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The Inconstant Gardener: Exile, Madness, and the Postcolonial Subject in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

by Avril Tynan

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Abstract

Gardens are a complex meeting place of nature and culture, shaped simultaneously by the natural resources and environmental limitations of the land and by the social, political, economic, and historical values and possibilities exploited by those who fashion and tend them. In Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974), the protagonist seeks out, in her garden, a restorative ground for resolution and progress; yet the same space stages uncomfortable encounters animated by hierarchies of power and acts of misappropriation. Through discussion of community gardens and cultural notions of uprootedness, I argue that the community garden is a site of economic security, cultural independence, and social belonging. The protagonist, an exile suffering from psychotic hallucinations, gains from the garden a means of grounding and rooting herself in a new land, countering narratives of uprootedness, estrangement, and illness. Yet, moving away from the purely redemptive and reparative readings of the garden, I argue that the garden remains an ambivalent space nourished by the co-existence of incongruous histories and identities, where progress is unsteady, inharmonious, and uncanny. To plant a garden is ultimately not to produce a world beholden to the gardener's will but to cultivate a space in which the gardener comes to realize their own entangled position among others.

Keywords: gardens, gardening, rootedness, uprootedness, postcolonialism, postcolonial literature, African literature, World literatures in English

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About the Author

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The Inconstant Gardener: Exile, Madness, and the Postcolonial Subject in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

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Sowing Seeds

Gardens are a complex meeting place of nature and culture. They are shaped simultaneously by the natural resources and environmental limitations of the land and by the social, political, economic, and historical values and possibilities exploited by those who fashion and tend them. Noting how "*the place itself is a boundary*," Edward S. Casey describes the garden as "*liminal* phenomena" (1993, 155), half-way between nature and culture, between death and growth, between the home and the world, between the past and future—between that which has been planted and that which will grow—and between "the completely constructed and the frankly wild" (154). In postcolonial readings in particular, the garden is a "threshold space" (Singh 2018, 152), an ambivalent, diasporic site upon which the postcolonial subject wages an incongruous neoimperialistic battle to conquer the land.

In this paper, I argue that the sense of plurality, failure, and discordance seeded in the garden plays a key role in illustrating the complex individual and interpersonal relations between postcolonial subjects and their lands, communities, and histories. Through a reading of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974), I argue that the community garden structures and cultivates a sense of home, belonging, and identity amid personal and political upheaval. At the same time, seeds of unfamiliarity, disorder, and instability take root and flourish, feeding the porosity and vulnerability of the subject and their entangled relations with others—both human and non-human. In *A Question of Power*, the protagonist seeks out and ultimately finds, in her garden, a restorative ground for resolution and progress. Yet the same space stages uncomfortable encounters animated by hierarchies of power and acts of

misappropriation. Through discussion of gardens, and particularly of community gardens, I move away from the purely redemptive and reparative readings offered by many scholars of Head's narrative and show instead how the author convincingly instrumentalizes the garden as a fitful site of unsteady progress amid embedded conflicts and inequalities.

Growing Gardens

In *Garden Plots* (2006), Shelley Saguaro argues that there is nothing neutral about a garden; the garden is always political and politicized, governed by the balance of power, place, and production. While the garden is, as Sarah L. Lincoln asserts, "a key site of colonial power" (2020, 4), it is also for Saguaro—in her readings of J.M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison, V. S. Naipaul, and Leslie Marmon Silko—and for Ieva Padgett—in the case of George W. Cable's novels—a key site for the renegotiation of spaces contested by colonial rule (Saguaro 2006; Padgett 2015). Yet there is a danger here of reading into the postcolonial subject's relationship with their garden a sense of design and control that would merely imitate the colonizers' relationship to the colonized land. In the poetry of Jamaican author Olive Senior, Jordan Stouck identifies the garden as an ambivalent space, at once a hybrid, diasporic site for the postcolonial subject and the battleground of imperialistic "conquest and the desire for pure origins" (2005, 104), where the gardener finds themselves "weed[ing] out indigenous populations perceived to be inappropriate" (104). If, as Padgett argues, the garden transgresses the dominant narratives instilled by colonial oppression by reclaiming the land and the past that were lost to colonizers and "creating space for groups and histories that the dominant narratives would rather forget" (2015, 67), then it may simply create a space in which one narrative opposes or replaces another, rather than enabling the negotiation of parallel histories and ideas.

It is this conflict between belonging and estrangement, and of uneasy co-existence, that comes to the fore in the garden of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*. The complex narrative presents the tragic psychological disruptions of Elizabeth, a South African exile in Botswana, who struggles with visions and nightmares of three competing and abusive personae: Sello, Medusa, and Dan. These three figures conflict with and complement one another: Sello as the embodiment of both good and evil and Medusa and Dan in visceral, often sexual exploitations of Elizabeth's insecurities. The narrative follows Elizabeth's daily life as a teacher in Motabeng, as a mother, and as a member of the local-industries project growing fruit and vegetables to sell, and also traces her early years in South Africa as the orphaned daughter of a Black man and a White woman confined to a mental hospital. This broadly chronological narrative is intersected with

the voices and visions of Elizabeth's tormentors who incite her mental breakdown.[1] After suffering a psychotic episode and losing her job as a teacher at the local school, Elizabeth takes up work in the village garden as part of a community development project. The role of this community garden has been the subject of a swathe of scholarly research, but there has been a temptation to overemphasize the positively restorative and productive potential of the garden without fully acknowledging how the garden also stages encounters with the uncontrolled, the unfamiliar, and the uninvited.

A Question of Power points towards a reading of mastery—both psychological and ontological—that figures the garden as a site of recovery and reparation. For Anissa Talahite, in her analysis of Head's work, the garden is "a hybrid and plural space where the self can be transplanted and recreated outside the hegemonic boundaries set by hegemonic discourses of identity. Placed in contrast with the mental institution, the garden is presented as a place of healing and recovery" (2005, 143). Still others find an invariably positive interpretation of the garden, identified as "redemptive, selfless, reassuring" (Young 2010, 238), "the key site of Elizabeth's recovery and integration into her new community" (Jäntti 2012, 23), where Elizabeth "[regains] a foothold on life [...] and decisively throws off her marginalized status" (Davidson 1990, 24–25). Yet these readings tend to overlook or omit Elizabeth's subsequent psychological relapse towards the end of the narrative. At stake in the narrative is thus not a question of mastery, but rather of the failure of mastery—be it of one's mental wellbeing, national and cultural integration, or incongruous postcolonial identity—and the need to return, time and again, to the garden, where progress, beset with setbacks, is slow and erratic.

In *Unthinking Mastery*, Julietta Singh problematizes the concept of mastery in anti- and postcolonial discourse, arguing that postcolonial and anticolonial thinkers often reproduce or reanimate the disciplinary discourses they claim to oppose. The failure to master a landscape, language, skill, or any other topic need not signal defeat or ignorance, but, on the contrary, an uneasy co-habitation that preserves and edifies the subject among others. Singh argues that mastery entails the submission, splitting, or destruction of the other object—or the objected other—altering or "estranging [it] from its previous state of being" (2018, 10). Mastery—in the hands of the colonizers or the postcolonial scholars—is a form of such intense, violent control over someone or something that it distorts, fractures, or erases those other lives and objects. In failing to master, the other is preserved in its fullest form and encountered with vulnerability, unfamiliarity, and discomfort.

Among the places to be disciplined, conquered, and ultimately mastered, Singh notes that the garden, an artificially bounded space of contained and often imported

wilderness, is a prominent site of conflict between the desire and the failure to master. In the garden, "the plants, the seeds, the soil, the perceptible and imperceptible beings that dwell therein [have] an agency that is never reducible to the gardener's will" (169). The gardener can never have sovereign control of their garden; the garden will never behave in the way the gardener desires, nor conform naturally to the artificial boundaries that are enforced upon it. Yet the gardener's failure to master their garden does not mean that the gardener has been defeated, nor that native weeds expel all other botanical imports; rather, it signifies the often uneasy co-existence of the garden and the gardener as autonomous agents on common ground. The failure of mastery in the garden cultivates a way of co-mingling, of living together, that nourishes both the agency of the gardener and the agencies of those others—human and non-human alike—whose presences exert an influence in our gardens and in our lives.

In a chapter titled "Cultivating Discomfort," Singh argues that in Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*:, the Antiguan author's memoir of her Vermont garden, failure to master the garden creates a discomfort that has "generative potential" (151). Kincaid's exotic seed hunting expeditions in China and Nepal, recounted in *My Garden (Book)*: (1999) and in *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalayas* (2005), and the nostalgia for the Caribbean which literally shapes her gardening exploits, feed this uncomfortable entanglement of identities and histories. Dictating what will and will not be grown within the bounds of her garden, Kincaid appears as an incongruous and dissonant subject, one who has been formed through colonization to emerge as a neocolonial explorer (162). Building on Sara Ahmed's queer feminist reading of discomfort in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Singh notes that discomfort is not about radical assimilation of, or resistance to, norms; being uncomfortable does not inhibit progress but alerts us to the myriad different ways in which progress may be achieved. Singh therefore reads "Kincaid's always failed attempts at mastering her garden as a promise of stalling mastery" (161) and concludes that "Kincaid's garden—rife with unexpected visitors and 'willful' species—reveals the entanglements of the past, present, and future as it uncovers not only the gardener's vulnerability but her fraught constitution as a porously bounded subject" (170). Shaped both by a colonial history and a neocolonial desire, Kincaid's garden is an instructive site of failed mastery and uncanny progress.

In *A Question of Power*, the garden's resistance to mastery prepares the ground for the uncomfortable co-existence of languages, histories, cultures, identities, and subjects. While redemptive readings typically figure the garden as a stable foundation for personal and social progress, Elizabeth finds in the garden a decidedly unsteady site of encounters with the unfamiliar that, in hindering progress and the possibility of

immaculate control, seeds a space in which the gardener comes to realize her own entangled emplacement in the world among others. In a work heavily influenced by experiences of exile and psychosis, it is not insignificant that the garden in *A Question of Power* is a community kitchen garden. As the source of useful, everyday products, this community garden figures as a seedbed of economic security, cultural independence, and social belonging. Yet the boundaries of this garden, its produce, and its gardeners are porous, exposed to the influences and encounters of uncanny intruders.

Community Gardens

Community gardens, and more specifically community kitchen gardens, are cultivated to provide nutrition for relative amateurs. These gardens differ significantly from more ostentatious formal or ornamental gardens such as those found in the grounds of private houses and châteaux and from agricultural farmlands aimed at the provision of crops or flowers on an industrial scale. Produce from the vegetable garden enables the possibility for self-sufficiency and thus for independence and freedom from external social order (Glatron and Granchamp 2018). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon's critique of the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized, Fanon figures the land and its produce as important sources of resistance and sovereignty, arguing that, "for a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity" (2004, 9). Relatedly, in her study of agricultural farming in the United States, Monica M. White notes how food production constituted a core tenet of the resistance against slavery and oppression, "using land as a strategy to move toward freedom" (2018, 4). For these farmers, agricultural autonomy represented not only a way of resisting or even escaping from racial, social, and political repressions, but also of "building sustainable communities" (5), held together by the interconnections between land, food, and freedom. Drawing on the work of W.E.B Du Bois, White argues against the imaginary that invariably paints the agricultural farmland of the American South as a site of oppression, exploitation, and enslavement, and instead proposes that "farming can become a complex strategy of resistance, one that in some cases confronts structures of oppression while in other cases supports community self-determination" (19; see also Marzec 2007; Lincoln 2020).

Particularly in urban contexts, vegetable gardening allows "the urban people to reconnect with the plants that feed them and to the act of producing one's own food" (Glatron and Granchamp 2018, 2), but the establishment of urban kitchen gardens may become entangled with concerns for health, education, and the environment that redeploy hierarchical structures of power and virtue. Nowhere is this more apparent

than in the community garden, where values of collaboration and parity disguise neoliberal agendas and structural inequalities (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014). As Ghose and Pettygrove argue, urban community gardens are "widely recognized as sites of grassroots citizenship practice and place-based community development" that "can challenge hegemonic ideologies, resist capitalistic relations, and assert rights to space for citizens marginalized along race and class lines" (2014, 1094). At the same time, however, they may also "cultivate racist agendas by masking structural inequities" (2014, 1094), often foisting individual responsibility for produce and practice upon those who have, for centuries, been denied the resources to develop the relevant knowledge and tools. Despite the potential for self-determination through the earth, land use is always contentious; by converting an area of land into a garden for produce, one person's source of food might just mean another's loss of home.

In *A Question of Power*, gardening represents, both for Elizabeth and for her friend Kenosi, an opportunity to emerge as pioneers on their own land (Head 1974, 142) at the heart of the social and economic community. Yet the specter of colonialism is an uncanny intruder into the garden, over which "there hangs the shadow of centuries of conquest: the wide installation of the plantation system, the prohibition of indigenous 'heathen' practices; the insistence on monocultures (crops and people); and the enforced displacement of people" (Saguaro 2006, 128). Elizabeth's assiduous work to establish the vegetable garden relies upon learning many of the modern techniques taught by the white Danes at an Englishman's farm. The hierarchies of power on the farm mirror colonial rule, with white, university-educated Danes presiding over Black workers, while the Danish-run farm itself is provisioned with a state-of-the-art irrigation system and European cattle, all of which are "totally supported by the Danish government" (Head 1974, 71). Elizabeth emerges as an incongruous and porous subject whose role plays into the replication of former colonial order, at once the subject of white, Western powers and an evolving independent authority in a new land. This double bind, whereby Elizabeth finds herself participating in an agricultural structure that upholds, rather than opposes, colonial tensions, demonstrates the contested sociopolitical space of the community garden. If the community garden offers new beginnings in old territories, as when a young Dane, Birgette, comments that, "There was nothing here a month ago [...] I passed this way and found only rock and stones and bush. And here you have a complete garden full of everything" (80), it also embodies the very ground from which—and into which—oppressive structures and ideals are embedded, including those of trade. As a result, the contested ground of the community vegetable garden vacillates between opposing forces of familiarity and liberty and strangeness and subjugation. When Camilla, a Danish landscape gardener-turned-

instructor descends on the farm, she immediately turns the vegetable garden into "the most miserable place on earth" (76), reminding all those present of the potential for familiar, friendly spaces to be transformed into plots of pain and punishment.

Elizabeth's participation in the community garden project is, on a practical level, a means of economic survival after she is fired from her job at the local school. It is also a space in which the protagonist finds a home after her exile from South Africa and a restorative space to recover from her psychotic episodes. Yet it remains an ambivalent space in which she must contend with unfamiliarity and instability, attesting to the structural inequalities and historic prejudices that drained the land for so many years. The community kitchen garden promises refuge, resources, and opportunities for the future, but it simultaneously conjures the persistent specter of colonial darkness that overshadows and obstructs tangible integration into spaces of power, productivity, and progress. Despite its successful harvests, the garden never offers complete refuge or recovery from external conflicts and complications, staging postcolonial life as endemically provisional (Casteel 2007), mutable, and unsettled.

Taking Root

For the Algerian intellectual Jean Amrouche, colonialism destroys a human being because it dispossesses them of social, historical, and mythological roots (1963a, 72) and forces a state of isolation, cut off from the indigenous community and yet prevented from acceding to the community of the colonizer: "The colonial condition makes the indigenous colonized subject a stranger, rootless [*déraciné*] in his own country" (1963b, 100).[2] As Richard Keller summarizes, colonial rule destroyed the possibility of belonging in a country that no longer had a history or an identity, but colonial racism thwarted any attempts to integrate the cultural identity of the colonizer (2007, 169–170). Reading through this postcolonial lens, the metaphor of uprootedness flourishes in *A Question of Power*, where the community kitchen garden animates themes of exile and madness, and the protagonist's economic, psychological, and social attachment to the garden compensates for what Christy Wampole, in her exploration of the philosophical and political evolutions and ramifications of rootedness in the Western imagination, describes as a lack of context. Although primarily focused on France and Germany, Wampole argues that the botanical metaphor stands in repeatedly, across time and place, "as a figure for filiation, cultural connectedness, regional or national allegiance, and symbiosis with the environment" (2016, 2), and it is particularly prevalent in descriptions of a yearning or longing for home (22). Yet it also signifies constraints and limits, an attachment to certain histories and spaces that "[reduce] our

range of experience" (30), and the desire for roots may surge towards violence when there is a perceived competition for space, resources, or origins.[3]

For French philosopher Simone Weil, writing in *The Need for Roots*, "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (2002, 40). Writing at the height of the Second World War and shortly before her death, Weil argued that human beings need both material and moral nourishment for life. Food, housing, and heating, for example, may fulfil our physical needs but are not in themselves sufficient conditions for the optimal life of the soul (6). Human beings also require the balanced satisfaction of opposing needs: both order and liberty, for example, both security and risk (11). When a human being is uprooted, which, as Weil suggests, was both the cause and the consequence of the tragic events of the first half of the twentieth century, she is cut away from a community and thus from the "treasures of the past and [...] expectations for the future" (40). This deracination is particularly prevalent in the brutal actions of war and colonialism, but also more subversively in modern capitalism and the dogmatic pursuit of economic gain (41). Uprootedness, then, is a social affliction that destroys temporal and spatial continuity by isolating mankind from both the security and permanence and the dynamic possibilities for action and change that are rooted in a community, be it national, biological, or any other (7).

It is for this reason that metaphors of uprootedness have a strong affinity with forced migration. As Alvin H. Rosenfeld writes of the endemic condition of Jewish exile reaching back to the story of man separated from the original garden: "Adam, banished from the paradisal garden, stands forth as the original exile" (2008, iv). In the postcolonial context, the modern condition of exile inheres, as Edward Said writes, in a "process of up-rooting" (2000, 141) as "exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (140). There is an important distinction, argues Dov-Ber Kerler, again in the Jewish context, between uprootedness and deracination, in which the first "invokes geographical rupture and separation" while the second may take place in one's own country and involves the loss—or more frequently the dispossession—of culture, upbringing, and heritage (2008, 217). It is no wonder, therefore, that exiles might seek to re-root themselves quite literally in a new space, to claim a home in a new territory and rediscover the security of self-sufficiency offered by the production and nurture of food.

Elizabeth, like Head, obtained a one-way exit visa from South Africa to Botswana, but she remained stateless in Botswana for over a decade. Neither Black nor white but "Coloured," Elizabeth is never able to experience the "simple joy of being a human being

with a personality" (Head 1974, 44). Her dissociation not only from South Africa but from Africa more generally becomes a powerful tool for her hallucinatory tormentors: "'You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages'" (44). As an opportunity to finally create a space for herself in Botswana and to—quite literally—put down roots, the garden represents the possibility for Elizabeth to cultivate her own identity, her own space, her own past and future. Accordingly, the village garden is an overnight success as "cabbages, tomatoes, cauliflower and peppers appeared as if from nowhere and grew with shimmering, green leaves in the intense heat" (124). Becoming herself a part of the "strong root system" (74) that founds and maintains the garden, Elizabeth cultivates for herself a world and an identity that both grounds and sustains her.

In their discussion of the sacred and the mundane in Head's *A Question of Power*, Denae Dyck and Tim Heath note that the communal garden contrasts with the profane and hallucinatory images of the novel as a space in which ordinary people come together. They argue that in locating the novel in the garden of Motabeng, there is a reimagining of the biblical Garden of Eden, but one in which the protagonist is embedded, rather than banished (2018, 64) in the humanity of the everyday:

> Even though Elizabeth cannot return to South Africa or take up citizenship in Botswana, her statelessness does not mean that she fails to emplace herself. Rather, at Motabeng, Elizabeth plants herself, or, more properly, she moves from alienation to a position in which her status as exile becomes complicated and qualified by the rootedness she finds in Botswana. Elizabeth's inner turmoil, then, intertwines with the narrative of grounding herself. (59)

Creating a world within the garden that may replace the loss of her former homeland, Elizabeth marvels at the mutual harmony of humans and plants together in the same environment. This shared home is given voice through the comic personification of the vegetables and their homeliness in this world within a world: "[the garden] has a big street down the middle with lots of side streets between the beds. People can walk around and look at everything. I think the vegetables like it too. They like neatness and order" (Head 1974, 113). Personifying the vegetables and integrating them into the planning and design of the garden, Elizabeth organizes and develops the community garden in the image of an ideal urban space where she too, like the vegetables, can finally take up residence and put down roots.

For Elizabeth, however, the context cultivated in the garden corresponds not only to a need for roots as a stateless exile but also to recovery from a psychological deracination resulting in repeated episodes of psychosis. The two are not discrete: in

Frantz Fanon's critical ethnopsychiatry of North Africa, he demonstrates that constructions of madness grounded in degenerative biological theories of race facilitated the Manichean opposition of the colonized and colonizer. Accused of being uncivilized and unreasonable by their colonizers, colonized populations could be further subjugated to European powers under a psychiatric racism that undermined their biological and intellectual potential. "Madness," he wrote in a letter to the Resident Minister and Governor General of Algeria, Robert Lacoste in 1956, "is one of the means man has of losing his freedom" (Fanon 1988, 53). Yet Fanon's critique of colonial psychiatry went further, demonstrating how psychiatry was not only a sophisticated tool for subjugation but played a crucial role in the processes of decolonization as insanity emerged as a direct consequence of colonial rule, the inevitable result of years of terror, isolation, and psychological warfare. Elizabeth's hallucinatory psychotic episodes in *A Question of Power* point towards a form of mental illness exacerbated by the condition of exile, and, while I do not seek to diagnose madness in the text, Head's narrative is objectively troubling in both its form and context. It demonstrates characteristic symptoms of narratives of madness—"fragmentation, amorphousness, entropy, chaos, silence, senselessness [...] filled with wreckage, dispersion, obsessional repetition" (Stone 2004, 18)—while the biographical coincidences of author and protagonist have colored its academic reception (see further MacKenzie 2014; Mukhuba, Adedayo, and Manning 2019; Rose 1994).

Read in parallel with *A Question of Power*'s descriptions of psychosis, Elizabeth's more lucid narrative often retains links to the garden and to her daily work on the land that suggests it provides a means of overcoming the endemic uprootedness of her exiled and unsettled subject position couched in the "tensions and instabilities" of her visions and nightmares (Bernaerts, Herman and Vervaeck 2009, 286). Coupled with a non-fragmentary narrative, the garden signals a passage towards language, power, and agency that overcomes the colonial dispossession of land, people, and heritage. Moreover, this conventional narrative text occupies an existent reality that is shared by the reader and thus surmounts the hallucinatory and incomprehensible narrative of the psychotic consciousness which excludes, confuses, or terrifies the reader (see Puschmann-Nalenz 2017). For Veit-Wild, the narrative repair afforded by the garden and gardening in *A Question of Power* makes it possible to speak of a "talking cure" (2006, 132) or what Suzette Henke elsewhere describes as "scriptotherapy," the therapeutic process of reconstructing and re-enacting traumatic experiences (1998; see also Atkinson 2011; Young 2010). Susanna Zinato similarly comments on Elizabeth's turn towards writing in the closing pages of the narrative as symptomatic of her psychological healing and eventual return to "a life of communal work and creativity"

(2013, 79). As a result, Zinato identifies a link to the garden as part of Elizabeth's post-pathological reconstruction: "That vegetable garden [...] is hallowed ground to her, as hallowed as the huge, yellow-orange pumpkin full of seeds left as a gift in her empty house" (2013, 79; see also Counihan 2011, 78). In this way, the narrative enlists the garden to draw parallels between rootedness, recovery, and rebuilding after psychosis, exile, and colonialism.

Yet, for all the narrative achieves in its staging of a resolutely reparative and reassuring space within the garden, Elizabeth's subsequent psychological breakdown suggests a failure to master the land, and the conditions for growth, reconstruction, and progress that it houses. Suffering a further psychotic episode, Elizabeth is re-hospitalized, only to return to the community garden and the work of gardening as part of her recovery: "Tomorrow they would plant out more carrots and beetroot; there'd be time today for seedling work" (Head 1974, 204). Looking to the future despite the precarity of her own psychological recovery and continued wellbeing, Elizabeth's relationship with the land is not straightforwardly secure and successful but riddled with unpredictability, adversity, and failure—a failure of mastery, nonetheless, that does not signal defeat, but rather the occasion for continuation, for work, and for the renewal of relations with others.

Perennial Progress

For Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester, in their introduction to *The Meaning of Gardens*, gardens "are powerful settings for human life, transcending time, place, and culture [that] connect us to our collective and primeval pasts" (1990, 2), and while they suggest that the garden has traditionally been studied and discussed as "an idea, a place, *or* an action" (2), they show that the meaning of gardens can only be fully understood through the simultaneity of these three aspects, "as a whole, as an ecology of interrelated and connected thoughts, spaces, activities, and symbols" (2). The garden draws out the tension between the exploitation of social expectations infused into the land, the physical structure of the garden, and the dialectic between the labor of gardening and the resplendent tranquility of self-sufficiency. At the intersection of nature and culture, man's attempt to restrain and train wilderness in the garden represents "constancy yet is ever changing" (4). Confronted as they are with both delights and disappointments, the gardener finds in the garden living proof of "both their influence over, and their place within, the world" (Bending 2013, 5). *A Question of Power*'s community garden is shaped both by the failure to master the garden and by the failure to submit to mastery in the garden, cultivating an agricultural space fed by the coincidence of incompatible histories.

As Wendy Knepper has written of Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*: and *Among Flowers*, the community garden in *A Question of Power* provides a site in and through which living relations to the world may be negotiated and renegotiated: "a place where rumination, regenerative resistance, and relation to a changing world order take seed and grow" (2011, 56). Images of gardens and gardening in *A Question of Power* both uphold and challenge the interconnected relationships between inside and outside, human and animal, self and Other, and nature and culture that play out across and within the space of the garden as a miniaturized world in which borders and beliefs are constantly open to renegotiation. While many discussions of rootedness and the afflictions of uprootedness focus on trees, the root as it grows in representations of community gardens—and particularly those producing root vegetables—has been lacking. Here, the root itself is consumable, impermanent, and marketable, providing not context, as Wampole claims, but sustenance for the deliberation of context on contentious and contested ground. When Elizabeth first arrives at the farm and surveys the peculiar assortment of instructors, she notes that, "It is impossible to become a vegetable gardener without at the same time coming into contact with the wonderful strangeness of human nature. Every man and woman is, in some way, an amateur gardener at heart" (Head 1974, 72). There is no expertise here, no claim to mastery, but rather the anticipation of failure and of inconstant and volatile progress. To plant a garden is thus not to produce a world beholden to the gardener's will and whim but to cultivate a space in which to negotiate an ethical relationship to an impermanent and ever-changing world.

Notes

[1] Due to its generic instability, I have avoided calling the work either a "novel" or an "autobiography." *A Question of Power* often features in discussions of African fiction, while the text also reflects a number of autobiographical coincidences with the author—most notably the childhood events in South Africa, statelessness in Botswana, and psychotic episodes and hospitalization. Head herself claimed that the narrative, "is totally autobiographical. Roughly I would pin it down to this tremendous disturbance I began to experience from 1968 until late 1970. Something's getting at you, and there's no way in which you can stop it or make it subside" (cited in MacKenzie 2014, 152).

[2] "L'état colonial fait de l'indigène colonisé [...] un étranger, un déraciné dans son propre pays." Translation from the original French my own.

[3] In Sarah Hammerschlag's philosophical mapping of the wandering Jew in French *Fin de Siècle* thought and history, she notes particularly the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Jew as "rootless" in the work of Maurice Barrès (2010, 25–41). In his 1897 novel, *Les déracinés* [*The Uprooted*], Barrès warned against the turn from national roots and prefigured discourses of rootlessness that would serve nationalistic ends in the following decades.

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