

Rob Burton  
Department of English  
California State University-Chico  
Chico, CA. 95929  
e-mail: [rburton@csuchico.edu](mailto:rburton@csuchico.edu)

Abstract Proposal for

The First Global Conference on Multiculturalism, Conflict, and Belonging

September 3-6, Mansfield College, Oxford, U.K.

“ARTISTS OF THE FLOATING WORLD: BESSIE HEAD AND KAZUO ISHIGURO”

In this paper, I examine two artists of the floating world: South African-born Bessie Head and Japanese-born Kazuo Ishiguro. Not only do these writers float across national boundaries in terms of their citizenship and cultural identities, but they also articulate through their fictional characters the pains and pleasures of “ukiyo” (Japanese for “the floating world”—a state of in-betweenness and uncertainty where binary opposites are seen as being reconcilable rather mutually exclusive). Indeed, if public discourse in certain quarters of the West can be said to be characterized by binaries (“local” versus “global,” “us” versus “them,” “insider” versus “outsider,” “developed world” versus “underdeveloped world”), then artists of the floating world, I argue, offer provocative meditations on the implications and complications of these binaries, and how to transcend them.

By closely analyzing Head’s *A Question of Power* (1976) and Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), I wish to raise and further develop two sets of theoretical questions: How do we “frame” the floating world (Head’s narrator wrestles with madness that threatens to subvert the structure of the novel), and what “narratives” do we use to construct the floating world (Ishiguro’s narrator attempts to establish a linear narrative that justifies past problematic choices). In suggesting answers, both authors double back and forth between gestures of universal and local belonging, between renouncing and affirming specific national, racial, and gender identities. It is this dynamic that I wish to explore in the paper.

In this paper, I wish to examine two artists of the floating world: South African-born Bessie Head and Japanese-born-Kazuo Ishiguro. I shall argue that these artists float across national borders in terms of their fluid citizenship and cultural identities, and that they articulate through their fictional characters the pains and pleasures of “ukiyo.” Ukiyo (or, technically, ukiyo-e) refers to the Seventeenth Century Japanese school of art dedicated to celebrating life’s transience and passing pleasures with brush-strokes that, paradoxically, suggest permanence of form and indestructibility. If the double-sided nature of ukiyo artistry highlights the fundamental paradox of how to render permanently (with a wood-block print) that which is ephemeral, evanescent, and impermanent, then perhaps it is equally appropriate to claim that the fictions of Head and Ishiguro attempt to transcend similar universal opposites and paradoxes: homeland versus place of exile, local versus global, familiar versus other, insider versus outsider, (to name a few).

I should offer an important caveat before I proceed further with this argument. I am not suggesting that Head and Ishiguro are dedicated practitioners of the floating world aesthetic, nor am I suggesting that they design their art-works with any grand intention to deliberately smash the binaries listed above. Indeed, I fully acknowledge that I am using the floating world as a trope to group Ishiguro and Head together in a way that might, at first, seem reductive. My purpose, however, is not to flatten nor essentialize their creative work, rather to highlight certain tensions, ambivalences, and contradictions that underscore and sustain their fictions.

Likewise, I acknowledge that the choice of Ishiguro and Head might at first seem rather arbitrary. Why not include other prominent examples of contemporary authors who

shuttle across nations and cultures and who fictionalize their experiences? Included on this list would be obvious candidates such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, V.S. Naipaul, and Caryl Phillips, or indeed Mira Nair and Joseph Roth, the artists who will be discussed by my fellow panelists later in this session. Yes, it's true that each of these authors could easily be made the subject of this paper. But I have chosen Ishiguro and Head for the fact that they address two sets of specific questions that speak immediately to the agenda of our conference. Firstly, how do we incorporate ambivalences, contradictions, and evasions into a seemingly seamless narrative of self and nation? Secondly, how do we incorporate tensions, fragments, anxieties, conflicts into a frame that guides an understanding of self and the world?

The critic, Homi Bhabha, locates these tensions and ambivalences at the heart of his approach to postcolonial studies. Bhabha warns of the dangers posed by the binary trap of pure versus impure, us versus them, self versus other. Instead, he urges a sliding between categories, an oscillation between subject and object, here and there, local and global, wholeness and fragmentation. He calls this, "one-in-the-other, not a relation of 'two' but a doubling relation." (453) It is this notion of "doubling" that I want to use here as a critical framework for appraising the fictions of Ishiguro and Head.

Ono, the narrator of Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), is caught between contradictory or doubling impulses. At one time a gifted apprentice to the aesthetic principles of the floating world school of painting, he later renounces these principles in favor of propagandistic painting techniques fueled by fierce Japanese patriotism of the late 1930's. If the outside reader is easily able to discern the contradictions teasing Ono's world, Ono himself seems less aware. From the onset, he is

determined to pursue a singular narrative track controlled by certain core principles, principally a belief that his life has not been “a waste,” coupled with a desire to experience “a deep sense of triumph and satisfaction” at the end of the day. Ishiguro exposes an epistemological gap between Ono’s investment in a grand narrative—a singular narrative track dedicated to self-justification and exoneration of possible war crimes—and the eavesdropping reader’s discernment of multiple, sometimes competing narrative tracks. Indeed, to the reader, it appears quite obvious that Ono’s intentions to continuously justify himself and his life-choices clash with the fact that he seems to have badly betrayed a young protégé, as well as himself, as a result of abandoning the “floating world” school of art, during a time of increasingly fierce patriotism in 1930’s Japan.

Nevertheless, in a 1989 interview, Ishiguro claims “that there is something dignified about Ono in the end that arises simply out of being human.” In a later interview, he makes a similar comment about Stevens, the butler from *The Remains of the Day*, who wrestles with similar dilemmas. “Most of us are like butlers,” Ishiguro says, “because we have these small, little tasks that we learn to do, but most of us don’t attempt to run the world. We just learn a job and try to do it to the best of our ability.”

If there is such a thing as an Ishiguro trademark style or register, it must surely be to draw the reader into the floating world narrated in the first person by his protagonists, in this case Ono and Stevens. We are complicit in their narrative devices and strategies. Inevitably, we are meant to reflect on the competing narrative tracks in our own lives, our own ways of telling and divulging, of justifying, of distorting and omitting, of feeling that we have risen above mediocrity and can take satisfaction from having lived a fulfilling

life. Often, this form of autobiographical narrative is rooted in a nostalgia for an airbrushed historical one-dimensional past, “the good old days.” The reader is both attracted by and sympathetic to the lure of this nostalgic narrative; yet the reader is also cautious of its simple essentialism and unreliability. We double back and forth from one position to the other, mindful of the importance of narratives we choose to define our sense of self in the world.

But what if there is no available established narrative to tell your story? What if your identity is so fluid, so amorphous that you cannot even begin to frame the structure of your narrative? The South African born writer, Bessie Head, once said, “I just don’t fit in and belong anywhere and I tend to pride myself on not fitting in or belonging.” Because she was born out of wedlock (in a mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in 1937) the result of a then-illicit union between the daughter of a landowning family of Scottish descent and a black stable-hand, she was never recognized as an enfranchised individual by the South African state she was born into. “I have always been just me,” she said at the end of her life, “with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself.” With no guiding frame of reference, she lurched in the course of her lifetime from issuing proclamations of comprehensive non-identification to making extravagant gestures of universal belonging.

Head’s fictional technique makes for an interesting contrast with Ishiguro’s novels where, as have seen, the reader is witness to the gradual disruption of a frame of reference once the paradigm by which his narrators understand and thereby hope to control the world is severely challenged. Bessie Head’s floating world draws attention to the difficulty of the frame itself. For here the boundaries are blurred, between life and

text, male and female, signifier and signified, local and universal, good and evil. From her chaotic beginnings in South Africa through her exile in neighboring Botswana to her eventual citizenship in Botswana; her life, like her texts, seems to progress from open chaos and dislocation towards closure and final resolution, the acquisition of a frame, the reconciliation of her multiple selves. Whereas in Ishiguro's fiction, the frame is torn apart by the ongoing narrative, in Bessie Head, the torn-apart frame is slowly healed and put together again, nurtured back to wholeness; not, however, before calling into question many assumptions about certain polarities and dualities. *A Question of Power*, her semi-autobiographical novel, is about a mental breakdown; but it also breaks down storytelling conventions, notably linear time and consistent narrative point-of-view. The novel charts a four-year period of emotional and psychological distress for its protagonist, Elizabeth, who like Bessie Head is an émigré from South Africa, transplanted into a rural Botswana village.

Indeed, the reader is constantly dislocated. Head informs the reader early in the novel that “the barriers of the normal, conventional and sane are all broken down” and explains that this is partly due to Elizabeth's “non-identity” under South Africa's apartheid laws: “the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth's mind...” she writes.

The rapid switchover in consciousness from Sello to Elizabeth on the first page of the novel demonstrates the propensity for characters to leak into one another, just as the spirits or baloi invade Elizabeth's consciousness with ease. The knowability of characters with fixed, stable egos and identities is deconstructed in the novel. Instead, these characters are fluid and dynamic. Historical figures reincarnate themselves through the two spirit figures of Sello and Dan who are responsible for triggering Elizabeth's bout of

madness. Rama, the Buddha, Medusa, Isis and Al Capone all feed off Sello's character, while Hitler, Napoleon, and Osiris emanate from Dan.

At the end of the novel, after her turbulent soul-suffering, Elizabeth once more floats back to everyday reality, experiencing a deep sense of peace. She is armed with a powerful insight, gained from a D.H. Lawrence poem, "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through." People's souls and spirit-powers can fly about the sky; Godliness is in all of us. This inspires Elizabeth's final revelation, promising "a new dawn and a new world." With it, she falls asleep, placing a soft hand over her land. "It was a gesture of belonging." As Caroline Rooney argues, it is a gesture that is both local and universal at the same time. She writes: "What is at stake is the transformation of 'no one's land'—land of original exile, or expropriated originality—into a land that is owned by no-one but is instead a shared space with potential for self-determination."

The floating world of Bessie Head is the still-point between these two poles: between the local and the universal, alienation and belonging, madness and sanity, chaos and frame. As another critic, Jacqueline Rose, remarks: "I am not sure that it is possible to read this book without feeling oneself go a little bit mad."

How one frames Bessie Head, how one reads her books and stories, depends therefore on the set of assumptions that the reader carries with them and the degree to which the reader is willing to allow those assumptions to shift. How much tolerance for lack of linearity and shape in a narrative, for lack of an overarching frame, does the reader have? How willing is the reader to reframe their reference points constantly when reading stories of breakdown and repair?

There are those who see in Bessie Head's work and in her life the dangers of living in a frameless context, without framing rules and regulations, without bearings and compass points, be it in a political, economic, cultural, or social context. On the other hand, there are those who find a powerful redemption in the story of her journey, as filtered through her characters. My argument is that it is more productive to read Bessie Head in both ways, to be prepared to double back and forth between states of dislocation and groundedness, madness and meaning, specific context and generality, suffering and redemption, fragmentation and wholeness. In this way, a novel like *A Question of Power* refuses to be fixed or held down by one particular theory or approach; instead, it remains fluid, dynamic, and sustained by a relentless in-betweenness.

Bessie Head unashamedly called herself a prophet, a revolutionary with a radical vision for new ways of belonging to a community and being in the world. Like Ishiguro and other artists of the floating world, she asks us to question the role and purpose of narratives and frames in our lives, to understand their limitations as much as to appreciate their necessity; indeed, they invite us to double back and forth between one and the other in a restless and dynamic continuum.