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"Creative Ferment": Abortion and Reproductive Agency in Bessie Head's *Personal Choices* Trilogy

Abstract

Using original archival research from Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, this article examines representations of abortion in three novels by Bessie Head: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power* (1973). I argue that Bessie Head documents both changing attitudes to terminations of pregnancy and dramatic environmental, medical, and socio-political developments during southern Africa's liberation struggles. Furthermore, her fictional writing queers materialism and its traditionally gender-dichotomous origins, presenting an understanding of development which exceeds temporal or national boundaries. Her treatment of human reproduction in both tangible and figurative terms disrupts teleological definitions of exile: separation and loss, rendered through literal and metaphorical abortions, are seen as inherently vital processes for gaining agency in post/colonial southern Africa. Instead of utilising discourse from contemporary debates about freedom and choice, which are often polarised, I use the term 'reproductive agency' to refer to a continuum of ethical presentness, rooted in considering women's desires. My literary analysis explicitly concentrates on Head's biological imagery of growth and separation and how this ruptures repronormative discourse underpinning colonial expansion in southern Africa. I refer to Head's ethical outlook as a critical form of humanism. My understanding of critical humanism differs from humanism proper in that it relies on queer associations: both queerness as strangeness, and queerness as resistance to categorisation (much like Head's critiques of essentialist national identities). Adapting new materialist theories with postcolonial scholarship, I coin the term 'queer vitality' to argue that abortion involves both tragedy and desire, and that southern African feminist fiction functions as postcolonial theory when the concept of reproductive agency is understood to encompass both individual and collective desires. In Head's words, in her creative worlds, abortion does not signal the ending of a life, but rather a plethora of new possibilities.

Introduction

Academic and biographical accounts of Bessie Head's life almost always begin by listing several formative events, and this article follows in the tradition, if somewhat self-consciously: born in the South African town of Pietermaritzburg in 1937, Head spent her early years under the impression that she was the child of Nellie and George Heathcote, a coloured couple.[i] Then, when as a young teenager she moved to an Anglican boarding school, authorities revealed that her biogenetic parents were a white woman and a black man. Her mother was a patient in a mental hospital and her affluent parents were ashamed of both their daughter and granddaughter, whom they saw as product and proof of an illicit relationship. This traumatic revelation was one of many which Bessie Head would experience while growing up in apartheid South Africa. After working for some years as a teacher and journalist, she chose to exit the country on a one-way permit and live as a refugee in Botswana. These are all facts that the writer is quick to address in her own autobiographical writings.[ii] When reading her fiction, however, it is clear that the author was not as preoccupied with the country of her birth as many believe. The plethora of historical recitations of her early life convey the sense that the South African political climate should be read as the primary thematic driver in her fiction:[iii] a strange situation, since Head is simultaneously referred to as a *Botswanan* writer (nearly all of her fiction is set in rural areas or villages like Serowe). In fact, reviewing secondary material on Head's work gives the distinct feeling that critics have overdetermined her 'tragic' origins as a 'powerless' South African adoptee, despite the fact that Head was extremely critical of biogenetic kin, nationalism, and partisan identification.

In two letters to the South African publisher A.D. Donker written during 1984, Head expresses that she desires for three of her earlier novels – *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru*, and *A Question of Power* – to be published as a trilogy titled "Personal Choices".[iv] The most important reason for gathering these texts is their *thematic* preoccupations, as reflected by the collective title which foregrounds choice. This article examines Head's representation of abortion and related medical

procedures in the *Personal Choices* trilogy, arguing that she anticipates and exceeds contemporary debates about reproductive choice and agency. Putting southern African fiction in dialogue with new materialist theory, I explore how Head experiments with a continuum between the humanism of postcolonial politics and posthumanist theorisations that unsettle anthropocentrism. Head queers non/human agencies through what I term 'creative ferment': individuals in her work possess a queer vitality that continues to be demonstrated in and by the broader political landscape. Her fiction traces forms of self-formation that challenge not only normative models of personal development, but also narrative time. The *Personal Choices* trilogy creates playful subversions of uneven social structures to attain reproductive agency, resisting repronormative readings of abortion as 'tragedy'.

I deviate from the common parlance of reproductive freedom, favouring reproductive agency instead, for two reasons. Firstly, when using the former term, it is unclear whose liberty is being referred to: that of the pregnant woman (and/or person),[v] healthcare providers, or society in general. Secondly and more importantly, the rhetoric of freedom often contains an ironic conundrum. This humanist tenet is almost always associated with liberal 'pro-choice' thought, which in turn often involves more discussions about when and how to abort rather than whether this is an appropriate solution out of the various options that are available to a woman. This is hardly the fault of those who support reproductive freedom; given the fact that the termination of pregnancy remains a taboo topic in most parts of the world, it is important not to give the impression that one is influencing women's decisions when circulating information to raise public awareness. Yet the fact is that dissociations of abortion from discussions of ethics often result in *limitations of choice*, per se, as women remain unconvinced that abortion really can be not only safe and legal, but also ethical.

Abortion and reproductive health are most explicitly discussed in a chapter of Head's first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968). Significantly, the section in question is published as a standalone story in her final (posthumous) collection, *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989).[vi] Her fictional works published between these years – *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), and *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (1977) – are less direct, but no less

important when it comes to discussing corporeality and the critical framework of new materialism. I am particularly struck by the term 'creative ferment', which appears in both *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, and the concept of 'vitality', which recurs throughout all the texts in some shape or form. 'Vitality' shares a root word with 'vitalism', the philosophical concept that states living organisms are distinct from inanimate objects because they are charged by an inexplicable life force. It must be stressed that Head does *not* use the latter term in her fiction and she also resists endorsing animist belief systems. Her views are more akin to the materialist theory of Claire Colebrook,[vii] who writes of "Queer Vitalism" in *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction, Volume Two* (2014). Colebrook attempts to recuperate vitalism from its spiritualist associations by 'queering' the organic/inorganic dualism – but this 'new' intervention remains myopic in its dismissal of agency as a political tool. Later in this article I engage with some specificities of Colebrook's argument, acknowledging the pivotal role of feminist contributions in this debate but further developing her work by forging a queer vital*ity* as seen in Head's fictional oeuvre. Vitality, according to my philosophical definition, is distinct from vitalism in that it has an ethical and political commitment to uncoupling *growth* from *reproduction*, and further disassociating both concepts from Western, materialist conceptions of *development*.

In a letter to Pat and Wendy Cullinan written in 1964, Bessie Head asserts, "I'm the New African who hasn't even started to exist in Africa. This is my continent but I'm not a tribal man. I meet with no hostility just as long as I do not impose my newness and strangeness."[viii] Throughout this article, I demonstrate how Head's metaphorical figure of the New African melds her affirmative and political stances on agency and choice with an ethics of refusal. I begin by offering a brief survey of changing legal approaches, traditional customs, and modern attitudes to reproductive health matters in Botswana during the late twentieth century. After discussing the representation of abortion in postcolonial con/texts and new materialist theory, I move on to my analysis of the novels in the *Personal Choices* trilogy and their communication with queer forms of vitality. My point of entry Head's first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and particularly its engagement with growth and vitality. I argue that the material nature of Head's fiction highlights the intersections between

patriarchal and nationalist anxieties about power in the 1970s (Botswana gained independence from Britain in 1966). Next I move onto a discussion of the two remaining novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. I conclude by considering how Head's queer chronologies present a new and materialist approach to contemporary readings of abortion as both life event and literary device.

Representing Abortion in Southern Africa

The first southern African country to have gained independence from Britain, Botswana saw rapid economic and infrastructural growth from decolonisation from 1966 onwards.[ix] With these developments came an apparent surge of popularity in liberal and feminist values. Published in 1977, Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* presents a series of vignettes which investigate the relationship between physical and mental health, particularly in light of Botswanans' movements from rural to urban settings.[x] Several of the stories allude to women's reproductive agency through adultery, infanticide, and domestic abuse resulting in miscarriages. With such issues being brought to the fore of public discourse, one could optimistically believe that access to abortion would be relatively easy to obtain. Despite such artistic developments, however, the majority of Botswanans believed that abortion was immoral. The country retained very basic laws relating to reproductive health; up until 1991, its Ministry of Justice only allowed pregnancies to be terminated in extreme cases when the life of the woman was in jeopardy.[xi] Much as in the cases of Zimbabwe and South Africa, this meant that poor, uneducated and/or black women were most at risk for complications from unsafe terminations, while those who were more privileged found it easier to approach and pay specialists for their services.

Those who studied traditional attitudes towards abortion near the end of the twentieth century openly admitted that they were baffled by such conservative outlooks, considering that almost all cultures relied on abortifacients or surgically induced miscarriages long before the establishment of Western medical practices.[xii] Rebecca J. Cook and Bernard M. Dickens observe that such hostility towards women's reproductive agency is not only at odds with international mandates like the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also with "the 1981 African Charter [which] gives respect for life in Article 4 to 'Every human being', and provides in Article 16.1 for the health of 'Every individual', which does not clearly cover a child in utero".[xiii] Similarly, social anthropologist Stephanie S. Smith notes in her 2013 study of attitudes to abortion law that Botswana's Penal Code defines the murder of a child as only possible when it exists in a completely independent corporeal state from its mother.[xiv] There is thus clearly a disjuncture between Botswanan citizens' perceptions of foetal agency, national laws about abortion, and the broader directives which most southern African states are purported to adhere to. While Smith's analysis contains some problematic stereotypes – such as the assumption that all modern democracies are necessarily beyond the influence of patriarchal ideology,[xv] or the generalisation that Botswanans have an "informal attitude towards time"[xvi] – she does generate some useful qualitative data about the average citizen's attitudes to reproductive health. Her analysis points towards the inextricable link between fertility and rites of passage in Tswana culture: not only is motherhood seen as synonymous with womanhood, but a Motswana woman is actually given a new name after the birth of her first child.[xvii] This tradition technically values both the gestating person and the foetus, but it is clear that the natalist values of Tswana culture cause most to view abortion as irresponsible, thus giving preferential treatment to the potential life of the foetus. Furthermore, Smith reveals that the Setswana phrase for the medical procedure is "'*go senya mpa*', which translates as 'to spoil/destroy the stomach'".[xviii] The destructive denotation stands in direct contrast with the supposedly creative and nurturing traditional roles of women. Even if they may personally believe that they have the right to control their futures, this expression reveals how anti-abortion values may cause women to feel ambivalent or hostile towards voluntary terminations of pregnancy.

Whether southern African abortion laws were classified as basic or advanced, requirements for special circumstances, doctors, or permissions meant that many faced the risk of illness or death due to complications from pregnancy during the late twentieth century. To the present day, even regions with liberal legislation face hurdles such as providing adequate healthcare facilities and sex

education to the public, as access to a range of gynaecological services remains a problem. Social inequality and various privileges mean that some women have easier access to safe abortions, while others are not even aware that the procedure is legal. The divergence of moral norms and cultural attitudes do nothing to combat this problem, as proven by historian Rebecca Hodes's 2016 article surveying access to illegal abortions before, during, and after apartheid.[xix] Hodes notes in an earlier publication that "postcolonial scholars have […] challenged the artificial separation of biomedicine and 'indigenous' medicine",[xx] and her findings in both studies suggest that researchers need to generate localised understandings of fertility and abortion in particular environments, and not merely replace imperialist or patriarchal laws with generalised rhetoric about 'rights'.

This is a point which Malvern Chiweshe and Catriona Macleod advance in a recent article criticising both liberal approaches to abortion access utilising rights discourse and decolonial perspectives that homogenise definitions of 'African' culture. Chiweshe and Macleod present a grounded reproductive justice approach,[xxi] rejecting what they view as the neo-colonial untranslatability of 'choice' that is present in the larger context of rights rhetoric. They unpack social and cultural discourse, material conditions, and power relations that lead to unsupportable pregnancies, with an approach that is grounded in the traditional philosophies of Hunhu and Ubuntu. These words do not merely denote a shared humanity, but rather show that each individual's existence is connected with the collective and the environment. Their approaches and mine share many characteristics: questioning the rhetoric of 'choice'; centring vulnerable beings through intersectionality; paying attention to geographical and historical contexts; balancing culturally and scientifically recognised knowledges; and asserting that the personal sphere is inherently intertwined with, and representative of, political accountability. Yet while Chiweshe and Macleod use the term 'reproductive justice', I phrase this reproductive shift as one from rights to *agency*. The latter term has been used as a disembodied concept by some neoliberal campaigners for abortion law reform, as Rachelle Chadwick discusses.[xxii] However, I use the term in the new materialist sense, where it "is

rethought as a product of particular assemblages, troubling the notion that agency is something that an individual self or subject 'has' or 'exerts'".[xxiii]

As two internally differentiated fields, new materialism and postcolonialism appear to have very different understandings of agency and (human) life. Whereas postcolonial theorists are generally committed to centralising the human agent who holds or does not hold power, new materialists are mostly concerned with moving beyond humanist constructions of personhood – and sometimes, worryingly, the political implications thereof. Yet both new materialist and postcolonial perspectives use agency in a visionary sense, arguing that it can be utilised to shape the broader ethico-political landscape and create different futures. Throughout this article the two fields counterpoint one another to create both a political and aesthetic critique of abortion and reproductive agency. To this end, I am inspired by Clare Barker's and Stuart Murray's adaptation of Edward Said's "*democratic* criticism" when 'disabling' postcolonialism,[xxiv] exploring a critical approach that is sensitive to both the experience of disability and the histories and specificities of postcolonial contexts. Synthesising approaches from the medical humanities and postcolonial criticism, Barker and Murray not only acknowledge how vital it is to discuss the broader environment when writing of health,[xxv] but also gesture to the participatory possibilities of culture and critique in Said's formulation of "democratic agency".[xxvi] Reproductive agency is utilised throughout this article to form a shared vocabulary focusing on individual and collective desires in postcolonial environments. Within this common ground lies the potential to reorient respect for foetal agency without equivocating it with humanist definitions of 'personhood': in other words, interpreting serious harms to health in a woman-centric way.

Metaphors abound in feminist materialist theory. They also accommodate the inextricable link between fertility and rites of passage in southern Africa: whether this is a symbolic gesture like the aforementioned case of first-time mothers in Botswana being 'baptised' with new names, or merely the fact that some African feminisms centralise motherhood as a source of mythologised power. There are good reasons why one might believe that engaging with such metaphors may have worrying

implications for abortion access. Yet there are also postcolonial feminisms that utilise elements of poststructural thought to treat 'Africa' and 'woman' as open signifiers; they focus on commonalities through material encounters and also differences through the localisation of experiences.[xxvii] What if the metaphorical flourishes of some traditional feminisms were complemented by their counterparts in new waves of feminism? Likewise, what if the political limitations of feminist materialism were counterbalanced with women's material experiences of abortion?

In a recent article titled "Humanist Posthumanism: Becoming-Woman and the Power of the 'Faux'", Claire Colebrook exemplifies Karen Barad and Edward Said as two rare thinkers who exceed the tired dichotomy of fixed and essentialist identity categories (particularly the word 'woman') on the one hand, and the homogenous category of 'we' humans on the other.[xxviii] Her evocation of Barad and Said is vital since both are formative influences in the fields of new materialism and postcolonial studies. What is inspirational here is the collaboration between two vastly different schools of thought and her insistence that both, actually, might be utilised to embrace posthumanism's 'faux' limitations.[xxix] That is, she argues for resisting "the hyper humanism of feminist posthumanism" or "pure becoming" that posits some feminisms are more 'real' than others and reminds the reader that poststructural thought must recognise all signifiers are inherently false.[xxx] Similarly, I approach new materialism from a postcolonial feminist perspective. How might southern African literature allow for non-anthropocentric, yet politically aware, views on reproductive agency to be expressed? Can such accounts of abortion disrupt the notion that the gestating body is a mere vessel for the embryo – a body that may develop to propagate the patriarch's genes – thereby disengaging gender from sexual difference, and further challenging repronormative and nationalist lineages? These are not questions that can simply be answered with one side of a theoretical coin; neither animism nor vitalism applies in such cases. Rather, as I discuss at length in my literary analysis, there is a queer vitality at play.

Queer theorist Jennifer Doyle notes that traumatic or 'tragic' abortion stories are often privileged in favour of treating abortion as a mundane and everyday reality.[xxxi] Such discursive erasure is performed by those both for and against abortion, as the thought that a woman may *desire*

to deliberately terminate a pregnancy remains unpalatable to many.[xxxii] Yet what emerges in the study of southern African fiction is that abortion stories often are not simple narrative arcs of women overcoming oppression. Even in cases where political issues like abortion access do inform the plot, there are multiperspectival moments where anthropocentrism is unsettled, thereby challenging humanist associations of legal personhood with power. Similarly to Colebrook's point on resisting strict dichotomies when thinking through feminist and postcolonial critical theories, my emphasis is that such abortion narratives *are* formations of desire; such fictions unsettle the binary of human rights narratives with linear trajectories, on the one hand, and experimental tales of sexual embodiment on the other. Aesthetic representations of abortion in southern Africa challenge normative sexual discourse to both political and ethical ends. Specifically, metaphorisations of abortion in Head's fiction defy nationalist teleologies, whether they are expressed by the racialised political violence of colonisers, or through the insidious sexualised control of the traditionalists who follow in their wake.

One is reminded here of Edward Said's distinction between filiation and affiliation.[xxxiii] According to Said, contemporary textual critics may form their opinions in one of two ways: either in response to unchosen genetic and early environmental factors like their nationalities or places of birth, or by actively forging new allegiances based on similar social and political values. In his recent work on transcultural adoption, John McLeod moves further beyond normative notions of literal or metaphorical family by envisioning identity formation not through a blood-line but as the "life line" in the palm of a hand, a crease in the skin which is determined, up to a point, by biogenetic inheritance, yet shaped by the agency and actions of the individual.[xxxiv] There are certainly differences between affiliation and "adoptive being",[xxxv] but both Said's and McLeod's couching of this distinction in biological terms (between faithfulness to what one is descended from, and devotion to that which one is *not* related to) is particularly interesting. In Head's fiction, women certainly gain agency through nonbiological linkages. This is even the case when they bond over shared stories of embodied processes like abortion, childbirth and domestic violence. Head's situated understanding of multiple

genders within rural Botswanan society works against the 'Mother Africa' trope found in many nationalist writings and sentiments of the time. Experiments with chronology in her earlier works show how male 'tenderness' and female 'power' are encoded with the queer and vital potential of self-formation.

Claire Colebrook has recently grappled with vitalism's queer potentiality. She distinguishes between "active" and "passive" vitalism;[xxxvi] while queer theory can be built on either, she argues that the former invests too heavily in the social construct of the self through familial relations.[xxxvii] Considering the above discussion of af/filiation and adoptive being, it would appear that such a distinction would be useful for analysing an oeuvre like Bessie Head's, with all its references to abortion, adoption, and other disruptions of repronormative teleology. Yet I take issue with Colebrook's dismissal of agency or activity in favour of passivity. In a 2014 article on creative becoming and patiency, philosopher Patrice Haynes criticises how some theories informed by Colebrook's work associate masculinity "with vibrant, creative productivity, [while] woman is aligned with less favoured qualities such as passivity, reproduction and inertia".[xxxviii] This is a fair criticism of new materialisms, particularly those iterations which are dedicated solely to considering Western theorising of agentive activity. However, reproduction is *not* passive; regardless of outcome (parenthood or living childfree), reproductive agency allows for multiple forms of vital potential to emerge. Haynes (and, by extension, Colebrook) relies here on the very dualistic nature of difference that she criticises, by distinguishing one 'strain 'of vitalism from another and suggesting that only one holds feminist or queer potential. I do share their suspicion of materialist feminists 'focus upon the agentive potential of *matter*, as a grown woman undoubtedly holds more intentional clout than foetal tissue (even if both possess agency in the recalcitrant and disruptive sense that the new materialists suggest humanist accounts exclude). That said, Colebrook's evocation of 'passive vitalism 'tends too

much to the side of political inertia,[xxxix] and her chapter in *Sex After Life* feels half-developed as it closes by quoting Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari rather than formulating what her own queer vitalism entails. Furthermore, I am not inclined to invoke theology as a corrective to materialist theory's shortcomings (as Haynes does), since Head remains agnostic by evoking a range of religious images alongside distinctly Darwinist theories.

Yet it would be foolish to pose Colebrook's intricate philosophical construction as a strawperson argument. Her theory is notable, particularly when concerning this study, for its focus upon queer *desire* as a curative solution to vitalisms which focus too heavily upon biological reproduction as a normative marker of social development. She argues that queer vitalism is less involved with majoritarian modes of identity politics than with celebrating the potentiality of difference as a positive force that makes one 'queer' to others and the multiple individuals within oneself. Wearing her poststructuralist influences firmly on her sleeve, she argues for considering "life beyond the concept of the person":[xl] using the example of a gay couple who want to have a child, she suggests moral arbiters should consider how both revolutionary and normative desires may constitute such a wish. The lack of political impetus in Colebrook's work leaves much to be desired – but the concept of desire is itself a source of affirmative potential when employed in conjunction with postcolonial theory. The limits of deconstructionist theory, which informs most new materialist thought, may thus be overcome by utilising more intentional conceptions of agency and vital potential. The analysis that follows adapts Colebrook's lexicon of queer vitalism and desire in conjunction with southern African feminisms; Head's *Personal Choices* trilogy, I argue, looks towards a fully-formed and political mode of vitalism, a queer vitality.

Queer Vitality and The *Personal Choices* Trilogy

Head's first published novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, narrates the story of a South African refugee in Botswana named Makhaya who joins forces with a British-born farmer to try and help their adoptive village through a drought. Unsurprisingly, there is a recurrence of dust in the rural setting,[xli]

and the "arid land" and "barren earth" is a literally sterile environment (116). It simultaneously figures for the stifling sense of fear and social seclusion in southern Africa during the twentieth century: the narrator's observation that "few black men in their sane mind envied or cared to penetrate the barrier of icy no-man's-land which was the white man and his world" could easily refer to any country with a history of racism and colonial control (125). Land, as a metaphorical device, also relates to tribalism (a word Head often invokes in her earlier works), particularly the issue of tribal land tenure (38). To the present day, land ownership remains a heated topic in southern Africa, since the governments of post-independence South Africa and Botswana did not compensate people whose ancestors were dispossessed of their properties under colonial rule.[xlii]

Yet the text also presents various surprising moments of literal and metaphorical growth. There are disruptive images and passages where life emerges amidst barrenness, such as the fragile grass which grows and spreads as an allegory for development as a creative and agentive process (37). Makhaya reinforces experimental associations of identity formation when he invites the women of the village to help with farming and gardening: "Perhaps," he thinks, "all change in the long run would depend on the women of the country and perhaps they too could provide a number of solutions to problems he had not yet thought of" (43). His view of women as catalysts of social change is a somewhat unconventional attitude in the traditionally patriarchal setting of a rural village. Shortly after this scene, the narrator reinforces this sense of development by observing that "things were changing rapidly […] and the change was not so much a part of the fashionable political ideologies of the new Africa as the outcome of the natural growth of a people" (45). Here, Head is quite literally naturalising an alternative narrative to those that render postcolonial southern Africa as dangerous and degenerating. The people of the village have not been influenced by 'new', imported materialist theories. Rather, they negotiate between themselves in order to best arrive at practical solutions to political or environmental crises. The repeated greeting used by the villagers, "branch-of-my-tree" (76), is one illustrative instance of such interconnected vitality.

I have already elucidated that Botswana is a comparatively conservative country, especially when considering the issue of reproductive agency. Counter to this fact, the scene which addresses abortion in *When Rain Clouds Gather* marks a moment of development for the rural community. Chapter four opens with a detailed description of Chief Sekoto, a jovial man whose brother Matenge is the novel's primary antagonist (later in the novel, he usurps Sekoto's role as chief of the village). Sekoto rules over court cases, and one day he is asked to make a particularly difficult verdict: a traditional healer named Mma-Baloi is suspected of killing children to use their body parts for witchcraft and accused of murdering a young woman who visited her house to seek medical treatment. Sekoto is aware of public opinion but turns to the local doctor, who reveals that the children's deaths were a result of pneumonia and the young woman "died of a septic womb due to having procured an abortion with a hooked and unsterilized instrument. He would say that the septic condition of the womb had been of three months' duration" (53). Hearing this information, the Chief rules that the people of Bodibeng are misguided and that they "falsely accuse [the old woman] of a most serious crime which carries the death sentence" (54). Importantly, the crime he is referring to is the practice of witchcraft; the traditional healer's attempts to help a 'wayward' woman with sepsis carry no consequences.

The chief rules that each family in the village must donate an animal as payment for their prejudice. His kindness towards the old woman is revealed to have personal motivations when he confesses that he is "tired of the penicillin injections" that he is given at the hospital for "an ailment", and he hints that "perhaps your good herbs may serve to cure me of my troubles" (54). Penicillin is commonly used to treat sexually transmitted infections, and this vulnerable but humorous monologue from Sekoto reinforces a later offhand remark that "[t]he Chiefs all had syphilis" (65). Nevertheless, whether through Western science or traditional remedies, his decisions are motivated by medical facts. They are also in keeping with sentiments expressed earlier in the novel by Makhaya that "witch doctors were human, and nothing, however odd and perverse, need be feared if it was human" (11). This humanising impulse relies on a critical humanism, which renders supposedly bizarre or

incomprehensible methods of healing as interconnected with normative (Western) understandings of human health and wellbeing. Anti-abortion or repronormative rhetoric may similarly be challenged by emphasising the importance of agency in post/colonial contexts.

Chief Sekoto's benevolent attitude renders him as the antithesis of his brother Matenge, whose personality the narrator summarises as such: "People were not people to him but *things* he kicked about, pawns to be used by him, to break, banish, and destroy for his entertainment" (176; emphasis added). In this description, the writer displays a certain wariness of southern African tribalism, warning that it can be just as problematic as the masculinist rule of colonial powers. This becomes apparent to the villagers, too, after Matenge victimises a bereaved mother whose child dies of tuberculosis while staying at a cattle outpost during the drought. Through "a strange gathering-together of all their wills" (182),[xliii] the community marches to the chief's house, where he locks himself inside and decides to commit suicide instead of facing justice. There is a sustained metaphorisation of termination here, as a corrupt political figure is removed – by public pressure – from a position of power. After the chief commits suicide, rain starts to fall (184): a literal reminder of the potentialities of social formations. The last lines of *When Rain Clouds Gather* speculate that it was "as if everything was uncertain, new and strange and beginning from scratch" (188). The rebirth of society in Head's novel is precipitated by a single mother's mourning, but it is *achieved* through collective agency – which, in turn, is informed by creative local leaders and the fresh views of outsiders like Makhaya.

Power and tenderness are uncoupled from gendered associations in scenes involving Makhaya and Chief Sekoto, two prominent male figures who express their authority playfully, appearing open to transgressive potentialities. Makhaya is a mysterious figure – he is referred to by himself and others as both Black Dog and "mad dog" (130) – yet he makes people feel at ease. When a female character suggests that this is because "[h]e takes away the feeling in us that he is a man" (113), she appears to be referring not so much to his gender as to his transgressive anthropomorphising of the elements – and his queering of human power through nonhuman agencies. As Makhaya builds a fire (a

traditionally feminised activity in southern Africa), we are told that in contrast to the other villagers, he "treated each stick as a separate living entity" (140). Earlier in the novel he reflects upon "this mass of suffering mankind of which he was a part, but he also saw himself as a separate particle", and later he begins "to stress his own separateness, taking this as a guide that would lead him to clarity of thought in all the confusion" (81). Through the inorganic agentive forces of particles – related to tinder and fire – Makhaya fixates not upon an inherent interconnectedness of all beings, but rather upon the agency that emerges from their distinctness. Returning to the earlier discussion of Colebrook's perspective on desire and difference, ecology is coded with queer vitality here in the sense that all these elements are *individuals* in a broader, political landscape. This transgressive developmental continuity is conceptualised even further in *Maru*.

The second text in Head's *Personal Choices* trilogy is also concerned with issues of literal and figurative re/creation – or anxieties about a lack thereof. As has been observed in several analyses of the text and in Stephen Gray's introduction to the Heinemann edition, the book's title (taken from one of its central protagonists), *Maru*, means "the elements" in Tswana.[xliv] The metaphorical treatment of ecological sterility in the novel extends beyond the earth; as Joyce Johnson notes in her study of the novel, "[t]he contrast between the sun with its boundless and uncontrolled energy and the fretful and *abortive* rain clouds […] highlights difference in the personalities of Moleka and Maru".[xlv] The titular character is one of several Totems or chiefs in the village of Dilepe; Moleka is his friend, another chief who is more stereotypically masculine and ostensibly powerful in the rural community. Both men fall in love with Margaret Cadmore, a Masarwa teacher and artist who is discriminated against because of her San heritage. Margaret's biogenetic mother died the day she was born, and she was adopted by a white woman of the same name who treated her relatively generously but also viewed her as something of a test subject, with "one of her favourite, sweeping theories being: environment everything; heredity nothing".[xlvi] Head places herself at a remove from such a deterministic position, opting instead to treat Margaret's identity formation ambivalently as the young woman negotiates the men's affections and her own growing feelings for Moleka.

Head's contestation of the so-called nature/nurture debate and affirmative rhetoric surrounding Westernised biological discourse begins early in the narrative with mention of blood: it is a pivotal substance in the narrative, particularly when establishing connections between characters. Maru imagines that other villagers are trying to conceal their thoughts from him, but reveals that "he could see and hear everything, even their bloodstreams and the beating of their hearts" (2). The phrase "They did not greet one another. Their bloodstreams were one" is repeated almost verbatim in reference to Maru's relationships with both his sister Dikeledi and his friend Ranko whom he employs as a spy (43). Here the filiative and affiliative are indeterminate, again, as characters' hearts and bloodstreams grow to signify an interconnected vitality. The rural community's vital continuities are best epitomised through Margaret, an 'outsider' who assimilates quickly in the village and who is described in strikingly similar terms to the 'new African' in Head's letters and the 'new and strange' societal rebirth at the close of *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The narrator explains of Margaret's nature, "*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" (10; emphasis added). Margaret *exceeds* the definition and limitations of her Masarwa heritage, particularly as she goes on to destabilise the power dynamic between two traditionally authoritative men.

Moleka is described early in the novel as a stereotypically masculine figure: alongside his physical and sexual prowess as a womaniser, his voice is so commanding that it appears to cause rooms to vibrate (19). Vibration is symbolic shorthand for power here, much as it is for Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*.[xlvii] Yet there are important differences between the two authors' definitions of authority: Head's philosophising is distinctly southern African, and feminist, as the autochthonous figure Margaret grows more and more important in both the narrative and her community. The young woman desires "a whole life of vibrating happiness" (13), and this vitality makes her romantically attractive to the infamously noncommittal chief. Yet, at the same time, Margaret also shares characteristics with Moleka's foil, Maru. The latter man is more artistically minded: "*Creative imagination* he had in over-abundance. Moleka had none of that *ferment*, only an over-abundance of

power" (45; emphasis added). Like bacterial cultures found growing in petri dishes or barrels of traditional beer, creativity and ferment appear synonymous to Head (and both, in this sentence, are at a remove from conventional definitions of political authority). In fact, the phrase "creative ferment" recurs in a later description of Maru (54). Margaret is also creative-minded; her artistic "skill for rapid reproduction of life, on the spot" draws the admiration of both Dikeledi and Maru (69). The lines between artistic and sexual recreation are blurred not only by this intense admiration, but also by the fact that the subject matter of her drawings is later described as "[w]hat she was trying to give birth to" (87). In contrast to Dikeledi, who marries Moleka after being impregnated by him, Margaret remains childless throughout the narrative, even in the opening segment of the text, a vignette looking forward to her married life with Maru. In a sense, then, the potential 'ferment' of an unsatisfying marriage is tempered by Margaret's artistic agency, the one arena in which she can express and act upon her true desires.

Margaret chooses to thematise ordinary village scenes in her work for the reason that they "were the best expression of her own vitality" (87), noting that

> There was this striking vitality and vigour in her work and yet, for who knew how long, people like her had lived faceless, voiceless, almost nameless in the country. That they had a life or soul to project had never been considered. (88)

Tackling Botswana rural life as subject matter is clearly an issue of representation to the Masarwa-born woman. Her artistic projects prove an underlying vitality connecting *all* those in the community, despite their various genetic or national roots. But it must be stressed that this worldview still treats the villagers as individuals: hers is not the homogenising impulse of her adoptive mother, the white woman Margaret who would have liked for all human beings to be equal in a 'colour-blind' epistemology that completely disregards genetic heritability. The young Margaret, in contrast, upholds the queer potential of vitality by refusing to take an all-or-nothing approach to philosophies of personal development. The new African is an artist who is attuned to the potential of both biology and environment, creation and fermentation; she is not a Nietzschean 'yes-man', but a maybe-woman.

By this I do not mean that Head lacks a developed political agenda of her own; rather, there is a multifaceted and processual nature to her affirmative stance. Her seemingly paradoxical formulation of creative ferment accommodates negation to allow for an ethics of refusal. For at the end of the text, in scenes which chronologically precede its proleptic opening, Margaret *loses* her vitality. Learning of Moleka's marriage to Dikeledi, she falls into a "living death" (101): "A few vital threads of her life had snapped behind her neck and it felt as though she were shrivelling to death, from head to toe" (96). This catatonic state renders her vulnerable to Maru's marriage proposal, aborting her artistic capabilities and the agency they afford her. Both her creativity and her sexual desires are overridden by patriarchal domination and pressure for a heterosexist *telos*. In a sense, then, there are actually three Margarets in the text: the social-determinist adoptive mother, the docile wife whom we encounter at the nonlinear 'beginning' of the novel, and the creative virgin whose aborted vitality courses through the rest of the text, charging much of its narrative development and the shifting philosophical and political outlooks of the village's previously prejudiced characters.

The most widely debated of all Head's novels is undoubtedly *A Question of Power*. Written two years after *Maru*, this text also thematises a clear aversion to sexual reproduction in favour of other creative endeavours, as Elizabeth Tucker notes in an instructive 1988 article.[xlviii] Reception of *A Question of Power* is particularly interesting for its association of Head with potential artistic influences: Desiree Lewis compares vacillating reception of Bessie Head to critical responses to Sylvia Plath;[xlix] Joyce Johnson likens the novel to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* because of the use of myth and human 'types' throughout history;[l] and Maria Olaussen notes that Head identified with elements of Olive Schreiner's work.[li] Crucially, all three of these authors – Plath, Joyce, and Schreiner – thematise women's reproductive agency in their fiction.[lii] As Olaussen's words illustrate, they may also prove to be fruitful comparative partners to Head for highlighting her continuous interest in tensions between the universal and the local, or the modern and the rural, and how these conflicts code for gendered power struggles.

I would go further by highlighting echoes in *A Question of Power* of another literary influence who is concerned with reproductive autonomy and societal pressures: Thomas Hardy. Like the appearance in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* of Little Father Time, who hangs himself and his two siblings with the suicide note "Done because we are too menny",[liii] Head's novel features a strangely named boy who is unusually preoccupied with suffering for a young child. The protagonist Elizabeth has a son nicknamed Shorty whose morbid anxieties are frequently paired with misspellings or incorrect grammar; this is particularly apparent when he describes "a dog what died",[liv] and, soon after, as he writes in a letter to his mentally ill and hospitalised parent, "Dare Mother, when are you coming home?" (182). Hardy's text is notable for its complex treatment of female sexuality through Sue Bridehead, a character who avoids engaging in sexual intercourse for most of the narrative and who miscarries one of the children she later conceives with her first cousin, the titular Jude. There is a clear fixation here on heredity and genetic anxieties, which is similarly extended in Head's novel through Elizabeth's dreamlike (or, more often, nightmarish) encounters with two imaginary figures named Sello and Dan. Her spiritual twin Sello is sceptical of Africanism, an ideology that the narrator raises when critiquing a term which is often used to rally sympathy in political causes in southern Africa, 'my people':

> When someone says 'my people' with a specific stress on the blackness of those people, they are after kingdoms and permanently *child-like slaves*. 'The people' are never going to rise above the status of 'the people'. They are going to be told what is good for them by the '*mother*' and the '*father*'. (63; emphasis added)

Suspicion of sexual reproduction and filiation takes on a political impetus here. Head's critical humanism seeks to move past the condescendingly racist (and controllingly nationalist) undertones of the possessive pronoun 'my' – if not the very repronormative and heterosexist logic underpinning supposedly progressive identity politics. Yet Elizabeth is still susceptible to feelings of shame about her political positionality as an ostensibly coloured woman in southern Africa. When Dan mocks her indeterminate genetic origins, she imagines that "he was African, she was mixed breed. What a plague that was! 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). Through the rhetorical register of breeding, infection, and biogenetic origins, Elizabeth renders her fears of an ultimately intangible figure – and his loyalty to an idealised and homogenised 'Africa' – in clinical, scientific terms.

While it is illuminating to consider the literary roots of Head's thematic preoccupations as well as the cross-pollination of reproductive anxieties in both Euro-American and southern African anglophone aesthetics, it must be noted that *A Question of Power* is not as bleak in its outlook as Hardy's fiction. As Jane Bryce-Okunlola points out,[lv] Elizabeth plans to kill herself and Shorty but he stops her by showing he trusts her (174), and when she plans suicide again later her son distracts her by asking for a football (193). Instead of terminating their struggles, she resolves to let them continue. This sense of cyclical inevitability is reinforced by Elizabeth's growing resolution to accept the nurturing role of motherhood. Initially focusing upon her own origins as an orphan whose biogenetic family pay a woman to care for her, Elizabeth remembers with reverence her maternal grandmother, who visited her every weekend during her childhood in South Africa: "It was such a beautiful story, the story of the grandmother, her defiance, her insistence on filial ties in a country where people were not people at all" (17). Yet in Botswana, the protagonist later prioritises her own potential as a carer and *exceeds* received definitions of filiation. A striking illustration of this point is how she calls the American expatriate Tom her son (183), even after he asserts he left the USA and his biogenetic family because he does not need mothers (121). Her relationship with the foreigner grows into a 'life line'; when she suffers a mental breakdown, for instance, Tom is the only villager who visits her in hospital and he correctly predicts that she will recover. The thought of her biogenetic and adoptive sons living in a future without her is what keeps Elizabeth fighting against her spiritual visions, eventually leading Sello to reveal that he used her as a pawn in conquering Dan (whom he also discloses is Satan).

Elizabeth's mental rebirth is precipitated, rather fittingly, with the sustained description of a "long thread-like filament like an umbilical cord" (117): "Attached to its other end was Sello. […] As she looked at it, it parted in the middle, shrivelled and died. The huge satanic image of Sello

opened its swollen, depraved mouth in one long scream" (140). I say this is fitting and not ironic because the protagonist's identity formation is contingent upon her *own* agency rather than the actions of her supposed soulmate (whom, it is crucial to note, appears just as demonic as the devil himself). With the withering of the umbilical cord, and Sello's metaphorical abortion, both he and Dan begin to lose their hold on her mental health. Shortly after this scene we are introduced to a character called The Womb who acts as a sexual surrogate for Elizabeth with Dan (146-47). The Womb is pivotal to the text's denouement: entering the narrative at the exact moment that the spiritual twin loses his power, she provides Elizabeth with a new perspective on female sexuality – from the creatively *embodied* position of female reproductivity. At this highly symbolic point in the text, homosexuality is also raised as an ethical concern. Elizabeth reacts to queer desire (which Dan brands a 'universal' phenomenon) with shock, thinking of both Dan and Sello as perverts for engaging in homosexual intercourse (138). Yet there are contradictions here in her attitude,[lvi] not least because the two figures engage in heterosexual acts that she finds equally abhorrent. This fear of carnality takes a quite literal turn when she says of Dan, "He's a homosexual, but he also sleeps with cows and anything on earth" (148).[lvii] Yet she grows to disregard the coupled men and their taunting, becoming more concerned instead by the figure of The Womb, who steals one of her floral dresses which has a pattern "symbolic of appeal, creativity and vitality" (165). Elizabeth thus embarks on a quest to reclaim the agency she has lost, which involves reconciling herself to the fact that she herself contains a strange amalgamation of embodied desire and queer vitality. Sello reinforces her similarity to The Womb when he confesses at the narrative's conclusion, "It wasn't power that was my doom. It was women; in particular a special woman who formed a *creative complement* to me, much like the relationship you and I have had for some time" (199; emphasis added). Considering his words, it is clear the figurative abortion scene advances not an ending, but rather a new beginning: Elizabeth's male 'twin' is replaced by his creative complement, the overtly sexualised Womb, who causes the protagonist to reflect upon her positionality as a mother and woman of colour in Botswana. In looking forward to a

future without Dan and Sello, but with her two children, she chooses to embrace the fact that the "creative ferment" of desire is integral to her identity (57).

A Question of Power is divided into two sections (named after Sello and Dan, respectively), and while discussing terminations, it is worth considering the literal endings of each part of the text. The first section closes with Elizabeth vowing to herself, "Oh God […] May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds" (100). This emphasis on multiplicities implies that there are several creative forces at play in the society and the protagonist is one of several agencies who may decide to either help or hinder potential new ways of living. The final section of the text also concludes with the protagonist speaking to herself; as she announces, "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). Head is constantly experimenting with the idea of a hybrid prophet in this trilogy. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* it is a 'mad' man-dog, but in *A Question of Power* it is a female prophet, specifically the woman who embraces negation for opening up alternative futures and lives. The Womb epitomises creative ferment and encourages Elizabeth to accept the messy indeterminacies of embodiment, to divorce herself from her mental demons by grounding herself in material reality and desires. This is made particularly apparent by the closing words of the novel: "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (206). These final lines advance a solution to the eponymous 'question': power lies in a sense of environmental situatedness and interconnected vitality. The protagonist's gentle reverence of the land appears to quell her earlier anxieties about how to belong in southern Africa as a woman of indeterminate genetic origins.

Conclusion

Aesthetically naturalising agency throughout the *Personal Choices* trilogy, Head explores how individuals' actions and desires are all interlinked by a strange and persistent vitality: one which manifests itself in nonhuman *and* human forms. The trilogy both parallels and challenges contemporary understandings of intersubjective connectivity by conceiving of political power as

contingent upon ecological forces, years before materialist and vitalist theories took their recent turn away from stereotypically white, male, heterosexual, and cisgender figures of authority. Head's philosophy is *actively* invested in foregrounding the figure and spirit of the fully-formed human – even when utilising elemental and environmental imagery and metaphors. Her vitality quite literally seeks to breathe life into old and new outlooks: she is against the nostalgic logic of colonial expansion as much as she is critical of emerging African nationalisms, since a repetitive and uncritically humanist hierarchy of power appears to underlie these disparate political causes. Abortion figures symbolically in her fiction for this tussle between established and developing regimes. Furthermore, scenes featuring discussions of actual abortions, adoptions, and related processes display a surprisingly progressive attitude to reproductive agency; they present readers with an imagined alternative to dominant discourse on women's sexual health and rights.

Bessie Head's distinctly African perspective tempers the more apolitical aspects of new materialism. Her very texts are symbolic of life lines: setting her fiction almost exclusively in Botswana, but thematising works by geographically distant writers who also fixate upon sexual reproduction and terminations, she foregrounds how identity is predicated by genetic material, environmental factors, *and* individual desires. This has enormous political implications, particularly in postcolonial contexts, where the agency of autochthonous people (and their literary-theoretical treatment) has historically been ignored. Throughout Head's fictional corpus readers are confronted with images of bodies at all stages of life: foetal forms, stillbirths, abandoned children, virgins, sex workers, newlyweds, biogenetic and adoptive mothers, dying leaders, and more. Her characters adopt multiple identities and her narratives alternate between varying perspectives and rebirths, complicating the linear continuum along which such markers of development supposedly fall. The result is that creativity and fermentation function synonymously in her fiction. Furthermore, her writing promises that a southern African feminism may emerge by cutting ties with colonial and repronormative tropes like 'mother Africa' and 'the motherland', focusing instead on queer desires. 'Queer', here, is both sexual and strange: it alludes to shared vulnerabilities between all organisms,

but also instructs individuals to be open to difference and to recognise that one is constantly becoming a stranger to oneself, irrespective of whether one reproduces or not. Queer vitality questions the apparent continuity between parenthood and personal or social development. It also interrogates normative markers of development which are popular in Western cultural and literary canons. There is transgressive potentiality in subverting traditional chronologies through narrative form and content, not least for challenging capitalist and colonial excesses. Playful inversions of power dynamics affirm the potentiality of the new African, the embodiment of creative ferment. The most apt illustration of this figure is one who defies repronormativity: she who believes abortion is not the denial of a future, but rather an affirmation of agency.

Patient and Public Involvement

This research was undertaken without patient or public involvement.

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Notes

[i] In South Africa, the term 'coloured 'is used to refer to people of mixed ethnic descent – particularly those whose ancestors were South- and Southeast Asian slaves. Even in the post-transitional democracy, such groups mostly embrace this term, and it is one of the country's five racial population groups listed in the census.

[ii] Bessie Head, *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1990), 3-5.

[iii] For two 'text-book' summaries of Head's "traumatic life" see *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egyptian to the Present*, ed. Margaret Busby (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992): 482; *South African Women Today*, ed. Margaret Lessing (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1994).

[iv] Letter from Bessie Head to A.D. Donker, 1 July 1984. Bessie Head Holdings, Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, Makhanda: B11, Box 2007.12.1, Folder 12.9; Letter from Bessie Head to A.D. Donker, 20 July 1984. Bessie Head Holdings, Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, Makhanda: B11, Box 2007.12.1, Folder 12.10.

[v] The latter term includes trans* individuals who do not identify as women but are still capable of becoming pregnant. My reason for not using this term throughout is that all cases discussed in these fictions involve cisgender women.

[vi] Bessie Head, *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1990).

[vii] Although she often focuses upon challenges facing posthumanism and feminist science studies, Colebrook's work is more consumed by sexual difference than feminist materialism. Nevertheless, some interpret her interest in Deleuzian theory as indication of a new materialist framework; see, for example, Myra J. Hird, "Feminist Matters: New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference", *Feminist Theory* 5, no. 2 (2004): 223-32.

[viii] Letter from Bessie Head to Pat and Wendy Cullinan, 28 September 1964. Bessie Head Holdings, Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, Makhanda: B11, Box 2015.176, Folder 1.4.

[ix] Stephanie S. Smith, "The Challenges Procuring of Safe Abortion Care in Botswana", *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 17, no. 4 (2013): 44.

[x] Bessie Head, *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (London: Heinemann, 1992).

[xi] Rebecca J. Cook and Bernard M. Dickens, *Emerging Issues in Commonwealth Abortion Laws, 1982* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1983): 58. Abortion is now legal under certain conditions, but only within the first 16 weeks of pregnancy.

[xii] Cook and Dickens, *Emerging Issues*, 122.

[xiii] Cook and Dickens, *Emerging Issues*, 63.

[xiv] Stephanie S. Smith, "Reproductive Health and the Question of Abortion in Botswana: A Review", *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 17, no. 4 (2013): 30.

[xv] Smith, "Reproductive Health", 28.

[xvi] Smith, "Challenges", 44.

[xvii] Smith, "Reproductive Health", 30.

[xviii] Smith, "Reproductive Health", 50 (emphasis added).

[xix] Rebecca Hodes, "The Culture of Illegal Abortion in South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 93.

[xx] Rebecca Hodes, "The Medical History of Abortion in South Africa, c.1970–2000", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39.3 (2013): 528.

[xxi] Malvern Chiweshe and Catriona Ida Macleod, "Cultural De-colonisation versus Liberal Approaches to Abortion in Africa: The Politics of Representation and Voice", *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 22, no. 2 (2018): 57.

[xxii] Rachelle Chadwick, *Bodies That Birth: Vitalising Birth Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018): 9.

[xxiii] Chadwick, *Bodies that Birth*, 11.

[xxiv] Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, "Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism", in *The Disability Studies Reader* (4th ed.), ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 62.

[xxv] Barker and Murray, "Disabling Postcolonialism", 70.

[xxvi] Barker and Murray, "Disabling Postcolonialism", 72.

[xxvii] Malvern Chiweshe, Jabulile Mavuso and Catriona Macleod, "Reproductive Justice in Context: South African and Zimbabwean Women's Narratives of their Abortion Decision", *Feminism & Psychology* 27, no. 2 (2017): 204.

[xxviii] Claire Colebrook, "Humanist Posthumanism: Becoming-Woman and the Powers of the 'Faux'", *academia.edu*, accessed 17 April 2019, 2-4. <https://www.academia.edu/30806048/Humanist_Posthumanism_Becoming-Woman_and_the_Powers_of_the_Faux>

[xxix] Colebrook, "Humanist Posthumanism", 17.

[xxx] Colebrook, "Humanist Posthumanism", 17.

[xxxi] Jennifer Doyle, "Blind Spots and Failed Performance: Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory", *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 18, no. 1 (2009): 25-52. Doyle simultaneously provides an excellent description of misogyny-by-omission in the work of Lee Edelman, probably the most notable queer theorist to have argued against procreation. Analysing his antinatalist critique of the 'Child', which he develops from the depiction of a foetus on a billboard funded by anti-abortionists, she observes that "The pregnant woman disappears into an amorphous and undefined background, even in Edelman's refusal of the image's ideological call" (32). For further critique of Edelman and anti-futurity's complicity with hyper-capitalism, see Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

[xxxii] Doyle," Blind Spots", 26.

[xxxiii] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 23-34.

[xxxiv] John McLeod, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 26.

[xxxv] McLeod, *Life Lines*, 23.

[xxxvi] Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 2* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities, 2014), 100.

[xxxvii] Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, 100-101.

[xxxviii] Patrice Haynes," Creative Becoming and the Patiency of Matter", *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 19, no. 1 (2014): 132.

[xxxix] This is not to argue that she is not interested in politics – Colebrook believes that passive vitalism is "micro-political: it attends to those differences that we neither intend, nor perceive, nor command" (106). Yet, as Seymour astutely articulates in her aforementioned monograph, extreme forms of anti-anthropocentrism such as this risk disregarding the visceral experiences of certain humans who may suffer due to overtly political problems of difference (13).

[xl] Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, 166.
[xli] Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (London: Gollancz, 1969), 8. Further page references are given after quotations.
[xlii] Post-apartheid South Africa's fifth president, Cyril Ramaphosa, started initiating land reform in 2018, much to the chagrin of white minority landowners and US president Donald Trump, who tweeted that he was concerned about "the large scale killing of farmers".
[xliii] Not for the first time, Head's words have a distinctly Nietzschean ring to them, as the villagers display a collective will to power.
[xliv] Stephen Gray, "Introduction", in *Maru* by Bessie Head (Harlow: Heinemann, 2008), ii.
[xlv] Joyce Johnson, *Bessie Head: The Road of Peace of Mind: A Critical Appreciation* (Plainsboro: Associated University Press, 2008), 97 (emphasis added).
[xlvi] Bessie Head, *Maru* (Essex: Heinemann, 2008), 9. Further page references are given after quotations.
[xlvii] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press), 2009. Bennett's influential monograph draws on the affirmation of life – as seen in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and the poetry of Walt Whitman – and the Actor-network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour. It is interesting that a supposedly feminist materialist follows such masculinist traditions, with only two mentions of Donna Haraway (and none of Rosi Braidotti).
[xlviii] Margaret E. Tucker, "A 'Nice-Time Girl' Strikes Back: An Essay on Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*", *Research in African Literatures* 19, no. 2 (1988): 175.
[xlix] Desiree Lewis, "Power, Representation, and the Textual Politics of Bessie Head", in *Emerging Perspectives on Bessie Head*, ed. Huma Ibrahim (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 2004): 121.
[l] Johnson, *Bessie Head: The Road of Peace of Mind*, 109.
[li] Maria Olaussen, *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain: Place and Identity in Three Novels by Bessie Head* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 155.
[lii] Here I am referring, in particular, to the protagonist's vaginal bleeding in *The Bell Jar*; Gerty MacDowell's 'female pills' or abortifacients in *Ulysses*; and Lyndall's potentially self-induced miscarriage in *The Story of an African Farm*. For a more detailed discussion of other possible instances of terminations in Schreiner's fiction, see Helen Bradford, "Olive Schreiner's Hidden Agony: Fact, Fiction and Teenage Abortion", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21 (1995): 623-41.
[liii] Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 264.
[liv] Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), 179. Further page references are given after quotations.
[lv] Jane Bryce-Okunlola, "Motherhood as a Metaphor for Creativity in Three African Women's Novels: Flora Nwapa, Rebeka Njau and Bessie Head", in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. Susheila Nasta (London: Women's Press, 1991): 215.
[lvi] A standout moment illustrating potentially internalised homophobia is when Elizabeth "gaily" says to her female friend Kenosi, "If I were a man I'd surely marry you" (90). For an exploration of potential queer undertones in Head's writings, see Elinor Rooks, "Picking Up the Pieces: Embodied Theory in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*", *Pivot: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies & Thought* 6, no. 1 (2017): 57 pars. <https://pivot.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/pivot/article/view/40276/35276>
[lvii] One is reminded here of Greta Gaard's exploration of ecosexuality in her recent work; see Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (London: Lexington, 2017).

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