

Chapter 12

Warring with *Windigo/Wihtiko*

Cree and Algonquian Insights into Spirituality, Emergent Creativity, and Reconciliation

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The “magnitude of consequence that issued from the collision of European and Indigenous American histories,” wrote Steve Stern a quarter century ago, “. . . forces us to consider the problem of meaning: to discover, define, appropriate what 1492 means to human history” (1993, 4). This critical pan-American reconciliation challenge persists, but any attempt to give a single meaning to 500 years of contact risks closing off sources and examples that are key to finding both meaning and reconciliation.

On the eve of the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ arrival, Richard White (1991) argued that the first two centuries of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in the Great Lakes region were defined not by European imposition and Indigenous resistance, but by a balance of power that obliged all parties to mutually cocreate, and meet on, a “middle ground.” White observed that he was surprised by this conclusion, despite the unambiguous evidence—a surprise echoed by most scholars in his field.

What I found most striking, in contrast, was not his conclusion, but the degree to which so few scholars were able to imagine a situation where Indigenous-European relationships were not defined by an imbalance of power. When White published his book, I was completing high school in a northern Indigenous community, where I had lived all my life: an ancient subarctic Cree summer gathering site where the Hudson’s Bay Company had established its second oldest fur-trade post in 1673. With a few temporary exceptions, I was usually the only non-Cree in my class: a fact that some never noticed and a few never let me forget. Yet, with few exceptions, all my Cree classmates had some admixture of Orcadian, Scottish, English, French,

or Norwegian ancestry. My hometown of Moose Factory, like much of the James Bay Cree region, has long been defined by what Cree Grand Chief Abel Bosum has called “partnership” (2017). It is an Indigenous-Newcomer “middle ground” that dates back to the seventeenth century but has persisted to the present.

After leaving the north for postsecondary studies that introduced me to the work of White and other scholars, I began to realize how my formative years had given me a perspective that did not fit into an Indigenous versus non-Indigenous binary. This outlook has been shaped by the need to bring the Cree perspectives and traditions in which I had been immersed from birth—and which I took for granted as not only relevant but also indispensable for understanding my world—into dialogue with the French and English perspectives and traditions of my parents, as well as other views and traditions. I needed to do this, because like other youth in my community, I was faced with fundamental human questions and the need to find meaningful and relevant answers to them—and no answer was relevant and meaningful to me if it did not account for the diversity of perspectives and traditions that shaped who I was. This defines the primary objective and approach of my scholarship: to bring Indigenous, Western, Christian, and other traditions into deep dialogue on the fundamental human questions.

This chapter is the fruit of research, conversations, and reflections on the cannibal *wihtiko* (*windigo*¹), as a photographic narrative of fundamental Cree values. I grew up hearing *wihtiko* stories, some of them shared below. It is not so much the *wihtiko*, however, but the values it inversely reveals that I propose as a source of critical insights on the theme of “spirituality, emergent creativity and reconciliation.”

WINDIGO AS NEGATION OF ALGONQUIAN SPIRITUAL IDEALS AND IDEAS OF EMERGENT CREATIVITY

A long time ago, according to one Cree *ahtalohkan* (mythic narrative), a man became greedy and disrespectful and killed too many fish²—a transgression against reciprocity that northern Ontario elder Louis Bird describes as *maahchihew*—“sinning against animals” (2007, 76). This resulted in a great deluge in which male–female pairs of all animal and human persons took refuge on a raft until, working together, they recovered a clump of earth beneath the waters and used it to reconstitute the land. One singular exception stands out in this account of transgression and reconciliation. On the raft was found one category of being that had no mate and remained seated alone in a corner, facing the north. It was known as Windigo.

Windigo is a cannibal monster that epitomizes the perversion of the spiritual values most fundamental for relationship, reciprocity, and reconciliation in Cree and other Algonquian subarctic communities—and perhaps any human community.³ Windigo destroys all relationships. Although it attained mythic proportions in the traditional spiritual and cultural landscapes of Algonquian peoples, the windigo reflects experience and insights that resonate beyond these landscapes. It emerged and evolved as a unique and creative response to very real crises that any human society could face in similar circumstances. Some of these crises originated from within subarctic Algonquian communities, but others from without—especially at the peak of European colonialism, which both challenged windigo interpretations and prompted new ones that challenged colonialism itself. The emergence, evolution, and interpretations of the windigo—phenomena and concept alike—reveal experiences, ideas, and ideals that are profoundly relevant to questions of spirituality, emergent creativity, and reconciliation.

In the 1970s, northern Saskatchewan Cree elder Marie Merasty recounted a harrowing incident that had occurred a century earlier, in the depths of a particularly difficult subarctic winter. A family of six had found themselves starving. When the father and son failed to return from a critical hunting quest, the mother and her three daughters mustered their remaining strength and left camp in search of their loved ones. After following the trail for some time, they suddenly sighted a frozen body ahead of them.

“Now we’ll be able to eat,” exclaimed the old lady. “Here’s a young bull moose!” In her hunger, she was hallucinating. The girls seized their mother, their eyes streaming with tears. “Mother, don’t say that,” one of them urged. “That’s my brother!” As if jolted by a startling force, the mother suddenly came back to her senses. (Merasty 1974, 1)

Continuing onward, the four survivors managed to reach and obtain help at an Anglican mission where they eventually recovered from the effects of near-starvation. So ends this *tipachimowin* (historical narrative). For a traditional Cree or Algonquian listener, the reason for the urgent tone in the daughter’s plea would have been self-evident, and it is succinctly captured in the title of this narrative—“Almost a Wetiko” (ibid.).

If this woman narrowly escaped going windigo, others were less fortunate. Edward Rae, a northern Manitoba Anishinabe elder, recounted a *tipachimowin* originating with John Thomas (also known as John Doggy), a Norway House fur trader of European and Algonquian ancestry (Fiddler and Stevens 1985, 32). One winter, after a trapper failed to return to his camp as expected, Thomas had become concerned. Recruiting another man for reinforcement, he packed ropes, chains, and tarps and departed in search of the missing

trapper. They eventually found him in such a state that they were compelled to subdue and bind him hand and foot before bringing him back to the main camp. With the help of non-Indigenous men, he was then transported across Lake Winnipeg. Rae explains: “When the Windigo woke up, they asked him about his wife and kids. The Windigo replied: ‘They are still living. No. I killed them.’ Then the Windigo started crying.” Upon reaching the rail line, they brought the windigo by train to a psychiatric hospital. There,

the Windigo woke up for longer periods of time. He asked for his wife and children. Then he said: “I believe I killed my wife and child.” Then he started crying. He would stay awake for three hours but he would be crying all the time. The hospital thought he was getting better but he cried all the time.

Soon after, when the Windigo’s mind was clear, he was still always crying. He was sure he killed his wife and kids. He had treatment but, eventually, he just died. John Doggy stayed there until the man died, [and] then he went home. (cited in *ibid.*)

Both these stories—of narrow escape and a more tragic fate—describe people whose responsibility for their windigo-associated behavior appears to have been minimal. Other *tipachimowina* depict more sinister cases. In a 1977 conversation with anthropologist Robert Brightman, northern Manitoba Cree elder Jeremy Caribou gave a very different description of someone who had gone windigo: “That windigo thinks he’s the strongest . . . [and] can do what he likes with the other [guy]. Kill him. Even eat him up” (Brightman 1988, 364).⁴ In the mid-1950s, northern Ontario and Quebec Cree elders Willie Frenchman and Samuel Iserhoff—the latter an ordained Anglican minister—prefaced another windigo *tipachimowin* with a comment that explains variations between more tragic and more sinister windigo cases: “It has happened before, that when men are hungry they turn cannibals, and this was the case with people who got lost in the bush. Some say that people who are cannibals go mad, others that they go thoroughly wicked.”⁵

Cree Spiritual Ideals

The central theme of so many Cree *tipachimowina* and *ahtalohkana*, observes anthropologist Richard Preston, “has to do with the practise of right conduct, and lessons learned from past conduct” (1982, 299). In a subarctic environment fraught with insecurity and the threat of starvation, Cree and other northern Algonquian hunters cultivated high ideals of respectful relationship and reciprocity as well as mental and moral competence in order to preserve human integrity and community when pushed to the edge of its disintegration. Still to this day, comments Preston, the Cree seek to “maintain respect

relations, even when they are not reciprocated . . . [in] the hope . . . that respect will eventually be reciprocated” (2010, 287–88). This echoes the comment by one northern Quebec Cree elder in the 1970s: “When we have food, and we are living with others, we give them half our food, and it seems like we find more to replace it” (cited in Feit 1994, 297).

This ethic of respect and reciprocity is not limited to human persons, but extends to other-than-human persons (animal and spirit persons) and the most fundamental mysteries—simultaneously immanent and transcendent—of their contingent existence in an emergent world. Anthropologist Colin Scott explains that for the Cree,

the world is a place of deep vitality, sometimes restful, sometimes dynamic; pregnant with possibility; a place of emergent, often orderly, sometimes surprising phenomena. Life in this sense, *pimaatsiwin*, was translated to me as “the continuous birthing of the world.” (2006, 61)

Everything that can be named has an animate or inanimate *ačahkw*, which can be translated as form, in the metaphysical sense of this term (Hultkrantz 1953, 488–89) and Algonquian languages define all nouns as animate or inanimate. The “animacy of the lifeworld,” observes anthropologist Tim Ingold, “is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence.” It is a “condition of being alive to the world” (2006, 3), which is full of emergent creativity, power, mystery, or *manitu*.

Anishinabe scholar Basil Johnston points out that *manitu*, often translated as spirit, “bears other meanings even more fundamental . . . a substance, character, essence, quiddity beyond comprehension and therefore beyond explanation, a *mystery*” (1992, 100–1, emphasis added). By Johnston’s description, *Manitu* “imparted life, form, growth, healing, and strength in all things, beings, and places” (ibid.) and is the source of vitality—of *piimaatsiwin*.

Manitu is the ultimate answer to questions of emergent creativity as well as contingent being, relationship, and knowledge. Yet the historical precontact meaning of *manitu* among Algonquians is unclear (Cooper 1933; Schenck 2011). For many, especially James Bay Cree, *manitu* seems to have commonly connoted a superior benevolent spirit-person of great power, though not necessarily creator. For other Algonquian peoples, the term applies to a plurality of superior other-than-human persons or “powers, which could help and sustain, or harm and destroy” (Schenck 2011, 41). At the same time, as Johnston and Ontario Cree knowledge keeper Greg Spence (personal communication, 2012) confirm, *manitu* sometimes connoted a mysterious force or essence that manifests itself in persons, human, and other-than-human. If

the historical meaning of *manitu* is a mystery, it is not only because historical records and oral traditions are limited. *Mystery* may simply be the most fundamental meaning of *manitu*. Nevertheless, conceptualizations of *manitu* are crucial because they shape understandings of the nature of power and contingency as well as human mental and moral competence. A contingent world in which *manitu* is impersonal mystery-power can easily become a world in which individuals seek to control that power, whether to help or to harm. “Adept shamans,” writes Landes, “were believed to manipulate the manito Supernaturals as we do electricity” (1968, 3).

Such a belief may explain why concerns about sorcery appear to have been more prevalent among some Algonquian people than among others (Preston 1989, 151; Preston 2002, 222; Feit 1994, 303; Rogers 1994, 330–331; Hallowell 1955, 181, 282; Bird 2005, 94–95). Adoption, under Christian influence, of a belief in *Kitchi-Manitu* was deemed to protect a person from sorcery (Long 1987, 21), and even the pre-Christian *manitu*, if conceived as a benevolent and singularly superior spirit-person, was not subject to manipulation by benevolent or malevolent shamans. Hope or belief in such a *manitu*, moreover, may have discouraged quests for manipulative power. It also made hope, in some ways, more important than power, or to put it differently, it made hope the appropriate manifestation of power for human persons.

Ehbebukdaet, the eastern James Bay Cree term for hope, Preston points out, “translates literally into English as untying something, like a knot—plus the quality of a revealing insight or perception, expressing some new knowledge” (Preston 2002, 208). According to some Cree origin stories or *atalohkana*, the first man and woman arrived from a sky-world—lowered on a rope woven by Ehep, the great spider. Bird comments that this rope is a metaphor for mystery (Bird 2007, 16). *Ehbebukdaet* is a mental and spiritual virtue or strength. It enables a person to endure great hardship not just by accepting human contingency but also by penetrating deeper into it, by untying knots in the rope of *manitu*-mystery. Yet it is also directed to *manitu*-person, to “*pakuseyimakan* (‘the one we hope from’)” (cited in Long et al. 2006, 481). Moreover, “if it is successful,” writes Preston, it “is transmitted to external phenomena and influences them . . . a kind of hunting power” (2002, 191). As such, *ehbebukdaet*—like the Christian “virtue of hope”—is far deeper than mere optimism.

Manitu may have topped the hierarchy of pre-Christian Cree cosmology, but animal persons were the primary other-than-human objects of Cree hope as they were “directly related to the over-riding concern of the Cree—the food quest” (Long et al. 2006, 472; Preston 2002, 223). Cree *atalohkana* depict animal persons who experience, think, plan, and communicate like humans (Bird 2005, 78). Human persons are integrated into the world, not

as lords of the animals, but by “moving into the existing social structure” (Preston 2002, 209; Feit 1994, 295). It is with the help of animal persons that they arrive safely and learn to survive. According to one story, “it was agreed . . . that all animals will have to contribute for the sake of . . . the human [who] can only be alive in the world by using the animals’ help—their body, their furs, their feathers and everything” (Bird 2005, 63, 78–80). The purpose of animal persons, at least in part, is to give themselves to the hunter and his family so that they can live. The hunter exercises reciprocity by taking care to show gratitude and respect for animal persons, with specific rituals and gestures (Preston 2002, 200–6; Feit 1994, 297–98).

This Cree view about reciprocity with animals (especially food animals) as persons appears to have emerged as a fundamental expression of hope that their survival in a contingent world was not dependent on mere chance. Their hope translated into a faith that their survival could be ensured by entering into loving relationship with animal persons who would give themselves freely if human persons respected their gift (*ibid.*). Although, for various reasons, the primary object of Cree hope, faith, and love has since shifted to *Kitchi-Manitu* as creator and owner of the animals, animal persons nevertheless remain important (Chabot 2016, 59).

There were always limits, however, to the reciprocity and parity between human and animal persons. As Preston puts it: “Considerable importance [is] attached to defining and maintaining the distinction between human and other persons. Perhaps their very closeness makes the difference more crucial” (Preston 2002, 210; Bird 2005, 63, 78–80). Anthropologist Regina Flannery found it “‘highly significant’ that the superior being was described [by Cree in the 1930s] as ‘owning everything, every sort of meat and birds, everything on the earth, but not humans’” (cited in Long et al. 2006, 21). “When humans get the terms of their metaphors confused and begin marrying animals or eating other humans,” writes Scott, “. . . the results are impossibly comic or tragic” (1996, 75). Scott elaborates: a “fundamental separation and asymmetry between human community and animal community” existed, a separation that translated into a fundamentally different reciprocity among human persons and among animal persons (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, an ethic of power through respect and reciprocity rather than manipulation or coercion held for relations with food animals as much as for human relations (Flannery and Chambers 1985, 9–10).

Even those who did not adhere to this ideal of respect and reciprocity out of virtue often did so out of social pressure and necessity. Referring to northern Algonquian peoples in the 1930s, legal scholar Julius Lips points out that “if a case should become known where an Indian maliciously disregarded a signal erected in extreme need, he would likewise be disregarded in case of his own need” (1937, 227). Adherence to such ideals on account of social

pressure and necessity was fragile. In extreme crisis situations, holding fast to these ideals depended above all on the prior cultivation of personal mental and moral strength.

WINDIGO AS INVERSION OF MORAL IDEALS

Not everyone exhibited such mental and moral strength in the face of hardship, which was understandable, but at times the Cree and Algonquian found themselves struggling to understand and cope with people whose extreme breakdowns of mental and moral competence seemed to push them beyond the edge of humanity—into the category of the monstrous. How could such people be brought back and reconciled with human community, or failing that, prevented from harming it further?

From Cree and Algonquian peoples, there emerged a creative response to this epistemic, moral, and practical dilemma: the concept of the cannibal windigo, a concept that evolved with sufficient ambiguity to allow for a range of causes, manifestations, and degrees of responsibility. It served to prevent or condemn monstrously inhuman actions while preserving or recovering the humanity of those who committed them, or threatened to do so. Even in exceptional circumstances, when execution was deemed necessary for communal safety, the individual deemed possessed by a windigo could be reconciled to the human community. In fact, the windigo was most often killed in order to preserve or release the humanity of a person threatened with possession by it. More rarely, those deemed more fully responsible for monstrous deeds or attitudes were condemned as having lost their humanity—because of their own choices—and transformed into a windigo. When the presence of a windigo threat was much clearer than the responsibility for it, preemptive defensive action could be taken without having to pass final judgment on a person.

Cree and other Algonquian windigo narratives often distinguish between an original supernatural windigo and human windigos, but the origin of the supernatural windigo is itself unclear (Chabot 2016, 68). Some traditions suggest it may have also originated as a human who became severely corrupted by their own will. According to Bird, the first windigos emerged “many years before the European came. People overpopulated the land and over-hunted. They sort of drove themselves [*sic*] into starvation. And then some of them became wigtigo—they started to eat each other—many became cannibalistic” (2007, 113; Thompson 1916, 260).

Other James Bay Cree narratives refer to a time “when all the Cannibals lived together.” In sharing these stories in the 1930s, Harvey Smallboy, Patrick Stevens, and Frank Rickard made it very clear that this community of cannibals was fragile and short-lived (Flannery et al. 1981). “In olden times,”

according to Smallboy, “two or three families always lived together. . . . There was a Witiko looking for human victims and he was heading to where the families were camped.” He found one Indian. Knowing he was being followed, the Indian tied brush together in the shape of a man and placed it on his own trail:

The Witiko thought the Indian was a moose and when the Witiko came to the tied-up brush he thought, “I have caught the Indian at last and he is dead.” So the Witiko put his carrying strap around the brush and carried it home . . . [to his own people, who] said, “He is carrying a bundle of brush.” The Witiko said, “Brush? This is not brush. This is the moose I was after.” They went to work, opened up the bundle, and found it was only brush. So the Witiko knew that he had not killed the Indian after all. So the Witiko went off again following the same Indian’s trail. (cited in *ibid.*, 59–60)

The man continued to outwit and avoid the windigo, sometimes with comical results. Finally, the windigo spied the man in the tree and began to shoot arrows at him, but the man called out: “Do not fire at your moose. You will lose his blood.” The windigo listened and began to climb the tree instead, at which point, using one final trick, the man succeeded in spearing the windigo in the back of its neck with the bone spear he had been carrying. “The Witiko fell down as though he were dead, but then stood up and headed home.” The families at the windigo’s camp then tried unsuccessfully to remove the spear. Finally, the oldest and “wisest” among them told the others to heat the spear and drive it through rather than pull it out. They did this, and the windigo fell dead as a result. “All of the people in the tent started to weep for the Witiko.” Then the “wise” person among them instructed the others to have the windigo’s wife cook him, so they could all eat him.

This was done. After they finished eating everyone started to cry and walk off from the tent in different directions. All these Witikos kept going. This was the last of them. They all turned into Witikos and that is why there are so many Witikos all around the world now. (*ibid.*)

In this account, which is echoed by Rickard’s version, the windigo is identified as such right from the start, but the others in his camp, to whom he was related by marriage and blood, do not go windigo until the very end. Until then, they are referred to as human persons, suggesting the first windigo was also once human. The windigo did not confuse these people with food animals; moreover, they initially helped him to see that he was only carrying brush rather than a moose. And the narrator says that the windigo knew then that “he had not killed the *Indian* after all.” Both points suggest he was in the

process of becoming a windigo—he still knew, deep down, that he was hunting a fellow human being, not a moose. Once he was killed and eaten, however, all those in the camp were then obliged to depart in different directions. In killing and eating him, they too had gone windigo, losing their capacity for relationship and their very humanity through such extreme mental and moral incompetence.

Patrick Stevens' story is shorter, omitting the part about the bundle of brush and the first return to camp. It begins by referring to the windigo and all the members of his camp as cannibals: "They say the cannibals have a place where they all live together." If these cannibals started off with a "place where they all live together," they ended up with their relationship completely disintegrated as a result of their cannibalism. The conclusion of Stevens' account is even more explicit on this point than that of Smallboy: "The cannibals said, 'The first two who meet will have a fight and the one who is beaten is the one we will eat next time'" (cited in *ibid.*, 60–61). Stevens' account appears to begin *in media res*, in the middle of things, when the disintegration of their humanity and their community, and their transformation into windigos, is underway but incomplete. They were what Bird calls "half-wihtigo[s]," still capable of living in community—albeit a fragile one—at least until they became full-fledged windigos (2007, 114).

Physical descriptions of windigos sometimes vary greatly, from cunning to dimwitted, gigantic to man-sized. They are thought to be unkempt and terrifying to behold, but some human windigos can also be difficult to detect. If the windigo's physical characteristics are often ambiguous, so too is the nature of "going windigo," which sometimes appears to entail possession and other times transformation. This ambivalence, as suggested already, allows for varying degrees of responsibility. In one story, for example, a mother-turned-windigo refers to her human victims as animals, but knows that this is a lie. She twists reality, deceives and manipulates others, and she is sneaky about her killing and her refusal of normal food. When she is killed, her body takes a long time to burn because her heart had turned to ice—a recurrent theme in windigo stories—which, now melting, repeatedly extinguishes the fire. She had *become* a windigo (Merasty 1974, 3–6). In another story, a man named Pelly is overcome by a windigo and kills others without being sneaky. When his companions kill the windigo, Pelly not only survives but is also cured as a result (Norman 1982, 103–106). He was clearly *possessed* rather than *transformed*.

Possession by a windigo implies the preservation of humanity, perhaps the humanity of a loved one who *could not have committed such a monstrous deed*, and whose execution is not a punishment but liberation from a monster. Even if no monstrous deed had been committed, a hunter could not leave a deranged and potentially violent relative at camp with his wife and children

while he hunted. If he stayed at camp to prevent any harm from occurring, everyone might starve. Ultimately, if treatment failed and necessity forced him to take preemptive defensive measures, killing a windigo in possession of his loved one was easier than killing his loved one. In such a case, the “*windigo* effectively separates the person from the problem” (Angell 1997, 179).

However, the windigo can also bind the person to the problem. To say that a person has become the windigo—unless it is transformation through evil acts of sorcery, which clearly frees a person from responsibility—is to condemn a person as having abandoned his or her humanity. “Some of those who became wihtigo were mitews who were capable and powerful,” explains Bird, “and they became the worst kind of wihtigos—they were cannibals and mitews at the same time” (2007, 113). They became windigos not because they were too weak to resist a malevolent power or persist under duress, but because they had powerful capacities that they used for malevolent purposes (Teicher 1956, 60). They lost their humanity by their own choice. In many cases, however, the nature of the phenomenon and the degree of responsibility remained ambivalent.

WINDIGO’S SPIRITUAL TRAITS

This ambivalence about responsibility is also present in the nature of the windigo’s most defining characteristics, which are not physical but spiritual in nature. Ultimately, the windigo’s spiritual traits—its disposition of will, mind, and emotion—are what set it apart and define it. These traits are found consistently across a wide geocultural and historical range of Algonquian narratives: severe loss or abandonment of self-control, or emphasis on manipulative control of others; disconnect with or manipulation of reality or truth; and withdrawal, rejection, or manipulation of relationship (Chabot 2016, 84).

The first of these windigo traits can manifest itself as a severe loss or abandonment of self-control, an incapacity or unwillingness to bring one’s actions into conformity with one’s understanding. Alternatively, in more sinister cases, the focus of control is displaced from self to others in a quest for manipulative and self-serving power over them (Bird 2007, 112; Johnston 1995, 224). One Cree narrative tells of a manipulative older woman who convinced a younger woman to abandon her new husband and follow her to her winter camp, where she first weakened her and then killed and ate her (Flannery et al. 1981, 72–73). Such cases of manipulative control are far less common than those involving the loss of self-control. An individual who believes himself possessed by the windigo “believes that he has lost permanent control over his own actions” (Teicher 1960, 5). This belief can point

to a desperate quest for control in the face of growing powerlessness—a loss or reduction of hope in the face of starvation, death, or an uncertain struggle against “going” windigo. Fatalistic adoption of the windigo identity could follow as an attempt to overcome the reluctance to kill and eat a human person, or escape the anticipated guilt; alternatively, it might be a plea for help in the face of temptations or the fear of giving in to them (Brightman 1988, 337, 354, 363, 372). Loss of self-control could manifest itself as compulsive violence after a period of apparent despondency amidst an interior struggle to overcome either the temptation or the reticence to give in to it. Loss of self-control is reflected in the disheveled and soiled appearance of many windigos (Flannery et al. 1981, 58). Legal scholar John Borrows suggests that the Anishinabe meaning of “windigo” may be “dirty or unkempt” (Personal Communication 2013). According to Johnston, the windigo has an insatiable and uncontrollable appetite for the consumption (literal or figurative) of others if not also self-consumption (1995, 223–24). This could manifest as addictive behavior. In contrast, those who resort to nonviolent starvation cannibalism without “going windigo” are those who maintain their self-control, fully acknowledge their actions, and do not withdraw from society (Flannery et al. 1981, 70).

The windigo’s loss of self-control leads to a second fundamental windigo trait: hallucinations and a loss of epistemic capacity or an intentional manipulation of truth to the point that one loses the capacity to see the manipulation of truth for what it is—a lie. This is especially true when a windigo’s lack of self-control is manifested primarily as a quest for raw power or manipulative and malicious control over others. In such cases, as Johnston points out, the windigo “exemplifies human nature’s tendency to indulge its self-interests, which, once indulged, demand even greater indulgence.” Ultimately, this results in an “extreme . . . erosion of principles and values,” and the incapacity to direct one’s actions toward an understanding of what is good (1995, 224). Having abandoned or rejected the challenge of bringing actions into conformity with an understanding of what is true and good, a windigo imposes a skewed understanding or mode of experience on itself and others. In the extreme, it destroys its capacity to escape its own distortions of what is true or good. Such a windigo is far more dangerous and sinister. Arthur Etherington tells of “an old man . . . [who] would go along with other Indians during the summer. When the winter came *he would think* [suggesting intentional distortion] of the other Indians as becoming animals. He would become a cannibal” (cited in Flannery et al. 1981, 69–70).

The most common manifestations of this windigo trait are less sinister and intentional, usually involving hallucinations induced by desperate conditions. Windigos redefine human beings as edible animals or simply as edible (Flannery et al. 1981, 58; Teicher 1960, 54, 85–87; Bird 2007, 115). This may

be a sign of being only “Almost a Witiko.” Without helpful intervention, however, the consequences may be disastrous. This trait may also manifest itself as a loss of memory or delirium. Anthropologist A. I. Hallowell recorded the story of a man from northern Manitoba who saw his wife, covered in blood, running toward him from their tent. “He shot her and the children and ate them. For the next month his mind was a blank. Finally, when he recovered sufficiently to tell others what had occurred, he cried” (cited in Teicher 1960, 76). Swift Runner, who was hung by the Canadian state in 1879 after being convicted of killing and eating his wife and children, had gone “on a moose hunt and on his return was close to camp and all he could hear were young moose, nothing but moose. That’s when it started on him.” Only when he was in court did he regain his senses. “He asked the judge why he was there. The judge told him that he had eaten up his family. . . . He started to cry,” and then pleaded for execution, fearing he would reoffend (cited in Honigsmann 1953, 309–31). Like Merasty and Rae’s stories, cited earlier, these accounts suggest genuine hallucinations, memory loss, and, in varying degrees, a diminished responsibility for monstrous deeds.

The human windigo may lose the capacity, or refuse, to govern his action according to what he once experienced and understood to be true. Either way, the need for unity of the constitutive elements of culture—experience, understanding and action—does not disappear. Therefore, the windigo modifies his perception and conception of reality to fit his behavior. The objective may be to avoid guilt, which suggests a lingering recognition that the forced unity of experience, understanding, and action is a lie. Such a lie can only be maintained by additional lies: by manipulating contradictory perceptions and understandings, by insulating oneself from them, fleeing them, or somehow muting or destroying them. If, as McIntyre suggests (2009, 35), a windigo “cannot be reasoned with,” it is not necessarily because of an absence of reason or experiential learning capacity, but rather a completely self-referential and self-serving rationalism and empiricism. This radically individualistic and subjective epistemology results in the destruction of people and relationships, but relationships are also shunned or destroyed simply because they expose or threaten the windigo’s circular logic. Because human relationship exposes the distortion of a human person as an edible moose, for example, the windigo retreats or withdraws from relationship, either anticipating or regretting a deviant act (Bird 2007, 113–14; Kohl 1985, 356–57; Johnston 1995, 222; Preston 1978, 61; McIntyre 2009, 38).

This extreme individualism reflects the third windigo trait: withdrawal from relationship, or rejection, manipulation, and destruction of relationship. Johnston says that Windigo “may be derived from *ween dagoh*, which means ‘solely for self,’ or from *weenin n’d’igooh*, which means ‘fat’ or excess” (Johnston 1995, 222). Cree elder, scholar, and Anglican minister Edward

Ahenakew refers to the windigo as “He-who-is-alone” (cited in Preston 1978, 61). Anthropologist Morton Teicher writes: “They do not live together as married couples; on the contrary, each windigo is a solitary being. If two of them should happen to meet, then the Indians believe that a violent battle ensues and the one who wins eats the loser” (Teicher 1960, 2, 77, 119). As suggested already, the exceptions to this isolation are temporary and involve what Bird calls “half-windigos” who are not yet fully possessed or transformed (Bird 2007, 113). In one story, a windigo father and two sons attack and kill others, but one son is “accidentally” killed in the process. At first, the father and surviving son lament his death, but they soon stop, and when they eat the dead, the murdered son and brother is the first to be consumed (Flannery et al. 1981, 62). In another version of this story, the surviving windigo son has a snowball fight with the father and sneaks stones into his snowballs (*ibid.*, 65). There is a constant threat of disintegration of their relationship (Teicher 1960, 56). As in the stories cited earlier by Smallboy, Stevens, and Rickard, social disintegration is inevitable. Some exceptionally malicious windigos deceive and manipulate others to such an extent that their evil nature goes unchecked or undetected for a period. They may remain in society, but they are not part of it (Flannery et al. 1981, 62). The windigo described by Cree elder Arthur Etherington is such a one. Most windigos, however, retreat from relationship, if they are not first ostracized. One suspected windigo named Nanusk, for example, would only place his furs on a large stone and refused to interact with others, behavior that immediately aroused suspicion.⁶ When he recovered his senses in court, Swift Runner explained that he had killed his last surviving child, not out of hunger, but to remove the last reminder of the gravity of his crime. In his words (translated from the Cree): “The devil suddenly took possession of my soul; and in order to live longer far from people, and *to put out of my way the only witness to my crime*, I seized my gun and killed the last of my children and ate him as I had done the others” (emphasis added, cited in Carlson 2009, 376).

Conversely, reintegration into human relationship and reality was the means by which an almost-windigo could recover mental, moral, and emotional competence—even if it meant a painful coming to terms with the experience and understanding a deviant act done under duress. Bab Wesley tells of one such story:

There was a man who killed his children and his wife. The man’s brother came to him . . . [with] an axe . . . gave him an awful crack but didn’t kill him [and] . . . took him back to his own camp. He melted a big bladder full of grease and made the man drink that. It made him vomit bad. At last he started to bring up ice . . . and at last the ice was all yellow . . . And when he started throwing up all that ice he started crying and thinking about what he had done.

His brother did that to him to bring him to his senses. And he was a live person again. They used to hear him crying because he had killed his wife and children. (cited in Flannery et al. 1981, 75)

As noted already, humans who go windigo are believed to develop hearts of ice. They cannot be cured until the ice is removed; alternatively, they are never fully destroyed until their heart is burnt (*ibid.*, 58, 68, 72). More than an association with winter and times of famine, the heart of ice represents an interior coldness, an inability to relate to others, and a loss of capacity for reciprocity. The *wihtiko* is “not a kindhearted one” (Merasty 1974, 7). Emotions and thoughts contrary to the *wihtiko*’s self-centered epistemology are rejected: “Nothing else matters—not compassion, sorrow, reason, or judgment” (Johnston 1995, 274). The withdrawal from relationship, however, might not manifest itself as an overt lack of empathy, but as depression resulting from a fatalistic loss of hope. Not surprisingly, therefore, symptoms associated by other cultures with depression or illness were seen as potentially far more serious from the perspective of Algonquians.

“Some say that people who are cannibals go mad, others that they go thoroughly wicked.” This explanatory remark, cited earlier, confirms that the windigo concept accounts for varying degrees of responsibility. Madness points to a less culpable breakdown in the quest for unity of experience, understanding, action, and objective reality. It is also seen as treatable, even if not entirely curable. Wickedness, in contrast, entails culpability, perversion, and immorality: a willful and often incurable breakdown in the quest for unity of experience, understanding, action, and objective reality. Madness may weaken humanity, but wickedness can pervert or destroy it.

In Algonquian culture, the concept of mental illness unrelated to malevolence or moral weakness (whether internal or external to the afflicted person) is a relatively new importation from Western science, which, in contrast, sometimes reduces evil to mental illness. Australian Criminal psychiatrist, Chris Richardson, comments that she has often faced realities that her scientific concepts fail to explain or even describe; she can only grapple with them by having recourse to spiritual concepts such as evil (Richardson 2010, 181–91). The Algonquian used the windigo to understand and cope with extreme mental and moral incompetence harmful to persons and society, regardless of the origin of responsibility: “Wetiko was the only sickness” (Merasty 1974, 1). Insofar as this was the case, manifestations of windigo traits and the responsibility attached to them were necessarily ambiguous.

INTERPRETATION, USE, AND ABUSE OF THE WINDIGO CONCEPT

The windigo concept appears to have originated as an explanation of behavior or symptoms that preceded, accompanied, or followed starvation-related cannibalism. If this was true, the concept was nevertheless adapted to explain similar behaviors or symptoms that may have had different causes. Physical and mental illness, for example, could produce symptoms that were interpreted as windigo possession. This was reinforced when windigo concepts and fears channeled and shaped the specific manifestations of more general mental illnesses. Extremely deviant behavior other than violent cannibalism also came to be explained by the windigo.

Nevertheless, despite the emergence of a wider range of catalysts and explanations for windigo possession or transformation the windigo continued to be perceived as cannibalistic by nature. Furthermore, fear of the cannibalistic windigo prompted Cree and other Algonquians to do anything to avoid even nonviolent cannibalism, which was thought to increase vulnerability to the windigo spirit (Flannery et al. 1981, 59). Non-Algonquians and Europeans often displayed less reticence to engage in nonviolent starvation cannibalism (eating the flesh of the dead in order to survive). On the other hand, as noted already, heightened fear of succumbing to the cannibal windigo spirit could lead some Algonquians to lose hope and fatalistically act out the symptoms and signs of the very thing they most feared. As noted already, this could be an expression of desperate hope for preemptive execution before it was too late to save them from full possession and its destructive consequences. This may explain why some people pleaded with their family members and friends to end their life before the windigo overcame them (Carlson 2009, 373).

Like any other concept relating to good or evil, windigo concepts and fears could also be used or abused to control others. One twentieth-century *tipachimowin* tells how a Cree hunter spread stories of a windigo in order to gain exclusive access to a particular hunting territory (Flannery et al. 1981, 75). In the earliest documentary references to the windigo, dating back to 1636 and 1661, Montagnais individuals used windigo fears to try to prevent neighboring Algonquians from coming into direct contact with the French, which would have eliminated their advantageous middleman position in the fur trade (Thwaites 1896, 9: 113 and 46: 261–63).

The windigo could also be used to scapegoat others, disguise, murder, or justify the killing of the elderly or sick. Even well-intentioned individuals could sometimes be too quick or rigid in their interpretations and responses. Yet, if windigo fears were used to manipulate others or truth or if they prompted rigid interpretations or precipitous executions, it was because these

fears were real. Nevertheless, Algonquians were well aware of the potential for abuse or misinterpretation, which is why they often turned to those who had more experience and exhibited prudent discernment. Unfortunately, some scholars have attributed great flexibility of interpretation to the windigo belief itself and almost none to those who held it (Teicher 1960, 2, 220; Hallowell 1951, 7). Although there is some evidence of such rigidity, most cases show far greater evidence of prudent discernment, with execution being resorted to only in extreme cases (Flannery 1981, 59; Brightman 1988, 357–58; Friedland 2009, 120–21).

Weipust's comments in this regard are revealing. Weipust was a Cree elder that Ahenakew respected greatly. Like Ahenakew he was Christian, but had only adopted Christianity as a middle-aged man, and was therefore fully fluent in pre-Christian Cree culture. According to Ahenakew, Weipust had "no doubt that Wetikoos existed in the old days," but only "very rarely." In Weipust's view, "the majority of the reports . . . were untrue—many . . . brought about by some mischievous minded Indian trying to frighten someone else" (cited in Preston 1980, 122–123). As Preston points out, Weipust was "more critical than suggestible, aware of wrongness and wrong-headedness on the part of Indians as well as white men, when they are wondering about such terror-inspiring topics." Windigo narratives could serve many purposes, from keeping children close to camp to explaining the boundary between humanity and inhumanity. Even when it was a question of real people, events, or conditions, the windigo was, "for many Algonkian Indians . . . very uncertain in both appearance and essence." In short, the meaning of the windigo is more flexible, open-ended, and "a matter of attitudes" than acknowledged by those Algonquians and Europeans who tended, instead, "to simplify this variance down to concrete kinds of person (monstrous, symbolic, or other) and condition" (*ibid.*, 124–28).

Whatever changes may have occurred in the interpretation and application of the windigo concept—especially in relation to delirium caused by physical illness—little has changed with regard to the three core traits associated with it. Even more significantly, these core traits point not just to continuities in Cree ideas and ideals but also to commonalities with ideas and ideals that are found in Western culture as well. These points of continuity and commonality have frequently been obscured by the complex evolution of Algonquian and Western struggles to understand and control the windigo (see Chabot 2016), but the ideas and ideals they reveal remain highly relevant to the nexus of mysteries—a free will, moral responsibility, madness, and evil—with which philosophers, theologians, neurobiologists, criminal psychiatrists, anthropologists, and others continue to grapple. As such, these Algonquian ideas and ideals remain also profoundly relevant to understanding deep-rooted conflict and fostering reconciliation.

RECIPROCITY, RELATIONSHIP, AND RECONCILIATION

The suggestion that profound cultural common ground can be found between Indigenous and Western cultural ideas and ideals is somewhat countercultural in contemporary scholarship, which tends to focus discerning and asserting cultural difference; scholarly literature on the windigo is no exception in this regard (Chabot 2016). Discernment of cultural difference is certainly important for recovering what is uniquely Indigenous in the wake of aggressively assimilationist policies and programs. On the other hand, emphasis on cultural difference sometimes aims at merely inverting—or distancing oneself from—assumptions about Indigenous cultural inferiority that these assimilationist policies were founded on or with which they were justified. For example, Jack Forbes' description of windigo psychosis as a “disease of exploitation, imperialism, and terrorism” largely confined to modern European cultures appears to be a reaction to depictions of the windigo as a culture-bound psychosis of Indigenous peoples (Forbes 2008). It also relies on an analysis of history that juxtaposes the best ideals of Indigenous cultures with the worst failings of Western culture to live up to their own ideals. Forbes is not a solitary example (Chabot 2016).

John Ralston Saul has recently argued for reconceiving Canada as a “people of Aboriginal inspiration . . . a Métis civilization.” His argument opens, however, with an emphatic moral judgement of Aboriginal-European cultural differences: “When I dig around in the roots of how we [Canadians] imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together in communities—how we treat one another when we are not being stupid—what I find is deeply Aboriginal” (Saul 2008, xvi, 1). This raises the question: if Canadians are Métis, what heritage are they drawing from when they are being stupid? Ultimately, the possibility seems left out that *métissage* may involve the creative discovery and rearticulation of deeply shared ideals—enriched by diverse experiences of the challenges of living up to them. Saul may have overstated his case for rhetorical purposes, but Bernard Sheehan warned against such rhetoric forty years earlier. “A history of Indian-white relations,” he observed in 1969, “. . . can gain nothing, and it might well lose everything, by proposing a mythic natural innocence and proceeding to direct thunderbolts at those who supposedly despoiled it” (267–68, 274).

Implicitly or explicitly, it is sometimes suggested that the problem of abusive power is predominant or inherent in Western culture or in those aspects that have been designated as the scapegoat for Western failings. Yet the Algonquian windigo emerged and evolved as a powerful interpretative concept before Europeans arrived. Moreover, postmodern and decolonial Western cultural currents remain vulnerable—like all human cultures—to the

problem of the windigo. The windigo, for example, would certainly approve of the assertion, by Justice Kennedy of the US Supreme Court, of “the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”⁷ Postmodern deconstructions of claims to religious, rational, or empirical authority, or assertions of individual moral autonomy, do not free us from the problem of power; rather, they simply change how the problem will manifest itself. To lose sight of this is to lose sight of the valuable Algonquian experiences and insights about spirituality, emergent creativity, and reconciliation that emerge from their struggles with the windigo—whether cannibal or colonialist in appearance.

Cree and Algonquian experiences and insights suggest that relationship, reciprocity, and reconciliation depend upon spiritual ideals and strengths that are rejected or lost by the windigo. The windigo’s attitude is that truth, reality, and others can be reduced to objects of self-serving power and desire. The windigo sees its own actions, needs, and choices as the measure of truth or reality, and it seeks to impose conformity with the demands of this radical epistemic and moral autonomy. Those who succumb to this spiritual state are often not malicious; rather, they are frequently weakened by fear of mystery or uncertainty, by isolation, a loss of hope, or lack of an education that fostered self-control or love of truth and goodness.

Reconciliation depends on our quests to bring our understanding into greater unity with a reality in which we are immersed but which also surpasses us. Cree ideas and ideals suggest that we can do this by patiently and prudently unbinding or discerning the rope of mystery and emergent creativity that defines our contingent existence. They also suggest that we cannot do this alone. Rather, we come into being through, in, and for relationships of reciprocity, and it is our relationships that open us to different experiences and understandings that help correct the limitations in our own. The maintenance of relationships of reciprocity, however, requires the cultivation of self-control, which enables us to recognize and live according to the truth we discover rather than define a truth that justifies the way we live. It also depends on our effort to avoid violence except as a last recourse for defense of self and others.

Finally, Cree and Algonquian experiences and insights suggest that reciprocity, relationship, and reconciliation depend on our willingness to maintain sight of the humanity of others, even when confronted with actions—even monstrous ones—that appear to diminish their humanity. On the other hand, a willingness to consider mitigating factors that may reduce responsibility should not blind us to the possibility of evil or the monstrous. For this reason, reciprocity, good relationship, and reconciliation require awareness of our own capacity to go windigo if we do not cultivate the spiritual values and strengths that it negates and rejects.

To be aware of the windigo threat, however, is not to make it a central or defining motivator. Living well together, increasing our freedom by unbinding the rope of mystery, of the true, the good, and the beautiful, cannot be founded on fear or rejection of evil. Windigo was never central to the predominantly Cree world in which I grew up. Nor was this world a static or monocultural world; it was one that had entered into deep dialogue with other cultures and traditions, especially Christianity, a dialogue founded on the virtue of *ehbebukdaet* (hope) in the face of what continues to be a great mystery—*Kitchi Manitu*. In seeking to bring Indigenous, Western, Christian, and other traditions into deeper dialogue on fundamental human questions, I am not doing anything original; rather, I am simply following the example of so many elders and scholars—Cree, non-Indigenous, and others who do not easily fit in such categories—who have been my teachers and mentors.

NOTES

1. There are many variations of this term, including *wihtiko*, *wetiko*, and *wendigo*. *Wihtiko* reflects a Cree pronunciation better, but Windigo, which is of Anishinabe origin, is the sole variant found in the Oxford English Dictionary, and is more widely known and used in the literature. For this reason, I have chosen to use this term. *Kokodjeo*, *atoosh*, and *atchen* are other Cree, Attikamekw, and Montagnais terms. *Chenoo* and *kiwakwe* are other terms of Mi'kmaq and eastern Algonquian origin.

2. LAC (Library and Archives Canada), MG 29, B 15 (Robert Bell Fonds), folder 54, file 12, “Indians. Legends—Charles H. M. Gordon,” “The Indian Deluge,” 1.

3. Algonquian refers to a broad cultural and linguistic family that includes the Penobscot, Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Abenaki, Attikamekw, Montagnais, Innu, Naskapi, Cree, Chippewa, Ojibwa, Anishinabe, Algonquin, Blackfoot, and others as well. I use Cree, because there is no other term that easily captures the diverse but related Algonquian peoples this term encompasses, including the Iiyuuch, Mushkegowuk, and so on. I use Anishinabe, because it encompasses peoples who are closely related, both culturally and linguistically, including the Algonquin, Ojibwa, Chippewa, and so on.

4. Robert Brightman, personal communication, August 2016. Brightman gave me the name of the elder, who was not mentioned in his published article. This story was taken from his 1977–1979 fieldnotes for research in Pukatawagan and Granville Lake, Manitoba.

5. Frenchman and Iserhoff, “The Nanusk Stone,” DAUL (Division des archives de l'Université Laval), Fonds Jacques Rousseau, P174/D3, folder 51. 1956–1966 was the period that both Iserhoff and Frenchman were in Moose Factory. For more context, see Chabot 2016, 26–27.

6. Frenchman and Iserhoff, “The Nanusk Stone,” DAUL, Fonds Jacques Rousseau, P174/D3, folder 51.

7. *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/505/833> (accessed September 3, 2016).

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