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Cannibalizing the Wiindigo: The Wiindigog in Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree Boreal Landscapes and Its Re-presentations in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT: This paper will discuss the Wiindigo, a cannibalistic character among some Indigenous peoples of North America. Illustrated through the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree, two Algonquin-speaking Indigenous groups, the Wiindigo serves as a personification of fear and hunger, and alludes to the cultural heritage elements of the boreal forest food system as well as the differing legal systems in Canada. In examining the Wiindigo from the Indigenous cultural and historical perspectives related to the author by several knowledge-holders, as well as from Euro-Canadian popular culture representations, the paper illustrates the importance of the Wiindigo to Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree world views, customary governance, and contemporary lived experience.

KEYWORDS: Wiindigo, customary governance, food systems, Canada, Anishinaabe, Oji-Cree

Introduction[1]

Wiindigo: the name sparks fear and mystery for horror film-lovers in North America. The familiar popular horror plot often includes a group of visitors from the city surviving the horrors of an Evil Spirit awakened by a long-

1 Acknowledgement and Appreciation: I would like to recognize and honour the collective and individual stories shared with me by members of the communities on Nigigoonsiminikaaning, Asatiwisipe akiing, Gojijing akiing. Gichi-miigwetch memindage dibaajimowag Walter Nanawinba miinawaa Richard Morrisonba, niin a'da miigwechiwendam a'do gikendamowinan. Any errors in the article are solely mine.

forgotten ritual of Indigenous people. In this story, a lone settler (or a group of attractive teenagers), finds himself/themselves in a dense wilderness that is representative of the Canadian "north". A howl, a growl, and a high-pitched shriek are heard but the sounds echo across the landscape and it is difficult to tell where they are coming from. Trees, too, creak in the stillness of the night – or was that branches cracking under the weight of the creature's heavy footsteps? And more importantly, is "the thing" moving towards its victim? The sounds seem to come from all directions and, unfortunately, running incites an attack of the frightening creature. Then, a semi-human figure with shiny red eyes and big deer antlers emerges.

Figure 1. A popular version of the appearance of the Wiindigo; the figure is covered in fur and carrying human head skulls. Source: Shutterstock, image 1511144420

The moonlight enables one to distinguish the horrifying creature, and, by its mere appearance, one can tell that the encounter will lead to a terrible fate. There are screams, there is blood; torn flesh is dispersed at the scene. If found, human remains are hard to identify. The audience later learns from an Indigenous Elder that this was the Wiindigo.

Such popular culture versions of the Wiindigo allude to an ancient "Indian" burial ground or an "Indian curse", both of which add a layer of exoticism, the unknown, and authenticity to "Indian myths". Due to that cultural affiliation, the "Scary Monster" that is the Wiindigo kills out of revenge for being awakened, or simply because it is his nature to do so. In North American and particularly in Euro-Canadian popular culture, the Wiindigo represents an enigmatic "Indian monster", sometimes reimagined through Christianity as a demon, but always terrifying the forest visitors with its haunting ubiquity.

Because the Wiindigo is associated with the eerie unknown of "the Canadian wilderness", it is a pervasive figure tied to a colonial understanding of Indigenous presence. However, the Wiindigo is immensely meaningful to the Algonquin-speaking people in the central boreal forest of Canada. For the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree[2] in these regions, the Wiindigo has always been – and continues to be – an important component of culture and worldview, arising out of oral stories and transported through time and re-imagined along with the peoples' historical circumstances. Although significantly "cannibalized" by Euro-Canadian understandings, the Wiindigo and the Indigenous narratives to which he belongs remain vital to the living heritage of the *akiwenziyag*, "men of the land"[3] and other community members.

This paper will discuss the cultural and historical heritage of the Wiindigo and the subsequent "cannibalization" of these Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree narratives by Euro-Canadian popular culture. By illustrating how Indigenous social values were "devoured" by (re)settler discourse, the paper highlights new Wiindigo narratives tied to colonialism, justice, and "Indian" presence. Written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous woman who has spent more than fifteen years examining intangible cultural heritage safeguarding and linguistic transmission with Indigenous communities in Canada, this paper elaborates on the narratives of Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree *akiwenziyag* about livelihoods and customary governance within the *Wiindigowi dibaajimowinan*, "stories of the Wiindigo from anecdotal experience". Despite the wealth of anthropological literature written about the Wiindigo (including the detailed work of Basil Johnston), this paper centers around the stories and perspectives gathered from community members and *akiwenziyag* at Asatiwisipe Aki/Poplar River, Nigigoonsiminikaaning, and Couchiching First Nations territories in central Canada. The paper concludes by articulating on the re-presentation of the "modern" Wiindigo through contemporary State apparatus and socio-cultural challenges historically and presently experienced by Indigenous communities.

The Wiindigog

Indigenous people in North America recorded their histories largely through oral stories. There are many different Indigenous cultures and Nations across the large country now called Canada. Even among the Anishinaabeg and Oji-

2 The Anishinaabeg are Algonquin-speaking peoples residing around the Great Lakes in North America; the Oji-Cree are located east and to the north of Lake Winnipeg, in Manitoba. The members with whom I spoke come from the boreal forest areas around the eastern side of Manitoba and north-western Ontario in central northern Canada. The *akiwenziyag* are members of the communities of Asatiwisipe Anishinaabeg Poplar River First Nation in Manitoba as well as Nigigoonsiminikaaning First Nation and Couchiching/Gojijing in Ontario, Canada, but their territories and traplines extend beyond and far away from these communities.

3 The term *akiwenzi* literally means "man of the land/man who walks the land" but is often used in the context of the Elder or a "man who knows his land and cultural way of life". I use this Anishinaabemowin term to refer to both the Anishinaabeg and the Oji-Cree because the term was used by both.

Cree, there are distinct features such as landscape, relationship with the state, and treaty promises that further deepen this cultural diversity. Many of the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree stories are divided into *dibaajimowinan* (stories, personal narratives, anecdotes from lived experience) and *aadizookanag* (sacred or historical stories). Many of these contained *gikinoo'amaagoowinan,* "teachings", that relied on Other-Than-Human Beings to shape cultural values and establish social norms (Johnston 1995; Pawłowska-Mainville, forthcoming). Shapeshifters, Weesakejak, Sasquatches and Memegwesiwag (Little People Who Live in the Rocks), and Buhnaabeg (Water Beings) are just some of the personas who exist in Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree narratives. Likewise, Mishu Bizhew, Animikiiwag, and the Wiindigog are beings which teach humans about respect, responsibility, and their role in the world (Johnston 1982, 1995; Benton-Banai 2010; Bouchard, Martin 2010). The Wiindigo, in particular, has generated interest in Euro-Canadian popular culture, and the creature, as we will see shortly, has permeated the horror film genre.

Figure 2. Norval Morriseau, *The Wiindigo* (tempera on brown paper, ca. 1963).
The Anishinaabe artist portrays the Wiindigo eating humans-turned-beaver.
Source: Courtesy of The Estate of Norval Morriseau

For the Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree, the Wiindigo is a combination of spirit, animal, and human nature, all of which evoke narratives of mankind's power, cleverness, strength, and resilience as well as Anishinaabe principles and values (Johnston 1995). Depending on the cultural dialect, the Algonquian name for the Wiindigo is also spelled Wendigo, Windigoo, Weendigo, and Wiitiko. The term "Wiindigo" will be employed here, with originals kept in citations so as to respect the linguistic and dialectical variability. The Wiindigo is understood to be of human form, often clad in hides and furs; sometimes he is half naked. He is understood to have shiny red eyes that permit him to see well in the dark. Newer and pop-cultural interpretations have added deer antlers to the Wiindigo (even among some young community members), but the Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau rarely painted the being with any horned components.

The Anishinaabe writer Basil Johnston describes the Wiindigo as a giant cannibal, who, as a manitou, a "spirit",

> towered five to eight times above the height of a tall man [...] Because it was afflicted with never-ending hunger and could never get enough to eat, it was always on the verge of starvation. The Weendigo was gaunt to the point of emaciation, its desiccated skin pulled tautly over its bones. As the Weendigo ate, it grew, and as it grew so did its hunger, so that no matter how much it ate, its hunger always remained in proportion to their size (Johnston 1995: 221–222).

There are multiple descriptions of Wiindigog[4] that add a hypnotic appeal to this frightening persona. In some versions, the Wiindigo is described as a giant cannibalistic skeleton of ice (Landes 1968), in others, he is a "monster" with "hate in his eyes, hate in his presence, and death in his breath" (Johnston 1982: 22). In his conversations with the Anishinaabeg of Berens River, the anthropologist, Irving Hallowell (2010: 142), noted that Wiindigo accounts rendered him as tall as or "taller than the trees". Some Oji-Cree narratives mention his sickly and disheveled appearance and strong, pungent smell of rot and old, bloody meat.

Emphasizing his bright eyes and easily angered demeanor, different cultural details add to the fantastic surrounding the Wiindigo figure. The Wiindigo could be a man or a woman, or even a young person. He is said to have a heart of ice, or be made up of ice altogether (Richard Morrison, personal communication, August 2, 2015; Johnston 1995) Other narratives from Anishinaabeg *akiwenziyag* speak to Wiindigo's attempts to kidnap babies and mention his angry prowess across the landscape to avenge his dead relatives. The anthro-

4 Wendigo is singular and Wendigog is plural. Some also anglicize the name in plural form to Wendigos or Wendigoes, however, Anishinaabemowin, the Ojibwe language, tends to pluralize with -ig, -wag, -ag, -wuk, etc.

pologist Hallowell, who spent over fifty years in an Anishinaabeg community in this region, was told by his friend, William Berens, that the Wiindigog are human beings who are "transformed into cannibals by sorcery, that cannibal monsters can be 'created out of a dream' by a sorcerer and sent into the world to perform malevolent acts" (Hallowell 2010: 237). These cannibal giants roam the woods, particularly in the spring, and people must always know how to get rid of them.

Figure 3. A version of the Wiindigo as described by many Anishinaabeg oral narratives, but with the antlers attached. Source: Shutterstock, image 2071031273

While the "Old People" (Elders of previous generations) were scared of the Wiindigog – who are generally described as powerful – the *akiwenziyag* also share stories where people would fight back. Some even challenged the beings in a fight of strength and cleverness. Basil Johnston (1982), for example, argues that the Wiindigo is loathsome in its habits, conduct, and manners, and enjoys challenging humans in a match. The Poplar River Oji-Cree Elder Walter Nanawin also shares that in the past, when the Wiindigog taunted

humans, humans would play hide and seek and eventually swim away from the location on a boat which the Wiindigo could not catch. According to this Elder, "the Wiindigoog could not swim or something... they were scared of the water" (Walter Nanawin, personal communication, July 14, 2015). Walter explains that during his trapping days, he has seen many strange things and many Other-Than-Human Beings. He also claims to have heard the Wiindigo himself, chronicling that the creature makes his presence known through shrill screams in the forest, "it's to scare you, you know. To instill fear, is what I say" (Walter Nanawin, personal communication, July 14, 2015). The Elder likewise tells me that the Wiindigo enjoys running through the trees, sometimes even bringing the trees down as he runs: all "those broken trees there, you see, that's the Wiindigo taking them down, you know" (Walter Nanawin, personal communication, July 14, 2015). The Wiindigo also enjoys playing "taunting" games with humans, and he does this by stalking a solitary trapper or throwing things at him until the trapper leaves the territory.

While the Wiindigo is said to have a malignant character and to enjoy menacing humans, people are aware of his sinister personality and work together to resist him. Walter reveals that one time, around the 1930s, a very strong windstorm went through Poplar River. The people believed that a Wiindigo was heading their way from the South-East and members of the community all assembled in one dwelling so that "some shamans" could work to "alter his path" (Walter Nanawin, personal communication, July 14, 2015)[5]. As is the case still, Poplar River is an isolated community in the boreal forest and without road access. As such, local people place high value on *widookodaadiwin*, "helping each other/mutual help", to ensure the well-being of the collective. To ensure the safety of community members and to prevent any disruption to *mino-bimaadiziwin*, "the good/balanced life", in this incident, the members used their collective powers to resist the aggressive attack of the Wiindigo. The fact that this particular moment of a group of men "working together" to alter the Wiindigo's path was unique and lived, illustrates that the community was responding to a real, rather than perceived, danger.

Because the Wiindigo is said to be made of ice, it is possible defeat the Wiindigo by clubbing it to death or by waiting until the creature thaws out or melts in the spring (Johnston 1995; Maude Kegg quoted in LeGarde Glover 2009). The flesh-eating Wiindigo can also be defeated by an individual "forcing boiling lard down its throat, thereby releasing the human at the core of ice" (Erdrich 1984). In other interpretations, it is only his heart that melts, and in others, the entire creature melts the moment the "ice on the river opens up. When the Crane Creek opens, [the creature] melts, you know" (Walter Nanawin, personal communication, July 13, 2007). For Walter, knowing the type of Wiindigo (they are not all the same) as well as the circumstances surround-

5 It is interesting to note that this story is also shared with Hallowell by William Berens (Hallowell 2010).

ing the Wiindigo (how he came into being) is important; it is knowledge of these details that helps to effectively eliminate the creature. “Some have tried, you know”, Walter shares one *dibaajimowin*, “but they don’t do it right. They [didn’t] know how to do it right, that time, you know. They [didn’t] do it right” (Walter Nanawin, personal communication, July 13, 2007). For those Wiindigog who do not melt with the spring, human interference is essential, otherwise the creatures will prevail and cause chaos for local families. The performative element of “dealing with” the Wiindigo illustrates not only the power and expertise of the *akiwenziyag*, but also the urgency of the situation. If undefeated, the Wiindigo continues its wrath; if conquered in the Spring, it returns the following year. Whether it shows up at another time or becomes embodied in another person or circumstance, the terrifying characteristic of the Wiindigo is that it is an ever-present and recurring threat in the boreal forest.

The Wiindigo as *Gikinoo’amaagoowin, “a Teaching”*

The Wiindigo intertwines Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree worldviews which include an overarching discourse on human nature merged with jurisprudence and cultural values around collective responsibility. This is particularly relevant to the Wiindigo’s cannibalistic nature. Stories around this figure refer to his insatiable hunger for beaver, which causes him to turn humans into giant versions of the animals: the more beaver he eats, the more he craves the meat (Hallowell 2010: 143). In some narratives, his desire for meat is proportional to his size, so the more meat he eats, the more he grows and craves meat. In the boreal forest, when summer supplies diminish in late winter, meat and fish caught at moment’s need are the only sources of food. But they are infrequent and not guaranteed. During this stage of winter, *wawashkeshiwag*, *atikak*, and *moozag*, deer, caribou, and moose, respectively, were prized, and men would often travel out of camp to seek them. Success in a hunt, however, requires a man to have a good relationship with the animals; only if the hunter is respectful and if he follows *Anishinaabediziwin*, the cultural “way of life”, will the animals agree to give up their life to the hunter (Pawłowska-Mainville, forthcoming; Tanner 1979). The animals who do give themselves up to humans are not abundant, however. This feast-and-famine period of food shortage caused previous generations to go hungry for days or even weeks at a time. This reality expanded *dibaajomowinan*, stories about the existence of a “ravenous and frightening Wiindigo spirit” (LeGarde Grover 2009).

In the boreal forest of central Canada, the exposed rocks of the Canadian Shield descend into the numerous cold black lakes. The thick lushness of the tall spruce trees intermingled with *azatiwag*, the poplar trees, contours the shorelines and exemplifies the beauty of the “Canadian north.” Yet the beauty of these trapline territories, the homeland of the local Indigenous people, can be deceiving. While the landscape is breathtaking, it is also dangerous.

Here, when the land-based mode of production fails, there is nothing to eat. Frances Valiquette, one of the local Elders in Poplar River, recounts that

Figure 4. The typical Canadian shield landscape around Asatiwisipe Aki with boulders descending into the iron-rich waters. Photo. A. Pawłowska-Mainville (2008)

"people fished in the summer and mostly trapped in the winter. [...] There was not much welfare, just the ones who were sick and under a doctor's care. It was a hard life [...] In the winter there wasn't too much to eat. [...] But it was a good life" (Frances Valiquette, notebooks)[6]. Frances acknowledges that livelihood and self-determination on the land brings a good life, but it is a demanding life, one that often includes *noondeskade*, the state of being short of energy that comes from food. Walter Nanawin concurs, illustrating his trapping days when he would travel across the land: "I'm talking about the land from here to Black River, where we used to travel to the trap lines. 'Cause the winter road there, from time immemorial that people have travelled to Manoomin River and Black River and Bear Head River. And that road, I have travelled that road, I've waded that up to my knees in cold freezing water in spring, going back and forth on native block, on the trap lines [to hunt and trap]. Even before the

6 In addition to the *dibaajimowinan*, in 2013 I received a set of notebooks compiled by one of the local Elders, Frances Valiquette. The notebooks, written between 1974–1981, summarized some of the changes in the community from 1950s onwards. Willie Bruce, Abel's Bruce's nephew from Polar River, dropped off these notebooks for me so I could "do something with them", thus some of the information from those years is present in (Pawłowska-Mainville, forthcoming) as well as in this article.

trap lines were made". Walter concludes by adding that "sometimes, we went hungry for weeks. That was the life, you know" (Walter Nanawin, personal communication, July 14, 2008).

In a community three hundred kilometers away from Poplar River, Richard Morrison, the Nigigoonsiminikaaning *mashkikinini*, medicine man, speaks to a similar reality. He shares that there were times when people had nothing to eat, and people went hungry for a long time; sometimes, people would die of starvation (Richard Morrison, personal communication, July 12, 2015). What these narratives tell us is that when the land no longer provides, the lifestyle gives rise to cannibalistic Wiindigog. In such extreme instances, when an individual is said to "grow fond of human meat" and poses a threat to others in his or her group, the people say that the Wiindigo has taken them over, or that they have "become" Wiindigo (Richard Morrison, personal communication, 2015). In this particular environment and with these specific circumstances, to ensure the well-being of the collective, the individual who has "gone Wiindigo" needs to be removed. And here is the key difference between the Wiindigo-Monster in popular culture films and the Indigenous version of the Wiindigo: in the latter version, the creature does not need elaborate features or embellishment of its appearance to make it scary. For the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree, by its very existence the Wiindigo is the scariest element of life imaginable: the cannibalistic spirit-human that comes into being in a bout of famine and decrepitude to devour members of its society.

When a person becomes Wiindigo, they become a threat to the safety of others and hence, must be dealt with. One such Oji-Cree Wiindigo story from this region became one of the most unique cases in Canadian jurisprudence. The story centers on Jack Fiddler, an *ogimaa*, "chief" or "leader," of his people at Sucker Lake in northern Manitoba, and a very powerful shaman (Fiddler, Stevens 1984). His father, Porcupine Standing Sideways, was said to appear into the community as a man who "lived before in this world" (quoted in Fiddler, Stevens 1984: 3). Both father and son were influential *mashkikiininiwag*, medicine men. By virtue of his ability to conjure animals, to cure, and to "relate to the animals of the forest," Jack Fiddler became a leader of his clan in the late 1800s (Fiddler, Stevens 1984: 4). The shaman was also known for his ability to defeat the Wiindigog. As was the common practice at the time, one day, a family member asked Jack Fiddler to kill a Wiindigo. Because of the foreseen violent ending, being asked to kill a Wiindigo was an important task, and not taken lightly. Jack Fiddler killed the family member who had become a Wiindigo. The shaman was subsequently accused of murder by the Canadian Mounted Police in 1906. From the standpoint of Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree customary law, the strangling of a woman who turned cannibal, that is to say, the Wiindigo, was not illegal; in fact, it was a "communally sanctioned defensive act", rationally justified in the circumstances (Hallowell 2010: 238). The murder and the trial were held in a Canadian court and, even though Jack Fiddler had no knowledge of Canadian law and did not speak a word of English, he was

found guilty of murder and put in prison. The case illustrates the imposition of Canadian law on the local people, who, up to that point, have been living under their own jurisprudence and customs. The case also symbolizes the lived fear and vulnerability of the people who, with Canada's removal of the peoples' ability to kill the Wiindigo, were left defenseless against it.

The court case exemplifies how local people's "scary stories" and practices of dealing with the Wiindigo were embodied in customary law and served as a form of social control used to ensure the well-being of community life. Those who have encountered a Wiindigo, and those who have "gone half-Windigo" (Erdrich 1988), meaning the individuals who started to crave (human) meat, as well as those who understand the gravity of the situation and the need for a legal system that deals with the Wiindigog. In *akiwenziyag* narratives, the Wiindigo is a combination of things weaved into one malevolent spirit. It devours the human mind, spirit, and body of its victim, while, simultaneously, obliging collective responsibility and action. It represents both the endurance and erosion of Anishinaabe principles and values around human self-interest (Johnston 1995). Through the principle of *ganawenindiwag*, "caring for each other", the Wiindigo also reinforces protocols around the sharing and distribution of food, reciprocity, and esteem for the land (Pawłowska-Mainville 2020, forthcoming). Since the northern boreal forest climate provides people with abundant but not assured resources and food, customary laws arising out of the land reflect unique social values and behaviours. In a time of food scarcity, when a person starts to crave meat – including human meat – it was common, as well as wise and responsible towards the collective, to kill the Wiindigo (or to sacrifice oneself by euthanasia or suicide, which frequently occurred as well). Life-and-death customs of the boreal forest societies mirror the landscape, and in times when the local food system falls short, the Wiindigo is given life though story and lived experience.

The Wiindigo must exist for people to exist. In its cannibalistic phase, a Wiindigo transforms fellow humans into food, thereby evoking local jurisprudence to deal with the threat to society. The Wiindigo is more than just the "scary monster" of the wilderness as conceptualized in Euro-Canadian popular culture. The creature is an important reminder about the reality of living in the boreal forest, and many *akiwenziyag* believe the Wiindigo still roams in the vast bush, forever hungry, never satisfied. Other community members, who consider the creature to be only a pagan myth that Christianity eliminated from social consciousness, equally respect the important significance it embodies. In these landscapes, the Wiindigo is a fact of existence that can happen to anyone. To survive here, it is critical to understand the protocols of respect and *akiiwi miijim*[7] food distribution, and it is equally urgent to have knowledge of *inaakonigewinan*, the necessary "laws" that ensure the survival of the collective.

7 The term literally means "land/dirt/earth food" but which is an identifiable Anishinaabe foodsystem or traditional boreal forest diet.

Although the feast-and-famine lifestyle is not as prevalent today, the Wiindigo continues to serve an important role in Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree worldviews. For example, the Wiindigo is used as a warning to children if they stray too far or stay out too late; pronouncing his name is likewise considered a bad omen. My petition to have an image of him drawn for this article was met with apprehension by some; it is for the fear of "summoning it", they said (John Mainville, personal communication, September 20, 2022).

Figure 5. John Mainville, *Humanity Fluctuates in Hunger Till It's Gone* (2022, used with permission). An original Anishinaabe rendition: the Wiindigo includes a human with deer rams but the "hunger" for human flesh is meant to represent drug additions that eat away a user

But there was interest in the request and excitement in the discussion, particularly when the conversations brought forth many dreams afterwards. Walter Nanawin, the Oji-Cree *akiwenzi,* especially enjoyed talking about the Wiindigo and other Other-Than-Human Beings. He confidently recounted the narratives around this figure, and, sharing one Wiindigo *dibaajimowin* with me over his kitchen table at *asatiwisipe aki* in 2010, he smiled at me in a mischie-

vous way. His confident voice and bold grin during the story of the Wiindigo breaking trees in the forest tells me that this fiery eighty-year-old man would still be able to take on a Wiindigo – and win.

Finally, it is important to point out that, while early anthropologists and scientists have relegated the Wiindigo to a psychosis – the state of insanity that ensues during famine – this position is perceived as limiting and even silly for some *akiwenziyag*. It is not simply "hunger" that creates psychosis; it is the Wiindigo that influences an individual's cannibalistic behavior. To Richard Morrison from Nigigoonsiminikaaning, the argument that the Wiindigo is simply a psychosis only explains how an individual became a Wiindigo (i.e., because of the starvation), but the assertion fails to explain why a particular individual at that specific time assumed the form of the Wiindigo. Given that the creature is both literal and figurative, Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree community members very rarely consider the Wiindigo as a psychosis; it is a *manidoo* that tempts and possesses under aggregate circumstances (i.e., a series of qualifiers in an individual's life) or it can be evoked to possess by fellow humans. For many community members, therefore, talking about the Wiindigo, even today, is a taboo. Many members are hesitant to say the creature's name and refuse to depict him in drawings; this fear is to avoid inviting the creature into one's mind and body – and to not bring it into existence. This is because they know from their Elders' stories that to vocalize its name is to tempt fate: becoming a Wiindigo or being devoured by one is an on-going fear in any society. Consequently, differing among families, regions, and cultures, many *akiwenziyag* still maintain that the Wiindigo can be "brought to life" anytime that the people are starving – for food, for self-determination, or for a return to *mino-bimaadiziwin*, "the good/balanced life".

Devouring Indigenous Presence

Because of its "exotic" nature and source, the Wiindigo has permeated into popular culture. In these representations, the Wiindigo is often understood and portrayed as the malevolent beast that comes out of the shadows to stalk, possess, and murder. They frequently feature innocent souls who happen to enter Wiindigo territory or overstep a supernatural boundary (such as breaking a specific taboo), to "invoke" the evil being into existence. Having awakened the malevolent Spirit, these individuals are then punished by it with dire consequences, as illustrated in the introduction. And while an Indigenous voice is occasionally added to provide a level of authenticity or indigeneity to an "Indian myth", these popular media Wiindigog stories and films are generally presented from the non-Indigenous, Euro-Canadian perspective.

The re-imagined Wiindigo illustrates the continuity of colonial practices of taking other entities and making them "monsters". In this case, the Wiindigo has been removed from its original culture-specific association and devoured by colonial discourse, became a Devil-like "Indigenous Evil Spirit" that hounds the (re)settlers. This characteristic is important as the notions of "evil" and "Devil"

do not exist in the Anishinaabe language or epistemology (Richard Morrison, personal communication, 2007). Even though the notion of *maji-*, "bad" or "negative consequence" is a part of Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree linguistic cosmos, the term "evil" as attached to the Wiindigo stems from Christianity. Due to the appended perspective, the Wiindigo is often re-imagined with Christian Devil-like features such as goat rams, hooves, and a half-human, half-goat bottom. This means that an outside value system contributes another layer of interpretation to the Wiindigo – and to its origins.

Since first contact, perceptions of Indigenous people in settler-imagination guided the European treatment of Indigenous communities and the subsequent relationship therewith. The initial amazement with the Indigenous way of life and customs quickly transitioned to a strategically negative view of the population so that "civilization" and "occupation" of the land would become more justifiable. Beginning with the notion that non-Christians cannot own the land, Indigenous people in the "New World" (which was very old to local populations) were classified as "wildermen" or "wild people", "savages" (noble or ignoble), and "pagans" (Dickason 1984; LaRocque 2010; Doxtator 1988). The physical appearance of North American Indigenous people led the way in shaping the way the 16th and 17th century English and French settlers behaved towards the locals and their way of life. Seeing the ostensibly naked people with little body hair and a skin colour "pulling towards red" (Amerigo Vespucci quoted in Dickason 1984: 10), the Europeans believed that the indigenous residents were "uncivilized" and strange – and depicted them to be almost monster-like in some drawings (LaRocque 2010; Dickason 1984).

The fascination with Indigenous livelihoods, particularly with the "free for all" hunting, trapping, and fishing economy led the early explorers to (wrongfully) assume that Indigenous people had no religion, markets, nor governments, and that they were living "according to nature" (Amerigo Vespucci quoted in Dickason 1984: 11). The subsistence economy of the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree, for example, contradicted the political economies of Europe: food "freely" harvested and redistributed according to local protocols represented a unique vision of subsistence. The culture-as-nature epistemology that argued for respecting Nature and being in a reciprocal relationship with it, challenged the European-imported Christian belief that humans dominate over Nature (Barton et al. 2022). Not able to identify or understand land-use and its accompanying resource management practices (such as *Anishinaabediziwin* and the practice of *asemaa*, putting down tobacco), ecological planning (such as burning, crop cycling, and aquiculture), and local food systems (such as *aki miijim*), early Europeans' myopic view interpreted Indigenous customary laws and spiritual/religious practices as evil, pagan, and monstrous, thus destined to be replaced by Christianity (Pawłowska-Mainville, forthcoming; Linklater et al. 2014). Consequently, Eurocentric thinking led to the enforcement of aggressive policies of disenfranchisement, land dispossession, and cultural genocide of Indigenous people in the boreal forest.

Figure 6. *Columbus Landing on Hispaniola* (engraving, 1594?). Spanish explorers represent the people they encountered in the "New" World as "primitive" and "savage".
Source: Wikimedia Commons

The land, too, mesmerized, and yet simultaneously terrified the Europeans. The "pristine" landscapes were interpreted in colonial ways that divided humans from Nature. Terms like "wilderness", "untouched" and "virgin land" re-positioned Nature as an entity to be dominated, justifying its exploitation, resource-extraction, and development by early colonists and Euro-Canadians. For the 16th and 17th century Christians in the Americas, "wilderness" was a potent symbol applied to the "moral chaos of the unregenerate and to the godly man's conception of life on earth" (Nash 1971: 1). Prior to (re)settlement, largely unmodified natural spaces of the North American continent served as an example of "wilderness" because the Europeans arriving to the New World considered it as such. Consequently, it was necessary to take control of and reorder the "frightful and obscene" Indigenous practices around Nature (Nash 1971: 7). To this day, North American "wilderness" continues to shape the imaginative and most mundane attitudes about Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations. Landscapes of the "frontier" articulate themselves systematically in terms of the absence and displacement of local peoples, only to replace their presence with "Indian lore".

As settlement of the Americas advanced and Indigenous populations were pushed to the margins, the combination of convenient imageries around Indigenous beliefs and "the wilderness" provided justification of colonialism. Subsequent contemporary popular culture productions amplified the "Indian" and "wilderness" horror tropes with themes of "Indian burial grounds", "Indian curses", and "evil shamans". Like the inherent characteristic of the Wiindigo, cannibalism "almost immediately became the appellation by which Amerindians were known in Europe", which re-presented Indigenous populations and their rituals as rooted in flesh-eating (Dickason 1984: 21). The merger of imagery and ideas helped popularize films like *The Shining* (1980), *Poltergeist* (1986), *The Lost Empire* (1984), and *Pet Sematary* (1983, 2019) and more recent films such as *Frostbiter* (1996), *Wendigo* (2001), *The Last Winter* (2006), *The Retreat* (2020), and *Antlers* (2020). In almost every film, the "scary" object is tied to an Indigenous presence or oral story, illustrating that since the beginning of colonialization, the scary monster in the wilderness who frightens the young (White) settler is not so much the Wiindigo, but rather "the Indian" and his existence.

The Wiindigo, like most similar motifs in films with "the Indian" trope, is conveniently represented as a horrifying figure: it occupies the landscape and devours "civilized society." What the Euro-Canadian Wiindigo represents is perhaps a personification of the "hellish" space – the space that nature and indigeneity represent and occupy. It is a Christian-infused understanding that "evil" exists in natural, unoccupied spaces and "demons" lurk in the shadows to devour the "innocent" frontiersmen. In that sense, the Wiindigo reflects a discourse of colonialism where the "civ[ilized]/sav[age]" dichotomy positions Indigenous populations as pagan nature-dwellers in opposition to the civilized settlers who arrive and control Nature (LaRocque 2010). Relying on the Wiindigo as a violent monster located in a forest emphasizes Eurocentric nuances that justify colonialism and civilization of "savage" Indigenous populations and their practices that both fascinate and repel (Taussig 1986).

The on-going existence of Indigenous people fighting for rights and land has been replaced with narratives of empty lands and Indian lore; these do not pose a threat to claims of Canadian sovereignty and legitimacy (Bordo 1992). By cannibalizing Indigenous presence and re-introducing it as "Indian lore", the viewer has a focal point from which to position disenfranchisement and displacement of Indigenous populations. Introducing the "missing" variable – "the myth of the Indian" – into the landscape enables popular culture films about the Wiindigo to place "Indians" as existing only through legends, cursed graveyards, and "myths of the savage" but not as self-determining and co-present populations fighting for territorial and resource management rights. The notion of wilderness filled with "wild" cannibals is central to the colonization process and exposes a deep-rooted European anxiety over enduring Indians who refuse to submit to their rule (Hämäläinen 2022). Euro-Canadian popular culture, therefore, reduced the culturally-important figure of the Wiindigo to a Scary

Monster, highlighting that, like Indigenous landscapes, popular culture representations of the Wiindigo are deeply political and nuanced in colonial legacy.

Today, Indigenous people are reclaiming their own stories through popular media, films, and books. Among others, Wiindigo stories are re-told and even reconceptualised to their original, albeit continually terrifying, importance. By reviving frightening *dibaajimowinan* about the Wiindigo, the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree offer popular culture the opportunity to learn about cultural values related to the boreal forest food systems as well as their very existence. The re-presentations of these stories by the Anishinnabeg and Oji-Cree offer new forms of self-determination and lived realities in a (post)colonial world.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to illustrate the Wiindigo and its significance to the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree in central Canada. While Wiindigo narratives differ across cultures, regions, and communities, the figure continues to be central to cultural and historical heritage of the Indigenous populations. With much of the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree cultural values "cannibalized", the Wiindigo has been absorbed into Euro-Canadian and North American popular culture and films. In conjunction with early representations of "the Indian" as "savages", popular culture representations of the Wiindigo limit the figure to a mere Scary Monster and inherent horror-film tropes, thereby decontextualizing Indigenous presence in North America. Even though the Wiindigo is indeed a dreadful figure that enjoys eating human flesh, his existence is paramount to the boreal forest Anishinaabe and Oji-Cree world views, values, and lived experiences.

As the Anishinaabeg shifted to a more settled way of life in the 20th century, Wiindigog narratives became reconstructed to expound upon the lived realities of colonization. The same fear used to describe the Wiindigo: of being chased, devoured, possessed (and fighting the possession) is now used to depict the "modern" Wiindigog, the colonial monster that today "kills" Indigenous people in different ways. While the "original" Wiindigo runs through the forest and takes over individuals to be devoured, the "modern" Wiindigo likewise cannibalizes the Indigenous world: it tears children from their families through the foster care system and it is embodied by the police who "get" young people like Neil Stonechild and take them on "starlight tours"[8]. This Wiindigo is causing environmental degradation in traditional territories, destruction of cultural knowledge transmission and language loss (Johnston 1995; Pawłowska-Mainville, forthcoming). Somewhere in between, there is also the terrifying Wiindigo-as-inter-generational trauma which arose from land dispossession,

8 "Starlight tours" refers to the practice of police officers taking young Indigenous men from the streets of the cities like Saskatoon and Regina, in the Canadian prairies, and driving them to the peripheries of the cities to walk home without their shoes. This was done usually in the middle winter when the temperatures often reached below −40°C.

unfulfilled treaty promises[9], and forced relocations[10]. This Wiindigo exhibits itself today though depression, anger, suicide, and challenges with parenting skills and addictions (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Wagamese 1997; Chrisjohn, Young, Maraun 2006; Morris 1991.) Policies like the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement of 1930, the Indian Act, and welfare programs which caused disproportionate experiences of ill-health, a shorter life expectancy, poverty, and food insecurity (Desmarais, Whitman 2013; Waldram, Herring, Young 1995; Shewell 2004) are also "creatures" that devour Indigenous youth. Because Indigenous people suffer from higher rates of diabetes, suicide, drug additions, and incarceration as well as foster care when compared to other Canadians, many *akiwenziyag* argue that the Wiindigo has been replaced by "modern" Wiindigog embodied by government officials, priests and nuns of the residential school systems, and contemporary social determinants of health. With this interpretation, the Wiindigo narratives remind us not only that all humans are capable of "devouring" fellow humans, but that they are also continually capable of justifying cannibalistic behavior. *Akiwenziyag dibaajimowinan* illustrate that the Wiindigo is a perpetual threat for their existence, but ultimately, in order to circumvent and subdue it, Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree living traditions must be (re)employed.

In conclusion, there are many faces to the Wiindigog. This cultural figure is an important character in many Indigenous oral stories because it teaches important values and ensures collective well-being. Although the Wiindigo has been re-imagined through the discourse of settler as well as popular cultural imagination and horror films as a terrifying "Indian" monster, the creature also serves as a fascinating personification of socio-political processes and human relations. Equally terrifying and educative, tied to colonization and self-determination, laws and murders, the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree figure of the Wiindigo, rather than be "evil", reminds people to respect the land, food, and each other.

For the Anishinaabeg and Oji-Cree *akiwenziyag*, the cannibalistic Wiindigo-spirit will always exist. The foundational element the Wiindigo, the idea that each one of us can figuratively and literally "devour" others if the conditions are right, still captures many imaginations and livelihoods. This is because the Wiindigo speaks to human nature and illustrates that in a time of intense conditions the worst thing that can happen to a society is precisely the Wiindigo.

9 Alexander Morris, the Treaty Commissioner working in this area, writes in his book outlining the process that a lot of Indigenous people complained about unfulfilled treaty promises as early as during the treaty signing.

10 A few scholars show the tragic consequences of relocations including Kulchyski, Tester 1994; Bussidor, Bilgen-Reinart 1997; Wikler 2019.

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