

Stolen Spirits: The Appropriation of the Windigo Spirit in Horror Literature

Kallie Hunchman, *Ball State University*

Although well-documented in Western literature, the windigo spirits present in stories like Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* and Algernon Blackwood's "The Wendigo" are stripped of their original context and reduced to mere stereotypes of the cultures from which they originate. By looking at the depictions of windigo in specific Western stories and Native beliefs, the ways in which appropriation has long-lasting effects on the perceptions of Native American cultures by the average consumer and even scientific communities becomes apparent. Ultimately, this paper argues that Native American spirits should belong to the cultures from which they originate.

His most vulnerable points, moreover, are said to be the feet and the eyes; the feet, you see, for the lust of wandering, and the eyes for the lust of beauty. The poor beggar goes at such a dreadful speed that he bleeds beneath the eyes, and his feet burn.

- Algernon Blackwood,
"The Wendigo" (1910)

Its eyes, tilted up like the eyes in a classical Chinese painting, were a rich yellowish-gray, sunken, gleaming. The mouth was drawn down in a rictus; the lower lip was turned out, revealing teeth stained black-ish brown and worn down almost to nubs. But what

struck Louis were the ears, which were not ears at all but curving horns... they were not like devil's horns; they were ram's horns.

- Stephen King, *Pet Sematary* (1983)

Introduction

The idea of the windigo is not entirely unfamiliar to Western readers, even if the windigo itself is not always referred to by name. A woods-dwelling, human-like, cannibalistic, horned figure—the common depiction of the windigo in television, books, and film—is visible in books by Margaret Atwood and Stephen King and shows like *Supernatural*¹ and even *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.² While the spirit itself comes from Native American beliefs, the common visual depiction of the windigo does not. In most Native American beliefs, the windigo greatly resembles the human being it used to be except for tiny features that give it away as a shell of what it once was.

The image of the windigo as seen in non-Native literature is recognizable as a Native American spirit in its use of exaggerated and stereotypical Native American characteristics created by capitalism. The windigo of pop culture is wild. It often has antlers and haunts forests and cemeteries, cursing the people who enter and eating the ones who do not leave. This horned depiction of the windigo appears in movies like *Wendigo* (2001), *The Last Winter* (2006), and *Devil in the Dark* (2017) and shows like *Hannibal* (2013-2015)³ and *Over the Garden Wall* (2014). In other Western depictions, the windigo takes on some remarkably werewolf-esque traits: pointy ears, sharp claws and teeth, howling, and frantic wandering through the woods (DeSanti 192), traits that can be seen in episodes of *Supernatural* (2005-2020) and *Charmed* (1998-2006).⁴ It exists in the realm of horror tropes of curses and “Indian burial grounds.” None of these representations, however, reflect the true nature of windigo myths. In the recreating of spirits that do not belong to them, Euro-American writers warp and decontextualize the windigo from its original contexts. The windigo is an important symbol in the many Native beliefs it inhabits, but the decontextualized Western windigo does not tell you what it symbolizes. Severing the windigo from its context allows Western authors to create a literary way of invoking spirituality and magic by drawing on their created stereotypical Native American themes: antlers, wilderness, spirits, and other aspects created to “other” Native American communities and create a marketable genre of Native American spirituality.

Native American spirituality, in its romanticization as the purest, most natural way of being American, is extremely marketable. Native American cultures are often commodified in Western culture—sold through dreamcatchers, feathers, masks, designs, tattoos, and Halloween cos-

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- 1 Season 1, episode 2
 - 2 Season 2, episodes 1 & 2
 - 3 Various appearances throughout seasons 1, 2, 3.
 - 4 Season 1, episode 12

tumes—and this commodification does not end with material culture. Spirits, stories, music, and general cultural characteristics are prime targets for Western creators. Native cultures have already proved to be marketable, and using stereotypes in horror literature quickly and easily lends an air of spiritualism and natural wildness to stories in ways appealing to American consumers.

Windigo spirits have existed in the oral traditions of many Algonquian Native American cultures long before they ever appeared in stories by horror authors like Stephen King and Algernon Blackwood. In the oral traditions of the Cree and Ojibwe, the windigo are important cultural spirits, each with individual histories, personal attachments, and reasons for being. Windigo stories serve as moral foundations, warnings, and histories of the communities in which they are told. Without the context of Native stories, the windigo is simply a cannibalistic monster. In Euro-American literature, they haunt white people and are separated—both physically and metaphorically—from the communities in which they are born. Western stories have appropriated the concept of the windigo, but they have changed it into a more marketable monster. The windigo is a personal spirit that still belongs to the Native American cultures from which it has been taken, and the appropriation of this spirit harms Native American communities by poorly representing their beliefs for a marketable gain. By looking at two stories, the 1983 novel *Pet Sematary* by American author Stephen King and the 1910 work “The Wendigo” by English author Algernon Blackwood, we see similar misrepresentations of the windigo by Western authors and how, despite the seventy-year gap between the publication of the two stories, the windigo is still prominent in Western literature as a symbol of horror and fear of the wilderness. *Pet Sematary* is an important cultural artifact thanks to King’s widespread popularity and recognition as a horror writer. The book’s cultural importance granted it not one, but two movie adaptations, the first in 1989 and the second in 2019. On the other hand, “The Wendigo” is one of the first representations of the windigo by a Western writer and served as a foundation for the image many people attribute to windigos as horrific creatures. By analyzing the representations of the original Western-shaped windigo created by Blackwood and the contemporary version that lives on in one of King’s most recognizable stories, it is possible to distinguish the Native windigo from the Western imitation and recognize the harm the latter puts on Algonquian communities.

Windigos in Native American Belief Systems

Before analyzing the Western literature in which windigos often reside, it is important to understand the cultural origins and context of these spirits. Beliefs about the actions and appearances of windigos vary from culture to culture, but the basic principles remain consistent. The

windigo is a Native American spirit who was once human but has since been transformed into a cannibalistic spirit. It belongs to the Algonquian tribes that spread across the northeastern United States and Canada, including the Cree, Ojibwe (Chippewa), Delaware, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Illinois, Fow, Kickapoo and many more. Among these tribes, the windigo goes by many names depending on the linguistic differences among the tribes. For example, the Cree refer to them as witiko or wihtikow and the Ojibwe refer to them as wintiko or wiindiigo. In light of the many spellings among the many tribes of the Algonquian peoples, I have chosen to use the spelling “windigo,” one of the standard English spellings of the word for clarity and uniformity throughout.

Among the Cree, there are two distinctive types of windigo: one type is a supernatural cannibal being with anthropomorphic characteristics that demonstrates quite a bit of power, and the other type refers to humans who develop cannibalistic cravings and slowly transform into windigos. The supernatural windigo has terrifying characteristics, enormous strength, and powers that allow it to paralyze and transform mortals into cannibals, while the previously human windigos appear dirty and unkempt, but are otherwise nearly indistinguishable from their mortal counterparts (Flannery, Chambers, and Jehle 57-58).

For the Cree, the windigo is a symbol of failing social relations, when the relationship between individuality and cooperation with the larger group becomes unbalanced. The transformation into a windigo is representative of the final shift from human to greedy cannibalistic creature (Turner 64). Typically, a windigo goes after the people closest to it: children, spouses, and close friends (68). Many accounts of the windigo from other Algonquian groups, such as those presented in Ojibwa Texts collected by William Jones, show the windigo going after their families or fixating on children (Brightman 347-48).

As with most depictions of the windigo in Native stories, the windigo of the Ojibwe has a heart of ice and cannibalistic tendencies. It is voracious, and its hunger is physically present, as the windigo is consistently emaciated (DeSanti 188). Presenting itself as a kind of psychological impairment, with the inability to control selfish desires and impulses, the windigo appears as a result of resource scarcity (Paredes 339-40) and an imbalance in the two souls that inhabit the body (DeSanti 196).

While the accounts of windigos vary slightly across Algonquian cultures, they all have essentially the same characteristics. They are mostly the spirits of people who were once human, but no longer are, transformed into windigos as a result of either famine-induced cannibalism or possession by larger, supernatural windigo spirits (Ferrara and Lanoue 78). The transformation from human into windigo is typically a gradual one, characterized by violence and selfishness (79).

Windigos have hearts encased in ice that must be melted to either cure or kill the windigo. They mostly appear in the winter, and they always appear alone (78).

Manifestations of the windigo are responses to environmental and cultural stresses—like isolation and starvation in harsh winter environments and outside colonial factors—as a way of explaining and taking control of stresses (Ferrara and Lanoue 76). Windigos haunt their local communities by facing them with prevalent issues of isolation, starvation, and selfishness. Separation from the community, either physically or emotionally, is detrimental to both the individual and the community, and windigo spirits serve as guardians of the community by protecting and enforcing the cooperative values of the community.

Windigos in Western Literature

While traditional stories of windigos have a long history within Algonquian tribal history, non-Native representations of the windigo date back to the 18th century, though the better known versions are more recent. One of the most popular and well-known of these was published in 1910. Algernon Blackwood's "The Wendigo" is one of the most prominent short stories about windigos in Western Literature, as it is the inspiration for Larry Fessenden's *Wendigo* (2001) and *The Last Winter* (2006) and has been recreated in an abbreviated form in *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (1981). Blackwood's windigo has little physical presence; it is instead characterized through storytelling around a campfire and the way it affects the people and environment around it. The footsteps it leaves behind reveal a long stride and huge physicality, and it is consistently described as having a hideous odor. The speed at which it runs after its victims causes its feet to catch fire and burn. In comparison to Native American representations, this windigo has many similar characteristics, but the way in which it is discussed and stripped of meaning and context is very different.

In Blackwood's short story, the windigo appears as a way to contribute to the Western dehumanization of Native Americans. The windigo in Blackwood's story shows the racist attitudes that underpin Blackwood's perspective of Native cultures and, ultimately, his writing itself. In writing about a spirit that does not belong to him, Blackwood has created a different kind of windigo, one that is but a racist depiction of the culture from which it stems. The ways in which Blackwood discusses the windigo—and aboriginal peoples themselves—contribute to racist stereotypes and creates a biased and ethnocentric perspective of Native spirits.

In the story, two Scottish travelers are led through the Canadian wilderness by indigenous Canadian guides who warn them of the windigo, a "sort of great animal that lives up yon

der" (504). Throughout the story, Native Americans as a people are also depicted as animal-like and wild with greater senses. In the darkness, they can see and hear like animals, and they move quietly "as only Indian blood can move" (495). Blackwood specifically describes the actions of one of the Native American characters in the story, Défago, as "like a dog sniffing game" (501). Défago later walks slowly into the woods and is described as being absorbed into the forest.

The windigo of *Pet Sematary* also makes few physical appearances, but its presence is blamed for many of the events in the book; it exerts its power over the people of Ludlow, inciting them to awful, macabre actions. It wants people to come to the local Native American burial grounds to resurrect their pets and loved ones and ultimately bring more people to their untimely and gruesome deaths. King depicts the windigo in *Pet Sematary* as an absolutely huge creature with ram's horns that can turn people into windigos by merely touching them. Any animal or person buried in the pet cemetery loses the essence that makes them unique and lively, and while this change does not seem to concern the characters when they consider resurrecting animals, it is a huge concern when thinking about their loved ones. Resurrecting a human is highly discouraged, as they will lose their humanity in the process, becoming what is essentially a wild animal seeking to destroy and cause harm.

Throughout the story, Judson Crandall refers to the Micmac tribe—properly spelled Mi'kmaq—in ways that associate them with wildness and the Western fear of the unknown that masquerades itself as a fear of the wilderness. The wilderness is a constant threat to survival in comparison to the paradise of civilization romanticized by Western societies (Nash 8-9). Especially in Christocentric societies, the wilderness stands in stark contrast to the Garden of Eden man was cast out of (15). Stephen King uses this fear of the wilderness to his advantage, making it the center of mystery and terror in *Pet Sematary*. The forest behind the Creeds' house has "a charm that was not Christian, but pagan" (42), and can be related to an "almost instinctive fear of woods" (37) that manifests itself in human beings, especially in Euro-American cultures that are more disconnected from the natural world. Louis is warned against entering "the Indian woods" just beyond the pet cemetery in another association between Native Americans and the wilderness that is so familiar to Western societies (104). Through its association with the pet cemetery and the resurrection of children's beloved pets, the windigo is dehumanized by being associated with a place where animals are buried and anything that is reincarnated is no longer human—and in most cases, never was. This suggests that the windigo itself is animalistic in its association with the pet cemetery.

The connection between windigos, Native Americans, and animals appears in King's book in much the same way as in Blackwood's story. While Blackwood connects Native peoples and animals through metaphors and animalistic actions and characteristics, King connects them through the tangible metaphor of the pet cemetery. Anything that is buried there, be it human or pet, is not human. The people who are buried there and brought back to life only resemble human beings. Their actions are murderous, dangerous, and animalistic, insinuating that the Native people who originally occupied the land and buried their dead in the cemetery are also murderous, dangerous, and animalistic.

King's version of the windigo, while physically and partially behaviorally similar to traditional Cree depictions of the supernatural windigo, does not fully represent the holistic idea of the windigo. King's version is tailored to dehumanize the windigo, making it an inhuman monster in a novel about the loss of humanity after death. Depicting the windigo as a supernatural monster targeting white people in Maine misrepresents the purpose and existence of the windigo, as it is no longer representative of the Native environmental and cultural struggles it stems from. Instead, it is a depiction of the wild, animalistic stereotype of Native Americans often used by Western writers to instill fear and distrust in their readers. In the same vein, Blackwood's version is harmful to Native American communities in its stereotyping and romanticizing of Native peoples' association with nature and the wilderness. It also draws on the idea that a cultural spirit is little more than a manifestation of "when an Indian goes crazy" (Blackwood 519), contributing to academic misunderstandings of cultural beliefs as psychological issues.

The Effects of Appropriation

Appropriation appears in many forms. The common idea of appropriation is the use of a specific group's cultural expressions by people from another culture without explicit permission, but many other things—unethical research, unauthorized collection and sale of cultural art and depictions, and the use of cultural aspects to appear "exotic," "spiritual," or "authentic"—fall under the umbrella of appropriation (Mathiesen 462). Unethical research and the collection and sale of stories, art, and music are two major issues that crop up when discussing the idea of the windigo. Appropriation creates a disconnection between Western depictions and Native realities that ultimately harms Native peoples.

Western depictions of Native spirits serve to disconnect the spirits from their culture. Both "The Wendigo" and *Pet Sematary* show this, as their authors weave in stories about the windigo while barely including the Native Americans to whom the windigos belong. The Mi'kmaq, al-

though mentioned quite a few times by Jud in *Pet Semetary*, are not physically included in the story. Their stories are told by a white man, who learned about them from another white man, who in turn learned it from a long line of white men with little to no connection to the tribe. In “The Wendigo,” the stories of the windigo are told by a Native American character, but the depiction of this man is problematic as it contributes to harmful stereotypes.

This disconnection between spirit and culture is partially ignorance on the part of the writers, but it is also part of a long history of disconnection that rends culture from people, an unwillingness to include Native American cultures in stories that center on their beliefs as an important plotline of stories. The long history of colonial deculturalization of Native communities has been spurred on by commodification, romanticizing, and the splitting of ideas from their original cultures. Taking something like the windigo from its Native contexts renders it less real, and the culture it comes from becomes less real for the consumer, making Native peoples and beliefs into something they can read and be scared of, but then something they can safely close and put on their bookshelf, never to be thought of again.

By appropriating Native themes without including accurate depictions of Native Americans, Western authors play an important role in a capitalist and colonialist economy. Cultural artifacts and stories are distorted to fit into a capitalistic mold, becoming commodities that can be easily sold to non-Native consumers (Kulchyski 605). Through the exaggeration of traits Western audiences deem more “Native,” authors are able to sell and play to their public’s wants and fears. The idea of Native American culture in media is largely based on the idea of “savage” vs. “civilized” and the romanticizing of the proximity to nature. By creating a romanticized and exaggerated idea of Native Americans, “non-Indian people ‘feel more American’” by identifying with Native ideas, but without acknowledging the results of this appropriation (Shanley 678). Equating Native Americans with wild, cold-hearted, greedy monsters makes them scarier, and authors can use that fear of the “uncivilized” peoples to create more frightening horror. The capitalistic molding of cultural commodities fundamentally changes those cultural artifacts in harmful ways. It skews understanding and perceptions of cultures, creating negative biases toward communities and their beliefs (Kulchyski 612). The appropriation of the windigo, like the appropriation of many Native American cultural ideas, is driven by a capitalistic appetite for money and fame. The irony of the appropriation of the windigo lies in the deep significance it holds in its Native communities as a warning against harmful and selfish appetites.

While Western horror authors have appropriated the windigo as a scary, animalistic, wild monster seeking to kill white men and reacting in a rage to colonialism, windigo stories have

important moral meanings and implications. They teach cultural values and morals to young members of the community through the important themes of the stories (Ferrara and Lanoue 77). Stories like these influence the development of morals important to the functioning and continued success of the community: the importance of self-balance, cooperation, collaboration, and family (79). Windigos function as a guide to psychological repair, reinforcing stories and beliefs in response to European colonialism and intrusion. Continued appropriation of these stories and myths further detracts this process of cultural reestablishment (Ferrara and Lanoue 70).

In museums, libraries, and archives, there are protocols in place for dealing with wrongfully gained Native American artifacts, like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). In many cases, the artifacts they have in their possession have been taken without permission and, although rights to these cultural artifacts are often not encoded in law or are vague and easily misused declarations of right, archivists must acknowledge their moral and historical rights of cultures to their own artifacts (Mathiesen 457). The people working in these professions are recommended to recognize that Native American communities have the right to limit or deny access to certain stories, ideas, information, etc. (458). Basically, the groups in question determine what archivists can have, know, and share about their culture. If Native Americans demonstrate the right to own their culture and refuse access to researchers, they reserve the right to limit the general public's access and use of their cultural ideas. By this reasoning, Western authors have no moral right to claim or disseminate ideas about Algonquian spirits. In writing stories about windigo, especially those which are stripped of context and without proper understanding and credit, Western authors are committing an act of cultural theft. Theft, however, is not the only issue with appropriation. Appropriation can lead to misinformation that can influence the thoughts of not only the general public, but researchers and scientific communities as well.

Many anthropological and medical texts refer to a psychiatric phenomenon known as the "Windigo Psychosis," an "environmentally induced cannibalism" (Ferrara and Lanoue 77). In the creation of this phenomenon, researchers drew on Native ideas of windigos, citing cultural stories and myths that do not match up with historic, literal cases of cannibalism. By creating this cannibalistic persona of Algonquian peoples, they misrepresent these tribes, making them seem cannibalistic and harsh and, ultimately, dehumanize the tribe by creating an animalistic view of them (Ferrara and Lanoue 77). Media unwittingly creates biases that influence research and study, and misrepresentations in media create a cycle of misunderstandings that perpetuate racial stereotypes of Native American peoples.

Conclusion

In both Western and Native depictions, the windigo is haunting someone or something, but the reasons for haunting differ. For Native Americans, the hauntings are personal, familial, communal. Westerners tend to conceive a windigo haunting as something directed at white people in general, in a fit of anger against colonial forces, connected to a specific place. This distinction between the focus of hauntings shows differences in community values that are lost in the appropriation of Native stories. Losing vital cultural context creates a misrepresentation of Native communities that has had immensely harmful effects on the people within those tribes, creating negative ideas about populations that create and perpetuate negative stigmas and racist ideologies.

In both Western and Native depictions of the windigo as a haunting, the windigo is a spirit representing the pains and sufferings of the past, a tangible, malevolent spirit coming back to bring light on the issues of inappropriate appetites and selfishness. What is distinctly different about these windigos is how they represent the issue. The Native American windigo depicts the selfish person as the one becoming the ice-hearted monster, while the Western windigo depicts the selfish monster as being attacked by the monster, creating a very clear idea of the cultural values involved. Western depictions misinterpret the purpose of the windigo as a vengeful spirit, while Native depictions use it more to show how individual selfishness impacts and harms others. This Western depiction shows how cultural hauntings are perceived differently in cross-cultural situations. Even though it is completely natural to use one's own cultural understanding of the world to interpret unfamiliar ideas and beliefs, the issues lie in the reproduction of those beliefs by people with no emic perspective.

In the reproduction of beliefs, culture is lost or, at the very least, disfigured for the personal gain of the reproducer. This appetite for money and fame on the part of Western writers is ironic in its use of the windigo as a featured monster in horror, as it depicts a similar selfishness as that in Native American stories of the windigo. The popularization of windigo in horror genres involves capitalistic gain on the part of Western writers, and the cultural owners of windigo spirits are left with nothing but stigmatization, misunderstanding, and stereotypes. Even the romanticized notions of Native cultures as being spiritual and close to nature that seem beneficial or kind have negative impacts on communities by masking real issues and distorting the perceptions of Native cultures. These romanticizations also function as part of a long history of cultures being stripped from their communities to lessen the connection between real, living Native American cultures and communities and the spiritual and natural Native American that can be put back on a shelf

when the book is done. Writing about the windigo in non-Native contexts is a type of cultural theft that presents itself not as a legal issue, but as a moral one, perpetuating the cannibalization of Native American belief systems.

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