



The Cowboy and the Detective: The Case of Craig Johnson

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Abstract. This essay focuses on Craig Johnson’s charismatic protagonist Walt Longmire, the county sheriff of Absaroka, Wyoming. A cowboy-detective *par excellence*, Longmire embodies the interrelationship between the Western and detective fiction while offering a good example of “glocal literature”—that is, a form of literature that is both global and local.

Craig Johnson is one of the most prominent North American crime writers in recent years. His fiction revolves around a marginal and charismatic detective: Walt Longmire, the county sheriff of Absaroka, Wyoming. The fictional county is inspired by the novelist’s everyday life, himself a rancher at Ucross in the same state of Wyoming. This West, delineated by vast plains spreading at the foot of the Big Horn Mountains, is, for Longmire, a space of investigation and meditation, a landscape whose omnipresence and personification make it a full-fledged character in the novels. Accordingly, this essay focuses on the figures of the cowboy and the detective, both emblematic of the genres they embody: the Western and crime fiction. The essay also deals with the representations and the different impacts of this vast natural space on the detective’s work (the reading of tracks, traces, and clues; the time-consuming drives; the importance of the weather, etc.). The apparent immensity of the American West also encourages introspection and tints the narrative with spiritual, almost mystical overtones. Longmire often has prophetic dreams and visions stimulated by his long-standing friendship with his Cheyenne comrade, Henry Standing Bear. The land shapes these two men, whose ecological sensibilities are an essential part of their detecting methods that, if they help them solve the criminal cases at hand, also raise existential questions that are far more difficult to answer. Lastly, this essay uses the *Longmire* series to discuss crime fiction’s belonging to the domain of world literature as a glocal phenomenon, that is, a form of literature that is both global and local, set in a particular place and time but also based on universally recognizable codes.

At first glance, Longmire may appear as a traditional western hero, a true cowboy.

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Yet, although white and male, he does not share all the characteristics usually associated with such a character: “independence, resistance to authority, freedom from individual history, practical inventiveness, and suspicion of expertise and education;” qualities that are often associated with the imaginary of the frontier (Viehmann 396). If Longmire is independent and somehow resistant to authority (as well as physically resistant), he is not freed from his own history (he served in the Marines as a military police officer for four years during the Vietnam War), he is much more inclined toward existential questioning than toward practical inventiveness, and most of all, he is very well educated (he was a football player at the University of Southern California and earned a degree in English literature). He makes countless intertextual references to canonical texts, from the Bible and William Shakespeare to Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. He is also a very good pianist and a very good connoisseur of classical, jazz, and country music.

In this perspective, Longmire is also quite different from, for example, C. J. Box’s game warden and main protagonist Joe Pickett who is far less ambiguous in terms of morals, religion, and acceptance of others. Both Wyoming residents share a similar approach (daunted about and respectful) to the land, but their home does not seem to reflect on them in the same way. Whereas Pickett never seems to put himself into question, Longmire is much more inclined to interrogate his own methods, behavior, and place in the world. This existential dimension may find its origins in the development of the detective figure itself.

THE *FLÂNEUR* AND THE COWBOY

Although detective fiction is usually labeled as an urban genre, Johnson’s fiction guides readers through the plains of northern Wyoming and the small town of Durant where life seems “deceptively simple” (*Kindness* 12) and where investigations are determined by time-consuming drives; moments waiting for test results from Cheyenne (capital of the state); and harsh, sometimes compromising weather. Johnson’s novels are set on the border between urban and natural environments, a trope that is more likely to be found in western crime fiction.

There is no real consensus about the origins of the western detective. In brief, there seems to be two different approaches regarding the development of the genre in cities of the American West. On the one hand, as Walter Benjamin famously contended, the origins of the detective figure lie in the *flâneur* who, in mid-nineteenth century Paris, becomes “an unwilling detective” (40). As he walks a little faster each day, the *flâneur* foresees that every step he takes “will lead him to a crime” (41). In his footsteps, the detective wants to impose rational thinking, whereas the *flâneur* is simply overwhelmed by the surplus of interpretative possibilities that lie behind each “countenance” of the city crowd. From this point of view, it is not a coincidence if the detective story develops in the stream of city masses. It is precisely the multitude that frightens, because it swallows the individual. Remember that, for Benjamin, “The original social content of the detective story [is] the obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big-city crowd” (43). The self disappears in such an incoherent mass, and the *flâneur* “cease[s] to be [at] home” (47) in the city. He has lost his power to read and interpret the crowd, an outcome envisioned by Edgar Allan Poe in his foundational story, “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), in which the “genius of deep crime” (406) remains frustratingly unreadable.

Other scholars such as Leslie Fiedler believe that “the private eye is not the dandy [or

the *flâneur*] turned sleuth; [but] the cowboy adapted to life on the city street” (qtd. in Witschi 382; see also Parker). More recently, Nicolas Witschi has argued that “the distinctly American detective story [one may understand Hammett and Chandler’s hard-boiled fiction] is by and large a genre western transposed into an urban environment, that the cynical and disillusioned gumshoe is but a twentieth-century gunslinger in a cheap suit and a fedora” (382). Generally speaking, it appears that “the detective novel in the United States relies vitally on the American West—as subject, as topos, or even simply as setting—to aid in the process of evolution or reinvention” (Witschi 381).

How does Longmire fit into this dichotomy? Johnson borrows from both traditions. If the crimes often happen in vast, deserted places, they are still committed by people. Longmire’s Wyoming is not totally empty, and he shows a deep interest in its different communities. Not exactly a *flâneur*, because, simply, it would be impossible to walk along those roads—and there is most of the time, no proper crowd to get lost into—he still has an ability to feel, in Baudelaire’s terms, “anywhere out of the world” (“Any Where”). He is also very curious, a quality that Baudelaire attributes to the *flâneur*, whose curiosity—the necessary condition to his inspiration—can also become “a fatal, irresistible passion!” (“Painter” 7). Indeed, the sheriff hates unanswerable enigmas, an inclination that he transmitted to his daughter:

Like me, she couldn’t abide mystery. Even as a young child, she asked questions—questions as statements, questions as answers, and questions as endless inquiry. She wanted to know everything and, if you told her to go look it up, she would and then come back with even more questions. Even then, she could interview a stump. (Johnson, *Kindness* 94)

Moreover, like the nineteenth-century Parisian stroller, Longmire has difficulties coping with the “transitory” and “fleeting” nature of his time, what Baudelaire called “modernity” (“Painter” 12). Although the “modern” does not correspond anymore to the poet’s vision of the changing French capital, Longmire is a diehard with no cellphone and ignorance about what wi-fi is. He is endearingly old-fashioned and nostalgic, convinced that “[n]o matter how far you [go] into the modern age, it always seem[s] to come down to the guy on the beat” (*Cold* 208–09).

On the other hand, Longmire has things in common with characters of the hard-boiled tradition whom, according to Witschi, “embody a sadness born of a distinctly western American alienation” (384). Like Spade and Marlowe, Longmire is a tough-guy who has his “own moral code” (384). Unlike them, however, he acknowledges and is thankful for the help he receives from his diverse friends and colleagues. He has a great sense of what he owes to people. This consideration makes him, according to Rachel Schaffer, a kind of mediator between people from different origins and cultures:

Because of Walt’s basic decency and open-mindedness, he enthusiastically appreciates the values, points of view, and qualities of his colleagues, regardless of their background. His appreciation leads him to defend alternative points of view and cultural beliefs, both to other characters and to readers, and he is openly admiring of people’s different experiences and perspectives. (97)

Indeed, Schaffer continues, “Walt’s personal struggle to maintain his open-minded view of other ethnic groups and to fight against any feelings of prejudice in himself is also a matter of significant interest in the series” (101–02). He is very much concerned in *Another Man’s Moccasins*, for instance, about whether he may have racist prejudices against Vietnamese

because of his war experience. Office dispatcher Ruby comforts him, however, answering that he may not be racist but still has prejudices: “You don’t care about the living as much as you do the dead” (Johnson, *Another* 149).

His respect and admiration for his Cheyenne friend Henry Standing Bear, further highlights his concern with sociocultural issues without having, however, to take things too seriously. In fact, 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.

Both fought in the Vietnam War. Their relationship is sincere and straightforward, based on mutual respect, which also allows them to poke fun at racial stereotypes. So, when in *The Cold Dish*, the sheriff asks his friend (whom he calls the Cheyenne Nation) 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 55). Their camaraderie goes beyond certain forms of political correctness and color-blindness. Although most of the teasing between them is based on racial clichés, the two men appear as equals, whose detecting abilities combine virile strength and spiritual open-mindedness.

DRIVING FOR CLUES

Longmire thus appears as a man who values the solitude of vast empty spaces as well as good relationships within his community. The landscape truly affects his mentality and behavior. In the same way, Witschi concludes that, “as a locus overwhelmingly determined by the relation of its people to its often spectacular spaces, the West lends to the detective novel one of its central conceits, namely the extent to which the detectives’ movements figuratively define their identities in relation to their spaces” (384–85). Indeed, even if the concept of western literature remains very elastic (from the pastoral to the hard-boiled), “the encounter with the landscape” remains “a defining characteristic of American and western experience” (Viehmann 395).

Again, the Wyoming setting, which defines Johnson’s novels and, at times, depicts a 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 here in Michel de Certeau’s terms as “an instantaneous configuration of positions [which] implies an indication of stability” (117)—have a strong impact in Johnson’s work, the plot always connects those places to the particular gaze that the scattered communities hold upon it.

This ecocentric scope finds an interesting echo in De Certeau’s spatial analysis of urban life and its possible transposition to vast natural landscapes, the famous: “*space is a practiced place*” (117; emphasis in original). Indeed, if Johnson’s characters do not walk around crowded streets but rather drive along straight, deserted roads, they are still caught in “the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (De Certeau 103). Longmire’s errands conducted by car have quite the same impact on his mind than the different sensations experienced by the city practitioner. Movement becomes “a space of enunciation” (98) and the traces—tire and boot tracks—are left for the detective to read. Longmire knows that “time in [his] part of the high plains mean[s] driving” (*Cold* 239), and he usually makes the most of it to reflect upon the case at hand and his personal life as well as have a beer or two.

Paradoxically, if Wyoming first appears as Longmire's stable home, his relentless existential questioning also reveals that he lacks a proper place. This lack 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 ago. 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" (*Cold* 51). In this connection, Longmire's house bears little resemblance to the concept of home understood, according to Gaston Bachelard (17), as "a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability." 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" (Bachelard 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 usually has his moments of epiphany while driving on deserted roads. Then, his mind is restless with feelings, premonitions, and musings about what is going to happen and what he should do next.

The long drives as well as Longmire's contemplation of the land that surrounds him, point at two other characteristics of Johnson's novels: the restorative potential of nature and the nearly metaphysical introspection it fosters. In *Another Man's Moccasins*, for instance, driving near a ghost town reminds Longmire of his own past:

I continued on my way and drove past the Bailey public school, which was a one-room schoolhouse, a last bastion of public education with, at last count, two students. It troubled me to think about the school closing, the cabins disassembled, and the ghost towns being flattened; it reminded me that the majority of my life had passed. I had started my education in a school very much like the one here and had spent my childhood in a town a lot like Bailey would have been if there had not been the mining disaster. I thought about Cady as I drove; about Michael, who was due to arrive imminently; about Vic; then about the upcoming election in November and the debate on Friday. (Johnson 74)

In *The Dark Horse*, driving leads the sheriff to a meta-level of introspection, reflecting not only upon his but also mankind's belonging to the land:

I thought about how we tilled and cultivated the land, planted trees on it, fenced it, built houses on it, and did everything we could to hold off the eternity of distance—anything to give the landscape some sort of human scale. No matter what we did to try and form the West, however, the West inevitably formed us instead. (Johnson 205)

Longmire is a product of his land. He depends on it. He knows that he must learn to decipher its language to better face his own ontological precariousness. Perhaps that 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, *Cold* 34). The language of the land constantly challenges and rephrases the interconnections between the human communities and the wild spaces of the West.

CRIME FICTION AS WORLD LITERATURE

Johnson's work points at the larger issue of the sources of interest of serial narratives as well as crime fiction's belonging to what is now called *world literature*. The remote setting, especially, enables the series to dissect small communities in which everybody is a

suspect. It offers an immersion in a world like ours but with a hint of exoticism that, in Raphaël Baroni's view, remains an essential characteristic of storyworlds,¹ enabling the proliferation and commercial success of series (46). Similarly, Olivia Kiernan discussed on *Crimereads* about the attraction of setting a detective series in such places:

For the writer, there is nothing more attractive than setting a mystery in a small town. Whether it's a character called back to their hometown to re-discover all the reasons they left in the first place or a newcomer who at first doesn't understand the town rules but soon gets sucked into some dark mystery, there are many reasons for choosing a tight-knit community as a setting to our dastardly plots. For the reader, you get to enjoy a variety of settings: a frozen Swedish forest or the sweeping, dry heat of the outback. Small towns have plenty of murderous secrets, within the pages of crime fiction if nowhere else. (n.p.)

As such, these detective fiction settings emphasize the genre's own belonging to bigger world narratives. In examples such as *Twin Peaks*, *Top of the Lake*, *Broadchurch* (and adaptations *Gracepoint* in the United States and *Malaterra* in France), *Quicksand*, *Sorjonen* (Bordertown, 2016–), *True Detective* (seasons 1 and 3), and the Belgian series *La trêve* (The Break), the multiple interests of such foreign settings can be understood.

The first one is economic. Detective fiction as a genre appears as a “glocal” phenomenon in the field of world studies. *Glocalism* is a concept introduced by David Damrosch to account for a peculiar “mode of literary creation and circulation” that combines “global patterns with local themes” (4, 14). The glocal nature of detective fiction lies in some of its distinguishing features such as the importance of the detective figure enabling the recognition of the genre worldwide, the marketing and translation issues related to its distribution, and the adaptations and appropriations by different cultures and media. Detective fiction, at least in its most classical whodunit or hard-boiled forms, is glocal because it exports “local situations abroad” and imports “global situations at home” (20). It is both stylized (based on a shared and recognizable set of rules) and localized (located in a particular place and time, rooted in the social and cultural contexts of the different countries where it develops). Detective fiction is an indefinitely malleable structure that can be used by any writer in any country. In many series, the stories are the same; the world and its inhabitants are different.

The second interest is thematic. The isolated settings go against the traditional urban landscape usually associated with detective fiction. They reveal an aspiration for more natural plots and characters, reflecting the detective's existential doubts and fragile identity, the complexity of the human psyche, the lack of a clear border between good and evil, and the multiple ways of apprehending reality and time. In the Longmire series, the apparent immensity of the American West embodies this ambiguity, offering endless paths to follow for the cowboy-detective, a driver who has no other choice than to cope with the force of the elements.

Today, the Longmire series has gained international fame. Its very local setting and related themes, combined with some more conventional tropes borrowed from the whodunit, the western, and the hard-boiled, provides to the public both unique and comfortably recognizable atmospheres. If, as Andreas Hedberg concludes, “Crime fiction is a travelling structure, applicable everywhere and thereby a world literature par excellence” (21), then the genre still has a bright future, especially in Wyoming.

Keywords: American West; cowboy-detective; *flâneur*; glocalism; Johnson, Craig

NOTE

1. Marie-Laure Ryan defines a storyworld as “an imagined totality that evolves according to the events in the story” (“Texts” 13). She explains elsewhere that it is “a broader concept than fictional world because it covers both factual and fictional stories, meaning stories told as true of the real world and stories that create their own imaginary world, respectively” (“Story” 33).

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