

Review

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Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining. By Desiree Lewis. Trenton & Asmara: Africa World Press, 2007.

Living on a Horizon is an outstanding companion to Bessie Head's extraordinary oeuvre, and one that matches the richness of vision, density of meaning and lyricism of Head's own writing. Over the course of eight chapters, Desiree Lewis presents deftly framed close readings of each of Head's published works, as well as of the "imagined communities" she produced in her voluminous correspondence. The study opens with an epigraph taken from a letter by Head in which she bemoans: "No one could understand a word of what I was saying and even today there is a huge joke going the rounds – 'It doesn't matter what Bessie says because no one will believe her'" (Lewis, 2007: 1). Here, finally, is a book length engagement that "understands", meticulously following Head's logic into previously unexplored vistas. As Lewis observes, Head's "comparative neglect [alongside other South African authors] is largely a result of her deviation from existing political standards" (Lewis, 2007: 1). A new language is being forged in Head's oeuvre, and it is one that critics have indeed been slow to comprehend. With sensitivity and exceptional scholarship, Lewis offers us a vocabulary and conceptual framework with which to enter into conversation with it.

Reassessing the manner in which "Head's writing represents and responds to the political" (Lewis, 2007: 2), Lewis, like Head, prises open conceptions of "the political" and of "resistance" "'Resistance' in South African writing during the fifties and sixties", Lewis trenchantly observes, "tended to limit definitions of social and creative freedoms. In particular, it meant fixating on racial struggles, neglecting the gendered implications of being black, and yoking the role of writing only to pressing political concerns. Head consistently challenges this" (Lewis, 2007: 125). In detailing this challenge, Lewis attends to one of the fecund conjunctions in Head's work, namely that between the individual and the universal (by-passing, in the process,

the politics of the narrow group, whether it be defined by nation, ethnicity or gender). As she emphasizes: “Head confronts many of the political relationships and situations that other South African writers explore. But she also interprets universal patterns associated with them, as well as the breadth of social and individual quests for freedom” (Lewis, 2007: 2).

Given her sustained enquiries into the very nature of power and of freedom, Head’s acute analyses, Lewis implicitly suggests, are as applicable, and necessary, today as when they were penned. As she notes: “While Head’s approaches to politics initially alienated her from a progressive cultural mainstream, they have become increasingly important to South African explorations of the discursive and psychological implications of power, and to varying and contextualized perceptions of freedom” (Lewis, 2007: 2). It is, indeed, to Head that we must (re)turn as we try to make sense of our post-apartheid political landscape, as well as that of post-colonial (Southern) Africa more generally.

Instead of seeking for coherence of stance, Lewis explores the ways in which “intersecting voices generate complex narratives” (Lewis, 2007: 5) in Head’s oeuvre. Those that she singles out for detailed attention include the voices of the autobiographical, the political and the spiritual. One of the more important contributions to Head scholarship that this study makes lies in its attention to “the spiritual”, and to the ways in which it meshes with the political and the personal in Head’s oeuvre. Head’s encounters with Hinduism, Lewis shows, radically shaped her literary vision, not least due to “its reluctance to separate the profane from the spiritual” (Lewis, 2007: 84), or the “religious [from] the secular” (Lewis, 2007: 11). Like Head herself, Lewis consummately avoids conceptual polarities. The investment in spirituality, she attests, does not in any way evidence a turning away from the material (as, for instance, it does in Ayi Kwei Armah’s presentation of Ram Krishna in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*): “Although [Head’s] philosophical views take recourse in Hinduism and Eastern philosophies, her epistemology, emerging both from her social locations and her interrogation of these, is also firmly rooted in cultural materialism” (Lewis, 2007: 15).

Head’s use of autobiographical material in her fiction and letters is similarly read outside of binary structures that would set it at odds with “creative envisioning” (Lewis, 2007: 6). Much has been made of Head’s personal biography, and certain critics have taken apparent delight in holding her to account for distorting it. Lewis’s handling of Head’s life-narrative

is most refreshing; she engages this material thoughtfully and sensitively, without holding it up to the test of veracity and beating the writer over the knuckles for acts of ‘creative re-visioning’. As she puts it, “in the same way that Head’s fiction sought to challenge oppressive social myths, so did she transform the details of her life history (as the dominant cultural myth of her ‘self’). In this way she asserted her right to name herself, seizing society’s position of authorship to – in a sense – write her own life script” (Lewis, 2007: 18). With this premise in place, Lewis explores the ways in which Head drew creatively upon autobiographical material in her critical engagements with structures of oppression, recasting it productively in her imaginings of new regenerative worlds. Once again the work of the imagination is prioritized, validated and valued. This is precisely the kind of reading that Head’s oeuvre seems to summon in an act of hailing that has been inexplicably ignored in far too many responses.

The extent to which this study reads Head’s oeuvre on her terms is apparent in its title, which was proposed by Head for her unwritten autobiography: “I would like the book entitled as *LIVING ON A HORIZON* – a title definitive of one who lives outside all possible social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and living experience” (Head qtd. 18-19). This is indeed the Head that Lewis recovers and engages, in a welcome and much needed departure from the rejected and tormented Bessie Head that has haunted the pages of so much scholarship. The horizon, rather than the state of agony, is indeed Head’s significant habitation. We read her again and again today *not* because of her “tragic life”, but because of her artistic vision which exceeded all the straightjackets into which society, and then the critical establishment, tried to squeeze her. What Lewis reveals is that, “while there are many indications of her suffering the circumstance of her life, there are also hints that this suffering inspired her philosophical and artistic vision. Situations of compound domination were seen both as locations of political powerlessness and as empowering enunciating positions” (Lewis, 2007: 21). Locating her on the horizon, they ultimately enabled Head to achieve, as she puts it, “the biggest view possible” (qtd. 105).

This view is one that Margaret, the artist figure in *Maru*, produces with sweeping gestures across her canvas. As Lewis notes of Head’s women characters such as Mouse and Margaret: they “often inhabit linguistically silent domains in which their non-verbal responses covertly contest the authority of other’s to

speak for or about them” (Lewis, 2007: 96); they are “character[s ...] trapped in others’ fictions, yet [ones who become] triumphant creator[s] of artworks” (Lewis, 2007: 109), confronting and contesting “distinctly gendered patterns of silencing in addition to those of apartheid” (Lewis, 2007: 111). The reading of Margaret is in turn magnificently enhanced by the dialogue Lewis sets up between her figuration and that of Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Questions of gender course through *Living on a Horizon*, as they do through Head’s oeuvre, yet Lewis avoids the temptation to approach “women” as a coherent and singular category. Instead, she notes the ways in which gender functions under various imaginings of domination and liberation. The romance script, in particular, with its specific castings of women is treated to scrupulous scrutiny.

Another of Lewis’s major contributions to scholarship on *Maru* lies in the manner in which she engages Margaret’s Masarwa identity, which is enabled by her attention to the intersectionality of gendered and raced identity. Rather than simply reading Margaret as a symbol of otherness and oppression, Lewis engages the historicity of the sign of Masarwa-ness that Head evokes. Once again Lewis notes and draws out the implications of Head’s larger vision, which refused to restrict itself to the concerns of the here and now. Thus, observes Lewis, “Head turns to the victimization of a San character at a time when this group’s extreme subjugation was repressed by a nationalist or anti-apartheid fixation with racial conflicts between white and black. She therefore represents a group whose unique story of victimization is drowned out by an influential politics of resistance” (Lewis, 2007: 160).

This project accrues further urgency in *A Question of Power*. Following Head in radically broadening the frame of reference from which to approach power and responses to it, Lewis is able to navigate with remarkable insight the continuum between good and evil that Head establishes in this novel. This is one of the few readings of *A Question of Power* that does justice to its psychic and spiritual intensity while remaining utterly lucid in exposition. It follows the novel in moving towards the vision that Elizabeth’s “softly, drooping hand” conveys, and that her participation in co-operative farming ventures begin to frame; “the pivotal struggles of everyday people”, Lewis argues, are presented as “constitut[ing] meaningful oppositions to power” (Lewis, 2007: 204). In a discursive context in which resistance and land, on the one hand, and women and land, on the other, have been rhetorically bound together, Head forges new relationships to the land, or recovers and

recasts prior ones, which anticipate in part the later strategies of a novelist such as Yvonne Vera. As Lewis points out, “Where conquest, ownership and the abstraction of “land rights” feature prominently in both colonial and ostensibly oppositional African nationalist fictions, Head’s emphasis on small-scale projects, co-operation and agricultural production suggests radically different encounters with the land” (Lewis, 2007: 145), and thus of post-colonial liberation.

Picking up on the “gesture of belonging” with which *A Question of Power* concludes, Head, argues Lewis, constructed “compelling textual home[s]” (Lewis, 2007: 255) in her latter three books, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, *The Collector of Treasures* and *A Bewitched Crossroads*. Emphasizing once again Head’s conception of the “the reconstructive thrust of narrative” (Lewis, 2007: 227), Lewis finds that *Serowe* “extols those who refuse socially prescribed courses and create their own destinies” (Lewis, 2007: 228) – those, in other words, who inhabit the horizon. Tracing continuities in Head’s oeuvre, Lewis shows how the concerns of her fiction are revisited and extended in the later books, describing her final work, *A Bewitched Crossroads*, as the “joyous condensation of her vision” (Lewis, 2007: 274) in which “previous narrative patterns”, treated with caution in the earlier works, finally “soar” (Lewis, 2007: 294). Ethical visions cohere again around states of reciprocity and co-operation, which challenge and transcend the frontiers and boundaries that colonialism and oppositional nationalisms depend upon, as “[l]iberating reciprocal encounters [that] reverberate throughout Head’s writing” find their “most sustained textualiz[ation]” (Lewis, 2007: 288-89).

Lewis’s concluding section, “Imagined Horizons”, urges readers to grapple with the “politics of imagining” that animate Head’s textual worlds. Head, she insists, “was deeply opposed to the relegation of the imagination to a dismissed realm of ‘fantasy’ – conventionally thought to have no meaningful role in collective and political struggles” (Lewis, 2007: 294). Seldom has southern Africa literature played host to such impassioned articulations of the imaginings of power, and the power of the imagination, as we find in Head’s oeuvre; even more seldom has the Southern African critical establishment recognized in imaginative processes the purposefulness that Lewis brings to the fore in *Living on a Horizon*. I recommend this important and beautifully-wrought study in the highest possible terms.

