixture of individuals

and peoples re-creating themselves. (Gordimer 1999, 28)

In sum, all I can do is express my awareness of my otherness and rely as much as possible on African and Africanist scholars. Any attempt to justify my stance would, no doubt, draw fierce criticism. Snead's article is delightfully unsettling in this respect, as he cites one critic after another. Of the well-known Africanologist Janheinz Jahn (1918-1973), he says: 'Jahn's over-reliance on concepts such as 'the African way of thinking' or 'the African conceptual world' leads him to ostensibly laudatory, but occasionally outrageous conclusions, such as '(i)n traditional Africa, everyone who speaks is a magician of words, a poet'' (Snead 1990, 238). So reminiscent of my own grievance against those critical of patriarchy, amongst whom I include myself, or of African women against white researchers, whom they argue represent them as stereotypes. Jennifer Robinson is, for example, concerned with 'the traces of colonial interaction' in the relationship between white women researchers and the researched. She states: 'Mapping and placing 'others' has been central to the project of apartheid: an archcolonial enterprise, currently in transition, and it is hoped, soon to be superseded by a new, postapartheid political structure' (1994, 197). I shall try to avoid such generalisations and insensitivities by applying interpretative strategies the texts suggest, however difficult this may be in theoretical terms. In the end, every character and author is, as I am, the other.

My reading and writing practice depends on my ability to negotiate a position for myself as a critic *vis-à-vis* the matrix. My approach is, as I mentioned earlier, hybrid in its genealogy and address, but it is bound to construct a discourse based, firstly, on my positioning as an outsider. So long as my interpretation is informed by African and postcolonial sources in the main, it may, with great self-consciousness, partly avoid falling prey to 'neo-orientalism'. This constant crossing of borders and the translation it implies locate as much my discourse as the subject

under study in that famous third space. The consensus is that I can only adopt one subjective position among the many denoted/connoted by the category 'woman reader', since there are so many different readers 'jostling for the position of preferred reader', as Lynn Pearce argues (90-3). She gives the example of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which 'becomes the site of a struggle for reader-privilege. Readers of different classes, races, and sexual orientations may turn hungrily from page to page for a sign of their own preferment'. Although author and context should not be ignored, the dialogic relationship with each text will show as much how it positions me as I position it; it is, moreover, subject to the 'same laws of selection, rejection and reciprocity as our interpersonal relationships'. My recognition of my 'situatedness' as a reader and my respect for the different 'situatedness' of the author and of the text make it easier for me to engage in this dialogic relationship.

Part I. Questioning Power: Postcolonialism, Space and Readership

In memory of Walter Sisulu

Only the rustle of reeds
thin pipe smoke
a flickering paraffin lamp
women in blankets bent over
their faces lost to the light.

And remnants:
gate without hinges
stones in a half circle
afterbirths buried in silt.

Can the forgotten
be born again
into the land of names?
Ingrid de Kok¹⁰

This chapter opens with a discussion of our critical distance from the literatures under study. In fact, the term transition, soon to be explored, is arguably a movable event, depending on the specific location of each writer. Among other considerations, it may at once be a defining moment in an author's body of work, as s/he passes through different stages in her/his writing life, and a means of describing a change in the socio-historical context within which the work is set. The writers I discuss live within what is known in the West as the postmodern period and their work is often studied from a postcolonial perspective. Since South Africa's literatures, in particular, have developed along distinct lines from Euro-American literatures, I propose to provide a critical background, by focusing more on the latter mode of critical analysis than the former, however much the former is on my mind. The final sections of Part I reflect upon

¹⁰ Ingrid de Kok, 'Some there be', *Terrestrial Things* (2002, 36)

literature in space, which includes among other aspects the questions of publication, censorship and readership. I study the issues concerning spaces in literature in Part III, which concerns Head's work.

It was the South African writer and painter Breyten Breytenbach who alerted me to this question of critical distance when he declined to participate in *Writing South Africa* (1998), a collection of essays on literature, apartheid and democracy from 1970 to 1995 compiled by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly. Breytenbach, who was imprisoned in South Africa in 1975 and released in 1982 on account of international intervention and later obtained French citizenship, pointed out the impossibility of their task because of their proximity to these literatures. The editors draw our attention to a number of questions, since most of the literary texts studied are set within the apartheid regime and attempt to reject the determinisms of apartheid and those of the systems which were implicated in supporting this ideological machinery: 'patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, class and language bias, ethnic nationalism, and so on' (Jolly and Attridge 1-3). The new freedom gained by the dismantling of apartheid, which affected not only South Africa but also Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia and other countries, if at different times, demands a change in the habits of the mind, as these peoples attempt 'to come to terms with the past in order to build a new future for themselves'. This task requires 'balancing the need to view the present as a time of reckoning for those complicit in apartheid's crimes and the need for reconciliation', which the South Africans effected through the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Just as 'the Commission highlights the need to narrativize the past' in such a way that the future becomes bearable, so do the writers. In the opinion of Attridge and Jolly, the Commission's 'double responsibility of exposure and acceptance' lies at the heart of current debates over the evaluation of literatures produced in this country. Such South African

novels as *David's Story* by Zoë Wicomb or *Red Dust* by Gillian Slovo offer very different examples of this trend.¹¹ Whereas the former tells the story of a veteran ANC guerrilla fighter from the perspective of a disengaged narrator, the latter exposes the complexities underlying the cases presented to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* from the perspective of Sarah Barcant, an expatriate lawyer living in New York. Artists throughout this region may well bear this twin responsibility but what appears to be the core issue is difference, as these scholars put it: 'The need to tell the underside of apartheid history, and to outline its implications for the present and future, is matched by a desire in many instances to find a form of narration capable of acknowledging difference'. Although the postcolonial world generally faces this task, it is worth outlining the specifics of the Southern African situation, particularly that of South Africa for its perceived role in international circles, as 'an ideological battleground that presents the Manichean conflict *par excellence*'. The period under study here reveals the various attempts made by scholars and writers alike to mark the personal and/or political transitional moments in their literary works and discussions. Our proximity to these works not only makes us pose questions of these literatures but also gives us pause for thought and for a critical reappraisal of the complexity of these literatures, which have all too often been reduced to simplistic and fallacious readings, as Attridge and Jolly suggest (4).

My approach is influenced by Bessie Head, even if I do not make specific reference to her work at this stage. From my critical distance of some years now, I might argue that she has, among other writers, exerted an influence on the Commission, as it examines this double responsibility and its underlying complexities. She wrote in 1984 that 'the situation of black people in Africa, their anguish and their struggles, made its deep impress on me. From an earlier

¹¹ Both writers are currently resident in the United Kingdom.

background, I know of a deep commitment to people, an involvement in questions of poverty and exploitation and a commitment to illuminating the future for younger generations' (Head 1990, 86). Most of her published work may have had Botswana settings 'but the range and reach of my preoccupations became very wide. People, black people, white people, loomed large on my horizon. I began to answer some of the questions aroused by my South African experience' (67). Her emotional and aesthetic distance will become as obvious as her commitment. However close Head is to her past, her detachment enables her to examine the false and oppressive premises that had almost quelled the creative quest.

This section of my study does not attempt to discuss how power is questioned in abstract terms, but how it is challenged by certain theoretical approaches that arise from the literary works themselves. It proposes to study the concept of transition and the transformations it entails in the context of postcolonial theory and, subsequently, how certain discourses are associated with it. Any study of transitional writing has to contemplate other methods of reading cultures, which take these transformations into account. Sarah Nuttall suggests three methods for theorising what she calls the 'now': the first has to do with creolisation, so closely linked with 'colouredness as a biological and cultural construct' in South Africa that it is seldom taken into account (2004, 3); the second comes at conceptions of race and class in the light of the first discussion; the third treats of 'the city itself'. She later writes that each fragment or register relates 'to an overall argument about how we read space'. Bearing the above in mind, I shall discuss Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* (1998). Throughout I refer to Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002), which explores, in general terms, the third of these reading methods by inviting her readers to perceive the city from different perspectives. Vera's novel is inspired by the photograph of a woman being decapitated (Bryce 2003b, 224) and it lays emphasis on the figure

of the migrant, whether worker, tourist, guerrilla fighter or voyeur, and thus on movement. Just as Vera expresses concern about how to interest her reader in such violent acts, so we should never forget the difficulties involved in publishing such a novel. For this reason, I shall reflect upon the many ordeals that African (women) writers have had to face.

The grounding of theory in literary practice seems the most worthwhile approach to such a network of complex relationships as that in contemporary Southern African texts. The larger political landscape in the form of apartheid and the colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial struggle impinges on the texts written by women in Southern Africa in many different ways (Coxon 7). Central to this discussion is the rediscovery of the ordinary posed by Ndebele when he argues against the conservative effects of a realist literature which brings into focus the violence of the apartheid regime in the 1980s and which alienates many local readers.¹² Another way of creating a distance from the local readers is to make, as Nadine Gordimer does, endless references in her fictional and nonfictional works to other literatures, which may well throw light on the situation in South Africa at the time, but are unavailable to most readers. For example, she inserts a passage from Hermann Broch's trilogy, *The Sleepwalkers* (1931-2), in *The House Gun*, as we shall see, in order to offer yet another view on transition in this novel.

¹² I study Ndebele's significant approach in I.

Transition

The idea of transition in Southern African writing is crucial to this study. Like other concepts that appear from time to time, transition is not studied methodically, but flows, somewhat like a river with many currents, throughout, revealing secrets under some stones that may, eventually, be understood, whilst others remain hidden. Transition depends upon the eye of the beholder, and the meaning of this term arises as much from the public as from the private sphere of the writers and the effect each has upon the other. For example, Vera's *The Stone Virgins* constitutes a literary response – that is to say, an imaginative response – to the period in Zimbabwean history from 1950-1981, when the indigenous peoples became engaged in the most violent phase of their struggle against white domination. Contesting a series of novels written from a white perspective and perpetrating the dominant settler discourse of blood and thunder, good and evil, it explores both the Liberation War (known as the 'Second *Chimurenga*'), its background and the backlash following Independence in 1980. In the case of Zimbabwe, formerly Southern Rhodesia, it was a local white man, the late Ian Smith, and his league of wealthy white gentlemen farmers and businessmen who first claimed independence in defiance of the British and the majority of the indigenous peoples under their Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965. For this reason, among others, there are many similarities in the histories informing the literatures of South Africa and Zimbabwe. Botswana, as a Protectorate, had quite a different relationship with the metropolis, particularly since the British apparently never discovered its diamond fields. In relation to the transitions in Botswana, Bessie Head wrote in her personal journal in 1985: 'Everything is at a beginning. No colonial power ever intended planning for black majority populations. Libraries, schools, and planning for people were provided after independence. It

could be said that a reading tradition was absent in the society'.¹³ This remark is telling: there is currently a boom in Botswana writing that wishes, however young it may be, to make its voices heard above the imaginative responses produced by those outsiders who have claimed wealth and fame from their Botswana inspiration.

Southern African countries are still deeply involved in this process of transition from the experiences of the colonial period, or decolonisation, as the South African multiracial elections of 1994 attest. Colonisation imposed a 'restructuring of social, political, economic, legal and cultural relations among Africans of different classes, ethnic backgrounds, geographic locations, genders and ages', as it led to the demise within the communities of 'age-old systems of socialisation, cultural and linguistic expression, artistic creativity and social reproduction' (McFadden 1998, i). Some of the indicators were migration, social dislocation and loss of land. The post-independence stance of most people in Southern African countries has been to reassess their former experience and, primarily, to seek justice and equality from the governments they have fought to elect. Historical processes are much more complex, however, and depend on so many different factors that the individual is barely contemplated, let alone mentioned. Besides all the other complications, they are not chronological; they build upon the past and reconstruct themselves in the present, bearing in mind all the shifts in power and contending with them. Robert Thornton argues that South Africa, now in transition, 'must remain in a sort of permanent transition', since there 'can be no end to history in South Africa that is not also apocalyptic' – a fear South Africans have lived with throughout the centuries (1996:158)¹⁴

13 <www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Head/html> (accessed 11.12.07) By 'reading tradition' the author means the custom and practice of reading.

14 Thornton mentions that Captain James Cook noted the tension between the 'races' and gave the colony twenty years before it would end in violence: 'At the end of the 1980s it seemed that (he) had been off by a precise factor of ten; that is, it had taken 200 years to dissolve into a bloodbath (.) Now it seems he must have been just plain wrong' (1996, 158).

It is often stated that African writers of the 1980s and 1990s have little knowledge of their past and, thus, record the *new* Africa: ‘They know the Africa since independence, since ‘modernisation’, since westernisation, since the feminist movement’ (Bruner 1993, vii). This extraordinary list defining the new Africa in such a homogeneous manner is certainly not what I mean by transition. The phrase ‘the New South Africa’ was, for example, coined by F.W. de Klerk, the President of South Africa, in a speech on February 2, 1990, when he announced Mandela’s release, proclaimed the end of apartheid and promised the repeal of apartheid laws, in the first of many ‘marketing events’ designed to demonstrate that he and his party members were ‘converts to decency and penitence’ (Jolly and Attridge 1998, 4).

Elleke Boehmer’s essay on South African fiction in transition provides an excellent starting point for our discussion of transition in literary texts, particularly since it complements Gordimer’s reflection on transition in her novel *The House Gun*, a theme that has concerned her before and after 1994. The essay returns to the past and opens with a reappraisal of Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930), generally acclaimed as the first work of fiction by a black African to be published in English and possibly the first African novel to explore this concept of transition.¹⁵ Plaatje was fluent in seven languages, but was most concerned to preserve the Setswana language. For this reason, he produced, with the help of the renowned linguist David Jones, *A Sechuana Reader in International Phonetic Orthography (with English Translations)* (1916, London University Press) and collected Setswana proverbs under the title of *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and Their European Equivalentents* (1916, Kegan Paul). In his novel *Mhudi*, this translator of Shakespeare’s plays into Setswana ‘straddled two cultural worlds’, as Boehmer explains:

¹⁵ Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876-1932) was a founder member and the first Secretary-General of the South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress (ANC)).

Embracing Tswana oral tradition and Shakespearean vocabulary, epic battlefield scenes and romance, speeches of biblical gravity and slapstick tussles with lions, *Mhudi* also looks two ways in time: back to the nineteenth-century wars of the Mfecane, and (...) to the future and its risks, the dangers of deals made between Africans and Afrikaners (1998, 43).

She detects a contrast between Plaatje's 'variations of voice and register' and the 'sense of hesitation, restraint, in some cases of delimitation', expressed both at stylistic and thematic levels in more recent late-apartheid fiction. The traditions informing *Mhudi* provide two different endings: on the one hand, the rout of the Matabele by a combined force of Barolong and Boers, and King Mzilikazi's warning concerning collaboration with the white man, and, on the other, the conventional Shakespearian comic ending of probable betrothal. Plaatje's exploration with forms and his denial of closure reminds her of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, which reveals the struggle 'to connect with her environment', rather than to distance herself from it, as so many critics have argued, in order to dramatise 'a central feature of the settler condition, the difficulty of finding the forms to fit a new world' (Boehmer 1998, 44). In Boehmer's opinion, recent South African fiction is 'less creative, less exploratory about, indeterminacy', in terms of form, language and subject-matter. In late apartheid fiction, choices of plot and style are, for example, 'marked by a kind of hawering (...), a cultural or artistic pessimism...' (44-45).¹⁶ The surrounding reality 'fenced in the potential questions raised by endings' and narrative uncertainty, 'its suggestiveness and tease were constrained with the deathly binaries of a long history of oppression and opposition'; these binaries, defining everyday life and imposed upon thought, haunt the author and critic seeking the means to represent a new nation in South Africa and express fresh starts in the literatures. Head became a great admirer of Plaatje's work and personality, particularly since his mother tongue was Setswana. In a 'Foreword' to his *Native Life*

¹⁶ Recent fiction refers to that between circa 1980 and 1997.

in *South Africa*, she wrote that his main aim in this ‘book of flaming power and energy’ is to the present ‘the black personality’, which has no power, ‘as deserving justice, humanity and dignity’ (1990, 81-2). It provides ‘an essential missing link’ to black South African ‘broken sense of history’, as it presents ‘a view of history reaching back nearly five hundred years and up to a period of change and transition as it affected the lives of black people’.

Since South Africa forms part of her literary background, one fresh start would be to rethink, as Head does in her texts, South African literary history, energising and re-signifying words and spaces, as well as the so-called canon. Jean-Philippe Wade identifies the crux of the matter when he revitalises the word ‘disclose’ in the new context:

Disclosing the nation. To disclose: to reveal that which has been hidden or marginalised. But also: to prevent or resist closure, to remain faithful to the contingency and openness of the real. It is within the playful encounter of these *divergent* meanings that any reconstructed literary history of the South African nation must find its **provisional** postcolonial space (1996, 1, my emphasis).

In the ‘Introduction’ to *Alternation*, launched in 1994, Wade, like so many South African scholars, calls for ‘a vibrant theoretical experimentalism’ that defamiliarises ‘traditional automated perceptions of our literary past’ in order ‘to construct a ‘shocking’, renewed, unrecognizable cultural history’ (4). This theoretical experimentation requires an interrogation of the key terms of ‘*national, literary and history*’ and of Eurocentric discourses – principally in the fields of literary criticism, philosophy, sociology and history – in order to open the debate and seek an insight into its complexities, a topic for another day.

By the mid-1980s, South African literary critics ‘could claim with equanimity that, unless fiction or poetry could be seen to mirror reality in some immediate way, they attached ‘relative unimportance’ to textual form’, Boehmer, a South African, states (1998, 46-7). From her critical distance, we hear her implicitly giving voice to Njabulo Ndebele’s thoughts of the 1980s,

complicating the arguments she later produces. Post-apartheid art should, in her opinion, give artists the opportunity to break away from the mimetic codes of the past, even if ‘a restraint continues to operate’ and writers are still settling for ‘second-hand, borrowed or inherited models’, such as magic realism, the treatment of history as ‘discourse’ or as fantasy, or ‘recuperative autobiography as a way of narrating a self into being’ (46-7). All of these are, however, crucial to Head’s textual universes, which negotiate their power relations from very different ideological positions. As I have mentioned, Boehmer proposes that current Southern African writing might be inspired by the example set by Head who combined forms in her fiction, although this might be considered another cul-de-sac, because later writers would be returning to a former model. Despite the inevitable contradictions, what at least some South African literary scholars seek, it appears, is theoretical and literary experimentation: a fresh start for one and all, if we ignore the inequality in circumstances for artists from different ethnic communities, who wish to recuperate inherited models, as they revise them, in order to narrate themselves ‘into being’.

The tendency to imitation and cultural obeisance, as well as the liking for aesthetic orthodoxies, are, Boehmer argues, also explained by South Africa’s position as a former colony. What characterizes postcolonial writing is the creative misreading of sources¹⁷ and it seems that the context for these kinds of development is potentially in place: ‘the mixing of different languages and the cross-fertilization of cultural traditions’ (1998, 52). Michael Chapman would agree with this stance when he suggests that the democratising process in this part of Africa ‘requires that we begin carrying information across our own borders’ (1996, 48-49). In this respect, translation, the attempt to cross borders, becomes a highly significant activity, which

17 This reminds us of the playful narrative strategies in Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, as we shall see in II.

makes 'the insights of one culture accessible to the other'. Moreover, writing is translation, in that it renders the familiar strange and the strange familiar, as does reading, for example. In practice, however, what South Africa needs at the moment is a sense of unity and a national culture. Boehmer's hope is that 'a society which has laboured under a unique situation of internal colonization in a postcolonial world will eventually bypass the teeming dreamscapes that characterize the postcolonial writings of an Amitav Ghosh or a Ben Okri and create something of its own' (1998, 52). But is this situation so unique, especially in light of the brutalities committed in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and other African countries during the twentieth century?

Gordimer presents one proposal for responsible young characters in *The House Gun*, her first post-election novel: young blacks and whites, homosexuals and heterosexuals, should live in 'a communal household', as the judge calls it (1998, 255). The idea that 'homosexuality is the real liberation' might be a fashion, Harald Lindgard thinks from his conservative and heterosexual perspective, when 'social groupings are in transition' (160). What engages us is, of course, an imagined world expressed in the distinctive novelistic form. The transformation in the narrative world may or may not anticipate a transformation in the extratextual community of readers. *The House Gun* states: 'don't kill the messenger, the threat is the message' (Gordimer 1998, 17), challenging, for example, D. H. Lawrence's statement that we should 'never trust the teller, trust the tale' or questioning W.B. Yeats' final line of 'Among School Children': 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' Can the Lindgards, or even the readers perhaps, interpret this message and the implications of the threat it contains if it stems from an experience without precedent in their lives? This affluent white couple in *The House Gun* discovers that Duncan, their son, has allegedly murdered Carl Jespersen, his friend and ex-lover who spent a night with Duncan's current girlfriend, Natalie James, depicted as a self-destructive woman. Since the

Lindgards have never been in a court or a ‘black man’s home’ before, let alone a prison, their construction of how their son could have done such a thing depends entirely on their power to interpret, to discover and decipher unknown signs, to explore the inner recesses of the mind (165). At first, the couple withdraws. Neither knows how to communicate: the word ‘nothing’ is dropped like a stone into the depths of their despair. Once they both realise they cannot condone this act, they ‘were closer, coming upon discoveries in one another’s being, than they had been (...) when they were young and in the novelty of perilous human intimacy’ (161). Particularly in South Africa, intimacy is not always a happy process, Sarah Nuttall argues; it may often be ‘another name for tyranny’ (2004, 9). This sense of tyranny, now of a different kind than that under the apartheid regime, pervades their beings at this moment of uncomfortable recognition.

‘The self is always in a state of flux’, Janette Turner Hospital once said.¹⁸ Upon arriving in a new country, we become, culturally speaking, hybridised beings; and on account of the ‘multiple displacements, we have all been blind, not just the first European settlers’ (2001). The constant displacement and dispossession Gordimer’s white settlers experience alert them to the falsehood of stereotypes and the complicated truth of cultural differences, as they try to come to terms with the new context in which they find themselves. After the initial shock of entanglement, the Lindgards are cast into a cultural turmoil: Hamilton Motsamai, the Senior Counsel for the defence, is black, ‘one of those kept-apart strangers from the Other Side’ (Gordimer 1998, 89). He becomes their guide, mentor and friend. They are totally dependent upon him, as Gordimer had partly anticipated in *July’s People* (1981): ‘The black man will act, speak for them. *They* have become those who cannot speak, act, for themselves’ (Gordimer 1998,

18 The Australian novelist Janette Turner Hospital is such an enthusiastic and intelligent speaker that I wrote down her words in my notebook, but sadly did not put the date or the place. She so inspired me that I hope she will accept the only acknowledgement I can give her.

89). This is not merely a case of the one and the Other/other, as Harald realises:

Not only had he come from the Other Side; everything; everything had come to them from the Other Side, the nakedness to the final disaster: powerlessness, helplessness, before the law (...) The truth of all this was that he and his wife belonged, now, to the other side of privilege. Neither whiteness, nor observance of the teachings of Father and Son, nor the pious respectability of liberalism, nor money, that had kept them in safety – that other form of segregation – could change their status (Gordimer 1998, 127) .

The Lindgards' fear in *The House Gun* stems as much from the unknown as from the unimaginable. Their immersion in these other worlds obliges them to observe everything very carefully, without falling back on former assumptions – formerly thought of in either/or terms – or even beliefs. Gradually, they realise that there are several sides or sites of power, and the process of deconstructing those 'deathly binaries' begins (Boehmer 1998, 45). In the post-apartheid period 'the politics of black empowerment play', as Nuttall notes, 'an important role in shifting institutional power politics' (2004, 13). Just as they start to 'rearrange the furniture of human relations', so they explore their former sense of security as successful professionals and parents, who had made a covenant with their son, 'the most important commitment in their lives': 'we're always there for you. Always.' (Gordimer 1998, 30, 160). It turns out to mean nothing. They have put him – and themselves – in the dock long before the trial. The 'right to life' and 'thou shalt not kill' return time and again to remind us of their immediate dilemma, particularly poignant in light of the brutality of the past. The echo of Thomas Mann's words resounds throughout the text – and Gordimer's oeuvre: 'It is absurd for the murderer to outlive the murdered' (1998, 71), showing how the meaning of words continually shifts.

In Maureen Issacson's opinion, Gordimer is one of the 'world's foremost post-colonial novelists', who, in the words of the poet Mongane Wally Serote, 'demystifies' the whites (446). She has always expressed a great interest in the transitions in Southern Africa, whether these be

personal, social, economic and/or political. All her fiction has been directed to that major transition in South African society, which eventually took place on April 27, 1994, when the abstract term ‘equality’ took on materiality, ending ‘over three centuries of privilege for some, deprivation of human dignity for others’ (Gordimer 1999, 156). The new has now been born, but she continues to explore what form it will take in *The House Gun*, in which the definition of transition comes from Hermann Broch’s novel trilogy, *The Sleepwalkers*, published originally in 1931 and translated into English by Willa and Edwin Muir in 1932:

... the transition from any value system to a new one must pass through that zero-point of atomic dissolution, must take its way through a generation destitute of any connection with either the old or the new system, a generation whose very detachment, whose almost insane indifference to the suffering of others, whose state of denudation of values proves an ethical and so an historical justification of the ruthless rejection, in times of revolution, of all that is humane ... And perhaps it must be so, since only such a rising glare of freedom, the light that flares out over the deepest darkness, and only over the deepest darkness ... (qtd. in Gordimer 1998, 142).

One is tempted to debate this philosophically, especially since Broch considered literature to be a poor substitute for philosophy, but it is difficult to use this as a theoretical starting point for a study of transition. Sleepwalkers are, according to this writer, people living between vanishing and emerging ethical systems and his trilogy portrays three representative cases of the ‘loneliness of the I’ stemming from the collapse of any sustaining system of values: the Romantic, Joachim von Pasenow who clings to the values of the landed gentry, the Anarchist August Esch, an accountant who lives by the motto ‘business is business’ and the Realist Huguenau, who seems to be a bully and a ‘value-free man’.¹⁹ Ethics, as Jolly and Attridge understand this ‘slippery word’, refers ‘to the continuing attempt to do justice to others, or, more precisely, ‘the other’ – the encountered person, group or culture which does not conform to the set of beliefs, assumptions,

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that Gordimer goes so far back to find the definition for her purposes. Cf. Theodore Ziolkowski’s review, ‘The Absolute Novel’ of 1985 <www.williamgaddis.org/jr/brochsleptimesrev.html> (09.06.1998)

and habits that make up the encountering self" (1998, 6). The challenge in this dialogic discussion is to understand the other within his/her context without reducing him/her to a version of the self. In Broch's case, this other would be the generation who are indifferent to suffering, but who pave the way to 'freedom', perceived as a sort of ethereal revelation. Taken out of context, Broch's words do indicate a framework as much for an exploration of the sources, context, and consequences of violence in this text as for a study of Gordimer's later novel, *The Pickup* (2001), in which Julie Summers, the young protagonist, seems detached from the values of either the old or the new system. We can never forget that darkness, however: the mystery of the human condition. 'A prison is darkness. Inside. Inside self', Duncan thinks (Gordimer 1998, 276). Günter Grass puts it another way: 'the inexplicable, the 'dark rest' remains unlit by explanations' (1998, 111). Like his son, Harald depends on books, such as *The Magic Mountain*, to enlighten him: 'the substance of writers' imaginative explanations of human mystery made it possible for him (...) to get up in the morning' (Gordimer 1998, 71). Mann writes that Hans Castorp has an understanding of the reverence for humanity:

It is the idea of the human being, the conception of a future humanity that has passed through and survived the profoundest knowledge of disease and humanity. The Grail is a mystery, but humanity is a mystery too. For man himself is a mystery, and all humanity is a mystery too (qtd. in Gordimer 1988, 71).

The primary emphasis thus seems to be on the psychological landscape of the two main characters, that inner space which draws a parallel with their self-imprisonment and their son's incarceration. We might wonder whether parents and son in Gordimer's novel are able to express empathy or forgiveness beyond the *crime passionnel*. Despite the narrative remoteness of the characters, its readers cannot remain detached: that is 'the terrible genius of literature' (Gordimer 1998, 52). These allusions to other texts demonstrate Gordimer's interests at this moment in time.

The intertextuality opens the text to many more potential readings and show how her male characters feel they have to return to the past, and incidentally to the European literary canon, in order to gain some insight into the crisis of the moment.

The impact of an offspring's crime on parents is a universal theme, but it does not take place in a vacuum: 'This could have happened anywhere, but it happened here, in a particular way, in our country, in our city, Johannesburg, at our time. It happens with all the consequences of apartheid around us, that is the structure of the novel', Gordimer tells us (Issacson 444). Transition thus informs the narrative structure of this text. 'Why is Duncan not in the story?' the narrator enquires and then gives her reply: 'His act has made him a vacuum; a vacuum is the antithesis of life' (Gordimer 1998, 151). Might this vacuum resemble Broch's zero-point of atomic dissolution? Murder is by no means a straightforward matter: 'To kill is only the definitive act arising out of many others surrounding it, acts of spilled words, presumptions, sexual congress, and, all around these, muggings in the street' (247). It takes place in the climate of violence plaguing South Africa: 'It is necessary', the Defence psychiatrist explains, 'to keep in mind this context in which there may be the unconscious sanction of violence and events which led to the act, and the act itself, took place' (227). Reflecting upon Broch's words, Harald thinks: 'Violence desecrates freedom, that's what the text is saying. That is what the country is doing to itself'. Does this painful legacy of apartheid mean there is no hope of freedom at the end of the tunnel?

A fresh start: the transition from one value system to a completely different one requires, the South African writer André Brink suggests, a 'redefinition of meaning' (1998, 420). 'Something terrible happened': the opening line and the premise of *The House Gun*. A platitude unexpectedly becomes the most meaningful expression, running like a refrain through the text.

‘The statements that seem to have been emptied of all meaning by endless repetition are the truest’, the narrator argues (Gordimer 1998, 122). The meaning of words, phrases and habits of mind that constitute communication are questioned, refreshed and thus appropriated. The familiar becomes strange (Duncan’s parents think of their son as ‘a stranger’) and the strange sometimes becomes very familiar (their dependency on Hamilton Motsamai for sanity and survival in the new South Africa). The Lindgards resort to such phrases as ‘some sort of’, ‘some kind of’ and ‘as if’ time and again to express the hesitant narrative of their changed lives. They have to learn how to communicate once more, how to make love again: the ‘old form of intimacy’ has fled, as Duncan fled the site of the evil deed. This challenge is extended to the readers: we also grow aware of the fusion of narrative perspectives and of direct and indirect speech. Just as Gordimer continues to demystify white South Africans, so she demystifies the reader, upon whom all writers depend. Can we, she asks, interpret her South African textual universe, can we discover meaning in this new context. The definition of a mess in *The House Gun* sets the task before us:

something before which you don’t know where to begin: what to turn over, pick up first, only to put the fragment down again, perhaps in a place it never belonged (118).

So like the act of reading. One section opens: ‘As you know, Senior Counsel said.’ This obliges the reader, who is caught out by this polite gesture of inclusion, to reread the former passage and discover that it is not emptied of all meaning but is resignified (125-126). These few examples indicate, or so it seems to me, that Gordimer is, as perhaps she has always been, a transitional writer; now that all the peoples in her country have the vote, she has to consider the different and multiple imaginative challenges that lie beyond.²⁰

On account of the historic upheaval in South African society, reading, writing, the power

²⁰ What amazes me is that the late Nadine Gordimer (1923—2014) had, like her fellow countrymen/women, taken on global tasks, which demonstrates, once more, the dedication to human rights throughout the world. She was still travelling to promote literature and human rights in 2012.

of the English language to express the ‘unsayable’ and the white nuclear family are also on trial. *The House Gun* ‘is the first real test of Gordimer’s endurance beyond her political engagement with the apartheid era’ (Temple-Thurston 145). It raises many issues, such as the death penalty, the climate of violence and social dis(-)ease, and it fiercely criticises the inherited habits of mind that so distort justice and the legal system in South Africa. Nevertheless, her main interests in this novel are the responsibilities of life and how much ‘we are influenced in our lives by the social, political and moral atmosphere in which we live’, as she puts it (Issacson 444). Her explorations of the complexities of power relations have not lessened in this new context, but they have certainly changed direction. Harking back to *July’s People*, she says:

The Smales are dependent on their servant, July, who is taking care of them in a civil war situation from which they are all refugees. But Motsamai belongs to the ruling class, he is a distinguished professional. So now the dependency has moved again (Issacson 1998, 444).

Reigning over all, however, is the spirit of forgiveness in this deeply personal tragedy. Moreover, it meets one of the writers’ responsibilities in this situation, which ‘is constantly to test the generalizations of moral systems by confronting them with specific realizations of otherness that demand creative ethical responses’ (Jolly and Attridge 1998,6).

Bessie Head’s work anticipated this crisis of meaning in a very different sense. From Ronald Blythe’s Eurocentric perspective, the transitions experienced by the Botswana peoples are quite straightforward, as he writes in the ‘Foreword’ to Bessie Head’s *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. Firstly, he states that after reading this text he has understood ‘for the first time certain things about Africa itself which had never before found their way into literature. A new light floods in on the scene when, early on, she quietly states that Africa was never ‘the Dark Continent’ to African people’ (Blythe 1981, v). His assertiveness makes it difficult to forgive him

for his innocence about Africa and its literatures, but it might explain his conception of transition: these black voices (of course they are not all black) from four generations ‘tell of a remarkable transition from the ancient tribal culture to a Black Christian culture, and cover the whole period between the setting up and the dismantling of white colonialism’; in sum, the transitions he speaks of seem to be set out chronologically from the pre-colonial period through the colonial to post-colonial period, or, to put it another way, before and after Christianity. To put Head’s remark that Blythe mentions in its context, what she actually says when talking about Khama the Great’s father Sekgoma I, who ruled the tribe as David Livingstone was making his way northwards in the 1840s: ‘But the white man had had some form of settlement in South Africa for over two hundred years’. Africa was never ‘the dark continent’ to African people and they had passed through Shoshong long before ‘Livingstone with reports of the white man’s deeds, especially his land greed’ (Head 1981, xiv). It is almost comical that Blythe should fall into Head’s trap, as she ironically locates herself as a member of what some still consider the dark continent. Yet, it is tragic: Blythe’s insensitive and ill-informed endorsement of this book does little to enhance its reputation. The roaring success of *Akenfield*, his village narrative, is undermined when he implies that the first generation was bound by its ancient (savage?) customs until the good Christian came along to enlighten them. Like Gordimer, Head explores, from her very different perspective, the issue of transition in all her texts, particularly the need for internal and inner transformation during a transitional period. The Bamangwato tribe, resident in Serowe since 1902, has experienced many transitions. These mainly concern ‘the pattern of tribal movement and migration’, which evokes, Head suggests, ‘the ancient African way of life’ (xv); some aspects are still observed, such as the movement to cattle posts and farming land. A plant embodying this displacement and happy relocation is the ‘Green Tree’, also called the Rubber Hedge or

Tlharesetala, denoting the change in name as well. Hendrik Pretorius, nicknamed *Seatasemadi* ('blood-on-the-hands' from hunting), and his wife, *Mma-Seata*, brought it to Serowe in 1923 from Maun in northern Botswana. Once Chief Tshekedi used it for fencing, Mosarwa Aunyane, a woman from Serowe who married a Ndebele man in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, decided to set up a business by bringing the Green Tree from Bulawayo and selling it to people, or so the villagers told Head (xvii-xviii).

One of the most significant transitions for both Blythe and Head is 'the Christianization of the Batswana', which the former typically compares to 'that of a Saxon kingdom by royal scholars – Alfred's Wessex, for example' (Blythe 1981,v). The latter has given much thought to Khama III's 'commitment to Christianity, because it was the basis for all his social reforms' and has, in the end, 'carved out a new road' and changed their values. Head regards the traditions and taboos, 'which all tribal people adhere to', as 'a kind of external discipline – rules of law and conduct created for people by generations of ancestors' (1981, xiv-xv). Conversion to Christianity abolished or modified their ancient customs, and 'the discipline which people now had to impose on themselves was internal and private'. In her opinion, this change might account for nothing less than 'the almost complete breakdown of family life in Bamangwato country'.

As we have seen, these writers and scholars give us different insights into the concept of transition, the meanings of which are always shifting. John Picton provides another example, when he states that the region covered by Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Zambia became known as 'the Front-Line States', because they comprised 'a buffer zone between apartheid South Africa and the rest of the continent' in the era of independence from colonial rule. Colonial governments were 'the compliant partners of South Africa, each with its own version of that apartheid', until the arrival of independence that provided 'a safe haven and

training ground' for those involved in the anti-apartheid struggle (7). It would be unwise to ignore that history, 'especially when colonial educational systems informed by apartheid deemed art not a fit subject for black African people'. This is, of course, the conventional western view, but nothing 'is quite as simple as it seems, especially when it comes to art'. Theoretically, this is behind us now, so much so that the artist Berry Bickle from Bulawayo asks in interview: 'Why the 'African' before the 'artist'? Such identification is seldom applied to European or American artists...' (Murray 20). Is it perhaps because the western art world has, for such a long time, ignorantly considered African art to be so 'static, fixed in its traditions, unchanging' that it is important to emphasise the artist's origin? Not only does this adjective demonstrate the influence of African art on western art, but also makes western artists reconsider their idea that appropriations by African artists were unoriginal – a topic I shall leave for a later date. As Murray puts it: 'In fact both groups of artists were in transition ... trying on each other's ideas', as are the spectators, or those 'who are willing to expand awareness and engage with 'other' realities' (6).

Postcolonialism

The spiral is an attempt at controlling the chaos...
It has two directions. Where do you place yourself,
at the periphery or at the vortex?²¹

The terms postcolonialism and postcoloniality have given rise to fruitful controversies and debates, demonstrating that post-colonial/postcolonial theory is full of contradictions. Ania Loomba throws some light on the matter by means of a comparison with the concept of patriarchy in feminist thought. Each term is ‘useful shorthand’, as she puts it, so long as it is located in a particular historical, geographical and cultural context (18). Her definition of terms comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines colonialism as

a settlement in a new country (...) a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up.

Since this definition makes no reference to indigenous peoples, it is debatable from the start because we have to consider, in the context of Africa at the time of European colonisation, what ‘a new country’ might mean, as well as the larger question of the difference between the term colonialism and imperialism. In *Rob Roy* (1818), Walter Scott speaks of the country of the Macgregors. So did the original Europeans settle in the country of the Khoikhoi in South Africa, for example? But the first Europeans to settle in South Africa were Dutch and not English, so the OED might be at odds with its Dutch equivalent, although the term colony comes from the Roman ‘colonia’ which means ‘farm’ or ‘settlement’. By only referring to the colonisers, the word ‘colonialism’ contains no implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and

²¹ This quotation outlines another way of overcoming that eternal binary, as the artist Louise Bourgeois explores her interest in the physical and metaphysical properties of the spiral. By so doing, she questions the spiral’s earlier geometry in western art that ‘seems to melt away, producing new drooping, biomorphic or phallic forms’ (Coxon 7).

domination (Loomba 2-3). The process of ‘forming a community’ necessarily involves *unforming* or reforming the indigenous communities and engaging in a wide range of practices at the expense of the indigenous peoples and their natural wealth. These practices and the writings produced are ‘an important part of all that contemporary studies of colonialism and postcolonialism try to make sense of’.

If we define colonialism as ‘the conquest and control of other people’s lands and goods’, we cannot restrict it to European expansion. It has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history and many of the invading powers form what has been called an empire, that is to say, ‘supreme and extensive political dominion’, especially that ‘exercised by an emperor’ or ‘by a sovereign state over its dominions’, according to the OED.²² There is no consensus of opinion concerning the difference between colonialism and imperialism. Loomba argues that Marxist thinking on the subject ‘locates a crucial distinction between the two: whereas earlier colonialisms were pre-capitalist, modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe’, and, in fact, contributed to the burgeoning of capitalism, because it produced, through the flow of human and natural resources, always to the profit of the so-called mother country, ‘the economic imbalance that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry’(3-4).²³ In the particular case of Britain, imperialism went in two contradictory directions, denoted by two particularly significant dates in its colonial history: 1776 and 1857. The War with the American Colonies, ending in 1781, ‘led towards ideas of free trade, and a federation of self-governing Anglo-Saxon dominions made up of settlers of the same race:

²² One should be wary of these definitions. My definition of ‘empire’ comes from a CD of the OED, which no doubt summarises the information that Loomba extracts, as the CD definition of colonialism is almost meaningless.

²³ In Loomba’s opinion, Lenin used the term ‘imperialism’ to describe the global system created by the growth of ‘finance-capitalism’ in European nations (1998, 5).

Greater Britain'. The Indian 'Mutiny' in 1857, by contrast, 'led to the end of commercial rule, progressive reformist policies, and the institution of imperial government with control from the centre, the tenets of which would always over-ride commercial interests, if necessary' (Young 2002, 35). In this way, the British Empire had two imperial systems, differentiated by the 'race' of the settled inhabitants; it was an irreconcilable split enterprise. As the Irish socialist and nationalist James Connolly put it shortly before his execution in 1916:

The British Empire is a heterogeneous collection in which a very small number of self-governing communities connive at the subjugation, by force, of a vast number of despotically ruled subject populations (qtd. in Young 2002, 35).²⁴

Whatever the differences among scholars may be, the best advice is not to pin down these concepts to one meaning but to relate the shifting meanings to historical processes, in which 'the tensions between economic and political connotations of imperialism also spill over into the understanding of racial oppression, and its relationship with class or other structures of oppression' (Loomba 6-7). Bearing these different interpretations in mind, Loomba argues that imperialism and colonialism might be usefully distinguished by thinking of them in spatial rather than temporal terms: 'imperialism or neo-imperialism originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and control'. The result of imperial domination is colonialism or neo-colonialism. Imperialism can function without formal colonies, such as American imperialism, but colonialism cannot. In this case, imperialist discourse valorises the colonised according to its own needs for reflection. 'The project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolute Other into a domesticated Other that consolidated the imperialist self', Gayatri Spivak explains, as she argues that it is the colonial subject who is the Other (1985, 53).

²⁴ Young quotes this from James Connolly. 1988. *Selected Writings*. Ed. P. Berrisford Ellis. London: Pluto Press.

These fluctuations complicate the meanings of the term ‘postcolonial’. Because of all the implications of colonialism, it may be too early to argue for its demise. As Anne McClintock argues, the new global order does not depend on direct rule. However, it does allow for the economic, cultural and, to a certain extent, political penetration of some territories by others. In theoretical terms, it is often the hyphen that lies at the heart of the controversy. In *Post-Colonial Transformations*, Bill Ashcroft suggests that the spelling of the term has become more of an issue for those who use the hyphenated form, ‘because the hyphen is a statement about the peculiarity, the historically and culturally grounded nature of the experience it represents’ (2001, 10). The hyphen may also be misleading, particularly if post-colonialism is thought of chronologically. The term postcolonial is ‘haunted’, as McClintock writes, by ‘the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle. Metaphorically, the term postcolonialism marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road’ from the pre-colonial, to the colonial, to the postcolonial.

If a theoretical tendency to envisage ‘Third World’ literature as progressing from ‘protest literature’ to ‘resistance literature’ to ‘national literature’ has been criticized for rehearsing the Enlightenment trope of sequential linear progress, the term postcolonialism is questionable for the same reason. Metaphorically poised on the border between the old and the new, end and beginning, the term heralds the end of a world era but by invoking the same trope of linear progress which animated the era (10-11).

This reminds us of the call to preserve unity and create a national culture in South Africa, as well as of Blythe’s ‘Foreword’ to Head’s *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. Ashcroft argues that this instability of meaning gives the term postcolonialism ‘a vibrancy, energy and plasticity which have become part of its strength’, however much he might agree with McClintock’s argument (2001, 10-11). What is worrying is that even though this passage is cited to support Ashcroft’s discussion, McClintock does not use the hyphen; postcolonialism without the hyphen has come,

in Ashcroft's opinion, 'to represent an increasingly indiscriminate attention to cultural difference and marginality of all kinds, whether a consequence of the historical experience of colonialism or not'.

However significant it is for some scholars, if a hyphen encapsulates one's entire stance, there seems to be little more to debate than the abstractions proposed by Ashcroft and others. Stephen Slemon's article 'The Scramble for Post-Colonialism' demonstrates the range of critical practices it embraces. The term has been used in recent times

as a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of 'class', as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a Third-World intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of 'reading practice'; and – and this was my first encounter with the term – as the name for a category of 'literary' activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called 'Commonwealth' literary studies. (45)

Although one might pick up various points here, I merely want to question what Slemon might mean, in the context of my study of literary activity, by an oppositional form of reading practice. In opposition to whom? In opposition to what? As we know, reading implies writing, which implies language, as well as an entire set of values, habits and customs that are totally different from those imposed by the colonial order. Moreover, since each reader/writer who engages with a literary text comes from a different cultural background, the interpretation is bound to differ. It is the text, and here I am using it in the most general sense, that is the source for our resistance to, and later reconfiguration of, certain reading practices. If it means reading/writing against the grain of western colonial education and its literary and theoretical heritage, it would not be merely oppositional but very different. One of the key words here is, I suspect, exclusion. Just as

many books written by women have been, until very recently, ignored in African literary circles, so the literary oeuvre of their male counterparts has been largely ignored in international literary circles. If this is included in this oppositional form of reading practice, the challenge is tremendous. Gayatri Spivak suggests, as I mentioned, that the colonial subject is the other; this displacement of the western reader involves an entire change in reading practices. Another key word might be resistance, which I do not understand merely as an oppositional practice: it is the mode of thought and, of course, action. Mary K. DeShazar argues that at its best 'resistance poetry offers and supports various counterhegemonic models of social justice and racial/gender/class empowerment, and it engages in acts of political and aesthetic intervention in the service of these models' (2). Ashcroft argues that resistance which 'ossifies into simple opposition often becomes trapped in the very binary which imperial discourse uses to keep the colonized in subjection' (2002, 20). What is most fascinating is the resistance on the part of postcolonial societies to be absorbed: 'a resistance which engages that which is resisted in a different way, taking the array of influences exerted by the dominating power, and altering them into tools for expressing a deeply held sense of identity and cultural being'.

One assumption underlying a postcolonial literary approach is that cultural representations are central to the process of colonising other lands or to that of gaining independence. Boehmer sustains that colonialist literature 'was informed by theories concerning the superiority of European culture and the rightness of empire' – she uses the past tense and does not pluralise literature (1995, 3). Postcolonial literature, in turn, 'is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship'. Among other dissident practices, writing resists and challenges colonialist perspectives, as it reshapes dominant meanings: 'To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the

discourses which supported colonization – the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination’. In this respect, postcolonial writing is marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire. This scholar uses the hyphenated term post-colonial as another ‘period term’ designating the post-Second World War era (Boehmer 1995, 4). Her definition indicates a daunting dichotomy, which produces, like many definitions, its own kind of orthodoxy. For this reason, postcolonial writing tends to be described as multivocal and disruptive, as that which emerged after independence. Just as this is not always the case, so not all colonial or colonialist writing is ‘as pompously dismissive of indigenous cultures as its oppositional pairing with postcolonial might suggest’.

It is worth noting Loomba’s emphasis on space as a means of distinguishing between imperialism and colonialism: in temporal terms, postcolonial writing started to emerge long before formal independence. Moreover, ‘an emphasis on the spatiality of postcolonial thought can help to move beyond the impasse of thinking primarily in temporal terms’, as the temporal marker implied by ‘post’ tends to make us do (Blunt and McEwan 3). The situation in South Africa demonstrates, for example, that a date signifying national independence does not change ingrained thought. Boehmer argues that ‘the post-1945 moment of anti-colonial and usually nationalist upsurge produced the first literature which unambiguously invites the name *postcolonial*: that is, a literature which identified itself with the broad movements of resistance to, and transformation of, colonial societies’ (1995, 184-85). At this time, colonised writers undertook the task of ‘imagining the nation’, that is to say, the nation has to be reconstructed in the collective imagination. Or, as Ashcroft puts it: ‘The central strategy in transformations of colonial culture is the seizing of self-representation’ (2001, 2). Writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have advocated the ‘wholesale rejection of dominant discourses, languages and

technologies as the only way to ‘decolonise the mind’. Ashcroft perceives this political gesture as an ideal; ‘any observation of everyday practice demonstrates that post-colonial futures lie in the adaptation of those discourses and technologies to local needs’ (2001, 2). In this sense, the ‘post-colonial’ example acts as a ‘powerful model’ because ‘the transformation of colonial cultures by local societies has been so dynamic’. It is a shame that such an experienced postcolonial scholar as Bill Ashcroft should so readily dismiss Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s thought-provoking challenge: even if he has written in English, he has also had some of his work translated into English or has translated it himself, as in the case of *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), a harshly critical and comic novel.

Postcolonial writers demand, above all, respect for difference; that is, respect for differences of the spirit of place, the source of their imaginary, differences in taste, in genre, in literary theory and critical practices, among many others. In this sense, they may not even regard postcolonial theory as a useful critical tool for the appreciation of literary texts, since it has been formulated and transformed by scholars who come principally from settler colonies. They may find such subversive western practices as poststructuralism and postmodernism useful in certain respects, but since their proponents are ‘westerners’ and former colonialists, who certainly did not formulate these theories with colonised countries in mind, they might also reject them as globalising practices that generally disregard the peculiarities of different local communities of writers and artists. A cursory glance at one of those Readers for undergraduates on the literary theories of the twentieth century reveals a page or two dedicated, somewhat begrudgingly, to feminism and postcolonialism, and the texts to which the theories are applied most often come from the Anglo-American traditions.

The late British postcolonial literary critic Bart Moore-Gilbert, born in Tanzania, draws

attention at one stage in his fascinating study to the objections levelled at postcolonial theory. Rather than discussing his chapter on this matter, I shall concentrate only on those issues that concern us here. His initial statements perhaps complement or counter those outlined above and fill in several gaps, as does his definition of postcolonialism. In his opinion, postcolonial modes of cultural analysis have to start with W.E.B. Du Bois, Sol Plaatje and, arguably, even earlier thinkers. While postcolonialism has had a long and complex history outside Europe, it has only been in the 1990s, after the influential publication of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) that the British academy has acknowledged it as ‘a separate category’, despite the many studies written about this subject earlier (2000, 6-7). For example, Edward Said complained in his *Orientalism* that ‘the systematic study of the relations between metropolitan culture and questions of race, empire and ethnicity was still considered to be off-limits by the Western literary-cultural establishment in the mid-1970s’. Moore-Gilbert’s emphasis is, however, on the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* as the moment of collective awakening rather than the earlier studies by Caribbean, Latin American and African scholars, as well as many dissertations written much earlier on precisely that same problem without a name, to use the feminist Betty Friedan’s phrase in a very different context. Since then, postcolonial criticism has had ‘a major impact upon current modes of cultural analysis, bringing to the forefront of concern the interconnection of issues of race, nation, empire, migration and ethnicity with cultural production’. This change of focus in academia in the metropolis has been accompanied by new patterns of scholarly production, such as conferences, professional associations and a variety of journals dedicated to the investigation of postcolonial cultural and critical production, such as *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Ariel*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Kunapipi*, *The Journal of New Literatures in English*, *World Literature Written in English*, *Third Text*, *Wasafiri* and others.

Besides studying and disseminating new literatures in English, postcolonial criticism has, in the case of the English literary canon, questioned ‘the values and attitudes underpinning the process of expansion overseas’ (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 7-8). For instance, it has exerted its influence on Shakespearean criticism and has become involved in a radical reassessment of literary periods, thereby enlarging the traditional field of English studies and helping ‘to undermine the traditional conception of disciplinary boundaries’, as feminism and deconstruction have succeeded in doing. It has, moreover, undermined the dominant notions of ‘the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere’. Many now accept the argument that ‘‘culture’ mediates relations of power as effectively, albeit in more indirect and subtle ways, as more public and visible forms of oppression’. In this sense, postcolonial critics break down the boundaries between text and context ‘in order to show the continuities between patterns of representation of subject peoples and the material practices of (neo-) colonial power’. This takes many forms, such as contesting the distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, which presents a challenge to those assumptions ‘governing traditional discriminations between literature and oral narratives’, or, from a colonial perspective, an increased interest in such genres as journalism and travel writing (8-9), as well as addressing ‘the histories and current predicaments of ‘internally colonized’ cultures within the nation state in the ‘developed’ world, such as Britain’. Besides all these complications, the proponents of Commonwealth literary studies have claimed, as we know from Ashcroft *et al*’s publications, ‘a postcolonial identity for the old ‘settler’ colonies’ (10).

The flexibility of postcolonial criticism has made some commentators express anxiety that it might implode ‘as an analytic construct with any real cutting edge’ (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 11). The term postcolonial has been applied, as I have mentioned, to such different kinds of ‘historical moment, geographical region, cultural identities, political predicaments and affiliations, and

reading practices' that many scholars have debated the legitimacy of perceiving these different areas of research as genuinely 'postcolonial'. Another point of contention concerns 'whether the proper object of postcolonial analysis as a reading practice should be postcolonial culture alone', or whether 'it is legitimate to focus on the culture of the colonizer'. There are many reasons for the challenges to postcolonial criticism as 'a coherent field of practice'; Moore-Gilbert mentions what Henry Louis Gates describes as the 'multiplication of margins' (as in the case of Canada), but this does not trouble him, 'primarily because it attests to the increasing success of the manifold struggles against neo-colonialism' (which also takes many forms) (11-12). He is of the opinion that postcolonial criticism can be 'legitimately applied to any number of different contexts' and, like feminist cultural analysis, its remit should not be 'exclusivist and narrow'. Bearing this in mind, Moore-Gilbert expands Slemon's oppositional form of reading practice when he defines postcolonial criticism, in general terms, as 'a more or less distinct set of reading practices (...) preoccupied principally with analysis of cultural forms which mediate, challenge or reflect upon the relations of domination and subordination – economic, cultural and political – between (and often within) nations, races and cultures'. These relations 'have their roots in the history of modern European colonialism', but they also 'continue to be present in the present era of neo-colonialism' (12). Besides the problem that postcolonialism might, by such a general definition (recognised by the author), be collapsed into an umbrella term for cultural embattlement, it is worth pointing out that Moore-Gilbert's focus is principally on the act of reading postcolonial texts rather than the act of writing, if it is possible to make such a distinction.

Postcolonial critics' hostility towards postcolonial theory has made some suggest that they should be regarded as 'separate fields of activity' (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 169). Although Moore-

Gilbert argues that postcolonial theory and criticism are not as divorced from each other as some observers claim, he indicates five principal areas of contention concerning postcolonial theory. The most damaging of these is, as I have said earlier, that it is ‘thoroughly complicit in the disposition and operations of the current, neo-colonial world order’ (153). This argument rests on a number of propositions, such as the ‘characteristic institutional location of postcolonial theory’, which does raise certain ambiguities, especially in light of the sacred trinity: Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. Focusing this part of his discussion principally on Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992), Moore-Gilbert concludes that critics like Ahmad and Arif Dirlik might consider ‘the implications of their own privileged institutional locations and the conceptual frameworks that they employ before accusing postcolonial theorists’ (156) of being ‘a privileged and deracinated class fraction’, who, cut off from the material realities of ‘Third World’ struggles, appropriate and domesticate them into an ‘unchallenged intellectual commodity’ circulating largely in the Western academy’ (18). They might also remember that careers are built as much on attacking a theory as on advocating it.

The second objection to postcolonial theory concerns its almost exclusive attention to colonial discourse as the object of analysis, which allegedly reinscribes the cultural authority of the West (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 156-7). The proponents of this argument disregard ‘Third World culture’ and the political implications of ‘the facts of current neo-colonialism’ by shifting to ‘the less contentious area of fictions produced in an era of formal imperialism’ (19). Since Moore-Gilbert studies the work of the three figureheads, this conflict perhaps arises from the development of their academic careers. Whereas Said and Bhabha tend to focus on colonial discourse in their earlier studies, later on they engage ‘with a wide variety of counter-discourses and other non-Western forms of cultural production’ (156-7). Spivak, in turn, is concerned with

the subaltern throughout her career. Without going any further, one might rebut this argument in very general terms by turning to feminist criticism. Could one truly sustain that the attention of feminist criticisms to the deconstruction of patriarchal authority reinscribes the prestige of patriarchy?

The third objection mounted against postcolonial theory derives from its alleged use of contemporary Euro-American critical theories, which are politically regressive and reveal postcolonial theory's complicity in the reproduction of neo-colonial forms of knowledge. Moore-Gilbert indicates how difficult it is to apply the theories of Foucault and Gramsci, for example, to postcolonial criticism. It is worth mentioning, even though we cannot study these objections in depth, that much of the hostility to postcolonial theory 'rests on the argument that it discounts material forms of colonial oppression and resistance to colonial power alike' (160). From the Marxist tradition represented by C.L.R. James's work for instance, we learn that it is essential for postcolonial analysis to remain alert to 'domains of social practice that are not governed by textual/communicative rules' (Henry and Buhle 140). For Moore-Gilbert, this is one of 'the most recurrent and intractable problems in the whole field, not just in postcolonial theory' (161). However, African activists and scholars have often succeeded in appropriating and adapting Marxist theory to the specific circumstances of their country or community.

Said, Spivak and Bhabha all provide a 'penetrating critique' of European critical theories from their individual postcolonial perspectives, even if many dispute their theoretical obscurities and ambivalences, their institutional affiliation and academic interests. But as they have matured academically, they have realised that they should complement their theoretical critique with practical struggle. This is the position that has, according to Moore-Gilbert, been espoused by postcolonial theorists. In his disenchantment with theory, Said argues that 'it is the critic's job to

provide resistances to theory', to open it up towards historical reality, society, human needs and interests, to indicate those 'concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory' (Said 1991, 242). Similarly, Spivak speaks out against vanguardist 'exorbitations' of the role of theory and insists upon the critical relation between theory and practice (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 166).

The fourth general objection to postcolonial theory concerns the style and language of the scholarly texts. Why should this particular theory be attacked when others, such as narratology, poststructuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism, clothe very interesting ideas in mystifying linguistic apparel? Although many studies are a joy to read, those written by Bhabha and Spivak are excellent examples of this tendency. One reason for this criticism is perhaps that certain key concepts are, on occasions, contradictorily defined, such as Bhabha's suggestive 'third space'. We have all probably experienced difficulties understanding Spivak's texts which often exemplify 'unreadability in deconstruction' that she herself criticises (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 166-167). This issue of style and clarity is not as simple as it is sometimes assumed to be, because even those who eschew technical critical vocabularies, such as the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, can be as enigmatic or elusive as Bhabha and Spivak. We should not forget, moreover, the ideological context underlying this insistence on stylistic clarity. Whereas we may wish our students to write clearly, concisely, coherently and correctly, these adverbs are 'judged by conventions' which are bound up with what are, in the end, 'political values and imperatives'. In this respect, there may well be advantages 'in adopting a writing practice' that is, directly or implicitly, 'disruptive, that denies the protocols of order and legitimation that (...) constructs both gender and race as 'properly' hierarchical', as Ian Saunders argues (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 2000, 168).

Speaking of gender, I reach the final objection discussed by Moore-Gilbert. As we have seen, postcolonial theory does not pay due attention to questions of gender and class.²⁵ For instance, Bhabha assumes that ‘the affective economies of mimicry and ambivalence operate equivalently for all colonial subjects irrespective of their positioning in the social hierarchy’ (1992, 439). Although class-based forms of analysis are often treated with suspicion, it would be wrong to foreclose the potential of these approaches. As we know, class plays a crucial role in ‘Western representations of the Other’: defining class identity of the non-European subject has been a primary concern for British authors for centuries. Postcolonial theory has also been reluctant to engage with ‘popular culture’. Younger scholars are addressing both these issues. Their engagement with popular culture is producing magnificently ironic results, as they overcome the strictures imposed upon their (grand) mothers, who challenged the patriarchal bias in the work of their male contemporaries.

Graham Huggan provides a rather gloomy afterword to this brief discussion when he identifies a ‘split’ in the postcolonial field of production, which ‘occupies a site of struggle between contending ‘regimes of value’’ (5-6). These two regimes of value can, he argues, be referred to by the terms postcolonialism and postcoloniality, generally regarded as theory and reality, respectively. Interrogating the distinction between these terms, he proposes that they can be compared to postmodernism and postmodernity. As ‘an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts’, postcolonialism ‘shares some of postmodernism’s relativistic preoccupations – with textual indeterminacy, the crisis of meaning, the questioning of the unitary subject, and so on’. In turn, postcoloniality is largely a function of postmodernity: its own regime of value ‘pertains to a

²⁵ I shall return to these issues later.

system of symbolic, as well as material, exchange in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed'. Postcoloniality's regime of value is 'implicitly assimilative and market-driven'; it regulates 'the value-equivalence' of marginal products in the global marketplace. Postcolonialism implies, or so Huggan suggests, a politics of value that stands in opposition to 'global processes of commodification'. However, a cursory glance at the state of postcolonial studies in western universities and the worldwide marketing of certain postcolonial writers demonstrates that the two apparently conflicting regimes of value are mutually entangled. Postcolonialism 'is bound up' with postcoloniality and in this commodity culture 'its rhetoric of resistance' has become a consumer product. Huggan's argument is too extreme, as he admits, but he wants to alert us to the dangers of working within the context of global commodity culture. As Spivak has attested, there is a constant need for vigilance to neocolonial structures of power (1990, 7). Her study is particularly useful as it demonstrates how difficult it is to negotiate one's position within the conflicting 'value-coding systems' surrounding such terms as marginality, resistance and the postcolonial itself (7). Part of the problem resides, as she indicates, in taking up localised positions within a global framework. Indeed, 'the local-global dialectic' has recently become, in Huggan's opinion, one of the main debates about postcolonialism and its role within the public sphere (8).

Literature in Space: ‘the writer is the dog’s body of the publishing world’²⁶

Ambroise Kom argues that with the birth of university institutions during the immediate post-independence period ‘African literary criticism has made its voice heard and has traced out its paths’ (427). In 1997, however, the former imperialist exclusionary practices have returned with a twist in the tail. Few of the structures that the first generation of African critics created or existed in their times have survived. African journals that had flourished at that time have either collapsed or moved to European cities, and African literary criticism is developing more in publications controlled by powers outside Africa, such as *Présence Francophone* and *Research in African Literatures*, which means they only reach privileged readers on the African continent. In Kom’s opinion, this is ‘a new form of the interruption of history that is now threatening our horizon. To the degree that initiatives escape us, the Other recuperates and appropriates these’ (429). In these circumstances, African literature ‘finds itself left an orphan by endogenous criticism’. Moreover, ‘the young diaspora’ write and publish in European cities. Understandable as this may be during the decolonising process, it highlights the isolation and exclusion of African intellectuals who lack the resources to join their overseas colleagues in literary debate.

Kom’s emphasis on publishing in Africa brings us to our next concern: African literatures in space and the readership of these literatures. Knowledge of the nature of African publishing gives us a better understanding of the context of African literatures. André Lefevre describes literature as a system, ‘embedded in the environment of a civilization/culture/society’, demarcated ‘by a poetics, a collection of devices available for use by writers at certain moments in time... The environment exerts control over the system, by means of patronage’, which tries,

²⁶ Bessie Head wrote to Giles Gordon in December 1974: ‘One knows the writer is the dog’s body of the publishing world but God, they rub it in! They could say they have no money, that one is a risk they can’t afford but they take ages to say it, not caring that one’s basic peace of mind and bills hang on that decision’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 175).

by combining an ideological and an economic component, to harmonise this system with other systems in the wider environment (465-6). Like other traditional literatures, African literatures fit this model perfectly, Lefevre suggests. Since the system allows of one ideal of literature, since the literature is oral and the artist a performer, 'the audience will immediately makes its displeasure felt if the artist makes a mistake in the telling or in the reciting'. This immediacy is lost in the transition from oral to written literature, when several constraints, such as poetics, language and even patronage, begin to influence the writers, who may decide to subvert them or work with or within them. At this stage, literature 'is produced in the zone of tension where the artist's creativity comes to terms with the constraints'. Literary revolutions 'tend to occur in systems with differentiated patronage, in which different ideals of literature are allowed to exist, and in which literature produced on the basis of those different ideals is read by different groups of readers'. This is the situation, known as interface, when two systems interact, in this case the English and the African system, and produce 'a kind of hybrid poetics', which depends for its survival on various shifts in patronage from the dominant group (English) to 'a hybridized group of readers' (Lefevre 468).

This acts as an excellent starting point for this discussion, which centres principally on postcolonial writers and their shifting patronage, rather than on their academic counterparts. In a stimulating article on the application of the word 'empire' to the USA, W.J.T. Mitchell indicates an idea familiar to us all: the most important new literature comes from the former colonies, while 'the most provocative new literary criticism' emanates from the (former) imperial centres (475). Despite this, he also argues against conservative criticism by stressing that this 'cultural transfer is no longer one-way', even if it does mostly benefit the Western institutions, such as universities and publishing houses. One should not minimise, he suggests, 'the dissonance

between post-imperial criticism and post-colonial culture'. On the one hand, criticism may be preaching 'a rhetorical de-centering and de-essentializing' to cultures struggling precisely to find a centre and an essence. On the other, it may bring 'an imperial theory of culture into a situation that resists any conceptual totality'. Moreover, the very idea of rationality or "problem-solving" tactics' may not be welcome or appropriate in 'cultures that are rediscovering their ethnic traditions' (477).

Since the products of knowledge are distributed unequally, S.I.A. Kotei outlined in 1981 three sets of conditions that determine the success or failure of the book industry in Africa and any other indigenous enterprise: the general state of affairs in the country, specifically national policies concerning private enterprise; the availability of the necessary manpower, skills and appropriate technology; the existence of consumer market forces (480). In relation to the unequal distribution of intellectual products, Philip Altbach wrote in 1975 that this results from a complex set of factors including historical events, economic relationships, language, literacy and the educational systems (485). Industrialised nations benefit from their control of the means of distribution of knowledge and at times use 'their superiority to the disadvantage of developing countries'. Indeed, Altbach argues that book distribution may be 'the single most serious dilemma of publishing' in developing countries (488), a position Charles Larson would agree with in 2001 when he controversially stated that too much publishing in Africa is local.²⁷

This does not mean that publishing in these countries is totally dependent on industrial cultures or that 'accomplishments have not been achieved' (Altbach 486). African nations that

²⁷ In relation to distribution, this was certainly my experience in 2007. *Exclusive Books* was the one bookshop recommended to me by academics in Johannesburg and Gaborone, which I presume is like *Waterstones* in the UK or *Barnes and Noble* in the USA. Both had the same very small collection of Anglophone African writers, which are readily available at Amazon.com. There was only one work by Bessie Head: her novel *Maru*.

have a relatively strong economy and are socially and politically aware of the role of the book in development have had 'a relatively healthy book industry' (Kotei 481). The success of the *Onitsha Market Literature* in Nigeria in the 1950s was 'a phenomenon of literary profusion without comparison anywhere in Africa'. As a starting point of 'talking with paper' for this generation, as Wole Soyinka puts it, these stories 'catered to Nigerian readers culturally, educationally and economically' (Larson 29). Even if they consisted mainly of 'boy-meet girl novelettes and rapid-results cram-books', they met the needs of the market of eager readers (Kotei 481). For example, Larson regrettably compares *Rose Darling in the Garden of Love*, a novel written by J.U. Tagbo, one of his secondary school students, with early European novels, but argues that this literary phenomenon provided a platform for new writers in other African countries, such as Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe (29-36). Nyasha in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* undermines this idea. In a letter to her cousin Tambudzai she writes that the other girls at school 'resent the fact that I do not read their romance stories', because she had read them when she was ten years old: 'that is a long time to have grown out of such habits' (200). The most popular Onitsha titles were thinly disguised sexual narratives with a high moral tone, but 'self-books', as they were called, also sold well, as did those on political and topical issues, such as *The Complete Trial of Adolf Hitler* by J.C. Anorue or *How Lumumba Suffered in Life and Died in Katanga* by Okenwa Olisa. Whatever its merit, this literature created a readership prepared to pay one shilling and sixpence for a book published locally by and for Nigerians. The later phenomenal success of Nigerian literatures owes much to this popular movement. The narrator of Vera's *The Stone Virgins* gives an insight into the hunger for books when she describes the lovers' meeting in the green telephone booth in Kezi, a rural enclave. Wondering if they can fulfil the promises they make, they offer each other copies of Nick Carter novels and Agatha

Christie stories instead: ‘Novels the Kunene Mission School has confiscated and thrown out to the old women to use for their cooking fires, but which these hungry few have retrieved, salvaged, wanting to possess anything which is printed and can be read around a fire...’ (19). Similarly, Miriam in Head’s *The Cardinals* finds ‘a brightly illustrated picture book’ on the refuse dump: *The Adventures of Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear*. Breathless with excitement she asks an old man, significantly the local letter writer, to read it to her and within a week she can read it too: ‘In all my life I have never seen one as hungry for words as you’, he says (1993, 7-8). The association of printed matter with refuse and hunger in each case is not new, but is highly significant in cultures in which it is either controlled or banned. In the case of these fictional characters, they only lay their hands on the scraps discarded by their colonial superiors, which might have been used to produce food. Nyasha takes this idea one step further. When cramming for her exams, she ‘binges’ on Englishness and then purges herself of her English education: ‘She rampaged, shedding her history book between her teeth (‘Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies’)’ (Dangarembga 205). Her refusal to eat symbolises as much her rejection of Shona patriarchal authoritarianism as her resistance to the European ideology she is force-fed at school: ‘you couldn’t expect the ancestors to stomach so much Englishness’, Tambudzai’s mother tells her (207). Even though both cousins are pretty confused at this stage, Nyasha’s courageous stance also represents her desire to read history and literature with which she can identify and which attempts to communicate the truth: a true inspiration for Tambudzai.

In general terms, the obstacles African writers have to overcome have not changed since the 1960s, Larson argued in 2001 (vii). They still have to confront the issues of language (local or international), of literacy and audience (apparently, 50 per cent of the people on the continent cannot read), of economics (many Africans cannot afford to buy books), of an inadequate number

of publishing houses on the continent, and, of course, the political obstacles of censorship, imprisonment (Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Winnie Mandela, among so many others), exile and worse. Many African writers have written prison diaries and had their books banned. For example, the dictator Daniel Arap Moi thought the main character in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Gikuyu novel *Matigari* (1986) was a real person and issued a warrant for his arrest. Upon learning that the character was fictional, he had the book 'arrested' from all bookshops and the publisher's warehouse. This meant that it was not sold in Kenyan bookshops until 1996 and all his books were removed from educational institutions. Once again, potential readers have been excluded: one severe disadvantage of writing in one's mother tongue. This disillusion, among others, led him and many other African writers to find publishers overseas. As Atukwei Okai, the President of the Ghana Association of Writers, put it in 1973:

all our best work (...) appears first to an audience which either regards us like some glass-enclosed specimen (...) or like an exotic weed to be sampled and made a conversation piece (...) or else we become some international organization's pet (4).

This was as true then as it is today. It is hardly surprising that Achebe called for 'a kind of collectivization' in which writers and audience would move together in 'a dynamic evolving relationship, through the publisher who must operate in the same historic and social continuum' (Kotei 482). In general terms, this could not be done from London, Paris or New York, because the writer's work should be published in African cities, where the local publisher could seize upon the peculiar characteristics of a place to operate more effectively within the social milieu. Perhaps an unrealisable ideal, it did lead to the creation of a Union of Writers of the African Peoples, which in 1989 became the Pan African Writers Association composed of fifty-two national writers associations. Later, Achebe reiterated this ideal in his address ('Africa Is People') to members of the World Bank in June 1998:

Africa believes in people, in cooperation with people. If the philosophical dictum of Descartes – I think, therefore I am – represents a European individualistic ideal, the Bantu declaration – *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a human is human because of other humans) – represents an African communal aspiration.

Our humanity is contingent on the humanity of our fellows. No person or group can be human alone (qtd. in Larson 149).

In 1985, a group of African publishers got together to propose a publishing company they would run. The outcome was the African Books Collective, which began operations in 1989, as non-profit Oxford-based worldwide marketing and distribution outlet. Its mission statement is as follows: ‘African Books Collective, founded, owned and governed by African publishers, seeks to strengthen indigenous African publishing through collective action and to increase the visibility and accessibility of the wealth of African scholarship and culture’.²⁸

A practical example brings home the complexities underlying the entire language question. Yvonne Vera, the late curator of the National Gallery in Bulawayo, once went to the National Archives in Harare with Terence Ranger to see a compilation of paintings from Cyrene mission. The man at the desk demanded her identity card, which she did not have on her and so she spoke to him ‘in a torrent of fluent Shona and Sindebele’. The man was unimpressed: ‘Languages will get you nowhere’, he said. ‘I still need proof that you are Zimbabwean’. In the end, Ranger, the expatriate researcher, as he called himself, had to vouch for her (Ranger 2005, 4). Whether the author should write in the mother or the other tongue has perplexed creators and scholars alike. ‘Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world’, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues in his *Decolonising the Mind* (1). In this respect, the practice of African language publishing influences the nature of African literatures, education and politics.

²⁸ Participating publishers from Botswana are Foundation for Education with Production, Lightbooks Publishers, Pyramid Publishing, but not Pentagon Publishers. There are 17 publishers from South Africa and 14 from Zimbabwe, including Weaver Books. <www.africanbookscollective.com> (7.01.2016)

Since literary awards rarely go to texts written in indigenous languages, the more ambitious either write in a colonial tongue or get their work translated. The situation is slowly changing, however. South Africa has established prizes for some languages, but not all: the M-Net Book Prize offers R50, 000 to a winning novel in four language categories (English, Afrikaans, Nguni and Sotho), whereas the Tshivenda and Xitsonga categories get a merit prize of R16, 000 each, and the Sanlam Literary Award offers R8, 000 each for English, Afrikaans, Nguni and Sotho categories (Mpe 2). The Publishers' Association of South Africa (PASA) launched a catalogue of literature and readers in nine African languages at the World Library and Information Congress in Durban in August 2007, which is now distributed to libraries throughout the country.²⁹ Oxford University has recently published several children's books in Xhosa and Zulu written by Sindiwe Magona and Gcina Mhlophe. The *Emerging Perspectives* series of the Africa World Press has published its first collection of critical essays on a Yoruba writer: Akinwumi Isola, a dramatist, novelist, poet, essayist, literary critic, actor, scriptwriter and translator. In 2000, he was awarded the Nigerian National Order of Merit. He told Segun Ajayi in 2005 that his target audience are the Yorubas. For example, *Death and the King's Horseman*, a play by the Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka, has been translated into many languages. Although Isola claims that Soyinka really translated the original story into English, he has added 'my own voice by translating it to Yoruba'.³⁰

Despite these achievements, African language publishers still face a series of dilemmas. These include the dominance of the colonial or 'world' languages favoured by ruling elites, such

²⁹ PASA has over 150 members. The nine languages are IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sesotho, Sesotho sa Leboa/Sepedi, Setswana (one of the two official languages in Botswana, in which Mantsetsa Marope started writing in 1980), SiSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga.

³⁰ Segun Ajayi. 2005. 'I'm sensitive to Yoruba culture and language – Professor Akinwumi Isola'. *The Sun News Online*, may 24. <www.sunnewsonline.com> (accessed 13/06/08)

as French or English, linguistic complexity, the high cost of specialised typography for tonal differences in non-standardised scripts, the political difficulties of privileging one language over another, cross-border linguistic tensions, the limited market, purchasing power and low literacy rates of readers and, finally, a shortage of basic materials (*Publishing in African Languages* 1). A myriad of technical and political problems have bedevilled publishing in Africa, ‘from the heritage of colonial contempt for indigenous writers to the stultifying effects of state domination’ (Limb 2). Although M.M. Mulokozi, Professor at the Institute of Kiswahili Studies, University of Dar es Salaam, is generally optimistic concerning the future of Kiswahili publishing, he reminds us that the writer remains ‘generally marginalized, despised, and swindled’, while publishing remains trapped in a socio-economic milieu that imposes ‘financial, infrastructural, cultural and political obstacles’ in its path. Altbach proposes a strange solution, which is taken up by other contributors to *Publishing in African Languages*: ‘the trend toward the privatization of textbook production will strengthen indigenous publishing’, despite the potential pitfalls of such a procedure (*Publishing in African Languages* 3). In Nigeria, ninety percent of titles in Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa are already dominated by the private sector.

South African language policy has become much more democratic in recent years, but it is almost impossible to translate this into practical terms. Parents and children mostly prefer instruction in English, with their first African language as an additional subject. This is hardly surprising, since those who speak languages other than Afrikaans and English, the languages of apartheid, have ‘come to see their languages, in education, as agents of separatist ideology’ (Mpe 1). Thus, the impressive range of possibilities for publishing companies is stifled from the start by a haltering demand, especially since they bear the burden of the memory of previous political and educational conditions. Under apartheid, moreover, educational publishers undertook the task of

African language publishing for those who were taught in their mother tongues in order to ensure their inferiority (Mpe 2). An interesting aspect of Phaswane Mpe's article that probably extends beyond South Africa is that the seven provincial departments still have 'a school prescription committee'. Any title that fails to impress the board is unlikely to be recommended for school reading. This affects publishers, who become less daring, and writers, who are 'still under pressure from publishers and publishers' readers to tone down their language, their thoughts and their styles in order to make their titles more palatable to the still conservative taste buds of educational authorities'. Although the weakest link in African publishing is distribution, this is only part of a pretty gloomy picture: 'Low incomes, poorly developed infrastructures of local book shops, libraries, and transport links', and 'domination by expatriate publishers have exacerbated foreign dependency' and made the task of publishing in African languages still more difficult (Limb 3). As we shall see later, British publishers, such as James Currey and Heinemann African Writers Series, have been exploiting these exciting new literatures that began to emerge in the 1950s; it seems that American publishers, such as African World Press founded in 1983, were late starters.³¹ Of course, publishing in Africa has had an illustrious tradition, going back several centuries to the advent of Islam: by the seventeenth century, if not earlier, various Arabic scripts were in circulation in the main urban and trading centres of the western Sudan. With the arrival of European colonialism and Christianity, publishing became 'mission-directed', designed to support the objectives of missionary education and the translation/production of the Bible in indigenous languages (Larson 100).

31 Two important sources of information concerning African literatures and scholarship are Bernth Lindfors' series of publications on Black Literatures in English from 1977 to 1999 and *The African Studies Companion: A Guide to Information Sources*. 2003. Ed. Hans M. Zell. Locharron: Hans Zell Publishing. Hans Zell has also compiled another expensive book: *Electronic African Bookworm. A Web Navigator*. 1998. Oxford: African Books Collective Ltd.

This attempt to place the issue of publishing in context centres mainly on African authors who write in English, a restriction which of course excludes other potential readers. In 1975, Chinua Achebe asked whether ‘a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s’. Even if it may look like ‘a dreadful betrayal’, which produces ‘a guilty feeling’, he suggested that ‘there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it’, later adding that it would have to be ‘a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings’ (Achebe 1975, 62). Despite the paradox, Achebe and most other African authors have embraced the colonial tongue. Why should African writers enrich other tongues, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o asks, rather than enriching their own (1997, 286). His question is highly significant. As a person who has spoken Gikuyu in and outside the home, he clearly believes that his stories, which he had heard from his relatives, should be narrated in the same tongue. Henry Chakava, a Kenyan publisher, writes that ‘many Africans do not have access to materials written in their own languages’ (73). Even English and French, two of the most widely used languages on the continent, ‘cannot be read by more than twenty-five percent of the population in the countries where they are used’ (97). However, when Chakava agreed to become Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s publisher he discovered that publishing in a postcolonial world is a path paved with good intentions but ‘subject to twists, turns, rocks, hard places, and pitfalls’ (45). There were government threats against both Chakava and his company, as well as ‘the constant threat of litigation from members of the public who have felt libelled by Ngugi in his writings’ (61). In spite of these setbacks, Chakava wishes others had followed Ngũgĩ’s example: ‘I am waiting for the day when he will return home so that we can continue from where I stopped’ (62-63).³² This distinguished Kenyan writer

32 Chairman of East African Educational Publishers Ltd., Dr. Henry Miyinzi Chakava was declared a Moran of the Order of the Burning Spear (MBS), a Presidential award, in 2006 when he also won the Prince Claus Award, a Dutch Award.

continues to call for an African cultural renaissance. In January, 2007, he told Kenyan students: ‘All languages are equally important. But knowing the English language does not diminish the importance of other languages. Those who know and speak their own language will have power. But those who know other languages well but little of their mother tongue are slaves’.³³

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s insistence on a non-hierarchical approach to languages, on the equal state of oral and written texts, brings us to a point made by Anjal Gera Roy that ‘a broader definition of the text can help us understand the changing notion of literature in the global village’ (113-14). She sustains that ‘the death of the book’, a western premise, means that the beginning of the book ‘was the death of the spoken word’ and the end of the book indicates ‘the return to sound’. An inclusive definition of the text permits ‘a creative artist to choose between the spoken, the written, and the electronic media’. Although it may be considered a luxury, electronic publishing also has the advantage that it cuts across those endless negotiations with publishers, literary agents and governmental authorities, which have been such a burden for African writers. Indeed, C.L. Innes and Chinua Achebe found that journals on the internet produced most of the stories for their *Contemporary African Short Stories* of 1992.

The conditions for publishing texts, whether scholarly or artistic, may have changed from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, but the study of the earlier post-war years is important to our discussion of Head’s ordeal as a writer, which runs from that initial hunger for books through her work as a journalist to her later headaches with publishers and literary agents. As we know, publishing has been a male monopoly in Africa since colonial times. From the time of its invention, ‘print culture has long been seen as a male medium, although certain functions, such as copy-editing, became gradually feminized over time’ (Veney and Zeleza 46). This is reinforced

33 <www.eastafricanpublishers.com/News> (accessed 24/05/ 2008)

by the unequal access to education and literacy. Véronique Tadjo, a writer from Côte d'Ivoire, has attributed the 'onslaught on literature' by African women writers to the expansion of women's education and readership and an increase in the number of publishing houses, some established by women. In Abidjan, for example, 'young women are reading more than men', and women are taking over libraries – so essential to a reading culture (47). As she has written in a poem:

I read to conquer my lost Kingdom,
 Childhood with its peals of laughter
 I read to stretch out my hand
 To live in the world.

Towards an unknown reality
 To cross the bridge separating me
 From others
 I read to escape
 To plant myself firmly on the ground
 To find the answers to my questions³⁴

The presence of women publishers all over the continent was confirmed at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair of 1999, which had the theme of 'Women's Voices – Gender, Books and Development'. Serah Mwangi, who set up Focus Publications in Kenya, said: 'I'll only publish the kinds of things I want. My objective is to influence society positively' (qtd. in Veney and Zeleza 48-9). Mary Asirifi is Managing Director of Allgoodbooks Ltd. in Ghana, a children's publishing company and a bookseller in Accra. Before the end of apartheid, publishing in South Africa was sexist and racist, but Eve Horwitz Gray, the director of Juta Academic Publishers, has emerged as a leading voice in charting new directions in post-apartheid scholarly publishing. In a letter to Jane Grant in 1982, Bessie Head writes: 'I met Irene Staunton quite by accident as I was going into a store. She said she recognised me as she had attended the lecture I gave at the Africa

³⁴ This is cited in the report of the one-day conference on 'Reading Africa: Readers, Libraries and African Publishing' organised by the Southern African Book Development Education Trust and Oxford Brookes University, October 30, 2004. <www.sabdet.com> (accessed 27/05/08). SABDET stands for the Southern African Book Development Education Trust.

Centre’ – in London.³⁵ This casual remark reminds us of one of the most daring and outspoken Zimbabwean publishers. At that time, Staunton had just returned to the land of her birth, where in 1987 she co-founded the influential publishing house, Baobab Books, which she left in 1999 to co-found the Weaver Press – Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* was one of the first works of fiction to be published by this press.³⁶ When Jane Katjavivi established New Namibia Books in 1990, she did not have any resources and depended on Heinemann for financial backing. Over the years, the balance has changed with local editorial work and typesetting: ‘Today she has eight or nine qualified persons working with her, and she has an extensive publishing program of her own, including several literature titles’, Robert Sulley wrote in 1997 (175). A memorable moment in her publishing career was, in her opinion, the discovery of Neshani Andreas, who gave her a copy of her first novel to read. Katjavivi passed this village narrative on to the Heinemann Writers Series, which published it under the title of *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* in 2001. ‘Writing is a lonely business’, Andreas has said. ‘You write alone, and you never know if anybody will ever read what you write’. However, her novel creates a bridge between scholarly and literary publications, between Namibia and Zimbabwe, because it has been reprinted by Irene Staunton at the Weaver Press, who said of her: ‘She is a talented empathetic writer whose perspective, compassion and social conscience are needed’.³⁷

Publishers and authors should work together even though so often they have different goals in mind, as Yvonne Vera points out in a letter to Charles Larson in October 1998. In her

35 BHP Box L2. KMM 71 BHP 61. The Khama Memorial Museum in Serowe holds Head’s papers. They were catalogued in this manner before Ruth Forchhammer changed the system between 2006 and 2007, which adds difficulties when quoting from this source.

36 I have tremendous admiration for Irene Staunton who has worked for decade upon decade encouraging and promoting young, older and old dissident writers from her different publishing houses in Zimbabwe.

37 These two quotes come from Erika von Wietersheim’s interview with Neshani Andreas entitled ‘Neshani Andreas: a passion for writing’. *Contact*, April 2005 <[www. weaverpresszimbabwe.com](http://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com)> (accessed 07/07/14)

opinion, a writer's aim must be singular: 'the writer is interested in perfecting the art form'. To this end, a writer 'must be willing to experiment, no matter what problems this might produce with a publisher', who is 'concerned with selling, with finding a market, and an audience, usually the maximum market and audience' (qtd. in Larson 54). She has been lucky as her publisher (Irene Staunton) has always been interested in nurturing her 'own original voice'. Most Africans cannot live by writing alone, as was the case with Vera who worked as an academic and a gallery curator, even if those who win – and accept – prizes may eventually be able to mould successful writing careers. Literary prizes, which I mentioned earlier, generally have a western and capitalist bias: they reflect 'shifting patterns of patronage, with an increasing emphasis on public sponsorship', and are, above all, 'signs of the dominant role played by international industry as a legitimising agent for literature and the other arts' (Huggan 105). Before this public recognition, however, the quest for publication involves every writer in an obscene labyrinth of correspondence with editors and literary agents, contracts, which may include financial contributions to help with production costs, especially among the so-called 'vanity publishers' (such as Minerva) in London, and negotiations of terms concerning copyright, royalties, translation and taxation, among many other aspects. At the African Writers-Publishers Seminar held in Arusha in 1998, many writers levelled accusations of unfair treatment at their publishers, though the Nigerian Kole Omotoso attributed the problem to a general 'innocence' (and, perhaps, trust?) among African writers (Larson 60-61). Both European and African publishers often 'forget' to pay royalties and since there is seldom any advance, the published author is left penniless. Véronique Tadjo wrote in a letter to Larson in May 1997: 'When and if you receive royalties, the statement is always fairly vague. In fact, the surest thing is to go there in person and demand your due', which in her case is L'Harmattan, based in Paris. Indeed, Professor Manthia

Diawara told Larson that this publishing house pays no royalties on the first 1000 copies. Bessie Head could not 'go there in person' and, as I shall discuss later, she launched bitter attacks on her literary agent and publishers born of frustration. For example, when Giles Gordon, her agent, wrote to tell her that there appears 'to be no way round the tax problem because of the lack of a double taxation agreement between Botswana and Britain', she wrote that he has left 'such a bad taste in my mouth just now that I could vomit and spew all over at the thought of him'. Gordon was fired: within 'the frame of her own universe, she felt her behavior perfectly justified', Eilersen argues (2007, 206-8). After other unfortunate vituperative statements recorded in letters, the crisis was eventually resolved. Over this debacle, she lost the friendship of Pat Cullinan, a man who had helped her so much throughout her time in Botswana: 'You have always had my respect', he writes in his final letter to her (*Imaginative Trespasser* 257). In his final comment, he states: 'She was not a saint, genteel or glib, but facing me she was never the squalid liar of her letters' (259). Head got as good as she gave.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o draws attention to another aspect of the writer's ordeal in his *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981):

We who write in Kenya, in Africa, in the Third World, are the modern Cassandras of the developing world, condemned to cry the truth against neo-colonialist and imperialist cultures and then be ready to pay for it with incarceration, exile and even death. (qtd. in Larson 114)

Bessie Head is, in this sense, one such modern Cassandra, a disempowered person of great insight. Not only did she experience physical and emotional suffering as a result of her personal perceptions leading to mental breakdowns, but she was also disbelieved when she tried to share her suffering with others. In their attempt to tell the truth, many African writers have suffered indignities, threats, humiliations and genuine terror, but whether their situation is worse than that

of their counterparts in the other parts of the world is arguable, as Larson suggests, especially since his first examples include Salman Rushdie and the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin, who fled her country in 1994 for fear she would be murdered by her readers (or non-readers) of her novel *Lajja* (shame) (115-16). It is true that the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz was stabbed by a fanatical countryman and Ken Saro-Wiwa was unjustly executed for campaigning and speaking out against the environmental damage caused to the Niger Delta by Shell Oil, not to mention the death, imprisonment or silencing of numerous writers in Southern African countries, for example. The need for engagement has brought so much suffering to individual African writers that it has silenced others. But not so Bessie Head, whose work was banned in South Africa until 1994. Pitika Ntuli's 'In my Country' sums up the psychological effect apartheid had on her:

In my country they jail you
 For what they think you think.
 My uncle once said to me:
 They'll implant a microchip
 In our minds
 To flash our thoughts and dreams
 On to a screen at John Vorster Square.
 I was scared:
 By day I guard my tongue
 By night my dreams. (81)

Doris Lessing, whose work was also banned in South Africa until 1994, said to a British journalist: 'Writing, writers, do not come out of houses without books. We are in a fragmenting culture, where our certainties of even a few decades ago are questioned, and where it is common for young men and women who have had years of education to know nothing of the world, to have read nothing' (qtd. in Kennedy 1). Many forms of censorship affect African women, but exclusion from libraries is exceptionally unjust, as Head experienced when growing up as a coloured woman in apartheid South Africa. Prohibited from white libraries, she went directly to

the M L Sultan Library, donated to the Indians of the city by one of their wealthy merchants. It was here that she encountered Hinduism and Mahatma Gandhi, who had during his residence in South Africa (1893-1913) established the Natal Indian Congress and taught the Natal Indian community the practice of non-violent resistance. Several aspects of the Gandhi story inspired Head, particularly the inclusive nature of Hinduism, as opposed to the exclusivity of Christianity, and Gandhi's 'simple and astonishing clarity in the way he summarised political truths', as she wrote years later: 'you could say I moved straight from Christianity, which I found stifling, to Hinduism, which I found was very rich and deep in concepts' (qtd. in Eilersen 2007, 36). Head was privileged, however, in that she had had access to world literature while at school. Key to 'a career in writing' is, in her opinion, 'a feeling for all the magic and wonder that can be communicated through books' (1990, 93-94). Her correspondence is full of references to writers and their work. Upon her arrival in Botswana, for example, she wrote impassioned letters to Pat and Wendy Cullinan expressing her identification with several writers. 'I devour everything Nadine Gordimer writes because she is so lonely and so much herself' (*Imaginative Trespasser* 67). At a time when it is said she had met a young man, she cites the following from James Baldwin at the beginning of 'This Is the House That We Built': 'wherever love is found, it unfailingly makes itself felt in the individual, the personal authority of the individual' (69). Attempting to understand her rejection of Africa and its rejection of her, she writes: 'DH Lawrence couldn't stand England. I shan't be the only writer who can't stand anything. But I don't want to get bogged down in bitterness' (81). A few lines later, she says: 'Half of it's my fault. I had a thing about Africa. It's all a build up from what I lacked down there (in South Africa). No one can separate Dostoevsky from Russia. He identified himself with it. I am of his type in this need of identification. It gives point and purpose to all I say.' Pat Cullinan comments

on the ‘inherited tendencies’ she mentions at the end of the letter (a ‘strong-minded’, ‘alert’, ‘alive’ and ‘whole’ personality):

Going beyond tribe or race and recognizing her identity as an individual becomes a hard-won affirmation. It is a wonderful antiphon to her previous insecurity about her African identity, a cogent, unequivocal response to the collective chauvinism of the tribe. And of course, it was this very rejection by ‘Africa’ that challenged her to become an ‘imaginative trespasser’, a bold phrase describing the only legitimacy that mattered to her – that of an artist. (*Imaginative Trespasser* 84-85)

Not every African woman writer has had the opportunities Head was given, but Vera’s father managed, for example, to sneak her into segregated cinemas and to gain admittance for her to the Bulawayo Public Library. Strangely, the first book that came to hand was by D.H. Lawrence: by the time she was twelve she had read all his novels (Ranger 2005, 5).

Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* draws attention to the inequality of opportunities for women: ‘Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables’, Tambudzai’s father tells her, reminding us of the Kunene Mission’s ‘charitable’ aim when they threw out the novels they had confiscated (15). It is only after her brother’s death that Tambudzai is emancipated, so that she may obtain an education and write the story ‘about my escape and Lucia’s; about my mother’s and Maiguru’s entrapment; and about Nyasha’s rebellion – Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle’s daughter...’ (Dangarembga 1). Indeed, the publishing history of *Nervous Conditions* gives us an insight into this discrimination. Initially rejected by a number of local publishers, it was only after it had been published by The Women’s Press and had won the Commonwealth Prize for Literature (African region) that a local publisher agreed to print it. One incentive that has helped Zimbabwean women writers was the foundation of *Zimbabwe Women Writers* in 1991: since that time, it has published over 200 women in English, Shona and Ndebele (Veney and Zeleza 87). However, it is

difficult to print them at an affordable price and thus readers depend on libraries. ‘Libraries as we think of them in the West do not exist in many African countries’, Larson argued in 2001 (45).³⁸ Online journals and books have helped, but sometimes the libraries cannot afford computers or fax machines. Library budgets have become so strained that the majority of public libraries now have to charge membership fees. In these circumstances, local publishers cannot rely on library sales and few readers have access to the work of their writers. For all the above reasons, it is ironic that the Main Library building of the *Msunduzi Municipal Library Services*, formerly the *Natal Society Library*, was renamed the *Bessie Head Library* in 2004.

Another form of censorship that particularly worries (experimental) African women writers is that which comes from foreign readers who, as Kole Omotoso said at the Arusha conference, ‘too often refused to take on issues of contemporary Africa, preferring outdated versions of Africa which suit their vested interests’ (qtd. in Larson 63). The South African Indian writer Agnes Sam argues, in a discussion about the difficulties she experienced when trying to get her experimental novel *What Passing Bells* published overseas, that publishers have decided that black women should write autobiographically. Any attempt on their part to experiment ‘with language and form’ is totally dismissed. In the new Commonwealth, those who do not conform ‘are said to have been influenced by Western tradition (.) But the crunch comes when we disregard Western tradition and publishers’ stereotypes, and attempt to experiment – this isn’t tolerated’ (George 119). Aidoo articulates a similar thought about writing ‘acceptable’ literature for publishers outside the continent: ‘someone can declare that your manuscript doesn’t read like a manuscript from a third world person’. As she says, it is ‘a wonder women write at all’ (qtd. in George 119). In a letter of thanks to Giles Gordon for the reviews of *Maru* he sent her, Head

38 The *UNESCO Statistical Handbook* gives a good idea of the number of libraries in each African country.

comments on the American reviews: 'I found things like *black* people in *black* Africa (...) and wild claims that I was relieving people there of fruitless racial arguments. As for Maru, he was swallowed whole, only one reviewer pointing out that he is really a combination of good and evil'.³⁹ What tortures her at this time is that she is 'dependent on an audience, seemingly hungry to comprehend 'the real Africa' and over-eager to take a writer as the epitome of everything African'. She appears to be as uneasy with the American response to her novel as she is with her position as a spokeswoman for "Africa". From a different perspective, she writes to Milly Daniel in 1974 about her Serowe book. Quoting a statement from Daniel's letter to Gordon ('most of the interviews with younger people living there tend to be with white settlers...'), Head suggests there has been 'a misunderstanding', as Daniel must be referring to Part Three of the book: 'I ought to point out that the white people interviewed (and) working on projects are certainly not 'white settlers' but international volunteers who are only here for (a few years). The die-hard white settler would never, never, never dream of associating with black people! And how would I ever write about them because I am black' (Eilersen 1995, 175). This ironic tone plays with the stereotyping these writers so abhor. Why did she have to explain this to an editor working at Pantheon, well-known at the time for its independent and leftish publishing policy? In this sense, Vera has been very fortunate. 'Without that nurturing relationship' with her editor, Irene Staunton, 'it is unlikely', Larson suggests, 'that Vera's career would have moved so quickly into a high gear or received such international acclaim' (82). This raises another question. Why does he attribute her success to her relationship with her editor rather than to the power of her work, however much we may admire Staunton, who has said: 'fiction is more important than history. Some truths can only be told through fiction. We can never understand wars, conflicts, love, and how things

³⁹ January 22, 1972. KMM24 BHP34

go wrong without fiction’?⁴⁰ Although Vera got her three academic degrees at York University, Toronto, she always wanted to return home to Bulawayo: ‘I did not want to be interpreted but to be heard. I find that immediacy very vital’, she told Ish Mafundikwa in interview (qtd. in Larson 85). Vera has thus had the good fortune of ‘a small coterie of readers’ and has been able to write for her own people, which is ‘no doubt every African writer’s dream’, Larson condescendingly reports (87). However, this is precisely what Tambudzai does: she tells her story to an invisible listener, who definitely is not an outsider. This addressee seems to be an educated Shona woman like Tambudzai, deeply involved in the same cultural context. Tambu even feels uneasy with that western ‘other’: ‘Another thing that was different about the mission was that there were many white people there’, she writes, remembering what her grandmother had told her: ‘The Whites (...) had come not to take but to give. They were about God’s business here in darkest Africa’. Their sacrifice ‘made them superior not only to us but to those other Whites as well who were here for adventure and to help themselves to our emeralds’. Even if they are now called ‘expatriates’, they ‘are deified in the same way as the missionaries were because they are white so that their coming is still in honour’ (Dangaremba 105). The ironic distance from this community shows that she is not talking to a western white reader. Like so many works written by African women writers, *Nervous Conditions* challenges us to conjure up new worlds in the imagination, rather than rely on stereotypes, to immerse ourselves in the quest of these writers ‘for new cultural forms and hybrid languages that better represent the particularisms of the communities about which they write’ (Lionnet 1995, 19).

40 <www.ukzn.ac.za/ccca/images/tow/TOW> 2008/bios/staunton/html (24/05/ 2008)

Readership

The success of any literary work is finally left to the good instinct of the reader, Vera writes in October 1998 (Larson 54). She is certainly more confident than Chinua Achebe was when he sent his manuscript of *Things Fall Apart* to an English agent and felt he had to explain culturally specific materials for his western readers: ‘Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten’ (1994, 7). However, Achebe also wishes to use his fiction to re-educate and regenerate: ‘I would be quite satisfied if my novels (...) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them’ (1975, 45). In a similar vein, Miriam Tlali states explicitly: ‘I’d like to present my stories with a black audience in mind, and I have never really intended to write for a white audience. I don’t think it’s important at this point. I don’t think I could have taken up writing if it was not my desire to take part in the process of change in this country’ (qtd. in Oosthuizen 184). At a workshop held in South Africa during 1990 on black women’s writing and reading, the participants expressed different views. Sanna Naidoo writes ‘as a woman, for women. I try to deal honestly with my own experiences, the inequalities I’ve endured as a woman, the traditions I’ve dared to break away from’. Although Thandi Moses writes, on occasions, for a mixed audience, the slant is towards women: ‘I still feel that women – writing for or about them – need more attention’. Boitumelo Mofokeng is ‘conscious of speaking as the voice of women’, particularly the domestic worker, but ‘the audience-mix’ is irrelevant. Finally, Lebohlang Sikwe sees her audience ‘as anyone who will read; but we must be equal. When I start writing I think of a person and I recognize them, and I want them to recognize me’ (*South African Feminisms* 110-111).

This poses a problem for the white critic of Southern African Anglophone literatures who has been brought up in another country, especially when one realises, as Sikwe suggests, that the ‘reading of fiction involves a certain conspiracy of feeling between the writer and his reader. They have both agreed to accord every act of the imagination the status of an absolute truth’ (qtd. in Lamming xxxv). Ann Oosthuizen, the South African compiler of a collection of women’s stories, points to their ‘generosity’ that is ‘part of the greatness of Africa. They do not treat the reader as a stranger. Whatever their colour, the authors write about families and communities that have been mutilated by apartheid’ (xiii). When lunching with one of the writers in a mid-town restaurant in Johannesburg, she had, however, remarked ‘how difficult it was for me to reconcile the scene around us with the war that was taking place in the townships which encircle the city’. The writer replied: ‘‘When I drive home after work, when I leave the motorway, it’s as if I’m in an entirely different place’’. This crossing of borders imposed by apartheid and the sense of estrangement felt by each woman, even within one city, confirms the daunting task for the foreign reader of these literatures. Despite this, it should be recognised that before and during the apartheid period South African authors have made a tremendous effort to make their work accessible to an outsider, often not writing in their own language, but the elections of 1994 ‘has released them from this bind’. Writers may at times introduce ‘an *untranslatable* strangeness into their work, so emphasizing its borderline situation, positioned both within and without Western traditions’ (Boehmer 1995, 243).⁴¹ This is the case of *By the Sea*, a novel written by the Zanzibarian Abdulrazah Gurnah, now resident in the United Kingdom. The narrators in *By the Sea*, the asylum seeker Saleh Omar and the poet/professor Latif Mahmud, constantly refer to two literary works in an attempt to make their stories of a feud from long ago and their subsequent

41 This reminds us of Graham Pechey’s argument that ‘South Africa may be entering not exactly a postcolonial phase but the latest of its *neo-colonial* phases’ (1998, 59).

displacement more accessible to each other and, thus, to the reader: *A Thousand and One Nights* and Herman Melville's *Bartleby. The Scrivener*. The suggestive intertextual allusions, which explicitly raise the issues of colonialism and orientalism, suggest rereadings from every perspective: 'I would prefer not to', the key phrase in Melville's story, becomes, for example, a theme to be expanded far beyond the confines of Gurnah's textual universes. However, what is clear from this novel is that the religious, moral and intellectual traditions of colonised countries have never been as fully suppressed as the authorities might have desired. The histories of these countries extend much further back than their colonialism by Europe, as Nayantara Sahgal explains of India:

My own awareness as a writer reaches back to x-thousand B.C., at the end of which measureless timeless time the British came, and stayed, and left. And now they're gone, and their residue is simply one more layer added to the layer upon layer of Indian consciousness. Just *one* more. (qtd. in Boehmer 1995, 245)

It is difficult for an outsider to reach such an awareness of the many layers running through a work set in a completely different cultural and socio-political background. Sarah Mandow argues that there is no simple access to African identity. In some texts 'white women readers can experience the effects of being marginalized', but 'in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, there is no escape. Inclusion is a dubious honour, however, as the reader is drawn into a nightmare world where there is no omniscient narrator and no overarching explanation' (149).

The tendency has been, if from a western perspective, to homogenize 'Third World literatures' as a coherent field of knowledge, by indiscriminately ironing out the differences, overlooking the areas of incomprehensibility and imposing interpretative strategies derived from Eurocentric theories. This all-embracing or totalizing discourse bears an uncanny resemblance to western Orientalist scholarship, so decried by Edward Said (Boehmer 1995, 246). As we are well

aware, Said rehearsed and studied arguments *vis à vis* Orientalism in 1978 from various perspectives. At the time, the contention of his study was that ‘without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period’ (Said 1995, 2-3). He argued, moreover, that European culture ‘gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self’. These arguments alone express another warning to those readers not immersed in the cultures of the literatures they are studying.

Boehmer suggests a couple of ways of avoiding ‘neo-orientalism’, which lie at the heart of my study. A ‘simple but serious recognition of difference’ constitutes a good starting-point: ‘some preliminary acknowledgement that post-imperial realities are far more contradictory, agitated, and diverse than any one critical approach could hope to describe’ (1995, 247-48). The emphasis here lies not only in the need for more than one critical approach, but also, as I have mentioned elsewhere, in translatability. This is a tricky business, because the texts catch the English-speaking reader unawares: they are, apparently, in the same language. Even the most profound investigation into the socio-political and cultural backgrounds of the text demonstrates that, despite globalisation, cultures are by no means mutually intelligible. For this simple reason, it is worth admitting that ‘(o)bscurities and silences’ exist, because postcolonial texts principally ‘represent locally rooted and uniquely distinct perceptions’, however far they may reach beyond this framework. It is crucial to develop, Boehmer goes on to argue, what James Clifford calls ‘an awareness of discrepant attachments’ in order to ‘locate texts in their own specific worlds of meaning’ (1995, 248). This requires a reading of many texts in order to establish ‘intertexts and

adumbrations'. Secondly, this 'sensitivity of location' requires our respect, because of 'the continuing political struggle for self-representation' in the decolonized world. Texts form part of this politics, but 'the struggle over meanings is not confined to the texts themselves'. For those on the fringes of these cultures self-determination remains a political imperative: 'the signifiers of **home, self, past**, far from representing instances of discursive contingency, stand for live and pressing issues' (my emphasis). Or as Lamming, and later bell hooks, puts it, oppressed peoples have to name their reality on their own terms before they can develop a critical consciousness. They have to sort out 'the whole issue of cultural allegiance between the imposed norms of White Power (...) and the fragmented memory of the African masses: between White instruction and Black imagination' (Lamming xxxvi).

The South African writer and academic Zoë Wicomb realises that the writer of fiction is 'crucially concerned with a reader's (or addressee's) background knowledge', but she questions the intention of South African writers who provide explanations of different kinds, which they would not construct 'in ordinary speech to co-South Africans' (1993, 2). 'The reader's knowledge of the world in which the fiction is located', she argues, 'is called upon as bridging assumptions in a complex inferential process activated by the text'. Do these writers believe that foreign readers have 'no inferential powers'? This is, in her opinion, 'not only a misconception of the reading process – foreigners too can infer – but points to fissures in some of our cherished ideals: the growth of a *national* literature and cultural autonomy, when in fact we look hopefully at a world literature in the English language and at a readership abroad'. These desires are not unreasonable, particularly as 'the English language continues to take colonial strides' in this global village, but she argues that the contradictions underlying the ideals should be examined. Of course, this 'known inferential pool from which readers draw meaning (...) fluctuates

according to our racial and gender differences' (Wicomb 1993, 6). The narrator of Ama Ata Aidoo's 'Male-ing Names in the Sun' underlines this when she expresses her annoyance that 'the issue of race is still allowed (towards the end of the twentieth century) to assume all forms, subsume all controversies and consume every little bit of human energy, vision and imagination'. In this light, it is strange that generally 'we do not stop to wonder whether we might have experienced', or indeed read, 'the whole imperial/colonial *wahala* differently if we had been white' (1997, 110-111).

In relation to the 'global village' of capitalism, Wicomb makes another point that is worth bearing in mind. Discussing Maureen Isaacson's *Holding Back Midnight*, she states that 'the act of crossing geographical boundaries', such as the whites going to the township of Sophiatown in the 1960s, 'itself encodes a position of privilege'. The narrator of Aidoo's 'Some Global News', who has founded a successful NGO, discusses the notion of the global village, the implications of which have been internalised by young people as much in African countries as in the United States of America: it reinforces the superiority/inferiority hierarchy. The 'result was a kind of galloping post-colonial lack of confidence – or loss in self-confidence...' (1997,36). Since this narrator-protagonist has to travel a lot, she has grown aware of the politics of dress for conferences and has had a wardrobe of clothes made from dark prints: "But Yaa-yaa, those are funeral clothes!" Kate exclaims confidently with the full weight of tradition behind her'. These typical outbursts in the work of Ama Ata Aidoo, a Ghanaian novelist, dramatist, poet, academic and former Minister of Education who is an outspoken proponent not only for pan-Africanist struggles against imperialism and racism but also for women's liberation in the national and the international context, demonstrate Wicomb's points particularly well: "the fashion dictators of the Euro-American world (...) dictate for the rest of the world, anyway?" Kate asks Yaa-yaa

(Aidoo 1997, 43).

That is the fear with literary studies as well. Boehmer was of the belief in 1995 that cultural ‘interaction will remain a first premiss, even an article of faith, in postcolonial criticism for some time to come’ – and she hopes that postcolonial literatures will take the same route (1995, 248-49). Such a premiss can become a political imperative, if, and only if, foreign readers firstly respect differences and the particular location of each work, and, secondly, grow aware of how much they can learn from their own shortcomings, be they temporal, spatial, geographical or cultural. As we know, in the early days of imperial expansion, travellers and colonisers made strangeness comprehensible by transferring ‘familiar metaphors’ to ‘unfamiliar and unlikely contexts’ (Boehmer 1995, 14-17). In this way, a country was, for example, ‘mapped’ or ‘spatially conceived’ by ‘using figures which harked back to home ground’ and ‘a familiar framework of grammatical and symbolic structures’. The foreign reader now confronts a very different reality: this power to work associatively has been complicated, undermined and enriched by postcolonial writers. When Sissie of *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) hears someone calling her ‘das Schwartzze (sic) Mädchen’ in Germany, her immediate response, of which she is later ashamed, is to use their value-system: ‘And it hit her. That all that crowd of people (...) had the colour of the pickled pig parts that used to come from foreign places to the markets at home./Trotters, pig-tails, pig-ears./ (...) And she wanted to vomit’ (Aidoo 1994, 12).

Boehmer argues in favour of ‘a more concerted quest for interpretative strategies with which to resist the dominance of Western theory’, but it seems that most Africanists are actually very happy to question western theories, appropriating and changing them wherever they deem it necessary (1995, 249). This does not mean, of course, that they have not constructed their own theories, as I hope I have shown. Such scholars as Henry Louis Gates and Carolyn Cooper have

argued that ‘the rhetorical and linguistic structures of a text may offer readers their own analytic guidelines’. That is to say, ‘a way of reading or a ‘theory’ is suggested in the form of the story’. This is, in my opinion, the most appropriate method to adopt in the study of postcolonial texts, which can no longer be interpreted purely by the dictates of one postcolonial theory or another. We must be wary, however, of not falling into the trap anticipated earlier of attaching a postcolonial text to a canonical colonial text.

Before discussing Bessie Head’s work in the context of African women’s writing, we should give a moment’s thought to that crucial concept of culture, so difficult to define briefly. The *Manifesto of the Organisation of African Unity’s First All African Cultural Festival* of 1969 affirms: ‘Culture starts with the people as creators of themselves and transformers of their environment. Culture, in its widest and most complete sense, enables men to give shape to their lives’ (Young 2002, 8).⁴² It is, thus, ‘the complex everyday world we all encounter and through which we all move’; although certain preoccupations affect us all (power, law, knowledge, etc.), the conflict between diverse cultures is forever present. From a western perspective, culture comes from the Latin *cultura* and *colere*, which has a range of meanings: ‘inhabit, cultivate, attend, protect, honour and worship’ (Young 1995, 283). These meanings diverge with Christianity so that ‘worship’ and ‘inhabit’ took on different meanings: ‘the ‘inhabit’ meaning became the Latin *colonus*, farmer, from which we derive the word ‘colony’ – so, we could say, colonization rests at the heart of culture, or culture always involves a form of colonization, even in relation to its conventional meaning as the tilling of soil’. Moreover, the culture of land has always been ‘the primary form of colonization, the focus on soil emphasizes the physicality of the territory that is coveted, occupied, cultivated, turned into plantations and made unsuitable for

42 It is worth noting that Young firstly uses the word ‘people’ as creators and transformers of their environment, and then adds that it is ‘men’ who give shape to these peoples’ lives.

indigenous nomadic tribes' (Young 1995, 30-31). Hence, agriculture and horticulture are fundamental to a culture and to the independence of a community from invaders. For others, the ability to construct and to use 'language' which embraces all sign systems is the most important aspect (Edgar 102). That is to say, we can also think of our authors as those concerned not only with social and historical issues but also with ecological issues. The awarding of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize to the Kenyan Wangari Maathia has given a boost to ecocriticism, potentially one of the most vibrant areas in African literary discourse and criticism. It is no accident that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is set in a village called Umuofia, which in Igbo means 'children of the forest'. Two Zimbabwean poets, Kristina Rungano and Charles Mungoshi, have written a poem called 'After the Rain' in their respective collections *A Storm Is Brewing* (1984) and *Waiting for the Rain* (1981), each of which takes this natural motif to reflect upon the political situation in Zimbabwe. Serowe. *A Village of the Rain Wind* written by Bessie Head, to whom we shall now turn among other writers, also captures the ominous moment of suspense represented in the titles of these collections.

Part II. African Women Writing: 'Fighting for space and air'.

The recognition of Southern African women's writing has transformed the literatures in this part of the world and elsewhere. For example, at the *Second African Writers' Conference* held in Stockholm in 1986 under the title of *Criticism and Ideology*, women's voices rendered audible their interest in change and renewal; at the first conference, *The Writer in Modern Africa*, held there in 1967 during the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, only their male contemporaries were granted permission to speak. During this later conference, Kirsten Holst Petersen sensed a 'definite feeling of the beginning of something tremendously important', when such women writers as Lauretta Ngcobo, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and Miriam Tlali courageously outlined their platforms and pronounced their grievances and demands (16). After much discussion concerning feminisms and women's writing, the South African writer Sipho Sepamla impatiently produced the familiar either/or argument that women should decide whether they wanted to be 'housewives and continue their traditional African way of life or not get married and become writers', as, he claimed, American women writers have done (Tlali 1988, 203-204). To put an end to their complaints 'about how they are being treated by the black men', he suggested that 'they take up the fight themselves and liberate themselves'.⁴³ Wally Serote and Njabulo Ndebele, his compatriots, promptly expressed their disagreement with this outrageous statement. The former posed that men and women should solve the problem of the oppression and exploitation of women. The latter focused on an alternative 'kind of family that would permit maximum creativity of all members in a given social situation'. Only one woman's intervention was

⁴³ It is worth noting that Sepamla is, by no means, an insignificant writer. N. Ndebele suggests that the narrator in Sepamla's novel, *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, struggles to subject the objective events of the Soweto uprising on June 16, 1976, to the demands of his art. His plot involves not only the recognition of a situation but the transformation of the same. In this sense, Sepamla, the writer, is 'moving in the right direction' (2006, 20).

recorded during this particular discussion period. The South African writer Lauretta Ngcobo delivered a lengthy, if measured, statement: ‘We are in a situation where we have got to understand what writing really means in terms of exchange of ideas. When a woman writes she crosses boundaries of traditional outlook towards ideas. Women in our societies have never been entitled to initiate ideas’ (1988, 203). Before a married woman can confront the world she has to confront her husband; Ngcobo recalled the case of Buchi Emecheta, whose husband burned her first book.⁴⁴ She went on to say: ‘When I make an appeal to the men in this gathering to let us write, to present our views differently, it is against the background of an unwilling male world’. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o seemed to detach himself from the problem while recognising its importance: in his opinion, the struggle to ‘overturn the entire system’ will not come from men’s initiatives, but ‘from the kind of offensive which is being waged by, for instance, the women writers in front of us’. He appealed to them to ‘go on articulating the problem even more vigorously and do not apologize, because it is important in correcting this imbalance’. Adopting a similar line of argument as Oliver Tambo, the President of the African National Congress (ANC), had taken at the first conference of the Women’s Section in 1981, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o concluded: ‘only the person who is affected can actually articulate the problem’ (Tlali 1988, 203-204).⁴⁵ Has he not also suffered from oppression? This patronising tone kindles, as it crushes, that blaze of resistance.

Significantly, this hostility towards African women writers was expressed in the year of

⁴⁴ Emecheta later explained that her husband could not afford to pay for her: ‘Until I had five children I was still on hire purchase’. When her mother-in-law realised Emecheta was leaving her son, she sold the family house to pay for her. That is, her mother-in-law paid the bride-price, so Emecheta can only buy land in her village in her sons’ names (qtd. in Ngcobo 1988, 151).

⁴⁵ Oliver Tambo said on that occasion that women ‘have a duty to liberate us men from antique concepts and attitudes about the place and role of women in society. (...) The oppressor has, at best, a lesser duty to liberate the oppressed than the oppressed themselves’ (*Voice of Women* 1981)

Head's death; she might well have been invited but the participants barely mentioned her. Apparently, all seek freedom, justice and equality but each man expresses, in one way or another, his hesitation to take any positive action towards gender equality, even if guided by the women. To be fair to Ndebele, he also says that 'questions of sexism in family and the feminist movement are inseparable from the question of what kind of society we are fighting for' (1988, 158). However, like the others, his words express thought, abstractions. The self-confident, and yet somewhat tense, discourse on the part of the male participants even dominated the proxemics of the event, as the editor, Kirsten Holst Petersen, made clear (within brackets) in one of Ama Ata Aidoo's interventions: 'I don't think this should be a two way argument (...) To repeat what I said earlier on and what has been said from this side of the room (the women writers were all sitting together in one section of the room) we are asking for a reconsideration of the whole issue' (Ngcobo 1988, 154). A reconsideration long overdue, Ngcobo said at the end of her talk that these crippling structures and attitudes 'must be done away with', for in the context of 'African struggles for freedom – freedom from (...) all oppression – it makes little sense to condone such extremes of oppression as our men are prepared to put the women of Africa through' (1988, 151).

The recognition of African women writers at this conference introduced new areas of debate twenty years after the first one. These 'centred around criticism and the critic, the state of South African literature and the new, or newly acknowledged voice of African women writers' (Petersen 7). The exchange of ideas at this conference also demonstrates that a woman writer, especially a married woman writer, is a transgressor who challenges the authority of the traditional patriarchal structures of her community. Three final points are worth mentioning, as they are important to our discussion, but should not be criticised too harshly in the conference environment, as abstractions are often inevitable. Firstly, both the European organisers of the

event and many of the African participants perceived Anglophone countries in Africa as a homogenous whole, and, secondly, gender roles as similar in every community and group. Thirdly, African writing unusually meant non-white writing.

However long and painful their struggle has been, these women writers have eventually become a dominant presence in the public sphere. The voices, perspectives and spaces they represent and explore have completely changed the face of African literatures. In ‘Outside History’, the Irish poet Eavan Boland summarises, in another postcolonial context, this exciting development in Southern African writing.⁴⁶ In the last generation or so ‘women have moved from being the subjects and objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them. It is a momentous transit’ – and, of course, disruptive (9-10, 16, 18). It raises questions of identity, of poetic motive and of ethical direction. Such a transit, ‘almost invisible to the naked eye’, changes not only the past and the future but ‘our idea of the Irish poem; of its composition and authority, of its right to appropriate certain themes and make certain fiats’. Feeling she might remain an outsider in her own national literature, she decided to repossess it. Like the African women writers mentioned above, she is vexed by the association of femininity and nationality, and feels the need to become ‘an agent of change’. That is to say, she wants to ‘move from image to image-maker’.⁴⁷ African

46 Some Irish literary critics sustain that it is premature to characterise Ireland as postcolonial, because ‘the binary of Englishness versus Irishness continues to grip the Irish psyche (and) to evolve notions of identity which fixate on the colonial linkage’. However, Richard Rankin Russell considers that it is ‘necessary, even foundational’, for Irish studies scholars to follow the lead of other postcolonial critics (102). For different approaches to this issue, see: Denis Donoghue. 1997. ‘Fears for Irish Studies in an Age of Identity Politics’. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, B4-B5 and Gerry Smyth. 1997. *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction*. London: Pluto Press. I would agree with Declan Kiberd who argues that postcolonial writing begins ‘at the very moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance’, whether the occupier has withdrawn or not (6). However momentous this change may be, in the very different contexts of Irish and South African literatures, there is no room here to explore this poetic upheaval and its implications.

47 The complex question of this interrelation of femininity with nationality is a topic for another study. Suffice it to say that Boland is as uncomfortable as Woolf was, and many African writers are, to have to repossess the literature of a nation in which she has been perceived as an object: ‘In fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country’ (109).

women writers and critics have accused their male contemporaries of ‘idealizing and romanticizing African women by positing an essentialist, beautiful, nurturing, marginal, and often submissive African woman’ (Nfah-Abbenyi 35-6). Turning away from this male stance, women writers depict women and women’s experiences, ‘women’s ways of knowing in women’s spaces and locations’.

Two interrelated questions lie behind the various interests running throughout this study. Do Southern African women writers need to rediscover ‘the ordinary’? Or is it more, as I would argue, a matter of studying how these voices, so often unacknowledged, represent the ordinary in their texts? These questions arise from Ndebele’s key essay published in *Journal of South African Studies* in 1986, a version of which he gave at the Stockholm conference under the title of ‘Beyond ‘Protest’: New Directions in South African Literature’. He suggests that South African aesthetics should move away from protest literature and towards a literature of affirmation through a ‘rediscovery of the ordinary’. In his opinion, the protest literature produced in the townships since 1976 has run its course, because it ‘now reproduces itself uncritically’; this literature flourished between 1948 and 1961 (Ndebele 1988, 205). Very few women writers are mentioned in this appreciation, however.⁴⁸ Understandably, the writer’s thought process is affected by the polarities imposed by the apartheid regime, but Ndebele proposes that the greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search

for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression, structures which can severely compromise resistance by domination thinking itself. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterized apartheid society.

⁴⁸ He does mention Miriam Tlali when he launches an attack on certain black South African writers for their overtly political writing that blinds their critical faculty. Although he admires her novel *Amandla*, he argues that the artist in her ‘repudiates the critic’ (Ndebele 2006, 25). I give a definition of protest literature in the Introduction.

Now talking specifically about South African literature, he puts its slow growth down to the 'general consensus of commitment' in art and society; in this situation, no activist or artist has a clear idea about the writer's role and his artistic practice (211-212). The relationship between politics and art is, Ndebele explains, 'by definition always mediated by reflection'. We distinguish only between 'immediate' and 'delayed' action'. No choice is made between politics and art; 'rather, we participate in the dialectic between them. To understand this is to understand the creative possibilities of both' (213). What troubles Ndebele is that the literary conventions used to combat 'the overwhelming injustice in the South African social formation' have become too constricting. The expectation is that everything must make 'a spectacular political statement' (1994, 57). In his search for a new direction in South African aesthetics that can speak to the territory's politics on equal terms, he questions the relevance and irrelevance of certain literary texts: some may be considered 'irrelevant since they offer no political insight'. But can this be so, Pechey later asks (1994, 4), if this aesthetics 'draws its strength from the integrity of living communities and with the confidence of a thoroughly indigenised intellectual tradition'?

According to Ndebele, the 'rediscovery of the ordinary' in a text is perceived by its attempt to break down 'the barriers of the obvious in order to reveal new possibilities and understandings' (1994, 53). He contrasts the ordinary with the so-called spectacular, each of which takes many different forms. The ordinary is 'sobering rationality. It is the forcing of attention on necessary detail. Paying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness'. To exemplify this attitude, he cites a few lines from a poem by Mongane Serote:

child
 if you stop weeping, you may see
 because that is how knowledge begins.

Then he adds: 'Where before the South African reality was a symbol of spectacular moral wrong, it is now a direct object of change'. The key word here is change. Acting as a prophet of post-apartheid South Africa, Ndebele foresees that in the new society 'that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people live' (1994, 53). What he seeks is not a new orthodoxy of liberation, because this is precisely what the 'reformed' apartheid ideologues would recognise. The theme of his criticism is, in Graham Pechey's opinion, 'nothing less than the (re)composition of the whole social text of South Africa', which thereby undermines the supposed oppositional discourse (1994, 3-4). The problems of the South African social formation are, Ndebele writes, 'complex and all-embracing; they cannot be reduced to a single, simple formulation' (57). He does not forget the demands of the present of the 1980s, however, and states that the 'new literature can contribute to the development of this subjective capacity of the people to be committed, but only on the basis of as complete a knowledge of themselves and the objective situation as possible. The growth of consciousness is a necessary ingredient of this subjective capacity'.

The dissident white South African Albie Sachs prepared a similar talk for an in-house seminar on culture organized by the African National Congress in Lusaka in 1989.⁴⁹ On account of his international reputation and his challenging style, his short essay has, in general terms, received much more attention than that of Ndebele until his work was collected in a book under the title of *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, published in 1994

⁴⁹ It was first published in *Spring is Rebellious*. 1990. Ed. Karen Press and Ingrid de Kok. Cape Town: Buchu Books. Since then I have found it in various publications, such as *Writing South Africa. Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970-1995* (1998).

by Manchester University Press. Out of print and almost impossible to get hold of, it was then republished at an exorbitant price under the title of *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: South African Literature and Culture*.⁵⁰ It is perhaps because of the later dating of Sachs' essay that he does make one explicit reference to women, when discussing the tensions within the African National Congress (ANC): 'Indeed, the whole issue of women's liberation, for so long treated in an abstract way, is finally forcing itself on to the agenda of action and thought, a profound question of cultural transformation' (242). Nevertheless, Ndebele's work studies the issue of the need for a change in direction in South African aesthetics in much greater depth.

Following this line of thought, Gordimer explained in different versions of her influential conference/essay 'The Essential Gesture' that 'many black writers of quality' of the 1980s, such as Ndebele, Ahmed Essop and Es'kia Mphahlele, 'have come into conflict with the demand from without – responsibility as orthodoxy (a white interpretation) – and have begun to negotiate the right to their own, inner interpretations of the essential gesture by which they are part of the black struggle' (1988, 293). The writer's revolutionary responsibility 'may be posited by him as the discovery, in his own words, of the revolutionary spirit that rescues for the present – and for the post-revolutionary future – that nobility of ordinary men and women to be found only among their doubts, culpabilities, shortcomings...'. Gordimer might well be referring to Ndebele, because he practises what he preaches in his collection of stories, *Fools and Other Stories* (1985), although he believes that probably the novel is the 'only art form that can encompass the range of problems before us' (Ndebele 1988, 216). These stories, set in the township of Charterston, 'a quiet law-abiding community' some thirty-three miles outside Johannesburg, observe the world

50 Besides this University Press, I had also written to some South African publishing houses, asking for this work and that of Miriam Tlali, but had no success other than Tlali's *Footprints in the Quag*, which is a collection of stories. Ndebele's work under the latter title mentioned above became accessible in 2006 when the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press republished it.

from a boy's perspective, until the final story 'Fools', in which a disgraced teacher is the focal character (Ndebele 1985, 225). The childhood memories include a child's rebellion against his parents' aspirations, a teenager's trial of endurance to prove himself worthy of his street-gang, and a child's adulation of his uncle, a trumpet-player. Ndebele sustains that there must be a 'change of discourse from the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration'. The strategies he mentions are observable in his texts: he employs not only a constant shift in perspective but also 'an open-endedness in the use of language, a search for originality of expression and a sensitivity to dialogue' (Ndebele 1988, 216). Such unacknowledged Southern African women writers as Bessie Head, Lauretta Ngcobo and Farida Karodia have explored these strategies for several decades.

Each of Ndebele's narratives gives us an insight into his aesthetic theory, but it is brother Mandla who outlines it most explicitly in 'Uncle'. He has just finished a charcoal drawing of Uncle, which surprises the child, because it is not Uncle as he had 'assumed':

The part that brings out the sound is so open that it is almost half the size of Uncle. And the rest of the trumpet is completely covered by Uncle's big hands and thick fingers. And Uncle's lips seem to have become part of the hands and seem to be swallowing the trumpet. (1985, 77-80)

Brother Mandla gladly explains this sketch from his particular spatial perspective, precisely because it is addressed to them. He claims that his ancestors had been with him when he met Uncle the day before "because he has always turned my drawings and sculptures into sound. My brother, art makes ordinary things extraordinary". Having won prizes in Johannesburg, been to parties in the white suburbs, he has returned, leaving his fame behind him. He did not mind the glory: "But there was something missing: there was no history to it. (...) There was no tradition." His sculpture 'The Hunchback' was his response: it was not the hunch that made him groan, but

“the emptiness of our minds”. In this small town, brother Mandla does not have to pretend or even offer an explanation that might compromise his art: “I am nothing, and that is where I begin, rather than from an imagined somethingness”. Salman Rushdie writes: ‘Art is a passion of the mind. And the imagination works best when it is most free’ (1992, 20). On account of his physical alienation from his homeland, Mandla has created ‘imaginary homelands’, such as his sculpture, and upon his return he reclaims ‘precisely the thing that was lost’ (Rushdie 1992, 10): that is, he recovers his soul after listening to Uncle’s music.⁵¹

Bessie Head has made similar remarks to those of brother Mandla. ‘The circumstances of my birth seemed to make it necessary to obliterate all traces of a family freedom. I have not a single known relative on earth (...). I have always been just me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself’ (1990, 3). Thus, as Desiree Lewis argues, ‘her compound disinheritance is imbued with an assertive personal freedom’ (23). Head’s redefinition of subject positions can, Lewis goes on to say, be explored in relation to Stuart Hall’s notion of hybridised identifications, by which means he draws attention to process, ‘rather than to product or any essentialist conception’; that is to say, that ‘change of discourse from the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration’, as Ndebele puts it (1988, 216). Thinking about this process, Rob Nixon argues that ‘Head made herself into what Rushdie calls a ‘translated person’ – she was the ultimate metissage. For in negotiating her impacted sense of loss and her imposed sense of deviancy, she admitted a whole new range of possibilities to the phrase ‘mixed ancestry’ (130). In response to her proposed autobiography, she wrote: ‘I would like the book entitled as LIVING ON AN HORIZON – a title definitive of one who lives outside all social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and living

51 Apologies are extended to all authors for any distortions to their stories when they are summarised.

experience' (qtd. in Lewis 18-19).⁵² Despite some underlying differences, this meeting of minds even tempts one to suggest that Head might also have exerted her influence on Ndebele's aesthetics.

Whether this is the case or not, African women writers have certainly discovered how to represent the extraordinary in the so-called ordinary. It is on this terrain that their imagination thrives, although they cannot be expected, in the circumstances, to go beyond the protest literature of their own making. 'Ordinary people', Elizabeth realizes in Head's *A Question of Power* (1974), 'never mucked up the universe. They don't have that kind of power, wild and flaring out of proportion. They have been the victims of it' (Head 1974, 190). That Elizabeth survives her intense inner struggle confirms her strength; she will not be downtrodden. Aidoo may ironically describe her story 'About a Wedding Feast' as 'kitchen literature' with a vengeance' for those 'who may be allergic to this genre' (*Enigmas & Arrivals* 1), but it never remains trapped in domesticity: the 'recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting' (Bhabha 1994, 9). To put it in Ndebele's words, these women's works of protest are also works of affirmation. The challenge of their art consists in freeing the social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterized patriarchal colonial and post-colonial thought. Their revelations are not confined, however, to that Eurocentric association of sight and knowledge, as the lines from Mongane Serote's poem I quoted earlier might seem to imply. Serote may, however, be playing metaphorically with this western association, which is, as Ashcroft points out, central to the

⁵² BKMM27BHP119. Head wrote on a manual typewriter, so she underlined words she wanted to emphasize.

Europeans' disruption of colonial space: 'With architecture and mapping British colonialism held a two-pronged grip on the spatial reality of colonial societies' (2001, 124-125).

As I repeat throughout this study, any discussion of Anglophone women's writing treats of themes, topics and interests that are difficult to compartmentalise; moreover, I am principally concerned with the representation of the ordinary in Southern African women's literatures from the 1960s to the present day and their description, or redescription, of urban and rural spaces, be they 'masculine' or otherwise.⁵³ An interrelated theme in these literatures is that of internal or external migration, whether voluntary, imposed or forced upon the subject. By this I do not simply mean that post-colonial migrant writing which has been 'defined and canonized by élites' who have chosen, whether for political or professional reasons, to live abroad, writing about their culture of origin from the vantage point of another nation (Boehmer 1995, 240). I extend this definition of privilege for the purposes of examining the transitions in postcolonial Southern African literatures; that is, those written during the 'post-Second World War era' (Boehmer 1995, 3), in which 'a welter of languages', as the Indian Amitav Ghosh writes in his *The Circle of Reason* (1986), alone demonstrates that migration and intercultural exchange are a central issue.⁵⁴ This crossing of borders takes many forms and physical spaces are significant because they are the sites of cultural production. As Rushdie tells us and Elleke Boehmer reminds us, this experience of cultural translation, even when the protagonist moves from one space to another within a country, 'not only stimulates invention, but may also give valuable perspective on conditions in a writer's 'home' nation' (Boehmer 1995, 240). Head's novel, *When Rain Clouds*

53 An historical overview of African Anglophone women's writing could be the subject of another stimulating study. In Southern Africa, it seems to have begun in the late eighteenth century, but there is so little available information that the literatures of the period about which I am writing form a kind of 'boom' in African writing in English. I make reference to earlier texts later on.

54 These literatures also evoke a spirit of resistance, because postcolonial writing does not simply refer, as we have seen, to that published during a given period.

Gather, for example, becomes one of ambivalence and hybridity, expressing a sense of homelessness and a sense of (be)longing to that (real)imagined home. Makhaya, a political refugee from South Africa, and the Englishman Gilbert Balfour have performed, as have other characters in this text, ‘the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, (they have) flown’ (Rushdie 1984, 85). Nevertheless, they have not conquered ‘the force of gravity’, that sense of belonging; they hover ‘in-between’, even if they marry ‘local’ women. By becoming unstuck from their native land, they have ‘floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time’ (Rushdie 1984, 87). To change the metaphor, we shall see how Bessie Head is ‘cut adrift from the only mooring she had known’ (Eilersen 2007, 25) at an early age when she goes away to school. After seeking shelter in several other ports, she eventually anchors in Serowe, a refuge far from the sea, in which she seeks to reinvent herself through her interaction with this community and creates alternative frameworks for new or different imaginings. As she once remarked: ‘I have been the sort of novelist who took great liberties with the novel form, throwing almost anything into it’ (qtd. in Eilersen 2007, 308).

Literature that treats of migration, and thus transition, should not merely concern those characters/authors who have sought refuge in another country, but should include ‘resettlement’ within the country, be it voluntary, enforced or metaphorical. By resettlement, I am not specifically returning to the concept of the colonial settler communities, even if there are certain cases which reveal the complexities involved, such as that mentioned in *Changes* by Ama Ata Aidoo’s narrator, when the ‘native’ couple move into Sweet Breezes Hill, which ‘had been the most prestigious of the colonial residential areas’ (1991, 16). Especially in a country which has been politically and culturally transformed through colonisation, a change in location generally gives rise to a sense of loss, displacement and isolation, as the persons involved realise that their

mother tongue, way of life, religion, customs and rituals can no longer be articulated or experienced in the same way. Ndebele demonstrates this in his story 'Uncle'. One result of the state of divide that has existed for so long in South Africa is that its 'literatures have, until quite recently, existed and developed in quite stunning and, I grant, disheartening, isolation', even though they may treat the same subjects (Wyk Smith 75). We should remember, however, that dwelling in the "inbetween" space need not represent loss alone: it gives us the opportunity 'to be part of a revisionary time, (...) to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic communality; *to touch the future on its hither side*' (Bhabha 1994, 7).⁵⁵ This isolation of literatures, even those in the same tongue, in Southern Africa might well be overcome by studying the effects of migration not only on the persons who flee but on those who remain, when the occasion permits as it does, for example, in Farida Karodia's *Other Secrets* (2000) or Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995). When crossing these metaphorical and geographical borders, the characters constantly have to translate themselves, just as others translate them, in their attempt to communicate between cultures (Wade 49).

An example that springs to mind is Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), in which July, a migrant worker, and the Smales family flee the city of Johannesburg in their yellow bakkie upon the outbreak of what promises to be a bloody revolution. Gordimer envisages this as part of the transition from one order to another, as is clear in her epigraph taken from Antonio Gramsci: 'The old are dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms'. Moreover, the Smales have called their sons Victor and Royce ('royal') and their daughter Gina ('Regina') as contrasted to July, the 'Julius Caesar' whose force 'ushers

⁵⁵ This 'in-between' space has given rise to multiple debates. In this context, Rushdie used it first and then Bhabha. As we shall see throughout, it is a space that is suggestive as a third space, which provides alternatives to the either/or discourse. In my opinion, it is not, as Bhabha argues in his discussion of Gordimer's *My Son's Story*, the space of the 'Coloured' person in South Africa during the apartheid era.

in change and who is perhaps representative of a more plebeian rule' (Folks 115). Their arrival in the community of their manservant creates the effect, in general terms, of disempowering them and empowering July, although the shift in power should not, of course, be simply stated in oppositional terms. The dislocation and gradual dispossession of the Smales family changes the colonial balance of power, so that July, now in the position of *paterfamilias*, can challenge his life-long role of dependence on Bam Smales, the former white employer who feels emasculated in his new role as 'guest and stranger' (Gordimer 1981, 35). The 'cultural hybridity' of the 'borderline conditions' of both the Smales and July forces them 'to 'translate', and therefore reinscribe the social imaginary' (Bhabha 1994, 6). The total breakdown in communication between Maureen Smales and July illustrates this: 'Suddenly he began to talk at her in his own language, his face flickering powerfully. (...) She understood although she knew no word.' That is, she understood how she had constructed him 'in order for him to be her idea of him. But for himself - to be intelligent, honest, dignified for *her* was nothing; his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others' (Gordimer 1981, 152-3). July 'spoke in English what belonged in English'; his outburst reveals the way he has found to redescribe his situation, and 'their words sank into the broken clay walls like spilt blood'. There is also a sense of deeper historical displacement, which reminds us of Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), when the white guests were welcomed to the country and could live in harmony with the local peoples if, and only if, they respected their hosts. Despite the hosts' oppression, *Mhudi*, the 'original mother (,) perhaps Mother Africa', as the South African scholar Tim Couzens suggests, still has a voice at the end (20). Ra-Thaga, her husband, says: 'my ears shall be open to one call only – the call of your voice' (Plaatje 188). Decades later, *July's People* ends with Maureen's thoughts as she flees towards a helicopter of unknown origin hovering menacingly overhead and evoking the "swan"

of Yeats' 'Leda and the Swan'. The narrator's apparent censure of the outcome suggests that South African whites cannot escape 'the political and ideological implications of race (repression, guilt) and must constantly find ways to accept responsibility for black suffering' (Uraizee 21).

Through her literary practice and her *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* (1981) in particular, Bessie Head gives us many an insight into the ways in which African women writers are challenging the conventions as much of the so-called English/American literatures as of their own literatures. In relation to the transitions in African women's writing, I had formerly proposed Head and Gordimer as tentative guidelines for this study. Both wrote introductory essays to Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography, *Call Me Woman* (1985), which reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century when her family benefitted 'from a special form of land tenure common to many Barolong tribes' and then traces the pattern of her life, so like that of many other black people, as a political activist in Soweto, Johannesburg, 'a community lost between its old heritage and culture and that of its colonists', as Head wrote (1985, xiv). For Gordimer, Kuzwayo 'Africanised the Western concept of woman and in herself achieved a synthesis with meaning for all who experience cultural conflict'; she is, moreover, 'one of those people who gives me faith in the new and different South Africa they will create' (1985, xi-xii). Why does this courageous South African campaigner for human rights base herself on **the** 'Western concept of woman' to achieve this meaningful synthesis and give her faith in a new South Africa they will create? This dialectic debate of the value of the particular and the reach for the universal, so typical of Gordimer, makes us question, as she would wish, much of what she says. A question that Miriam Tlali, another early key figure in this literary mosaic, might well discuss; from her first novel *Muriel at the Metropolitan* she 'dared' to speak out against the South African system and against 'the dominance of male writing which had attended black literature from the very beginning'

(Ngcobo 1989, xv).

Some might level the accusation that such an approach counters the non-racial, non-sexist democratic ideal of most Southern African countries, but it is clear that until the early 1970s, ‘the writing of women represented something of a lost continent in both colonial and postcolonial nationalist discourses’ (Boehmer 1995, 224). Colonised women suffered from oppression on many more fronts than colonial women, and ‘the grim irony of the independence period was that many of these forms of exclusion were reinforced by the pressures of national liberation’. Whereas men were, at this time, ‘invoked as leaders and citizens of the new nation’, women were widely regarded as ‘icons of national values, or idealized custodians of tradition’ (225). They would later challenge these icons in the strongest of terms. Yvonne Vera’s ‘Independence Day’ ruthlessly undermines the aesthetics of iconicity at the time of Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980. A nameless man decides to celebrate the great day with a cold beer and an anonymous woman. As the Prince of Wales and the new Head of Government (Robert Mugabe) walk to the flagpole in the stadium, the man ‘pushed the woman onto the floor. He was going into the new era in style and triumph. She opened her legs. It was midnight, and the new flag went up. The magic time of change. Green, yellow, white. Food, wealth, reconciliation’ (1999, 29). The optimistic public rhetoric embodied by the flag has remained precisely that: the patriarchal politics, forged by whites and blacks alike, have led the country to its current disastrous situation. Although this is simply an overview, it is worth remembering that there is a wide range of gender differences – sexuality, ‘race’, ethnicity, class, work, language, religion and age, among others – and they arise in specific contexts: ‘At one moment the racial may take priority over sexual, and in another ethnicity may act as the defining difference’ (Butler 50). For instance, in South Africa, as Gertrude Fester explains, ‘during the Black Consciousness period (of the 1970s), race was

prioritized. However, because of the 1980-90s context and of women's multiple and contradictory subjectivities, formations emphasising gender emerged' (12). The gendered picture thus began to change at this time, when literature became 'a powerful medium through which self-definition was sought' and there was a general consensus, partly through the United Democratic Front, that apartheid had run its course.

The other Southern African writers I mention, such as Farida Karodia, Zoë Wicomb, Sindiwe Magona from South Africa, and Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera from Zimbabwe, have at least one characteristic in common: they all write in English, despite the differences in their backgrounds. If we take language as the common denominator, as Nair Anaya (5) suggests, rather than national frontiers imposed by the Europeans in Berlin in the 1880s, we discover that the appropriation of a dominant language and 'the shift of dominant poetics towards the standards of a minority or post-colonial people are potent means of realigning power structures' and 'asserting an independent world-view' (Tymoczko 35). The inclusion of two Zimbabwean writers does complicate matters, in that their social, historical and cultural conditions differ, but they must remain, because their novels exude that energy and courage so characteristic of African women's writing in general, and Southern African women's writing in particular. Few of these authors restrict themselves to one genre: they write novels, short stories, plays, poetry and, in some cases, film scripts. By no means inhibited by the male tradition, they revitalise and challenge it by being surprisingly experimental in style, technique, and subject matter; I say surprisingly experimental because one might expect a young body of work to follow the conventions more closely.

I have noticed several tendencies in these writers' work. For instance, they call into question the literary and historical view presented by male writers, who tend to forget the

countryside and the omnipresence of women activists represented in such works as Wicomb's *David's Story*, Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, and Boehmer's *Bloodlines*. For this reason, it is important to retrieve the stories of these women. Bessie Head's interest in the history of her adopted community began when she discovered the story of Khama III, or Khama, the Great, as she calls him, who fascinated her. She became involved in the complex task of telling his history from an African woman's perspective in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* and then decided to extend it to a full-length study in a work she called *A Bewitched Crossroad*. 'I have found the key to Southern Africa in Khama, the Great', she wrote to Wendy and Patrick Cullinan, 'and I kept on thinking that I'd have to do much more on him – perhaps that great novel on Southern Africa because my generation never accepted that we were the dogs of anyone' (*The Imaginative Trespasser* 14). She picked up what she said would be her first line from a remark a local cattle farmer made to her as they were standing in the queue at the post office: 'Well of course Botswana has always been black man's country', but she changed her mind (qtd. in Eilersen 2007, 306). She also gave up the idea of writing her Khama novel, although he still remains a central figure in *A Bewitched Crossroad*, her final work.

Sindiwe Magona's autobiography, *To My Children's Children*, reveals some of the themes I hope to cover. The narrator decides to write down her life-story for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The text opens with these words:

Child of the Child of My Child

As ours is an oral tradition I would like you to hear from my own lips what it was like living in 1940s onwards. What it was like in the times of your great-mother, me.

However, my people no longer live long lives. Generations no longer set eyes on one another. Therefore, I fear I may not live long enough to do my duty to you, to let you know who you are and whence you are. So, I will keep, for you, my words in this manner. (1)

What stands out is the narrator's nostalgia for a community in which a grandmother passes on her

life-story to the future generations, answering whatever questions she is asked. The socio-political situation has, sadly, transformed story-telling and she must transcribe it, in the hope that they will read it. The rupture of this continuity is perhaps one of the most significant changes in African literatures, as it is in any literature throughout the world. Orality entails ‘a critique of writing (...): its lifelessness, its unanswerability, the damage it does to memory’ (Steiner 397). The speaking self becomes the writerly self, which is reliant on the suspect fixity of the textual, but Magona does not allow the speaking self to be forgotten or suppressed. Whereas the voice emerging from this woman’s life begins her story shortly before the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948, Kuzwayo’s life-story started at the beginning of the twentieth century. The retrieval of women’s voices through autobiography depends on the narrator’s memory that constructs a version of her identity. The ‘greatmother’ writes:

As far back as I can remember, there has always been a place in which I belonged with a certainty that nothing has been able to take from me. When I say place that means less a geographical locality and more a group of people with whom I am connected and to whom I belong. This is a given, a constant in my life. (Magona 1991, 1-2)

The narrator establishes, from the start, the significance of memory, which she relates with the word ‘place’. This is generally associated with a ‘geographical locality’, but in this case it refers to a group of people, which constructs a sense of belonging. ‘How does space become place?’ Erica Carter and her co-authors ask: place is, to their mind, ‘space to which meaning has been ascribed’ (*Space and Place* xii). As we shall see in Part III, this word, like many others, suggests ways in which foreign readers can avoid a kind of ‘orientalism’ and understand the cultural significance of the spaces named and described in this region.

The life-story is one form that gave women the opportunity, as it had the earlier male nationalists, ‘to call into being an autonomous selfhood’ Boehmer argues (1995, 225). She cites

the example of the situation in South Africa in the 1980s when government repression was at its height. At this time, ‘autobiographies by black women first began to appear in significant numbers’. Autobiography ‘allowed them to give shape to an identity grounded in (their) diverse experiences of endurance and overcoming’, as it helped them to forge ‘political solidarity, reaching out to black women caught in similar situations’. Elaine Unterhalter, a South African living overseas and studying the effect of exile and migration on South African women from evidence in interviews and works written by émigrées, sustains that exile and migration has been ‘a major spur to South African women’s creativity’ (119). According to her, ‘the experience of exile and migration is a major theme in (their) writing, unlike that of many men in exile’: a difficult statement to agree with. As one would expect, ‘women categorised as white’ have gained greater recognition, but it is worth noting that twelve of the twenty-two authors listed have written autobiographies, from Mary Benson and Hilda Bernstein through Ruth First and Gillian Slovo to Zoë Wicomb, Sindiwe Magona, Phyllis Ntantala and Freda Matthews. ‘This portrayal of exile in terms of journey towards new identities, a different vision of the world, echoes the post-structuralist approach to theorising diaspora identities as a journey of shifting selves’ (Unterhalter 119). That is to say, this journey and its consequences fall within the post-colonial approaches that tend to analyse ‘diaspora communities (...) in terms of the hybridity of their culture, the obviously fractured and constantly sliding and relational aspects of identities, both for individuals and communities’ (Unterhalter 108).

This is crucial to my study of migrant writing. Discursive positions and material locations are interrelated, without ever forming an unchanging unity or connection. However, in migrant writing, as these scholars indicate, the ‘very notion of ‘location’’ changes, and ‘‘place’ becomes layered with numerous meanings’ (Anderson 114). Paul Gilroy suggests that we might substitute

‘placeless imaginings of identity’ for the powerful claims of ‘roots and territory’ and think about movement as an alternative to the ‘sedentary poetics of either blood or soil’ (128). Moving beyond nation and genealogy, he takes the modern African diaspora as his model for this new way of thinking about identity and identification, in which contingent and temporary linkages enable us to perceive ‘new understandings of self, sameness and solidarity’. These linkages transform notions of space and identity, creating ‘new possibilities and new pleasures’ as we are challenged to apprehend ‘mutable forms that can redefine the idea of culture through a reconciliation with movement and complex, dynamic variation’ (129-30). Diaspora allows us to valorise forms of kinship other than those of national and familial forms that tend to draw on notions of gender hierarchy in order to ensure the continuance of blood lines: ‘The integrity of the nation becomes the integrity of its masculinity. Indeed it can only be a nation if the correct version of gender hierarchy has been established and reproduced’ (127): an inexplicable conclusion to an interesting discussion.

The novel of formation and political awakening to self-assertion, such as Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) and *One Is Enough* (1981), Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* (1976), Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy, or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977), a truly innovative work, constitutes another complex network in African women’s migrant writing in English. These literary works of resistance not only thematise race and gender ‘as a developmental issue’ from very different cultural and socio-political locations and perspectives, but they stand ‘in opposition to the entire African male literary tradition – a tradition to which the very notion of female development is alien’ (Stratton 107). The narrator of Head’s short story ‘The Collector of Treasures’ tells us that among the ‘many errors’ the ancestors

made was that they gave men ‘a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffer from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life’ (1977, 92). The shifting identities of the characters as they try to come to terms with their different selves in their changing societies, which are, as they are, naming and renaming the colonial legacy, highlight the growth in critical consciousness of these women and their subsequent empowerment: Rushdie echoes bell hooks when he argues that ‘re-describing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it’ (1992, 14). The issue becomes, in one sense, a question of power, a variation on that which Bessie Head examined in her “almost autobiographical” novel of the same name (Eilersen 1995, 149). The ‘soul power’ Head associates with the autobiographical is, as she has written, ‘linked in some way to the creative function, the dreamer of new dreams; and the essential ingredient in creativity is to create and let the dream fly away with a soft hand and heart’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 294).⁵⁶

Boehmer cites Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy, or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977) as ‘a significant early testament to a black woman’s self-assured and resistant otherness’ – seemingly so unlike Rosa Burger’s insecurity in Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, until we realise that silence is the mark of her resistance (1995, 226-27). In Aidoo’s novel, the protagonist Sissie makes her way to England via Germany, whereas Rosa goes to France. According to Boehmer, this change from one location to another exemplifies a crucial feature of postcolonial women’s writing, its ‘mosaic or composite quality’, which arises from the stress on the multiplicity of differences and the concern ‘to bring to the fore the specific textures’ of their own existence. Bearing their distinct cultural and political contexts in mind, we perceive how these creators ‘emphasize the need for a lively heterogeneity of styles and speaking positions in their work’.

⁵⁶ Gillian Stead Eilersen quotes from Bessie Head Papers held by Khama Memorial Museum, Serowe, Botswana.

It is ‘the mixing and permutation of forms’, as Head demonstrates in *The Question of Power*, ‘which in literature gives an occasion and a framework for new imaginings’ (Boehmer 1998, 47). Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2000) is a delightfully self-conscious example of this mixing of forms; she even challenges the theoretical stance she adopts in academic articles. The narrator foregrounds the constraints on her act of narration, announcing that she is simply a recorder of David Dirkse’s story, but that this former freedom fighter who is trained not to reveal anything will not tell her what the subject is, or read the whole manuscript:

Aesthetics, he said, should be left to the so-called artists, to the writers and readers of fiction. There is no need to fret about writing, about our choice of words in the New South Africa; rather, we will have to make do with mixtures of meaning, will have to rely on typographic devices like the slash for many more years, he predicted. (Wicomb 2000, 3)

David is ‘not much of a reader’, the narrator assures us (Wicomb 2000, 140). Despite her unfamiliarity with his world, the narrator/reader makes ‘numerous inferences’ from David’s notes, realising that he ‘knows nothing of the art of inferencing’ (Wicomb 2000, 134-35). Hence, they engage in a stimulating dialogue, such as that which might develop between the critic and the subject under study. In this case, it is a person of Griqua descent, which takes Wicomb and her narrator back to *God’s Stepchildren* (1924), a novel about miscegenation written by the South African Sarah Gertrude Millin from a white and racist perspective.⁵⁷ Dialogue is, thus, central to this narrative, as David, his ‘ghost writer’ and the author create, by means of their research, an intertextual web with literary and historical texts. This web spun by transitional African women writers is central to their postcolonial stance.

Another point of interest in postcolonial migrant literature is the role biography plays: the

⁵⁷ The history of the Griqua peoples is so complex that I cannot provide a definition in a few words, other than to say that they form part of the South African nation and have survived, with a many a change, the different European invasions. The South African official website provides one version of their history: www.sahistory.org.za (08/08/2013).

life-story is, once again, transformed by the imagination. Boehmer describes such émigrés or ‘cultural travellers’ as Salman Rushdie, Jamaica Kincaid, Caryl Phillips, Ben Okri and Rohinton Mistry in the following manner:

Ex-colonial by birth, ‘Third World’ in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national background (1995, 233).

The writers are the point of departure; their novels often retrace ‘biographical paths’ and are marked ‘by the pull of conflicting philosophies and contrasting forms of social behaviour’. The hybridity of the migrant text is also ‘form-giving, lending meaning to the bewildering array of cultural translations which migrants must make’ (Boehmer 1995, 234). Surely one could say the same of any literary work written ‘on the colonial outskirts’? Indeed, Chapman argues that any comparative approach that bears the socio-political context in mind should open ‘the literary field to acts of cultural translation’, especially ‘at a time when the intent in southern Africa as a whole is to move beyond conflicts of the past and chart new African destinies’ (1996, 41-48). The tension between literatures that grow in isolation, as I have mentioned, and those that are inevitably comparative is thought-provoking. The ‘democratising process in this part of Africa’, Chapman sustains, ‘requires that we begin carrying information across our own borders’.

This becomes a subject of the texts themselves, as we observe, for instance, in Gordimer’s *The Pickup* (2001), set in the social mix of the new South Africa and an Arab village in the desert, which, like the parched South African Karoo, has symbolic significance for Julie Summers ‘as a place of solitude, a place of physical and spiritual testing’ when she emigrates (Wade 41): ‘The stream of vision, thoughts, re-creation has a kind of narrative of its own; the desert is a good place for it to relate itself’, she thinks (Gordimer 2001, 245). This young woman from a

dysfunctional but wealthy family and her lover, Abdu, his pseudonym in South Africa as an illegal immigrant, or Ibrahim ibn Musa, continually engage in translation, understood as ‘the activity of making the insights of one culture accessible to another’ (Wade 49). By transporting her character to an Arab village in an unnamed country, Gordimer appears to fall prey to at least some of the stereotyping Edward Said’s *Orientalism* criticises, though she does reveal an ironic awareness of her stance. In her earlier novel *The House Gun* (1998), the Lindgards similarly enter unknown territory, surprisingly that of a South African courtroom, a foreign country for them, and of dependence upon Motsamai Hamilton, a brilliant black lawyer, who becomes, in *The Pickup*, a successful businessman, and helps Julie and Abdu leave South Africa, ‘for the survival and sanity of their souls and for the redefinition of meaning in their lives’, writes Per Wastberg, a member of the Nobel Committee for Literature of the Swedish Academy (8).⁵⁸ Bessie Head, in turn, explores internal migration and racism in her novel *Maru* (1971) by rendering visible the prejudice against the Bushmen or Masarwa, who traditionally lived in the Kalahari Desert, in the figure of Margaret Cadmore, so named by her missionary foster-mother. Maru, the future chief, falls in love with Margaret, now a young teacher in Dilepe. Trying to sort out his preconceptions, he thinks: ‘Who could absorb the Masarwa, who hardly looked African, but Chinese? How universal was the language of oppression. They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: ‘They can’t think of themselves. They don’t know anything’’ (1995, 108-109). Much of the adaptation to new ways of thinking and being occurs through language and what initially seems to be a barrier to communication becomes, at times, a means for

⁵⁸ Despite the different circumstances, one cannot help but make the association between *The House Gun* and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). Duncan’s sentence, upon the abolition of the death penalty, and the mitigating circumstances of a *crime passionnel*, bear the full burden of the injustice of Absalom Kumalo’s condemnation to death for murdering the son of a white farmer, James Jarvis. Duncan’s friend who stands by him and his parents is called Khulu.

productive cross-cultural exchange. Margaret Cadmore uses the language of painting to communicate with Maru. Her themes from everyday life in the village carry ‘a message to his own heart. Look! Don’t you see! We are the people who have the strength to build a new world! And his heart agreed’ (Head 1995, 107-108). Gordimer’s characteristic detachment from and commitment to her country could not be clearer in *The Pickup*, in which she explores the conflicts involved in cross-cultural communication in post-apartheid South Africa, as Head does in the very different circumstances of Botswana, shortly after independence, when Seretse Khama, who had earlier married the Englishwoman Ruth Williams, much to the initial displeasure of his uncle and other members of his tribe, became the nation’s first Prime Minister. The protagonist in each novel represents the author’s status as an out/insider.

The township novel, a category unto itself, is another example of Southern African internal migrant literatures that give a greater insight into cultural and aesthetic experience. In these fictional universes, the authorities categorise the characters that have just arrived in the city by their value-systems, which are totally foreign to the newcomers. A forerunner of the post-colonial renaissance in Southern African literature was Peter Abrahams, whose first novel *The Mine Boy* (1946) ‘remains (in 1985) staple reading about black-white relationships in an urban industrial society’ (Gray 319). The title itself represents the criticism of a white capitalist perspective of the black proletariat, who are, other than in their own location, ‘voiceless, landless, oppressed’, nameless and faceless, ‘their victimization compounded by their dislocation from tribal ties’ (Nfah-Abbenyi 124). *The Mine Boy* serves as one of the models later writers may build upon. *Ways of Dying* (1995), a shocking and magical text written by the successful South African playwright and novelist Zakes Mda, narrates the odyssey of Toloki from a rural community to the outskirts of a violent city in the new South Africa, where he is eventually reunited with the

beautiful Noria, who had left the village earlier, and they heal each other's wounds of the past.⁵⁹ The moving narration foregrounds the oral tradition and is, purportedly, controlled by rumour and gossip:

It is not different, really, here in the city. Just like back in the village, we live our lives together as one. We know everything about everybody. (...) We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the story-teller begins the story, 'They say it once happened (...)', we are the 'they'. No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria. (Mda 1995, 12)

This definition of orature is worth bearing in mind, especially when we read Head's *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. Placed in a setting after the declaration of amnesty (1990) when the armed struggle was suspended, Mda's text, like *David's Story*, expresses an amusing self-consciousness *vis-à-vis* the act of narration, its post-structuralist readers and copyright. Humour has always been a release for black Southern African writers. The absence of laughter and music in 'white writing', as J. M. Coetzee has called it, makes us aware of its constraints.

More important texts, for my purposes, are Bessie Head's *The Cardinals*, a novella published posthumously in 1993 to be discussed later, and *Butterfly Burning*, published in 1998 by the Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera and set in Makokoba, a township in Bulawayo, in the late 1940s. Vera's novel presents a moving, lively, if tragic, 'rewriting' of Abrahams' *Mine Boy*, creating a beautiful verbal mosaic inspired by its protagonist Phephelaphia, who is captivated by the township but yearns for independence. Nevertheless, the foregrounding of Phephelaphia's

⁵⁹ In Wicomb's *David's Story*, we are told that 'tolokos' is a mythical 'evil creature of popular superstition' (Wicomb 2000, 218). Toloki works as a professional mourner, so we might think that his name derives from 'tolokos'. In Mda's *Cion*, Toloki is transplanted to the culture of Ohio in the USA, as he creates his own story, trying to avoid the author at all times. This fascinating novel explores once more his appeal of constructing a modern self unfettered by history and tradition: in this case, it may be that of the itinerant mourner or of the African-American community.

dilemma makes this a very different text from *Mine Boy*. ‘Historians tell us’, Ranka Primorac argues, that women present in the early Rhodesian town ‘were not conceptualized as rightful inhabitants: there was, literally, no urban place a woman, especially black, could comfortably claim as her own’ (2003, 105).

Finding a space in which to write is frustrating, Aidoo argues, if the literary establishment ignores women writers:

(I)t is especially pathetic to keep on writing without having any consistent, active, critical intelligence that is interested in you as an artist (...). Therefore, it is precisely from this point that African writing women’s reality begins to differ somewhat from that of the male African writer. (1988, 158)

This brings us, belatedly, to the question of literature in space and space in literature, a topic that cannot be disregarded when studying African women’s writing. As I map the context in which we are inscribing Head’s writing, so we should briefly discuss the term mapping, which has several interrelated meanings: to put the migrant literature written by women on the map, to delineate how it is represented and/or transformed, and, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, ‘to establish the relative positions, or the spatial relations or distribution’ of the components. Mapping may also be associated, as the O.E.D. implies, with the term ‘configuring’, which means, figuratively speaking, ‘to frame by construction, to fashion to shape’ or ‘to fashion according to something else as a model...’. As a literary phenomenon, mapping means placing it in its space, Franco Moretti argues (7). Even if I cannot study this subject in the depth it deserves, two concepts coexist, and, indeed, overlap in his ‘literary geography’: ‘the study of *space in literature*; or else, *of literature in space*’. His examples are significant. Whereas the former treats of fictional space, such as ‘the Africa of colonial romances’, the latter treats of ‘real historical space: the provincial libraries of Victorian Britain, or the European diffusion of *Don Quixote* and

Buddenbrooks' (Moretti 1). In terms of colonial literature, we only have to remember the map at the beginning of *King Solomon's Mines* by H. Rider Haggard, which seems, at least from a feminist perspective, to represent a female torso, with all that this implies for the white male adventurers of the nineteenth century. The mythology persists, it appears. In Boehmer's *An Immaculate Figure* (1993), Rosandra White, an unselfconscious and vacuous white South African, lives, as Sarah Nuttall argues, 'in a world where men rather than women act upon the land, and the men she accompanies conquer and reshape the African land according to their own desires and fantasies, just as they appropriate and act upon her own body' (1996, 226-28). It seems that 'white South African representations themselves have been 'infected' by fantasies of the African land' derived from a romance tradition. What is striking is the smallness of the space for 'an alternative response', a 'less exclusivist sense of belonging'.

Objections are often raised against the study of space within a literary text, because, as Henri Lefebvre initially argues, *any* search for space in literary texts 'will find it everywhere in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about' (15). From a postcolonial perspective, studies of this kind are often reduced to dyads, such as abstract/concrete, centre/periphery and text/context, which do 'an injustice to the complexity of the spaces postcolonial texts describe' (Moore 3-4). In other words, 'postcolonial theory by and large ignores the complex *production* of space in favour of a neat divide between 'real space' and 'social space'', Moore suggests, without exploring the 'interaction between 'subjects' and their space and surroundings' (Lefebvre 18). When developing his argument on the notion of transition, Lefebvre states that the very form of space 'stems from the dominance of the male principle, with its violence and love of warfare', its 'use and overuse of straight lines, right angles, and strict (rectilinear) perspective' (409-10). The map of Africa demonstrates this abuse

of straight lines, which dominated the partition of this continent, without a single thought for the inhabitants, at the Conference of Berlin held between November 15, 1884 and November 26, 1885 under the leadership of the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck.⁶⁰ The ‘supposedly manly virtues’ inherent to this principle ‘can only lead to a generalized state of deprivation: from ‘private’ property to the Great Castration’. In these circumstances, it is inevitable that ‘feminine revolts should occur, that the female principle should seek revenge’. Whatever the disadvantages of a mere ‘inversion of the masculine version’, the contradiction may ‘be resolved in this way, and the split bridged. But not necessarily’. In Lefebvre’s opinion, space ‘is becoming the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles’; it is a medium, a milieu, an intermediary, ‘but its role is less and less neutral, more and more active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end’.

Despite its occidental perspective, Lefebvre’s argument is stimulating. However, my idea is that this study of Head’s work in space and within the context of African women’s writing should be as concrete as possible, even if theoretical abstraction is, at times, inevitable. My proposal is to focus mainly on the mode of production of women’s literatures in space; a detailed exploration of the mode of production of space in these literatures is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, the former contextualizes the latter, which includes how the different subjects produce textual spaces and how they interact with them. For example, women writers have been largely excluded by western and by male African scholars from the critical and literary canons of many African countries until the late 1980s. Except for the odd token writers, I have little doubt

⁶⁰ This abuse is also noted in Cecil John Rhodes’ plan for a telegraph line from Cape Town to Cairo. His British South African Company used every means to convince the local realms to be placed under its rule. The Tswana Kings would not sign any agreement and travelled to London to seek help. After winning their case that the Bechuanaland Protectorate would be governed by Britain, Rhodes commented: ‘It is humiliating to be utterly beaten by these niggers’ (Parsons 179-181).

that the early decades of the twentieth century were dominated by white writing in South Africa. According to Stratton, '1966 is a significant date in African literary history', because in that year 'Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*, the first novel to be published by the East African Publishing House, and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, the first work by a woman in the Heinemann African Writers Series, both appeared' (58). Although Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* was first published by Victor Gollancz in 1969, it did not appear in the African Writers Series until 1987.⁶¹ For reasons of marriage, family organization, 'the paucity of women's education' (Nfah-Abbenyi 3) and the prioritising of the struggle for equality, the 'women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies' (Brown 3). This disregard for 'African women writers on the continent has become a tradition, implicit, rather than formally stated, but a tradition nonetheless'. In relation to South African culture, the international consumer 'has been encouraged to view South Africa as an ideological battleground that represents the Manichean conflict *par excellence*', Jolly and Attridge argue (1998, 3-4). It is 'both simplistic and fallacious' to utilise South Africa during apartheid as emblematic of racial struggles internationally, or to use the inauguration of the 'New South Africa' (...) 'as a symbol of the triumph of multiculturalism over racism and other forms of discrimination'.⁶² This attraction to South Africa-as-spectacle has led, in a different context to that in which Ndebele was writing, to the assumption that there is 'a fairly unproblematic thing called South African literature and that it resides in a series of

61 Chinua Achebe was the Series Editor (1962-1990). His death on March 21, 2013 is deeply regretted by us all.

62 In his opening to the Second Session of the Ninth Parliament of the Republic of South Africa in Cape Town, F.W. de Klerk said: 'I hope that this new Parliament will play a constructive part in both the prelude to negotiations and the negotiating process itself' for the transition to a new South Africa. He later declared: 'I wish to put it plainly that the Government has taken a firm decision to release Mr. Mandela unconditionally'. <www.info.gov.za/speeches/1996> (10/12/2007)

canonical texts', Isabel Hofmeyr wrote in 1993 (19). This is certainly not true: even the canonical texts, if she and I are referring to the same canon, demonstrate the complexities in South African literatures. It is true, however, that the struggle for independence and equality has sidelined all but the most determined African women writers. During the last twenty or so years, the situation has begun to change, as the volumes of critical essays on such writers as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer demonstrate. Ever ready to take advantage of academic interests, publishing houses, such as Garland, are producing very expensive volumes of African feminist criticism. Another trend is to extend the concept of the text in the so-called global village, so as to thwart the demise of literature. Anjal Gera Roy suggests that we might expand the concept of *orature* and *scripture* discussed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to include electronic format as well: 'If text can be cast alternatively in the oral, written and electronic format, the global village will not be seen as the death of the book but its transmutation' (113). Theoretically, this is an exciting proposal in many ways, perhaps most importantly because it would make the book accessible to everyone, thus promoting a 'democratisation' of literary texts and integrating oral-aural cultures. In practical terms, however, the global village has strict economic boundaries.

An obvious example of the mode of production of space in these literatures is the domestic sphere, particularly in communities in which gender roles are strictly adhered to. It is in this space that the imagination runs riot with its stories and their meanings are discussed, demonstrating how Lefebvre's argument can be challenged. As a child, David loved to hear the stories Ouma Ragel and great-Ouma Antjie told him over and over again: in the latter's 'round hut (...) little Davie was drugged with wood smoke' but in the former's more modern home 'a fire crackled under the three-legged pot, and Ouma's stories of the Chief were flavoured with the rich

smell of mealies, beans and marrowbones that simmered all day long' (Wicomb 2000, 147). Unlike Magona's grandchildren, he experiences these intimate oral renderings that alert his senses. In relation to David's concern about the reliability of these stories, the narrator comments:

David ought to have seen how truth, far from being ready-made, takes time to be born, slowly takes shape in the very act of repetition, of telling again and again about the miracles performed by the Chief, seasoned and smoked in Ouma's cooking shelter to last forever – stories that made that much more sense than the remaining fragments of the old man's text. (Wicomb 2000,103)

My interest in this difficult topic, both metaphorical and very literal, is inspired by Yvonne Vera's observation that 'writing has created a free space for most women – much freer than speech'. The written text 'is granted its intimacy' and 'retains its autonomy much more than a woman is allowed in the oral situation', either in everyday discourse or when she has to tell stories of the Chief, for example (Vera 1999, 3). Let us remember Tambudzai's shocking statement: 'I was not sorry when my brother died' (Dangarembga 1). Within its cultural context, this statement would 'make clear that the speaker has been abandoned by her ancestors and all acts of healing summoned' (Vera 1999, 3). Her brother's death gives her the opportunity to write the differing stories of women from her community: entrapment (her mother and Maiguru), rebellion (her cousin Nyasa) and escape (Lucia and her own). This explains Vera's comment when speaking about the African writing woman: 'It is an act of courage that she writes and releases those vital secrets. (...) She is the dreamer and storyteller, the one Bessie Head envisaged with so much idealism – the broken shards come together, and the thunder behind her ears subsides' (Vera 1999, 3). These writers open spaces in an attempt to introduce new values, particularly concerning justice for women. Others are not so gender-specific, however. Lindiwe says in Magona's 'A State of Outrage', for example: "Eloquence is one thing we cannot be accused of lacking, as a people". What they are losing and need to recuperate is 'Umbuntu', a

Zulu word difficult to define in abstract terms; it generally means ‘a social philosophy incorporating the values of personhood, humaneness, morality, honesty and concern for the social good’ (Magona 1999, 123, 121).

South African women’s writing often demonstrates an allegiance with particular spaces. Examples include Gordimer’s allegiance to Johannesburg, Tlali’s to Soweto, Wicomb’s to Cape Town and Kuzwayo’s to her family’s prosperous farm, ‘wrenched’ from them ‘as recently as 1974’ (Kuzwayo 56). Bessie Head proposes another conceptualisation of space by projecting herself ‘as a Southern African writer’, whose writing was ‘profoundly informed’, Nixon argues, ‘by the partial continuities that linked the two adjoining national spaces’ (244). This ‘peculiar shuttling movement between two lands’ represents her in-betweenness (Head 1990, 167). She is, moreover, ‘the only black South African writer – writing in English – to have grown up in the city and to have transformed herself into a rural writer’ (Nixon 250). Her singular achievement as a model for future writers was, to his mind, her power ‘to transform that regionalism into a groundbreaking literary vision’. In this respect, my contention is that African women writers’ exploration of space renders visible and articulates not the ‘Lost European’ (male) that Moretti speaks of when discussing colonial African romances but the ‘lost continent’ of ordinary women (62). This approach ‘seems more important than ever’, for if one is to combat ‘the sort of social imagination that insists, deterministically, on viewing differences within set hierarchies – just as postcolonialism tends to see nationality or race as the determining factor – a sense of how subjectivity is exercised in everyday instances, in all of its complexity, needs to be conveyed’ (Jolly and Attridge 1998, 12). The most powerful resource is literature.

The dismantling of apartheid led to great activity amongst academics to search for new

approaches to Southern African literatures, for example, cultural exchanges across the borders.⁶³ The texts' negotiations with different cultures locate them in a 'third space', that space of cultural hybridity, and place emphasis on intertextuality. For this reason, it seems pointless to discuss Southern African women's writing in isolation. It should be compared, as I have implied, with the writings of other African women – and certain male writers for questions of context, especially since these women have experienced the nationalist discourse of exclusion, which made them begin to talk back. By comparing Southern African women's writing with other works, as is so often the case in anthologies, they are freed from the strictures of nationalist discourses and the accompanying literary canon. The inherent danger is that the texts may tend to float above the historical and socio-political background, even though they may be 'joined by land, by the evidence of the eyes, by current struggles, by a hunger to escape' (Vera 1999, 2): thematic considerations cannot ignore this background. Generally speaking, talking back in literary terms is not such a recent development for Southern African women authors, as some might surmise, given that they have played a highly significant, if largely unrecognised, role in the socio-political struggle against colonialism and its implications. Rendered invisible by the patriarchal system, they 'often have no platform for expressing their disapproval, even their *mihloti*, the tears Miriam Tlali once described so intensely. Like pods, some of these women merely explode. Words become weapons' (Vera 1999, 2). The writing experience of other African women, who have been through the independence crisis and the subsequent upheaval, represents a significant model for Southern African artists. African-American women writers have also

63 It took twenty-four years of insurrection and warfare, with a death toll of between 20,000 to 25,000 persons, for Namibia to gain independence from South Africa on March 21, 1990. Northern Rhodesia became the Republic of Zambia on October 23, 1964, the Protectorate of Bechuanaland became Botswana on September 30, 1966, Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe on April 18, 1980, and Nyasaland became Malawi on July 6, 1964. The death toll in South Africa is uncountable.

exerted a certain influence.

The Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela, who won the Caine Prize in 2000, illustrates this negotiation of different cultural spaces in her delightfully stinging story 'The Museum'. Shadia, her protagonist, goes to a museum with Bryan, a young Scotsman, during the year when Shadia is 'fighting and struggling', unlike him, 'for a piece of paper that would say she was awarded a M.Sc. from a British university' (1999, 88). In this enclosed space, she criticises 'Europe's vision, the clichés about Africa' as she reads the words on a poster:

During the 18th and 19th centuries, northeast Scotland made a disproportionate impact on the world at large by contributing so many skilled and committed individuals. In serving an empire they gave and received, changed others and were themselves changed and often returned home with tangible reminders of their experiences (86).

Her hope of relieving her homesickness is dashed, as she comes face to face with 'a Scottish man from Victorian times. He sat on a chair surrounded by possessions from Africa: overflowing trunks, an ancient map strewn on the floor of the glass cabinet' (85). The description of the amateur-anthropological exploits of this figure reminds us of the District Commissioner in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* who wants to insert Okonkwo's experiences into a book called *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, thus arguably placing it within what Graham Huggan calls 'the tradition of the postcolonial parody-reversal' (42-45). These ideas of 'disappearing cultures' and of 'an untrammelled cultural authenticity are', he goes on to say, 'the stuff of a European anthropological exotic' observed so well in the Malian writer Yambo Ouologuem's novel *Le devoir de violence* (1968) (*Bound to Violence* (1971)), which is a satire of the German explorer/ archaeologist/ ethnologist Leo Viktor Frobenius. The relics the character Shrobenius collects are later sold at exorbitant prices to European museums, thus making his 'exoticist ravings' a 'symptom of anthropological fraud', in which 'the Western reader,

pornographic conspirator, becomes complicit'. Bearing this among other ideas in mind, Shadia then sees a 'portrait of a soldier who died in the first year of the twentieth century'; this immediately makes her think of Bryan – one of those spontaneous associations of mind that highlights cultural differences. She instantly realises her 'mistake': in those days, 'they knew what to take to Africa: doctors, courage, Christianity, commerce, civilization. They knew what they wanted to bring back....' (Aboulela 1999, 86-87).

The evidence is there before her eyes: 'They are telling lies' she tells Bryan. This woman in exile feels threatened and yet empowered by this 'mummified' demonstration of imperialism. Shadia seeks, in vain, the atmosphere of her family and homeland, but it is not there: 'It's all wrong. It's not jungles and antelopes, it's people. We have things like computers and cars. We have 7Up in Africa, and some people, a few people, have bathrooms with golden taps...' (89). Indeed, her own arranged marriage to Fareed, a rich overweight man, 'was a package that came with the 7Up franchise, the paper factory, the big house he was building, his sisters and widowed mother' (74). One form of imperialism fuses with another: both may be lies. In Aberdeen, she discovers a third cultural space epitomized by Bryan, a joiner's son who discards naively the rules of her strict upbringing (81). Bhabha states:

we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves (1994, 38-9).

Shadia decides that if 'she could enter the cabinet, she would not make a good exhibit. She wasn't right, she was too modern, too full of mathematics' (Aboulela 1999, 87). That is to say, she does not form part of the image of Africa 'as a fiercely seductive, if ultimately self-consuming, object of desire' (Huggan 45). In attempting to see herself as the imaginatively conceived other, she

ironically contests the image of a woman as stereotype/commodity within this tiny space and illustrates the power of African women's expression today.

African women's writing permits us to gain a deep insight into the ways they represent space as they experience it. Is Shadia's education overseas enough, for example, to protect her from exhibition in a glass cabinet, or is that her fate, as it was for Sarah Baartman in the nineteenth century, to be exposed to the gaze of the Other in a public space? The conflicts and contradictions persist, as they do in the hegemonic cultures/spaces. What is so fundamental to these women's texts is their power to represent the extraordinary of the ordinary. Their challenge to and questioning of the dominant conceptions of space – those masculine spaces Lefebvre speaks of – are equally significant. Said argues that beyond the 'objective space of a house', for example, lies 'a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name or feel: thus a house may be haunted, or homelike, or prisonlike, or magical' (1995, 55). In this sense, space, like time for that matter, 'acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning...'. The key point here is that there is 'something *more*', which will, of course, change when it is seen through a woman's lens. Does the interaction of these writers' characters with a specific domestic space, for example, force upon us, as Bhabha puts it (1994, 9), 'a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting'?

Southern African women writers have evolved and become empowered spokespersons. Slowly but surely, they have undermined the argument that the struggle for 'racial' equality must necessarily precede the struggle for gender equality, by exposing, exploring and redefining the spaces of the ordinary: a contradiction in terms supported by many women. As I have said, their writing has transformed the literatures of Southern Africa. From the times of early Southern African authors, they have played a crucial role during transitional periods, even if these periods depend on the artist's location.

Part III. Bessie Head's Literary Struggle.

A Woman Writer in Exile

Loose I have my own independence
 from graves from treacherous friends
 the hearth I have comforted glares at me
 my parents have broken themselves off from my death
 the worms stir against my mother, my father
 is clasping his hand which feathers loose against the sky
 loose I believe my old friend has forsaken me
 loose I believe you had mountains toppled in me
 loose my landscape reeks of bitter sun and blood
 What will become of me...
 Ingrid Jonker, 'I Drift in the Wind'

Jonker (1933-1965) wrote this poem in Afrikaans some six months after returning from a lonely stay in Europe and days before walking into the sea at Three Anchor Bay, Cape Town: 'Beauty Queen of Afrikaans Poetry Commits Suicide', the newspaper headline read on July 20, 1965. This captures a crucial dilemma, Antjie Krog, her translator, states: 'If her writing is about the body and lovers, the (male) literary world treats the poet as a 'beauty queen', as one with more sex and emotion than talent'. If she 'writes about politics, male discomfort is audible in the paternalistic tone of words such as naive, innocent, angry, or decadent' (*Women Writing Africa*, 307). Jonker's landscape is, the poetic voice says, 'mine hardened/ fierce embittered but open'. But who accompanies her?

My volk
 follow my lonely fingers,
 people, wrap yourself in sincerity
 veiled by the sun of the future
 My black Africa
 follow my lonely fingers
 follow my absent image
 lonely as an owl
 and the fingers of the world becoming lonelier

lonely as my sister
 My *volk* rotted off away from me
 what will become of this rotted *volk*
 a hand cannot pray alone

The sun shall cover us
 the sun in our eyes for ever covered
 with black crows.

Pleading for the sincerity of friends, family and *volk* who have deserted or misunderstood her, the poetic voice puts her hope in the hand/fist of black Africa. Krog changes an earlier translation. The word *los* becomes 'loose', in the sense of 'cut off, deserted, forgotten, uprooted', instead of 'free'; when Jonker makes a distinction between the 'rotted *volk*' and Africa, Krog keeps this word in her version (formerly translated as nation), because it refers specifically to Afrikaners and their particular destiny. The final stanza reinforces the poem's pessimistic tone: it foresees the poetic persona's death as well as that of her sister, her *volk* and, possibly, her Africa. Bessie Head's critics and scholars regarded her, as she regarded herself, to be an orphan in every sense of the word, but she must have borne in mind the ideological implications underlying Jonker's words when she went into exile; besides, she often felt in her solitude similarly misunderstood, misread, mistranslated, especially by her male contemporaries, and abandoned by the country of her birth.

Part III continues the debate concerning Head's quest for identity, for a voice, for positioning as a subject, and, finally, for belongingness, working within the framework of the various issues running throughout this study. Having gnawed away at the white, slimy pulp of the morula fruit (the name of the marula in Setswana), we reach the juicy flesh, even if the stone is hard to crack. Chapter I proposes a controversial autobiographical study by exploring the South African literary background of Head's times, such an influence on her work, before placing

Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind within the context of her *oeuvre*. This approach underlines the sense of movement in her texts, as Head, a refugee, shifts from one topic to another in an attempt to discover her writerly voice and identity. The other two chapters are dedicated to *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. Chapter 2 centres on its different/differing transformational and transitional spaces, which become, by the flickering light from Head's creative candle, a meaningful place that extends what some critics have called her 'romantic' gesture of belonging at the end of *A Question of Power*. Perhaps unconventionally, this approach centres on three directions in her work: Head's narration and spatial description of the village from her perspective as an inhabitant, her publishing dilemmas and ordeals, and, finally, her possible engagement with the tradition and conventions of the English village narrative, which opens her text to those from other countries and cultures. Perhaps not the first African woman author to undertake this project of 'writing back' by means of intertextuality, a term requiring reformulation in this context, her dialogue with British, Indian, African, Caribbean and American authors further frees her own and other Southern African women's literatures from the local constraints that propose resistant discourses. Her discourse is critical and often subversive, because 'the discourse of the post-colonial is rooted in conflict and struggle' (Ashcroft 2001, 65), but there is no insidious attempt to replace one canon by another or to reconstruct 'the centre which is being subverted'. The underlying debate on gender aesthetics involves, as I have said earlier, a process of deconstruction, construction and reconstruction, creating a complex analogy with the creative revision of history. In this respect, the individual stories, some of which are narrated in her short story collections or in her letters, are crucial to our understanding of Head's community's history and its cultural identity. The interviewees in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* partly outline this approach: 'the pattern of tribal movement and migration and an intimate

knowledge of construction are two themes they raise time and again' (Head 1981, xvii-xviii). Thus, this text does not intend to represent the colonialists' devastation and reconstruction of African communities according to their own paradigms. Concerning Head's aesthetics, we should bear in mind that she was brought up in a print culture. Chapter 3 continues this discussion by exploring Head as a writer of cultures, a translator of the local oral stories. Her identity is clarified through this act of interviewing others and transcribing not only their words but also her own impression of the interview, which gives us an insight into her involvement in this local community. My discussion throughout Part III should dispel any misgivings concerning the eminence of this late African writer and make us realise that her interest in entering into dialogue with other texts is one of her major achievements and aesthetic concerns, not only in imaginative but also in spiritual terms.

Before going any further, I shall delve deeper into the question of gendered aesthetics. Notable in Head's writing is a 'time-lag', to use Bhabha's phrase without all the implications, between her positioning as an African woman and that of her Batswana colleagues. Her upbringing in South Africa reveals its psychic, social and political effect on her writing. The Bamangwato people had quite a different relationship with the colonial power. The compilers of *Women Writing Africa* (xxiii) give us an idea of this difference: by becoming a British Protectorate, Botswana escaped settler colonialism, but it 'was isolated from early influence leading to the emergence of literacy'.⁶⁴ The first writings from Botswana are all in Setswana: three letters, two of 1926 and one of 1929, and a 'Speech to the Bangwaketse' delivered in 1928 by Ntebogang Ratshosa. The first Botswana text in English is, in effect, Bessie Head's 'For

⁶⁴ The oldest text recorded is a court testimony from a slave woman in Cape Town in 1709, which the compilers of this anthology could not include, because the court record did not offer an account in the first person.

‘Napoleon Bonaparte’, Jenny, and Kate’ of 1965. This story anticipates her later writing by fusing essay and short story conventions and by presenting the ambiguities of powerful men, who tend to combine malevolence towards others, emotional vulnerability and visionary power; that kind of Napoleon Bonaparte Head’s women characters are attracted to in *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, for example. The ‘Letter to the High Commissioner’, cowritten by Oratile Sekgoma and her aunts, Baboni Khama, Kmakgama Khama, and Milly Khama, and the two letters she wrote independently in 1926 and 1929 reveal a great gap in Head’s brief historical account in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. By focusing on the “heroes” (chiefs and regents), she forgets to mention that Tshekedi, who became regent in 1925 on behalf of Seretse Khama, his four-year-old nephew and heir to the throne, had eight older half-sisters and one niece, Oratile, some twenty years older than Seretse. Women were not eligible for the throne, although Gagoangwe and her daughter Ntebogang Ratshosa served as regents for the Bangwaketse chief Bathoen II (1923-1924 and 1924-1929 respectively). Tshekedi’s sisters and niece do not claim regency but their inheritance, of which he, as chief patriarch of the Bangwato, has total control. Despite their excellent and subtle manipulation of Sengwato and colonial discourse, they all lose their cases.⁶⁵ These early plaintiffs stress, as Head would later, that ‘Khama’s law was equal to both sexes, women had the same right as men. Estate were (sic) always proportionally divided to the deceased family, sons and daughters’ (*Women Writing Africa* 181).⁶⁶ When Tshekedi came to power, he was manipulated by ‘traitors’, who wish to return to the ‘ridiculous native laws and customs, which

65 Sengwato, a northern dialect of Setswana, is most interesting, as Elizabeth Zsiga and One Tlale discovered recently, because it contains a sound not believed to exist in human languages. Fricatives usually occur serially but in words such as *øsa* (to burn) ‘speakers use two simultaneous fricative articulations’ (1998, 179).

66 The translator or transcriber of this text is unknown. Khama negotiated the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland, when he ‘crossed the great ocean waves to meet the Great Mother of orphans and destitutes, like ourselves’, as these authors cunningly put it.

(...) Khama had totally abolished'. These early examples of Botswana women's writing demonstrate their familiarity with intricacies of the power struggle in the public sphere and, hence, their strong opposition to the patriarchal system. 'It is my right to sustain my life', Oratile Segoma states. 'Every man, when he accumulates cattle, accumulates them for his child. No household subsists at the expense of others' (184). Despite men's depiction of women as silent and submissive in later literature, these correspondents, however privileged, are self-assertive and self-reliant.⁶⁷

In 1985 Bessie Head wrote: 'I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless', whatever she means by that (1990, 95). 'I have worked', she continues, 'outside all political and other ideologies, bowing to life here and there and absorbing all that I felt to be relevant, but always fighting for space and air. I needed this freedom and independence, in order that I retain a clarity (sic) of thought, in order that my sympathies remain fluent and responsive to any given situation in life'. I sustain, however, that Head's writing in general discloses her interest in examining gender identities, roles and relations within the particular context of each work, rather than relying on European paradigms. Scholars of African literatures have written many studies on the controversy of applying such western terms as feminism and gender to African writing. 'Black women in Africa and the Diaspora have been at the helm of interrogating Western and bourgeois constructions of feminisms giving the concept cultural specific renderings', the Kenyan scholar Micere Githae Mugo (2000) writes. 'The result is we now speak of feminisms'. Some Black women 'would rather not identify with the term 'feminism''. Instead they use 'womanism', 'Africana womanism' and

⁶⁷ Oratile Segoma withdrew her appeal to the Privy Council in London in favour of an administrative settlement.

others'.⁶⁸ Clenora Hudson-Weems explains her understanding of Africana womanism in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1993), for example. Daisy Lafond writes of this book:

Molefe Kete Asante gave us Afrocentricity, to help us relocate ourselves from the margins of European experiences to the centrality of our own. Now Clenora Hudson-Weems (...) is helping black women relocate themselves from the margins of white feminism to the centrality of their own experiences. (qtd. in Hudson-Weems 2004, 15)

This approach addresses the particular situation of Africana women and their community's historical and cultural realities. According to Hudson-Weems, the primary goal of feminism, 'a theoretical construct named and defined by (white) women of European descent' is that of female empowerment, 'insisting upon female centrality, the very foundation upon which the feminist agenda and thought rest' (34-35). For example, West African women 'never have had to fight for the 'right to work' (in the public sphere) – a major concern of early Western feminists', as Aidoo argues (qtd. in Hudson-Weems 2004, 34): a confusing remark, as women have always 'worked'. Hudson-Weems suggests that 'self-naming (*nommo*) and self-defining are at the core of authentic existence'; she calls upon 'Africana women worldwide to reclaim, rename and redefine themselves', using this term and concept, which evokes 'a new paradigm of prioritising the tripartite plight of race, class and gender (...) as a new tool for analysis' (xix). In African cosmology, the word *nommo* evokes material manifestation. Thus, Barbara Christian summarises: 'It is through *nommo*, the correct naming of a thing (...) that it comes into existence' (qtd. in Hudson-Weems 2004, 18).

Like Alice Walker before her, Hudson-Weems explains her theory by suggesting sixteen

68 Other terms include 'Motherism' (Acholonu 1995), 'Stiwanism' (Ogundipe Leslie 1994), 'negofeminism' (Nnaemeka 1995), 'femalism', 'Black feminism' (Kohrs-Armissa 2002) and 'gender activism and femalism'. *African Feminisms* <<http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/5940/African-Feminisms.html>>African Feminisms (16.07.2012).

descriptors besides self-naming and self-defining.⁶⁹ She indicates various differences between her theory and those of other feminists. Whereas black feminists, by definition and in view of the very name, align themselves with white feminists, even though they propose to treat race, class and gender issues simultaneously, African feminism demonstrates a misnaming, as ‘it is more closely akin to Africana womanism’ in agenda and priorities. Africana womanism is

not Black feminism, African feminism, or Walker’s womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the Black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana womanist. The conclusion is that Africana Womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both White feminism and Black feminism, and moreover, to the extent of naming in particular, Africana Womanism differs from African feminism. (Hudson-Weems 1993, 24)

However appealing it may be, this term proposes an ideology, which is at once inclusive, ‘all women of African descent’ and exclusive, ‘Africana Womanism and its agenda are unique and separate’ from White feminism, Black feminism and African feminism. It unites, as it divides. Despite this, she makes some useful observations concerning the Africana woman’s agenda, or, as some put it, African/a womanism. For instance, a priority for black women and their communities is to ‘establish their own racial and cultural integrity’ (Hudson-Weems 2004, 36). Differences in the kind of struggle are also significant: whereas (white) women struggle against (white) male domination, black women join their male counterparts in liberation struggles, as they question male domination in these struggles. Hudson-Weems seems to imply that the order of priorities is different: all women are ‘trapped in a patriarchal society’, but the Africana woman can only realistically address the gender question ‘after dealing with race’. She places class above these

⁶⁹ These include: ‘family-centered, in concert with the men in the liberation struggle, strong, genuine in sisterhood, whole, authentic, respected, recognized, male compatible, flexible role player, adaptable, respectful of elders, spiritual, ambitious, mothering, and nurturing’ (Hudson-Weems 1993, 24).

two issues: many Africanas believe that ‘economic equality is their number one concern’ – and this is race-related (2004, 38).

The questions raised by the generalisations in this theory are clear from this brief outline: a mistake we all make. For example, Hudson-Weems speaks as if different groups espouse one feminist approach; her grasp of their feminisms seems cursory and she tends to homogenise ‘African culture’. Moreover, her valuable emphasis on communalism tends to overlook the particular situation of each community, as, for example, when she argues that such problems of African women as physical brutality, sexual harassment and female subjugation must be resolved ‘on a collective basis within their communities’ (2004, 42). My interest lies in exploring the literary transformation of individual ordinary lives in one community, but the specificities of racism and gender, among other issues, should also be taken into account.

This debate among scholars enriches the theoretical possibilities rather than containing them within preconceived theoretical closures. A reviewer of *Gender in African Women’s Writing*, quoted by the author, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, states that this scholar finds and names ‘critical theory which is African, melding it with western feminist theory and coming out with an overarching theory that enriches both western and African critical perspectives’. She calls this ‘a truly liberating force’, because it breaks ‘the cycle of dependency of western critical theory’ (21). This theoretical opening foregrounds many of the contradictions Head encounters in her writing. It mainly focuses on village life offering different configurations of space, crossing the borders between one genre and another. Her narratives seldom take anything for granted. She contests the status of literature itself, its conventions, priorities and genres. As an exiled South African, she confronts the country that haunts her writing and everyday life, questioning her role and identity, as she challenges the stereotypical patriarchal figures she herself depicts. Setting off on this

career in another country, she defies the sense of belongingness, her condition as exile and outsider, who had to report to the police every Monday morning for thirteen years after her arrival in Botswana. Her internal colonisation is at least four-fold: she is ‘coloured’ (neither African nor European), a non-citizen in Botswana and a woman writer.⁷⁰ In this hostile environment, she gets lost, picks fights and eventually finds her peace. The reader becomes her companion on this quest for self-discovery, each from his or her own perspective.

⁷⁰ The case *Unity Dow vs The Attorney General of the Republic of Botswana* (Msc 134/90), which challenged gender discrimination was eventually resolved in favour of the applicant on June 11, 1991. Among their reasons was the following statement: ‘(T)he time when women were treated as chattels or were there to obey the whims and wishes of males is long past and would be offensive to modern thinking ...’ (Dow 1994, 257-260). Dow is Botswana’s first female High Court judge and has become an accomplished novelist.

Bessie Head's Autobiographical Tendency: 'My consciousness inside me is such a heavy burden'

Context

During the period from around 1960 to the present day, Anglophone African writing has undergone great changes from those modes utilised, in different communities, to protest against colonialism and promote nationalism. Storytelling now represents the hybridity and heterogeneity of the different communities and has, more openly and thoroughly, disrupted and challenged those expectations of genre laid down by the colonial regime and followed by most early postcolonial writers. From her first novel onwards, Bessie Head contests literary conventions and techniques, colonial and urban values, as she does patriarchy, with delightful touches of humour at times but generally with great anguish. However difficult it was for Southern African writers to take any experimental step, Head gave a sense of literary direction. This inspires us to question certain ideas because her perception of the "real" world is very different from that of her male African contemporaries and, above all, of her European publishers. Moreover, she is an unrecognised "Coloured South African" writer. In an edition of Wicomb's *You can't get lost in cape town* (2000), Carol Sicherman writes that it has 'unique status within South Africa and, indeed, world literature: it is the first book-length work of fiction set in South Africa by a coloured woman writer'.⁷¹ Head's novella, *The Cardinals*, set in South Africa and published posthumously in 1993, is barely mentioned: as an aside Sicherman does concede that 'Wicomb finds some common ground with Bessie Head, the only other well-known coloured South African writer' (211). Head's early text suggests that 'the radiance of ordinary life was what she wanted

⁷¹ Since the term 'coloured' is used here as an expression of uniqueness, it is worth remembering that most people of mixed descent, who suffered discrimination from both black and white people during and before the apartheid era, are opposed to its use in the post-apartheid era.

to capture in her own writing' (Daymond vii, xi). Her literary oeuvre reveals that affirmative stance Ndebele proposes when writing about everyday life and much of its energy comes from the conflicts she knew. In *The Cardinals*, for example, she took the risk of 'writing her profoundest angers in non-protest form'. On September 28, 1964, some six months after her departure from South Africa, she wrote to Patrick Cullinan: 'A protest is an excuse, a cover up. I no longer have that and besides it's the lowest form of writing. Anyone can be justifiably indignant' (*Imaginative Trespasser* 23). She goes on to say:

My consciousness inside me is such a heavy burden. There is no answer to it, except a terrible darkness which is impossible to ignore because there is a dreadful pain, craving, longing, ache, fear, uncertainty and I carry it around all the while unable to drop it anywhere or bargain it off on someone else.

The Immorality Act of 1950, which prohibited sexual encounters between people of different 'races', is the focus of her anger. That no publisher would print it at the time is hardly surprising, especially since incest is the subject. Certainly, this text laid, as Daymond argues, the groundwork for a 'living contact with her new world in Serowe' (xii).

In this respect, a brief introduction to *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* provides a background to Head's work. In 1965, shortly after her arrival in Bechuanaland, she wrote:

I think of myself as a woman of Southern Africa – not as a black woman but as an ordinary and wryly humble woman (...) I have solved nothing. I am like everyone else – perplexed, bewildered, and desperate. (1990, 31)

As I have mentioned, I propose to discuss the ordinary in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, in which Head uses different strategies to expand and to resist canonical western literary models. Grounded in the physical, historical, biographical and poetic space of a large village, it is the most hybrid of Head's texts and an enabling construct of a community imagined by an out/insider. Serowe lies in the northeastern province of Botswana, called the Ngwato Reserve by

Mutero Chirenje in *Chief Kgama and His Times* (1978). It borders on Zimbabwe to the northeast and South Africa to the southeast and lies between 'Crown Lands' to the southwest and northwest.⁷² Slightly north of the Tropic of Capricorn, Serowe has 'a short, dazzling summer', which is 'an intensely beautiful experience'. Everything comes to life and it rains 'unpredictably, fiercely, violently in November, December, January'. The sky 'takes on a majestic individuality and becomes a huge backdrop for the play of the rain' as the barren earth 'becomes clothed by a thin fine carpet of green' (Head 1990, 29-30). 'There isn't anything in this village that an historian might care to write about since historians do not write about people and how strange and beautiful they are'. Creative artists do tell its story: a wide range of narrators recounts their experiences of change. Some still vaguely "recall" when the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland was established in 1885 to protect them from the marauding Afrikaners and the scheming of Cecil John Rhodes' South Africa Company, which continued until February 1896; at this time, 'an embarrassed British Government proclamation postponed the transfer of the British Bechuanaland Protectorate to the British South Africa Company' (Head 1981, 198). The Batswana Chiefs' trip to London, which guaranteed direct rule from London, meant that Botswana 'experienced a history without parallel in southern Africa', because the indigenous peoples did not lose their lands to prospectors nor become 'a source of cheap labour to any white exploiter at hand'. Most elderly narrators enlighten their past by using the techniques of the oral tradition. Thato Matome, a schoolteacher, tells Head: 'We Bamangwato have had a colourful history. I have it mostly from hearsay, from the stories the old people have handed down to us about our chiefs, but my generation can still feel its inspiration and it is something we can build

72 At Independence, Botswana inherited three types of tenure: 48% was tribal land (native reserves), 47% was state land (Crown lands) and 6% was freehold land (white settlement). B. Machacha of the Ministry of Local Government in Gaborone states that in 1982 the state held only 23% of the land and this was decreasing as more was turned into tribal land (1986, 43).

upon' (Head 1981, 84). This text also explores the legacy of colonialism in the post-independence period, after 1966. Independence has given, Matome says, 'Botswana people a dignity and respect they didn't have in colonial days' (87). When Head goes to a summer school in the USA, she is surprised by their ignorance about Africans: 'They expect us to be creatures of the past, in pre-historic dress'.

Generically speaking, *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* depicts an imagined community that presents different ways of combining the oral or speakerly text with the written text, destabilises auto/biography, H(h)istorical narratives with a continual shift in perspective, and challenges the boundaries of fiction. This textual confusion draws attention to the subject and its positioning within such different discourses as those of the interviewer and her many interviewees. *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* resides in Bhabha's third space of enunciation, which he describes as a contradictory and ambivalent space in which the identity of culture also emerges (1994, 37-38).⁷³ Contradiction and ambivalence are characteristic of Head's work.

Like her novels and short stories, this text represents and enacts transitions in ordinary spaces, which assert their significance within the larger picture of Botswana life and history: what we might call the community's space in order to differentiate it from the dialogic public and

73 That space is where all cultural statements are constructed, according to Bhabha. When I speak of an 'imagined community', I am using Benedict's term, which he borrowed from elsewhere, very loosely: 'In an anthropological spirit, (...) I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (2003, 6-7). Nevertheless, he makes several points that one might apply to Serowe, a community within a nation. Firstly, it is 'imagined' because the members of a nation will never know most of their 'fellow-members', yet 'in the mind of each lives the image of their communion'. Secondly, 'all communities (...) are imagined', and may be distinguished 'by the style in which they are imagined'. Finally, even the largest nation (community?) 'has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations (communities)'. Of course, all these issues should be studied in greater depth, especially when it comes to the complex question of defining the sense of nationhood in different African countries. As Anderson himself writes: In the original edition of *Imagined Communities*, his short-sighted assumption 'was that the official nationalism in the colonized worlds of Asia and Africa was modelled directly on that of the dynastic states of nineteenth-century Europe. Subsequent reflection has persuaded me that this view was hasty (...), and that the immediate genealogy should be traced to the imaginings of the colonial state' (163): much food for thought, given that 'colonial states were typically anti-nationalistic...'

private sphere, although it inevitably includes both. Since interviews with local residents lie at the heart of this text, the combination of the perspective of an out/insider, a non-Setswana speaker, with that of her interpreter/translator and of the interviewees, all members of the Setswana cultural community, raises interesting questions concerning translation and gender studies. Its focus on translation is significant in that it embodies the notion of transition as that of ‘passings or changes from one place, state or condition to another’ (*Transitions*); that is, we perceive the process of translating, and the subsequent transcription of the *dict*, sometimes in the autochthonous tongue, to the *script*, paradoxically in a colonial tongue (Schipper 64). Similarly, the writer’s/translator’s condition is that of ‘continuous transition – consciously or unconsciously absorbing influences, ideas and experiences, subtle and shocking, from the altering physical, social, intellectual, historical and emotional environment in which the individual exists’ (Murray 6). The intercalation of forms, languages and details suggests that Head and her interpreters/translators are in the process of writing culture(s). These filters further complicate the question of authorship and the translation process challenges the authenticity of the final product, as it studies Head’s translation strategies – insensitive at times – which indicate, as Ashcroft *et al* and translator scholars say, the differences in and of this text.

To contextualise translation in South(ern) Africa, I should mention that the local peoples became involved in acts of interpretation/translation upon the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch. It is said that the written history of this region began when Bartolomeu Dias reached the coast on March 12, 1488. Luís Vaz de Camões, a sailor and poet, celebrated, in his fantastical manner, the Portuguese voyages of discovery of the sixteenth and the seventeenth century in his *Os Luciadas*, in particular that of Vasco da Gama, who rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached India in 1498. 1595 marks the Dutch arrival in South Africa, but it was not until the

seventeenth century that Krotoa/Eva became, like the Mexican Malintzín/Marina, an interpreter/intercultural communicator for the colonisers and a symbol of betrayal for the colonised.⁷⁴ Later, we shall see how Press' 'Krotoa's Story' captures this woman's ambiguous position as a linguistically competent young woman placed by powerful men in a situation of political manoeuvring in which she had no choice (434,437).

T.J. Cribb reveals how complicated this intercultural process is: 'Criticism should make it its business to assess the qualitative outcomes of such translations and interactions, and that entails command of an adequate quantity of knowledge' (1999, 12). Since English, like Dutch in Krotoa's case, occupies an 'immense variety of language positions in literature' and a variety of (un) desirable discourses, it is essential that writer and critic acknowledge the different languages/cultures involved in the acts of narration, interpretation, and rewriting. *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* celebrates both the ordinary but by no means apolitical spaces in a Setswana community in Botswana from an Afrocentric perspective, and Head's inner reconciliation with her position as a refugee and her sense of belonging to her new home, first recognised by Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*. *Serowe* reveals, as do so few South(ern) African women's texts, that 'characters and narratives voices can use ordinary, everyday language', even if it is translated and rewritten by a woman in continuous transition as she absorbs new ideas and experiences (Senior 42).

Bearing in mind the effects of the journey of shifting selves, that toing and froing between one space and another which at times blurs the borders because these spaces inevitably coexist, we shall see how this coincides with Head's personal circumstances and those of her characters.

Moreover, the hybridity of this text challenges our reading practices by pursuing her intelligence

⁷⁴ It is said that Krotoa ousted her uncle Autshumato, chief of Goringhaikonas, from the position of official mediator in 1660 and she later married a Danish gentleman.

beyond orthodox western models. In fact, Head's work became more audacious and less saleable after her first three novels and her outstanding short-story collection, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977). Serowe. *Village of the Rain Wind* moved from publisher to publisher and did not make her any money for almost ten years. Her subsequent *A Bewitched Crossroad*, a historical saga, has not been available in many parts of the English-speaking world for many years.

Indeed, Head's work has only received international recognition within the last twenty-five to thirty years. Notably, the English Department at the University of Botswana offered its first course on Bessie Head published online, from January to April in 2003. One of its assignments was to write 'an item to contribute to Botswana's first-ever web-site on Bessie Head', set up after the students went to the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe. Among these contributions was a comparison of the Setswana translation of *When Rain Clouds Gather* with the English version, a reflection on Bessie Head's feminism, and interviews expressing local opinions about this writer. Her late son, Howard Head, whom the students met, said his mother was, indeed, a feminist 'because she tried to speak for women through her writing. She was trying to appeal to men to stop treating women as inferior (but) during their time it was unheard of for a woman to voice her views'.⁷⁵ The narrator writes in 'For 'Napoleon Bonaparte', Jenny and Kate': 'I am contained in a wall of silence' (Head 2003, 296). However, Dr. Leloba Molema, their lecturer, told the interviewers: 'Bessie has shown people that you should speak for what you believe in; it is clear that she wasn't afraid to voice her opinions. For example, she brought up the case of the ill-treatment of the Basarwa in Botswana which she thought was very wrong'. Besides

⁷⁵ Howard Head's words are summarised by Mmereki Kgosiabone, Opelo Letsamao, Tshepo Madoda and Lenah Mosimane in their essay, 'Bessie Head and Feminism'. The interviewers were: Nature K. Motimedi, Nomsa Motshidisi, Randy Morentwa, Gorata S. Mosweunyane, Basetsana Mokola and Nicky Magapa.

magnificent local athletes, white writers, such as Naomi Mitchinson, and, more recently, Alexander McCall Smith have put Botswana on the literary map recognised in Eurocentric literary circles. But could a serious African woman writer find a publisher, especially when outsiders dominate publishing, thereby perpetuating colonial ideology? The late Yvonne Vera wrote in a letter to Charles Larson:

A writer must be willing to experiment, no matter what problems this might produce with a publisher. The publisher is concerned with selling, with finding a market, and an audience.... (55)

Head certainly experimented, but her problems with publishers were eternal, particularly since her work was banned in South Africa (122).⁷⁶ Like other African women writers, she had to battle against all the odds in the 1970s to get her work published as she had written it. At a time when the Irish writer Brian O’Nolan, better known under his pseudonyms of Flann O’Brien or Myles na Gopaleen, was refusing to let anybody change a comma in his work, Head was plagued by “kind” editors offering to put her whole text into publishable (and marketable?) shape. *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* was eventually published, after hasty dismissals of literary agents and publishers, in the Heinemann Educational *African Writers Series* (AWS), which eventually appointed African writers to edit and select the material.⁷⁷ James Currey, who ran AWS from 1967 to 1984, said that ‘Chinua Achebe, more than anyone else, re-shaped the literary map of Africa’ (qtd. in Low 34). Small presses in certain parts of the Anglophone world have opened up the field tremendously. In the 1990s, the task of compilation has become more complicated for these editors, as several African journals have suffered cutbacks and paper shortages. Moreover,

⁷⁶ *A Question of Power* was banned until after the South African elections of 1994. Head’s correspondence with Jane Grant gives us a good insight into the disputes with agents and possible publishers of *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. Cf. BHP Box L2 (KMM 71 BHP)

⁷⁷ Head’s arguments with publishers were intense and perhaps a reflection of her feeling of isolation, particularly as an African woman writer. Cf. Eilersen’s *Bessie Head –Thunder Behind Her Ears*.

‘major publishers (...) have lost interest in putting out stories in translation’ (Innes 2). Translation plays a powerful role, as we know, in the manipulation of literary canons.

Living as a refugee in a village (of some 40,000 inhabitants), Head was exiled from literary circles, perhaps fortunately for her own well-being, but it made her dependent upon benevolent admirers. She chooses this space to bring into focus the politics of knowledge, which are, as we know, never innocent. Towards the end of her life she began to travel. Her vital and energetic textual voices are unforgettable, but she never really gained that public speaking voice so essential in this age of marketing writers. The bewilderment she perceives in all women such as herself is a prominent feature of her writing. One way of coming to terms with this bewilderment is to externalise and explore it in different modes, which has inspired women writers worldwide in their pursuit of truth and knowledge.

The context in which Head began to write was by no means ideal, but turned out to be a source of inspiration. Dieter Riemenscheider’s lecture of March 1985 in Harare on ‘some regional approach to African literature’ did not mention a single woman writer. When reproached, he apologised, but it had been ‘so natural’. ‘I could have died’, Aidoo exclaimed. ‘It had been ‘natural’ to forget that some African women had been writing and publishing for as long as African men writers’ (Aidoo 1988, 159).⁷⁸ From the explanations Head, a pioneer of Anglophone women’s writing in the period and region under discussion, gives of her writing, it seems as if she found herself in a similar position to that of Toni Morrison, who claimed she had to be reader and

⁷⁸ It seems that Ghanaian women in particular have been writing longer than their male counterparts. Efua Theodora Sutherland (1924-1996), for example, is a Ghanaian pioneer playwright and children’s author, whose best-known works include *Foriwa* (1962), *Edufa* (1967), and *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975). After graduating from St. Monica’s Training College, she studied at Homerton College, Cambridge, and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Upon her return home in 1951, she co-founded the cultural journal *Okeyame*. This does not mean, of course, that their African sisters were not writing in other parts of the African continent, as we have seen earlier.

writer of her own work, since she had no models. Those Head had were principally the energetic male contributors to *Drum*, a South African magazine of the 1960s, and an eclectic assortment of books written mainly by men. Jim Bailey, who founded *African Drum* in 1951, chose Anthony Sampson, a friend from Oxford days whom Mandela subsequently invited to write his biography, as his editor. *Drum* has always been a medium for progressive black intellectuals. In its early days, it produced such writers as William Bloke Modisane and Henry Nxumalo, later nicknamed 'Mr. Drum', Todd Matshikiza, Nat Nakasa, Can Themba, Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Arthur Maimane, Dyke Sentso, James Matthews, Peter Clarke, Richard Rive, Jordan Ngubane, Alex La Guma and Casey Motsisi. I list these writers in homage to their courage as journalists and to show that apparently there were only two women contributors: Bessie Head and the British poet Jenny Joseph. When he returned to Britain, Sampson lost no time in writing a book about his experiences: *Drum: A Venture into the New Africa* (1956). The title reveals his political stance. Can we overlook its allusion to *Venture to the Interior* (1951) by the controversial writer and Jungian mystic Sir Laurens Jan van der Post? This travel book about his adventures in Nyasaland (now Malawi) borrowed the structure of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Van der Post's equally controversial biographer J.D.F Jones calls him a 'compulsive liar'. Booker defends his friend, arguing that Jones has missed the point: however much van der Post might have exaggerated the truth, 'he opened up a spiritual dimension to life in our spiritless modern world'. The *Drum* writers, who celebrated the cultural hybridity of the city, kindled the creative flame of three generations of writers in South Africa. Their literary monuments include Mphahlele's novels, stories, criticism, and autobiographical writing, Bessie Head's novels and stories, Lewis Nkosi's criticism, plays and prose, as well as the sketches, autobiographical writing and stories of Motsisi, Modisane and the music of Matshikiza (Heywood 26).

Heywood mentions the ‘pioneering autobiographies’ as a sign of South Africans’ literary independence and their skill in recognising the fanatical conclusion the segregationist constitution of 1910 had reached under the apartheid regime (2004, 117). Notable examples include Peter Abrahams’ *Return to Goli* (1953) and *Tell Freedom* (1954), Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue* (1959), a literary landmark, Todd Matshikiza’s *Chocolates for My Wife* (1961), Bloke Modisane’s *Blame Me on History* (1986) and Noni Jabavu’s *The Ochre People* (1963). ‘Based on the Latin tradition of *saturus*, a mixture of modes as in vaudeville or cabaret, satire is written by writers who have iron nerves and who are willing to be misunderstood’. Teasing the reader, they present themselves through ‘a maze of digressions, absurdities, metamorphoses, and exaggerations’. If presented in this light, it is difficult to suggest that the *Drum* writers represent anything other than ‘elitist bourgeois values’, as though ‘its subjects, drink, debt, death, and crime, are restricted to one class rather than to our species’ (118). In this context, until the appearance of *Second-Class Citizen* (1958) by Sylvester Stein, most white writers ‘portrayed white society for white readers, viewing black characters through the Hamite ideology as comic objects or passive victims’. Stein adopted the mode of G.K. Chesterton’s *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), which made the light-hearted prophecy in the wake of the Boer War that London would be overrun by revolutionary urban warfare in 1984 (Orwell’s title for his satirical novel of 1949). In relation to South Africa, Stein’s novel made amazingly accurate prophecies, as Heywood argues: ‘The action takes the form of a boycott, then a strike, and finally a violently repressed urban conflict’ (119).

On March 21 1960, South Africa shocked the world: police gunfire put an end to a demonstration against the South African pass system in Sharpeville, a township in the gold-

mining region of Transvaal (now Gauteng).⁷⁹ The Cape legislature's Master and Servant Ordinance of 1842 was used to justify the issuing of passes to black workers at the diamond mines after 1872 (Davenport 154). It prevented workers from bringing their families to their place of work and ordered them off mine terrain if they resigned or were sacked (Heywood 145). After this demonstration, the National Party declared a state of emergency to crack down on dissidents, ban political organisations (for example, the ANC and the PAC), to imprison leaders, such as Nelson Mandela, and to send writers into exile. Alex La Guma, a Marxist and ANC leader, was among those who decided to leave South Africa; his residence in Cuba led to the banning of his work in South Africa. Despite the boom in Afrikaans writing, such authors as Jan Rabic, Étienne Leroux and Breyten Breytenbach left as well. Upon his return in the 1970s, the poet and professional painter Breyton Breytenbach was imprisoned in Pollsmoor, where he wrote *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, a criticism of the apartheid state. André Brink stayed in South Africa to see his works become the first Afrikaans novels to be banned by the government, at which time he decided to write in both Afrikaans and English. In contrast, Wilbur Smith, born in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), was the most popular escapist writer. Following the tradition of Rider Haggard, he produced adventure stories awash in sex and violence set against a backdrop of political turmoil and revealing racist attitudes often in tune with apartheid South Africa.

After 1960, 'despair and hope enveloped the suicides' of Ingrid Jonker and Nat Nakasa, the murder of Harry Nxumalo, an editor of *Drum*, and the premature deaths of other contributors (Heywood 146).⁸⁰ Hilda Bernstein, whose husband Lionel 'Rusty' Bernstein was charged with

⁷⁹ The figures Hilda Bernstein gives are 69 men and women pronounced dead and over 180 wounded. Cf. 'A History of Struggle' in the online edition of *For Their Triumphs and Their Tears: Women in Apartheid South Africa*.

⁸⁰ Sylvester Stein, editor of *Drum* from 1955 to 1958, wrote a book called *Who Killed Mr. Drum* (Corvo Books, 2003) that treats of the murder of Henry Nxumalo and the other suspicious deaths. Zola Maseka, who directed a film on Nxumalo's death, said that Nxumalo's story 'is as poignant as that of Sophiatown itself'. Web (10/10/2008).

treason with Nelson Mandela and nine other prominent leaders of the ANC after the police raid on Liliesleaf Farm, in the suburb of Rivonia in Johannesburg, but was found not guilty, wrote: 'In 1961 the fruits of several decades of work and struggle disappeared from the South African scene and a new, harsher era arrived'.⁸¹ Although both the Bernsteins and Head set off for the Protectorate of Bechuanaland in 1964, Head apparently did not meet Hilda Bernstein until 1981 when Pat Spann, her library friend, brought her to Serowe to visit Bessie: 'the three women talked in a lively surge of warmth and understanding' (Eilersen 1995,244). Bernstein impressed Head: there seems to have been a meeting of minds. Head admired her writing, particularly *Women in Apartheid South Africa*, in which she depicts the 'secret silent tragedy', as Head put it, of the lives of women evicted from their homes and resettled where they could barely survive. It was 'so stark, bleak and bare ... one gets the feeling that the people are eating earth and dying there'.⁸² This appreciation gives us an insight into Head's response to those who might influence the portrayal of women in her work.

The violent response to the Sharpeville demonstration inaugurated a new stage in the freedom struggle with the birth of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, as it did a new phase in South African literature. According to Heywood, the new literary phase was signalled with *South African Writing Today* (1967), a Penguin anthology by Nadine Gordimer and Lionel Abrahams that tended to follow the lines of the banned Freedom Charter of 1955 (146). In his 'Introduction', Sampson compares this with Russian pre-revolutionary writing. He indicates not only the obvious similarities of political situation and types but also 'the powerful sense of

⁸¹ Hilda Bernstein describes the arrests, the Rivonia trial and the escape of several detainees from South Africa in *The World That Was Ours* (1967). In this book, she quotes W. H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts': Suffering 'takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window/ or just walking dully along'. It is the combination of ordinariness, danger and the beauty of its 'plain, unpretentious style' that Anthony Sampson so admires (2004, 24).

⁸² KMM8 BHP 20.10.1981

place, the feel of a vast and varied canvas, which has now largely gone out of English writing' (1967, 11-12). It is, moreover, 'the pull' between the writer's privacy and 'the tide of outside events, that gives to South African writing its special quality, as it gave it to the Russians'. The overriding question is: can people remain creative in this hypertension? Lewis Nkosi's contribution to this volume courageously proposes that 'in the overheated atmosphere of change and power-acquisition in which the masses of the people may even be compelled to do certain things, the pre-eminent duty of literature is still to proclaim the primal value of Life over the Idea' (1967, 203). Other significant publications include the critical journal *Standpunte*, which bridged the Afrikaans and English traditions. In the 1970s, Mafika Gwala edited *SASO Newsletter* and South African voices emerged in *A World of Their Own. South African Poets of 1970s* (1976), edited by Stephen Gray and André Brink, playing with the title of Hilda Bernstein's book in a somewhat divisive manner, which represented the political situation in the country when the Black Consciousness Movement led by Steve Biko excluded white dissidents. Other notable anthologies include Robert Royston's *Black Poets in South Africa* (1973), significantly published within the country as *To Whom It May Concern*, and, much later, *Sometimes When It Rains: Writings by South African Women* (1987), edited by Ann Oosthuizen

Before 1960, there was also a ground plan of literary achievement from the different linguistic communities in South Africa. The Khoisan community voice has expanded since the seventeenth century 'through assimilation of former slaves, whites and half-whites' (Heywood 29). Nguni-Sotho oral and written repertoires began to be collected during the nineteenth century conflicts 'that led to the fall of the Zulu and Xhosa kingdoms'. The compilations of mFundisi the Revd. Tiyo Soga and Sol T. Plaatje have, as Heywood tells us, been lost, but other early examples survive, such as 'those of Callaway and the more recent Shapera'. The Anglo-Afrikaners

colonisers and missionaries also exerted their influence on modern South African literature: ‘their oral resources have entered print through ballads, folktales, and their literary derivatives, as well as through the Bible and its derivatives’, especially John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1679) (Heywood 30). Such twentieth-century writers as Eugène Marais, Uys Krige, Laurens van der Post and Stephen Watson have ‘assimilated Khoisan poems and poetics’. As Marais discovers, for example, ‘metamorphoses and dreamlike wanderings are integral parts of Khoisan poetic practice’. In *Dwaalstories* (1927) (‘Tales of Wandering’), Marais transforms ‘the spiritual of lyrical and narrative art into a modern tale of the supernatural’ (Heywood 33-4). ‘Die dans van die reën’ (‘Dance of the Rain’), the final tale in this poetic collection, recalls the much later *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. It treats of a magical downpour, which contains ‘dreamlike transformations and shifts of character and setting’.⁸³

Noting the dramatic qualities of Nguni-Sotho oral poetry, A. C. Jordan believes it is impossible ‘to draw a dividing line between the lyrical and the dramatic’ (177). This tradition has influenced the writings of ‘H.I.E. Dhlomo, Modikwe Dikobe, Athol Fugard, Mazisi Kunene, Thomas Mofolo, Nadine Gordimer, Sol. T. Plaatje, the *Drum* generation from Mphahlele to Head, and the later generation of poets and novelists from Mongane Serote (...) to Laretta Ngcobo and Zakes Mda’ (Heywood 34-35). In ‘generally enigmatic phrases’, the male repertoire of this poetry concentrates on the public sphere (battles, heroes, the living dead, historical movements, current affairs); the female repertoire, generally ‘narrated in the form of riddles and metaphors’, as some detect particularly in Head’s *Maru*, explores issues more related to the domestic sphere (farm work, childbirth, marriages, husbands, metamorphoses, animals). In this society, these repertoires ‘form intersecting rather than watertight compartments’ because men reserve cattle husbandry

⁸³ Heywood tells us that collection is marred for modern readers by satirical nicknames, which were current in his day.

and warfare for themselves, as farming and beer making are traditionally reserved for women. The Nguni-Sotho tradition has also influenced theatre. Dumakude KaNdlovu, the editor of *Woza Afrika!* (1986), a collection of South African plays, recalls: ‘In the city dwellers’ minds there remained vivid images of grandmothers and grandfathers telling their stories to families by the fireside. This was theater at its most natural, its most creative’ (xix). The *imbongi* (praise singer, dramatist, etc.) tradition has taken South African performers all over the world. The African bard is, as Jordan tells us, ‘a chronicler as well as a poet’ (60).

The year 2006 marked the centenary of two outstanding South African writers and intellectuals: Dr Benedict Wallet Bambaataa Vilakazi and Dr Archibald Campbell Jordan. Both have left a significant intellectual legacy concerning the development of indigenous languages and earned an important place in modern literature. They pushed the boundaries of the vernacular languages to express the complexities of African life. Both wrote mainly in their mother tongue and sometimes translated their work. They were trailblazers, as Head later wished to be, for an approach to African literature that would be taken up by the likes of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. At the Steve Biko Memorial Lecture in 2003, this Kenyan intellectual spoke about Vilakazi’s contributions and the Senegalese intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop: ‘We must hearken to Diop’s and Vilakazi’s call when they tell us to use our language as vehicles for ‘thought, feeling and will’’.⁸⁴ In other words, intellectuals should produce knowledge in African languages and use translation as a means of conversation in and among African literatures. Moreover, works should be translated from European and Asian languages into African tongues, for ‘languages must not stay isolated from the mainstream of progressive human thought in the languages and cultures of the globe’. Those who write in a colonial language are not to be discarded, however; these ‘stolen

84 Cf. ‘Steve Biko Memorial Lecture’. PDF (09/08/2009).

gems' must be 'retrieved and returned to the languages that inspired them in the first place'. The central thesis of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls a 'Restoration Project' is that language is memory. Many keepers of memory in dominated groups involve themselves in acts of cultural translation 'from the subject memory into the dominant memory. But it is a mental act, which means that in the process, the original text is lost'. Unfortunately, his 'imagined project' is difficult to complete, because it supports 'models of translations for works written in dominant languages by people who draw from languages and cultures other than the dominant one, in which the works were first written'. This cross-cultural translation act is further complicated because the restoration of the text to its language/culture of inspiration depends on no inference of its existence in the dominant memory – almost like rescuing 'the original' mental text from exile. Or, 'to use the metaphor of a harvest stored in somebody else's granary', it would be, this scholar argues, 'like the owners of the harvest retrieving their produce and re-storing it in their granaries'. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is always open to working with those who are stimulated by writing in their mother tongue. In this lecture, he also says he would like 'to explore ways in which we can work with South African publishers and international publishers to start a pilot project to have their unpublished works republished in book form, or those out of print reissued in scholarly editions in both the original African languages and in English'. Examples abound: 'all the Zulu works of Mazisi Kunene, an intellectual descendant of Vilakazi', the great tradition of 'Zulu orature going back to Magolwane and Mshongweni of Shaka's court, published in Zulu and other African languages', 'the historical Zulu novels of R.R.R. Dhlomo. We would also like to see the works written in English by say, H.I.E. Dhlomo, and others restored back to their original language and even other African languages'.

Bessie Head met Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o at a conference in Denmark in 1980, where Karen Blixen was a 'revered national symbol', but not one of his favourite authors, as he detected 'the more ambiguous notes' in her description of her time in Africa (Eilersen 2007, 280). This radical so inspired Head that she chastised European readers in a television interview for their condescension towards African writers and the racism in Blixen's work. Even if she had to admit that she had not read Blixen's *Out of Africa*, she enjoyed the controversy: she felt she had been patronised on several occasions during this visit.

This summary of the internal influences on later South African writers introduces what most South African literary scholars call modern South African literatures. These concern, in the context of this study, Southern African fiction written after World War II, and, specifically, the work of Bessie Head, who wrote her greatest works in exile, one of her recurrent themes. The 'periodisation' of these literatures, especially in English and Afrikaans, has been hotly debated.⁸⁵ According to Dorothy Driver, the beginnings of modern South African writing may be dated 'through a combination of four specific publications': Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), which 'inaugurated a tradition of protest in white English-speaking writing'; Herman Charles Bosman's *Makefing Road* (1947), 'with its use of Afrikaans storytelling traditions and its sharp, home-grown humour'; Nadine Gordimer's *Face to Face* (1949), marking 'the start of her lifelong focus on white consciousness'; and, before all this, Herbert Issac Ezra Dhlomo's essay 'African Attitudes to the European' (1945), which 'not only heralded a transition to modern themes and settings in his own plays and short stories but also defined 'the new African' as a modern, urban figure opposed to European versions of African

85 The approach to this subject depends, in part, upon each scholar's background, culture and academic interests. No doubt all have participated in structuralist/poststructuralist/postcolonialist/postmodernist debates, even if the periodisation of South African literatures seldom falls in line with these debates.

past' (1996, 99).⁸⁶ He was, as Ntongola Masilela explains in *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (2006), one of the most outstanding African intellectuals of the New African Movement, which included the following: Dr. Charlotte Manye Maxeke (1874-1939), Thomas Mofolo (1876-1948), Solomon T. Plaatje (1879-1932), R.V. Selope Thema (1886-1955), Clement Martyn Doke (1893-1980), Peter Henry Abrahams (1919-), J. Harold Cressey (1889-1916), Notsizi Mgqwetho (c.1885-c.1948), Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) and Ezekiel Mphahlele (1919-2008). An outspoken defender of human rights and dignity, Dr. Manye Maxeke was one of the first women activists of the ANC.

Peter Henry Abrahams Deras is said to be the first black South African to publish a black novel since Sol Plaatje. He marks, moreover, another trend in modern South African literature; his spiritual home is South Africa, but he became an adopted citizen of Britain. One wonders if Driver omitted him from her list because his exile 'meant not only a physical displacement, but also the loss of an audience at home, creating a huge fissure between indigenous South African writing and exilic texts' (Loflin 206). All his early work, from his first collection of short stories, *Dark Testament* (1943), his first novel, *Song of the City* (1945) to *Mine Boy* (1946), were published in Britain and the United States of America; no mean task for a black writer at that time.⁸⁷ A pioneering township novel, *Mine Boy* addresses the dehumanising effects of the South African racist system, predating the formal declaration of apartheid when the National Party came to power in 1948. Paddy, the 'Red One', tells Zuma, the protagonist of *Mine Boy*: 'You

⁸⁶ It is interesting to note that H. I. E. Dhlomo (1903-1956), the brother of R.R.R. Dhlomo, was born in Siyama, a village near Pietermaritzburg, the town where Head was born. R.R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1928) is often overlooked as the first novel published by a black South African; too many of us, as have I, grant this achievement to Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930).

⁸⁷ I cite only his early publications. His last publication is, so far as I know, *The Black Experience in the Twentieth Century: Autobiography and Meditation* (2000), although it is really the final installment in his autobiographical series. Notably, he moved from Britain to Jamaica in 1956, when many Jamaicans were settling in Britain.

must think as a man first. You must be a man first and then a black man. And if it is so you will understand as a black man and also as a white man. This is the right way, Zuma. When you understand that you will be a man with freedom inside your breast. It is only those who are free inside who can help free those around them' (172). These words evoke one image after another until Zuma feels light and carefree: 'People were people. Not white and black people. Just people. Ordinary people'. His reverie is interrupted now and then by the words: 'If only it were so...' (174). When we compare this dream with Bessie Head's words cited earlier, we understand how similar their thinking is, in this respect: 'I think of myself as a woman of Southern Africa – not as a black woman but as an ordinary and wryly humble woman' (1990, 31). Ndebele's sense of the ordinary also includes this conscious sense of equality. In his story 'The Prophetess', a young boy is sent to find holy water for his mother, which he accidentally spills and replaces with tap water that cures her after all. The power of the prophetess is apparently questioned in a move that creates the miraculous. Pechey suggests: 'The water might almost be a figure for the authenticating inauthenticity of modern writing itself, the boy more specifically a figure for the post-apartheid writer using the bolthole offered by the random-everyday to flee not only the bonds that bind apartheid discourse to his complicit antagonist, but also the very bounds of representation and the probable' (1998, 58). However farfetched this interpretation may sound on the strength of a brief summary of the story, there is a certain undermining of hierarchical power structures in this counter-hegemonic sphere that gives everyone a subject position, even if the mother, the interpreter, is deceived yet again. Almost like a Joyce epiphany, the ordinary reveals the extraordinary. The boy asks himself: 'Did holy water taste any differently from ordinary water?' (Ndebele 1985, 52).

The periodisation of South African literatures has been, as Christine Loflin argues, a

fragmented and divided subject, ‘categorized by race, language, ethnicity, and geography into multiple, mutually isolated streams of literary histories’ (205). One controversial aspect of the postcolonial project is the revision of South African literatures and literary study, which formerly depended mainly upon those movements (whether of Frank R. Leavis or American New Criticism) that focused on the text itself. Debates on this topic are still heated, but common themes do emerge. There is consensus concerning, firstly, cultural inclusiveness (orature, vernacular literatures and popular culture) and, secondly, the historical, political and social circumstances that should be taken into account, especially such events as Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976), which are important for defining literary periods for black writers, if not all committed writers (207).⁸⁸ In the past, periodisation has primarily used racial classifications, yet another form of perpetuating apartheid. For this reason among others, Loflin suggests ‘a form of periodization for recent South African literature that would have the potential of crossing the boundaries separating these literatures’, as proposed earlier in this study. Rosemary Jolly argues that critics, teachers and students need ‘to forge a language beyond apartheid that refuses to hypostasize South Africa as the model in which the colonized black and the settler white eternally confront each other in the ‘ultimate racism’’ (1995, 22). Through an analysis of the ways in which historical events resonate throughout South African literature, periodisation can reframe, as Loflin proposes, ‘the history of South African literature so that a multiplicity of positions within South African society can become visible’ (208). For obvious reasons, most South Africans/Africanists have been so affected by the past that they are most vulnerable to it and are at the forefront of those proposing new approaches that engage other perspectives.

Loflin suggests three periods for modern South African writing: 1948-1960, 1960-1976,

⁸⁸ The shift in perspective concerning these events is clear on any official South African web site.

and 1971 to the present (208). Her description of these periods differs slightly from that of Driver. The first ‘would include white anti-apartheid novels by Gordimer, Paton, and others, and also works by Es’kia Mphahlele and Peter Abrahams’.⁸⁹ The Sharpeville massacre and the later Soweto riots are useful, in her opinion, to mark the shift from earlier black prose writing to the rise of a new generation of poets. It also indicates, as I mentioned earlier, a new phase in white writing. These events symbolise ‘historic shifts in the relations of power in South Africa in both black and white literature’ and they create periods within which ‘a comparative study of South African literatures becomes meaningful’ (212). Initially seeking a theoretical model for her periodisation from outside Africa, Loflin realises European theories are of little use (209). The changes are not revolutions, but shifts, trends and possibilities, which only later might be perceived, in her opinion, as the beginnings of a new South Africa. It seems these culturally hegemonic models require a sense of community. Thus Loflin proposes that ‘the multiple traditions of literature can be read intertextually, as commenting on each other in a variety of ways’. She would, however, hesitate to say that they ‘form a community of shared values’. Her proposal of the intertextual study of these literatures is significant. Commenting on Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood* and Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, both of which represent the Soweto riots, Loflin finally uses Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s ‘Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition’ to discuss, for example, the ‘moments of affiliation across the boundaries of race’ and the ‘shared political horizon’, even if this is interpreted differently within each text (qtd. in Loflin 210). Periodisation, as Loflin perceives it, is useful to such a comparative study more as ‘a way of comparing the multiplicity of reactions, strategies, and literary forms that develop during a specific historical period’ than as

⁸⁹ It is always interesting to discover the order in which scholars place the writers.

a means of emphasising similarities (212).

Others, such as Michael Chapman, have, as I have mentioned, propose this comparative approach. If informed by Eurocentric theories, his periodisation is explicitly political: it is not 'to be regarded primarily as a genre consideration but as responsible to political change' (1996, 8). At times, he uses historical dates to locate works and, at others, he uses overlapping periods. This practice allows him to demonstrate the differences in periodisation between the different nations he includes in his literary history, even if he cannot offer an encyclopaedic survey. Instead, he produces 'a particular view of literary-cultural development and value at a particular point in history' (xx). He is not convinced, however, that Southern African countries can have national literatures, because they lack a fundamental requirement of converting groups into nations, 'namely, widespread multiclass literacy in a common language' (xv). Perhaps like Antjie Krog, the translator I quoted earlier, he is wary of the abuse of nationalism, especially since he defines it as 'originary and symbolic'. The 'common language' he mentions is presumably the official languages of each country other than the imposed colonial languages. From her perspective, Loflin considers that the construction of a national literature in South Africa would be part of a reinvention of South Africa as a single nation (213). Even if this might be convincing in theory, in practice it would, as in colonial America, be reconstructed in hindsight by literary scholars rather than by the writers of the moment. Eventually, 'South African literature may come to resemble Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's vision of a multilingual society, in which all national works are translated into all languages' (Loflin 214). Or, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o puts it: 'there would thus be a real dialogue between the literatures, languages and cultures of the different nationalities within any one country – forming the foundations of a truly national literature and culture' (1986, 29).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's approach is much closer to that outlined in John Mbiti's *African*

Religions and Philosophy, a book originally published in 1969 that Head had read. Mbiti reminds us that modern change in Africa has imported 'a future dimension of time', which he considers may be 'the most dynamic and dangerous discovery of African peoples in the twentieth century' (1990, 216). They work for progress, they wait for the immediate realisation of their hopes, and they create new myths for the future. It is here, Mbiti argues, that 'we find the key understanding to African political, economic and ecclesiastical instability'. Two of the major forces against the traditional tribal structures, which oriented many generations to the two-dimensional concept of time, are 'modern nationhood and urbanization'. The historical phase after colonial rule is the birth of African nations, which 'are composed of peoples of many cultures, histories, languages and traditions'. In this situation, 'the points of unity on national level weigh less heavily than points of disunity'. Mbiti is aware that he is too close to this historical phenomenon to draw a clear picture. Even if it is possible to evolve a national solidarity which parallels or replaces tribal solidarity, Mbiti stresses that the 'destruction of tribal solidarity does not automatically create a fully integrated and mature national solidarity'. This presents a great challenge and responsibility. In these circumstances, one can hardly expect an African nation to produce a national literature based on one or two languages. If one were to propose the foundation of a national literature in any African country, it would depend on the different cultures within it.

There is one other issue concerning the nation, nationalism and national literature that should be mentioned in passing: its gender specifics. Boehmer argues that two mutually reinforcing cases can be made for the relationship between patriarchy and nationalism (1992, 6-10). Firstly, both endorse 'a unitary, monologic vision, a tendency to authorise homogenising perceptions and social structures and to suppress plurality'. Secondly, and historically speaking, the 'emergence of nationalism was characterised by a co-operation between patriarchies in the

nation-state and the household', coinciding with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the middle-class family unit. Nationalism thus found 'in existing social patterns the models for hierarchical authority and control'. Despite the promises of freedom and equality, this pattern has persisted throughout the lengthy process of colonisation, decolonisation and national reconstitution in African countries. If this is the case, 'Mother Africa may have been declared free, but the mothers of Africa remained manifestly oppressed'. This raises problems of identity for women and, by extension, for women writers: wherever masculine identity is normative and 'the female is addressed in the main as idealised bearer of nationalist sons, woman as such, in herself, has no valuable place'. It seems that women who claim a place or identity in any field of national activity face, as I have sustained, 'multiple perils of self-contradiction'.

We might wonder how women disentangle themselves from this conundrum. If they were to repossess 'matriarchal myths', how would these be separated from the myths that 'shore up patriarchal desire and a system of gendered national authority'? Men monopolise the field of nationalist identity and self-image, so a more effective path for women would be to evolve 'other strategies of selving', which might be, Boehmer discovers in Head's writing, 'less unitary' and 'more dispersed and multifarious'. Even if African literatures in the past have been a nationalist and patriarchal prerogative, women have challenged this exclusivist stance: 'To write is not only to speak for one's place in the world'; one also makes 'one's own place or narrative', tells one's own story and creates 'an identity'. It is to deploy another strategy, as Simon Gikandi explains:

To write is to claim a text of one's own; textuality is an instrument of territorial possession; because the other confers on us an identity that alienates us from ourselves, narrative is crucial to the discovery of our selfhood (qtd. in Boehmer 1992, 10)

This self-creation, or reterritorialisation, through narrative connects with Kristeva's concept of

excess in writing: it is “transformative’, operating through the displacement of what is already signified, bringing forth the yet-to-be imagined and the transgressive’.⁹⁰ African women writers subvert the nationalist narrative that excludes them through their texts.

Patriarchal nationalist texts may be, in Boehmer’s opinion, disrupted and transformed in two main ways: the textual and the temporal or territorial. The first challenges the ‘definitive’ histories and mythologies of nationhood by ‘interrupting the language of official nationalist discourse and literature with a woman’s vocalicity’ and, thus, constructing a very different text that uses vernacular forms, part of the people’s experience. The second involves changing the dominant subjects of the nationalist text and reterritorialising it. Configuring their own experience, geography and history, African women writers ‘contest the representations of nationalist reality’, particularly, in our case, during the independence and post-independence periods.⁹¹

Somewhat belatedly, I shall now formally introduce Bessie Head, who like her sisters throughout the African continent has discovered a voice and a way in this new territory. In a similar manner to them, she contests South Africans’ invocation of Mother Africa as their muse, which forms part of the cultural independence movements. This country’s chauvinist and racist politics haunt Head throughout her short writing life and she is a diaspora writer *par excellence*; not only did she write back to the metropolis, but also to different hegemonic groups within southern Africa. Upon writing *The Cardinals*, a novella published posthumously in 1993 that treats of her early experience in South Africa, she learned that the novel form, as she had formerly perceived it, could not transmit her felt or lived experience of transition. That

90 Cf. Kristeva’s essay ‘How Does One Speak to Literature?’ (92-123).

91 As I discussed earlier, Vera’s ‘Independence Day’ is an obvious example. Later we shall see that the response in Nigeria to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) by Amos Tutuola demonstrates just how effective these methods can be.

her writing is, as she has often confessed, principally autobiographical reveals that she does not want to forget her past but to break its hold upon her. 'The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically', as bell hooks writes, 'a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release' (1999, 84). The act of writing one's autobiography 'is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present'. Reflecting upon how her mother's family had to hide their skeleton in a cupboard, Head laments as late as 1982 that 'no real sensation or scandal has ever touched my life' (Head 1990, 5). Even as a well-known writer within certain literary circles, she finds it difficult to express her belief in her voice. Her writing life had consisted of well-received novels, stories and non-fiction, as well as prolific correspondence with very different people, who consistently expressed their admiration, despite the way she often, and at times understandably, mistreated them. However, in 1984 she begins to consider the possibility of writing her autobiography: 'I have ample material for it in notes, in papers, in letters to private friends. There is no sex and love for these 46 years of my life but rather a rich spiritual discipline which I feel now is finally coming into its own', Head wrote to Christine Green who had told her of Heinemann's interest in commissioning her to write her autobiography (Eilersen 1995, 277). Head might well have been particularly silent about her life-story, which would, she argues, have bored any biographer to tears, but her hesitance only enhances her fictional rendering of this quest (Head 1990, 5).

Her original plan for this autobiography was to call it *Living on an Horizon*, because she wished to demonstrate her affiliation with the Hindu holy man, Swami Vivekananda. This title describes someone, as she said, who 'lives outside all possible social contexts, free,

independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and living experience' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 277). We observe the contradictions in this initial plan. Her ideal of artistic integrity would be undermined by the politics of experience and location, which would shape her vision. Her initial proposal is clear in a letter she wrote shortly after her arrival in Bechuanaland: as a half-caste, 'I'm a New African who hasn't even started to exist in Africa (,) it's not possible to assert my kind of Africanness which is a wide, all-encompassing feeling of great intensity' (*Imaginative Trespasser* 23). She feels 'superfluous' at this time in Southern African history; she rejects 'protest writing' and realises that it is 'myself, and myself alone that I have to present'. This is, of course, part of the process of her self-discovery as a writer and this crucial shift in her thinking was certainly 'a brave and unheard-of stand for a black writer to take in 1964', Pat Cullinan confirms (*Imaginative Trespasser* 23).

The narrator in the New Zealander Janet Frame's posthumous novel, *Towards Another Summer* (2008), says: 'High in the sky, buffeted by the winds from everywhere, trying to persist in her course of flight as a migratory bird, Grace (one of the protagonists) felt the need for a warm supporting wind blowing in her direction' (21).⁹² The life of Bessie Head, another migratory bird is, as we know, more of routes than of roots, although her roots exerted a great influence on her. It seems that her painful experience of displacement started before her birth. Her mother, Bessie Amelia Birch, was the second of seven children whose parents, Walter Thomas Birch and Alice Mary, née Bezant, had emigrated to South Africa from England in 1892. Their second daughter, Bessie (called 'Toby' by the family) was born in Hammersmith,

92 There are many coincidences between these two women writers, both equally unappreciated in their country of birth when they began to write. Despite Frame's difficult beginnings and her constant feeling that others constructed her, she did live to see the recognition of her work, as she accompanied Jane Campion in the filming of her autobiography, *An Angel at My Table*.

Orange Free State, where the family had settled, on March 13, 1894.⁹³ Later, Bessie Birch, ‘a good-natured, lively and musical young woman’, married Ira Garfield Emery, an Australian by birth (Eilersen 1995, 3-4). An attractive woman, Toby’s ‘eyes, large, brown and expressive, were set in a face with a generous mouth’ (Eilersen 1995, 3). Her brown hair was, she goes on to say, ‘short and thick’. She was ‘strongly built and slightly plump, giving a general impression of wholesome well-being’. Ira Emery later divorced Toby, because he blamed her for the accidental death of their elder son on December 17, 1919. This frightful incident in Toby’s life made her mentally unstable and she spent periods in mental hospitals. When Alice Birch, the family matriarch, discovered her daughter was pregnant, she sent her to Fort Napier Mental Institution in Pietermaritzburg, then the capital of Natal and eighty miles inland from Durban (Eilersen 2005, 7). Born on July 6th, 1937 two months after her mother’s admission, Bessie Emery, later Head, explains the circumstances of her birth in the Preface to ‘Witchcraft’ (1975): ‘The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man’. Judged insane, she ‘was committed to (this) hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie (Amelia) Emery and I consider it the only honour South African officials ever did me – naming me after this unknown, lovely and unpredictable woman’ (1990, 27). Interracial intercourse had always been prohibited, but it became a criminal offence under apartheid and Bessie bore the sentence of her parents’ alleged crime throughout her life. Described as ‘white’ on her birth certificate, this young girl experienced racial discrimination and began to live by that ‘travelling metaphor’ I have mentioned. A white family adopted her, but thought she looked ‘strange’: she had a brownish tinge on her fingernails and her hair was slightly too curly. Thus, Nellie and

93 There seems to be no reason to substantiate that the ‘Bezant’ Eilersen speaks about here is related to the famous Sir Walter Besant, to whose talk on ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1884) Henry James responded with his own ‘Art of Fiction’, but in my next footnote the spelling changes, as Gray describes the ‘Besants’ as a revolutionary Victorian family (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 121).

George Heathcote, a Coloured couple, fostered her, receiving a monthly payment of £3 for this job from the Birches, the noted horse-breeding family.⁹⁴ Her mother and George Heathcote both died in 1943. Rebelliousness is one trait she inherited from her mother.

The Cardinals: ‘that funny book I sent’. Butterflies and Birdsong.

Bessie Emery made good progress at the Greyling Street Coloured School, her first school. However, Mrs Heathcote seemed to disapprove of reading. Eventually, she bought her young charge a book about a bear called Fuzzy Wuzzy, which she recalls as *The Adventures of Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear* in her novella *The Cardinals*. The young protagonist, firstly called Miriam, then Charlotte and finally Mouse, finds it on a refuse dump and begs the old man who has befriended her to read it to her: ‘The adventures of the bear became too real too and she spent many hours sharing his experiences with him. When he ate an ice-cream, it was as though the melting cream dripped over her fingers. When he swam in the sea, she felt the waves rising to swamp her’ (Head 1993, 8). The protagonist, even as an outsider in this context, could find art anywhere, notably in a place where it has been discarded by others, and be moved by its rendering. As I have mentioned, this ‘jolly old man with a twinkle in his eye’ was held in high esteem because he could read and write (5). When requested to write a letter for someone in the community, he would copy it out of a book entitled *The Art of Letter Writing*. When he had taught Miriam to read and write, he decided to give her his letter book, or book of letters, and died two weeks later.

Distraught, the young girl took long walks on her own, ‘a silent, stubborn little figure possessed

⁹⁴ Kenneth Stanley Birch decided to break the silence in 1995, after the publication of Eilersen’s biography. His article appeared in *English in Africa* in May 1995, the cover of which shows Head with her mother and the grandmother she so resembled. They were also Besants, of the great Victorian revolutionary family, which Head would have enjoyed, if she had but known (Gray 1995). Her half-brother Ronald Emery died in February 2005 in Nelspruit, South Africa. In his final decade, he was disillusioned and embittered that his grandmother had prevented him from meeting his sister.

of an insatiable desire to learn to read and write, but not knowing at which point to start or where to go for knowledge' (8-9). One night, her foster-father, who had had too much to drink, tried to assault her and thus 'thrust her out into a new way of life': the young child fled to Cape Town. Ironically, Miriam's friend and outcast had given her the means to enter the world of letters. This exaggeration of the actual events gives us, nonetheless, an insight into young Bessie's fears.⁹⁵

The South African disastrous upheaval during Emery's childhood culminated in the victory of the National Party in 1948, with the subsequent introduction of the cornerstones of grand apartheid: the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act of 1950. Nellie Heathcote confronted every insult with fortitude and her daughter learned to do likewise. At the age of 13, Emery was removed from her foster-mother's care to join St. Monica's Home for Coloured girls, an Anglican mission school in Durban (Nellie was a devout Catholic), where she discovered her origins and realised she was an orphan: 'I have always been just me, with no frame of reference or anything beyond myself' (Head 1990, 3). The emotional impression this had on her can only be imagined. In 1982 she wrote that 'for years and years after that I harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries and for the Christianity which they represented, and once I left the mission I never set foot in a Christian church again' (Head 1990, 4). She decided that her 'blind choice for survival', a 'choice for books', lay in breaking her relationship with the Heathcote family, but she kept in touch with their other fostered children. At the age of thirteen, she published her first story, 'The Stepping Stones of Truth', a parable in which Peter, the lying protagonist, is transformed by a dream and learns to tell the truth. It concludes: 'we must help others by Love, just as his guardian angel (a woman in white) helped

⁹⁵ Firmly set in the apartheid era, *The Cardinals* narrates Miriam's trials when she leaves home after her stepfather's abuse. While working in a hair salon, she sends an angry letter to 'AFRICAN BEAT – *The Paper of the People* – under the name of Charlotte Smith and the editor, PK, offers her a job (12). It is here that Miriam, now nicknamed Mouse, finds love; her lover turns out to be her real father.

Peter. Punishment only seems to make us worse' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 24). The final sentence might be taken as a direct comment on the school system. Bessie Emery later attended Bechet High School, where she, along with four other girls, completed tenth grade and took the Natal Teachers' Senior Certificate. Discharged from the provisions of the Children's Act in 1956, she was appointed to the teaching staff of Clairwood Coloured School in Durban, where Margaret Cadmore, her friend and mentor at St. Monica's, had arranged good lodgings for her. Cadmore, who became a missionary after her fiancé was killed in action, made a tremendous impression on Emery, as we shall see: 'Her off-beat sense of humour, her unconventionality, her earthliness and common sense were qualities she had never encountered before' (Eilersen 1995, 29-30).

After an education financed by her mother's family, Emery's confrontation with the real world and its political implications was troublesome. 'Slegs Blankes/Europeans only': this sign outside the library made her join the M L Sultan Library, where she read all about Hinduism, which she found 'very rich and deep in concepts' in comparison with her experience of Christianity, as she said in 1978. In 1975, she wrote of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who greatly inspired her: 'Never have I read anything that aroused my feelings like his political statements. (...) I recognised that this could only be God as man (;) he was a peculiar combination of India's ideal, the truly religious man and astonishingly, a practical man of the world' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 40-41). This year of intellectual growth, which almost ended in a nervous breakdown, affected her teaching and she resigned from her job in June 1958. Both Margaret Cadmore and Nellie Heathcote tried to dissuade her from going to Cape Town, but she was determined to get a job as a reporter. Upon her arrival there, she found a room in the Stakesby Lewis Hostel in District Six and the warden advised her to go to the office of *Drum* and *Golden City Post*. She soon began to work as a journalist on *Golden City Post*, under the editorship of

Dennis Kiley. At first he assigned her the task of covering court cases: not her forte. The young trainee got round this by writing sensitive pieces on individuals: 'I can see myself doing strange things as I fear people's dreams could be extraordinary', she wrote of one assignment (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 40). Living in District Six, a vibrant township in Cape Town, was her first conscious encounter with her own identity within a group. Moving in and out of other people's lives, she became aware of social injustice and human worth in a new way: 'This type of work leaves no time for mind troubles or frustrations or hysterics. One is always listening to other people's troubles', she wrote (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 40). She also observed another form of discrimination within the Cape Coloureds, as Eilersen goes on to say: 'There is a rigid caste system; the upper class who are very fair and cultured; the middle class who are factory workers and the no goods who are so poor that they have degenerated morally'. She sensed a 'cold reception' in some houses she entered: 'They seemed to pick out immediately that I had no class and sophistication, which is associated with being fair'. She had good friends among the poor, but had to admit she was a mental snob: 'I search avidly for anyone really intelligent. With intelligent people one forgets such shameful matters as the colour of one's skin and facial features which seem to matter so much in South Africa'. In April of 1959, she moved to Johannesburg, because she had the chance of getting a job on the *Golden City Post* there. However, she moved to *Home Post*, a weekend tabloid supplement of this newspaper. It was here that she met the *Drum* writers, because the two newspapers shared an office, as they did in Cape Town.

Scholars of Bessie Head's life and work generally begin to scrutinise her life from this time onwards. Some have maintained that she was not among the *Drum* school of writers. In Clayton's opinion, it is 'inappropriate, politically or stylistically, to group her with writers such as (Lewis) Nkosi, Can Thema, Todd Matshikiza or Richard Rive, since she was writing columns for

teenagers ('Hiya Teenagers!') and younger people ('Dear Gang') in a domestic supplement, the *Home Post*' (1989, 228). As we shall see, periodical evidence counters this argument. Susan Gardner dismantles other myths, extraordinary in their scope, which have haunted Head criticism (1989, 229-230).⁹⁶ Firstly, she cannot be regarded as a Coloured writer, 'drawing on the wide array of linguistic and social resources of a background in Cape Town's now-destroyed District Six, in the way that Richard Rive, for instance, can'. Since she was brought up in an English-speaking orphanage in Natal, she did not speak Afrikaans very well or form part of a community 'which has evolved its own characteristic language-use and cultural customs'. She wrote, as Gardner puts it, from the outside in. Even if she was an outsider, Head would disagree: 'I love the Cape because it can give me, a writer, a fierce individualist – a warmth, a love, a sense of something that is the opposite of isolation, and a **sense of belonging**, if not to the country, at least to the human race' (1990, 10, my emphasis).

Secondly, Gardner questions Head's status as an African writer. For example, three years after her death in 1986, students at certain African universities disowned her writing, principally for two reasons. On the one hand, she refused to be a political writer: 'I knew some time ago that I am a useless kind of person in any liberation movement or revolution; I can't stand them, or the people who organise them' (Head 1990, 27). This outburst is typical of her contradictory response to the great figures she explores in Botswana history and her admiration for Robert Sobukwe, the leader of the Pan-African Congress (PAC), with whom she had corresponded for a short time.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Gardner's article "'Don't Ask for the True Story': A Memoir of Bessie Head' (1986) has been challenged by the Finnish academic Maria Olausson in her *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain* (1997) as an example of a naive and at the same time powerful weapon of the critical establishment. Earlier, Teresa Dovey had analysed Gardner's article in depth, showing how it disempowers Head's own vision of her origins with the claim that they had not been verified by countering this vision with a 'true story' which brings in no new evidence. Olausson and Dovey are so right: events have completely overtaken Gardner's article, since Kenneth Birch, Head's uncle, broke his silence. For all these reasons, it is worth exposing Gardner's arguments once more.

⁹⁷ Upon his death, Head wrote 'The Coming of the Christ-Child', a story based on this leader.

He wrote to her twelve years after their first meeting: 'You were very intellectual and sceptical the day we met – quite suspicious, as many of our intellectuals were of the Africanism we propounded which, I admit, did have some racist undertones then' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 46). In other words, Sobukwe acknowledges the suspicion that the PAC might be considered racist because it supported the call to be 'real Africans' and opposed the ANC's willingness to negotiate alliances with non-black groups and movements. But who is an African, the South African writer Mongane Wally Serote asked in 2000:

It is a question steeped in history. It must be a means to seek to enrich our understanding of representivity and democracy. It must deepen, when it is asked, our understanding and resolution of the elements of the contradictions which have been intrinsic to both ethnic and racial conflicts. It is a question with possibilities to the resolution of problematic and conflictual issues. It is a question with the power to turn the world round (181-183).

Since he wrote this when he was Chairman of the Arts, Culture, Language, Science and Technology Portfolio committee in the South African Parliament, his discourse is, as are his rhetorical devices, very different from those who queried Head's status as an African writer in the 1980s. He believes in a culture of collectivism and communalism: a diversity of cultures, including those of the former 'colonialists'. Other people cannot 'explore and interpret that past for us. (By doing it ourselves), we will be contributing to a new consciousness about Africans and Africa in the first instance, and most importantly, to Africans themselves and to humanity in general' (Serote 183). This seems to me to be one of the paths Head anticipates in her writing.

On the other hand, Head does not 'ensconce herself in traditional, tribal life'. She prefers to remain 'defiant and independent' (Gardner 230). Certainly, this may be a reading of some of her essays, especially in the light of her emphasis on the importance of 'personality' as the true expression of a culture (Head 1990, 10). But her fiction does not endorse this interpretation. It

seems that 'Life', one of Head's stories to which we shall return to later, might have playfully been inspired by Gardner's critical approach. Moreover, Head's so-called feminism contains many contradictions, particularly in her treatment of sexuality: 'A consistent pattern in her fiction is for the female hero to endure trials only surmountable through the intervention of a god-like man' (Gardner 231). There is, Gardner admits, 'a discernible feminist content' in her fiction: she speaks out against the oppressiveness of tribal life for women, even if she does not 'ensconce herself in it' and, refusing to be called a feminist, as she understands the term, reveals ambivalent attitudes towards women. This South African critic, who interviewed Head – I have heard the recording – seems to have been influenced by the patriarchal and nationalist pressures at such a significant time in South African history: the dismantling of apartheid and the struggle for franchise. This is clear when she reaches Head's historical writing. In 'Social and political pressures that shape life in Southern Africa' (sic), Head discusses the sense of deprivation felt by a colonised person who grows up without an understandable sense of history, since it is either imposed or does not exist: in South Africa, 'a sense of history was totally absent in me (...) Black people could make no appraisal of their own work (...) In a creative sense I found myself left only with questions' (1990, 66). Head determined to reconstruct Botswana history, even if she could not claim it as her own. It turns out, however, that history now plays, as Lekan Oyegoke sustains in 'Renaissance' & South African Writing', 'a major role in the shaping of cultural directions' in that uneasy relationship between creative writing and literary criticism in Africa in recent years (2002, 1). Head's outlook is, in the opinion of most readers, 'less materialist than moralising and metaphysical' (Gardner 234). Her historical writing echoes her fiction, because it appears she is 'more interested in character and personality than in socio-structural forces'. Women 'may be powerful protagonists', Gardner concludes, 'but they are never allocated the power to change

history’.

It is amazing that the object of Gardner’s scorn even contemplated writing a novel at so young an age. As Ezekiel Mphahlele, Gordimer’s first ‘black friend’, wrote: ‘It is impossible for a writer who lives in oppression to organise his whole personality into creating a novel’ (qtd. in Roberts 79-80). In an essay of 1963 he contrasted the prose of black writers such as Peter Abrahams with that of white writers such as Gordimer. Abrahams operated in a situation of ‘perpetual terror and flight’, as he tried ‘to reconcile all these disparate elements, to come to terms with his anger and bitterness, with a life of rejection, where he has to assert his human dignity’. Whereas white writing ‘is steady, sure of itself’, Abrahams’ writing reveals impressionism, unevenness and experimentation, also characteristic of Head’s writing. From her first novella to her last piece of prose writing, Head’s search for an understanding of gender constructs has always involved an exploration of the patriarchal society in which she lived and which she hoped would change. She described Africa as ‘the silent, cruel and fickle lover with two sides, and two faces: bland and smiling, and twisting and deceiving, giving all and yet giving nothing’. Yet it was she who needed ‘the part of your masculinity that is covered by layer and layer of restraint and tradition’ (Head 1993, 121).

This heterosexual image, at once humorous and very serious, is embodied by Johnny in *The Cardinals*, in which she outlines her experience as the only black woman reporter in Cape Town. She makes one of her few comments about this novella in a letter to Cullinan:

You know – that funny book I sent – ‘The Cardinals’ – I started to create a mythical man there and he has since appeared everywhere. I write about him all the time - yet he is not a flesh and blood reality. But every time I need to say something about love – he’s always there – so conveniently. Don’t you think he’d be rather over-used? He gets better and better with each story but how can one write about a non-existent person? I can’t understand this phenomenon. We

exchange words too. (*Imaginative Trespasser* 47).⁹⁸

Whether mythical or not, Johnny represents the lively atmosphere of District Six, captured so well, for example, by Head's friend Richard Rive. Although Johnny inexplicably falls in love with Mouse, his fellow reporter, it turns out that, unbeknownst to them, he is her father. Critics have often discussed the incestuous twist in the plot in the light of the cornerstones of grand apartheid and her personal background. Mouse's sexual awakening is interconnected with her awakening to her creative powers, both as a sketcher and a writer, significantly under Johnny's tutelage. At the end Johnny echoes Head's thoughts when he says: 'Just don't delude yourself that you're safe. Anything can happen. Life is a treacherous quicksand with no guarantee of safety anywhere' (Head 1993, 118). He is ostensibly speaking about their love, which Head frequently associates with creativity. Earlier, Johnny tells Mouse angrily: 'You've been living in bits. These bits and pieces are scattered all over the place like an upturned jigsaw puzzle. I just don't know how long it's going to take to put all the pieces in place so that we finally have a sane and well-composed picture' (Head 1993, 114). In 'Africa', she tells Africa: 'the man I least despise, yet whose face I cannot bear, is one like you, driven by an overpowering lust for power, dominance, place and position. True, we are but two sides of the same coin, and in the jigsaw puzzle of life each part of you fits some exact part of me' (Head 1993, 122). The pieces of this puzzle, in which Africa is compared with a man (he is the 'Green Tree', 'Africa', the 'Beautiful Birds Dancing in the Sun-wind', 'Earth and Everything', she told Cullinan), are still in disarray and would never be

98 Margaret Daymond, Professor of English at the University of Natal, agreed with Patrick Cullinan that this novella, together with seven other stories, were ready for publication in 1993, despite, as Cullinan says, Head's assertions that she has 'faults' and that her 'inspiration is too much a flash of lightning' (*Imaginative Trespasser* 41). The cardinal has multiple meanings, but significant here is that it may refer to a certain system in journalism, whether hierarchical or not, or to the principles of fictional composition. Moreover, for Head cardinals in the astrological system 'are those who serve as the base for foundation and change' (Eilersen 1995, 55). Ambiguity is central from the start, especially concerning the 'mythical man'.

completed. But there are glimpses of thematic pieces that are reassembled in her later work: her autobiographical stance, her interest in politics (is she, really, as she claims, apolitical?), creativity, sexuality, the topography of the mind, love, revenge, the ambiguous role of the outsider, her tortuous inner quest for a stable identity and her ‘reverence for ordinary people’ (Head 1990, 63).

At the time of writing this novella, Head was inevitably politically engaged (firstly with the Pan-African Congress and then with the Liberals). She had embarked on an original form of journalism, writing her own paper, *The Citizen*, when she met Harold Head and married him in Simonstown on September 1st 1961. Her early contributions to *The New African* expressed her nascent social and political awareness, but she was highly suspicious of the interrelation of politics and writing. In one piece of 1962 (‘Let me tell a story now...’), notably written before she left South Africa, she expresses the ambivalence central to her life and fiction, when she tries to find words for her tangled emotions: ‘When I think of writing any single thing I panic and go dead inside ... I have my ear too keenly attuned to the political lumberjacks who are busy making capital on human lives. Perhaps I’m just having nightmares. Whatever my manifold disorders are, I hope to get them sorted out pretty soon, because *I’ve just got to tell a story*’ (Head 1990, 8). This demonstrates her lack of self-confidence, as it anticipates her creative path.

When Rain Clouds Gather: a house and a home

The notion of homeland often inspires a conflictive setting for diaspora writers. Nearly all of Head’s work published during her lifetime had, as she wrote in 1978, ‘Botswana settings but the range and reach of my preoccupation became very wide’. South Africa haunted her: ‘I began to answer some of the questions aroused by my South African experience (...) My work has covered

the whole spectrum of Southern African preoccupations – refugeeism, patterns of evil, and the ancient South African historical dialogue’ (Head 1990, 67). Her three novels set and written in Botswana, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1969, *African Writers Series*, Heinemann, 1987), *Maru* (Victor Gollancz, 1971, *African Writers Series*, 1972) and *A Question of Power* (David-Poynter Ltd. and *African Writers Series*, 1974) demonstrate her interest in different forms of biography/autobiography, crucial for Southern African writers and others during the transitional phase accompanying the struggle for independence, in that they attempted to name reality and construct a sense of self that differs from colonial configurations. That a Southern African woman writer has chosen these genres reveals her challenge to the established literary techniques and conventions; she prefers to be ‘a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future’ by telling the stories of unsung women and men (Head 1990, 64). These go much further back than the 1960s when apparently ‘no prose narrative autobiographical texts in English by black South African women appear to have been published’ (Gordon 2001,7). *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru* were widely read and praised highly at the time of publication, but *A Question of Power* was not a hit: ‘I was building up a reputation in England as the critic’s pet and the third book stopped that’, as Head wrote (qtd. in *Imaginative Trespasser* 140).

Crucial issues in these novels are alienation/estrangement, and the search for a new sense of belonging and identity. This process of dislocation and regeneration affects not only the invaded colonies but also members of diaspora communities. The colonised are, at best, dislocated, metaphorically speaking, in that their cultures and institutions are cast to one side in favour of those of the coloniser; many postcolonial novels explore the psychological effects of denigration and exclusion. What is interesting, of course, is that migrants develop their own distinctive cultures, which modify the cultures they come into contact with and are modified by

them. Just as Head launches her literary career in Botswana, so her novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, opens on the border: that physical and metaphorical third space, on the fringes of ‘no-man’s land’, across which the character must leap before gaining an illusory freedom far from his Zulu heritage. It opens with the following lines:

The little Barolong village swept right up to the border fence. One of the huts was built so close that a part of its circular wall touched the barbed-wire fencing. In this hut a man had been sitting since the early hours of dawn. He was waiting until dark when he would try to spring across the half-mile gap of no-man’s-land to the Botswana border fence and then on to whatever illusion of freedom lay ahead. (Head 1986, 1-2)

The old man, in whose hut Makhaya Maseko seeks shelter, offers the distraught fugitive a glass of brandy: ‘he liked (their) stories. He stored them up against the day when he would be free to surprise his village with his vast fund of information on fugitives’. Maseko is waiting, significantly, in a Barolong village: the Boers first came into contact with the Barolong peoples around 1834, and Sol Plaatje defends their traditional life in his novel *Mhudi* (1930), as he reinterprets history from the point of view of his own people (Couzens 5). The Heinemann version of Plaatje’s text quotes Head:

When I first read this beautiful book, I was absolutely in despair. I needed to copy the whole book out by hand so as to keep it with me. It was more than a classic; there is just no book on earth like it. All the stature and grandeur of the writer are in it.

The village creates the sense of space pervading the opening of Head’s novel; running along the border between South Africa and Botswana, it also evokes transition, from one socio-political and cultural system to another. The old man ‘collecting the treasures’ from the refugees seems, in the light of Head’s work, to represent an older order that Makhaya Maseko and his creator challenge.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ *When Rain Clouds Gather* is set in the poverty-stricken village of Golema Mmidi, a haven for refugees, before Botswana’s independence. Makhaya Maseko and the English agricultural expert Gilbert Balfour join forces to revolutionise the villagers’ farming methods. Their task is fraught with hazards that threaten to divide the community, but both men remain, gently moving themselves and the community forward.

Lodged in an old woman's hut, the fugitive is surprised by a child prostitute, sent by her grandmother. In compensation, he gives her a ten-shilling note and hears the grandmother exclaim: 'This is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God!' Sadly, he thinks:

He has known many such evils in his lifetime. He thought they were created by poverty and oppression, and he had spent the last two years in jail in the belief that, in some way, a protest would help to set the whole world right. It was the mentality of the old hag that ruined a whole continent – some sort of clinging, ancestral, tribal belief that a man was nothing more than a grovelling sex organ, that there was no such thing as privacy of soul and body, and that no ordinary man would hesitate to jump on a mere child. (Head 1986, 9)

This scene is worth discussing briefly, because it appears at the beginning of Head's first novel set in Botswana. *Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust (Botswana)* defines patriarchy as 'a system of domination and control that promotes the rule of men. It expresses the values, beliefs, stereotyped myths, practices, and tendencies that support the power and interests of men' (Ngafela 97). Since women have no independent existence under patriarchy – perpetrated by the colonial officials – patriarchal values are bound to affect the representation of women in fiction. The patriarchal system has created these stereotypes: villains and paragons of virtue, for example. But we might wonder which is which. Does Maseko's refusal to defile the child make him morally superior to the grandmother? Even if we disregard that money changes hand, that the fugitive participates in this transaction, I would draw attention to the ambiguous tone of this passage. Supposedly it represents a man's thoughts and yet the outburst (is it ironic?) seems to introduce a tone more typical of Head's narrators and later protagonists. This idea is supported by the changes Maseko makes to his household upon his father's death, the foremost of which was 'that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends' (Head 1986, 10). After his mother's protest, Maseko says: 'Why should men be brought

up with a false sense of superiority over women?' Maseko's anger against the old order indicates that his creator has presented him as a 'progressive representation of a man', as Ngafela suggests (100). Even as outsiders, they seem to feel that they can speak from their cultural perspectives on behalf of "Africa", without taking the other culture into account: those of the grandmother and granddaughter are excluded. At the other extreme, the narrator undermines the depiction of the idealistic male muse of Mother Africa; she is now, among other things, a 'suspicious old hag' who trades her granddaughter. This scene also points to another characteristic of Head's novels: in the everyday encounters between women we discover that the 'most intriguing and complicatedly textualized characters (...) are not Gilbert or Makhaya, but Paulina and Maria' (Lewis 2007, 141). In this text 'a woman's world emerges as a form of sub-culture' (143-44). Although subordinated by a dominant patriarchal culture, 'it is simultaneously unique and antithetical to a socially superior domain'. Struck by the burdens placed on women as the primary food producers, the narrator celebrates them: They pitch themselves 'into the hardest, most sustained labour with perhaps the same joy that society women (...) experience when they organize fêtes or tea parties' (Head 1986, 100).

Patriarchal tribalism is not Makhaya's only complaint: he refuses to remain in a country where black men were called 'boy' and 'dog' and 'kaffir'. 'The continent of Africa was vast without end and he simply felt like moving out of a part of it that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs' (Head 1986, 10). Although still an outsider in the new land, this traveller, like Head, embarks on his quest for a place where he can establish his identity on his own terms, where he can perceive and interpret issues from his own perspective. Head thinks of this novel as her 'only truly South African work, reflecting a black South African viewpoint' (1990, 68). Makhaya represents, in her narrator's opinion, 'the South

African personality. We are an oppressed people who have been stripped bare of every human right'. However, like Plaatje's novel, which she evokes as an intertextual reference from the start, her text goes beyond South Africa to other African contexts that have experienced and been affected by colonialism and its aftermaths. In this sense, it recaptures the past, from a black perspective, the confusing 'nervous conditions' of the split self in the present, recalling Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Preface' to the same work, and anticipates the future of this particular region.

The dialogue set up between different orders here becomes a prominent feature of Head's work and might make us think that her discourse is binary, especially since she appears to work with doubles in her texts. For example, *When Rain Clouds Gather* tells the story of this South African political escapee and urban dweller, who ends up in the village of Golema Mmidi, and his counterpart, Gilbert Balfour, a white agriculturalist and idealist who has escaped from an upper middle-class English background delightfully described by Head's narrator and who introduces "utopian" cooperative farming methods with the help of Makhaya (1986, 98-9). Head participated in similar projects, but claims that she obtained the agricultural details from Oxfam, which had undertaken research in Botswana during the 1965 drought. She explains, moreover, that two characters in the novel, Makhaya and Paulina Sebeso, the woman he marries, express her opinions. The happy ending of a purposeful future for the villagers, the reconciliation between Makhaya and Balfour and their marriages to local women reveal how this binary patriarchal and colonial discourse is challenged. Set in a dynamic of change, the text proposes cultural engagement in order to discover the similarities and differences among cultures. Both the romances in the novel are seen 'either to symbolise or to prompt social changes and freedoms' (Lewis 2007, 137).

The condemnation of men is mostly treated humorously, but the narrator's comments on the plight of women are unequivocally critical of male attitudes. Makhaya's friend Dinorego tells the story of Mma-Millipede, who had 'a distinct personality from birth' (Head 1986, 64-65). Her family was very poor, but her religious views soon brought her to the attention of the chiefs. Ramogodi, a drunkard boaster and 'the son of the reigning chief', cannot conquer this woman, who just stares at him whenever he waylays her, thus challenging 'the pride of a vain man'. Forced to marry him, she soon bores him with her religious ways.¹⁰⁰ Some years later, Ramogodi's assault on his sister-in-law leads to his brother's suicide. Now 'the most hated man in the village', he divorces Mma-Millipede and marries his brother's wife. Mma-Millipede's son seeks vengeance, but is swiftly sent into exile. Dinorego and his wife persuade her to come to Golema Mmidi. Mma Millipede becomes a successful trader and maintains her friendship with Dinorego even after his wife's death. The narrator expresses the following reflection: 'One might go so far as to say that it is strong, dominating personalities who might play a decisive role when things are changing. Somehow they always manage to speak with the voice of authority, and their innate strength of character drives them to take the lead in almost any situation'. In this case, the dominant personalities are very different women: Paulina Sesebo and Mma Millipede, a traditional woman for whom foreigners, such as Gilbert and Makhaya, 'were still taboo' (Head 1986, 71).¹⁰¹ Yet it is this woman who has the strength to confront her men and lead her community forward into a more egalitarian society.

The villagers' disregard, firstly, for British colonialism and, secondly, for Chief Matenge's

100 'Heaven is Not Closed' offers another version of the conflict between Christianity and local customs. Once again, an old man, Modise, tells the story. At the end, the group debate this conflict 'in their minds': 'Was heaven really closed to the unbeliever, Ralokae? Or had Christian custom been so intolerant of Setswana custom that it could not hear the holiness of Setswana custom?' (Head 1977, 12) This is just one of many intratextual references in Head's oeuvre.

101 This idea is explored in greater depth in *Maru* and, one could argue, in *A Question of Power*.

selfish ambitions as their leader are, as some have argued, a clear condemnation of white minority rule in South Africa 'where a co-operative of any kind' would, Head believes, 'cause a riot of hysteria among the white population – their wealth and privilege are dependent on the poverty and distress of black people' (Head 1990, 64). Thus, another key issue in this novel is, as Head wrote in 1978, the first general election for independence; Makhaya registers himself as a refugee in 1965, 'the year of self-government prior to complete independence' (Head 1986, 13). Despite this achievement, the narrator describes the election campaign as 'pathetic': 'The sons of chiefs, who had all the advantages of education, pounced on the spelling errors of the sons of slaves, who had little or no education' (59). Black peoples in South Africa, unlike those in Botswana, will never, in Head's opinion, 'vote for a government of their own choice'. *When Rain Clouds Gather*, which she considers her 'most amateur effort', is prophetic in other ways: Makhaya's arrival, perhaps like her own, was 'like sending a message back to his own home' (Head 1990, 64). It is a diaspora novel, which intercalates the perspectives of distinctive outsiders. Besides those from other lands, Mma Millipede and Paulina, for example, come from the northern part of Botswana: 'Northerners really pride themselves on being inexplicable to the rest of the country. They speak Tswana at a faster, almost unintelligible pace and have added so much variety to the Tswana language as to seem to an outsider to be speaking a completely foreign tongue' (Head 1986, 71).

Besides socio-political issues, what fascinates Head is the figurative power of language to transform and inspire. 'Thank God', she chose 'a vista of (desert) land that was dry and unproductive', a vista that emerges often in her descriptions of village experience: 'Bessie needed transplantation in order to discover her own organic voice' (Beard 1991, 584). Head's displacement offers 'a store of images' for 'alternative notions of liberation' to those of protest

writing; for example, ‘metaphors based on rural and small-scale agriculture or stories describing supportive relationships’ (Lewis 2007, 128-9). This fictionalising of her new home does not celebrate a pastoral world, however. Instead, she celebrates ‘newfound regenerative metaphors at the same time that she continues to probe forms of personal and social injustice’. We have seen how Makhaya’s flight from South Africa is as traumatic as it was for Head. Later on, the narrative returns to the harshness of his new environment and towards the end, the death of Paulina’s young son and a ravaging drought underscore the theme of the opening of the text. ‘If a man didn’t have dreams like this, in Africa, he would end up food for the vultures too’, Makhaya thinks, giving us a key to the regenerative process, even as he observes the environment around him:

These horrible creatures guzzled and guzzled, seeming to have bottomless appetites. The wind swept huge columns of sand up into the sky, which carried the odour of death with it and brought more vultures, in thick, black patrols. They swooped down with their big wings outstretched like supersonic jets. Some of the fully gorged birds made way for the newcomers, flying up into the thorn trees and adorning the bare branches in monstrous, silent, carved postures. Even the wind blew according to its own mad pattern. For hours tiny gusts flew in harassed circles around the thornbush until they all converged into a roaring turmoil of air and red dust which would race madly for a mile or so along the earth and then sweep up and disperse itself in the sky. (Head 1986, 161-2).

Perceiving the starkness of the bush to which he has flown (‘on all sides was the most awful life imaginable’), Makhaya observes the vultures’ purposeful flight and the wind’s incomprehensible movement. The creativity of Paulina’s son represents one sign of regeneration in this desert of death and destruction. Makhaya, an artist and philosopher, finds the child’s wooden carvings he had done during the lonely hours at the cattle post:

Among the assortment he picked up a porridge spoon, one and a half feet in length. A great deal of effort had been put into the production of this spoon. The small boy had probably intended it to be a gift to his mother. He had decorated the long handle with the twisting pattern of a snake’s scaly body, and almost every detail, right up to the

venomous eyes, had been reproduced. The design was bold and vivid and he had burned it into wood with a red-hot piece of iron. (Head 1986, 159)

A carved crocodile arouses Makhaya's interest: 'Where had the boy seen a crocodile? (...) And the surrounding area was thornbush forest, and the tiny piece of wood was a foreigner to the area' (160). Once again, image-making reveals the idea of intercultural engagement. Later, in a very tender scene when Paulina and Mma-Millipede look at the carvings, they realise that 'the handiwork on the little crocodile was different from the boy's rough strokes. It had the smooth, polished finish of an old professional hunter and wood-carver and such a man had passed by the small boy's cattle post one day and exchanged his own professional work for that of a cheerful little boy' (166-67). Apparently, an outsider has introduced and created new objects for contemplation. The title of the novel, which may well anticipate the renewal that follows devastation, is perhaps the most significant symbol of hope, even if it is 'the product of imagining' (Lewis 2007, 148), prefiguring *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. Lewis argues that this reference to rain suggests tropes of rebirth and progress, which is undeniable concerning textual and intertextual allusions, a topic for future study. What is most important is that Head called her house in Serowe 'Rain Clouds' after the publication of this novel. This demonstrates not only the close relationship between text and context in Head's work but also the anamnestic relationship between imaginary and physical space.¹⁰²

102 I use the term anamnestic in the sense that Lyotard suggests: anamnesis 'corresponds to the 'freely floating attention' of the psychoanalyst or the free association of the aesthetic imagination' (Cook 322). While it is the second of these correspondences that interests me, it seems, as Jon Cook explains when citing Lyotard, that Lyotard fears, in *The Inhuman* (1988, 57), for the aesthetic imagination in the light of new technologies which produce writing or rewriting that erase 'all traces left in the text by unexpected or 'fantasy' associations' (qtd. in Cook 322).

Maru: Margaret and Windscreen-wiper

From this novel onwards, Head shapes her earlier dreams and stories into a vision for a dignified and compassionate future for Africa, once it, and Head herself, has risen from exploitation, slavery and oppression. *Maru* explores in greater depth those innermost thoughts momentarily studied in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.¹⁰³ It revisits the traumatic experience of Head's education at a mission school and her position as an outsider who arrives in a strange place as a teacher. This novel thus represents, on the one hand, Head's concern with the 'hideousness of racial prejudice', in the form of the name Margaret Cadmore, which is ironically given to two characters: the missionary's wife and her adopted Masarwa daughter, whose mother dies in childbirth (Head 1990, 68). This complicates the significance of Hudson-Weems' understanding of *nommo*: the child is named and defined by the other, and is given, moreover, the same name. Our protagonist's name epitomises at least two complex narratives that identify her as an inferior: the colonial narrative and the indigenous narrative (Pimentel 1998, 63-68). In this case, the name itself is a device that represents transition in the narrative universe. Once qualified, the young Margaret goes to teach in the remote village of Dilepe, where she is regarded as an outcast by Botswana society, thereby demonstrating, yet again, that racism is not peculiar to Europeans or Asians (Head 1995, 11). Maru, heir to the village chieftaincy, thinks: 'How universal was the language of oppression! They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: 'They can't think for themselves. They don't know anything'' (109). Masarwa, or Bushmen, 'is the equivalent of 'nigger', a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy

103 *Maru* narrates the story of Margaret Cadmore, an orphaned Masarwa girl, who becomes a teacher in the village of Dilepe. An outcast, she polarises the community represented, principally, by two men: Moleka and Maru. Once again, however, the protagonist's artistic talent, or another version of her cardinals of composition, secure her lonely future.

nation' (12).¹⁰⁴ Unlike Alex La Guma, for example, Head seeks solutions to racism, the class system and gender bias in confrontational action in her literature and in the dark recesses of the soul.

On the other hand, this novel again addresses issues of creativity: performing that double role, Head wanted her novel 'to be so beautiful and so magical that I, as the writer, would long to read and re-read it' (Head 1990, 68).¹⁰⁵ Having lived 'faceless, voiceless, almost nameless' in the country, Margaret chooses themes 'from ordinary, common happenings in the village as though those themes were the best expression of her own vitality' (Head 1995, 107-108). The silenced women she paints carry 'a message' to Maru's heart: 'Look! Don't you see! We are the people who have the strength to build a new world!' The text repeatedly mentions the resources others provide for her painting: her white mentor teaches her to draw, Dikeledi, Maru's sister, provides her with materials, Moleka gives her a space in which to create, and Maru offers her a repertoire of dream images (Lewis 2004, 128). In this respect, Margaret's politics of representation exploits that space between her dependence on what she receives and 'her independent, uniquely positioned expression' (Lewis 2004, 128); it differs from Maru's 'rich creativity', which manipulates those he loves and fears 'to ensure the coming of the new order' (Eilersen 1995, 116). The character's view sums up this paradox: 'I first see something as it looks, but it looks better when it reappears as a picture in my own mind' (Head 1972, 104). The 'reappearance' not

104 There is a wide use of 'gender-neutral pronouns ('they') in many living African languages', Benedicta Egbo points out. Translations, particularly to colonial tongues, often efface the female gender. For example, the term translated to English as 'headman', in this case a noun, may refer in Sotho to both female and male (*Women Writing Africa* 16). The same must be true of the Masarwa's language, as it is of the English language before the age of 'political correctness'. Egbo's awareness of this problem should alert us to problems of translation into English. The greatest contribution of *Maru* resides in the recent foundation of the Centre for San Studies at the University of Botswana.

105 There is no doubt that Africana women writers of the 1960s and 1970s, if not the 1980s, wished to achieve this aim, and perhaps still do, even if they are very well represented today. But a politics of exclusivity is still firmly in its place, as young Black British writers remind us.

only challenges the ‘dominant codes and signifiers’ but reconfigures them so that ‘they acquire different and independent meanings’ (Lewis 2004, 129). In this sense, creativity shapes transition as it is shaped by it. Margaret finds painting the ‘most terrible discipline but the reward has been the production of that canvas’. Seemingly a cycle is completed. When it is taken away, Margaret’s ‘forlorn face’ clearly expresses her thoughts: ‘I want it for myself. It is the only record I have of something which profoundly affected my life’, perhaps voicing the opinion of her creator (Head 1995, 116).¹⁰⁶

Like Head’s other works, *Maru* is full of autobiographical references. The hostility she had felt in Serowe is expressed most poignantly when she was ‘thrown off’ the gardening group of an alternative rural development project called *Boiteko*, or ‘self-help’: ‘You’d ask why? Then read *Maru*. To Africans I am a Bushman, filthy, tainted, half-breed’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 132). This text also acts as a tribute, so to speak, to Margaret Cadmore, her colonial mentor from St. Monica’s. Head’s inspiration and influences, such as her reading of B. Pasternak, D.H. Lawrence, B. Brecht, Sol Plaatje and, among many others, most importantly W. B. Yeats, place her, as they do her protagonist in *Maru*, in that peculiar position between cultures, which might well be an advantage, if one acquires the necessary detachment. Her challenge is to adapt her influences to this particular context. Cadmore, the Bushwoman, surprises everyone when she speaks: ‘Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore (the missionary’s wife). It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation’ (Head 1995, 16). Head returns to her idealistic concept of the

106 In relation to this, we should recall that Head, working on a manual typewriter, made a copy of everything she wrote, from novels to bills, accounts and local quarrels. It is for this reason that the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe has invested so much time in filing her papers.

‘New African’, who has the courage to transgress the conventional boundaries, whether imposed by colonials or by the African peoples.

The opening of this novel is, once again, a powerful evocation of the conflict and a sense of place:

The rains were so late that year. But throughout that hot, dry summer those black storm clouds clung in thick folds of brooding darkness along the low horizon. There seemed to be a secret in their activity, because each evening they broke the long, sullen silence of the day, and sent soft rumbles of thunder and flickering slicks of lightning across the empty sky. They were not promising rain. They were prisoners, pushed back, in trapped coils of boiling cloud. (Head 1995, 5)

Like the title of the former novel, the clouds promise rain, so essential to the rural community, but these have become prisoners of some secret activity. Their brooding darkness infects the villagers: although Maru is ‘a king in their society’, they are ‘horrible to him because they imagined that their thoughts and deeds were concealed when he could see and hear everything’ (Head 1995, 7-8). Maru’s present is, he thinks to himself, comparatively simple, but ‘there was a depth of secret activity in him like that long, low line of black, boiling cloud’: the storm in his heart. In a nutshell, this concerns Moleka, his foil and rival, whom he fears he will have to kill. ‘There were two rooms. In one his wife totally loved him; in another she totally loved Moleka. He watched over this other room, fearfully, in his dreams at night’. The storm clouds of masculine rivalry, the explosive nature of each man and prejudice entrap these three characters in the traditional mind set in which ‘secrets and evil bore the same names’. The calm after the storm is largely due to Dikeledi, a strong woman character, who is Margaret’s only true friend and eventually becomes Moleka’s wife.

Once again, the promise of rain foregrounds a sense of regeneration or rebirth. Despite Maru’s misgivings and moodiness, he dreams about a new world. Despite Margaret’s trials and

tribulations, she is eventually accepted in the local community principally because of her friendship with Dikeledi, who underplays her achievements, such as her diploma from England in childhood education, because she is, as Margaret proudly perceives her, 'a drastic revolutionary' (Head 1995, 25). Unlike others 'who made wealth synonymous with idleness', Dikeledi's wealth gives her 'the freedom to specialize in what interested her most'. However, she does have two 'slaves', presumably Masarwa, even if she gives them a regular monthly wage, and they 'walk about the village with a quiet air of dignity'. This is part of the 'sham' Dikeledi has grown up with. When they first meet, Margaret reveals her greatest secret: the drawing of her mother done by her missionary mother. Dikeledi is overwhelmed: 'Did a white woman write that? (...) And about a Masarwa? She looks like a Goddess' (24). Margaret is right 'to tell anyone that (she is) a Masarwa'. Subsequent meetings confirm their sisterhood in this patriarchal society. It is empowering, but when Head wrote this novel, it sounded idealistic because these two women come from totally different backgrounds. Her proposal of inclusivity is admirable: the discrimination against the Masarwa is still a shameful problem for many Batswana.

Like other women in Head's texts, Margaret challenges prejudice from her Motswana perspective. A 'little like Uriah Heap', Pete, the principal of the school where Margaret and Dikeledi teach, is surrounded by his accomplices who attempt to undermine Margaret by whatever means (Head 1995, 39). For example, Morafi, a cattle thief who is the son of a paramount chief, is amusingly described, also in a Dickensian manner, as a revolting man: his 'bulbous protruding eyes' were 'completely vacant of thought or feeling'; his neck 'was covered in layers of fat'; his stomach 'hung to his knees'; finally, he had 'an acquired laugh', which was 'staccato, squeaky' (Head 1995, 43). While conversing with his friends, Pete and Seth, he raises the problem of the Masarwa at the school. Pete claims he had given Margaret a loophole in that

she could have said she was coloured: 'Coloureds are just trash, but at least she could pass as one' (44). However, the recognition that she is a Masarwa fuels the school's political flame. After much plotting over the weekend, the class eventually chants: 'You are a Bushman'. Pete had forgotten Dikeledi who intervenes with a murderous, shrill and high voice: 'Stop it! Stop it! I'll smash you all to pieces! She is your teacher! She is your teacher!' (46) As Margaret, keeping her head bent, and Dikeledi meet for lunch, Margaret explains that she has never made a fuss, even though she felt that she had killed 'a little girl in the front desk who was laughing' (47). 'It's funny how we agree in feeling,' Dikeledi says, who had thought when she saw the girl: 'Poor little swine. They have been taught to be brave about the wrong things and laugh about the wrong things. Someone will have to teach them decency, because their parents won't'.

Although Dikeledi eventually marries Moleka, who is also in love with Margaret, her experiences with her friend and colleague transform her from 'her coddled life' to become a member of the local community (Head 1995, 108). Or so Maru, who is very close to his sister and feels guilty because he has used her for his own ends, observes in a picture Margaret gives him. Dikeledi is given the same treatment as the ordinary women depicted, 'until she too belonged amidst the vigour of the goats and water-carriers' (108). He also sees 'a third Dikeledi' emerging: alone, she stares 'with penetrating eyes on the value of her own kingdom'. It is in the magical meeting of the artist and the observer/reader of the painting that Maru recognises his sister's worth and the 'unfolding of the soul'.

A significant aspect of this text is the questioning of perspective, whether it treats of form or content. Maru not only has his own revelation, but also perceives, at last, his sister's awakening. Now he is aware that he carries a tremendous burden: highly individualistic, he also represents his tribe, but wishes this 'great woman', the creator of these pictures, had no affiliation

to tribe or race, because he has fallen in love with her. For him, she is ‘a symbol of her tribe and through her he sought to gain an understanding of the eventual liberation of an oppressed people’. The image of colonialism appears before him: ‘The combinations were the same, first conquest, then abhorrence at the looks of the conquered and, from here onwards, all forms of horror and evil practices’ (Head 1995, 109). In his ‘moments of optimism’, he begins ‘to undo the ties of his birth’, anticipating the impossible outcome that he eventually has the courage to embrace.

The narrative perspective is, by no means, restricted to Maru. He may be the protagonist, as many Head critics argue, but Margaret’s perspective dominates the text, even if the narrator often appears to act as an oral storyteller, as Erika Ortega argues (2008). Although Ortega’s proposal is worth bearing mind, there are two important narrative strategies among many others in this text that demonstrate a development from Head’s former writing. Firstly, she combines oral and written forms.¹⁰⁷ In this respect, the opening section summarises the story. We have learned from our readings of African-American and British women’s writing that gardening is more often associated with female creativity. Yet the opening portrays Maru as the temperamental person who wants to plant ‘yellow daisies’, perhaps in an attempt to undermine gender differences whilst confirming them, because ‘they were the only flowers which resembled the face of his wife and the sun of his love’ (Head 1995,5). As Maru walks home, the narrator, using these daisies as an image in this narrative tapestry, makes explicit mention of the connection between the ‘secret activity’ of the clouds and Maru. The storm envelops both the public and the private sphere of this text by combining the inner and outer perspective of the husband, wife and narrator. According to Maru, the love conflict is perceived spatially: his wife loves him in one room and Moleka in the other. Yet both Maru and Moleka are public men: ‘What did (Maru) want

¹⁰⁷ The power to listen to oral stories has implications for Eurocentric literary theory and criticism based on the printed word, as I discuss later.

with a woman who meant nothing to the public? In fact, until the time he married her she had lived like the mad dog of the village, with tin cans tied to her tail' (9). The conflict takes place in the public sphere and it might be argued that Margaret is no more than 'a real, living object' for this interracial/literary experiment, whether of her husband or her missionary 'mother' (15).

Secondly, those familiar with oral storytelling in this community would also recognise certain general African myths that Head questions through her visionary Hindu stance, adding extra depth to each of her characters. There is, for example, a common myth in African traditions of a god who lived among men until they made him angry and he departed for a faraway land. Another narrates the story of 'Sun, Moon and the Pretty Girl', in which two men fall in love with the same woman.¹⁰⁸ A Dahomey myth of Mawu-Lisa, a deity with two faces, suggests that one side is the face of the woman, Mawu, whose eyes are the moon; the other is the face of the man, Lisa, whose eyes are the sun. Joyce Johnson explains that this creation myth might be applied to Head's text – with all the differences – in that Maru is characterized more as the moon and Moleka as the sun (1985, 5-8). But is this so? Maru describes his wife as 'the sun of his love'. The effects of the possible use of these myths in Head's text are multiple, but one is that they interlink 'the local and immediate with the wider cosmic context', which is clearly associated with Margaret, the 'new and universal' personality (Head 1995, 10).

Head's revision of race, gender, class and ethnic discourses within Southern Africa in *Maru* presents a challenge few are prepared to meet, especially since the narrator claims, from Margaret's perspective, that the scientists, particularly those involved in eugenics, examine the teeth of the zebra and 'they do the same to Bushmen (Masarwa) (who) are not supposed to mind'

108 Although Erika Ortega and I worked together on these myths, I would like to thank her for her help. Alice Werner narrates the first in her *Myths and Legends of the Bantu*. www.sacredtexts.com Paul Radin outlines the second in his *African Folktales and Sculptures*. The problem with these myths is that they are far too general to apply to this particular case.

(Head 1995, 11). A text proposing such a complex examination of marginality within one African country should never have had the success that *Maru* did, as a romantic tale with a so-called happy ending, however much it might have been appreciated for its insight into “African imagination and discrimination” within an “African community”: what Europeans might want to read, but do not seem to understand. In this generic sense, it is the most accessible and most loved of her novels. Evidently, the heterosexual romance plot is simply a form to hide many other levels of coherence, but not those the idealistic and ideologically-torn teenagers would expect. In this conflictive community, governed by an inflexible hierarchical structure, Margaret does marry Maru, who has paid the price, as does she: ‘his wife looked up fearfully from her work of preparing the table for the evening meal’ (Head 1972, 8). The narrator counteracts this, with typical Headian gushiness, as she called it, by saying that ‘most often’ Margaret ‘felt quite drunk and mad with happiness’. Yet, the narrator suggests from the start: ‘Maybe a dark shadow had been created to balance the situation’. At a time when women were fighting for their rights in Botswana, Margaret’s union with Maru ‘constrains her articulation of independent desires’ (Lewis 2004, 129).

Undermining literary conventions, Head’s narrator reaches no point of plausible closure or, for that matter, a happy ending. The protagonist, whatever her dreams, is whipped off in a van with ‘Windscreen-wiper’, her goat. However much Maru says he loves her, Margaret is not prepared: ‘at that moment she would have chosen anything as an alternative to the living death into which she had so unexpectedly fallen?’ She hears his ‘sweet music’, but she has heard it before (Head 1972, 124). In that her love of two men has not been resolved, this truncated version of a romance plot, in the modern sense of the term, reveals its challenges to the western perception of love and the genres accompanying it. Fielding argues that the reader of *Maru*

‘imagines Maru and Margaret beginning a new community of men and women who are equal’ and that love heals this traumatized woman (101), but one cannot ignore the underlying tensions running through the private and the public sphere.

A Question of Power: ‘the dusty brown road’

Significantly given the provisional title of *Summer Flowers*, *A Question of Power* is divided into two parts: ‘Sello’ and ‘Dan’, two patriarchs in the village, ‘terrorize’ and charm, as did Maru and Moleka in Head’s *Maru*. ‘When Elizabeth looked back (,) she could see that the whole story had its beginnings with Sello’ (Head 1974, 13). However, it is soon ‘taken over by Dan, first as a subtle, unseen shadow in the background, later as a wild display of wreckage and destruction’. It took Elizabeth a year to say: ‘Phew! What a load of rubbish’. It constructs Elizabeth as an unstable protagonist/ narrator who further complicates the sense of a second self or a double by creating different selves of the same observer in her inner and outer world until it seems that she blurs all into a vision of hell. In her moments of anguish, she becomes a ‘freak’ or a ‘lunatic’ who hears villainous voices and speaks openly – even in the presence of others in the so-called ‘real world’.

These voices epitomise the continual shift between different layers of consciousness. Before, during and after the nervous breakdown that Head represents in this text, the voices challenge Elizabeth to take this dark soul ‘journey into hell’, which may lead to madness, but in the end they do not break her, even if the ‘villain’, taking different forms and bearing different names, is ever present (Head 1974, 126). Once Elizabeth is on the mend, she begins 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’ (Head 1974, 204-5). Instantly reminding us

of Robinson Crusoe's i(s)land, this allusion is typically changed by her memory of a D.H. Lawrence poem – *Song of a Man Who Has Come Through* – that she then quotes: 'Not I, but the wind that blows through me! A fine wind is blowing the new direction of time (...) Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul...'. As we note here, Elizabeth begins to write her own narrative, creating a distance from the experiencing self through a third-person narrator. She is inspired by D.H. Lawrence, as is Head, whose epigraph for this novel is taken from his 'God':

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!

Head's poetic rendering of Elizabeth's journey to the depths of despair is, despite the third-person narrator, unreliable on occasions and my interpretation(s) may be as difficult to follow as is the novel itself. It seems almost an insult to the writer to impose sense upon a text that attempts to describe the indescribable, express the inexpressible. Rupert Read writes: 'the decidedly strong grammar of Faulkner's Benjy or the fairly strong grammar of Coetzee's quasi solipsistic and voice-hearing narrator in *In the Heart of the Country* can (...) provide us with the illusion that we are now understanding (in the usual sense of the word) an idiot, a schizophrenic or what-have-you'. The risk of thinking that 'this is an understanding that helps us to capture the psychopathological is (...) in the end rather less than the analogous risk in the case of the weaker grammars employed by psychologists and psychiatrists...' (136-137).¹⁰⁹ Twentieth-century writers of 'deranged literature' give us 'a new mode or manner of representation, not a way of capturing something waiting to be captured'. Moreover, the stronger the grammar, 'the less likelihood of

¹⁰⁹ Read writes in a footnote that he takes the term 'strong grammar' from Garrett Caples and James Guetti, but does not give the source. He tells us that Wittgenstein understands grammar more broadly than most of us would, but again does not give us a definition (141).

thinking that one has found the real meaning of what is represented'. The great temptation we must resist, Read concludes in his philosophical article, 'is to think that anything human must always be comprehensible' (141). Read only mentions male authors from Dostoyevsky to Coetzee, but some scholars suggest that *A Question of Power* by Head and *Faces in the Water* by Janet Frame go even further in exploring this mode of representation than Anglo-American women writers: 'like other late-twentieth-century madness narratives, the autobiographical writings of Frame and Head articulate the fundamental questions of power that must be asked'. The 'union of aesthetics and politics surpasses that of previous madness narratives' (Herbert, 111). This is, perhaps, Head's greatest achievement in this entangled web of reason and irrationality that raises so many questions. Head's text is so memorable, yet so incomprehensible, that I shall try to discuss some of its characteristics, if in fragmentary notes. An innovative novel of transition, *A Question of Power* treats of the consequences of diaspora experience: like Head, the orphan Elizabeth leaves South Africa to become a teacher in Botswana. It is, moreover, a narrative that plays with untranslatable metaphors, to borrow Read's term, and so many visual images that it cannot be reduced to an allegory exploring go(o)d(s) and (d)evil(s). Before narrating this breakdown, Elizabeth feels she is an outsider, surrounded by hostility, perhaps caused by her former experience, roughly based on Head's experience: some of the answers to 'the power people' of South Africa 'lay in her experiences in Botswana' (Head 1974, 15-19). Once protagonist and author give expression to their fears and fantasies, they are accepted by their community and find a sense of belonging there.

Head describes *A Question of Power*, her most autobiographical novel, as 'a private philosophical journey into the sources of evil' (1990, 69). The sources lie, partly, in Elizabeth's South African past, so like that of Head: mainly her hatred of colonial, patriarchal, sexist and

racist power regimes. This does not mean, as Head often insists, that her masterpiece should be reset in South Africa, because no white South African has the power to invade her mind. In her opinion, as she wrote to so many of her correspondents, this novel relates as much to the evils practised in South Africa as to the Belsens and Dachaus of Hitler's time, 'more of Hitler than anything else' (Head 1974, 46-7).¹¹⁰ Once again, it is set in a village, in this case called Motabeng ('the place of sand') on the edge of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana, 'where, mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth's mind', the narrator, perhaps also an outsider, explains (15). Like Serowe where Head wrote her novel, this village, which Elizabeth privately named 'The Village of the Rain Wind' (20), is much more cosmopolitan than those in her earlier novels, in that there are many outsiders, including Europeans, whom Elizabeth meets and, at times, has violent encounters with, such as Mrs. Jones: Elizabeth finally and regretfully remembers that 'she'd beaten Mrs Jones too'.¹¹¹ The main characters that accompany Elizabeth on this dark journey into the depths of the soul and its hells are two patriarchal figures, Sello and Dan Molomo, the only character given a surname. Each claims he loves her, as she, initially, adores Sello and, finally, loves Dan, but she soon begins to question their "values" and, in the end, despises them. They may have taught Elizabeth a cruel lesson through their endless binary discourse along sexist and racist lines, but they reveal their contempt for her as a coloured female outsider. Finally, the answers to the power people, 'uncovered through an entirely abnormal

110 In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon quotes from memory a comment made by Césaire: 'When I turn on my radio, when I hear that Negroes have been lynched in America, I say that we have been lied to. Hitler is not dead'. When he hears on the radio that Jews have been "persecuted" and that 'African forced labor has been inaugurated and legalized, I certainly say we have been lied to: Hitler is not dead' (1968, 90). We know that Fanon exerted a great influence on Bessie Head, but *A Question of Power* also questions his work, according to certain specialists. Elizabeth mentions that she had 'lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa. It was like 'living with permanent nervous tension because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you' (Head 1974, 19).

111 Cosmopolitanism is a term that runs through Head's oeuvre. It seems to embody her stance on egalitarian relationships among different peoples.

relationship with two men (,) might not be so much due to her dubious sanity as to the strangeness of the men themselves', Elizabeth concludes when beginning her narrative (19).

The third-person narrator represents Elizabeth's attempt to understand the nature of evil as an intense 'internal drama' in which there is a conflict between these two male characters who also form part of her daily reality, the external drama (Head 1974, 15). 'The everyday level involves', Head explains to Randolph Vigne, 'a development project. The people I work with', such as her friend Kenosi, also a single mother, 'come in and keep moving steadily and sanely through the book, just as beautiful as they are in real life' (*A Gesture of Belonging* 165). These two women create a sense of sisterhood that withstands Elizabeth's outsidership (Head 1974, 90). The other level concerns the journey into the soul, 'with three soul characters, who are really disembodied persons (;) the concentration is on arguments of power, good and evil and it is really in the form of dream sequences which had thread of logic, the sort of logic of war' (*A Gesture of Belonging* 165). In other words, it treats of her breakdown, in which Elizabeth becomes engaged in 'psychological battles with the demons that oppress her, her horrific nightmares, her struggle for her sanity', as she seeks a place in this hostile environment (Lorenz 591). The 'nervous condition' appears to be, as Lorenz argues, 'the result of colonisation in real, personal, tangible terms'. Head writes: 'there are deeper causes for human suffering and starvation – perhaps found in the realm of the spirit' (qtd. in Lorenz 591). Colonisation is questioned in more complex terms in this text, since Elizabeth hates African men and Hitler, for example. Moreover, it narrates not only Elizabeth's experience of the events but the effect these are having on the narrator in the present: 'But how that year of 1970 was to reel and reel right in the depths of hell!' (Head 1974, 124) The inner torment of her adult life becomes as intense in the early 1970s as it had become in Head's life: 'What a nightmare I've been through, as though I were being slowly choked to

death', she wrote in 1969 (Eilersen 1995, 132). Elizabeth's battle, waged in a 'horrible territory full of evil images', to which we shall return later, largely mirrors Head's battle, which led to the nervous breakdown and institutionalization in a mental hospital of both protagonist and author.¹¹² The dissident South African Eugene Graham(e), who has created a local industries project, tells Elizabeth: 'I suffer, too, because I haven't a country and know what it's like. A lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns' (Head 1974, 52). The sense of displacement, of dis (-) location and even of dismemberment is central to this novel: as Elizabeth's personality and identity disintegrate, she lives her life and her body in fragments and is internally split apart by the cast of terrifying characters.

Before commenting upon the questions of diaspora, transition and Head's experimentation with the novel form, I should mention briefly the difficulties of reading this complex work. Among many others, the interpretations I find most disconcerting and cannot contest with any authority are those written from a psycho-literary perspective that discuss the psychotic state of author/protagonist, as well as the characters' mental instability. Besides tending to ignore the literary complexities of the text, they also forget that this is Elizabeth's narrative of her past experience, perceived, they do notice, solely from her perspective; it is not Head's experience *per se*. A narrative within a narrative, this text contains several different narrators. These tend to concentrate on the voices in Elizabeth's head, such as Sello, Dan, Medusa and the Father, presented as types that seem to represent the patriarchal society of Botswana and South Africa, if not beyond. The unremitting claims of these figures on Elizabeth's mind are so painful, humiliating, intimate and moving that 'I would prefer not to' to interpret them, even if I must and

¹¹² We notice here another turn in the question of self-naming, or *nommo*: Bessie Head's protagonist is called Elizabeth. Moreover, she went to Botswana with her son, Shorty, rather than the late Howard Head in real life.

they do haunt me. The exiled South African poet and novelist C.J. Driver describes the novel as ‘very strange and occasionally compelling’ and concedes that he has no taste for the ‘surreal or fantastic’ and, thus, it is his own fault ‘that the novel only seems to take life when dealing with actual people, rather than the phantasms of Elizabeth’s imagination’ (qtd. in *Imaginative Trespasser* 143). Perhaps I would agree more with Patrick Cullinan: ‘One can despair, at times, of making mundane sense of Bessie Head’s thought, but one cannot deny its vitality, its ‘vigour’’ (*Imaginative Trespasser* 142).¹¹³ The apparent simplicity of Head’s moral scheme running from good to evil is undermined, Eilersen suggests, by her complicity with her narrator who expects the readers to accompany her, as she explores through her protagonist ‘a nervous breakdown from within, an entirely different undertaking from analysing or discussing one’ (1995, 143). Without taking the narratological complications into account, I would agree with Eilersen on this point, as I would with Paddy Kitchen, one of her first reviewers, who politely wrote that it was not altogether easy ‘to share the journey’ Head describes (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 156). Certainly, one feels ‘the clarity of the terror’ that has been rescued from the inner hell represented in ‘private muddled nightmares’.

Tom, a character whose real name is unchanged, witnesses various extraordinary events almost from within these nightmares:

And Sello said: ‘Yes, that’s right’ and off went the chair with a loud ‘ting’.

Tom started and looked about the room with wide, alert eyes: ‘Did you hear something?’ he said quickly. ‘I distinctly heard someone say “Yes, that’s right”’: and he kept very still (as) Elizabeth kept quiet too, incapable of explaining the mad state of affairs in her house (Head 1974, 24).¹¹⁴

113 Cullinan borrows the word ‘vigour’ from W. B. Yeats who declared: ‘Tension is but the vigour of the mind’ (qtd. in *Imaginative Trespasser* 142).

114 Tom Holzinger was at the time a member of the Peace Corps and working on agricultural projects in the area. He became, as Eilersen says, Head’s second son and visited her regularly while she was in hospital. After living a long time in Canada, he is back in Serowe, where I met him in 2008. He has written articles on Bessie Head, but is, rightly, secretive about this time in their lives.

At this stage, Tom walks out, declaring that he is tired. After their hours of philosophical discussion, it appears that Elizabeth and Tom have heard the same voice. Later in the text, his boots twinkle ‘to a stop outside her gate’ (120). Revealing the conflictive modes of representation, Elizabeth thinks: ‘People made unlikely friendships on the Motabeng projects (but) she wasn’t the sort of person Tom could get along with’ (121). The earlier intimacy between the two has disappeared, but once they are chatting about books they love, she begins to appreciate ‘the vastness and freedom of (friendliness) towards another, which was always tentative and yet secure’ (120). His visits to the hospital disclose equally ambivalent reactions (182-3).

The blurring of borders between fact and fiction challenges the conventions of the novel as it undermines them. When Head sent her manuscript to Giles Gordon at Gollancz, she also sent a copy to her agent Hilary Rubinstein to whom she wrote: ‘There is almost despair in me. I tell an impossible story’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 142). He agreed, but she never expected to hear that it was ‘unprintable’ (*A Gesture of Belonging* 162).¹¹⁵ Indeed, ‘the problem of the complexity of the issues’ addressed in *A Question of Power* and its comprehensibility is explicitly dealt with (Lorenz 159). Camilla, a Danish aid worker, says: ‘In our country culture has become so complex, this complexity is reflected in our literature. It takes a certain level of education to understand our novelists. The ordinary man cannot understand them...’ (Head 1974, 79). Conversing with her Danish colleague, Camilla ‘reeled off a list of authors, smiling smugly’. However clear the irony is here, elsewhere it is difficult to detect. It had never occurred to Elizabeth that ‘those authors had ceased to be of any value whatsoever to their society – or was it

115 Head subsequently dismissed Hilary Rubenstein. She wrote: ‘Patronage galls me. I see you waiting patiently and hopefully for another book. Please do not bother. This letter is intended to end whatever business relationship we had’ (qtd. in Currey 2005, 20).

really true that an extreme height of culture and the incomprehensible went hand in hand?' She seems to be asking whether what Fanon writes is really the case: 'The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority'. It is, as he goes on to clarify, 'the racist who creates his inferior' (1968, 93).

A Question of Power reflects upon and challenges the notions of diaspora and transition, always within the context of novel writing. Concerning the first issue, Head wrote: 'How much I am a displaced outsider, I alone know (...). To a great extent, my preoccupations are all within' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 142). Her lived experience places her in an 'elsewhere', which represents neither the cultures from which she hails nor the cultures in which she lives, since all change every day. However, her felt experience places her outside the cultures she hopes to address. Writing in English and attempting to publish her work in the USA and the UK, two very different nations, she might seem to erase her background, but writes a novel challenging the work of that time in the UK, where she eventually found a publisher. Besides these practical issues, her parents come, as do those of her protagonist, or so we are told, from different countries, cultural and linguistic communities. Elizabeth 'loved another woman as her mother, who was also part African, part English', but in the mission school she learns that her real mother is 'a white woman', who had an affair with a stable boy, 'a native' (Head 1974, 15-16). For these reasons, these women writers, Head and Elizabeth, embody the complex movement of peoples from one country or continent to another: a double, triple or multiple diaspora. 'The closed conception of diaspora rests on a binary conception of difference', Stuart Hall explains when speaking of cultural identity in the Caribbean (1999, 7). It is founded on 'the construction of an exclusionary frontier and depends on the construction of an "Other" and a fixed opposition between inside and outside'. But 'syncretized configurations' of cultural identity require, as do those in the case of

Elizabeth and Head, ‘Derrida’s concept of *différance*’, a sense of deferral or differences, as Hall calls them, that do not work through binaries, ‘veiled boundaries that do not finally separate but double up as *places de passage*, and meanings that are positional and relational, always on the slide along the spectrum without end or beginning’. This search for an identity is implicitly discussed throughout this study, but may become clearer later. Elizabeth, like her creator, lives between changing cultures, which were probably considered to be fixed entities in Head’s time, but which she challenges in her *oeuvre*.

In relation to the second issue, Elizabeth’s experience reminds us of Broch’s definition of transition from his trilogy, *The Sleepwalkers* (1931), cited earlier:

... the transition from any value system to a new one must pass through that zero-point of atomic dissolution, must take its way through a generation destitute of any connection with either the old or the new system, a generation whose very detachment, whose almost insane indifference to the suffering of others, whose state of denudation of values proves an ethical and so an historical justification of the ruthless rejection, in times of revolution, of all that is humane ... (qtd. in Gordimer 1998, 142).

Head’s protagonist seems to pass through this so-called ‘zero-point of atomic dissolution’, during which she is confronted by the cruel figures of Sello, Dan and Medusa, who are at once almost timeless stereotypes and concrete members of her community: for example, Sello is married to ‘a large Motswana woman’, is a crop farmer, a breeder and a womaniser (Head 1974, 26-28). In Elizabeth’s inner world, they create a conflict by detaching themselves from the suffering of others, such as Elizabeth and a series of women paraded before her. They have connections with the old systems that exclude Elizabeth, torturing her as an ‘out-and-out outsider’ (26). Indeed, Elizabeth becomes almost insane in her indifference to others because she supports an ideology that she knows many Africans and, particularly, her community disagree with. Her ‘soul-power’ communication with Sello is linked ‘to the creative function, the dreamer of new dreams’ (42).

These concern the future of Africa. Her fear is exclusivity, whether this comes from ‘black power’, any form of ‘ambition and power’, particularly patriarchal power in Africa or the western world, or supernatural power, such as witchcraft (133-37). What she seeks for this future is inclusivity, as she describes it when discussing the efforts ‘people of totally foreign backgrounds’ were making to work on the cooperative project in Motabeng, and to ‘understand each other’s efforts to establish the brotherhood of man’ (158). Even spoken language may break down, as she implies, in the communication system necessary to such a project.

Transition, a process involving several generations, also informs the narrative structure of *A Question of Power*, which proposes, among other things, that a refugee may, within its context of the early 1970s and of Head’s earlier work, have a nervous breakdown, but will survive it to write down her experiences. The representation and ‘rememory’, to use Toni Morrison’s term from *Beloved*, of such a private experience is often partly (auto) biographical. The privacy of this experience – so honest, Eilersen suggests – makes this text difficult for the reader to come to terms with. When expressing Elizabeth’s thoughts, the narrator represents these difficulties: ‘A real, living battle of jealousy, hate and greed was more easily understood and resolved under pressure than soaring, mystical flights into the soul’ (Head 1974, 66). Elizabeth had formerly turned her thoughts to ‘African realism’, with such irony (‘a woman was simply a woman with legs; a man simply a man with legs...’) that this subsequent reflection alerts us to the ambiguities of meaning throughout the text.

The shifting from one level of consciousness to another might interest those who would like to engage in a psychoanalytical study. The narrator poetically represents this in a series of mental images or pictures: ‘people in her daily life were reintroduced through imagery at night’ (Head 1974, 159). Towards the beginning, she thinks that Sello’s presentation of ‘constructive

goodness in images and pictures' are as much a form of 'teaching and reaching the soul as a means of manipulation' (62). Elizabeth's nightmares give her an insight into 'what the German concentration camps must have been like' (200). No longer does she have illusions 'about God, or mercy or pity'. Persecution, death and Judaeo-Christianity obsess her, but she is much more interested in the power of different religions than of one alone. She might have been a victim of Sello's 'strange drama' at some stage, but she now feels, towards the end of this experience, 'as normal and ordinary as other people'.

As I have mentioned, some critics speak of 'untranslatable metaphors' in this text. It is worth noting, however, that Paul Ricoeur argues that metaphorical meaning 'is not the enigma itself, the semantic clash pure and simple, but the solution of the enigma, the inauguration of new semantic pertinence' (1986, 214). Even if I had time to delve into this topic, I could not construct such a coherent metaphorical framework of *A Question of Power* as Pimentel does in her *Metaphoric Narration*, for example, since this is a so-called deranged narrative and relies more on the irrational. Its images and metaphors challenge the protagonist and her readers, at least in the western world, if not elsewhere. Elizabeth perceives projections of other people emerging from herself and other people, as well as the most horrific scenes. The representation of a double forms a memorable part of her inner world: 'Then out of himself, he (Sello) projected another man, his replica (...) Out of the fainting-away woman (his wife) stepped a powerfully built woman' (Head 1974, 37). These doubles, not always identical, evolve to threaten Elizabeth's later life writing. Much later, Sello's wife, now the 'wife of Buddha emerged from Elizabeth's person and walked towards Sello. She quietly settled herself at his feet. She was a queen of heaven who was a housekeeper', just what Elizabeth was not (201-2). However, if we pursue this image of Sello's wife, we discover that he had achieved Nirvana and she had 'stained his hands with

blood'. This comes at the moment of Elizabeth's recovery when she realises: 'They had perfected together the ideal of sharing everything and then perfectly shared everything with mankind'. Another example concerns the many birds in the text. When Elizabeth finally falls asleep, she sees Medusa, Sello's accomplice, standing next to 'the brown suit', a metonym often used to describe Sello. During this feverish inner debate about Africanness with Sello and Medusa (a most confusing image), his face changes from that of a monkey to that of 'a wise owl', as he says (48). The next morning, Elizabeth finds an owl 'stone dead on the doorstep'. Terrified she has killed the owl, she retreats 'muttering incoherently to herself', as she grows aware of 'a powerful sense of evil'. This shift from a feverish night of struggling with her demons to everyday reality is not always as clear as it is here, however complicated the image may be. Upon returning from hospital, she sees 'Sello, the soaring sky-bird' rising, but 'this time he came walking towards her drenched from head to toe in light' (198). There is also the 'small bird who lived in the tree outside her window', the only 'coherent thing', that accompanies her throughout her life as experiencing and narrating self (145). Might these birds remind us of Paul Gilroy's emphasis on movement as an alternative to the 'sedentary poetics of either blood or soil' and 'placeless imaginings of identity' as an alternative to the powerful claims of 'roots and territory' (128)? Whereas the dead owl and the bird outside the window claim their roots, Sello, as a 'soaring sky-bird', reminding us of D.H. Lawrence's 'Phoenix' and embodying Elizabeth's dreams, seeks 'placeless imaginings of identity'.

The crude images in this text made Head fear it would never be published. Before Sello reappears with his boyfriend, for example, Dan puts on 'an interval show' with his girls: 'Miss Pelican-Beak, Miss Chopper, Miss Pink Sugar-Icing', whom he wants to marry, 'Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor where anything goes, The Sugar-Plum Fairy' and so on (Head 1974, 148).

Elizabeth is ‘ungrateful’; she prefers reading. This dramatic performance highlights Dan’s stereotyping of women, clear throughout most of his intervention. Another example is the cesspit. When Elizabeth goes to hospital, Sello makes her visit a deep cesspit, ‘filled almost to the brim with excreta’ with ‘huge angry flies’ buzzing around it (53). Upon returning home, ‘she was immersed in the filth from head to toe’ (64). When she is getting better, she perceives the cesspit as ‘clean and empty’, its walls ‘seemed to be made of marble’ and it ‘was full of light’ (97). These images of the cesspit seem to follow a logical development of a metaphor for Elizabeth’s illness, which has arisen from the ‘cesspit’ of her life: at first it is associated with filth and darkness and later with cleanliness and light, as Elizabeth cleverly ‘empties’ it of significance. But her playfulness grows even more complex when she realises that the shape within the hole is ‘her bath-towel’: then, slipping over the edge of this hell, she clings to ‘its periphery with both hands’ and cries out, evoking the dichotomy good/evil running throughout this narrative, but not dominating it: ‘Oh God, if anyone plans evil like this again, may they suffer alone and not involve others. If anyone has to fall, let them fall alone’. Cleanliness lies beyond Elizabeth’s reach in the filth and yet she manages to cling to the periphery. Suddenly, she realises the hole is full of people she knows. Might they be writers, agents and publishers from periphery and centre?

This text grapples with the meaning of power, and, ultimately, empowerment: Elizabeth feels empowered to write down her gruesome experience once it is over.¹¹⁶ Shorty, her son, writes a poem about flying that expresses her final freedom: ‘That’s what she felt about people’s souls and their powers; that they were like sky birds, aeroplanes (...); that there’d be a kind of liberation of these powers, and a new dawn and a new world’ (Head 1974, 205). The title of this novel comes from Sello’s words to Elizabeth towards the end of the novel: ‘You will never know your

¹¹⁶ The word ‘empower’ interestingly goes back to the times of John Milton at least, but was not common parlance among feminists until the early 1970s.

power. I will never let you see it because I know what power does. *If the things of the soul are really a question of power, then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer*' (199). When quoting this, Fani-Kayode Omoregie argues that Sello has a narcissistic personality disorder (173): a persuasive proposal. However, Sello seems to be explaining that it is Elizabeth's 'apparent powerlessness' that dismantles Dan's power (Beard 1979, 27): 'You still topple giants with a stone sling', Sello reminds her (Head 1974, 199). In Sello's battle of wits with Dan, he explains that there are many layers of awareness: 'Bring an inferior into contact with a superior; he tramples you into the dust. He saw only what he thought was the milksop monk; it was so soft and tender it aroused all his savage, brutal passions. They go wild when they see something helpless, defenceless': 'they' are men who have 'blown up civilization after civilization' (199). His words reveal that power is often a question of perception: Sello is clearly a patriarch who has great knowledge of evil, but he presents himself as different men in order to win the battle, whether in Elizabeth's hallucinations or in her everyday life. However important this issue of perception is, as it certainly is, Head's questioning of power takes many forms that challenge power relations. Cecil Abrahams argues that Head shows that 'sexism is more degrading and devastating, because it is a more intimate form of violation' (qtd. in Omoregie 175). In Abrahams' opinion, 'power rapes, as Head indicates when she writes that Dan "attacked (Elizabeth's) head the way he had attacked the vaginas of the nice-time girls"' (qtd. in Omoregie 175, Head 1974, 153-4). The people inhabiting Elizabeth's nightmare world are all Africans, yet another sign of her inferiority: 'he (Dan) was African, she was mixed breed. What a plague that was!' The narrator ironically asks: 'Perhaps in their past incarnations as lovers they had mercifully been of the same race and could peacefully join their souls together "at the roots?"' (147) Whereas Elizabeth, like her creator, fights for an inclusive community, an "exclusivist"

discourse dominates the text ('he had to give her real African insight' (159)).

The tensions between biography and autobiography create power relations in this text that I cannot study in any depth here. What Head is sure about is that the 'real truth is a conflict of mind/feeling', as she writes to Vigne (*A Gesture of Belonging* 160). These conflictive experiences express how autobiographical this novel is: there is, on the one hand, 'catatonic shock, the extreme state where the ego has been violently destroyed'; on the other 'the joy of living again is so intense that I totally lack humility'. Head claims that Gollancz, for example, 'produced a terrific performance from Naomi Mitchison', who usually vetted Head's typescripts for libel because 'I'm black (and you) can't trust black' (qtd. in *A Gesture of Belonging* 165). Apparently, Mitchison 'knew every bloody character in the book!' and gave Gollancz 'all the lowdown'. She wrote to Head 'demanding to know why I had not made Seretse *real*'. This raises, implicitly, another problem concerning power relations in Botswana. Like Elizabeth, Head had put a notice in the post office saying that 'Seretse Khama had committed incest with his daughter and suppressed the news of the assassination of his Vice-President', who was alive at the time (Eilerson 1995, 136). At the subsequent court hearing, she was admitted to hospital. *A Question of Power* was written to explain, to Coreen Brown's mind, her irrational outburst against President Seretse Khama and to examine her inner hells, which led to her breakdown and affected many of those closest to her (89). Mitchison's response also shows the conflict of readers who blur fact with fiction. According to Head, only Ken Mackenzie 'caught the two levels', but her readers in Swaneng Hill School also gave her 'many helpful and glowing comments' (qtd. in *A Gesture of Belonging* 163).

Given that this text is divided into two parts, there are two principal narrative levels: the primary narrative, which Monika Fludernik significantly calls 'a framing device' (343), if it is an

introduction to the main or secondary narrative. This device is characteristic of oral narrative. Whatever the differences concerning the nomenclature of these different levels, it is the alternation between these levels that is most interesting. Elizabeth, the focal character, narrates her story in the third person: she is at once the accomplice of her protagonist as she detaches herself, at times with ironic effect, from her nightmarish experience. The apparent authority provided by the biographical third-person narrator does not mean that she is reliable. One of her functions is to structure the protagonist's inner turmoil, but she may distort it as well. For example, when Elizabeth and Tom are chatting and he touched 'the back of her neck', 'her shattered mind was screaming aloud in agony: 'Sello is prancing around in my nightmares with his face full of swollen green blotches. There's a little girl with her face upturned in death (...). There's nothing I can do to stop it. I'm going insane'. It was the 'last coherent conversation she had with him, because when he returned in November she was stark, raving mad' (Head 1974, 161-2). The narrator's complicity appears to reside in her citation of Elizabeth's muddled thoughts. However, she then stands back and reports very coherently what happens later. Yet Elizabeth's realisation that she is losing her mind rears its head in the judgmental comment: 'she was stark, raving mad'. This strategy is not the first of its kind in Anglophone African literatures, but with all the other devices that Head uses we must admit, as have many critics, that she paved the way for her younger sisters.

Sello and Dan do not represent two sides of evil/good cruel outer forces invading Elizabeth's mind: they are ingrained in her mind. The opening of this novel depicts an inner psychic space, a 'strange journey into hell', as the narrator subsequently calls it:

It seemed almost incidental that he (Sello) was African. So vast had his inner perception grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to

have made one of the most perfect statements: 'I am just anyone'. It was as though his soul was a jigsaw; one more piece being put into place. How often was a learner dependent on his society for his soul-evolution? But then how often was a society at fault and conclusions were drawn, at the end of each life in opposition to the social trends. It wasn't as though his society were not evil too, but nowhere else could he have acquired the kind of humility which made him feel, within, totally unimportant, totally free from his own personal poisons – pride and arrogance and egoism of the soul. (Head 1974, 11-12)

This short dissertation poses several questions, among many others. The narrator might want to ignore the prejudices of belonging to a particular context and suggest the possibility of universality – identification with 'mankind' – but she cannot. She introduces a seemingly very perceptive and experienced man, almost incidentally 'an African'. This makes him 'just anyone', but his name is Sello. This initial sign of identity means that he cannot detach himself from his conditioning and he has to depend on his socio-cultural background, whatever its defects, for his 'soul evolution'. Only within this environment can he overcome his personal poisons and discover that humility and freedom so essential to his growth. Besides drawing attention to the context, the narrator also points out his 'poisons'. The narrator claims: 'A barrier of solitude and bleak, arid barrenness of soul had broken down. He loved each particle of earth around, the everyday event of sunrise, the people and animals of the village of Motabeng', before quoting what he says to himself, 'I might have died before I found this freedom of heart', and stating her own conclusion: 'love was freedom of heart' (11). Opening the novel, does this passage anticipate Elizabeth's ideas when she recovers from her nervous breakdown? Does it hint at what is to come? The narrator's affirmative statement at the start becomes hesitant and halting until the final lines. Is she the learner mentioned? Are these her expectations of mankind, or humankind, or the conclusions she has drawn from her interaction with this poisonous man?

When writing this novel, Head relives those past experiences that call into question her

earlier writing. The pattern of *A Question of Power* returns her to *Maru*. She famously wrote to Vigne that in *Maru* she had dominated Dikeledi, Maru and Moleka mentally ‘and that was my power’. However, ‘they had a stream of evil and my unease about them clearly comes through’ (*A Gesture of Belonging* 157). Startled by the favourable reception of *Maru* in the western world (the story of black men in Africa), Head believes her readership want her to be the ‘epitome of everything African’, even if she felt like a ‘displaced outsider’, whose ‘preoccupations are all within’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 142). One of this outsider’s aesthetic proposals is to portray ‘the man with no shoes in Africa’, the ordinary person who would be her guide. The above discussion reveals that her questioning of power reaches beyond thematic issues to encompass the mode of expression and the possible subjects that would inspire her.

Readership and publication is another power relation that raises several aesthetic issues Head is concerned with at this time. Like her fellow Africans, she is offended by her publishers’ lack of respect for her mode of expression. It pains her, she told Gordon, to be ‘continuously insulted about my misuse of the English language’. She might misspell words and drop prepositions, but ‘the impact of the English language on the rest of mankind cannot be realised by people living in certain circles in England’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 152-3). Other English-speaking peoples lend local colour; just as some would have to make an effort to understand American English, so there is ‘also Setswana English, Chinese English, etc. and for myself I prefer to evolve my own version of English as I go along’. In February 1972, she demonstrates how she is evolving her own English, when she confesses to Vigne that *A Question of Power* ‘lacks the rebounding, rhetorical rhythm of *Maru*’ (*A Gesture of Belonging* 158-159). James Currey from *Heinemann’s African Series* explains what happened when he received the manuscript:

I never ever prescribed revisions. When I took Bessie Head's *Question of Power* on, Richard Lister, the novelist who had discussed Head with me, (...) said "I don't think there is any great problem about her writing, it's a bit dense ... often it is just a question of punctuation... a comma here, a comma there..." I wrote to Bessie and said "Look, you don't need to change anything...you don't need to change a comma... we will publish it as it is...but I think it would help everybody if you did work through it again." She was so relieved to have the book accepted ... "Oh! I have already got back to it. I am already working on it..."¹¹⁷

Further developing her writerly voice and identity, Head's position as a displaced person is noted in two ways in the above quotation. Firstly, her mode of expression disrupts the colonial and imperialist code that is thought to erase differences and create unity among peoples from different parts of the world. Secondly, she, like Elizabeth, is a person of "mixed race" who thinks that this code will eventually free her. Neither author nor protagonist believes they have much in common with a person like Tom, or, for that matter, with the perspective of certain African writers. Thus, readers' expectations are not met. Medusa, the superwoman in the text who represents the destructively exclusive, 'the surface reality of African society' that 'had a strong theme of power-worship running through it', tells Elizabeth that she does not belong there because she is coloured (Head 1974, 38): 'Africa is in troubled waters (...) You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages' (44). A refrain runs through her nightmares at this stage: "'Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death.'" (45) Perhaps mostly significant is that this 'pursuit after the things of the soul' eventually releases Elizabeth from her sense of exile and alienation. After this remarkably violent and tortuous inner journey, a consequence of colonialism examined by many Africanists, among others, Elizabeth, who is no longer disturbed by 'the clamour of horrors', places 'one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging' (Head 1974, 206). The emphasis is on 'a gesture of belonging'; Elizabeth has still come to terms

117 'AWS, Chinua Achebe, & All those Books II': James Currey in interview with Nourdin Bejjit. *African Writing Online. Many Literatures, One Voice*, No. 5 (n/d) WEB (07.2010). Richard P. Lister is best known as a metallurgist, although he was also a novelist, poet and travel writer.

with her diasporic situation, but this gesture directs us to Head's future work.

One wonders whether the novel form itself becomes a question of power, even if, as I shall now briefly explore, T.S. Eliot famously wrote: 'The novel ended with Flaubert and with James'. Ahead of their times, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis 'felt a conscious, or probably unconscious dissatisfaction with the form, (and) their novels are more formless than those of a dozen clever writers who are unaware of its obsolescence' (Eliot 1975, 177).¹¹⁸ The Anglo-American and French trend of pronouncing the novel dead has persisted throughout the twentieth century, but it has actually outlived its death sentence, graduating, as Marthe Roberts suggests in *Origins of the Novel*, 'from a discredited sub-category to an almost unprecedented Power', and now reigning 'more or less supreme over the world of literature (...). With the freedom of a conqueror, who knows no law other than that of its own unlimited expansion, it has abolished every literary caste and traditional form and appropriates all modes of expression, exploiting unchallenged whichever method it chooses' (2000, 58).¹¹⁹ However hyperbolic, this contention indicates that the power of the novel after modernism is at once inclusive for all novelists and yet exclusive in that it reigns supreme. Eliot, Woolf and others were probably referring to 'the canon of the genre-novel', as Michael Holquist points out in his 'Introduction' to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981, xxxi). Bakhtin's view of the novel reaches beyond the limited concept of the novel started by Cervantes and Richardson, for example: it is 'the sole genre that

118 The phrase 'death of the novel' has, as we note from Eliot's words, different meanings: a radical change to an unrecognisable form (Eliot), stasis (Bradbury) or end (*Granta*). Malcolm Bradbury traces this throughout the century and reminds us that in the 1970s 'The New Review ran a symposium in which it took nearly sixty British novelists to get together to agree there was nothing at all going on in the British novel' and *Granta* 'devoted its third issue (1980) to mourning 'The End of the English Novel'' (2001, xviii).

119 I would like to thank Karen Langhelle for drawing my attention, if indirectly, to this line of argument again. Cf. 'Why Pass a Knife between Two Texts?' *Grafting New Novels after Modernism: Sheila Watson's **The Double Hook** and the *nouveau roman**. MA thesis. Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 2003. WEB (02/08/2010).

continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted' and as such its ability 'to criticize itself' is one of its remarkable features (1981, 6). In this sense, he claims that the 'utter inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when

it is forced to deal with the novel. In the case of other genres literary theory works confidently and precisely, since there is a finished and already formed object, definite and clear (...). Everything works as long as there is no mention of the novel (...). Faced with the problem of the novel, genre theory must submit to a radical restructuring (8).

Bakhtin appears to provide an insight into how the novel has risen from the ashes of the pyre upon which it was thrown by eurocentric modernists and later detractors to reach the heights of hybrid construction Marthe Roberts so provocatively suggests. In the process of becoming the dominant genre, 'the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness' (Bakhtin 7). One way in which it does this is through its dialogic interrelations, such as polyphony in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; heteroglossia in 'Discourse in the Novel'; and carnival in *Rabelais and His World* and the study of Dostoevsky. 'Each of these terms captures, though each with a different emphasis, the dialogic interrelationship of utterances as a complex unity of differences' (Zappen 14).

The most important of these terms, in our case, is heteroglossia, or 'raznorechie', which literally means 'different-speech-ness' (Roberts 248). This refers to the conflict between different discourses within the same national language (centripetal versus centrifugal, official versus unofficial, for example), but it is also present on the micro-linguistic level, where 'every utterance contains within it the trace of other utterances, both in the past and in the future'. In 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin describes heteroglossia

as a complex mixture of languages and world views that is always, except in some imagined ideal condition, dialogized, as each language is viewed from the perspective of the others. This dialogization of languages, dialogized heteroglossia, creates a

complex unity, for whatever meaning language has resides neither in the intention of the speaker nor in the text but at a point between speaker or writer, listener or reader (Morson and Emerson 284-90).

This ‘dialogization of languages’ is an ongoing process; language is always changing, as a result of what Bakhtin calls *hybridization* (Morson and Emerson 325-44). This term is defined as ‘a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor’ (358). It is ‘intentional as an artistic device in the novel’, but also unintentional and as such is the primary means of change in a language, ‘a mixing of various “languages” co-existing within the boundaries of a single dialect, a single national language, a single branch, a single group of different branches or different groups of such branches, in the historical as well as paleontological past of languages’ (358-59). Bakhtin’s dialogized or dialogical rhetoric ‘is less a means of persuasion than a means of testing our own and others’ ideas’, a testing of our individual and cultural differences’ (Zappen 16). In contemporary cultural theory, this rhetoric expresses, juxtaposes and negotiates these differences. For example, the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha transforms ‘Bakhtinian hybridization into a rhetorical process of cultural negotiation’. By undermining the binary opposition colonizer/colonized, he emphasises ‘the mutualities and negotiations across the colonial divide’ (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 116). Bhabha infers from Bakhtin’s notion of the utterance as a link in the chain of speech communication ‘a broader concept of human solidarity that transcends cultural boundaries’ (Bhabha 1994, 188-92; Moore-Gilbert 2000, 136-37). In Bhabha’s opinion, these forms of human solidarity are ‘hybrid forms’, developed via a ‘*public rhetoric*’, construed as ‘the symbolic process of political negotiation’ (Bhabha 1994, 22-25). ‘Bhabha’s agenda for postcolonial theory turns on an unresolved tension between the postcolonial

as an individual agent with its own self-identity and the postcolonial as a hybrid, mixed and impure—the site of political negotiation’ (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 129-30). Finally, the novel is, as Bakhtin puts it, a ‘world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken’ (1981, 30). Hence, all fictional characters, events, objects, etc. are unfinished and mutable.

No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present. But meanwhile our present has been moving into an inconclusive future. And in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability of the object is lost; its sense and significance are renewed and grow as the context continues to unfold (30).

From this I understand that our negotiations with the text are always determined by its context that is always changing; thus the meaning of the text and our understanding of it is always shifting. This is a central tension Head has to come to terms with.

A Question of Power fulfils the expectations of the title, notably in the singular. Different power relations are explored, but the main emphasis is on the power of the word to express the inexpressible, to give form to such a painful experience and, finally, to restore balance; in other words, the power of the soul, the mind and the imagination. Elizabeth thinks: ‘An elegant pathway of private thought stretched ahead of her, shimmering with light and undisturbed by the clamour of horrors’ (Head 1974, 206). This falls in line with Lewis’ argument that the “‘questions of power” in Head’s novel constantly refer to spiritual configurations of freedom and confinement’ (2007, 192). What is important is that the writer, her narrator and protagonist challenge power, even the power of the novel itself, whatever its origins. Although Elizabeth is entrapped by the “Word”, in a Lacanian sense, which is central to her exploration of ‘the unconscious’, she eventually finds a way to overcome this confinement (Lewis 2007, 191-2). Her

quest for freedom often leads her ‘to a body of Eastern philosophy’ that draws different conclusions about consciousness. Many have written about the ideal of universality in Head’s work, which she supports, but others would argue, as would I, that she sets her text in a village in Botswana and uses the experience of ordinary people to discuss philosophical, religious, ethical and social issues, which must always arise from the community, however diverse it may have been in her novel.

There are other interpretations worth pursuing. One centring on the gardening project would draw attention to the feminist/ecological readings of this novel and to its hybrid form in that it appropriates different genres. Hybrid forms, which mix different genres in the same text, are often considered to be postcolonial forms in that they challenge the conventions of, in this case, the novel form as perceived by writers (and publishers) in the colonial and colonised countries at the time. Publishers judge Head’s text in accordance with the conventions of the novel during the early seventies in the UK: they wish to bring out a marketable product that meets the expectations of their (dare I say British) readership, even ‘as an experiment’ (Currey 20). Like some postcolonial scholars, they seem to have forgotten that the novel has always been a hybrid form. In relation to the cooperative project, Head’s mother loved gardening and her daughter felt privileged to have inherited her green fingers: a hint of Africana womanism, perhaps. An interesting proposal is that Elizabeth’s release from the inner nightmare of her battles with Sello, Dan, Medusa and others lies in the outer reality of this project. Within these two sections, there is a significant shift between her inner and outer world. What Anissa Talahite finds most striking in Head’s work is ‘the quest for a language of difference based on symbolic forms that could allow the cultural/gender “other” to emerge from textual and representational invisibility’ (144). *A Question of Power* achieves this aim partly ‘through the use of a complex

symbolic system of representation revolving around images and metaphors of transplantation and hybrid growth, all of which are embodied in the symbolism of the garden that punctuates the novel'. In this respect, Head's garden might well form part of that hybrid, 'interstitial', 'in-between' space posed by Bhabha as a counterpoint to hegemonic discourses and systems of representation (1994, 2). It acts, moreover, as a transitional space, in the sense that not only the Cape gooseberry but also Elizabeth and her son, Shorty, have been transferred from South Africa to Botswana. The gooseberry, indicated by Boehmer, becomes, for example, a central metaphor of this transition:

At first, the miracle had occurred in Elizabeth's yard. She had planted out fifty seedlings. Over a period of three months they had slowly developed into shrubs, two feet high. One day, as she walked through her garden she noted thick mats of brown husks lying on the ground beneath the gooseberry bushes. With Kenosi, she harvested an enormous basket of berries, not only berries but a heavenly view of glistening autumn shades of brown, yellow-gold, green-tinted fruit (Head 1974, 152).

These imported plants, grown by local people, represent Elizabeth's challenge to her arid and segregated homeland of South Africa. They also capture, as Talahite argues, the 'concern for issues pertaining to hybridity, transplantation, and growth', as they lay emphasis on 'the importance of cross-cultural contact and "cross-fertilization" as essential and redeeming processes' (148). Indeed, it is on the gardening project that Elizabeth finds a true Motswana sister: Kenosi. This relationship between outsider and insider exemplifies the above and gives another insight into Elizabeth's feminist stance. At first Elizabeth is very demanding, if perceived from the outside, and full of self-pity when Kenosi visits her.¹²⁰ Kenosi brings Elizabeth back to the garden, 'to life and reality!' Elizabeth has neglected her gardening duties, but there was, in Kenosi's eyes, 'a fierce glow of pride; the pride of the pioneer moving into the wonderful

¹²⁰ From her South African upbringing, Elizabeth acts, at first, almost like a colonial woman, and her despair reminds us of Mary Turner in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* (1950).

unknown', Elizabeth, as Kenosi's teacher, thinks, almost self-reflectively (Head 1974, 142). Even Dan, who picks on everybody in Elizabeth's life, hardly touches upon her relationship with Kenosi. Even if he meddles, 'the woman lived her own shut-in, elusive life, and the work-relationship had been established on the solid respect of one work partner for another'. This relationship reaches beyond Dan's stereotypical gaze: in general, women are sexual objects to be ab/used. At the end of a year of mental confusion, 'she made every effort to avoid (...) snapping at Kenosi too, until she was forced into total silence' (160). When Elizabeth eventually confesses to Kenosi that she is ill, Kenosi returns the next day to plant some seeds from Elizabeth's store (172). Seeing the drawn curtains, she waits for five minutes of 'silent indecision'; then she 'walked back up the dusty brown road, and down the valley to the garden'. They meet again when Elizabeth comes out of hospital: she reels, 'blissfully happy, up the dusty brown road' and sees Kenosi working in the garden. They walk away, Kenosi complaining that Elizabeth had left them, and Elizabeth so enjoying her company and her record of all she had sold during Elizabeth's absence: 'The record book looked so beautiful that Elizabeth kept quietly turning it over in her head ...' (203-4).

The hybrid form of this novel, shifting from the narrator's short essays through the contestatory discourse of Sello and Dan, to a recipe for gooseberry jam and, at least, one list of produce (154-5), challenges the conventions of the Anglophone novel of the early 1970s, although gender issues are central to novels both in the former colonies and in the former metropolis. Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) is, for example, as critical of the dominant heterosexual romance plot as is *A Question of Power*; both these novels treat of alienation, isolation and loss of spiritual values within their very different contexts. Another might be Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970), of which Ian Rankin writes: 'Not once is the reader allowed to enter Lise's

mind via some omniscient narrative voice. Instead, everything is external, and visual clues must be utilized like the pieces of a jigsaw to build up the portrait' (1985, 146). Only once does the narrator access Sula's mind in Morrison's novel, which is also full of colour and fascinating imagery, used to shake us out of our preconceptions. The readers of *Sula* and *A Question of Power* are invited, through the complex narrative structure of each, to identify with the protagonist's bid for freedom. Sula seems to lose her battle; Elizabeth may win but the questions raised remain. Her hopeful closure, if not an ending, offers a temporary respite from the struggles to be fought by her sisters later, such as Tsitsi Dangaremba and Yvonne Vera. Just as Morrison talks back to the Black Power Movement, so Head explores questions of power, as well as the effects of displacement and exile imposed on people by racial discrimination. The only answer is action, as Sula and Elizabeth discover. Recovering her spiritual strength after her battering by Sello, Elizabeth sees, with 'a bounding sense of liberation', the 'soft shifts and changes of light' of the African sky, hears a bird trilling loudly, feels the 'soft, cool air', smells 'the perfume of the bush' and says: 'May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds' (Head 1974, 100). As I have said, she also repeats this idea at the end of the second section, despite her awareness of man's brutality and discrimination: 'there'd be a kind of liberation of these powers, and a new dawn and a new world' (Head 1974, 205-6). Unlike the more radical Sula, however, she finally reaches a point of reconciliation with her new home.

Head's work is located in a particular environment; part of the conflict seems to be resolved once Elizabeth frees herself from the strong grip of the African man. At the same time as Head attempts to exorcise her demons in this extraordinary novel and come to terms with her own community, she launches upon a project in 1970 to record others' lives. Inspired by the rich heritage of oral history she has unearthed for *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, "Mma-Heady", as

she was known, writes the stories to be included in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977), finally published before *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). The title story raises several issues already discussed and, perhaps, moves her to take a more “womanist” approach in her next work. Reminding us of Dinorego’s tale of Mma-Millipede in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, this narrative, typical of this collection in its condemnation of patriarchal society, tells us of Dikeledi (meaning “tears”) Mokopi, a woman who is mistreated by her husband, Garesego, by far, critics agree, the most repulsive specimen of the men in this collection. After independence, his salary soars and he becomes even more of a womaniser. He leaves his wife and three sons, perhaps because ‘she was the boring, semi-literate traditional sort, and there were a lot of exciting new women around’, the narrator speculates (Head 1977, 92). Ultimately, Dikeledi is charged with manslaughter and given a life sentence, because she chops off her husband’s genitalia with a kitchen knife and, perhaps accidentally, kills him. She meets four other women guilty of a similar offence in the state prison in the ‘new independence town of Gaborone’ (Head 1977, 88). This good woman has always produced a positive response from others, but she is, by no means, the innocent victim: she has ‘made love’ to Paul Thebolo, with the permission of his wife, her best friend. Interpretations of this act, never made explicit, may vary, but it reveals that ideal of sisterhood Head seeks.

On the surface, this story, published in *MS*, seems to discuss two kinds of men: Garesego, the evil beast, and Paul, the generous and good man – perhaps, her muses. By no means is this a moral debate concerning good and evil; it is a deft postcolonial exploration in terms of gender, class and race, although these issues cannot be studied in the depth they deserve. For example, she writes an essay on masculinity in this text that exemplifies her doubts. These men are considered to be evil by their respective communities, but Head’s journey into the human soul

‘takes her to three sources of evil and, hence, goodness’ (Abrahams 1990, 8). The sources of evil can be summarised as the male-dominated hierarchical world of power and authority, be it before or after independence. During this period of transition in Botswana, there are conflicts among the different kings, or chiefs, who oppress their subjects as the colonials had, or so it seems to Head’s narrator, because the chiefs often engender stasis on every level. Their encouragement of corruption, racial prejudice, narrowness, and myopic tribalism prevent the ordinary people from pursuing their utopian goals. In relation to ordinary people, this may have been the case, but Seretse Khama, the first president of independent Botswana, set, or so I have read and been told, an excellent example of equality for his peoples.¹²¹

But how has independence affected Dikeledi’s life? Is she really a collector of treasures? Such words as ‘collect’, ‘recollect’ and ‘remember’ are often associated with postcolonial discourse. She certainly represents sisterhood, rural and subordinate, independent motherhood and womanhood. Her hands give her economic independence, ‘soft, caressing, almost boneless, hands of strange powers – work of a beautiful design grew from those hands’ (Head 1992, 90). Only her sisters in this act of castration appreciate her true gift: ‘so the woman Dikeledi began phase three of a life that had been ashen in its loneliness and unhappiness. And yet she had always found gold amidst the ash, deep loves that had joined her heart to the hearts of others. She had found another such love’, which presumably comes from those inner sources causing such anxiety. For her imprisoned sisters, she ‘was the collector of treasures’; whatever the circumstances, she creates and discovers spiritual kinship. This takes us back to *When Rain*

121 His marriage of September 1948 to Ruth Williams created a diplomatic earthquake. When the decision was taken that Khama should remain in exile, Rev. A.J. Haile of the LMS was furious at the British government’s handling of the situation: ‘The London Missionary Society urges His Majesty’s government to declare it to be their policy to oppose such racial discrimination in any of the territories of which it is responsible’ (qtd. in Mbanga 249-250).

Clouds Gather, for example, where the old man on the border (re)collects the fugitives' stories. It seems that women are no longer only reproducers; they are also producers and appreciators of art and knowledge, if at a price.

Head proposed that *A Bewitched Crossroad*, her next literary text that I shall not discuss, should focus on her hero, Khama, the Great, but in the end it centres on the scramble for Africa in the nineteenth century from a black man's perspective. Khama III and the Bamangwato nation survive the storm created by the arrogance and greed of black and white powers. Undoubtedly, these historical events should be rewritten from the inside, especially since Khama III played such a significant role in gaining Protectorate status for Botswana and is buried in Serowe. Head indicates at least one path Botswana history might take. Following ideas central to her past work, she resists, Lewis argues, 'the recuperating stories of imperial mastery, the icons and images of oppressive authority, or human encounters that assume insurmountable differences or conflicts', thereby producing 'an idiosyncratic vision of the past that also configures an alternative present' (296). She creates what Ricoeur calls 'the imaginary project of another kind of society, of another reality, another world' (qtd in Lewis 2007, 296). In Lewis's opinion, 'her autobiographical concerns with the sources of individual artistic genius or spiritual freedom' recur in this text. Since she developed many of the interests that led her to write this historical narrative while doing her research for *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, I shall now embark upon a study of this text.

Transformation of Space into Place: *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*.

the spirit of place is a great reality.
D. H. Lawrence

A 'place': a position whose contradictions
those who impose them don't see, and from
which will come a resolution they haven't
provided for.
Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter*

Julie Mullaney's comment regarding Arundhati Roy's project in *Her God of Small Things* might equally apply to that of Head in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*:

Her project is one of disturbance, movement, unearthing, dusting down, and reassembly of the fixed and received narrative of public or national events ("History") to bring to light the hidden or eclipsed histories therein. What Roy mounts then is no less than an excavation of "History" through the mobilization of "histories"; opening her narrative up to a plurality of voices, the many over the one, the small things (...); what their place is and what they represent in the wider order (41).

A brief summary of Head's text shows how it opens itself to these histories, even if this raises questions I try to cover later. *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* not only includes historical accounts and memories, but is a radically hybrid text of its time. At the beginning, there are two maps of Botswana. The 'Introduction' offers different perspectives on that former colonial single story of village life. Divided into several sections, it starts with 'General Portrait of Serowe', which contains a subsection on 'Some Notes on the Main Themes'. This is followed by 'Things Unique to Village Life', under which there are several subsections: 'The "Green Tree" or Rubber Hedge or Tlharesetala', 'The Village Dogs' (Head loved dogs), 'The Old-Style Calendar (translated by Martin Morolong)', 'People's Names' (they 'evoke stories of events'). Finally, there is a section on 'Marriage and Death (by Thato Matome)'. Notably, Mrs Matome, the principal of Swaneng Hill School, also gave Head information about the locals' former hatred of

the Ndebele for her historical novel, *A Bewitched Crossroad*. The division by topic not only makes the text more accessible, but creates spaces in which each reader, particularly those from Serowe, can add their own memories or fill in the ellipses. This initial spatiality draws attention to the textual interaction and dialogue throughout this work. Contextualisation is provided by informative, at times gentle and/or humorous, introductions to the interviewees and to the different sections, the appendix on the founding of the Protectorate and a bibliography that offers an insight into Head's sources and perspective: these are mostly white African or British. The book is divided into three Parts: 'The Era of Khama the Great (1875-1923)', 'The Era of Tshededi Khama (1926-1959)', 'The Swaneng Project (1963—): Patrick van Rensburg'. Without going into the complications of historiographic metafiction, these sections suggest a gloss to satisfy Head's English readers.

Having lived most of her life 'in shattered bits', Head finds solace in the 'sense of wovenness' and wholeness of Serowe life, in its circularity: 'the circular huts are enclosed by circular yards and circular paths weave in and out between each yard' (Head 1981, xii). The Zambian artist Enock Ilunga captures this beautifully in 'A Visit to Serowe' (1993): his painting of the circular huts amidst the sand and grasses makes it seem as if nothing has changed.¹²² The first-person narrator, representing Head, opens this challenging and moving narrative with a line from 'The Poet's Post' by the Caribbean poet Harold Telemaque (1909-1982) and ends with her own poem expressing great tenderness for her adopted home.¹²³

Central to this text is the space of the community and its transitions. Intercalating biographical accounts with testimonials, it 'is built', as Head puts it, 'around the lives and work

122 This painting by the Zambian artist was in an exhibition of Southern African painting from 1960-2004 under the title *Transitions*, held at the Brunei Gallery (SOAS, London), at the beginning of 2005.

123 I shall take it as given, for sake of space, that there is a distinction between Head and the narrator of this text. However interesting, a narratological study would be quite complicated.

of three men (...) and the story of Serowe is told through their contributions to the community and the response of that community to their ideals and ideas' (1981, xiv). This dialogue creates an alternative history of this village narrative, which pays tribute to her adopted home, to three of its leading figures and, above all, to the people of the community. Her particular rewriting of history creates this 'beautiful' story, if one-sided as Head admits (she selects and organises the material), that 'has a long thread' (xiv). The period covered is 'an astonishing record of self-help and achievement': somewhat like her own, the final project described is called 'boiteko', which can be 'roughly translated as 'many hands make light work'' (170): 'the construction of Serowe intimately involved its population', Head writes (xii). The changes instigated by the three central figures created 'an oceanic effect' on this community, starting with Khama the Great, whose conversion to Christianity, perhaps for political reasons, 'forced him to modify or abolish all the ancient customs of the people'. This tidal wave meant that the 'discipline people had to impose on themselves was internal and private'. It brought in its wake 'the almost complete breakdown of family life in Bamangwato country, which under traditional custom was essential for the survival of the tribe' (xiv-xv). In material terms, it finally led to the carving up of the centre of the village 'into tarred ring roads and super highways', as construction companies take over from the villagers (xii). Head's choice of theme is that of social reform/ upheaval and educational progress from pre-colonial to postcolonial times, but other themes emerge from the villagers' stories. I have mentioned those of migration, a favourite among the elders, construction, which meant that people have 'total knowledge' of how their goods are produced, and of 'self-help', which dates back to 1875 when Khama the Great "christianised" *bogwera*, the initiation ceremony for men and ordered the new *mephato*

or age regiment to build a portion of the mission church wall.¹²⁴ That is, he abolished one part of the ceremony, but kept the other part intact: the young men had, as in earlier times, to offer their services for free to construct the symbol of the new culture in their community. ‘These black voices tell of a remarkable transition from the ancient tribal culture to a British Christian culture, and cover the whole period between the setting up and the dismantling of white colonialism’, Ronald Blythe (1981, v) writes in the ‘Foreword’. Head explains that it ‘was this peaceful world of black people simply dreaming in their own skins that I began to slowly absorb into my own life. It was like finding black power and black personality in a simple and natural way’ (Head 1990, 72). In this way, Serowe is swiftly transformed into a politicised place.¹²⁵

This chapter takes an unconventional approach to the issue of space in literature by stating that African women writers transform an abstract space into a specific place, whenever they give voice to histories by reaching below, beyond and beside History and opening their narratives up ‘to a plurality of voices’, as does Head in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. The former silence within the community is rendered audible as the interviewer engages them in dialogue with voices from Britain, who have written texts in a similar vein throughout the centuries. In this respect, the study of intertextuality, which I have mentioned throughout, centres, principally, on a postcolonial comparison between Bessie Head’s *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* and Ronald Blythe’s *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969). I have chosen Blythe’s text rather than others suggested to Head partly because it was recommended to her and he wrote the ‘Foreword’

124 The initiation school for girls was called *Bojale*. Before the advent of Christianity many ethnic groups regarded these schools highly. Whereas Khama III abolished these practices, the Batawana, Bangwaketse, Bakwena, and Barolong abandoned them and the Bakgatla suspended them. At present, the Bakgatla, Balete and Batlokwa continue these practices. Songs creating ‘a sense of dialogue’ between teachers and initiates ‘offer a commentary on the harsh realities of womanhood and life in general’ (*Women Writing Africa* 506).

125 Even if Head lived before the age of computer technology, her comment regarding ‘black power’ is by no means innocent. Before the digital age, there were other social media that might seem strange to us now. Even in 2007 I only saw a television in one of the two hotels in Serowe.

to Head's village narrative. Thus, I firstly study the sense of place in Head's text before moving on to the question of intertextuality, which I consider one aspect of space in literature and literature in space.

As I mentioned earlier, Head wrote a letter to Giles Gordon stating that she could not take the teaching post at a Norwegian university and permanent residence there: 'I'm going to say something very illogical now. It's a question of love for a place' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 163). Negotiated for centuries, this process of transforming an abstract space into a specific place points, as the editors of *Women Writing Africa* argue, in two directions: to the women who 'seize or are accorded agency' in the narrative universes they create and to 'Africa', or, in this case, Southern Africa, even if each text represents an imagined community (4). Women writers' interlinking of different places in Southern Africa offer us new ways of reading and understanding this vast and variable configuration. For example, Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) tells the story of two sisters (one brutally murdered and the other disfigured by war) and follows the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe (meaning 'house of stone' in Shona) from so-called "white independence" (Ian Smith (1960s-1980) to post-independence, in the form of a civil war (1981-1986). In the first chapter, it creatively links places in Bulawayo, such as the smoke-filled, seductive and noisy basement bar on Selborne Avenue,¹²⁶ leading to Johannesburg, the route of the migrant workers, eyed so suspiciously upon their return, and the 'ekoneni' or corner above ground, which is 'a rendezvous, a place to meet. You cannot meet inside any of the buildings because the city is divided' (Vera 2002, 11). This ambivalent space marks a 'place of protest', of crossings and transgressions, the narrator indicates, 'but the meeting point is also dangerous, for every aspiration to change is risky' (Mzali 167). The vibrant market atmosphere in the bus station

126 Selborne Avenue is now called Leopold Takawira Avenue.

stays with us until we reach Kezi, ‘a rural enclave’ in the bush, defined in part as ‘a naked cemetery where no one is buried and everyone betrayed’ (Vera 2002, 31). At the heart of this forgotten village and of the text lies the Thandabantu Stores, a similarly ambiguous meeting point or contact zone for passing and local customers. ‘Vera’s poetic descriptions establish a distinct sense of place’, Christine Leahy argues.¹²⁷ Each space becomes a place, as it acquires meaning.

African women’s writing challenges, as I have said, ‘colonial habits of mapping’: their texts often cross borders or thematise border-crossings, an important topic in Head’s work. The European colonisers mapped identities by means of territorial limits. These became ingrained in their own and the colonised minds by the querulous whim of heads of state armed with a long and straight ruler in Berlin in the late nineteenth century. Head’s appendix to *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981) reminds us of this disastrous separation of lands and peoples: ‘Since time immemorial, people have referred to themselves as Batswana, people of the Tswana grouping of tribes, but during the colonial era they were known as Bechuana and their land as Bechuanaland’. Before the colonial invasion, the lands of the Tswana ‘extended as far south as the Vaal River and included the lands of the Barolong and Batlhaping tribes’ (Head 1981, 180).¹²⁸ Having lived under this misnaming, the authorities promptly corrected the error upon independence, giving their country the name of Botswana. This territory became the crossroad where three factors central to Southern African history met: the settlement of the Dutch at the Cape in 1652, the eruption of tribal violence in the nineteenth century, known as the *Mfecane*, and British

127 www.freewilliamsburg.com/march_2003/stone-virgins.html The question of civil war in this country is much more complex than I make it out to be: it has been endemic throughout the twentieth century in these lands, if not earlier.

128 The Tswana chiefs called for Imperial British protection and rule in 1884. A crown colony was created in the southern parts in 1885, while a protectorate was established in the north. Later, the protectorate survived as the Bechuanaland Protectorate, a political entity separate from South Africa, having formerly been integrated into existing white-ruled colonies in South Africa, which were combined in the Union of South Africa (1910).

imperialism, in which Cecil John Rhodes played a dominant role.

African women's texts also transgress 'modernity's distinction between the urban and the rural, for the experience of migrant labour', as we observe in Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, 'means that in the lives of many people, (...) the two are continually combined' (*Women Writing Africa* 4). In December of the mid 1960s, just before Christmas, 'young men, donning the latest style hats and strutting like proud cockerels would arrive from the gold mines in South Africa', the young narrator Monei Ntuka, who comes from the village of Mochudi, in 'the then British Bechuanaland Protectorate', tells us in Unity Dow's *Juggling Truths* (3). In *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), migration of a different kind is a central theme, particularly among the older male interviewees. The Bamangwato Nation was founded, as the traditional historian Mokgojwa Mathware relates, when two brothers, Chief Kwena and Ngwato, had a misunderstanding.¹²⁹ During the pre-colonial and the earlier colonial period, migration was caused as much by these quarrels in the royal household as by a search for surface water. Shoshong, 'a village to the south and some hundred miles away', was the Bamangwato capital for some fifty years, 'from about the time the first missionaries began to record southern African history' (Head 1981, xi). In 1889, drought caused an upheaval: Khama's community moved to Palaye, and, subsequently, to Serowe in 1902. This movement suggests that the spirit of place and sense of identity come primarily from pertinence to a particular community rather than to a space plotted and fixed on a map. For this reason, 'Serowe has several arms' and this text 'shuttles to and fro all the time, linking up the other dwelling places of the Bamangwato tribe' (xi). The villagers' seasonal activities further complicate the idea of internal migration. They often have three homes: one in Serowe, one on their land and one at the cattle posts, often miles away from

129 This concerned one of Ngwato's brown cows. The Bamangwato (the people of Ngwato) decided to leave secretly and thus parted from the Bakwena and Bangwaketse for ever (Head 1981, 17).

the village.

Besides migrant labour, this sense of ‘home’ is another way in which the ‘villagers’ separate and combine the rural and urban spaces. Unlike westerners, they do not worship one particular domestic space: the home in Serowe is ‘not really a place of employment but almost of rest’. During the resting period – after the harvest and before the next rainy season – weddings take place, courtyards and huts are repaired (Head 1981, xi). The western vision that people most probably have more time to integrate their thoughts, memories and dreams (Bachelard, 6) is clearly undermined. The metaphorical playing and dancing of the bird at the beginning of this text represent this movement.

Images such as the bird and the candle, evoked in different contexts, seem to stand by Head throughout the creation of this text: the bird’s ‘peep-peep’ at the beginning and the ‘call at dawn’ at the end is one of the mysteries she loves (Head 1981, ix, 179). This intratextual analogy, if we may call it such, reminds us of the flight and settling of birds in this and other texts: their song calls her to her creative quest. Indeed, her journey through the villagers’ histories and experiences gives her a sense of place she now loves and appreciates from different perspectives: ‘My home at night and the hours I spent outside it watching the yellow glow of the candle-light through the curtains; The (sic) hours I spent inside it in long, solitary thought’ (179). In this intimate poetic space, she enjoys solitude and protection for recollecting, daydreaming and imagining – a ‘community of memory and image’, an image never in repose. From within, she looks out at the world and makes the association between ‘exterior destiny and interior being’ (Bachelard 5, 11). Once outside, Head, cycling along the maze of sandy pathways and car tracks, sees the candle in her window. ‘This image would have to be placed’, Bachelard argues, ‘under one of the greatest of all theorems of the imagination of the world of light: *Tout ce qui brille voit*

(All that glows sees)' (33-34). In this sense, the 'lamp' in the window is 'the house's eye and, in the kingdom of the imagination, it is never lighted out-of-doors'; enclosed, it 'can only filter to the outside'. Head, an image-maker, resolutely resists such Bachelard-type fantasies; she presents images that shed light on her text. However, the outsider peeping in may well be hypnotised by solitude, by the gaze of the solitary house; 'the tie (...) is so strong', Bachelard suggests, 'that we begin to dream of nothing but a solitary house in the night' (36-37).

The main character of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* is, inevitably, Serowe itself, an 'historic village but not spectacularly so; its history is precariously oral', Head (xii) points out, revealing her awareness of her role as chronicler and ethnographer, although she would never think she was such, within that significant yet confining space of a print culture.¹³⁰ Significantly, the oral cultures with which the colonials/outsideers come into contact are 'a world beyond representation, a world of enunciation rather than the enunciated, beyond the will to truth' (Ashcroft 2001, 59).¹³¹ Head is not the first to lay emphasis on this differing epistemological process, but it does challenge the power of the written word and of the conventions ruling written texts. She and her interviewees speak, in their different ways, to the readers of the world 'beyond the edge of speech', creating a space for the language of possibility, the 'true language', 'the always unenclosable horizon of language'; in sum, the postcolonial poet's language is 'beyond the gaze of the grande autre' (Ashcroft 2001, 59-60). Moreover, the oral performances throughout

130 Ethnography is considered to be the systematic description of a single contemporary culture, based upon direct observation of and reportage on a people's way of life. The primary information is most often obtained through fieldwork, such as Head did in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* – by no means her only source. A case might be made for this postcolonial approach and it is certainly worth bearing in mind for a future study. In her discussion of this approach, Lewis argues against it for many reasons (2007, 224-34).

131 Although Ashcroft is speaking here about 'Childhood and Possibility' in two novels by the Australian writer David Malouf, his argument is suggestive, given that the child, introducing different ways of knowing and being, 'is an important (if questionable) trope in representations of language and indigeneity' in postcolonial discourse (2001, 54).

this text transform this ‘village of the rain wind’ into an image-making of place. If never the same place, this ‘place’ represents, in all its contradictions, as Gordimer says, a rupture with the colonial centre in terms of agency.

Like hybrid texts by other African women writers, *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* engages different textual spaces and discourses. These include lyrical descriptions of village life, contextual information concerning the effect History/history has had upon the community, the interviewing process, knowledge of the community’s culture, in a broad sense, as well as its language Head forges in her stories, as does her South African sister Miriam Tlali, ‘ways of writing about her community, thereby relating speech, storytelling and writing’; Daymond suggests that this may lead to ‘an inclusive aesthetic for Southern African writing’ (1994, 225-226). As in traditional narrative, the author is apparently in control of her project – she organises the text, draws up the interviews and outlines her interests in the ‘Introduction’. At the same time, she questions this authority by organising a collective project. She may have chosen the main theme of her book, but the ‘other themes of the book people of Serowe developed themselves during the year I moved in and out of their homes’ (1981, xv), when she often relies on an interpreter. Contrasting the strategies of the oral and the written tradition, Head foregrounds ‘the African tale’, an ‘integral part of the oral legacy of the continent’ threatened during colonial times and eclipsed by western influences (Scanlon 1983, 1). Head never extinguishes the light of this ‘living tradition’. This movement between different texts creates, as we shall see, that other important space of intertextuality.

The narrative does not, like anthropological/ethnographical texts, rely on the perspective of a curious outsider who er(x)oticises his/her subject-matter. Head challenges these models through shifting perspectives, thereby creating spaces that propose differing views on the same

subject. The narratives intertwine, changing the nature of each, as they change the imagined place. Her overall narrative pattern exemplifies this. In her section on Khama the Great, Head begins with a brief biographical study and closes with an extract from a lengthy preliminary document for British protection that he drew up significantly in 1885. Then she presents the villagers' stories about this period in Botswana history. The shift in voice and perspective reminds us of Gabatshwane's words in his brief biography of Tshedkedi Khama (1961): Khama's writings 'will prove of interest and abiding value to all those who wish to see and know through the feelings of an African some of the problems arising today from the contact of whites and blacks in southern Africa' (60). In this respect, one of Head's most significant contributions is her insistence on contextualising her narratives. This text may not explore 'individual character', but she does draw on him or her to depict the 'larger social scale', to evoke the 'materiality of everyday existence' and breathe 'new life into the harshly familiar and unrelentlessly dull' with 'immense skill and sympathy' (Nkosi 1981, 99-100). Lewis would agree: 'Whereas social history usually suppresses the researcher's desires, Head turns to the genre to textualize them' (2007, 234). Perhaps sounding naive at times, Head is not politically ignorant. Her evocation of the ordinary and her rendering of individual perspectives, which create alternative spaces, ideologies and values, confirm a political stance that refuses to restrict itself to the conventions of protest literature advocated by many of her South African colleagues. Or, as Walsh says of V. S. Naipaul, Head creates characters who are 'seen from within so that they possess intrinsic, spontaneous vitality, and from without, so that they are located in time and place and in a context of value and feeling' (qtd. in Nkosi 1981, 99). She treats this topic in different ways in the novels and short stories that are the inspiration for *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*.

The opening pages of this text celebrate the natural beauty of this village, and, by

extension, of Botswana, but they also alert us to its intertextual references that create multiple organic spaces, whether these create a dialogue with Head's other texts or with other literatures. For Makhaya of *When Rain Clouds Gather* the sunrise is so sudden that 'the birds had to pretend they had been awake all night' (Head 1969, 10-11); for Head, in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, the day starts with that 'peep-peep' as though (the bird's) half scared at opening his eyes' (1981, ix). Walking through the bush, Makhaya observes how 'the earth had adorned herself for a transient moment in a brief splurge of gold', which he found so 'bewitchingly beautiful' that he wondered if he had concocted it because 'he simply wanted a country to love'. At dawn, Head notices a white light, which she finds 'unearthly': it 'quickly pulsates into a ball of molten gold...'. Echoing *Maru*, she explains that the seasons when it did rain in Serowe 'were so exceptional and stunning that I cannot even describe them' (Head 1981, x-xi). During the drought years, before the first rains fall, 'it gets so hot that you cannot breathe. Then one day the sky just empties itself in a terrible downpour. After this, the earth and sky heave alive and there is magic everywhere'. The people are so dependent on rainfall that it becomes as much a measure of time as of survival. The wind rushes through a 'ring of low blue hills', which partly surrounds the village, and 'you get swept about from head to toe by a cold, fresh rain-wind. That's about all you ever get in Serowe most summers'. These allusions of one text to another of Head's oeuvre represent the different experiences, however ambivalent they may be, of the narrators/translators and characters/readers. Just as these spaces interconnect in our imaginations, so they evoke a contradictory sense of place and propose new reading practices and means of interpretation.

Analogies also reveal the tendency to interrelate time with space in the 'traditional African village' in each text: there is a season for all events, whether for ploughing, harvesting or weddings. Significantly, Head's inclusion of the "most poetic" calendar indicates that time is not

ruled by the Julian/Gregorian calendar (1981, xix) but ‘continues to be denoted by whatever convenient units are locally available’, Chinweizu *et al* (103-4) argue in their contentious study. This is a ‘matter of cultural form’, as is the sense of space: ‘spatial relationships are indicated by what is available, and by what suits specific needs’. The Serowans’ needs are agricultural. For this reason, migration is such a significant theme in their narratives. Despite the sensuous description of the climate, the birds and the hills, Head’s focus on the village foregrounds the postcolonial reality: the settlers’ land is now ‘stark, rocky, goat-eaten and soil-eroded’ (1981, xi). The details she draws attention to are by no means coincidental: in ‘South Africa the white man took’, she wrote in 1975, ‘even the air away from us – it was his air and his birds and his land’ (Head 1990, 27). She thus confronts ‘white writing’ by observing the beauty of this countryside from her own perspective: she now has the freedom to reread, rename and rewrite it. Of the bird outside her window, she says: ‘No one laid any particular claim to him, so I am able to confide, to the whole world, that he sings like this, and he sings like that, without some white man or woman snickering behind my ear: ‘Why, you people don’t appreciate things like *that!*’ (27-28).

Intertextuality pervades the three main parts of this narrative. The first concerns Khama the Great and contains an epigraph from the Protectorate document of 1885 drawn up by Khama: ‘I am not baffled in the government of my town, or in deciding cases among my own people according to custom’ (Head 1981, 1). Head’s further citation contextualises this declaration. Khama wishes to retain the laws in operation, ‘advantageous to my people’. He refers to the prohibition of ‘intoxicating drinks’ (among black and white peoples); to the law preventing the sale of land: ‘let it be upheld and continue to be the law among black people and white people’ (9). Once again, the circularity, marking the village, is maintained in this short biographical sketch. Moreover, the interviews in Part I close with a section called ‘The End of an Era’. Part II

discusses the time of Tshekedi Khama. Taken partly from *Tshekedi Khama*, a biography by Mary Benson, his secretary in 1951 when he was attempting to have his banishment revoked, the epigraph again whets the appetite: ‘All my work has been helping my people’.¹³² T. Khama’s major contribution was his self-help architectural projects, which halted upon his final banishment. However, by that time the young age-regiments had built four primary schools and one college, many silos and water reticulation systems. The first interview in Part II is a lengthy chat with Lenyletse Seretse about ‘The Building of Moeng College’ and the final one really does signify the end of an era. Grant Kgosi closes his interview with the following words: ‘I like independence. There’s no use hating the changes we see. What is needed is arguments to see that the government is following the right line’ (132). Part III, ‘The Swaneng Project (1963—) Patrick van Rensburg’, opens with an epigraph from Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*: ‘What happiness it is to work from dawn to dusk for your family and yourself, to build a roof over their heads, to till the soil to feed them, to create your own world like Robinson Crusoe, in imitation of the creator of the universe’.¹³³ Van Rensburg ‘has an air of impersonal abstraction, the legend and the fame’. The legend was his ‘abdication’ from his diplomatic position ‘on moral grounds’; his fame came from the educational theories for developing countries (135-6). We might expect this to be more personal, since Head knew him well, but once more her information apparently comes from printed matter, be it his semi-autobiography, *Guilty Land*, or papers he had written after the construction of Swaneng Hill School, catering for secondary school students who took British

132 T. Khama had an unfortunate relationship with the British: he suffered, Head maintains, ‘from a backwash of suppressed British resentment against his father’s rule’ and the Protectorate officials sent him into exile on a couple of occasions (Head 1981, 77). However, his later banishment was caused by love: he opposed the marriage of his nephew, Seretse Khama, to Ruth Williams. Head tells us that both men behaved very well, but the British intervened and sent them temporarily into exile.

133 It seems that Head identifies with Yuri Andreevich, who had more time in the winter, if in exile, to write down notes, of which the above is one. First published in Italy in 1957, *Doctor Zhivago* was published in English in 1958.

examinations. This led to the Project, which made every attempt to tackle unemployment, truancy and indifference at a time of tremendous upheaval. It drew volunteers from many different countries, making Serowe ‘one of the most international villages in Africa’ (138). Since volunteers built the school, it is hardly surprising that Head ends this Part with the Boiteko Project. Significantly, the last interviewee is Anotseng Olefhile, a weaver: she has learned to ‘produce a blanket, carpet or shawl, right from the time the wool comes off the sheep...’ (178). She has produced a circular carpet, so to speak, of different textures and colours within the greater circle of this text and its location.

Head does not so much privilege men, as (western/feminist) critics have argued, as she challenges gender/genre issues in an unclassifiable text, thereby creating another intertextual space. ‘*Serowe* offers’, Lewis argues, ‘a baffling fusion of romanticizing ethnography, popular history, epic narrative, biographical history and post-modern ethnography’, as it contains, much as we would expect, ‘ideological contradictions’: at one and the same time, she subverts ‘elite, bourgeois and patriarchal perspectives’ by focussing on the extraordinary achievements of ordinary people, and writes epic narratives, if short, on heroic personalities (2007, 226).¹³⁴ Much of her writing is poetic and defies classification; set in a specific context, it is an individual response to very particular circumstances.¹³⁵ For all these reasons, she is, as so many have implied in one way or another, a writer of transition. Thus empowered, she undermines the publishing industry’s desire for classification, noted on the Heinemann copy, which, to their

134 It is true that Head emphasises ‘heroic personalities’, but I would suggest that most of the heroism in this text comes from the interviewees. As the community (Serowe) is the most important character in this text, it challenges the potential epic narrative that Head would develop more in *A Bewitched Crossroad*.

135 Lewis argues that the contradictions in Head’s text ‘are held together by the coherence that derives from narrativization, from the recurring vision conveyed through emplotment, characterization and storytelling’ (226).

credit, is not classified.¹³⁶ In an article of 1983, however, Head refers to this work as ‘oral history’ (2001, 55). It is clear from her enthusiasm, impatient as she may be, that she has eventually discovered a model she would like others to follow: in Serowe, ‘(t)here were things I loved that began to grow on me like pages of cloth’, Head wrote almost upon arrival (1990, 30). No longer is she a writer in exile; she has ‘put down roots’. In this setting, she ‘forcefully created’ for herself, as she wrote in 1975, ‘my ideal life’, she made it her ‘own hallowed ground’ (hence the romanticism):

Here, in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems.

Implicitly rejecting the conventions of western literatures, and transforming, once again, an abstract space into a place, she writes: ‘My work was always tentative because it was always so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing...’ (28). If I were to question the word ‘nothing’ and its complications, this would be a ‘never-ending story’.

Having discussed the ways in which space becomes ‘the spirit of place’ in this text, I shall now address the question of literature in space in the form of the publication of this text, before comparing it with village narratives written and/or published in the United Kingdom. These two matters are, up to a point, interrelated. Ken Mackenzie, the Cape Town editor of *Drum*, asks Head if she could do some research into John Mackenzie, his great-grandfather and the London Missionary Society minister ‘who worked with the Bamangwato under their great chief Khama III’ (Eilersen 1995, 158). She reads his *Ten Years North of the Orange River: A Story of Everyday Life and Work Among the South African Tribes, from 1859 to 1869*, ‘which has an excellent chapter on Bamangwato history’: so ‘Khama, the Great’ entered her life’. In 1970, Gollancz

¹³⁶ It has been difficult to find as is her *A Bewitched Crossroad*. I thank Nattie Golubov for giving me her copy of Serowe. *Village of the Rain Wind*. Head’s texts are eventually being republished.

offers her an outlet for non-fictional work. Her reply expresses ‘the wilfulness of Head’s formal innovation’ (Lewis 2007, 225). Head is not sure whether Gollancz ‘might find my very off-beat ideas suited to the non-fiction bracket’. Rather than write a non-fiction work on Africa, she suggests she might ‘produce a collection of essays, in free-wheeling, intuitive style on almost any of the sorrows which plague mankind and black people in particular’ (qtd. in Lewis 225). Noting her enthusiasm for this subject, Giles Gordon, her editor at Gollancz, argues the case for ‘a “village” book about Serowe along the same lines as Jan Myrdal’s *Report from a Chinese Village*’ and Ronald Blythe’s *Akenfield. Portrait of an English Village*.¹³⁷ However, he stresses that ‘she should feel a strong reason for writing the book and impose her own approach on her material’. Head sent off her typescript to Gordon in May, 1974, which started the ‘publisher clash’ of 1975 (Eilersen 1995,175-176). Liking her book, Milly Daniel of Pantheon/ Penguin, which had apparently commissioned this book, recommends so many changes that Head feels they ‘did not seem related to her book at all, but to another book’. They did not like ‘her eclectic straddling of generic boundaries’: it defies conventions (Lewis 2007, 225).

Presenting an insider’s view, Head is, to Lewis’ mind, ‘deeply concerned with establishing an overall subjective frame for her text’, thus manipulating, in one way or another, her potential publishers. What the Penguin representative found unacceptable was Head’s authorial self-consciousness and manipulation, ‘when she claimed that Head’s choice of themes were too selective, and her work fell outside of the “realm of a true village narrative”’ (2007, 227).¹³⁸ Interesting: what is ‘a true village narrative’ and how does this text fall outside the realm of the renowned *Akenfield*? Lewis, such a sensitive critic, seems to disregard Head’s manipulation, one

¹³⁷ Head acknowledges Mackenzie’s study in her ‘Bibliography’ at the end of *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, but not the books Gordon suggests she should read (1981, 199).

¹³⁸ Lewis’ quote comes from BKMM44BHP134.

of the very few weapons in her armoury she can use to contest the Euro-american publishing giants. Her manuscript falls into the trap of the expectations of Anglophone publishers and readers: 'Don't hate me, Giles. Don't foam at the mouth', she writes when telling him she has refused Pantheon's offer (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 176). If Davis-Poynter Ltd. were to publish it, having given her an advance of £100 and expressed great interest in 1973, they needed another publisher to share the costs; as I said earlier, Head suggests Patrick Cullinan's Bateleur Press. In September of 1975, Cullinan has a meeting in London with Gordon and Reg Davis-Poynter. They agree that Bateleur Press will 'design, set and print the book and sell copies to Davis-Poynter' (Eilersen 1995, 178). Thus, Head's taxes would be kept at a minimum; Bateleur, South Africa, would be the primary publisher of *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* and *The Collector of Treasures* 'with sub-leases to Reg Davis-Poynter and possibly Heinemann Educational Books, because James Currey was very interested in *Village Tales*'. This is the substance of Gordon's letter to Head, in which he emphasises Davis-Poynter's 'dedication to your work and preparedness to co-operate in every way to see that you receive as much for your work as possible' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 178).

After her breakdown, Head discovers new 'hate figures' in the form of 'publishers and literary agents in London' (Vigne, *A Gesture of Belonging* 191). Gordon had earlier sent her into a panic concerning her tax situation in Botswana: 'I am asked to ask you to confirm that you are paying tax in Botswana...'. African writers complain profusely about the unfairness of double taxation in a literal sense, but the double taxation agreement between Botswana and the UK meant that Head was exempt from paying tax in the UK. However, she did have to put her tax situation in order (and was) furious that she had to pay 'a 30 per cent flat tax on all her American earnings' (Eilersen 1995, 176). After the arrangement made by Gordon with the publishers, he

adds a seriously incorrect sentence, claiming there is ‘no way round the tax problem because of the lack of a double taxation agreement between Botswana and Britain’. This might well explain the letter she writes to Davis-Poynter Ltd. in September: ‘I do not intend to have Patrick Cullinan act as my secret agent and collect money for me in dubious ways’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 178).

The outcome of this lengthy tax discussion is a showdown between Head and the Cullinans (Patrick and Wendy, his wife,) who had been excellent friends, as their correspondence reveals. Towards the end of October, we learn that she has sorted out her tax situation, sacked Giles Gordon as her literary agent at Anthony Sheil, and received some compensation for Gordon’s mix-up concerning her tax problem (*Imaginative Trespasser* 236-7). When Cullinan visits Head in Serowe, they have a violent row about several matters, but eventually ‘agree to carry on with a revised publishing plan’: if only ‘I had had the sense to break off all business with Bessie then and there’, he writes, arguing that he still believes in their friendship (*Imaginative Trespasser* 236-7). Head had done a lot of historical and archaeological research for Wendy, which may have irked her in the short term because she had to look after her son and could not go to Gaborone very often. On December 31, 1975, she withdraws *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* from Bateleur and in February of 1976 discovers that Anthony Sheil has lost the US manuscript: he had sent it to ‘a personal friend in Washington’... (*Imaginative Trespasser* 246, 242). Vigne published a series of letters before Cullinan’s *Imaginative Trespasser*, in which he respectfully leaves out names: ‘More than half the contents have been omitted because they are wounding and probably libellous (.) She developed fierce hatreds of those she did business with’: much was due to her ‘remoteness and isolation, though some of her bitterest attacks were on people who had come to see her from South Africa’ (*A Gesture of Belonging* 210). Was Cullinan one of these? A later letter to Vigne (February 18, 1976) suggests this is the case: Head mentions Cullinan’s

‘wonderful sense of humour’ and ‘unbridled greed and stupid ambition (...) I don’t think Davis-Poynter wants to contract with Pat Cullinan, hence his silence. He must have seen that Pat Cullinan is a circus show’. This section is left out in Vigne’s *A Gesture of Belonging* (198), but Cullinan fills in the gaps in his *Imaginative Trespasser* (247). Head writes to Cullinan five days later to tell him she ‘has just received the Serowe typescript’ and hopes ‘everything will be made final between you and Davis-Poynter, soon’. Of course, nothing will ever be made final between these two publishers, as Head knows. Or does she? This is always the question when reading her correspondence. Her battle with Davis-Poynter is no easier: his lengthy silence convinces her that ‘he was cheating and lying to her’ and she wants to collect her manuscripts. Calling her bluff, the publisher promptly replies: she can pick them up as soon as possible. Head has been pulling down ‘the framework of her creative expression. Now the whole structure was crashing round her ears’ and there was nobody to blame but herself (Eilersen 1995, 181). On July 7, 1976, Cullinan writes yet another letter to Head to dig her out of this hole. He and Lionel Abrahams are prepared to publish *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, if she so wish; however, she is bound to be better off with Heinemann (*Imaginative Trespasser* 250-4). From the following letter, we learn that Davis-Poynter has eventually ‘called it a day’ and has returned three files to Vigne: one file contained ‘the revised pages of *Serowe* which Davis-Poynter had not inserted in the typescript’. Cullinan cannot understand why she ‘has prolonged this farce (.) She again reconfirms her detestation of me and her rejection of Bateleur’ in a letter to Vigne, which Vigne leaves out and Cullinan publishes in full. Repeating much of what she has said earlier, she is even more vitriolic, as she openly attacks his marriage.

This lengthy and complicated correspondence creates another (inter)textual space, if melodramatic in content, especially regarding Head’s problems as a writer living in a village

some three hours from Gaborone. In this digital age, it is easy to forget the difficulties of communicating with the outside world by telegram, letter and the all-too-expensive telephone. Isolated, Head complains about Nikki Giovanni's replies to her long philosophical letters. How can (I) 'write a full and coherent letter to someone who only sends short scrawls because I don't know if you cared about all my latest speculations' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 182). Head also describes her method: 'I pace (my letters) very sensitively against the person to whom I am communicating because it is something outside of what you can buy and sell. And it is intended to give happiness to the recipient'. Giovanni apologises, stating that 'she did not come from a culture that valued letter-writing'. But in her first letter to Giovanni, Head writes: 'I tend to get so angry (...) that people wonder what they have done to upset me so when for a long time I seemed to get along with them' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 183). Certainly, this foreshadows what she calls her 'turbulent and hysterical' behaviour with Cullinan. Towards the end of his *Imaginative Trespasser*, he cannot contain his anger: 'And damn her I certainly did when I read these letters, costive with hate. They roused me to a rage, which was concentrated into a tunnel-vision fury against her. How dare Bessie say these things about me, so obviously', manifestly, patently, provably untrue? (248). Vigne's collection of her letters is much more measured and censored. The portrait depicted in the latter does not reveal the character and personality of his correspondent as honestly as the former does: Cullinan's portrait expresses all the wrinkles of each correspondent.

But who will publish *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* after this debacle? Vigne reports that '*Botswana Village Tales* came out as *The Collector of Treasures* in 1977, from Heinemann Educational Books, who have remained Bessie's British publisher' (*A Gesture of Belonging* 310). Moreover, his relationship with her agent, John Johnson at this time, has survived. Head tells him

in a letter of October 1977 that ‘it would come out in hardcover with David Philip, Cape Town’ (213). After further meetings with James Currey and others, when Head began travelling and participating in international events, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* eventually came out in 1981.¹³⁹

Throughout I have mentioned the different responses to her village narrative. In 1980, Head attended its pre-launch in London, meeting many old friends. Not among them, Giles Gordon later wrote: ‘the original typescript is in so many places engraved on my mind. Engraved is the word, too, as your descriptions of people were so incised, so definitive’. Despite their battle, he suggested that she publish ‘a book of extracts from your letters, your occasional writings, what a lovely book it would be, a kind of commonplace book’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 244). Paddy Kitchen, who later authored her own village narrative, and Jane Grant wrote reviews in *Listener* and *South* respectively. The former’s review delighted Head. The latter’s review spoke about Head’s language: ‘Whether recording the words of the villagers or giving us her own prose, as she describes her feelings for her adopted home, the words take on the cadence of song. It is a story told from the inside, with love’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 217). Most important of all were the villagers themselves; some did not live to see the publication of the book and others had moved. Eilersen mentions the letter Kethamile Kgasa wrote about her grandfather, who had ‘shortage of time’ but he often thought of Head. He had been the organiser of Serowe Tannery Brigade and Kethamile said the book made sense to her too because she had ‘heard about his dealings’ (1995, 247). In 1984, Head attends the Adelaide Festival. She writes to Kitchen: ‘That white-dominated world is closed and narrow (...). It is as though many small villages in England and Europe

¹³⁹ Inevitably, Head paid a heavy price for her decisions concerning the publishing of her work. It is worth noting that Toni Morrison was an editor of Random House when Head sent *The Collector of Treasures* and *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* there. Another correspondence began: Morrison was very interested in these works, but felt they were more for young adults, which upset Head (Eilersen 1995, 183).

transposed themselves onto the Australian soil' (Eilersen 1995, 271), which in fact they did, as Germaine Greer would argue. Responding to her village mentality, they begin to open up: 'I talked to the most receptive audience in the world', with whom her village 'created an echo that they wanted to explore'.

These descendents of Australian settlers and their offspring brings me to the next topic in this chapter: Head's place within the village narrative tradition. I propose that this comparison with former and contemporary works in this genre opens Head's text to many different literatures and creates other spaces within and beyond her work, even if I confine my discussion only to the conventions abided by and transgressed in English literature. The echoes among authors in very different times and spaces are, strangely, so glaringly obvious that I shall not comment upon them. Indeed, it seems as if these writers are considered transgressors, in that they do not follow the conventions established, mainly, by "historians" in the past, to which social scientists and anthropologists have later added. Gordon unwisely suggested, I have argued, that Head should read Myrdal's *Report from a Chinese Village*, first published in Swedish in 1963, and swiftly translated into English by Maurice Michael and published in 1965 by William Heinemann Ltd.¹⁴⁰ 'One of the prerequisite conditions for travelling in China today', Myrdal writes, 'is that you accept interpreters and guides' (xxii). He gives his interpreters full acknowledgement and describes them and the method in depth. Although replete with statistical information and anthropological detail that do not make for easy reading, the 'real value of the book lies in the life stories of thirty villagers related to the author in a series of interviews' (Bernal 1965). Head certainly gained an insight into this genre from this interesting and unconventional text,

140 The Chinese village is Liuling, or Liu Ling, 'a small collection of man-made caves hollowed out of a soft slope set in the weirdly beautiful loess hills and gorges that cover much of Northwest China' (Bernal 1965). Edgar Snow also writes about this area from a similar perspective in *The Other Side of the River*. 1962. New York: Random House (475-489).

especially since the author has done a lot of research, centres on change in village life and interviews local inhabitants.

Despite various formal similarities with *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, the context and eccentric approach of Mydral's text is so alien to Head's experience that it seems wiser to compare her text with the other book Gordon recommended: Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield. Portrait of an English Village* (1969), which recalls, as he mentions, the *Little Domesday Book* (1086), and which is not an anthropological study (1999, 13). Blythe's text is regarded as a seminal text 'in the history of oral history in the United Kingdom' (Abrams 4).¹⁴¹ Its significance lies partly in its timing, Lynn Abrams writes, in that it is 'part of the social revolution that viewed history from the bottom up' by giving voice to 'ordinary historical actors' (labourers, skilled craftsmen, the vet, the local magistrate, men of the church and various women who are perceived as performing different roles in their community: a widow, a district nurse, a Samaritan, a headmistress and the President of the Women's Institute, for example). Another reason for its success is 'its sheer literary quality', to use Abrams' phrase (4). Blythe had written a novel before publishing *Akenfield*, but this text represents a writer's insight into local communities, as we note, firstly, in the 'Introduction'. Indeed, his skill as a writer 'allows him to convey the words of his narrators' with sympathy and unsentimentality (4). Its 'scholarly integrity' concerned the critics. For example, Howard Newby argues that *Akenfield* enters that no-man's-land between novel and documentary study (qtd. in Abrams 6). The reviewers represent the debates of the time among historians, who would propose a 'more productive relationship' between history and storytelling a decade later. Upon its publication, historians and social scientists distrust author and text, because

141 It is often coupled with George Ewart Evans' contemporary studies of rural life, which are also based on what Abrams calls 'spoken history'. That an oral history is considered "seminal" in the 1960s opens the doors to many areas of study.

he has no clear methodology and, worst of all, no evidence that his informants' words are, indeed, "their words".¹⁴² Abrams 'would beg to differ' (9): Blythe's work is often considered transgressive.

Formerly, so-called 'oral history' had been the 'preserve of the antiquarian and the ethnographer', but at the time of the writing of *Akenfield* it enters 'historical practice'. This text and others gave rise to a 'boom' in methodology at all levels, 'from academic to community-based studies' (Abrams 3). Among the forefathers of British local historians were White Kennett (1660-1728) and Richard Gough (1634-1723), who does not mention among his antiquarian writings the first modern example of local (as distinct from county) history writing to be published in England, namely White Kennett's *Parochial Antiquities attempted in the history of Ambrosden, Burcester and other adjacent parts in the counties of Oxford and Bucks* of 1695, which established the conventions of this genre (Hey 1983, 7).¹⁴³

The local historians of the past, whom I cannot study in any depth here, were deeply involved in their community, their country and their nation, almost blind to the world outside England or Britain, immersed in their scholarship and position in the class system. It was not until 1902 that Henry Rider Haggard – of all people – determined 'to adopt a new system – that of the interview' – in his *Rural England*, however inappropriately he used this method.¹⁴⁴

142 I shall discuss these perils of transcription in 'Writing Cultures'.

143 According to Bandinel's 'Advertisement' at the opening of the first volume of the 1818 edition, the Delegates of the Clarendon Press have given to the Public 'an enlarged and improved edition, at a time when the original one was become (sic) so scarce, as almost to have disappeared'. Kennett defines his Glossary: 'to explain/the original, the acceptance, and obsolescence, /of/words and phrases;/and to shew/the rise, practice, and alteration of customs, laws, and manners' (all the above is in capitals). The first word is 'Abunda' (a long discourse on this) and the last is Yconomi, apparently Churchwardens, although most of the explanation is in Latin.

144 The full title is *Rural England. Being an Account of Agricultural and Social Researches Carried out in the Years 1901 & 1902*. I say 'of all people' because he wrote adventure stories set in Southern Africa, such as *King Solomon's Mines* or *She*, from an embarrassing colonial perspective.

Experience is essential, in Haggard's opinion: not only was he born in a farmhouse, but owns land in Natal, on which he has worked; he has 'travelled in many different countries, including Mexico and the Southern Territories and States in Africa' (xi). No wonder he is not sure how to treat his subject. The interview enables him to

preserve, together with something of their personalities, the individual experience and opinions of many witnesses which, if I had been content to melt them down in the crucible of my own intelligence, might have acquired, perhaps, qualities derived from myself rather than from my informants (1902, xi).

This concern to preserve individual experience, personalities and opinions is also an area of discussion in the spoken narratives of *Akenfield* and *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. Indeed, Haggard goes on to undermine this new method (notice the gender bias):

I have recorded the substance of what each man said to me as he said or wrote it, always from notes taken in his presence, or from written documents with which he has furnished me, and, except in cases where I have been asked to omit it, under his own name.

Whatever the misinterpretation, this 'testimony is', according to the writer, 'in the main incontestable' and remains as a 'record' of what certain people 'intimately connected with English land and agriculture, thought and said on these matters in the years 1901 and 1902'. Thus, Haggard expressly does what he said he would not do: he melts the information down in 'the crucible' of his 'own intelligence', as do Head and Blythe, within their very different contexts. Despite this, his interviewing method is very different from that of Blythe or Head. He writes a tortuous narrative, interjecting it with a word or two from a local farmer or labourer whom he quotes directly (his signposts), but most of his "interviews" are summarised from conversations or written information. His final quote comes from a letter written to him by 'someone' who had to move to London:

The result was migration to the metropolis, the only place apparently where one can,

in a case of emergency, find a living, or, as it might more truthfully be termed, a living death, a life lived amongst bricks and mortar, with scarce a square yard of sky, the air pained and heavy with germs and gases and smoke and direct; the noise and bustle tearing one's nerves to pieces; and the longed-for country with its health-giving, beautiful surroundings a thing to read about or see in the shop-windows of picture dealers ... (446).

Throughout the centuries, the authors of these village narratives do not transcribe, as I have observed from my research, the spoken speech of the informant, but mainly reproduce it in their own words. This representation may include misinterpretation, omission, stylistic embellishment, and so on. Like Head, Haggard interviews with notebook in hand. Unlike Head, Haggard claims to be an insider when that simply could not be the case, as he interviews local residents from every part of the English countryside. The 'perfect investigator of agricultural matters and the English land' must have the mind 'of a trained lawyer, able to weigh and sift evidence, discriminating between the true and the false, the weighty and the trivial. His intelligence must be of that patient and prosaic order that scorns no detail, however oft repeated (;) impertinences and rebuffs should not disturb him; with a smile he must try again elsewhere' (ix-x). The superiority noted in these words is clear elsewhere when he speaks of the uneducated farmers who cannot understand that anyone could undertake this 'wearisome task' without having 'an ulterior object tending to his own advantage or to their disadvantage'; indeed, his task is foreign to farmers as a whole, 'whence perhaps their rooted dislike and mistrust of co-operation' (xii-xiii). Sadly, I cannot discuss more writers of this ilk, such as the daughter of Rider Haggard, before Ronald Blythe took the public by storm with his *Akenfield*.¹⁴⁵

145 Lilia Rider Haggard, the youngest daughter of Henry Rider Haggard, wrote *Norfolk Life* (1943) and *Norfolk Notebook* (1946), among other works. It seems as if both books first took diary form before being publishing in a newspaper. Of the latter, she writes on the first page: 'The diary from which this book is made was first published in the *Eastern Daily Press*, and I would like to thank the Editor for his permission to reprint much of the original material' (1983). The former contains an 'Introduction' written by Henry Williamson, author of *Tarka the Otter* and a sympathizer of Sir Oswald Mosley's new vision for Britain.

In the award-winning *Akenfield*,¹⁴⁶ Blythe returns to Kennett's idea of writing as an insider: his only credential is, as he suggests, that he 'was native to its situation (...) and had only to listen to hear my own world talking' (1999, 8, 18). The world echoes his world, even if he states that his book 'is the quest for the voice of Akenfield, Suffolk, as it sounded during the summer and autumn of 1967'. In contrast to Blythe's renaming of Charsfield and surrounding villages as Akenfield, Head's contestatory work is of a very different order, inspired, first and foremost, by a real African village. On the one hand, her purpose is, in part, to write a collective history of a community, which has moved from one place to another, and to link her own exploration of exile to this silenced history. Her rewriting emerges, Ibrahim suggests, from remembering and (re)envisioning the past (207). Even the title is significant: 'I write best if I can hear the thunder behind my ears. Not even *Rain Clouds* was real thunder yet. Some of my letters to friends are faint rumblings of it' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, i). Her storm brews in the silent creativity of letters within this text and beyond it. On the other, Blythe has to explain himself: 'The book is more the work of a poet than a trained oral historian, a profession I had never heard of when I wrote it' (8). Whereas the wind moving the apple trees of *Akenfield*, which 'has done more to shape the character of the people' than anything else (Blythe 1999, 21), has been translated into more than twenty languages, as well as inspiring 'an elegaic, fictionalised film by another Suffolk man, Sir Peter Hall' (Taylor xii), Head's thunder has been out of print for many years. Has it **ever** been translated?

However much these texts may differ, starting with the concept of the village (the population of the real Serowe was around 40,000 and of the fictional Akenfield precisely 298),

146 It won the W.H. Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature and the Silver Pen Award of International P.E.N. in 1969, and was the Literary Guild choice for June 1969. Moreover, Blythe has been made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Head's text might be thought to resemble Blythe's portrait in certain ways, but her 'cunning' and her desire to be 'a pioneer' are never far below the surface (Head 1990, 64). The opening lines of the 'Introduction' give us one good example of an apparent difference:

His name was Harold M. Tel(e)maque. His poem, the title of which I cannot remember, appeared unexpectedly in a magazine of the sort I used to read then – hoarsely and violently asserting blackness. I cannot survive in the heat of the moment, and I remember the peace with which my mind latched on to one line of Tel(e)maque's poem...

Where is the hour of the beautiful dancing of birds in the sun-wind?

All time stands still here and in the long silences the dancing of birds fills the deep blue, Serowe sky. Serowe people note everything about nature: 'The birds are playing,' they say, more prosaically. (Head 1981, ix)

Blythe begins in quite a different fashion:

The village lies folded away in one of the shallow valleys which dip into the East Anglian coastal plain. It is not a particularly striking place and says little at first meeting. It occupies a little isthmus of London (Eocene) clay jutting from Suffolk's shelly sands, the Coralline and Red crags, and is approached by a spidery lane running off from the 'bit of straight' as they call it, meaning a handsome stretch of Roman road, apparently going nowhere. (13)

Head's response to her subject and her invitation to join her in the realm of imagination is captivating, but Blythe's more practical approach, taking the form of mapping a space in historical and geographical terms, is not without its beauty: the rhythm of the passage and its musicality blind us to the terminology of its content. It says little at first meeting, but sonorously anticipates a characteristic of this text: at the beginning of each of the 20 sections, he quotes several pertinent lines from different poets. On the very next page, he writes: 'The clay acres themselves are the only tablets on which generations of village men have written, as John Clare did, *I am*'. However, the sounds of machines and aircraft from the American base at Bentwaters make 'the place seem riven, splintered – yet it resumes its wholeness the second the plane vanishes. Nobody looks up', as Blythe goes on to quote lines from Auden's 'Musée des Beaux

Arts' (14). 'Could this be village indifference or village strength', Blythe asks. Whereas Blythe's local history is a post-war narrative, transgressing the English canon as it commemorates it, Head's text is postcolonial, revising Serowe's past. Her intimacy with her subject makes her seem a much more committed insider than Blythe. But she has a double-edged perspective, as Valerie Kibera calls it: 'an outsider's clear sightedness, an insider's intimacy and the very real risk of misinterpreting' what she sees (325).

Head's opening certainly draws us to the ideological assumptions created by Euro-centric studies of Botswana, but this is not her only purpose. Political and literary rewritings go hand in hand, Judie Newman argues; the postcolonial writer may decide to revise the work of predecessors 'in order to deconstruct images of the colonial situation' (24). So as to lay claim to their own stories, to possess their own realities, women writers may, she suggests, 'employ intertextual strategies, repositioning the text in relation to its point of origin or offering revisions of canonical texts'. 'The Poet's Post' by the Trinidadian Harold Telemaque introduces this intertextual strategy, as it gives rise to the meditation Head writes about it, which she calls a '*cris de coeur*', and Dennis Brutus calls 'the beginning of a gold-mine', as she wrote (*Gesture of Belonging* 23). Telemaque's 'sun-wind' acts, moreover, as another framework for this hybrid text about what is now almost her community (Head 1981, 204). Once again, intertextuality seems to be crucial to Head's postcolonial stance.

The openings to each text reveal the difference in approach, despite superficial similarities – principally of presentation. Head offers intimate details of life in this particular village,¹⁴⁷ while

147 As Eilersen points out, *Transition*, the East African journal, was the first to publish a Serowe piece, 'The Green Tree', or *Tkharetala*, Head mentions in the Introduction (1995, 78-79). This tree appears to have adapted itself to local conditions but is actually concerned with the silent fight for survival. She links this tree with a stranger in the village, a woman figure who reappears in other stories under different guises disrupting local life.

Blythe centres mainly on individuals, who seemingly all perform a significant role. Head's emphasis on the building schemes in Serowe, which involve everybody, reveals how she resists the hierarchical assignation of roles: 'This intimate knowledge of construction covers every aspect of village life', including gossip, that is, storytelling (Head 1981, xii). Cooperative construction is an appropriate symbol for Head's narrative practice in this text, in which the interviewees provide information that complements and counters her research sources. For Head, 'the transition from the collector and writer of village tales to the research historian did not present any conflict' (Ibrahim 200).

Each author observes circularity in the respective "village", which is again treated differently. Fusing collective and lyrical spaces, Head develops this trope by concluding her narrative with 'A Poem to Serowe'. After listing her 'small joys', she compares them with her favourite books, 'to be indulged in over and over' (1981, 179). However much I have resisted this comment, it does seem that Serowe, a circular village, speaks for itself; its pleasures become books to be read, appropriated and interpreted. *Akenfield* ends with a section under the title of 'In the Hour of Death', revealing the author's method. William Russ, the gravedigger, not a reader but a talker, declares: 'I want to be cremated and my ashes thrown in the air. Straight from the flames to the winds, and let that be that' (286-7).

It appears that neither author has had much experience in oral history, although Head, as her novels substantiate, has been more exposed to it than Blythe: 'the term only entered the British academic lexicon in the late 60s' (Abrams 1). While cycling around the villages, as did Head, Blythe barely asks questions on occasions, but simply listens 'to people talking about bell-ringing and ploughing and the church and the village school' (Taylor 2006, 7). His list suggests his priorities: the change in agriculture, church and education over the last hundred years. Like

Head, however, he covers various skills by interviewing people from every walk of life, including the poet, who has left London for a vegetable garden in East Anglia.

Although I have barely skimmed the surface of such a huge topic, this chapter offers different approaches to how a writer such as Bessie Head transforms an abstract space into a specific place. Head always regarded this narrative as a refuge from her anguish and the difference between this and *A Question of Power* is remarkable. Whereas Elizabeth eventually endears herself to Motabeng by retelling her lived experience, Head expresses her love for Serowe in a more detached genre. When she is invited to go to Australia, she says: ‘They knew not me nor Botswana’ (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 271). By describing her home, the characteristics of the village, its inhabitants and their history, she transforms the abstraction this named country represents for others into a meaningful place: Serowe becomes a significant place in the literatures of Africa and beyond. Her emphasis on change stands as well for her own change in direction as a writer. Interested in the village’s history, she researches its past. Moreover, she learns to listen to other voices and tells stories that others have suggested or told. Having found this sense of place, she becomes calmer and more esteemed by writers throughout the world. She has fought the battles others had fought and still fight with publishers and literary agents and has found a wider readership as the years go by. Finally, she brings her work to more readers by alluding to other texts and other literary traditions. Andrew Motion writes of *Akenfield*:

As a piece of oral history, it set new standards of authority and popularity; as a picture of rural life in turmoil it had exceptional social interest; as a witness of ordinary lives, it had unforgettable pathos; (...) it’s moving, because it’s clear-eyed. The emotional strength depends on the documentary discipline.

If we change the title of the book, almost the same could have been said of Serowe. *Village of the Rain*, although such esteemed poets are unlikely to read Head’s text, let alone write about it. This

does not mean, however, that she has lost her feisty spirit that engages the imagination: therein resides her undermining of *Akenfield*, set in the metropolis and acclaimed by its readers. As we shall see in the final chapter, she translates and, thus, writes cultures, fully aware of her position as an in/outsider, who hesitates to reproduce local speech, as Blythe attempts to do in his ‘The Cook’s Tale’.

Translating and Writing Cultures: Multiple Metamorphoses

each writer writes the missing parts to the
other writer's story.
Alice Walker

The medley of people on board *Northern Lights* J. M. Coetzee creates in *Elizabeth Costello* is a possible starting point for our study of translation and the writings/ rewritings of culture(s) in Bessie Head's *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. When the Nigerian writer Emmanuel Edugu delivers a lecture on the African novel one night, he cites the Senegalese writer and philosopher Cheikh Hamidou Kane's opinion about Africans who write in European tongues: 'The writers (...) are truly African, their sensibility is African ... What distinguishes them lies in life experience, in sensitivities, in rhythm, in style'. A French or English writer may have thousands of years of written tradition behind him, but 'we on the other hand are heirs to an oral tradition' (Coetzee 2003, 44).¹⁴⁸ In other words, the difference between African and European writers lies, according to Kane, not only in the particular sensibility of African experience, always a contentious issue (is it essentialist, for example), but also in the peculiarities of the style of their oral literary practice.¹⁴⁹ Such a significant voice in earlier twentieth-century African literatures, Kane's statement in this context is too general: his argument may well be used for other purposes, as Edugu and, by default Coetzee, imply, even if he later quotes Paul Zumthor, a Francophone specialist in orality: 'One of the symptoms of the disease (the cancer of colonisation) has without doubt, from the beginning, been what we call literature; and literature has consolidated itself (...) by denying the voice ... The time has come to stop privileging writing...' (Coetzee 2003, 44-

148 Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1926-) is best known for his autobiographical novel *L'aventure ambiguë (Ambiguous Adventure)* (1961), for which he was awarded the 1962 *Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noir*.

149 As I have said, all literatures have their roots in oral practice, but these scholars seem to be drawing attention to the significance of a living oral tradition, which has died in those cultures that bathe in illusions of superiority and colonial amnesia.

53).¹⁵⁰

This chapter contends, among other things, that Head's *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* counters, and possibly deconstructs, any argument that the African writer who celebrates the oral is ex(r)oticising the body, partly because Head renders audible a multiplicity of voices, precisely what Zumthor might just approve of and what Elizabeth Costello, a writer from the settler colony of Australia, disavows: in her opinion, the oral tradition props up, among other things, 'the mystique of the African as the last repository of human energies' (Coetzee 2003,47). Although this chapter opens with a discussion of several theoretical issues, which bear all the above in mind, the narrative of the translation process and rewriting of culture(s) in Head's hybrid text is so complex that theory and practice run throughout. Barely touched upon or contested by earlier Hadian scholars, this constitutes yet another of those extraordinary hidden narratives.

Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind reveals how its author organises the information she has culled, as reader and listener, from many different sources. Thus, the narrator of this community narrative is also narratee and interpreter as much of the texts she has read/listened to as those she has perceived through her felt experience. This dialogic position demonstrates what she considers her particular talent as a writer: 'letting people teach you about themselves can be a wonderful experience' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 165). The village storytellers are fully aware that they are interpreting their past to a privileged South African outsider. At each interview, Head would 'write, listen and absorb, then hurry back to her typewriter' (Eilersen 1995, 159); we are led to believe that the interviewees speak English.

150 Coetzee tends to blur fictional/nonfictional borders. 'Acknowledgements' in *Elizabeth Costello* states an earlier version of 'Lesson 2' in *Elizabeth Costello*: his 'The Novel in Africa'. 1998. Occasional Paper no. 17 of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities. Berkeley: U. of California P; Paul Zumthor is quoted from *Introduction à la poesia orale*, by permission of Éditions du Seuil.

Otherwise, Bosele Sianana is her interpreter throughout this project. These women worked side by side in silence, Head tells us, on Patrick van Rensburg's alternative rural development 'Boiteko' project: 'today I look at the garden almost as an evolution in the relationship between the woman and I (...) Something remained of the early effort; the pioneer struggle' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 122). Apparently, her friendship with Mma Bosele began before Head had taught her to speak English.¹⁵¹ The pioneer struggle she refers to immediately concerns the co-operative project, but it also goes back to her former creative struggle. Head's love of gardening, a creative practice inherited from her mother, now becomes what we might call the common bond with her friend. It is Sianana who finds the interviewees, seeks their permission, and finally takes Head 'through the long series of introductory greetings', after which she 'patiently extracts the account Bessie wanted' (Eilersen 1995, 188). Head's publishing battles upset her local readership: 'It was hard for some of her village informants to hear of the publishing delays', Eilersen tells us, as they awaited their copy: seeing their names in print 'was to be a major event in their lives'.

This summary overlooks the difficulties involved in a lengthy and complex process, which at the moment I only outline in more theoretical terms. The transcription of an interview that Head conducts combines the original act of narration by a member of the community with its reception by Head and Sianana. Just as the original narrator presents a missing piece, so these narratees try to place it in the mosaic of this community narrative, after their transcription of the oral into the written word. The original and secondary narrators 'actualize a legacy of long-standing communalism so characteristic of an authentic African worldview' Hudson-Weems

¹⁵¹ Rightly, Mma Bosele Sianana does not give interviews. I apologise for westernising her name and thank her for her significant role in Head's book and, subsequently, in my study.

suggests (2004, 35).¹⁵² Once they are satisfied with their version, they return to the informant and let him or her hear/read the written text. By this stage, the narrative is under the interviewers' control. Or is it? Head makes no bones about her impatience with this project; she has to wait several months for people who are cultivating their land. An explosive person, she has to bite her tongue and be as tactful as possible: 'I always have to be very polite and people rile me a lot. They first say they like girls and then they don't like to see it in print and I began to have a block mentally through being so polite ... So I shot out and made side notes in my style, and commentary', she wrote to Giovanni (qtd. in Eilersen 1995,160). I shall discuss this in greater depth later on. This process reveals a much more challenging agenda than that which Elizabeth Costello so detests. Unlike an anthropologist or sociologist, Head enters into dialogue with the community as a storyteller. 'Ordinary people', Elizabeth, the protagonist of *A Question of Power*, realises, 'never mucked up the universe. They don't have that kind of power, wild and flaring out of proportion. They have been the victims of it' (Head 1974, 190).

Irritated by Egudu's pomposity, Ms Costello, in turn, declares that the English novel is written by the English for the English, and likewise the Russian novel: 'But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans'. They may set their work in Africa and write about particular experiences, but the African novelists 'seem to me to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them' (Coetzee 2003, 51). They have, as she says, 'accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa for their readers. Yet how can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time you (have) to explain it to outsiders?' To put

152 What does Hudson-Weems mean by 'authentic African worldview'? In this case, she is summarising an argument put forward by the Nigerian writer and dramatist Zulu Sofola (1935-1995) that since men and women are co-rulers in 'the dual-sex-system of socio-political power sharing fully', they can actualise this legacy of communalism mentioned above, Hudson-Weems writes. 'Power-sharing, complementarity, accommodation, compromise, negotiation and inclusiveness form the foundation of African feminism', Andrea Cornwall argues (34).

Egudu at his ease (rather than hitting him, as she says), she tells her addressees that this has been sorted out in Australia: a bitter irony. The situation is quite different in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. It may not be directed solely at a Batswana/African readership, but Head's Serowe listeners/ readers are her first addressees, when she reclaims the oral tradition as one of her literary strategies. Peppered with quotations, descriptions and translations from local inhabitants, the 'Introduction' provides a partial understanding of the community. A sympathetic village woman offers Head a recipe for a dog's diet. Dogs eat the remains from the pot: 'That porridge and water is dog's food' (Head 1981, xviii). The villagers explain how they make fences with the 'Green Tree', an exotic plant perhaps of Mexican origin, Head writes in her letters, which easily adapts to its new surroundings ('It came here as a stranger (.). It needs no water in the earth but draws into itself the moisture of the air for its life. We use it as a hedge' and it provides protection from 'the sandstorms' (Head 1989, 46)); Martin Morolong translates the old-style calendar and Thato Matome elucidates marriage and death ceremonies: 'one is a riot of joy, movement and dancing; the other, a deathly silence, broken only now and then by mournful hymn-singing or prayer', Head tells her readers, introducing a note of ex(r)oticism (1981, xii).¹⁵³ My partial repetition of these details, so essential to the community, gives an insight into the difficulties of cultural translation.

This particular translation process raises the issue of orature, a portmanteau word

153 Martin Morolong, a good neighbour and friend, was headmaster of Swaneng Primary School, which Howard Head attended. He did many translations for Head, who could not learn the language, even though her son and friends chatted away in Setswana. The missionary John Mackenzie found 'Sechuana' difficult to learn, but he managed quite well, because the Bible had already been translated: 'At the time there was no printed vocabulary, and practically no grammar on the language. We had copied part of one grammar which was exhibited in a public museum or library in Cape Town, and I managed, as a favour, to procure, for the purpose of copying, another grammar which had been printed for private circulation. For a dictionary we had the Sechuana Bible and Cruden's Concordance' – so much easier for them than for those who had 'first committed the language to writing' (41).

introduced into Anglophone African theory by such scholars as the Ugandan Pius Zirimu and later Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o that combines the tradition of oral story-telling with the tradition of written story-telling, known as literature. According to some scholars, the former is *dict* and the latter *script*. *Scripts* and *dicts* are, as Monroe Beardsley states and I have said earlier, both texts; 'moreover, a particular *script* and a particular *dict* may be the same text' (qtd. in Schipper 64), and, thus, there is no hierarchy. What is most significant is that the *dict* cannot exist without the performance: literary scholars tend to leave the issue of oral literatures to anthropologists and folklorists (Schipper 64-65). The emphasis is, Ruth Finnegan argues, on subject-matter: the 'artistic genius and the literary devices' used during the author's performance are transcribed literally, changed or adapted and are cast to one side in favour of 'an attempt to trace back the detailed history of certain elements...' (qtd. in Schipper, 65).¹⁵⁴ The interviews in Head's text exemplify what Schipper calls, when writing about Amos Tutuola's work, 'written orality' (66). Not only are the stories firmly rooted in the oral tradition but also in the History/histories of the indigenous peoples. Of course, the devices common to oral storytelling are found in many cultures. One obvious instance is *skaz*, a narrative mode inspired by the verbal art practised by the popular storyteller, as the Russian Formalists described it. Needless to say, African orature is grounded in a very different context from *skaz*: as a narrative technique, *skaz* 'is a reaction to the written tradition of solemn nineteenth and twentieth century Russian prose, while written orality practised by African writers directly continues the often age-long tradition of fully alive African story-telling' (Schipper 67). For example, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, whose mother tongue is Yoruba, defines Amos Tutuola's language in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* 'as an original mixture made of 'scraps of language such as officialese, journalese, and ungrammatical

¹⁵⁴ Mineke Schipper quotes Ruth Finnegan in her article, presumably because she was, at that time, known as one of the most western significant scholars of 'orality' in different African cultures.

English words of the Yoruba language”(103). Many of his figures of speech, such as repetitions, puns, antitheses, metaphors, proverbs, riddles, and so on from his mother tongue, ‘are not always easy to detect and understand for the non-Yoruba, who as a foreigner should be modest and cautious in interpreting Tutuola’s texts’, as Schipper argues in light of Ogundipe-Leslie’s reassessment of Tutuola’s novel (67). Tutuola has motivated many later writers, including those who write back to the dominant British tradition, such as Head.

Head’s knowledge of and sensitivity to the different cultures and languages in Botswana would certainly have grown over the years, but her intimate contact with these peoples from different cultures, who may or may not have spoken English (the two dominant indigenous languages in Botswana are Setswana and Sekalanga), reveals her weakness: sometimes she cannot grasp what they are saying, despite her strict interviewing system.¹⁵⁵ Head, an out(in)sider, has to take great care when transcribing the villagers’ stories: a caution for her foreign readers who have a much more limited understanding of the local cultures and languages. As of 2007, Setswana is spoken by about 90% of the population either as a mother or as a second tongue. Thus, Setswana is the *lingua franca*. Nyati-Ramahobo’s study of 1999 states that the language policy of the country inferred that ‘Setswana is the national language’, the language of national pride and unity, of cultural identity. English is the official language – that of government and business. It appears, however, that some government documents refer to Setswana as both an official and a national language (80-83).

Head, a non-Setswana speaker, found herself in a difficult position: ‘she had no other choice except to stick to an almost prescribed role of being a person with no-one-to-talk-to’

¹⁵⁵ There are at least twenty-two distinct languages spoken in Botswana. A glance at the webpage of the Botswana Embassy in London reveals that only 2% of the population are English speakers, even though it is an official language. It cites a study of 2001: ‘Setswana 78%, Kalanga 8%, Sekgalagadi 3%, other’ (30/01/2013).

(Rasebotsa 57).¹⁵⁶ She might well have regarded culture as a site where struggles over recognition and identity are waged (Kaplan 29). Like other so-called ‘products of the new *diasporas* created by the post-colonial migrations’, as Stuart Hall puts it, she has to learn ‘to inhabit two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them’ (1992, 310). She must come to terms with the new cultures, ‘without simply assimilating to them and losing (her identity) completely’. As we have seen, Head brings with her ‘the traces of particular cultures, traditions, languages and histories’ by which she was shaped. In so doing, she, other South Africans, Europeans and Americans who live in Serowe, change/ translate the culture they enter as it changes/ translates them, but this should never be understood in binary terms; as we know, the process is much more complex.

Patrick van Rensburg’s projects, built on local cultural traditions, exemplify the complexity involved in any translation process. According to Head, he wrote a number of papers that began with the words: ‘Before the white man came to Africa, African peoples had a system of exchanging goods, without money’.¹⁵⁷ A ‘British volunteer’ reminds Rensburg of Robert Owen, who had countered exploitation during the industrial revolution in Britain by building a shop to which ‘members brought goods which they had made themselves, in exchange for a paper currency of their own’: the shop and its prompt collapse are the two points in common between these projects from such different cultures (Head 1981, 170). This brings to mind what Walter Benjamin describes as ‘the irresolution of (...) ‘translation’, the *element of resistance* in

156 Similarly, Ruth Khama was wounded by comments that she could not speak Setswana: ‘I just can’t seem to get my tongue around it. It’s so, so ... foreign’, she told her husband. Of course, the children were fluent in the language (Mbanga 330-1).

157 Patrick van Rensburg has published many works, but Head relies on his unpublished texts that he passed out to the members of the project. Most of his published works are now in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Head explains that a lot of business in Serowe is still conducted along these lines (1981, 170).

the process of transformation, ‘which does not lend itself to translation’ (qtd. in Bhabha 1994, 224). Owen’s system collapsed partly because the members had fixed tastes, but the *Boiteko* co-operative, which apparently had no such ‘fixed tastes and set ways’, could survive on the goods the members made. What they lacked were such basic products as sugar, tea, powdered milk or mealie meal (Head 1981, 170-171).

A ‘translating’ culture is ‘passive and active, a condition and a process’, Bruce Woodcock sustains (59). Although I have discussed culture at the end of Part I, I mention it again in the context of this chapter. As we have seen, definitions depend upon the context and ideology; every attempt to define this term should be taken into account. ‘Culture, in its widest and most complete sense, enables men to give shape to their lives’ (Young 2002, 8). It is ‘the complex everyday world we all encounter and through which we all move’: this echoes Raymond Williams’ understanding of this term. We do not move within the same culture but among diverse cultures. Some key issues affect us all (power, law, knowledge...), however differently they may be perceived in each cultural context. Indeed, the late Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist and sociologist with a literary background, mainly influenced by European left-wing thinkers, describes culture as a ‘critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled’ (qtd. in Proctor 1). For him, ‘the study of culture involves exposing the relations of power in society’ at a particular time in order to consider how marginal, or subordinate, ‘groups might secure or win, however temporarily, cultural space within a dominant group’: an ‘extremely complex process, full of potential pitfalls’ (qtd. in Proctor 2). This is certainly an issue underlying this chapter. The concepts of agriculture and horticulture remind us of Head’s interest in producing vegetables and fruit in that garden of her own. Each definition creates an unsatisfactory hierarchy, whether one turns the soil or the word: it is

undemocratic and should be recognised as such.

When Blythe's *Akenfield* was written, Abrams indicates that the criticism of this text was based, principally, on the perils of transcription. Raphael Samuel argues in 1971: 'The spoken word can very easily be mutilated' when transferred to the written page. Many rearrangements occur 'in the interests of readability' from the 'imposition of grammatical forms', of paragraphs, of punctuation to that of continuity, which often violate 'the twists and turns of speech' (389). Questioning itself 'produces its own forced sequences' and the writer's purpose may not coincide with that of the informant, possibly leading to further distortion in the editing process. 'The decadence of transcription may become extreme', he argues from his perspective at this time, if the author subsequently tries 'to weave the text together again with interpolated words of his own'. The transcription of Head's interviews reveals that the structures controlling the written text based on oral narratives are very different from those underlying oral narration. Above all, there is, in the written text, a narrator behind the narrator telling the story, and the primary narrator, let us call her Head, introduces and contextualises the narrator. The introduction itself places her in an ambiguous position. It demonstrates, on one hand, her power to create a vivid portrayal of the performer and his/her position in the community, and, on the other, a certain lack of confidence in her narrators and her own transcription of their narratives. Likewise, her interviewees' awareness that they are addressing an outsider might encourage them to provide unnecessarily detailed descriptions – most presumably deleted. Even if she depends on more than one translator, Sianana is the person she most relies upon.¹⁵⁸ Just as Head haunts the borders of different cultures, so do her interpreter and interviewees. Although this might sound like a contradiction, one suspects that, at times, the interviewees did not give all the explanations Head

¹⁵⁸ Of course, Sianana's performance in the English language was coloured by the particularities of Head's English, with all the implications this involves.

adds when transcribing their *dicts*. Or might it be that both writer and narrator are conscious that they are addressing outsiders?

These complications raise the issue of African women's freedom of speech, explored by Yvonne Vera, for example, in *Under the Tongue*, in which a young woman loses the power of speech because she has been raped, and, thus, has to relearn how to speak her mother tongue: 'In the beginning was Africa/orality/the word and the word was women's' (Nnaemeka 138). This coincides with the interviewing process, which I simplify here. During an interview, Head speaks, listens and attempts to decipher her interviewees' narrative; later, in her own space she tries to make sense of the whole event with the aid of her translator, so that she can write it down. We might think the comparison a little violent, but for speakers/writers of colonial tongues, such as Head paradoxically, it is difficult to forget how the conquistadores ravaged, to put it briefly, the inhabitants of other lands, their cultures, territories and value systems. Is Head's act violent? Translation has always been crucial, as theorists have shown, to the success of colonisation. The current focus on the multiplicity of languages circulating in the world and the 'reactualization' of cultural forms has apparently, in Simon's optimistic view, finally 'put to rest the myth of pure difference' (141). The understanding of the plurality of differences tends to prioritise the concept of 'location', finding new places from which a subject speaks. The great migration of postcolonialism reveals that 'the passage from one location to another always involves displacements and changes in the relationship between both terms' (136). It has, moreover, undermined the idea of culture as a set of unchanging and coherent values, behaviours or attitudes. The idea of culture is now perceived 'as negotiation, symbolic competition or 'performance'' (153). For these reasons, we should reassess our translation habits. Gayatri Spivak and Lawrence Venuti have argued, from different perspectives, that 'the political agenda of

translation is best pursued by foregrounding the act of mediation, by giving voice and body to the figure of the translator' (154). However, Head seldom mentions the name/voice of her interpreter/translators.

Just as reading is translation, so translation is reading. The creativity of the reader/listener, who translates and transfers the text to his/her own mind, constantly (re)structures it. It is not the aesthetic object but the reader/listener who formulates expectations or their modification. Many have spoken of the contract drawn up between writer and reader, including the translator. The story teller/writer and listener/reader generally merge in the translator whose act takes place in that third space between the source language and its culture(s) and the target language and its culture(s). So what happens when one or other agent transgresses the terms of the contract? We know, for instance, that we expect the unexpected in a work of fiction, but there are also limits to the form of the unexpected that those of us who have been brought up to read in the western/patriarchal tradition are willing to accept. If the text does not fulfil genre expectations, if it makes its conflicts too clear or too obscure, the imaginative interaction between 'trained' reader and text may not work; in other words, the reader's willingness to produce meaning is contested, as are his/her expectations. Let us return to Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952) to explain this issue of expectations and transgression. The protagonist has been a palm-wine drinker since the age of ten, but when his father 'got dead' and his tapster dies, he writes: 'I felt not so happy as before. I was seriously sat down in my parlour': no palm-wine, no friends (8). A formerly affluent person, he goes in search of his tapster in Dead's Town and finds a world of magic, supernatural beings, on the way. Critics have compared his work with the magical realism of some Latin American writers, even if this work preceded most of their texts. Based on Yoruba folktales, it has become one of the most compelling Nigerian novels: his successors, be they men

or women writers, have had to come to terms with this shadow haunting them.

The Palm-wine Drinkard met with a mixed reception overseas and at home. The ‘herald of the dawn of Nigerian literature’, a critic condescendingly said (qtd. in Larson 5). Dylan Thomas greeted Tutuola’s novel with high praise:

the writing is nearly always terse and direct, strong, wry, flat and savoury; the big, and often comic, terrors are as near and understandable as the numerous small details of price, size, and number: and nothing is too prodigious or too trivial to put down in this tall, devilish story (qtd in Larson 5).

However, his use of language, not “standard” English, provoked particularly disparaging responses in the United States of America: he is ‘a true primitive’, his work is ‘naive poetry’; his style is ‘naive and barbaric’ (qtd in Larson 5). Such remarks caused understandable discomfort and anger among African critics and scholars. Would westerners regard Tutuola as a ‘typical educated African’, a person who might step into power when they gained independence? There is no doubt that this novel is among those works that started the debate about aesthetics in Anglophone African writing: Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner and Neale Hurston might well have violated the purity of the English tongue, but Tutuola could not. His language ‘is foreign to West Africans and English people (...). Patois is more intelligible than the language’ of this text, Babasola Johnson explains (qtd. in Larson 6). Tutuola replaces the dominant tongue: ‘its use of language incorporates the warning that the site of shared discourse – the literary text – is not’, Ashcroft *et al*, argue, ‘the site of a shared mental experience’ (1989, 59). This seems to undermine those Eurocentric theories I referred to earlier that are based particularly on the reader’s ability to activate the text through an imaginative contract with the author. This contract now depends on the particular location of the writing and reading subject, whether in terms of gender, ‘race’, class, literacy, and many other differences. These postcolonial scholars go on to say: ‘The writer

‘function’ meets the reader ‘function’ in the writing itself which dwells at the intersection of a vast array of cultural conditions’, too many of which we may not even grasp, let alone understand; in other words, the writer transgresses those expectations that make the text familiar to the (western) reader. Each story Head tries to transcribe, from what her translator has told her and she has understood, might have well made her ask herself a series of fundamental questions concerning her understanding of the genre of storytelling. Familiarity with certain literary systems involves a negotiation with this estrangement, which would have alerted her, if she were not already aware of it, to the many limitations of her former training.

Head’s estrangement means that she has to depend on a member of the community, her interpreter/translator, to conduct her interviews. Access to another cultural community is by no means easy; determining cultural meaning demands ‘the exercise of a wide range of intelligences’ (Simon 138). Spivak puts it another way, when she suggests that the translator should ideally learn the language, or, at the very least, be familiar with the ‘history of the language, the history of the author’s moment, the history of the language-in-translation’ (1992, 186). A high standard, Head would recognise, neither she nor her readers can reach. One difference between literary translation and postcolonial literature is, we are often told, that ‘postcolonial writers are not transposing a text’ but a culture, understood in a general sense, with perhaps more than one culture or language in the background (Tymoczko 20).¹⁵⁹ The complexity of material drawn from culturally specific tales, fables, epigrams, proverbs, etc. in any oral tradition demonstrates the truth of this statement (Tymoczko 23). This border is blurred in Head’s work. As a transmitter of information across cultural and linguistic gaps, she combines

159 By a culture, Tymoczko understands: ‘a language, a cognitive system, a literature (comprised of a system of texts, genres, tale types, and so on), a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history, and so forth’ (20).

postcolonial writing and translation. Needless to say, this is a simplification: Head is as informed by many different cultures as are her interviewees. They may share a language called English, but it is never the same language, as it would not be for D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce or Emily Brontë, to quote three of her favourite authors.

We cannot discuss translation and its dangers in Southern Africa without mentioning in passing the role played by one of the first cultural mediators in Southern Africa: born circa 1642, Krotoa, known as Eva by the Dutch and a member of the Goringhaikona, a tribe that lived by the shore. Although this is not directly related to Head's practice in this text, we might bear in mind that Krotoa was perceived as a traitor, not only for speaking the enemy's language and assimilating his values, but also for bearing his children. However, the intercultural and linguistic ability of her ancestress adds another dimension to Head's translation practice. Krotoa's linguistic performance and competence were so outstanding that she replaced her male relatives. Bearing the context of this act in mind, we should recall that Krotoa refused an arranged marriage and, subsequently, married Pieter van Meerhoff, a brilliant Danish surgeon who was sent to Robben Island as the new superintendent of the criminals of the time (Bloem 7). This action, so far in the past, is particularly relevant to this study, when we remember that Head left South Africa in the same year that Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment on that island. Van Meerhoff and the other Dutch settlers turn Krotoa/Eva into myth, whose life cannot be documented. For some, she may embody at once the Edenic past and the more recent colonisation of the Cape, but as soon as she has accomplished her role as cultural intermediary, she 'disappears from the record': 'There is no room for her in the world which grows out of the new order' (Simon 41). After her husband's death, Krotoa seems to have 'squandered her inheritance and lived an

immoral life', often confined on Robben Island' (Bloem 231).¹⁶⁰ The Dutch described her upon her death in 1674 as 'this brutal aboriginal, (who) was always still hovering between the Dutch and Khoikhoi cultures' (*The Island* 2003). Yet she was given a Christian burial in the Castle in Cape Town. As Bloem shows with such empathy in her biography, this legend suggests 'the points of tension which mark the dynamics of translation between unequal partners: the conflicts between loyalty and authority, agency and submission' (Simon 41). Cultural intermediaries are trapped 'in a particularly dramatic version of the double-bind situation' of conflicting values, which brings into play 'the Judeo-Christian association (or that of any other religion) of sexuality, language and betrayal'.

After this brief summary concerning some of the issues involved in Head's translation practice and rewriting of culture in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*, I should extend this dialogue to the text itself. Giles Gordon's suggestion that she write a 'village' book along the lines of Jan Myrdal's *Report from a Chinese Village* and Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* involves a translation process in itself, as Head tries, firstly, to come to terms with these very different 'models' and, secondly, to accommodate her text for an international market, which as we have seen, conceives such narratives in different terms. Head foregrounds local voices and performs the multiple roles of interviewer, listener/reader, transcriber/writer and communicator of art, ideas, history, knowledge, as well as her controversial ideology, all of which involve negotiation and manipulation.¹⁶¹ She relies on an interpreter and/or a translator on many more occasions than

160 In his address on the occasion of the National Woman's Day on August 9, 2004, Thabo Mbeki, the President of South Africa at the time, paid homage to two heroines who were among the first prisoners on Robben Island in the seventeenth century: Krotoa and Catherine of Paliacatt.

161 Among other things, the local voices are asked to articulate three stages in the development of education in village history: 'the missionaries' education of a few children sitting out under a tree; the establishment of village schools (,) the introduction of secondary and vocational education' (Eilersen 1995, 158, 261).

she acknowledges. In the first testimonial (Mokgojwa Mathware), she explains: ‘We communicated through an interpreter. He spoke no English and I, no Setswana’ (Head 1981, 11).¹⁶² What is unforgivable is that she never names Sianana, who acts as her cultural and linguistic intermediary, at any point during the interviews. In her acknowledgements, she merely gives ‘special thanks to Mary Kibel, Thato Matome and Bosele Sianana, who contributed advice and aid for all my work’ (Head 1981, viii). When Sianana arranges an interview, Head goes along with her “questionnaire” and leaves Sianana to deal with the situation, from formal greetings to interpretation throughout the meeting, a process repeated when they return to the interviewee with the finished product.

In spite of this novelist’s lack of knowledge of the languages of Botswana, she ‘clearly had a good ear for a tale in speech’, Daymond writes: ‘This ability to hear the poetry of others is like her ability to see into the beauty of the land and, in some respects, the way of life around her’ (xiv). Paratextual commentary brings these two acts together. Translators tend to suppress commentaries, but readers often demand them, however much others prefer the challenge of engaging different socio-historical and cultural contexts without explicit comment. In order to familiarise her different readers with her topic, Head uses the devices, as we know, of maps, introductions and prefaces. Placed at the beginning of the book, the maps highlight the significance of imposed colonial boundaries and the spatiality of the text.

The first, entitled ‘The Republic of Botswana’ (1978), depicts the colonial division of lands:

162 During my stay in Serowe, I had several chats with Howard Head and long discussions with Tom Holzinger and the very helpful Curator and Assistant Curator of the Khama III Memorial Museum: Scobie Lekhutile and Gasenone Kediseng, respectively. Scobie, a childhood friend of Howard, assured me that only the following interviewees had no knowledge of English, some of which he wrote down for me: Romosamo, Mokgojwa Mathware, and several women: Lekoto Digate, Akamyang Malomo, Sekgabe Nsl, Kefhaletse Tobesti, Keitese Lefhoko and Makatse Modikwa. Since he was a child at the time, neither he nor I can verify this information, although I did meet one headman who said his English was very poor at the time that he was interviewed.

the Crown Lands, to the west and the north, are shaded and the ‘native reserves unshaded’. The second, entitled ‘The distribution of the tribes in Botswana’, is taken from Isaac Schapera’s *A Handbook of Tswana Custom* (1938). The boundaries, seemingly drawn by a ruler, are maintained but obviously not adhered to by the inhabitants. The Afrikaners’ inclusion to the southeast and the greater space given to South Africa provide an insight into the different perspective of each author.¹⁶³ In the preface to her interview with Mokgojwa Mathware, a traditional historian aged about ninety-six, Head mentions migration and the arrival of the British (1981, 10-11), which coincided with Mathware’s birth in Shoshong; his family then moved with the tribe to Palapye and, in 1902, to Serowe. Traditional historians describe these movements as ‘ruins’ – their homes in the villages would eventually be washed away and forgotten. European historians and ‘map-makers’ take a different view, thereby distorting the meaning of the ‘ruins’:

Shoshong, which was the Bamangwato capital for fifty years, is still on the map and by the time the tribe moved to Serowe, the railway line from the south extended as far as Bulawayo, and Palapye station became one of the main railheads of Bamangwato country. But Palapye itself is divided into what people refer to as ‘New Palapye’ and ‘Old Palapye’, and in the latter the ruins resulting from the move to Serowe can still be seen.

This mapping of a region, in the terms of Rhodes’ railway, has an effect, for instance, upon the people’s historicity and, thus, upon the mode in which they narrate their stories. Wherever they are, however, a ‘*mogoma*’ is always a ‘*mogoma*’, whether a hoe or an imported iron-hand plough. In other words, language, the bearer of their history and traditions, moves with them. Defining the term translation as derived from the Latin bearing across, Rushdie suggests that as having

¹⁶³ This gives us a further insight into the spatiality, or should I say mapping, of this literary text. The difference in perspective is key to Head’s stance, as she presents her text to an international readership. The first map is taken from J. Mutero Chirengo’s *Chief Khama and His Times*; Schapera’s book is published by Oxford UP.

been borne across the world, ‘we are translated men (women). It is normally supposed that something (...) gets lost in translation’ something can, as he insists, ‘also be gained’ (1992, 17). Just as we are translated ‘men’, so our tools become the objects of ‘cultures of hybridity’, Hall argues, the products of ‘several interlocking histories’ (1992, 310). This is, in his opinion, one of the processes that create postcolonial awareness, if masculine (the ‘we’), which, in turn, translates the world around it.

From her introduction, Head indicates other signs of the colonial rewriting of cultures, which I have mentioned, but not in this context: the calendar and the method of naming. The calendar ‘must be one of the most poetic (...) in the world filled with vivid observation of nature – its changes, its trees, wild fruits and flowers and the everyday work of man as he ploughs his fields’ (Head 1981, xix). The old Setswana New Year began sometime in August:

PHATWE (August)

‘*Thare di tloga*’ ... ‘The trees are budding,’ the old people said. There is an abrupt separation between the very cold days of winter and the heat of summer. This sudden approach of summer occurs about 15 August. There is a stirring movement in plant life. The sap rises in the trees.

It originally had thirteen months, so ‘*Powane*’ (sic), meaning a young bull because this was the mating season, was eliminated when the missionaries imposed the ‘Julian’ calendar. People’s names ‘evoke stories of events which took place at the time of their birth’, Head explains and proceeds to narrate several of the stories she has been told (1981, xxi-xxii). Children may even be named after a foreigner who gains respect in the community. Like Margaret Cadmore in *Maru*, in Serowe children are named after Miss Evelyn Haile, a missionary who ran the first maternity centre: ‘The baby girls she delivered were called *Mma-Haile* and the boys, *Rra-*

Haile'.¹⁶⁴ Head was known as Mma Heady, partly because her son, Howard, went to the local school. Children are also named after historical events: in 1902 when the people moved from Papaye to Serowe, for example, the children were called Serowe. A plague of rats is one gentleman's claim to fame. 'Well, I am *Rra-Dipeba*, Father of the Rats. I was born just at that time...' (Head 1981, xii). By these means, Head tries to communicate a contestatory understanding of the cultural context of this community, even though her research depends partly on the work of outsiders, be they missionaries or historians.¹⁶⁵ The unreliability of some of her sources annoys her: white historians, she writes, 'trod rough-shod' over local history 'dismissing it as 'petty, tribal wars', denying for a long time that black men were a dignified part of the human race' (Head 1981, 67). They even invented 'a new name for a black man, that of 'boy''. *Houseboy* (1966) (*Une Vie de Boy* (1960)) by Ferdinand Oyono springs to mind: a French colonial's culturally complex translation of a diary in an indigenous language, eventually translated into English.¹⁶⁶

164 Michael Crowder explains when discussing Acting Chief Tshekedi Khama's opposition to the South African scheme of incorporating the Protectorate into South Africa: Tshekedi arranged a visiting Conference with 'his great supporter in London, the hyperactive and imperious Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, Sir John Harris.' Having rustled up support for Tshekedi's cause when he addressed a twenty-five thousand strong meeting of Quakers in Philadelphia, Sir John arranged that a delegation should visit Serowe and 'find out for themselves just how deep the opposition was in the Ngwato capital to the Incorporation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate into South Africa. A large kgotla was held in Serowe in honour of the visitors and was attended by Rev. Burns, Sister Evelyn Haile, Chief Kgari Sechele of the Bakwena, Bathoen of the Bangwakwetse, Tshekedi and some 1,400 Bamangwato'. One imagines that Sister Haile might have been there to represent the London Missionary Society or to accompany Mrs. Thomas Jones, the only woman member of the small delegation. Cf. Michael Crowder (s/n). (15.07.2009)

165 What gives rise to so many problems is, as we know, the missionaries' failure to find 'equivalents' to the bases of their religious doctrine, among other things. The example Simon gives is particularly good, as the word 'belief' does not exist in the Nuer community (138-139).

166 The narrator of this 'novel' finds a diary kept by the Cameroonian houseboy, Toundi Ondoua (Oyono 1966, 9), in Spanish Guinea (now the Republic of Equatorial Guinea), and translates it from Ewondo, one of the main languages of the Cameroon, into French: 'I have tried', the narrator says, 'to keep the richness of the original language **without letting it get in the way of the story itself**' (Oyono 5) (my emphasis) – and the author ironically preserves the colonial approach in his title. Oyono's narrator signals with familiar clarity the risks one runs if one proposes to foreground the translator's act of mediation in the text. My quoting it in yet another language demonstrates how many cultural bridges this diary has had to cross, each with its own peculiarities.

Translation has always been a dominant theme in African literatures, whether literally or metaphorically. Many authors, such as Grace Ogot and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, write in English and their mother tongue: Dholuo and Kikuyu respectively. Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* tells the story of Sammar, a young woman translating from Arabic to English at the University of Aberdeen, who ironically describes the vast gap between her world and that of Rae Isles, her Scottish Orientalist professor: worlds ‘divided by simple facts – religion, country of origin, race – data that fills forms’, which fuel cultural misreading (1999, 29).¹⁶⁷ Isles persuades her to translate for a person interviewing terrorists in Cairo by saying: ‘you’re translating, not interviewing, someone else will be asking the questions’. However different the circumstances are in each case, it is this dilemma of being caught between two worlds that becomes ‘the basis of the struggle to make art’ (Simon 41).

What is clear from Head’s *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* is that similar constraints on the process of relocation affect both postcolonial writing and translation (Tymoczko 23). Head addresses her estrangement from the receptors by using several other paratextual strategies, which I mention indirectly below. The first is her cultural confession. Anticipating her interview with Ramosamo Kebonang, a man of about one-hundred-and-four, she says of the traditional historians: ‘It is impossible to translate in straightforward interviews the haunting magic that surrounds these ancient men’ (Head 1981, 66). This statement, which seems to indicate that Head is following a method in her transcription of the interviews, raises many questions. At this point, I restrict my discussion to the issue of authentication. The voice she reproduces is, apparently, that of the interviewee. There are, however, few signs that the *script* is the *dict*, as it was performed when Head met the interviewee. She seems to have appropriated the speaker’s words.

¹⁶⁷ While writing this, she wrote ‘The Museum’, the winning story of the 2000 Caine Prize I discussed earlier.

Interviewing a retired schoolteacher Rannau Ramojababo, she writes that he is proud of his ability to read and communicate in English:

‘I don’t know whether my English will sound quite proper to you,’ he said, with an engaging, toothless smile. ‘The words don’t come out so well, I have no teeth’. (1981, 20-22)

From this engaging joke, Ramojababo embarks on an amazingly articulate story, concluding with his opinion about independence:

I don’t like the government and independence because originally I was Ngwato but today I am just an ordinary person and controlled by someone who is clever and comes in from other tribes, but he may be someone we don’t like.

This seems to be a direct transcription: like most interviews, it is narrated in the first person and the present tense. But the first extract citing his words mediated by the narrator makes us wonder. We shall never know, however, because this is the only version of the interview. The translation has become the original, or the ‘authenticated version’, as Theo Hermans (39) sustains. According to Article 33 of the Convention of Vienna, authentication means ‘the performative speech act by which the various versions in different languages are declared to be equivalent, as a result of which they ‘are presumed to have the same meaning in each authentic text’’. If there is any difference of meaning, ‘one cannot go back to the originary text, since such a step would privilege one version over others’; they must be resolved, Hermans argues, ‘with reference to the common intent underlying all the versions’.¹⁶⁸ For this reason, ‘the one originary original will have ceased to be an original, for it is only when a text has spawned a translation that it becomes an original’. Whether through divine intervention or legal authentication, the translation, which is declared equivalent to the original, ‘marks the end of its status as a translation’ – and,

¹⁶⁸ The United Nations convention of 1969 (revised in 1985) governs bi- and multi-lingual treaties. This may well have changed since I researched this information.

consequently, ‘spells the death of the translator’.¹⁶⁹ Is the translator really an invisible person converting the world of one language into another? Needless to say, this idea of equivalence is an illusion; a translation may well be, as some theorists argue, self-referential, but it also blurs borders and requires a much more fluid interpretation of meaning, which depends on the particular perspective and voice: those, finally, of the interpreter and translator, who inhabit different cultures, in every sense of the word, from those of the narrator.

Although Head’s text revises and enlarges the concept of translation, which involves ‘a widening in the definition of the translating subject’, a definition that eludes us in most cases, it is not so easy to decide whether her interviews are direct transcriptions or not (Simon 13).¹⁷⁰ And does it matter, especially at this time? (Abrams 10) Like Head, Blythe did not intend ‘to produce an ethnology of dialect’ in *Akenfield*; he was, it seems, more interested in the ‘meaning and sentiment’ expressed by the respondents. What also interests Head is her interviewees’ performance. For example, Mokgojwa Mathware confirms that the picture the interpreter has shown him is that of Khama:

My interpreter said teasingly:
 ‘You are mistaken, old man. That’s the picture of a white man.’
 ‘I might only have one eye,’ Mokgojwa replied indignantly. ‘But I can still recognize Khama...’. (Head 1981, 11)

Head’s narrator, seemingly bi- or tri- lingual, gives a lively rendering of this version in English, once Head has negotiated the terms upon which to conduct and translate this interview.¹⁷¹

At this point, ‘authentication’ raises the question of ‘authenticity’. Postcolonial writers have firmly resisted the idea of authorisation from the ‘metropolis’ of the authenticity of

169 Hermans bases his discussion on *The Septuagint*, the Greek version of the Hebrew *Old Testament*: the 72 translators who worked on it for 72 days each all ‘emerged, miraculously, with identical Greek texts’ (39).

170 The voices and perspectives include those of the storyteller/listener/reader, prompted by the interviewer and the interpreter, and, subsequently, of any other contributor.

171 I repeat: Head gives us a stimulating insight into narratology throughout this complex text.

experience, Ashcroft et al argue (1989, 91). Now a dated concept, during Head's times, 'authorized' literary practice tended to exclude or condemn 'the inexpressible', that 'world of speech, of proverb, of talk': a "sentence" Head challenges by foregrounding the oral history of this community. This draws attention to an unfortunate situation in the Anglo-American community: cultural, gender, queer and postcolonial studies, among others, are nourished through translations, but the scholars in these fields have rarely looked 'critically at the translation practices' through which the required texts have been brought into being, as Simon writes (135). She then makes a seminal point: 'The altered understanding of translation as an activity which destabilizes cultural identities, and becomes the basis for new modes of cultural creation, is crucial to contemporary thinking'. If we overlook translation, we cannot understand the 'moving boundaries of culture and cultural identity'. These identities may be, as Emmanuel Edugu says in his lecture, fleeting, those 'we pick up and wear and discard like clothing', but they are fundamental to any translation process (Coetzee 2003, 43).¹⁷²

The helpful villagers express their concern when Head decides to visit Ramosamo Kebonang, the oldest traditional historian in the community: "He's very stupid", they said, alarmed, 'and he has the history of the tribes mixed up in his head'" (1981, 68). Head and Sianana visit him over a period of three months (Eilersen 1995, 159). He talks for ten minutes before beginning to wheeze and cough. Upon the next visit, Head recapitulates; he and his cronies deny

172 This reminds us, once again, of Makhaya in *Rain Clouds Gather*. The old man on the border is puzzled by the fugitive's name since 'Tswana-speaking tribes dominated the northern Transvaal' (Head 1969, 3). Makhaya explains he is a Zulu: "But you speak Tswana fluently," the old man persisted'. Makhaya replies: 'Yes, we Zulus are like that. Since the days of Shaka we've assumed that the whole world belongs to us; that's why we trouble to learn any man's language'. On his quest for freedom of self-expression, Makhaya might think that linguistic competence is enough. Stating he is not a tribalist, he later encounters Chief Matenge in Golema Mmidi, who has 'known two strict classes: royalty and commoner. Golema Mmidi was a village of commoners. No one could claim even distant relationship to royalty and dispute his authority...' (Head 1969, 39). Makhaya's contradictory stance makes us wonder if he is able to overcome the binary discourse ingrained in his mind.

everything. To cut a long story short, she takes her revenge on these old men by weaving their versions into a fictional story called 'The Deep River'.¹⁷³ Head's apparently authentic interview with this historian reveals translation strategies she may or may not have used to make her text accessible to her (inter-) continental readers. The question of readership is, of course, crucial, since Head translates/transcribes the texts into the former colonial language. The interview opens as follows:

'Dumela Phuti,' my interpreter said. (*Phuti* indicated Ramosamo's connections with Bamangwato royalty.) Then the interpreter added:

'I have brought you a Mongwato. She would like some information from you.'
(Mongwato was meant to indicate that I was a member of the Bamangwato tribe.)

'Dumela Mongwato,' old Ramosamo said to me, absent-mindedly.

As soon as I returned his greeting, he started slightly, blinked to clear the mist from his ancient eyes, and said in high astonishment: 'Yo! she isn't even a proper Motswana!' Then he said to me loudly:

'O tswa kae kae?' ('Where's your original home?')

'South Africa,' I said. (Head 1981, 68)¹⁷⁴

I shall discuss these strategies one by one, in the knowledge that it is very difficult to separate them, since they coexist in any translation practice. The first concerns the illusion that this is performed in English, like the play *Translations* written by the Irishman Brian Friel.¹⁷⁵ Head's knowledge of what is said depends, firstly, on her interpreter's competence to respect the tongues of interviewee and interviewer: this is one of the few times that Head acknowledges the act of interpretation, a further mediation between performer and potential reader. The subsequent task of translating a culturally-specific oral performance into literary form is a process 'of negotiating the interstices between two entirely different ontological modes' (Mackenzie 1997, 61). It involves

173 The men in this story 'keep on giving confused and contradictory accounts of their origins, but they say they lost their place of birth over a woman' (Head 1977, 6).

174 *Phuti*, a small buck, became, Mokgojwa Mathware tells us, the totem of the Bamangwato (Head 1981, 17-18). 'Yo'/'Jo' is 'a Tswana expression of surprise' (Head 1969, 3).

175 Although this play is performed in English, most of the cast speak Irish Gaelic: one of the major conflicts in the play is that of linguistic and cultural colonisation, as the two English army officers try to map the local area by renaming the local sites, villages, towns and regions.

moving, in culturally-specific terms, from the spoken to the written word, from live audience to reader, from 'reciprocity and interaction to a process of private interpretation removed (...) in time and place'.¹⁷⁶ By reproducing the performers and the live audience, Head/her narrator is active, but she also summarises and mediates the interaction between the participants. The final text is the outcome of private interpretation. There are several signs of this inner process. Particularly striking are the modifiers, such as 'absent-mindedly', for instance. Quite the contrary, he seems to be very attentive – he soon realises she is not 'a proper Motswana', highlighting the cultural differences. Does he really say this in 'high astonishment' or has Head, perhaps purposely, misinterpreted his tone of voice? Does he really blink 'to clear the mist from his ancient eyes' or for some other reason? Tone of voice and gestures are difficult to recreate in another cultural code. For example, the interviewee raises his voice when speaking in his own language. Is this common practice or the outsider's perception? Head also omits her greeting; she selects and arranges information to be passed on.

Given Head's keen sense of the dramatic, perhaps she attempts to reproduce this performance by offering 'stage directions', as 'asides', rather than assigning them to a glossary; it seems that more paratextual commentary is needed when she acknowledges the interpreter's presence. We might wonder why certain words left in the original language, such as *dumela* and 'Motswana', are not all italicised. The strategy of not translating words, phrases and so on in literary texts 'not only acts to signify the difference between cultures, but also illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts' (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989, 64). These words represent cultural concepts, but it seems as if the colonial tongue has appropriated the term 'Motswana'. What the uninformed reader, myself included, might not realise is that these

176 This is 'not like translating a literary work from one language to another' (Mackenzie 1997, 61).

Setswana words should be gender-specific: we note that ‘*dumela*’ is used as a form of address for both interviewee and interviewer.¹⁷⁷ Thus, her decision not to attempt an English equivalent is ideologically significant. Other such concepts are represented by the words *mephato* and *bogwera* which she mentions several times but seldom explains: ‘Then, in April 1865, Sekgoma called an age regiment or *mephato* for one of his young sons. A number of young lads had at this time to be put through the initiation-into-manhood ceremony, *bogwera*’ (Head 1981, 4). Leaving words in the local tongue shows her respect for the Setswana meaning, which she can only partly reproduce in another tongue, and her desire to familiarise outsiders with this intercultural exchange and her own situation, while distancing herself from this practice. It also reveals her resistance to the ceremony that the young men had to experience and overcome. Some scholars suggest that language switching is a suspect practice, but others realise it is common practice in multilingual communities. Ngũgĩ disagrees: he argues that Third World authors writing in English or French live in exile: ‘the problem of exile is being forced away from the location of inspiration’ (2003, 9). However artificial, as Ngũgĩ works in the USA and has translated his latest novel himself, or so he says, this complication for the English-speaking interviewees in *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind* raises the genuine concern of the ‘cross-cultural character of the linguistic medium’ and the particular use of English as ‘a political discourse in post-colonial writing’ (Ashcroft 1989, 53-54). The notion of writing back makes sense when the ‘english variant establishes itself in clear contradistinction’ to ‘Standard English’: a theoretical construct created by westerners, or, perhaps, those who live in settler colonies, which obfuscates the

177 Before going to Botswana (the importance of experience), I was not certain that ‘*dumela*’ generally means any expression (‘hello’) of formally greeting another person, however culturally distinct. In this case, the suffix indicates the gender of the person addressed: *dumela-rra* refers to a man and *dumela-mma* to a woman. However many slang expressions when I was there, they culturally express the same intention, so fundamental to the Setswana community, of greeting each other and passing the time of day.

interview process and the perils of transcription.

I have mentioned this strategy of omissions and authorial decisions earlier. When reviewing the anthology *Women Writing in India* (1993), which restores ‘forgotten voices’, mostly in translation, Simon criticises the editors because they are too wary of reproducing ‘the erudite distancing of the Oriental gaze’ (32-3). This affects their translation practice. Stories are left out because of their lewd content; moreover, by attempting to produce a ‘reader-friendly’ text, they take decisions that do not ‘look like an Orientalist text. What we have lost (sadly) was the variety of the regional languages’. Whatever the reason for Head’s omission of her greeting, its inclusion might have detracted from the power of the performance. Moreover, her dramatic decision ‘to record the irrelevant’ in this interview gives an insight into her insecurity as an outsider: she would rather write a story than transcribe the interview (Head 1981, 67). She is not the only person who leaves things out. When she asks Ramosamo about his family’s involvement in the dispute between Khama and his son, Sekgoma II, the historian replies: ‘It was family disturbances which I refuse to explain’. Head is disappointed: ‘I had had dreams of recording the endless moves from one village to another from an eye-witness. All the old men are guarded about controversies, involving their chiefs and cover up the past with a thick blanket of silence’ (1981, 69). Detecting her dismay, Ramosamo tries to placate her with ‘the usual trivia about Khama’, such as: ‘I was pleased by everything Khama did’. She omits most of what he says later.

The variety the Indian anthologists mention includes individual means of expression. By adhering to the format of the ‘straight-forward’ interview, Head runs the risk of homogenising her text, by soliciting the same answers to her questions, and of ironing out the wrinkles of the original speech act, which seems to run counter to her purpose. This is detected in the transcription of three voices speaking about the break-up of the family, a section that anticipates

the later debate on the devastating effects of AIDS on Botswana:

- i The morals of the men are very low. Today, women are eager to grab men and they appear loose too. A woman might have three or four boyfriends – always in the hope of marriage. (Head 1981, 64)
- ii If there is really a shortage of men, this anxiety must have communicated itself to women and may in part account for their promiscuous behaviour. (Head 1981, 62)
- iii Both men and women of today have very cheap values. To a woman a man means money and there is no peace in her search for money. She moves from one man to another. (Head 1981, 61-5)

Of course, I have selected the passages carefully, but they are based upon a similar complaint, which we might call a change in moral values. What is each speaker's age and gender? It is not easy to identify them: so much, once again, for Kaplan's *Erotics of Talk*. Can one tell, from the discourse, that there is a difference of 52 years between the first and the last speaker? We seem to hear more the interviewer's voice than the interviewees' voices: the first speaker is an unmarried mother of 18, the second a man of 49 and the third a man of 70. My selection distorts the context of the entire passage, however. Lebang Moremi, the unmarried woman, got pregnant at the age of sixteen because of peer pressure: she and her partner knew nothing about contraceptives. She took the case to the District Commissioner's office. Her boyfriend, aged twenty-eight, denied he was the father, but the Commissioner ordered him to pay R10.00 a month.¹⁷⁸ Like other men, he has never paid. Many women now raise children on their own: 'Our children run wild, are very cheeky and have become thieves'. Another woman informant is in a similar situation, but she has five children and has never married: 'In the old days the most important question was: 'Who was your father?' If you had no proper father you were nothing in the society'. So most unmarried

¹⁷⁸ As we know, Botswana is no longer part of the Rand area; its currency is now the Pula (100 thebe). The AIDS pandemic in Botswana has destroyed lives Head sought to restore. Her work anticipated this future, in ecological terms, however harsh she may have been at the time.

mothers tell their children to lie. Keitese Lefhoko, the forty-nine year-old man, is the principal of a primary school. He also returns to the past: ‘Men used to love their wives in the old days and women were tough to get’. Nowadays women are influenced by western ideas: they ‘no longer regard themselves as a prize that has to be won. They just offer themselves to men, are over-romantic and easily available’. Mpatelang Kgosi, the last speaker, blames ‘the evils amongst us on lack of proper leadership. (...) It looks as though many new evils have come with the laws of Independence’. These interviewees agree that the young have too much freedom: they live in ‘complete chaos’, Head sustains (1981, 58-59).¹⁷⁹

Head seems to imply that this is the price one pays when in the process of transition from colonisation to independence. The interviewees’ sense of security under the strong leadership of the past has crumbled and ‘today there is a gaping hole in the fabric of society. Its main victims are women...’. However, as Angela Carter wickedly states, in the context of Head’s story ‘Life’: ‘If you don’t play by the rules (of the past) but try to start a new game, you will not necessarily prosper, nor will the new game necessarily be an improvement on the old one. But this does not mean it is not worth trying’ (xi). Head’s introduction to the section, ‘The Breakdown of Family Life’, relates the family values under past regimes (58-59). She closes by citing part of a short story called ‘Why Marry?’ by C.G. Mararike, a young Botswana writer. It treats of the popular Benjamin Baoki, or BB. One of ‘the first Africans to obtain a degree in Economics at the London School of Economics’, the first to be an accountant and to buy ‘an automatic Mercedes Benz car’: it was ‘an honour to a girl to be driven’ in his car, ‘to be spoken to by this graduate...’ (60).

179 An anonymous reader of Head’s original manuscript sent to the publisher complains about this section: ‘Sociology may be an inexact science, but it is not as unscientific as that’. Under the filing system in the Khama Memorial Museum, this is known as ‘Report B’ (20). KMM 456 BHP 19 (Box J1). Of course, Head has never attempted to be a sociologist: the reader has missed the point, even if s/he thinks ‘the material in the book is so interesting and so valuable...’.

He could have married, 'but he saw no point 'in buying a cow if he could get its milk free''.¹⁸⁰

Head's choice of story declares her stance: even privileged men are to blame for the breakdown in family life. This theme also runs throughout the fiction of Unity Dow, a current Batswana writer.

Trapped between different languages/cultures and not feeling "at home" in any of them, Head seems to be in an impossible position in this patriarchal society. Although not the bilingual translator Spivak speaks of, Head might have been interested in certain points Spivak makes in her 'Politics of Translation' in order to clarify her own process when translating, transcribing and publishing her interviews. 'Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader', Spivak argues, 'she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text' (1993, 183). Among the issues raised by this statement is, firstly, the question of the culture within which the language is learned. Head writes and speaks English, but this is not Standard British or American English. In this particular article, Spivak forgets to take the differences in englishes into account. The writer/translator must be aware of the history of the language, of her self-history, but this does not mean that it is the same as that of the 'British woman/citizen within the history of British feminism, focused on the task of freeing herself from Britain's imperial past, its often racist present, as well as its made-in-Britain history of male domination' (Spivak 1993, 180). Head became, as we know, particularly angry with the reviewers' insults concerning her 'misuse of the English language' in *A Question of Power*; she claimed that 'the impact of the English language on the rest of mankind cannot be realised by people living in certain circles in England' (qtd. in Eilersen 1995, 157). The specificity of location of the interviews means that the translations, even those conducted in English, work both within and outside the dominant

¹⁸⁰ 'Why Marry' by C.G. Mararike appeared in *Kutlwano*, a Botswana magazine, which has been published monthly mainly in Setswana and English since 1962.

language tradition. Whatever the target language, the local language must be respected. This highlights Spivak's mention of one historical irony: 'In the old days, it was most important for a colonial or post-colonial student of English to be as 'indistinguishable' as possible from the native speaker' (1993, 187). Head teaches Bosele Sianana the English she has learnt as her mother tongue in an asylum, with her foster-parents and in a South African convent in Durban, particularly from one English woman, Margaret Cadmore, who must, in turn, have been taught to conduct herself within the appropriate phallogocentric discourses. Head may well, like Spivak, have learnt to resist 'both the solemnity of chaste Victorian poetic prose and the forced simplicity of 'plain English' that have imposed themselves as the norm' (1993, 180). Sianana would surely have benefitted from Head's own learning process, but would also be influenced by her mother tongue: 'Her own native space is, after all, also class-organized (or hierarchically organised). And that organization often carries the traces of access to imperialism, often relates inversely to access to the vernacular as a public language...' (Spivak 1993, 187).

Significantly, Head performs as translator and transcriber: Bosele Sianana, who presumably has little knowledge of Anglophone literatures, bears the responsibility of 'transporting' the content and form of the interviews to the other tongue. She may be in the best position to 'respond to the special call of the text', but can she be that intimate reader and reproduce this in the public sphere? As Spivak argues, 'the standard for the (literary) translator could not be 'anyone who can conduct a conversation in the language of the original'' (1993, 188). Would Head or Sianana, as Spivak says s/he must, 'be able to confront the idea that what seems resistant in the space of English may be reactionary in the space of the original language'? There is no reason to believe that Sianana could not meet this challenge. Nnaemeka argues convincingly that African woman writers can only survive if they overcome their historical

amnesia and take ‘a measured walk in *their* mothers’ gardens’ (137-138). In different countries on the African continent, women have, Nnaemeka writes, actively participated, not only as ‘performers and disseminators of beliefs, cultural ideals and personal/collective history’, but also as composers who sometimes transform and re-create ‘an existing body of oral traditions in order to incorporate woman-centered perspectives’.

Spivak states: ‘the translator must be able to discriminate on the terrain of the original’ (1993, 189). Among other things, this poses the question of the intended audience. In Head’s case, the interviewers are the interviewees’ immediate audience, but the translator’s immediate audience is Head. Spivak gives sound advice: ‘If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote (or spoke) it’, that is, Sianana and the interviewees (1993, 191). However clear the intentions are, the problem is that the performances in the original language have become *scripts* in the colonial tongue, which has been ‘read’ intimately by a person who is not ‘within the same history of style’. So what is the writer making accessible to the interviewee? Perhaps, betrayal and ‘rather dubious politics’? History does not relate the interviewees’ response to the transcription of their narratives, even if most of them read or heard what Head had written ‘as a form of verification’ (Eilersen 1995, 159). This reminds me of Nabokov’s suggestive comment in the foreword to the last edition of his autobiography: ‘This re-Englishing of a Russian (Setswana) re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian (Setswana) memories in the first place, proved a diabolical task’ (364).¹⁸¹ His distinctive focus provides another approach to the multiple metamorphoses of the oral narratives in Head’s text, if we remember that the English-speaking interviewees have spoken in an(m)other tongue, whether literally or metaphorically.

¹⁸¹ Nabokov goes on to say he was given some consolation ‘by the thought that such multiple metamorphoses, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before’.

This negotiation between theoreticians/ practitioners and speakers/writers of colonial and colonised languages reveals a history of women's solidarity, but Spivak is quick to criticise this as well: 'How will their common experience be reckoned if one cannot imagine the traffic in accessibility going both ways?' (1993, 192) Give this idea a 'decent burial', if there is no interest in learning that 'there *is* women's solidarity'. Rather than imagining it, why not say, 'my first obligation in understanding solidarity is to learn her mother-tongue'. This is precisely what Sianana does, thus preparing herself for the 'intimacy of cultural translation', in Spivak's opinion. However, Head could not learn Sianana's language.¹⁸² 'There are countless languages in which women (...) have grown up', whether 'female' or 'feminist': 'yet the languages we keep on learning by rote are', Spivak adds, 'the powerful European ones, sometimes the powerful Asian ones, least often the chief African ones'. In every language system there is, Spivak maintains, 'a difference in the way in which the staging of language produces not only the sexed subject but the gendered agent, by a version of centering, persistently disrupted by rhetoricity, indicating contingency' (1993, 193). This is one very good reason for focusing on women's texts.

Head's primary focus in this text is a village and its residents. Just as the communal voices rendered audible and imaginable provide an insight into their cultures, minds, spirit and imagination, often through translation, so Head's revelation through the act of multi-cultural translation is an act of empowerment for them all as transitional figures. At this time, the most difficult task she had to confront is the response of (racist) South African literary critics and those elsewhere: she talks back to them through her fiction and her non-fiction.

In typical revolutionary fashion, she has, perhaps unwittingly, brought into play new ways of extending the role of the translating subject and reached, despite false stops and starts, an

¹⁸² People all over the world find it difficult to learn another language, however proficient they are in its culture.

understanding of her community and her place among them. The outcome may not be true and original, but it certainly displaces from her mind, and maybe from those who read her work, any versions performed by other hands (Seth 14). This gesture of belonging reaches beyond the ideologically more comforting notions of transition: cultural dispersal, homelessness and migration as ends in themselves. I may have used ‘stylised analogues’ such as the ‘equivocal half-life of in-betweenness and unbelonging’ to describe Head’s position, but there is no doubt that this text proposes ‘a more grounded, material sense of cultural location’ (Ilona 71). The border-crossings, mappings and movements are almost all ‘literal and local’, in that they describe a process of connecting with rather than detachment from the community. Nonetheless, the poetics of movement unites interviewer and interviewee, because each places a missing piece into the mosaic containing so many stories.

Concluding Remarks

Like a tapestry, the colourful threads in this study highlight patterns that are weaved into the transitional writing in Southern Africa and elsewhere on the African continent. One of the brightest, if clashing, is the power of the extraordinary in Southern African women's writing set in ordinary situations, despite their former neglect or omission. Against the taupe background of colonialism, decolonialism and the brightness of independence, we perceive the pastel colours of Southern African men's writing and their theoretical constructs. Hopefully, they will soon explode into colour, throwing my incomplete tapestry, like those in Musée du Moyen-Âge (formerly Musée de Cluny), into total disarray.¹⁸³

Anglophone African women writers are, generally speaking, now accepted, and even esteemed, in their respective literary circles for their power to write dissident literature set in everyday spaces, despite their former exclusion. However, it seems that when it comes to the publication of their work, little has changed concerning aesthetic politics since 2001, unless they happen to be young, pretty, articulate, outrageous and er(x)otic according to standards set by the Anglo-American publishing world. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a very intelligent and friendly young woman, as her friends have told me, is manipulated by her agents, giving her a bad reputation in Mexico, as we have heard. However much I despise these prejudices in the media and the global publishing market, Southern African women's literary empowerment, in terms of international recognition and winners of the many literary prizes, has led to exciting experimentation with different forms, even if we are still, as I said earlier when talking about transition, too close to these texts to make any definitive statement.

183 This metaphor is inspired partly by Rosa Burger's visit to see *The Lady and the Unicorn* at this museum in Paris in Gordimer's novel *Burger's Daughter* and partly by my own visit. The meaning of each tapestry is contested, as is the meaning of the whole work. Many have said it means love and understanding and many have also suggested that it is incomplete.

Transition is a key word when discussing Head's work. These concluding remarks focus more on her achievements and the difficulties of reading her work, without attempting to reach any point of closure. As Gordimer's narrator says in *No Time like the Present*: 'She was black, he was white. That was all that mattered. All that was identity then. Simple as the black letters on this white page. It was in those two identities that they transgressed'. However, nothing is as 'simple as the black letters on this white page': everything turns out to be grey (qtd. in Davies s/n).¹⁸⁴

Abie, the young narrator in Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor Stones* (2006), returns to the country of her birth (never named, but presumed to be Sierra Leone) to find out about her past from her women relatives. Early in her narrative, she states:

for a moment I found myself in a place that was neither the past nor the present, neither real nor unreal. *Rothoron*, my aunts called it. (...) Rothoron, the gossamer bridge suspended between sleep and wakefulness.

In that place, for a moment, I heard them. (...) A humming – of women singing as they worked. (...) I stood still, straining for the sound of their voices, but the layers of years in between us were too many (10).

The definition of *rothoron* brings to mind the difficulties I have experienced trying to read and interpret Bessie Head's literary oeuvre. However ambiguous this word may be, it describes not only her novels, especially *A Question of Power*, but also *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. Outsiders attempt to perceive this "elsewhere", as Seamus Heaney and others have called it, from another perspective, which we never fully grasp. Even Abie realises, as she tells us earlier, that she cannot understand the sound of her aunts' voices, let alone their speech, which reaches her in

¹⁸⁴ This novel treats of the life of a young couple, whose complexions and thus backgrounds are different: Jabu, black wife, and Steve, white husband. They are united by their past as activists against the apartheid regime, but their present is haunted by the centuries-old discrimination. It is a novel of 'disillusionment', particularly concerning class inequalities and corrupt politicians, in this case, a fictional figure similar to Jacob Zuma. 'The conflict between the quest for social and economic equality and the revolutionary fatigue that Steve and Jabu experience is the paradox on which the novel turns', Dominic Davies sustains.

fragments. The significantly complex gossamer bridge represents Head's literary achievement, particularly concerning those who have inspired her and her own creative awakening. This fragile frame evokes subtle allusions to local and international texts throughout her work, which often interweave one voice with another and then present a harsh clash of tones, excluding, perhaps unwittingly, western spectators. Her oeuvre alludes as much to another of her texts as it reaches out to include Latin American and Caribbean texts, the British village narrative and her favourite authors throughout the world.

From the failing heart of the empire, Virginia Woolf writes in 1937: 'Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today – that they are stored with other meanings, with other memories, and they have contracted so many famous marriages in the past'.¹⁸⁵ If Head, a postcolonial author, writes in this language some thirty-five years later, it creates a further burden for her: 'You cannot use a brand new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence', Woolf sustains. Particularly admiring certain British authors, Head writes similar words, but they are not those that Woolf and others mention are 'on people's lips': her words, like those of her African sisters, come from other lips, streets and fields. Her words are 'stored with other meanings' and 'memories'. Words contracting famous marriages within the British tradition fall apart in Head's writing. The multiple linguistic divorces have mourned in silence and then erupted into voice, as the contestants create different words, grammar and syntactical relationships. Like other African women writers of her time, Head

¹⁸⁵ 'Craftsmanship', broadcast on the BBC, April 29, 1937, was later published in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942). (03/03/2014)

combines, or almost translates, the different linguistic codes and traditions that influence her literary oeuvre. Woolf seems to assume that there is some basic structure to the English language, which daily reveals its malleability, its power to change and adapt itself to new conditions, especially concerning the sentence, a legacy from male pens and the meanings associated with it. Words 'are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things'. In this sense, she would have understood Head's dilemma when challenged by the British readers' reports of her work. The most striking peculiarity of words is, Woolf goes on to say, 'their need of change'. They try to catch a 'many-sided' truth, which they flash 'first this way, then that. Thus they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person'; unintelligible to one generation, they are 'plain as a pikestaff to the next'. It is 'because of this complexity, this power to mean different things to different people, that they survive'. Woolf is not Head. Nor is she Bakhtin, but the underlying idea is similar: 'The word is', Bakhtin writes, 'born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in a dialogic interaction with an alien world' (1981, 279). He argues, moreover, that the 'dialogic orientation of a word among other words (of all kinds of degrees of otherness) creates new and significant artistic potential in discourse, creates the potential for a distinctive art of prose, which has found its fullest and deepest expression in the novel' (275). The distinct theoretical approaches of Gordimer, Woolf and Bakhtin give us a much deeper understanding of the different levels of intertextuality in Head's work, still to be explored.

Inspired by and contesting her ancestors' literary practice of her ancestors, wherever they come from, Head hums as she works in chorus with the birdsong outside her window. Each story, whether a novel, within a novel or a "tale" in her collections of stories, represents an ancestor stone, all of which are her legacy.¹⁸⁶ Yet these ancestors or storytellers are often beyond her

¹⁸⁶ Abie's 'daughter loves to play with them while I write' and hearing the noise they make, she says: 'It sounds like they're talking' (Forna 317).

comprehensive reach, especially in this new cultural space: a challenge no writer can resist. By building a bridge over which the past of her culturally complex adopted country crosses to the present and again to the past, she constructs her own voice and finds her own way during this transitional period in the Anglophone literatures of Botswana and other Southern African literatures, as they discover patterns, partly of her making and partly of others, anticipating the future. Her narratives often start in the past and insist upon it in order to put them in context, as we have seen particularly in ‘The Collector of Treasures’, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Serowe. Village of the Rain Wind*. This later text demonstrates the power of ancestors, be they men or women, upon the present of Head and her interviewees, as it anticipates the fears of the future. Like Tambu in *Nervous Conditions* for example, Abie of *Ancestor Stones* wishes to render audible the stories of her female relatives, but Head and her contemporaries decide, despite international neglect and long before Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera and Aminatta Forna, that their stories revealing the extraordinary should centre principally on the consequences of intersectionality, particularly in ordinary village spaces, where the women gain a sense of empowerment.¹⁸⁷

Principally from the later 1990s onwards, scholars have been challenging Head’s work, in the light of later interests, such as *San Studies*. Instead of citing their arguments, I would like, finally, to take a stance concerning her stereotyping. I agree with those who suggest she presents stereotypes every once in a while, but I would ask them to remember her context, as well as the humour throughout her work. On one level, caustic parody and performance become Head’s literary strategies for talking back to her empire, whether this is the male African canon, the

¹⁸⁷ These gender-conscious texts are often inscribed within those texts concerning independence struggles that seldom consider gender equality. They empathise, if not exclusively, with women characters. In this context, we should not forget Ama Ata Aidoo, Head’s contemporary, who has always fought the battle of the sexes in an African, and particularly Ghanaian, context.

Anglo-American/British canon or, specifically, the South African canon. This remark underlines the subtlety of her work, which is never as simple as it may appear to be. For example, her characters do not meet happy or destructive endings: in fact, the so-called endings often make us question our own reading practices. Whatever objections this thesis may raise, these years of research, debate, talks and conferences have inevitably provided more pap to the pot,¹⁸⁸ and this ongoing discussion reveals the depth of her literary oeuvre: yet more food for thought ... so long as nobody forgets *rothoron*.

188 One final note: we should not understand this phrase as ‘drivel’ or ‘nonsense’: it is a traditional food in Southern Africa made from ground maize.

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