

Wild Man, Cannibal, Trickster: The Wendigo in Literature
and Media

Alfred John Howard

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Abstract

In traditional Algonquian belief systems, the wendigo (also *windigo*, *wétiko*, and many other variants) is a manitou associated with hunger, greed, winter, and cannibalism. The figure also appears in works of literature, film, and television created by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers. In this thesis, I examine representations of the wendigo in literature and media by comparing it to three other figures: the wild man, the cannibal, and the trickster. Focussing on works by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, I also examine how the wendigo and its attributes can take on different meaning and significance in different cultural contexts.

In Chapter One, I examine the wendigo's role as a monstrous and wild figure in works by Algernon Blackwood and Basil Johnston, considering in particular how the concepts of wildness and wilderness take on different meanings for each author. In Chapter Two, I examine the wendigo as a cannibal, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense, comparing Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* and Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* with the films *Ravenous* and *The Last Winter*. In all four of these works, the wendigo is associated with exploitation and violence, and in the two novels, this violence is frequently sexualised and/or racialised, with the destructive greed of the wendigo linked to that of colonialism. In Chapter Three, I examine the relationship between wendigos and tricksters in Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and in the American television series *Hannibal*. Although tricksters are frequently the enemies of wendigos in traditional narratives, both works depict a blurring of the line between the two figures.

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Introduction

In the Season One finale of the NBC series *Hannibal*, Will Graham is trying to work out whether or not he is a serial killer. Will, who has an almost superhuman ability to empathise with murderers, has been working for the FBI as a profiler, but evidence has emerged to suggest that he himself is the culprit behind many of the cases on which he has been consulted. He has been suffering from hallucinations, seizures, and undiagnosed encephalitis, and is beginning to doubt his own reality. For help, Will turns to his psychiatrist, the respected Dr Hannibal Lecter – who, unbeknownst to Will, is the real murderer behind the crimes of which he is accused. Throughout the episode, Will has a particular hallucination which is quite bizarre and which is never explained in the show: a tall, gaunt humanoid with black skin, pale eyes, and a pair of black antlers. Will sees this figure first in what appears to be a dream sequence, then again when discussing his possible crimes with Hannibal, and finally he sees Hannibal himself as the antlered, emaciated being when he realises that the psychiatrist is the true murderer.¹ This sinister antlered figure also appears several times throughout the second and third seasons, but it is never named or even discussed by Will or any other characters in the show. Only from interviews with the show's creator is it explicitly clear what this hallucination is meant to represent: the wendigo.²

Few figures have shown themselves to be as malleable as the wendigo. From traditional tales to twentieth-century horror stories, to modern novels, visual media, and online forums, it has taken many forms: a man-eating giant, the wilderness, capitalism, a human cannibal, resource extraction, sexual violence, colonialism, climate change – all these are guises of the wendigo. Once confined to the oral traditions of the Indigenous Algonquian cultures of North America (including the Ojibwe, Cree, and others), the wendigo is now a global figure, featuring in books, films, television shows, games, and urban legends. There is perhaps no other Indigenous belief that has incited such morbid fascination in the minds of European settlers, and through this morbid fascination, the wendigo has worked its way into Hollywood, PlayStations, and the vast world of digital folklore.

¹ 'Savoureux', *Hannibal*, NBC, 20 June 2013 [on DVD].

² Clint Holloway, '10 Highlights From *Hannibal* Creator Bryan Fuller and Star Hugh Dancy's Comic-Con Panel', *IndieWire*, 19 July 2013 <<https://www.indiewire.com/2013/07/10-highlights-from-hannibal-creator-bryan-fuller-and-star-hugh-dancys-comic-con-panel-36508/>> [accessed 18 June 2021].

In traditional Algonquian belief systems, the wendigo (also *windigo*, *wétiko*, and many other variants) is a manitou associated with hunger, greed, winter, and cannibalism. The term *manitou* is often translated as ‘spirit’, but Ojibwe scholar Basil Johnston argues that this is an oversimplification: *manitou* also has other meanings, including ‘mystery’, ‘supernatural’, ‘godlike’, and ‘essence’, referring to ‘the unseen realities of individual beings and places and events that are beyond human understanding but are still clearly real’.³ Although it often appears in traditional stories as a terrifying, monstrous giant, the wendigo is more than just this physical incarnation: it is a concept, an essence, an unknowable spirit that threatens not only to kill people but also to transform them into man-eating monsters like itself. Transformation is a key feature of many wendigo narratives by Indigenous and non-Indigenous storytellers alike.

In contemporary non-Indigenous narratives, the wendigo sometimes functions simply as a generic monster, interchangeable with other figures such as the vampire and the werewolf. Citing the popular television shows *Charmed*, *Supernatural*, and *The X-Files*, Michelle Lietz writes, ‘When non-Natives use wendigos in a contemporary context, all that carries through is their physical monstrosity and their hunger for human flesh’, with the manitou’s more complex elements – in particular its association with human greed – being overlooked.⁴ However, some non-Indigenous wendigo tales combine these standard horror tropes (physical monstrosity and cannibalism) with more subtle themes: the popular 2015 video game *Until Dawn*, for example, features wendigos as deformed humans who resorted to cannibalism after being trapped while excavating a site that was sacred to the local Cree.⁵ Many non-Indigenous storytellers – most of them British or white American – have appropriated the figure of the wendigo to critique the faults that they see in their own societies. Often, as Lietz notes, this appropriation is done rather lazily and displays little respect towards Indigenous cultures. Indeed, Western culture is something of a wendigo-like force itself, ripping figures and ideas from other cultures and using them for its own (frequently profit-driven) ends in ways that often ignore their original

³ Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), pp. xxi-xxii, 2.

⁴ Michelle Lietz, ‘Cannibalism in Contact Narratives and the Evolution of the Wendigo’ (master’s thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2016), p. 42.

⁵ Supermassive Games, *Until Dawn* (2015), PlayStation 4. Admittedly, the ‘sacred Indian site’ is something of a tired horror trope itself, but in this context, the miners’ disregard demonstrates the wendigo’s link to greed, particularly in relation to colonialism and resource extraction. Incidentally, based on anecdotal evidence from my own conversations, *Until Dawn* appears to be the main way in which many people (at least in the UK) have heard of the wendigo.

cultural contexts.⁶ Nevertheless, a discussion of the wendigo in contemporary narratives would be incomplete without considering the works of non-Indigenous creators, many of which are interesting in their own way, even if they are at times ignorant of their own source material.

Recent decades, however, have seen something of a reclamation of the wendigo by Indigenous creators. While the history of the wendigo's emergence as a global figure is largely a history of the dominant (Western) culture's appropriation of an element of Indigenous culture, Indigenous writers have also used the medium of literature to tell stories of the wendigo in the modern world.⁷ These narratives tend to stress the greed and destructive nature of the wendigo, frequently using it as a tool to explore the traumas of colonialism and settlers' exploitation of the North American continent. It is variously associated, for example, with resource extraction, residential schools, and sexual violence against Indigenous women and children.

In this thesis, I examine the wendigo by comparing it to three other transcultural figures – that is, figures that exist (or, like the wendigo, have spread) across multiple different cultures, albeit not necessarily in the same form. These three figures are: the wild man, a figure who straddles and subverts the boundary between civilised humanity and savage wilderness; the cannibal, a destructive figure whose insatiable hunger causes them to consume (literally and/or figuratively) those around them; and the trickster, a more comical figure who uses adaptation, transformation, and (as the name suggests) trickery to survive. The wendigo, I argue, shares features with all of these figures, though it is reductive to equate it to any one of them. In each chapter, I examine works by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous storytellers, demonstrating how both the wendigo and the figures to which I am comparing it take on different significance in different cultural contexts. However, there are frequently similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to the wendigo, and it is misleading to suggest that there is a binary distinction without overlap between the two.⁸

⁶ I use the term *Western* in a broad sense to mean 'European and/or settler'. In the context of this thesis, *Western* and *non-Indigenous* are mostly interchangeable, since the relevant non-Indigenous cultures are also Western cultures.

⁷ Although the works by contemporary Indigenous creators that I examine in this thesis are all in written form, Indigenous filmmakers such as Armand Garnet Ruffo have also used the figure in their work (*A Windigo Tale*, 2010).

⁸ Indeed, in the case of Joseph Boyden, it is difficult to say for certain whether his work should be considered Indigenous or non-Indigenous, owing to his contested 'Indigenous' identity (Alban Harvey, 'Joseph Boyden', in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/joseph-boyden>> [accessed 23 June 2021]).

In Chapter One, I begin by discussing Algernon Blackwood's novella *The Wendigo* (1910), which is probably the most significant work by a non-Indigenous author to feature the figure. In this story, the wendigo acts as both a monster and a wild man, representing a terrifying subversion of several boundaries, most notably that between civilisation and wilderness. I then compare Blackwood's novella with the writing of Basil Johnston (1996), for whom the wendigo also acts as something of a wild man. However, I argue, the exact nature of the wildness that the wendigo embodies is different for each author: for the English Blackwood, the wendigo represents the rejection of European society in favour of 'the wilderness', whereas for the Indigenous Johnston, it represents the rejection of traditional community values in favour of one's own selfish desires and indulgences, and poses as great a threat to non-human life as it does to humanity.

In Chapter Two, I examine the wendigo as a cannibal, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. I compare Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005) and Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012) with the films *Ravenous* (1999) and *The Last Winter* (2006). In all four of these works, the wendigo is associated with exploitation and violence, and in the two novels, this violence is frequently sexualised and/or racialised, with the destructive greed of the wendigo linked to that of colonialism. In the two films, the metaphorical cannibalism of the wendigo is directed at the North American continent itself, becoming tied up with both Manifest Destiny and resource extraction. However, unlike the two novels, which feature Indigenous protagonists, the films take a non-Indigenous approach to the figure of the wendigo, with their Native characters somewhat sidelined in favour of white leads. In this chapter, I also discuss issues of justice in relation to the wendigo, particularly in an Indigenous context. As with the figure of the cannibal, there are often complex questions about who meets the definition of a wendigo, who decides this, and what should be done about it.

In Chapter Three, I consider the relationship between wendigos and tricksters, with a focus on Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) and the American television series *Hannibal* (2013-2015). Although tricksters are frequently the enemies of wendigos in traditional narratives, Highway's novel depicts a merging of the two figures, with the trickster figure of the Fur Queen displaying wendigo-like qualities; meanwhile, *Hannibal* portrays its eponymous villain as a wendigo, but one who engages in trickster-like acts. Similarly, both works also present the danger faced by tricksters who seek to destroy wendigos – namely that

they risk becoming wendigos themselves. This is demonstrated through the characters of Weesageechak and the Okimasis brothers in Highway's novel, and through the character of Will Graham in *Hannibal*. I also suggest that, while individual wendigos may not be tricksters in their own stories, the *figure* of the wendigo has become something of a trickster in the modern world, crossing between cultures and adapting to survive.

This thesis is certainly not the first work to analyse the wendigo's role in modern and contemporary culture; Margaret Atwood gave a lecture on the topic in 1991, and since then, Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike have examined the different ways in which the figure has been represented by creators of various media. By comparing the wendigo to the wild man, the cannibal, and the trickster, I hope to offer new insight into the roles that it plays in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous narratives. I also hope to draw attention to links between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous material in each chapter; while scholars such as Lietz have accurately identified key differences between the two, my approach aims to highlight the sometimes less obvious similarities, while recognising the significant ways in which cultural context gives meaning not only to the wendigo but also to the other three figures. Considering how the traits (e.g. wildness, cannibalism, trickery) of a monstrous being such as the wendigo can take on different meanings in different contexts will, I hope, provide a useful framework for analysing other transcultural figures – monstrous or otherwise.

Much of the material that I examine in this thesis could be analysed from the perspectives of many academic disciplines – film studies, folkloristics, Native studies, or anthropology, to name a few. I am approaching the wendigo from the field of literary studies and perform a textual analysis on the works under consideration, examining their meaning and significance in their various cultural contexts. While I devote extensive discussion to both audiovisual media and traditional folk tales, I am not an expert in either of these fields.⁹ Instead, my area of specialism is literary and textual analysis, and I have an undergraduate background in politics and economics, which informs my approach to the themes under discussion such as colonialism, gender, and environmental exploitation.

⁹ I hope it is clear that I use the term 'folk tales' not in a dismissive or derogatory sense, but rather as an acknowledgement that traditional oral narratives, even when compiled in a book, are a medium of their own.

I am also non-Indigenous. As a white Englishman whose introduction to the wendigo was through non-Indigenous media (specifically, *Hannibal*), I count myself among the many Westerners who have developed a strange fascination with the figure. While I have endeavoured to understand the wendigo from an Indigenous as well as from a non-Indigenous perspective, I have no doubt that my white, European background has impacted on my ability to fully appreciate the being's significance within its traditional context. Nevertheless, almost any analysis of a transcultural figure will, by definition, require the author to examine a cultural perspective that is not their own, and I hope that this thesis succeeds in doing justice to a complex figure whose cultural origins lie far from mine. The wendigo has already made its way into white popular culture; I do not believe that it benefits anyone for white scholars to shy away from discussing it.

Before continuing, I would also like to explain my decision to refer to this being as 'the wendigo'. As mentioned above, several variant spellings exist, and there are even seemingly unrelated words (such as *chenoo* and *kokodje*) which refer to similar beings in various Algonquian languages.¹⁰ *Windigo* is perhaps the most common spelling in academic writing when discussing the figure in its traditional context; among the authors referenced in this thesis, it is the preferred form for Grace Dillon, Shawn Smallman, John Robert Colombo, Howard Norman, and others.¹¹ Within fiction, however, there is less consistency: Boyden uses *windigo*, but Erdrich uses *wiindigoo*, and Highway uses *Weetigo*. Johnston uses *Weendigo*, while Jack Forbes, another Indigenist scholar, uses *wétiko*. However, I have chosen to use *wendigo* (except where quoting from authors who use a different spelling), because this name appears to be the most prevalent in contemporary discourse around the figure. Almost all of the online material that I have encountered uses this spelling, including (at time of writing) the English Wikipedia article on the figure.¹² It also seems to be more common when discussing contemporary narratives and white appropriations of the figure: Lietz uses *wendigo*, as do Danette DiMarco, Jackson Eflin, Katarzyna Jusiak, and Margaret Atwood. Indeed, the prevalence of this spelling can probably be attributed at least in part to Blackwood's early appropriation of the figure and the lasting impact of his work on non-Indigenous understandings of it. Clearly, there is no

¹⁰ John Robert Colombo, *Windigo: An Anthology of Fact and Fantastic Fiction* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1982), p. 3.

¹¹ It also appears to be the most common spelling used in anthropological writing, particularly in relation to 'windigo psychosis', discussed briefly in the introduction to Chapter Two of this thesis.

¹² 'Wendigo', *Wikipedia*, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendigo>> [accessed 16 June 2021].

single 'correct' name for the figure, but, as far as I can tell, most people who have heard of it today know it as the wendigo, and so that is how I refer to it. Its name is sometimes capitalised, though I have opted not to do this. I use the plural *wendigos* (rather than the similarly common *wendigoes*) to refer to multiple manifestations of the manitou.

Chapter One: Wild Man

Introduction

It may seem strange – and rather colonial – to begin an analysis of the wendigo with a discussion of the wild man, a figure which has a long history in Western thought and which has frequently been projected onto Indigenous cultures. However, I believe that the wild man and the concepts associated with him can be helpful for considering the role and significance of the wendigo in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. The link between the two figures is more explicit in the first text that I discuss: Blackwood's *The Wendigo*. However, the wendigo also acts as something of a wild man in Johnston's writing. Predictably, there are problems that arise if we try to force the Indigenous figure into a role created by European cultures, but meaningful comparisons can be made between the wendigo and the wild man.

The wild man, as his name suggests, is a (male)¹³ human who rejects the rules of society and is governed instead by his own desires. As Hayden White notes, the figure's origins can be traced back at least as far as antiquity, but his relevance persists into the modern world.¹⁴ Related to the wild man are two key concepts: *wildness* and *wilderness*. *Wildness* refers to the quality of being wild – that is, the quality of being self-willed, ruled by one's own urges and desires rather than any societal rules or morals; *wilderness* refers to a *place* that is wild, outside of human control, and ruled by the forces of (non-human) nature. The wild man *exhibits* wildness and (traditionally) *inhabits* wilderness.

The wendigo has a complex relationship with these concepts. For most non-Indigenous writers and creators who use the figure in their work, the figure is strongly associated with both wildness and wilderness, such as in the recent film *Antlers*, whose director Scott Cooper has described the wendigo as a 'murderous spirit that's summoned by nature to seek vengeance on a callous mankind that has abused it', while Guillermo del Toro, one of the film's producers,

¹³ The wild woman is generally considered a distinct figure from the wild man; the wendigo, however, is not exclusively male.

¹⁴ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 150-82.

sees the creature as ‘a god [...] ancient and powerful, and one with nature’.¹⁵ In her lecture on the wendigo, Atwood suggests that no one ‘goes wendigo’ (i.e. transforms into a wendigo) in the city: ‘[t]he bush, the trees, the loneliness, are essential’.¹⁶ Many contemporary urban legends shared in online forums such as Reddit and 4chan also make this link, presenting the wendigo as a wild, animalistic monster of the forest, preying on humans who venture into its territory.

For the Indigenous communities in which wendigo stories originate, however, the figure can have quite a different significance. Although the wendigo has traditionally represented dangerous forces of nature such as cold and hunger, it is problematic to associate it with wilderness, since, as discussed below, the entirety of precontact North America has been considered a wilderness despite its Indigenous population. Indeed, Johnston describes colonists and modern corporations as wendigos that pose a threat to Indigenous peoples and their homes, contradicting the idea of the wendigo as a being that inhabits these ‘wild’ places.

Furthermore, the concept of wildness can have different meanings in Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. If a wild man is a person who lives outside the control of society, then exactly what that entails will depend on the society in question. For Blackwood, an English author writing in the early twentieth century, *society* essentially means ‘European/settler civilisation’, and so Indigenous people are classified as wild, and their homes are classified as wilderness. For Johnston, on the other hand, *society* refers to traditional Indigenous communities; wild forces are those that come from outside these communities, while people within the community can turn wild if they reject community values and place their own interests ahead of the community’s. In this sense, the wendigo in Johnston’s writing can be seen as a wild figure, as it is in Blackwood’s; the figure’s relationship to *wilderness*, however, remains a key difference.

¹⁵ *Antlers*, dir. by Scott Cooper (Searchlight Pictures, 2021); David Crow, ‘Antlers: Guillermo del Toro Wants the Wendigo to Look Like “A God”’, *Den of Geek*, 25 July 2020 <<https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/antlers-guillermo-del-toro-wants-the-wendigo-to-look-like-a-god/>> [accessed 5 January 2021].

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), p. 75.

‘The Call of the Wild’: The Wendigo in Blackwood’s Writing

Algernon Blackwood’s 1910 novella *The Wendigo* tells the story of a hunting trip into the Canadian wilderness that goes horribly wrong when one of the participants falls victim to the wendigo. The hunting party consists of four members: Dr Cathcart of Aberdeen, who is the author of a book on ‘collective hallucination’; his nephew Simpson, a divinity student; Cathcart’s experienced and foul-mouthed guide Hank; and Simpson’s guide, a French Canadian named Défago with ‘an unparalleled knowledge of woodcraft and bush-lore’ and a love of the ‘wilderness’.¹⁷ The party begins at base camp, where they are attended by a Native man called Punk, but they soon leave to explore new territory for signs of moose. Hank and Dr Cathcart head west, while Défago and Simpson set out in a canoe across the lake before heading up through the woods and making camp.

During the night, Défago vanishes from the tent, apparently called by a ‘windy, crying voice [...] as of something lonely and untamed, wild and of abominable power’, later implied to have been the voice of the wendigo. As he vanishes into the distance, he calls out, ‘Oh! oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of fire! Oh! oh! This height and fiery speed!’ (pp. 82-83). After some confusion and panic, Simpson heads after the guide, eventually finding his tracks in the snow beside another set of tracks, apparently belonging to some unidentifiable creature. To his amazement, the stride of both tracks begins to increase, as if the creature has begun to take huge flying leaps and has lifted Défago with it. Simpson also notices another change occurring in each set of tracks: those of the unknown creature are becoming increasingly tinged with red; and, to Simpson’s horror, those of Défago are gradually changing from the tracks of a human into a miniature version of the mysterious tracks next to them.

The tracks then stop, and Simpson hears the voice of Défago, speaking again of the fiery height and his feet of fire. Simpson searches for Défago in a panic, but eventually concludes that the guide is lost, and so makes his way (somewhat miraculously) back to base camp. He, Hank and Dr Cathcart then return to the area where Défago disappeared. There, they encounter Défago – or rather, a figure who resembles Défago. Cathcart tries to convince the other two that it is indeed the Canadian guide, but Hank is certain that it is an imposter of some kind. ‘Défago’

¹⁷ Algernon Blackwood, ‘The Wendigo’, in *Windigo*, ed. by Colombo, pp. 65-93 and 100-12 (p. 66). Further references to Blackwood’s story in this section are given as page numbers in the body of the text.

begins to explain that he has ‘seen that great Wendigo thing’, but Hank cuts him off with a cry of terror, pointing to Défago’s feet, which have apparently changed in some hideous way that is never fully described (p. 108). Défago then leaves the camp and vanishes, seemingly carried up into the sky.

Back at base camp, Punk has disappeared, but the hunters find ‘the true Défago, returned’ by the fireplace, although his mind has ‘fled beyond recall’. He seems unable to eat and complains that his feet ‘burn like fire’, and after a few weeks, he dies. Blackwood concludes by explaining that Punk abandoned the camp when he saw and smelt the approach of Défago: ‘He knew what it all meant, Défago had “seen the Wendigo”’ (pp. 111-12).

Throughout the novella, Blackwood sets up an oppositional dichotomy between human civilisation and untouched wilderness. While crossing the lake, Simpson feels that ‘himself and Défago [are] against a multitude – at least, against a Titan!’, that Titan being ‘the virgin heart of uninhabited regions as vast as Europe itself’. On one side are the men with their rifles, canoe (described as a ‘symbol of man’s ascendancy’) and an axe with which they ‘blaze’ the spruces; on the other side is the wilderness, displaying not so much hostility as plain ‘indifference to human life’ and housing ‘the merciless spirit of desolation which took no note of man’ (pp. 72-74). Indeed, conflict between humanity and nature provides the premise for the story: the protagonists have come to this place to hunt.

For Blackwood, the wendigo itself can be seen as a monster of the wilderness. The evening before his disappearance, Défago mentions it as a creature of lumbermen’s legends, ‘a sort of great animal that lives [in the north] [...] quick as lightning in its tracks, an’ bigger’n anything else in the Bush, an’ ain’t supposed to be very good to look at’ (p. 79). Dr Cathcart believes the wendigo to be ‘the Call of the Wild personified’ (a claim supported by Hank), with a voice that ‘resembles all the minor sounds of the Bush – wind, falling water, cries of animals, and so forth’ (pp. 102-03). The creature’s appearance is never described in any detail, and the closest the reader gets to a visual description of it is when Simpson finds what seem to be its tracks after it abducts Défago; he initially believes them to be moose tracks but realises on closer inspection that they are ‘wholly different [...] big, round, ample, and with no pointed outline as of sharp hoofs’ (p. 86). Although the tracks defy identification, they nevertheless reinforce the idea of the wendigo as an animal being, a wild, bestial threat to the humans who have ventured

into the wilderness. Blackwood's wendigo can be classified into the grouping of what Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock terms 'natural monsters', which are 'naturally existing creatures that are deemed monstrous due to their appearance and/or perceived threat to human beings', in contrast to those created by humans, such as Frankenstein's monster.¹⁸ Simpson notices a strange smell in the camp immediately after Défago's disappearance, described as 'not unlike the odour of a lion [...] with something almost sweet in it that reminded him of the scent of decaying garden leaves, earth, and the myriad, nameless perfumes that make up the odour of a big forest' (p. 84). The association with a predator reinforces this idea of an animal danger, while the comparison to forest scents furthers the link between the wendigo and the wilderness.

Blackwood also suggests that the wendigo is an ancient force, powerful perhaps partly because it predates civilisation. Simpson believes it to be 'something crudely and essentially primitive [...] that had survived somehow the advance of humanity', suggesting it belongs to a pre-civilisation world, 'when superstitions, gigantic and uncouth, still oppressed the hearts of men' (p. 110).¹⁹ The reference to the wendigo as a 'superstition' is presumably not meant in a dismissive sense, since the being is, to Simpson, very real. There is a clear implication that the wendigo is essentially a thing of the past, however, which is a contrast to contemporary writings of many Indigenous authors. Weinstock notes that natural monsters may offer 'a romantic representation of a world [...] full of mysteries to be explored and wonders still to be discovered (and all too often conquered as well)', and Blackwood implies that the wendigo has survived into the modern world because its wild domain has not (yet) been encroached upon by humans.²⁰ In reference to the immense forest that surrounds their camp, Défago remarks to Simpson that '[t]here's places in there nobody won't never see into – nobody knows what lives in there either' (p. 78). For Blackwood, it is in these unexplored areas of wilderness beyond human control that the wendigo lurks.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 'American Monsters', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), pp. 41-55 (p. 50). It is tempting to analyse Blackwood's wendigo as a *supernatural* figure, and it certainly transcends human understanding of the world. However, this transcendence does not imply that it is unnatural, but rather that human understanding is inadequate.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Blackwood refers here to the wendigo as existing in the heart of 'unreclaimed wilderness'; the use of 'unreclaimed', rather than simply 'unclaimed' seems to suggest that human civilisation has some inherent right to the wendigo's territory. This idea links to the concept of Manifest Destiny, which is addressed (from a more critical angle) in other wendigo media, as discussed in the following sections and chapters.

²⁰ Weinstock, 'American Monsters', p. 51. This idea of natural monsters and their domains as romantic and desirable is one to which I return at the end of this section.

Whether directly or indirectly, this conception of the wendigo appears to have heavily influenced contemporary non-Indigenous understandings of the being. In online stories, wendigos almost always dwell in forests, and indeed in many cases they seem unable to cross the treeline to either leave their forest home or enter a human encampment within the forest.²¹ The online ‘Demon Hunter Wiki’ even makes the bizarre claim that the wendigo ‘shares close kinship with the forest’s wildlife, mainly predatory animals [...] [and] willingly shares its kills with these companions’.²² For contemporary non-Indigenous people, as for Blackwood, the wendigo seems to be a creature inherently linked to the wilderness.

This link to the wilderness is also shown in visual representations of the wendigo in contemporary non-Indigenous media, perhaps most notably through the wendigo being depicted with antlers, or in some cases an entire deer head. Despite having seemingly no basis in traditional narratives, the image of an antlered wendigo permeates non-Indigenous imaginings of the figure, from drawings shared on Reddit to Fuller’s *Hannibal*, to the title of Cooper’s film, for which del Toro has described the antlers as ‘a must’ when it comes to representing the wendigo.²³ One early example – possibly the earliest – of a deer-headed wendigo can be seen in Larry Fessenden’s 2001 film *Wendigo*, but the association with antlers seems to reach back further: an illustration by American artist Matt Fox from a 1944 reprint of Blackwood’s story, which also adorns the inside cover of John Robert Colombo’s *Windigo* anthology, depicts the wendigo as a furry, antlered giant, snorting out steam as it sweeps Défago above the treetops (Figure 1).²⁴

²¹ AgentOne1776, ‘First Encounter: Wendigo’, *Reddit* <https://www.reddit.com/r/Wendigo/comments/eqb9w4/first_encounter/> [accessed 7 November 2020]; May1400, ‘Fear in the Woods: Wendigo’, *Reddit* <https://www.reddit.com/r/Wendigo/comments/brr72q/fear_in_the_woods/> [accessed 7 November 2020]; Jackson Eflin, ‘Incursion Into Wendigo Territory’, *Digital Literature Review*, 1 (2014), 9-19 (p. 14) <<https://issuu.com/bsudlr>> [accessed 7 November 2020].

²² ‘Wendigo’, *Demon Hunter Wiki* <<https://demonhunter.fandom.com/wiki/Wendigo>> [accessed 9 November 2020]. Online sources like this one tend to treat the wendigo as a cryptid, a type of natural monster, in Weinstock’s words, ‘whose existence is maintained by some but not yet proven’ (‘American Monsters’, p. 52).

²³ T. L. Bodine, ‘The Wendigo is Not What You Think’, *Tumblr* <<https://tlbodine.tumblr.com/post/188549064879/the-wendigo-is-not-what-you-think>> [accessed 22 June 2021]; Emily Zarka, *Windigo: The Flesh-Eating Monster of Native American Legend | Monstrum*, online video recording, YouTube, 28 August 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guiuXIMZ2vE>> [accessed 10 November 2020]; ‘Wendigo – Native American Zombie Survival’, *Reddit* <<https://www.reddit.com/r/Wendigo/>> [accessed 5 November 2020]; Crow, ‘Antlers’.

²⁴ *Wendigo*, dir. by Larry Fessenden (Magnolia Pictures, 2001); Colombo, *Windigo*, p. 98.



Figure 1: Matt Fox's 1944 illustration of an antlered wendigo for Blackwood's novella (source: Murray Ewing, 'Matt Fox's Wendigo', *Murray Ewing* <<http://www.murrayewing.co.uk/mewsings/2011/02/20/matt-foxs-wendigo/>> [accessed 7 July 2021]).

The origin of the antlered/deer-headed wendigo is unclear, but it is likely to be the result of mixing different cultural ideas: consider, for example, the visual similarities between the antlered wendigo and the similarly wild figure of Herne the Hunter.²⁵ Fessenden has described the creature in *Wendigo* as based on a combination of half-remembered stories from his childhood, including an adaptation of Blackwood's tale,²⁶ and non-Indigenous storytellers have frequently conflated the wendigo with other figures, perhaps most significantly the werewolf of European folklore. Paul Le Jeune, one of the earliest settlers to write about the wendigo,

²⁵ Other aspects of Blackwood's wendigo – in particular the great height at which it travels, and the danger associated with seeing it – may be influenced by other 'Wild Huntsmen' of European folklore.

²⁶ Adam Barnick, *The Shape of the Wendigo*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 October 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3fdNQZsUV0>> [accessed 17 March 2021]. As he explains in this video, the wendigo also features in many of Fessenden's later works, including *The Last Winter*, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

described it in 1636 as ‘a sort of werewolf’.²⁷ More recently, as Lietz discusses, a 2014 episode of the series *Charmed* features a so-called ‘wendigo’ which bears a strong resemblance to a werewolf, and an episode of *Supernatural* from the same year conflates wendigo characteristics with the werewolf-like rougarou.²⁸ Another recent tendency has been to conflate the wendigo with figures from different Indigenous cultures of North America, such as the skin-walker of traditional Navajo beliefs and even the benevolent *tornait* spirits of Inuit religion;²⁹ that both of these (unrelated) beings are linked to animals may go some way to explaining the link between the wendigo and ‘wild’ nature in many contemporary representations. However, Blackwood’s novella has undoubtedly been a major influence on non-Indigenous representations of the wendigo and is probably the primary reason why the wendigo is so consistently associated with both wildness and wilderness in contemporary non-Indigenous narratives.

Since Native Americans have themselves routinely been associated with wildness and wilderness in settler and European imaginations,³⁰ it is unsurprising that, when Native characters feature in contemporary non-Indigenous wendigo stories, they are often implied to have some greater link to the wendigo than the non-Native characters. In one online story, for example, the narrator has a Native companion who is the first to identify the wendigo, only to seemingly be killed and/or possessed by it at the end of the story; in another, the land on which the wendigo (or at least, the creature presumed to be a wendigo) lives is owned by an old Native man, and the narrator later finds him killed, seemingly by the wendigo.³¹ The link can also be seen in literature: Stephen King’s 1983 novel *Pet Sematary* features a wendigo with ram’s

²⁷ Paul Le Jeune, ‘A Sort of Werewolf’, in *Windigo*, ed. by Colombo, p. 7. Le Jeune actually uses this phrase to describe the *Atchen*, but, as Colombo notes, this is generally understood to be a local name for the wendigo.

²⁸ Michelle Lietz, ‘Cannibalism in Contact Narratives and the Evolution of the Wendigo’ (master’s thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2016), pp. 54-56.

²⁹ Chris Hibbard, ‘The Many Faces of the Wendigo’, *The Kitchen Sink* <<https://chrishibbard.wordpress.com/2008/10/31/the-many-faces-of-the-wendigo/>> [accessed 16 November 2020].

³⁰ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 1-7, 28; Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 139; Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, ‘American Frontier Gothic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 128-40.

³¹ Eflin, ‘Incursion into Wendigo Territory’, pp. 14-16; plague692, ‘Black Willow: nosleep’, *Reddit* <https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/comments/iqj1ac/black_willow/> [accessed 13 November 2020].

horns that dwells in an old Mi'kmaq burial ground.³² There are clearly problems with this tendency to link Natives and the wendigo; Lesya, a Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) and Wyandot contributor to the blog *Writing with Color*, writes that the wendigo is 'every negative stereotype of Native Americans – cannibals, demonic, rabid, indiscriminate hunters, a threat to civilized society – wrapped up in one', and criticises non-Native storytellers who tie the wendigo to Native characters while simultaneously ignoring its significance and meaning within Algonquian culture and featuring few (if any) heroic Native characters.³³

A similar approach can be seen in Blackwood's presentation of Punk, the one Native character in his story. Punk has no dialogue, merely 'grunting to himself' while he performs his household chores, and in one early passage, he is described as 'supplying the atmosphere of mystery', more like a piece of scenery than an actual character (pp. 67, 69). Blackwood repeatedly compares him to animals, both in his possession of 'other senses' and when he 'merg[es] his figure into the surrounding blackness in a way that only *wild men and animals* understand' (p. 70, emphasis added). That these characteristics are linked to his 'race' is fairly unambiguous; he moves 'as only Indian blood can move', and his acute senses are contrasted earlier with those of the '[w]hite men, with their dull scent' (p. 70). And indeed, he does seem to have a greater understanding of the wendigo than the white characters: when Défago finally returns to the base camp, Punk somehow understands that the guide has 'seen the Wendigo' and immediately flees before the others return, driven by '[t]he terror of a whole race', implying that his Native heritage gives him a greater understanding of the wendigo (p. 112). Being generous, this might be seen as an attempt by Blackwood to acknowledge the Indigenous origin of the beliefs that he is incorporating into his story. Such a reading, however, is difficult to square with the complete lack of resemblance between Blackwood's wendigo and that of traditional Indigenous narratives. It is more likely that the presentation of Punk reflects the racist tendency of non-Indigenous storytellers to tie Natives to ideas of wildness and therefore, by extension, to the wendigo, while simultaneously disregarding the figure's cultural context.

³² For a discussion of the wendigo in King's novel (and in several other works, including *Hannibal*), see Katarzyna Jusiak, 'The Embodiment of the Taboo: The Images of Wendigo in Literature and their Rendition in Modern Media' (bachelor's thesis, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, 2015).

³³ Mod Lesya, 'No Longer Taking Questions Involving the Wendigo', *Writing with Color* <<https://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/171102081849/no-longer-taking-questions-involving-the-wendigo>> [accessed 13 November 2020]; Mod Lesya, 'Using Native American Folklore', *Writing with Color* <<https://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/133355041681/so-basically-im-writing-a-supernatural-thriller>> [accessed 22 December 2020].

Indeed, Blackwood suggests that the wendigo's victims are usually Natives. Hank explains to Cathcart and Simpson 'that several Indians had "seen the Wendigo" along the shores of Fifty Island Water [...] last year' and that '[w]hen an Indian goes crazy, [...] it's always put that he's "seen the Wendigo"' (p. 101).

However, in Blackwood's story, it is not the Native Punk but the French-Canadian D efago who falls victim to the wendigo. Blackwood's wendigo can be seen as what Jeffrey Cohen calls a 'monster of prohibition', which

policing the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviours and actions, envaluing others [...] [and which exists] to call horrid attention to the borders which cannot – *must* not – be crossed.³⁴

Blackwood's wendigo patrols the border between civilisation and wilderness; D efago, who already exhibits a predisposition towards wilderness, crosses this border, costing him first his sanity and then his life. Cohen writes that the monster of prohibition 'prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual)', threatening transgressors with 'attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) [becoming] a monster oneself'.³⁵ All four hunters enter the geographic space of the wilderness, but it is only D efago who crosses the intellectual boundary when he 'sees the Wendigo'. And indeed, he does become a monster: a wild man, rejecting society and embracing the freedom of the wilderness – but, it appears, at a terrible cost.

Arguably, however, D efago not only becomes a wild man when he runs into the wilderness; it seems that he also transforms into a wendigo himself. When he (or rather, what appears to be him) meets the others in the forests, he tells them, 'I seen that great Wendigo thing [...] Now *you* seen it too', the latter phrase referring to himself and his transformed feet, suggesting that he has become one with the wendigo (p. 108, emphasis in original). Indeed, when the three hunters meet 'the true D efago' back at the camp, he too seems to have become at least partly

³⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25 (p. 13), emphasis in original.

³⁵ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 12. Blackwood's focus on boundaries, prohibitions, and the transgression of both these things also marks out his story as a work of Gothic literature, with the wendigo taking on the role of a Gothic monster. See Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic*, ed. by Weinstock, pp. 1-12. Of course, Blackwood was a writer of English – rather than American – Gothic, but his novella has clearly had a major influence on American creators (perhaps most significantly Larry Fessenden, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis). It is also worth noting that he uses Canada, rather than the US, as the domain of his Gothic monster – a choice which has no doubt helped his work to resonate more with US readers.

wendigo: he draws ‘wads of coarse moss from his swollen cheeks and [tells] them that he [is] “a damned moss eater”’, a trait which Hank has previously explained is characteristic of the wendigo (pp. 111, 103).³⁶ The wendigo, therefore, is manifest not only in the mysterious monster that abducts Défago, but also in the guide himself after he undergoes his monstrous transformation to become a wild man.

James Thompson notes that, at the end of the story, ‘readers are left unsure whether Défago has indeed succeeded in transcending ordinary human experience, or whether he has lost everything, including his very self’.³⁷ In some sense, it seems as if the ‘Défago’ that the trio initially encounter, despite his physical uncanniness, may in fact be the Canadian’s true self, though somehow joined with the spirit of the wendigo. He certainly seems aware of who he is and what he has experienced, whereas Blackwood says of the ‘true’ Défago that ‘[t]he “something” that had constituted him “individual” had vanished forever’, perhaps leading readers to wonder in what sense, aside from physical resemblance, he really is ‘the true Défago’ (p. 111).

Cohen suggests that, on one level, a monster may simply be ‘difference made flesh’. However, he argues, a monster can also undermine the very concept of difference; it may be ‘a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions’, with the power to show that ‘difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential’.³⁸ The being that the trio meet in the woods exemplifies this: it appears at first to be the human Défago, but Simpson considers its face to be ‘more animal than human’; it sniffs the air ‘exactly like an animal’; and it carries with it ‘[t]hat odour’ (presumably the ‘odour of lions’ mentioned earlier) (pp. 105-08). The wendigo in Blackwood’s story is what Cohen calls a ‘Harbinger of Category Crisis’, subverting the distinction between human and beast, between Euro-Canadian civilisation and savage wilderness.³⁹

³⁶ Although humans are the food of choice for most wendigos in traditional and modern folklore, the idea of a moss-eating wendigo is not without precedent, at least in Cree narratives. Norman discusses this in relation to a tale narrated by Job Walks (*Where the Chill Came From*, pp. 128-29).

³⁷ James Thompson, ‘Selfhood and Bodily Transformation in Algernon Blackwood’s THE WENDGIO’, *The Explicator*, 73.4 (2015), 283-85 (p.285) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2015.1089211>>

³⁸ Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, pp. 7, 6, 12.

³⁹ Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, p. 6.

Likewise, the figure of the wild man, though once confined to the wildernesses outside of civilisation, has now also come to subvert the distinction between these two places and between supposedly savage and civilised peoples. As Hayden White writes:

From biblical times to the present, the notion of the Wild Man was associated with the idea of wilderness – the desert, forest, jungle, and mountains – those parts of the physical world that had not yet been domesticated or marked out for domestication in any significant way. As one after another of these wildernesses was brought under control, the idea of the Wild Man was progressively despatialized. This despatialization was accompanied by a compensatory process of psychic interiorization. And the result has been that modern cultural anthropology has conceptualized the idea of wildness as the repressed content of *both* civilized *and* primitive humanity. So that, instead of the relatively comforting thought that the Wild Man may exist *out there* and can be contained by some kind of physical action, it is now thought [...] that the Wild Man is lurking within every man, is clamouring for release within us all, and will be denied only at the cost of life itself.⁴⁰

Défago exemplifies this in Blackwood's novella. He would presumably not be considered by Blackwood or his readers to be a 'primitive' man, despite his love of the outdoors; he is a Canadian of European descent, and so racial prejudice would encourage him to be placed firmly in the group of 'civilised' humanity. The fact that the story depicts Défago (rather than, for example, Punk)⁴¹ being transformed into a half-human being of the wild – a wild man – underscores the fear that Blackwood is seeking to evoke through the wendigo: that the spirit of wildness is not external from supposedly civilised cultures, but instead, however repressed, is integrated into humanity.

The concept of wildness as a repressed desire is a prevalent idea in the novella. Cathcart says of those who hear the wendigo that their 'most vulnerable points [...] are said to be the feet and the eyes; the feet, you see, for the lust of wandering, and the eyes for the lust of beauty' (p. 103). It is the desire for the wilderness and for natural beauty that draws people to the wendigo. As mentioned above, Défago is shown to have a particular love of the wilderness, perhaps explaining why he is the most susceptible to the wendigo's call. Early in the story, the reader

⁴⁰ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 153-54, emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Recall that Blackwood has already implied that Punk – and indeed all 'Indians' – are 'wild men' (p. 70).

is encouraged, through Simpson's perspective, to share this wonderment and love of the wilderness. Blackwood writes of the vast forest:

Simpson, who saw it all for the first time as he paddled hard in the bows of the dancing canoe, was enchanted by its austere beauty. His heart drank in the sense of freedom and great spaces just as his lungs drank in the cool and perfumed wind. Behind him in the stern seat, singing fragments of his native chanties, Défago steered the craft of birchbark like a thing of life, answering cheerfully all his companion's questions. Both were gay and light-hearted. On such occasions men lose the superficial, worldly distinctions; they become human beings working together for a common end. Simpson, the employer, and Défago the employed, among these primitive forces, were simply – two men, the 'guider' and the 'guided' (pp. 71-72).

This almost utopian description of the wilderness as a land of 'freedom' without the 'superficial' hierarchies of the supposedly civilised human world invites the reader – and Simpson – to share Défago's love for it. Like the Canadian guide, the reader sees in themselves a desire to see and experience this untamed wilderness, in spite of – or perhaps partly because of – its terrifying, unknown vastness. The 'mysteries to be explored and wonders still to be discovered' that natural monsters like Blackwood's wendigo represent are at once terrifying and enticing.⁴²

Cohen discusses the idea that our fear of monsters also represents a kind of desire, writing:

The habitations of the monsters (Africa, Scandinavia, America, Venus, the Delta Quadrant – whatever land is sufficiently distant to be exoticized) are more than dark regions of uncertain danger: they are also realms of happy fantasy, horizons of liberation.⁴³

The dwelling of Blackwood's wendigo (that is, the Canadian wilderness) exemplifies this; it houses an 'uncertain danger' (the wendigo), but it also allows 'liberation' from the constraints

⁴² Weinstock, 'American Monsters', p. 51.

⁴³ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 18. The fact that the habitation of Blackwood's wendigo is not merely America but specifically Canada may have some bearing on the figure's longevity, particularly in American imaginations. Had the English Blackwood set his story in the US, the idea of the mighty force of untamed wilderness may have come to be seen as outdated by contemporary Americans; Canada, however, has retained its 'wild' reputation into the present day.

imposed by human society. The wendigo itself is a source of fear for the characters, but it also represents something desirable, and that is what makes it such a dangerous threat. Indeed, in a sense, the wendigo *is* the desire; Cathcart describes it as ‘the *Call of the Wild* personified’, not as an embodiment of the wild itself (p. 102, emphasis added). Défago’s transformation can be seen as a reflection of the desire that already exists inside him, the wild man lurking within – not an external beast of the wilderness, but a distinctly human desire to escape from the society that we ourselves have created.

Johnston and the ‘Modern Weendigos’

Basil Johnston (1929-2015) was an Ojibwe scholar and the author of thirty books (twenty-five in English and five in Ojibwe) about his Indigenous culture, language and experiences.⁴⁴ His 1995 book on traditional Ojibwe beliefs, *The Manitous*, closes with a chapter on the wendigo, which he describes as ‘a giant manitou in the form of a man or woman [...] afflicted with never-ending hunger’.⁴⁵ On one level, the wendigo is an external threat, a monster with a face so terrifying that many who see it die of fright, who preys on humans and whose approach is heralded by a mighty blizzard. However, Johnston also stresses the fact that the wendigo is an embodiment of human weaknesses, in particular overindulgence and selfishness, the latter of which is ‘regarded by the Anishinaubae peoples [an Algonquian group that includes the Ojibwe] as the worst human shortcoming’. By extension, fear of the wendigo could inspire moderation and consideration for others in traditional Ojibwe communities. Johnston suggests that even the being’s name (which he spells ‘Weendigo’) may be derived from either *ween dagoh*, meaning ‘solely for self’, or from *weenin n’d’igooh*, meaning ‘fat’ or ‘excess’ (pp. 222-23).

I begin now by considering Johnston’s presentation of the wendigo as an external threat. He describes it as born in part ‘out of the conditions that men and women had to live through in winter when it was sometimes doubtful that the little food they had would carry them through

⁴⁴ Brendan F. R. Edwards, ‘Basil Johnston’, in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/basil-h-johnston>> [accessed 14 December 2020].

⁴⁵ Johnston, *The Manitous*, p. 221. Further references to *The Manitous* in this section are given as page numbers in the body of the text.

until spring' (p. 224). The link between the wendigo and winter famine is a prevalent one in traditional narratives across cultures, not just among the Ojibwe; it is consistently prominent in the Cree tales collected by Howard Norman, and the frequent association of the wendigo with cannibalism also clearly supports this link.⁴⁶ Similar to how Blackwood's wendigo is, on one level, a monster of the wilderness, the wendigo as presented by Johnston can be seen (again, on one level) as embodying a threat that comes from outside the community and is beyond human control.

Indeed, in two of the tales which Johnston recounts in *The Manitous*, wendigos seem to live entirely separately from humanity: in the first, the wendigo apparently lives alone as a hermit in the Mille Lacs region of Minnesota, and in the second, a colony of forty wendigos has been terrorising the Anishinaubaek of Nipissing. In both cases, the wendigos are defeated by the trickster Nana'b'oozoo, a great 'human champion' who is the 'archenemy' of wendigos (pp. 231-34). Again, this can be seen to reflect ideas present in traditional narratives: wendigos are often presented as living apart from humanity, either as hermits or in wendigo 'families', and they often appear to be classified as entirely non-human beings, sometimes originating on islands in the far north.⁴⁷

The wendigo, for Johnston, has continued to embody an external threat to the Anishinaubae peoples, but the nature of that threat has changed with the arrival of colonialism. Johnston ends his wendigo chapter – and indeed his entire book – with a section titled 'The Modern Weendigos'. He writes that, over time, 'Weendigos were driven from their place in Anishinaubae traditions and culture and ostracized by disbelief and skepticism'. However, colonisation did not destroy the wendigo; on the contrary:

⁴⁶ Howard Norman, ed. and trans., *Where the Chill Came From: Cree Windigo Tales and Journeys* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982); Shawn Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits: The Windigo in Myth and History* (Victoria, BC: Heritage House, 2014). In Norman, see for example 'The Owl-Famine Windigo' (pp. 53-55), narrated by Joseph Sandy.

⁴⁷ Norman, *Where the Chill Came From*, pp. 22-27 (recounting a story told by Michael Autao); Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits*, pp. 39, 24; Edwin James, 'Cannibals', in *Windigo*, ed. by Colombo, pp. 12-13. Interestingly, Smallman notes that, in these stories, intermarriage between human and wendigo families is often presented as a way to defeat the cannibals (pp. 39-42). This contrasts with the tendency in Western cultures for monsters to embody fears around miscegenation, as discussed by Cohen ('Monster Culture', pp. 15-16): in these Indigenous stories, miscegenation appears to be the *solution* to the problems posed by the monster. Carol Edelman Warrior also discusses miscegenation in her 2015 doctoral dissertation 'Baring the Windigo's Teeth: The Fearsome Figure in Native American Narratives' (University of Washington).

the Weendigoes did not die out or disappear; they have only been assimilated and reincarnated as corporations, conglomerates, and multinationals. They've even taken on new names, acquired polished manners, and renounced their cravings for raw human flesh in return for more refined viands. But their cupidity is no less insatiable than that of their ancestors.

In particular, Johnston describes a certain 'breed' of modern wendigo which 'subsists entirely on forests'. He narrates how, driven by a constant demand for greater profits, these wendigos have 'laid waste to immense tracts of forest that were seen as beyond limit as well as self-propagating, ample enough to serve this generation and many more to come'. Arriving on the North American continent for the first time, these wendigos 'looked on an endless, boundless sea of green [...] and saw money' (pp. 235-37). They are unconcerned by the harm they inflict on Indigenous peoples, wildlife, the environment, or future generations; like the wendigos of traditional tales, they are motivated solely by their own greed.

Here is a marked contrast between the wendigo of Johnston's writing and that of Blackwood's: while Blackwood's wendigo is a threat that comes *from* the 'wilderness' of Canada, Johnston's modern wendigos are a threat *to* that same wilderness. This is perhaps unsurprising when considering again the fact that, in the settler imagination, the Anishinaubaek (along with other Indigenous groups) were themselves a part of the precontact 'wilderness' of North America. For both writers, the wendigo represents a threat to their respective cultures: for Blackwood, it exists outside of settler 'civilisation' and threatens to wreak havoc upon it, while for Johnston, the modern wendigos are a force from outside the familiar world of the Anishinaubaek who impose themselves upon that world with no regard for the harmful consequences.

However, as with Blackwood, it would be wrong to construe the wendigo in Johnston's writing as *only* an external threat; the figure also represents human weakness. It is 'born out of human susceptibility' as much as the harsh conditions of winter, and Johnston describes wendigos as 'men and women except on a grander, exaggerated scale'. He further explains:

Although the Weendigo is an exaggeration, it exemplifies human nature's tendency to indulge its self-interests, which, once indulged, demand even greater indulgence and ultimately result in the extreme – the erosion of principles and values.

While the wendigo may appear to be an external threat to humanity, it is in fact an embodiment and reflection of humanity's own worst traits, stripped of 'compassion, sorrow, reason, [and] judgement' and leaving only selfish obsession and hunger (p. 224). Although Johnston's modern wendigos may take the form of faceless corporations, these corporations are nevertheless led by humans; colonialism and resource extraction may be external threats to the Anishinaubae peoples, but they are still very much human threats. Indeed, Johnston makes it clear that some – if not all – wendigos were once human themselves, and the other two stories that he recounts in the chapter exemplify this.

The first tells of a hunter who, during a particularly hard winter, drinks a magic potion that makes him grow to 'six times the height of an ordinary man'. This enables him to travel great distances quickly, but it does not allay his hunger. Eventually, the hunter comes across a village. He calls out to its inhabitants in friendly greeting, but his voice is so terrifying, 'boom[ing] and crackl[ing] like thunder', that many of the villagers die of fright, and the rest flee. Although he had meant them no harm, the scent of human flesh reminds the man of his hunger, and he eats one of the corpses, causing him to grow in size. He continues to eat the corpses, growing each time, but his hunger remains, and he is 'no better satisfied at the end of his ravenous meal, despite all he had eaten'. However, he eats none of the villagers' food supplies; his hunger is solely for human flesh, as he has now become a wendigo. One of the villagers, who had been away at the time of the attack, returns to find his home destroyed and sets out to kill the wendigo. He eventually catches up with it and kills it by mercilessly clubbing it to death and leaving its remains for 'the ravens or whoever craved even the flesh of a cannibal' (pp. 225-27).

Johnston describes this tale as exemplifying the eventual triumph of moderation over excess. At the start of the story, it is not just the hunter but also his family and neighbours who are starving. Johnston writes that '[e]veryone was desperate, but only this one man went to a sorcerer for a talisman that would enable him to find food and allay his hunger' (p. 225). Despite the difficult conditions, it is the man's decision to resort to drastic measures (sorcery) that causes his transformation. Once he is a giant, he forgets the hunger of his family and neighbours, thinking only about himself and his own needs. Although he was not aware that the talisman would give him a craving for human flesh, he was driven to take it by his single-minded desire to satisfy his hunger regardless of the consequences; his transformation into a

wendigo, in other words, is due to his own human weakness as well as the conditions of the harsh winter.

The second tale of human transformation tells of a young woman who is transformed into a wendigo by a resentful sorcerer after her father refuses to let him marry her on the grounds that the sorcerer already has several wives. The young woman kills and eats her family, but when the sorcerer finds her and brings her back to his home, she has no memory of what has happened. His other wives, however, distrust her. She eventually asks the sorcerer what happened to her family, and he reluctantly tells her, at which she is horrified and begins to feel the spirit of the wendigo returning to her. Consumed by guilt, hunger, and cold, she throws herself onto a fire, killing both herself and the sorcerer's unborn child that she is revealed to have been carrying, thereby getting revenge on the sorcerer and saving the rest of the family and village from the wendigo spirit (pp. 227-30).

Here, although it is the young woman who becomes a cannibal, the real villain is clearly not her but the sorcerer. Indeed, although her motivation is not entirely clear, her suicide can be seen not only as an act of remorse and vengeance but also as a noble act of self-sacrifice to save the camp from the wendigo spirit; this certainly seems to be the implication in James R. Stevens' retelling of the same (or at least a very similar) story.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Johnston presents the initial dispute between the sorcerer and the woman's father as another case of excess and greed versus moderation and selflessness:

The father refused, pointing out that the petitioner already had several wives, more wives than most men, and should not take on yet another lest one of the wives be neglected. The father suggested that the man should [also] think of other men who did not yet have wives (p. 227).

The sorcerer pays no heed to this advice, demonstrating that it is not just his spitefulness but also his greed and disregard for others that lead to the tragic events of the story. Unlike in the previous story, the creation of the wendigo cannot reasonably be attributed even in part to external, non-human forces; it is entirely the sorcerer's personal flaws that are to blame.

⁴⁸ James R. Stevens, 'Stories of the Windigo', in *Windigo*, ed. by Colombo, pp. 193-200 (pp. 195-96); also discussed in Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits*, p. 38.

It is also worth mentioning that, even in the two stories where wendigos are not explicitly transformed humans, they are defeated, in Johnston's words, 'not so much as a result of the heroism and ingenuity of humans, but as a result of the Weendigo's own personal foibles'. Nana'b'oozoo is only able to defeat the Mille Lacs wendigo because it decides to prolong and relish his torment before eating him, giving him time to plan its destruction with the help of a mouse; and the Nipissing wendigos inadvertently destroy themselves while chasing Nana'b'oozoo in 'single-minded, blind pursuit' across a lake. In Johnston's stories, obsession and greed are not just deplorable traits; they are also the seeds of their own destruction (pp. 230-34).

Johnston's consistent framing of wendigo stories as cautionary tales teaching of the dangers of excess and selfishness may be seen as another example of the wendigo being presented as a wild man. From Johnston's Indigenous perspective, the wendigo is a human who has given in to their own internal cravings which harm the greater good of the community. He writes:

As long as men and women put the well-being of their families and communities above their own self-interests by respecting the rights of animals who dwelt as their cotenants on Mother Earth, offering tobacco and chants to Mother Earth and Kitchi-Manitou as signs of gratitude and goodwill, and attempting to fulfill and live out their dreams and visions, they would instinctively know how to live in harmony and balance and have nothing to fear of the Weendigo. If all men and women lived in moderation, the Weendigo and his brothers and sisters would starve and die out.

But such is not the case. Human beings are just a little too inclined to self-indulgence, at times a shade too intemperate, for even the specter of the Weendigo to frighten them into deference (p. 223).

Although Johnston does not use terms like 'civilisation' or 'wildness', his explanation of the wendigo establishes a similar dichotomy between two ways of living: on one side is humanity respecting traditional Indigenous beliefs and customs, living in harmony with itself and the natural world; on the other side is single-minded greed and destructive selfishness. The wendigo is a person who crosses this boundary, abandoning community-minded living in favour of their own untamed (i.e. wild) desires. It is not simply an external horror, but a spirit

‘lurking within’ humanity, representing the selfish desires which must be suppressed for society to function.

In this sense, then, Johnston’s wendigo may be seen as quite similar to Blackwood’s: a wild man who also acts as a ‘monster of prohibition’, demonstrating the possible terrible outcome of giving in to one’s desires when those desires deviate from societal norms.⁴⁹ However, we should be wary of applying the Western concept of the wild man to an Indigenous writer’s explanation of an Indigenous figure. Recall that White described the wild man as originally ‘associated with the idea of wilderness – the desert, forest, jungle, and mountains – those parts of the physical world that had not yet been domesticated or marked out for domestication in any significant way’, and that only after these ‘wildernesses’ were ‘brought under control’ did the figure come to be seen as ‘lurking within every man’.⁵⁰ The history of the wild man trope, in other words, is intrinsically linked to the idea of wilderness, and this is where it becomes more problematic for analysing the Indigenous figure of the wendigo. Roderick Nash describes wilderness as a concept invented by ‘civilization’, only coming into existence ‘with the advent of herding, agriculture, and settlement’. The term is derived from ‘wild-dēor-ness’, meaning ‘place of wild beasts’; for hunter-gatherer societies without domesticated animals, ‘wild beasts’ is a tautology. Furthermore, as has already been discussed, European colonists viewed North America itself as a wilderness, with its Indigenous people viewed as ‘wildēor’ (wild beasts).⁵¹ In other words, the concept of wilderness was created outside of – and used as a tool to erase the existence of – Native American cultures.

It should be noted that precontact Algonquian societies were not exclusively hunter-gatherers; the Ojibwe, for example, have traditionally cultivated rice.⁵² Furthermore, while the meaning of wilderness as a ‘place of wild beasts’ may have little significance for a culture with no concept of domesticated animals, a meaningful distinction can still be made between where

⁴⁹ Wendigo tales like those retold by Johnston can also be seen, like Blackwood’s novella, as Gothic narratives. As Weinstock writes, ‘All cultures inevitably have boundaries – dividing lines [...] between what is acceptable and what is off-limits [...] – and as soon as there are boundaries, there are anxieties and fantasies about crossing them. All communities, therefore, have their own Gothic tales and traditions’ (‘Introduction’, p. 2). Like Blackwood’s novella, these traditional stories tell of the dangers of transgressing social norms – albeit different norms – and so the wendigo is again a Gothic monster, as it is in Blackwood’s story.

⁵⁰ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 153-54.

⁵¹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, pp. xi-xiv, 1-7.

⁵² Amanda Raster and Christina Gish Hill, ‘The Dispute over Wild Rice: An Investigation of Treaty Agreements and Ojibwe Food Sovereignty’, *World Languages and Cultures Publications*, 154 (2016) <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs/154> [accessed 17 December 2020].

humans live and where they do not, between the village and the forest outside. Jackson Eflin writes that the wendigo in traditional stories may subvert this distinction by ‘hunt[ing] in the village, where no one is supposed to be prey’, but in general, wendigos in traditional tales live away from humans, either as hermits or in wendigo families.⁵³ Crucially, however, these human societies that wendigos live outside of are Indigenous societies, and so an Indigenous perspective informs the imagination of the wendigo’s domain. Speaking about his own perspective as an Indigenous (Lakota Sioux) person, Chief Luther Standing Bear explains:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as ‘wild’. Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’ and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame [...] When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the ‘Wild West’ began.⁵⁴

The Lakota are not an Algonquian people, and I am wary of suggesting that a monolithic ‘Native’ perspective is shared by all Indigenous groups of the US and Canada. However, Standing Bear’s words demonstrate that an Indigenous culture’s idea of what constitutes wildness may be not only different but completely antithetical to the Western understanding of wildness: while settlers may view deforestation (for example) as a taming of wilderness, for the people who have held that forest as home for generations, its destruction is the *creation* of a wilderness where before there was tame familiarity. As William Cronon writes, ‘[the Western view of] wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural’, but the idea that any sane human can be ‘outside’ nature is quite alien to the Indigenous perspectives discussed here.⁵⁵ For Johnston, the wildness of the wendigo does not cause it to be aligned with nature, as in Blackwood’s novella and in most urban legends; instead, it causes it to be at odds with nature, disregarding the wellbeing of non-human life just as it disregards the wellbeing of humans. If there are any ‘wild places’ where Johnston’s modern wendigos might be found, these places would not be pristine, untouched forests or mountains or lakes;

⁵³ Eflin, ‘Incursion into Wendigo Territory’, p. 10. Even when the wendigo is a converted villager, they do not remain in the village for long; either the village or the wendigo will inevitably be destroyed.

⁵⁴ Luther Standing Bear, ‘Indian Wisdom’, in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 201-06 (p. 201).

⁵⁵ William Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. by Callicott and Nelson, pp. 471-99 (p. 484).

they would be timber yards, mines, quarries, pipelines – marks of (white) humanity’s assaults on the earth.

In his earlier book *Ojibway Heritage*, Johnston relates a slightly different version of the story of the hunter’s transformation, in which ‘a man named Weendigo’ is transformed into a giant and eats a village of people after they mysteriously turn into beavers when he appears. He travels around James Bay, trying to satisfy his desperate hunger, until at last he is killed. Johnston concludes this version of the story with the following passage:

With Weendigo’s death, his victims revived, Weendigo himself, though dead, continued to live on as an incorporeal being, the spirit of excess. As the spirit of excess, Weendigo could captivate or enslave anyone too preoccupied with sleep or work or play or drink or any pursuit or occupation. Children and the young were often warned. ‘Don’t play too much, Weendigo will get you.’

Though Weendigo was fearsome and visited punishment upon those committing excesses, he nevertheless conferred rewards upon the moderate. He was excess who encouraged moderation.⁵⁶

This version of the story is interesting not only because it suggests a more benevolent aspect of the wendigo,⁵⁷ but also because it presents a human as not merely possessed by the ‘spirit of excess’ but rather as the origin of that spirit. Not only does the spirit of the wendigo have the power to transform a human into a cannibal, but it is itself of human origin. Admittedly, Johnston does not mention this as being the origin of the wendigo in *The Manitous*, and we should perhaps be wary of reading the tale too literally, but it is clear that Johnston understands the wendigo as fundamentally linked to humanity, rather than as a being that is external to the human world. It is for this reason that the wendigo has been able to persist into the present day: while Blackwood’s wendigo is a relic of precontact wilderness that has survived *despite* colonisation, Johnston’s has survived *through* colonisation; it is not merely a superstition but a representation of ‘real human cupidity’, a cupidity that is epitomised by the destructive greed

⁵⁶ Basil Johnston, ‘A Man Named Weendigo’, in *Windigo*, ed. by Colombo, pp. 201-03.

⁵⁷ Grace Dillon, in the Foreword for Smallman’s *Dangerous Spirits*, writes that ‘Native storytellers such as Basil Johnston challenge the assumption that the windigo is exclusively malevolent’ (p. 18), presumably in reference to this work rather than *The Manitous*; in the latter, there is no suggestion of wendigo benevolence.

of colonialism (p. 235). This relationship – between the wendigo and colonialism – is the topic of further discussion in Chapter Two.



Figure 2: A 1965 painting of the wendigo by Ojibwe artist Norval Morrisseau (source: Neal Hall, ‘Family of Renowned B.C. Aboriginal Artist Settles Legal Dispute with “Adopted” Son’, *Vancouver Sun*, 25 January 2012 <<https://vancouver.sun.com/news/family-of-renowned-bc-aboriginal-artist-settles-legal-dispute-with-adopted-son>> [accessed 7 July 2021]). The blue shape probably represents the wendigo’s heart of ice, and it appears to be eating beavers that have suspiciously human-like markings. This image also appears on the front cover of Colombo’s *Windigo* anthology.

Conclusion

For both Blackwood and Johnston, the wendigo can be seen as an external threat to human society. In Blackwood’s novella, it is an animal-like monster, a giant creature that lives in the Canadian wilderness, leaves mysterious tracks in the snow, and lures humans away from

civilisation and into madness. For Johnston, however, the nature of the threat posed by the wendigo has changed over time. As demonstrated by the stories he retells, the wendigo was traditionally an embodiment of cold and hunger, but over time, it has come to represent the threat posed to Indigenous people and their traditional homelands by colonialism and resource extraction. Colonialism does not represent the death of the wendigo, pushing it back into the realms of superstition and fantasy; colonialism *is* the wendigo in a different form.

For both authors, however, the wendigo can perhaps best be understood as reflecting an element of human nature. For Blackwood, it embodies not simply the wilderness but human *desire* for the wilderness – ‘the Call of the Wild’, ‘the Enticement of the Desolation that destroys’.⁵⁸ It represents not just a geographic *wilderness* but the *wildness* that exists within humanity. For Johnston, the wendigo is primarily an embodiment of human weaknesses, most significantly selfishness and overindulgence. These too can be seen as a form of wildness; they signify a rejection of one’s community and traditional values in favour of excessive, unrestrained consumption. In the tales that Johnston recounts, it is not just circumstance but also individual choices (albeit not necessarily their own) that cause people to turn into wendigos. It is for this reason that the figure remains so relevant in the modern world; as long as there are humans, there is greed, and so the wendigo lives on.

Discussing the works of Blackwood and Johnston among others, Shawn Smallman writes:

In contemporary Indigenous traditions, the windigo has become associated with the danger of greed, capitalism, and Western excess, while in European and Canadian imagery, it is the symbol of evil, wilderness, and madness – two diametrically opposed visions of the same phenomenon.⁵⁹

While I broadly agree with this assessment, it risks oversimplification; it is true that the wendigo in Johnston’s work does not represent wilderness (at least in the Western understanding of the term), but it does represent evil and, I would argue, a form of madness: single-minded, harmful, and ultimately self-destructive greed. Indigenous scholar Jack D. Forbes certainly views the wendigo as an embodiment of both evil and madness, as I discuss

⁵⁸ Blackwood, ‘The Wendigo’, pp. 102, 89.

⁵⁹ Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits*, p. 67.

in the following chapter. Furthermore, I also discuss how some *non*-Indigenous creators have used the wendigo as a symbol of Western capitalism and colonialism. With that said, wilderness is perhaps the key point on which Blackwood and Johnston differ in their representations of the wendigo: for Blackwood, the wendigo is a monster of the wilderness, while for Johnston, that ‘wilderness’ is simply the home of the Anishinaubaek, and it is this home, as well as the Anishinaubaek people themselves, which the modern wendigos threaten.

Chapter Two: Cannibal

Introduction

The figure of the cannibal has a somewhat paradoxical relationship with colonialism and capitalism. In colonial discourse, the idea (whether accurate or not) that native peoples of the Americas, Africa and the Pacific were man-eaters was instrumental in justifying the colonisation and exploitation of these territories, aiding the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ necessary for the emergence of industrial capitalism.⁶⁰ However, the figure of the cannibal has also been used metaphorically to critique the capitalistic exploitation of fellow humans and to critique primitive accumulation itself, as discussed by Jerry Phillips.⁶¹ The idea of the cannibal as an exotic, primitive, non-European savage has also been frequently subverted: as early as the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne was using the figure of the cannibal to reflect on the ‘barbarous’ practices that he observed in his native Europe,⁶² and many contemporary Indigenous cultures around the world have narratives of European colonisers not only devouring their lands and lives in a metaphorical sense but also physically consuming the flesh and blood of natives.⁶³ As Maggie Kilgour writes, the figure of the cannibal, which was once ‘used to reinforce the need for progress, individualism, capitalism, and imperialism’, is now more often used to ‘denounce’ these same things.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Crystal Bartolovich, ‘Consumerism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism’, in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 204-37 (pp. 213-14); see also the other essays in this volume.

⁶¹ Jerry Phillips, ‘Cannibalism qua Capitalism: The Metaphorics of Accumulation in Marx, Conrad, Shakespeare, and Marlowe’, in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Barker, Hulme, and Iversen, pp. 183-203.

⁶² Michel de Montaigne, ‘On Cannibals’, trans. by Charles Cotton (1686), *HyperEssays* <<https://hyperessays.net/florio/book/1/chapter/30>> [accessed 23 March 2021]. See in particular the passage: ‘I am not sorry that we should here take notice of the barbarous horror of so cruel an action [cannibalism], but that, seeing so clearly into their faults, we should be so blind to our own. I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead; in tearing a body limb from limb by racks and torments, that is yet in perfect sense; in roasting it by degrees; in causing it to be bitten and worried by dogs and swine (as we have not only read, but lately seen, not amongst inveterate and mortal enemies, but among neighbours and fellow-citizens, and, which is worse, under colour of piety and religion), than to roast and eat him after he is dead.’

⁶³ See, for example, a discussion of the Andean figure of the *kharisiri* (or *pishtako*) in John Kraniuskas, ‘Cronos and the Political Economy of Vampirism: Notes on a Historical Constellation’, in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Barker, Hulme, and Iversen, pp. 142-57 (pp. 150-52); also a discussion of African beliefs about European cannibals in William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 10-13.

⁶⁴ Maggie Kilgour, ‘The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time’, in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Barker, Hulme, and Iversen, pp. 238-59 (p. 247).

The wendigo, a figure usually associated with cannibalism in both traditional and contemporary narratives, has a similarly paradoxical relationship with colonialism and capitalism. William Arens notes – giving the wendigo as an example – that a culture’s myths around cannibalism can be misunderstood by foreign anthropologists as evidence for cannibalism as an established cultural practice. And indeed, what appears to be a French variant of *wendigo* (‘Onaouientagos’) is listed as the name of a northern Indigenous tribe (along with Cree, Assiniboine and others) in a 1722 work by Bacqueville de la Potherie, suggesting that the author believed the term referred to an Indigenous ethnic group.⁶⁵ Stories of wendigo transformations also led, in the twentieth century, to the formulation by anthropologists and psychiatrists of ‘windigo psychosis’, a supposed culture-bound psychiatric disorder among Northern Algonquian groups which causes sufferers to be overcome by obsessive, cannibalistic cravings. This theory has proven controversial, however, appearing to be a ‘politically convenient’ misrepresentation of Indigenous beliefs that implies that Algonquians are innately predisposed towards cannibalism, thereby justifying the colonial project of their cultural destruction.⁶⁶ This also, of course, links to the tying of the wendigo to Indigenous characters in non-Indigenous narratives, as discussed above (pp. 16-17).

However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the wendigo, like the generic cannibal, can also be used to critique capitalist excess and environmental destruction, as in Johnston’s writing. Indigenist scholar and activist Jack D. Forbes uses the figure as a metaphor for colonialism and exploitation more generally, arguing that Western society suffers from a deep-rooted wendigo ‘disease’. In *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* (a 2008 revised edition of a work originally published in 1979), he writes:

Wétiko is a Cree term (*windigo* in Ojibway, *wintiko* in Powhatan) which refers to a cannibal or, more specifically, to an evil person or spirit who terrorizes other creatures by means of terrible evil acts, including cannibalism. [...] I have come to the conclusion that *imperialism and exploitation are forms of cannibalism and, in fact, are precisely*

⁶⁵ Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth*, pp. 139-62; Bacqueville de la Potherie, ‘Onaouientagos’, in *Windigo*, ed. and trans. by Colombo, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Grace Dillon, ‘Foreword’, in Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits*, pp. 15-19 (p. 19). See also: Lou Marano et al., ‘Windigo Psychosis: The Anatomy of an Emic-Etic Confusion [and Comments and Reply]’, *Current Anthropology*, 23.4 (1982), 385-412 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/202868>>; Robert Brightman, ‘The Windigo in the Material World’, *Ethnohistory*, 35.4 (1988), 337-79 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/482140>> [accessed 2 March 2020]; James B. Waldram, *Revenge of the Windigo: The Construction of the Mind and Mental Health of North American Aboriginal Peoples* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

*those forms of cannibalism which are most diabolical or evil. [...] Cannibalism, as I define it, is the consuming of another's life for one's own private purpose of profit.*⁶⁷

For Forbes, cannibalism does not necessarily entail the physical consumption of the victim's body; instead, a cannibal – or *wétiko* – is someone who exploits the life of another (often to the point of killing the other) for their own benefit:

Thus, the slaver who forces blacks or Indians to lose their lives in the slave-trade or who drains away their lives in a slave system is a cannibal. He may 'eat' other people immediately (as in the deaths of tens of millions of blacks in the process of enslavement or shipment) or he may 'eat' their flesh gradually over a period of years.

Thus, the wealthy exploiter 'eats' the flesh of the oppressed workers, the wealthy matron 'eats' the lives of her servants, the imperialist 'eats' the flesh of the conquered, and so on (p. 25).

Forbes links this cannibalistic exploitation strongly to Europe and white America: he describes Christopher Columbus as 'a clear example of an insane person, a killer and a cannibal', and criticises the tendency of European historiography to equate civilisation with exploitative, 'wétiko-dominated' societies (pp. 33, 38-39). Similar to how Johnston describes colonists and exploitative corporations as wendigos, Forbes argues that the wendigo disease is spread through imperialism, coming with the Roman Empire to the tribes of Europe, then spreading from Europe to the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific.⁶⁸ He describes Yehoshu'a ben Yosef (Jesus) as:

an 'Indian'. That is, he was a non-white [...] of very poor origins who [...] retired to the desert or mountain peaks to seek visions, never built any monuments, never saved any money, challenged the wealthy and the powerful, and publicly condemned greed, dogmatism and the acquisition of wealth.

⁶⁷ Jack D. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*, revised edition (New York: Seven Stories, 2008), p. 24, emphasis in original. Further references to Forbes' work in this section are given as page numbers in the body of the text.

⁶⁸ Forbes does acknowledge the roles that other empires and cultures (e.g. Chinese, Egyptian, Aztec) have played, but he argues that 'Europeans are [...] the major transmitters' of the wendigo disease (pp. 45-46).

Forbes laments, however, the fact that Jesus' teachings have been 'pervert[ed] [...] into a materialistic, *wétiko* series of cults' which have been used to spread the disease of oppression and exploitation (p. 40).

In the previous chapter, I examined the wendigo as a wild man; in this chapter, I examine the wendigo as a cannibal. In particular, I examine how the wendigo is used to explore the relations between cannibalism, colonialism, capitalism, and violence. I start by focussing on two 21st century novels: *Three Day Road*, by Canadian Joseph Boyden, and *The Round House*, by Native American Louise Erdrich.⁶⁹ I then discuss two contemporary films: *Ravenous*, directed by Briton Antonia Bird, and *The Last Winter*, directed by American Larry Fessenden. The two novels are told from the perspective of Indigenous characters, while both films have a primarily white perspective, with Indigenous characters having fairly minor roles; all four works, however, feature the wendigo and – in some form – cannibalism.

The Wendigo in Boyden's *Three Day Road* and Erdrich's *The Round House*

In Joseph Boyden's 2005 novel *Three Day Road*, Xavier Bird, a young Cree man, returns to Canada and his aunt Niska after fighting in the First World War and losing a leg. Niska, a medicine woman who has inherited her father's gift for defeating wendigos, takes Xavier by canoe back to her home in the bush, and the novel consists mainly of flashbacks to each of their pasts, with most focussing on the experiences of Xavier and his childhood friend Elijah Whiskeyjack in the war. The two Cree men are snipers, and both kill many people, but while Xavier is clearly upset by the violence that surrounds him and longs to return home, Elijah finds meaning and pleasure in the killing; as the war progresses, he even starts taking scalps of his victims as trophies. Eventually, Xavier realises that his friend is becoming a wendigo, and he reluctantly kills Elijah.

Throughout the novel, Elijah's behaviour and experiences are described in ways that are clearly reminiscent of the insatiable, cannibalistic hunger of the wendigo in traditional stories such as

⁶⁹ While both authors claim Indigenous ancestry, Erdrich is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, but Boyden's claims to indigeneity have never been confirmed. Nevertheless, the latter's novel features Indigenous protagonists and takes an Indigenous approach to the wendigo.

those retold by Johnston. For example, during an out of body experience on the ship across the Atlantic, Elijah sees:

Men in hammocks sleeping. Some tossing. Others sick. Rows and rows of meat, they look like meat wrapped in wool blankets.⁷⁰

Later, after the two friends have experienced much fighting, Elijah volunteers to help with burying the dead. As Xavier relates:

Before he leaves a corpse, Elijah tells me he has taken to opening each man's eyes and staring into them, then closing them with his calloused right hand, letting a strange spark of warmth accumulate deep in his gut each time that he does it [...] he says the spark fills his belly when it gnaws for food (p. 227).

Towards the end, Xavier sees 'a hunger [for killing] in Elijah that he can't satisfy', and at one point, Elijah gives Xavier some meat before telling him it is human flesh. Xavier gags and sticks his finger down his throat to make himself vomit out the meat, at which Elijah claims that he was only joking and that the meat is in fact horse. However, he has 'the gleam of the trickster [...] in his eyes', and it is never entirely clear whether or not he has tried to trick Xavier into eating human flesh (pp. 369, 352).

On one level, Elijah's transgression may seem to be that he treats humans as if they are animals – a transgression which, of course, forms the basis of cannibalism. While the two friends had hunted animals together in their childhood, Elijah has now become addicted to hunting humans. In the chapter following the horsemeat incident, Elijah asks for Xavier's help; they construct a fire, and Elijah presents a shoulder blade, which Xavier initially assumes to have come from a bear, but which Elijah reveals to be from a German soldier. Elijah wants Xavier to perform a divination on the bone to determine where other Germans are. When used on the bones of animals, this is a traditional practice which has featured earlier in the novel in flashbacks; Xavier, however, angrily refuses to divine for Elijah. As such, Elijah's hunting can be seen as

⁷⁰ Joseph Boyden, *Three Day Road* (London: Phoenix, 2006), p. 143. Further references to Boyden's novel in this section are given as page numbers in the body of the text.

a perversion of traditional practices: rather than animal prey, he seeks out and kills human prey, and it is this which makes him a wendigo.

However, Elijah's killings are also – at least in Xavier's view – unnecessary. In flashbacks to traditional life in Canada, there is an emphasis on only killing and taking what is needed: when Xavier and Elijah reluctantly kill a marten in the prologue, Xavier skins it carefully 'to not damage the fur, to keep the body intact. I want Auntie [Niska] to see that I do not waste' (p. 2). In one of Niska's flashbacks (which features a wendigo transformation), she relates how every part of a hare is valuable, and after a bear is caught, none of it is wasted 'for fear of insulting [the] animal'. Despite the hunger in the village, some of the villagers even believe that it was wrong of the hunters to kill the bear during its hibernation (pp. 40-44). In contrast, by the end of the novel, Elijah is killing primarily for the joy of killing. He is not merely treating humans as if they are animals; he is treating them in a way which, following traditional customs, would be unacceptable *even if* applied to animals. After refusing to divine for him, Xavier berates Elijah, telling him that one should only hunt 'for sustenance'. Elijah, however, claims that he does indeed hunt for sustenance, arguing, 'I have found the one thing I am truly talented at, and that is killing men. I do not need food when I have this' (p. 363). Elijah, by this point, is becoming neither human nor animal. He does not need – or at least, he believes that he does not need – to eat; he needs only the thrill of killing.

Throughout much of the novel, Elijah is addicted to morphine, and this also seems to be relevant to his wendigo transformation. The first time he takes 'the medicine' is on the ship from Canada to Europe: an American called Grey Eyes gives him stolen morphine when he discovers Elijah sick on the deck. It is then, under the influence of the medicine, that Elijah has his vision of the sleeping men who 'look like meat' (pp. 139-43). Despite his hatred of the morphine, Xavier ends up addicted to it himself after he is given it as treatment when he loses his leg. He describes the drug as a man-eating, wendigo-like force:

Their morphine eats men. It has fed on me for the last months, and when it is all gone
I will be the one to starve to death. I will not be able to live without it (p. 11).

This leg loss and subsequent addiction happen immediately after Xavier kills Elijah, and because he has taken Elijah's identity tag and discarded his own, he is believed by the nurses

who treat him – and by those who write to Niska to inform her – to be Elijah, while ‘Xavier’ is believed to have died on the battlefield. After he returns to Canada, Niska takes him back to the bush in her canoe, and on the way, she constructs a *matatosowin* (sweat lodge) and performs a healing ceremony for Xavier (pp. 412-32). Xavier, it seems, has inherited the spirit of the wendigo from his friend, and along with it, the name Elijah Whiskeyjack and the addiction to morphine.

For Boyden, as for Forbes, the wendigo is strongly associated with violence, and it appears to be Elijah’s contact with Europe that causes his transformation. In contrast to the wendigo in the writing of Forbes and Johnston (and Erdrich, discussed below), Elijah himself actually exemplifies *Indigenous* violence *against* Europeans, his victims being almost exclusively German soldiers. However, he and Xavier can also be seen as victims themselves, and the force to which they fall victim is a European one. On a broad level, it is the European war which turns Elijah into a wendigo, placing him in a situation in which mercy and hesitation can be fatal and in which violence is rewarded: he eventually rises to the rank of corporal due to his high kill count. However, there are also more specific ways in which Europe aids his transformation. For example, in contrast to the healing ability of Indigenous medicine in the novel, the army’s medicine (morphine) is presented as an anthropophagic force which infects first Elijah and then Xavier. Furthermore, Elijah begins taking scalps of his victims (another practice which disgusts Xavier) after a group of French soldiers that they meet at Christmastime suggest that he should keep evidence of his kills. Remembering this meeting later, Xavier privately reflects, ‘They [the Frenchmen] put the chill in me. I think that they are *windigos*’ (pp. 228-32, 235).

It also emerges that Elijah was repeatedly sexually abused by a nun while at the residential school where he and Xavier were sent as children. He recalls this memory after he murders both Grey Eyes and their commanding officer, Lieutenant Breech – the only time he deliberately kills anyone who is not an enemy soldier (pp. 385-87).⁷¹ This is not the only instance of sexual violence in the novel, nor indeed the only instance of it related to Christianity. In earlier flashbacks, Niska has been having a passionate relationship with a French trapper in the bush. After several months of not seeing him, she eventually decides to

⁷¹ In an earlier chapter, Elijah instinctively shoots someone before realising it is a child; in the same scene, Xavier similarly kills a civilian woman (p. 347).

seek him out in Moose Factory, and they have sex in a church. This initially seems consensual, but once the act is finished, the Frenchman declares that he has ‘fucked the heathen Indian out of [her] in this church’, that he has taken away her power as a medicine woman and ‘sent it to burn in hell where it belongs’, leaving her ‘just another squaw whore’. Horrified by this, Niska flees the church and returns to the bush, healing herself by constructing a *matatosowin* and performing a similar ritual to that with which she heals Xavier at the end of the novel, suggesting that this Frenchman, like those who encourage Elijah to start taking scalps, is a wendigo (pp. 196-200).

The wendigo also embodies violence – and in particular, sexual violence against Indigenous women – in Louise Erdrich’s 2012 novel *The Round House*. The novel begins in 1988 with thirteen-year-old Native American Joe Coutts and his father, a tribal judge, learning that Joe’s mother, Geraldine, has been violently raped, and her attacker is later revealed to have been a white man named Linden Lark. It also emerges that Linden has murdered another Native woman, Mayla Wolfskin. Linden’s twin sister, Linda, who was rejected by their mother at birth and raised by a Native family (the Wishkobs), describes her brother as ‘a man who set loose his monster’. She believes that she herself is tied to this monster, saying:

I gave and gave, but know what? It was still hungry. Know why? Because no matter how much it ate, it couldn’t get the right thing. There was always something it needed.⁷²

The description of Linden’s inner monster as one that eats and is never satisfied is clearly reminiscent of the wendigo, which has been mentioned earlier in the novel. Joe and his friend Cappy eventually decide to kill Linden, and after they do this, Joe worries that he will ‘become a wiindigoo [...] [i]nfected by Lark’ (p. 343). Joe’s mother also believes that Linden is a wendigo, and after Linden’s death, Joe’s father claims that he ‘met the definition of a wiindigoo’ (pp. 290, 358).

Maggie Kilgour discusses the parallels between consumption and sexual intercourse, both of which are a form of incorporation and of ‘mak[ing] two bodies one’, and it is perhaps unsurprising that the wendigo, which represents a violent and insatiable desire to consume, has

⁷² Louise Erdrich, *The Round House* (London: Corsair, 2013), p. 350. Further references to Erdrich’s novel in this section are given as page numbers in the body of the text.

also come to embody sexual violence.⁷³ The wendigo's defining characteristic (insatiable cannibalism) is a violent perversion of a basic human need (eating), and so it follows that its sexual behaviour will be similarly violent and perverse. Hadley Louise Friedland considers the similarities between wendigos and people who sexually abuse children, comparing the characteristics and tactics of wendigos in traditional stories with those of abusers, as well as considering the factors which may contribute both to wendigo transformations and to the actions of abusers.⁷⁴

Forbes identifies patriarchy and 'female subordination' as symptoms of the wendigo disease, contrasting 'egalitarian indigenous societies' with male-dominated empires and 'hegemonic religions' such as Catholicism, 'ultra-orthodox Islam' and 'priestly-controlled' Hinduism and Judaism.⁷⁵ He argues, for example, that:

white empires in the Americas often ignored female leadership, instead selecting [Indigenous] American males to be brokers, leaders, and co-opted spokespersons.

In the United States white officials and missionaries together often sought to force Native women into the house, persuading them to give up their control of horticulture and wild food gathering and their importance as food-providers in favor of a 'more civilized' domesticated role.⁷⁶

This desire of white patriarchy to strip Indigenous women of their powers can be seen in both novels: in the Frenchman's sexual violence against Niska, and in Linden Lark's sexual violence against Geraldine and Mayla. The acts of both men, however, result in their own destruction: while Linden is killed by Joe and Cappy, Niska, after healing herself in the *matatosowin* ceremony, constructs a shaking tent and asks the spirit of the lynx 'to go out and find the source of my hurt and extinguish it'. A few months later, she learns from her mother that the French

⁷³ Maggie Kilgour, *From Cannibalism to Communion: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 7-8.

⁷⁴ Hadley Louise Friedland, *The Wetiko Legal Principles: Cree and Anishinabek Responses to Violence and Victimization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). Although this book was published after *The Round House*, Erdrich cites Friedland's work as a major help in her understanding of 'wiindigoo law' (pp. 373-74).

⁷⁵ Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, pp. 143-50.

⁷⁶ Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, p. 147. As may be apparent by now, there is not a huge amount of nuance in Forbes' argument, and his reference to 'egalitarian indigenous societies' in particular reads like something of an oversimplification. Nevertheless, his main point here is, I would argue, both accurate and relevant to the current discussion.

trapper has died after throwing himself from a window, apparently under the belief that he was being pursued by demons. Whether or not Niska intended for him to die is never entirely clear; she says that, after her mother told her this, ‘I stared into the fire for a long time [...] not able to look at her’ (pp. 199-200).

For Erdrich, the wendigo’s violence is undoubtedly racialised as well as sexualised. Joe’s mother and Mayla are both Indigenous, and Erdrich writes in an afterword to *The Round House* that, of the high number of rapes and sexual assaults committed against Native American women, 86 percent are perpetrated by non-Native men (p. 372).⁷⁷ Furthermore, the novel presents white attempts to violate not only Indigenous people’s bodies but also their land rights. While Joe and his father are looking through files and past cases for clues to the identity of Geraldine’s attacker, they come across a case relating to the Lark and Wishkob families. Following the deaths of her adoptive parents (Betty and Albert Wishkob), Linda has continued to live at their house, which is on tribal land, with the agreement of the Wishkobs’ three biological children. Linda’s (and Linden’s) biological mother, Grace Lark, has then appealed for guardianship over Linda (who is now middle aged), ‘in order to manage her affairs’, on the grounds that Linda is ‘severely depressed and mentally confused’. Grace claims that the Wishkobs’ house, and 160 acres of land around it, have been left to Linda as inheritance, and has openly stated that she plans to develop the land. Joe’s father, who was the judge in the case, rejected the appeal, not least because Linda showed no signs of mental confusion. The case is significant, however, as a brazen attempt by a white family, the Larks, to obtain legally protected Native land. Joe’s father believes that Linden resents him for his judgement in this case, and speculates – correctly, as it turns out – that Linden may be the attacker. Joe’s father also describes Grace, who is now dead, as having had ‘a way of inciting emotional violence’, and wonders if her son has ‘absorbed her anger’ and ‘poison’ (pp. 60-63). And indeed, Linda seems to think that her brother’s ‘monster’ was also present in their (biological) mother:

There was always something it needed. Something missing in his mother, too. I’ll tell you what it was: me. My powerful spirit. Me! His mother couldn’t face what she did to

⁷⁷ Erdrich refers to the 2007 Amnesty International report *Maze of Injustice*, which also contains the grim statistic that 34.1% of Native women will be raped in their lifetimes (a figure which is almost certainly an underestimate, as Native women often do not report rape).

her baby, but even more: that what she did could not destroy me. Still [...] she could still call me after telling the doctor to let me die. All those years later (p. 350).

The wendigo in Erdrich's novel seems to be present not only in Linden but also in Grace, embodying not only violence against Native women, but the violent invasion and theft of land from all Natives.

As well as the loss of tribal land, law and sovereignty are also major themes in Erdrich's novel. Part of the difficulty that Joe's father faces in trying to construct a case against Linden is that it is initially unclear whether his crimes were committed on land under federal law or on the grounds of the round house (which are under tribal law). However, he later explains to Joe that the 1978 *Oliphant v. Suquamish* case '[t]ook from us the right to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes on our [tribal] land', meaning that, even if it could be proved that Linden's crimes were committed on the grounds of the round house, he could not (at least under existing legal precedent) be prosecuted by a tribal court. When Joe asks why he continues with his legal work despite all these infuriating obstacles, his father replies that he and other tribal judges 'are trying to build a solid base here for our sovereignty [...] *We want the right to prosecute criminals of all races on all lands within our original boundaries*' (pp. 268-69, emphasis in original).

Questions around Indigenous law and sovereignty have long been a key issue in relation to the wendigo, perhaps most clearly exemplified in the 1907 trial of the Ojibwe brothers Zhauwunogeezhigo-gaubow and Pesequan, aka Jack and Joseph Fiddler. Jack Fiddler was well known for his abilities to defeat wendigos (he had allegedly defeated fourteen), and, while European diseases such as smallpox and measles were ravaging Indigenous Canadian communities, word eventually reached the North-West Mounted Police that the two brothers had executed a 'delirious' woman as wendigo. The brothers were arrested and taken to Norway House; Jack hanged himself while a prisoner, and Joseph was tried for murder. After hearing the argument that the executed woman was believed to be a wendigo, and that the other members of the band had fully supported the killing, the judge advised the six-man jury, 'What the law forbids, no pagan belief can justify'. They reluctantly found Joseph Fiddler guilty of murder, but made a recommendation for mercy; the judge sentenced him to hang. Local Euro-Canadians made

several appeals for his release, which were eventually successful. In a sad irony, however, the order for Joseph's release arrived three days after his death, probably from tuberculosis.⁷⁸

In *Three Day Road*, Niska relates to her sleeping nephew a memory from her childhood which is in some ways reminiscent of the Fiddler case. It is a time when '[t]he snows were settled in so deeply that winter had become a part of us'. Food is very scarce, not least due to the actions of colonial authorities: the band of thirty people is dependent on fewer hunters than usual, since '[t]hree families' hunters had been taken away the autumn before, two by the North-West Mounted Police, one by Hudson's Bay Company rum' (p. 39). Although a group of hunters eventually kill and bring back a bear, the meat from that soon runs out, and the families become desperately hungry again. Eventually, a young hunter called Micah decides to leave the village and heads off into the bush with his wife (who is never named) and their baby.

Many weeks later, Micah's wife returns to the village with the baby and confesses that, following Micah's death from cold, she butchered his body to feed herself and the baby, since they had no other source of food. She also claims that near their lodge they had found 'tracks that resembled a man's but much larger, holes in the snow gouged where claws instead of toes had dug in. Tracks of the *windigo*'. She further states that:

on the night before she cut into Micah's flesh, a strange man-beast came out of the bush. He threatened to take and eat her child if [she] did not feed it the next day.

However, since they have tasted human flesh, the woman and baby are now both 'turning *windigo*'; the woman starts growling madly and gains seemingly superhuman strength, while her baby starts desperately suckling for milk and cries constantly. Niska's father, who has slain wendigos in the past, reluctantly kills the two of them to prevent the wendigo 'madness' from spreading. A few days later, a group of hunters return with a moose, and winter begins to thaw into spring (pp. 45-51).

Next autumn, however, a group of North-West Mounted Police take away Niska's father to stand trial for murder. Niska sees this as an act of ignorance and malice. The Cree see no reason

⁷⁸ James R. Stevens, 'Zhouwuno-geezhigo-gaubow', *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* <http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/zhouwuno_geezhigo_gaubow_13E.html> [accessed 5 March 2021]. See also Thomas Fiddler and James R. Stevens, *Killing the Shamen* (Moonbeam, Ontario: Penumbra, 1985).

why they should follow settler laws when it is the settlers who live on the Cree's land and who have, since their early interactions, relied on the Cree for handouts and knowledge. Under Indigenous customs and traditional beliefs, the killing of a wendigo is not only permissible but often necessary (pp. 52-54). As with the Fiddler case, from the point of view of the colonial authorities, the execution of a wendigo is plain murder, an unlawful killing performed outside of legal processes which cannot be justified by 'pagan belief'. For the Indigenous community, however, the execution of a wendigo *is* a legal act, one which must be performed according to proper traditional processes. A wendigo accusation is not simply an excuse for murdering an unpopular neighbour.⁷⁹ The importance of following proper process is exemplified in a story recounted by Joe's grandfather Mooshum in *The Round House*, which is similar to Niska's in some respects, but with a crucial difference: the woman accused of being a wendigo is in fact innocent.

Mooshum's story, like Niska's, takes place in a harsh winter, when a group of Ojibwe have been forced onto a reservation. Akiikwe ('Earth Woman') and her husband Mirage have always been able to find food, but this year they are struggling. Mooshum contrasts the hunger they face with the settlers' prosperity:

Ah, those first reservation years, when they squeezed us! Down to only a few square miles. We starved while the cows of settlers lived fat off the fenced grass of our old hunting grounds. In those first years our white father with the big belly ate ten ducks for dinner and didn't even send us the feet. Those were bad years (p. 216).

Mirage, who has a roving eye, decides he is tired of Akiikwe and so convinces himself that she is becoming possessed by the spirit of a wendigo. He persuades a group of men of this, despite apparently having no evidence, and they capture her and tell her twelve-year-old son, Nanapush, that he must kill her.⁸⁰ He refuses, attacking one of the men, and after a series of

⁷⁹ See Brightman, 'The Windigo in the Material World', pp. 357-58 for a rebuttal of the argument that wendigo killings were the result of 'witch hysteria or scapegoating'. Another story of the conflict between Indigenous and colonial approaches to wendigo cases can be found in Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (published in 1999, before both Boyden's and Erdrich's novels): the tale of Chachagathoo, a shaman who was imprisoned by the authorities for attempting to cure a man of a wendigo possession and who, like Jack Fiddler, hanged herself in jail (pp. 245-47). Highway's novel is discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

⁸⁰ 'Nanapush' is another name for Nana'b'oozoo, the Ojibwe trickster figure whom Johnston describes as the archenemy of wendigos (see Chapter One). A similar figure in Cree storytelling is Weesageechak, often anglicised to 'Whiskeyjack', as in Elijah's surname in *Three Day Road*. Tricksters and their relationships with wendigos are discussed further in Chapter Three.

struggles, the mother and son escape, heading out into the bush alone. Eventually, they are able to catch a buffalo, which they bring back and share with the relatives who had previously tried to kill Akiikwe, and the attempted unjust execution is apparently forgiven (pp. 210-14, 216-20).

Friedland offers some ‘*wetiko* legal principles’ which appear to be followed consistently in traditional stories when dealing with suspected wendigos or people believed to be undergoing a wendigo transformation. Specifically, she suggests that ‘legitimate decisions are collective and open’, with final decisions being made by ‘leaders, medicine people, and the closest family members of the *wetiko*’. Evidence must be gained through observation and questioning to determine whether or not someone is a wendigo, and if they are, attempts at healing should be offered before resorting to execution. She argues that the ‘vast majority of recorded *wetiko* cases demonstrate the most conventional response to a *wetiko* has always been healing’.⁸¹ In the case of Mooshum’s story, these procedures are clearly not followed: the decision to execute Akiikwe is made by a group of men without any evidence, and no attempts are made to heal her. Later in the novel, Mooshum explains:

It was true that there could be wiindigoog [wendigos] – people who lost all human compunctions in hungry times and craved the flesh of others. But people could also be falsely accused. The cure for a wiindigoog was often simple: large quantities of hot soup. No one had tried the soup on [Akiikwe]. No one had consulted the old and wise (p. 250).

The (deliberate) failure of Mirage and his collaborators to follow proper processes demonstrates the importance of these processes in traditional communities. Similar to Johnston’s story of the resentful sorcerer, it is not the (in this case suspected) wendigo woman who is the true source of violence and destruction, but her husband.⁸²

In both *Three Day Road* and *The Round House*, the wendigo represents violence, and in each case, this violence is both racialised and sexualised. Linden Lark and the French trapper both

⁸¹ Friedland, *The Wetiko Legal Principles*, pp. 74-108. See also Brightman, ‘The Windigo in the Material World’, pp. 357-58.

⁸² Incidentally, Linda speculates (pp. 350-51) that her brother may have been motivated in part by a jealous bitterness at being rejected by Mayla, which is also reminiscent of Johnston’s sorcerer story.

embody white male sexual violence against Indigenous women; Elijah, meanwhile, is an Indigenous man who inflicts violence primarily on European (German) men, though he himself is a victim of violent European forces, including sexual violence from a Christianising woman (the nun at the residential school) as well as the more immediate forces of the European war and morphine. Both novels also highlight issues of law and sovereignty when it comes to dealing with wendigos: the imposition of colonial law in reaction to the (in Indigenous terms, legitimate) execution of Micah's wife and baby is shown to be harmful and destructive, and the inability of the imposed legal systems in the US to deal with Linden's crimes causes Joe and Cappy to take direct, violent action themselves. Indeed, the colonial legal systems can themselves be seen as wendigo-like, cannibalising the Indigenous legal traditions that they see as backward superstitions rather than as legitimate processes, just as Johnston's 'man named Weendigo' sees his victims as beavers rather than as fellow humans. As Grace Dillon writes in the Foreword to Smallman's book, '[i]mperialism is cannibalism, the consumption of one people by another'.⁸³ As seen in the previous chapter, Western culture has even cannibalised the wendigo itself, repurposing it for its own narrative ends. In the following section, I examine two representations of the wendigo in what is perhaps the most typically 'Western' form of media – film: Antonia Bird's *Ravenous* and Larry Fessenden's *The Last Winter*.

The Wendigo on the Big Screen: *Ravenous* and *The Last Winter*

The 1999 film *Ravenous*, written by Ted Griffin and directed by Antonia Bird, is primarily set in and around Fort Spencer, a remote military outpost in the Sierra Nevada mountains, in the 1840s. When a starved, frostbitten man named Colqhoun⁸⁴ arrives at the fort with a horror story of cannibalism on his journey through the mountains, a party of soldiers headed by the good-natured Colonel Hart (the fort's commander) and the reserved Captain Boyd (a new arrival at the outpost and the film's protagonist) set out to try and find survivors. They bring Colqhoun with them to show the way, but when they reach the cave where he claims the cannibalism took place, Boyd realises (too late) that Colqhoun himself was the murderous cannibal; in the ensuing chaos, Colqhoun kills (or appears to kill) all of the soldiers except Boyd, who hides

⁸³ Dillon, 'Foreword', p. 19.

⁸⁴ This unusual spelling (as opposed to *Colquhoun*) is used in the credits and subtitles.

and survives by eating the flesh of one of his dead comrades. When he finally returns to the fort, he learns with horror that Hart's replacement is Colqhoun, masquerading as one of his own victims, Colonel Ives. The others at the fort, including the visiting General Slauson, refuse to believe Boyd's insistence that 'Ives' is in fact the cannibal who murdered Hart and the other men from the fort (as well as his travelling companions), but Colqhoun privately explains to Boyd how cannibalism has allowed him to recover from illness and injuries, and he encourages Boyd to give in to his own cannibalistic desires. The rest of the film focusses on the ideological and physical struggle between the two men, with Boyd eventually killing both himself and Colqhoun in a bear trap.⁸⁵

After Colqhoun's story, the outpost's Native American scout, George, warns the others about the wendigo. Despite apparently being able to understand English, he explains the wendigo in his own language,⁸⁶ which is translated by Hart as:

an old Indian myth from the north [...] a man eats another's flesh – it's usually an enemy [...] and he [...] steals his strength, essence, spirit [...] and his hunger becomes craven, insatiable. And the more he eats, the more he wants to, and the more he eats, the stronger he becomes (0:23:00).⁸⁷

As in Indigenous stories, insatiability is a defining feature of the wendigo in *Ravenous*, along with superhuman strength and, of course, cannibalism. The strength-giving qualities of cannibalism presented in the film are particularly interesting when compared to the wendigo in the work of Boyden and Erdrich. While the wendigo is presented in the novels discussed above as a sickness from which one can be healed, cannibalism in *Ravenous* can actually be a healing process: Colqhoun explains how cannibalism cured his tuberculosis, and after he has eaten the bodies of his victims from the fort, the gunshot wound that Boyd inflicted on him is no longer

⁸⁵ *Ravenous*, dir. by Antonia Bird (20th Century Fox, 1999). Further references to *Ravenous* in this section are given as timestamps in the body of the text.

⁸⁶ The English subtitles for the Amazon Prime version of the film say that George speaks in 'Washu', possibly a misspelling of Washo/Washoe, a language native to the California/Nevada area where the film is set. However, Grace Dillon, an Anishinaubae scholar, writes that George speaks in Ojibwe ('Windigo', *Portland State University* <<http://web.pdx.edu/~dillong/Windigo%20%28Dillon%29.pdf>> [accessed 25 March 2021], p. 4). Having no knowledge of either language, I am unable to give an informed opinion on which is correct, though I am more inclined to believe Dillon's expertise.

⁸⁷ The reference to eating specifically 'an enemy' to gain strength could suggest a conflation of the wendigo with (disputed) accounts of Iroquoian cannibalism (see, for example, Thomas S. Abler, 'Iroquois Cannibalism: Fact Not Fiction', *Ethnohistory*, 27.4 (1980), 309-16 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/481728>> [accessed 15 July 2021]).

visible. It also appears that eating human flesh helps Boyd to recover from a broken leg after his initial escape from Colqhoun. This is not to say that cannibalism is presented as a good thing; Colqhoun is clearly a villain, and Boyd's resistance to him is heroic, while another wendigo (discussed below) quickly realises that life as a cannibal is too miserable to be worth living. Turning wendigo, in other words, may heal physical wounds, but it is a spiritual curse, and one which cannot itself be cured through healing, only through death: when Boyd asks George's sister Martha how to stop the wendigo, she replies, 'You stop wendigo, you give yourself. You must die' (0:54:54). And indeed, death is the only way in which the film's wendigos are defeated – through a combination of killing and self-sacrifice on the part of Boyd. *Ravenous* is essentially a Western, and in the spirit of its Western predecessors, the violence of the wendigo can only be defeated through the heroic violence of Boyd – a man who has himself tasted human meat by this point. Indeed, the final shot of the film shows Boyd and Colqhoun both held inside a bear trap which has closed upon them like a giant mouth (see Figure 3) – perhaps a visual suggestion that the wendigo can only be defeated by being eaten itself; it takes a wendigo to kill a wendigo.⁸⁸



Figure 3: The closing shot of *Ravenous*, showing Boyd (Guy Pearce) and Colqhoun (Robert Carlyle) held in a deadly embrace inside the mouth-like bear trap (1:36:56).

⁸⁸ While this conclusion may seem at odds with much of what has been discussed so far (particularly in relation to the work of Boyden – Niska is clearly not a wendigo, for example), it is an idea to which I return in Chapter Three.

In a surprise twist roughly three quarters of the way through the film, Colonel Hart, whom Boyd had reluctantly left for dead outside the cave, reappears at Fort Spencer and murders the last two soldiers there apart from Boyd, 'Ives', and himself. He explains to Boyd that, though he felt himself dying at the cave, he woke to find Colqhoun feeding him human meat, after which 'there was no turning back' (1:16:20). He has become a wendigo, and he and Colqhoun now plan to convert Boyd as well. Hart is the wendigo mentioned above who realises that he 'can't live like this' and eventually asks Boyd to kill him (which Boyd does) (1:25:53); all the same, it is significant that, while Boyd fiercely resists Colqhoun, the latter has no difficulty in transforming the fort's former commander into a wendigo. He similarly has no trouble convincing General Slauson and the rest of the military establishment that he is indeed Colonel Ives, and near the end of the film, Slauson unwittingly tastes some stew containing human meat. The tendency of US military officers to be easily tricked and converted by the wendigo Colqhoun hints at the susceptibility of this violent institution to infection by the wendigo disease.

Indeed, rather like the Canadian Army in *Three Day Road*, the US Army in *Ravenous* is shown to reward and encourage wendigo behaviour. At the beginning of the film, Boyd receives the dubious honour of being promoted to captain, followed immediately by his posting to Fort Spencer. It emerges through flashbacks that the supposed act of heroism for which he was promoted was in fact rather questionable in its motivations: during a battle of the Mexican-American War, he played dead while his soldiers were massacred around him; after being piled up with the other bodies at the Mexican base, the blood dripping from his commanding officer's wounds into his mouth gave him a mysterious superhuman strength, and he was able to capture the base.⁸⁹ After a celebration in which a vast table of army officers devour steaks, Slauson privately tells Boyd that he is 'no hero' and that his posting to Fort Spencer is a punishment for his cowardice; however, since he did single-handedly capture an enemy base, he is being promoted and outwardly praised as a hero, apparently to keep up morale in the Army and to avoid setting a 'bad precedent' (0:02:06, 0:11:12). In other words, he is being (nominally) rewarded for the 'heroic' act of capturing the Mexican base, but punished for his preceding 'cowardice' of playing dead. However, it becomes clear throughout the rest of the film that the strength that enabled him to capture the base, since it was derived from consuming (part of) a

⁸⁹ Juan A. Ramirez, 'Bonnets, Guns and Trails: Westerns Made by Women', *Juan A. Ramirez*, 25 June 2017 <<https://www.itsnumberjuan.com/all/westerns-by-women>> [accessed 30 March 2021].

fellow human, is an aspect of the wendigo – or at least, this film’s version of the wendigo; in other words, he is rewarded for wendigo behaviour. In contrast, his refusal to die and to kill others in the opening battle can be seen not as an act of cowardice but, in Danette DiMarco’s words, ‘a form of unpatriotic resistance’ to the Army’s expansionist aims in the Mexican-American War – aims which are, of course, congruent with the idea of Manifest Destiny, which is discussed below.⁹⁰ Later in the film, Colqhoun tells Boyd that ‘it’s not courage to resist me [...] it’s courage to accept me’, and describes Boyd’s moral refusal as ‘the last bastion of a coward’ (1:07:58). While it is not certain that these two decisions of Boyd’s (his refusal to fight and his refusal to become wendigo) are equivalent, there is certainly a suggestion that, just as the morality which Colqhoun dismisses as cowardice is in fact a strength, the supposed cowardice for which Boyd is punished at the start of the film is actually a more noble act than the use of wendigo powers to capture of the Mexican base for which he is rewarded.

It is arguably not just the US Army but the entire US which is presented as wendigo-infected in *Ravenous*. As Colqhoun explains to Boyd:

Manifest Destiny. Westward expansion. You know, come April, it’ll all start again. Thousands of gold-hungry Americans will travel over those mountains on their way to new lives, passing right through here. [...] We [wendigos] just need a home. And this country is seeking to be whole, stretching out its arms and consuming all it can. And we merely follow (1:17:01).

Although Colqhoun and his officer converts are the film’s literal cannibals, their prospective victims are also metaphorical cannibals, ‘consuming all [they] can’ in their westward expansion – not only the land and resources of the continent, but also the lives and cultures of its Indigenous inhabitants. As in Forbes’ metaphor, the settlers ‘eat’ the flesh of the Natives. Indeed, it is significant that Colqhoun’s first victim (by his own account) was the Native scout who told him about the wendigo. He is similarly quick to kill the Native George, the only person at the fort to warn the others of the wendigo from the start. Martha, however, is not killed, and remains the sole survivor of the original crew of the fort. In a penultimate shot reminiscent of Punk’s departure in Blackwood’s novella, she flees the fort on foot, having

⁹⁰ Danette DiMarco, ‘Going Wendigo: The Emergence of the Iconic Monster in Margaret Atwood’s “Oryx and Crake” and Antonia Bird’s “Ravenous”’, *College Literature*, 38.4 (2011), 134-55 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41302892>> [accessed 19 February 2020] (p. 142).

realised that a wendigo is among them. The implication is perhaps that the wendigo sickness that afflicts white America is causing whites to cannibalise not only Natives but also each other, and that in the end, the only survivors will be Natives – specifically the Natives who, like Martha and Punk, perceive what is happening before it is too late to save themselves.⁹¹

As in *Three Day Road*, a link between cannibalism and Christianity is also present in *Ravenous*. When Colonel Hart expresses shock at George's description of the wendigo and asks, 'George, people don't still do that, do they?', George replies that the 'white man eats the body of Jesus Christ every Sunday' (0:24:00, Hart's translation). For Hart, the wendigo is a part of Native culture, representing a barbaric practice that must surely have died out with the coming of 'civilisation'. For George, on the other hand, the wendigo is confined neither to Indigenous communities nor to the past: for him, as for Forbes, it is an integral part of white culture and religion in the present day. And indeed, it is not the film's Indigenous characters but their white counterparts (including Hart himself) who become wendigos. In the final confrontation between Colqhoun and Boyd, Colqhoun daubs a bloody cross on his forehead, a sign, in DiMarco's opinion, 'that he views himself as a cultural savior'.⁹² When he arrives at the fort, he introduces himself as 'F. W. Colqhoun, servant of God' (0:16:43), and while he recounts his story, he is caressing a bracelet with a crucifix on it; he wears this again when he appears as 'Ives'. Indeed, with his beard and long hair, he bears at least a physical resemblance to Jesus – or rather, a whitewashed Jesus. He is certainly not the 'Indian' Yehoshu'a ben Yosef that Forbes praises as a challenger of the powerful and an opponent of greed; rather, he is a white man who has cannibalised Jesus, just as Forbes believes most doctrines of Christianity have done, and just as George believes that white men do each week at communion.

Arens writes that cannibalism is something that cultures around the world consistently project onto their neighbours as 'an aspect of cultural-boundary construction and maintenance', i.e. a way of distinguishing between selves and others: they are cannibals, we are not.⁹³ DiMarco argues that this self/other distinction is established – and questioned – in *Ravenous* on a more personal level, between Boyd and Colqhoun: Colqhoun 'serves as the symbolic cannibal', in

⁹¹ It is worth noting, however, that Martha does nothing to help Boyd besides telling him he must 'give [him]self' to destroy the wendigo (see above). Indeed, at one point, she rushes to the aid of 'Ives' when Boyd pulls a knife on him. This is presumably because she was away from the fort the first time Colqhoun arrived, and so she does not recognise him as 'Ives' and instead suspects Boyd of having murdered George and the other men.

⁹² DiMarco, 'Going Wendigo', p. 150.

⁹³ Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth*, p. 145.

opposition to Boyd.⁹⁴ Around the midpoint of the film, however, Boyd resorts to cannibalism himself, and throughout the film's second half, Colqhoun attempts – with some success – to convert him into a fully-fledged wendigo. Ultimately, Boyd destroys both Colqhoun and himself (in addition to Hart), demonstrating his rejection of the wendigo. However, Slauson's consumption of the human stew upon arrival at the fort suggests that the spirit of the wendigo will persist in the US Army, and the audience knows that Colqhoun's prophecy of settlers 'consuming' the continent will prove to be correct. Boyd and Hart learn the hard way that cannibalism and the wendigo are not external to them, either on a cultural or a personal level; similarly, viewers are faced with the idea that is not the 'savage' Natives, but rather the 'heroes' of the Old West (pioneers, gold prospectors, army officers) that are the true cannibals of this time. The subversion is perhaps best expressed when Hart, about to tuck into a bowl of stew that he has made from the flesh of his former second-in-command, cheerfully remarks, 'Well, isn't this civilised?' (1:20:15).

Larry Fessenden's 2006 film *The Last Winter* (co-written with Robert Leaver) also suggests the wendigo's link with white America – and, as in Johnston's writing, with capitalism and humans' exploitation of the natural world. The film is set in the twenty-first century on an oil drilling base in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, where the base's leader, Ed Pollack, is set against environmental scientist James Hoffman and his assistant Elliot Jenkins, who are concerned about the rising temperatures in the area and who refuse to approve Pollack's plans for bringing in drilling equipment before the temperature drops, on the grounds that the transportation will damage the tundra. Workers at the base start disappearing and dying in mysterious ways, and a herd of giant spectral caribou (which may or may not exist only in the imaginations of some characters) seem to be haunting the land near the base. Although it is never quite clear what is going on, it seems that the drilling may have disturbed ghosts that were trapped in the oil. The film's two Indigenous characters, Dawn and Lee, discuss whether the strange occurrences may be due to 'the coming of the Chenoo', which Dawn describes as 'a dark spirit, sometimes called "wendigo"'.⁹⁵ Fessenden, who has a longstanding interest in the figure of the wendigo, has cited Blackwood's story as one of his main influences, and *The Last Winter* abounds with allusions to the novella: footprints in the snow that inexplicably stop;

⁹⁴ DiMarco, 'Going Wendigo', pp. 146-47.

⁹⁵ *The Last Winter*, dir. by Larry Fessenden (IFC Films, 2006), 0:51:57. Further references to *The Last Winter* in this section are given as timestamps in the body of the text.

giant, unknowable nature spirits that carry people through the sky; a man running about with literal ‘feet of fire’ after a plane crash; and even an email client called ‘Defago Xpress’ (which, of course, encounters an ‘unknown error’ when it is most needed to reach the outside world).⁹⁶

In relation to his representation of the wendigo in *The Last Winter*, Fessenden has said:

I’ve read some stuff in which it says that the white man is the wendigo, with this idea of the wendigo, endlessly rapacious, endlessly hungry, endlessly greedy, causing harm [...] in the simplest way, cannibalism [...] cannibalising our entire ecosystem and way of life.⁹⁷

The Last Winter is, first and foremost, a film about environmentalism and the impact of humanity on the planet. Whether the spectral caribou really are ghosts disturbed by oil drilling, or whether they are hallucinations brought on by sour gas released due to climate change (Hoffman’s initial explanation), their coming seems to be humanity’s own doing. It is Hoffman, the environmentalist, who provides the main voice of reason at the base, in contrast to Pollack’s increasing aggression and irrationality, and the two men are eventually forced to work together in the snowy wilderness despite their conflicting views.

On one level, then, it is the oil drillers (and in particular Pollack) who are the wendigos of this film, determined to cannibalise the ‘New World’ and its natural resources to turn a quick profit, like the conquistadors, loggers, and gold prospectors before them. Indeed, Fessenden has described Pollack as following in ‘a great American tradition that has run its course’.⁹⁸ Like many nations, the US is founded on the exploitation of a land and the genocide of its native inhabitants (along with, of course, the violent exploitation of African slaves), and *The Last Winter* suggests that we are finally reaching the point where white Americans will themselves be faced with the consequences of this destructive attitude. The drilling project in the wildlife refuge is framed by the oil company as a drive towards energy independence for the US, but

⁹⁶ Fessenden discusses some of these allusions in Barnick, *The Shape of the Wendigo*; see also Simon Abrams, ‘Hell to Pay: Indie Horror Icon Larry Fessenden on Wendigos and Ugly Americans’, *Roger Ebert*, 16 February 2016 <<https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/hell-to-pay-indie-horror-icon-larry-fessenden-on-wendigos-and-ugly-americans>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

⁹⁷ Barnick, *The Shape of the Wendigo*, 4:27.

⁹⁸ Jeremiah Kipp, ‘This Is the Way the World Ends: An Interview with *The Last Winter* Writer-Director Larry Fessenden’, *Slant Magazine*, 2 October 2007 <<https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/this-is-the-way-the-world-ends-an-interview-with-the-last-winter-writerdirector-larry-fessenden/>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

since the energy source is not renewable, it really amounts to an act of national autocannibalism: the US is feeding its insatiable hunger for energy by consuming a part of itself that it will not be able to recover.

However, the humans are not necessarily the only wendigos in the film: the spectral caribou, though bearing no real resemblance (apart from maybe size) to the wendigo of traditional tales, are nevertheless similar to the wendigo of Blackwood's story and of Fessenden's other work. Recall that the image of an antlered wendigo appears in an illustration of Blackwood's novella and featured in an earlier Fessenden film (*Wendigo*, 2001).⁹⁹ These spectral caribou, like Blackwood's wendigo, appear to be unknowable, otherworldly spirits of the wilderness, whose existence is never conclusively proven.¹⁰⁰ They also appear (though this, again, is ambiguous) to eat people. The wendigo in *The Last Winter*, then, stands not only for American oil companies cannibalising their own planet, but also for the response to this exploitation. It can be seen, in Simon Abrams' words, as 'a corrective', as the earth's response to humanity.¹⁰¹ Hoffman writes in his notes that 'the wilderness' is fighting back against humanity, 'like any organism would fend off a virus' (0:33:00). Of course, this role of the wendigo as a misanthropic nature spirit, as discussed in Chapter One, does not seem to have much in common with the wendigo of traditional narratives, but Fessenden's overall anti-capitalist, anti-exploitation narrative is in keeping with the work of Indigenous writers such as Forbes and Johnston.

⁹⁹ An antlered wendigo also adorns the front cover of a 2016 book edited by Fessenden: *Sudden Storm: A Wendigo Reader*, published by Fiddleblack. The book contains thirteen essays on the wendigo by authors from various perspectives, including, it seems, Chris Hibbard's *The Many Faces of the Wendigo* (also available online), which makes the bizarre conflation between the wendigo and the Inuit tornait mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis (p. 16). Unfortunately, the book is now out of print, so the only information I have on it comes from the website of Fessenden's production company, Glass Eye Pix: <http://glasseyepix.com/project/sudden-storm-a-wendigo-reader/> [accessed 25 March 2021].

¹⁰⁰ This also highlights two contrasting views of what it means to see the wendigo as a 'spirit': for most Western viewers, the ghostlike caribou would probably appear to be the 'spirits' of the film, but the idea of the oil drillers being possessed by the 'spirit' of the wendigo is closer to Indigenous understandings of the figure.

¹⁰¹ Abrams, 'Hell to Pay'.



Figure 4: A spectral caribou advances on an injured Pollack (Ron Perlman) (*The Last Winter*, 1:28:26).

All the same, Fessenden, like Bird, is undoubtedly approaching the wendigo from a white perspective. While Forbes, Johnston, Boyden, and Erdrich explore Indigenous responses to the wendigo and offer ways to overcome it, Fessenden primarily uses the figure to reflect on his own (white American) society. As in *Ravenous*, the film's two Indigenous characters say and do relatively little beyond giving an ominous warning about the wendigo: after giving Pollack some advice (which the latter ignores) and helping with firefighting and the search for a missing crew member, Lee himself vanishes, leaving behind only a pair of boots in the snow. Dawn later goes mad (possibly because she is possessed by the wendigo)¹⁰² and kills another worker, before being badly injured (possibly killed) and then also vanishing. Interestingly, Fessenden has said that, when coming up with ideas for the film, he 'originally imagined a Muslim and a [non-Muslim] white guy stuck out in the middle of nowhere with some forced interdependency between them'.¹⁰³ This cultural/theological contrast was evidently replaced with the ideological conflict between Pollack and Hoffman, but, especially since the film uses a figure from traditional Indigenous belief systems, it could have been interesting to show some kind of philosophical conflict between Pollack and one of the Indigenous characters. Instead, however, Fessenden makes the spiritual element of what is happening more ambiguous and leaves the relevance of Indigenous beliefs to the modern world implicit, with the more explicit conflict

¹⁰² Dillon, 'Windigo', p. 5.

¹⁰³ Kipp, 'This Is the Way the World Ends'.

being between the reactionary capitalist Pollack and the ecologically minded scientist Hoffman.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which the wendigo appears as a cannibalistic figure in works by Indigenous and non-Indigenous creators. Sometimes, the wendigo seems tied to Indigenous cultures, as in Elijah's wish to use a traditional practice to divine the location of his human prey; sometimes, as in Fessenden's work, the wendigo seems to be a part of the natural world; more often, however, the violent cannibalism of the wendigo is linked to colonialism and/or capitalism. In all four of the fictional works discussed in this chapter, there are explicit or implicit cases of white wendigos: the French trapper who abuses Niska; the Frenchmen who encourage Elijah to take scalps; Linden Lark; Colqhoun; Colonel Hart; and Ed Pollack, an embodiment of capitalist white America.

However, there remain key differences between the works discussed here. Despite their dark subject matter, the two novels are arguably more optimistic in their approach to the wendigo: though Xavier and Joe both resort to murder to defeat their respective wendigos, healing is also presented as an option to defeat the spirit. Indeed, both texts explore recovery from trauma and the healing of those who have encountered the wendigo, with Niska seeking to heal her nephew and Joe seeking to heal his mother. In contrast, *Ravenous* presents death as the only answer to a wendigo affliction, and the closing scenes of *The Last Winter* seem to imply that the spectral caribou were the heralds of some kind of apocalypse, with only one character appearing to have survived the events of the film. This difference is perhaps not surprising: as Indigenous creators such as Rebecca Roanhorse and Cowboy Smithx have observed, Natives have 'already survived an apocalypse'.¹⁰⁴ As such, while Fessenden's film addresses white fears of an impending apocalypse, the two novels depict characters recovering from their people's own

¹⁰⁴ Alexandra Alter, "'We've Already Survived an Apocalypse': Indigenous Writers are Changing Sci-Fi", *The New York Times*, 14 August 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/books/indigenous-native-american-sci-fi-horror.html>> [accessed 4 July 2021]; Julian Brave NoiseCat, 'How To Survive an Apocalypse and Keep Dreaming', *The Nation*, 2 June 2020 <<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/native-american-postapocalypse/>> [accessed 4 July 2021].

apocalypse. The wendigo is associated with colonialism and exploitation in all four works, but for Indigenous characters and creators, these are things which have already been experienced and survived, while for Westerners, the prospect of having to suffer the consequences of these acts is terrifying.

It is also worth noting that, in all of the cases discussed here, there is ambiguity or confusion as to the identity of the wendigo and the reality of its cannibalism. Xavier becomes convinced that his friend is a wendigo, but the one time that Elijah professes to cannibalism, he immediately backtracks, and both Xavier and the reader are left with uncertainty; eventually, it appears that Xavier himself becomes possessed by the wendigo when he is mistakenly assigned Elijah's identity. Joe's family and friends are convinced that Linden is a rapist and murderer, but he never faces trial. The story of Akiikwe in *The Round House* highlights the dangers of false wendigo accusations, making the suspected wendigo a hero and her accuser the villain. Boyd is met with disbelief – even from the Native Martha – when he accuses 'Ives' of being a wendigo, and Boyd himself tastes first the blood and later the flesh of his army comrades over the course of *Ravenous*, though he resists the temptation to turn fully wendigo. In *The Last Winter*, Pollack and Hoffman never completely agree on what is happening or how best to respond, and even after studying interviews with Fessenden, it is unclear whether he considers the film's wendigos to be the oil drillers or the spirits who haunt them – or both. The ability of the wendigo to assume multiple guises, to change its identity, and to confuse and trick its enemies leads on to the theme of the final chapter in this thesis: wendigos and tricksters.

Chapter Three: Trickster

Introduction

In the Foreword to Smallman's *Dangerous Spirits*, Anishinaubae scholar Grace Dillon describes the figure of the trickster as follows:

The trickster is a stock character of Native storytelling, the Brer Rabbit of *indianness*. He plays tricks. He plays jokes. He always gets the upper hand. And he is always present [...] Always he uses comedy to draw attention to the strangeness of human tragedy.¹⁰⁵

While it may seem quite logical to analyse the wendigo as a cannibal or a wild man, the idea that the figure can be seen as a trickster is perhaps less intuitive. Cannibalism and wildness (in some form) are defining features of the wendigo in many (probably most) of its representations in contemporary and traditional narratives. When tricksters appear in wendigo stories, however, they are usually set in opposition to the cannibal spirit: recall that Johnston describes the trickster Nana'b'oozoo as the 'archenemy' of wendigos, and – as I discuss in this chapter – the Cree trickster Weesageechak fulfils a similar role as a vanquisher of the cannibalistic menace.¹⁰⁶ And there are certainly fundamental differences between wendigos and archetypal tricksters. While tricksters are often relatively small beings (e.g. spiders, ravens, weasels) who survive by their wits, wendigos are frequently described as giants who exploit others through raw strength and by striking (sometimes lethal) terror into the hearts of their prey. Both tricksters and wendigos can undergo transformations, but while tricksters' transformations are usually both voluntary and easily reversible, wendigo transformations (as has been discussed) often seem to be beyond the subject's control and can only be reversed through expert healing – if at all. Furthermore, while tricksters are generally *amoral* or morally ambiguous, wendigos are almost always a malicious embodiment of *immorality*, breakers of a terrible social taboo.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Dillon, 'Foreword', pp. 16-17.

¹⁰⁶ Johnston, *The Manitous*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁷ Wendigos are not necessarily *always* malicious: recall that Johnston's 'man named Weendigo', while punishing excess, also 'conferred rewards upon the moderate' (p. 203). Furthermore, Smallman notes that, in Plains Cree narratives, the wendigo sometimes features as a 'comic figure' that can act as a spirit guide (*Dangerous Spirits*, p. 26). However, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the wendigo is mostly – if not exclusively – malevolent.

However, there are undoubtedly some similarities between the figure of the wendigo and the figure of the trickster. In *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde writes that tricksters are found at the boundaries, where they frequently subvert distinctions:

Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life. We constantly distinguish – right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead – and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction.¹⁰⁸

With this in mind, it may be easier to see how the wendigos that I have already discussed could, to some extent, be seen as trickster-like. Blackwood's wendigo is a boundary-defying monster that subverts distinctions such as civilised and wild, human and animal, and perhaps even (in the form of the uncanny 'Défago') living and dead. Likewise, the cannibals of *Ravenous* question the civilised/savage distinction and – as cannibals are prone to do – the human/animal distinction (which I discuss further in this chapter). In *The Round House*, Linden Lark is a character who operates at the juridical, social, and political boundaries of Native and settler territories; that is the very reason why he cannot be prosecuted for his crimes. Furthermore, the fact that humans can become wendigos is a subversion of the distinction between humans and inhuman man-eaters – between those who are 'like us' and those who pose an existential threat to us – even if the transformation itself does not resemble that of a trickster.¹⁰⁹

Wendigos and tricksters also share some key characteristics. Hyde notes that hunger is a major driver in many trickster narratives, citing tales in which tricksters design or exploit traps to feed their appetites; in which tricksters' appetites lead them to foolish actions; and even a Tlingit Raven story which appears to tell 'the origin of appetite'.¹¹⁰ There is certainly more to tricksters than their hunger, but it is worth considering how these features of trickster narratives are similar to wendigo tales: the ability of tricksters (Hyde gives Raven and the Zulu trickster Thlókunyana as examples) to steal food from traps without springing them parallels the

¹⁰⁸ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Recall Arens' view of projected cannibalism as 'cultural-boundary construction and maintenance' (*The Man-Eating Myth*, p. 145).

¹¹⁰ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, pp. 17-31.

wendigo's desire to eat endlessly while evading the consequences; like tricksters, wendigos' hunger can lead them to foolishness and even their own destruction, as in Johnston's tale of the Nipissing wendigos; and, while the Tlingit story tells the origin of appetite, Johnston's tale of the 'man named Weendigo' tells the origin of excess.¹¹¹ Furthermore – and perhaps more significantly for the works that I discuss in this chapter – wendigos can play tricks. In one of the traditional stories in Norman's collection, a wendigo uses a fox to try and lure a naïve man away from the safety of his village; in another, a moth, working for a wendigo, impersonates several different animal sounds and tricks its victim into wasting all his broth, leaving him starving and weakened when the wendigo itself arrives.¹¹² Smallman notes that, in traditional stories, a person can be tricked into becoming a wendigo by taking food offered to them by a wendigo in a dream, if they fail to recognise the spirit.¹¹³ Indeed, the character of Colqhoun in *Ravenous*, though not a trickster in the mythological sense, is certainly a person who tricks others, convincing the entire military establishment that he is a respectable soldier, and that it is Boyd who is the dangerous, unstable one; echoes of this behaviour can be seen later in this chapter, when I consider the characters of Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham.

There is a final way in which the wendigo can be considered a trickster, and I will mention it here before returning to it in the conclusion of this chapter. Tricksters survive, and they often survive by adaptation. Wendigos, within their own stories, often do not survive: Elijah, Linden and Colqhoun all perish, as do most of the wendigos in traditional stories (including those retold by Johnston). However, the figure of the wendigo – the concept, the spirit, the manitou – persists. Johnston notes that many Indigenous traditions and beliefs have 'passed into the Great Beyond' – including the spirit of Nana'b'oozoo, who was rejected by his people in favour of 'the pale-faced latecomer and his new ways' – but the wendigo remains: 'the Weendigos did not die out or disappear; they have only been assimilated and reincarnated'.¹¹⁴ Indeed, the wendigo has not only survived through Indigenous storytelling; as I have shown throughout the course of this thesis, it has also worked its way into settler and European culture, becoming a familiar figure in urban legends as well as horror films, television shows, and games.

¹¹¹ Johnston, *The Manitous*, pp. 233-34; Johnston, 'A Man Named Weendigo'.

¹¹² Joseph Badfoot Michael, 'The Childhood Foxes Windigo', in *Where the Chill Came From*, ed. and trans. by Norman, pp. 36-39; John Rains, 'The Echoing Moth Windigo', in *Where the Chill Came From*, ed. and trans. by Norman, pp. 47-49.

¹¹³ Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits*, pp. 24-25.

¹¹⁴ Johnston, *The Manitous*, pp. 235, 95.

In this chapter, I consider two works that feature wendigos and tricksters: *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, by Indigenous Canadian Tomson Highway, and the US television series *Hannibal*, with which I began the introduction to this thesis. In both works, there is a blurring of the line between wendigo and trickster, as wendigos display trickster-like qualities and vice versa. Both stories show the danger faced by tricksters who try to defeat wendigos: namely, that they may become the very thing they seek to destroy. Both also utilise (dark) comedy, which is a frequent element of trickster narratives. I begin by discussing Highway's novel, in which the eponymous Fur Queen takes on the trickster role, in opposition to the wendigo in its now familiar guises of colonialism, religious oppression, and abuse. I then move on to *Hannibal*, in which Western media's favourite fictional cannibal appears as a particularly trickster-like wendigo.

Weesageechak and the Weetigo: Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

Kiss of the Fur Queen is a semi-autobiographical 1998 novel by Tomson Highway which tells the story of two Cree brothers, Jeremiah (also called Champion by his parents) and Gabriel (also called Ooneemeetoo, meaning 'Dancer') Okimasis, the two youngest sons of world champion dogsled racer Abraham Okimasis and his wife Mariesis. The brothers, originally from the Eemanapiteepitat Indian reserve in northwest Manitoba, are sent to a residential school in the south, where they suffer abuse and cultural repression at the hands of the priests. They both later move to Winnipeg, where Jeremiah becomes a concert pianist and later a playwright, and Gabriel becomes a professional dancer. Gabriel also has several homosexual relationships and eventually contracts AIDS, from which he dies at the end of the novel.¹¹⁵

The wendigo ('Weetigo' in Highway's writing) has a recurring and increasingly significant role throughout the novel. The figure is first mentioned in passing in Chapter One, in the surprising context of a 'dreaded Weetigo look-alike contest' (which one would presumably hope to avoid winning), embedded in a list of other contests (p. 7). It is mentioned again in Chapter Two, when Abraham, returning from his sledding victory to Eemanapiteepitat, passes 'the house of the widow Jackfish Head Lady, who once had a near-death encounter with the

¹¹⁵ Tomson Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen: A Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000). Further references to Highway's novel in this section are given as page numbers in the body of the text.

cannibal spirit Weetigo just off Tugigoom Island’ (p. 15). However, the significance of the wendigo only starts to become clear in Chapter Eight, once Jeremiah and Gabriel are both at Birch Lake Indian Residential School. One night, a few months after Gabriel joins his older brother at the school, Jeremiah sees the principal, Father Lafleur, sexually abusing him. Neither of the brothers knows how to deal with this: Gabriel assumes that the unfamiliar act that the priest is performing on him is simply a ‘right of holy men’, and Jeremiah denies to himself what he has seen, despite apparently having witnessed similar things before:

Had this really happened before? Or had it not? But some chamber deep inside his mind slammed permanently shut. It had happened to nobody. He had not seen what he was seeing.

As Jeremiah walks through the dormitory of sleeping boys towards Gabriel’s bed, he sees the silhouette of Father Lafleur beside it, which resembles ‘the Weetigo feasting on human flesh’ (pp. 77-80). As in the work of Boyden and Erdrich, the wendigo is linked to white sexual violence, and as in *Three Day Road*, the violence is inflicted on an Indigenous boy at a residential school. Indeed, the exact nature of the abuse (forced orgasm) is almost identical to that inflicted on Elijah in Boyden’s later novel. Despite his repression of the memory, Jeremiah eventually writes a play which features a wendigo ‘shedding his costume at death, revealing a priest’s cassock’; only after hearing a confused review of the play does Jeremiah’s ‘memory [open] the padlocked doors’ to the trauma that he has been trying to express in his writing: that of witnessing his younger brother’s abuse at the hands of Father Lafleur – and, it is implied, directly suffering abuse himself (p. 285).¹¹⁶

In Highway’s novel, the figure of the wendigo is contrasted with that of the eponymous Fur Queen, an apparently benevolent figure who appears in various guises and watches over the two brothers. Like the wendigo, the Fur Queen is introduced in the opening chapter: after Abraham’s victory in the sled race, his trophy is presented to him by Julie Pembroke, the newly crowned winner of the Fur Queen Beauty Pageant, draped in ‘a floor-length cape fashioned from the fur of arctic fox, white as day’ (p. 9). He brings home with him a photograph of the

¹¹⁶ It is never directly stated that Jeremiah was also abused, but it is implied that the abuse is very widespread in the school (p. 109), and the attraction to sexual violence that Jeremiah feels at later points in the novel (combined with the extent to which he represses the memories) could imply that that he too was sexually abused. See Mitchell Leslie Spray, ‘Trickster and Weetigo: Tomson Highway’s *Fur Queen*’ (master’s thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2008).

Fur Queen presenting him with the trophy and kissing him on the cheek, and Mariesis, seeing light coming from the photo, receives a vision of the coming birth of Jeremiah (pp. 18-19). Several other characters in the novel are described in ways reminiscent of the Fur Queen, including Jeremiah's piano teacher Lola van Beethoven ('a monument of pearls, pink cashmere, and white fox stoles') (p. 99); a dancer of indeterminate gender (pp. 167-68); and even a mannequin who speaks to the brothers in Cree to guide them through a Winnipeg shopping mall (p. 117). However, the figure's most significant incarnation is perhaps the character of Maggie Sees (a pun on *mageesees*, the Cree for 'fox'), whom Jeremiah meets in a whisky-induced vision shortly after his father's death. She is described as 'a torch-singing fox with fur so white it hurt the eyes' who 'used to be Fred but it bored the hell outta me so I changed'.¹¹⁷ She explains to Jeremiah that she puts on 'faaabulous shows' to entertain people, because 'without entertainment, [...] without distraction, without dreams, life's a drag [...] Without celebration, without magic to massage your tired, trampled-on old soul, it's all pretty pointless'. She also presents herself as an embodiment of all Native American trickster figures, calling herself 'Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap-oh-you-should-hear-the-things-they-call-me-honeypot-Sees, weaver of dreams, sparker of magic, showgirl from hell' (pp. 229-34).

The feminine trickster figure of Maggie Sees opposes the patriarchal God of Catholicism, declaring:

Show me the bastard who come [*sic*] up with this notion that who's running the goddamn show is some grumpy, embittered, sexually frustrated old fart with a long white beard hiding like a gutless coward behind some puffed-up cloud and I'll slice his goddamn balls off (p. 234).

Catholicism is associated with the cannibalistic wendigo not only through Father Lafleur but also, as in *Ravenous*, through communion: the Catholic Abraham, lying on his death bed, recalls a Cree tale of the evil 'man who ate human flesh', immediately before consuming the

¹¹⁷ This vague suggestion that the character is transgender and/or gender-fluid reflects Highway's – and Gabriel's – belief that, since Native languages lack the sex-based grammatical gender systems so common in European languages, the Indigenous trickster figure is 'neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously' (p. i). This is of course in keeping with the figure's tendency to defy distinctions and dichotomies, though it contradicts Hyde's view that tricksters are almost always male (*Trickster Makes This World*, pp. 335-43).

sacramental bread given to him by the local Eemanapiteepitat priest (pp. 227-28). The trickster, embodied in the ‘showgirl from hell’, is traditionally the enemy of the wendigo: Johnston (as recalled in the introduction to this chapter) describes the Ojibwe trickster Nana’b’oozoo (a variant of ‘Nanapush’/‘Nanabush’) as the archenemy of wendigos, and Nanapush is also the hero of Mooshum’s story in *The Round House*; in Highway’s novel, the two brothers recount a tale of the Cree trickster Weesageechak defeating a wendigo by transforming himself into a weasel, crawling up the wendigo’s anus, and chewing up its entrails from the inside (pp. 118-21). The small, subversive trickster’s defeat of the all-consuming monster can be read as an optimistic foretelling of the ability of the suppressed Indigenous culture and religion to resist colonialism and Christianisation. In a foreword to the novel, Highway says of the trickster, ‘Without the continued presence of this extraordinary figure, the core of Indian culture would be gone forever’ (p. i). As long as the trickster lives, however, the wendigo of colonial oppression can never be truly victorious.

It is also significant that Weesageechak defeats the wendigo by infiltrating it and eating it from the inside. Sophie McCall contrasts *Kiss of the Fur Queen* with *Three Day Road*, arguing that, while Boyden’s novel ‘imagines healing as a retreat from the polluted spaces of the residential school, the reserve, and the battlefields, a withdrawal of contact from mixed cultural spaces, and an embrace of the life of the ascetic who denies his or her desires’, Highway’s novel ‘embraces desire and contamination as agents of change and transformation’ for the purpose of ‘re-Creeifying urban, colonized spaces’.¹¹⁸ Weesageechak embodies this approach, working physically within the wendigo to transform (kill) it, and in the process becoming contaminated: he emerges from the wendigo with his ‘nice white coat [...] covered with shit’ (p.121). Indeed, the brothers can be seen as tricksters themselves, adapting to the world of white Canada in order to keep their own culture alive. Their theatre productions use a medium of the dominant culture to tell stories based on their own Cree background and experiences,¹¹⁹ and in a prize-winning piano performance of Rachmaninoff’s ‘Preludes’, Highway writes that Jeremiah

¹¹⁸ Sophie McCall, ‘Intimate Enemies: Weetigo, Weesageechak, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*’, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 25.3 (2013), 57-85 (pp. 67, 71) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/studamerindilite.25.3.0057>> [accessed 18 February 2021].

¹¹⁹ Of course, the novel itself is also an example of this, being based on Highway’s experiences and existing in a medium of the dominant culture.

played a northern Manitoba shorn of its Gabriel Okimasis, he played the loon cry, the wolves at nightfall, the aurora borealis in Mistik Lake; he played the wind through the pines, the purple of the sunsets, the zigzag flight of a thousand white arctic terns, the fields of mauve-hued fireweed rising and falling like an exposed heart (p. 213).

Although he is, on the surface, playing European music to a panel of English judges, Jeremiah is using the music to express his Indigenous identity, infiltrating white settler culture but avoiding being consumed by it. In the final chapter, when Gabriel is on his deathbed in hospital, Jeremiah and his Ojibwe girlfriend Amanda (at Gabriel's request, but to the horror of his mother) refuse to allow a priest entry to the room, and a sacred death ceremony is instead performed by Amanda's grandmother, Ann-Adele Ghost rider. As McCall notes, the hospital is 'an institution, like the church and residential school, which attempts to prohibit Cree healing practices such as burning sweet grass and to impose Christian rituals such as last rites'; Gabriel, Jeremiah, Amanda, and Ann-Adele, however, resist this prohibition, bringing their culture and sacred practices *inside* the colonial institution.¹²⁰ In *Three Day Road*, resistance of this kind necessitates a retreat from colonial institutions and a return to the bush, but in Highway's novel, resistance is possible – and indeed most effective – from within. Weesagechak defeats the wendigo by crawling inside it, and the Okimasis brothers (with significant help from the Ojibwe women) are able to overcome colonial oppression by maintaining their culture and identity within colonial spaces and structures.

Even from a young age, the brothers are shown mimicking colonial culture through the form of parody. While back in Eemanapiteepitah for the summer between school terms, 'Father Gabriel' conducts a service at the 'Church of the Sacred Meadow', with Jeremiah as the 'organist' (accordionist) and 'sticks broken off at various lengths and arranged in three neat rows' as the 'congregation', along with Kiputz, the family's dog. The service consists of misunderstood Latin chants, such as 'Me a cowboy, me a cowboy, me a Mexican cowboy' (*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*), and it is disrupted when Kiputz gets distracted and runs off after a squirrel. Chasing him, Gabriel falls and is knocked senseless when his makeshift chasuble catches on a branch, bringing the service to a premature end. As well as illustrating the merely surface-level understanding of religion that school has given the boys, this scene can be read as a foretelling of Gabriel and Jeremiah's future disruption of the

¹²⁰ McCall, 'Intimate Enemies', p. 78.

Catholic, colonial order, with the brothers themselves attempting to act as the representatives of this same order, only to be undermined by Kiputz, who is ‘as Cree a dog as ever there was’ and who will not be constrained by this imposed ceremony (pp. 93-96). In contrast to Kiputz, the brothers genuinely attempt to assimilate themselves with settler society; like the dog, however, they have a Cree identity too strong to remain suppressed, and this identity persists within the colonial world that they enter. The humour in this scene (and in Highway’s depiction of life in Eemanapiteepitat in general) also contrasts with the seriousness of Catholicism, furthering the idea of trickster-like Cree culture in opposition to the oppressive wendigo of colonialism.¹²¹

Mitchell Leslie Spray argues that the Fur Queen is in fact simultaneously a trickster and a wendigo, noting that Julie Pembroke is described in the opening chapter as having teeth that are ‘pearls of ice’ and ‘lips [that are] streaks of blood’ (p. 10) – imagery reminiscent of the wendigo in traditional stories. Spray suggests that Abraham mythologises the Fur Queen when relaying the story to his sons, presenting her as a fairy godmother figure rather than the wendigo/trickster that Highway’s descriptions imply, and that this (combined with ignorance of imagery associated with the wendigo) has led other critics to overlook the figure’s more sinister side and view her as wholly benevolent.¹²² Spray also notes that later incarnations of the Fur Queen seem to have less than benevolent intentions: for example, a mysterious woman in a fur-lined cape gives Jeremiah and Gabriel tickets to a ballet, distracting them from helping a pregnant and vulnerable young (possibly Indigenous) woman; later, the photo of the Fur Queen smiles and winks during arguments (one of them violent) between the brothers.¹²³ This idea of a trickster-wendigo synthesis can also be seen in *Three Day Road*: recall that Elijah is described as having ‘the gleam of the trickster [...] in his eyes’, and his surname is Whiskeyjack, an anglicised form of Weesageechak.¹²⁴

However, while Elijah becomes a wendigo by enthusiastically embracing the violence of colonial powers in the First World War, the Fur Queen seems to be a broadly anti-colonial figure. Spray’s thesis largely ignores the character of Maggie Sees and her trickster resistance

¹²¹ The contrast is similarly highlighted in a later scene in which Gabriel (to the outrage of the congregation) erupts into uncontrollable laughter during communion, with the ritual once again being linked to literal cannibalism (p. 181).

¹²² Spray, ‘Trickster and Weetigo’, pp. 6-9.

¹²³ Spray, ‘Trickster and Weetigo’, pp. 13, 8.

¹²⁴ Bodyen, *Three Day Road*, pp. 352, 174.

to the imposition of patriarchal and hierarchical (and arguably wendigo) religious ideas. It is also important to clarify that her being morally ambiguous and mischievous does not indicate that the Fur Queen is a wendigo, since moral ambiguity and mischievousness are classic attributes of a trickster. Nevertheless, it is true that, as Spray argues, the Fur Queen symbolises and encourages the Okimasis family's achievements within settler – rather than their own – culture: Lola van Beethoven and the mysterious ticket-giver encourage Jeremiah and Gabriel's respective artistic passions within settler culture, arguably at the cost of neglecting their own culture and people; Julie Pembroke is a white woman whose interaction with Abraham is a result of his victory in a settler competition;¹²⁵ and Maggie Sees, despite embodying Indigenous trickster figures and claiming to have local ancestry, is embedded in settler culture as a torch-singing showgirl with 'ice-blond meringue hair' (p. 231). She also has an English name which is a pun on a Cree word, which may itself be an allusion to *European* trickster foxes (e.g. Reynard). In other words, the Fur Queen embodies and encourages cultural hybridity, but this does not make her a wendigo; instead, it reinforces the idea of challenging oppressive (wendigo) systems from within, as discussed above. The Fur Queen encourages Jeremiah and Gabriel to be like Weesageechak, entering colonial culture and becoming 'contaminated' by it on a surface level, while remaining true to their Indigenous background. It is even possible that the wendigo imagery used to describe Julie Pembroke is a subtle allusion to Weesageechak's defeat of the wendigo: as Kristina Fagan notes, Weesageechak kills the wendigo 'in a Weetigo-like way', by adopting the monster's own defining characteristic – eating.¹²⁶ As such, Highway's subtle indication of the Fur Queen's wendigo-like qualities may suggest not that she is a wendigo herself, but that she has the power to adopt the wendigo's characteristics and thereby defeat it.

However, in adopting wendigo characteristics one risks becoming a wendigo oneself. This is perhaps best exemplified in the character of Gabriel, whose sexual promiscuity later in the novel can be seen as both a trickster and a wendigo characteristic. Hyde describes tricksters as 'ridden by lust', and in Gabriel's case, the targets of his sexual advances (his 'sexual prey' in Spray's words) are often those more powerful than himself, suggesting that he is using his

¹²⁵ Although dogsled driving is a traditional Indigenous activity in northern Canada, Abraham is the 'first Indian to win [the Millington Cup World Championship Dog Derby] in its twenty-eight-year history' (p. 6).

¹²⁶ Kristina Fagan, 'Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humour, and Trauma in the Fiction of Richard Van Camp, Tomson Highway, and Eden Robinson', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 38.1 (2009), 204-26 (p. 218) <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc134_1art11> [accessed 19 April 2021].

sexuality to subvert existing power dynamics.¹²⁷ Around the middle of the novel, he has a sexual encounter with a priest, but whereas at the residential school Gabriel was the victim in such encounters, here he is presented as being the one in power, taking advantage of the priest's sexual weakness. While receiving communion, Gabriel 'watche[s] with glee as celibacy-by-law [drives] [the priest's] mortal flesh to the brink'; afterwards, the priest slips Gabriel his phone number. When Gabriel calls, the priest seems reluctant to meet, but Gabriel 'boldly' invites him to his residence ('actually the home of lawyer Stuart H. Everett and his wife, Diane'), and the two have sex in Gabriel's basement room (pp. 180-85). It is also clear that Gabriel has little regard for the harm that his sexual activity has on others: he is unfaithful to his partner Gregory, and he continues to seek out sexual encounters even after suspecting that he may have AIDS. Gabriel towards the end of the novel can be seen as a sexual wendigo, exploiting and harming others while striving to fulfil his own (apparently insatiable) desires – behaviour that he has learned from his earliest sexual experience: his abuse at the hands of Father Lafleur. While Lafleur is abusing Gabriel, his crucifix necklace rests above Gabriel's mouth:

The subtly throbbing motion of the priest's upper body made the naked Jesus Christ – this sliver of silver light, this fleshy Son of God so achingly beautiful – rub his body against the child's lips, over and over and over again. Gabriel had no strength left. The pleasure in his centre welled so deep that he was about to open his mouth and swallow whole the living flesh – in his half-dream state, this man nailed to the cross was a living, breathing man, tasting like Gabriel's most favourite food, warm honey – when he heard the shuffle of approaching feet (pp. 78-79).

Lafleur seems to almost turn Gabriel into a cannibal, just as wendigos often have the power to do in traditional stories. Indeed, it is only the approach of Jeremiah that interrupts Gabriel's cannibalistic fantasy. This passage could suggest that Gabriel is – almost – converted into a wendigo by the abuse, explaining his harmful sexual practices later in the novel.

Jeremiah also struggles with the psychological scars of his time at the residential school. Towards the end of the novel, he gets a job in Ontario 'providing urban Indian children, most

¹²⁷ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, p. 8; Spray, 'Trickster and Weetigo', p. 16. Hyde further notes that tricksters' 'hyperactive sexuality almost never results in any offspring'; this is also the case with Gabriel, whose sexual relationships in the novel are all with other men.

from broken homes, with REC: recreation, education, culture'. After teaching the children a short song about the Son of Ayash – another Cree hero who faces wendigos and other monsters – Jeremiah has some disturbingly wendigo-like thoughts: 'How fresh children smelled. You could take them in your hands, put them in your mouth, swallow them whole'. After the session, a six-year-old boy stays behind and tells Jeremiah that a wendigo 'ate' him – a reference, it emerges, to the fact that he has been sexually abused by his stepfather. As the boy hugs Jeremiah around the waist and tells him this, his face 'buried' in Jeremiah's groin, Jeremiah is horrified to find himself experiencing 'a raging hard-on'. Afterwards, he rushes to the director's office and reports what the boy has told him (pp. 269-72). Jeremiah rejects his dark sexual urges, resisting the cycle of abuse. Similarly, though Gabriel's sexual practices are selfish, reckless, and arguably exploitative, they never appear to be abusive: he generally seeks out encounters with those older and/or more powerful than himself, and there is no evidence that these are ever non-consensual on the part of the other person.¹²⁸ In other words, neither brother is turned fully wendigo by their experiences; they enter the wendigo of white culture, religion, and abuse, and emerge – like Weesageechak – tainted, but still themselves.

However, this then raises the question of what exactly it means to say that the brothers are 'still themselves'. Do they have some 'core' Indigenous identity, distinct from their 'acquired' identities as participants in settler society and culture? Discussing the Okanagan trickster tale 'The Bungling Host', Hyde notes that, while tricksters may be experts at impersonating others, they lack their own inborn 'way[s] of being'. They are skin-changers, identified (if at all) only by their lack of fixed identity:

With some polytropic [versatile, many-faced] characters it is possible that there is no real self behind the shifting masks, or that the real self lies exactly there, in the moving surfaces and not beneath. It's possible there are beings with no way of their own, only the many ways of their shifting skins and changing contexts.¹²⁹

In the case of the Okimasis brothers, it seems that there is indeed a 'real self' – a sincere self that exists beneath the acquired identity. On Gabriel's deathbed, he has no desire to conform

¹²⁸ However, the fact that Gabriel apparently does not disclose his suspected AIDS to his sexual partners arguably nullifies their consent, since they are not fully aware of what the consequences will be. Either way, it is certainly not moral behaviour – but tricksters are not moral characters.

¹²⁹ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, pp. 43, 54.

to settler customs or to have his brother perform some childish parody of the last rites; he wants an Indigenous medicine woman to burn sweet grass, and demands that no priests be allowed ‘anywhere near’ his bed (p. 299). Though Jeremiah uses white cultural media, it is Indigenous stories that he truly wants to tell. All the same, the great peril of the trickster seeking to infiltrate and destroy the wendigo is that they may become like the monster they fight against – that it may be the wendigo that reshapes the trickster to its own liking, rather than the other way around. This is a peril that also arises in the next work that I consider in relation to tricksters and wendigos. It is the work that began the introduction to this thesis, and it was my own introduction to the wendigo: Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal*.

Hannibal the Wendigo

The US television series *Hannibal*, developed by Bryan Fuller for NBC, aired for three seasons between 2013 and 2015.¹³⁰ Featuring characters from Thomas Harris’ novels *Red Dragon*, *Hannibal*, and *Hannibal Rising*, the show centres around the relationship between FBI profiler Will Graham and his psychotherapist, Dr Hannibal Lecter. Over the course of the first season, Hannibal (who is secretly a cannibalistic serial killer) attempts to manipulate his patient into believing that he himself is a murderer, and plants extensive evidence of his crimes on Will. Will is imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital but protests his innocence throughout the second season, insisting that Hannibal is the real murderer. Will is eventually released, and Season Two culminates in an elaborate and legally dubious plan by Will and his FBI superior Jack Crawford to catch Hannibal. Hannibal escapes, however, and flees to Europe with his own former therapist, Bedelia Du Maurier. He and Will are eventually captured by bounty hunters in Florence and taken back to the US, where they are handed over to a rival murderer who plans to eat Hannibal; with the help of one of his former victims, Hannibal escapes and rescues Will, before surrendering to the FBI. He later escapes again, and Season Three ends with Hannibal and Will falling from a cliff, though it is implied in a post-credits scene that they survive.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Rumours periodically circulate that the show will be revived for a fourth season; at time of writing, this is yet to materialise.

¹³¹ *Hannibal*, NBC, 4 April 2013 - 29 August 2015 [on DVD]. Further references to *Hannibal* in this section are given as episode titles and timestamps in the body of the text.

Throughout Season One, Will has recurring visions of a black stag, which he seems unable to interpret and which he apparently never discusses with Hannibal or anyone else. In the final episode of the season, he envisions himself pursuing the stag through woods, but when he draws near to it, he instead sees a tall, gaunt humanoid with black skin, pale eyes, and a pair of antlers. He sees the figure again during a conversation with Hannibal, and finally he sees Hannibal himself as the antlered, emaciated being when he realises that Hannibal is a murderer. The figure appears several more times throughout the second and third seasons. The word *wendigo* is never actually spoken in the series (nor are any of the equivalent terms such as *wétiko*, *chenoo*, etc.), but Fuller has referred to this monstrous ‘stag man’ as a wendigo, and it has been analysed as such by other scholars.¹³² In some respects, this wendigo is more in keeping with the non-Indigenous reimaginings of the figure that I have already discussed. Specifically, the antlers and the association with a ‘wild’ location (woods) are more characteristic of the wendigos of Blackwood and Fessenden than those of Johnston, Erdrich and Highway. However, Fuller’s wendigo also has much in common with Indigenous understandings of the figure: like Johnston’s wendigo, it is a human-like being, but uncommonly tall and ‘gaunt to the point of emaciation’;¹³³ though Will first sees it in a forest, it is not confined to ‘wild’ places, as he sees it in several other locations; and, through the wendigo’s embodiment in the character of Hannibal, it represents unambiguously violent cannibalistic excess.

¹³² Holloway, ‘10 Highlights From *Hannibal* Creator Bryan Fuller and Star Hugh Dancy’s Comic-Con Panel’; Astrid Schwegler-Castañer, ‘The Art of Tasting Corpses: The Conceptual Metaphor of Consumption in *Hannibal*’, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 32.5 (2018), 611-28 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1499874>>; Richard Logsdon, ‘Merging with the Darkness: An Examination of the Aesthetics of Collusion in NBC’s *Hannibal*’, *Journal of American Culture*, 40.1 (2017) <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1880396125>> [accessed 19 May 2021]; Jusiak, ‘The Embodiment of the Taboo’.

¹³³ Johnston, *The Manitous*, p. 221.



Figure 5: The first appearance of the ‘stag man’ wendigo (Kalen Davidson) in *Hannibal* (‘Savoureux’, 02:09).

As we might expect of a cannibalistic serial killer, Hannibal appears to see little distinction between non-human animals and his human prey; as Will infers, he sees his victims as ‘no better [...] than pigs’ (‘Futamono’, 02:41). This attitude is reflected in how Hannibal eats his victims, extracting some (usually a small number) of their organs and meticulously cooking these as the core ingredients of an exquisite meat-based recipe, literally treating the human meat as if it were animal meat.¹³⁴ Hannibal also humanises animals, including those that he eats. When dining at Hannibal’s house, Jack asks what type of fish they are eating, and Hannibal replies that ‘he was a flounder’ (‘Kaiseki’, 05:08). In a later episode, Hannibal notes that giant forest pigs are ‘just like man’ in their opportunistic omnivory, before ominously discussing the paradox of farmers loving the animals that they raise for slaughter (‘Naka-Choko’, 26:44). He states, ‘Animals are far more like humans than we ever realised. And humans are far more like animals. One thin barrier between us’ (‘Shiizakana’, 25:24). Rather like Elijah in *Three Day Road*, Hannibal’s transgression can be seen, on one level, as being

¹³⁴ In 2016, the show’s food stylist, Janice Poon, published *Feeding Hannibal: A Connoisseur’s Cookbook*, containing over 135 recipes featured in or inspired by the show – based, of course, around animal meat rather than human meat; nevertheless, it is somewhat ironic that a show with arguably pro-vegetarian themes (see below) has spawned a meat cookbook.

that he treats humans as if they are animals. As with Elijah, however, there is more to it than this. In the very first episode of the series, the FBI track down another cannibalistic murderer, Garrett Jacob Hobbs, who has killed and eaten a series of young women who resemble his daughter, Abigail. At one point, the body of another woman, Cassie Boyle, is found with her lungs removed; she fits the profile of Hobbs' other victims, but Will believes that it is the work of a different killer, because the way that Hobbs treats his victims suggests he has 'some form of love' for them, whereas this victim has been treated with contempt, her lungs having been removed while she was still alive and her naked body left on display in a field. It is revealed to the audience that Will is correct, and that Hannibal is Cassie Boyle's murderer ('Apéritif', 16:58, 26:30). In a later flashback, Hobbs and Abigail hunt a deer together; after the creature is killed, Hobbs tells his daughter that they 'will honour every part of her' and that 'eating her is honouring her. Otherwise, it's just murder' ('Potage', 03:16).¹³⁵ It emerges that Hobbs also takes this approach to his human victims, not only eating them but also using their hair as stuffing for cushions. Although Hobbs is clearly a depraved individual, the care with which he treats his victims – and his refusal to waste any part of their bodies – is contrasted with the disdain that Hannibal exhibits and his indifference to (or even enjoyment in) the suffering of his human prey. Hobbs is a cannibal, but one who kills out of a perverse love and who treats his prey – human and animal alike – with respect, even reverence. He is not, in other words, a wendigo. On the other hand, Hannibal, like Elijah, is motivated (at least in large part) by a compulsive desire to kill, and, like Johnston's wendigo, he feels no remorse for the pain that he causes his victims.¹³⁶

Indeed, while Hannibal's cruelty and murderous nature make him a villain, his subversion of the boundary between humans and animals can be seen as radically anti-violent, encouraging meat-eating viewers to reflect on their own carnivory and their attitudes to non-human animals. Fuller has said that he believes we have been 'taught to dehumanize' the animals we eat despite

¹³⁵ It later emerges that Abigail was (reluctantly) complicit in her father's crimes, and so it could be that this flashback actually represents her suppressed memory of helping him butcher his human victims. However, it is also established that Hobbs taught her to hunt, so it is entirely possible that, in this memory at least, the body being discussed really is that of a deer.

¹³⁶ Johnston, *The Manitou*, p. 222. Schwegler-Castañer makes the interesting argument that Hobbs and Hannibal 'incarnate the two seemingly paradoxical sides of the same conceptual metaphorical coin of modern consumption: the idealized and the excessive respectively', with Hobbs' hunting being 'associated with traditional rural values and responsible or ethical eating in which food is consciously respected and waste is avoided', in contrast to Hannibal's 'excessive luxury' and 'production-use-discard' approach to his human meals ('The Art of Tasting Corpses', pp. 614-16).

their psychological and emotional sophistication, and that making the first season of *Hannibal* caused him to become mostly pescatarian:

[W]hat I've found in writing *Hannibal* is that I'm humanizing animals in the same way that I look at actual human beings and seeing more similarities than I see differences. And so that has made it much more difficult to eat meat [...] and also, in those rare occasions where I do have a piece of meat, in my mind, it is cannibalism. And I'm eating another sentient being and it's no different than eating another human being, in my mind. And I'm comfortable with that in those moments. [Laughs] The trauma of *Hannibal* cuts both ways.¹³⁷

This defiance of the human/animal boundary can be seen as a trickster quality in both Hannibal the character and *Hannibal* the show. By highlighting the similarities between humans and animals – both while they are alive and when they are converted into meat – Hannibal exposes the hypocrisy of the high society in which he engages: namely, the hypocrisy of claiming to be appalled by cruelty and cannibalism while happily enjoying exquisite meals such as foie gras made from the flesh of fellow ‘sentient beings’ that have suffered severe cruelty.¹³⁸

Hannibal's assimilation to high society also illustrates another of the show's boundary subversions: that of the distinction between savage criminality and respectable civility. Aside from his appreciation for fine dining, Hannibal is also a respected psychiatrist and former surgeon who composes music for the harpsicord; he is a skilled artist with a love of Renaissance architecture; after Will's incarceration, the FBI consults him for help with difficult cases; and he is also a brutal murderer. On several occasions, he performs crimes while wearing a tailor-made three-piece suit and tie, protected from blood and other evidence by a clear plastic ‘kill suit’ – a visual embodiment of his combination of refined appearance and violent acts.¹³⁹ Hannibal's veneer of respectability, as well as his friendship with Jack and other FBI agents,

¹³⁷ Arlana Bacle, ‘Hannibal Series Finale Preview with Bryan Fuller: Interview’, *Entertainment Weekly*, 28 August 2015 <<https://ew.com/article/2015/08/28/hannibal-series-finale-preview-bryan-fuller-interview/>> [accessed 14 May 2021]. Incidentally, wendigo enthusiast Larry Fessenden (discussed in Chapter Two) is also pescatarian (Abrams, ‘Hell to Pay’), and Antonia Bird, the director of *Ravenous*, is vegetarian (Roger Ebert, ‘Reviews: *Ravenous*’, *Roger Ebert*, 19 March 1999 <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ravenous-1999>> [accessed 2 June 2021]).

¹³⁸ See also Michael Fuchs and Michael Phillips, “‘It’s Only Cannibalism If We’re Equals’”: Carnivorous Consumption and Liminality in *Hannibal*’, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 35.6 (2018), 614-29 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2018.1499344>>

¹³⁹ This ‘kill suit’ is discussed in the DVD extra ‘The Style of a Killer Featurette’, *Hannibal*, 02:57 [on DVD].

helps him to escape justice throughout the first and second seasons. When Will accuses Hannibal of being a murderer, very few people are inclined to believe the scruffy, mentally unstable Will Graham over the sophisticated, charismatic Dr Lecter. Hannibal's apparent sophistication may also go some way to explaining his attitude to murder and cannibalism: he tells Will that he seeks to 'eat the rude', and repeats his line from *Silence of the Lambs*, 'Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me' ('Mizumono', 01:35). Indeed, most (though by no means all) of Hannibal's victims appear to be people who have offended him in some way – whether by claiming credit for his murders (as Abel Gideon does) or simply by speaking to him in a blunt and impolite tone (as a medical examiner does). It seems that, from Hannibal's perspective, it is his sophistication and manners that set him apart from his prey – a separation more significant than that of humans and animals; all those ruder and less sophisticated than himself are eligible to become his food, whether human or animal. As he explains to Gideon, 'It's only cannibalism if we're equals' ('Antipasto', 08:13). To viewers able to see Hannibal for the abhorrent murderer he truly is, however, he exemplifies the fluidity of the constructed boundary between civility and savagery: he is a well-mannered socialite with a love of European art and music, and yet he also performs acts of horrific cruelty. He is the epitome of what viewers might consider civilised, and yet he is also that most terrifying stereotype of savagery: a cannibal.¹⁴⁰

Of course, it is not only through his sophisticated demeanour that Hannibal avoids being caught: he is also careful to avoid leaving evidence linking himself to his crimes, instead making it look as if others are responsible. In Season One, while exploiting Will's vulnerable mental state to make him doubt his own reality, Hannibal plants extensive evidence to suggest that Will is the culprit behind several of his own crimes. This includes embedding remains of his victims in Will's fishing lures, which are noticed by the forensics team when they inspect Will's belongings. He also uses a plastic tube to force the severed ear of the missing Abigail Hobbs down Will's throat, in a memory that the latter is only able to recall later through hypnosis. Will vomits up the ear in his sink, 'proving' to the FBI (and almost to himself) that he has murdered and eaten Abigail, who is in fact still alive and in Hannibal's 'care'. Halfway through Season Two, after Will's release and exoneration (which is the result of further deliberate evidence left by Hannibal), the cannibalistic psychiatrist commits a string of murders

¹⁴⁰ Kilgour makes a similar point about Hannibal's character in *Silence of the Lambs* ('The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time', pp. 248-49).

implicating his colleague, the comical but unpleasant Dr Chilton, who knows that Hannibal has used unorthodox ‘treatment’ on Will. Chilton flees, but he is apprehended and brought into custody, then shot during his questioning.¹⁴¹ Like the character of Colqhoun in *Ravenous*, Hannibal is able to trick the necessary authority figures for long enough to evade capture, discrediting or silencing those who might testify against him. By the time Jack realises the truth in Season Two, Hannibal has already planned his escape; the season finale ends with him fleeing the country, leaving Will, Jack, Abigail, and his former lover and colleague, Dr Alana Bloom, all critically wounded at his home.¹⁴² Will, Jack, and Alana survive, but Abigail does not.

Prior to this catastrophic defeat for the enemies of Hannibal, Will himself takes on something of a trickster role in the show. After Chilton is shot, Jack realises that Hannibal is the true killer, and he and Will conspire to catch the psychiatrist and bring him to justice. This requires elaborate planning, however, since there is currently no evidence against him, aside from the testimonies of Will and Dr Bedelia Du Maurier. Will therefore attempts to gain Hannibal’s trust by appearing (to both Hannibal and the viewer) to abduct and murder the journalist Freddie Lounds. He visits Hannibal, bringing with him meat which Hannibal identifies as human and takes to be the flesh of Freddie, but which is actually that of Randall Tier, a killer who experiences ‘species dysphoria’ and whom Will slaughtered earlier in self-defence.¹⁴³ Will and Hannibal dine on the meat, and Will later saves Hannibal from being killed by Mason Verger, the sadistic head of a meatpacking empire. By the start of the Season Two finale, each of Hannibal and Jack trust that Will is on their respective side; the episode begins with a disorientating sequence, cutting between Will’s conversations with each of them and culminating in a surreal merging of Hannibal and Jack’s faces, as both ask Will if he will ‘do what needs to be done’ (‘Mizumono’, 03:30). Hannibal, who has an almost superhuman sense

¹⁴¹ Chilton survives, but he is absent from the show until partway through Season Three. His would-be killer is Miriam Lass, an FBI trainee who was captured by Hannibal some years before the show’s start; Hannibal apparently used psychological techniques to make her believe that Chilton was her captor.

¹⁴² It is worth noting that Hannibal’s relationship with Alana appears to be largely motivated by pragmatism on his part: the first night that they sleep together, he drugs her and leaves her sleeping while he abducts Abel Gideon; he returns before she wakes, then uses her as an alibi when questioned by Jack about Gideon’s disappearance.

¹⁴³ ‘Episode 10 – Naka-Choko: Commentary with Bryan Fuller and Caroline Dhavernas’, *Hannibal*, 41:01 [on DVD]. Incidentally, the very existence of Tier also questions the human/animal boundary: biologically, of course, he is human, and yet he believes himself to be – and, when killing, acts as if he is – an animal. As such, when Will and Hannibal eat his flesh, we might wonder whether it should best be classified as cannibalism or carnivory – or whether, as Fuller believes, there is no clear distinction between the two.

of smell, only realises that he has been betrayed when he detects Freddie's scent on Will several days after the former's supposed death, and deduces that she is still alive.

At the start of the eighth episode of Season Two, Will and Jack are fishing through a hole in the ice. As Jack complains about the cold, and Will (who is a fishing enthusiast) explains the technique of fishing for trout in winter, they discuss their plan to catch Hannibal using fishing metaphors:

JACK Trout are supposed to be hunters, they should be chewing on my hook here.

WILL Yeah, when it's cold, their metabolisms drop and they're not as hungry.

JACK Yeah, so how do you catch a fish that isn't hungry?

WILL You change your tactics. You use live bait that moves and excites them to action. You ... you gotta make him bite, even though he's not hungry.

JACK You make him act on instinct. He's always a predator.

WILL You have to create a reality where only you and the fish exist. Your lure is the one thing he wants, despite everything he knows.

JACK Make a wrong move, he swims away?

WILL Yeah. I'm a good fisherman, Jack.

JACK You hook him. I'll land him ('Su-Zakana', 00:40).

This use of fishing metaphors is particularly significant when considering Will's actions from a trickster perspective. Hyde notes that tricksters all around the world have been credited with the invention of fish traps – whether nets, hooks, or weirs – which turn their enemy's actions against them:

‘Trick’ is *dólos* in Homeric Greek, and the oldest known use of the term refers to a quite specific trick: baiting a hook to catch a fish [...] [In this case,] the victim’s hunger is the moving part. The worm just sits there; the fish catches himself.¹⁴⁴

Likewise, Will and Jack’s scheme exploits Hannibal’s own hunger – not just for human flesh, but also for recognition and appreciation. In their attempt to catch the killer, they (temporarily) trick Hannibal into believing that he has succeeded in turning Will into a murderer who understands and seeks to emulate him. Bedelia advises Will, ‘Hannibal can get lost in self-congratulation at his own exquisite taste and cunning. Whimsy. That will be how he will get caught’ (‘Tome-Wan’, 15:48). Rather like tricksters and wendigos in traditional stories, Hannibal’s hunger and arrogance – two of his defining characteristics – are also his greatest weaknesses.¹⁴⁵

However, like Weesageechak and the Okimasis brothers, Will’s efforts to infiltrate and outsmart his wendigo enemy risk turning him into the very thing he seeks to defeat. The most striking visual representation of this is perhaps in the opening of Episode Eleven of Season Two, in which, after eating Tier’s flesh, Will envisions his own hideous rebirth as a wendigo (see Figure 6). Prior to this, his abduction of Freddie visually mirrors an earlier scene in the series in which Hannibal murders Beverly Katz, one of Will and Jack’s FBI colleagues. For his plan to succeed, Will must convince Hannibal that he is becoming more like him – and to do that, he must *actually* become more like him. Hugh Dancy, the actor who plays Will, has said of the character’s plan to catch Hannibal:

It can only work if [...] Will is not playing a part [but instead] has entered down [...] a corridor in his mind that there may be no coming back from, and he has risked himself

¹⁴⁴ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, pp. 18-19. Recall that it is on Will’s fishing lures that Hannibal plants the evidence for his murders, in a sense using the trickster’s ‘trick’ against him (a trickster-like tactic if ever there was one). The evidence that Hannibal later deliberately leaves to secure Will’s release is similarly that of human remains worked into the fishing lures with which he decorates one of his crime scenes.

¹⁴⁵ It should be noted that Hannibal’s fascination (or, perhaps more accurately, obsession) with Will probably also contributes to his temporary blindness to the latter’s deception. There certainly seems to be some kind of romantic subtext between the two characters, and there is a general understanding among fans of the show – apparently shared by its creators – that they have some strange form of love for each other; the Season Three finale ends with them embracing before falling to their ambiguous fates (‘The Wrath of the Lamb’, 39:19). Interestingly, one critic has also detected ‘a thinly-disguised flavour of homoeroticism’ in *Ravenous* (Joel Harley, ‘Remembering *Ravenous*’, *Horror DNA*, 5 February 2021 <<https://www.horrorDNA.com/features/women-in-horror-month-remembering-ravenous>> [accessed 1 June 2021]). Queer themes are also present not only in Highway’s novel, but also in Robin Hardy’s *The Call of the Wendigo* (Bantam Starfire, 1993) and Michael Jensen’s *Firelands* (Boston: Alyson Books, 2004), a gay romance which features a wendigo mystery.

in that way, so that when he talks to Hannibal about the lure of killing and so on and so forth, he's speaking with total honesty.¹⁴⁶

Indeed, although the reveal that Freddie is still alive suggests to the viewer that Will is on Jack's side, his loyalty is clearly divided, as suggested by the disorientating cuts at the start of Episode Thirteen. After being warned by Alana that Jack's FBI superiors have refused to sanction his plan to 'entrap' Hannibal, and that agents are on their way to arrest both Will and Jack, Will, realising that the plan is falling apart, phones Hannibal and warns him that 'they know', in the hope that Hannibal will flee ('Mizumono', 23:57). In Season Three, he confesses to Jack that he did this 'because [Hannibal] was my friend', and that he had 'wanted to run away with him' ('Aperitivo', 12:05).



Figure 6: Will (Hugh Dancy) reborn as an antlered wendigo (*Hannibal*, 'Ko No Mono', 00:54).

Will is not the only person whom Hannibal attempts to transform into a killer. Tier is also a former patient of Hannibal's, and it emerges that Hannibal encouraged him to embrace his desire to become a violent beast; it is in fact Hannibal who sends Tier after Will, forcing one

¹⁴⁶ 'Episode 13 – Mizumono: Commentary with Bryan Fuller and Hugh Dancy', *Hannibal*, 10:41 [on DVD].

of them to kill the other. He also provides therapy to Mason Verger's sister, Margot, who has suffered years of abuse from her brother; Hannibal encourages Margot to kill Mason, which she eventually does in Season Three, with help from Alana. It also emerges that, seemingly due to Hannibal's influence, Bedelia murdered one of her own patients; Hannibal witnessed this and helped her to hide the evidence, causing her to be in his debt. As she explains to Will, 'What Hannibal does is not coercion. It is persuasion' ('Tome-Wan', 15:10). Indeed, Hannibal not only seeks to turn his patients and colleagues into murderers; he also makes those around him into unwitting cannibals. In the fourth episode of Season One, a scene of Hannibal serving 'rabbit' to Jack is intercut with shots of Hannibal hunting down a man who, it is implied, is the true content of their meal ('Oeuf', 15:50). Hannibal later throws a number of lavish dinner parties, and the tendency of these to coincide with murders in which victims' organs are removed eventually causes Jack to suspect that Will may be right that Hannibal is a serial killer. As Will explains to him, 'You and I probably sipped wine while swallowing the people to whom we were trying to give justice' ('Futamono', 03:00).¹⁴⁷ Hannibal, in other words, tricks his FBI pursuers into becoming unwitting participants in his crimes by consuming the products of those crimes.

It is also worth noting that this element of the show is, in its own sinister way, quite funny. The viewer's knowledge from the start that Hannibal is a cannibalistic killer creates a dramatic irony that is at once tense, horrifying, and borderline hilarious. Jack and Alana's confidence in Hannibal's integrity throughout most of the first two seasons is on a par with Othello's trust in 'honest Iago' in terms of how ignorant the viewer knows it to be. The juxtaposition between Hannibal's brutal murders and his sophistication in the eyes of other characters is comedic as well as ironic – a comedy which is enhanced by actor Mads Mikkelsen's portrayal of the character, with frequent subtle expressions such as almost imperceptible smiles, hinting that Hannibal is barely able to contain his amusement at what is going on around him. The psychiatrist even cracks the classic cannibal joke, 'I'd love to have you both for dinner', in reference to Jack and his wife ('Amuse-Bouche', 23:37). Such darkly comic elements are also present in *Ravenous*, as in Colqhoun's suggestion that one of his and Hart's future victims 'might ... contribute' to a stew that he is making.¹⁴⁸ As mentioned above, there are also several

¹⁴⁷ Hannibal, however, is one step ahead of his pursuers, and when Jack takes a sample of meat from one of his parties to be tested in the lab, no trace of human is found in it.

¹⁴⁸ *Ravenous*, 1:14:14.

humorous episodes in Highway's novel, including when the brothers burst out laughing while recounting the tale of Weesageechak and the wendigo in a shopping mall.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps this tendency of wendigo stories to incite laughter as well as horror – at least in modern audiences – is a further sign of the figure's merging with the trickster.¹⁵⁰

The image of an extravagant, refined dinner party, in which the guests are unaware that they are consuming human flesh, is one of the most iconic elements of *Hannibal*, and one which exemplifies both the trickster and the wendigo qualities of its eponymous villain. The meat that Hannibal serves is human masquerading as animal, evidence of savage crimes masquerading as evidence of sophistication and refined tastes. The fact that the guests are unable to discern this hints at their hypocrisy, and subtly supports the view – apparently held by both Hannibal and Fuller – that the boundary between humans and animals is more fluid than most of us like to believe. By feeding victims to his FBI 'friends' (such as Will, Jack, and Alana), Hannibal tricks these carnivorous agents of the law into becoming cannibals – indeed, into becoming the very cannibals that they are trying to track down. This is not just a trick, but specifically a wendigo trick: as the traditional tales retold by Johnston demonstrate, it need not be through choice that a person becomes a wendigo, and even the unknowing consumption of human flesh is enough to make Hannibal's dinner guests partly like him. Smallman writes of traditional Algonquian beliefs:

If a person had a dream in which the North spirit, or windigo, offered them food, and they failed to discern this being's identity, they might be tricked into eating another human in the dream. After this, the victim would be doomed to have these cravings in their waking life.¹⁵¹

This description is not entirely applicable to Hannibal: he (usually) feeds human meat to people while they are awake, and these people do not immediately become insatiable monsters like him. However, as in traditional wendigo tales, those who fail to see Hannibal for who he truly is (which, for the first two seasons, is almost everybody) risk being tricked into cannibalism. And, like many of the wendigos I have considered in other texts, the true horror of Hannibal –

¹⁴⁹ Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, p. 118.

¹⁵⁰ For an earlier example of (non-Indigenous) wendigo humour, see Ogden Nash's 1936 comic poem 'The Wendigo' (in *Windigo*, ed. by Colombo, p. 127).

¹⁵¹ Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits*, p. 24.

and his most ambitious goal – is not simply the horror of eating people; it is also the horror of converting people into something like himself, whether through unwitting cannibalism or through conscious murder.

Conclusion

In her Foreword to Smallman's book on the wendigo, which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Grace Dillon begins by stating, 'One likes to imagine our heroes as tricksters'. She then spends a page discussing her own hero, Johnny Depp, and his 'problematic' portrayal of the wendigo hunter Tonto in Disney's 2013 film *The Lone Ranger*, in which he wears a dead crow on his head, apparently inspired by a white man's painting in which the headpiece is an attempt to 'symbolize the [Native] subject's essence'. She then discusses tricksters, before moving on to the wendigo and concluding with a somewhat cryptic allusion back to Johnny Depp:

Dismissing the experience of the windigo as a form of insanity or the stuff of legend emboldens the imperialist myth that windigo psychosis is a politically convenient psychological disorder.

The kind of disorder that makes tricksters look crazy because they wear dead-crow hats.¹⁵²

A book on the wendigo, in other words, begins with a discussion of tricksters, and quite how this relates to the cannibal spirit is left for the reader to infer. It is also significant that Dillon focusses her discussion around an appropriation by white culture – by Disney, no less – of the Indigenous figure. As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, it is perhaps in this form that the wendigo is most like a trickster: it is an adapter, a skin-changer, able to survive and twist itself into whatever role this foreign culture demands it fulfil – wild man, cannibal, werewolf, vampire, Hannibal Lecter.¹⁵³ I think it is uncontroversial to say that the wendigo is

¹⁵² Dillon, 'Foreword', pp. 15-19.

¹⁵³ I have not discussed vampires in this thesis, but confluences between the wendigo and this figure occur predictably enough. Ramirez describes *Ravenous* as a 'vampire cannibal Western-comedy' ('Bonnetts, Guns and Trails'), and Ebert also views the film as a 'vampire movie' ('Reviews: Ravenous').

as relevant for Indigenous people now as it has ever been, but it has not only survived contact with the Eastern Hemisphere; it has thrived in it. As Astrid Schwegler-Castañer notes, viewers are invited to feel both ‘pleasure and uneasiness’ when viewing the exquisite meals and ‘artful bodies’ that Hannibal creates – and indeed, all horror traps its consumers in a form of complicity as they choose to engage with it and derive enjoyment from it.¹⁵⁴ By exploiting our morbid fascination with that which supposedly repels us, the figure of the wendigo has expanded its domain into Western horror, where its presence silently calls attention to the disturbing obsessions of our allegedly civilised culture.

However, even within their own narratives, wendigos and tricksters are not as different as they might at first appear: the Fur Queen is a trickster, and yet she displays some unsettlingly wendigo-like characteristics; Hannibal is a wendigo, but he also acts as a trickster, subverting boundaries and deceiving his enemies. When Weesageechak enters the wendigo to defeat it, he emerges tainted, visibly changed by his enemy; when the Okimasis brothers enter settler society, they cannot avoid being altered by it, even if they eventually realise that their true identities are their Indigenous ones; when Will seeks to entrap Hannibal, he realises that his only option is to become more like the murderer, going down the ‘corridor in his mind that there may be no coming back from’. The distinction between the trickster and the wendigo – the archenemies – is blurred. The greatest boundary that the trickster defies, perhaps, is their own.

¹⁵⁴ Schwegler-Castañer, ‘The Art of Tasting Corpses’, p. 622.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have shown how the wendigo takes on different meaning and significance in different cultural contexts. In particular, the meaning of its wildness depends on the storyteller's perspective, since wildness is socially subjective. Indigenous and non-Indigenous creators alike have linked the cannibalism of the wendigo to colonialism and resource extraction, but while the films discussed focus introspectively on the problems of white American attitudes, Boyden's and Erdrich's novels explore the harm caused to Indigenous people and communities by these same attitudes, while also offering a more optimistic view of the possibility for healing and recovery. And of course, the problematic linking of wendigos with Native characters (as discussed in Chapter One) is reminiscent of colonial narratives of Natives as cannibals (as discussed in Chapter Two), demonstrating another non-Indigenous – and more overtly racist – way of assigning meaning to the wendigo's cannibalism.

I have also suggested that, despite their differences, the boundary between the wendigo and the trickster is less clearly defined than it might at first appear. This is not just the case in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *Hannibal*; Colqhoun exhibits trickster-like qualities, as do Elijah Whiskeyjack and (in some ways) Linden Lark. Even Johnston's modern wendigos can be seen as somewhat trickster-like in the same vein as Hannibal, having 'taken on new names [and] acquired polished manners' to hide their insatiable greed.¹⁵⁵ Likewise, the other attributes of the wendigo are not confined to the texts through which I have analysed them: Elijah, Linden, Colqhoun, Ed Pollack, the Fur Queen, and Hannibal all exhibit some form of wildness, and the wendigos of Johnston, Highway, and Fuller are all cannibals, as are most in Western folklore.

Most scholarship on monstrous figures comes from a Western perspective. The only mentions of Native Americans in Cohen's 'Monster Culture' are in the context of them being painted as monsters by settlers.¹⁵⁶ While it is certainly important to recognise the ways in which dominant cultures have demonised – and continue to demonise – others, there is also value in considering monsters from a transcultural perspective, examining how those presented as monsters view the monstrous themselves. The late Carol Edelman Warrior explores this in her 2015 work 'Baring the Windigo's Teeth: The Fearsome Figure in Native American Narratives', in which

¹⁵⁵ Johnston, *The Manitous*, p. 235.

¹⁵⁶ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', pp. 8, 16.

she contrasts the ‘monstrous hybridity’ of Western monster figures with the disruptive acts of villains in Indigenous narratives; in the latter, the emphasis is on what the characters *do* and how they interact with the world, rather than on what they *are*. The texts that Warrior analyses are not ‘explicitly *about* windigos’, and she instead uses the figure ‘as a literary theory that can predict, illuminate, and trace fearsomeness in Native American fiction’.¹⁵⁷ This is an intriguing approach, and one which I unfortunately only encountered after I had almost completely finished writing this thesis. Unlike Warrior, my analysis of the wendigo has focussed not on figures that exhibit wendigo-like behaviour, but instead on those that are identified as wendigos by those who tell their stories.

Working from this approach, it is apparent that the figure of the wendigo has entered the wendigo that is Western culture. Whether this entry is indeed a trickster-like infiltration (as I have suggested in Chapter Three) – or whether it is instead a cannibalistic act of incorporation by the Western cultural wendigo – is a difficult and possibly meaningless question. (Can a concept as abstract as ‘the figure of the wendigo’ be said to have its own agency and willpower? Perhaps.) What is clear, however, is that the figure has simultaneously retained its significance in Indigenous cultures. Any incorporation of the wendigo into Western culture is – and will probably always be – only partial. Perhaps no invading culture can ever fully appropriate an Indigenous cultural figure: these figures retain their cultural histories, even if these histories are unknown to the invaders. Figures like the wendigo remain untameable, rebellious, unpredictable, wild.

¹⁵⁷ Warrior, ‘Baring the Windigo’s Teeth’, pp. 2, 10, emphasis in original.

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