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## Classroom Cannibal: A Guide on how to Teach Ojibwe Spirituality Using the Windigo and Film

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# Classroom Cannibal: A Guide on how to Teach Ojibwe Spirituality Using the Windigo and Film

## **Abstract**

This paper is intended as a pedagogical guide on how to teach elements of Ojibwe religious and philosophical beliefs using the windigo and its depictions in the films *Wendigo* and *Ravenous*. The windigo complex is exceedingly complex and remains an enduring component to the cultures of Ojibwe and several other Algonquian-speaking communities in the United States and Canada. While the windigo enjoys exposure in a variety of popular entertainment sources, film remains one of the most useful methods to incorporate in the classroom to help students comprehend how an anthropophagus “monster” directly relates to Ojibwe ideas of personal balance, social harmony, and kinship relations among nonhuman persons in the natural world and the larger cosmos

## **Keywords**

Windigo, Ojibwe, Cannibal, Wendigo, Ravenous, Spirituality

## **Author Notes**

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## **Introduction**

As a teacher, I primarily focus on Native American cultural and religious traditions but have an interest in the connections between religion and popular culture, too. One example is a class I taught on religion and horror, which allowed me to combine these interests in a week-long section over horror films about Native American traditions. Because of my own identity as an enrolled member of the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe tribe and familiarity with the topic, I chose to focus our class time on the dreaded windigo, a cannibalistic entity which remains an enduring part of Ojibwe lifeways and many other Native American and First Nations cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup> Students reacted positively, and I currently use this particular section in my Native American religions class, too.<sup>2</sup>

My intention in this paper is to provide a detailed account of how to teach principles of Ojibwe religion and philosophy using the windigo's depiction in film. I strongly recommend bolstering standard lecture and reading assignments with a variety of methodologies, which can include films, documentaries, and guest lectures for teaching about Native American and First Nations religious beliefs in general. These traditions are often outside most students' frames of reference, even those that have taken an introductory course on world religions. Utilizing diverse approaches to teach these complex ideas and concepts helps make the material accessible to students in ways that regular lecture and reading material alone are unable to accomplish sufficiently.

In the case of the windigo, however, I find cinematic representations of the entity to be among the most useful methods in facilitating student engagement on how to best understand it as it relates to Ojibwe religious traditions as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Besides film, there are other popular entertainment sources available to examine the windigo, including television, novels, cartoons, and comic books. And I have successfully utilized examples from all of these resources with students in my classes, so I am in no way designating film as the only valid approach to this topic. Conveying the intricacies of an anthropophagus monster and how to properly situate it within Ojibwe cultural traditions calls for a direct approach—one that helps make difficult concepts less abstract for viewers. Film helps accomplish this by immersing students in a visual, auditory, emotional, and imaginative experience that can help demonstrate the fiendishly bizarre and scary windigo's remarkable connections with Ojibwe understandings of the spirit world, human selfishness, and social harmony. To ensure success, it is important that not only the appropriate films be chosen, but that viewers know what to specifically focus on in the selections.

### **Cinematic Versions of the Windigo**

There are several films to choose from that depict the windigo and closely related phenomena, but they are not all created equal. I should stress that no single movie sufficiently addresses all of the facets of the windigo and its relation to Ojibwe traditions, but some certainly do a better job than others in these regards. I

selected *Wendigo* (Dir. Larry Fessenden, 2001) and *Ravenous* (Dir. Antonia Bird, 1999) because each film highlights key aspects of the windigo complex, facilitating in-depth examinations of Ojibwe notions of communal and individual balance and relationships with the nonhuman world.

As encouraging as even these two films are, it is also important to emphasize to students the fact that most mainstream popular culture sources on the windigo come from non-Ojibwe and indigenous creators, which should serve as a class discussion about the cultural appropriation of Native traditions. The situation of the dominant culture co-opting Native practices and beliefs for use in film and television remains a contentious issue for Native communities, one that has been and continues to be addressed by North American indigenous actors and film makers. Native communities are resolute in seeking greater representation in the entertainment industry, particularly in terms of creative control, which often holds great weight in these matters.<sup>4</sup>

These observations aside, *Wendigo* and *Ravenous* are small-budget films that feature aspects of Ojibwe beliefs about the windigo by non-Native directors, but nevertheless provide sufficient material to warrant further exploration of the topic from Ojibwe points of view. This fact also highlights the importance of incorporating readings from Ojibwe scholars whenever possible and responsible non-Native specialists who possess the cultural acumen to discuss Ojibwe traditions in a culturally sensitive manner.<sup>5</sup> Before elaborating further, a brief

word on the windigo's standing among other supernatural Hollywood monstrosities is necessary.

For many years, Hollywood's rogues' gallery of supernatural horror villains seemed to revolve predominately around established stock characters like werewolves, vampires, zombies, demons, and ghosts, each enjoying occasional periods of popularity. The entertainment industry has made sporadic attempts to incorporate creaturely antagonists outside these selections, often with mixed receptions from audiences. These experiments frequently coincide with attempts at finding untapped non-Western representations and one of the more recent examples gaining in popularity is the windigo.

Despite the intentions of horror movie purveyors to use more diverse horror antagonists like the windigo, the entity continues to be mostly portrayed as just another supernatural threat. This lack of development is unfortunate because major distinctions abound between the windigo and other fiendish big screen representations. This element also presents another opportunity to impart an important idea to students, who may have never contemplated that a more sophisticated interpretation of monsters was possible outside of the mayhem they witness on screen.

Many recognizable monsters may have originated in specific cultural settings at one time, serving a larger purpose other than frightening communities for entertainment, but these origins are debatable and tend to remain obscure

today. Furthermore, despite the strong likelihood that historical and cultural backgrounds exist for elements of zombie, werewolf, and vampire lore, it is difficult to locate their origins in any single specific cultural milieu with certainty. The exception may be with zombies, who enjoy a long and muddled association with Haitian Voodoo. Even then, the zombies of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* through Robert Kirkman's *Walking Dead* comic book series bear little resemblance to the zombies of Haiti, which themselves seem to be strongly informed by the brutal legacy of the African slave trade and the colonization of the Haitian people by France.<sup>6</sup> Onscreen, these aforementioned terrors are depicted as threats capable of being easily deployed in various times, settings, and cultural contexts while retaining their core Hollywood characteristics as nefariously generic threats to human beings.

### **Ojibwe Beliefs about the Windigo**

The windigo represents something different from its cinematic predecessors in that it remains a viable feature of Ojibwe spirituality. In order to truly grasp the windigo's meaning it must be positioned alongside the entirety of Ojibwe beliefs about the tripartite nature of human beings (two souls and a physical body), spiritual beings, ideas of personal and communal harmony, and kinship towards the nonhuman world. When the windigo is severed from its cultural foundation, its relationship to the Ojibwe cosmological world is lost.

At this point, I always think it is a good idea to introduce students to some Ojibwe cultural foundations first before I show them films and begin by emphasizing that while most Western and Eastern understandings of personhood are limited to human beings, Ojibwe and other indigenous traditions radically depart from such a limited perspective. The trees, plants, waters, stars, clouds, animals, and the sundry other components of the natural world are understood as different types of “people” who possess some attributes common to humans but display rich assemblages of talents and capacities that highlight their uniqueness, too.<sup>7</sup>

When I first introduce this concept to students, I refer to these other inhabitants of the Ojibwe world as “other-than-human persons” because it unambiguously asserts that these occupants are not humans, but are most certainly people.<sup>8</sup> Most students have cared for a beloved pet at some point, but would not ordinarily think of them as a different type of person. And it is worth clarifying to students that the Ojibwe viewpoint is not simply a matter of sentimentality or a case of anthropomorphism. Rather, it is an awareness of the dignity inherent within the natural world and the delicate balance that exists between human communities and the “other-than-human persons” who share this world. Traditionally, Native hunters thanked the animal for its life-sustaining gift and abstained from overhunting. These sorts of considerations assured that the

animals continued to give themselves to their human relatives and helped maintain the reciprocal kinship obligations towards one another.<sup>9</sup>

This material often provokes a discussion with my classes over whether these nonhuman persons are viewed as types of deities by Ojibwe communities. This is a sensible question, given the importance animals and elements of the natural world play in Ojibwe spirituality. I stress, however, that it is best to consider these other people, including different spirits, not as gods as many religions might understand them to be, but as fellow co-inhabitants of the universe, with each playing essential roles in maintaining harmonious relationships with all of the other participants. I tell my students that this interrelatedness among humans, animals, and nature personalizes the universe, where responsible participation maintains cosmological harmony.<sup>10</sup>

The Ojibwe refer to this balance as *mino-bimaddiziwin*, a concept that translates as “living a good life.”<sup>11</sup> When an individual Ojibwe maintains internal equilibrium between their two souls and body, treats their fellow human beings, animal relatives, and various spiritual forces with respect, they are living in accordance with this concept. Many traditional windigo oral narratives provide lessons on how to live a balanced life in accordance with *mino-bimaddiziwin*. Furthermore, it also becomes clear after learning about the windigo that while the Ojibwe universe may bustle with innumerable kinds of people, all of them are not favorably inclined towards harmonious relations. The following examination of

the windigo and discussion of the films *Windigo* and *Ravenous* showcase some of these facets of the cannibal monster and how its negative dispositions can be used to positively reinforce Ojibwe goals of maintaining or achieving equilibrium.

Some students have commented that both films, particularly *Windigo* are a little slow at the beginning, so I recommend mentioning some of the core characteristics of the windigo beforehand. Doing so helps them know what to look for in the films. The windigo is one of innumerable Ojibwe manitous (spirit beings) residing within the cosmos. Ojibwe and other Algonquian-speaking communities generally understand the windigo to be a tall, rail-thin monster with a heart of ice and cursed with a taste for human flesh. The windigo's appetite for human flesh is believed to increase infinitely, assuring that it is never satisfied. In some accounts, the windigo is said to even chew its own lips off in a gruesome display of its pathological appetite.<sup>12</sup>

Along with these features, individuals who are lost or alone in the woods are susceptible to attacks by the windigo or even becoming one due to the stress and emotional trauma of being isolated.<sup>13</sup> If the windigo infects someone, they often appear normal in size and appearance. Rather, it is their insatiable desire to cannibalize other humans and exhibiting berserker-like strength that are the tell-tale signs of their hideous abnormality.<sup>14</sup>

Another characteristic of the windigo and humans-turned-windigos is that of selfishness and gluttony. In fact, Ojibwe author Basil Johnston believes the

name “windigo” may mean “solely for self,” indicating an abnormal preoccupation with satisfying one’s own desires at the expense of the community. From my research and familiarity with windigo stories, I agree with Johnston’s translation. Ojibwe teachings caution against selfishness and some stories about the windigo are helpful demonstrations to share with students regarding this aspect of *mino-bimaadiziwin*.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, other attributes of the windigo include its association with the dangerous, freezing temperatures of the Great Lakes regions and food shortages that could possibly result in famine cannibalism. For the Ojibwe, a person who eats human flesh could result in them becoming a windigo, whether the consumption was intentional or out of starvation. The Ojibwe historically viewed cannibalism as an unspeakable act, making such an occurrence during the winter, where resource scarcity could result in famine-like conditions, a horrible prospect to consider.<sup>16</sup> With these basic features of the windigo complex shared with students, it is appropriate to turn attention to the two films and what they help illuminate about Ojibwe understandings of the windigo.

### ***Wendigo (2001)***

*Wendigo* opens in the dead of winter with a family of three—husband George, wife Kim, son Miles—traveling to a vacation home in the Catskills.<sup>17</sup> Along the way, they accidentally hit a deer some hunters had been tracking. This leaves the family, particularly Miles, troubled and apprehensive. One of the

hunters, Otis, is unhinged and remains hostile towards the family throughout the movie. Upon arriving in town, Miles and the viewer sense something sinister in the woods near the cottage where the family is staying. This later proves to be the windigo.

Director Larry Fessenden does a good job of establishing a creeping sense of dread in these early sequences. His portrayal of a cold, remote environment matches the tone of some Ojibwe windigo stories in which a person's psychological and emotional dissolution coincides with the entity's appearance and resulting carnage. I believe this makes *Wendigo* a good atmospheric, psychological horror film. Fessenden, however, portrays some of the lesser known aspects of the windigo and this should be pointed out to students who may be expecting a standard ham-fisted, violent horror movie. I encourage students to primarily focus on three aspects of the windigo in the film—one that addresses Ojibwe beliefs about the windigo's ability to shape-shift, its ability to trick unsuspecting victims, and its associations with being lost and vulnerable.

At one point, Miles and Kim visit an antique store. A Native man behind the counter notices Miles examining a small deer-headed statue with a human body and explains that it represents the windigo. He expounds on the windigo's evil disposition and all-consuming, insatiable appetite and its ability to change appearances to that of a human being or anything in nature that it desires. Shape-shifting is a capability shared by all Ojibwe manitous.<sup>18</sup> Miles says he believes the

windigo is real and the man gives him the statue. This entire exchange between the two is not seen by anyone else in the store, including Miles's mother, indicating the man is a spirit. My interpretation, which always provokes an interesting conversation in class, is that this is in fact the windigo masquerading as a man.

While my interpretation can be debated, subsequent events in the film seem to support this theory and go along with some Ojibwe understandings of the windigo. For example, the man makes sure that Miles believes the windigo is real before giving him the figurine, which becomes the catalyst for unleashing the vengeful spirit's fury. After this encounter, Miles and his father George go sledding. George is shot by Otis, forcing Miles to flee towards the cottage through the woods at night.

This is where the Native shopkeeper's description of the windigo comes to life in visceral fashion, pursuing Miles and displaying its ability to shape-shift at will. From screeching winds that nearly overtake Miles, tree branches that grab for him, to a nightmarish creature with a human body and deer head—the windigo exhibits the transformative abilities of all manitous. Furthermore, this scene partly exhibits windigo characteristics besides a voracious appetite for flesh—namely, an association with missing persons who may become windigos after being isolated and experiencing great emotional and psychological trauma.<sup>19</sup> While

Miles does not become a windigo, he becomes lost and is disoriented during his race through the woods, which offers a good reference point for students.

If I am correct and the shopkeeper deceived Miles into taking the windigo figurine after affirming his belief in the entity's existence, this is a good opportunity to elaborate on similar instances in Ojibwe traditions of spirits tricking human beings in a *pawagan* (dream, or dream visitor encounter). (Some students have expressed doubt whether the shopkeeper was the windigo or another spirit, but agree that intentional trickery characterizes his interaction with Miles.) A *pawagan* of this sort can occur during a vision quest, which is a ceremony undertaken for a variety of purposes involving fasting and isolation. The ritual can be used as a puberty ceremony to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, to acquire self-knowledge, and as method for medicine people to obtain new healing capabilities.<sup>20</sup> In most cases a vision quest also involves either renewing relations with a spiritual protector or acquiring one. In the case of the latter, an individual will fast in a designated place away from their settlement, striving for an encounter with a spirit that will pledge its allegiance to them in exchange for a reciprocal commitment on the petitioner's behalf.

The spirit helper most often appears as an animal figure, promising a long, successful life. In return the individual promises to respect his or her spiritual guide through the offering of tobacco and, when applicable, enacting proper rituals before and after successfully hunting it. After elaborating on these points, I

take a moment to remind my classes that just because the Ojibwe and other Native communities believe in a peopled cosmos, relations are not always collegial amongst these many “people.” There can be many bumps in the road.

Inexorably tied into this world, the volition each person and being possesses means that potentially harmful developments can ensue during a dream or vision quest. Along with this, the Ojibwe and related Native communities believe dream participation predetermines an individual’s future life-course. For instance, a spiritual agency could appear to an individual in a dream as one thing but reveal itself to be a windigo. Good evidence of such a belief comes from the journal of fur trapper George Nelson. In the following story, a Cree man makes a choice to reject a windigo dream:

Those who at any future period are to become cannibals thus dream of them. After the things usual in all dreams “I was invited by the North [spirit] to partake of a feast of ducks, the most beautiful I had ever seen and well-cooked. The dish was set before me, I set too [sic]. A stranger by me touched me with his elbow and said, ‘Eat not thou of that, look into thy dish.’ Behold that which I had taken for the wing of a duck was the arm of a child. ‘He! What a narrow escape’ said I. Then he took me into another room and gave me most excellent meat, the most delicious in appearance I had ever seen. I would not eat—I discovered it was the flesh of Indians thus served up to me. He took me into a third room and gave me Tongues. These I also perceived were the tongues of Indians. ‘Why refuseth thou what I offer thee? Is it not good?’ ‘I feel no inclination to eat,’ I replied. Then he took me in a fourth room where fine beautiful hearts were served up and I was desired to eat but I perceived it was still the same. I therefore refused. Then said he, ‘It is well done, thou hast done well.’ Heh! Had I unfortunately eaten of this then had I become a cannibal in addition to all my other misfortunes.” Those who eat at these feasts

are frequently but not universally told thus: “This is a sign to thee that one day thou shalt become a cannibal and feed on the flesh of thy fellows. When thou shalt see children play with and eat ice (or snow) in thy tent say, ‘My time is near’ for then thou shalt soon eat Indian (human) flesh.”<sup>21</sup>

This sort of trickery by some spirits could be in retaliation for a perceived lack of respect towards it, such as offending the spiritual overseer of an animal species. When hunting played a more substantial role in Ojibwe economies, an angry game protector could withhold food from the community or the individual’s family for a perceived slight.<sup>22</sup> And in the example above, a kind of fatalism can characterize dream participation. If the Cree man had consumed the flesh and fallen for the spirit’s deceit, he would have possibly become a windigo later in life.

The viewer is never given a reason why Miles is chosen as a victim of the windigo’s deceit. Perhaps his innocent naivety and nervous disposition primed him to become a conduit for the windigo to unleash its fury out of expediency. In the end, I believe *Wendigo* is a good psychological horror film to incorporate into the classroom. While it does not address the more well-known beliefs about the windigo, such as its giant size and cannibalistic dispositions, it does provoke discussion about some of the entity’s overlooked characteristics and their relationship to Ojibwe understandings about the capabilities of spirits and the important role dreams and vision quests play in their cosmology. On the other hand, for a depiction of more well-known traits of the windigo, particularly

violent displays of cannibalism, *Ravenous* is an indispensable source to use in a class.

### ***Ravenous* (1999)**

Director Antonia Bird's *Ravenous* departs from *Wendigo* in the portrayal of Ojibwe beliefs about the windigo and cannibalistic mayhem, as well as other characteristics in key ways. And while it may be tempting for some viewers to initially downplay *Ravenous*' effectiveness early on due to its darkly comedic tone, Bird handles the windigo complex responsibly while addressing Ojibwe beliefs surrounding the phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> I encourage my classes to focus on the following aspects of the windigo's characterization in the film: individuals becoming windigos while appearing normal, cannibalism as a metaphor for the colonization of North American indigenous people, and the important role maintaining internal, personal equilibrium serves in perpetuating amicable relationships with other human beings and nonhuman persons.

The plot focuses on a group of American soldiers stationed at a desolate fort in the Sierra Nevada in 1847. The main character, John Boyd, is sent there by his superiors for possibly abdicating his responsibilities during the Mexican-American War. His conflict over the ethics of that war and his reluctance to wholeheartedly embrace the rampant colonization of North America presents Boyd as the film's moral compass. This emotional turmoil over his duties as a soldier versus what he feels is morally acceptable causes him to become

despondent and withdrawn from his fellow residents. Left unchecked, this condition forecasts an emotional breakdown and combined with the wilderness and isolation, leaves Boyd vulnerable to becoming a windigo.

After settling in at the fort and meeting his fellow soldiers stationed there, the group is confronted one night by a starving, freezing man named Colqhoun, who lies about his group being attacked by cannibals. In reality, he murdered and ate his companions and his now a windigo. An Ojibwe man stationed at the fort named George realizes Colqhoun's treachery and elaborates in private with Boyd and the others on the windigo. He highlights the entity's fierce strength and insatiable hunger for human flesh and shows them a drawing of it on a piece of animal hide. And in true horror film fashion, Colqhoun eventually either murders and eats most of the residents or turns them into fellow windigo, leaving only Boyd to make a final stand.

To defeat Colqhoun, Boyd gives in and eats human flesh in order to become a windigo. The final battle between him and Colqhoun is fierce and bloody and ends with them killing each other. This scene touches on some Ojibwe traditions in which someone chooses to become a windigo to stop an even more menacing version of itself. One narrative example comes from Wisconsin and involves an attack on a small village by a giant windigo. Everyone was terrified except a young boy. The youth requested the assistance of a healer to change him into a windigo and to prepare a remedy to cure his condition later. Upon

transforming, the windigo boy engaged the cannibal in combat, and eventually killed him. Immediately afterwards, the healer poured a boiling kettle of tallow into the boy, melting the bad windigo spirit out of him.<sup>24</sup> Another story along similar lines is known as “The Man with Four Wives.” In this account, a man happily resides with four wives and is an expert hunter. Jealous of this man’s success at consistently attaining food, a windigo arrives one day to murder the man and his wives. However, the man had seen the signs of an impending windigo and had his wives prepare a cauldron for him. When the windigo came to his door, the man quickly drank the potion and grew into a giant windigo, and quickly dispatched the cannibal.<sup>25</sup>

Along with featuring these aspects of the windigo, *Ravenous* best utilizes the windigo and its corresponding characteristics in ways that challenge comfortably sanitized versions of American history, which too often trivialize or lionize westward expansion, which resulted in the deaths and disenfranchisement of countless Native Americans. Colonization resulted in the political, social, and scholarly marginalization of indigenous people, leaving a legacy that continues to reverberate throughout Native American and First Nations communities today. The windigo in *Ravenous* is deployed as a critique to these unchecked events, which mirrors the rapacious consumption of the windigo itself.

The scene that best exemplifies this use of the windigo in the film, which should be discussed with students, is in a talk Colqhoun (appearing as General

Ives at this point in the film) delivers to his recent windigo converts and a captive

Boyd:

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 won't kill ... indiscriminately. No ... selectively. Good God ... we don't want to break up families. Of course, we've no wish to recruit everyone. We've enough mouths to feed as it is. We 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.<sup>26</sup>

You could make the case that Colqhoun (Ives) embodies the unrestrained expansion westward and unconscionable colonization of Native Americans so many Europeans and their descendants participated in, while Boyd represents the moral ambivalence such actions posed for many immigrants who still participated in such an enterprise. Furthermore, not only do many Ojibwe and other Native communities use the windigo for this purpose in scholarship, fiction, poetry, film and activist work, it features in the traditional narratives about the windigo, which admonish against greed and selfishness and the need for an individual to balance and appropriately use their tripartite nature—two souls and a physical body.<sup>27</sup>

Maintaining this balance in accordance with Ojibwe values not only offsets the windigo and its disastrous social and personal consequences but leads to stable relationships with fellow human beings and inhabitants of the natural world. While the idea of maintaining equilibrium between an individual's two souls and physical body is not directly referenced in *Ravenous*, the focus on

unrestrained greed and social unrest as a result of such behavior offers an excellent opportunity to explore this aspect of Ojibwe religion and tie it directly to understandings of the windigo.

This is also an important time to remind students that *Wendigo* and *Ravenous* do an adequate job of showcasing aspects of the windigo complex according to Ojibwe beliefs, but fall short of positioning the entity within the entirety of Ojibwe traditions as it relates to the concept of *mino-bimaddiziwin*. While *Ravenous* hints at the balance a person must maintain to avoid becoming a windigo through the morbid excesses of Manifest Destiny and individual gluttony at the expense of one's community, these and other movies about the windigo neglect what I regard as among the most important dimensions of Ojibwe beliefs about the windigo—working to keep balance between an individual's two souls and to use them at the right time and in the right context in daily life. I believe such information, drawn from traditional Ojibwe knowledge, not only helps students appreciate what *Wendigo* and *Ravenous* offer in terms of windigo lore, but it reminds them of their cinematic limitations and the importance of obtaining material drawn from direct cultural sources.

### **Teaching Traditional Ojibwe Stories of the Windigo**

Making sure students comprehend Ojibwe ideas about humans possessing two souls working together with a physical body can be difficult. Demonstrating how this soul-body construct relates to the windigo can be an even harder task, which

is why I incorporate a few traditional Ojibwe windigo stories into discussion when I teach this section.<sup>28</sup> Before doing so, I first stress that each of the souls is responsible for a wide array of activities. What I call the ego soul is housed in a person's heart and acts as a person's basic awareness of their abilities, memory storehouse, ideas, and intellectual capacity. The free-floating or dream soul resides in the head region and is believed to leave the body during dreaming and other altered states. Creativity, spontaneity, intuition, and following one's gut instinct are also qualities associated with the dream soul.<sup>29</sup> Living a balanced life means utilizing each soul in conjunction with the body at the appropriate times and circumstances. An imbalance among these features can lead to a person becoming a windigo or indicate that they are engaging in windigo-like behavior.

For example, there are several physical features and behaviors exhibited by the windigo which can be understood as illustrations of imbalances to either of the two souls or the body. Many other traits and predilections of the windigo exist in Ojibwe and other geographically situated tribes, but the ones I stress to students more than adequately present a manifestation of the windigo as an indicator of individual and social disequilibrium. The fact that the windigo chews and mutilates its own lips out of desperate hunger and has a heart of ice indicates an imbalance to the ego soul. An individual may be toxically consumed with personal issues at the expense of their family and community. The fact that the windigo is said to often reside alone and avoid human contact (unless it's stalking

them as prey) further establishes an unhealthy preoccupation with “the self.” Even in rare instances where windigos are found residing in small groups, the hive-mind quality exhibited can still be understood as egotistical obsession at the expense of other obligations.<sup>30</sup>

A sign that an individual’s dream soul is imbalanced can be seen in how the windigo, especially a human-turned windigo, refuses to eat available animal meat in favor of human flesh instead. This behavior goes against Ojibwe beliefs in which animals are viewed as relatives and give themselves freely to hunters, provided the relationship is characterized by mutual reciprocity.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, it is a person’s dream or free-floating soul that interacts with the spirit world and gains a spiritual protector, usually in the form of an animal. An imbalance is evident in the strained relationship between the human being and emissaries from the spirit world, the consequences of which should be clear from previous discussion over vision quests and the complications that can possibly develop. Lastly, the destabilization of the body can be understood as an individual over-engaging in spirit questing and seeking communion with the spirit world, which is understood as requiring a physical transformation of some sort on their part. Too much of this behavior overlooks the natural limitations of the body.

Students usually have a hard time fully understanding these ideas and I would encourage other teachers to use a few Ojibwe narratives about the windigo to help clarify things. The following stories don’t directly comment on dream soul

imbalance, instead focusing mostly on the windigo as a manifestation of selfishness and egotistical fixation. One stars the beloved Ojibwe trickster-hero figure, Nanabush, who in many stories showcases how to correctly use one's two souls and physical body in various circumstances. Students have responded well to these stories and I usually try to read them aloud in class, as that is how they and other Ojibwe narratives have been traditionally told for centuries despite some of them being written down during the past few centuries.

One Nipissing Ojibwe story states that during a particularly harsh winter, a man experienced trouble hunting. At wit's end, with he and his family reduced to having to eat tree bark, the man approached a healer to help alleviate his family's suffering. The medicine man gave him a potion and told him to drink it the following morning, and that his hunger would leave him soon after. The man did as he was told and almost immediately grew to a height six times that of an ordinary man. Soon, he became so enamored of his increased height and abilities he neglected his family's predicament. After enjoying his increased physical stature and abilities, the man began to experience an inhuman hunger. Walking for miles in search of food, he eventually came to a village. After announcing his presence, the entire village except one person fell dead from his ferocious voice. The man quickly devoured every last one of the villagers but was still indescribably hungry. Furthermore, with each piece of flesh consumed, the man not only increased in size, but his hunger grew in proportion to his height as well.

Meanwhile, a lone boy who had been sleeping at the time of his village's massacre awoke and sought out the windigo in search of revenge. Also, by this time the man, so consumed with alleviating his hunger, continued to forget about his starving family. Before long, the boy caught up with the man-turned-windigo and slew him.<sup>32</sup>

Another Nipissing windigo story, this time involving Nanabush, again illustrates the folly of overindulgent behavior at the expense of larger Ojibwe world concerns. Upon hearing of a continual onslaught by a windigo on an Ojibwe village, Nanabush decided to stamp out his reign of terror. Nothing could stand in the way of Nanabush's mission to rid the world of the dreaded creature. However, upon reaching the encampment and calling for the cannibal bully to show himself, four windigos emerged from the woods. Nanabush immediately began running away towards a lake. He leapt from stone to stone, which had miraculously emerged and then disappeared. The windigos, consumed by their own egos and appetites, forgot their inability to swim. Upon entering the river, they immediately drowned.<sup>33</sup> The first tale illustrates the folly of only considering individual wants and needs at the expense of family and community obligations. The Nanabush story shows the importance of realizing one's own limitations and acting accordingly, as evidenced by the four windigos' destruction.

Teaching about Native American and First Nations religious beliefs can be a daunting task, as many of the ideas and practices are not usually familiar to most

college students. Including a section on the dreaded windigo during a class or section on Native religious traditions not only captures the attention and interest of students, it presents an excellent opportunity to explore Ojibwe philosophical understandings of human beings and the intimate relationships that exist between themselves, the natural world's other inhabitants, and the kinship obligations that must be maintained in order to ensure cosmological equilibrium among all types of "people." The windigo complex is diverse and the films *Wendigo* and *Ravenous* offer good examinations of different aspects of Ojibwe beliefs about the entity. By incorporating these two films into a course on Native and First Nations beliefs, students can learn to appreciate how interesting and complex Ojibwe cultural practices and philosophies are while being engaged, scared, and entertained by a few horror films starring a cannibalistic monster, albeit an extremely complex and misunderstood one.

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<sup>1</sup> Spellings of the word *windigo* vary according to tribal tradition, region, and individual preference. For example, the Cree use *wihtikow* and some Ojibwe communities prefer *wintiko*. Marvel Comics and other popular culture sources often use *wendigo*. I prefer *windigo* for consistency and due to it being regularly used in scholarly sources. See Robert Brightman, "The Windigo in the Material World," *Ethnohistory* 35 (1988), 337. The windigo plays a role in several Native American and First Nations traditions, mostly within Algonquian-speaking communities located in the Great Lakes and Northern Woodlands. I include Cree beliefs about the windigo alongside Ojibwe traditions due to the two sharing similar cultures and geographies. In many cases, both groups overlap linguistically and culturally enough that windigo traditions from each can be viewed similarly. For more, see Theresa Smith, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunders and Water Monsters in the Ojibwe Life-World* (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms "First Nations" to refer to Canadian indigenous communities and traditions and "Native American" when speaking of the federally recognized tribal nations of the United States. These are the most often used and preferred designations when speaking collectively of the indigenous peoples of these two countries. Due to the Ojibwe residing in both Canada and the

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United States, I also use “Native” as a general way of speaking about these communities and their beliefs about the windigo. Lastly, I also occasionally refer to the indigenous peoples of North America collectively as “Native,” in this paper, too.

<sup>3</sup> For a broad examination of the windigo in popular entertainment sources such as comic books, television, cartoons, and films, see Brady DeSanti, “The Cannibal Talking Head: The Portrayal of the Windigo ‘Monster’ in Popular Culture and Ojibwe Traditions” *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27:3, Fall 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The appropriation of Native American cultural traditions remains a problem in literature and cinema and has been the subject of many scholarly works. While there has been an increase in Native American and First Nation film roles, some major problems continue to linger in Hollywood. Even films with sizable Native American casts, the themes tend to focus on past events, obscuring Native people’s contemporary existence and circumstances. Perhaps the largest predicament facing indigenous people and Hollywood is that films tend to be under the creative control of non-Native directors and script writers. These circumstances further marginalize Native American and First Nation communities while perpetuating inaccurate portrayals of their cultures. For further reading, see Gretchen Bataille, *Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images, and Literary Appropriations* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), and Beverly Singer, *Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens: Native American Film and Video (Visible Evidence, vol. 10)* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Some useful books on Ojibwe religion and culture include Jennifer Brown and Richard Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed: George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988); Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995); Shawn Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits: The Windigo in Myth and History* (Victoria, B.C.: Heritage House Publishing Company, 2014); Theresa Smith, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunders and Water Monsters in the Ojibwe Life-World* (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1995); Anton Treur, *Living our Language: Ojibwe Tales and Oral Histories* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001); Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes* (Independence Square, Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1983); and Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984). For articles specifically addressing the windigo and its relation to Algonquian-speaking indigenous communities, see the following: Robert Brightman, “The Windigo in the Material World,” *Ethnohistory* 35 (1988); Brady DeSanti, “The Cannibal Talking Head: The Portrayal of the Windigo ‘Monster’ in Popular Culture and Ojibwe Traditions” *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27:3, Fall 2015; Nathan Carlson, “Reviving Witiko (Windigo): An Ethnohistory of ‘Cannibal Monsters’ in the Athabasca District of Northern Alberta, 1878-1910,” *Ethnohistory* 56:3 (Summer 2009); Lou Marano, “Windigo Psychosis: The Anatomy of an Emic-Etic Confusion,” *Current Anthropology* 23 (1982); and Carolyn Podruchny, “Werewolves and Windigos: Narratives of Cannibal Monsters in French-Canadian Oral Tradition,” *Ethnohistory* 51:4 (Fall 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Mike Mariani, “The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies,” *The Atlantic* (December 28, 2015). <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/> (accessed 10/1/17).

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<sup>7</sup> For a good account of Native communities traditionally understanding animals in particular as nonhuman persons, see Calvin Luther Martin, *The Way of the Human Being* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999) 32-51.

<sup>8</sup> The famous anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell first used this phrase in his “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View” in *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, ed., (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1975), 145.

<sup>9</sup> A good illustration of this type of ethos towards animals that I tell my class about comes from a Seneca oral narrative on the founding of the Beaver Nation, conflict with human beings (the Seneca), and an eventual long-lasting and sacred relationship that developed between the two parties. See Calvin Luther Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 18-20; 54-56.

<sup>10</sup> Vine Deloria, Jr., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 237-245.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Carlson, 359.

<sup>13</sup> Marano, 386.

<sup>14</sup> Brightman, 344.

<sup>15</sup> Johnston, 222. Johnston is not at all alone in associating the windigo with gluttony and selfishness, as the connection is wide-spread throughout Algonquian-speaking traditions in Canada and the United States. Furthermore, the windigo is often correlated with notions of balance and imbalance in individuals and communities. For more on these connections, see Brady DeSanti, “The Cannibal Talking Head: The Portrayal of the Windigo ‘Monster’ in Popular Culture and Ojibwe Traditions” *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27:3, Fall 2015; Shawn Smallman, *Dangerous Spirits: The Windigo in Myth and History* (Victoria, B.C.: Heritage House Publishing Company, 2014); and Nadia Ferrara and Guy Lanoue, “The Self in Northern Canadian Hunting Societies: ‘Cannibals’ and other ‘Monsters’ as Agents of Healing,” *Anthropologica* 46 (2004). Ideas of the windigo as a marker of selfishness and imbalance can even be found in the *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* animated series episode, “Hearth’s Warming Eve.”

<sup>16</sup> Morton Teicher, “Windigo Psychosis among Algonkian-Speaking Indians,” *International Journal of Parapsychology* winter (1962); reproduced in John Robert Colombo in *Windigo: An Anthology of Fact and Fantastic Fiction*, (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1982), 167.

<sup>17</sup> *Windigo*, directed by Larry Fessenden. 2001; Artisan Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, 1995, 46).

<sup>19</sup> Richard Preston, “The Witiko: Algonkian Knowledge and Whiteman Knowledge,” in *Manlike Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 126-127; Lou Marano (1982, 386).

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<sup>20</sup> Brightman (1988)366; Arlene Hirschfelder and Paulette Molin, *Encyclopedia of Native American Religions: An Introduction* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000), 264-26.; Gerald Mohan and Joseph Eagle Elk, *The Price of a Gift: A Lakota Healer's Story* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 109-112.

<sup>21</sup> Brown and Brightman, 90-91.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 18, 128-129.

<sup>23</sup> *Ravenous*, directed by Antonia Bird, 1999; Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.

<sup>24</sup> Victor Barnouw, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths & Tales and Their Relation to Chippewa Life* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 120-121.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 121-122.

<sup>26</sup> Danette DiMarco, "Going Wendigo: The Emergence of the Iconic Monster in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Antonia Bird's *Ravenous*," *College Literature* 38:4 (fall 2011), 5.

<sup>27</sup> For a good example of a scholar who uses the windigo to analyze colonialism, see Jack Forbes, *Columbus and other Cannibals: The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008). Forbes (Delaware affiliation) employs the windigo as a means of critiquing the brutal dispossession Western nations leveled and continue to inflict on indigenous nations in the Americas and other parts of the world. He argues how Western rapaciousness increases with every instance of exploitation of non-Western peoples and their lands similarly to how the windigo's appetite intensifies with every bite of flesh it consumes. Another example of the windigo being used to appraise colonial greed and exploitation can be found in the song "The Priests of the Golden Bull" by Cree folk singer Buffy Sainte-Marie.

<sup>28</sup> The stories I use to teach about the windigo are from published works either by Ojibwe authors and storytellers or non-Ojibwe scholars whose work has been substantiated as ethical and done with their Native American collaborator's consent.

<sup>29</sup>Smith, 132-133 and Vecsey, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Nadia Ferrara and Guy Lanoue, "The Self in Northern Canadian Hunting Societies: 'Cannibals' and other 'Monsters' as Agents of Healing," *Anthropologica* 46 (2004), 79.

<sup>31</sup> Preston, 129-130.

<sup>32</sup> Johnston, 225-227.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 233-235.

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