

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The Dark Wind. By Tony Hillerman.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/29b164st>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 6(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Beidler, Peter G.

**Publication Date**

1982-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

purists would raise this concern, but over centuries of depiction and study, too many liberties have been taken with original narrations. The suspicion also rears its head that "white man's Indian artists" were selected. Those artists who create only for their own people and for communities with long-standing artistic traditions seem neglected. Commercial, outside success may have been an implicit criterion for inclusion.

Future research in the mode of the self-portrait is clearly warranted. The extension of Katz's effort as well as some in-depth, single-artist treatments with ample photographic support would increase the trend to recognize Indian artists, like others, as individuals with imagination and creativity who draw on group traditions.

While these issues can be raised, and although other attempts are more visually compelling, Katz's self-portrait gallery is a laudible addition to those seeking to revise the view of the anonymous, simplistic, anachronistic panorama of Indian arts. Respect for individualization—the awareness that the adherence to the traditional fabric of Indian life permits contemporary artists a variety of ways to express themselves creatively, in a personal way—is vital for a correct perspective.

R. D. Theisz  
Black Hills State College

**The Dark Wind.** By Tony Hillerman. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. 214 pp. \$12.50. paper.

*The Dark Wind* is a novel of mystery, danger, intrigue, witchcraft, murder, and revenge. It is about a cop who is drawn into a diabolical scheme to import \$15,000,000 worth of cocaine from Mexico. The scheme is foiled, however, by a mysterious person who causes the airplane delivering the precious cargo to crash in a late-night desert landing. In the fast-moving aftermath of the crash the cocaine disappears, but murdered body after murdered body appears. The cop, who soon finds himself a suspect in the case of the missing cocaine, tries to piece together the puzzle of greed, corruption, and vengeance. *The Dark Wind* is an exciting, if not particularly believable, novel, and it will undoubtedly enhance the reputation of Tony Hillerman among those who like such fare.

What distinguishes this novel from most mystery novels—and what provides the impetus for a review in this journal—is that *The Dark Wind* is set in the Indian country of the American Southwest. Its primary action takes place on the Hopi and Navajo reservations in northeastern Arizona. The cop is Jim Chee, a Navajo who bears certain clear resemblances to Joe Leaphorn, the Navajo protagonist of several earlier novels by Tony Hillerman. Chee is assisted from time to time by a Hopi cop named Cowboy Dashee, and his investigations take him from mesa to wash, from kiva to sweat house, from Tuba City to Keams Canyon, from Hopi motel to Navajo trading post. These are all familiar enough to those who know the territory, and they lend a ring of authenticity to the book.

And the book *is* reasonably authentic. It conveys a feeling for the stark beauty of the desert country in which it is set. It effectively portrays the conflicts felt by many Indians who are trying to maintain Indian values in a world increasingly dominated by the technology and values of the White man's culture. It suggests, for example, that a Navajo singer can also be a radio-dispatched policeman, and that he might be equally at home in his trailer or in his sweat house, reading a topographical map or reading the subtle signals of the desert. It indicates that, while many Hopis and Navajos hate each other on a political level, they often cooperate and can be good friends on a personal level.

Much of what is not authentic in this book results from the justifiable application of poetic license. If the terrain around First Mesa in the book more closely resembles the terrain around the Canyon de Chelley than that around First Mesa, well, so what? The plot *needed* such terrain for that airplane to make its landing. If the motel at the Hopi cultural center has a telephone switchboard in the office and a phone in each room, rather than a single pay phone outside the main office, well, so what? Hillerman needed to have one of his characters intercept a phone call or the plot would not have worked right. If the village of Piutki is portrayed as an inhabited town out on First Mesa past Hano—well, does it *really* matter that there is no such town out there? And I suppose it does not really matter either that Hillerman tells us that Hopi *piki* is a hard, chewy sandwich bread, rather than the delicate, crumbly, rolled-up-paper-thin "stuff" that it really is. We can overlook or forgive all this, especially when Hillerman admits in a prefatory note that he makes no

claims to being an authority on the Hopi and that he is "an outsider on the Hopi Mesas."

We can also, perhaps, forgive Hillerman's suggestion that the Navajo cop in the story can run intellectual circles around the Hopi cop. The story, after all, has to have a hero, and Hillerman is by no means the first writer of detective fiction to introduce an outsider to solve a crime that the local cops are too obtuse to solve for themselves. We may wonder why that same clever Navajo cop is so naive and unacculturated that his "Navajo mind" cannot understand the White man's concept of revenge, but never mind. After all, Hillerman is writing a novel, not a work of history, sociology, anthropology, or psychology, and art makes certain demands that will not always be served by mere facts. We may get a little nervous when Hillerman refers readers who want to know about the facts of Hopi metaphysics to Frank Waters' *The Book of the Hopi*, for it is well known that that book contains many inaccuracies and that it was written after consultation with Hopi informants who later repudiated the book. Again, however, perhaps we can forgive such statements from a writer of mystery novels.

It is less easy to forgive certain other fictions which come close to issues of practical politics in Indian country. I shall give only one example—Hillerman's treatment of the Hopi-Navajo dispute over the so-called "joint-use" lands. The dispute is an impossibly complex one, and there is much to be said on both sides. Hillerman's novel, however, tells us only one side—the Navajo side. Just for the sake of balance, it might be appropriate here to tell the story of the joint-use area from the Hopi point of view.

The Hopis have lived in the Southwest for well over a thousand years, and they have left many ruins as monuments to mark the reaches of their various clan migrations: at Mesa Verde, in Chaco Canyon, at Betatakin, in the Canyon de Chelly, at Wupatki, and so on. In the end most of the clans regrouped in a half-score of villages on three bleak mesas in northeastern Arizona—the heart of the present Hopi reservation. One of these villages, Old Oraibi, is the oldest continuously inhabited village in the United States.\*

---

\*The Pueblo people of Acoma also make this claim for their village high on top of White Rock Mesa in west central New Mexico [Ed.].

In 1882 President Chester Arthur issued an executive order setting aside some 2.5 million acres for the Hopi Indians and, in wording which has come to plague the Hopis in recent years, for "such other Indians as the Secretary of the Interior may see fit to settle thereon." Fourteen years earlier the United States government had set aside a large tract of land to the east for the exclusive use of the Navajo Indians, an Athabascan tribe which had come into what is now Arizona in relatively recent times—probably less than a century earlier. As part of the terms of that treaty, the Navajos had agreed to "relinquish all right to occupy any territory outside their reservation."

Very soon, however, the Navajos began ranging far outside their allotted reservation and conducting their raids deep into Hopi country. Soon they squatted in any and all lands which they found "unoccupied" by Hopis or from which they could drive the Hopis—always a more peaceful and retiring people. In 1962, by which time the Navajos had occupied most of the original Hopi reservation, a federal court, yielding to pressure from the powerful Navajos who claimed that the Hopis had abandoned much of their land, ruled that four-fifths of the Hopi reservation would henceforth be owned and used jointly by both tribes. The ruling was upheld by the Supreme Court, and the Hopis found that most of their original land base was now referred to as the "joint-use area."

No one familiar with the two tribes and their vastly different traditions, beliefs, and ways of life could have thought that such a solution would work, for the Hopis tended to stay together in their villages while the Navajos virtually took over complete control of the so-called joint-use lands. In 1974 Congress was prevailed upon to call for an equal partition of the land, and in 1977 a district court in Arizona, acting on the recommendation of a federal mediator, drew up the fairest boundary lines it could devise so that each tribe would have clear and unambiguous ownership of its own portions of the former joint-use lands. An important part of the partition legislation was that Navajos living on lands assigned to the Hopi would have to move to land now assigned exclusively to the Navajo, while Hopis living on land assigned to the Navajo would have to move to Hopi land. The Hopis left peacefully and were accommodated on Hopi land. Many of the Navajos, however, refused to leave what they had come to call their "ancestral" homelands, and disputes still rage to this day.

What happens to all this history in *The Dark Wind*? Very little. Hillerman says that the Navajos are "uprooted and moved out to make room for the Hopis," but makes no reference to what the Hopis have had to give up. He refers in simplistic terms to the Hopi "winners" in the land dispute: "the Hopis had won, and 9,000 Navajos were losing the only homes their families could remember." Hopis who bother to read the book will be puzzled to learn that they are the "winners" in a dispute which resulted, finally, in their losing nearly a million acres of the land originally reserved for them by the United States government. To the Hopis, the history of their relationship with the Navajos has been the history of one loss after another. They fear still more losses, because the Navajos are launching expensive political and public relations campaigns in an effort to gain permanent ownership of even more of the Hopi lands.

What does all this have to do with the mystery novel of cocaine smuggling, greed, and murder? Not much, and one searches in vain for artistic, thematic, or narrative justification for Hillerman's stance. The main events of the novel depend slightly on there being a certain area over which the Navajo tribal police no longer have jurisdiction, but those events in no way necessitate that one side in the dispute be seen as "winning." Certainly no important action in the novel is motivated by any Navajo's conviction that he or she has been unfairly "uprooted" from a traditional homeland. Hillerman's stance can be explained in one of two possible ways. Either he did not know all the facts and did not take the trouble to check them, or he felt a clear bias toward the Navajo side and wanted to defend that side through his fiction. I suspect that both reasons are pertinent here. It appears that Hillerman learned most of what he knew about the Hopis from a book written before the joint-use area had been established. The rest he apparently learned by listening to those who espoused the Navajo point of view. The dedication of *The Dark Wind* tells the rest, for it mentions only Navajos:

This book is dedicated to the good people of Coyote Canyon, Navajo Mountain, Littlewater, Two Gray Hills, Heart Butte, and Borrego Pass, and most of all to those who are being uprooted from their ancestral homes in the Navajo-Hopi Joint Use country.

Fiction, of course, has frequently been written to advance one cause or another, and few of the most enduring works of fiction pretend to be neutral on those political issues which they embrace. It is one thing, however, to take sides on a heated political issue, and quite another to ignore or submerge the full truth in order to present a single point of view, particularly when it is the point of view of the more powerful of two disputants. Because *The Dark Wind* promises to be widely read, especially in the Southwest, it will have a pernicious influence on popular opinion about the Navajo-Hopi land dispute, and it could influence the outcome of pending legislation.

The title of the novel refers to a certain "dark wind" which is supposed, in the Navajo view, to enter a person and destroy his judgment: "One avoided such persons, and worried about them, and was pleased if they were cured of this temporary insanity and returned again to *hozro*." I hesitate, even in so partisan review of the novel as mine is, to attribute *The Dark Wind* to the effects of a dark wind, but one cannot help but wish that a brighter wind might have made the novel more balanced. It is unfortunate, in any case, that while certain elements in the intricate plot will be commonly understood to be the mere contrivances of fiction, others which masquerade as "background" or even as "local color" will be taken as fact, if only because the plot does not turn on them. Perhaps we can only hope that they come to have no direct influence on the real plot that is working itself out in northeastern Arizona.

PETER G. BEIDLER  
*Lehigh University*

**Crowfoot, Chief of the Blackfeet.** By Hugh A. Dempsey. Foreword by Paul E. Sharp. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. 226 pp. \$12.95; \$6.95. paper.

**Charcoal's World.** By Hugh A. Dempsey. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979. 178 pp. \$11.95; \$3.95. paper.

**Red Crow, Warrior Chief.** By Hugh A. Dempsey. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. 247 pp. \$16.95. cloth.