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Review

Windigo Violence and Resistance

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Abstract: The windigo is a generally malicious figure in several Indigenous cultures of the land currently administered by the governments of the USA and Canada. In traditional narratives, the windigo is generally associated with hunger, greed, winter, and cannibalism. In this paper, I discuss how both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers have used the figure of the windigo to critique and challenge environmental injustice. While some windigo stories present the being as a terrifying monster of the "wilderness", others use the figure as an embodiment of environmental destruction and the injustice that comes with it. Windigo stories also highlight three further aspects of colonial violence: military violence, sexual violence, and religious violence. Although some stories depict windigos being defeated through violence, many stress the importance of care and healing to overcome the windigo affliction. In fact, storytelling itself may be part of the healing process. Windigo stories, I argue, can be a useful way to interrogate the injustices created by colonialism and environmental destruction, and the stories can also offer hope for healing and for an environmentally just future.

Keywords: indigenous; storytelling; colonialism; cannibalism; wilderness; healing

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1. Introduction

The windigo is a generally malicious figure in several Indigenous cultures of the land currently administered by the governments of the USA and Canada. In traditional narratives, the windigo (also spelt *wendigo*, *wétiko* and many other variants) is generally associated with hunger, greed, winter, and cannibalism. The windigo is a *manitou*, a term which Ojibwe scholar Brady DeSanti (2015, p. 187) translates as "spiritual being", and it is usually described as a giant with a heart of ice and an insatiable appetite for human flesh. Sometimes, the windigo's hunger is so great that it devours its own lips (ibid.; Kimmerer [2013] 2020, p. 304). In many stories, the windigo is a human who has undergone a terrible transformation to become this cannibalistic monster.

Windigo stories exist across many cultures in the Algonquian group, including the Ojibwe, Cree, Potawatomi, and others. These cultures are indigenous to the land that is currently most often known as "North America" (probably after Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci), but which is also known by other names, including "Turtle Island", which derives from an English translation of an Indigenous name (Kimmerer [2013] 2020, p. 8; Johansen 2000). Following the European colonisation of this land, the figure of the windigo has crossed into European and colonial cultures, and the manitou can now be found not only in the works of Indigenous writers, artists, and storytellers, but also in novels, films, comics, and video games by non-Indigenous creators.

In this paper, I discuss how both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers have used the figure of the windigo to critique and challenge environmental injustice. Windigo stories, I argue, can be a useful way to interrogate the injustices created by colonialism and environmental destruction, and the stories can also offer hope for healing and for an environmentally just future. I begin by discussing the windigo's relationship with the non-human ("natural") world. Some works, such as Algernon Blackwood's *The Wendigo*, present the windigo is a threatening element *of* the non-human world, but other narratives, such as the works of Basil Johnston and Robin Wall Kimmerer, present the destructive manitou as

a threat whose violence is directed *towards* the non-human world. Larry Fessenden's film *The Last Winter*, I argue, can be seen to incorporate both of these contrasting visions of the windigo. I then discuss how the violence of the windigo can also be linked to the violence of colonialism, with reference to Jack D. Forbes's *Columbus and Other Cannibals*; Antonia Bird's film *Ravenous*; and Joseph Boyden's novel *Three Day Road*. In these works and others, I argue, the windigo embodies military, sexual, and religious violence against Indigenous people, in addition to the clearly related violence of environmental destruction.

I then discuss how various works address the matter of defeating the windigo. Many works depict the violent destruction of windigos, including *Ravenous* and *Three Day Road*, as well as Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. However, this violence rarely does much to tackle windigo injustice at a systemic level, and Boyden's, Erdrich's, and Highway's novels all present healing as a less violent—and perhaps more effective—alternative for defeating windigos. Forbes and Kimmerer also advocate healing as a means to treat the windigo "disease" (as Forbes calls it), rejecting the violence of the windigo and responding instead with care and a love of the world. I also suggest that storytelling itself can be seen as a form of resistance to windigo violence.

Before continuing, I would like to state that I am an Englishman with no Algonquian or other Indigenous American heritage. I am a doctoral researcher based at a university in the UK, and I am currently funded by a trust whose existence was enabled by extreme colonialist exploitation of human and non-human life in the Belgian Congo. I am, in multiple ways, a beneficiary of the capitalist and colonialist power structures that the texts I am discussing criticise. I do not believe that this invalidates my discussion of these issues, but I believe that it is important to acknowledge. The realities of environmental injustice have difficult and unsettling implications for my own life outside the area of academic study. Writing and scholarship are, I believe, ways to start engaging with these implications, but they are not sufficient to address them fully. With that in mind, I begin the discussion of the windigo's relation to the non-human world.

2. Environmental Destruction and "Windigo Economics"

In contemporary non-Indigenous culture, from Hollywood cinema to urban legends, the windigo is generally presented as a being of the "wilderness" and a threat that comes from the non-human world. Scott Cooper, director of the 2021 windigo horror movie *Antlers*, has described the windigo 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, sees the manitou as "a god [...] ancient and powerful, and one with nature" (Crow 2020). In a lecture on the windigo, Margaret Atwood (1995, p. 75) suggests that no one "goes wendigo" (i.e., transforms into a windigo) in the city: "[t]he bush, the trees, the loneliness, are essential". Many contemporary urban legends shared in online forums such as Reddit and 4chan also make this link, presenting the windigo as a wild, animalistic monster of the forest, preying on humans who venture into its territory. In many of these stories, in fact, the windigo seems unable to cross the treeline to either leave its forest home or enter a human encampment within the forest (Eflin 2014, p. 14; AgentOne1776 2020; May1400 2019).

This link to the wilderness is also shown in visual representations of the windigo in contemporary non-Indigenous media. DeSanti (2015, p. 189) notes, for example, that the version of the windigo that appears repeatedly in Marvel Comics stories generally "physically resembles a cross between a yeti (Abominable Snowman) and a werewolf, which differs from Ojibwe traditions of the entity as a tall, rail-thin being with a heart of ice". Another significant feature of non-Indigenous depictions of the windigo is the prevalence of antlers, and in some cases an entire deer head. Despite having seemingly no basis in traditional narratives, the image of an antlered windigo permeates non-Indigenous imaginings of the figure, from drawings shared on Reddit to the American television series *Hannibal* (Fuller 2015), to the title of Cooper's film, for which del Toro has described the antlers as "a must" when it comes to representing the windigo (Crow 2020). One

early example—possibly the earliest—of a fully deer-headed windigo can be seen in Larry Fessenden's 2001 film *Wendigo* (Fessenden 2001), but the association with antlers seems to reach back further: a 1944 illustration by American artist Matt Fox depicts the windigo as a furry, antlered giant, snorting out steam as it sweeps a human victim above the treetops (Colombo 1982, p. 98). Fox's illustration comes from a reprint of a novella, first published in 1910, which is perhaps the most significant windigo story to be written by a non-Indigenous person: Algernon Blackwood's *The Wendigo*.

The idea of the windigo as a monstrous creature of the wilderness can clearly be seen in Blackwood's novella, and it seems likely that this has influenced the subsequent non-Indigenous representations of the figure discussed above. The novella tells the story of a hunting expedition in Canada that goes horribly wrong one of the participants "see[s] the Wendigo" (Blackwood [1910] 1982, p. 112) and undergoes a mysterious, terrifying transformation as a result. The windigo is described at one point in Blackwood's novella as "a sort of great animal" that lives in the Canadian "Bush" (ibid., p. 79) and later as "the Call of the Wild personified", with a voice that "resembles all the minor sounds of the Bush—wind, falling water, cries of animals, and so forth" (pp. 102–3). The creature's appearance is never described in any detail, but it appears to leave vaguely hoof-like tracks in the snow, and the scent associated with it is described as "not unlike the odour of a lion [. . .] with something almost sweet in it [like] 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 windigo and the non-human world.

Throughout the novella, Blackwood sets up an oppositional dichotomy between human civilisation and untouched wilderness. On one side are the (male) hunters 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 forest, displaying "indifference to human life" and housing "the merciless spirit of desolation which took no note of man" (pp. 72–74). The windigo, for Blackwood, seems to be an embodiment of this terrifying, cosmic "spirit". He describes the creature as "something crudely and essentially primitive [. . .] that had survived somehow the advance of humanity", living "in the heart of unreclaimed wilderness" (p. 110). The "advance of humanity" here appears to be a euphemism for the colonisation of Turtle Island, while the unusual adjective "unreclaimed" clearly suggests that "humanity" has an inherent right to occupy this land. Although Blackwood (an Englishman) does not explicitly refer to European colonisers as the humans in question, the main characters of his novella are Europeans and settlers, and there are clear colonialist undertones to his writing here and elsewhere in the story. The one Indigenous character, Punk, has no dialogue, merely "grunting to himself" while he performs his household chores (p. 67), and in one early passage, he is described as "supplying the atmosphere of mystery", more like a piece of scenery than an actual character (p. 69).

The image of the windigo as a force of nature opposed to humans, however, is not universal, and indeed, it is a stark contrast to the windigo as it appears in many contemporary works by Indigenous writers. Ojibwe scholar Basil Johnston, for example, writes in his 1995 book *The Manitous* that the windigo is an embodiment not of non-human wilderness but of human weaknesses:

> 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. (Johnston [1995] 1996, p. 224)

Potawatomi author and scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her 2013 book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, specifically contrasts the windigo to non-human animals:

> This monster is no bear or howling wolf, no natural beast. Windigos are not born, they are made. The Windigo is a human being who has become a cannibal monster. (Kimmerer [2013] 2020, p. 304)

While the idea of the windigo as a transformed human is certainly present in the non-Indigenous narratives discussed above, the nature and cause of the transformation are quite different. For Johnston and Kimmerer, it is not immersion in the non-human world that causes the transformation but *alienation* from the non-human world. Johnston writes that humans become windigos due to their failure to respect "the rights of animals who dwel[l] as their cotenants on Mother Earth" and to offer "signs of gratitude and goodwill" to Mother Earth (Johnston [1995] 1996, p. 223).

Furthermore, in this contemporary Indigenous understanding of the windigo, the violence of the windigo can frequently be observed through harm and damage done to the non-human world. Kimmerer writes, for example, about the "footprints of the Windigo":

> They're everywhere you look. They stomp in the industrial sludge of Onondaga Lake. And over a savagely clear-cut slope in the Oregon Coast Range where the earth is slumping into the river. You can see them where coal mines rip off mountaintops in West Virginia and in oil-slick footprints on the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico. A square mile of industrial soybeans. A diamond mine in Rwanda. A closet stuffed with clothes. Windigo footprints all, they are the tracks of insatiable consumption. (Kimmerer [2013] 2020, p. 307)

Johnston similarly equates environmental destruction and degradation—in particular deforestation—to windigo activity. While the windigo in Blackwood's novella and the other non-Indigenous narratives discussed above is a threat that comes *from* the non-human world, the windigo in these Indigenous narratives is a threat *to* the non-human world. Furthermore, while Blackwood's windigo is an ancient and "primitive" creature, the windigos of contemporary Indigenous narratives are very much integrated with the modern world.

Canadian scholar Shawn Smallman (2014, p. 67) describes these differing versions of the windigo as "two diametrically opposed visions of the same phenomenon". Both of these "diametrically opposed visions", I would argue, can be observed in the 2006 film *The Last Winter*, co-written by Larry Fessenden and Robert Leaver and directed by Fessenden. The film, set in the twenty-first century on an oil drilling base in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, centres on the conflict between the base's leader, Ed Pollack, and environmental scientist James Hoffman. When workers at the base start disappearing and dying in mysterious ways, and a herd of giant spectral caribou seem to be haunting the nearby land, 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'" (Fessenden 2006, 0:51:57). Fessenden, an American of (to my knowledge) no Indigenous heritage, has a long-standing interest in the figure of the windigo: in addition to directing *The Last Winter* and *Wendigo*, he was a writer for the popular 2015 windigo-themed video game *Until Dawn*, and he is the editor of a collection of essays on the windigo titled *Sudden Storm: A Wendigo Reader*.

On one level, the spectral caribou in Fessenden's film may be seen to embody the "dark spirit" of the windigo. Fessenden has cited Blackwood's novella as one of his main influences (Barnick 2015; Abrams 2016), and the spectral caribou in *The Last Winter*, like Blackwood's windigo, are unknowable, animalistic spirits who dwell in the "wilderness" into which the human characters have ventured. In physical appearance, they resemble the antlered windigo so prevalent in non-Indigenous media (including in Fessenden's own work). However, the contrasting view of the windigo as an embodiment of contemporary environmental destruction can also be seen in Fessenden's film. In relation to his representation of the windigo in *The Last Winter*, Fessenden has said in an interview:

> 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. (Barnick 2015, 4:27)

The Last Winter is, first and foremost, a film about environmentalism and the impact of humanity on the planet. It is Hoffman, the environmentalist, who provides the main voice of reason at the base, in contrast to Pollack's increasing aggression and irrationality. Pollack himself can be seen as a windigo, an insatiably destructive force "cannibalising [the] ecosystem" of the Alaskan nature reserve.

Johnston, Kimmerer, and Fessenden all link the windigo's environmental destruction to the greed of capitalism. Johnston ([1995] 1996, p. 235) writes that "corporations, conglomerates, and multinationals" are the modern "reincarnat[ions]" of the windigo, pillaging Turtle Island in pursuit of wealth, with no regard for human or non-human life. Kimmerer describes the current age of capitalism as "an era of Windigo economics of fabricated demand and overconsumption" governed by "a systematic policy of sanctioned greed" (Kimmerer [2013] 2020, p. 308). While traditional windigo stories caution against selfishness and overconsumption, Kimmerer argues, these behaviours are encouraged and rewarded under the current global economic system. In *The Last Winter*, the demands of capitalist America motivate the environmentally destructive oil drilling project which, though framed as a drive towards energy independence for the US, 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, like a windigo eating its own lips.

3. The Windigo Violence of Colonialism

This capitalistic destruction of the non-human world is inherently linked to colonialism, and windigo narratives reflect this. Johnston ([1995] 1996, p. 237) discusses modern windigos' violations of Indigenous people's rights alongside the monsters' disregard for the non-human world, and Kimmerer ([2013] 2020) interweaves the history of colonialism and genocide into her discussion of ongoing crimes against the non-human world. Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan's 1995 novel *Solar Storms* (Hogan 1995) also uses the windigo to criticise colonialist environmental destruction, as discussed by Birgit Hans (2003), Summer Gioia Harrison (2012), and Desiree Hellegers (2015). The link between the windigo and colonialism is also made explicitly by Jack D. Forbes, a scholar of mixed Powhatan-Renápe, Delaware-Lenápe, and non-Indigenous background, in his book *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* (originally published 1979; revised edition published 2008). Forbes ([1979] 2008, p. 24) defines windigo ("*wétiko*") cannibalism as "the consuming of another's life for one's own private purpose or profit", and he associates this consumption strongly with colonialist and capitalist exploitation. He describes Christopher Columbus as "a clear example of an insane person, a killer and a cannibal" (ibid., p. 33) and argues that "colonialism is maintained by means of properly-controlled *wétiko* behavior" (ibid., p. 87). The windigo is a force of destruction and oppressive violence in the human world as well as the non-human.

The link between the windigo and colonial violence is illustrated in the 1999 film *Ravenous*, written by Ted Griffin and directed by Antonia Bird, which is set in the 1840s and draws explicit parallels between windigo cannibalism and American expansionism. As the windigo character of Colqhoun explains to Captain Boyd, one of his prospective victims:

> 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 [windigos] 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. (Bird 1999, 1:17:01)

Discussing this speech, DeSanti (2018, p. 18) argues that Colqhoun "embodies the unrestrained expansion westward and unconscionable colonization of Native Americans so many Europeans and their descendants participated in". Here, more explicitly than in *The Last Winter*, the United States itself is being compared to a windigo, "consuming" the land, creatures, and people of Turtle Island in its quest "to be whole". Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon (2014, p. 19) writes that "[i]mperialism is cannibalism, the consumption

of one people by another", and the windigo can be seen to embody this expansionist, imperialist violence.

Ravenous links the windigo to the US military in particular, with many army officers being converted to cannibals throughout the film. The violence of the windigo is also linked to military violence in Joseph Boyden's 2005 novel *Three Day Road*, in which Xavier, a young Cree man, witnesses the gradual windigo transformation of his friend Elijah (also Cree) over the course of their service in the Canadian Army during World War One.[1] Although Elijah himself is Indigenous, it appears to be his contact with Europe that causes his transformation. The war—driven by the colonial powers of Europe—places the two friends in a situation in which mercy and hesitation can be fatal and in which violence is rewarded, with Elijah eventually rising to the rank of corporal due to his high kill count. Elijah also begins taking scalps of his victims after a group of French soldiers suggest that he should keep evidence of his kills (Boyden [2005] 2006, pp. 228–32). Remembering this meeting later, Xavier privately reflects, "They [the Frenchmen] put the chill in me. I think that they are *windigos*" (ibid., p. 235). Forbes ([1979] 2008, pp. 45–46) describes how the windigo "disease" has "spread" through imperialism, with Europeans being "the major transmitters". Similarly, Elijah's direct contact with the violence of Europe can be seen as the cause of him becoming infected with the windigo sickness.

There is also a sexual element to the windigo violence of colonialism. In Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich's 2012 novel *The Round House*, a white male rapist and murderer is described as a windigo whose violence is directed towards Indigenous women. In Erdrich's novel, the violation of Indigenous people's bodies is linked to the violation of Indigenous land rights; due to the limits of Indigenous sovereignty, Native American lawyers are unable to prosecute the windigo for his crimes, despite them having been committed on tribal land. Furthermore, the murder in the novel turns out to have been linked to a scheme by a white family to illegally obtain Indigenous land for development. Danette DiMarco (2011, p. 149) argues that Colqhoun's violence in *Ravenous* "illustrates the exploitation and feminization of people upon which imperial capitalism is necessarily dependent", and Erdrich's novel depicts explicitly gendered sexual violence in the context of colonial power relations.

There are also instances of sexual violence in Boyden's novel. In flashbacks, Xavier's aunt Niska (a medicine woman) remembers having a passionate relationship with a French trapper. After several months of not seeing him, she eventually decides to 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" (Boyden [2005] 2006, p. 197). 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 (ibid., pp. 385–87). Both of these instances of sexual violence occur in a religious context, and indeed, religious conversion is a major element of much colonial violence, especially in the context of Turtle Island.

The link between the windigo and religious violence is made explicitly in Cree author Tomson Highway's 1998 novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Like Boyden's later novel, this depicts sexual abuse of an Indigenous boy at a residential school, and in this case, the sexually abusive priest is compared to "the Weetigo feasting on human flesh" (Highway [1998] 2000, p. 79).[2] Highway's novel also highlights the link between cannibalism and the Catholic communion (ibid., pp. 181, 227), a point which is also made in *Ravenous*, when, after relating the story of the windigo, an Indigenous character observes that the "white man eats the body of Jesus Christ every Sunday" (Bird 1999, 0:24:00). The windigo stands at the intersection of military, sexual and religious violence—all three of which can be seen as elements of colonialism.

These three facets of windigo violence can also be seen in Forbes's writing. Although Forbes ([1979] 2008, p. 40) praises Jesus for "publicly condemn[ing] greed, dogmatism and the acquisition of wealth", he describes most organised Christian religion as "a materialistic, *wétiko* series of cults" based on "perver[sions]" of Christ's teachings. He describes mission-

aries' violent suppression of traditional Indigenous practices (e.g., healing ceremonies) as "a form of religio-psychological terrorism designed to convert through creating a sense of utter hopelessness" (ibid., p. 76), and he also links dogmatic religion to patriarchy, noting the "[m]ale dominance" of many organised religions (p. 144). Indeed, Forbes goes on to argue that the "union of male religion with male military dominance [. . .] has been an all too frequent problem among human beings" (p. 145), highlighting again the interrelationship between these three elements—military, sexual, and religious—of colonialist windigo violence.

4. Slaying the Windigo Monster

If the windigo is an embodiment of the injustices created by colonialism and environmental destruction, then stories of windigos being defeated may help readers (or viewers, or listeners) to imagine ways to overcome these structural problems of the modern world. After discussing the modern reincarnations of the windigo, Johnston ([1995] 1996, p. 237) speculates whether "some champion, some manitou, will fell them, as [the trickster hero] Nana'b'oozoo did in the past". Some of the stories that Johnston relates depict this hero destroying windigos, and indeed, many other windigo narratives end with the (or a) windigo's death. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* contains a section where the two Cree protagonists recount a story of the trickster Weesageechak (a similar figure to Nana'b'oozoo) defeating a windigo by chewing up the monster's entrails from inside (Highway [1998] 2000, pp. 118–21). In *The Round House*, the inability of the legal system to bring the windigo to justice drives the protagonist Joe and his friend Cappy to take matters into their own hands and execute the murderer themselves. In *Ravenous*, Boyd sacrifices himself to kill Colqhoun, and the film ends with the two men locked in a deadly embrace inside a bear trap that has closed upon them like a giant mouth.

Three Day Road depicts the killing of several windigos. Xavier reluctantly kills Elijah when he realises that his friend has become a windigo and that "[t]here is no coming back from where [Elijah has] travelled" (Boyden [2005] 2006, p. 418). The sexually violent French trapper also dies: after he abuses Niska, she asks the spirit of the lynx "to go out and find the source of [her] hurt and extinguish it" (ibid., p. 199); a few months later, she learns from her mother that the man has died after throwing himself from a window, apparently under the belief that he was being pursued by demons. Boyden's novel also contains a flashback in which Niska's father kills a windigo woman and her baby child, both of whom have eaten human flesh and whose "madness" threatens to destroy their community (ibid., p. 50).[3] All of these examples, like *Ravenous*, seem to present violent destruction as the only way to defeat the windigo. However, as discussed in the following section of this paper, such an interpretation may be limiting.

Furthermore, in both Erdrich's and Boyden's novels, the violent spirit of the windigo is not necessarily defeated by the physical death of the windigo him-/herself. In *The Round House*, Joe fears that he will "become a wiindigoo" himself, "[i]nfected" by the man whom he and Cappy have killed (Erdrich [2012] 2013, p. 343), and, although Joe survives, Cappy (who delivers the fatal shot to the windigo) later dies a violent death himself. In *Three Day Road*, after Xavier kills Elijah, he takes his friend's identity tag and 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. While being treated, Xavier also develops an addiction to morphine, something which Elijah had previously suffered from and which had induced vaguely cannibalistic visions in him (Boyden [2005] 2006, pp. 139–43). The drug itself is described as an anthropophagic, windigo-like force early in the novel:

> 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. (ibid., p. 11)

Similar to Joe's fears in *The Round House*, Xavier's violent destruction of the windigo Elijah in *Three Day Road* seems to cause the spirit of the windigo to transfer to him, in the form of Elijah's name and, more harmfully, the addiction to morphine.

The danger of windigo-killers becoming windigos themselves can also be seen in *Ravenous*.[4] As DeSanti (2018, p. 16) observes, "[t]o defeat Colqhoun, Boyd gives in and eats human flesh in order to become a windigo". Here, in fact, the order of events is different from the examples in the novels above: Boyd's windigo transformation is not a consequence or a side effect of him defeating Colqhoun; instead, it is a *requirement* that he become a windigo *in order to* defeat the windigo Colqhoun. DeSanti notes that this has parallels with traditional tales in which ordinary people are voluntarily transformed into windigos to defeat other windigos. Indeed, Johnston (1982) relates one story that features an ordinary man transforming into a giant in order to defeat a windigo—although there is no indication that the hero becomes a cannibal in this story. While Xavier and Joe manage to survive their respective windigo encounters, Boyd, as mentioned above, is less fortunate. Indeed, *Ravenous* presents death—both killing and self-sacrifice—as the only way to defeat the windigo. As Martha, one of the film's two Indigenous characters, tells Boyd: "You stop wendigo, you give yourself. You must die" (Bird 1999, 0:54:54).

It is worth mentioning at this point that, although the above line is spoken by an Indigenous character, *Ravenous* as a film has a generally non-Indigenous focus. The main characters are non-Indigenous, and the director, Antonia Bird, is British. Similarly, in *The Last Winter*, although the two Indigenous characters provide exposition about the windigo, the main conflict is between the non-Indigenous Americans Pollack and Hoffman, and director Larry Fessenden is also a non-Indigenous American.[5] While *Ravenous* presents death as the only way to overcome the windigo affliction, *The Last Winter* seems similarly pessimistic in its general outlook: the final shots of the film suggest that some kind of apocalypse has occurred while the events on the base were taking place, and only one character appears to have survived.

5. Healing the Windigo Sickness

In addition to presenting death as the only way to defeat the windigo, *Ravenous* is similarly pessimistic in its depiction of an ultimate windigo victory. Although Boyd kills both Colqhoun and another windigo (in addition to himself), a visiting general unwittingly eats human flesh near the end of the film, suggesting that the spirit of the windigo will persist in the US Army. Furthermore, the audience knows that Colqhoun's prophecy of settlers "consuming" the continent will prove to be correct. Likewise, although Xavier kills Elijah in *Three Day Road*, the violent and oppressive forces that caused his transformation survive and persist. The windigo in *The Round House* is killed, but this does not end the violation of Indigenous people's rights. Discussing the ongoing violence against Indigenous people in Central and South America, Forbes writes

> But this we must emphasize over and over, that *the* wétiko *disease is not limited to the brutes*[6] *and goons who handle the gun, the lash or the instruments of torture*. The nice people in the offices, the typists, the lab technicians, the clerks, and, of course, the owners, directors, stakeholders, senators, generals and presidents who use, profit from, and feed on human exploitation are also cannibals to one degree or another. (Forbes [1979] 2008, p. 68, emphasis in original)

The broad themes of such an observation—if perhaps not the terminology—will probably be familiar to many readers. It relates closely to a central problem of existence in the modern world: the fact that systems of violence and oppression are so integrated into everyday life that it is almost impossible to avoid some form of involvement with them. If we live and function in a windigo society, does that make us windigos? And if the only way to defeat a windigo is through death, does that mean that the only solution to the injustice and violence of the modern world is death and destruction on an apocalyptic scale?

In fact, I would argue, death is *not* the only solution to windigo behaviour. In *The Round House*, Joe's grandfather Mooshum recounts a story which is similar in some respects to the tale of Niska's windigo-killing father, but with a crucial difference: the woman accused of being a windigo in Mooshum's story is in fact innocent. The woman, Akiikwe, faces execution after her husband convinces a group of men that she is a windigo despite having

no evidence, but she and her son Nanapush (a variant of "Nana'b'oozoo") escape. They later return to their village, and all is apparently forgiven (Erdrich [2012] 2013, pp. 210–20). Later in the novel, Mooshum explains

> It was true that there could be wiindigoog—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 wiindigoo was often simple: large quantities of hot soup. No one had tried the soup on [Akiikwe]. No one had consulted the old and wise. (ibid., p. 250)

The idea that "hot soup" can heal someone from a windigo affliction is consistent with the connotations between the windigo and the cold (e.g., the being's heart of ice). The nourishing food may also indicate that care and compassion are the cure for the isolation and desperation that characterises windigos. Citing a number of studies, anthropologist Robert Brightman (1988, pp. 357–58) writes that, in traditional societies, "windigos were more typically cured than executed", with "techniques conventionally entailing attempted exorcism, prayer, and the administration of hot grease that would warm the frozen viscera of the victim". In contrast to the executions of windigos depicted in *Ravenous* and *Three Day Road*—and indeed later in *The Round House*—this passage in Erdrich's novel indicates the importance of healing over killing. This is also indicated by the story of the female shaman Chachagathoo in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (Highway [1998] 2000, pp. 245–47). The windigo is perhaps better understood as an affliction—a "disease", as Forbes calls it—than as a physical monster.

Indeed, Forbes advocates love and nonviolence as a response to windigo violence and injustice. While acknowledging the legitimate motivations behind some violent resistance movements, he argues that the history of meeting violence with violence has meant that "hundreds of thousands have died, but little real change has been seen" (Forbes [1979] 2008, p. 142). Kimmerer further supports this approach, narrating a story in which a windigo is treated with a healing tea:

> And then he [the windigo] drinks, just a sip at a time of the golden-pink tea, tea of Willow to quell the fever of want and Strawberries to mend the heart. With the nourishing broth of the Three Sisters and infused with savory Wild Leeks, the medicine enters his bloodstream: White Pine for unity, justice from Pecans, the humility of Spruce roots. He drinks down the compassion of Witch Hazel, the respect of Cedars, a blessing of Silverbells, all sweetened with the Maple of gratitude. You can't know reciprocity until you know the gift. He is helpless before their power. (Kimmerer [2013] 2020, p. 379)

Like the hot soup mentioned in Erdrich's novel, this "nourishing broth" seems to embody a tender and caring response to the violence of the windigo. As Kimmerer discusses elsewhere in the book, the "reciprocity" of a gift-based economy is a stark contrast to the "Windigo economics" (ibid., p. 308) of neoliberal capitalism. The simple act of giving something without a demand for payment is itself a subversion of windigo systems and "Windigo thinking" (ibid., p. 309).

The focus on plants in Kimmerer's writing also suggests the need to de-alienate oneself from the non-human world as part of the healing process. Forbes ([1979] 2008, p. 181) writes that "there are no 'surroundings'" and stresses the interdependence of all life. If windigo transformations arise partly from a loss of "balance", as Johnston ([1995] 1996, p. 223) and DeSanti (2018, p. 18) suggest, then an awareness and reaffirmation of the interrelatedness of life can help to restore this balance. In *Three Day Road*, although Xavier violently kills Elijah, Niska successfully heals Xavier from the windigo sickness after his return to Canada, taking him away from the city and into the bush. As Smallman (2014, p. 71) notes, "Boyden inverts the traditional Euro-Canadian usage of the windigo as a symbol for the wilderness and the madness that it can create", as demonstrated in narratives like Blackwood's *The Wendigo* and the urban legends discussed earlier in this paper. There are many different

windigo stories—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—and it matters which ones we choose to tell.

Indeed, storytelling itself may be a part of the healing process. Remembering how her father used to tell her stories to comfort her, Niska begins to tell Xavier the story of his own life as part of her efforts to heal him (Boyden [2005] 2006, p. 401). In Kimmerer's ([2013] 2020, p. 379) narrative, after the windigo drinks the tea, the narrator begins to tell him a story—specifically, the story of "Skywoman Falling", which is how Kimmerer's book starts. The book itself is part of the treatment for the windigo sickness, and stories can help us to understand how to live responsibly and sustainably in the world. To achieve environmental justice, we must imagine what it would look like, and stories—windigo or otherwise—can help us to do that.

6. Conclusions

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous creators have used the figure of the windigo to address the violence and injustices generated by colonialism and capitalism. While some windigo stories present the being as a terrifying monster of the "wilderness", others use the figure to critique environmental destruction. Windigo stories also highlight three further aspects of colonial violence: military violence, sexual violence, and religious violence. Undoing the violence and injustice of colonialism and environmental destruction means defeating the modern windigos that embody these systemic evils. Although some stories depict windigos being defeated through violence, many stress the importance of care and healing to overcome the windigo affliction. Cultivating a love for others and reconnecting with the non-human (or more-than-human) world are steps on the path to recovery.

In this paper, I have not made much effort to draw attention to the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives on the windigo. I believe that both can be useful for approaching questions of environmental (in)justice, and that the content of the stories is ultimately more important than who is telling them. However, it is perhaps worth reiterating two broad differences that may be apparent from the discussion above. Firstly, as Smallman (2014, p. 67) notes, the concept of the windigo as a non-human monster is far more common in non-Indigenous narratives, whereas Indigenous narratives (particularly contemporary ones) very often treat the windigo as an embodiment of human flaws and a threat to the non-human world.[7] Secondly, the potential for healing and recovery from the windigo sickness is far more apparent in Indigenous stories, while non-Indigenous stories rarely depict successful healing. Perhaps both of these points reflect a fundamental pessimism in the contemporary capitalist, colonialist mindset: "nature" as a merciless threat, and destructive greed as incurable. Indigenous stories of the windigo, on the other hand, are more often infused with hope—the hope for healing and the hope for a just future.

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Notes

1 Boyden claims Cree ancestry himself, but these claims have been the subject of much dispute.

2 See Bowers (2017) for further discussion of gendered sexual violence in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *The Round House*.

[3] The story is reminiscent of the historical case of Ojibwe brothers Zhauwuno-geezhigo-gaubow and Pesequan, also known as Jack and Joseph Fiddler, both of whom died while imprisoned by the Canadian authorities for executing a woman whose community believed her to be a windigo.

[4] See Howard (Forthcoming) for a discussion of this danger in the contexts of Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and the American television series *Hannibal*.

[5] In both films, it is unclear what specific nation or cultural group the Indigenous characters are supposed to be from. *Ravenous* is set in the Sierra Nevada, and the subtitles describe George's language as "Washu", which is possibly a misspelling of "Washo", a local Indigenous language; George is played by Joseph Runningfox, a Pueblo actor from New Mexico, while Martha is played by Sheila Tousey, an actress of Menominee and Stockbridge-Munsee heritage who was born in Wisconsin. *The Last Winter* is set in Alaska, but the Indigenous characters are played by Pato Hoffmann (a Bolivian actor of mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage) and Oneida writer and performer Joanne Shenandoah.

[6] It should be noted that Forbes writes elsewhere of his discomfort with this term: "I hate to use the word 'brute' in such a way, because it reflects white stereotypes about animals. But to me animals are almost never brutes: *wétiko* humans are the true brutes of the world!" (Forbes [1979] 2008, pp. 46–47).

[7] In addition to Smallman, see also DeSanti (2015) and Lietz (2016) for discussions of contrasts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous representations of the windigo.

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