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A Japanese-American Sam Spade:
The Metaphysical Detective in *Death in Little Tokyo*,
by Dale Furutani

CARLA PORTILHO
Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF)

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to discuss the legacy of the *roman noir* in contemporary detective fiction produced outside the hegemonic center of power, here represented by the novel *Death in Little Tokyo* (1996), written by Japanese-American author Dale Furutani. Starting from the concept of the metaphysical detective (Haycraft 76; Holquist 153-156), characterized by deep questioning about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality and the limits of knowledge, this article proposes a discussion about how these literary works, which at first sight represent a traditionally Anglo-American *genre*, constitute narratives that aim to rescue the memory, history and culture of marginalized communities. Typical of late modernity detective fiction, the metaphysical detective has none of the positivistic detective's certainties, as he does not share in his Cartesian notion of totality, being presented instead as a successor of the hardboiled detective of the *roman noir*. In this article I intend to analyze the paths chosen by the author and discuss how his re-reading of the *roman noir* dialogues with the texts of hegemonic *noir* detective fiction, inscribing them in literary tradition and subverting them at the same time.

Keywords: contemporary detective fiction, Japanese-American literature, *roman noir*, metaphysical detectives, ex-centric detectives, counter-discursive narratives, memory, Japanese Internment, marginalized communities, parody

In 1996, Japanese-American author Dale Furutani published his first detective novel, named *Death in Little Tokyo*. Set in contemporary Los Angeles, the novel was warmly received by the general public and specialized critics, and earned an Agatha Award as well as Anthony and

Macavity Awards in the category best first mystery novel. As the story begins, protagonist Ken Tanaka is not a detective. Japanese-American, in his early 40s, Tanaka is an engineer who has recently been downsized from his corporate job. To busy himself through this hiatus in his professional life, while he takes his time deciding the best path to take, Ken devotes his time to the L.A. Mystery Club, a club that brings together detective fiction aficionados for fun weekends in which the members of the club stage mysteries and work to solve them. When it is his turn to be the host of an L.A. Mystery Club Weekend, Ken works so hard to prepare the scenery of his proposed mystery that he is taken for a real detective and hired by a *femme fatale* in the style of Brigid O'Shaughnessy.¹ At first, he thinks this is a practical joke played by the other members of the club, or by Mariko, his girlfriend, who is an actress; however, as he realizes the payment had been made in real cash, Ken is convinced that he has been taken for a real detective and decides to do the task he has been hired for – fetch a package from a Japanese businessman staying at a hotel in Little Tokyo. The next morning, when the businessman is found murdered, Ken becomes the main suspect, and decides to investigate the crime on his own. As in many amateur sleuth cases, he starts investigating to prove his own innocence.

This essay seeks to analyze the character Ken Tanaka using as a guideline the concept of the metaphysical detective, developed by Michael Holquist in 1971, which derived from Howard Haycraft's concept of metaphysical detective story (1941). Metaphysical detective fiction closes with questions instead of answers; the detective not only fails in solving the crime, but also faces mysteries related to questions of interpretation and identity, undertaking, in Patricia Merivale's words, "the profound questions that it raises about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality and the limits of knowledge" (Merivale 1). In very brief terms, it can be said that the metaphysical detective investigates himself, and his inability to interpret the mystery proposed by the plot represents his frustrated attempt to make sense of the world. Thus, stories end with new questions, which, if solved, lead to yet other questions – the detective's search for answers is subjective, and does not reach any objective answer, but only drives him to a new search, which is also

subjective, and so on. Quoting Alain Robbe-Grillet, who states that “objectivity in the ordinary sense of the word – total impersonality of observation – is all too obviously an illusion,” Todd Natti concludes that there are no objective answers in the text because objectivity does not exist.

The novel analyzed in this essay is, evidently, a parodic revision of the traditional *roman noir*. The term parody is used here in accordance with Linda Hutcheon’s concept of parody developed in her essay “The Politics of Parody,” which states that parody of the past is not nostalgic, but critical and ironic. As a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies (Hutcheon 95). Parody, thus, constitutes a dialogue with tradition, so much so that, in order to subvert it, it must first inscribe it, that is, acknowledge its hegemony – this is a common trait of contemporary literature (not only crime fiction) produced in the periphery of power. According to this assumption, our first task must be then to draw a brief historical panorama of the *roman noir*.²

Around 1930, a new kind of detective novel, different from the traditional whodunit novel, starts growing strong in the United States. This new style, named *série noire*, abandons some basic characteristics of the whodunit, such as optimism, conventional morality, a conformist spirit and the infallible detective. As it admits the fallibility of the detective, the *roman noir* subverts all the tradition of the *genre* so far, which praised the success of the Cartesian logic, and becomes a turning point in the history of detective fiction, opening it up for discussions about humankind and society, becoming a sort of contemporary novel of manners (Reimão 42-46). The *roman noir* creates the figure of the P.I. – private investigator or hardboiled detective – who solves crimes professionally, not for fun or curiosity, as in the whodunit novel. The new professional detective presents a critical posture regarding the world, which is no longer considered perfectly ordered. The detective himself is not the autonomous subject of modernity anymore, and moves towards the decentering of late modernity. In the plots of the *roman noir* it is common to see the detective mingling with and befriending criminals, sometimes being mistaken with them by the police, and getting involved with suspicious women, so that it becomes the reader’s task to distinguish (or, at least, try to) where lies the

boundary, ever so subtle, that separates the world of the law from the world of crime. The emphasis is transferred to action, and every kind of feeling that might involve human beings. The reader takes up a more active role than in the whodunit novel, as he or she must make deductions about the characters based on the descriptions offered in the plot.

An important factor for the development of the *roman noir* in the United States was the historical moment the country was going through. After the First World War, the country began a period of unprecedented prosperity, which lasted throughout the '20s, the so-called "Jazz Age." Throughout the decade, the atmosphere was one of great abundance and change, resulting from the increased urbanization and industrialization. Some traditional Puritan values were put aside – women shortened their hair and their skirts, and started smoking; at parties, people danced to the sound of the Charleston and the Jazz; and, despite the passing of Prohibition in 1920, unlicensed bars thrived due to the great consumption of alcoholic beverages. There was a general mood of euphoria (especially because of the high rates achieved at the New York Stock Exchange), despite the fact that Prohibition provided the preconditions for the development of organized crime on a great scale. According to Dennis Porter:

...the era of Prohibition began. Probably the most deeply misguided piece of legislation of the American twentieth century, its effect was to turn hundreds of thousands of ordinary working and middle-class Americans into criminals, and to create a society in which crime syndicates flourished in the effort to cater to an appetite that could not be contained. (96)

In 1929, however, this euphoric phase came to an end with the Great Wall Street Crash, which marked the beginning of the Great Depression. Crime rose steadily, backed up by scandalous corruption, and criminals such as Al Capone, Babyface Nelson, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker became national celebrities. The country was going through a violent and unsettled period, which constituted the ideal background for the development of the *roman noir*. Peopled by criminals and "real" policemen, filled with the tensions of the time, endowed with considerable narrative urgency and immersed in the spirit of disenchantment typical of postwar American literature, the *roman noir* was considered an honest and precise portrayal of American life (Grella 105).

Dashiell Hammett created the most emblematic hardboiled detective, Sam Spade, a character who appeared for the first time in *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), which would become his most famous novel. Spade became the prototype of the hardboiled detective, an idealist disguised under a mask of cynicism, fighting against the corruption of society and searching for the truth above all. Rude, vulgar, blunt and always involved with women, Spade is the opposite of the classic whodunit detective (Reimão 54-56). Another detective who represents the style is Philip Marlowe, the character created by Raymond Chandler, who regarded himself as an imitator of Dashiell Hammett. Marlowe, just like Spade, is a professional detective, who works for money. He is the narrator of his own stories, lots of times starts the action himself and gets involved with other characters. Similarly to Spade, Marlowe perceives the imprecision of his activity and the possibility of making mistakes involved in being a detective who is simply human, as opposed to the ratiocination machines of the whodunit novel (Reimão 67-72).

In terms of narrative style, the most significant innovation brought by the *roman noir* refers to the fact that most narratives take place at the same time as the action itself, the narrator and the protagonist being one and the same.³ There is not, as in the whodunit novel, the narration in retrospect of a previously solved case. The *roman noir* points to an uncertain world, in which the detective is not sure whether there will be a possible solution to the mystery. The absence of a memorialist shows that there is no guarantee that the investigation will have any success or even that the detective will survive it. The protagonist-narrator and the reader are always together at the same point of the narrative. Also, in the *roman noir* there is not a final unquestionable truth. Instead, the interpretation proposed by the detective is only one among many other possible ones (Reimão 56-61). The notions of guilt and crime are diffuse, and the detective is not able to attribute all the responsibility for a crime to a single culprit.

Returning to the concept of parody and to the novel *Death in Little Tokyo*, it is possible to see that the protagonist Ken Tanaka tries to emulate the iconic Sam Spade. This occurs mainly through outfits and quotes that make us think of Hammett's detective; however, he does not

follow the trajectory of the traditional hardboiled detective. Furutani builds his character as a re-reading of hegemonic characters, whose characteristics are either reversed or exaggerated. Thus, the naïve Ken Tanaka is an ironic counterpoint to the cynical and highly competent Sam Spade – our mystery-weekend detective has absolutely no idea how to carry out an investigation.

From the *roman noir* on, the detective novel starts offering the reader a view which may be considered more “realistic,”⁴ more skeptical and cynical in relation both to the world of crime and to the detective’s role in the judicial system. At the beginning of detective fiction, a basic formula of the genre was followed strictly – a crime was committed and, in principle, must be solved by the detective, who, supposedly, must also lead the culprit to his/ her due punishment. This detective was Cartesian and trusted intellect and logic to solve crimes and re-establish the world order. In the *roman noir*, the basic formula of the genre is not valid anymore. The hardboiled detective has no illusions, and does not hold many certainties about the world – in this *noir* universe, it is not always easy to tell the bad guys from the good ones. Still, the *roman noir* does not question the guideline that structures detective novels – even though it is not easy, it is still necessary to find a culprit for the fact that has destabilized the social order. In our fragmented contemporaneity, the detective does not have any of the certainties of the positivist detective, as he does not share the notion of totality his predecessor had. The metaphysical detective (sometimes also referred to as anti-detective), the main character of detective fiction in late modernity, has doubts about the world he lives in, his own identity, but does not find answers to soothe his anxiety. The metaphysical detective does not find a culprit for the crime, if he solves it it is by chance, sometimes he does not even know that a crime has been committed, and will hardly trust that official punishment will serve any dignified purpose in society... (Portilho 74-75). Furthermore, Fredric Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping (347-360) is useful in considering the postmodern detective figure. Jameson uses the term to refer to the way the individual makes sense of the urban space – this mapping works as an intersection between the personal and the social space, and allows people to work out and evaluate the urban spaces in

which they move. Cognitive mapping, then, is a negotiation of urban space, closely related to individual experience. It is possible to notice this negotiation, in the history of detective fiction, from the *roman noir* on, as its scenery is essentially urban, but it becomes especially necessary in late modernity, when the disorderly growth of cities makes it impossible for the individual to access and evaluate urban space as a whole.

In the narratives of metaphysical detectives, we observe that the posture of the detective/ narrator switches from rational investigation to subjective incursions:

As it seems, the contemporary world, the crisis of old models, the breaking of essential and absolute values has taken its toll on detective fiction which, breaking its own rules, started presenting few answers to proposed questions and a lot of questions to those who read critically. (Freitas, my translation)

Through these doubts and uncertainties of the metaphysical detective, as well as their counterhegemonic developments, questions about national and individual identity take up growing importance in contemporary detective fiction.

The Los Angeles setting described in *Death in Little Tokyo* is fundamentally different from the one pictured in Raymond Chandler's novels, and in the *noir* films of the 1940s. Even though Furutani shares this taste for the night sceneries, so traditional in the *noir*, with characters who are typical of the underworld, such as the theater/ strippers' club in Little Tokyo, the novel is not limited to cliché sceneries. Rather, the reader also sees a Los Angeles of the 1990s, characterized by ethnical, social and cultural diversity. The protagonist's movements predominantly take place around Little Tokyo, the Japanese enclave. There, the reader finds Tanaka's rented office, the hotel where the Japanese businessman is murdered, the theater/ strippers' club and the boutique where Mariko works. However, Furutani also refers to a Latino neighborhood where Ken arrives while following a suspect. In this neighborhood, where the population is predominantly of Mexican descent, he talks to an old lady of Latino origin at a yard sale. In the middle of this conversation, he is surprised to find himself making the same kind of assumption and nurturing the same kind of prejudice about her that white people make

about himself. Ken is surprised to see that she speaks English very well, as if it weren't natural that a person of Latino descent could have been born in the US, the same way other people presuppose that he, a person of Japanese descent, would have been born in Japan, and are surprised by the quality of his native English...

Her English had no accent, and I realized with a jolt that I've come to expect an accent from Latinos. It's the kind of racial stereotype I hate when people have similar expectations about Asians, and I was embarrassed and troubled by my own prejudice. (Furutani 117)

Throughout the process of following the clues to solve the mystery, Ken, as the metaphysical detective he is led to become, ends up investigating himself. Crime as a conspicuous trait of Western social life emerges with the rise of the metropolises, at the beginning of the 19th century. The inhabitants of the big cities demonized the criminals at the same time that they romanticized the detective, who was seen as a hero. As the city grows more and more into a disorganized space, its representation becomes impossible for the individual – even for the detective, who also feels he is lost in the urban space. In the space of late modernity's cities, the detective is already irremediably decentered, without the conviction of his autonomy as a subject, “confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity” (Merivale 2). Ken roams the city of Los Angeles in search for a solution to the murder; what he finds, however, is knowledge about his own history as a member of the Japanese-American community in the United States. As he delves into the life history of Mr. Susumu Matsuda, the Japanese businessman murdered at the hotel, he learns that the businessman was, in fact, an American citizen who had requested Japanese citizenship in the aftermath of World War II. With the aim of deepening his knowledge of the Japanese-American community in the United States at the time of the war, Ken interviews older members of the community; through this process, he ends up learning more about facts related to the history of Japanese immigration to the United States, such as, for example, the episode of the Japanese-American internment.⁵

In 1942, in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the

American government relocated about 110,000 Japanese-Americans and Japanese citizens who lived along the Pacific Coast to camps called War Relocation Camps. President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the internment by allowing local military commanders to designate “military areas” as “exclusion zones”, from which “any or all persons may be excluded” (National Archives). This power was used to declare that all people of Japanese ancestry were excluded from the entire Pacific coast, including all of California and much of Oregon, Washington and Arizona, except for those in internment camps, for being potentially disloyal to the United States, portraying a classic case of racial prejudice. Besides being confined in the camps, the members of the Japanese-American community also had their property confiscated or had to sell whatever assets they had in a matter of days, usually at great financial loss.⁶

As he starts the process of solving the mystery, Ken learns that the solution to the investigation of the crime is a fairly simple one: it was a crime motivated by personal revenge related to events which took place between murderer and victim at one of these Relocation Camps many years before. The crime and its solution, however, are presented as little more than a means for immersing the reader in information about a fact that is not often told by the official history. Ken dives into an investigation about himself, his origins, his past and the history of his people. As it is becoming recurrent in the detective fiction produced in the margins of the hegemonic center, we see that the real object of investigation is not the crime presented in the plot – this becomes only a pretext to investigate broader issues of contemporary societies, the role performed by these marginalized communities and how these power relations are established in late modernity, with the aim of provoking reflection about the role of the Other, representative of the periphery, facing the hegemonic center. Angolan writer Pepetela, in an interview with Doris Wieser about his incursions in the mystery/ detective genre, stated that he uses the criminal plot only as a pretext, allowing his narrative to privilege the analysis of society, social and political criticism, and scenery, characters and conflict building. In his own words:

The criminal foundation is only a pretext to analyze society. This is what detective books are about. The books of the American school of the 30's

and 40's were the same. They have always been that. [...] In this book I find that the mystery part is the least important one. What matters is to take the reader to Luanda society or at least some layers of that society. (Pepetela 1, my translation)

In Furutani's novel, we see that the solution of the mystery of Matsuda's murder is only possible through the new knowledge Ken acquires about the relocation camps and the events that took place there – related both to the history of the Japanese American community and to the personal life of members of the community that had been interned there. In fact, the crime was by no means related to Ken's being hired by the *femme fatale*.

Tim Libretti highlights the fact that writers from ethnic minorities in the US have chosen detective fiction with the aim of subjecting the dominant concepts of crime and injustice to criticism, making way for new concepts, based on a historical perspective of the racial experience in the United States. From this point of view, detective fiction is not an aim in itself; instead, it becomes an instrument, a means to give a voice to communities which have been marginalized throughout history. In these novels, detectives from the ethnic minorities are inevitably confronted with acts of violence that seem, at first sight, random and isolated, but which show, in the broader picture, deep social and historical causes related to the pattern of injustice systematically perpetrated against minorities (Libretti 61-62). In Furutani's novel, the murder itself, which could be seen as an isolated case of personal revenge, helps draw attention to the episode of the Japanese Internment, a much broader act of violence performed by the hegemonic power against a minority. In this sense, detective fiction contributes to inform and instruct the reader not only about his own history, if he is a member of the community portrayed, but also about historical facts that are not always brought to light by the official history.

The insertion and development of detective fiction in a cultural and demographic context diverse from the hegemonic one in which it was created and established opens the possibility for considering this kind of narrative in a different light. Still according to Libretti, the formula of detective fiction might easily serve a radical and transforming function in social and political terms (67). The notions of law and justice, for

instance, that are used interchangeably by the hegemonic center, may not coincide for the peripheral communities. If the law is made to answer to the interests of the center, that is, to maintaining the *status quo*, it will not often correspond to the idea of justice and the expectations of those who are in the margins. Thus, serving justice, for the population of the periphery, does not always mean supporting the existing order (Libretti 66-67). One of the most remarkable characteristics of the detective novels that do not follow the hegemonic model is precisely the fact that these authors privilege the detective's path, without claiming to come to an answer, to find truth (Freitas). Ken learns about himself and his history in the course of this investigation – he also learns that historical facts and social conditions are not as easy to explain as the murder he solved. After all, the idea of absolute truth, of a single possible answer, has become practically unattainable in late modernity, when the subject has too many doubts and very few certainties.

In closing this essay, it is valid to emphasize that, more than offering answers, the aim we sought was to provoke thought. This article has proposed a discussion of the metaphysical detective (Haycraft 76; Holquist 153-156), characterized by deep questioning about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality and the limits of knowledge, as portrayed by Dale Furutani in his novel *Death in Little Tokyo*. Typical of late modernity detective fiction, the metaphysical detective, represented by Ken Tanaka, has none of the positivistic detective's certainties, as he does not share in the latter's Cartesian notion of totality, being presented instead as a successor of the hardboiled detective of the *roman noir*. At first sight, Furutani's novel might seem to represent a mere exotic version of the old formula of detective fiction; a closer look, however, brings to light the counterdiscursive elements it presents. In proposing a discussion about this traditional Anglo-American *genre*, through a narrative that aims to rescue the memory, history and culture of the Japanese-American people as a marginalized community in America, the novel provokes violations and erasures in the canon of detective fiction.

Even though they do not escape the basic (and we might even say necessary) conventions of detective fiction, these novels produced outside

the hegemonic center call for Other textualities, imbricated in the narrative of detection. At the same time that they proceed to the analysis of the societies in which they are immersed, they inscribe the tradition of the hegemonic detective fiction, through strategies such as re-reading, counterdiscursive narratives and, at times, parody.

Notes:

¹ Brigid O'Shaughnessy is one of the main characters in the novel *The Maltese Falcon*, by Dashiell Hammett. She has become the iconic *femme fatale*, especially after being played by Mary Astor (with Humphrey Bogart playing Sam Spade), in John Huston's film adaptation released in 1941.

² It is important to highlight here that, although traditional detective fiction, in which the *roman noir* produced by writers belonging to the hegemonic center of power is inserted, is canonical in relation to the detective fiction produced in the periphery, it is still considered 'inferior' by the literary canon.

³ This is not the case of Hammett's novels featuring Sam Spade, which show an impersonal third person narrator, but it is the narrative form sanctioned by the vast majority of the *série noire* novels.

⁴ In using the word "realistic," I refer to the term *Dirty Realism*, coined by *Granta Magazine* in the 80s to describe the style of authors such as Raymond Carver, who bring the working class and common people into their fiction. According to A. Karlsson, the term suggests a writing focused on the sordid aspects of life, the dark side of contemporary America.

⁵ For detailed information about this historical episode, I recommend consulting the studies of Thomas Connell, Erica Harth and Cherstin Lyon.

⁶ The Government of the United States has made available the documents referring to the episode of Japanese Internment for free online consultation at the site Internment Archives.

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