Research Article

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When Earth Matters: Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

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Abstract: This essay discusses Bessie Head's When Rain Clouds Gather from an ecocritical perspective, asking how her late 1960s' novel already anticipated some of the politics of early twenty-first-century environmental thinking in the postcolonial sphere. The alliance of various marginalized characters who, one way or another, violate against existing hegemonic structures replaces the ideological and cultural conflict over territory, which derived directly from the colonialist past, with an agricultural revolution that aims to empower those who most closely resemble the subaltern classes variously theorized in postcolonial theory. This re-turn to the physical or even Real, to the materiality of the earth, opens up an alternative to the cultural essentialism that, from its beginning, created numerous stumbling stones on the path towards decolonization. Through its turn towards farming and the land and away from cultural forms of hegemony, the novel emphasizes the materiality of reality.

Keywords: Head, Bessie; When Rain Clouds Gather; ecocriticism; agriculture; materiality; tribalism

In postcolonial studies, discussions about cultures and identities claim a prominent place and have moved the balance away from considerations about materiality and the physicality of actual spaces. This essay sets out to return the gaze towards space and to discuss Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* from an ecocritical perspective, asking how her late 1960s' novel already anticipated some of the politics of early twenty-first-century environmental thinking in the postcolonial sphere. The alliance of various marginalized characters who, one way or another, violate against existing hegemonic structures replaces the ideological and cultural conflict over territory, which sits at the heart of the historical colonialist project of empire, with an agricultural revolution that aims to empower those who most closely resemble the subaltern classes variously theorized in postcolonial theory. This re-turn to the physical opens up an alternative to the cultural essentialism that, before G.C. Spivak pointed towards its strategic potential and thus suggested a possible subversion of essentialism's logocentric politics (Spivak 1989: 1-16), created numerous stumbling stones on the path towards decolonization. At heart, postcolonial studies, born out of Edward Said's study *Orientalism* (1978), has from its inception concentrated on culture and language as the key forces that did in fact structure and enable the building of empires. However, in confronting the materiality of earthly existence, various forms of perceived difference suddenly go out of focus, allowing for a different form of visionary cultural politics.

This "going out of focus" is not necessarily to be viewed as a lack of attention or a form of disregarding reality. On the contrary: it resonates directly with recent discussions of cosmopolitanism that also, at least implicitly, aim for a reconsideration of the critical weight that attaches to terms and concepts that are primarily based in cultural forms of definitions of self and other. When Paul Gilroy, in *After Empire*, invites his readers to envision forms of interhuman communication that are predicated on a trans-conventionalized form of understanding, he also draws on the idea of moving beyond focus:

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> We need to know what sorts of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals to cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile. We need to consider whether the scale upon which sameness and difference are calculated might be altered productively so that the strangeness of strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of a basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant. (Gilroy 2004: 3)

While his turn to "other dimensions" betrays a reliance on the richness of human cultural and intellectual forms of empathy, the "'new codes' of honor and human value" discussed by Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown (88-89), it may not be adverse to his thinking to consider as well a move from the strictly humanistic to the actual physical: the other dimension might then refer to the actual physical spaces that exist beyond (and irrespective of) cultural forms of meaning making, dependent as they are on power, ideologies, and other aspects of historicizing reality.

Given that colonialism began with a desire to control politically and strategically those geographical spheres outside of Europe that could be exploited for the natural resources and products that directly contributed to the wealth of the colonizers through global patterns of trade, it actually makes sense to focus on the spatial side of colonialism, in particular on how matters of agriculture and ecology interact with questions of power and hegemony. Yet it would be naïve to assume that ecological exploitation were an invention of Western modernity or profit-oriented economist thinking; that there was, as Wendell Berry (1977, passim) suggested for the USA, ever an original moment that "unsettled" the supposed contrast between culture and agriculture. Any such nostalgia, as William Cronon has argued, always hinges on conceptualizations of nature as a wilderness that is, somehow, separate from human experience.

While the nexus that links ecological thinking and colonialism has been frequently addressed (see, for instance Curtin and Guha), one need only turn to Richard Wright's *A Short History of Progress* to learn that species extinction, for example, is by no means an exclusive talent demonstrated by Western colonizers. While nature has suffered under any form of human impact, Wright's discussion also shows that imperial arrivals of glorious travellers often turn into ecological disasters. At least, they do so if one is willing to assume that equilibrium is something to which the planet and its diverse eco-systems should aspire. This equilibrist idea, inspired at least in part by the nineteenth-century biological thinking that natural ecological systems are driven by an inbuilt drive to go through certain predetermined successive stages towards some form of final and higher equilibrium, in the end nurtures a way of thinking that derives most justification from a sense of progress and perfectability, itself the outcome of a part-Christian and part-Marxist attitude towards time that is directed at a state of felicity to be reached in an as-yet unspecified future. Taking an egalitarian approach to the causes of natural disasters, Wright's 2004 Massey Lectures evoke various scenarios from around the world where ecological disasters occurred in the absence of industrial western civilizations. The examples show that catastrophic ecological outcomes result from a disregard for the inherent logic of ecosystems and are thus not directly linked to any particular form of (colonialist) politics. For instance, Wright turns to the Easter Island, which "was once well watered and green" (58) but which subsequently deteriorated to an almost entirely barren island, depleted by an uncompromising devotion to cultural forms that are self-destructive. The Rapa Nui turned at least partly against their tribal knowledge, throwing over the statues that served as the ossified reminders of their past follies and their history of exploitation that had converted their erstwhile lush islands, a typical example of a supposedly Edenic site (Bayer, "Tropical Paradise") into ever more meager ecosystems. Wright's comments about the environment and the western progressivist need to unearth positive developments towards a future state of permanent bliss relate uncannily to recent criticism about the implications that such Enlightenment thinking has on how colonialism developed and on how postcolonial studies should deal with what critics like Enrique Dussel or Walter Mignolo have described as coloniality, the evil doppelgänger of modernity. This critique of Enlightenment rationality, implicated as it was in structures of exploitation and deceitful explications of supposed essential differences between different members of the human species, directs attention back to the underlying physical continuum not just between the racialist differentiations that drove colonialism but also between the anthropocentrism that assumes an essential difference between human culture and mere nature. The realization that the justifications of empire were built on such diverse misrepresentations of reality discredits the very core of any reconciliatory rhetoric that refuses to acknowledge these ecologist

insights. It instead invites us to consider the material ground from which the kind of discursive differences grew that came to keep colonialism in balance while it lasted; and it holds the promise to reveal other forms of continuity and differentiations that are more forcefully connected to the real environment surrounding us.

Colonial Matters

In this essay, I will focus on a novel by Bessie Head, her 1968 work, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, asking how this novel offers alternatives to the way in which colonialism and postcolonialism relate to earth, soil, water, and agriculture; in other words, how they try to prevent the "desert of the real," Slavoj Žižek's markedly spatial phrase to critique the simulacra of post-9/11 politics, to succumb to desertification, evoking a much more chthonic quality of Žižek's Baudrillardian quip. This battle over the ontological status of reality, and hence also about the relationship between humanity and the natural environment, is fought primarily through culture and over the meaning that past institutions are allowed to play in any present age. In the novel, the conflict with the fore-fathers, who are admittedly more representative of colonialism than pre-imperial indigeneity, plays out as a potentially violent exchange between various groups: tribalist traditionalist and post-tribalist progressives, the latter including domestic Tswana people; refugee immigrants like the novel's protagonist Makhaya; benevolent postcolonial administrators like the local chief of police; and committed individuals like Gilbert, the can-do renegade farmer from England whose idealism and intellectual autonomy allow him to ignore all existing divisions by placing the physicality of reality above the ideal purity of abstract and politicized thinking.

In addressing these tensions between what Gregory Bateson has discussed as western culture's mind-body split in his writing about an ecology of mind, Head's novel also speaks to what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin describe in their *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* as the need to work on "narrowing the ecological gap between coloniser and colonised" (2). The novel in fact draws extensively – and sometimes also dangerously – on the kind of ecological nostalgia that Leo Marx has described for American culture and that here aims to transcend tribalist cultural taboos. In other words, what Head's novel envisions is a return to an ecologically driven agro-culture that is not hindered by the existing socio-cultural realities, itself a form of neocolonial exploitation. Unlike Alfred Crosby's justifiable concern with the kind of "ecological imperialism" that describes how the introduction of non-domestic life-forms eventually contributes to substantial capitalist gain, Head's vision of an agricultural utopia is based on indigenous plants and animals which have been pushed out of the ecosystem due to either the arrival of other species or the management decisions of farmers that result in overfarming and other forms of exploitation of the indigenous ecosystem. What I hope to demonstrate in this essay is that Head's novel approaches cultural questions over tribe and race, in other words discursive formations related to issues of power, through a focus on the physical realities of the local ecosystem, by effectively grounding this debate in matters of the earth.

This focus on the physically real affects all major characters in her novel. For Makhaya, who acts as the heterodiegetic novel's main focalizer, the natural environment is of major importance. Disillusioned by the rhetorical and discursive fault lines in his native South Africa, he follows, to use a concept Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have coined to describe means of resistance towards the territorializing powers of the state apparatus, his personal "line-of-flight" into the neighbouring Botswana, hoping to discover there the kind of immediate (meaning, unmediated) involvement with life that he could not find at home. Putting his reasons for leaving his native country into words, he says: "It's the road of peace of mind that I'm seeking" (Head 20). Tellingly, his search for a state of mind revolves into a form of engagement with the natural landscape. To serve this strategy, Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* does not subsume the physical environment under its mythological heritage, thus departing from novels by Chinua Achebe or Ben Okri, who frequently evoke the natural in order to educate readers about the cultural (see Guignery). While Achebe and Okri thus expose themselves to the potential accusation of taking a romanticist notion of nature and landscape—an accusation that their unequivocal political stance in their writing easily counters (see Bayer, "Political Power")—, Head's novel pays almost realist attention to minute biological details, at

times almost sounding like a textbook that introduces the area's ecological system, covering soil quality, climatic aspects, and the resulting types of vegetation. Throughout the text, the personal developments of its major characters, with all their psychological and emotional depth, are situated in a physical reality that grounds their lives. The book has its feet firmly planted in chthonic tropes, reminding readers that despite the distance that any literary or aesthetic representation brings with it, this narrative wants to reconnect with its readers' actual reality, or what we could call their matteReality. True to the political commitment lived by its major characters, the novel betrays an almost Marxist belief in the ability of speech to relate back, dialectically, to material reality (see Ward). Evoking the pedagogical principles of the late Patrick van Rensburg's institutions, of which the Swaneng Hill School in Serowe is easily the most famous one, Bessie Head's fictionalized Botswana indeed promotes "education with production" (see Vally and Motala).

One way in which Bessie Head's novel links education and production is by introducing into the ethnic and national tensions that define her characters' biographies (not to mention gendered differences; see Kgafela) forms of agriculture that draw on the opportunities afforded by indigenous realities, bring in Western forms of science and research (but see Bayer, "Coral Reefs"), and use the outcome of those experiments in blending knowledge about ecology with a willingness to bypass tribal traditions and prejudices to benefit local farming and sustenance, what Dokubo Goodhead discusses as the novel's "sustainability." As *When Rain Clouds Gather* takes its readers through the landscape of southern Africa, it emphasizes the physicality of the very biosphere in which it is set. Very early in the narrative, for instance, Makhaja Maseko, a South African refugee who seeks shelter and a new home in neighbouring Botswana, is shown looking at the environment around him, wondering at how its materiality contributes to its significance:

> "I wonder what the birds live on, he thought. The land on either side of the footpath was loose windblown sand and thornbush. Often the thornbush emerged as tall, straight-trunked trees, topped by an umbrella of black, exquisitely shaped branches, but more often it grew in short low tufts like rough wild grass. Long white thorns grew on the branches, at the base of which were tightly packed clusters of pale olive-green leaves." (17)

The manner in which natural detail is presented prevents readers from reaching for mythological significance and instead invites the kind of response that takes physical properties seriously. As the novel progresses, ecological details are also increasingly connected to human interference, thereby insisting that nature and culture are enmeshed at such a level that it becomes meaningless to discuss one without the other. The narrative thus evokes environmentalist concepts as earlier advanced by thinkers like Aldo Leopold, whose "land ethic" marked a foundational moment in American ecological thinking; and it anticipates the debate about the anthropocene that, as Erle Ellis has demonstrated, also moves beyond what strikes contemporary philosophers of ecology as somewhat romantic (see also Thomas). Head's novel in fact insists that to reflect on the state of nature always requires us to ask about the role played by human agents and the manner in which their chosen form of civilization impacts the natural environment.

Culture vs Agriculture

The description of the novel's main setting makes this very clear, albeit presenting its case in rather neutral, even technical language that strives to avoid any sort of value-judgments:

> "Golema Mmidi was in the eastern part of the country, in a watershed area that received an average annual rainfall of eighteen inches, while vast stretches of the western region were almost desert and received an average annual rainfall of nine inches. Thus, the eastern watershed was also the most heavily over-stocked and overgrazed and overpopulated part of the country. Because of this, much of the softer, sweeter types of grass had long since disappeared from the area, and great stretches of land were covered by a species known as the carrot-seed grass." (36)

Aspects such as overpopulation and overgrazing, clearly connected by Gilbert to human agency, are here merely added to the picture, as if they are givens, like the local soil quality or the rainfall patterns. At other moments, though, the passage reminds readers that causality and human agency play a crucial role. Causal links such as "thus" and "because of" make it clear that the present ecosystem largely results from

human decision making. Head's novel thus chimes in with Shephard Krech's influential discussion of the "ecological Indian," whose racialist portrayal as fully embedded in a harmonious relationship with the environment refused to grant agency and thus humanity to the non-Western inhabitants of the New World. Head's novel also refuses to reduce its African characters to such a level of romanticist appendix to a perfect state of ecological equilibrium and instead presents the landscape as under duress from the agricultural traditions at use in the communities she describes.

It is here that the novel's progressive attitude towards both culture and agriculture sets in. After his arrival in Golema Mmidi, Makhaja, who will eventually form one half of the novel's love plot alongside Paulina, quickly joins the co-operative farm run by Gilbert, the idealistic European who wants to introduce both reliable subsistence farming and cash crops to the arid region. In order to overcome the ossified cultural practices he encounters in Botswana, he turns to the physical reality of the land, its soil, and the plant life that grows there, building his argument for change and improvement on the hard and arid facts of the agriculture and ecology he encounters. The process chosen by Head is accordingly heavily indebted to the empirical approach to science and knowledge. One of Gilbert's first acts is to fence in plots of land and to measure the changes as they occur under different gracing patterns. While such a scientistic approach, where systems of control are extended over clearly marked territories in order to create measurable outcomes deemed potentially profitable, seems committed to Western structures of Enlightenment thinking, the most telling results materialize in the very borderlands between the actual testing grounds, as new plants appear in the protected areas in between the fenced-in testing areas, what James Garrett identifies as the novel's substantial investment with aspects that play out precisely "on the periphery of the text" (124). Reminiscent of one of postcolonial studies' foundational metaphors, Homi Bhabha's empowering third space, Head describes these border strips in liminal terms:

> "Over a period of two rainy seasons, a number of interesting changes took place on this border strip. Springing up between the carrot-seed during the first season were the long frail, feathery stalks of the wind-blown eragrostis, a lush sweet grass. Within two years, this type of grass had gained dominion over the border strip area, crowding out the carrot-seed grass, which by then had ceased to grow." (36-37)

So, while Gilbert approaches discursive obstacles by turning to the physical, he unintentionally transgresses his own categories: the plotting of land that was to reveal to him an improved form of exploitation turns out to have been misdirected and thus spatially inappropriate. The novel thereby insists that replacing one strict system of thinking with another will not provide lasting solutions. It points instead to a more flexible engagement to problem solving that is willing to negotiate the gulf between reality and representation. Quite appropriately, Head in the scene just quoted chose a type of grass whose Greek etymology smoothly matches the novel's romantic plot: eragrostis is derived partly from eros and means "love grass." By evoking through this species of grass amorous notions of emotions and desire, and thereby countering Enlightenment reliance on logical structures, the scene implicitly undermines Gilbert's excessive logocentrism. What brings positive results, namely the return of valuable grasses, is not the systematic cultivation of the land that comes out of Gilbert's book-knowledge, but rather an unintended side-effect, something that happens while nobody is looking and where nobody is taking control of nature. The novel's plant life thus embodies an almost ideal environment where hegemonic (read, cultural) forces play no role. Rather than replacing one regime with another, which it initially set out to do, Gilbert's co-op eventually leaves room, albeit unintendedly, for spontaneous developments. It is in these spheres that ecological changes play out that seem promising:

> "Other miracles too had taken place in the border strip. The minute star faces of wild flowers peeked up amidst the now dense grass: white stars and purple stars and the lacy curving sprays of delicate blends of pale-pink blossoms with, here and there, the jaunty yellow-gold of strange freakish daisies with stems that were one inch wide and flat as rulers, topped by flowers with the odd shape of inverted whorls. A strange gourd too crept along the fence, the hard outer husk of the fruit enclosing enormous seeds which were covered by a thin film of syrup that tasted like honey." (37)

Told through Gilbert's focalizing perceptions, these passages give voice to his own lack of a deeper understanding of the complexity of ecological dynamics and potentialities. The passage actually ends with

the question: "Had all this strange new growth lain dormant for years and years in the soil?" (37) The residual power of plants for Head signifies a buried potential within (agri-)cultural systems to revert back to more appropriate and sustainable forms of survival. And to stress this fact, the novel relates the biological changes on Gilbert's test farm directly with the socio-cultural realities in the local community.

Landed Power

Gilbert's enclosure of land in fact causes major tensions in Golema Mmidi since tribal territory, by convention, never goes into ownership, instead being handed to those in need of farm land as seen fit by the local chief. The highly hierarchical system had prevented extreme poverty in that it provided for those in need; but it had of course also perpetuated the power of those in charge. What is interesting about Gilbert's practice, though, is that it combines an agricultural co-operative built on the idea of stewardship with a capitalist model driven by cash crops, thus drawing a profit from land that, legally speaking, is not owned by those benefitting from the products produced on that land. It is therefore less a question of personal business acumen than a matter of appropriate ecological engagement with the land that Head's novel proposes, and this despite the fact that Gilbert's attitude is primarily capitalist, contrasted as it is to the novel's overall interest in promoting a worldview that places value on creating "a vibrant, self-reliant society" (Pangmeshi 71). Throughout, Head's narrative reminds readers that what stands in the way of social progress is the two-fold issue of insufficient ecological thinking and a tribalist notion of conservative politics which prevents any structural changes. From a postcolonial point of view it is remarkable how she describes the post-independence situation in Botswana as driven by the same hegemonic principles as implemented by the European colonizers; that is to say, she suggests that tribal chiefs are predominantly interested in keeping the huddled masses in a state of ignorant dependency that allows their supposed betters to present their interventions as the only path into the future. The system of exploitation, once again, is built on a structure of self-imposed acceptance. The Gramscian forms of subalternity [so widely circulated in postcolonial studies through Spivak's writing on speech and so readily available to discuss Bessie Head's biographical background (see Mukherjee, 39-40)] nevertheless simply fall by the wayside when cultural forms of domination are placed alongside biological forms of survival. Echoing Gilbert's reliance on his agricultural book-learning, the local tribalists lack the ability to engage ecologically with the changing needs of their local community.

Gilbert comes to understand this problem as well, most noticeably when he learns about the various options that exist for growing grains that would actually feed people even with the kind of harsh climatic environment in which they live. In speaking to the local authorities about research into seeds that can be planted in the local ecosystem, he finds out that they have indeed tested more than a thousand varieties of millet and discovered one that perfectly fitted the soil quality, precipitation patterns, and temperature extremes. Rather surprised, he learns that this millet is shunned by most farmers. He is told that most Batswana people will not plant or eat this millet "because certain minority tribes, traditionally considered inferior, had long had a liking for millet and had always grown it as part of the season's crop. Therefore, other tribes who considered themselves superior would not grow it or eat it" (41). Testifying to his willingness to bypass such ideologically motivated reasons, he then successfully introduces millet to his farm. With such tribalist comments, the novel returns to its opening scene, when Makhaya flees from South Africa, preferring life as a refugee in Botswana to the painful daily confrontations with racism and tribalist strife in his home country. In the novel, his disillusionment and impatience with tribal (or even proto-nationalist) thinking turns him into a role model for the country's future developments. Even before meeting his soon-to-be co-worker, Gilbert had known that "He needed, more than anything, somebody with the necessary mental and emotional alienation from tribalism to help him accomplish what he had in mind." (30) For Gilbert – and, one could add, for Bessie Head – cultural changes can only succeed if and when based on actual material changes, most importantly those related to crucial real objects like food or water. Changes to cultural practices, in turn, frequently require that cultural conventions are allowed to develop and change. Such a rudimentary turn to Marxism, in the passage just cited clearly visible through vocabulary such as

"alienation," may resonate on an ideological level with radical politics; on a physical level it nevertheless betrays a certain determinism that refuses to engage in the utopian visions of historical progress. Progressive culture, in the novel, depends on agriculture; it literally is an outgrowth of the materiality of agriculture and the ecosystem that supports it. Or, to approach this textual logic from its obverse end: any cultural formation that runs against nature's grain is ultimately doomed to failure. And it is this aspect of Head's cautionary tale that should give any reader pause, regardless of when and where they read her novel.

Shifting Borders

In conclusion, let me focus my comments on tribalist conflicts over proper food sources more explicitly to this special issue's overall theme on matteReality. What I detect in Bessie Head's novel is a way of engaging in the physicality of agriculture as a means of overcoming the culturally over-determined conflicts both between Africa and the west, between different ethnic groups within Southern Africa, and between different segments of society that are defined by their relative status of affluence. Her novel aims to point out ways how these cultural conflicts can be transgressed by concentrating on the ecological base that supports all these superficial differentiations, and she does so through placing various plants or agricultural practices prominently within her novel's structure. Allow me to turn to one further element that also serves this purpose, namely to water. In the arid setting of *When Rain Clouds Gather* water determines, through precipitation patterns in particular areas, which plants will grow, and which will not. On that count, water creates clear lines of distinction, the kind of sharp borders that, in the novel, lead to the death of countless cattle, and some herders, when the rains do not appear and the overall drought situation reminds all inhabitants that the presence and absence of water creates clear either/or distinctions. Yet these borders always move; and it is the material reality of this ontological flexibility that causes death, in particular when people stubbornly and naively rely on the supposed fixity of what are merely conventionalized and therefore essentially virtual lines. Lawrence Buell, in discussing how science defines various watershed systems in a complex natural environment similarly points out the constructedness of such constructs, describing them as "aesthetic-ethical-political-ecological image" (247). While the novel's use of water thus appears, on a symbolic level, to subscribe to the principle of strict scientistic differentiation, Head also draws on another and quite different point of contact between the role of water and postcolonial studies, namely one that relies on its physical or material properties, specifically its state as a liquid that, literally, cannot be grasped. In the novel, this elusiveness of water relates to the ultimate lack of fixity of tribal, cultural, or national identity. Anticipating the poststructuralist theories by critics like Homi Bhabha, *When Rain Clouds Gather* alludes to the substantial elusiveness at the centre of many ideological discourses. The novel aims to deflate the supposed stability of semantic concepts (like the tribe) by signaling towards the non-cultural and therefore more flexible materiality of the earth, existing in a non-semanticized state of significance that allows for unlimited nuance and differentiation. It thus alerts readers to the fact that more often than not, those driven by cultural distinctions stand to lose more than they win. As it does in the case of millet farming, which is rejected due to firmly-held stereotypes, the whole novel suggests that ossified cultural norms can be hurtful to those committed to them.

For Bessie Head, whose biography is marked by the racist system of South African apartheid, the path towards ecological sanity needs to lead alongside the kind of development that, much later, Paul Gilroy has described in *After Empire* as the convivial togetherness of cosmopolitanism, where people finally, and physically, and despite the perceived differences of discursive categories, sit down together [as it were, on the ground] and draw energy from the earth and the fluent materiality of reality before words. *When Rain Clouds Gather* is, thus, in the best sense of the word, an example of a worldly text awaiting worldly criticism. It brings together a politics that signals beyond the limitations and limiting forces of cultural discourse and hegemony, and it emphasizes that, at its very heart, human interaction depends on and grows from material reality. The very materiality of agriculture – its dependence on physical properties, on the contingencies of weather and climate, and on the successful interaction of ecological networks – thus also serves as a reminder of the complexity that underwrites any form of interaction. It hierarchizes reality with a clear

preference for body over mind; and it signals towards forms of conviviality that hold the promise to find implementations also beyond the immediate context of Head's novel. Just as the novel envisions forms of communication and togetherness that are not limited by the protagonists' diverse linguistic, ethnic, or national backgrounds, so its focus on physicality conjures up the shared corporeality of all its readers, regardless of their individual backgrounds and forms of socially-defined identities.

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