IDENTITY AS LIMINALITY IN POST-COLONIAL FICTION: NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE PICKUP* AND BESSIE HEAD'S *A QUESTION OF POWER*[*]

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Abstract: This paper sets out to analyze the interstitial/liminal aspect of postcolonial literature as ciphered in the narratives of Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head. *A Question of Power* and *The Pickup* both voice hybrid subjects in terms of race and gender, and thus represent the new epistemological space that this literature opens up. Focusing on the shifting identities of the female characters in these novels, we will establish a connection between the praxis of post-colonial writing as a continuous refocusing of cultural certainties and the relocation of the familiar in the uncanny.
Keywords: Liminality, Post-colonial literature, Neo-colonialism, Hybridity.

Resumen: Este artículo pretende analizar el aspecto liminal de la literatura postcolonial tal y como se refleja en la narrativa de Nadine Gordimer y Bessie Head. *A Question of Power* y *The Pickup* articulan la voz de individuos híbridos en cuanto a raza y género, y, de este modo, representan el nuevo espacio epistemológico que esta literatura abre. Al centrarnos en las identidades variables de los personajes femeninos de estas novelas, trataremos de establecer una conexion entre la praxis de la literatura postcolonial como un continuo reajuste de certezas culturales y la reubicación de lo familiar en lo extraño.
Palabras clave: Liminalidad, literatura postcolonial, neocolonialismo, hibridez.

In *The Newly Born Woman* (1986), Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément established the crucial connection between logocentrism and patriarchy that has informed feminist discussions at large. Interestingly enough, they also recognized in the hierarchical opposition man/woman the basis for the dichotomy "Superior/Inferior" that permeates colonial discourse. The female, like the colonial other, occupies "this space, always virginal, as matter to be subjected to the desire [the male] wishes to impart" (Cixous & Clément 1986: 65). As Luce Irigaray has put it, "[w]omen, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another; if it were otherwise, we are told, the social order would paralyze all commerce" (Irigaray 1998: 576). Commerce, patriarchy and colonial discourse depend on what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the concept of "fixity". According to

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Bhabha, fixity is "a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (Bhabha 1996: 37). This form of knowledge based on the stereotype is placed at the very core of the epistemic regulations that enable the emergence/persistence of colonial/patriarchal discourse.

Within this epistemological framework, neither the female nor the colonial other are granted the possibility to reach any sort of personal identity, since they are fetishistically discursivized as objects of desire. It is when these objectified groups use the analytical tools that have been previously used to silence them, that the presence of patriarchal authority and the validity of colonial discourse are revealed as "ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (Bhabha 1986: 169). This is where the concept of hybridity plays a central role as it unsettles the cornerstone binarism of the colonial/patriarchal episteme. "Hybridity," Bhabha writes, "represents the ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification —a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" (Bhabha 1986: 174).

The voice of hybrid subjects is of central relevance for the study of postcolonial literature as it represents a new epistemological space that begs for self-authentication. In their desire to express their identity, post-colonial writers can be argued to go through some sort of rite of passage. As Victor Turner points out, Arnold Van Gennep, in *Rites of Passage* (1908) distinguishes "three phases in a rite of passage: *separation*, *transition* and *incorporation*" (Turner 1982: 25). For the transition stage, Van Gennep chose the term 'limen', the Latin for "threshold." In anthropological terms, the liminal stage operates as an anti-structure where the initiand in a given society experiences a blurring of social distinctions and strays from the prevalent order of the rest of the community. This critical term seems adequate to delve into the implications of the hybridity of post-colonial writing. Placed in the agonistic locus between center and margins, liminality is the non-space liable to generate new worlds. In Turner's words, " '[m]eaning' in culture tends to be *generated* at the interfaces between established cultural subsystems… Liminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos'" (Turner 1982: 41). However, it should be noted that the liminal does not irrevocably lead to a discursive center, but can operate as a permanently transitional space where referents stand in a catachrestic relation to cultural signifiers. Commenting on Turner's inferences, Mihai I. Spariosu aptly affirms that "the liminal as the cunicular may not necessarily always lead back to a center; on the contrary, it may, under certain conditions, lead away from it in a steady and irreversible fashion" (Spariosu 1997: 38).

The general implications of post-colonial narrative as liminal space can be closely tested in the analysis of two novels that trope the figure of the female and/or the colonial other as the interstitial locus where new epistemological ground emerges as a consequence of the voicing of the formerly silenced object of desire. Both Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) explore the possibilities of a hybridity that goes beyond the impositions of the neocolonial fixity of apartheid in their

attention to the decentering of the self. This decentering relates to the liminality of the micropolitics of the body and the transgression of technologies of sexual control as well as to the geopolitics of what Michel Foucault has called 'heteropias', i.e. counter-sites where real spaces of the society "are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986: 24). These considerations are especially significant in the context of South-African society, where "the majority of the population has been involved in a life-long struggle for national liberation [and] the voices of women have been subsumed under the colonial/ racial discourse" (Ravell-Pinto, 1995: 127).

Gordimer's fiction has been studied as "the area in which historical process is registered as the subjective consciousness of individuals in society" (Clingman 1981: 165). Her fiction is, then, history seen from the inside, since it is the response of a consciousness to the intricate historical developments of South Africa as a whole. Gordimer herself has provided obvious support for this type of analysis as she has affirmed: "[m]y own consciousness and subconscious, the most personal aspects of mind and spirit, come from destiny, shaped by the historico-political matrix into which I was born" (Gordimer 1996: 16). However, if liminal dissidence is to be achieved through her writing, an utterly epiphenomenal assessment of Gordimer as a novelist should be contested. Stephen Clingman warns us against this type of assumptions as he denies the fact that her "novels act as mere supports for pre-given ideological structures" (Clingman 1981: 165).

The resistance to the measures of early apartheid rule launched by the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) shortly after the end of colonial rule in 1961 were quickly sapped by massacres and the arrests of black leaders such as Nelson Mandela. Gordimer's 1963 novel *Ocassion for Loving* reflects the dissolution of her early optimism in multi-racial solidarity as it portrays the unsuccessful aftermath of the sentimental relationship between a black man, Gideon Sibasa, and a white Englishwoman, Ann Davis. Ann's inability to get fully involved in Gideon's cause for liberation expresses the intense alienation of a dissenting but incapacitated white consciousness, while it shows how "Gordimer is at the border of the historical conception which humanist terms can sustain, and she lacks adequate terms to effect a transition" (Clingman, 1981: 179).

This sense of alienation and oppressive marginality is intensified once greater changes towards the abolition of apartheid measures are effected, but the individual consciousness does not know how to produce a brand-new discourse that shapes the microethics of urban intercourse. After the unbanning of the ANC and other outlawed organizations and the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, Gordimer expected "a big-bang ending, because we didn't want to tackle it ourselves" (Gordimer 1992: 139). This anxiety has become the focus of Gordimer's fiction in her latter work, as the issue of self-definition at both national and personal levels is central in *The Pickup*.

Documenting the story of the complex relationship between Julie Summers, a young professional from an affluent white, South-African family, and Ibrahim Ibn Musa, an Arabic illegal immigrant, *The Pickup* becomes an examination of identity, freedom and nationality. In Gordimer's words, "internal reasons for rebelling come out when people slough off their birth-determined identity and become something else" (Gordimer 1992: 147). In the no-

vel, Ibrahim and, especially, Julie struggle to transcend the social impositions that construct subjectivity. While Julie wants to escape the nets of patriarchy ciphered in the figure of his wealthy father, Ibrahim paradoxically aspires to her father's lifestyle. These conflicting perspectives problematize the concepts of alterity and liminality in relation to identity that the opening lines of William Plomer's poem "Another Country" —a poem that thematically recurs in the novel— encapsulate.

"Let us go to another country / not yours or mine / And start again" (Gordimer 2001: 88) this poem reads. Significantly enough, "[s]he [Julie] has read it aloud to him [Ibrahim], but it is meant for her" (Gordimer 2001: 89). Julie, as the central character in the novel, is the one that genuinely embarks on a search towards a self-definition of her identity. By contrast, Ibrahim is just trying to desperately escape his background and enter the neocolonial circuits of wealth and power that people like Julie's father control. For Julie, Ibrahim otherness offers a potential way to transcend the fixities that frame her society. For Ibrahim, Julie becomes the gate towards the life to which he aspires. Even though their ulterior motives are never spelled out, the relationship turns into an agonistic space where new identities —especially in Julie's case— struggle to emerge. In this regard, Julie "often has the sense that he is not looking at her when his regard is on her; it is she who is looking for herself reflected in those eyes" (Gordimer 2001: 129).

Early in the novel, we learn about Julie's reluctance to identify with the world to which her father belongs. When asked by Ibrahim whether she owns the Rover she drives to the garage where he works, she cries out: "It's not mine! She claimed her *identity*: I'd like to have my own old one back!" [my emphasis] (Gordimer 2001: 9). This sense of alienation from the society which the figure of her wealthy father represents is intensified at the cocktail party at his house, where she is disheartened to discover that "[e]ach room she looks into up there—no one of them is the room that was hers, with the adolescent posters of film stars and on the bed the worn plush panda her father brought her once on an airport" (Gordimer 2001: 45). The symbolic implications of the lack of a room of her own in her father's house, operates as a catalyst of the process of separation —to use Van Gennep's term— from her society. This separation, which takes the form of her elopement with Ibrahim to his nameless homeland, is interestingly read by Ibrahim as a symptom of madness: "She's not for me, can't she realize that? Too indulged and pampered to understand that's what she is, she thinks she can have everything, she doesn't know that the one thing she can't have is to survive what she's decided she wants to do know. Madness. Madness. I thought she was intelligent. *Stupidity*. That's it. That's final" (Gordimer 2001: 95). Interestingly, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1967: 141-210) referred to madness as a colonial disease as he related it to a sense of alienation stemming from the experience of colonialism. In an act of reverse orientalism, Ibrahim's thoughts are extremely colonial, but also patriarchal, since, as Elaine Showalter (1985: 154) has shown, labeling rebellious women mentally unstable is a defense mechanism to preserve the system. Julie's attempt to escape "what she is" is, therefore, clinically conceptualized from a position of authority as mental illness since it threatens to disturb the power/knowledge relations on which both the systems of patriarchy and neocolonialism are based. From the perspective of the individual who desires to attain a new identity, madness can be arguably reinterpreted as a

liminal stage following the process of separation mentioned above. As Foucault has put it, "[t]he madman's voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute Passage. In one sense, it simply develops, across a half-real, half-imaginary geography, the madman's *liminal* position on the horizon" (Foucault 1965: 11).

The process of escaping fixed identities and adumbrating new ones is inextricably related to an understanding of the other as a way to transgress fixities through hybridity. Gordimer's own consideration of cultural identity has led her to state that such an identity should be a kind of encounter between self and other, cultural identity being impossible where racial separation is enforced (Gordimer 1975: 149). Such enforcement was prominent in apartheid measures like the 1949 Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act, which prevented inter-racial marriage and sexual relationships, and the Group Areas Act a year later, that divided urban areas into racially-exclusive zones. The neocolonial politics of sexuality, race and space are disrupted by Julie in her separation from her original cultural and ensuing liminality as other in a foreign country.

The recurrent theme of sexuality is one of the ways in which this transgression of neocolonial fixity is facilitated. Through a reference to a poem by Jorge L. Borges, sex is identified with a primeval space where "[*e*]*verything happens for the first time but in a way that is eternal*" and where "*there is no possessor and no possessed, but both surrender*" (*PU* 28). These lines that Julie reads after having had sex with Ibrahim for the first time connect lovemaking with freedom from imposed constraints. The William Plomer intertext shapes this notion of sex as utopian space further as they had "the kind of love-making that is another country, a country of its own, nor yours nor mine" (Gordimer 2001: 96). Sex emerges, then, as a foil to apartheid measures as it symbolically undermines the topological constraints these measures enforce, while it obviously disrupts their sexual prohibitions. Julie approaches sex, envisioned as "that country to which they can resort" (Gordimer 2001: 130), as the preliminary space where her new identity can take root and flourish, since it suspends the defining mechanisms she is trying to evade.

It is through an understanding of Ibrahim's otherness that Julie is trying to create a new identity ("It is she who is looking for herself reflected in [his] eyes" [Gordimer 2001: 129]). Her sexual involvement with Ibrahim and the ensuing temporary liberation is actually related to the transcendence of racial divisions. According to Dominic Head, the politics of the body in Gordimer's fiction becomes an issue "in which questions of sexual expression and transgression are closely linked to racial consciousness" (Head 1994: 19). Head goes on to say that "white patriarchal society supplies a niche for the white woman, based on the requirement of her sexuality, which is subservient, but nevertheless and integral part of the colonising structure" (Head 1994: 21). The white woman's dual, ambiguous role as the basis of patriarchal society and as its silenced object of desire makes her the site of connection between herself and the muted racial other on the basis of affinity of oppression. The impossibility of such a connection, which would dissolve the basis of the patriarchal/ colonial system, is effectively overcome by the interracial relationship between Julie and Ibrahim.

In so far as it is an inter-racial sexual and sentimental relationship, Julie and Ibrahim's marriage can be interpreted as the locus where alternative identities to the ones regulated

by institutionalized power/knowledge relations are likely to emerge. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, Ibrahim replicates, in an act of reverse orientalism, the constraints from which Julie is trying to break away. Paradoxically, Ibrahim is in awe of the culture of which Julie is embarrassed. He, like Festus, the driver of one of the guests at Julie's father's party, attempts to get "relocated" (Gordimer 2001: 46). Relocation, closely linked with immigration, implies the repossession of the outsider by a ready-made set of sociopolitical parameters. At the party, Julie watches how, among Nigel Summers' wealthy friends, Ibrahim "listens to this intimate language of money alertly and intently" (Gordimer 2001: 45). These people and their language encapsulate what, for Ibrahim, qualifies as "the world. They own it" (Gordimer 2001: 160). And this is the world to which he wants to belong. Julie wants out. Ibrahim wants in.

In fact, Ibrahim comes from a strongly patriarchal background where gendered segregation is strictly enforced. For instance, his Muslim upbringing prevents him from seeing "his female cousins", who are confined to "the women's quarters of the house" (Gordimer 2001: 128). Along these lines, it is interesting to see how the figure of Ibrahim's Uncle is somehow touched by the 'aura' of the members of Nigel Summers' coterie as he, as "official agent for American and German cars" (Gordimer 2001: 129), "has everything to the limit of material ambitions that are possible to fulfil" (Gordimer 2001: 128) in his country. From this figure and what he represents radiates the patriarchal impositions that Julie is quick to note shortly after their arrival in Ibrahim's household. During their homecoming celebration, Julie, to signal her closeness to him, "had lifted her glass to him, down there among the men, calling for his rare and beautiful smile—but it did not come, his glance met her a moment but he was apparently answering questions from his father and brothers. It was *the Uncle* who made him smile…" [my emphasis] (Gordimer 2001: 120). Clearly, Julie and Ibrahim, though a couple, are worlds apart. Whereas Ibrahim sees in the society Julie wants to escape the perfection of his own —and is not, therefore, engaged in any sort of transgression—, Julie is anxiously trying to find a genuinely personal identity. Indeed, Ibrahim is firmly located in the transactions of what Irigaray has labeled homosexual society. According to this French critic, "all economic organization is homosexual. That of desire as well, even the desire for women. Woman exists only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself" (Irigaray 1998: 575). As a corollary of this kind of homosexuality, Ibrahim, once he is granted permission to go to the United States, and after Julie's refusal to go with him, significantly thinks, again, that she is mad: "Are you mad? Are you mad?" (Gordimer 2001: 250). Mad because she does not want to be "what she is."

Therefore, we can hardly say that Julie's "another country" is coterminous with Ibrahim's. The former is the liminal space where new identities are liable to reside; the latter becomes equated with the geographical reality of the First World countries. Paradoxically, in Julie's case, this liminal space becomes increasingly identified with Ibrahim's homeland. It is after her first contact with Ibrahim's family that "it came to her that she was somehow as strange to herself as she was to them" (Gordimer 2001: 117). In their country, she is entranced by a place that seems finally real. Contrary to what Ibrahim thinks about the First World, Julie believes that during their time back in her homeland (clearly South

Africa) they "were playing at reality; it was a doll's house, the cottage; a game, the EL-AY Café" (Gordimer 2001: 164). Specifically, the desert turns into a space that, like interracial sex, stands in opposition to the artificial 'homelands' that segmented Julie's country into segregated racial nations. The desert is that bewildering space where everything comes to a stop: "[w]here the street ended, there was the desert" (Gordimer 2001: 131). It is the place with "no seasons of bloom and decay. Just the endless turn of night and day. Out of time: and she is gazing —not over it, taken into it, for it has no measure of space, features that mark the distance from here to there" (Gordimer 2001: 172). The desert can be interpreted, then, as a heteropia that resists operations of surveillance and shows how urbanization, like regulated sexuality, is a space of incarceration. At the same time, it symbolically represents the freed locus of liminality where Julie utopically struggles to find an identity and a home. The relation between utopia and heteropia has been spelled out by Foucault as he has referred to the heteropia as "a kind of effectively enacted utopia" (Foucault 1986: 24). He goes on to specify that the relation between utopia and heteropia is like a mirror, thus reinforcing the conviction that identity is to be attained through the 'othering' of the subject. In his own words: "From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back to myself" (Foucault 1986: 24).

The desert is the spatial counterpart of her stay in Ibrahim's country, referred to as "life in the meantime" (Gordimer 2001: 142). In the meantime, however, Julie finds the home she never had among the women in Ibrahim household. Maryam and Amina, Ibrahim's sisters, Khadija, his sister-in-law, and, eventually, his mother, become a female community where Julie finally develops what she considers is her true identity. In contrast to Ibrahim, who never wants to talk in English and had taught Julie "nothing of the language, dismissing even the conventional polite exchanges" (Gordimer 2001: 135), Julie teaches English to Maryam and the "quiet young neighbourhood girls" (Gordimer 2001: 142), but "in exchange for lessons in *their* language" (Gordimer 2001: 143). In this way, linguistic and emotional ties grow among the silenced females in this patriarchal society. Ibrahim, as an agent of patriarchal power, is against Julie's assimilation to the culture. He tells off his sister Maryam for knitting his wife a robe that she put "around her head like any village woman in the street" (Gordimer 2001: 163). After the male intrusion, Maryam puts her arms around Julie as if she "were a sister" (Gordimer 2001: 164). This is so much so that when Ibrahim announces to the family their immanent departure for America, Maryam thinks that "he was taking his wife away from her" (Gordimer 2001: 239).

Growing in this sisterly atmosphere, Julie makes liminality her identity, as she finds a life in what she thought was going to be a temporary stay in a foreign country. She now inhabits a domestic realm where "the mother directed everything" (Gordimer 2001: 195). Indeed, Ibrahim mother's acceptance of Julie in the feminine space of the kitchen marks the emergence of a continuously fluid sense of identity. Toward the end of the novel, the kitchen becomes the space where the sisterly ties developed through language and cooking imply future possibilities, the place through which newness enters the world of both Julie and her sisters: "the kitchen was the neutral ground from which to take the right of entry by

way of household tasks, playing with the children, exchanging pidgin-language" (Gordimer 2001: 255). Homi Bhabha has actually associated the liberation struggle from discursive constraints with the domestic domain. This domain, he argues, "can be reoccupied by those who have taken up the position of 'inwardness from the outside'" (Bhabha 1992: 151) like Julie. In the domestic sphere of the kitchen, the "women speak 'in tongues', from a space 'in-between each other' which is a communal space. They explore an 'interpersonal' reality: a social reality that appears within the poetic image as if it were in parenthesis" (Bhabha 1992: 151). The interstitial, the liminal, becomes, in this way, "another country", the unhomely space where the agency of surveillance is suspended and new identities are (constantly) in the making.

The issue of liminality as identity also occupies a central position in Bessie Head's fiction. According to Rob Nixon, "Head's haunting quest for alternative, improvised grounds for her identity generated an oeuvre that testifies, with singular intensity, to the inventedness of many of most authoritative social categories —nation, family, race, and history" (Nixon 1993: 107). Indeed, it can be argued that the recurrent subject of Bessie Head is change itself, the investigation of the boundary. This claim should not come as a surprise when the author involved is a doubly-oppressed individual: the voice of a South African 'coloured' woman of mixed origins must necessarily be liminal in nature. As Head herself argued, "I have always just been me, with no frame of reference beyond myself" (Head 1990: 3). Deprived of any sense of nation and family, she struggled her whole life for a sense of identity. *A Question of Power* (1974), which, in its author's words, is "totally autobiographical" (MacKenzie & Clayton, 1989: 25), explores Elizabeth's (Bessie's alter ego) spiritual journey towards self-definition, and is, therefore, a pivotal case study of the possibilities for fashioning cultural hybridization.

Bessie Head's birth was an act of transgression in its own right: "I was born on the 6th July 1937 in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital, in South Africa. The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant" (Head 1990: 1). During her early years, Head was deprived of a permanent family, and a few years after she moves to Botswana, she is diagnosed with mental illness. *A Question of Power* stages the harrowing process of Elizabeth's (Bessie's) mental breakdown: "It was in Botswana where, mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth's mind" (Head 1974: 15). As discussed above, insanity is the disease of those who do not want to be what they are according to official discourses. It is, according to Foucault, the "half-real, half-imaginary" (1965: 11) realm of the outcast in search of an identity. In fact, Head's identity, as reflected in *A Question of Power*, is, insofar as family and race are concerned, characterized by illegitimacy and rootlessness.

Head does not only escape official labels in terms of race and family, but also in relation to nation. As Nixon argues, "Head's sense of familial and racial estrangement was intensified by the fact that, until the age of forty-two, she was also denied the moorings of nationality" (Nixon 1993: 10). In this oppressive situation, Head, like Julie, is irrevocably bound for "another country" where she can develop a sense of self. This alternative space

or heteropia can be equated to her own writing as therapeutic practice[1] and, particularly, to the development of Elizabeth's identity in *A Question of Power*. This novel can be understood as the mental process that results in what Bhabha has defined as "the translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities" (Bhabha 1994: 5), a sense that sheds light on the reality effect at the basis of the concepts of homogeneous national cultures and/or identities.

Elizabeth lives beyond the officialdom of cultural regulations, in the abrasive zone between old and decaying values and the newness of the unknown. The sense of fragmentariness that comes with hybridity and the patriarchal equation of unsurveilled female sexuality with madness marks the starting point for a search of personally adumbrated sense of wholeness in *A Question of Power*. "'Oh God'," Elizabeth cries out "'May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds'" (Head 1974: 100). As in *The Pickup*, her madness can be actually interpreted as the site of resistance to official constructions of reality like nation, race and family. As mentioned above, madness has been read from a colonial/patriarchal standpoint as the symptom of transgression. The onset of Elizabeth's madness and the ensuing collapse of normative logic becomes the liminal space where "[t]here was just these loosely-knit, shuffling ambiguous mass which was her personality" (Head 1974: 62).

The exorcising of the disruptive power of sexuality is of central interest in Elizabeth's mental breakdowns. Two males, Dan and Sello, a female, Medusa, and a host of secondary figments populate her disturbing dreams every night for three years. Elizabeth, Sello and Dan "had shared the strange journey into hell and kept close emotional tabs on each other" (Head 1974: 12). Dan, who is "simply an extension of Medusa" (Head 1974: 168), emerges as a hyper-sexualized figure: "I'm the king of sex," he claims at several points in the novel, "I go and go. I go with them all. They've been specially created for my desires. The road to me is past all those women" (Head 1974: 168). Dan emerges, then, as the cipher of the homosexual circuit that uses women as mere exchange tokens. He is the one that, as an extension of Medusa, the female principle in Head's nightmares, parasitically deprives the female of an identity. Consequently, sex becomes the mechanism that secures male control over the female and silences her. In her retrospective account of her mental struggle, Elizabeth opposes this violent rape of the female to what she considers love, that is, "two people mutually feeding each other, not one living in the soul of the other, like a ghoul" (Head 1974: 13). Therefore, Elizabeth, like Julie, recognizes in the mutual understanding between self and other the only common ground that could possibly facilitate change.

According to Foucault, the cornerstone function of sexuality to maintain the patriarchal status quo was accompanied by a repression of the subject of sex at the level of language. "As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality", Foucault argues, it had been first been necessary to "control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present" (Foucault 1978: 17).

[1] Coming after Head's recovery from mental illness, *A Question of Power* can be understood as an exorcism of her personal anxieties. As Cherry Wilhelm argues, "[t]he novel must have had a therapeutic effect, for the *Collector of Treasures*, the next work, moves on to chart, more objectively and with a wider inclusiveness of mood, the same devastating effects of transition and tribal breakdown in a finely shaped series of short stories" (Wilhelm 1983: 3).

Talking about sex becomes in this way an institutional practice handled by the power relations that support the reality effect of the patriarchal/colonial discourse. The prevalence of sex in the account of Elizabeth's breakdowns can be understood, then, as a strategy to counter the suppressing effect of the patriarchal system. As a figment of her imagination, Dan is an aspect of Elizabeth's officially determined identity that tries to impose sex on her as a disciplining measure[2]. The connection between Dan as a hyper-sexualized enforcer of patriarchy and Dan as a homosexual figure that strives to keep power under male control becomes clear, since "[t]o sex he added homosexuality and perversion of all kinds. To witchcraft terror he added the super-staying-power of his elemental soul; he could outlast anyone in a battle. All this he presented to Elizabeth" (Head 1974: 137). These elements of surveillance and ruthless control that sap the emergence of an independent identity lead Elizabeth to equate Dan with the hell of madness she had to go through: "[s]he had no time to examine her hell. Suddenly, in one short leap of freedom, she called it Dan" (Head 1974: 12).

As in Julie's case, the alternative to sexuality as rape and entrapment is sought in female bonding. Elizabeth's relationship with Kenosi points towards the renewal and redirection that their agricultural project symbolically represents. Kenosi stands for the bridge that connects the private realm of Elizabeth's mental purgation and the public sphere of the economic programs of the community. Significantly, Elizabeth tells Kenosi once: "If I were a man I'd surely marry you" (Head 1974: 90). As in *The Pickup*, this female bond constitutes the liminal site for reconfigurations. This bond, along with the gardening project, represents the visible counterpart of Elizabeth's struggle to adapt to the environment and to create an imagined community that replaces the hollow shams of nation, race and family. After the ordeal of madness, gardening in the middle of the desert can be seen as the creation of a new space where Elizabeth fits. The micropolitics of the village can be read as a heteropia where a true identity is liable to emerge. As Helen Kapstein has argued, "after using the madness trope to break down a series of artificial boundaries, then, Head discards it in favor of a more materialistic strategy, grounded in the land and her garden" (Kapstein 2003: 96). Once she is recovered, Elizabeth comes back to the garden as the place where her country and her family is: "'I've come back to work', Elizabeth said. 'Let me see the garden'" (Head 1974: 203). Elizabeth, like the Cape Gooseberry that successfully takes root in the garden, "settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng" (Head 1974: 153)[3].

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[2] Judith Butler has examined the regulations of sexual difference and sexual practice as a process informed by the same kind of fixity parallel to the one that produces the stereotype of the racial other. In her own words, sex is "not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization thorugh a forcible reiteration of those norms" (Butler 1999: 236).

[3] It is interesting to notice that Bostwana, and the village of Serowe in particular (the real-life counterpart of Motabeng), have been relatively untrammeled by colonialism. As Nixon points out, "Botswana had experienced a peaceful and sheltered twentieth century, a point not lost on Head as she sought a refuge from the psychic and bureaucratic violence that had undone her" (Nizon 1993: 117). In Head's words: "[t]he thing about Botswana is that it is a vast-semidesert, and drought-stricken land, and all through its history it attracted few white settlers" (Head 1990: 27).

Parallel to the Anglo-Arabic pidgin that became the means of communication for the female community in *The Pickup*, Kenosi's spelling of the produce of the garden, in its "fantastic combination of English and Setswana" (Head 1974: 203), ciphers the hybridity that transgresses the limitations of official (fictional) discourses. This notion of hybridity as viable ontological alternative must foster the possibility of a sustainable future where racial and gender differences are overcome, just as the Cape Gooseberry and the autochthonous crops must join together for productive agricultural success. Shortie, Elizabeth's son, and Sello, the cooperative, brotherly male principle that, along with Elizabeth herself, "had introduced a softness and tenderness into mankind's history" (Head 1974: 202), point towards a narrative of reconciliation between genders and races, where production is feasible without the disruptive impositions of sexuality. The poem Shortie writes towards the end of the novel celebrating flying, along with Kenosi's spelling, reverses the sinking process of Elizabeth's breakdowns, suggested by the poem by D. H. Lawrence that serves as an epigraph to the novel. Gender and racial hybridity becomes, then, the liminal space that endows Elizabeth (Bessie) with an identity and a sense of belonging. Elizabeth's final gesture in the novel links this liminal ontological space to the physical reality of the land: "[a]s she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over held land. It was a gesture of belonging" (Head 1974: 206).

Nixon has established an interesting connection between the gardening project as a rite of passage and Head's writing. "The land," he argues, "became the site of her labor while providing a sustaining metaphoric matrix for her work" (Nixon 1993: 126). As Head herself once argued, the therapeutic narrative of *A Question of Power* should be taken as the force to create "new worlds out of nothing" (Head 1975: 28). Just as the market gardening project emerged from the void of the desert, Head's fiction occupies the liminal space between the lack of certainties and the adaptation to the reality of Serowe. Like Julie Summers, Elizabeth and Bessie Head find their home elsewhere, relocating it in an unhallowed, heteropic place, like the desert, from which the utopia of a new identity is liable to emerge. Their refusal of fixed origins leads them to have "the barriers of the normal, conventional and sane all broken down, like a swimmer taking a rough journey on wild seas" (*QP* 15). The unstable, fluxional space that this quote suggests results from the looping of the self into the other and the ensuing abrogation of the official restrictions that enforce fixity as a means of discipline and control. As Bhabha has argued, the beginnings of new narratives can "be the narrative limits of the knowable, the margins of the meaningful" (Bhabha 1992: 146).

The progression of Julie and Elizabeth towards a liminal identity, continuously in the making, charts the operations of post-colonial literature in its search of a discursive space. According to Tejumola Olaniyan, postcolonial discourse "appears to be an open warrant to rifle through the history of Empire —before, during, and after—*from the perspective of the victims*" (Olaniyan 1993: 744). This perspective tends to create imagined communities like Julie's and Elizabeth's that find in heteropic spaces the ground to transgress nationalism, racial divisions and gender constructions. Her shifting identities are paradigmatic of the permanent discontinuity of the liminal nature of post-colonial discourse, as they escape the margins while transcending the centering, imperialistic notions

of gender, race, and nation. Therefore, their relation to these cultural models is catachrestical, since what they have created is not a fetishized identity, but a permanent liminal state that evades definition from an outside center. From the point of view of postcoloniality, of the victims, "the basis of *all* serious ontological commitment is catachrestical, because negotiable through the information that identity is, *in the larger sense*, a text" (Spivak, 1996: 207). This permanent ontological displacement has been the hallmark of Julie's and Elizabeth's liminal recognition of themselves in their projection of otherness. Making their interstitial their home, they parallel the praxis of post-colonial writing, as this can be argued to relocate the familiar in the uncanny, thus being engaged in a continuous refocusing of cultural certainties. As Bhabha has summarized it,

> The present that informs the aesthetic process [of post-colonial fiction] is not a transcendental passage but a moment of 'transit,' a form of temporality that is open to disjunction and discontinuity and sees the process of history engaged, rather like art, in a negotiation of the framing and naming of social reality—not what lies inside or outside reality, but where to draw (or inscribe) the 'meaningful' line between them (Bhabha 1992: 144).

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