

Windigo presence in selected contemporary Ojibwe prose and poetry

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Weeindigo (Weeindigook or Weendigoes) A giant cannibal (or cannibals). These manitous came into being in winter and stalked villagers and bested wanderers. Every hungry, they craved human flesh, which is the only substance that could sustain them. The irony is that having eaten human flesh, the Weendigoes grew in size, so their hunger and craving remained in proportion to their size; thus they were eternally starving.

Basil Johnson¹

The presence of the ravenous and frightening Windigo spirit in work by contemporary Ojibwe writers ranges from the specific to the symbolic, the universal struggle between good and evil. Values and desirable ways of being are the heart of cultural foundations of indigenous people worldwide as are stories of actions and consequences; both traditional storytellers and contemporary writers link the dialectics of that inclusion to their literary application. This paper will seek and explore the presence of windigog in selected Ojibwe prose and poetry through an examination of (1) stated and unstated inclusion, (2) literal and figurative beings (3) individual and group entities, and (4) indigenous epistemology.

Terms and Word Usage

The word Ojibwe (Ojibwa; Ojibway; Chippewa) will be used for the indigenous nation in the center of North America². Our word for ourselves and all indigenous people is Anishinaabeg, original people created by the Great Spirit³, who also created manitous(spirits): those on the side of goodness, including Mother Earth, our hero Nanaboozhoo, plants and trees, waters, rocks and air all things animate and last of all those who live on the dark side, including the Windigog⁴.

Introduction

The fate of the windigo is to walk the world exhausted and ravenous, unable to rest or to satisfy physical and spiritual cravings. Human interactions with windigog have included

sightings, encounters, and changes in the environment: rumblings in the earth; wails and screams; a vibration in the air that causes the shaking of tools, utensils, and cooking kettles.⁵ The possibility of their arrival creates wariness and nervous edginess; victims rarely live to give witness, and those who are not devoured might become windigog, themselves.

Examples of Ojibwe views from the Oral Tradition

“The purposes of traditional Ojibwe education were both to serve the practical needs of the people (to learn life skills) and to enhance the soul (to grow in spiritual ways)”⁶. Indigenous pedagogy, or the oral tradition, is the means by which knowledge, history, culture and worldview are passed from one generation to another.⁷

A story from the Saginaw, “consisting originally of individuals who were refugees from the great Odjibwa family”, is included in Henry Schoolcraft’s 1839 collection. Schoolcraft’s retelling describes the windigo as a large man who took over a family’s lodge and devoured the wife while her husband was out hunting, leaving her infant boy motherless. “The father now knew that it was the Great Spirit who had thus miraculously raised him a son from the remains of his wife; and he felt persuaded that the boy would, in time, become a great man, and aid him in his revenge on the Weendigoes.”⁸

William Jones’ Ojibwe texts contains translated interviews from the beginning of the 20th century. The stories begin with a locating of the event in time and place, in a manner that is usual in Ojibwe oral tradition⁹; the description of the Windigo becomes part of that sense of place. “Truly big was the creature; not even half so tall were the trees, was how high he reached ... they became alarmed at a great rumbling in the earth, the earth shook ... ‘It is the Windigo,’ they said. Nearer it kept coming.” When a brave man stepped forward to fight, “everywhere over this region was the sound of her voice heard when she, the Windigo, was slain.”¹⁰

During the 1960s, University of Minnesota Duluth anthropology professor Tim Roufs visited extensively with Paul Buffalo, an Ojibwe Elder on the Leech Lake Reservation.¹¹ “That Windigo and Gwashun story is only for cold weather. But it is getting cold ...” Buffalo began. “There was a little boy they call Gwashun....” who was cautioned to stay from the ice out in the big lake, in particular the center, where the ice was weak. “If you go beyond that

point on the ice, you might get in danger...There's a WINDIGO out there. He is a dangerous man." Buffalo explained, "It's a story to teach young people what the waters are, what the ice is, so they'll be cautious when they're playing on the ice. And always, when the little kids at that time hears....'WINDIGO'...they knew it was very dangerous."¹²

Other accounts are found in Jim Clark's and Maude Kegg's biographies. "Long ago a people far away were called Zagwaadagaag. They're the ones that are feared when they are hungry," Maude Kegg said. She spoke of a family discovered "lying about, scattered about in pieces. The flesh must have been chewed off their bones. There were just the bones of the dead ones there. That man must have eaten them." Kegg recounted a story told by her grandmother, about an old man who long ago had almost become a windigo. "And she said, 'When it's beginning to be spring, perhaps in March, and it's starting to warm up, then it melts,' she said, 'the ice he must bear within himself,' she says."¹³ This reference is to the Windigo heart of ice.

Jim Clark (Naawigiizis), too, remembered stories told by his grandmother.¹⁴ "This is a story that she told us about a wiindigoo. A windigoo is a giant, and from her story a windigoo is a person who has turned cannibal. Also the story is about how they could detect a person who will turn cannibal. I guess the person himself knew when this urge came on him – when he would crave human flesh. So he would tell his people what to do, or for, him. He would give specific instructions on treating his urge."

Like Paul Buffalo, Naawigiizis recalled the windigo story as a means of cautioning children away from danger. "We had to camp at site and the first thing they told us was there was a monster on the other side of the ridge. They made us listen. What we all heard was the waves hitting the stones on the shore, and it did sound like someone smacking, or licking, their chops. We had been camping there for about five days, and when the work was finished we were getting ready to move back home. Us kids wandered to the top of the ridge and there was this big inviting lake. All this time we could have been there, playing in the water."

Windigo presence

Windigog appear in Ojibwe poetry, short stories, essays, novels, and a fifth category of writing that involves the retelling and passing along of Ojibwe history and cultural instruction. Interwoven through all are the oral tradition and Ojibwe epistemology. The following examples of contemporary Ojibwe literature contain references to windigo as well as windigo-related themes and concepts of hunger, gluttony, fear, challenge, pursuit and chase. In each work the windigo is specifically named.

Wub-e-ke-niew (Francis Blake, Jr.) in his biographical/philosophical translation of aboriginal thought from an Ahnishinahbaeo'jibway perspective, presents a concept tacitly present in all of the literature included in this project: the windigo was created, like everything else, for a purpose, and thus is part of the cosmos; "neither good nor bad"; it simply exists, its amorality enigmatically "in harmony and connected to Grandmother Earth."¹⁵ It is as it was created to be, part of the mystery of the Great Spirit. Variations in human attitude and belief have no bearing on its reality.

The windigo, tradition, and winter stories from the White Earth reservation are present in Kim Blaezer's 1994 poetry collection Trailing You. In "Ice Tricksters and Shadow Stories" a woman in the isolation of winter listens to "voices of ice....Remembering the story, how ice woman froze the wiindigoo at just that point in the moccasin game."¹⁶ Blaeser's "Surviving Winter or Old Stories We Tell Ourselves When a Blizzard is Coming" recounts stories of cave-ins and burials, snow caves and liquor, lurid lessons in coping. The urgent voice that offers stories while warning the reader to watch out for the dangers of winter brings to mind the moccasin game story in the former. As the woman in "Ice Tricksters" recalls how the ice woman froze the Windigo, in the last verse of "Surviving Winter" Blaeser concludes that "I used to think we told these stories to survive winter but now I know that winter comes so that we tell stories and learn to survive life."¹⁷

Originally published in White Earth Reservation's newspaper *The Progress* more than a century ago, Vizenor's "Nanabozho and the Gambler" pits the "compassionate trickster" hero Nanaboozhoo against the Great Gambler, playing the dish game, a game of chance, for his life and the continued existence of the Anishinaabeg. If he lost, the price would be larger than his own existence. "... that forfeit is life," said the great gambler. "I keep the scalps

and ears and hands, the rest of the body I give to my friends the wiindigoo...”¹⁸ taunting Nanabozho with the prospect of his body going to the dark wiindigoo as the spoils of a game. Nanabozho’s skill and the great risk he took resulted in a loss for not only the great gambler but the wiindigoo as well. And the Anishinaabe people continue to exist today.

Guilt and fear over a long-ago linguistic miscommunication with a white man that had resulted in a physical altercation clouded the trip to Blunder Bay for “an older man ... one of those who had never gone to town” in Basil Johnston’s story “Yellow Cloud’s Battle With the Spirits”. As part of his recent conversion to Christianity, “Old Yellow Cloud had been assured that he had nothing to fear from Weendigo, the evil being who devoured those guilty of any form of excess”, the bear walker, or any other “old superstitions”. On the way home Yellow Cloud, believing that he was being attacked by the bear-walker, prayed but found to his dismay that “White man’s prayer was in vain against an Indian monster...there was only one thing to do. Stand up in front and face the monsters with raw courage.” The result of the battle that followed, told with humor and compassion by Johnston, was Yellow Cloud’s breaking the headlights on the priest’s car with a club.¹⁹

Marci Rendon’s poem “dancing blue” is an impressionist expression of the death of a husband and father who drowned while out trapping. Rendon links death and massacres of the past (“wounded knee red lake sand creek wounded knee”) to the present; however, her interpretation is not limited to the confines of the metaphorical or symbolic: the windigo waits behind the kitchen door, laughing ominously in anticipation of his inevitable victory.²⁰

Louise Erdrich is the most prolific of contemporary Ojibwe writers; however, that alone does not explain the number of encounters the reader has with Windigog in her works.²¹

Erdrich’s work has been extensively researched, including several papers that contain references to Windigog and address Windigo-related themes.²² Like Francis Blake, Erdrich connects oral tradition to the articulation of stories and lessons. Her storytelling style is classic Ojibwe: Shirley Brozzo, in her analysis of food themes in *The Antelope Wife* notes that “writing in vignettes, or short pieces of story or history, is Erdrich’s way of staying true to her oral tradition.”²³

Erdrich’s poem “Windigo” begins with a definition: “The Windigo is a flesh-eating, wintry demon. In some Chippewa stories, a young girl vanquishes this monster by forcing boiling

lard down its throat, thereby releasing the human at the core of ice.” Presence signaled by flapping towels, groaning dogs, and rattling kettles, he courts the young woman, who conquers him through a figurative melting of the ice within. The poem is unsettling combination that brings to mind the ambiguities in Ojibwe cosmology and storytelling.

In The Antelope Wife, Klaus Shawano is visited by a mysterious dog, “scuffed-up white with spooky yellow-brown eyes, and a big pink dragging tongue”, who stands on his chest and talks to him, tells jokes and tales, and gives advice in the humorous and indirect manner of traditional Anishinaabeg. Klaus calls him “windigo dog”.

Fleur Pillager, whose life story plays across the pages of most of Erdrich’s novels connecting land and lives, is introduced in Tracks, in the aftermath of a tuberculosis epidemic that killed her family. The tribal policeman “did not want to enter the cabin, fearing the unburied Pillager spirits might seize him by the throat and turn him windigo”²⁴ but Nanapush, braving the terrifying prospect, broke into the cabin and found the teenage girl huddled in a corner. The trauma, combined with the necessity of leaving the bodies unburied until the ground thawed, created a depression and sickness of spirit that resulted in the two survivors becoming lethargic and ill. “The blood within us grew thick,” recounted Nanapush. “We needed no food. And little warmth. Days passed, weeks, and we didn’t leave the cabin for fear we’d crack our cold and fragile bodies. We had gone half windigo.”

Windigo concepts and themes

Jane Inyallie expresses the hunger of the disenfranchised and uprooted in her poem “the forgotten son”²⁵. The street person “boozes drugs and smokes until nothing satisfies his appetite”; at the sight his own reflection he weeps with the realization of his past and future. His hunger dissipates; defeated, he has lost his power to pursue even what is self-destructive.

The consumption of Native identity is addressed by several Ojibwe poets. Marci Rendon asks “what’s an Indian woman to do?” “when the white girls act more indian than the indian women do?”²⁶ addressing a cultural imperialism that involves the acquisition of Native clothing, names and accents by majority women. Rendon speaks to the same theme in her poem “i am tired of being romanticized”²⁷, continuing, “your emptiness attempts to devour me mind & heart & soul ... you pass me by searching hidden valleys secluded caves for bits

of you think you'll find in me". In Joyce carlEtta Mandrake's "Values"²⁸, an old white woman declares that she feels cheated because she was not born an Indian. Mandrake silently asks if the speaker, too, has been cheated out of her land, ceremonies, and language. Finally I, Linda LeGarde Grover in "To the Woman Who Just Bought a Set of Native American Spirituality Dream Interpretation Cards"²⁹ write into free verse the experience of standing in line at a bookstore behind a woman who purchases an ersatz cosmology she desires.

In conclusion

Windigo

At the end of that last summer
 that last summer we were like you
when even the pines could give us no shade
and their brown, sharp needles, paler each day
fell, *at first I thought the sound was rain*
and lay lifeless where they fell,
where they cut and scratched our feet till they swelled.
At the time of day that no shadows were cast
a piece of fire fell from the sky
and the sun grew on the ground.
Ravenous, it began to eat the earth.
Some escaped the smoke and heat carrying
babies, grandparents, the infirm
but after the dry hungry summer
we were in a weakened state,
even the strongest. We chose, one by one,
to live alone or die with our people
My brothers chose to die with their wives.
Myself, after my old parents, my wife,
our children, all but one, fell like pine needles,
walked with my firstborn.
My first daughter, a fast runner she'd always been
and strong as a man, slow to tire she
walked beside me for how long
 days, nights, lifetimes.
We were as few as the fingers on both my hands
when she tripped and fell, like so many had,
and I thought that like the others she had died
but she struggled to stand, weeping without tears,
salt-dried black eyes reddened, starved with grief.
As I lifted my firstborn, my heart recalled her birth
her mother, her small brothers and sisters her grandparents
 and tor
then, like my daughter, it wept without tears
and struggled to stand, starved and dry with grief.

Linda LeGarde Grover³⁰

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¹ Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Supernatural World of the Ojibwe* (NY: HarperCollins, 1995), 247. Chapter 13, pages 221-237, is titled "Weendigo" and contains both traditional explanations of the spirit and Johnston's interpretation of the concept to current times.

² Gerald Vizenor, *The Everlasting Sky: Voices of the Anishinabe People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), 10-12. This section originally appeared in *The Everlasting Sky: New Voices of the People Named the Chippewa* copyright 1972 by Gerald Vizenor.

- ³ Edward Benton-Banai, *The Moshomis Book* (Hayward, WI: Indian Country Communications, Inc., 1988), 2-4; 5-9.
- ⁴ Basil Johnston, *The Manitous* (New York: HarperCollins Press, 1995), xiii
- ⁵ Victor Barnouw, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales and their Relation to Chippewa Life* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 121-123.
- ⁶ Thomas Peacock and Marlene Wisuri, *Waasa Inaabidaa: We Look in all Directions* (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002), 67-74.
- ⁷ Linda LeGarde Grover. "Are You Teaching Them Anything Yet, My Girl? Auntie Carol's Advice, Given in True Ojibwe Oral Tradition, as a Guide to Embedding American Indian Pedagogy into American Indian Studies Classrooms", *Bimaadizing: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Native Thought* V1.3, Spring 2008.
- ⁸ Mentor Williams (editor). *Schoolcraft's Indian Legends from Algonic Researches, The Myth of Hiawatha, The Race in America, and Historical and Statistical Information Respecting ... the Indian Tribes of the United States*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1991). 169-174.
- ⁹ Thomas Peacock, *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), 45.
- ¹⁰ William Jones (collected by), *Ojibwa Texts Volun V7.1* (Leyden and New York: E.J. Brill, Ltd., 1917), 175-179.
- ¹¹ Tim Roufs (edited). "When Everybody Called Me *Gah-bay-bi-nay*: 'Forever-Flying Bird'" An Ethnographic Biography of Paul Peter Buffalo. Website, Tim Roufs, University of Minnesota Duluth:
<http://www.d.umn.edu/cia/faculty/troufs/Buffalo/pbwww.html>
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Maude Kegg, *Nookomis Gaa-Inaajimotawid: What My Grandmother Told Me*, (Bemidji, MN: Indian Studies Publications, Bemidji State University, 1990), 15-17.
- ¹⁴ Jim Clark, *Naawigiizis, The Memories of Center of the Moon*, (Minneapolis, MN: Birchbark Books, 2002), 27. Other stories with windigo-related themes and beings can be found on pages 28, 52, and 55.
- ¹⁵ Wub-e-ke-niew (Francis Blake, Jr.) *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought* (New York City, Black Thistle Press, 1995), 206; 256.
- ¹⁶ Trailing you, and refer to the moccasin game; explain
- ¹⁷ Kimberly Blaeser. *Trailing You*. (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 1994), 7-9; 41-42.
- ¹⁸ Gerald Vizenor. *Summer in the Spring*. Minneapolis, MN: The Nodin Press, 1965), 15-17, 129-131. The story is included with the term "windigoo" replaced by "flesh eaters" in "The Four Ages of Man", *The Everlasting Sky*, (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000, 1-4.
- ¹⁹ Basil Johnson. *Ojibway Tales*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 57-64. This collection of stories about the mythical Canadian Moose Meat Point Reserve was originally published in 1978 by McLelland and Stewart, Toronto, Ontario; the characters are linked and connected in a variety of ways, and stories that illustrate a reservation life during the 1940s-1960s are humorously and leveling told from a Native perspective.
- ²⁰ Marci Rendon, *Nitaawichige: selected poetry and prose four Anishinaabe writers*, (Duluth, MN: Poetry Harbor Publications, 2002), 59-63.
- ²² Excellent bibliographies can be found in Brightman's "The Windigo in the Material World", *Ethnohistory* 35:4 (Fall 1988) as well as Brown & Brightman's "Orders of the Dreamed": *George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth*, 1823 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988).

²³Shirley Brozzo, "Food for Thought: A Postcolonial Study of Food Imagery in Louise Erdrich's *Antelope Wife*", in

²⁴Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*, (NY: HarperFlamingo, 1988), 2-3.

²⁵Jane Inyallie, "the forgotten son", *Gatherings: The En'owkin Journal of First North American Peoples*, V.XI, 2000,

²⁶Marci Rendon, "what's an indian woman to do?" *Sister Nations: Native American Women Writers on Community*, (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 138-139.

²⁷Marci Rendon, "i am tired of being romanticized", *Dreaming into Being*, (Marci R. Rendon, 1994), 6.

²⁸Joyce carlEtta Mandrake, "Values", *Traces in Blood, Bone, & Stone* (Kimberly Blaeser, editor; Bemidji, MN: Loonfeather Press, 2006), 130.

²⁹Linda LeGarde Grover, "To the Woman Who Just Bought a Set of Native American Spirituality Dream Interpretation Cards", *Sister Nations* (edited by Heid Erdrich and Laura Tohe, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 91-92/

³⁰Linda LeGarde Grover, unpublished poem, 2007.