
It Consumes What It Forgets

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Wiindigoo¹ is more than just a character in the stories of Anishinaabe Indian people; it is a presence in the world and so powerful that in uttering its name we risk calling it into our lives. It storms through the wintry woods and frozen swamps of the Anishinaabe homeland, as tall as the trees through which it hunts and monstrously gaunt as well, its lips chewed to shreds as it gnaws on itself in the absence of tender prey. Wiindigoo may have been a person once, someone who fell victim to the enticement of the cannibal spirit in the deep winter of the northern woodlands and who, lacking other food, turned on those family and community members with whom they lived for sustenance. Eating the ones they loved and lived with, who they once supported and by whom they were once supported, such a person becomes a monster, ever on the hunt, always hungry: they become the spirit that possessed them. Instead of living for and with others, wiindigoo lives only to meet its own needs. It consumes families and communities, yet no matter how much it eats, it always wants more and cannot stop its destructive impulses unless it is put to death. In speaking its name, we risk calling it into our lives, but naming it, calling it forward, may also be an act of love if the intent is to heal those the spirit has wounded.

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“Wiindigoo.”

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Stories of this malevolent presence provide insight into Anishinaabe values concerning how people ought to relate to one another; they also provide insight into what happens when those values are perverted. Wiindigoo has a heart of ice; it cannot assess human relations with any sort of compassion. It is cold; unwilling or unable to see the pain others might feel, it is driven only to feed its own never satisfied appetite; it has forgotten the proper way of living with others in the world.

Forgetting seems to be part of what makes a wiindigoo a wiindigoo. It forgets the relationships that others cultivate and by which they are, in turn, cultivated. It forgets its bonds to the human and other-than-human relations that shape each of our lives, the interconnections with kin, clan, tribe, and lived environment by which we come to find out who we are and what we

will do for these relations. It forgets that it is part of something larger than any one person. It forgets the stories that make us who we are, regardless of tribe or nation. It forgets its embeddedness in a whole living complex of nurturing, sorrowful, banal, and joyful experiences; it forgets its humanity—these feelings and the ability to experience them—focusing solely on its hunger; it forgets to yearn for anything other than human flesh. It forgets to resist the temptation to indulge its appetite. It is tempted by those it should love. It forgets to love and consumes what it forgets.

Wiindigoo lives for itself.

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Unable to ever get enough to eat, wiindigoo walks at the grim edge of starvation, its bones pushing against the thin layer of skin that stretches over them. Its skin is the pallid gray of death and papery dry. Its hunger has drained it of life, and though rank with the stench of death because it is rotting from the inside out, it is not dead.

When we die, the water of our bodies—our lives—is absorbed into the earth, but for wiindigoo the water of its life turns to a heart of ice; frozen, its heart is life suspended. It embodies the worst part of winter in the deep north: the scarcity of food which leads to hunger and which might lead some to the desperate thought of eating their kin, of putting their own needs ahead of those with whom they live. It embodies selfishness, in other words, an idea that the Anishinaabe scholar Basil Johnston finds in the etymology of the word itself. Wiindigoo breaks down into *ween* and *dagoh*, which Johnston tells us means “solely for the self” (222). In a community where the needs of the group as a whole are more important than an individual’s needs, this kind of selfishness is horrific enough, and when that selfishness is fed by a hunger for human flesh, that horror is multiplied and stretches into a towering monster that sweeps down out of the cold north and threatens to pervert the lives of those in a stricken community.

Though found in Anishinaabe sacred stories, the wiindigoo is more than a spirit whose misdeeds are recounted from a mythic time before time. What is fearsome about the wiindigoo is the very real threat that someone may turn into one, that the spirit may come to possess a man or woman, corrupt their appetite, and with it their humanity. In thinking solely of the self, a person becoming wiindigoo forgets what it means to be a good Anishinaabe, forgets to think of others. Its notions of community, family, and love are perverted by its selfish hunger.

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In 1823 George Nelson was in charge of the Hudson's Bay Company outpost near Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan. He had been in the fur trade for more than twenty years, living almost always alongside Anishinaabe communities, and it was here he set down stories of his experience with the Anishinaabeg as well as offering his observations concerning the *manidoo*, the spirits that people the Anishinaabe homeland and the cosmos it is seated within. In 1988, the anthropologists Jennifer S.H. Brown and Robert Brightman edited and annotated Nelson's work from this era into the book *"The Orders of the Dreamed"*. In the nearly hundred page long letter-journal that is the centerpiece of the book, Nelson spends much time describing the *wiindigoo* and offers his ideas about the causes of the condition. "I look upon this," he wrote, "as a sort of mania, or fever, or distemper of the brain." He describes seeing the eyes of those afflicted with this distemper as "wild and uncommonly clear—they seem as if they glistened." He recounts other symptoms as well:

They are generally rational except at short, sudden intervals when the paroxysms cease [seize] them: their motions then are various and diametrically contrary at one time to what they are the next—Sullen, thoughtful, wild look, and perfectly mute: staring, in sudden convulsions, wild incoherent and extravagant language. (91)

Nelson tells a story about one *wiindigoo* case from "a few years back" during his time at Lake Winnipeg. Evidence of the affliction started to present in late December of 1811 when a man "began staring at his [adult] daughter with an extraordinary intensesness." He gave voice to his feelings in an extravagant manner. He told her:

"My daughter! I am fond of thee! I love thee extremely."

"I know thou dost," replied the woman abashed, for she was then very young.

"Yes! I love thee—I think I could eat a piece of thee, I love thee so much" (91).

Nelson reports that the young woman cried out at her father's "rashness," distressed by words that suggested he was forgetting what love meant. We can only wonder at the fear she and her husband must have felt when night fell and her father "stark-naked and uttering a strong tremulous noise, and his teeth chattering in his head as if thro' cold, rose up and walked out of the Tent and laid himself as a dog in a heap upon the wood that his daughter had that day bro't to the door" (91-92). In the morning he came inside, but that night he returned again to the woodpile.

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Some irrational force masked as love seized this poor man and left his teeth chattering in his head. Imagine his “wild, uncommonly clear” eyes glistening as he tells his daughter he loves her so much he “could eat a piece of thee.”

The coldness that gripped him in the tent and allowed him to survive what had to have been freezing nights sleeping on a woodpile is a common symptom of the wiindigoo disease. One who is becoming wiindigoo feels a strong pull to cannibalism and if they don’t feel the ice forming in their chest, others in their community find evidence of it in their actions, moods, and behavior. The father in Nelson’s story is cold enough deep in his body that he does not freeze to death when sleeping out in the Canadian winter. Perhaps his kin found this indicative of the ice forming.

Becoming wiindigoo often means that the afflicted person begins to hallucinate, to see their loved ones as an animal normally hunted for food. Nathan Carlson reports that in 1896 an Anishinaabe man, shuddering with the fear of his own thoughts, told his wife that one of their children looked to him like a “spring moose,” which he wanted to kill and eat. Rather than let the man suffer, members of the community engage in ceremonial cures in an attempt to call him back to his life as an Anishinaabe man, but their interventions are overmatched by the spirit. The man’s frenzy grows and during one particular outburst, the men who had been attempting to restrain him, fearing what he would do if he got loose, struck four blows to his head with an axe. Bullets from a rifle could not pierce a wiindigoo. After his death, Carlson tells us that the man’s body was buried under a woodpile in order “to stop—or stall—his perceived impending resurrection” as the towering monster that would continue to stalk the Anishinaabe (369).²

While many Western scholars identify the wiindigoo condition as a psychosis, Carlson asks us to consider the condition as more of an anxiety about engaging in cannibalism than it is a psychotic break that causes someone to act on those destructive, self-serving impulses. The worry about turning cannibal becomes obsessive and all consuming (so to speak), disquieting to both the afflicted person and those around them. At the point in history that Carlson discusses, the late 19th century, the Anishinaabe lived in small camps and family groups during the long winters. In light of that isolation from others and living in close quarters with a limited number of kin and community, we can understand how, if one of the group began to exhibit wiindigoo symptoms, the anxiety would swell not just in the chest of the stricken one, but would grow throughout the group. Even if the afflicted one were dead, the group would need to worry about

what Carlson called the “impending resurrection” of the person, that is, their transformation into the roaming spirit of unending hunger and self-indulgence predicted by Anishinaabe cosmology. We can imagine the anxiety about this resurrection growing in such a group, stretching as tall as the trees, its skin pulling taut over its bones, its humanity forgotten.

The worry over becoming wiindigoo must surely have been a source of further anxiety—imagine what it must feel like to lose your sense of Anishinaabe selfhood and become this reviled creature. Brightman notes that most, if not all, “windigos were once human beings, transformed, usually irreversibly, into their monstrous condition” (337). Loosed from the bounds of their personhood by the craving for human flesh and loosed from their graves if not properly disposed of, wiindigoo is ever in motion out in the bush, and in the stories and minds of community members. The wiindigoo forgets its humanity, but the Anishinaabe anxiously remember its presence.

For those afflicted with wiindigoo impulses, the idea swells to monstrous proportions, intensifying certain negative aspects of the human character. The infection distorts the human spirit into a malevolent form that, though perverse and destructive, is useful to think with. The wiindigoo experience is horrifying, but wiindigoo stories are instructive engagements in cultural teaching.

In this light, the wiindigoo is a cautionary figure. Basil Johnston tells us that his mother warned him when he was young that there were wiindigoog in the woods that would grab and carry off children who failed to listen to their parents, but he also makes it clear that stories about the wiindigoo spirit should not be reduced to mere bogeyman tales. Like all stories about the manidoo, wiindigoo stories offer powerful tools to advance one’s understanding of the world. Wiindigoo is more than a childhood fear. As one grows and matures, so does one’s understanding of the nuances and layers within the stories. A wiindigoo tale to keep children from wandering off becomes something else when an adult uses it to look at the world.

When scholars of Native studies like Johnston and Jack Forbes turn the lens of these stories on the contemporary world they see evidence that the spirit has possessed modern institutions like corporations and drives political/economic ideologies like capitalist colonialism and imperialism.³ In taking these forms, wiindigoo has “renounced” eating human flesh, as Johnston puts it, and instead now consumes human lives through economic exploitation or by eating the environments from which humans make their lives. Corporations clear-cut forests, for

instance, displacing their human and other-than-human inhabitants, making it impossible for those who relied on that environment to make a life there. They indulge their selfish hunger with the profit to be found in timber, insatiably moving from one stand of woods to the next and they feed their hunger for power over others, by forgetting the lives of those who call the forest home. They forget their relations in favor of self-interest. They forget they are part of a community. Riven with gullies and washouts, clear-cut landscapes reflect the erosion of principles that the wiindigoo embodies. Logging companies today even employ machines with massive jaws that grasp trees at their base and bite them off. These masticators, as they are called, literally chew their way through the forest. I cannot help being reminded that wiindigoo eats the flesh of its kin or that, in the absence of other food, it chews off its own lips: it is a tireless, obsessive masticator.

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Johnston and Forbes point out that a society's institutions can become wiindigoo; institutions can forget their relations to their human and other-than-human communities, and can forget the principles and values which allow communities to develop and flourish in partnership with particular environments. Wiindigoo feeds on its power over others, whether those others are the felled trees of a clear-cut forest or the humans that live in anxious fear of what it might do—those who live in anxious fear of forgetting what it means to be Anishinaabe, to be a good relative.

The U.S. government instituted the federal Indian boarding school system in the late 1800s, based on the model of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, established by an Army officer named Richard Pratt in 1879. The schools were an immersion experience, with Native children removed from their families and taken off reservation to be instructed in the standards of Euro-American life. There they were given uniforms, had their hair cut, and were forbidden to speak their Native languages. The schools were an alternative to the heavy costs of war, but one with the same end in mind. The goal in bringing a Native child to the schools was, as Pratt infamously put it, to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” Less well known, is another description of his concerning how the schools should operate: “We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of *feeding the Indians to our civilization*” (qtd. in King 108, emphasis added).

Recall Nelson's description of those seized by the wiindigoo distemper. Their eyes he said were "uncommonly clear" and "glistened," perhaps in anticipation of the feast. He describes them as speaking with "wild incoherent and extravagant language."

I see Pratt's eyes glistening as he speaks extravagantly of killing the Indian "in" these children and feeding them to "our" civilization. From a humanistic point of view, his words, while clear, are incoherent. Killing children to save them, feeding them to civilization until, as he also said, "all the Indian there is in the race should be dead" ("Kill the Indian") only makes sense within a desiccated value system. Wiindigoo indulges in its power over others, pretending, as the father did with his daughter, that it is acting with love. It forgets the intrinsic value of others, and sees only that which will feed its own selfish ends.

Boarding schools were cheaper than war.

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Ella Martineau was a woman I never knew, nor did I know her son, but her grandson is my dad. We never had contact with Ella or her son after he, to keep the story short, abandoned my dad, uncle, and grandma when my dad was not yet two and my uncle was not yet born. While my dad and uncle rightly have nothing but hard feelings for their father (to quote my fellow Minneapolitan, Paul Westerberg: "he might be a father/but he sure ain't a dad"), they also regard their grandmother Ella with indifference (in my dad's case) and with suspicions that she was a pathological liar (in my uncle's case). Perhaps coming from a later generation I am insulated from these raw feelings because I have found a different story in what I know of her experience.

Ella was born in 1895 in Isle, Minnesota on the Mille Lacs Indian Reservation in the northern part of central Minnesota. She was born to an Anishinaabe mother and a white father. Sometime between 1895 and 1910 the family moved to the White Earth Reservation.

In that same time period Ella also attended the Morris Indian Industrial School for three years where, according to an interview she gave to the Crow Wing County (Minnesota) Historical Society, she was "taught English, sewing, and cooking." As far as I can tell her entire adult life was spent off-reservation. In the 1910 U.S. Census her race is listed as "Indian." In the 1920 census she is listed as "White," as is her son, my dad's father. What had she forgotten in ten years?

"We make our greatest mistake," Pratt claimed, "in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization." It was customary back in the treaty-making

days of the 19th century for Native people to refer to the President, with whom they were ultimately treating, as the “Great White Father.” I am reminded of the father who loved his daughter so much that he exclaimed, “Yes! I love thee—I think I could eat a piece of thee.” I am reminded that the Great White Father created boarding schools.

My dad did not raise my sister, brother, or I as Anishinaabe because no one remembered that part of our story. It is too much to say we forgot it because we knew nothing of it until the early 1990s. In some sense, wiindigoo ate that part of us.

“I love thee so much,” said the stricken father to his child.

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The goal of wiindigoo stories, like so many Anishinaabe stories, is to direct us towards healing. They seek to restore the afflicted to a healthy way of living *in* the world—and *with* the world. Wiindigoo stories are not fairy tales or yarns told around the campfire that capture the exotic and chilling strangeness of Native culture. They are instructions. They are alive and relevant when they are used to keep children from wandering off into the woods, which is, after all, preserving the coming generation from potential destruction, and the stories are alive and relevant when they are used to gain insight into ways to understand the destructive events unfolding in the world around us. They are alive and relevant when they are shared with the purpose of reviving values that may have become eroded over time. Along with a mythic and cultural life, Anishinaabe stories have a social life. They live in the world, not just the world of words and stories, but the world of social experience as well. Wiindigoo is not an abstraction, a symbol, or a metaphor; it is a presence.

Wiindigoo stories help us remember the importance of nurturing our relations to both the human and other-than-human world and by other-than-human I mean both the spiritual and natural world. They help me make some sense of the experience of my Anishinaabe ancestors (who are now all spirits) as they were fed to “our” civilization. They help me understand the distemper of an American mindset that thought it best to “kill the Indian” and clear-cut forests, which is, in my part of the world, a direct assault on the health of the woodland homelands of the Anishinaabe. Just as critically, clear-cutting, whether in Minnesota, Amazonia, or Thailand, is an assault on each one of us. There is a loss of beauty as forests are masticated and a loss of homeland for our human and other-than-human relatives that live there, of course, but there is a loss of a physical connection as well.

What the trees exhale, I inhale; what I exhale, the trees inhale. We are bound together in a positive feedback loop that is just one of billions of similar loops by which our other-than-human relations, our environments, and we create life for one another.

Wiindigoo, though, wants to steal our breath. Wiindigoo breaks the symbiotic loop, eroding the value of life, of creation, by forgetting its interdependence with others.

Once felled, the trees it consumes cannot scrub the air of carbon dioxide that comes from burning the strip-mined, fracked, and deep ocean drilled coal and oil that our economy feeds on. Climate change, driven in great part by the burning of fossil fuels, indicates a deeper distemper. Recall that one of the leading symptoms indicating that someone was becoming wiindigoo was the formation of ice in the person's chest or heart. Climate scientists regard the polar vortex that swept over North America in the winter of 2013-2014 and plunged most of the United States and Canada into one of the coldest and snowiest winters on record as an indicator—a symptom—of global climate change. In Anishinaabe teachings, wiindigoo storms out of the north bent on feeding its never satisfied hunger, utterly indifferent to the pain it brings its prey, and utterly indifferent to the fact that its actions threaten to destroy the communities with which it should have lived, suffering when they suffered, loving when they loved, remembering what they remembered: how to be good Anishinaabe, good people, living with others rather than off of others. Instead, we see:

Forests falling.

Fuels burning.

Vortexes spinning.

Winter deepening.

We see:

A father who loves his daughter.

A Great Father who loves his children.

Indian children fed to a hungry civilization.

A never known Indian grandmother becoming white.

We see:

Wiindigoo forgetting its relations are not food.

We see it sleeping stark naked in the freezing night.

We see it mistaking its heart for the ice all around it.

We see it stretch and grow, getting bigger, hungry for more, destroying more, thoughtless in its pain.

We see a threat to be sure, but one that still demands our compassion.

As long as we remember the Anishinaabe understandings of the stories, we will never be hopeless when facing the wiindigoo.

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Wiindigoo stories come out of the social and cultural experiences of Anishinaabe people, but the insight and understanding they provide into the world are available to everyone. Native teachers and medicine people, scholars and writers, have been sharing stories like these with colonists and settlers since the earliest days of contact, and before that, they shared them among tribes that were as distinct from one another as the European nations were from one another. (Tribal nations continue to be distinct in this way, of course, and the sharing of knowledge across tribal cultures continues in the present as well.) Too often in the modern West tribal stories have been reduced to *objects*, evidence that Native people were different, that *they* were superstitious, that *they* believed odd things. Stories that were shared with the intent of providing healing to the settlers, of helping them, were too often lifted out of that context by Europeans and Americans and put into a box marked “Other.” Thus reified, wiindigoo became a *representation* of incommensurable difference, rather than a presence we can learn from. While wiindigoo stories (in this case) may be most relevant to Anishinaabe communities, those who shared the stories must have felt it imperative to help other people learn to reflect on the need to think with Anishinaabe cultural and social teachings, of remembering Indigenous values in a world that thought to destroy them—to make them forgotten. Wiindigoo stories are more than simple monster tales or reports of potentially horrifying historical events. They are a complex means of thinking about and addressing injustices that storm through our world. Rather than a way to think about Native people, they are a means of *thinking with* Anishinaabe people. They are, in the context I lay out here, a means of recognizing a relationship between peoples, one that emerges from Indigenous knowledge and nurtures a way of seeing that helps all who engage with it.

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The father of the young woman, the one who loved his daughter so much that he wanted to eat a piece of her, slept naked on a pile of wood. Nelson writes, “Thus he did every night for about a month and every time slept out naked; nor would he eat, excepting at times a little raw

flesh” (by which I suppose that Nelson means the meat of some game animal, not that of his daughter; still, he was eating raw meat). “In the day time,” Nelson tells us that the man “was more composed, but his face & c, bore the appearance of one possessed of the Devil.” Still, Nelson is able to report that the man “recovered and became as usual, composed, and good natured.” He ends the story: “I knew them all well” (92).

The young woman and her husband, though no doubt disturbed and distraught at his behavior, do not lash out at her father. Rather, we can gather by implication that they wait to see what will happen, caring for him in the mean time, letting him eat raw meat if that is what will help him, but they do not allow him the human flesh that would complete his transformation. Since Nelson’s record of the incident is so brief, I can only suppose they did this out of concern and compassion, and I can only suppose that their love melted that which had grown cold within him. They healed with compassion what the wiindigoo tried to take with its corrupted notion of love.

Nelson remembers their story for us.

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Before 1970, U.S. census takers determined the race of the people they enumerated based on their observations. They may have asked a person about their racial identity, but they might just as well have made note of what they saw—or thought they saw. In the 1920 census, Ella Martineau and her children are counted as “White.” In 1930, they are listed as “Indian.” I do not know what happened between 1920 and 1930 that altered the opinion of the enumerators as to the race of Ella and her children. Ella’s mother, who Ella describes as a “Chippewa squaw” in that interview with the historical society, was living with the family in 1930 and perhaps her presence in the household shifted the perception of the person taking the census. Regardless of what happened, Ella was no longer “officially” White. Whatever the wiindigoo of boarding school assimilation attempted, her transformation was suspended—at least in the story I am telling. Like the man who came inside from the woodpile, she remembered that good Anishinaabe make and maintain relations. She became Indian again in the 1930s.

Sometime after my dad was born in 1938, Ella borrowed his birth records from my grandma and enrolled him as a member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, a son and grandson of White Earth Anishinaabe people. She never really had any contact with my dad after that.

In the 1940 census she is enumerated as “White.”

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Wiindigoo is a powerful spirit moving through the northern woodland, stalking through stories of mythic and historic events; it lives as an anxiety that seizes an Anishinaabe person in winter; it also lives in the words that expressed the mission of the boarding schools and in the economic logic that forgives (and celebrates) the clear cutting of Anishinaabe homelands and the fracking of the earth, the homeground of all of us. It swirls about our lives in a whirling vortex of mind-numbing cold.

Wiindigoo has a heart of ice, but a daughter who loves her father doesn't forget to love. She remembers what the wiindigoo wishes her father would forget: love cares, never destroys. Just as the daughter remembers to love so does a grandmother who enrolls her grandson at White Earth because, I can only assume, it was important to her. Even though she was never an active presence in my dad's life, she wanted him—and us too, I suppose, her descendants—to be remembered by the Anishinaabe; she did not forget that she, her son, and my dad were Anishinaabe. Hers was only a love on paper as it turns out, but paper is warmer than ice—and paper remembers.

Wiindigoo stories are ways to remember what compassion means by asking us to look at what happens if we forsake that impulse. The stories are useless if we forget that they exist to help us heal the wounds we suffer in our lives and those we visit on a world that loved us enough to breathe us into life.

Notes

¹ I am using the double vowel orthography to spell Ojibwe words like wiindigoo in this essay. Not all scholars or writers use this system and so wiindigoo may also be spelled “windigo” or “wendigo.” These variant spellings will only be used when quoting the works of other writers. In Ojibwemowin, words become plural when a –g is added to the end and so wiindigoo becomes wiindigoog.

² My summary of this story is drawn from pages 359-369 of Nathan Carlson's excellent article, “Reviving Witiko (Windigo).”

³ Johnston explicitly identifies contemporary corporations as wiindigoo on p. 235 of *The Manitou*. Jack Forbes's *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* is a lengthy polemic that identifies the cannibalistic tendencies of colonialism and capitalist corporatism.

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