

**Contesting the Cannibal Wihtiko:
Common Ground on the Edge of Humanity**

**Book Proposal submitted to
McGill-Queen's University Press
For the Native and Northern Series**

Cecil Chabot

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General Description

Two prominent historians, David Cannadine and Brad Gregory, have recently contended, in very different contexts, that history is distorted by overemphasis on human difference and division across time and space. This problem has been acute in studies of Native-Newcomer relations, where exaggeration of Native pre-contact stability and post-contact change further emphasized Native-Newcomer difference. Although questioned in economic, social and political spheres, emphasis on Native-Newcomer *cultural* difference persists, and remains entangled in contests over moral and political power, authenticity, as well as questions of truth and reconciliation.

To investigate this problem, I examine the Algonquian *wihtiko* (windigo), an apparent exemplar of Native-Newcomer difference and division. With a focus on the James Bay Cree, I first probe the *wihtiko* phenomenon's Algonquian origins and meanings. I then examine post-1635 Newcomer encounters with this phenomenon: from the bush to public opinion and law, especially between 1815 and 1914, and in post-1820 academia. Given the historical depth of this study as well as the intercultural and interdisciplinary nature of the contexts and questions, my study draws from very diverse archives, ethnographies, oral traditions, and bodies of scholarly literature.

I show how the cannibal *wihtiko* evolved from Algonquian attempts to understand and control rare but extreme mental and moral failures in famine contexts, on the edge of humanity. Although it attained mythical proportions, fears of *wihtiko* possession, transformation and violence remained real enough to provoke pre-emptive killings even of family members. *Wihtiko* beliefs also influenced Algonquian manifestations and interpretations of generic mental and moral failures. Consciously or not, others used it to scapegoat, manipulate, or kill.

Newcomers threatened by moral and mental failures attributed to the *wihtiko* often took Algonquian beliefs and practices seriously, even espousing them. Yet Algonquian *wihtiko* behaviours, beliefs and practices sometimes presented Newcomers with another layer of questions about mental and moral incompetence. Collisions sometimes arose when they contested, discounted, misconstrued or asserted control over Algonquian beliefs and practices.

For post-colonial critics, colonial Newcomer responses to Algonquian *wihtiko* beliefs and practices have raised a third layer of questions about intellectual and moral incompetence. Yet such critics have sometimes also misconstrued these earlier attempts to understand and control the *wihtiko*, or attributed an apparent lack of scholarly consensus to Western cultural incompetence or inability to grasp the *wihtiko*.

In contrast, my study of *wihtiko* phenomena and concepts reveals deeper commonalities and continuities. This intercultural and historical common ground is often obscured by the complex evolution of Natives' and Newcomers' struggles to understand and control the *wihtiko*. Yet hidden in these very struggles and the *wihtiko* itself is a persistent shared conviction that reducing others to objects of power signals mental and moral failure. The *wihtiko* reveals cultural differences, changes and divisions, but it exemplifies more fundamental commonalities and continuities. Ultimately, contestations with and about the cannibal *wihtiko* reveal significant common ground on (at and about) the edge of humanity. This finding has important implications for contemporary efforts towards truth and reconciliation.

As a non-Cree of French and English ancestry who was born, raised and educated in the James Bay Cree community of Moose Factory, I bring a relatively unique insider/outsider perspective to both the questions and context in which I pose them. It was in this context that I first grappled with the central question and encountered many of the stories and people who appear in this book. My perspective on both the questions and the context have been further enriched by a wide range of professional, volunteer, political and scholarly experience in Native-Newcomer relations (summarized in the attached curriculum vitae).

Description of Chapters

Drawing on *wihtiko* and other stories, my introduction raises and contextualizes the central question of Native and Newcomer interculturality, conflict and commonality, especially in the wake of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools. I show that emphasis on Native-Newcomer *cultural* difference persists, and I examine how this persistent emphasis is entangled in contests over moral and political power, authenticity, truth and reconciliation. I also introduce the context in which I examine the question of common ground on (*at* and *about*) the edge of humanity: Natives and Newcomers' entangled and mutually transformative struggles to understand and control the cannibal *wihtiko* and the extreme mental and moral incompetence it epitomized. Following the suggestion of Cree and non-Cree readers from

James Bay I also incorporate personal stories and autobiographical elements as a way drawing people in and establishing a voice and credibility as a storyteller with personal connections and experience among the James Bay Cree.

Chapters one and two examine the nature and evolution of the *wihtiko* as revealed in Algonquian oral tradition and early Newcomer records. Emphasis is placed on the James and Hudson Bay Cree, where some of the earliest and most recent accounts can be found. The first chapter addresses the methodological and epistemological challenges of tracing Cree and Algonquian cultural history while mapping the ecological, socio-economic and cultural context of the *wihtiko* phenomenon. It also proposes a working definition of culture and analyzes the relationship between the constitutive elements of culture: experience, understanding and action. (My objective is not to engage in debates about culture, but to be clear about how I define a term that remains contested.) This is essential to the larger questions of cultural change, difference and division. It also helps explain the nature and evolution of oral tradition and the *wihtiko* itself.

Chapters three to six focus on Native and Newcomer encounters with each other and the *wihtiko* phenomenon from the bush (chapter three) to courts of public opinion and law (chapter four) between 1800 and 1930, and in courts of academia before 1970 (chapter five) and after 1970 (chapter six). In these chapters, the term “court” evokes both meanings of the word: locus of activity and locus of judgment. This highlights the fact that public opinion, law and academia were all spheres of deliberation and judgment and were tremendously connected in European contexts as much as Native contexts, where the point seems more obvious. These chapters also provide additional historical evidence for the findings of the first two chapters.

All these chapters rely on recordings and transcriptions of Algonquian oral tradition, but also a wide range of archival records, ethnographic data, and academic literature. Relevant archives were too vast to be systemically combed for evidence of the *wihtiko*. Instead, I began with known *wihtiko* stories, archival references and academic literature, and then made more targeted archival and database searches, as well as other inquiries.

My concluding chapter reiterates the larger question of Native-Newcomer interculturality, conflict and commonality. It summarizes the evidence showing that contestations with and about the cannibal *wihtiko* reveal significant common ground on (at and about) the edge of humanity. It then explores the important implications for questions and efforts relating to truth and reconciliation.

Chapter Headings and Subheadings

Introduction: Common Ground on the Edge of Humanity

Chapter 1: Wihtiko in Changing Cultural Contexts
Challenge of Cultural Change & Difference
Changing Cultural Context of the Wihtiko
Defining Cultural Change & Difference

Chapter 2: Wihtiko in Cree & Other Algonquian Cultures

North-Bound Wihtiko

Types, Origins & Causes

Traits & Treatments

Struggles for Understanding & Control of the Wihtiko

Chapter 3: Wihtiko Among Partners in Furs, 1630-1870

Early Newcomer Encounters with the Wihtiko, 1630-1815

1817 Big Lake Incident: Wihtiko Trial that Resonated Across Century & Ocean

Struggles for Understanding & Control of the Wihtiko

Chapter 4: Wihtiko in the British World, 1870-1914

Starvation Cannibalism & Wihtiko in the British World, 1870-1914

‘Full penalty of the Law’? Wihtiko Trials, 1870-1914

1907 Fiddler Case: Wihtiko Trial that Resonated Across Century & Ocean

Struggles for Understanding & Control of the Wihtiko

Chapter 5: Wihtiko in Modern Academia

Manlike Monster or ‘Redman,’ Like Monster, on Trial?

Algonquian History to Culture-Bound Psychosis?

Culture-Bound Psychosis to Algonquianist ‘Myth’?

Struggles for Understanding & Control of the Wihtiko

Chapter 6: Wihtiko in Late-Modern Academia

Manlike Monster or ‘Whiteman,’ Like Monster, on Trial?

Understanding Wihtiko: Native & Newcomer Cultural Paths?

Wihtiko: A Path to Understanding Natives & Newcomers?

Struggles for Understanding & Control of the Wihtiko

Conclusion: Wihtiko, Truth and Reconciliation

Readership

First and foremost, my book aims to address scholars and general readers interested in the fundamental human questions that I address – questions about good, evil, madness, monstrosity, truth, reconciliation, interculturality, etc. With reference to the specific context in which I explore these broader questions, I also want to speak to scholars and general readers interested in Cree and Algonquian history and culture, Native-Newcomer relations, colonial history, Canadian history and other specific fields listed below.

Although I address questions of concern to specialized scholars, I try to avoid unnecessarily specialized or technical terminology and I seek to maintain a narrative flow, to raise and explore questions by telling a good story without distorting the facts or sacrificing nuance or accuracy. Chapters one to four are built around gripping and detailed stories and historical accounts. The last two chapters are the most academic in content, as they depict the evolution of scholarly attempts to understand and assert

(interpretive) control over the *wihtiko*. Nevertheless, the primary style of these chapters remains narrative rather than heavily analytical. As noted below, in my assessment of comparable titles, experts in the field have found these chapters very helpful.

Several Cree and non-Indigenous readers with a college or undergraduate university education were asked to read an earlier first version of the manuscript. These readers recommended changes to the introduction to make it less academic and to bring it in line with the storytelling approach and simpler language and sentence structure of the core chapters. In particular, Cree and non-Cree readers from James Bay suggested incorporating more personal stories as a way of drawing people in and establishing a voice and credibility as a storyteller with personal connections and experience among the James Bay Cree. I have followed these recommendations, but, if needed, I can provide the earlier and more academic draft introduction for purposes of comparison.

This book draws from and engages with numerous disciplines or interdisciplinary study areas, including: history, anthropology (cultural anthropology especially), ethnohistory, psychology, sociology, law, philosophy (ethics, epistemology and ontology), cultural studies, comparative literature studies, postcolonial studies, Indigenous studies, conflict studies, and religious studies.

This manuscript will be of particular interest to scholars who work on the following fields, themes or questions: ethnology, history and historiography of the James Bay Cree and other subarctic Algonquian peoples; history and historiography of Native-Newcomer relations in Canada and the Americas; history of the fur-trade and the Hudson's Bay Company; history and historiography of Christianity and Indigenous traditions; subarctic environmental history; colonial and imperial history and historiography; British North American history and historiography; northern Canadian history and historiography; oral history and tradition as well as methodological challenges relating to both; Canadian, Indigenous and intercultural legal history and historiography; transcultural psychology; history of psychology and anthropology; Native-Newcomer inter-religious encounters and comparative ontology, cosmology and ethics; interculturality, cultural change, continuity, conflict, commonality and relativism; intercultural conceptions of good and evil, madness and monstrosity; politics and politicization of history; the entanglement of quests for knowledge, authenticity and power; and, finally, issues and questions relating to truth and reconciliation.

This manuscript could be useful, in part or in whole, in a variety of university courses, above all those that look at Cree and Algonquian culture and history; Native-Newcomer relations; Native and Northern Canadian history; cultural anthropology and cultural studies; and conflict studies.

Comparable Titles

Because this manuscript touches on a wide range of disciplines, fields and questions, a full list of comparable books would be very lengthy, even if one only considers core areas. Significant comparable titles that address similar questions of interculturality in

subarctic Algonquian contexts and broader North American contexts include: Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Theodore Binnema's *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), Toby Morantz's *The White Man's Gonna Getcha: The Colonial Challenge to the Crees in Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), Emma Anderson's *The Betrayal of Faith: The Tragic Journey of a Colonial Native Convert* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Hans Carlson's *Home Is the Hunter: The James Bay Cree and Their Land* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008). While these and many other titles focus or touch on similar sets of problems or questions, or on similar or comparable contexts, none of them ask the same set of questions in the same context or on the same scale.

What sets my book apart is the focal point through which it examines the nexus of fundamental human questions described above. This focal point is geo-culturally relatively narrow but chronologically deep: the intercultural Native-Newcomer attempts to understand and control the *wihtiko*, from pre-contact to present-day, with a focus on the James Bay Cree, but not to the exclusion of other Algonquian peoples.

My manuscript is by no means the first scholarly or popular work to have the *wihtiko* as a central focus. In fact, the *wihtiko* may be the aspect of Algonquian culture that has received the most extensive interdisciplinary scholarly attention and the most wide-ranging attention in popular culture. Most of the academic attention, however, has been limited to articles and book chapters that are necessarily limited in scale and scope. Moreover, much of this literature remains contested, largely because of interdisciplinary and intergenerational miscommunications and incomplete literature reviews. My manuscript makes this clear with two chapters that recount the story of scholarly attempts to both understand and control the *wihtiko*. Several scholars who have published on the *wihtiko* have described my manuscript as the most comprehensive and helpful assessment they have read of the existing and contested scholarly literature.

Robert Brightman, for example, recently commented to me as follows: "It's certainly the most complete and microsurgical appraisal of the lit[erature], old and new, that I know of, and I appreciated attention to balance between likeness and difference both inside/across Algonquian and non-Native discourses" (personal communication, August 16, 2016). When I asked him more explicitly if he found the last two chapters "too long, detailed or tedious" or the level of "detail appropriate and helpful," he responded as follows: "'detail appropriate and helpful++' but most readers won't have my degree of interest in the topic so I would be open to considering condensation that could occur without loss of quality" (personal communication, August 19, 2016). The main argument for retaining a fairly detailed account is that this helps resolve scholarly debates that stem in larger part from intergenerational and interdisciplinary miscommunication and contention; this miscommunication and contention, moreover, is central to the story and main argument about quests for understanding and control of the *wihtiko*.

There exist several older anthologies of wihtiko stories that are prefaced by, or include limited scholarly analysis, including: Marie Merasty's *The World of the Wetiko: Tales from the Woodland Cree*, edited by Candace Savage and translated by Bill Merasty (Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre, 1974), John Robert Colombo's *Windigo: An Anthology of Fact and Fantastic Fiction* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1982), and Howard Norman's *Where the Chill Came From: Cree Windigo Tales and Journeys* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982). The authenticity and reliability of the last text, however, has been contested (Robert Brightman, personal communication, August 16, 2016).

There are only two scholarly books that focus on the wihtiko from a historical, ethnohistorical or anthropological perspective: Mireille Thibault's *La légende du Wendigo. Entre fiction et réalité* (Québec: Éditions Québec-Livres, 2012) and Shawn Smallman's *Dangerous Spirits: The Windigo in Myth and History* (Toronto: Heritage House, 2014).

Thibault's *La légende du Wendigo* is based on a Master's thesis in history (ethnology) defended at the Université Laval in 2011. Her primary interest is in the paranormal and psychotic as evidenced by her fairly extensive writings on these topics (http://www.archambault.ca/qmi/navigation/search/ExtendedSearchResults.jsp?searchType=JLI_ALL&erpId=JLI&searchMode=advanced&searchArtist=Mireille+Thibault). In this book, Thibault seeks to discern the *wihtiko*'s significance within a broader intercultural context. To this end, she examines Native and Newcomer *wihtiko* legends and historical accounts, including two trials (57 cases in total mostly drawn from previously published sources). She also examines and compares cultural representations of fear; survival difficulties faced by migratory peoples; cannibalism of different types; legends about other monsters, such as the werewolf and the vampire; and various other 'culture-bound syndromes.'

Although Thibault draws from a wide range of evidence and scholarship, she offers no significant new analysis and her synthesis contradicts, ignores or misinterprets some of the existing scholarship (this is discussed in my book). The fact that she characterizes the *wihtiko* as a culture-bound psychosis without full engagement with an extensive literature that has been critical of such characterization is problematic. Her study reflects a well-founded instinct to think broadly and comparatively as well as deeply, but it also illustrates the challenge entailed in such a project and the origin of much of the apparent discord in *wihtiko* scholarship: inadequate communication among scholars from diverse disciplines, some of them too quick to claim full understanding or interpretive control of a phenomena that has long been evasive, diverse, ambiguous, changing, and open to debate even among Algonquian experts.

Ultimately, Thibault addresses some similar questions, but she does not rely on the same set of sources or examples and her knowledge of the scholarly literature is incomplete to the point of impacting her conclusions. Even where she has similar questions, her conclusions are quite different from mine and are contested by my findings and those of other scholars, whom she sometimes misreads or omits.

Smallman's *Dangerous Spirits* is an excellent and informative study and covers some areas (the *wihtiko* in contemporary narratives for example) that I spend less time on. My book has a specific geo-cultural focal point (James Bay Cree) whereas he approaches the topic by examining specific case studies from a wider range of contexts. I consider this wider frame, but do not focus on it. As a result, our cases studies complement each other; they are either different or examined on a different scale and sometimes with different sources.

More important than evidentiary complementarity, my book does not duplicate Smallman's work because the questions we ask are not the quite the same. Smallman, for example, explicitly excludes one of the questions that has been central to interdisciplinary studies of the *wihtiko* and remains central to my own book: the question of the veracity, nature and origin of the *wihtiko* phenomenon. Smallman observes:

There has been a great deal of literature generated on the reality of the so-called windigo disorder, ... discussions have sought to find possible explanations for this behaviour based on Western ideals or to discredit the phenomenon entirely. These efforts have not always been productive. For the purposes of this book it is enough to say that the windigo was real to a diverse group of Northern Algonquian peoples over a wide area and extended period of time. The more complicated question that this book pursues can be summed up thus: what did the windigo mean to the people who believed in it, and how did this belief change through time, especially as Indigenous peoples came into contact with outsiders and settlers from Europe" (26-27).

I also look at this question, but I do not separate it from the questions that Smallman sets aside: what phenomena and experiences gave rise to the *wihtiko* belief and how did the *wihtiko* belief shape both the phenomena and the experience of them? Is transcultural explanation of the *wihtiko* possible? I contend, moreover, that these are equally complicated questions.

While I give equal consideration to non-Algonquian and non-Indigenous attempts to understand and control the *wihtiko*, Smallman considers the latter primarily in light of their impact on Algonquian *wihtiko* beliefs and practices. For this reason, Smallman draws from an "extensive academic literature," as he acknowledges in his introduction, but does not engage it at any great length in his book for his focus is elsewhere.

Smallman and I have been in contact since 2010, when I sent him a conference paper (later published) on the *wihtiko* ("Witiko Possession & Starvation Cannibalism Among the Cree of James Bay: Monstrosity or Madness?"). We have since shared drafts of our work and sources with each other. I have greatly benefitted from his work and input and he has found utility in my work as well. In 2011, for example, he asked about the paper mentioned above: "I wanted to ask if your article – which I thought was outstanding – has been published yet, as I would like to cite it in an upcoming book project" (personal communication, May 24, 2011). In the introduction to his book Smallman makes particular mention of the some of the scholarly work he relied on, such as "the classic works of Robert Brightman and newer studies [articles] by Nathan Carlson and Cecil

Chabot” (28). More recently, Smallman has read my proposed book and comments as follows:

First, I thought the book did an excellent job of being fair and thoughtful; I really liked how your argument broke down the simple binary between Natives and Newcomers, and problematized existing narratives. Your introduction and chapter one were especially well done. I also very much liked your discussion of mental and moral competence that started on page 44. *I think that this discussion of the windigo phenomenon within the context of Cree belief was much needed* (emphasis added, personal communication, September 19, 2016).

Ultimately, Smallman and I share an interest in the *wihtiko* and an appreciation for each other’s work, but our central questions are distinct. Although I also inquire into his central question, *it is not my central question*; rather, it only overlaps with part of the questions I ask about the *wihtiko* in order to address a distinct *problématique*. My central question is about Native-Newcomer common ground on the edge of humanity – *as revealed in* their mutually transformative and entangled struggles to understand and control the *wihtiko*.

In sum, while there is inevitably some overlap with these two books, neither of them has the same geo-cultural focus on the James Bay Cree, or gives similar attention to the James Bay Cree cultural context, its historical evolution, and the methodological challenges this entails. As a result, neither examines the same set of primary sources or case studies, and any overlapping examples are not on the same scale. (I summarize case studies detailed elsewhere or I detail case studies that are summarized or missing elsewhere). Neither of them gives a complete assessment of the existing scholarly literature on the *wihtiko*. Most importantly, even if I share an interest in the *wihtiko* with both Thibault and Smallman, our central questions are distinct. There is greater complementarity between my work and that of Smallman. In contrast, there is a greater degree of common ground with Thibault’s central question, but her book draws different conclusions based on an incomplete and sometimes problematic reading of the primary and secondary sources, a reading that I challenge in my book.

Sections Previously Published or Submitted Elsewhere

Limited parts (ideas and some wording) of chapters 1 and 2 have been published elsewhere (three brief chapters, articles or encyclopaedia entries on the *wihtiko*) or are under consideration (one draft book chapter has been submitted to an editor, but not publisher has been secured yet, and this text can be withdrawn or revised if needed). Part of chapter 3 has been published elsewhere (in an article) and all of it may be submitted for publication in another article and expanded for publication as a separate book. Copies of these publications and draft publications can be provided.

Revisions Undertaken to Convert a Thesis into a Book

This manuscript is based on a PhD thesis, defended at the University of Ottawa in November 2015, which was supervised by Jan Grabowski and Nicole St-Onge. The

internal examiners were Richard Connors, Brenda Macdougall and Eric Allina; the external examiner was Ken Coates. Professor Coates' first and final reports are appended. Note that the thesis was revised extensively after the first submission.

General revisions

- to eliminate thesis-specific content, style, structure or language

Introduction: substantial revisions

- to increase narrative flow and style
- to integrate more of the author's experience into the story where relevant
- to retain academic rigour amidst revisions outlined above
- to elaborate on the larger questions of truth and reconciliation
- to give more examples of contemporary politics of cultural difference

Chapters 1-3: minimal revisions

- to improve accuracy, clarity and style

Chapter 4: minor revisions

- to improve accuracy, clarity and style
- to integrate some new evidence

Chapters 5-6: minor revisions

- to integrate some new material
- to reduce length and detail where possible

Conclusion: some substantial revisions

- to make my conclusions more explicit
- to integrate more references to contemporary Cree *wihtiko* narratives
- to improve accuracy, clarity and style
- to reconnect with the contemporary Cree context and my ongoing attempts to grapple with Native-Newcomer interculturality, history, truth and reconciliation

Other Technical Details

Estimated word count of the finished manuscript: 100,000 words.

Nature and number of illustrations and other non-textual material: approximately three maps and up to ten photographs (see author's note in manuscript).

Projected completion date: December 2016.

Attachments

1. Curriculum vitae
2. Copy of the external examiner's initial report and final report on PhD thesis
3. Current draft list of potential reviewers and people to exclude from review process
4. Comments by Arthur Ray, co-editor of MQUP Native and Northern Series (letter of recommendation in which he makes reference to the book and an email exchange)