

It's the body that matters:
reticence and desire in *Snow Falling on Cedars*

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David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* contains all the elements for a good story – unfulfilled desire, a dead body that has met its end mysteriously, a quest for “the truth”, a trial, unrequited love and finally, a solution to an elegantly constructed puzzle. Overlay these elements with the most seductive siren song for late twentieth-century audiences, ethnicity and race relations, and the story looks irresistible. And irresistible it was for Universal Studios who bought the publishing rights for the book and hired Australian Scott Hicks of *Shine* fame to direct the film, released in 1999.

In the tradition of the nineteenth-century realists and crime novel writers such as Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert and Poe who often shrouded in the mystery genre an acute critique of the ways in which society legitimises its beliefs, Guterson employs the framework of the crime mystery genre to tease out the uneasy strains of racial tension in mid-twentieth century Northwestern America. Like other major centres on the North American West Coast, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Vancouver, Seattle and its surrounding areas have supported large immigrant populations from South East Asia for many generations. Asian Americans from these communities are now prominent in the political, cultural and economic spheres of all these cities but in an oppressive backdrop of driving snow, fog, freezing temperatures and a sometimes sweaty canopy of cedar and fir, Guterson documents the struggle of this population to obtain full American citizenship.

The result is that the reader is presented with two trials. The first is the trial of the Japanese American Kabuo Miyamoto who is accused of the murder of his childhood friend, Carl Heine, fellow fisherman and owner of the land Kabuo considers rightfully belongs to his family. The processes of this trial constitute the temporal sequence of the narrative, and it is into

these processes that the issues of ethnicity and race are folded. The second trial is what I would term an adumbrated trial, an unarticulated trial where the reader is asked to judge the behaviours and motivations of the community prosecuting Kabuo Miyamoto. In the guise of the crime novel Guterson, like his nineteenth-century predecessors, presents another version of humanity on trial in which the hard light of race relations penetrates an isolated, insular community.

Between these two trials is the milieu of a 1950s Northwestern American community and the nuances of its human relationships. The defining characteristics of these relationships could be described as those of the modern mainstream novel with its mood of individual introspection and alienation, isolation and despair. Guterson is concerned with a realistic or authentic representation of character and milieu, and with the social and ethical systems that transcend them. The story line of the trial therefore proceeds diachronically from effect to cause: Carl Heine's body is recovered; clues as to the cause of his death are identified; the clues are investigated, ignored or mis-interpreted; a suspect is arrested, and so on. This measured and diachronic chronology is however interrupted by a plot that moves in and out of the trial's proceedings. Viewed through the eyes of San Pedro journalist Ishmael Chambers, each moment of the trial is syncopated with the circularity of his own history, so that the past constitutes the present moment as surely as each present moment turns on the past. The novel therefore acquires a new dimension of time as "duration" having a narrative that is not merely the diachronic projection onto a flat surface of a series of causally related events but which, in addition, rebuilds them spatially or synchronically into a labyrinth of time and memory.¹

The narrative is therefore heavy, slow, and as wet as a Northwestern winter. Scott Hicks's film version of the book exaggerates this heaviness and sense of duration through the use of soft focus, slow motion shots and flash-backs that constantly re-present scenes from the failed romance between Hatsue, Kabuo Miyamoto's wife, and Ishmael Chambers. Both

the film and the book proceed by a series of delays in the chronological story line that are intrinsic to the trope of crime novels which must always postpone the solution to the enigma of the crime under investigation. In Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, for example, essential characteristics of the murderer's fingerprints are incorrectly interpreted so a necessary delay in the explanation for the murders is occasioned. Dupin, Poe's arch-sleuth, tells us that the best clues are at once marginal and obvious – "perhaps a little *too* self-evident."

The facts concerning Carl Heine's death are not self-evident, but the clues are either misinterpreted, ignored, avoided or lost and hence the mystery set before us. The case Alvin Hooks prosecutes against Kabuo Miyamoto is built upon prejudices and stereotypes, assumptions and mis-readings of the evidence. Carl Heine's disappearance must therefore be read as not only a focal thematic device but also as a structural necessity or a hermeneutic code: just as rhyme structures a poem according to the expectation and desire for recurrence, so the details of Carl Heine's disappearance structure the enigma that is the centre of the novel according to the expectation and desire for its solution. The narrative dynamic of *Snow Falling on Cedars* is thus paradoxical: it is what Roland Barthes would term "a static dynamics". The problem for Guterson is to maintain for about four hundred pages the enigma of Heine's disappearance given the initial emptiness of its explanation. Whereas the sentences quicken the story's development and hurry us towards the truth, the hermeneutic code performs the opposite action: it sets up delays, obstacles, stoppages and deviations in the flow of the discourse. The narrative structure of the novel could therefore be considered reactive since it opposes the ineluctable advance of language with an organised set of stoppages. Between the question of Kabuo Miyamoto's guilt and the answer of his innocence is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be called "reticence", the rhetorical figure that interrupts the narrative, suspends it and constantly turns it aside.²

We could then claim that, on one level, the theme of race and ethnicity in *Snow Falling on Cedars* is a rhetorical device

enlisted into the service of the hermeneutic code so that the narrative may, as Freud says, “die in its own way” in a play of blockage and forward movement. While central to the theme of the book, it is also peripheral to the narrative structure in relation to which it functions only as a device, a figure of reticence that displaces or de-positions some elements of the story as much as it positions others. This paradigm demonstrates how an interplay of opposed thematic symmetries such as same and “other”, subjectivity and objectivity, fact and belief, judgement and value, truth and mystery, passivity and activity, silence and articulation, establishes the essential rhythm or plot of this crime mystery novel by continuing to suspend the answer to the enigma of Carl Heine’s death.

These symmetries are articulated in Guterson’s account of everyday life in this Northwestern community—a familiar but oppressive mixture of common opinions and received ideas stalked by a small army of stereotypes. The most outspoken proponent of these opinions is Carl Heine’s Bavarian mother, Etta, who opposes her husband’s illegal sale of the land to the Miyamoto family. Her re-sale of the land to Ole Jurgensen in 1945 while the Miyamotos were held in an internment camp in California establishes the potential for conflict between Carl Heine (Junior) and Kabuo Miyamoto, and provides the circumstantial motive for the prosecution’s case against Kabuo Miyamoto. Hers is the dominant cultural code, the mother tongue, the Alien Land Law that precludes Japanese Americans not born in the United States from land ownership. The other side of this symmetry is her own husband, Carl (Senior) who treats all Americans, even Native Americans, alike, and who thinks that the Japanese internment, along with his relationship with Etta, “just ain’t right.” Equally strong in her own cultural orientation is Hatsue’s mother, Fujiko Imada, who insists Hatsue not forget that she is “first and foremost Japanese,” that she marry a boy of her own kind whose “heart is good and strong,” and that she resists the white men who “would desire Hatsue and seek to destroy her virginity.”

Between these opposed thematic symmetries is a lacuna of silence and assumption between the men of San Piedro who had “learned to be silent”. True to their code, the men most responsible for Kabuo’s prosecution exercise their own prejudices and stereotypes more silently but as effectively as Etta Heine and Fujiko Imada. Although unspoken, the traces of their prejudices are found in the analysis of the clues relating to Carl Heine’s death and in the conclusions they reach. While Sheriff Art Moran and Ed Soames never articulate the attitudes of Etta Heine, they are easily persuaded by a very weak set of assumptions proposed by Horace Whaley, the Island County Coroner, that Kabuo Miyamoto is the prime suspect for Carl Heine’s death. Art Moran’s apparent fair-mindedness quickly gives way to Whaley’s suggestion (which he would not repeat on the witness stand) that “if he were inclined to play Sherlock Holmes he ought to start looking for a Jap with a bloody gun butt – a right handed Jap to be precise”.³ Whaley cannot separate his war-time memories and the Japanese stereotypes imprinted on his psyche from his rational judgement, and so he creates another necessary diversion for this circuitous narrative. And Moran and Soames in their passivity and silence occupy the structural position of stupidity in the crime novel, so they too become unwittingly complicit in the narrative machinery. The problem for Guterson is how to represent stupidity without declaring the narrator omnipotent and therefore giving the mystery away. To put the problem more theoretically, how can one cultural code be more powerfully articulated than another without abusively closing off the plurality of all codes?

Snow Falling on Cedars cannot answer this question: like most crime novels, it can only put the codes into circulation in the form of symmetries of silence and distrust. These symmetries also define the relationship between deceased and accused, Carl Heine and Kabuo Miyamoto. Both men, in the best tradition of San Piedro masculinity, are silent, physically strong and hard working. Apart from one having “dark eyes” and the other being “blond,” their physical descriptions bear a striking resemblance. Kabuo Miyamoto is described as:

proudly upright...His figure, especially the neck and shoulders, communicated the impression of irrefutable physical strength and of precise, even imperial bearing. Kabuo's features were smooth and angular; his hair had been cropped close to his skull in a manner that made its musculature prominent (1).

And Carl Heine, even on the coroner's table, is:

... blatantly and exceedingly powerful, stout and thick muscled, the chest broad, the quadriceps muscles of the thighs pronounced, ... an extraordinary specimen of manhood, six foot three and two hundred and thirty five pounds, bearded, blond and built in the solid manner of a piece of statuary, as though the parts were made of granite ... (43)

Both men share similar war experiences, and both were traumatized in the fight for their country; both are fishermen, married and both have children. Crucially, both share the same historical connection to the same piece of land. Their only and defining difference is that one owns the land, the 'other' does not and it is the issue of land ownership that not only provides the motivation for the alleged crime, but also marks the status of citizenship on San Pedro.

Land ownership should therefore be considered the deterritorialising factor in this Northwestern community; it is the primary relation constituting belonging and "otherness" from which proceeds a territorial organisation based upon one's legal relationship to the land. This organisation is then taken up by an overcoded cultural space articulated most clearly by Etta Heine and, to a lesser extent, Fujiko Imada. The symmetry of their respective languages assumes the ability of one language to represent in the same way the givens of another, and beyond that, the ability of a mother tongue to represent all other languages and cultural codes in order to achieve a seamless conception of the world. This property of overcoding which means filling one's mouth with words rather than just food and noises—an injunction that eludes the San Pedro fishermen who

rarely speak—is foreign to Kabuo Miyamoto who remains silent in his own defense, and dooms the adolescent relationship between Ishmael Chambers and Hatsue Imada which is also characterised by silence:

His thoughts, however, yielded no clue as to how to talk to Hatsue. Words evaded him completely. He felt in her presence that to reveal himself would be a mistake he might never correct. She was closed up and offered him no opening for talk (85).

The unresolved conflict between the mouth and the brain positions the body as a central element in this oscillating interplay of silence and passivity, recognition and misrecognition, mystery and illumination. In the rhetoric of reticence, more emphasis falls upon the body as a repository of clues and codes. The jury constantly scans Kabuo's face for clues as to his guilt or innocence and, in his cell, Kabuo examines his own reflection in a mirror for four pages. He also recognises that his face holds his fate. He knew he could not change how his face arranged itself while he sat at the defendant's table, and he also knew what Nels Gudmundsson had asserted before the trial—that there are facts to which the jurors will listen, but more importantly, “They watch to see what happens in your face, how it changes when witnesses speak” (136). It is the jury's inability to read Kabuo's face that becomes the focal point of their decision-making process and judgement, a process that emphasises the face as surface, a map that seems curiously disconnected from the rest of the body over which Kabuo has such precise control. Even he cannot project in his face the innocence he desires; instead it is a face of defiance.

Part of the reason for Kabuo's inscrutability is a different cultural code. Kabuo's facial gestures would signify different meanings to a North American jury than they would to one that was predominantly Japanese. The Japanese paradox is the greater the composure the greater the transparency, but for a North American audience the paradox is lost: for them, the greater the composure the less the affect, which leads to a

fetishism of facialisation. San Pedro social formations need face as much as they need landscape, and when the face cannot be read, and the jurors are unable to read in Kabuo's face "the palpitations of his heart," he becomes a "hard man to trust ... You sit before us with no expression, keeping a poker face through –" (362).

The young Ishmael Chambers stands in the same relation to Hatsue Imada as the jury is to Kabuo Miyamoto: neither can read the face of the "other" yet the face was the only available surface that could be read. Words evaded Ishmael because Hatsue offered him no opportunity for talk so his tongue felt "paralysed". Without a common language, Ishmael is restricted only to looking at Hatsue so that once, as his face lay against the sand from which they were plucking geoducks, her knee "was his whole view of things." From this perspective, Ishmael can only continue to gaze upon Hatsue from a distance. On many occasions, he therefore finds himself positioned in the passive role of voyeur:

Four days after the kiss on the beach, just after dusk—it was dark in the woods, but the strawberry fields lay in twilight - Ishmael crouched at the edge of the Imadas' farm and watched for half an hour. To his surprise no boredom overtook him and so he stayed for an hour more. It was a kind of relief to rest his cheek against the earth underneath the stars and to have some hope of seeing Hatsue. The fear of being discovered and labeled a Peeping Tom urged him to move on finally....

Ishmael watched Hatsue pull sheets from the line, standing in a pool of muted porch light with her arms illuminated and elegant....

Ishmael returned the following evening; five nights in a row he spied religiously (90-91).

Ishmael maintains this perspective for many years, so that even at Kabuo's trial he can, in a mesmerised state, only watch Hatsue from the press gallery manifestly insensible to the actual proceedings of the trial itself. Voyeurism draws Ishmael into the domain of facialisation—a static relationship to the object of one's gaze that operates not through affective patterns of

recognition and resemblance, but is instead a more unconscious operation that writes the social order over an entire body. In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, the role of the face is not that of a tracing or image of some inner state or a reflection of guilt or innocence, but it is an overcoding of all that is abstracted in the social order that prosecutes Kabuo Miyamoto, who was arrested only because he was Japanese. It is a reflection of all that is inhuman in humanity that serves finally to put humanity itself on trial.

Ishmael's strategy is therefore always to see but never to be seen so he can be bound to Hatsue in a series of shifting relationships through time. Hatsue will always be present to him as long as he retains a visual mastery over her. But mere seeing is a potentially perverse and empty activity so Hatsue's actual loss is enshrined for Ishmael as a memorialised presence – an aestheticised object that has made Ishmael's heart small and caused him to calcify in his own development, “filling the pages of his newspaper with words, burying himself in whatever was safe, typesetting the ferry schedule and the tide table and the classified advertisements” (388). Hatsue will forever remain for Ishmael the Strawberry Princess she once was – “always a virginal Japanese maiden dressed in satin and dusted carefully across the face with rice powder” (68).

The result of Ishmael's aestheticisation of Hatsue is an attitude that Freud characterises as “the condition that we do not ask anything of the object, especially no satisfaction of our vital needs”.⁴ If we follow Freud's logic, Ishmael's journalistic practices, which he specifically links to Hatsue's loss, may be considered perverse since they depend upon the deflection and deferral of his desire for Hatsue. His stasis results from the sidetracking of his primary goal in order to drive an activity clearly dissociated from the satisfaction of his most vital needs. Yet reading Ishmael's aestheticisation of Hatsue as both perverse and excessive need not imply his withdrawal from the mundanities of everyday life. On the contrary, his journalistic activity can be understood as a function of Ishmael's involvement in the social web of his community.

Deflection and deferral situate Ishmael within the rhetorical figure of reticence and directly implicate him in the static dynamics of the narrative. Not only is he literally reticent to pursue the true explanation of Carl Heine's death until the last thirty pages of the book, but as a central character in the narrative he occupies a position of impotence: Hatsue's departure and rejection positions him as both voyeur and masturbator.

With his first vision of Hatsue, and with the first touch, there is an initiation for Ishmael into a dimension that can never again be closed, and the establishment of a sensibility in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated.

Sensibility must be interpreted as a touch first of all that wells up to transform the event of contact into an act of informing. For Ishmael, this touch becomes a cognition collected on the sandy or rough surface of things – a beach, a strawberry field or on the moss under a safe and secret cedar – that leads him to thematise his own relationship with Hatsue and so to assume a certain responsibility for the narrative. Hence his plea for marriage. This sense of Ishmael's responsibility is not measured by the degree to which he stands behind his act, but by the degree to which he does not, the degree to which he remains passive. The authentic, responsible agent is always in a deficit position, always in a sense guilty. Ishmael's epiphany is not the fact that he has to answer for his continued love of Hatsue as the cause of his guilt and fatuousness, but the fact that, like his father, he has to answer for what others have done – a vulnerability which makes itself felt as sensibility. The court case enables Ishmael to bring to self-consciousness his representations of Hatsue and himself, to become aware of himself in a relatively unreflective bodily practice. And it also enables his move from self-consciousness to expressive activity. Nevertheless, his stasis and reticence cause a constant deferral of his actions to investigate the trial. His passivity and role as observer allows the focus of the book

to fall constantly on issues that are peripheral to the central mystery itself, and by focusing on the failed relationship between Ishmael and Hatsue, both the book and the film merely propose another strategy for relegating femininity to the idealist and absolute category of “Otherness” – a position doubly reinforced by Hatsue Miyamoto’s racial “otherness” – in which woman is destined to function as a passive predicate to male desire.

The film version of the book casts Ishmael and Hatsue as San Piedro versions of Tristan and Isolde – as symbols of the forbidden couple and of flesh rebelling against the law. The camera’s gaze, however, misses the fact that Hatsue only ever flirts with such a rebellion, and that even this flirtation is never fully consummated. Part of her interest in Ishmael lies in her desire for a secret life that emancipates her from the strictures to which she is subject, and in her adolescent desire to test the limits of solitariness and rebellion. Another part speaks to her attempt to bridge the gulf between herself and the “other”, the white community of San Piedro to which she is ineradicably foreign – a move that has been read as another version of cultural hybridity leading to a “state of in-betweenness”⁵ that, properly inhabited, leads to a state of self knowledge.

It would be more accurate however, to characterise the relationship between Ishmael and Hatsue as a dance rather than a hybrid state. Their contact is evanescent, it is a crossing over or a split that permits for Hatsue a momentary forgetting of her history, her “otherness” and her mother’s injunctions. This split is intensified in her meetings with Ishmael under the cedar, but then paradoxically re-sealed when the object of her desire is himself detached from all that surrounds him and brought into the stillness of their own private domain.

The revolt of her flesh when Ishmael penetrates it returns Hatsue to her own identity and re-seals it tightly within her own cultural code. Finally, it is Hatsue’s own body that takes and leaves what it likes. Hatsue never discovers her motive in concealing from her parents the time she spent with Ishmael, but she does discover her own culture that has been pushed

down into her body and its synapses where the associative pleasures of lips and skin, and the loose arrangement of entwined limbs are registered. It is her body itself that mediates here as it seeks, finds and takes what it likes. In Ishmael's arms, Hatsue felt "unwhole". Yet she knew in her bones what she wanted, and her entire body felt the "rightness" of her relationship with Kabuo.

Snow Falling on Cedars can therefore be read as a collection of interlocking narratives that are peripheral but also integral to the mystery of the story—the enigma of Carl Heine's death. In the tradition of the mystery genre, we are presented with a disrupted discourse that is held together by the central image of Carl Heine's massive body lying pink and prostrate on the coroner's table. Radiating from this body are two distinct narrative lines that oscillate between a kind of horizontal direction toward the solution of the mystery and the ending of the story, and a second narrative line that could be called a vertical blockage. The horizontal line is most fully represented in the orderly, chronological proceedings of Kabuo's trial which move us inevitably to the end; the vertical blockage is achieved in a more disorderly way by the many flashbacks, mistakes and prejudices of the primary characters as well as the peripherally related narratives of love, race and ordinary life in San Pedro County.

If this is a possible model for the crime mystery genre, then it is not too difficult to read *Snow Falling on Cedars*, and perhaps most crime stories, as a species of joke. According to Freud, the joking process is a kind of defence mechanism against the obstacles to desire posed by reality, and it also works as a play of blockage and forward movement. The rhythm of this book's narrative plot as I have described it could therefore be described as a comic or riddling rhythm, a movement that starts and stops which defers the final, revealed solution. Read this way, we may more fully appreciate the cast of stock characters and stereotypes who inhabit the pages of the narrative for the sole purpose of confusing it. It may be that a critique of cultural codes of the type undertaken by Guterson is

no longer tenable except through a certain trickery or joking which makes it possible to criticise the stereotypes without recourse to the formation of a new stereotype, that of irony.

1. In his extensive discussion of time and the human ego, Henri Bergson characterises "duration" as "the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; ... it is enough that, in recalling these states it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole..." See his *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (London: Allen, 1913), p.100. Guterson is not an innovator in this respect: Bergsonian notions of time as duration were enthusiastically embraced by modernism in general and Virginia Woolf in particular.
2. In *S/Z* Barthes applies this paradox not to a crime novel, but instead to a more classical novel—Balzac's *Sarrasine*. He proposes five codes to account for our activity when reading a text. Two have to do with narrative, and are distinguished as the proairetic and hermeneutic codes which are applied to the sequence of actions. The other codes relate to information not processed sequentially—semantic, cultural and symbolic—that stand on the vertical rather than the horizontal axis of the work. Combined, these codes create a "stereographic space" within which we produce our own reading, so changing our views and, ideally, ourselves, altering our opinion as to what matters and what does not. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). See also "Detective Fiction" in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). Following on from the Russian Formalists who identified the twin narrative axes of the story and the plot where the story is what happened in life, and the plot is the way the author presents it to us, Todorov also develops the paradox of how there can be two points of view about the same thing in the archetypical detective novel.

- 3 David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 1994), 52. Subsequent references to the text will cite the same edition.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious", in James Strachey, trans., *Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Standard Edition 8 (New York & London: W.W. Norton), 10-11.
- 5 Monique Rooney, "Visions of Blindness: Narrative Structures in *The Great Gatsby* and *Snow Falling on Cedars*" in *Sydney Studies in English*, 25 (1999), 116-32.

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