Autobiography of Things Left Undone: Politics of Literature, Hyphenation and Queered Friendship in Africa

S. N. Nyeck*

The public assignment of credit and blame has profound implications for democracy. Democracy can live with us-them differences. It provides a means of temporarily bridging social differences by class, gender, religion, or race without abolishing them. But writing us-them divisions into law and politics undermines democracy.
-- Charles Tilly (150)

The difference “between” two things is only empirical, and the corresponding determinations are only extrinsic. However, instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself – and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it.
-- Gilles Deleuze (28)

That Africa is multicultural is not news. However, literature in political science raises questions about the prospect of plural societies with regard to democratic development in the modern world, given the assumption that these societies are more likely to become unstable or trapped in ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and regime breakdowns. These concerns are particularly important to anyone who interrogates ontological claims based on race, sexuality, and citizenship constitutive of national and political domains in Africa. The stability of the state and of social institutions worth preserving is therefore not to be neglected in any scholarship that deals with new social demands in plural societies. In this essay, I analyze possible operating dynamics of change in Africa with regard to hyphenated citizenship, gender, sexuality, and race in Bessie Head’s¹ novel, A Question of Power (henceforth

* Sybil N. Nyeck is Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles. The author thanks Dianne Forte who introduced her to the work of Bessie Head, and Mani Bakirathi and Jimia Boutouba for their comments on early drafts.

¹ Bessie Head was born in 1937 of an illicit union of a white mother and a black father in South Africa. The parents of Bessie’s mother thought their daughter was insane. In South Africa under apartheid, sexual relations between whites and blacks
S. N. Nyeck

AQP. In this novel, the author attributes “Africaness” to a main character traditionally not perceived as a true African: a young biracial woman in South Africa whose sense of belonging to the continent is partly sustained through homoerotic friendships. This essay explores the ways in which the biracial body in Head’s novel with its masks and desires deconstructs the postulation of a universal abstracted, racialized, heterosexualized “black” reason and hypothesizes hyphenation as an autobiographical and critical genre relevant to political theory of representation in Africa.

Since the formation of early political parties and pressure groups in 1930s in Africa, African literature has been at the forefront of many battles and shaped political imagination, concepts of gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship. However, if yesterday’s struggle was mainly anti-colonial in nature, today, African hyphenated post-independent societies and people stare at us with a new task, which takes the form of a question that gives an analytical content to “things left undone” in the domains of sexuality, gender, citizenship, and race on the continent. By analyzing the political imagination of gender, eroticism, sexuality, race, and citizenship plurality through literature and not through conventional state apparatuses, I emphasize the proactive role of African literature in inspiring, translating, and transforming political epistemology. Not only the peaceful production of literature as a vehicle of public and social demands challenges assumptions about the inexistence of non-violent means of contention in plural societies, the multiplicity of themes that emerge from works such as AQP sheds light on embedded transformational processes d’avant garde in Africa.

For instance, by choosing a biracial girl as the main protagonist in AQP, Head shifts discourse over skin color and its masks in a traditional decolonizing trope to discourse over embodiment of citizenship beyond its ceremonial tasks in an imagined post-Apartheid South Africa. That is, if colonial and apartheid identities were, at least in part, based on ceremonial citizenship aimed at regulating governor-governed relations, new citizenship in AQP is autobiographical in the sense that it speaks of the questions that different political bodies generate in the process of making power in a post-

were legally prohibited. To punish their daughter for shaming the family, Bessie Head’s white grandparents sent her mother to an asylum for the mentally ill where the child (Bessie) was delivered. After her birth, Bessie was given to a poor black foster family where she grew up. Her biracial childhood and experience as a woman who fled South Africa to find refuge in Botswana (where the novel is set) is a tale of sporadic mental breakdowns and a testament of an incredible ability to narrate her sense of alienation in both black and white communities. Bessie’s prolific life as a writer ended with her suicide in 1986.
independent moment. The post-independent moment is, in this case, a moment for hyphenation, friendship, and coalition building among and across categories formerly separated under the regimes of ceremonial citizenship in colonial and apartheid administrations (Young 23-49).

Traditional approaches to decolonizing the body trapped in colonial subjugation have emphasized among other features, the phenotype of the colonized as the material culture of domination. To illustrate, in Black Skins White Masks, one of the most celebrated works by Franz Fanon, the author plays with asymmetric dynamics between the inner and outer worlds of racialized subjection in colonial settings. He juxtaposes “skins and masks” to capture identity tensions within a dichotomized world of colonial binaries and models of oppression. “Skins and masks” signify embodied, simulated and mistaken racial performances in at least two ways. First, skins only have blackness as the most enduring site of oppression and blackness is first and foremost a matter of skin color (embodied performance). Second, whiteness is first and foremost a matter of simulation (simulated and mistaken performance if it occurs within the first scenario). From this perspective, the skins and masks cancel each other’s existence in the world of social and symbolic interaction. Not surprising, violence, is according to Fanon, the method of decolonization; it is the only way out of oppression.

Head’s project converges with Fanon’s because it is a tale of freedom from political, social, and psychological oppressions. As a critique of power, AQP takes on “things done” to the body of ceremonial citizens at critical historical junctures and “things left undone” in the discourse over decolonization and construction of full fledged citizenship in post-independent Africa. This is where the two authors diverge. Oppression needs not be limited to the exclusive domains of “things done” to blackness by whiteness and vice versa in a dichotomized world. By extending the scope of domination to things done and to those left undone between, across and within social groups, Head shifts attention to “biracial oppression,” and to the bivariate and multivariate features of political oppression at the personal, societal, and conceptual levels.

The autobiographical dimension of African literature is therefore important to any researcher concerned with social and political change in Africa. Although the dream of change may sometimes lag behind the actual moment of change in Africa, the dynamic nature of lived experiences contained within African literature offers a new set of questions that political leaders, activists, and scholars will inevitably grapple with. The new challenge that African literature raises in this essay is the question of the relevance of
hyphenations to African political, economic, and social future. By change, I do not mean a radical shift overnight from one social, economic, and political status to another. I conceptualize change as the experience of a possibility and the desirability of hyphenations for personal and societal good. From this perspective, I would call a changing society, the one that shows the characteristics of diversity (gender, race, ethnicity, religion, political and economic choices, etc.) with a real possibility and desirability for individuals and communities to claim and benefit from more than one link to another aspect of diversity in which they partake. Because I am mainly dealing with literature the question of how to bring about change and protect hyphenated possibilities is not provided here. The function of literature is not always to provide answers, as it is to formulate questions. The proper setting up of politically and socially embodied questions is already elimination of a source of lamentation and frustration that occur as a result of repressed speech (Aristotle 13). What is new under the sun of African literature in the post-independence era is that Africa is not just multicultural; it is also hyphenated erotically, socially, and politically.

From the colonial to the post-independence era, political consciousness in Africa has taken many shapes, possessed many voices, and given birth to prolific writers. However, the speed with which things get done and undone, the sharpness with which questions are raised and perspectives broadened in African literature does not always coincide with political and social reforms. More often than not, African writers, rather than imagining another world through fiction, recompose and revive not a dormant concept that needs to be given a voice, but a reality in which Africans partake already.

In order to bridge politics and literature, I borrow from Rancière the following working definition, the idea that:

The syntagma “politics of literature” means that literature “does” politics as literature—that there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing...Politics is commonly viewed as the practice of power or the embodiment of collective wills and interests and the enactment of collective ideas. Now, such enactment or embodiments imply that you are taken into account as subjects sharing a common world, making statements and not simply noise, discussing things located in a common world and not in your own fantasy. What really deserves the name of politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak.
about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking. (10, my emphasis)

The ability to partition the visible makes literature hardly indifferent to change. For instance, in the early independence days, political and cultural elites of newly independent African countries believed in the solidarity of all Africans (often referred to as “blacks”) as the cornerstone of true freedom for the continent. At the core of a movement such as négritude was the desire to reclaim “blackness” as the unifying soul of Africa in order to assert its authenticity, rationality, and emotional endowment. However, Pan-African discourse and writings produced by men often muted women’s voices and ignored Africans whose “blackness” is not given such as white-Africans, Arabs-Africans, Asian-Africans, biracial children, Albinos etc. During the decolonization period in Africa as elsewhere, sexual orientation was not even thought of as an important political concern. This conscious and unconscious tendency towards exclusion proper to nationalist movements everywhere is an element of both victory and self-defeat and makes “every revolution a betrayed revolution” (Marcuse 91). Consequently, African literature is not exempt of imaginative bias and strategic omissions.

Stressing blackness to build alliances with the enslaved African Diaspora was strategically important to nationalist groups fighting for independence. Today, most African countries are sovereign states. However, Africa’s quest for coherence and authenticity through discursive and cultural homogeneity is still a major preoccupation of postcolonial sovereign states with multiracial and multiethnic citizenship. How do we determine who is African and who is not in the postcolonial era? This is a “question of power” and autobiography of power intersecting with individual and collective political identities in Africa. Taken to an extreme level, answers to these questions could lead to civil wars caused by feelings of exclusion from national communities. Sudan, Rwanda, and Chad offer few examples of madness in civil wars and failed hyphenations of national identities.

In Head’s life experience and highly autobiographical writings, madness, provisionally defined here as both thought and actions that resist abstraction and the monopoly of power in AQP introduces us to Foucauldian notions of “folie et déraison” [folly and un-reason]. Madness as a question to Power questions the rationale in support of ideological repressive apparatuses through which “men imprison their neighbors, communicate, and recognize themselves through the unmerciful language of non-folly” (Foucault 15). So defined, madness in AQP is a rhetorical tool and a critical device that allows the author to cut through sensible data of social and political segregation in
the name of a unified “black” heterosexual reason. Head locates within her biracial protagonist the soul of the “neighbor” imprisoned by the language of a certain kind of reason. Madness/folly/un-reason staged in AQP is not just anti-thesis to abstracted reason. It does something new through the embodiment of un-reason as the dynamic of knowledge and power. Head exposes the violent processes of abstraction of bodies and depicts the bitter economic, political and moral consequences of policies that ignore hyphenated genders, races, citizenships and sexualities as constitutive of African social life.

I first focus on the ways in which Head confronts the disembodiment of senses in the performance of abstracted knowledge and reason represented by Sello. I then analyze the relation of power between Sello and Elizabeth who incarnates the rawness of bodily expressions that metaphorically represents African social pragmatism. Hyphenation, a discursive and linguistic multilingualism beyond the text, reflects the changing nature of African societies and its Diaspora, as well as a site of reformulation of questions about gender, race, sexuality and citizenship in Africa. AQP critically expands our understanding of identity politics and cultural performances that reshape the social and epistemological landscapes of Africa. In theorizing social transformation including queer awareness in Africa, hyphenation allows us to understand the practical and rhetorical implications of plurality and the connections between sexualized identities, race, gender, and citizenship beyond mere coexistence.

Madness: A Power of Confrontation

A Question of Power is a tale of love and madness in which the woman protagonist is gradually discovered through the people and things she loves and hates. From the start, the protagonist is seen through the portrait of her two lovers who are also the pivots of her troubled soul. Sello and Dan are impersonal men in the protagonist’s mind who possess and monopolize her horizon to the point where she is no longer responsible for her own life. The conflict between Sello and Dan is what divides the novel in two parts and backgrounds. Each part is a venue of reason devoid of emotions from which surfaces the Janus-like face of madness as undifferentiated experience of the protagonist questioning the power of manly abstracted reason. The idea of hyphenations as linkages and similes, objectifying and analyzing the concept of an immutable African persona and its corollary discriminatory essence, inspires the protagonist to seek other ways to envision citizenship beyond the classical dichotomized “Us versus Them” model.
Head stages madness in a postdichotomic space in which the question of identity interrogates the configuration of power and its philosophical relevance to changing social realities in postcolonial Africa. To claim the postcolonial moment as a “postdichotomic” moment is to acknowledge citizenship’s strategic differences and homogeneities constructed during colonial dependences, and to assume that they have come to a point of maturation with the recognition of independence. The postdichotomic moment emphasizes the reconfiguration of social and cultural geographies and imposes self-reflection, the de-centering of previously constructed similarities and dissimilarities between African people and between Africa and the world. Theoretically, madness creates the space of discomfort from which “common sense” acquired and produced during the decolonization period is confronted, reevaluated, and readapted to the spiritual, social, and political reality in Africa. Madness in this sense is a site of monologue that does not primarily “talk back” or “write back” to Western imperialisms.

Madness in the novel confronts the self with the self. The Heinemann edition of 1985 has on the cover a photograph of a naked woman seated in the darkness in a fetal position. The only visible parts of her body are the arms around the legs resting against her chest. Her face remains invisible. The way she grabs her legs suggests not the end of motion, but a different kind of motion: a movement from what is seen and obvious (parts of her body) to what is hidden and waiting to be revealed (her face, soul, and mind). Although her posture suggests confinement, the readers are not able to determine with accuracy the nature of the power that imposes such an attitude just by “looking” at the cover of the novel. Nevertheless, what is revealed alludes to the possibility of making some inferences however imperfect and/or partial they might be. In addition to pointing to building blocks for the self in monologue, the body given, the gender assumed, and the nakedness enlightened on the cover of the novel, do not cancel out ambiguities. At the intersection of power and reason, is the discursive and material gendered body through which madness speaks. The body revealed is hyphenated. It is the body of a biracial woman wrestling with darkness.

The detail on the cover suggests at least two levels of interpretation. First, as a monologue, AQP is a journey into the inner self of a hyphenated African woman whose spirituality and philosophy is informed by what happens to her body. The monologue, from this perspective, is a paradigmatic subtext in the novel. However, AQP is also about mutilation when these bodily attitudes and attributes are understood within the larger picture of societal and political displacement of power. From this larger picture of societal and political arrangements, the hyphenated biracial African
woman’s hidden face is seen in a new light. The juxtaposition of the light, the flesh and darkness on the cover of the novel describes the nature and power of the ideological tapestry that keeps the protagonist’s feelings and mind off the map of African reason.

In this contribution, I consider both levels of interpretation and place AQP at the center of philosophical enquiries in which African postcolonial reason is confronted, re-evaluated, and readapted through postdichotomic dialectical narratives of ambiguous spaces, hyphenated bodies and sexualities. It follows that in constructing and assuming a monolingual, a monosyllabic one-dimensional dichotomic identity (Us versus Them) as the backbone of resistance against real and imagined European imperialisms, the prospect of ambiguities and indeterminacy escaped the framers of African postcolonial reason. For instance, in the “equation [heteronormative] Reason = Truth = Reality” there is a “transmutation of the idea of Reason into a logic of domination,” the denial of individuality, and pressure to conform to norms and behaviors in contrast to “multidimensional discourse, which focuses on possibilities that transcend the established state of affairs” (Marcuse 123, xxvii). Recalling Rancière’s naming of politics as a “way of framing among sensory data,” and a “partition of the sensible, of the visible…which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear and specific subjects to designate them and speak about them” (10), the process and act of determining and fixing gender, race, sexuality, and citizenship in one-dimensional trajectory lends its name to something else, but politics.

**Madness: A Question of Knowledge**

Although AQP identifies two men in the mind of the protagonist, Sello, the first African man’s identity “seemed almost incidental…So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: ‘I am just anyone’” (Head 11). Beautiful as it sounds, the statement nevertheless neither tells us who “anyone” stands for, nor which location of subjectivity the “I” is speaking from. To put it in the words of Nietzsche, I wonder “what does such claim tell us about the man who makes it?” (Nietzsche 99). Moreover, “what discursive (and structural) tradition establishes the ‘I’ and its ‘Other’ in an epistemological confrontation subsequently decides where and how questions of knowability and agency are to be determined” (Butler 10). It may well be that Sello’s universal statements, whether forged to help others forget him or something about him, are a “sign of language of the affects” (Nietzsche 100).
Sello’s quest for the things of the soul is a constant effort to match the “truth” of his abstracted perfect statements with social reality. He depends on society for his spiritual growth, but the location of society is not revealed so far. Like Elizabeth, the woman-protagonist, Sello knows “how often was society at fault and conclusions were drawn, at the end of each life in opposition to social trends” (Head 11). But what puts Sello at odds with society is not his African identity per se, but his ontological statements. Sello’s rejection of the use of the “exceptional” as a categorical imperative to identify with “mankind” rather than with a particular environment is the source of conflict between him and society. “I am just anyone” as a perfect statement does not satisfy society’s differential reason, which argues that an African can only be worse or better than anyone else. Sello’s perfect statement “I am just anyone” and “[I] hunger for the things of the soul, [and] intuitions of mostly what is right” (11) is un-reason and folly in his society. Further alienation from society is expressed in his second perfect statement: “love [is] freedom of the heart;” a statement that has no other audience and jury but himself.

Emerging from this tapestry of conflicting statements, and “parallel[ing] his inner development” is Elizabeth, a woman in the village of Motabeng. Elizabeth and her first lover Sello, are “souls with closely-linked destinies” (11). However, in contrast to Sello, Elizabeth’s quest for freedom is more critical. First, Elizabeth questions Sello’s assumption that mere reference to “mankind” suffices to produce and Africanize humanity. Although previous great teachers about mankind formulated “indistinct statements about evil, they never personified it, in vivid detail, within themselves. What they did say, vaguely, was that it was advisable to overcome one’s passions as the source of all evil” (emphasis added), Elizabeth notes. She then argues that it is only through embodiment of power and subjection that one comes to full understanding of the “subtle balances of powers between people” (12).

The power that creates closure and distance between Sello and Elizabeth is erotic but impersonal. This eroticism is not just desire; it is also confinement and solitude in the excess of the imaginary. Georges Bataille defines such eroticism as “the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question” (31). He moves on to argue that in contrast to human eroticism, “animal sexuality does not make for disequilibrium [because] nothing resembling a question takes shape within it” (29). Here, the taboo creates disequilibrium only in part. In fact, the “knowledge of eroticism or of religion demands equal and contradictory personal prohibitions and transgressions,” Bataille explains (35-6). However, the function of eroticism is not to eliminate the taboo. The suppression of a
taboo might hide disequilibrium, but will not bring about the question that is fundamental to the understanding of humanity as Bataille theorizes it.

First, by creating not a formula but a space from which a question of power and identity, “Africaness and un-Africaness,” reason and un-reason, is consciously formulated, human and political eroticism redefines madness as “the work of reflection continually subordinate[d] to something else” or the end of reflection (260). Human eroticism within the political framework is about opportunity and robustness of interrogations that arise therein and attend to hidden dimensions of the self, society and politics.

Second, by framing this question as the work of consciousness, human eroticism offers a discursive and practical space from which knowledge is produced continuously regardless of the existence of a taboo.

Third, because of the centrality of the question to its work, eroticism as defined by Bataille, is “potential solitude” (264). In Head’s novel, the formulation of questions is the prerogative of the woman-protagonist wrestling with societal confinements in the domains of gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship.

Elizabeth’s solitude is accumulation of knowledge about humanity. She owns the question that transcends the taboo. Her folly is not schizophrenia but un-reason speaking to and from her body at the intersection of both perfect and imperfect speculative statements on African personhood. This bodily is a philosophical endowment that allows her to discover horrific details about Sello’s inner life that otherwise might have gone unnoticed. Her body-question, as the “pivot of the examination” is central to understanding the ways in which power and performance recode hyphenated gender, race, sexuality, and citizenship in Africa.

Head’s choice of Elizabeth, a biracial woman whose mother was condemned to an asylum because of her illicit intimate relationships with a colored man in South Africa is interesting. Elizabeth’s life unfolds as if the story of her mother is not a sheer accident but a design. Because of her mother’s imprisonment, the story of her life was hidden to Elizabeth until she was thirteen. Elizabeth grew up “loving another woman as her mother, who was also part African, part English” (15) like herself. Elizabeth’s hyphenation therefore encloses both gender and citizenship. But where do philosophical and political ideologies leave Elizabeth?
Elizabeth leaves South Africa because of white racism. She also wanted to move away from the anti-apartheid political party. Few days before her exit, Elizabeth is arrested in South Africa because the police assume she is carrying communist and propagandist material of the anti-apartheid party. However, it is later established that what was misnamed “communist material” was in fact a “letter extremely critical of the behavior of the people belonging to the banned party” (18). Elizabeth’s voice is critical of white racism, social exclusion, and of the resistance movement itself.

The anti-apartheid movement addresses her economic and social discrimination as if they were a problem created by white supremacists only. To a certain degree, Elizabeth is comfortable with the state of the politics of resistance. But, the political liberation movement fails her as a biracial woman because no one is politicizing her multiracial future in South Africa or elsewhere on the continent. Consequently, white racism, coupled with internal disillusionment about political parties convinces Elizabeth to seek alternative answers and to also interrogate assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship in nationalist political discourse. This dissatisfaction with traditional political organizations pushes Elizabeth to open up her inner life and reconfigure from within archetypes of socio-political scenes in order to engage critically with them one by one. Recalling Rancière’s assertion that literature does politics as literature, the creation of genres, especially the autobiographical genre, is politically significant in AQP. Autobiographically speaking, political implications of self-knowledge are not just about a “search within for hidden constitutions” (Ogrodnick 14) in the tradition of Plato and Rousseau, but extends instinct and intimacy to the vocabulary of sociability, as preambles to political engagement and democratic commitment.

Before turning to her inner self, Elizabeth tries marriage as a way to integrate society. She marries a gangster just out of jail and soon after, she understands that even under a meta-oppression such as apartheid, the solidarity and pedagogy of the oppressed can still survive only as a myth. In the words of Marcuse, Elizabeth soon realizes that “the free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation” (7-8). Elizabeth’s husband is a womanizer who also sleeps with a few white men. Many women complain to Elizabeth because her husband has either raped or abused them in some other ways. After a year of marriage, Elizabeth, is “forced [by political ideologies and racism in South Africa] to take out an exit permit, which, like marriage, held the ‘never return’
clause” (Head 19). She leaves South Africa with her son and her memory hoping to be a teacher in Motabeng, a small village in Botswana.

**Madness: A Critique of Monopolies**

From Botswana, she continues to question the configuration of power in South Africa. However, as a refugee, she relies on her mind to re-memory (Morrison 70). The answer to her questions comes through mental socialization and abnormal relationships with Sello and Dan. The question of power and the formulation of an African identity – be it provisional – “uncovered through an entirely abnormal relationship with two men might not be so much due to her dubious sanity as to the strangeness of the men themselves,” Head writes (19). Here, Head cautions against misreading Elizabeth’s life in Botswana as a tale of personal insanity. Elizabeth’s “madness” as un-reason is critical knowledge and discourse that examines the function of good and evil, universal truths and particular statements on hyphenated gender, sexuality and the structures of strangeness that reify rigid citizenship binaries in Africa.

The first question to power formulated through Elizabeth’s mind is not whether universal statements, such as the idea of the “universal man” favored by Sello can be applied to changing African societies. She is more concerned about the processes and the techniques by which the utterance of such statements is made possible in the first place. Motabeng, which means “the place of the sand,” is a remote village on the edge of the Kalahari Desert (Head 19). There, the rain never supplies the water needed for survival. Even during the rainy season, “it rained in the sky, in long streaky sheets, but the rain dried up before it reached the ground” (20). Inspired by this phenomenon, Elizabeth privately renames Motabeng “The Village of The Rain-Wind.” The weirdness of the village, Elizabeth thinks, is explained climatologically in the phenomenon of the Rain-Wind: the sky, presented in this novel as the dwelling of the gods, captures the rain and the earth dries up as a result of this monopoly. Using the language of nature, Head sets the stage for her protagonist whose primary goal in leaving South Africa and going to exile in Motabeng Botswana is less to “find the answers” as it is to question the reason why hyphenated sexualities, gender, and citizenships are often used as “explanatory” rather than “reflective/interrogative” paradigms for social misfortunes. She uses the language of nature to expose the criminal activities of the “gods” acting against nature by letting people die of thirst.

Unless it produces its own questions, “hyphenation” in Africa would continue to be a tool in the hands of systems and values that reserve for
themselves the prerogative of formulating questions and assigning universal answers to them. The Rain-Wind effect that Elizabeth circumscribes poetically here is the first step to cognitively map the issue at stake. Like the people of Motabeng waiting for the rain, Elizabeth too waits. As a biracial woman, she looks forward to the day when cultural, political, social, religious, and erotic apartheids will cease to exist between communities. Her soul, like the dry land of Motabeng, is longing for the rain to come and quench her thirst for freedom, soothe her broken heart, wash away the blood of the victims of human hatred, and proclaim the year of a new harvest for all who toil. But the rain is captured by the sky “gods” whose ambition is not to feed the people and the land but to show off their personal power expressed here in the metaphor of the wind. Unlike the rain, the wind is only seen through its performance. The greater the performance, the better it is for whomever the rain showcases for.

After making her home in the central part of Motabeng, Elizabeth is “amazed to uncover a permanent adult game that should really have been relegated to children: ‘I’ll bewitch you and you’ll bewitch me’” (21). Unable to understand the role of the “gods” in creating aridity, the villagers turn to one another for blame. The terror and cruelty manufactured by witchery creates a black hole in this village of Motabeng otherwise a beautiful society. What is sad about obsession with witchcraft in Motabeng is that such beliefs rob from the people the opportunity to formulate questions that could elucidate the power struggle that bring about drought in the village. Witchcraft may be an “answer” to the “question” of why there is no rain, but it does not account for the origin or the trajectories of the question itself. Consequently the power embedded in the trajectory of the question is ignored in responses centered on witchcraft as the explanatory framework for the drought. In Motabeng, gender, racial, sexual, erotic, and citizenship hyphenations must come to terms with cultural beliefs that disembody political and social agency from the lived experience of citizens. Elizabeth’s Rain-Wind effect adds to what lacks in witchcraft narratives: the question of the monopoly of power apparatuses and obsession with guilt-fixing narratives in Motabeng.

Elizabeth is not the only person trying to understand how climatic aridity affects human social life in this village. Motabeng is full of refugees from South Africa, Europe, and Peace Corps volunteers working to keep the land fertile despite the bad climate. Regardless of its dryness, people settle in Motabeng because of the “good supply of underground water” (19). The underground world in Motabeng is geological but also a postdichotomic mental space in which reality is reconstructed in order to create new
trajectories for popular imaginations and deconstruct the configurations of power that governs existence in Botswana. For Elizabeth, the underground world is her inner self whose constellation mirrors the social struggle of a woman with a hyphenated identity and aspirations in Africa.

Elizabeth’s inner life resembles the Rain-Wind power struggle that she identifies as critical to understanding of the socio-psychological dilemma of the people of Motabeng. The underground world of Elizabeth’s mental connections establishes the link between the ascetic “personality who held her life in death-grip” and the “master of psychology behind witchcraft” (21). The psychology of witchcraft narratives in Motabeng is the product of social and spiritual alienation orchestrated through the confiscation of nurturing elements in nature such as the rain by the sky gods. In order for Elizabeth to embody the social struggle of her environment, she needs to first identify and name the acting “god” in her own inner sky and understand what in her life has been domesticated and monopolized by this god-like figure. Second, she has to uncover the specific “knowledge-wind” produced by the god-like figure that prevents her from seeing and showing her own face as it is: African and hyphenated. Elizabeth is determined to find her voice, show her face, and celebrate her hyphenated womanhood as a source of positive spillovers into African societies and philosophical regimes of thought.

The god seated in Elizabeth’s inner sky is revealed to her in her sleep. Soon after she blows out the light to sleep, Elizabeth is overwhelmed with the feeling that someone enters the room and sits down on the chair next to her bed. Laying in the dark and staring at the dark, it seemed “as though her head simply filled out into a large horizon. It gave her a strange feeling of things being right inside her and yet projected the same time at a distance away from her” (22). Although her mind can stretch out and see the horizon, it is not her self that fills this horizon. A man stands there. He “totally filled the large horizon in front of her…He had an almighty air of calm and assurance about him. He wore the soft, white flowing robes of a monk, but in a peculiar fashion…as though it were a prison garment” (22). Although there is no verbal exchange between the man and Elizabeth, “the name of the monk has instinctively formed itself in her mind” (22). The name she associates with the white-robed monk is that of the universally adored God with whom she engages in absorbing conversations.

Elizabeth is terrified by nightly encounters with the white-robed monk constantly invading her privacy and telling her how much he owns of her life. When she wakes up in the morning, she would pour a cup of tea for herself and “pour a second cup and absent-mindedly walk towards the chair and say:
‘Here’s a cup of tea for you,’ and they jolt back to reality, shaking her head: ‘Agh, I must be mad! That’s just an intangible form’” (23). So far Elizabeth’s perceived madness points at a generic man with universal attribution as her potential torturer. The blurring of boundaries between the social and abstracted reality in Elizabeth’s mind exemplifies the pervasive nature of the struggle in her life. However, her gesture shows the trajectory of the blur that moves from inside out.

Despite her resistance to entertain these nightly conversations with an unknown visitor, Elizabeth is nevertheless seduced by the attention she receives from him. Beyond attention, her underworld and social life is full of men determined to increase her sense of insecurity. The ghostly white-robed monk has come to stay in her life. His name is not revealed to Elizabeth until she befriends Tom, a Peace Corps volunteer from America working in Motabeng. As soon as Elizabeth starts counting on Tom for the return of her “sanity,” and after Elizabeth and Tom begin to imagine themselves solving the problem of the universe together, Tom says to her: “You are a strange woman, Elizabeth. The things you draw out of a man! You know, men don’t really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that, but their deepest feeling they reserve for other men” (24).

The friendship with Tom further alienates Elizabeth and establishes the connection between the real world and her subconsciousness. The white-robed monk, who Elizabeth identifies cognitively as Sello, later validates Tom’s statement. Here, the blur that establishes connection between Elizabeth’s social life and her inner journeys moves from without to within. Sello’s indexation catches the reader by surprise. One wonders how Sello, the man so far presented to the reader as a theorist of “perfect statements” for humanity, can be at the same time the oppressor of Elizabeth. Why would Head set up the twist that hails us into a kind of dissatisfaction that connotes the failure of previously established “perfect statements” supposedly personifying reality in Africa?

Desiree Lewis argues that “with its abrupt shifts, unexpected arguments and immense breath of vision, [Head’s] writing eludes the levering procedures of past and present critical orthodoxy” and sets a broader platform by defying boundaries of cultural expectations (3). Madness in AQP is not just defiance; it is also critical and rhetorical unorthodoxy that allows Head to confront Sello’s universal claims about African identities and expectations. Once adorned as the prophet of mankind, [Elizabeth] seemed to have only been a side attachment to Sello. It never occurred to Elizabeth
that the basis of her relationship with Sello was masculinity and patriarchy. As an African biracial woman, Elizabeth is excluded from the metaphysical ascetic society of men that claims prophetical monopoly on existing African subjectivities. Men do not just overwhelmingly determine agencies. Men-centered knowledge is about the ordering of the present and the future.

Abstracted philosophical manly assumptions have political momentum, with strong social and symbolic linkages and spillovers in Motabeng. Sello’s attitude toward Elizabeth indicates that her gender, not her neurons, is what constructs Elizabeth as “insane” and “strange.” As an American “volunteer” and “humanitarian” interventionist in Africa, Tom’s interference is not without ideological consequence on gender representations either. According to Tom, Elizabeth is allegedly stepping out of her boundaries every times she attempts to venture in the deepest feeling of men by producing philosophical and metaphysical knowledge. However, it is precisely because Elizabeth’s knowledge is rooted “not in the order of Prophecy [yet], but derives from an equivalence of imagery” (Foucault 19), that she is able to establish a discursive and material link between the white-robed Sello, the torturer in her dream, and Tom in her social life. Such connection, justifies Elizabeth’s constant juxtaposition of images from the underground world with their double in the village of Motabeng. There exists more than one double of Sello in Motabeng, and these doubles are both native Africans and visitors.

It is “madness” as un-reason that permits the blurring of boundaries between somatic intuitive knowledge and social events. Head intentionally refuses to portray Elizabeth’s inner world as “imagined.” Instead, she writes that Elizabeth was “not given to ‘seeing’ things. The world has always been two-dimensional, flat and straight with things she could see and feel” (22). The state of “madness” keeps Elizabeth within this two-dimensional world and nothing left of flat and straight truths remains unexplored in her mind and social engagement. Elizabeth’s underworld is not *imagined*; it is *felt*. If imagined only, the dynamic of Elizabeth’s underworld must assume there is nothing else that exists beyond the signification of the elements of her constellation (Sello, his philosophy, and Elizabeth herself). Head is aware of the fact that such assumption could establish an epistemological rupture that mistakenly views these characters as finite in themselves. By stressing the relational dynamic between Sello and Elizabeth, Head leaves open the possibility of a post-imagination as interplay of feelings. Even when Elizabeth’s imagination is at work, her hyphenated body remains at the center of this process by producing the feeling necessary to establish analogies and disanalogies between the inner world and society. Disanalogy
as différence here is referential. Elizabeth’s feelings allow both undifferentiated experience and difference from Sello.

There exists no philosophical and political assumption about African identities without consequences on social arrangements of power. Tom echoes Sello but Sello also has a native double in Motabeng. Similar to Sello, the white-robed man who claims ownership of universal knowledge, Sello, “the living man” in Motabeng has monopoly over economic transactions and makes himself indispensable in the village. There is no thought and no venturing away from the paths already established by him. Sello “the living man” drives a green truck in Motabeng and “people are fond of remarking: ‘You want to know about cattle and crops? Go to Sello. He knows everything.’ Sello was a crop farmer and a cattle breeder” (28). This technique of accumulation of power and resources by way of monopoly is what Elizabeth names the Rain-Wind.

Both the white-robed Sello and “the living” Sello not only own impressive symbolic means of production (affection, trucks), and communication (horizon), they are also co-partners in the killing business save that the thing being slaughtered is not the cattle but women. Sello the felt and Sello “the living man” sleep with other men’s wives and kill their own in an “aloof and detached way, as though it were simply part of a job” (28). Let us first consider the genocidal aspect of these “gods” before unpacking the ways in which their economic practices are often in contradiction with their philosophical and political claims.

In a nightly vision, Elizabeth sees the white-robed monk Sello walking toward her person. Shortly after, Elizabeth sees in her mind a “monstrous woman, with teeth about six inches big smiling at her.” But Elizabeth is incapable of discerning the nature of the woman and her real story until she too “walks into Elizabeth’s person” (33). It turns out that the woman is Medusa, Sello’s real spiritual black wife. In order to earn the symbolic prize of the “brotherhood of man,” (37) the monk Sello subjected Medusa to austere spirituality. Though Medusa’s eyes were open during these nightly encounters with Elizabeth, “they were abstracted like those of one who lives in a permanent trance” (37). This medusa is ferociously opposed to Elizabeth and keeps telling her that she is not wanted in Africa. Medusa with her “wild-eyed [face] express[es] the surface of African society. It [is] shut in and exclusive. It has a strong theme of power-worship running through it, and people need small narrow shut worlds…Sello had introduced [Elizabeth] to the soul-reality of the black man” (38). As Medusa built her own fortresses, people too find in witchcraft the power to maintain closure. With witchcraft,
people built their own institutions “which to a certain extent protect them from power-lusting president for life with the ‘my people’ cult” (38).

Elizabeth opposed the use of witchcraft as the unique explanatory paradigm for understanding the ordering of power and gendered postcolonial identities in Africa. Inspired by black magic rituals raving the world of the Pharaohs, Head uses the myth of Osiris-Isis to explain the fate of women in Africa and the relationship between Sello and Medusa. Sello has been “Osiris who had been shattered into thousand fragments by the thunderbolt of [the] Medusa (Isis)” (39). When Medusa challenges Sello, she does so because she was composed of the same materials, her “personalities whose powers, when activated, rumbled the heavens like thunder,” often oppose Sello. However, lacking the same ferocity, Elizabeth soon realizes that she cannot rely on the mediation of the white-robed Sello to know who Medusa really is. Direct contact with Medusa however means that Elizabeth has to first liberate herself from “her demon and her goodness” and live beyond good and evil (43).

Torture in Elizabeth’s mind has many names and shapes. Medusa maintains that Elizabeth is worthless. “[You] will ruin the African continent…You haven’t got a vagina…Africa is troubled waters, you know. I am a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know African languages…You’re too fat” Medusa keeps reminding Elizabeth (43, 64). Facing all these threats, Elizabeth cannot help but “rememory” and identify with other weak, homosexual colored men in South Africa who died before her eyes. In this underworld of extreme physical and verbal violence, Elizabeth is appalled by the absence of questions and the abundance of “pre-planned, overpowering statements” that choke her (47). Medusa does not allow Elizabeth to formulate her own questions. All that Medusa has are statements about how unfit Elizabeth is to be called a true African and a woman. With Medusa in full view, psychological torture becomes “wisdom”: “Oh, no, I’m not a monkey. I am a wise old owl,” says a relative of Medusa to Elizabeth sarcastically (48).

What is noticeable here is not rejection per se, but racism located not in the mask of skins as Fanon argued, but in the tasks and values assigned to personality traits. In Head’s critique, the colonial and the “nativist” mindsets share in commonly what Ann Laura Stoler calls “epistemic anxieties” linked to the nonvisual and nonsomatic dispositions that define racial membership. From Medusa’s perspective, Africa is “troubled waters” and membership is based on physical and cultural competencies (ability to swim and to
reproduce – wisdom in the old). In fact, Medusa rejects the old cliché of African as a “monkey” of colonial travelogues and embraces nonvisual, non-somatic politically charged modes of exclusion. Hence, political essentialisms in the novel also transform repertoires of identification by mobilizing consciousness against differentiation, and by pushing the boundaries of racial and gender codes to unseen and non-somatic attributes.

On the one hand, the invocation of a “vagina” and the “owl” as new sites of cultural and political membership seems to shift attention from biological and somatic prerogatives to more complex ways of defining identity. On the other hand, such an invention of Africa through new loci of identity is couched in a language of determinacy, mortification, and ruin. By claiming that Elizabeth *will* ruin the African continent Medusa reinvents discourse over race. She concomitantly defines Elizabeth as residual imperial debris. By so doing, Medusa preemptively assumes “über-knowledge” over the principles and practices of empire that could be said to remain in active register as well as the disposition of future postcolonial societies (Stoler 192). Medusa’s shift in discourse is insidious because it rests upon presumably infallible predictions that do not account for the indeterminacy of “things left undone.”

The rejection that Elizabeth experiences in her underworld also has its double in society. Unending nightly and daily conversations with Medusa and Sello force Elizabeth into seclusion. After a while, Elizabeth starts breaking down under the strain of Sello and Medusa’s torments. She almost becomes a ghost in the village. When she goes shopping, “she turns into a shop and stands abstractedly at a counter, not having any idea of what she wants to buy” until one day, her inner torment rips open and explodes into public view (50). She is officially declared insane. However, her mental breakdown is attributed to the instability caused by her displacement as a refugee and not by the constant assaults on her biracial status. Even on her sickbed, Sello and Medusa continue to visit Elizabeth. Nevertheless, before she flees from the mental hospital, Elizabeth makes the most important discovery about herself. Far from being meaningless, her constant journeys inwards have in fact “thrown a powerful life-line [into her soul] and found that the center of her inner life was still sane and secure, and the evils which had begun to dominate her mind had a soaring parallel in goodness” (55). To capitalize on that energy from the inner centers that bring forth secured knowledge requires that Elizabeth abandons momentarily her ghostly companions Sello and Medusa, and gets involved in the social life of Motabeng.

**Madness: A Socialization of Queerness as such**
Waking up to social realities does not mean the end of harassment and rejection. Sello and Medusa’s essentialist views on African traditions and values are encrusted in people’s mind. The villagers first try to discourage Elizabeth by scaring her away. Indeed many aspects of the village escape Elizabeth. However, when she asks Thoko, the greengrocer shopkeeper, if she could accompany him to the farm and learn more about the land, Thoko is shocked. He then tells stories about big mamba snakes, great wild cats and leopards, and night jackals in the bush eating the tasty skulls and the brain of “foreigners” like Elizabeth. On the grounds of being a “foreigner,” Elizabeth does not share the so-called “exclusive” prerogatives of the “native,” which is the knowledge and mastery of esoteric dangers and bush life in Africa. In this sense, “the evils overwhelming here [in Motabeng] were beginning to sound like South Africa from which [Elizabeth] had fled. The reasoning and the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black and it was not local people. It was large, looming personalities” (57). Head’s emphasis on the personalities rather than locality confirms my assumption that the power of signification in Motabeng as the signifier through which meaning about African personhood cues thoughts and images. I want to pause here and give more thought to the signification of imagination and zoological references.

Lewis contents that Head’s romance and pastoral imagery allegorize her search for socio-psychological freedom. She particularly notes that concerning Head’s views of Botswana, “we need to consider how her fictionalized adoption of this country stemmed not so much from her sense of literal security there…a perception of its potential to offer rejuvenating symbolic and psychological meanings” (128). This search of meanings out of social and political vulnerabilities, I argue, is done through powerful symbolic hyphenations that conjure vulnerability in the long run. Because Elizabeth is excluded from the nationalist esoteric fellowship of the insurgent, she finds alternative fertile body-lands in which she voluntarily cultivates and promotes the idea of hyphenated gender, citizenship, and sexualities as a high value and affordable “real estate” in Africa. After the denial of her eligibility into national esoteric guilds, Elizabeth becomes the source of esoteric knowledge herself. Her madness deconstructs the dynamics and configurations of power, and “appears as an utterance wrapped up in itself, articulating something else beneath what it says, of which it is at the same time the only possible code—an esoteric language…since it confines its linguistic code within an utterance that ultimately does not articulate anything other than this implication” (Foucault, *Histoire de la Folie à l’Age Classique* 102-3). Once Elizabeth awakes from her nightmare, the social life in Motabeng begins to
mark a difference with Sello and Medusa. Of all the social elements in Motabeng, the land, with its psychological and material concreteness, represents the most secure and unstable space from which Head’s diachronic and synchronic social relationships are contested.

This drifting closeness to the soil is not just protection against the abstracted life with Sello and his universal truths. The materiality of the land and its personality puts Elizabeth’s critique in perspective. However, Elizabeth is too afraid of the “staged” danger associated with the impenetrable land and rejects totally the idea of becoming a farmer after she is dismissed from her school because of presumed insanity. She now knows more than one aspects of life in Motabeng to understand that “when someone says ‘my people’ with specific stress on the blackness of those people, they are after kingdoms and permanently child-like slaves” (Head 63) Elizabeth cannot be the slave of anyone. Although denied access to the raw land, she nevertheless resolves to cultivate her own garden in which she rediscovers bodily sensuality that soothes the “pressure of mystical flights of the soul” (66).

Gradually, Elizabeth as a sister outsider, moves away from the immaterial telepathic relationships with Sello, the “spiritual Superman” and Medusa, the “mystical Madonna” (63), to other socially embodied relations. The concreteness of the land echoing that of her body, Elizabeth turns to other women involved in the gardening business for help. Elizabeth first meets Birgette, the daughter of the half-crazy Dutch woman named Camilla. From the start, Elizabeth is not only magnetically attracted to Birgette, she also identifies Birgette as the “only center of sanity in the babbling madhouse” of the racist Camilla. It is through Birgette’s eyes that we discover the social reality of Elizabeth’s house. Elizabeth lives with her son. She loves cooking and her first meal in the novel is shared with Birgette. Although of Dutch origin, Birgette’s Africanness, not so obvious to other whites in Motabeng, nevertheless alienates her every time she goes back to Denmark. Before coming to Motabeng, Birgette volunteered as a teacher in Algeria and after returning home, she became as Elizabeth is in Africa, “the contamination” that her Dutch friends wanted to stay away from.

Birgette and Elizabeth have more in common than the profession of teacher and the experience of social marginalization because of their race and career choices. Unlike the impersonal ascetic eroticism between Sello and Elizabeth, sensuality informs Elizabeth-Birgette encounters. “The sun might so gone and the stars come out. The beautiful girl in front of [Elizabeth] was part of that shift from light to shadow darkness” that makes Elizabeth shout
aloud with joy for the first time in the novel (81). Before she could start a real
garden, Birgette’s body presented itself as the land that attracts down the
“stars” and other celestial “personalities,” haunting Elizabeth’s sky. This
alternative land-body does not rely on the pedigree of ancestral knowledge
and esoteric formulas. Here I note the double function of ostracized
hyphenated bodies as agents of double-consciousness and *double entendre*,
which agential work of deconstruction reconfigures the social and
philosophical skies of Africa by disrupting surplus repression between
Africans and between Africa and the world.² Hyphenation in this sense is
erotic in the Lordian sense because it is deeply rooted in the power of
unexpressed and unorthodox feelings that create socio-spiritual and political
bonds.

**Madness: A “The Devil-May-Care” Paradox**

In contrast to Motabeng drying up because the whims of the wind-gods
prevent the rain from falling in the village, Birgette, the land-body-personality
magnetically releases the grip of the gods in Elizabeth’s sky-body, and flings
heaven wide open. After Birgette enters Elizabeth’s house, nothing is secret
anymore, “almost everything could be seen from the front door entrance…three doors opened out…Elizabeth stared at her, fascinated. She
loved, more than anything, the wild, free, [Birgette’s] devil-may-care gesture,
and truth was so often devil-may-care” (82,84). But before their relationship
could mature, Birgette’s contract with Motabeng expires. However, before
Birgette’s departure, Elizabeth is changed into a prophet of her own kind. If
darkness were to overwhelm her soul again, Elizabeth prophesizes, it would
only take Birgette to walk back in and remind her of the magic formula: “I
feel secure in my own nobility.” However, with the departure of Birgette, the
year ends in a “roar of pain” (87). Birgette cannot “fall in love” and Elizabeth
has no experience of it. Subjectivity epitomized here is embodied enough to
raise consciousness with prophetic prerogatives, and beyond embodiment,
maintains open, new interrogative formulations.

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² By “surplus” binary, we mean a binary that contributes to creating a double
victimization of people because they allegedly “embody” the values and phenotype,
or actions viewed as “un-African” and which by analogy are associated with the idea
of “residual” colonialism in Africa. I am not contesting here the usefulness of
provisional binaries that creatively informed nationalist movements in Africa
fighting for independence. However, my critique of the added value (*valeur ajoutée*)
informing gender, citizenship and sexual binaries in postcolonial Africa is grounded
in the argument that surplus binaries today are not only socially irrelevant, but they
essentially sacrifice “the potential of interrogation” on the altar of excessive abstracted
ontology which is a form of self-imprisonment.
Then comes Kenosi, a woman Elizabeth had convinced to join her garden group based on voluntary contributions with no financial return. Like Elizabeth, Kenosi has no husband. He walked away one day and never returned. As time goes by and the two women get to know each other, the pain in Elizabeth’s head eases as soon as she hears Kenosi’s knocks on the door. This time, she crawls out of the bed, laughs, washed, dressed, and walks to the garden where she “works beside the woman” (91). But the garden is deserted. There, they place poles in the holes that men had dug around the circumference of the garden. Always departing and stopping at Elizabeth’s house after gardening, Elizabeth was soon “utterly fascinated as [Kenosi] ate her food” (89). These little epiphanies and social eroticisms between women synchronize Elizabeth’s house life with that of the people in Motabeng. Each woman’s life reveals aspects of their socio-political struggle in Motabeng and the multiplicity of concrete actions that give meaning to the idea of African identities and social consciousness. From an erotic perspective, Motabeng is not one-dimensional. Women code their “mad” gestures with substantially different and ambiguous strategic claims. Like the gods, Kenosi is a traveler and likes open air. Elizabeth confesses to Kenosi: “if I were a man I’d sure marry you” (90). Kenosi smiles and responds by saying that all she has are her hands: “I work with my hands,” she said proudly. “I have always worked. I do any kind of work” (91). All these gestures and language escape abstraction to find firmness in the work of multiple internal and socio-political signifiers shaping the idea of Africa.

Africa in this sense is not just a collection of names, places, animals and secret knowledge. Africa is also a dialectic of gestures in movement, sometimes mediated, sometimes silenced within the meta-narrative of the native construction of an African personhood of “uncompromising goodness” (95). Head acknowledges love between women as integral to social and political stewardship. In fact, political and social institutions symbolized by sixty holes left in the communitarian garden of Motabeng are in construction. But work done so far remains incomplete as long as the poles are not erected.

Queer eroticism though not totally devoid of it, should not be confused with genitalia fever. It is a kind of social and political engagement that should aim at freeing us from fear and empowering one another as co-workers in the African garden of identities. Though queer eroticism sometimes perceives heteronormative holes carved into our social and political constitutions as burial grounds, Head insists on the possibility of transformation of the holes themselves, the coming to terms of the vertigo they cause. To understand itself, queerness in Africa must draw from
previous work on African political, economic, and social struggle. Queer friendship not only identifies the holes in the unfinished work of its predecessors, it also uniquely contributes to the masonry of political identities and social spaces in Africa.

Queerness does not just construct intimate identities; it participates in the construction of a strong society through the power of hyphenation. Eroticism between Elizabeth and Kenosi takes the work of social and political reconstruction from where other people have left it. It is queer eroticism in *AQP* that puts sixty poles standing like “silent sentinels” in the holes (95). As imagined by Head, African queer eroticism seen in the image of a sentinel is a challenge, a commitment to vigilance, and to understanding oneself as a participant in the security and stability of the continent even at the most uncomfortable hours of our socio-political existence. While this work is progressively taking shape in different African societies, it is embodied in the idea of hyphenated gender, citizenship, sexuality, race, and multiple African subjectivities. The idea of queerness in Africa is a critical reflection on things left undone in the domains of politics and socio-economic hyphenations with effects on family representations. When Kenosi tells Elizabeth, “your smile is an indication of the possibilities of friendship between us,” she understands the impossibility of queer friendship as epistemological violence in Africa. The future of what is promised in friendship between Kenosi and Elizabeth belongs to the history of social and political change in Africa. This promise comes with the obligation to avoid speaking in denials about the relevance and dynamics of ambiguities, gender, erotic, and citizenship hyphenations in Africa today.

The idea of queerness must remain paradoxical in Africa in order to safeguard its critical nature and ability to puzzle. The erotic nature of friendship between Kenosi and Elizabeth adds to the understanding of the work of deconstruction and reconstruction in the nation-state. Every time Elizabeth and Kenosi part, the sun sets on the horizon like a “blaze of hellfire” (91). As Elizabeth moves from the dreamed world to social engagement, her hyphenated identity is substantiated. However, as Judith Butler notes, the deconstruction of identity does not always imply the deconstruction of politics. To be politically salient, identity should be substantiated through a signifying practice that creates appearances that are “rule-generated identities, ones which rely on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that condition and restrict culturally intelligible practices of identity” (144-5). The rule-bound clause that inserts the performance of the subject into social structures and codifies identity must not only be repetitive but also voluntary. Kenosi-Elizabeth friendship could become a
failure if it cannot insert itself as a “sign by which intelligibility is insistently created and contested” in African societies (145).

In order to succeed, in order to turn away from restrictive clauses and seek those that enable the assertion of alternative domains of social and political intelligibility, the identity process of repetition must first be aware of the rules that govern signification in society. Elizabeth’s hyphenated race, and now the queer erotic friendship with Kenosi become substantive and politically intelligible through voluntary and repeated labor. First the two women agreed to create a garden group and to work without material rewards “when the very poor whom (the garden) was to cater for did not care to work for no money” (Head 88). Identity as a signifying practice in this sense is grounded in the acts of repetition of choice, a free choice by the subjects to convert knowledge into instrumental modes of belonging. Second, it is the acquisition of self-knowledge that enables Kenosi and Elizabeth to find their domain of assertion within the social and political structures that define the rules of signification. The only reason the “men who dug holes right round the circumference of the garden” (89) did not put the poles in the holes is that the celebration of Christmas and New Year imposed a holiday on their work. They left the garden with all their tools scattered therein. For Kenosi and Elizabeth, the “taking up of the tools where they lie, [meant] the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (Butler 145). In other words, the rhetorical tools for theorizing queer friendship in Africa need not to be reinvented from scratch.

Gilles Deleuze argues that repetition for itself “changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it” (70). It follows that there is always potential waste or transformation in all-iterative acts. To bring about change in the self, Deleuze adds, the mind must embrace difference, “a state in which one can speak of determination as such” (28). This Deleuzian determination is seen in the ways in which Head gives full presence to Elizabeth through a series of unilateral moves that primarily give theoretical and differential content to social “nothingness” so far associated with her name. Societal repetition of holidays creates a space where the undignified, or the “unholy” women, “suddenly start to work so hard...As far as Elizabeth was concerned she was to look back on this strange (holiday) week and the Kenosi woman’s sudden appearance as one of the miracles or accidents that saved her life” (Head 89). Having substantiated their individual and partnered identities, and having given them social intelligibility through labor, Kenosi and Elizabeth become part of the African postcolonial reason in which racial hyphenation and erotic ambiguities are no more “a linguistic error, a spoken blasphemy, an intolerable meaning, or the halo of
illness” (Foucault, *Madness* 101, 104). This is possible because women construct a new reality within societal symbolic systems of distribution of labor and resources.

The blaze of fire is also the metaphorical sign that the work of identity as a practice of everyday labor has been initiated successfully. This positive shift concludes the narrative consecrated to Sello in *AQP*. Sello is no longer occupying Elizabeth’s horizon. The dawn came with soft shifts and changes of light, slow wonders over the “vast expanse of the African sky...A small bird in a tree outside awoke and trilled loudly...[and] the sun thrust one powerful, majestic, golden arm above the horizon,” finally liberated (100). Nature, in the image of the sun, progressively finds its way back in Elizabeth’s life not through impersonal theories with Sello, but through social linkages and erotic encounters. However, beyond the personal narrative of emotional and sensual epiphanies with female acquaintances, Elizabeth has to revisit her relationship with Medusa in order to close the chapter on the place of death in the emergence of an impersonal civilizational ideology that keeps us indifferent to the sufferings of repressed voices, bodies and “sexual strangers.” As a discourse over power, *AQP* interrogates confinement and freedom in theories of abstraction of the soul which African men and women adopt, sometimes consciously, other times unwillingly. What results from this “eternal abstraction of the soul” is the erasure of “raw passions.” The raw here is the Senghorian *émotion*, the being in truth that springs from the matter, the reality within African societies in transit that gives meaning and concreteness to hyphenated gender, citizenship, bracketed sexualities, and social eroticism.

The “gods” seated in the sky of Elizabeth stumble on evil “as a power outside themselves; a power that could invade and destroy them. They perform delicate mental discipline about an evil never personified, but they had vividly personified God” (98-9). From the start, Sello claims to be an African, a man just like any other. The question is, who is the Other and what type of universal man does he wish to identify with? The answer is twofold. On the spiritual register, he wants to be called god, a prosthetic master of the universe. Philosophically, he is the rational Man and the father of the idea of an ascetic African civilization. However, “civilization,” as epitomized by Sello and structurally constructed by his “doubles” in Motabeng, entails the “destruction of the memory-trace,” which means a powerful deflection of the questions raised in civilization’s attempts to regulate social relationships and subjectivities. This destruction is what Bessie Head tries to prevent by writing about the ways in which hyphenated identities in postcolonial Africa embody “madness” in order to perform the
work of epistemological and practical deconstruction. At the end of the novel, when madness is crowned, the horizon is renewed.

Conclusion

In sum, the epistemology of plurality captured in *A Question of Power* sheds light on literature as a salient channel of social demands whereby identities are constructed through hyphenation operating in three dimensions. Firstly, Bessie Head interrogates the philosophical and theoretical bearings of a universalistic postcolonial reason on social and political representation in Africa. Secondly, she focuses not so much on undoing previous work—save when necessary—as much as in appropriating the work left undone through socialization and strategic posturing of her main character, Elizabeth, as she progressively moves from the realm of abstract knowledge to that of critical embodiment of labor. Finally, from the perspective of things left undone, Bessie Head explores the idea of queer eroticism as a paradox. Queer friendship beyond bed politics raises the question of hyphenation in identity politics in Africa. The strange, symbolically staged as madness in this novel is hyphenated erotically, racially, socially, and politically to show not only the interconnectedness of social demands, but also the ways in which such a dynamic is unavoidable in theorizing identity in Africa today. By taking up the tools of embodiment, the vocabulary of sociability is made politically salient as an autobiographic genre. *AQP* helps us rethink democracy as the reign of many, including the devil’s caring gestures.
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