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Native Narratives, Mystery Writing, and the Osage Oil Murders: Examining *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose*

Mary Stoecklein

Mansions, fur coats, diamond rings, and chauffeured cars abounded in Osage County in the 1920s, when members of the Osage Nation in Oklahoma were the richest group of people per capita in the world.¹ Between 1902 and 1936, the Osage amassed an estimated \$252 million from oil and during the peak years of the 1920s, an Osage family of four collected approximately \$60,000 in royalties annually while an Osage individual, in terms of property and per capita income, was four times richer than non-Natives, and fifty times richer than Native Americans from other tribes.² With such great wealth came great jealousy and greed from outsiders, particularly from non-Native settlers, and suddenly members of the Osage Nation were mysteriously dying, one by one. The deaths resulted from being pushed off trains, poison, bombs, shotguns, and from almost every other imaginable weapon, including knives, wrenches, and dynamite.³ These strange events, known as the Osage oil murders, may seem like the invention of a novelist, with their murder-mystery themes of wealth, greed, and murder, but they are facts of the United States' recent past, less than a century ago.

Two Native American authors foreground the Osage oil murders in their own mystery novels: *Mean Spirit* (1990) is a Pulitzer Prize–nominated novel by Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) and *The Osage Rose* (2008) is by Tom Holm (Cherokee/Muscogee Creek). Both authors utilize elements from the widely read and popular genre of

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detective fiction to reach broad audiences and provide Indigenous representations of Native American history and culture. These novels demonstrate how mystery and detective fiction by Native authors bring the most pressing issues for Native individuals and communities into sharp focus, including Native nations' concerns about their ability to maintain control of their land and natural resources. In the hands of Hogan and Holm, the genre of mystery/detective fiction provides the perfect narrative vehicle to illustrate the conditions of living in a settler-colonial society. Indeed, the genre inherently lends itself to arguments for strengthening tribal sovereignty.

WRITING SETTLER-COLONIAL CRIME MYSTERIES

Detective and mystery writing possesses recognizable characteristics, in particular the inclusion of a crime, a criminal, a detective, and a resolution. Authors who write within the genre have attempted to develop some basic "rules" regarding what elements must be included in detective fiction. In 1928, for example, the popular American author "S. S. Van Dine" (Willard Huntington Wright) delineated twenty specific rules for the detective novel. Wright believed that the story must contain only one detective, one criminal, and one victim—specifically in the form of a corpse.⁴ In 1929, detective-story author Monsignor Ronald Knox prescribed specific guidelines in "A Detective Story Decalogue": the detective must not be the criminal; the criminal must be mentioned early on; and the supernatural must not play a role in the story.⁵ Some may see these guidelines as limitations, but arguably, it is conventional characteristics that compel readers to return again and again to this form of fiction. As Raymond Chandler writes in "The Simple Art of Murder" (1950), "it is one of the qualities of this kind of writing that the thing that makes people read it never goes out of style."⁶ The ways in which writers play with such genre conventions is what keeps readers intrigued; as Dennis Porter writes, "one important source of literary pleasure is in the artful deviation from the norm. In this respect, a detective novel is not less literary than a major work of highbrow culture, but more so. No other genre is more conscious of the models from which it borrows and from which it knowingly departs."⁷

Paying attention to how Native writers such as Hogan and Holm adapt some of the genre's "requirements"—such as the openings of the novels, the detectives, the forms of detection, and the resolutions—reveals how Native writers leverage a familiar and accessible storytelling form to raise awareness about Native American histories and cultures and to convey Native American resilience in the face of settler colonialism. The works of Hogan and Holm disrupt the typical white-male orientation aspects of the popular detective novel not only because the victims, the detectives, the heroes, and the communities in upheaval are all Native, but also because the forms of detection and the enactments of justice largely hinge upon Native cosmologies. This deviates greatly from many texts in the detective fiction genre, particularly in texts where Native characters are used only as tokens of exoticism or helpers serving non-Native communities and individuals.

Mean Spirit and *The Osage Rose* not only explore actual puzzles from the historical past, but also bring attention to a specific string of murders that are inextricably related

to a much larger and more complex network of settler-colonial crimes: European contact, spread of disease, dispossession of land, forced assimilation, and the attempted eradication of Native cultures, to name a few. To use detective fiction to specifically foreground Native American history, culture, and perspectives, demonstrating that Native Americans are still here today and that stories from Native perspectives need to be told, as Hogan and Holm do, practices what Charles Rzepka refers to as “alternative detection,” in which writers “seek to challenge traditional assumptions about the nationality, race, and gender of investigative authority.”⁸ In highlighting some of the specific atrocities enacted upon Native Americans by settlers, Hogan and Holm illuminate both historical and contemporary examples of criminality and, challenging assumptions, convey how violence and crime have been the rule, rather than the exception in terms of settler-Native relations.

HISTORY OF THE OSAGE OIL MURDERS

The genesis of the Osage oil murders can be traced back to how the Osage Nation first arrived in Oklahoma. The ancestral homelands of the Osage Nation consisted of much of the central part of the country—land that stretched from what is now Missouri and Kansas to Oklahoma and even farther west to the Rocky Mountains.⁹ However, over time the federal government compelled the Osage Nation to cede much of its ancestral homelands—cessions the Osage felt they had to make in order to avoid becoming enemies of the United States—which left the tribe with an area in southeastern Kansas 50 by 125 miles square. At this time, the US government reassured the Osage Nation that their Kansas territory would remain their home forever, but it wasn't long before the Osage were under attack from settlers, who destroyed Osage lodges, looted their graves, and even killed several tribal members, mutilating their bodies and scalping them. By 1870, the Osage Nation had had enough and agreed to sell their Kansas lands to settlers for \$1.25 an acre. The Osage looked for a new homeland and found an unoccupied area of land within Indian Territory bigger than the size of Delaware. Most settlers found this particular parcel of land useless, and for that reason the Osage Nation decided to purchase it, hoping that the settlers' dislike of this land meant they would stay away. The Osage Nation bought the territory for seventy cents per acre in the early 1870s and left the last remaining bit of their ancestral homelands, wishing for peace.¹⁰

During this time, the federal government began introducing policies that aimed to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American culture, with the ultimate goal to strip Native peoples of their cultures. One particularly critical piece of policy is the Dawes Act of 1887, also known as the General Allotment Act, which authorized the president of the United States to survey tribal lands and divide them into individual allotments for individual Native Americans.¹¹ “Surplus” allotments were then distributed to non-Native individuals. For many tribes, allotment devastated the remaining unity of the lands they had left, since the system created a checkerboarded pattern of land ownership, with tribal members' property next to property held by non-Native individuals and families. Consequently, since many tribes practiced hunting

and gathering for their food sources, and often moved locations throughout the year, the allotments ensured that Native people would stay in one place and adopt Western forms of agriculture—the main goals of the policy.

The Osage, though, owned their land in Indian Territory and were in a stronger position than other tribes. While the Osage Nation was also forced to accept allotment, its lands were the last in Indian Territory to be allotted. Furthermore, the Osage retained their surplus allotments, and tribal members received plots of land that far exceeded the typical 160 acres, with individual tribal members getting 657 acres.¹² Significantly, the Osage retained mineral rights to what was below the surface. The Osage advantage of land ownership would attract non-Native greed, however. In 1896, when oil was discovered within the Osage Nation's new homeland, the settlers' opinion of that piece of land changed quickly and drastically. Settlers began flocking to the Osage Nation's new home, and with the help of the US legal system, they gained fairly easy access to Osage wealth.

Most likely, at least in part, it was because of Osage control of the mineral rights that policymakers came to devise one of the most complicated mineral regulatory schemes that had ever been developed.¹³ The regulations included authorization from the secretary of the Interior to issue "certificates of competency" to adult Osage individuals who were considered "competent" enough to manage their own affairs.¹⁴ Needless to say, federal officials found many Osage adults "incompetent." In addition to stripping autonomy from Osage people, the regulations also set up a system in which oil rights held by an Osage person would, upon death, be transferred to that individual's spouse. This designed a wealth transfer system that enticed unethical white settlers to marry Osage individuals for the sole purpose of accumulating the headrights—basically, a share in the tribe's mineral trust—to the oil-rich land through inheritance. These inheritances were usually the cause of oil murders: the non-Native spousal killings of Osage allottees.¹⁵

This complex and discriminatory regulation system's corruption, greed, and murder presents a case study in settler colonialism on a microcosmic scale. Settlers and the US government not only exploited Native peoples, but essentially created a system in which murdering Osage individuals was condoned. As Osage scholar Rennard Strickland explains, "Osage annuitants were treated with indifference and their deaths willingly ignored by state and county officials. Furthermore, the federal trustees who were charged with supervision of the mineral estate dollars looked at the balance sheet of oil dollars and ignored the human devastation."¹⁶ In 1923, after numerous suspicious deaths and no help from county or state officials, the Osage urged the federal government to send investigators.¹⁷ The Department of the Interior finally requested assistance in the investigations from the director of the US Bureau of Investigation (now the FBI).¹⁸ The murders became one of its first major homicide investigations. Federal agents infiltrated Osage County, dressed as medicine men, cattlemen, and salesmen.

Their incognito tactics were successful and several individuals were held accountable in the murders. Along with others convicted and sentenced to life in prison was William Hale, nicknamed "King of the Osage Hills." Hale was a popular and

well-known cattleman who had built up significant wealth and political influence not only in Oklahoma, but also among the Osage.¹⁹ Contemporary studies suggest that he was responsible for as many as twenty of the murders.²⁰ Yet contemporary research also estimates that between 200 and 250 individuals suffered mysterious deaths during this time period; clearly, many other killers completely escaped punishment.²¹ Moreover, Hale and others were apprehended and sentenced only after a significant loss of Osage lives. The greed that drove so many white Americans to murder Osage individuals—particularly men preying on women—is emblematic of older historical policies that set the precedent regarding theft of Indian land. As a result, the Osage oil murders were an extension of policies that had always seen the Native American as a barrier to “proper” use of the land.

LINDA HOGAN’S *MEAN SPIRIT*

In *Mean Spirit*, elements of the detective fiction genre highlight the extremities of settler-colonial manipulation and violence. Set in 1922–1923 in Osage County, Oklahoma, the novel focuses on two distantly related multigenerational Osage families, the Blankets and the Grayclouds. Grace Blanket, who by sheer chance had become the richest person in the Territory since her tract of land was particularly rich in oil, is murdered. Subsequently, other members of the Graycloud family begin to die mysteriously. The murders remain unsolved at the hands of local police and the Osage are forced to demand assistance from the federal government. The US Bureau of Investigations eventually sends federal officers to investigate, one of whom is Stace Red Hawk, a Native American of Lakota heritage. Before he uncovers one of the culprits, Stace discovers corruption, fraud, intimidation, and even more murder. Although two trials are held and a murderer is imprisoned, sustained justice is not so easily restored for the Osage people, because more than one killer lurks these lands. The US legal system fails to provide justice to the Osage Nation, drawing readers’ attention to the inherent criminality of settler colonialism.

In a review of *Mean Spirit*, M. Annette Jaimes writes,

The mechanism which drives the book’s plot bears in some ways a more than passing resemblance to the Agatha Christie thriller *One Little, Two Little, Three Little Indians* as, one by one, Indians holding title to land and oil rights are killed by various means. The main structural difference is that where Christie writes from invention, Hogan plies historically factual waters, and does so with a fine eye to accuracy. In this sense, while the form of *Mean Spirit* may be that of a mystery, its genre is actually that of an historical novel. And in this genre, it must stand as an achievement of the very first rank.²²

Other critics see the text as a shining example of mystery fiction or argue its importance in the general canon of Native American literature. Jaimes’s desire to prioritize the genre of *Mean Spirit* as an historical novel, and to praise its achievements in that genre, provides a good point of departure for this article and how the analysis of mystery, crime, and detective fiction elements is important in illuminating the historical

injustices presented in the story. As a result, the categorization of *Mean Spirit* should not be one or the other—mystery or history. Instead, *Mean Spirit* inhabits multiple genre spaces: mystery, crime, and detective fiction, historical fiction, as well as Native American fiction. To attempt to disentangle these different genres and their corresponding elements would be akin to pulling the book apart, disrupting the totality of the story. A more productive analysis considers how these generic conventions overlap.

In Osage scholar Robert Allen Warrior's view, Hogan "de-Osaged the story, picking and choosing what she liked about the particulars of history and inventing new material for what she didn't."²³ This criticism is certainly valid; Hogan is not Osage herself and detailed tribally specific Osage elements are not included in the novel. However, Warrior misses the point that *Mean Spirit* is indeed a novel—not a nonfictional account, not an ethnography, but a work of fiction *inspired* by historical events. Whether Hogan gets *all* of the historical details correct is peripheral, and in fact, many of the historical details remain unrecovered. What matters is that Hogan is raising awareness that the particular event of the Osage oil murders is emblematic of larger US policies that have exploited Native peoples. As Hogan explains, "I realized that I had to do something stronger than history to reach the emotions of readers. It had to be more than just a record of the facts; it had to get larger. That's when it became a novel—when it stopped being history."²⁴ As Hogan became familiar with the Osage oil murders, she purposefully made storytelling choices to achieve the greatest impact on her readers. Fictionalizing some aspects of the Osage oil murders, in using the genre of mystery and detective fiction, Hogan reaches a wide audience to share an Indigenous perspective on Native American history and culture.

TOM HOLM'S *THE OSAGE ROSE*

The Osage Rose provides another example of a Native American writer successfully depicting a specific moment in history that is emblematic of settler-Native relations of the past five centuries. Set in the same time period and in the same region as *Mean Spirit*, *The Osage Rose* not only brings attention to the Osage oil murders, but also sheds light on the Volstead Act and events like the Tulsa race riot. Set in Tulsa and Osage County in 1921, the story features Private Investigator J. D. Daugherty, an ex-cop from the Southside of Chicago, and his associate, Hoolie Smith, a Cherokee WWI veteran and mechanic. The main mystery driving this novel is the disappearance of Rose Chichester, the daughter of wealthy E. L., who enlists the help of J. D. To complement his traditional investigative skills, J. D. recruits Hoolie to work on the case, and the two sleuths work from their separate and distinct worldviews to solve this mystery. While the combined skills of J. D. and Hoolie ensure the restoration of justice at the end of the novel, the crimes and the criminals who commit them highlight the criminality embedded in a settler-colonial society.

Like *Mean Spirit*, a book review of *The Osage Rose* observes the novel's qualities of mystery and history. Described as a story "that will appeal to both mystery buffs and history buffs" because it "combines a carefully detailed account of real racial and political tensions with that of two rough-and-tumble detectives on a quest for truth

and justice,” the elements of history and mystery fiction work together to appeal to mass audiences and inform readers about a particular moment in history.²⁵ Beyond this review, however, *The Osage Rose* has yet to receive much critical attention. Scholars such as Robert Allen Warrior may also have criticisms about *The Osage Rose*, because like author Linda Hogan, Holm is not Osage, but rather Cherokee and Muscogee Creek. Because one of Holm’s main sleuths is Cherokee, the author is able to include tribally specific details from the Cherokee worldview, but some specific aspects of Osage culture are glossed over. In the contemporary context, Native American writers use the mystery and detective fiction genres to raise the consciousness of all readers, so criticism of such inaccuracies is certainly valid, yet it is even more important that these stories are told in ways that raise awareness of our settler-colonial society.

GENRE CONVENTIONS AND NATIVE EPISTEMOLOGIES, HISTORIES, AND CULTURES

Hogan’s and Holm’s novels immediately highlight settler-colonial crimes, both opening with brutal killings of Native American individuals at the hands of non-Natives, specifically white men. In *Mean Spirit*, a young rich Osage woman named Grace Blanket is shot by two white men, and in *The Osage Rose*, the body of a young rich Osage man named Tommy Ruffle is disposed of in a ditch on the side of the road. Victims in detective fiction usually become targets due to their personality, wealth, or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hogan and Holm, however, nuance the motivation of their murderer characters. The killers are indeed motivated by their victims’ wealth, but they are also motivated and accommodated by the colonialist power structure of the United States, a system that typically fails to provide protection to Native peoples. For example, the killers believe they can cover up the brutal murders by pouring whiskey on the corpses, making it appear as if the victims were drunken Indians who created their own demise. In opening the stories with white men murdering Native individuals, Hogan and Holm highlight the broken justice system that allowed this to occur, creating a metaphor for the centuries of injustices committed against Native peoples by white settlers. As a result, *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose* are not simply about a single crime, or even just about the Osage oil murders, but rather shed light on larger structural and historical injustices embedded in American history and faced by Native people.

At the outset of *Mean Spirit* we learn that Grace Blanket is extremely rich because the first oil discovered on Osage land was located on her allotment. The seemingly inexplicable murder of Grace Blanket, the initial puzzle of *Mean Spirit*, makes for a memorable opening scene. On a Sunday morning, Grace, her daughter Nola, and Nola’s friend Rena leave to gather water willows before church. This was not uncommon, but they do not return in time for the church service. Long after it ends, Nola and Rena finally return home without Grace. When two men in a black Buick crept up and stared at Grace and the girls, Grace told them to stay put and then took off running. Shortly thereafter, “in day’s full light, a gunshot broke through air.”²⁶ The girls hid until they heard the car drive away, then discovered that the men had “placed Grace’s

body behind a clump of wind-whipped black bushes,” put a pistol in her hands, and “opened a bottle of whiskey and poured it on Grace Blanket’s body.”²⁷ The prologue of *The Osage Rose* also presents the initial puzzle of the novel in a scene describing two unidentified men who are dumping a dead body. The reader learns that the dead man’s “throat had been severed” and also that the victim was Native, as one man states “He’s just another redskin dumped alongside the road.”²⁸ One of the men subsequently pours “whiskey over the hair and rubbed some into the cheeks” of the deceased, reasoning “even if they find him, they’ll think he was drunk and got into a fight.”²⁹

The openings of the novels not only mirror one another, but also closely resemble two actual murders. Grace Blanket’s homicide is very similar to the murder of Anna Brown, a very wealthy twenty-five-year old Osage woman. Brown’s body was discovered in May 1921 with a bullet in her head and a whiskey bottle near her hand.³⁰ The murder of the unidentified Native male opening *The Osage Rose* can be compared to the brutal death of Charles Whitehorn. On May 14, 1921 Charles Whitehorn left his home to go to Pawhuska. His body was later found on a hill about a mile north of Pawhuska, shot between the eyes, execution-style.³¹ Both Hogan and Holm depict the monstrous viciousness that pervaded this place and time.

Once the crime is established, the mystery and detective novel genre requires at least one detective. The identity of the sleuth is critically important to the author’s goals in the text.³² Often, the characteristics of the detective provide commentary on the mystery or crime to be solved. Hogan and Holm easily might have chosen to echo the historical record by casting non-Native men as the primary detectives. However, although non-Native individuals do play important roles in both novels, the authors purposefully choose Native people as the primary sleuths. *Mean Spirit’s* detective is Stace Red Hawk, a Lakota member of the Bureau of Investigations in Washington, DC, who travels to Oklahoma to investigate the string of mysterious murders. In *The Osage Rose*, Hoolie Smith, a Cherokee amateur detective, leaves Tulsa for Osage County initially to gather details about a missing white girl named Rose Chichester, which ultimately allows him to intervene in the plot of white men planning to kill Osage individuals for their oil wealth. In casting a Native person as the detective, Hogan and Holm nuance the depiction of Native peoples in literature generally; they are not always the victim, because Native people can be the hero as well.

Within the genre conventions of mystery and detective fiction, Hogan and Holm employ a “non-conforming protagonist,” who typically, as Charles J. Rzepka writes, “will bring to the task of investigation skills and abilities not ordinarily attributed to Western, white, male detectives, and face obstacles that his or her traditional counterparts need never face.”³³ The positionalities of Stace and Hoolie as Native individuals allows them access to information a non-Native detective likely would not have been able to uncover. The knowledge of the Native detectives is particularly important in solving the respective crimes depicted in the novels, since non-Native investigators had attempted to uncover the criminals, but failed. It makes sense that Native sleuths would be the ones solving the crimes in *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose*. The crimes of white people calculatingly killing Native people is not new—and in the 1920s, such crimes had been going on for centuries—so a Native detective would likely

have more motivation to solve such crimes, as such crimes are not only representative of what happened during the Osage oil murders, but also emblematic of the treatment of Native people since European contact. In these novels, the Native detectives provide the opportunity to seek retribution for the injustices committed by a settler-colonial society.

In their roles as Native sleuths, Stace and Hoolie underscore the lack of justice the United States has historically provided Native Nations and individuals. Rather than being able to rely upon the US justice system, the Native American characters garner understanding only from fellow Native peoples, emphasizing the similarities in experiences of all Native people and the fact that a settler-colonial society often fails to protect Native individuals. Although both Native American sleuths in *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose* are from tribes other than the Osage Nation, in depicting their empathy with them, Hogan and Holm convey the significance of pan-tribal cultural support as well as the ways that the pan-Indian community can promote resilience.

Hogan and Holm also may have been motivated by a desire to depict participants in the events with greater historical accuracy. In fact, a Native American Bureau of Investigations officer, John Wren, was sent to Oklahoma to work on the Osage murders. While not solely responsible for uncovering the network of individuals involved in the murders, John Wren's assistance was of great importance, and Stace and Hoolie are nods from Hogan and Holm to the historical figure of John Wren. Like Stace and Hoolie, Wren was not Osage, but in part Ute. When J. Edgar Hoover handpicked FBI agent Tom White to lead the investigation of the Osage murders, White recognized that Wren could bring an essential perspective to the team. His Native identity was one of the primary reasons he was recruited, but experience such as his work as a spy for the revolutionary leaders in Mexico also made him an excellent candidate for investigator. Although highly regarded, Wren encountered scrutiny from his bosses, since he often failed to write reports or follow all of the necessary regulations.³⁴ Unlike some of the non-Native agents sent into the field in Oklahoma, who had openly displayed contempt and racism, John Wren's positionality as a Native person allowed him to gain trust and information from the Osage.

In addition to having empathy that non-Native detectives might not possess, Hogan's and Holm's detectives employ Indigenous-centered forms of detection and utilize tribally specific practices to aid their investigations rather than strictly relying upon ratiocination. That the Native epistemologies Stace and Hoolie use to assist their investigations are not necessarily those that non-Native sleuths would use also serves to foreground Native perspectives on history and culture. As he does his best to help the Osage Nation, Stace implements Lakota spiritual practices to keep himself balanced, while Hoolie employs Cherokee oral tradition to help him solve the puzzle of the mysterious disappearance of Rose Chichester.

In *Mean Spirit*, Stace initially relies on observation to discern information, with multiple instances of Stace standing back and monitoring people. For example, at the wedding of Benoit, a French-Indian, and Lettie Graycloud, daughter of Belle and Moses, Stace "looked around the church. Everyone was a suspect."³⁵ Shortly after the wedding, Benoit is found dead, supposedly from suicide, and at Benoit's funeral,

again, “Stace Red Hawk stood far behind them all, watching” (203). While initially Stace separates himself from the people of Watona and relies on non-Native forms of reasoning, he soon becomes aware of how important it is for him to use his positionality as a Native person to gain trust from the family and community members affected by the murders and he eventually turns to alternative forms of investigation. In a detail that Hogan seems to have taken directly from the actual tactics of John Wren, Stace soon dresses “Like most of the traveling medicine men” because “he wore black slant-heel cowboy boots and carried with him a long cedar box, a small black suitcase, and a buckskin bag” (146). As a result, “people believed [Stace] to be a younger medicine man,” which gave “Red Hawk credibility in the eyes of the local Indian community” (245). When John Wren first arrived in Oklahoma, it was “as an Indian medicine man who claimed to be searching for his relatives.” As a result, Wren was able to create inroads with the Osage people, “attending tribal gatherings and gleaning information from Osage who might not otherwise talk to a white lawman.”³⁶

Also like Wren, Stace embeds himself into the Osage culture by attending and participating in a ceremony. Lionel Tall, a medicine person who is not Osage but is of an unidentified tribal affiliation, has come to Indian Territory to conduct a healing ceremony because “he’d heard, from his network of traditionalists, that the Oklahoma Indians were in deeper trouble” than most suspected. Tall conducts “a ceremony for healing everyone, even the injured earth that had been wounded and bruised by the oil boom” (213). Stace’s presence at the ceremony is the first time he has direct contact with the Graycloud family and community members affected by the murders; had Stace been non-Native, he likely would not have been present at the ceremony, and thus, would not have been able to form solid bonds with the Osage community and family members of the victims.

Hogan foregrounds Stace’s cultural worldview from the outset, such as depicting him waking up and “offering tobacco to the four quarters of the earth. He’d been instructed by the elders to always remember the earth and the spirit people, especially now, when he was so far away from home” (50). Infusing cultural practices from his Lakota worldview to help him uncover the assailant(s) is integral to Stace’s investigative process. Later in the novel, for instance, Stace prays again asking for help for the Osage. As he is praying, Stace recalls that as a boy, he “knew the constellations of the older people. In the sky he saw the planets and stars take the form of eagle, wolf, and buffalo. Stace had known the man called Black Elk, who’d said that the Indians were now living in a broken circle.” With that thought, Stace “offered the pipe to the east” (205–6). Although these actions may not seem like forms of detection on the surface, engaging in prayer and spiritual practice not only help Stace stay balanced, but also allow Stace to recognize the broken circle, which ultimately motivates him to solve the murders. Stace’s engagement in his own spiritual practice furthermore allows him to feel a cultural connection and allegiance to the Osage people, and despite being Lakota and a tribal outsider, responsible for solving the murders and helping the Osage. By means of the character of Stace, whose Native ways of knowing frame his investigative methods and thus highlights Native worldviews and epistemologies, *Mean Spirit* enacts Native people representing Native American histories and cultures.

In *The Osage Rose*, several different detectives operate, allowing Holm to contrast their ideological differences and how their worldviews directly inform their participation in their profession. For J. D., who is Roman Catholic and Irish, his work had put him “constantly on the move, never settling in one place for more than a couple of years, and he’d forgone wife and family.”³⁷ As a result, J. D. sees working as a detective as the most important aspect of his life. Hoolie, on the other hand, is guided by his Cherokee identity and worldview, and thus rationalizes his work very differently: “Hoolie’s work as a detective required him to poke into other people’s lives. That aspect of investigative work went contrary to Cherokee principles. It was confrontational and intrusive; it was thus exactly the opposite of the emphasis Cherokees placed on harmony and consensus within the clan and household, among the people” (17).³⁸ Instead of seeing detective work as a business or a career like J. D. does, Hoolie views it as a way to help individuals and communities to restore balance: “He had pretty much decided that his intrusive work could be reconciled with his Cherokee beliefs since he used his job to restore harmonious relationships when discord had upset the right way of things” (17). As with Stace, Hoolie brings an Indigenous worldview to his work as a detective, which ultimately affects his motivations and greatly impacts his methods and detection process, while at the same time these Cherokee perspectives provide readers insight into Native American history and culture.

In a specific example, Hoolie relies on his Cherokee worldview to guide his investigation when he makes a stop on his way to Osage County: “In his peripheral vision, Hoolie detected a slight movement on a rock a few feet to his left. He looked more closely. It was a snapping turtle, *saligugi*, finding a place to bask in the morning sun before he went hunting for his meal.” The snapping turtle possesses cultural importance for the Cherokee and Hoolie feels the turtle’s message to him: “The Thunderers have heard you. I will tell the people of this place of your duty. Terrible times are here. It is war. As in the old times, I will be a shield. You have to be a warrior in the old way. You must remember the stories and listen to others” (43). Hoolie has learned from the turtle two very important things: with the help of the turtle, Hoolie needs to be a warrior and he also needs to remember and listen to Cherokee oral tradition.

Throughout the story other characters will reiterate these two pieces of advice and they are what ultimately help Hoolie solve the mystery. Moreover, reading the snapping turtle as a symbol of how he needs to act within this investigation strongly influences Hoolie’s behavior. When Hoolie meets the Lookouts, an Osage family, they invite him to their home and introduce him to Lily, an Osage elder. Ben, who is Lily’s son, tells Hoolie, “My mother says you’re here to help us . . . that you were sent. She said an ol’ snappin’ turtle told her” (77). Because the Lookouts are Osage, and Hoolie is Cherokee, Ben wants to make sure that his mother’s perspective aligns with Hoolie’s. Ben says, “I don’t know how your people take these kinds of signs, but Osages take ‘em serious. Now, my mother says that you’re a warrior and we take that serious, too. So, you can stay here all you want, and we’ll help you find Tommy and this girl you’re lookin’ for” (78). Even though Hoolie himself is somewhat skeptical of this situation, due to his Cherokee worldview he does acknowledge the importance of the snapping turtle. Hoolie’s positionality as a Native person earns him trust from the

Lookouts despite technically being an outsider, trust a non-Native detective may not have received. This particular interaction is significant because it conveys a skill as a detective that Hoolie possesses that J. D. does not.

In another example, Hoolie conducts a sweat to prepare for his travels in Osage County and asks “that the spirits help him in his quest to find the lost daughter of the white man from Pennsylvania.” Almost immediately, Hoolie is answered when he observes a peregrine and a bat, two other animals of cultural significance for the Cherokees. Upon seeing two glowing eyes in the rock pit, Hoolie “knew that the peregrine—the far-seeing bird of Cherokee warfare—would be there to help him see at great distances” (41). The bird also unnerves him, since the peregrine is associated with war, and Hoolie wonders if “the bird [was] trying to steel him for terrible things to come?” The bat speaks, saying, “I will help. My time is the night, and you’ll need to know the darkness to find the lost girl.” Hoolie considers the nocturnal bat a welcome omen, since “piercing the darkness meant that a mystery would be made clear and that harmony would be restored” (41–42). Embedding these specific details about the Cherokee view of animals like the snapping turtle, the peregrine, and the bat works to magnify the interconnectedness of a tribally specific worldview and the process of detection.

When Hoolie returns home to prepare for his final leg of the investigation, his grandfather echoes the turtle’s advice, telling him, “Just remember the stories . . . They’ll tell you what to do” (220). As Hoolie is attempting to figure out how he will ambush Pete Henderson and Sheriff Herschel McKinley, he “wished that he had the old time power to make himself appear in one place while he was really in another” (222). He is reminded of a story his mother told him about how the terrapin beat the rabbit in a foot race. Non-Cherokee readers may know a fable called “The Tortoise and the Hare,” which represents the importance of persistence and teaches the lesson that “slow and steady wins the race.” The Cherokee version of the story has a very different moral. When Hoolie turns to this story, he realizes that the answers are indeed embedded within the narratives he has been told his whole life. Holm makes it clear that this is why these stories exist, because they are there to instruct and teach; people have faced these situations before, which is why it is so important to turn to the stories to learn and use them as a guide.

In the Cherokee version, the rabbit, who is boastful about winning, challenges all animals to a race, but the only animal willing to participate is the terrapin. Assuming that this will be an easy win, the rabbit agrees. However, during the race, each time the rabbit comes over a hill, he sees the terrapin in front of him; when he passes the terrapin, the rabbit discovers that at the next hill, the terrapin is still ahead of him. When the race is finished, the incredulous rabbit loses, and the story reveals that the brothers and cousins of the terrapin helped him beat the arrogant rabbit. In order to be a warrior, like the snapping turtle instructs him, Hoolie needs to figure out how to be in two places at once. But he can only succeed with the help of people like John Tall Soldier, an Osage who assists Hoolie with the investigation. Hoolie uses sacred history, specifically the story of the terrapin and the hare, to guide him in designing his ambush of the culprits, the sheriff and Pete Henderson.

The typical ending of a detective novel involves “the final confrontation in which, ideally, all the suspects are gathered together . . . the detective demonstrates that each suspect in turn is capable of having committed the murder, and then clears each, one by one.”³⁹ Neither *Mean Spirit* nor *The Osage Rose* conforms to this typical convention, since there is no final scene in which all potential culprits are eliminated one by one. Rather, in both novels, Stace and Hoolie enact their own forms of justice and justice is restored, to an extent, through acts of retributive murder of non-Native characters who have murdered Osages.

At the end of *Mean Spirit* two trials are conducted, thanks to the work of Stace, and the non-Native oilman John Hale is imprisoned for numerous murders of Osage people. Even though John Hale and John Tate are recognized as two of the murderers, the ending of the novel does not provide a clean, “closed-case” resolution that is the hallmark of so many mystery, crime, and detective texts. Instead, Hogan makes a political assertion about the role of law enforcement and justice, particularly in regard to Osage people in the 1920s. Just as in the real-life case of William Hale, the prosecution of John Hale does not ensure that the Osage are now safe. Stace realizes this: “Hale, sent to prison, was lost to time. Yet his presence had changed the world. And Stace was not yet certain the crimes were over, or that all the culprits were locked behind bars” (360). Indeed, the final scene proves that Stace’s intuition is correct. Belle wakes up to the sound of a fight, where Floyd, her non-Native son-in-law, is having an argument with an unidentified individual. Suddenly a shot is fired and from his campsite, Stace hears it and rushes to the Graycloud house. The family discovers that Ruth, Moses Graycloud’s twin sister, has been murdered by her own husband, John Tate, a non-Native man. Moses then shoots John and he tells his family, “We have to go. I shot him. I’ll be arrested. They’ll be looking for me.” As a final resort, the Grayclouds pack what they can onto a wagon and leave, and with their house on fire, they “looked back and saw it all rising up in the reddened sky.” As they left, “No one spoke. But they were alive. They carried generations along with them” and “The night was on fire with their pasts and they were alive” (375).

Instead of ending with the imprisonment of all the murderers, and thus the restoration of justice, *Mean Spirit* ends by highlighting the instability the Osage people felt in regard to seeking justice. Even though Hale and his cronies murdered upwards of twenty Osages, Moses, who killed one individual as a form of self-defense, is the one who must leave the area for fear of being arrested and jailed. Hogan’s ending mirrors history, since the historical record suggests that not all of the murderers were discovered or prosecuted. The mystery lives on. Hogan highlights the continued lack of justice for these grisly murders, and makes it clear that even though this is the end of the novel, this is likely not the end of the plight for the oil-rich Osage, even the Grayclouds who leave the area. When Hogan writes that the Grayclouds “carried generations along with them,” she highlights the resilience of the Osage people and how the legacy and the effects of the Osage oil murders will have deep impacts on the Osage Nation for generations to come. This too is emblematic of the centuries of injustice that all Native Americans carry.

As in *Mean Spirit*, the killers in *The Osage Rose* are involved in a murderous plot to scam Osage individuals out of their oil rights, but *The Osage Rose* wraps up more cleanly as Hoolie's Cherokee stories help him bring an end to the unidentified killers in the prologue, who are revealed to be the sheriff and his nephew Pete Henderson. The murdered individual was Tommy Ruffle, a wealthy young Osage man. Hoolie kills the sheriff and Pete Henderson. He then asks Lily Lookout and John Tall Soldier, two Osage individuals directly affected by the murders, to talk with him in private; he says to them, "the warriors used to go out and take captives and scalps to show that they fought the enemies. The captives and the scalps were given away to the women to stop them from grievin' and to get everything back to normal . . . Now, we've put away takin' scalps." Instead of bringing back scalps, Hoolie brings two red bundles, one of which holds the sheriff's badge and the other a gold watch with a chain and fob. Hoolie explains, "I killed Pete and the sheriff. I don't care what the white man says. It was justice" (241). Hoolie recognizes how his Cherokee worldview fails to match the non-Native worldview, but from his Cherokee perspective, justice has been served, and balance has been restored.

While justice is a critical component of the mystery and detective genre in general, Native American authors working with the genre add dimension to the notion of seeking retribution, since tribally specific contexts can add layers of meaning. With both *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose* ending with retaliatory killings, these acts could be interpreted as forms of vigilante justice. However, examining traditional cultural practices of both the Osage and Cherokee nations conveys that such a characterization is not entirely accurate, since retaliatory killings were common traditional practices for both tribes. Moses's murder of John Tate in *Mean Spirit* upholds Osage practices, but barely makes a dent in reestablishing the balance from the numerous homicides of Osage individuals. In *The Osage Rose*, since Pete Henderson and the sheriff would be considered enemies of the Osage, Hoolie's decision to kill them could also be read as upholding traditional Osage practices. Moreover, Osage cultural practices regarding murder commonly included an additional killing that was not necessarily retaliatory, but concerned the journey the murdered individual made to the spirit world. Even if the murdered individual was not a tribal member of high rank, the practice of killing another individual to accompany the murdered to the spirit world was typical. For example, according to Willard H. Rollings,

Tribal tradition maintained that while an important tribal member was mourning for a family member he was visited by the spirit of the dead kin. The spirit claimed that spirit land was a lonely place and asked his kinsman to kill someone to accompany him. The mourner raised a raiding party and sought out a stranger to accompany his relative in the spirit world. After the killing, the mourner scalped the victim and fastened the scalp to a pole over the dead relative's grave.⁴⁰

Another example is the mourning dance, which was a ceremony performed by the Osage "at the request of the parents or other relatives of the dead person and for the purpose of organizing a war party to go against some enemy of the tribe to secure a spirit to accompany the dead to the spirit land."⁴¹

Hoolie's decision to kill Pete Henderson and the sheriff is compatible with both the Osage and Cherokee worldviews, since the sheriff and Pete murdered Osage individuals. In Cherokee tradition retaliatory killings were a normal practice, especially in cases of homicide. The Cherokees "believed in and followed an early code of justice often referred to as blood feud or blood revenge," according to Michan Chowritmootoo.⁴² The idea of blood revenge upheld the Cherokees' guiding principle, the concept of dualism, and death was used as a means of maintaining the balance. In the Cherokee worldview, failure to avenge the victim would have two detrimental effects: "first, the earth would be out of harmony, and it is when the world was out of harmony that many believed that diseases would come to visit; second: the soul of the victim, if left un-avenged, would be condemned to roam the earth unable to cross over into the darkening land." Because of these beliefs, whether the death had been intentional or accidental did not matter. In a homicide, the convening authority consisted of the clan members of the immediate family of the deceased and the enforcing agent of justice was the oldest male of the family, normally the brother or matrilineal uncle of the murdered person. The appropriate punishment for this crime was death, and if that was not possible, the death of a clan member of the murderer. The individual who was going to enact justice would "sneak into the camp of the offending party and kill the person responsible."⁴³

With its set of "rules," some critics may argue that the detective fiction formula presents limitations, particularly for female and minority writers. However, as Hogan and Holm show through their novels' openings, detectives, forms of investigation, and resolutions, such limitations allow for ingenuity. Detective fiction is a dynamic literary device, the perfect vehicle for the inclusion of particular cultural worldviews. In the case of Native American writers, detective fiction offers a well-known and accessible literary vehicle for sharing tribally specific details about history and culture. The formula allows readers access to information they may not otherwise encounter or even comprehend. In this way, even though the typical orientation of detective fiction has been white and male, female authors and writers of color are actively displacing these narrow parameters. Hogan and Holm are just two examples of Native writers working within this well-known genre to foreground Native American histories and cultures.⁴⁴

While the mansions, fur coats, diamond rings, and chauffeured cars of the 1920s are long gone, Linda Hogan and Tom Holm have constructed mystery novels that blend historical fact with fiction. In doing so, Hogan and Holm use this dynamic genre to spotlight the havoc wreaked upon the Osage Nation, and how such traumas continue to live on in the hearts and minds of those descended from victims and survivors. In other words, *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose* exemplify the importance of Native representations of Native American histories and cultures. Both of these novels utilize "the constraints of the historical record in order to explore actual puzzles from the past," and as a result, Hogan and Holm not only highlight the Osage oil murders, but also the larger injustices that have been waged upon Native Americans for centuries—a primary function of Native American mystery and detective fiction.⁴⁵ In focusing on specific acts of injustice committed against Native peoples—whether from the past or the present, whether committed against individuals or communities—Native writers

are using the mystery and detective genre to raise the consciousness of all readers, about the brutalities of the past and the ensuing contemporary realities of Native peoples living in a settler-colonial society. Hogan and Holm both conform to and subvert detective fiction conventions in order to provide self-representations of Native American cultures and histories in a narrative format many readers will find accessible. In doing so, Native writers use the mystery and detective genre to make a call to action for strengthened tribal sovereignty.

NOTES

1. David Grann, "The Forgotten Murders of the Osage People for the Oil beneath their Land," *PBS News Hour*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/the-forgotten-murders-of-the-osage-people-for-the-oil-beneath-their-land>.

2. Tanis Thorne, *The World's Richest Indian: The Scandal over Jackson Barnett's Oil Fortune* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

3. Rennard Strickland, "Osage Oil: Mineral Law, Murder, Mayhem, and Manipulation," *Natural Resources and Environment* 10, no. 1 (1995): 43.

4. S.S. Van Dine [Willard Huntington Wright], "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946), 189–93.

5. Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1992), 1.

6. Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in *Death by Pen: The Longman Anthology of Detective Fiction from Poe to Paretzsky*, ed. Deane Mansfield-Kelley and Lois A. Marchino (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 208–19, 209.

7. Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 54.

8. Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 235.

9. David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), 37.

10. *Ibid.*, 38–41.

11. Under the Act, heads of family received allotments of 160 acres, a single person or orphan over eighteen years old received eighty acres, and people under eighteen received forty acres. Eligible tribal members had a time limit of four years to select their land, and if they exceeded that time limit, the Secretary of the Interior made the selection for them. While tribal individuals received allotments, they did not own the land, as the allotments were held in trust by the federal government for twenty-five years. See D. S. Otis, *The Dawes Act and the Allotment of Indian Land* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 5–6.

12. Grann, *Flower Moon*, 52.

13. Strickland, "Osage Oil," 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 40.

15. *Ibid.*, 42.

16. *Ibid.*, 43.

17. Grann, *Flower Moon*, 96.

18. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Osage Indian Murders," nd, https://www.webharvest.gov/peth04/20041015105909/http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/osagei_nd.htm.

19. Terry P. Wilson, *The Underground Reservation: Osage Oil* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 45.
20. Donald L. Fixico, "The Osage Murders and Oil," in *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources*, ed. Donald L. Fixico (University Press of Colorado, 1998), 27–53.
21. Strickland, "Osage Oil," 43.
22. M. Annette Jaimes, "The Ways of Evil: *Mean Spirit* by Linda Hogan" (book review), *Wicazo Sa Review* 8, no. 2 (1992): 53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1408999>.
23. Robert Allen Warrior, "The Deaths of Sybil Bolton: An American History by Dennis McAuliffe, Jr." (review essay), *Wicazo Sa Review* 11, no. 1 (1995): 52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1409043>.
24. Linda Hogan, "An Interview with Linda Hogan," *The Missouri Review* 17, no. 2 (1994): 124–25, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mis.1994.0027>.
25. Julie Ramey, "Cherokee Mysteries: An Oil Boom in Indian Country Means Trouble for Two Oklahoma Detectives," *Tucson Weekly* (2008), <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/cherokee-mysteries/Content?oid=1093065>.
26. Hogan, *Mean Spirit*, 24.
27. *Ibid.*, 25.
28. Tom Holm, *The Osage Rose* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), vi.
29. *Ibid.*, vii.
30. Wilson, *Underground Reservation*, 146.
31. Grann, *Flower Moon*, 14.
32. Rosemary Herbert, *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 420.
33. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 235–36.
34. Grann, *Flower Moon*, 116, 117.
35. Hogan, *Mean Spirit*, 180. Subsequent references to the novel will appear parenthetically in the main text.
36. Grann, *Flower Moon*, 119.
37. Holm, *Osage Rose*, 2. Subsequent references to the novel will appear parenthetically in the main text.
38. Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green similarly characterize the Cherokee worldview "as composed of opposites that balanced each other" and that "Cherokees arrived at decisions by consensus . . . they discussed issues until everyone could agree or those who disagreed withdrew from the discussion." See Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 3.
39. Herbert, *Oxford Companion*, 89.
40. Willard H. Rollings, *The Osage: An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 36.
41. Francis La Flesche and Garrick A. Bailey, *Traditions of the Osage: Stories Collected and Translated by Francis La Flesche* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 129.
42. Michan Chowritmootoo, "So Their Remains May Rest: Cherokee Death Rituals and Repatriation," MA thesis, Texas Women's University, 2009, 32, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/305141229?accountid=14512>.
43. *Ibid.*, 33–34.
44. Numerous Native American authors have embraced the detective fiction genre to simultaneously reach wide audiences and to foreground Native histories and cultures. Some examples of note are: Louise Erdrich (Anishinaabe) for *The Round House* (2012); Frances Washburn (Lakota/Anishinaabe) for *Elsie's Business* (2006) and *The Red-Bird All Indian Travelling Band* (2014); Louis

Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee) for *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) and *Bone Game* (1994); Carole laFavor (Ojibwa) for *Along the Journey River* (1996) and *Evil Dead Center* (1997); and Sara Sue Hoklotubbe (Cherokee) for her Sadie Walela mystery series. For further discussion of how Native writers use the detective fiction format to foreground Native histories and cultures, please reference my book *Native American Mystery Writing: Indigenous Investigations*.

45. Herbert, *Oxford Companion*, 209.