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Reading, interventions. States of interpersonal and intrapersonal violence in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

Saara Jääntti

Bessie Head (1937-1986) was a South African writer with a mixed racial background. Born to a white mother in a mental hospital, she was raised in a foster family until she was thirteen, and later was placed in a missionary orphanage. Her mother died in the mental hospital in 1947 and she never knew her father. She trained as a primary school teacher and worked as a journalist. In the 1960s, when Apartheid legislation was being implemented in South Africa, she migrated to Botswana on an exit visa to take up a post as a teacher.

Her third novel, *A Question of Power* (1973), tells the story of Elizabeth, a single mother with a similar background. The novel describes Elizabeth's struggle to become part of her new community in a foreign country and the simultaneous deterioration in her mental health that eventually leads to a breakdown and the loss of her job. She becomes a gardener in a local development project, suffers another breakdown and is placed in a mental hospital. Her madness has two distinctive phases, the description of which form the two parts of the novel. Each part is named after a male molester. These men are personifications of men in the village and represent different types of gendered and racial violence: Sello forces her to witness a number of atrocities in human history, while Dan's violence is primarily sexual. Depending on the interpretative framework, the men themselves can be read as hallucinations and thus as symptoms of mental illness; as metaphoric embodiments of cultural violence; or, in the vein of post-colonial theorizations, as ancestral presences. This is why Elizabeth's state of mind is here referred to as madness.

Although Head was not considered a political writer by her contemporaries, this article addresses her novel and the madness it describes as a meaningful intervention in the social reality Elizabeth is living in, and discusses the multiple forms of violence that the text presents. The various types and forms of violence include the *actual, physical violence* that happens between characters in the text; the violence that occurs in Elizabeth's mind, i.e. her *inner states of violence*; and the gendered, sexualized and racialized *societal violence* that this, in turn, reflects. In the colonial setting each inter-personal encounter is imbued with complex political power relations that have wider repercussions than the actual encounter, as my reading of the invasion of Elizabeth's home will show. Through the depiction of the racial and gendered violence of Elizabeth's abusers, Head points to the impossibility of Elizabeth, as a mixed race person, belonging: she is caught in a hybrid position in a culture that only recognizes singular identities. I will also address *textual and discursive violence*: the characters abuse each other verbally and the narrative techniques employed in the novel establish a violent relation with the reader. Finally, the article takes up academic interpretations of Elizabeth's condition and seeks to unravel the historical and discursive burdens and possible *epistemic violence* that the various ways of interpreting Elizabeth's troubled state carry within themselves.

Elizabeth's complicated racial, ethnic and national identity, and her positions as a refugee and a single mother, a writer, a gardener and a madwoman call for a multi-faceted, intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) reading of violence that addresses the simultaneous existence and operation of multiple subject positions (Brah and Phoenix 2004). Here, the notion of intersectionality is used to recognize the simultaneous presence and interdependence of especially gender and race in Elizabeth's inner state of madness in Southern Africa of the early 1970s. As the analysis will show, these mutually constitutive subject positions are entwined and interlink with other axes, such as sexuality, ethnicity and religion. They all inform Elizabeth's madness

and its possible interpretations. As Nira Yuval-Davis (2011, p.7) has argued, “There is no separate concrete meaning of any facet of these social categories, as they are mutually constitutive in any concrete historical moment”. The following analysis seeks to unravel the different ways in which these differences operate within the space of Elizabeth’s madness.

Spatiality madness

In *A Question of Power* madness is spatially conceived. As Jaqueline Rose (1996) has observed, Elizabeth is constructed as a place “where the hidden and the invisible of history accumulates; she is the depot for the return of the historical repressed.” (Rose, 1996, p.108) Rose further points out that paranoia, experienced as voices in the head, is “the perfect metaphor for colonization”, where both the body and mind of the colonized are taken over (ibid, p.103). In *The Wretched of the Earth* Franz Fanon (1967/2001), who worked as a psychiatrist in Algeria, links this “take-over of body and mind” directly to the possession of land. He defines colonization as “a systematic negation of the other person”, a denial of his/her humanity that leads to a perpetual crisis of subjectivity, where identity is constantly called into question. However, the hierarchically organized, simultaneous yet incompatible, competing realities of the colonial context, Fanon argues, make the question “who am I?” impossible to answer. Fanon further links colonial dehumanization and the psychology of the colonized to loss of space as a cause of mental pathology. (Fanon, 1967/2001, p.200–201)

In *A Question of Power* Elizabeth’s madness manifests itself as the taking over of her mind and dwelling. It thus presents both a personal tragedy and the shared social condition of conflict and colonization. Elizabeth’s madness consists of multiple blurrings and transgressions of boundaries – both between physical spaces and between physical and mental

realms. Head's unsettling text describes the protagonist's actions and life as divided into two realities: the nightmare reality of madness, which is a site of the perpetration of gendered violence and abuse, where the protagonist negotiates her belonging to humanity, and a social reality where she struggles to find her place in a culturally mixed community. The two realities are not, however, two completely separate spheres, but they reflect and influence one another.

As Kathleen M. Kirby (1996) has pointed out, subjectivity is inherently spatial: First of all, the subject is bodily situated and located in geographical and cultural space. These spaces do not necessarily coincide with the consciousness of the subject, but are crucial to understanding the limitedness of all perceptions and knowledge production (Martin & Mohanty, 1986; Rich, 1985; Braidotti, 1994). Furthermore, our understanding of subjectivity is deeply embedded in spatial metaphors, as expressions such as "deep feelings" convey. In this way, the human mind is understood as a space. In this respect, Head's description of Elizabeth's state as an invasion of her home is telling: the invasion of her house conveys to the reader the mechanisms through which her mind is tormented. Not only her body but her home too becomes a space that embodies the historical seizure of land.

Madness in Head's novel can be read as a space where questions of belonging are negotiated, and as Desiree Lewis has argued (2007, p.19), Head's oeuvre creates "a broad critical standpoint from immediate personal experience." (Lewis, 2007, p.19) Elizabeth's madness is deeply embedded in the process of settling into a new community. As Maria Olausson (1997) points out, Elizabeth is doubly displaced: first, through the Apartheid legislation that places

her in a different racial category from that of her white mother, and second, through her exile to Botswana. She has left behind a country that is in many ways a negation of home¹ and she struggles to make a home in a new setting. It is, however, this original homelessness and the violence of the practices and discourses that she has escaped from that (in)form the madness that overwhelms her in her new environment: “The evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she had fled” (*QP*, p.57) The space she has left behind thus importantly shapes her experience of the new place she is settling into. At the same time, she is able to build “patterns of affection” in her new location in Botswana. It is this dynamic of two simultaneous yet oppositional processes that shape Elizabeth’s experience of madness.

In the colonial context of *A Question of Power*, then, madness can be read as a site where, as Jacqueline Rose (1996, p. 109) suggests, “history talks in its loudest, most grating voice.” For although Bessie Head was not considered a political writer, her literary description of Elizabeth’s madness in the context of 1960s and 1970s South Africa and Botswana can be read as a space where multiple layers of societal violence come into play. As Michael O’Donnell (2005 p.46) claims, literature has the capacity to “capture human experience in all its particularity and through that particularity grasp something of wider - if not universal - significance.” Furthermore, literature “tends to present the world in terms of social patterns.” (Kaup, 1993, p.16) The literary depiction of madness in *A Question of Power* can therefore be read as a crystallization of an intersectional subject position in Southern Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Elizabeth’s mental turmoil stages gendered and racialized violence by describing mechanisms of dehumanization which are both intra-psychic and abstract enough to point to other culturally and historically diverse events in the history of human violence and atrocities, e.g. the holocaust and slavery. The encounters in which this violence takes

place are, however, experienced as interpersonal encounters and the take-over of her own home.

The invasion of Elizabeth's home

In the course of the novel, Elizabeth's home is taken over by two men, Sello and Dan, whom she takes to be embodiments of two men who live in the village. Elizabeth knows very little about them, and the figures who invade her house are, in fact, not the real village men. They are accompanied by other figures, but only Elizabeth can see or hear them. However, the power these hallucinatory figures or ghosts exercise over Elizabeth leads to her physical and social withdrawal and to two public outbursts that result in her hospitalization.

In the first part of the book, Sello appears in Elizabeth's hut, where she lives with her little son, as a benign presence, dressed as a monk. At first, he is kind and comforting, but Elizabeth's uncritical worship of him gives him power. His goodness turns out to be mere show (see also Kim, 2008), and other figures soon appear. The most important of these is Medusa, who abuses Elizabeth about her sexuality, unfeminine behavior, and character. She torments Elizabeth about her mixed-race background and the consequent impossibility of her belonging to the truly oppressed. According to Kim (2008), Medusa represents modernity and the tension between humanism and nationalism. Sello represents (white) humanism. Aligning with this would, for Elizabeth, mean aligning herself with the oppression and atrocities of the past. However, due to her mixed racial background she is also excluded from any unequivocal inclusion in black nationalist identities. This same tension only increases when Dan, in the second part of the novel, steps in.

Dan invades Elizabeth's house in the second part of the book, which opens with a seduction. In this scene Dan appears to Elizabeth - suddenly, as if from nowhere - as a warrior, a breathtakingly romantic figure who stuns the world into silence. (*QP*, p.103) Dan immediately seduces Elizabeth with his masculine force, but soon he becomes frustrated by her lukewarm response and invades her house with "nice-time girls". These stereotyped, sexualized, female figures with nicknames such as "Miss Wiggly-Bottom", "Miss Sewing Machine", "Miss Body Beautiful" and "the Womb" take over Elizabeth's home. They walk around the house, using her bedroom and her toilet and stealing her clothes and her perfume. They expose their bodies and bodily fluids, and force Elizabeth to be a witness of the invasion of her own home. Head describes this as an invasion of Elizabeth's mind and soul by devils. Unprotected, Elizabeth's mind is open territory, where normal codes of conduct, politeness and respect are abandoned, and devils smash up everything. (*QP*, p.192). Dan tells the girls to use freely everything Elizabeth owns.

The material belongings in one's home can be understood as material continuations of identity. Head's formulation of Elizabeth's recovery as being "back in her own form again, back in her own house" (*QP*, p.116) suggests that Elizabeth's house can be understood precisely as a material extension of her identity. Thus, the invasion of Elizabeth's house by Dan and the nice-time girls constructs madness as a state where a person is materially robbed of her identity. According to Iris Marion Young, home is also a space where the subject recreates herself through daily activities. (Young, 1997). The nice-time girls literally push Elizabeth out of the spaces where the simple, everyday acts of recreation of her subjectivity through sleep and washing herself could take place. The walls of Elizabeth's house fail to protect her; she has no privacy. The drama/trauma played out in Elizabeth's house is staged as a battle over the space of her body and privacy. Also the clothes that the nice-time girls

steal “with reckless speed” (*QP*, p.128) are intimately connected to identity; they mark the boundaries of the body as public and private. In the African context clothes have been a battlefield of cultural norms of privacy and decency between colonizers and natives (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). In *A Question of Power* this battle, however, is gendered and the victimizer is African.

Elizabeth’s state of being robbed of an identity is constructed as a feminine position and juxtaposed with Dan’s dominant, masculine position. Head describes Dan as the epitome of the African male,ⁱⁱ whose “loose, carefree sexuality” (*QP*, p.137) and attempts at sexual domination are manifest in the fact that he stops wearing underpants around the house and parades around with his penis naked and erect. He also engages in sexual activity with the nice-time girls all over Elizabeth’s house at all times of the day. In addition to representing African male heterosexuality, which Head describes as violent and oppressive, Dan also represents the anti-colonial political movement of Pan-Africanism, which sought to unify Africa – native Africans and African diaspora – on the basis of a common cultural inheritance and experience. Due to her mixed racial inheritance such a unified position or identity is impossible for Elizabeth, which is exactly the message that Dan wants drive home to her. In addition to the girls, Dan fills her house with “propaganda records.” These records take over the acoustic space of Elizabeth’s mind / house with a discourse that continually re-enforces her sense of racial inferiority as a half-white, and thus not properly African. They also continually assert her sexual inferiority to the nice-time girls. Besides, obsessed with dirt, Dan keeps telling Elizabeth that as a half-breed she is inferior to real Africans, and dirty.

The invasion of Elizabeth’s house marks a position of internalized self-hatred where the subject loses her sense of self-worth. Dan’s invasion of Elizabeth’s house and the erratic way

in which he keeps shifting between the positions of pathetic, wounded lover and a perpetrator of violence lock Elizabeth into a permanent state of terror. She becomes unable to sort out her own thoughts and perceptions. In addition, Dan keeps up a running commentary on the sexual lives of the people Elizabeth meets in the village, which means that Elizabeth loses not only her own privacy but also her sense of other people's privacy. He focuses her attention on other people's bodily fluids and functions, turning everything beautiful and nurturing into "shit and piss." Dan presents everything and everyone to her as sexualized. Head compares this to the experience of sexual harassment by a pervert who, despite being told off, continues to press the victim, claiming that she likes it (*QP*, p.138). Such behavior is based on a denial of the other person's humanity. In this case, worse still, Dan is within Elizabeth's own mind.

The power that Dan exercises over Elizabeth is discursive: he engages Elizabeth in his perversions by dominating Elizabeth's linguistic and material spaces with his naked body, sexual activity and propaganda records. He thus reiterates the violence of racial categorization in the Apartheid-ridden South Africa that Elizabeth has fled, but from the point of view of an African. As Dan appears to Elizabeth as the epitome of African man, his obscenity and racialized discourse work to "make all things African vile and obscene." (*QP*, p.137) His behavior is associated with the cruelty of the practices of witchcraft, which Head describes as "mental torture that reduces its victim to a state of permanent terror" until she becomes "stark, raving mad." (*QP*, p.137) The identity politics of African nationalists and their definition of who is African are thus condemned as reactionary and narrow.

Violence of/in the text

The depiction of the atrocities that Elizabeth is made to witness and the invasion of her house are so vivid that they seem more real than Elizabeth's social reality. Anne Gagiano (2000,

p.157) points out that on a line count, the passages describing Elizabeth's work in the garden, growth, and life as a communal effort outnumber the passages of violence, but as a text it lingers in the readers' imagination as violent and disturbing (Rose, 1996). *A Question of Power* is an unsettling text: with its vivid depiction of the horrors Elizabeth faces at the hands of the persecutors it takes the reader inside the violence and subjects her to the forces at play in Elizabeth's mind.

The erratic violence of Elizabeth's tormentors is repeated in the structure of the narrative, which moves abruptly and unexpectedly between Elizabeth's two realities (see also Olausen, 1997), reproducing the violence of Elizabeth's mental distress. The narrative point of view at times thrusts the reader inside Elizabeth's mind, presenting her internal struggles, at others jumps to describing her social reality, her external life and actions in the community. The narrative, mimicking Elizabeth's consciousness, also frequently draws together diverse historical events that have taken place in dispersed geographical locations and makes reference to various mythologies, so that the text becomes like a mosaic. Head herself described her novel as a vast canvas, filled with references to various religions and ideologies, historical times and events (Talahite, 2005). At first glance, these references may seem haphazard and mad, and they definitely make the text difficult to access and follow. For Head and Elizabeth, however, they form the basis for negotiating new forms of subjectivity, outside the categories allowed by their social and political contexts.

Given the violence of the speech and discourses Elizabeth is subjected to in the nightmare world, it is no wonder that Head promotes silence as a powerful form of resistance – perhaps the only form of resistance – in the face of the dehumanizing discourses of racism and sexism. Elizabeth's attempts to engage with the destructive discursive violence of her oppressors only

render her weak and depressed. She loses her own home. It is only by aligning herself with what represents belief in the creative forces in life that she can regain her health and her home.

The counter-forces to Elizabeth's madness - or the mad violence perpetrated by Dan and other figures - are people in her social reality who prefer work and silence to speech and chatter. While Camilla, a Danish voluntary worker who perceives and treats the locals as children, reiterates the racism of Elizabeth's inner tormentors, the acts of mothering her small child, her work in the communal garden, the growth she witnesses in the garden, shared meals served in her house and the friendships she develops in the course of her work alleviate Elizabeth's pain. Elizabeth's closest companion at work is Kenosi, a silent village woman who works with her in the garden, and she develops strong respect for another Danish voluntary worker, the quiet Brigette, whom she idealizes as an almost saintly figure. Head thus seems to promote silence and kindness as counter-forces to madness: at the end of the book, when Elizabeth finds the conviction within herself that her oppressor is wrong, she only needs to stand silently next to Sello, the embodiment of the counter-discourse to Dan's hate-speech, and Dan leaves, slamming the door behind him.

Given the violence of *A Question of Power* as a text, it is rather surprising to realize that there is actually only one episode of actual physical violence that takes place in Elizabeth's social reality (Brown, 2008). In this, the perpetrator is Elizabeth; she strikes Mrs. Jones, an elderly British missionary who has been visiting Elizabeth throughout her illness (out of Christian piety, which annoys Elizabeth). Towards the end of the book Elizabeth becomes convinced that Mrs. Jones is prostituting her children. She walks up to Mrs. Jones's house and hits the old woman in the face. This leads to Elizabeth's hospitalization in what was then the only

psychiatric hospital in Botswana, and makes possible the interpretation of her condition as a psychiatric illness.

Head wrote *A Question of Power* in only a few months, shortly after she had experienced a breakdown similar to that suffered in the novel by Elizabeth. In a letter written in 1976, Head described her experience as a state of mind where she was “completely deprived of the assurance that I could not be evil, too” and compared this state of losing trust in oneself to “death itself” (Olaussen, 1997, p.177). This idea is echoed in Sello’s statement: “You don’t realize the point at which you become evil” (*QP*, p.96). For Head, the novel thus discusses problems of moral consciousness and agency. After its publication, she felt offended by critics’ claims that the protagonist was mad. Later she grew more tolerant toward the various ways of reading her novel, claiming that its “attitude of uncertainty is an open invitation to the reader to move and re-write and interpret the novel in his/her own way” (Eilersen, 1995, p. 252-253). The question of interpretation is, however, yet another space where questions of cultural heritage, historical legacies, ethnicity and race surface and intersect. Here the burning question is how to interpret Elizabeth’s madness.

The violence of interpretation

Madness in *A Question of Power* is by no means merely metaphorical. Elizabeth is seriously ill. She suffers from mental torment that she recognizes as unnatural. The attacks she is subjected to exhaust her to the point where she is unable to get out of bed. Her actions and her interpretations of other people are misjudged. She is placed in a psychiatric hospital. Yet at the same time Elizabeth’s madness testifies to the violent structures in the various cultures that form the web of discourses and provide the frameworks for understanding and interpreting human experience.

In the rapidly increasing scholarship on Head's work, there are two sharply contrasted readings of Elizabeth's madness: one line of interpretation (Evasdaughter, 1989; Hogan, 1994) draws on different Western psychiatric traditions to frame her experience and discuss the ways in which it matches their theories and definitions; the other, more recent trend places the novel in the postcolonial framework and the presence of ancestral figures in African traditions. The multiple implications of these two different readings are discussed by Jacqueline Rose (1996), who points out that while Head's description of Elizabeth's suffering meets the criteria of psychosis and paranoid schizophrenia (Evasdaughter, 1989; Hogan, 1994), madness is by no means universal: in a culture where it is believed that one's body and mind can be visited by ancestors who live underground, paranoia - and subjectivity - are differently conceived than in Western psychiatry. (Rose, 1996). Linking Head's novel to the native African tradition, where ancestral ghosts and communication with them are regarded as a natural part of everyday-life, thus redefines what in psychiatric discourse would be called hallucinations and identified as symptoms of mental disturbance and disorder. In native African discourses these can be seen as natural and important communications with one's ancestral past (Bhana, 2004). According to this line of reasoning, the presence of Sello and Dan would not, then, be a sign of Elizabeth's madness. What makes her ill is what these figures do to her. This reading is supported by Head's own interpretation of Elizabeth's condition: according to her, it is the violence perpetrated by Sello, Dan, Medusa and others that destroys Elizabeth's health.

This re-situating of the interpretative frame of Elizabeth's madness in African traditions, however, only accounts for one half of her experience, characterized by the simultaneous existence of multiple discursive frames. In actual practice, Elizabeth is subjected to Western

psychiatric norms in her hospitalization, and even if psychiatry is described as impotent to alleviate her pain, Head does resort to psychiatric discourse as well. As some scholars have pointed out, in its colonial context, calling Elizabeth mad could be seen as a powerful, and indeed a humanizing gesture (Bhana, 2004): psychiatry was born in the West, and in the colonial context it was conceived that African women had not “reached the level of self-awareness to go mad” (Vaughan, 1991). In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth is defined as civilized enough to go mad, but it is the realization that the denigrating way in which she addresses the Batswanan around her has led the European doctor to assume she is a “comrade racist” that shakes her out of her lethargy and prompts her sanity (*QP*, p.181–182; Ibrahim, 1996, p.165–166).

On the other hand, reading Elizabeth’s state as paranoid schizophrenia or post-stress disorder participates in the colonial gestures of othering and the deviation of Africans, as madness is far from being a culturally neutral concept (Bhana, 2004). The coupling of blackness and pathology has a long history (Gilman, 1985), and although this discourse contradicts earlier views that black people are not civilized enough to become mad, the cultural processes whereby blackness is constructed in opposition to white rationality involve the definition of blackness as mad and diseased. Fanon (1967/2001) argues that colonial psychiatry participated in the “pacification” of natives and independence struggles by pathologizing resistance and classifying their struggles as cases of “reactionary psychoses.” His case studies point to the role of colonial and anti-colonial violence in developing psychiatric disorders or mental turmoil and suffering in both the victims and perpetrators of violence. In *A Question of Power* Elizabeth’s mental suffering is not framed as revolt against the colonizer, nor is psychiatry seen as a significant oppressor, but it does contribute to Elizabeth’s suffering rather than to her cure. But there is a problem in psychiatric readings of *A Question of Power*: they

fail to recognize illness as meaningful (see Jäntti, 2012). To read Elizabeth's state as a psychiatric illness (see, especially Evasdaughter, 1989) lays the emphasis on symptoms, rather than on content and *what* constituted the patient's state of terrorⁱⁱⁱ. As Jacqueline Rose (1996) suggests, Elizabeth's communication with Sello, Dan and the other figures or ghosts can be interpreted as a kind of talk-therapy that eventually liberates her from the past.

Elizabeth is clearly haunted by her past, but as Margree (2004) points out, the society in which Elizabeth arrives is also far from "healthy": while Botswana suffered less severely from colonialism and remained a relatively independent British protectorate, it was, at the time of Elizabeth's arrival, a society so charged with poverty and malnutrition that the conditions were clearly detrimental to a person's health, even if they formed the normal conditions of life. Margree (2004) calls this "pathological normality." Thus, while in South Africa it was pathological political oppression that constituted the "normal" everyday life of black people, in Botswana it was poverty and malnutrition; qualities essential to health had been alienated, and what was left was a "survival response to hostile normalities". (Margree, 2004, p.17–18). International studies do, indeed, show that mental health problems, and depression, are more prevalent in places where women are faced with violence and economic hardship (WHO 2005). Elizabeth's madness is, however, more than a reaction to a hostile reality, and reading Elizabeth's madness as illness reduces its political and social edge (c.f. Ussher, 2010, p.17). As Anne Gagiano (2000) observes, Sello, Medusa, Dan and the nice-time girls are not illusions or hallucinations, but mechanisms that allow Elizabeth to study "the concentrated onslaughts of power on the soul." (Gagiano, 2000, p.159)

Hersini Bhana (2004), on the other hand, resituates Elizabeth's experience in the temporalities and spatialities of African tradition, where ancestors can cross generational gaps and appear in

the lives of the next generations as living, bodily beings, thus transgressing the spatial and temporal boundaries between life and death of Western rationality. She reads Elizabeth's haunting by her mother as ancestral communication and her "hallucinations" and memories as the embodiment of the collective pain of the past. Elizabeth is troubled not only by things that have happened to her personally but also by the Holocaust and the lynching of black people in the United States which, through their racialized genealogies, are constitutive of the collective experience of blackness and, thus, of her identity as a South African black woman. Like Rose (1996), Bhana thus interprets the novel as a collective and personal therapy that seeks to redefine and find alternative collective identities and humanity. She argues that, although embedded in the collective memory, such new formations do not equal a return to a pre-modern past or the collective injury of modernity. Rather, resituating subjects in ancestral history both validates their experience and enables their cultural heritage to become a guiding force for the future. (Bhana, 2004). Bhana's reading thus places *A Question of Power* in the African cultural lineage with its spiritual connection to the earth. This connection is also affirmed by the famous, final scene of the novel, where Elizabeth places her hand on the ground in "a gesture of belonging." (*QP*, p.206)

Bhana's argument is crucial to understanding the African lineage and African presence in the cultures of which Head and Elizabeth were products. Such readings, however, are also problematic: Elizabeth occupies a hybrid position not only because of her mixed racial background but also because of her colonial education in a missionary school. She has no contact with her native father. In Botswana she does not speak the local languages and is largely rejected by the local villagers. She eventually finds her place in the international community of refugees and voluntary workers on the margins of the village. As Olausson (1997) argues, Elizabeth's finding her place in the communal garden testifies to "culture's

hybridity” (Olaussen, 1997, p.31; Bhabha, 1994). The polarization of the Western/Northern and African lines of interpretation is also problematic as it leads to a failure to recognize the influence of Western/Christian religions in Southern Africa and in the novel.

In *A Question of Power* Head repeatedly refers to Christianity and calls Dan nothing less than Satan. The novel is filled with references to devils and demons – a discourse that directly draws on Christianity and formed the basis for understanding madness as demonic possession in medieval times (see e.g. Feder, 1980). Some Christian sects regard having visions and hearing voices as natural. At the time Head wrote her novel, Christian faith-healing churches were spurned in the region due to the presence and active involvement in the local communities of missionary churches (Head 1981/2008; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). There are thus elements that naturalize and make meaningful what in psychiatric frameworks are understood as pathological in both the white/Western and the black/African inheritance, which is why *A Question of Power* calls for a reading situated in the context of its cultural hybridity also in terms of the interpretation of madness. As Head herself stated, *A Question of Power* is a novel that explores the universal questions of good and evil. It does this, however, in a very specific context and by drawing on multiple cultures and cultural influences.

To conclude

The different, critical lines of interpreting Elizabeth’s experience are historically burdened and discursively charged. While Western psychiatric discourses pathologize Elizabeth’s experiences, African ancestral tradition naturalizes it. This serves to juxtapose Western and African traditions, aligning the first with modernity and “rationality” and the second with cultural belief systems and tradition.

Elizabeth's state can be called paranoid, hallucinatory or bewitchment. More important, however, is to recognize her experience as meaningful and relevant, and to read Elizabeth's "pathology as a place where history talks in its loudest, most grating voice." (Rose, 1996, p.109). For while what Elizabeth experiences meets the criteria of psychosis and paranoid schizophrenia (Evasdaughter, 1989; Hogan, 1994; Rose, 1996), Head constructs Elizabeth's madness as a space that allows her to *study* the multiple mechanisms of power and oppression (Gagliano, 2000) at the same time as it creates a space for negotiating a personal trauma of not belonging.

In *A Question of Power* madness is constructed as a product of inhabiting uninhabitable spaces, of politics and social orders that deny and violate aspects of Elizabeth's identity. The oppressive forces of racial and gendered violence produce madness in their subjects. Hence madness itself can be conceived as a space within which oppression can be studied and understood – and a place in which the object of oppression, the victim, can overcome her objectification and gain subjectivity.

This is also what Elizabeth, at the end of the novel, does: grateful for the journey through hell that mostly took place in her own home and for the lessons she has learnt, she engages in reading and writing together with her son. For although madness in *A Question of Power* is described as the invasion of Elizabeth's home, it is also, philosophically, understood as a journey. It is a depiction of subjection to hallucinatory powers, and the painfulness of this experience. But it is also a space that enables Elizabeth to study how power works. Head describes this process as necessary for Elizabeth to overcome her previous state of

objectification and to become a subject aware of the social, institutional and cultural violence that participate in her subjection.

In *A Question of Power* madness is thus a meaningful space for learning and understanding the denial of humanity involved in the violent imposition of identity categories. In the novel, race and gender form the two most important axes of intersectionality: they are the basis and content of the violence Elizabeth is subjected to. These categories are complicated by Elizabeth's status as a migrant. In her experience, migration and madness are closely interlinked, and her position as a refugee and stranger in the village renegotiates the stability of the place itself. Nationality and ethnicity are thus also problematic for Elizabeth who, due to her position as a mixed-race migrant, does not occupy a clear-cut identity position within the culture, or cultures, in which she is located. Head thus points to the social roots of Elizabeth's madness and reveals the danger and violence of strict identity categories that - as in the only scene of actual violence in the book - only generate further violence and abuse. Elizabeth's health and recovery involve her both establishing her inner balance and re-defining her place in the social and cultural setting. Health and sanity can only be established in and through mutually respectful interpersonal relations.

Elizabeth's madness thus draws its contents from the cultural and ideological context she has fled from and from the one she is living in and facing as a migrant. This being the case, her madness can be read as a confrontation with the vilest aspects of the context in which she is living. The novel depicts madness as a confrontation with God and the devil, and it draws from the cultural context of Apartheid in South Africa and its imposition of racist and sexist categorizations. To read madness this way is to acknowledge it as a state where the most

brutal and violent aspects of one's social reality are negotiated. Furthermore, as Elizabeth is also forced to confront herself as an actor in this violence, and the reader, pushed around by Head's violent narrative, is drawn into the violence of the text, we are forced to ask a very basic moral question: how are we to behave toward one another in order not to violate one another?

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ⁱ The Apartheid regime made inter-racial relationships illegal with the Immorality Act of 1950. As a daughter of a white mother and a black father, Elizabeth, in her “home country” is an illegitimate person: her origin is criminalized by the state laws.

ⁱⁱ Head’s depiction of African male sexuality is stereotypical and far from flattering. Her perceptions are homophobic and far from “politically correct.”

ⁱⁱⁱ This problem with modern psychiatry of recognizing the meaningfulness of the content of psychotic symptoms dates back to Emil Kraepelin (1896), the doctor who first distinguished the symptoms of psychosis from manic depression and mood disorders. Kraepelin initially named the syndrome “Dementia praecox”; the term ‘schizophrenia’ was not introduced until 1911, by Eugen Bleuler. What became a crucial turning point in the history of psychiatry was precisely Kraepelin’s decision to start recording the ways in which madness presented itself in the patients (whether it included changes in mood, for example), and not the content. This realization helped to develop diagnostics and medical drug treatments, but it also contributed to the tendency in psychiatry to ignore the cultural context and phenomena that the patient’s mind was engaged with and the psychotic symptoms rose out of.