



# PARLOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY  
CRITICISM AND ANALYSIS

## **Insatiable Hunger for Indigenous Flesh, Cultures, and Lands: Colonialism as a Ravenous Monster in *Monkey Beach* and *Kiss of the Fur Queen***

**Léna Remy-Kovach**

**Issue 3: HAUNTING, HORRIBLE HUNGER: FOOD FOR FRIGHT. Kristin M. Diste (ed.)**

<https://www.ohio.edu/parLOUR/growlery/news-story.cfm?newsItem=5D85BA66-5056-A874-1D83D01CA99F227B>

The Windigo (also Wendigo, Weetigo, or Wintiko) is a cannibalistic creature said to haunt traditional Algonquian territories, namely the forests of the Atlantic Coast and the Great Lakes region. It is found mainly in Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) and Nehiyaw (Cree) stories. It can be purely monstrous, or it can be a hybrid creature made of a demon that took possession of a human body. During long and cold winters, food can become increasingly scarce, and the weather makes it harder for groups to travel. The Windigo creeps in when hunger and isolation combine. In Algonquian storytelling, this being represents greed, anger, and most of all, insatiable hunger. Its loneliness and gluttony cause it to prey on humans for food, and each feeding makes it crave more victims.

The figure of the Windigo has prominently been used in Algonquian oral stories, with some recent written occurrences in Indigenous literary fiction. Since the Windigo can be either a monster or a condition, or both at the same time, its various states of hunger can be more than physical. It can starve for more than meat, seeking power, destruction, and revenge. In recent North American Indigenous fiction, the traditional Windigo figure of the monstrous Other evolves into allegories of violence through colonization, industrialization, the

residential (Canada) and boarding (USA) school systems, and the two World Wars. These modern characteristics characterize new types of Windigo-like monsters in non-Indigenous texts as well. Patrick Bateman, the wealthy yuppie in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, for example, is a greedy, lonely sociopath who kills people to feed his insatiable hunger for destruction, being consumed by this hunger more every day.

### Indigenous Gothic

European Gothic was defined as a literary tradition emerging as a counter-response to the Enlightenment's scientific rationalism, and as the "violent and disordered underbelly of reason and democratic revolution" (Burnham 225). In Indigenous Gothic, the villainous objects are often consumer capitalism, hyper-individualism, and historical amnesia. Through the use of the traditional Algonquian figure of the Windigo, authors Eden Robinson and Tomson Highway attempt to express that which is, in English, unspeakable; the Windigo is in some ways untranslatable and entirely dependent upon cultural context. Robinson and Highway employ the Windigo figure in order to question the unappeasable hunger of colonialism for Indigenous peoples and their lands. In Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, concentric features oscillate between narrative, narrator, and narration to explore Indigenous (Haisla and Cree, respectively) traditions, colonization and assimilation, destruction, and possible routes towards healing. Reading the novels through a Gothic lens helps frame the horror, violence, and monsters that the protagonists experience.

In *Monkey Beach*, Lisamarie is confronted with the loss of language, severed generational ties, rampant drug addiction and alcoholism, domestic violence, and sexual abuse, all of which cripple her Haisla community. Her uncle Mick is an American Indian Movement activist, but he is also alcoholic and suicidal, just like his sister Trudy, as a consequence of being sent to residential school. There, they were deprived of their traditions, punished for speaking their native language, psychologically, physically, and sexually abused, and separated from their family for years at a time. This was also the experience of Jeremiah-Champion and Gabriel Okimasis, the Cree brothers from *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. The novel further addresses the repeated sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of the priest who managed their residential school in northern Manitoba.

The references to cannibalistic monsters in these novels illustrate horror and hunger in new ways. Physical comfort and food alone cannot satiate these characters' fears and cravings. This is because the hunger consuming them and their culture is monstrous on all levels. In both novels, the unrepresentable is the multifaceted trauma experienced by the

protagonists, victims of colonialism's rapacious hunger. The figure of the lonely, famished, and cold-hearted Windigo embodies this hunger.

### **Monstrous Hunger**

In *Monkey Beach*, a young Haisla woman, Lisamarie, narrates the three days of physical and spiritual journey that she embarks on when her brother Jimmy disappears. He seems to be lost at sea, so she travels to Monkey Beach, along the Haisla shore, where she thinks he might be stranded. The novel uses narrative, semantic, and stylistic loops, as well as interruptions to illustrate Lisamarie's journey between two worlds (her physical reality and the world of ghosts and spirits), two time periods (her childhood memories and her present quest to find her missing brother), and two cultures (her Haisla heritage and modern colonial Canada). The novel also describes residential schools, colonialism, and modernity as dangerous, hungry monsters: "There were tons of priests in the residential schools, tons of fucking matrons and helpers that 'helped' themselves to little kids just like you. You look at me and you tell me how many of them got away scot-free" (Robinson 255). This is the very essence of a Windigo.

The dangers of violent gluttony confront Lisamarie several times. These confrontations begin when she finds a disfigured dog in a ditch (Robinson 18, 20), then her father's chickens get killed and eaten by her brother's crows (37). Then she finds the body of her uncle, who drowned in the ocean and whose corpse was eaten by seals (144, 148). These episodes depict hunger as violent and destructive. Unlike the Cree Windigo, however, the Haisla ghosts of *Monkey Beach* require sacrificial offerings of blood as a tool for cultural survivance and spiritual healing.

In *Monkey Beach*, the trauma of residential schools, colonialism, and assimilation are destructive, violent monsters. However, the ghosts and the spirits who communicate with Lisamarie are not the unspeakable creatures she must fear: "You don't have to be scared of things you don't understand. They're just ghosts" (Robinson 265). The novel describes these ghosts not as dangerous, but familiar: "The hallways were filled with ghosts. They stood watch over their families" (267). They bring her comfort and healing, through cultural survivance and the transmission of her Haisla heritage.

Whereas loss of language, lateral violence, and sexual abuse are the hungry monsters that devour Lisamarie and her friends' lives, her exploration of "the other side" where the ghosts and the spirits come from is an exploration and a means of resisting colonial violence. Their magic offers a counter-narrative to colonialism: "The chief trees - the biggest, strongest, oldest ones - had a spirit, a little man with red hair. Olden days, they'd lead medicine men to

the best trees to make canoes with.” “Oh,” I said” (Robinson 152). At first, Lisamarie interprets the spirits’ hunger for her blood as evil gluttony: “They snigger. I push myself up with my right hand, cradling my left hand against my chest. The bushes rustle. ‘More,’ a voice says from the shadows. ‘More.’” (369-370), but actually expresses the need for her to reconnect her body to her spirituality. By literally feeding Haisla blood to the spirits, Lisamarie accepts her connection to “the other side” and starts her healing process in the comfort of her traditional Haisla heritage (Castricano 802). Unlike the Cree Windigo in *Three Day Road* or *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the Haisla creatures hungry for blood bring spiritual peace and an opportunity for healing in *Monkey Beach*.

### **Genocide, Cannibalism, and Pedophilia**

The two protagonists of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* are Cree brothers. Champion-Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis were forcefully separated from their Cree community and sent to a residential school. While there, they learned classical music, ballet, and English, but managed to keep their Indigenous language and the relationships with their family when allowed to return home after a few years. The priest who administrates their school is not the benevolent mentor their parents believe him to be, however. The priest, the representative and embodiment of the Catholic Church, is a pedophile, and he assaults Champion-Jeremiah and Gabriel multiple times. The two boys and the narrator refer to him as a Windigo throughout the novel not only because of his sexual violence, but also because of his embodiment of the Catholic Church and the government of Canada.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, explicit references to the Windigo are made in connection with the mall in Toronto, non-Indigenous Canadian cities, and the Catholic priest who sexually abuses the young Cree boys at the residential school he operates. The Windigo is present in Jeremiah and Gabriel’s lives as an evil, ravenous monster that devours the land and Cree boys. Their elders tell them about the creature that arrived when their community was starving: “‘The hunger became so severe,’ Ann-Adele Ghost rider’s mouth exuded flame now, ‘first one died. Then another. And more. Until one day, a man became possessed by Weetigo, the spirit who feasts on human flesh’” (Highway 245). Over the course of their lives, they meet the Windigo under the shapes of consumerism and pedophilia: “‘Haven’t you feasted on enough human flesh while we sit here with nothing but our tongues to chew on?’ hissed Gabriel. But the cannibal spirit now had the face of Father Roland LaFleur” (Highway 299). The Windigo is haunting their lands and their lives. Although it is able to change its face and voice, the boys are always able to recognize it.

There are multiple references to the sexual assaults of Jeremiah and Gabriel at the hands of the priest, whose sexual appetite is described as cannibalistic: “Flailing for his soul’s deliverance, the priest thrust out a hairy, trembling hand. And by immaculate condensation or such rarefied event, a length of raw meat dangled from his fingers” (181). When Jeremiah witnesses the priest abusing his younger brother Gabriel, he is unsure if the priest is human, animal, or supernatural. He is “bending over him, like a crow. Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey-comb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh” (79). He associates the sounds of the rape with eating: “As he stood half-asleep, he thought he could hear the smacking of lips, mastication” (79). The pedophile priest is a Windigo, devouring more young Cree boys each school year as his cannibalistic sexual violence grows.

Later in the novel, Gabriel’s consenting sexual encounters seamlessly blend with memories of sexual assaults, comparisons with modern, non-Indigenous foods, and human flesh or blood: “With Gabriel’s now six-year-old posterior exposed to the light, the priest had lashed and lashed until, by the third blow, it had turned as red as cherry Jell-O. ‘Bleed!,’ a little voice inside Gabriel had cried. ‘Bleed!’” (85). Even in non-sexual situations, the now-adult Gabriel repeatedly refers to the Windigo when he finds himself in presence of children: “the fact remained that few of these five- and six-year-old girls came up to his navel, making him look, and feel, like a Weetigo” (152). The windigo-priest, his violent appetite for young boys, as well as his symbolism for Catholicism, all go hand-in-hand in Gabriel’s narrative of hunger and cannibalism: “Gabriel stirred his way through the little swirl of blood. And this is what they drink, he mused, the priests, as they celebrate their Holy Communion. Male blood. He removed his eye from the pan. This is what they eat” (Highway 125). Gabriel cannot differentiate love from abusive sexuality, and associates the toxic practices of the Church with cannibalism. He is unable to understand his physical desires as normal. Under the evil spell of the Windigo, he can only recognize violence in physical consumption.

Non-Indigenous Canada, Toronto, its mall, and the rest of the Western world are constantly referred to as a frightening environment that devours “Indian” children, similar to the Windigo: “The cities of the world twinkled at his feet - Toronto, New York, London, Paris: the maw of the Weetigo, Jeremiah dreamt, insatiable man-eater, flesh-devourer, following his brother” (241). Toronto appears as a violent city, a monster that kills and devours “Indian” girls and boys at night. The cafeteria of the mall is not only the place where people eat but also where they are eaten. The Windigo fills the space, creating new ravenous victims. Hunger is like a disease, an epidemic that strikes the Cree brothers:

The world was one great, gaping mouth, devouring ketchup-dripping hamburgers, french fries glistening with grease, hot dogs, chicken chop suey, spaghetti with meatballs, Cheezies, Coca-Cola, root beer, 7-Up, ice cream, roast beef, mashed potatoes, and more hamburgers,

french fries... The roar of mastication drowned out all other sound, so potent that, before the clock struck two, the brothers were gnawing away with the mob (Highway 120).

The city's hunger for violence and blood is also illustrated several times with a group of White boys who stalk, rape, and kill young Indigenous women without ever being caught: "She staggered, just as a hulking junk heap of a car pulled up, springs groaning from the weight of young white men out looking for a thrill" (138). She is later "found in a ditch on the city's outskirts, a shattered beer bottle lying gently, like a rose, deep inside her crimson-soaked sex" (107). Every few chapters there is mention of another Indigenous girl found murdered, disposed of like garbage. The Windigo of racial violence treats its victims like animal prey. The murderous group of White men is the Windigo within the Windigo city. They are colonialism's means of annihilating Indigenous youth in the city. They hunt, devour, and digest Indigenous women as they do hot dogs at the mall cafeteria.

### **Colonial Gluttony**

In traditional Algonquian storytelling, the Windigo can be a greedy, cannibalistic creature and/or a condition that affects a lonely, greedy, and famished human being. Its insatiable hunger drives it to kill and devour human beings, but ultimately turns it even hungrier. It is a horrific, terrifying hunger that destroys everything and everybody involved. Eden Robinson and Tomson Highway use traditional monsters to illustrate the ravages of colonialism on Indigenous peoples. Colonization, industrialization, and assimilative policies devour Indigenous lands, cultures, languages, and populations. This hunger becomes more ravenous every time and therefore indulges even more.

In Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, colonization is a Windigo, alongside with the residential school system, alcoholism, and sexual abuse. It devours Haisla lands, cultures, and population, and it can never be satisfied. During her quest to find her missing brother, protagonist Lisamarie faces non-Indigenous embodiments of evil and ravenous creatures, but her traditional Haisla ghosts ultimately save her. As opposed to being terrifying and dangerous, as previously assumed, they embody the solution to her pain. By offering her blood, she accepts her Haisla heritage and starts her healing journey by fulfilling her family prophecy.

Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* likewise portrays colonization, residential schools, urbanization, and sexual abuse as separate Windigos. These monsters also join together and embody consumerism and colonialism as an evil, ravenous force destroying Cree land, cultures, and population. The Catholic Church and their network of "Indian schools" is the most detailed illustration of the Windigo. The only potential salvation for Champion-

Jeremiah and Gabriel seems to be a return to their traditional Cree ways and the complete disavowing and confrontation of individualism, capitalism, and Catholicism.

### Conclusion

Western epistemologies may commonly understand hunger and consumption as purely physical phenomena related to feeding. In contemporary North American Indigenous literatures, the struggle to overcome the loss of other human needs, such as language or memory, often overshadows the bodily need for sustenance. Surviving hunger requires more than physical prowess; it requires spiritual and psychological healing, as well. Basic dignity is not *lost*, but *taken* from the protagonists, by a creature consuming their bodies, as well as their souls and those of their family members. Like an evil entity feeding itself, the Windigo keeps devouring but never feels satiated. Under the traits of colonial institutions such as the Catholic Church and the Canadian residential school system, the Windigo haunts the lands and the minds of Lisamarie and the Okimasis brothers. On all levels, genocidal and assimilative practices eat away at Indigenous peoples' individual and communal resources.

Colonialism never gets enough. The novels' characters are representative of the new generation of Indigenous youth: courageous and resilient, they cultivate strong ties with their home communities. They (re)learn and practice their languages and ceremonies, and by doing so, participate in a communal form of healing. They are united on all fronts and know how to navigate Canadian institutions. Colonialism and the Windigo now try to run and hide because these strong young people are hungry for change, and only a true Reconciliation will satiate them.

### Works Cited

Burnham, Michelle. "Is There an Indigenous Gothic?" *A Companion to American Gothic, First Edition*. Edited by Charles L. Crow. John Wiley and Sons: 2014, pp. 225-237.

Castricano, Jodey. "Learning to Talk With Ghosts: Canadian Gothic and the Poetics of Haunting in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 75.2, 2006, pp. 801-813.

Highway, Tomson. *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press: 2008.

Robinson, Eden. *Monkey Beach*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2000.