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ARTICLE



## 'Knock it off with the mystical horseshit:' Detection in the American West

### Detection in the American West

Antoine Dechéne and Luca Di Gregorio

#### ABSTRACT

This article offers two close readings of prominent American detective novels: Tony Hillerman's *The Blessing Way* and Craig Johnson's *The Cold Dish*. Both texts display aspects of the Western wilderness (the Great Basin and the Great Plains) which, in different but related ways, remodel the dynamics of the investigation through several motifs: the missing person, the hidden or lost clue in the apparently empty, sidereal space, the constraint of distances, the paradox between the enclosed Reservations and the open Plains. Most of all, the two novels are centered on very strong detective figures: the Tribal Policeman Joe Leaphorn and the blasé Sheriff of Absaroka County, Walt Longmire. The land shapes these two men, whose ethno-ecological awareness is an essential part of their detecting methods as well as of their own identities.

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Although they were written more than thirty years apart,<sup>1</sup> Tony Hillerman's *The Blessing Way* (1970) and Craig Johnson's *The Cold Dish* ([2005] 2015) share a vision of the American West which, rather than simply reflecting an Euro-American gaze – contrasted with a Native American one – is deeply aware of 'more multicultural conceptions of nature and the environment' (Adamson 2001, xviii). Their vision of nature is idiosyncratic, sensitive, and not narrowed to a matter of race, class or gender, although these preoccupations work as constructive elements of a type of crime fiction that has successfully developed during the past fifty years. This fictional current, already studied by some scholars as a broader subgenre labeled 'ethnopolar' (La Mothe 1992),<sup>2</sup> is restricted, in this article, to non-urban detective novels set in the American West and modulated by a diegetic environment that intertwines the ethnological and ecological aspects of the land.

Hillerman's and Johnson's detective novels draw their originality from this ethno-ecological perspective by developing an ecocentric aesthetics of space, simultaneously wild and inhabited. Taking into account the wilderness and its observers (detectives and Natives), these texts offer new ways of tracking criminals and discovering clues. Besides, the ethno-ecological complexities of the West rush the investigators into a form of perpetual doubt, compelling them to reconsider their

deductive methods and professional (self-)confidence, thereby inducing a strong metaphysical dimension in the novels.

*The Blessing Way* and *The Cold Dish* introduce two unique and yet complimentary detectives. Hillerman's Tribal Policeman Joe Leaphorn is helped in this first investigation by his ethnologist friend Bergen McKee, while Johnson's Sheriff of Absaroka County, Walt Longmire, cannot work without the help of a series of truculent characters among whom is the Cheyenne bartender Henry Standing Bear. The two investigator-protagonists are characterised by hard-boiled attitudes and spiritual reflections in a metaphysical version of detective fiction set in the wilderness. Accordingly, this essay addresses the different ways in which Hillerman's and Johnson's detectives are ontologically defined by the land. This approach should also highlight the relation between their methods of detection and the vastness of the American West. In these novels, the landscapes give rise to a metaphysical reflection on the possibility of bringing a sense of purpose, meaning, and justice in remote and deserted territories. The scenery mirrors the sleuths' own introspection, counterbalancing their power of reasoning with profound questions about the nature of reality and the possibility of knowledge. These questions are, of course, much harder to solve than the crime investigations at hand and, like clouds over the Big Horn Mountains, their shadows keep hovering above the detectives' heads by the ends of the novels.

### Between the hard-boiled and the metaphysical detective story

*The Blessing Way* and *The Cold Dish* share more characteristics with the hard-boiled novel than with the classical whodunit.<sup>3</sup> The stories are based on the actions of strong characters with well-defined features such as a high sense of justice, moral good, and courage: indeed, on what makes a 'tough-guy.'<sup>4</sup> This article follows Andrew Pepper's idea that 'the hard-boiled is best theorized as a highly unstable political category that operates in a field of tension between different and competing political ideologies' (2010, 142). These ideologies oscillate between the application of the official law and the detectives' own morality and sense of justice, which highlights the discrepancies of a broken and corrupted system. For Pepper, this reaction further manifests itself as 'a macro-political response to the authority of the state' and, consequently, as a way 'to reconstitute white masculine heterosexual hegemony' (142). The latter argument is particularly relevant to Jopi Nyman who, insists that vernacular language is used in the genre to convey the violence of city streets where 'masculinity and power enable an individual to survive' (1997, 16). Hard-boiled fiction is in fact, for Nyman, 'a form of literature which describes tough, masculine, characters in a violent social context by means of a tough language' (16). Such a description certainly fits with Longmire and Standing Bear's friendship. Both fought in the Vietnam War. Their relationship is sincere and straightforward, based on mutual respect and thus, when the Sheriff asks his friend what is the 'general feeling' on the reservation about the way he handled a previous case, Standing Bear cannot but tell him what he thinks: he 'could have done better' and the phrase 'general feeling' is just 'silly white-man talk' (Johnson 2015, 55). As will further become clear, their camaraderie goes beyond certain current forms of political correctness and 'color-

blindness'. Although most of the teasing between them is based on racial stereotypes, the two men appear as equals, whose detecting abilities combine virile strength and spiritual open-mindedness.

What is more, it is important to remark that the hard-boiled genre was also influenced by American naturalism and the popular western, two types of narratives presenting recurrent themes such as man's 'endurance [...] and hopeless struggle against nature and society' (Nyman 1997, 16). Hard-boiled fiction thus cannot be separated from a number of other literary genres which developed in the late twentieth century and which tainted the private eye's investigation with an idea of wilderness as compelling as the most industrial and capitalist of modern metropolises. *The Blessing Way* and *The Cold Dish* seem to adhere to Nyman's outline of the origins of the hard-boiled since the two plots – like the rest of the writers' works – are not set in big Western cities but in the vastness of the Four Corners and in the plains of Wyoming.<sup>5</sup>

Leaphorn and Longmire are 'tough-guys' in their own way, both questioning the authority of the state as well as their own activity as representatives of the law. Leaphorn is a forty-year-old Navajo who received a white education and is thus considered by his peers as 'a young one who [knows] the old and the patient ways' of his Indian tribe (Hillerman 1970, 90). He is a strong, confident man, trusting his reasoning abilities, but somehow also incapable of entirely living according to 'the Navajo Way,' that is, 'the Middle Way, which avoid[s] all excesses – even happiness' (40). As for Longmire, he is a fifty-year-old widow, more or less alcoholic, brave, with a strong sense of justice. He understands nature, life in the West, Native Americans and their culture. Even though *The Cold Dish* opens with the discovery of a body connected to a previous case in which Longmire failed to bring 'justice' to the Indian people (2015, 55), the Sheriff still cares and believes that it is possible for him to reintroduce 'a little order into the chaos' (180).

Like Leaphorn, Longmire questions the system and never stops feeling 'the fraud of human institutions' (2015, 212). Both *The Blessing Way* and *The Cold Dish* insist on the idea that justice in the West works on two different and mostly unfair levels: the Tribal laws *versus* the white ones (Hillerman 1970, 102). In that way, they also echo own-voices Native American mystery novels such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) or Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* (1990). Hogan's first novel, for instance, relates a series of murders among Osage Indians killed by white men during the Oklahoma oil boom in the 1920s. It reveals how white people, driven by greed, created a two-tier justice system designed to enforce their privileges and enable them to get away with their crimes. Hogan's detective, Stacy Red Hawk, a Lakota Sioux working for the U.S. Bureau of Investigation, launches an investigation into internal corruption, though he soon realises that justice will be hard to administer: 'the trial was going to be beset with numerous problems, missing witnesses being only the smallest of the difficulties' (1990, 332). Witnesses are indeed threatened or killed, and Red Hawk sees no other option to save his integrity than to resign from his job since he believes that 'the bureau might in fact be involved with some of the crime' (324).

Interestingly, Red Hawk's investigation turns further inwards throughout the narrative until it becomes a spiritual quest for his Indian identity. In fact, the detective never solves the mysteries and eventually drops out of the case, retiring in the mountains with what remains of the uncorrupted Osage Indians. Red Hawk's identity quest brings him

closer to the elements. What he seeks is a vision: 'to find a cure deep in the heart of the earth' (1990, 230), a quest that cannot end with the finality of the detective genre's characteristic denouement.

Such lack of resolution and ongoing cognitive doubts are central elements of what has been called the 'metaphysical' or 'metacognitive' mystery tale. This other category of detective fiction is defined by 'the profound questions that it raises about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality [one might add the reality of nature], and the limits of knowledge' (Merivale and Sweeney 1999, 1).<sup>6</sup> Hillerman's and Johnson's detectives share Red Hawk's skepticism in front of the possibility of finding reliable knowledge and a stable identity. Leaphorn, for example, although he trusts his ability to read clues and derive fluent reasonings from them, is also beset by doubts each time he stumbles upon fortuitous new evidence:

And suddenly he was no longer sure of anything. This unexpected fact visible at his feet fell like a stone in a reflecting pool, turning the mirrored image into shattered confusion. The answer he had found converted itself into another question. Leaphorn no longer had any idea why Horseman had died. He was, in fact, more baffled than ever. (Hillerman 1970, 198–199)

And again:

He worked methodically and carefully, resisting an urge to hurry. And when he put it all together, he had nothing but another enigma which offered no possibility of solution. (1970, 205)

Leaphorn suffers when facts do not fall into the anticipated pattern. He feels an 'acute mental discomfort' (1970, 203) and is not at ease until he is able to accept the 'Navajo way' that is, the natural order of things and its part of mystery.

Similarly, after more than twenty years as the Sheriff of a small and isolated community, Longmire realises that 'Maybe half truths were all you got in this life' (Johnson 2015, 353). The end of the investigation in *The Cold Dish* reveals that the case was a matter of revenge: a white woman, who was abused as a child, was trying to bring justice for herself and for Melissa Little Bird, a Cheyenne girl who was also raped and whose molesters were convicted, but never really punished. While thinking about the latest turn of events, and the cruel twist that a survivor of rape will now be punished for a revenge-crime, Longmire remarks sadly that revenge is 'a dish best not served at all' (352).

In this perspective, nature appears as the 'middle way' advocated by the Native American cultures represented in order for humanity to find stability. The landscapes of the American West mirror humanity's lack of certainties, reminding its inhabitants that their presence is only transitory, like the geese that Longmire watches as they fly away at the beginning and end of the novel. Nature, whether it means the deserts of the Four Corners or the prairies and mountains of Wyoming, overwhelms with a feeling of sublimity that evokes both dread and fascination.<sup>7</sup> It is now worth focusing on the peculiar landscape in which *The Blessing Way* and *The Cold Dish* are set so as to better apprehend a possible interconnection between a form of hard-boiled/metaphysical narrative and its ethno-ecological background.

## The ecological and geographical setting

Hillerman's detective novels take place in a large zone of the American West which comes close, according to Don Scheese's scalar typology of environments, to a wilderness understood as a 'terrain with little or no historic evidence of human manipulation, whether it be "virgin" forest, desert, or alpine summit' ([1995] 2002, 7). The region of the Four Corners, where Hillerman locates his novels, belongs to North America's Great Basin, one of the driest regions in the world, where only a small number of human populations have managed to survive (The Zuni, Anasazi, Hopi, etc.). As Longmire explains, the imaginary county of Absaroka, Wyoming, is 'the least populated county in the least populated state in the union' (2006, 10).

Of course, in terms of wilderness aesthetics, those two territories offer sharp contrasts. The Four Corners constitutes the most iconic scenery of the West in popular culture and imagery. It reveals spaces saturated with red-orange tones and ubiquitous minerality. The name of one of its most famous parks fully renders the iconic status of this country covered in sandstone and narrow passes: Canyonlands. Hillerman meticulously depicts the physical resistance of those rocky defiles winding between the canyons. In *The Blessing Way*, both Leaphorn and McKee are amazed by the 'labyrinth of canyons' (1970, 110) shaping the land, as well as by its intense loneliness and the infinite echoless distance that separates them from others (111).

Wyoming, on the other hand, embodies the heart of the Great Plains and rolling prairies: its chromatic tones display a vast array of browns and greens, added to the white of winter in the Big Horn Mountains area. In *The Cold Dish*, the survival scene in the snowstorm implicating Longmire, Standing Bear, and the arrested suspect George Esper, appears as a perfect example of the cohesion between the storyline and its natural geopoetics. From the plains to the peaks, the space is panoptic. Longmire can observe his target from afar, keep it in sight and capture it without difficulty. Obstacles arise, however, when the Sheriff has to come down from the mountain storm. Unlike in more 'traditional' detective fiction, the pursuit of the criminal happens to be less arduous than the confrontation with the elements. There are always traces of the survival story in the narratives of the West as is demonstrated, for instance, by the works of such nature writers as John Krakauer or David Vann.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the Four Corners and the Great Plains share an ultimate ecological and geological bareness, being characterized by a relative depopulation. It is only recently that these scenic traits have come to be put into question by the growing activities of tourism and industry. Of a radicalism inversely proportional to that of the sprawling metropolises, these vast American regions have taken on more 'sidereal' connotations in the literature of the past fifty years, from Edward Abbey to Cormac McCarthy. Such dodging spaces can be seen to reflect the apparent anomie of contemporary society. They have also become a refuge for a part of humanity willing to run away from itself in a connection with nature that is more hard-boiled – harsh and uncompromising – than bucolic.

In this sidereal perspective, the visual abstractness of the Canyons exceeds that of the Prairie and Plains. Their vanishing lines and warm-colored walls, eroded by the strength of the wind, give these sandstone canyons and mountains a non-human and inorganic appearance. The vertiginous power of this wilderness disrupts the more pastoral register

usually employed to depict the Plains such as one can find in Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827) or in Alfred B. Guthrie Jr.'s *The Big Sky* (1947). For these reasons, the Southern deserts offer a productive setting for the western, the detective story and, because of its nearly cosmic atmosphere, for science fiction narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, its setting within the most radical wilderness does not prevent the detective story from remaining an inherently social genre, requiring human interactions and mysteries. If the environmental quality of space and the feeling of place – apprehended in Michel de Certeau's terms, that is as 'an instantaneous configuration of positions [which] implies an indication of stability' ([1984] 1988, 117) – have a strong impact in Hillerman's and Johnson's novels, the plot always connects those places to the particular gaze that the scattered communities hold upon it. As it were, these isolated communities actualize the apparent permanence of places, turning them into unstable spaces. They also explain the fundamentally ecocentric (rather than biocentric) dimension of an ethno-ecological detective story.

This ecocentric scope finds an echo in De Certeau's spatial analysis of urban life and its possible transposition to vast natural landscapes: '*space is a practiced place*' ([1984] 1988, 117). Indeed, if the novels' characters do not walk around urban environments, but instead drive long distances, they are still caught in 'the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper' (103). Longmire, for instance, is more of a driver than a walker, but his errands have quite the same impact on his mind than the different sensations experienced by the city practitioner. Movement, whether in the Great Plains or in the desert, driving has become 'a space of enunciation' (98), leaving traces – tire and boot tracks – for the detective to read. In Longmire's case, driving leaves plenty of time to think: the enunciation thus also comes from his train of thoughts, which either gets carried away or rearranges the different clues gathered so far. The Sheriff knows that 'time in [his] part of the high plains mean[s] driving' (Johnson 2015, 239) and he usually makes the most of this time to reflect upon the case, his personal life, and (why not?) have a beer or two.

Most of these novels' characters seem to lack a sense of place, and experience a belonging that is often fractured and hard to reconcile. In *The Blessing Way*, the criminal and victim, Luis Horseman, is hiding in the canyons. In this no man's land between the reservation and the closest urban center, he is deprived of identity, torn between the Navajo way and the newer, 'whiter' reality to which he aspires. As Leaphorn concludes, he is '[j]ust another poor soul who didn't quite know how to be a Navajo and couldn't learn to act like a white. No good for anything' (Hillerman 1970, 67).

Relatedly, Longmire's lack of place is symbolized by his forever-unfinished house, which stands as an allegory of the hero's life since the death of his wife two years previously. For his friend Standing Bear, it is clear that the house reflects the Sheriff's own mental distress: 'Walt, your life is a mess, your house is a mess, and you are a mess' (2015, 51). In this connection, Longmire's house bares little resemblance to the concept of home understood, according to Bachelard, as 'a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability' ([1969] 1994, 17). The house is not, at least in the beginning, a place where the detective can rest; it is not a shelter that 'protects the dreamer' (6), but rather another provisional space where Longmire feels trapped in melancholy. His car, on the other hand, which he calls the Bullet, is more of a home to him. Again, the detective detects and has his moments of epiphany while driving on

empty road when his mind is restless with 'feelings,' 'premonitions,' and 'musings' about what is going to happen and what he should do next. Longmire's house, however, eventually gains a sense of solidity thanks to Standing Bear who not only comes to cook for his friend, but also hires some Indian workmen to build the house a porch on which the Sheriff will be able to think, watching the plains and mountains in the distance. In the end, Longmire is grateful that his place has taken on 'a look of permanence, the look of a home' (2015, 129), thereby also implying the new feeling of stability of his own identity.

### **Towards ethno-ecology: a reading of the land through its communities**

In this context, one can better understand why the relation to nature is so important in these texts: it is linked to the characters' roles and, essentially, to the men and women sharing a deeper connection with the land. These communities consist of Native Americans, but also of mediating individuals, such as Leaphorn, Chee, Longmire, and Standing Bear who are receptive to Native American beliefs and mystical rituals. Unlike many nature-writing narratives, whose drastic approach strives to remain attached to a biocentric ethics, these novels bend towards a more ecocentric approach, taking into account both the environment and its perception, the habitat and the inhabitants (Despraz 2008, 14–15).

Detective fiction is indeed, even in the wildest parts of the United States, characterized by the necessary encounter, exploration, and (mis-)understanding of different human communities throughout the process of the investigation. This negotiation between the constraints of the genre and the recurrent reflection on nature establishes the inseparable ethno-ecological dimension of most detective stories set in the regions of the Great Basin and the Great Plains. On the whole, the ethno-ecological concerns described here locate these novels at the periphery of the regular corpus of Native Studies. Without entering into the important debate regarding cultural appropriation and the issue of the representation of Native American characters and worlds by white writers, one can concede that Hillerman succeeded, to a certain extent, in preserving his Navajo protagonists from merely being portrayed as spiritualised 'others' (Murray 1997, 128). Even though Hillerman acknowledges and dwells upon cultural differences between Native Americans and Euro-American settlers, his characters are equally part of a landscape which reminds them of their own vulnerable human nature. Another of Hillerman's achievements, Murray argues, resides in his Navajo detectives' 'double sense of identity' which 'is constantly probed, without turning [them] into mysterious "others" or versions of noble savage or Vanishing American' (135). Through Chee (the spiritual) and Leaphorn (the rationalist), Hillerman manages to open 'different systems of thought' while avoiding the too-comfortable and criticized stance of the ethnographer, which still 'constitutes the natives as objects of study' (144–145).

As already argued, Johnson's detective novels discuss the West following the literary codes of the hard-boiled. This conception shatters usual ways of addressing territorialized spirituality and interconnection between white and Native American communities. The relationship between Sheriff Longmire and his bartender friend, the Cheyenne Henry Standing Bear, epitomizes Johnson's approach. The two men's friendship is not presented as a form of intercultural tolerance, but rather as a rough brotherhood, a

kinship dictated by the living conditions of the West in the twenty-first century. The hard-boiled portrays a world that is particularly masculine, introducing, as in the western, male characters 'with social dominance' (Nyman 1997, 35). In *The Cold Dish*, this brotherhood is reinforced by the degraded conditions of life in Wyoming: characterising the interdependence of their relationship, Longmire helps to fix Standing Bear's electrical installation, and Bear hires Indian workmen to fix up the Sheriff's house. The two friends seem to be willing to 'fix' each other, each trying to occupy a shifting space in a materially and symbolically precarious society.

Longmire and Standing Bear mutually respect their ethnical traditions in a highly unceremonious and at times provocative way. Their cynical and dark-humored conversations, filled with second-degree exchanges of stereotypes on white and Indian people alike, reveal the two men's liberation from intercultural decorum. The way that Longmire calls his comrade 'The Cheyenne Nation' and, most of all, his invective against 'mystical horseshit' (2015, 253), illustrate the virile and straightforward character of their relationship as well as the bittersweet approach towards spirituality in the Longmire mysteries.

Nevertheless, the Sheriff is forced to acknowledge the importance of Native American spiritual customs and beliefs as clues lead him on to the threshold of a Cheyenne Reservation. The Rez, as Longmire calls it, is an essential space, a sort of chronotope *par excellence*, within both Hillerman's and Johnson's novels. The reservation is an enclave which concentrates diverse clues and suspicions. Suspicion indeed often falls on the Indians living there. These communities are implicated because of their autarky, their opacity, and the spiritual character of their rites. The space of the reservation interconnects the defining ecological and ethnological features of the West: it is both hardly accessible and barely knowable to white characters, thereby also contributing to the unreadability of the mystery characterizing the metaphysical branch of crime fiction. Guthrie Jr.'s *The Genuine Article* (1977) offers another good example of the narrative functions assigned to the reservation in detective fiction: the first people suspected in the novel are the inhabitants of a reservation in Montana, a somehow too easy lead, which is ultimately contradicted by the revelation, as in *The Blessing Way* and *The Cold Dish*, of the white criminal's identity.

Hillerman's novels also plunge into the ethno-ecological depths of Southwestern Navajo Reservations. Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee added to their ancestral knowledge of the terrain and tribal traditions, their education to 'the way of the Whites.' As both detectives and Navajos, the two protagonists share a double status defined, according to Caisson (1995), following Ginzburg (1989), by its conflicted identitarian character, which is also what enables them to solve mysteries. Because of their schizoid work as Tribal Police Officers, whose conscientiousness frequently collides with tribal solidarity, the reservation people call them 'apples, red on the outside, white on the inside' (Johnson 2015, 317).

The characters of Chee and McKee represent yet another way to address the cultural world of the reservation. Both are ethnologists, whose scientific authority reinforces the 'ethno' component of this type of crime fiction. For example, in *People of Darkness* (1980), Chee uses his academic knowledge of Native American traditions to explore the underground web of the reservation and dismantle a Navajo sect. In that sense, these

characters combine the functions of the detective, the Indian and the ethnologist – induction, spirituality, and science – which work together towards the resolution of the investigation and ultimately define the specific narrative style of a detective story that deals with ethnological and ecological concerns.

### Mystical horseshit?

For Leaphorn and Longmire, signs, tracks, traces and possible material evidence are often doubled with the understanding of rites, omens and spells characterizing the 'Native' interpretation of the events. Leaphorn eventually succeeds in finding the 'Navajo Wolf' guilty of the different murders thanks to the cousin of the first victim, the young Billy Nez, who tracked the man he believed to be a Witch, so as to have an 'Enemy Way' and get rid of him. Leaphorn's method is based on the reading and interpretation of different tracks and traces (shoes, car tires, livestock, etc.) left on the sandstone land. But it is equally inspired by the possible mystical meaning one can give to these traces, as Cook explains: 'Leaphorn uses a mixture of conventional clue-solving and Navajo lore in order to arrive at the solution to the case' (2014, 177). The detective, however, is often confused by what he sees and even wrongly interprets the actions of the Witch. It is McKee who comes to understand that the Navajo Wolf everyone is talking about is, as it were, a 'fake Indian,' whose only knowledge of traditional rites was found in a book. The criminal happens to be a 'Relocation Navajo,' the result of 'one of the most disastrous experiments of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' which, in the 1930s, tried to relocate Native Americans in urban centers (1970, 248). Leaphorn's mistake was thus based on the racial misinterpretation of the criminal's identity: 'I figured him to act like a Navajo and he was acting like a white man' (269).<sup>10</sup>

For McKee, 'the Wolf superstition [is] a simple scapegoat procedure, giving primitive people a necessary outlet for blame in times of trouble and frustration' (1970, 23). Leaphorn's investigation, by contrast, reveals how much the 'Navajo Way' condemns all sorts of excesses and denounces the corrupted system which has brought greed into the Native Americans' lives. In the end, the wicked mind behind all these crimes is a white greedy entrepreneur who recruited thugs to take care of his dirty business. Moreover, one can also argue that Luis Horseman and the Navajo Wolf are both criminals and victims.<sup>11</sup> Leaphorn indeed considers the young Navajo to be a 'lost soul ... [n]o good even at crime' (95), and 'another failure as a man' (74). As for the Witch, he also appears as the victim of an inequitable society, yet another 'hungry city alcoholic' (248) who was not given the opportunity to reconcile his double identity.

Tracks, traces, and their possible mystical interpretation are also at the heart of *The Cold Dish*. Longmire is convinced that looking is 'one of [his] better law-enforcement techniques' (2015, 1), but he still needs Standing Bear's spiritual exegesis. For instance, one of the case's principal clues is a feather that was found next to the body of Cody Pritchard. At first, the Sheriff thinks that it might be an eagle feather. Standing Bear soon corrects him: the feather is a turkey one. Longmire comes to the conclusion that the criminal must be a 'white attempting to make it look like an Indian' (137). Besides, the criminal's plan was wrong from the start since, as Bear explains, the 'eagle feather is a sign of life, attached to all the activities of the living' (137). The murderer should have used owl feathers instead, which 'are the sign of death, the messengers from the other

world' (137). This collaboration highlights the many significations, rational and spiritual, contained in a single clue.

Lastly, it is interesting to remark that the mystery lingering on the reservation is often embedded into a particular object, which is both a talisman and a material piece of evidence. This object is usually related to the history and traditions of Native Americans. In Hillerman's *People of Darkness*, Chee enquires about a chest that has been supposedly stolen by a Navajo cult. In *The Cold Dish*, it is the discovery of an antique rifle from the battle of Little Big Horn which directs Longmire's speculations towards the closest Cheyenne Reservation. Longmire's connection with the 'mystical horseshit' indeed changes after he receives from Standing Bear's family the 1876 'Cheyenne Rifle of the Dead' (Johnson 2015, 298). From then on, the detective starts having visions of Old Cheyenne Warriors, which eventually guide him through a snowstorm and help him catch the culprit. Longmire progressively learns to hear and accept these voices: 'The Old Cheyenne were with me, and I could feel their strength as I continued along the trail' (256); and 'The Old Cheyenne were there now with me, and I could hear their voices ascending as I held their rifle' (327). The climax of Johnson's novel oscillates between rational evidence and mystical invocations, hard-boiled attitudes and metaphysical reflections.

Yet Longmire's strengths as a Sheriff do not really lie in his knowledge of the Cheyenne's particular rites and beliefs, but rather in his capacity to identify with others, without considerations of race or gender. He empathises with white criminals and Native Americans alike because he relates to their condition as isolated human beings living on the vast lands of Wyoming. Longmire does not treat the different mysteries he investigates from the perspective of an ethnologist (as Chee or McKee do), but from his *habitus*, his privileged stance as a resident of the West and as a hard-boiled detective, whose mind embraces the metaphysical reflective powers of the wilderness. This is also Cook's conclusion when he writes about Hillerman's novels that:

It seems that the combination of a long, undisturbed landscape and its attendant generations of occupants give rise to a culture which has at its roots a mystical symbiosis. It is as if the relationship transcends mere occupation and that the land itself takes on an identity of its own, so that the people who dwell there are not merely on the land, but of it, too. (2014, 176)

Joe Leaphorn and Walt Longmire are both products of *their* land. They depend on it. They know that they must learn to decipher its language in order to better face their own physical and identitarian precariousness. Perhaps the elements have a language of their own, wonders the Sheriff as he contemplates the falling snow: 'It looked like a Morse code of white dots and dashes leading down the road. If I could read the message, would it tell me the story I wanted to hear?' (Johnson 2015, 34). The language of the land is an ecocentric one. It constantly challenges and rephrases the interconnections between the human communities and the wild spaces of the West. Leaphorn's and Longmire's investigations are determined by the cultural and spiritual value of clues and traces. The diegetic environment in which they roam engenders a metaphysical reflection made of open questions, which, even though the crime is eventually solved, linger above the two men alike, incapable of reaching the 'dreamer's omniscience' (Hillerman 1970, 212).

## Notes

1. Almost forty years separate the writers' work, although Hillerman's latest books overlap with Johnson's. Their novels thus belong to different historical and cultural contexts. Hillerman was a journalist and essayist during the emergence of the American Indian Movement (1960s–70s). His ethno-ecological perspective gives a more serious and compromised tone to his fiction, and is more concerned with cultural rehabilitation than Johnson's. The latter, owner of a ranch in the small community of Ucross, Wyoming, addresses ethno-ecological questions, but in a more territorialized way. In his early 21st century Wyoming, ethno-political conflicts seem to be, if not reduced, at least put into perspective by the precariousness of all communities living on the Great Plains. Notwithstanding these differences, the writers' *œuvres* are complementary for at least two reasons: first, they depict distinct and yet inseparable historical instances of ethno-ecological awareness in the West. Second, they transfer this changing sensibility within the codes of the detective story.
2. The 'ethnopolar' includes narratives involving not only Native American populations, but also other indigenous cultures such as Australian Aboriginals in Arthur Upfield's fiction.
3. We are well aware that the distinction between the 'classical' and the hard-boiled crime novel is not as clear-cut as sometimes suggested, nor do we understand the two genres as fixed categories defined by the prose of their very founders – Poe, Doyle, and Christie on the one hand; Hammett and Chandler, on the other. For more information on this distinction see Andrew Pepper's article (2010, 142).
4. In this respect, the character of Vic, the Sheriff's deputy in the Longmire series, is particularly representative of the toughness adopted by the detectives moving from the mean streets of L.A. to the deserted roads of the West.
5. The region encompasses the quadripoint where four of the principal Western states intersect – Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah.
6. See Merivale and Sweeney (1999); and Dechêne and Delville (2016).
7. To learn more about a possible sublime reading of space see Den Tandt's book (1998).
8. Krakauer's famous *Into the Wild* (1996) and Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* (2008) are illuminating examples of recent narratives dealing with survival in the rough environment of the West.
9. See Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973) and the ongoing HBO TV series (2016–).
10. For discussion of race misdetection and connected anxieties see Jinny Huh's *The Arresting Eye* (2015).
11. On mixing of victim and criminal roles in metaphysical detection see Merivale in *Detecting Texts* (1999).

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