
The Self in Northern Canadian Hunting Societies: “Cannibals” and other “Monsters” as Agents of Healing

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Abstract: This paper presents a theory of the Self in northern Canadian hunting societies. Ethnographic arguments are drawn from the Athapaskan-speaking Sekani of northern British Columbia and the Algonquian-speaking Cree of northern Quebec and Ontario. We describe the three dimensions of the Native “composite” Self in order to discuss Native mechanisms of social and individual inequilibrium and healing. We also attempt to re-analyse the so-called windigo psychosis among the Cree. Like others before us though for very different reasons, we argue that the label “psychosis” misrepresents this phenomenon. The assemblage of beliefs describing the windigo cannibal monster is an important clue for the dynamics by which composite Selves are constructed.

Keywords: Self, nomadic hunters, Cree, Sekani, windigo psychosis

Résumé: Cet article décrit une théorie du Soi tel qu’il est conçu par les chasseurs nomadiques du Canada septentrional. Les données sont tirées des Sekani, un peuple athapascan de la Colombie-Britannique, et des Cris du Québec et de l’Ontario. Nous décrivons les trois dimensions du Soi ‘composé’ afin de décrire les mécanismes autochtones de la guérison et de l’équilibre, soit de l’individu soit de la société. Nous présentons une réanalyse de la dite “psychose windigo” parmi les Cris. Nous affirmons que l’étiquette “psychose” n’est qu’une projection occidentale qui ne tient pas compte des faits. La description détaillée du monstre windigo fournit un indice important pour mieux comprendre la construction du Soi composé.

Mots-clés : le soi, chasseurs nomades, Cri, Sekani, psychose windigo

In this paper we propose a theory of the Self in northern Canadian hunting societies. In particular, we draw on material from two, the Athapaskan-speaking Sekani of northern British Columbia and the Algonquian-speaking Cree of northern Quebec and Ontario, because we have noted strong similarities in their respective views of the Self after comparing the results of our independently conducted research. We argue that the Native¹ Self can best be described by the word “composite.” We discuss Native mechanisms of social and individual inequilibrium and healing in terms of this composite Self. Although our arguments are based on extensive field contacts in various communities, Native views of the composite Self are not easily accessible in ordinary discourse for reasons that we will briefly describe below. We also attempt to incorporate some of the older ethnographic literature, especially as it concerns the so-called windigo psychosis among the Cree, with the aim of applying our view of the composite Self to “pre-modern” ethnographic contexts, roughly the period between contact and the early 1950s. Like others before us though for very different reasons and with different implications, we shall argue that windigo psychosis is misnamed. The assemblage of beliefs and legends surrounding the windigo cannibal monster is instead an important clue for the dynamics by which composite Selves are constructed.

Our descriptions of Native notions of the Self do not use contemporary Native accounts as such for a variety of reasons. One argument we advance is the persistence of the composite Self through different economic and political regimes imposed by Euro-Canadians, so we must interpret older descriptions of social life in support of our views. Most older ethnographic accounts, however, rarely make mention of the Native sense of Self as such, especially as it is pertinent to our hypothesis. Second, complex

biographical narrations obtained in field research situations are not often explicit, since Natives usually see explicit descriptions of activities as bragging. Third, one component (or “dimension”) of Sekani and Cree selves, the relationship to the world of animal power, is not only unmarked in discourse, it is surrounded by explicit rules that prohibit talking about that aspect of the Self (which, we argue, is the basis for imagining the community). This, coupled to the traditional Native belief that all knowledge is keyed to individual agency, makes it difficult to obtain general descriptions that are sufficiently decontextualized from individual experience. In other words, on some issues—and the construction of the Self is one—Native people often seem to speak in parables and metaphors, when they speak at all about certain issues.² Finally, Ferrara’s data based on interviews with over a thousand Native patients over the years is strongly suggestive that their emphatically stated need for “harmony” is based on a view of illness resulting from the disequilibrium of the elements of the composite Self.³

Far from apologizing, we are attempting to frame the discussion that follows. We argue that the process of healing depends very much on ideas of *what* is being healed and how this ontological object came to be sick. In other words, wellness depends very much on local definitions of illness and on the specific triggers that cause imbalance. For example, we will argue that windigo beliefs, which have often been described in the literature as symptomatic of “illness,” also represent “wellness” or healing if Native definitions of the Self are taken into account.

Nomadic Selves in Context

Our aim in this section is to describe the composite Self, which we will argue has three dimensions. Although we issued a warning in the introduction that parts of our descriptions are not supported by explicit Native discourse, we have noted in our respective first hand contacts that there are many suggestive metaphoric expressions that describe the workings of the composite Self.

We will describe briefly how the Sekani of north-central British Columbia construct the Self. We are convinced that the dynamics of the Self described in this section are also relevant for the Algonquian speakers that we describe below. In particular, Ferrara’s conclusions based on her long-term participation in healing practices are similar to Lanoue’s, which are based on extended fieldwork contact in “modern” and “traditional” contexts.⁴ Besides contemporary Sekani descriptions of illness and the Self, their traditional stories⁵ mention cannibals and monstrous beings, which, we argue, symbolize threats to mental harmony. Like the Sekani, we do not treat cannibal and mon-

ster stories as descriptions of empirical truth but as metaphors for equilibrium. In this sense, they are useful guides to Sekani ideas of the Self.

Before presenting our arguments, we would like to mention two caveats. First, it is not only Native ideas of the Self that differ from Western notions. The composite Self is framed in a social space that is imagined in a completely different manner than the social of tribes and nations. Nomads’ ideas of the link between territoriality and the polity are unique in band societies for two reasons. First, society as an entity is believed to emerge from individual contact with a hidden transcendental dimension. Second, social solidarity is strongest when people are dispersed over the homeland and weakest when they aggregate in a community, which goes against popular and analytical Western notions that a high degree of social solidarity is achieved by the abnegation of the Self. The reasons for these qualities are too complex to examine in detail here (see Lanoue, 1992) but will become clearer when we examine the social Self.

Our second caveat concerns the quality of the evidence we present. We suspect that Athapaskan descriptions of threats to equilibrium are less elaborate and less ritualized than comparable Algonkian beliefs because Athapaskan contact histories with Europeans and Canadians have been less dramatic. For example, windigo beliefs of cannibalistic monsters are associated more with Algonkian-speakers than with Athapaskan, although Ridington’s description (1990) of Beaver wechuge beliefs offers a close parallel.⁶ If our hypothesis is correct—beliefs in “monsters” are a guide to the psychological repair of Selves as well as the more traditionally-described threats to equilibrium—then one would expect richer stories in circumstances in which various dimensions of the Self have been weakened, eroded or artificially augmented beyond traditional limits by market forces (more in the early and middle periods of contact) and by contemporary politics and Euro-Canadian social engineering. The relatively isolated Athapaskans may have fewer cannibal tales because the conditions that allow for full development of normal Selves have remained relatively untouched for a longer period of time, whereas many Algonkian-speaking peoples have suffered more as a result of contact with Europeans and with Euro-Canadians. They may have had to reinforce their stories and beliefs to deal with greater threats from the outside. Although we do not explore this here, we believe that windigo tales are post-contact precisely because they are ritualized responses to the more explicit threats by Euro-Canadians many eastern Algonquian peoples faced in their early contact histories.

“True” Selves

While the word “composite” that we use here is a new usage, at least for specialists of northern Canadian First Nations, the thinking behind it is not. For example, when describing a “medicine fight” between two Chipewyan (Dene) men who were squaring off in terms of their respective “power” (*inkoze* for these people; the concept of power is discussed below in more detail), Sharp describes (2001: 135) reasons for the eventual loser’s weakness. It was not so much that he was not known as a man who had cultivated his power (in contrast to his opponent, known as a man with strong power) as it was that the outcome of the struggle was partly determined by the context in which each opponent’s individuality was expressed. In other words, the social (in this case, public opinion that the man was a bit of a buffoon) was not a mere backdrop to the drama but was a part of the loser’s sense of self that may have contributed to his loss: “That context, these symbols, values and emotions were not just internalized within [the man], they *were* [the man]” (ibid.: 135; emphasis in original). The term “composite selves,” then, is merely an attempt to recognize that the production of the self among northern nomadic societies is different than comparable Western dynamics, not because the people of these societies are especially sensitive to gossip and informal social controls, but because their notions of society and self are unique. In other words, Euro-Canadian Selves may be just as mouldable by interaction with others (a view Sharp espouses) but this sensitivity to the social is framed very differently because Euro-Canadians often assert that the two, the individual and society, are unique and somewhat autonomous entities that are often at odds. Not so among northern First Nations, who, we will argue, define the social as an intrinsic part of the individual.

What we are arguing is not complex. Like the various contributors to Allen’s collection of non-Western conceptions of the Self (1997), we are only seeking an adequate language to describe the influence of two dimensions of existence that are sometimes overlooked in classical (Western) definitions of the “true” Self as an autonomous entity at odds with the social and political currents that shape the public persona: while the first, “society” (more precisely, the interaction between individual’s representations of the social and the degree to which the individual sees these as influencing him or her), is often believed to play a role in shaping the public Self, the extent of that role and especially the mechanisms with which individuals mediate a position between the “true” and “social” self are generally not well-defined. The second aspect of the composite Self, the transcendental dimension, is less well under-

stood and so has generally been left to the province of esoteric or marginal religious theories at worst (again, see Allen 1997, whose contributors can only find parallels to nomadic composite Selves in Eastern religions and philosophies), or metaphysics at best. In neither case are links between the empirically unknowable and the “true” Self generally given much importance. We argue that one reason for defining a composite self with three dimensions is precisely to define more clearly the role of what is conceived of as the transcendental in the Self.

In some ways, the problem of the Self has been a thorny one for anthropologists, used as we are to thinking in Durkheimian terms that were strongly influenced by the 19th and 20th century affirmation that an alienated Self was the norm in modern industrial societies, which of course led to an endless round of speculative attempts to identify what the Self was alienated from. The problem, however, is deeper than one of the mere inertia of a particular intellectual paradigm more or less contaminated by Western ideologies that sanctioned economic individualism and political domination by means of complex semiotic engagements that led to individual complicity. Cartesian subjectivism deeply polarized subsequent Western thinking about the Self. Descartes’ arguments seemed to propose that the essential defining quality that made us human was an innate capacity to transcend history and culture by the power of pure reasoning. This position was later interpreted as dangerously close to an apology for capitalist individualism and positivist instrumentality.

When Western states consolidated their hold on power by the late 19th century, both ideologues and critics of the state’s newly-defined social space set off a new round of debates about the Self that defined much of 20th century approaches. By arguing in favour of the explanatory power of the social fact, Durkheim provided a means of thinking around the problem of the autonomy of the Cartesian subject, whose logical implication was that society could not exist except as a voluntary agglomeration of rational, independent Selves. By deriving the Self from the social, the Durkheimian approach was in some respects a throwback to a pre-Cartesian position, although this was hidden by the new rhetorics of social functionalism at the time. Indeed, Durkheimian epistemology could be seen as a modern manifestation of the Aristotelian concern with the empirical sensorium, weighed against Descartes’ espousal of Platonic logical dialectics. In either case, Self and society remained problematical terms.

No matter how seductive contemporary critiques of the inviolate (Cartesian) Self may appeal to a Durkheimian-derived (and Aristotelian) cultural relativism that sanctions the primacy of local conditions in defining the Self, it

is our contention that the nature of the individual agency of the Self is far from resolved by being simply redefined by the modernist (paradoxical) position that alleges co-determination, albeit unequal and hegemonic, between Self and society. Even later attempts, notably by Foucault, fail to discern the outlines of what an unalienated Self might look like. For Foucault, modern Selves are even more fragmented than the alienated individuals described by the Marxist theory of overt political oppression and hidden economic domination. Despite Foucault's insights into the mechanisms (normalization of alienation through discipline) governing individual complicity with structures of domination, the Foucauldian Self is even weaker and more victimized by history and culture than the Marxist Self, whose autonomy is crippled by historical and cultural circumstances but redeemable by its potential creative capabilities when engaged in productive activity. It remains a moot point whether or not Foucault's attempt to trace the possible outlines of a fragmented Self reconstituted by individual (and subversive) appropriation of the technologies of domination would have led him to develop a vision of unalienated, "true" Selves, since his theoretical explorations were cut short by his untimely death.

What we are attempting here is to describe a model of Self under unalienated conditions, or at least a Self in which a kind of alienation—a movement from the individual Self to the Transcendental Self—is voluntary. Our model of the nomadic composite Self might serve as a limited guide for situating postmodern attempts to recover and reinvent otherwise fragmented Selves.

The Three Dimensions of the Nomadic Self

Sekani Selves comprise three dimensions: the ego-Self, consisting of individual desires, ideas, and remembered experiences and actions; the social Self, consisting of each individual's field of shared values and expectations framing the social environment; the transcendental Self, consisting of the powers acquired from the invisible dimension through dreams and vision quests, especially as these powers are channelled through animals. We shall briefly describe each dimension of the Self, keeping in mind that no one dimension is more important than the other two in defining a person's experience of the Self.

The Sekani, like the Cree, explicitly believe that an individual sense of harmony and balance of the various dimensions of the Self are desirable goals. Balance must be achieved because human naturally tend towards selfishness, which is a sign of imbalance, especially of the ego-Self. Because this "diagnosis" is something the Sekani have long recognized, they have developed "traditional" means of dealing with the tendencies for self-serving self-

ishness, which is kept in constant check by specific rules aimed at inculcating generosity and sharing. These practices are so well documented among nomadic hunters that we will not examine the Sekani versions here except to say that people feel a very strong obligation to share meat from game animals, sometimes travelling long distances between camps to make sure that less fortunate hunters get a share (although meat from trapped animals such as beaver, which is occasionally eaten, is exempt).

The Sekani have a very strongly developed sense of the ego-Self, which seems natural in an environment in which individual skills are the key to well-being. People collaborate while hunting (hunting groups consist of two partners; most commonly, two unrelated men; husband and wife; father and son; brothers—though each partner generally hunts alone during the hunting expedition). The basis of collaboration is mutual respect of each partners' individual hunting skills such that a complementary relationship emerges. There are usually some differences in skill levels between partners, as men will usually rotate through a series of hunting partners in their lifetimes and expect to learn from more skilled partners while young and to impart some of their wisdom to junior partners in their old age.⁷ However, these status differences are relatively minor and are believed to be more due to the qualities of the transcendental Self than the result of empirical learning retained and used by the ego-Self. In other words, collaboration between "selfish" individuals is possible because the ego is always framed by its interaction with the social and transcendental Selves, which shifts agency from the purely selfish and individual to much more complex realms inhabited—in the case of the transcendental—by superior entities. Because of the traditional importance of hunting and the Western view that northern environments are extremely dangerous, we think many researchers have underestimated these other aspects of the Self in order to reinforce a Western-derived notion of the centrality of economics in hunting societies (cf. the influential papers in Lee and Devore, 1968 or in Lee and Daly, 1999). Some researchers, in other words, try to frame the selfishness of the ego-Self by attributing collaboration to a Western-style economic rationale for sharing risks.

There is another, more complex reason why the importance of the ego-Self was recognized long before the forces of market-driven colonialism destabilized Native communities in the contemporary era. Sekani hunting groups are always potentially hiving off to pursue their own economic interests. However, this economic selfishness (which is of course encouraged, within limits, because it favours survival) may lead to serious political consequences for the

collective, since it is only by constant circulation of these small groups over sometimes economically uninviting parts of the homeland that the Sekani were able to demonstrate ownership of the entire homeland to their neighbours and potential enemies. Means must be found to balance individual interests manifested as local hunting group autonomy against the necessity of “patrolling” less-favoured or less well-known ranges within the homeland. The Sekani therefore had strong moral injunctions not only favouring generosity—which cancels the short-term economic advantages of selfishly sticking to a richer range by moving “wealth” from the “rich” to the “poor” and moral authority from the ego-Self to the transcendental—but that also respected the moral authority of good hunters. In other words, the “luckier” a hunter, the more it was thought that his luck came from greater power derived from an enhanced contact with the transcendental realm inhabited by the atavistic “monstrous” form of animals left over from pre-Transformation times (the Sekani believe, like many other northern nomads, that animals are superior to humans and can only be hunted if the animal is willing to sacrifice itself). The respect shown to this moral leader and to his exhortations to visit relatively unoccupied ranges suggests that the Sekani sought to balance a potentially dominant ego-Self by linking its main manifestation—hunting prowess—to an increase in the power of the transcendental Self, with obvious implications for a stronger social-Self as well. A person in disequilibrium not only suffers individually but also causes the community to suffer as well, since others’ social Selves have partially incorporated him and his augmented ego-Self (conversely, one person’s wellness benefits others by the same logic). The Sekani believe that a selfish person also causes the “animal-masters,” the pre-Transformation transcendental forms of animals, to abandon humans. In brief, any imbalance in the Self has potentially disastrous consequences for individual and community survival.

The social Self is more difficult to describe. It is certainly arguable that all human beings have a social Self, which in fact is often described as the persona. Originally defined in the modern context by Jungian psychology as a kind of mask of how individuals wish to represent themselves to the social world (although the word is of course much older and traceable to theatrical masks used by ancient Greek and Roman actors) and by philosopher George Herbert Mead (cf. Mead, 2001) as a way of objectifying the immediacy of the sense of “I,” anthropologists have sometimes been loathe to use the word in order to avoid its volitional connotation, as if people are in complete control of what they project to others and what others

see in them, and as if social life were nothing more than a series of strategic and instrumental negotiations that uses culture as a supermarket-repository of symbols to be mobilised in the search for individual advantage. The social Self is usually seen in more Durkheimian terms, as the outcome of continual negotiations between a (usually autonomous and Cartesian) Self and the reified (Cartesian) Other, an aspect of the physical body on which “society” inscribes its principle values, something that T. Turner calls (1979) the “social skin,” although Turner is arguing that the body is not only a superficial Durkheimian representation of the collective but also refers to the process of socializing the psycho-biological individual.

These negotiations can be empirically real and therefore come close to the idea of a mask “hiding” the “true” Self, or they may engage individuals’ notions of their place in an Andersonian imagined (“cultural”) community (Anderson, 1986). Some, notably Herzfeld (1998), have refined this idea into very complex views of how individuals in modern nation-states negotiate status and access to resources not under their control by appropriating and using the state’s own ideological capital (pace Bourdieu) to their own ends as they navigate the maze-like corridors of state-instituted political practices and therefore modify state technologies of social control (and, theoretically, lift culture from the level of a symbolic storage bin to an active protagonist in all negotiations). The persona, in other words, can be both a true mask of the “real” ego and a temporary and “public” ego-Self that is a “true” representation of the ego-Self insofar as the individual, to negotiate successfully for social resources, must deploy symbols of the ego-Self that are recognized as legitimate by others. Obviously, these remarks are too brief to paint a complex picture of how the Sekani see the social Self, but this latter observation at least gets to the heart of Sekani ideas.

There is another dimension to the Sekani social Self, however. Not only does the Sekani social Self consist of individual negotiation vis-à-vis the rules of social life that engage others (there are few explicit rules as such), it also incorporates an ongoing process of constructing the social through the transcendental Self. This is a crucial difference with Western notions of the social Self, since the Sekani and the Cree are explicit that the outcome of all negotiations in the social sphere engages the transcendental Self, and that the goal of such engagement is not limited to cementing partnerships or establishing a representation of the Self for public consumption. People in these hunting societies are acutely aware that each moment of negotiation brings part of the Self into contact

with the transcendental, with important repercussions for bringing the community into being. Briefly, and taking into account our description above of the potential for selfishness, the collective is seen as weak and must be continually created and reinforced by augmenting the transcendental Self through contact with the realm of “monstrous” animals. Although we cannot describe this process in detail here, individuals present themselves to others as partial manifestations of an invisible dimension that contains “real” power. The transcendental realm becomes a vehicle for defining the collective because it allows for the possibility of a strong ego-Self whose potential selfishness is lessened by shifting agency to the transcendental.

The third component, the transcendental self, is more or less absent in Western notions. For the Sekani and the Cree, it consists of “power,” the special and indescribable qualities that are acquired through contact with the transcendental dimension of animals.⁸ Sekani, like all Athapaskan and Algonkian speakers, are ambiguous about the creation of the world but clear about the Transformation, an epoch in which a Trickster-like creature (a beaver for the Sekani, a raven for the Southern Tutchone [cf. Legros, 1999]) appears and, through the usually-inadvertent consequences of his actions, gives the world the form it has now. In the past, animals were larger (“monstrous” or “giant,” according to most accounts), spoke, and sometimes married and hunted humans. For their part, humans are often represented as weak and unable to defend themselves from the depredations of various monsters, including those of the monstrous animals. In other words, animals were superior to humans, a belief that many Sekani still profess, since animals live in the same environment as the Sekani yet survive without weapons, society and language.

The Transformer imposed on each species a smaller, limited and weaker biological form that reduced the monstrous or giant animal’s ability to express its powers—it could no longer talk, marry or hunt humans. However, the Transformer did not alter in any way the innate capacities of animals, just as he did not significantly alter human physical abilities by making them stronger or better-armed, as in many classic culture-hero tales from other parts of the world. Significantly, the Transformer gave humans several rules to live by; notably, respect for transcendental power and for blood as a powerful sign of life. “Rules,” whatever their content, become signposts of the social, whose arbitrary qualities are unique to humans. In brief, the Transformer separates the two as humans become less animal-like (because they acquire culture through rule-driven behaviour) and animals become less

human-like (because they are unable to express some of their natural attributes while occupying the physical bodies they now possess).

To come into contact with this now-hidden dimension of animals, hunters transform themselves into symbolic prey, calling into being the pre-Transformer dimension of animals: hunters can dream this contact, but the more usual way is what has been sometimes called a vision quest, which among the Sekani and many other northern nomadic hunters is not so ritualized as versions found among the semi-tribalized peoples of the Plateau or the Plains. Immobile, without food or weapons, and alone, the hunter creates a ritual space⁹ by these inversions of normal experiential reality; he becomes symbolic prey for animals and hence evokes the pre-Transformer epoch. Because an animal’s biological nature would normally urge it to flee humans, any animal that approaches the hunter in this temporary ritual space is assumed to be under the sway of its transcendental, non-biological nature. Because the human has become animal-like prey and the animal has become less like an animal, a channel of communication is then opened between the hunter and the animal. In fact, the favourite metaphor used to describe this is a “conversation” or “talking with the animal doctors” (the widespread Native English name for the act of engaging the invisible dimension of animals).

Just as the Transformer did not alter the essences of humans or giant animals, people who come in contact with the transcendental are not necessarily transformed in any fundamental way. They have access to the transcendental and its pre-Transformation powers, and these acquired powers usually cause men to become more successful in the hunt.¹⁰ While it may be tempting to some to think of enhanced abilities as a result of contact with some spiritual force, in reality people become more “efficient” because they are more graceful and composed. They simply feel better because they are attuned to themselves and to the people and natural environment around them. Again, while it is true that these beliefs enable the Sekani to shift agency from individual abilities to a wider and invisible dimension, it is also important that people who are said to have received power have achieved a balance between the ego, social and transcendental Selves. In other words, “power,” hunting “luck” and the Transformer’s actions are perfect metonyms of balance and harmony: in each case, potential polarities (contemporary humans versus the transcendental; contemporary humans versus contemporary animals; early humans versus early monstrous animals) are attenuated by bringing the two poles closer to one another (contemporary humans obtain transcendental power; contemporary humans eat animal

flesh if the animal wishes to sacrifice itself; early humans move closer to animal perfection and early animals move closer to human imperfection). The ideal is always integration that does not sacrifice or eradicate the elements that define the opposition. This is neatly encapsulated in local Transformer myths, as we mentioned above, that describe the distancing of humans and animals in the past, which, in the present, are used to justify the bringing together in the vision quest the hunter temporarily transformed into prey and “normal” animals temporarily transformed into monstrous animals. In other words, Sekani notions of integration favour placing elements in a relation of complementarity rather than in a hierarchical ladder. Excessive attention to status differences and talents (in other words, hierarchy) is a sign of failing to achieve the partial blending of oppositions, the failure to exchange without compromising the fundamental identities of each partner. What is true in terms of this reading of Transformer is equally true for the social and the Self: each domain must exist in a delicate harmony with the others without altering the fundamental qualities of each component’s signifieds, whether this be the Self or society.

All men are expected to be able to achieve contact with the transcendental. Women cannot because they already possess an essential quality of the transcendental, the blood of reproduction and of survival, the same blood that superior animals willingly sacrifice to ensure the survival of inferior humans. In one sense, women are symbolic animals and are more perfect than men just as animals are more perfect than humans. Men are the semi-otically marked category that is subjected to the ritual transformation of the Self by means of the vision quest; women are unmarked because they are “naturally” transcendental. Furthermore, female superiority is tacitly acknowledged by the absence of male strategies for controlling female sexuality. Unlike other societies in which men limit, regulate or even partially eliminate sexual contacts because female sexuality is seen as polluting or dangerous (for example, by long-lasting postpartum sexual taboos, by elaborate rituals of pre-coital protection and post-coital purification, by a period of ritualized homosexuality, or even by the simple ritualization of coitus designed to limit the expression of pleasure to implicitly deny female inequality and explicitly reaffirm male control of female sexuality), the Sekani, like all northern nomadic hunters we are aware of, do not mark sexuality as a vehicle of domination (women and men are viewed as equal; each is responsible for their respective sexual pleasure and for initiating sexual contact).¹¹

Some men never initiate a conversation with the transcendental. This is not viewed as failure as such, since

animals initiate such contact; men merely invite animals to visit by ritually transforming themselves into pre-Transformer prey. However, men with no contacts are viewed as “ordinary” and will not enjoy luck while hunting. They will have to depend purely on skill. Occasionally, they are viewed as weak because without an augmented transcendental Self, the social Self may inhibit the ego-Self (for example, Sharp’s example of the “weak” sociable buffoon that we cited earlier). On the other hand, because contact with the transcendental is the ultimate source of “luck” that keeps the ego in harmony with the social, men who only possess skill may develop a tendency to egoism. Both extremes, weakness and excessive egoism, are disdained.

Other men have a variety of contacts. These, anthropologists sometimes call shamans, although it is significant that the Sekani do not acknowledge a special status by placing them in an explicitly defined category (“shaman”), though we have occasionally heard the word in English, along with “medicine-man.” Such people are merely more successful or luckier at initiating contact and obtaining power. They are potentially dangerous because they suffer from an augmented transcendental Self. It is noteworthy that almost all anthropological descriptions of shamanism (not curers as such) often describe such individuals as “unbalanced,” “dangerous” and even “psychotic.” Well they might be, since they are suffering from a form of imbalance of the Self brought about by an excess of the transcendental.

In brief, too little or excessive contact with the transcendental are potentially dangerous situations. If there is no or little contact, a man is considered potentially unbalanced, prone to expressing excessively the other components of the Self, ego-Self or the social self. He can be ungenerous, mean and aggressive (i.e., denying the social self because the ego fills the void left by the absent transcendental). However, too much contact can be equally dangerous, since ego and society become submerged to the transcendental. “Spirit” power¹² invades the individual; the “conversation” with power is too intense. People in this condition start acting like their “spirit helpers” and lessen or even temporarily lose their humanity. Ridington, the major ethnographer of the neighbouring Dunne-Za (Beaver) gives (1980: 175) some examples: a man infected by frog power can begin jumping up in imitation of giant frogs; another with wolf power began sharpening a nail to a sharp point in imitation of the “silver teeth like knives” that are said to have been characteristic of giant wolf. In all cases, they are potentially dangerous because they are no longer “conversing” with the social Self. Similar forms of disequilibrium among the

Sekani, though in the contemporary colonial context, have been described in Lanoue (2002).

Although some of these dimensions, especially the dimensions of ego and the social, have been discussed in terms of Western notions of Self by anthropologists, philosophers and psychologists (among others), the fact remains that many people still apparently take for granted that a large part of their public personae is a direct expression, sometimes contradictory, of a strongly-integrated ego not differentiated into various components. Even therapists and researchers more familiar with Native views essentialize Native references to the third, non-experiential (in Western thought) transcendental component by treating it as a “metaphor” for a desire to root the present in the past; in other words, as essentialized “tradition” that expresses a desire to bolster a fragilized contemporary political identity by a nostalgic appeal to the utopian, pre-contact past. As Geertz noted (1983: 75), anthropology often projects Western essentialisms onto “primitives,” who are reduced to culturally modified versions of the major Western European ideological categories: totemism is “really” religion in another guise, cargo cults are “really” ideology, the kula “really” evidence of economic and political calculation, and so on. For some, the transcendental Self in “conversation” with animals is “really” a Native form of Western-style ideologically-sanctioned history. We argue, however, that the transcendental Self as embedded in the world of animal power is not a metaphor for the past but a very real component of the present.

In the West, individuals often see the social as a somewhat reified “imagined community,” an immobile, atemporal and hegemonic entity that forms a backdrop framing individual attempts to work their way through cultural and institutionalized pathways. In other words, individuals tend to see the social as a place of institutionalized hegemony, whatever the actual power relations governing the local pond in which they are swimming, because of ideologically fed processes of the normalization (cf. Foucault) and of naturalization of power (cf. Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995). For the Sekani, the absence of institutionalized spaces imbued with (disguised) political power means that the community is a direct manifestation of the continual displacement of individual agency from one component of the individual Self to the other two. Such displacement creates a “multi-sited” (with apologies to George Marcus) idea of agency that acts very much like Naskapi scapulimancy, which transfers individual responsibility for important decisions from an individual to the group and ultimately to the invisible dimension of the transcendental (see Moore, 1965), or like indirection in

Native speech described by Irvine (1979) and commented on by Brenneis (1988), which avoids direct confrontation when individuals negotiate pathways in the social.

Windigo and the Self

We have argued that the composite Self is a deeply embedded notion in contemporary Native northern nomadic hunting societies, although we have only been able to trace its contours from its manifestations rather than from explicit Native discourses as such. Here, we will examine one of the premier ethnographic examples of a traditional Native “illness” to argue that it is possible to see the workings of the composite Self in a post-contact but pre-colonial situation. We propose that windigo psychosis has been misnamed and misunderstood as an illness.

We argue that these beliefs, whether or not they are anthropomorphized as windigo, can be interpreted as a map describing both dangers to the composite Self and conditions that bring the unbalanced Self into equilibrium. We suggest that it is the disequilibrium of the Self’s components that leads to the negative valence assigned to the windigo condition. In other words, traditional cannibal beliefs (and especially cannibal stories) are a richly detailed and polysemic reference guide dealing with imbalance, whatever particular element—ego, society and the transcendental—that may happen to be in disequilibrium, either through relative absence or relative surfeit. Windigo, spirit quests and other healing practices are evidence of attempts to deal with psychological disequilibrium by the metaphors of possession, transformation and cannibalism, in a traditional reading of the phenomenon, to which list we would add metaphors of representing mobility and emotional isolation. In this contemporary context, windigo is more of a representation of the cause, effect and cure of the disequilibrium that can affect individuals with a hyper- or weakly developed sense of individual components of the Self.

Over the years, anthropological enquiries have clustered around the notion that windigo possession is a sickness, a psychosis, a manifestation of isolation and of the stresses of the nomadic lifestyle of northern hunters and trappers trying to wrest a living from the harsh northern Canadian environment. In general, the descriptions of windigo-induced cannibalism among northern nomads has been interpreted in the literature either as a real possibility or as a symbolic representation of what can go wrong during the periods of isolation that characterized people’s winter and spring hunts. During these episodes, the summer aggregate band would separate into sub-units (the hunting groups, usually two hunters and their

spouses and children) that established base camps in local ("family") hunting and trapping areas. The extreme cold and snow made it seem a real possibility that people would not be able to find food and might starve, especially as the weather got warmer towards spring: although still covered by ice, rivers are too dangerous for sleds and snowmobiles, and the frozen ground does not absorb the runoff from the melting snow. Travel is difficult and sometimes impossible for several weeks. Cannibalism might be a real or potential outcome of forced immobility leading to starvation (see Vecsey, 1983).

Naturally, many debates centred whether there was any factual basis for reports of starvation among the Cree, Ojibwa and various other northern nomadic hunters that might have led to the development of a widespread fear of environmentally induced cannibalism. The absence of "real" (documented) episodes of cannibalism led some to reject the semiotic underpinnings of windigo beliefs (see, for example, Marano's 1982 controversial paper in which he argues forcefully that windigo psychosis is an anthropological misinterpretation or even projection). We are not concerned with the alleged facts surrounding stories of cannibalism as such but with indigenous notions of the Self that give weight to polysemic representations of cannibalism, monstrosity, isolation and transformation; in other words, as signs of the composite Self. While we certainly do not subscribe to the notion that the term "psychosis" has any relevancy today (especially since it was first used in this context in 1930s by a non-specialist), the pertinent literature, our own observations and contemporary Native accounts tell us that there is still a widespread feeling in many Indian communities that windigo is *something* negative.

There are many fragmentary accounts of windigos and of windigo psychosis. For example, there are several references in the *Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 6, The Subarctic* that mention, almost in passing, that windigos are feared by Algonkian-speaking peoples from the East coast to the Rocky Mountains. A slightly richer account, a few lines, is mentioned in the article on the *Saulteaux of Lake Winnipeg* (Steinbring 1981: 253):

Most describe the windigo as a giant, human male who appears dramatically and devours the people he happens upon. windigo is, however, quite separate from "becoming (or being) windigo." This latter denotes an identifiable craving for human flesh. One may contract the ailment by confrontation with a windigo, or one may be sorcerized by a shaman into "becoming windigo." In the event of the latter, copious doses of hot grease (including bear fat, melted deer tallow, and sturgeon oil) are said to bring about a quick cure. Those

who have the windigo psychosis can be identified in the bush at night by bright, sparkling lights that surround and follow them.

Another synthetic account is contained in the *Dictionary of North American Mythology* (Gill and Sullivan, 1992: 345), also worth quoting at length:

Witiko—Fearsome anthropomorphic cannibal beings. During famine, humans can become witiko and compulsively seek human flesh. Human witiko differ from the nonhuman northern witiko giants and the malignant transformations of the spirits Ice and North. The nonhuman witiko are depicted as giants who use treetops as snowshoes and cover vast distances with every step. Their most common characteristics are a heart of ice, filthiness, a mean appearance, and the ability to transform humans into cannibals. They become witiko after being mortally wounded and subsequently eaten by the human families with whom they lived. Their power can be overcome by conjuring, and human excreta blind and confuse them.... Sometimes humans become possessed of witiko by dreaming of the malevolent spirits North and Ice.... Witiko stories express the danger and isolation of living in the subarctic wilderness as well as taboos against cannibalism.

Today, documented accounts of windigo sightings seem to be less frequent, though many legendary accounts survive as tales for children.¹³ Windigo beliefs are treated as allegories that illustrate a moral injunction against selfishness rather than as a narrative encapsulation of the dangers of a hunting lifestyle. However, cannibal beliefs are still extant among contemporary Algonkians and Athapaskans, and there are enough reports to suggest that belief in windigos has not disappeared (cf. 1993 Brightman's analysis of the semiotic links between cannibalism, cardinal directions, temperature and hunting and "religious" beliefs among the Rock Cree).

Although isolation, immobility, sickness and cannibalism are the major traits underlined by an older anthropological reading of the phenomenon, there are other dimensions to windigos that we believe are just as important. In fact, these overlooked dimensions are strongly suggestive that windigo is a guide for balancing the various dimensions of the composite Self. First, windigos can appear in summer; a case of windigo panic affecting "over 1 000 people" one summer was reported by Teicher (1960, cited in Vecsey 1983: 82), which belies the winter starvation scenario. Second, windigos are only one of many powerful spirits, though they are the only ones that can *possess* people (Vecsey 1983: 106). Third, if windigo psy-

chosis is the result of the isolation of hunting groups, why is only one individual and not the entire group transformed? Finally, why are windigos hypermobile when the condition is believed to be caused by immobility? Windigos are always alone and always highly mobile.

There are several elements that run through these accounts (and others we have not cited): isolation (the condition is often associated with too long a separation from the community; though non-human witikos travel fast and far);¹⁴ famine and food (though witikos eat their own lips and human flesh even when normal food is available, and human excreta confuse them); ambiguous causality (some accounts, notably Brightman [1993: 140],¹⁵ suggest that humans are transformed into witikos as a result of famine-induced cannibalism, while most accounts suggest transformation by possession leads to cannibalism); size (non-human witikos are giants; transformed humans become bigger); temperature (human and non-human witikos have hearts of ice that must be “melted” to kill or cure the witiko); identification and appearance (witikos are unkempt and ill-dressed; human witikos can be detected by their violent behaviour and by other signs such as lights hovering around them); duration (the phenomenon can be temporary and is curable if the infected person does not die or is not killed by non-infected persons); volition (the condition is involuntary though contaminated people are at first conscious that they have been infected and may warn others of the impending danger); “mythic” status (no accounts of “real” cannibalism are documented, though many Native second-hand accounts exist; people have “heard of” or “seen the tracks” of witikos; these accounts are usually situated in a distant past or in a geographically remote part of the band territory; non-human witikos can arrive in dreams to possess hunters); and, finally, witikos are usually (though not always) male. In brief, some traits seem to support the standard view that witikos are an expression of the dangers of becoming too isolated, too immobile, too cold, too hungry—all the risks that northern nomads face as a matter of course during their winter hunts.

Quite apart from questions regarding the quality of the evidence that allegedly supports the isolation hypothesis, other traits do not seem to fit this model: windigos can be cured by animal fat or grease¹⁶ (ingesting animal fat balances the excess of human “meat,” which becomes a powerful metaphor not only for balance but also for contact with the transcendental, the ultimate source of meat and fat) and confused by non- or anti-food (excreta, which is neither fat nor meat; significantly, windigos are neither cured nor harmed by excreta; it is outside the significant category, in Mary Douglas’ sense). Standard views also

take for granted that witikos are male, though this is apparently more the result of the old view of hunting as an exclusively male activity. Furthermore, we believe that anthropologists have persistently misinterpreted the main symbol associated with witikos—their hearts of ice—as a reference to winter, when starvation is admittedly more likely, instead of being a symbol of social and emotional isolation (more or less as it would be interpreted in a Euro-Canadian context), which some traditional accounts and contemporary Native interpretations support.

The main objection to the standard model, however, is that if windigo represents the fear of the disastrous consequences of isolation, immobility and eventual starvation, then stories should somehow stress the resumption of mobility (ideally, moving towards human company) or the ingestion of “normal” animal meat as cures. On the whole, they do not. In fact, human and non-human witikos are often considered even more dangerous because they travel far and wide *after* they are transformed into witikos. When they begin to roam, the transformation is complete and there is generally no hope of being cured. They must be killed, usually by a combination of ruse and heroic action (often by a culture hero such as Nanabozho or by a person with marginal social status such as an orphan).

Sometimes, however, the transformation can be halted by members of the community coming to the isolated victim. In effect, this displacement of community members negates the potential windigo’s hypermobility and induces immobility, which is exactly the cause of the problem in the first place, according to the standard model. In other words, while it might seem that the cure involves mobility, it is really about the community being symbolically reconstituted, which is symbolized by its voluntarily moving to another locale. The community as social category refers to the summer aggregate band, which is highly marked in terms of immobility, and not to the hunting groups, which are highly marked in terms of mobility. In other words, if one of the standard cures is a form of immobility, then immobility can hardly have been the root cause of the transformation.

Other views see witiko as a metaphor for structural tensions within northern band formations. Turner argues (1978) that witiko myths are expressions of an incorporative logic that produces hunting-group solidarity under normal conditions. Briefly, selective cannibalism is a metaphorized fear of the potential hiving off of the component parts of Cree society, the local or seasonal hunting bands. What we have called the potential “selfishness” of local hunting bands is in effect the potential realization of autonomy of the only major social category between the individual and the band.

Hence, if individuals act “selfishly” and refuse to participate in the circle of collaborative and sporadic displacement over the homeland (for example, if they happen to be in a particularly well-favoured zone as a result of normal variations in animal populations), the structural underpinnings of co-occupation and co-ownership of the entire homeland can be weakened. Windigo, therefore, is not a simple warning of the physical danger of isolation as such, and cannibalism in this view is not merely “a primary Algonkian symbol of exploitation, domination and evil” (Brightman, 1990: 113).¹⁷ In Turner’s view, windigo cannibalism is about the evils of self-incorporation, the evils of denying one’s political affiliation to other hunting groups.

This argument avoids the psychological and ecological reductionism of materialist views and acknowledges the political complexity of band societies. On the other hand, it ignores the facts regarding cures (ingesting fats; social support). It also fails to address the questions of windigo hypermobility and solitude (windigos never travel together), an especially important consideration since mobility of the dispersed hunting groups is positively marked as an affirmation of band ownership of land. Hence, the same objections to the standard model seem to apply: if isolation and immobility are the causes, then mobility and sociability should be the cures. Furthermore, if physical isolation during winter hunts is represented as a metaphoric trigger for witiko psychosis, then other instances of isolation—in particular, heightened individualism as a result of post-contact pressures towards personal economic relationships negotiated with the aim of aggrandizing individual interest at the expense of collaborative ties—should have produced more witiko stories as expressions of this problem. These, however, are usually absent in the literature.

We have other objections to the standard winter-isolation-starvation view and to Turner’s model of potential political breakdown. First, windigo is a form of *gradual* possession. The transformation is not instantaneous but signalled by a period of strange emotions and behaviours that are usually explicitly signalled by the possessed person through a series of warnings to others (among the Athapaskans, a man may not be aware he is “becoming” a monstrous animal, though others will speak of it). Second, isolation and famine are not usually causes of possession. Native stories dealing with people under threats of extreme environmental stress do not normally describe possession by spirits as an outcome but visitations by monstrous beings who threaten but do not possess humans. In fact, possession is a trait associated with supernatural vision beyond the normal ken of physiological sight that is sometimes described as a form of spirit travel.

Possession, in other words, is the flip side to shamanic “vision,” and it is not surprising that in many societies shamans are often possessed by tutelary spirits so they can “see” the normally invisible.

We believe that the windigo’s hypermobility is linked to the symbolism of hunting group displacement in the political dimension, in which extreme tendencies, too little or too much movement, lead to imbalance: too little invites invasion of ranges left empty as people stay in the home community,¹⁸ and too much (for example, the hunting group not returning to the summer site of summer aggregation, the village) leads to selfish individualism in which the fragile idea of the collective becomes even more ephemeral. Both threaten the social, and because the social is constructed through the transcendental, windigo possession or transformation is a complex metaphor for the Self in society through the intermediary agency of the transcendental.

While eating others may be a metaphor for the destructive incorporation of society, as Turner cogently argued (1978), cannibalism is not *only* a warning tale of the political dangers of people becoming too individualistic. It is an attempt to set things right, to urge people to augment the ego-Self (by one’s selfish action of not respecting others) and the social Self (by incorporating them) that have been temporarily submerged by a surfeit of the transcendental or by the absence of the social. In cases of disequilibrium, the only real option is to augment the social Self (windigos eat humans), the ego-Self (windigos eat their own lips), or the transcendental (transform oneself). The windigos’ extreme mobility may be a powerful metaphor for the disequilibrium of the invisible and immaterial transcendental component of the composite Self, but it is cannibalism that in a sense “heals”: the sick windigo “eats” (reduces or eliminates) its own ego-Self and the social but is cured when people come to it (which augments the social) or feed it fat (another powerful symbol of collaborative hunting).

Full-blown windigo “possession,” when the transcendental is no longer in harmony with the ego and the social Selves, is indeed a dangerous condition because it signals a loss of control. Given that the social is constructed by ego-Selves coming into contact with the transcendental, a person without control is subject to the buffetings of the primordial power of monstrous beings and, more importantly, becomes incapable of affirming his membership in the fragile collective. In our reading of the available facts in light of our hypothesis, the heightened mobility of witikos could be interpreted as an affirmation of the ego-Self attempting to flee excessive contact with the animal-spirits of the transcendental. Contact with

monstrous animals can lead to full transformation, which must be immediately countered by curing the individual if possible, either by giving him fat, the “best” or essential part of the biological animal, according to all Athapaskans (natural “essence” is semiotically linked to the animal’s transcendental dimension), by being “compassionate” (augmenting the social Self by approaching the sick individual and reminding him he is not alone) or by killing him (killing his heart of ice, a perfect metaphoric allusion to the emotions surrounding a weak social Self and selfish ego-Self). In brief, while “going windigo” may be a metaphor for the disequilibrium of the Self, windigo stories are also guides to healing. In this sense, Marano (1982) may be right when he affirms that anthropologists have projected Western values when they describe windigo psychosis only in negative terms.

While there are many contradictory details in the rich panoply of windigo stories, the essence seems to stress the same theme: unbalanced people—solitary, grieving, selfish—must seek harmony. Windigo stories map out the cures while warning of the dangers of attempting to augment the transcendental Self and, implicitly, attempting to augment the social through such contact. Possessed people can lose their humanity if the illness or the cure are too severe because they are alienated from the community. If others do not intervene by interrupting the imitative actions that would eventually transform them into the giant animal or into a windigo, then the person completes the transformation (empowering the transcendental Self) and consumes himself (windigos eat their own lips, a metaphor for excessive ego-Self) or others (a metaphor for the social Self dominating the other two aspects).¹⁹

There is no automatic cure for the disequilibrium of the Self, since contact with the transcendental that precedes windigo psychosis can dangerously over-augment the transcendental Self and weaken the ego- and social Selves, which are subsequently augmented through endo- or exo-cannibalism. Exactly what elements are in disequilibrium and what therefore must be augmented or countered must be the result of individual circumstances and contingencies. In this limited sense, some of the case histories cited in Marano (1982) to support his view that windigo describes a sense of loss of humanity, which may be especially acute among people who are grieving for the death of a loved one, is consonant with our position: the social is in disequilibrium and must be harmonized with the other components of the Self.²⁰

Conclusion

To render the windigo phenomenon as a culture-specific psychiatric syndrome is an ideologically derived Euro-

centric tautology that evacuates the link between Native definitions of the individual and of the social. As Ridington notes (1990: 179), “the assumption that windigo belief and behaviour are psychotic has gained a kind of tacit acceptance because of our own culture’s willingness to reify the labels we have become accustomed to using to describe a phenomenon we do not otherwise understand.” We propose that windigo is an indigenous belief—in this case, Algonkian—in which the individual is in intimate contact with the intangible powers of the transcendental in order to achieve equilibrium within the Self embedded in the social. Rather than being a “culturally patterned form of psychosis” (ibid.:179), windigo is more of an attempt to describe the dangers of disequilibrium and the steps that help heal the fragmented and disassociated composite Self. This powerful sign is still relevant today as people try to balance the components of the Self that are brought into disequilibrium by Euro-Canadian political agendas.

We suggest that although the semantics of the discursive field called “tradition” have changed drastically since windigo psychosis was first described as a “typical” feature of northern Algonkians, Indigenous beliefs in the composite Self and in the importance of balancing its dimensions have changed little, such that various alleged cures for windigo possession that seem to be based on very different postulates and aimed at very different conditions are merely particular manifestations of the same underlying beliefs in the composite nature of the Self. In other words, belief (or disbelief) in the immanence of the transcendental mediated through contact with animal-spirits (“tradition”) or contemporary belief (or disbelief) in the efficacy of forced vision quests among contemporary people who feel oppressed by enforced marginalization at the hands of Euro-Canadian colonialism is irrelevant as a guide to selecting the most efficacious path to healing damaged Selves. As long as these Algonkian and Athapaskan-speaking peoples still believe that the Self is composed of several dimensions that can become seriously unbalanced, cures will involve bringing unbalanced dimensions into a harmonious relationship—in the “traditional” case, possibly leading to windigo possession manifested by “cannibalistic” desires; in the contemporary case, by enforced vision quests that augment the presence of the transcendental and of the social in the Self. People do not have to believe in witikos or in modern psychotherapy to be healed (although many do believe in both of these domains and do not see a contradiction between them, precisely because they both aim at inducing balance), nor must they be possessed of a complete semiotic map of “tradition” or of “contemporary politics” for the windigo

sign to be a meaningful guide to illness and healing the composite Self. They must merely believe that the Self is composed of several interdependent dimensions each of which is embedded in and sensitive to the other. They must above all believe in harmony and in its implicit opposite, the potential disequilibrium of the Self.

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Notes

- 1 We will use this word as a shorthand way of designating the hunting societies to which we specifically refer. We make no all-encompassing claims.
- 2 Native accounts of the Self are also oblique because—at least for Athapaskan speakers—all discourses touching the Self are negatively marked as a means of reducing or at least imposing limits on the expression of the ego-Self. See Lanoue (2001) on multiple naming systems and attempts to weaken the ego-Self.
- 3 Because of their very intimate nature, none of these data will be cited or referenced here.
- 4 The Sekani have been described elsewhere (Desgent and Lanoue, 2003; Lanoue, 1992) on the basis of nearly two years of fieldwork in 1978 and 1979.
- 5 Here, we use “traditional,” in two senses: the commonly accepted anthropological meaning that refers to early contact and relatively undisturbed culture, and the Indigenous meaning that is invoked when Native people present material they say no longer describes a contemporary situation.
- 6 An anonymous reviewer of this paper suggested that Ridington's description is suspiciously too congruent with windigo legends. In fact, Ridington's is the only attested description of a windigo-like complex of which we are aware, and Lanoue found no analogies among the neighbouring Sekani (Beaver and Sekani are in fact now reclassified as a single language, Sekani-Beaver), although cannibal themes (without windigo-like transformation) are present in Sekani legends.
- 7 Typically, a male hunter passes through several stages as his skills and status improve. He starts as a junior partner to an older member of his family of origin or with someone closely linked to this family of origin (e.g., sister's husband). As a young adult (a status recognized in discourse as distinct from older adult), he is a junior partner to wife's brother. Finally, he is a senior partner to younger sister's husband or to a younger member of his family of origin. “Senior” and “junior” refer to decision-making regarding hunting and the division of the spoils, usually 60-40 in favour of the senior partner when trapping. Game animals are usually the property of the senior partner who “gives” his junior partner a substantial share. The more senior a hunter, the more he is expected to be generous. Game is also “given” to the hunter's wife when back in camp, and she has the right to serve the game as she wants. There are, however, no significant wealth differences as such between senior and junior partners; any individual can “borrow” (without repayment) all the necessary equipment for hunting and trapping. Neither age nor wealth alone produce status differences. For example, some men never come to be considered as potential senior partners because they do not sufficiently develop their hunting skills and “luck” (power), despite their growing into “older adult” status. Productive ability is a sign but not the cause of high (“senior”) status. The true measures of status are a person's transcendental power and generosity. Age-grades are slightly different for women, who pass directly from “adult” to “grandma” (the male equivalent is “grandpa,” sometimes called an “elder” in front of Whites) after menopause. Since they cannot acquire transcendental power, they cannot become “older adult” women.
- 8 Among Athapaskan-speaking peoples, this power is called by several names: *nadetché* by the Sekani (Jenness, 1937: 68; although the Sekani in 1978-1979 never used this word); *zhaak* (“grace”, Legros, 1999) among the Northern Tutchone; *in'kon* (Helm, 1994) among the Dogrib; *nitsit* (R. McDonnell, personal communication) among the Kaska. See also Sharp (1987, 1988) for a discussion of the same concept among the Chipewyan and Ridington (1988) for the Beaver.
- 9 By “ritual space” we do not refer only to the ceremonial aspects of the transformation of hunters into symbolic prey but to the fact that there are a limited number of signs in this space, leading to an increase in polysemy. The result is powerful metonymic displacements that establish metaphoric links between animals and humans (cf. Desgent and Lanoue, 2003).
- 10 This has often been described in the literature as men “acquiring” power (and so it is, in one limited sense, although a much more accurate, non-economic metaphor is that they have entered a ritual field suffused with power).
- 11 Athapaskan menstrual taboos and beliefs that female genitalia can ruin male hunting power have nothing to do with the alleged inferior status of women. Women's genitals and especially their menstrual blood are not considered dangerous because of the risk of inadvertently blending distinct social categories that are functionally necessary to reinforce fixed hierarchies (*à la* Douglas). Menstrual blood, like animal blood, is a sign of the transcendental, and male contact with menstrual blood ruins a man's hunting power because it displaces the locus of the “conversation” from relatively-perfect animals, who assure human survival, to relatively-inferior humans, who do not. Another way of seeing this is that already-powerful men would risk disequilibrium by close contact with this metaphoric pathway to the transcendental.
- 12 Here we are using a common anthropological expression, though the Sekani do not conceive of the transcendental in terms of spirits.

- 13 For example, see www.kayas.ca/Stories/witiko4/witiko4.html; <http://www.dinojoe.8m.com/crypto/windigo.html>. We are unconcerned with the “New Age” uses to which windigo has been put in the last 20 years. “Tradition” and “modern” are simple temporal reference points that, for us, do not raise issues of authenticity.
- 14 Significantly, Swampy Cree stories collected in the 1970s refer to windigos as *Upayokwitigo*, “He who lives alone” (Norman, 1982: 4).
- 15 Brightman argues (1993: 144) that windigo or *atuush* relates to a loss of cultural identity; individuals are sometimes paralysed by the fear this possible loss elicits. He suggests that beliefs in cannibal monsters are related to Cree views on food, spirits and becoming human, a view also suggested by Vecsey (1983: 77).
- 16 Although this is not clear for Athapaskans. Some Sekani stories collected in the 1920s suggest cannibals crave human fat and not meat, and that the “normal” human body has little or no fat, which of course pushes people to crave fat even under normal conditions (in one story, a captured woman is fattened for eventual consumption but escapes and washes away the accumulated fat until she regains her “normal shape”; cf. Desgent and Lanoue, 2003). The Sekani and, as far as we know, other Athapaskans, then and now, consider fat to be the best and strongest food. The Cree studied by Brightman (1993: 146) seem to fit the witiko trope more closely; he argues (1993: 155) that eating fat is akin to being human because it is the result of a highly “cultural” (in the Lévi-Straussian sense of opposed to “natural”) process, boiling, and that hot grease cures witikos because the heat melts their hearts of ice.
- 17 This latter argument merely uproots windigo from any reference to experiential reality and transforms it into a sign of generalized evil, much like the devil in many Christian interpretations by people who do not believe in the literalness of symbols.
- 18 This is a real possibility that has been described for one case in Lanoue (1992). The Sekani live in a homeland bounded by two mountain ranges, which at several points in their documented history channelled game in such a way that the northern Sekani ceased moving over the homeland, in one case for a 20-year period. The result was a loss of autonomy as non-Sekani began using the abandoned zones of the Sekani homeland.
- 19 A contemporary windigo tale told by a Quebec Algonkian to Bernard Assiniwi (1998: 48) makes the point more succinctly: after an episode of inadvertent selfishness by the narrator’s grandfather in the late 1800s (he forgot to turn over a beaver he had caught on a neighbour’s trapline or to replace it at a later date), he was visited by a windigo who warned him to replace the beaver he had consumed. The narrator’s grandfather answered the windigo’s questions truthfully and was left alone. “That’s how I [the narrator] became aware that the windigo monster only eats people from the *inside*.” (our emphasis).
- 20 Marano argues that windigo describes the death (usually by execution) of an individual who is no longer considered human. For Marano, windigos are essentially scapegoats. However, a loss of humanity can be caused by “normal” stresses such as grief. He cites case histories to that effect,

although he points to environmental conditions as the source of stress.

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