

# Passing and Posing: The Japanese American Body in the Detective Fiction of Sujata Massey and Dale Furutani

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IN SUJATA MASSEY'S DETECTIVE NOVEL, *THE FLOATING GIRL* [FG], Nicky, a white American male who makes his living in Japan as a male stripper, assesses the sex appeal of Rei Shimura, Japanese American sleuth: "you can almost pass for Japanese, but your personality's all wrong. You can't possibly attract anyone here. You have boundaries, and they don't. Japanese girls are kinky. They do things you couldn't imagine" (FG 76). Nicky's slur succinctly encapsulates Western assumptions about the sexuality of Asian women that typecast Rei just as much as the Japanese notions of ethnic purity epitomized by the derogatory epithet "half blood" (*Zen Attitude* [ZA] 10). If being half American disqualifies her from a job at the Morioka Museum in Tokyo and from marriage to Takeo Kayama, being half Japanese leads to Rei's being mistaken for a prostitute in Washington, DC. Rei's imperfect impersonation of Japanese and American womanhood, however, proves perfect training for an amateur detective.

Even a cursory glance in the mystery section of any bookstore conveys the sexual, economic, ethnic, and racial diversity of the contemporary fictional detective, who may be gay, working class, Native American, Jewish, Hispanic, African American, or Asian American.<sup>1</sup> That detective fiction should be well suited to investigating cross-cultural tensions is not surprising because, according to Michael Cohen, it is characterized by an anxiety about the Other that has often taken the shape of racist and national stereotypes. While a fascination with otherness has continued to be a feature of mystery/detective

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*The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2007

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fiction, there has been a shift generally from what Gina and Andrew Macdonald term “the stereotyped exploitation of the exotic” to a more enlightened, politically correct “serious exploration of the experience of the Other” (60).

My interest in this essay lies in examining the Japanese American detective hero, as imagined by Sujata Massey and Dale Furutani.<sup>2</sup> In coming to terms with what it means to be Japanese American in the United States and conversely, what it means to be American Japanese in Japan, this hero/ine “contests entrenched notions about the confluence of national, ethnic and cultural identities,” in addition to critiquing cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity (Yamamoto 88). Massey and Furutani’s detectives continually (re)situate themselves as insiders/outsideers depending on shifting sociocultural contexts. Insofar as this double consciousness enables them more readily to recognize and perhaps even to identify with persons who possess alternate identities and secrets, it contributes directly to their detecting abilities.

Although Massey and Furutani’s novels are not overtly about colonialism, postcolonial theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the relationship of ethnic minorities to mainstream American culture, to the extent that minority groups within the United States have historically been treated like colonized peoples, exemplified by the extermination of Native Americans, the enslavement of African Americans, and the internment of Japanese Americans. In outlining how the insights of postcolonial theory might be applied to ethnic American literature, Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt have identified the relevance of several postcolonial concepts, including double consciousness, hybridity, and diaspora. Given the cross-fertilization between dominant and minority groups, and the diversity within those groups, it is evident that the boundaries dividing dominant from minority are not fixed, nor is either a monolithic entity. The postcolonial theorist Trinh Minh-ha has asked “where should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color, by language, by geography, by nation, or by political affinity? What about those, for example, with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities?” (418).

Regarding Japanese Americans specifically, Traise Yamamoto observes that “While Japan has not been literally colonized by the West, it has been consistently subjected to the West’s colonialist and imperialist attitudes,” attitudes, she argues, that have had a continuing

impact on the self-image of Japanese Americans (11). What Yamamoto describes as the West's feminization of Japan has affected the representation of Japanese (and Japanese American) gender roles in American popular culture: "Since the threat of difference must be defused but not eliminated in order for idealized or exoticized difference to function, the Japanese male, the threatening other, is discursively erased. In his place, the Japanese woman—and more crucially, the Japanese woman's body—is inscribed as the pleasurable site of racial and sexual difference that can be appropriated and mastered" (21–22).

I begin by investigating Trinh's "hyphenated identities and hybrid realities" in three of the novels in Massey's Rei Shimura series: *Zen Attitude* (1997) and *The Floating Girl* (2000), both set in Tokyo, and *The Bride's Kimono* [BK] (2002), which takes place in Washington, DC.<sup>3</sup> As a woman and as an antiques dealer, Rei is implicated in the commodification of bodies and artifacts, within the context of a wider consumer culture in which "Everything's available if you've got the money for it," or, in Rei's case, a credit card with a high-enough spending limit (FG 102).<sup>4</sup> Speculation about Rei's identity—is she Japanese or American?—has a parallel in the ongoing speculation in and about objects—are they authentic or are they fakes?

Turning next to Dale Furutani's pair of novels, featuring a Japanese American male detective, Ken Tanaka—*Death in Little Tokyo* [DLT] (1996), set in Los Angeles, and the Tokyo-based *The Toyotomi Blades* [TB] (1997)—I argue that, like Massey, Furutani considers the costs of being/having a foreign body. As a would-be detective, for instance, Ken may self-consciously pattern himself after Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, but he is also shadowed by images of Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto.<sup>5</sup>

Massey and Furutani use the genre of the detective story, in which hidden or false identities so often figure, to challenge the stereotyping and commodification of persons on the basis of gender, racial, ethnic, and national identity. Although they implicitly interrogate the social and economic dominance of Euro-American culture, and along with it, the primacy of the white male hero, they resist a simplistic reversal that would privilege the East at the expense of the West, recognizing that racial, ethnic, and national homogeneity are fictions whether applied to the West or to the East.

Even characters who seem to possess uncomplicated identities are shown to be otherwise, as is the case with Hugh Glendinning, the

Scotsman who appears in seven of Massey's books as Rei's boyfriend. In spite of the obvious ways in which Hugh, as a white European corporate lawyer, is a member of an advantaged socioeconomic group, in his advocacy of Scottish devolution (and his working-class origins) he is constructed as an historically oppressed ethnic minority in relation to English colonialism and imperialism. His sense of alienation is dramatized in Japan where he is also a racial minority; as he puts it bluntly, "I am the wrong color" (ZA 255). Yet it is noticeable that Hugh's return to his native Scotland is always followed by his leaving again, and that he shows no particular attachment to other English-speaking countries. His self-exile gives him an unlikely resemblance to characters in the novels who are refugees, like Marcelus, a male stripper from Senegal, and Mohsen, an illegal alien from Iran who sells black-market phone cards. Thus Massey repeatedly uncovers the conflict and stratification within racial, ethnic, and national categories that appear homogenous from outside. So, too, Furutani pays particular attention to the differences within the Japanese American community—between generations, between geographical locations, and between genders—as well as to ethnic differences within Japanese society.

Despite Furutani's male hero, Japanese American women are central in the novels of both authors. Debra Walker King has coined the term "body fictions" to denote the way that the "cultural construction of racialized, gendered, or sexual body fictions disfigures or conceals women beneath a veil of invisibility, threatening economic, political, emotional, and spiritual suffocation" (viii). Yet invisibility may serve subversive ends, as is the case with Barbara Neely's detective heroine Blanche White, whose invisibility on multiple levels—as a middle-aged, overweight woman, as an African American, and as a domestic servant—is strategic camouflage that enables her to uncover the secrets and lies in other people's houses and lives.<sup>6</sup>

Where King employs the imagery of veiled women, conjuring another version of orientalism, Yamamoto adopts the trope of masking to describe Japanese American women who "have long been perceived by dominant culture as either perpetual foreigners or exotic others, both masks of 'oriental' difference" (3). But like Blanche White "they have deployed the very surface whose opacity has denied them particularity and humanity in order to claim and preserve both" (Yamamoto 3). Terry Castle has explored the doubleness of masking in a very different

social–historical context, that of the eighteenth-century English masquerade. At these social performances, middle- and upper-class women might elect to appear in disguise as men or as lower-class women (of course, promiscuous women might attire themselves as proper ladies). Castle has argued that this masking potentially (and temporarily) empowered women by allowing them to experiment with radically different subject positions, including gender and class.

Interestingly Massey explicitly raises the possibility that Japanese womanhood can itself be a masquerade. When Rei tries to track down possible witnesses to a suspicious death, she learns of a Japanese woman wearing “a bright *kimono* and an old-fashioned hairstyle” whose face “was covered with white makeup” (ZA 116). Rei immediately interprets this masked woman as being in “costume”: “in this old section of Tokyo, whoever had worn it could pass as someone working in a tourist shop or restaurant or even, as Mohsen suggested, a musician” (ZA 116). The garb of a traditional Japanese woman functions here as an ambiguous sign of criminal (tres)passing.

Although Castle’s observations are grounded in a specific social–historical milieu, recent theorists like Judith Butler have suggested that gender is always a social performance, that “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo,” “instituted through the stylization of the body” (402). As Rei’s own experience at a masked carnival illustrates, one’s performance of femininity may be inadequate. When a small boy sitting beside Rei taunts her that “you have hair like a boy! And your voice is weird,” she lifts her mask to show him that she is, in fact, female, but the boy is not convinced because “You’re sweaty like a construction worker. And construction workers are boys!” (ZA 238). Despite the scene’s deliberate humor, the episode underscores the extent to which femininity is continually evaluated and judged.

Extending and critiquing Butler’s insights, Yamamoto claims that “Identity, then, may be performative, but its ability to function *as* performance is itself unstable and contingent on the extent to which one can/not delimit how the racially marked and gendered body signifies to those other than oneself” (91). Just as bell hooks has analyzed the sexual stereotypes projected onto the African American female body, so Yamamoto cites the Japanese American woman’s “hypervisibility as a sexualized, racially marked body,” regardless of the image that she wishes to project (5).

## Dressing Bodies

In both *The Floating Girl* and *The Bride's Kimono* Massey alludes to ukiyo-e, or images of the floating world, the woodblock prints that documented and disseminated the urban consumer culture of Edo (Tokyo) during the Tokugawa Shogunate from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. The subjects were primarily courtesans, kabuki actors (including female impersonators), and sumo wrestlers, all of whom depended for their livelihood upon their bodies' performances. This period was also characterized by a rigid social hierarchy, made visible through laws regulating the kind of clothing that persons might wear: "In the absence of warfare or violent class struggle, personal image and style became one of the battlegrounds on which shifting power relations were contested" (Timothy Clark 11). Ukiyo-e were influential in defining feminine style, for at the same time that the courtesans and female impersonators depicted in the prints emulated respectable women of fashion, fashionable women found inspiration in those prints for their own wardrobes (Clark 11). As the clothing styles of the ukiyo-e blurred the differences between respectable women and courtesans, so Massey emphasizes in her fiction the similarity between the heroine's body and the "contaminated body" of the prostitute or promiscuous woman (BK 346).

For Rei, an avid consumer of art and fashion, clothing is theatrical costuming that, consciously and unconsciously, exposes her body to the appraising gaze of others. In Rei's initial interview with Mr. Nishio and Mr. Shima at the Tokyo museum, she dresses in vintage textiles to advertise her knowledge and taste, in order to convince them that she is a good choice for courier. For her first lecture on kimono at the Washington Museum, she appears in one herself, embodying her topic. While it could be argued that by inviting the audience to speculate upon her body, she merely reproduces the way that the museum exhibit packages Japanese women for the Western gaze, in fact her position as speaking subject allows her to turn that gaze back upon her audience.

As garments that have been closely, although not exclusively, identified with Japanese women, kimono—the word means clothing in Japanese—acquire symbolic significance in Massey's fiction as surrogates for the women that they are designed to envelop. Traditionally, in its pattern and the way it was worn, each kimono reflected personal information about its owner. Posing in Aunt Norie's kimono with her

obi tied in a style indicating a married woman, Rei is, perhaps without conscious intent, masquerading as her aunt. As a native Japanese, as a married woman, and as a mother, Norie embodies several identities important to Rei, who is barred from Japanese citizenship and whose American citizenship is disputed, who is torn between two boyfriends, and who worries if she can have children at all. Hugh's confession to a kimono-clad Rei that "I've been dying to find out if you're the same woman underneath all the layers," is not just an invitation to disrobe, but also an acknowledgement of the way that changing clothes can be a means of (ex)changing identities (BK 169).

Kimonos take the place of Japanese women in other ways. When Rei discovers that the antique bride's kimono of the novel's title is missing from her Washington hotel room, she wrongly suspects Hana, a Japanese tourist who has disappeared, of having stolen it. The American police do not appreciate the value of the kimono, discounting it as a bathrobe, as they later undervalue Hana by discrediting her as a prostitute. Just as they are unable to tell one kimono from another, so they cannot distinguish Hana from Rei, as if all Japanese women are interchangeable. When Hana tells Rei at their first meeting that "I'd trade my life for yours anytime," she has no idea how entangled their lives will become (BK 45).

As the trail of the bride's kimono turns up Hana's corpse, so it also leads to another dead woman, a courtesan who has been dead for 150 years. Unlike Hana, whose premarital fling destroys her posthumous reputation—Takeo refers to her as "that slut who was killed"—the courtesan Miss Love, in a different era, metamorphoses seamlessly into Ai Otani, a tea merchant's respectable wife, leaving only her exquisitely decorated kimono behind as evidence of her former disreputable identity (BK 346).

If "a woman's worth was judged by her clothing" in nineteenth-century Japan, as is Rei's premise in her lecture, it seems equally true in twenty-first-century Washington where Rei and her mother go shopping at the mall for designer labels: "Look at you! Krizia this, Cynthia Rowley that. How can you say clothes aren't important?" (BK 157, 181). In fact it is through clothing that Rei's identity as her mother's daughter is confirmed; believing that Rei has been murdered, Mrs. Shimura accepts that Rei is alive only after she passes an oral quiz about clothing. Mrs. Shimura explains that "She and I have the same taste in clothes" (BK 181).

Although all clothes are, in some sense, costumes, clothing carries radically different meanings depending upon the context in which it is worn, defining the wearer as insider or outsider. At the manga convention Rei's outlandish wig and leotard serve as camouflage that allows her to blend anonymously with the crowd, whereas her street clothing draws stares. Outside the convention, however, the same garb brands her a "freak" (FG 277). Similarly the kimono that bestows respectability upon Rei inside the museum is viewed as a tacky costume on the Washington subway.

In its role as costume, clothing may function to reveal as much as to disguise identity. Nicky, for instance, exposes less of himself onstage in his jockstrap than he does when he dresses up as manga heroine Mars Girl. Like Rei, who has a Japanese father and an American mother, the imaginary Mars Girl is also the product of a mixed marriage—between a Japanese woman and a Martian man. By dressing like a woman (and an alien one at that) Nicky is engaged in passing on multiple levels. His purple hair, kabuki makeup, and skirt signal his self-perception of being/in a foreign body, neither male nor female, neither Japanese nor American.

The dog costume favored by Nicky's girlfriend Seiko similarly holds contradictory meanings. On the one hand, her dressing as a "bitch" literalizes Nicky's misogynism, and the fact that she is Mars Girl's dog reinforces Nicky's ownership of her. On the other hand, masquerading as an animal rather than as a woman offers her temporary escape from being a battered daughter whose father has forced her to leave college to work in his copy shop. Marina Warner points out that in fairy tales, animal metamorphosis can be "preferable as a temporary measure to the constrictions of a woman's shape," allowing the heroine "to enter a new territory of choice and speech" (354). Even Rei is critical of Seiko's "normal" female body: "Seiko's voice was as sexy as a torch singer's. Not what I'd expect from a round-faced girl wearing a striped pinafore over jeans" (FG 139). Seiko's adoption of a nonhuman identity may be a response to the way that she has been subject to stereotyping that denies her sexuality.

Rei's own body is also vulnerable to stereotyping. When she visits a Tokyo salon for a bikini wax, she is dismayed to hear the receptionist loudly broadcasting details about her excessive pubic hair to the other women in the salon. Rei's hairiness is treated as a physical abnormality that distinguishes her from "real" Japanese women: "If I'd been fully



Japanese, I would have inherited the hairless gene" (FG 1). Thus despite her fluent speech, which, like her Japanese clothes, covers up her Americanness, her naked body gives her away. In addition to being humiliated publicly, Rei is subtly discriminated against by having to pay far more for the procedure than do the Japanese female clients. In spite of the painful and expensive waxing, the hair grows back quickly, as if resisting attempts to conform to Japanese standards of female beauty. Her body is more definitively marked by the scar on her neck where Mr. Shima stabs her toward the end of *The Bride's Kimono*: "If I wore a kimono again, I'd have to pull the collar snugly against my neck, hiding the ugly marks" (BK 377). The fact that the neck is traditionally "the most erotic part of a Japanese woman" distances Rei's body still further from the idealized Japanese female body (BK 377).

### Commodifying Bodies

If clothes in the Tokugawa era were a site for enacting class skirmishes, in Rei's late-twentieth-century existence clothes figure in the struggle for power between the sexes. For instance, in *Zen Attitude*, Rei is acutely aware that she appears to be a "kept woman." Having given up her tiny apartment to move into Hugh's luxurious flat, she is surrounded by possessions that she could not otherwise afford on her meager salary as a struggling antiques dealer. Her fear that Hugh regards her, too, as a possession to display is reinforced when he buys material and tells her to have it made into a dress for an important dinner party. Rei resists his implied claims on her by forgetting to have the dress made and turning up in her old clothes, a move that incurs his anger and precipitates their breakup.

But it is not only female bodies that are treated like material objects. Hana, for example, freely admits that she does not love her fiancé Yoshi; instead she regards her impending marriage as an economic bargain that "will give me the freedom to do whatever I like," from furnishing an ultra-modern apartment to buying a karaoke box (BK 43). Appropriately, the tour group of which she is a part, facetiously named the See America Tour, is nothing more than a consumerist orgy. Instead of visiting museums, Hana and her friends have mapped out which malls they will visit on both coasts. Ostensibly shopping for accessories, "the most important investment a woman can make," she is

really in the market for an American male with whom to have a one-night stand, querying “if men can stretch their wings, why can’t women?” (BK 43, 44).

The role reversal evident in the Show a Boy bar in Tokyo takes the exploitation of male bodies a step further. Rei goes there in search of Kunio, the artist behind the *Showa Story* comic that she is researching for a story in the *Gaijin Times*, a newspaper written for alien, that is, non-Japanese, readers. Instead of a venue for salarymen to be entertained by mock-geisha, the Show a Boy bar is a place where office ladies pay to watch men dance and strip. This reverse sexism is tainted with racism, for the male dancers are all non-Asian men, from the white American Nicky to the black African Marcellus. Coining the malapropism “rape-*artiste*” to describe his performance, Marcellus confides to Rei his disgust with being a male sex object consumed by voracious women like Takeo’s spoiled sister Natsumi (FG 42). When he mockingly calls himself Natsumi’s slave, he implicitly likens her and the other women to the colonial landlords and slaveholders of his homeland, Senegal, where racial difference was historically an excuse for sexual and economic exploitation of the native population.

As the dancers at the Show a Boy bar are identified by and with the roles they play onstage, such as the Cowboy, they are to some degree treated as interchangeable types, rather than as individual persons. With the requisite accessories, such as a rope, one dancer presumably can take the place of another. The notion that identities are neither singular nor stable is also dramatized by the multiple “copies” of manga and anime characters that roam the floor of the manga convention. As Rei discovers, money can purchase a makeover into a new, if temporary identity. This buying and selling of identities is not unlike the marketing of avatars in the computer role-playing games described by Lisa Nakamura in *Cybertypes*. Arguing that the internet “commodifies images of race and racism,” Nakamura has documented the phenomenon of non-Asians masquerading online in stereotyped Asian roles, such as geisha and samurai (3).

Even the (fictional) *Showa Story* comic book, written by Nicky and drawn by Kunio, suggests the instability of identity. *Showa Story* is an example of doujinshi, which borrows the name and physical form of the characters from standard manga comics, but freely reinvents and re-contextualizes them in adventures often radically different from those featured in the original comic. For example, by sending Mars Girl

time-traveling back to 1930s Japan where she encounters “comfort women,” Nicky and Kunio incorporate controversial aspects of twentieth-century Japanese history into what was originally an innocuous superheroine fantasy. Thus the unofficial Mars Girl of *Showa Story* functions as an edgy double of the official, mass-produced version.

This theme of doubling has a parallel in the ways that Rei is at times indistinguishable from other characters. Rei perceives herself, for example, to be a darker body double for her white, blonde-haired, middle-aged mother: “It was true that I had gotten my mother’s body. How else could I fit so well into her old clothes?” (BK 341). However, the body of Hana, the young Japanese tourist, is almost farcically confused with Rei’s body: the American police assume that Hana’s Japanese passport belongs to Rei, but when they discover Rei’s American passport on Hana’s dead body, they believe that the corpse is Rei. Toward the end of the book Rei narrowly escapes being killed, like Hana, by Mr. Shima.

Nicky is a less obvious double because with his fair hair and blue eyes he seems Rei’s physical opposite, yet when Rei poses before a mirror in her Mars Girl costume, she fantasizes that she is morphing into Nicky: “I didn’t look like myself anymore. I looked like Mars Girl. No, I realized with a shudder, I looked a lot like dead Nicky dressed up as Mars Girl. My American nose and cheekbones were more akin to his than I’d thought” (FG 261). For Rei, this is a moment of double vision, “seeing herself through the other’s eyes and seeing herself as other” (Yamamoto 92). Hana and Nicky, both foreigners and both murder victims, reflect back to Rei her anxieties about her own tenuous place in Japanese society. Despite her disapproval of Hana, Rei reads Hana’s loveless marriage-to-be as a cautionary tale about her empty relationship with Takeo, whose socially conscious family would never approve of a “mixed marriage” between the two of them. In Nicky-as-Mars Girl she sees a distorted reflection of herself that makes her wonder if she is no better at passing as a Japanese woman than Nicky was.

Unlike Mrs. Shimura, Hana, and Nicky, Seiko does not physically resemble Rei, but the two women share common ground, despite Rei’s (and Nicky’s) belief that they are different. The epithet “The Floating Girl” would be apt for either of them, not only because they both come close to drowning, but also because of their intimacy with the murky “floating (under)world” of the (male) prostitutes at the Show a Boy bar and the gangsters who want a cut of the profits from the *Showa Story*

comic. Moreover, Nicky and Takeo treat Seiko and Rei more like prostitutes or courtesans than girlfriends, meeting with them only in secret and engaging in sexual activities that they think are off-limits for the ordinary (respectable) woman. Nicky expects Seiko to indulge his sexual fantasy of being tied up with pantyhose while having sex in the backseat of a car, just as Takeo persuades Rei to fulfill his fantasy of having sex in the ocean near a public beach. What Seiko and Rei share above all is the experience of feeling exploited by men.

Rei's insistence on taking complete responsibility for writing the *Gaijin Times* story about Seiko's murder of Nicky is her attempt to produce a sympathetic account of Seiko, in contrast to the many examples in the novels where women's images, including her own, have been distorted and manipulated. Nowhere is that distortion and manipulation more evident than in the way that copies of Rei's body circulate via print and video without her consent. By photographing Rei in intimate embraces with Hugh, and later with Takeo, the Japanese tabloids represent Rei as a promiscuous golddigger, who is using her body to lure men, at the same time that they are using her body to sell newspapers. Even Marcellus accuses Rei of dating Takeo because of his money. Being in the United States, however, does not mean that Rei's body is free from surveillance. The subway security videotape that captures her kissing Hugh is screened by the police as if it were a commercially produced pornographic video. To the American police, Rei's kimono is a sign of otherness that connotes sexual availability, if not criminality. Perhaps in the end the real identity crisis facing Rei is not so much about being Japanese and/or American, as about being a woman, (re)claiming her body from those who insist on defining it narrowly, whether in economic, sexual, or racial terms.

## Staging Bodies

I turn now to Ken Tanaka, the Japanese American male detective created by Dale Furutani. As a foreign-looking body in Los Angeles, his claim to be American is contested: "to some people we will never be 'real' Americans because our faces remain Asian" (DLT 88). Because he is a full Japanese, Ken blends in physically on the Tokyo streets more successfully than does Rei, whose appearance is (somewhat) racially ambiguous. But, ironically, while Rei is culturally and linguistically

assimilated in Japan, Ken can understand neither Japanese language nor Japanese culture, declaring Tokyo to be “as alien to me as Lagos, Nigeria, or Bombay, India would be” (TB 50).

Ken’s relationship to American identity is further nuanced by virtue of the fact that he is from Hawaii. Just as Hugh is constituted simultaneously as a minority and as a member of the dominant culture, so is Ken. Although he is a minority in the (mainland) United States, he is not one in Hawaii, where Japanese, and later Japanese Americans, have historically represented a significant percentage of the population: “I used to think the world is color-blind. Maybe that’s my Hawaiian upbringing” (DLT 54). On the other hand, despite his having been born in Hawaii, Ken does not qualify as a “native Hawaiian,” a designation that pertains only to persons whose ancestry dates back to the races inhabiting the Hawaiian Islands before 1778. Consequently, even within the United States itself, the perception of whether Ken, as a Japanese American, is “native” or “alien” depends upon context.

In Junko Ohara, the Korean Japanese female translator for the Japanese *News Pop* television program on which Ken is invited to appear, Ken encounters his mirror image. As Ken’s American identity is disputed, so is Junko’s Japanese identity: “You have to have a Japanese mother and a Japanese father to get automatic Japanese citizenship at birth. My family has been in Japan since the thirties, but we’re still classified as foreigners” (TB 34). Ken, a culturally assimilated American, and Junko, a culturally assimilated Japanese, are both treated like permanent “aliens” in their “native” countries.

Ken’s decision to play along when Rita Newly hires him as a detective involves him in another kind of passing. A former computer programmer, Ken has no license to work as a private investigator. In fact, his Kendo Detective Agency is really an elaborately contrived stage set for his mystery club, which meets every month to solve an imaginary crime. By pretending to be a detective when he is not, Ken enters into a double life that resonates with his dual identity as Japanese and American. His play-acting also aligns him with criminals like Rita, who poses as a model hiring Ken to retrieve some sexy photos, but is actually involved in gunrunning and insurance fraud. Consequently, the official police are uncertain whether they should regard him as a serious suspect in the murder of Japanese businessman Susumu Matsuda or a harmless fraud who is impersonating a detective. Yet in Furutani’s novels passing and posing also have the potential to

transform people in a positive way. Ken's acting the part of a detective, on the Los Angeles streets and on Japanese television, prepares him to become one in earnest; at the end of the second book he decides to apply for a license. Similarly in Japan his posing as Toshiro Mifune, an actor playing the role of a samurai, turns him, momentarily, into a brave samurai able to stand up to a murderer.

Whereas Ken is thrust accidentally into a leading role in a real-life detective drama, and later given an on-camera role on Japanese television, his girlfriend Mariko is an aspiring actress whose Japanese face and body have prevented her from being taken seriously as a female lead. Instead she has to accept being typecast as an Asian woman in marginal roles. Furutani treats this devaluation of Asian actors ironically, implying that Mariko has already proved herself a consummate performer offstage by impersonating a happily married, successful woman while covering up a failing marriage, a boring job, and a dependence on alcohol. Like Mrs. Okada, who has spent most of her life masking her resentment about the internment camps, Mariko, too, has had to be an actress in her everyday life merely to survive as a Japanese American woman.

In addition to Ken, Mariko, and Mrs. Okada, who have led double lives as a consequence of their being Japanese Americans, Yoshida, the murderer of Matsuda in *Death in Little Tokyo*, also has a dual identity, represented in the two different first names that he uses. On the one hand, he is Jiro Yoshida, an internment camp survivor who still mourns the death of his sister in the camps. On the other hand, he is Fred Yoshida, who once dreamt of becoming a Japanese American version of Fred Astaire, but, as stage manager of a burlesque theatre, is now reduced to choreographing routines for strippers. There is an eerie correlation between his dismemberment of Matsuda's body and the way that the strip club redefines women in terms of body parts, rather than whole bodies. This antipathy to wholeness serves as metaphor for the way that Yoshida's internment camp experience severed his life into two parts—before and after.

It is not only persons whose identities are unstable. The garage-sale samurai sword that Ken wields as a prop on Japanese TV proves not to be the cheap copy that he imagines, but instead is a valuable antique. Thus what has passed for a fake turns out to be authentic. In other cases, that which passes for authentic is fake, as with the Kendo Detective Agency. Another example is the shopping mall where Mariko

works, dubbed the “Japanese Village,” which, Ken explains, “was designed by a Korean, so it looks like a Korean’s version of what a Japanese Village in Los Angeles should look like” (DLT 17). As this “Japanese Village” is a travesty of an authentic Japanese community, so, too, were the World War II internment camps of Manzanar and Heart Mountain, central to the plot of *Death in Little Tokyo*. Masquerading as “natural” places, the camps mimicked aspects of American small-town life in an effort to disguise the fact that they were prisons for Japanese Americans coerced into living there.

## Conclusion

Although English-speaking authors have previously created detective series set in Japan, their detectives are usually men, exemplified by the modern Japanese police detective, like James Melville’s Superintendent Otani, or by seventeenth-century samurai detectives, like Laura Joh Rowland’s Sano Ichiro and Furutani’s Matsuyama Kaze. What is unique about the Rei Shimura and Ken Tanaka series is that they focus on the contemporary Japanese American detective. In addition, both Massey and Furutani use the liminality of their characters not only to critique specific aspects of American and Japanese cultures, but also to explore what it means to have a hyphenated identity of any kind.<sup>7</sup>

Invoking the term “multicultural detective fiction,” of course, raises the question: to whom does the description apply? In the case of Furutani, both he and his characters are Japanese American, and like himself, his hero is Hawaiian. However, there are differences, too, because Furutani is half Japanese, and though born in Hawaii, he grew up in a non-Asian neighborhood in California. Furutani explains that “I wanted Ken to be more universal in his experiences, and I didn’t want the books to become autobiographical” (Avey 2). Like Furutani, Massey “didn’t want to write about a character exactly like myself,” creating instead a heroine whose identity crisis is metaphorically, if not literally, similar to hers (Carter 2). As a naturalized American citizen born in England to an Indian father and German mother, her own experience of being taken for a “native” Indian while visiting in India, and yet being unable to communicate, closely parallels Ken’s experience in Japan. Massey does, however, have a close relationship with Japan, having lived there for two years, and returning for visits; she

herself identifies with Rei as “a foreigner who can almost pass for Japanese because that was my experience” in Japan (“About Sujata”). Is Massey engaged in ethnic trespassing? Does it matter that Massey is not Japanese American? Does it matter that Furutani is? I would argue that Massey and Furutani’s criticism of racially loaded terms like “alien” and “native” makes such judgments suspect.

Although critics have characterized the genre of detective fiction as “Western ratiocination tempered by intuition,” the increasing numbers of multicultural detective writers may challenge the idea that detective fiction is peculiarly Western (Macdonalds 69). Certainly Furutani and Massey’s fiction contests this conventional wisdom. Massey implies that Rei’s insider knowledge of Japanese culture allows her to perceive connections that evade both the Japanese and American police, while Ken is told that “maybe your Japanese heritage has something to do with your desire to get mysteries solved” (TB 122). In order to solve the crimes committed in *Death in Little Tokyo* and *The Toyotomi Blades* Ken draws on Japanese and Japanese American culture. He pieces together the true scenario of Matsuda’s murder by finding out more about the internment camps, he figures out that the samurai swords form a treasure map by watching a Japanese child playing with tangrams, and he invokes Akira Kurosawa’s film *The Hidden Fortress* to persuade Professor Hirota, a cold-blooded murderer, to let him go. Just as Rei is drawn to the imagery of ukiyo-e, Ken finds another kind of inspiration in woodblock printing, comparing the process itself to detective work: “It occurred to me that unraveling crimes is a little like woodblock printing. Layer after layer is put together until the total picture emerges, and everything has to fit together properly if the picture is going to look clear” (DLT 89).

Whether explaining the history of ukiyo-e or describing daily routines at Heart Mountain, both authors serve as interpreters of Japanese (and Japanese American) culture for an American audience, for one of the objects of successful multicultural detective fiction, according to Gina and Andrew Macdonald, is that it should make the alien familiar (94). At the same time both Massey and Furutani defamiliarize American culture, so that the United States seems like a foreign country. Massey, for example, makes a deliberate decision to disorient Rei by not having her travel to her native San Francisco, but placing her instead in a sterile suburb of Washington, DC. In addition, Rei’s accidental affiliation with the See America Tour means that the hotel



labels her a Japanese tourist. Like a tourist, she has to adjust to quaint local customs, such as the fact that no one walks anywhere, and when she does drive, she has trouble remembering to drive on the right side of the road. Similarly, even though Ken lives in Los Angeles, he becomes a tourist himself when he ventures into Angela Sanchez's Spanish-speaking neighborhood. His meeting with Japanese gangsters in a Los Angeles park also places him in the position of feeling as if he is on his own in a place that has suddenly become unfamiliar and frightening.

Not only do Massey and Furutani stress the ways in which the United States can seem an alien and dangerous place, but they also emphasize how Rei and Ken are made to feel like foreigners in the United States, especially after Rei's passport is stolen from her hotel room. Both Ken and Mariko have experienced prejudice firsthand in the American workplace: Ken lost his job as a programmer because he complained about racial discrimination, and Mariko cannot get work as an actress because of it. But racism is hardly unique to the United States, as both Massey and Furutani are careful to note. Racism accounts for Rei's being barred from working at the Morioka Museum, and for Junko's "glass ceiling" on *News Pop*. By showing that racism exists within Japanese society, too, neither country is demonized or idealized at the expense of the other.

Moreover, Massey and Furutani's novels expose the ways that racism and other forms of prejudice may offer a context in which to place, and even to explain, the crimes committed by individuals, supporting Tim Libretti's argument that in spite of its conservative reputation, detective fiction can also "serve a politically radical and socially transformative function" (67). For instance, in the case of *Death in Little Tokyo's* Fred/Jiro Yoshida, whose killing of Matsuda avenges Matsuda's murder of his sister fifty years earlier, Furutani implicitly entertains the possibility that had these families not been brought together in the unnaturally close(d) environment of the internment camps that the original crime might not have happened. Put another way, Americans' prejudice against Japanese people created the environment in which such a crime could occur (and go unpunished). Ironically, Yoshida's sister, who was also Matsuda's girlfriend, was killed as a result of an argument between Matsuda and Yoshida about whether their loyalties should lie with the Japanese or with the Americans. The murders in *The Bride's Kimono* and *The Floating Girl* have their ultimate origins in

cultural attitudes that devalue women, manifest in the misogyny shared by Nicky and Mr. Shima. Seiko's murder of Nicky is not only an act of desperation, of temporary insanity, but also an act of revenge against the men in her life who seek to control her, including Nicky, her father, and even the gangsters threatening to sell her into prostitution if her father does not pay them. To Mr. Shima, engaged in illegal smuggling, antique netsuke and kimono are of far greater value than the life of a woman, to such an extent that he offers Hana's getting a lipstick stain on the bride's kimono as sufficient reason to kill her. In Professor Hirota's desire to "return us to the values we've forgotten since our defeat in the Pacific War," xenophobia is clothed in nationalistic rhetoric that, for him, justifies murder and possibly war (TB 202). For both Massey and Furutani individual crimes are inextricable from social and political attitudes.

Finally, I want to return to the notion of passing with which I began. Although Nicky speaks of "passing for Japanese," in the United States we more commonly think in terms of African Americans passing as white. In fact Ken and Rei do not want to change or disguise their racial identity. That their claims to be American are treated with suspicion merely underscores the way that being American is equated with being white. For American readers, what is more surprising is that Rei should be treated as racially Other in Japan, where her physical differences from other Japanese women are subtle, if perceptible at all. The stigma attached to her in spite of her appearance places her in a position reminiscent of the nineteenth-century mulatto in American society. As hidden blackness—the infamous one drop of blood—could condemn the visibly white mulatto, so hidden whiteness brands the visibly Asian Rei as Other.

Massey's depiction of the reverse racism with which Rei is confronted in Japan (like the reverse sexism in the *Show a Boy* bar) is a means of defamiliarizing racism and sexism. By stripping prejudice and stereotyping from their familiar contexts, Massey focuses readers' attention on attitudes within American society that they may have taken for granted or assumed to be unchangeable. While Rei and Ken do not seek to deny or privilege one part of their identity at the expense of another, they frequently have that decision made for them by others, including the government.<sup>8</sup> Being a detective, however, not unlike being an actor or actress, is itself a kind of passing that allows them "to experiment with multiple subject positions," an appropriate profession

for two characters who are resistant to being typecast because of gender, race, ethnicity, or national identity (Ginsberg 16).

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Gina and Andrew Macdonald, "Ethnic Detectives in Popular Fiction: New Directions for an American Genre," and Frances A. DellaCava and Madeline H. Engel, *Sleuths in Skirts: Analysis and Bibliography of Serialized Female Sleuths*.
2. For a fascinating account of contemporary detective fiction by Japanese women writers, see Amanda Catherine Seaman, "Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in Contemporary Japan." However, apart from Miyuki Miyabe's *All She Was Worth*, these novels are not, as far as I know, available in English translation.
3. With the publication of *The Samurai's Daughter* (2003), *The Pearl Diver* (2004), *The Typhoon Lover* (2005), and *Girl in a Box* (2006), there are now nine novels in the series.
4. The connection between a credit-based economy and the instability of identity is, in fact, the subject of a recent popular Japanese detective novel, Miyuki Miyabe's *All She Was Worth* (1996). In Miyabe's novel a woman passes herself off as other women to escape the persecution of her creditors; in order to claim each new identity (and unblemished credit history), she becomes a serial murderess. Nor is this observation limited to present-day Japan. In fact, as Deborah Laycock argues, it has roots in seventeenth-century England where "the development of public credit and the associated fashion industry stimulated by credit, seemed to contemporaries to threaten the bases of a stable identity or personality" (128).
5. In an interview with Feliece Avey, Furutani specifically mentions his frustration with the stereotyped Asian detective, embodied in Chan and Moto, as contributing to his decision to create the more realistic Ken Tanaka.
6. See Doris Witt's essay, "Detecting Bodies: Barbara Neely's Domestic Sleuth and the Trope of the (In)visible Woman."
7. This seriousness of purpose distinguishes Massey and Furutani, for instance, from Isaac Adamson's Billy Chaka series (*Tokyo Suckerpunch* and *Hokkaido Popsicle*) which spoofs Japanese culture.
8. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/OMB/bulletins/b00-02.html>. The US Census of 2000 allowed respondents to check more than one racial and/or ethnic category to describe themselves. However, the Office of Management and Budget's Bulletin 00-02 of March 9, 2000 issued guidelines for interpreting the census data that arguably reversed the intent of those earlier revisions by reassigning respondents who elected to identify themselves both as a minority and as white to the minority category.

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Sujata Massey is an American mystery author and historical fiction novelist. Her books are published in English in the US and Canada, the United Kingdom and India, and Australia/New Zealand. Massey's novels are also available in different languages and formats in Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Spain and Thailand. 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. 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. Even though Furutani shares this taste for the night sceneries, so traditional in the noir, with characters. *Passing and Posing: The Japanese American Body in the Detective Fiction of Sujata Massey and Dale Furutani*. M. Harris. *History*. 1 June 2007. 1. View via Publisher. Save. This essay identifies a genre of popular fiction for children and young adults, prevalent in the 1990s and continuing into the early twenty-first century, that incorporates computers and the. Expand. 11. View on Springer. Save. Alert. Cite.