Against epistemic totalitarianism: the insurrectional politics of Bessie Head

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This paper argues that South African writer, Bessie Head, crafted art that refuses discursive closure, or epistemic totalitarianism. The essay demonstrates this by examining Head’s commitment to analysing power in the context of people’s daily lives and her attention to the insurrectionary role of imagination in intervening in established dynamics of power. The first section draws connections between Head’s practice of writing about ordinary people to her own experience and observations of living under South African apartheid. The second section focuses on the analytical links that Head makes between poverty, white privilege and institutional economic structures in order to demonstrate how her analysis of the rigidity of the system yielded an attentiveness to the need to be able to imagine other possibilities. The third section depicts Head’s insurrectionary writing as part of a moral force that is, in part, a function of her analysis of the problem as an absence of imaginative possibilities. This, I suggest, indicates that – as with much critical African anti-colonial writing – Head’s approach presents contemporary social theory with a challenge to epistemic totalitarianism that can be useful for addressing current issues.

Keywords: Bessie Head; imaginative politics; discursive closure; insurrectionary writing

Like many novelists, Bessie Head (1937–1986) wrote stories that emerged from her observations of the world.1 This world – South Africa (and later Botswana) in the mid-twentieth century – was characterised by a high degree of rigidity and ambient violence. Arguably,

Head, [influenced by her experience of closed space], recreated a place that accommodated her social vision, a world without barriers. In such spatial settings her characters have the freedom to move beyond restricting social structures based on race or gender. The harsh experiential realities of the artist yield an idealistic vision in the art. (Sample 2003, 43–44)

I argue that Head’s contribution, then, was to craft art that refuses discursive closure, or epistemic totalitarianism. My reading of Head’s work is influenced by Mudimbe (1988), who argues that while the theory of discursive power might overlook the agent, thinkers like Levi-Strauss (and Foucault) exemplify an insurrectionary approach to the analysis of discursive power that refuses to reproduce a ‘totalitarian order of knowledge’ (Mudimbe 1988, 33). I suggest that Head’s work can help students of social theory address...
increasing rigidities related to categories of identity, the security apparatus of states (and other forms of authority) and the uneven relations of power that contour contemporary lived experiences.

Generally, however, Head is treated in scholarly material as ‘a woman alone’ and, in a sense, taken on her own terms – foregrounding the aspects of her life experience to which she refers most frequently. For example, most essays comment on the discussion of whether or not Head’s work is political, on the nature of her birth to a mother with severe mental illness who was impregnated by an unknown African man, and her orphaned status. Across pieces, reflections abound regarding the autobiographical nature of her books/characters and her gardening. They yield statements that draw on psychologised readings of her work, such as, ‘[a] large part of Bessie Head’s lived reality … involved a sense of primary guilt at being alive, of having no right to life’ (Atkinson 2011, 271). This extant literature seldom examines Head’s contribution from a socio-political perspective that might ask questions like: What political commitments underlie Head’s writing? How can one account for the widely acknowledged challenges Head faced, and still take seriously her socio-political theoretical vision? How might Head inspire socio-political theorists to engage critically with contemporary questions of power? And, how is it possible to understand Head as being engaged in an ‘insurrectional’ (Shapiro 1989) writing strategy that challenged modes of communication and meaning-making that upheld the oppressive dynamics of power in Apartheid South Africa?

Thus, although I understand the impulse, I move away from the notion that Head presents an example of postcolonial feminism that emerged in response to perceptions of second-wave feminism’s elisions (Ibrahim 1996). Instead, I draw from writing that helps to situate Head’s work alongside anticolonialism’s rejection of racialism and an emphasis on imagination as a challenge to dehumanising practices. This colonisation of the mind is a conversation that loomed large across Africa in the mid-twentieth century (e.g. Ngũgĩ [1986] 2011). I place Head in conversation with her contemporary Edward Said’s (1978) arguments regarding Orientalism, and with Michael Shapiro’s (1989) notion of insurrectionary textuality. Significant overlap occurs around Head and, for example, Edward Said’s epistemological points of departure and what I read as their insurrectionary approaches to the dynamics of power. One might say that Edward Said (1978) sought to examine the mechanisms by which epistemic order becomes sedimented. He outlined how discourses work to uphold and reproduce existing dynamics of power using the discourse of Orientalism as an example. Orientalism epistemologically reconfigures social order via notions of novelty and fear by creating its objects of knowledge to manage perceptions of threat (Said 1978, 59). In other words, Orientalism presents and represents hierarchical relations as a function of differences in culture that come to be synonymous with subordination, such that notions of domination and subordination are embedded in the discourse itself. The embeddedness of this hierarchy in Orientalism’s framework manifests in different ways. Ultimately, Orientalism is insidious in that it discursively bounds not only what is actually said, but also what it is possible to say. Said and Head respond to hopeful anticolonial conversations with analyses that address power’s consistency. Both Said and Head confront tensions regarding consistent and sedimented structures of power that are ambivalent and irresolvable. Both illustrate the role of binaries and essentialised notions of identity in discourses of power. In so far as a contemporary and politically powerful episteme continues to work through narrow, fixed,
and essentialised categories (particularly reinforced after 9/11), then upending the rigidities can be read as insurrectionary.

This essay demonstrates Head’s commitment to analysing power in the context of people’s daily lives and her attention to the insurrectionary role of imagination in intervening in established dynamics of power. The first section draws connections between Head’s practice of writing about ordinary people to her own experience and observations of living under South African apartheid. The second section focuses on the analytical links that Head makes between poverty, white privilege and institutional economic structures in order to demonstrate how her analysis of the rigidity of the system yielded an attentiveness to the need to be able to imagine other possibilities. The third section depicts Head’s insurrectionary writing as part of a moral force that is in part a function of her analysis of the problem as an absence of imaginative possibilities. This, I suggest, as with much critical African anti-colonial writing, signifies that Head’s approach presents contemporary social theory with a challenge to epistemic totalitarianism that can be useful for addressing current issues.

**Coming up under Afrikaner rule**

In her ‘Foreword’ to another important South African woman’s biography (Ellen Kuzwayo), Head briefly outlines the impact of the conditions of circumstance unique to South Africa on its people (Head [1984] 1985). These are the conditions that give form to both Kuzwayo’s and Head’s own (social) commentary. In one instance, Head depicts Afrikaner rule as ‘a death imposed on people by the ruling white race and black people constantly struggle under this pall of doom’ (Head [1984] 1985, xiii). This sentence belies Head’s recognition that, while Afrikaner rule impacts people differently based on race, no one wins or comes out of it alive. This type of insight – that no one wins within forms of categorical rigidity – appears regularly in Head’s writing.

Head was acutely aware of the uniqueness of her conditions – not just as a person with no family, but also as a person who came of age under apartheid. Born in 1937 in a South African mental hospital to a white upper-class woman who got pregnant by an unknown African man, Head was raised by a coloured family and did not come to know of the circumstance of her birth until she was in her early teens. As her writing indicates, these circumstances haunted her. She is very expressive about her history, writing process and ethical drive. For instance, she described the panic that came with the creative urgency to tell a story as a way to critique ‘the political lumberjacks who are busy making capital on human lives’ (Head [1962] 1990, 24). She said, ‘Whatever my manifold disorders are, I hope to get them sorted out pretty soon, because I’ve just got to tell a story’ (Head [1962] 1990). Reflecting later on this urgency, Head gave it form:

My work was always tentative because it was always so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; it battled with problems of food production in a tough semi-desert land; it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate, together, and it did not really qualify who was who – everyone had a place in my world. But nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person. (Head [1975] 1990, 45)
Here, she presented an in-between-ness that represents more than her positionality. It also presents her experience as one of fundamental dislocatedness that is connected to her need to document observable and ordinary moments of incongruency in people’s lives.

Head passed her early adult years in a racially mixed, intellectually engaged, literary and politicised community of friends in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In the 1960s, this intellectual activist group suffered the attention of the authorities and, in many cases, members were detained and deported, often on one-way exit visas. Head conveyed the insecurity and loss of intellectual and emotional support at that time:

One of the slobs who are left behind told me rather scornfully the other day that I was not a freedom fighter. I have to admit that it is the truth. I never joined fund-raising campaigns because I can’t ask for money. I never paid at fund-raising parties because I was always broke and yet drank as much wine as I could and talked as loud as I could and quarrelled with the whites who were there. The ‘liberal’ whites seemed to like one to fight because they always provoked the arguments as far as I was concerned and always laughed at the offensive remarks. Yes, maybe I am going to pieces because I was never the type to rush about doing things. I just sat around talking all the time and now all those beautiful ideas have blown up in my face. You can’t think straight about anything if you’re hating all the time. You even get scared to write because everything has turned cock-eyed and sour. This would never have happened if my friend ‘D.B.’ were around. He hated that kind of mentality, and with his sarcastic wit and optimism would have made me seem a complete fool. (Head [1963] 1990, 32)

Head is not quite consistent in her depiction of her own political agency. Above, she presented herself on the margins, but occasionally she placed herself in the conversation. For example:

One can’t help admiring political people. They never talk about God. I do not, of course, wish to imply that my political friends are non-believers like myself. It is just that we have been too busy arguing about George Padmore to have any time left over for such a subject. (Head [1963] 1990, 33, emphasis added)

However, much she presented herself as politically peripheral, she appears to have drawn strength from her group of thinkers, and she had been caught up in a series of arrests surrounding Sharpeville Massacre. To avoid prosecution, she turned state’s witness. She suffered what is reported as a violent ‘sexual encounter’ and a breakdown, and then left South Africa on a one-way exit visa to the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland for a teaching job.6

Fourteen years after her 1964 ‘exit’, Head commented that all intellectual work and activity in South Africa was political because the nature of the system that in practice rigidly controlled minute details of people’s daily lives made it so7:

I think that our only education in South Africa, as black people, is a political one. We learn bitterly, everyday, the details of oppression and exploitation so that a writer automatically feels pressured into taking a political stand of some kind or identifying with a camp. It was important to my development to choose a broader platform for my work, so I have avoided political camps and ideologies because I feel they falsify truth. It was necessary for me to concentrate directly on people because I believe it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden, unknown God or devil. (Head [1978] 1990, 85)

This ‘broader platform’ came out of her own experience and yielded her analysis of power, her recognition of its discursive elements and its radical consistency. Nevertheless, Head
was moved by the ordinariness of human suffering and oppression that she argued stems from greed and politically corrupt institutions. For instance, one of her observations had to do with the way that changes in traditional gender relations destroyed old protections on which women could rely, thereby placing them in more legally and economically precarious positions despite political enfranchisement:

Change and progress has always been of a gentle and subtle nature – the widespread adoption of Christianity gradually eliminated polygamous marriages. At Botswana’s independence in 1966, women were given the right to vote alongside men. They did not have to fight for it. But strangely, this very subtlety makes it difficult to account for the present social crisis. The country is experiencing an almost complete breakdown of family life and a high rate of illegitimate births among the children. No one can account for it. It has just happened somewhere along the line. A woman’s place is no longer in her yard with her mother-in-law but she finds herself as unloved outside the restrictions of custom, as she was within it. (Head [1975] 1990, 79)

This passage comes from an essay (entitled ‘Despite broken bondage, Botswana women are still unloved’) with a particularly gentle tone that describes conditions that she had seen and that had been conveyed to her by other women. With it, Head develops comments on the impact of subtle institutional changes on interpersonal dynamics that unequally dispersed vulnerability onto young wives.

While ‘Head [i]s a writer concerned with the personal and interpersonal realms of human experience[,] … the automatic assumption that to focus on the personal is to ignore the political, that turning inward necessitates a turning away from that which is outside’ is erroneous (Garrett 1999, 123). Indeed, Head’s focus is precisely on people as they navigate the worlds that enable and constrain their capacities. Thus, it might be considered ironic that ‘the ideologies that preoccupy the society are investigated by the very “process of the subject they wanted to ignore”’ (Lorenz 1991, 599). Head’s focus on this subject (and ironically, as herself this ignored subject who refused to be silent) is a politics – an insistence to personhood for those whose narrative positions are disallowed, or circumscribed by racialised institutions.

Herein lies Head’s political response to the politics of her time, and to others’ responses to the politics of her time. In fact, early on in her writing career, and in a letter to Langston Hughes, Head writes:

I’ve decided it’s unnecessary to shout my political convictions out loud. I’ll write them and then everyone will see themselves and what they look like and where they are going. They’re going to blame me, I know. They won’t like it. But I do care! I do say. Look! You are going somewhere. Believe me you are not stuck in the present. (Moore 2010, 13 [Head, 12 December 1960])

A couple of years later, Head exclaims:

If I had to write one day, I would just like to say people is people and not damn white, damn black. Perhaps if I was a good enough writer I could still write damn white, damn black and still make people live. Make them real. Make you love them, not because of the colour of their skin but because they are important as human beings. (Head [1962] 1990, 23)

The American revolutionary, Angela Davis (1974 passim) makes a similar, albeit less passionate, comment about the need to move away from these racial divisions in order to
seek political solutions to problems in another segregated society wracked by poverty (Davis 1974).

**Against epistemic totalitarianism**

At the age of 24, Head made links between poverty, white privilege and institutional political economic structures that served to create and maintain a racialised distribution of labour when she stated:

> There is something terribly sinister happening. Why are the Coloured, with unashamed determination, handing over the education of their children to the Coloured Affairs Department? In Port Elizabeth and Cape Town they are doing this terrible act with conviction and maddening self-compulsion. (Head [1963] 1990, 25)

For Head, this ‘handing over’ was part and parcel of a system meant to keep people ‘in their place’ by way of ‘an education that is going to grind them back into muck’ (Head [1963] 1990, 26). Highlighting passivity, Head exposes the institutions (specifically the Coloured Affairs Department) that dictate social order and reproduce specific hierarchies. Further, Apartheid places the not-Black/not-White person in a troubling position between poles of extreme categorisation that yields a similarly problematically classed leadership:

> The Coloured man knows he is oppressed, and he knows his oppressor. He of all oppressed groups in South Africa fears his oppressor most because he is closer to him and really understands the ruthless nature of his power. So, he complies. He is obsequious, just so long as everybody leaves him in peace. … Some Coloured leaders would appear to be unaware of the tragedy that is the day to day life of the Coloured people. They would give the impression that the Coloured man is working hand in glove with the oppressor. The real trouble with these leaders is that they have created a conservative middle class of their own which is but a pallid and watery reflection of white privilege. (Head [1963] 1990, 28–29)

The insight with which Head here describes the condition of the Cape Coloureds reflects a Fanonian understanding of racialised colonial dynamics and their impact on the development of corrupted local leadership (Fanon [1963] 2004). For Head ([1963] 1990), ‘[the Coloured person] achieved a compromise with the ruling, dominant group. Superficially, he has many outward mannerisms and speech similarities of the Afrikaner’ (27). Thus, the Coloured leaders have been able to create a small middle class giving the illusion of ‘white privilege’, but the majority of Coloureds are ‘perpetually poor’ (Head [1963] 1990, 28; see also Mark 2013). Of note here is the artfulness of Head’s observations that instrumentalising forms of social categorisation serve to discipline and control a subject population. Reminiscent of human behaviour in other stark circumstances, the acceptance of the designation ‘Coloured’ amounts to complicity with the Apartheid regime. Head (1974) narrates the totalising power of apartheid’s racial categories in *A Question of Power* by illustrating how they rest on dehumanising practices. Writing about the main character Margaret, she outlines:

> In South Africa she had been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn’t any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. They were races, not people. (Head 1974, 44)
Threaded through her writings is a commitment to analysing the problem of domination as an epistemological one. Apartheid’s social categorisation becomes another institutionalised ordering practice that dehumanises in the service of creating disciplined (racialised) subjects. This commitment yields another – attention to the necessity of decolonising the mind.

By the early 1960s, Head wrote for ‘Golden City Post’, a supplement of the well-known Drum Magazine. Head’s ties with Drum are significant because Drum contributed immensely to how Africans imagined the emergence of the continent from colonialism and possibly participated in shaping, even if indirectly, its future political prospects, through the articulation of transnational African concerns about the continent’s economic, cultural and political future from the mid-1950s onwards.

in particular fostering a conversation illustrating a rejection of racialism (Odhiambo 2006, 159–60). As a magazine with offices in a number of major cities, Drum operated as a site to train and disperse ideas about contemporaneous politics in Africa, decolonisation, future possibilities, etc. Youthful and skilful energies were successfully drawn in to this end. In fact, as Odhiambo put it, ‘its employment and training of black journalists wherever an office was set up is what really contributed to its fashioning what could be described as a popular “cultural imagination” across Africa’ (Odhiambo 2006, 159). Head was ensconced in efforts to ‘imagine’ an end to the colonisation of the mind, but her emphasis on ordinary people and interpersonal relations is analytically useful.

For instance, a young Head writes:

I would like to write the story about a man who is a packing hand at the railways and lives in one of the tumbling down, leaky houses in District Six. One year for his annual leave he decided to make use of railway concession and take a free train ride with his wife to Durban. (Head [1962] 1990, 23)

Head relays her observations of the husband and wife who don’t take a train journey. The couple get ready for their journey. Everyone is very excited. They pack up their things and some food. But once on the train platform the man balks:

Just as the first warning bell rang he shouted with real terror in his voice: ‘Ma, get off. Let’s go home.’ And that was that. He didn’t even have to explain. Everyone understood. To leave Cape Town and go gallivanting around like some fool in a foreign place like Durban would be an act of the most vile treachery…. Why go to that fool of a place called Durban? What is there in it for him? To leave Cape Town would be like dying. It would be the destruction of all that he is as a man. He just doesn’t have the kind of pretentiousness that makes an American tourist come and gape at the Zulu dances. (Head [1962] 1990, 24)

Head is observing more than a ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott 1991). With incredible sensitivity, she recognises the moment of play between a person’s habitus and the institutional features that give it form and that are formed by it. In the final moments, the man makes a decision that upholds the existing dynamics of power. This observation allows one to pinpoint the complex situated and embodied nature of ‘human experience’ that Head seeks to examine in her work (including in her nonfiction writing) as well as the centring of specific instances whereby power dynamics are reinforced even by those who are ostensibly ‘oppressed’. A passage from her novel, A Question of Power, further
links these interpersonal engagements and experiences with those distant from South Africa pointing to systems of power. From the perspective of the main character, Margaret:

The German woman she had lived with in South Africa had told her of how Jewish people awoke one morning to a nightmare like that. Prior to Hitler’s propaganda they had just been like any other German citizens, with family lives and occupations. She came home one evening and remarked on an incident that had taken place in the office where she worked as a typist: ‘I thought I was back in Hitler’s Germany this morning’, she said. “We have our tea served by a young African man. There’s a small swing door at the entrance to our office, and he always comes in that way with the tea-tray. Well, this morning one of the Afrikaners in the office walked up to him and kicked the tray right out of his hands. The cups and sugar and milk all went flying around the place. The Afrikaner turned around to his fellows and burst out laughing. They joined in. I thought the man would be angry. Oh no, he cringed and laughed, too. He said: ‘Ha, ha, baas’. And I thought: ‘I’ve seen this somewhere. The Hitler Youth did this to the Jews. They were so demoralised by the propaganda, they cringed like this man. They began to believe they were inferior, but once the liberation came and the war was over it disappeared overnight. There was no sign of it in them’. Then I thought, ‘The same will happen here. Once these people are free of the humiliation, there will not be a sign left’. (Head 1974, 47)

With this passage, Head lays forms of oppression next to one another and encourages the reader to acknowledge links between them. Anticolonial writers of the period often linked colonial and racist oppression with Hitler’s Germany for its logical correlation as well as its shock value, given the worldwide condemnation of Hitler’s systematic killing and other violence (see for example Césaire 2000 and Senghor 1961).

For today’s reader, Head’s oeuvre is as consistent as Head herself suspects 16 years later. Looking back at what she had accomplished, Head writes, ‘Most of my novels published so far could be said to be didactic works; they were arranged from pre-planned conclusions and principles. I knew what I was preaching against and simply went ahead and preached’ (Head [1978] 1990, 84). Head emerged as a person out of a certain set of circumstances that include the rigidity of apartheid with its high degree of ambient violence (which Fanon [1952] 2008 called a situational neurosis created by colonialism), but it would be a mistake to read Head’s oeuvre ‘as straightforward testimonies of experience’ (Lewis 2007, 17). Rather, in her work, Head moves from the scrutiny of her own lived experience, to others’ experiences, and finally to an exploration of how power generally operates (19).

**Imaginative politics and insurrectionary textuality**

Against the hopeful current of her period, Head’s insight seems to have been that people internalise systems of oppressions to the extent that she had no choice but to gear her efforts to pushing the boundaries of what it is possible to imagine. Given this, Head writing from and against the severity of South African apartheid can be read as an example of insurrectional textuality:

Inasmuch as dominant modes of understanding exist within representational or textual practices, criticism or resistant forms of interpretation are conveyed less through an explicitly argumentative form than through a writing practice that is resistant to familiar modes of representation, one that is self-reflective enough to show how meaning and writing practices are radically entangled in general or one that tends to denaturalise familiar realities by
employing impertinent grammars and figurations, by, in short, making use of insurrectional textuality. (Shapiro 1989, 13)

In her work, Head ‘redefines power and the political. The war is fundamentally a conflict over definition’ (Beard 1991, 586). To this end, Head sticks close to her depiction of how power operates discursively in order to imagine its displacement through her writing and her ‘impertinent’ crafting of tales that she does not simply let lie. In her nonfiction writings she continuously maps out the contours of her fiction, such that ‘the complexity of her vision and her voice have made her inaccessible’ (Beard 1991). Head’s consistent position in this struggle is to envision possibilities. ‘From her earliest work onwards, Head registers a fascination with how the representational impulse, the ability to speak disruptively and to convey a path-breaking vision can be nurtured, realised, and described’ (Lewis 2007, 35). The idea that the abstention of imagination dehumanises is an important one for it seems to drive her consistent desire to centre the human subject in her work, such that her notion of imaginative politics encompasses pushing the boundaries of what is thinkable.

In the context of these dynamic discursive processes, Head and, I would say, Said accepted contradictions with seemingly little anxiety. Said remained unfazed by contradictions in Orientalism (Said 2003). Similarly, in her nonfiction writings, Head appears sanguine about irresolvable tensions. Her insights are open for a variety of (mis)readings. From one angle, that Head adopts oppressive positions in her readings of people (i.e. her reliance on categories of race, gender and ethnicity) may be seen to mark a betrayal, both theoretical and practical, to the explorations she undertakes in her work. This contradiction is not to be dismissed, but it does not invalidate Head’s contributions to the conversations of her time – decolonisation, African nationalism, civil rights, etc. Rather, one might view it as an act of insurrection that Head heads directly at these contradictions and that her conclusions offer no resolutions, no recognition of a tension-free space.

One reason for the lack of emphasis on irresolvable tensions/contradictions may be that emphasis lies elsewhere. For Said, Orientalism is addressed to a 1978 audience and emphasises the notion that a very specific knowledge/power nexus has grown into being that relies on an imbalance in discursive power that is mapped onto global politics with very real outcomes for international politics. Likewise, Head emphasises a dynamic of power that is similarly unfashionable in so far as it cannot be instrumentalisable by actors in the Bourdieusian field of play. For example, her solution [to shock the reader into recognising their neo-slavery – neo-colonialism] is ‘the frank discussion of the effects of cultural colonisation as a form of mental disease, a cultural schizophrenia actualised as a battle for the soul of each and every individual’ (Lorenz 1991, 597). Both Head and Said’s arguments dovetail with other theorists of neo-colonialism.

Yet, many negotiations of Head’s work exhibit an almost fetishistic fascination with the contours of her life that I only briefly touched on above: her unique ‘experiences’ of mental illness, statelessness, racial and gendered transgressions. There are ways in which these contours, however they are ‘enframed’ (Mitchell 1991), can yield a compulsion for expression like this one:

it was as though, in an internal and private way, I perceived the ease with which one could become evil and I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power. This terror of power and an examination of its stark horrors created a long period of anguish in my life and forced out of me some strange novels I had not anticipated writing. It was almost as though
the books wrote themselves, propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environment and historical circumstance that seems to me a howling inferno. (Head [1982] 1990, 102; Lewis 2007, 12)

This is what Lewis sees as a strong moral ‘force’ and vision in Head’s work. The condition that led to this may well have been greater than the fact of her ‘birth’ or the terms of ‘belongingness’. In a particularly moving paragraph, Randolphe Vigne hints at the intensity of the stresses of the period, recognises that a number of their group suffered breakdowns of varying degrees of severity and queries whether this can be considered a coincidence or a consequence of social and political conditions in South Africa (Vigne 1991, 4).

Reading her nonfiction writings, I find that Bessie Head is consistent in her recognition of, and refusal to accept, the parameters set by the circumstances in which she lived, and by her engagement with other writers. By the same token, she allows these parameters to aid her in efforts to carve out a space for herself in Serowe, Botswana, in what comes to be her adopted home after she leaves South Africa on a one-way exit visa in 1964. While Head’s experiences and disposition no doubt impacted her work, and certainly dominate analyses of her work, the social commentary in which she is engaged – particularly with regard to race, gender and governance, and their role in social and institutional forms of oppression – is particularly pertinent for thinking about the contemporary legacies of her work.

Conclusion

Bessie Head is one of the most well known of Africa’s English-language women writers, having authored a number of novels, epistolary pieces and other non-fiction essays (many of which are gathered in A Woman Alone, Head 1990). Head has been the subject of many biographical texts and essays (Eilersen 1995; Cullinan 2005; Vigne 1991). Essays authored by those who knew her and were swept up in similar problematic relations with the South African Government double as memoirs. Texts authored by writers and academics, such as myself, who find Head an interesting figure and writer often present biographical elements in analytical frames. Head’s work has been treated through a number of analytical frames such as madness, feminism, race, gender and postcolonialism (see for example Lionnet 1993; Ibrahim 1996; Atkinson 2011). This literature shows Head as a complex figure that is intelligent, unstable, angry, tender and a casualty of South Africa’s Apartheid system. Concomitantly, it depicts her consistent attempts to think against the grain of binary oppression and resistance by looking at practices of ordinary people. Heavily reliant on first-voice narrative, this literature illustrates Head commenting on national independence, racialism and ordinary life among other socio-political themes pertinent to the ‘turbulent’ 1960s and 70s.

Head understood politics as a process. In fact,

her exploration constantly unearths two principles. One is that power, although sometimes explored only as a material phenomenon is also discursively constructed. [And] social categories and myths in which groups and individuals are located profoundly shape their sense of themselves and their worlds. (Lewis 2007, 24)

Thus, the contours of Head’s work expand widely with her insight into, and attention towards, the human condition. Unlike Said in Orientalism, ‘Head constantly examines
how being-in-the-world may constrain or enable liberating forms of self-identification as well as inter-personal and social relationships’ (Lewis 2007). Ahead of her time, Head was committed to an insistence of the necessity of examining what we now call the ‘lived experience’ of ordinary people.

Social theory caught up with the argument that one must understand gender, for example, as a lived relation, which requires coming to terms with the relationship between agency and experience, and which recognises that people are the subjects of social analysis. A particular division emerged between materialist and culturalist forms of feminism, the area of study in which gendered analyses traditionally take place. Critics of materialist forms of feminism suggest that it privileges ‘simplistic divisions such as base and superstructure, reality and representation in order to assert the primacy of economic forces in their analysis of women’s oppression’ (McNay 2004, 175). Critics of culturalist forms of feminism suspect ‘the effects of the “linguistic” turn in feminist theory which … results in a narrowing down of the issue of oppression to the rarefied one of identity politics’ (McNay 2004). McNay navigates away from these positions and argues that ‘denuded of the idea of experience and attendant notions of self-hood, intention and reflexivity, post-structural work on subjectivity often finds itself without a workable concept of agency with which to animate its notions of resistance, subversion, etc.’, or indeed, I would add, to narrate Head’s unique body of work as one that systematically and intentionally works against epistemic totalitarianism (McNay 2004, 179).

Head makes a set of arguments that can be connected to a conversation on anti-colonialism that is broader than her own personal story. Her A Question of Power is commonly approached as an autobiographical text. It is the case that significant parallels exist between the fictional character Margaret’s life and Head’s own life. Yet in another novel, Maru, Head identifies with the male character. Her work can be read as a site where various analyses of experience meet. In other words, Head’s work belies an awareness that exploring questions of power requires ‘focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of “experience” and on the politics of its construction [is necessary]’ (Scott 1991, 797). But it is not clear that readers are meant to seek internal consistency in Head’s experience and her responses to it, or to encounter her work as an exploration of the human condition more generally. I suggest that it is the latter that drives her commitment to ordinary people’s experiences. Head’s approach presents contemporary social theory with a challenge to epistemic totalitarianism that can be useful for addressing current issues.

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Notes
1. See for example Head 1971 (Maru) and Head 1974 (A Question of Power).
2. For more on the particularities of South Africa’s version of racial segregation that separately designated, legislated for and governed Whites, Coloureds and Blacks, see Clark and Worger [2004] 2013.
3. Bessie Amelia Emery was born in Pietermaritzburg, Natal Province, 1937. Legal provision/prohibitions like the 1927 Immorality Act rendered Head’s very existence evidence of illegality.

4. Eilersen (1995) presents the details of Bessie Head’s birth and childhood in her biography.

5. George Padmore (b. 1903–d. 1959) wrote the book Pan-Africanism or Communism in which he argued that ‘In our struggle for national freedom, human dignity, and social redemption, Pan Africanism offers an ideological alternative to Communism on the one side and Tribalism on the other. It rejects both white racialism and black chauvinism. It stands for racial coexistence on the basis of absolute equality and respect for human personality’ (1972, 355).

6. Eilersen’s (1995) narrative encompasses much that I have not space to include here. Also see Cullinan (2005).

7. Peter Nazareth (2006) writes that Head characterised her own work as non-political (218), but that ‘the introduction of M. J. Daymond [of The Cardinals] indicates that Bessie did not want to write “protest” literature because she believed protest “is an excuse, a cover up” and consequently the lowest form of writing’, (225) thereby indicating a political position.

8. Randolphe Vigne (1991) characterises the Post in this way: ‘Though Post took pains not to offend the authoritarian apartheid government on major issues, it went in for hectically worded crusades on minor issues of race discrimination’ (1).

9. Drum magazine was invested in creating a space for critical engagement with imaginative politics that included a rejection of racialism, for example. Odhiambo uses Kenyatta’s writing to illustrate this point. He suggests that Kenyatta’s writing transitioned from a focus on local Kenyan or Kikuyu interests, to nationalism and Pan Africanism. In fact, ‘Kenyatta makes a culturally significant leap and statement about the imagined African society that belongs to people of all races rather than the indigenous groups only, a subject that exercised the minds of both politicians and the common people’ (Odhiambo 2006, 166–167). Odhiambo acknowledges other voices in this conversation, in particular ‘Julius Nyerere and Tom Mboya, a Kenyan politician. Nyerere’s answer to the question, “Should we get rid of whites?” was simply that “African nationalism is not anti-white but simply anti-colonialism” (Drum March 1959). On the other hand, a reader writing in the January 1968 issue of Drum demands that non-indigenous citizens of African states should behave like “true citizens” be deported. The editor’s response to the opinion calls for racial tolerance and respect for minorities’ (167).

10. This is precisely not a hidden transcript because a hidden transcript is an infrapolitical way to resist. She is talking about just the opposite, it seems: infrapolitical domination, not resistance. That is why this is totalitarian – it starts to shape the most intimate and subtle areas of everyday life.

11. An element exists in Head’s writing of Christian inflected proselytism, particularly in the persistent feelings of being embattled and the idea that she sees things others don’t see.


13. Agency refers to an individual’s capacity for action and cannot be simply understood as a property of unstable discursive structures (McNay 2004, 179–180).

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References

