

Reviving Witiko (Windigo): An Ethnohistory of “Cannibal Monsters” in the Athabasca District of Northern Alberta, 1878–1910

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Abstract. An ethnohistorical examination of the Algonquian witiko (windigo) phenomenon, utilizing both previously unexamined documentary sources and oral traditions of Athabasca Cree and Métis elders, reveals that a witiko “condition” is historically verifiable, that the celebrated cannibalistic “windigo psychosis” of Algonquianists eludes proper definition as a bona fide culture-bound pathology, and finally, that no single hypothesis, as of yet, consistently accounts for this phenomenon within an internally coherent non-indigenous theory. The witiko phenomenon should be analyzed from within northern Algonquian cosmologies rather than Western perspectives if it is to be adequately accounted for in future discussions.

The *witiko* (var. *windigo*) phenomenon of the northern Algonquians of Canada has long been an intriguing, controversial, and poorly understood topic among anthropologists, ethnohistorians, and scholars of the fur trade. Legends of the Algonquian witiko monster and accounts of “cannibal mania”—or the famed “windigo psychosis” of clinical psychiatry—found in historical records have inspired a large corpus of scholarly writing on the topic, focusing primarily upon explication from a Western scientific, psychological, or sociological perspective. Despite the substantial volume of treatment on this subject, there is a notable lack of consensus among scholars regarding a precise classification of the witiko phenomenon, and, furthermore, even the historical existence of the witiko condition or the cannibalistic windigo “psychosis.” For instance, in spite of evidence demonstrating the historicity of the witiko condition,¹ a number of scholars and commentators *still maintain that witiko is regarded as a disproven artifact of cultural anthropology.*²

As its title suggests, this article seeks to revive witiko (metaphori-

cally) from the skeptical discourse of these scholarly circles, through an examination of witiko case studies not previously scrutinized.³ The notion of an “ethnohistory of cannibal monsters” reflects the position expounded in this article that any reckoning of the witiko phenomenon must entail a fair-minded consideration of northern Algonquian (and specifically in the context of this paper, Athabasca Cree/Métis) beliefs in a cosmos dictated and affected by spirit beings, dreams, “medicine,” and “power,” a cosmos wherein witikos are a taxon of beings existing in the real world and interacting with real human individuals. Beginning with my personal background, the article examines the witiko phenomenon from both an Algonquian perspective and an “Algonquianist” perspective.⁴ Subsequently, some newly revealed archival evidence is presented, highlighting previously unexamined witiko case studies from the Athabasca basin region of northern Alberta. The article specifically discusses both the local indigenous beliefs surrounding the characteristics and etiology of the witiko phenomenon and the historical existence of the witiko condition. This article also questions the validity of the claims of a definable and characteristically coherent windigo “psychosis” involving obsessive cannibalism, as postulated by anthropologists and psychiatrists in the past. As will be shown, no *single* hypothesis, as of yet, coherently articulates the witiko phenomenon within a Western framework.⁵

Personal Background

Accounts of my own interest in, and academic research on, witiko invariably go back to my childhood, with a story that was told to me by my late grandmother Marie Anne Marguerite Carlson, née Beauchamp (1921–2002). Marie was a Métis woman raised near Grouard, a native community founded near the northwest shore of Lesser Slave Lake in the Athabasca district of northern Alberta, Canada.⁶ During her childhood years, Marie occasionally accompanied her Métis father, Edouard Beauchamp (1879–1960), who was intermittently stationed as a clerk and fur trader for the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) store at the Trout Lake outpost in northern Alberta, circa 1920–1930 (see fig. 1 for locations of Alberta place names referenced in this article). During his time there, Beauchamp discovered that a number of years previously, a man had been violently murdered by the residents of Trout Lake. Evidently, their actions were motivated by the collectively shared belief that the man had become a witiko—the malevolent cannibal monster of northern Algonquian legend. Decades later, my grandmother told the story of that incident to me, describing an individual who was allegedly driven insane by a curse that had transformed him into a



Figure 1. Map of the Athabasca district in north-central Alberta, highlighting witiko case studies discussed in the article. Drawn by author, 2008

witiko at Trout Lake. According to her account, this man's condition steadily deteriorated and over several days he grew more incoherent, violent, and uncontrollable until he was finally bound with ropes and murdered with an ax to prevent him from destroying the entire settlement. Marie stated that the witiko's corpse was interred in the ground under a large woodpile to prevent him from resurrecting and digging himself out of his grave.

As I was growing up, I did not believe my grandmother's story, which I dismissed as a Métis folktale, used as a device to frighten children (in this case myself) from venturing off into the boreal forests alone to become lost or die of exposure or starvation. Although I found the story somewhat disturbing, I did not find it plausible and reasoned, at the very least, that the man in her story had certainly not been murdered for becoming a so-called witiko. Only years later, after my grandmother had passed away, did I consider her words once more, and I decided then to investigate her steadfast claim about the factuality of this almost entirely forgotten witiko "fable." Expecting to prove her mistaken, I began perusing archival records and discovered a brief report in the *Bulletin*, the first newspaper of record of the city of Edmonton, Alberta, dated more than a century earlier, of an incident that sounded somewhat reminiscent of Marie's account: "A LETTER from Lesser Slave Lake which arrived to day says that an Indian of Wabiscow lakes, about 150 miles north of that place, became dangerously insane. He was tied up, and finally in accordance with the Indian custom in that country he was killed."⁷ With my curiosity stirred, I continued searching the archived records and came across a subsequent report in the *Bulletin* that, to my surprise, described the very incident my grandmother had told me about:

**A 'Wehtigo' Murdered
Canadian Indians at Trout Lake Kill an Insane Companion
~News of the Tragedy~**

[An] Indian or half breed . . . was killed as a Wehtigo at Trout Lake, in February [*sic*] last. . . . His Indian name was Na-pa-nin. . . . About the end [*sic*] of January [1896] he started, apparently in good health, with his wife and children on a visit to his father, who lived at Trout Lake about eighty miles from Wapisca. His wife reports that on the second night out he acted strangely, saying that some strange animals were about to attack him. . . . They reached his father's place at Trout Lake safely, and was [*sic*] there for twenty days, his fits of insanity becoming more frequent and more violent. His body is said to have swelled considerably and his lips were very much puffed out. . . . On the day of his death he was tied hands and feet, face down, in one of the houses. . . . The men are reported to have said that they tied him before he entered

one of his frantic fits for their own protection. . . . at this time during his frenzy he had nearly broken loose and they feared he would get loose altogether and kill some of them. They struck him four blows with an axe, about the head. The reason that an axe was used was that there is a belief amongst the Indians that a bullet will not pierce a wehtigo or man-eater. The body was burned [sic] and *large trees felled over the grave* to prevent the possibility a [sic] re-appearance of the wehtigo. Some days after the death of the man, the people of the settlement were terror stricken, *believing that he might re-appear and destroy them.*⁸

Admittedly, I was somewhat confounded by the discovery of a newspaper account that seemed to confirm a story that had been in my family for almost one hundred years; my grandmother had, in a sense, proven *me* mistaken. I subsequently conducted a substantive search of archival records and discovered a considerable body of accounts detailing several incidents in northern Alberta that were attributed to witiko. Eventually my research into these accounts became the basis of a thesis in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta. This article is a summary of that research.

The Witiko of the Northern Algonquian Cosmos

In the cosmology of the subarctic and Great Lakes Algonquians, the Witiko is a cannibalistic humanoid monster or spirit entity that preys upon people to satisfy a compulsive hunger for human flesh. In the legendary cycle of tales (*atâyohkewina*) of the northern Alberta Cree and Métis, the Witiko is sometimes described as an owl-eyed monster with large clawed hands, matted hair, a naked emaciated body, and a heart made of solid ice. The Witiko's hunger instinct is believed to be so insatiable that it has consumed its own lips.⁹ In essence, the Witiko's frightening and grotesque visage and its superhuman strength make it the consummate predator of humanity.¹⁰

In addition to being a character in the *atâyohkewina* of the Athabasca Cree/Métis people, “witiko” is also a term for an alleged “condition” believed to have affected subarctic and Great Lakes Algonquians in the past.¹¹ The primary feature of the witiko condition is an obsessive-compulsive anthropophagous inclination accompanied by homicidal behavior—a state heralding transformation into the mythic cannibal monster. Accounts of this condition are found within the *kayâs acimowina*, a corpus of oral traditions that purportedly recall incidents involving real persons and events that transpired in the past;¹² some *acimowina* describe individuals who supposedly acted upon this propensity and engaged in cannibalism, an action that typically eventuated in their ostracism or execution by other Algonquians.¹³ Witiko cases are also found within a scattered number of non-Algonquian histori-

cal records written by Europeans or Euro-Canadians (typically fur traders, missionaries, and explorers) in the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries; these are *primarily* secondhand reports describing northern Algonquians who were, in some cases, ostracized or executed due to a conviction that they had acquired the witiko condition and were inexorably compelled to murder and cannibalism.¹⁴ A small number of the non-Algonquian reports document homicide cases that transpired in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where the persons implicated in the homicides, either as accused cannibals or as their executioners, were charged with murder by the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), working under the auspices of the newly confederated Dominion of Canada. The suspects were sent to trial in criminal court to be variously acquitted, imprisoned, or executed by agents of the Canadian state.¹⁵ These court cases are, in a sense, reminiscent of the Salem “witch” trials and have on occasion been referred to as the “windigo” trials.¹⁶

In the collective belief system of pre-twenty-first-century Algonquians (contrary to the opinions of some modern academics, as discussed below), the witiko condition was not a legendary fabrication.¹⁷ For example, in early 1896, Richard Young, the Anglican bishop of the Athabasca district, wrote the following in a letter-journal to the “Evangelical Fathers” in the Church Missionary Society (CMS): “The Indians have a great terror of these so called Wetigoos, or cannibals. They believe that after eating human flesh their heart becomes a lump of ice and no one alive is safe from them. Absurd as all this sounds to us it is a real terror to the untutored Indian.”¹⁸ Fur trader George Nelson affirmed this fact in a letter-journal written at the Lac La Ronge trade post, Saskatchewan, in 1823: “There is a kind of disease (or distemper rather, and of the *mind* I am fully persuaded) peculiar to the Crees and Sauteux’s, and of which they have the greatest dread and horror; and certainly not without the very great[est] cause, the consequences 49 times out of 50 being death. . . . They term *this* Win-di-go.”¹⁹

To pre-twenty-first-century Algonquians, witiko was a very real syndrome with a definable etiology and supposedly predictable symptomology. It was believed that anyone manifesting any of the symptoms was potentially an incipient witiko, and as such, they were monitored carefully to determine if the condition was progressing or worsening. According to Algonquian reports, the following symptoms were signals of a potential witiko condition: stupor; catatonia; depression; paranoia; anorexia or the inability to hold down food; nausea and vomiting; emaciation; awry or glazed-looking eyes; swelling of the face, trunk, or limbs; and violence and shouting—in some cases with unusual vocal sounds.²⁰ None of these symptoms is exclusive to witiko, and the manifestation of these conditions,

in any permutation or combination, could be diagnostic of a wide variety of psychiatric or physiological illnesses understood in Western medicine.²¹ Additional symptoms, however, appear specific to the alleged condition itself. In this category are hallucinations, typically those wherein others—particularly children or relatives—appear as animals that were normally hunted for food (such as beavers, moose, or game birds).²² The most diagnostic indications of witiko, however, were cannibal impulses and the subjective perception of a freezing heart or formation of ice in the chest or viscera, as reported by the victim or perceived by eyewitnesses.²³ These last symptoms, by way of their curious nature and seemingly supernatural basis, are the most contested aspects of the witiko condition by academics, some of whom have argued that the reports wherein these symptoms figured positively were based upon hearsay or were metaphorical embellishments.²⁴

Despite the controversy over witiko’s existence, historical reports confirm repeatedly that northern Algonquian peoples regarded the manifestation of these symptoms, in cohort with threats and violent behavior, as signs of witiko and in response attempted traditional cures to rid the victim of the condition.²⁵ Typically the afflicted individual would consume heated—or even boiling—liquid animal fat (such as bear grease, beaver fat, or sturgeon oil) voluntarily or by force; if the cure was efficacious, the victim would cough up or otherwise discharge ice from the mouth as a signifier that the condition, manifested in the core of ice, was overcome.²⁶ According to fur-trader Nelson, consumption of alcohol, “draughts of high-wines,” and rest by the fire was believed to facilitate the melting of the ice in the chest.²⁷ Another way witiko was purged was through the use of the shaking tent ceremony, wherein the aid of a spirit agent was implored. In the ceremonial lodge, a medium (“conjurer” or “jongleur”) who was believed to have the ability to contact the spirit world would tap into medicine power with which the witiko entity could be overcome.²⁸

Barring the success of these traditional cures, the victim was often bound or incapacitated in some measure and finally ostracized or put to death. Executions sometimes involved strangulation, but were mainly accomplished with an ax, due to a widespread (but not universal) belief that bullets could not pierce the flesh of a witiko.²⁹ Afterward, cremation or other treatments sometimes followed in an attempt to prevent the witiko from returning to life.³⁰

The Northern Algonquian Etiology of Witiko

From an Algonquian perspective, the dynamics involved in the etiology of the witiko condition are as clearly delineated as its symptoms, and these are

classified under three primary categories: cannibalism, dreams, and spirit power. Cannibalism is thought to culminate in witiko by means similar to those of a contagion; like the flesh of any other animal, human flesh is believed to possess spirit power that is acquired through consumption of the tissue or organs.³¹ Cannibalism, in a sense, exacerbates the powers already present in the human consumer, in effect multiplying them and causing them to expand out of control³² into an incipient witiko compulsion.³³ Famine cannibals described in Algonquian *acimowina* were believed to acquire witiko through acts of emergency anthropophagy committed to prevent death by starvation due to the lack of edible food that occasionally accompanied the wintertime in the subarctic and Great Lakes regions, particularly during the Little Ice Age era in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries when winters were notably severe and cold. In some isolated instances, starvation or exposure was believed to be enough of an impetus to cause the witiko condition, without the commission of cannibalism. Charles Bishop has argued that the witiko “mania” may have been generated in the postcontact period, arising out of an increased incidence of famine cannibalism initiated by faunal disruptions allegedly resulting from the overexploitation of game resources in the fur-trade era, which in turn threatened the stability of the food supply.³⁴ Although this thesis has been contested in past literature, starvation does seem to be causally linked to many witiko cases.³⁵ Consider, for example, the following instance, published in the *Edmonton Bulletin* in 1888: “Last Spring it was reported that owing to to [*sic*] hunger during the previous winter several cases of cannibalism had occurred at the Little Red river on Peace river below Vermillion. It is now reported that the cannibalism was not caused by hunger but was the work of a woman who had turned wehtigo several years ago, and who has since killed and eaten twelve persons, members of her family and others. She was alive at last accounts.”³⁶ This incident was reported differently by the Anglican missionaries of Athabasca, who took the woman into their Fort Vermillion mission under care after she had walked several miles through deep snow in a half-starved, half-mad condition from somewhere around the Little Red River area. Bishop Young reported in his CMS journal in 1887 that the woman had been forced to cannibalism after a prolonged bout of famine that had claimed the lives of several of her band members wintering in a remote camp far removed from emergency aid; she had, through extremity, shot and consumed her own sister.³⁷ Her acquaintances and members of other Cree bands and Métis families had shunned her as a witiko monster, requested that the NWMP arrest her, and threatened to murder her if she remained in their midst.³⁸ The *Edmonton Bulletin* account, interestingly enough, seems to describe the beliefs and opinions of the native people in the Fort Vermillion community,

who claimed that she had volitionally murdered and cannibalized several people. According to another seemingly sensationalist newspaper account published in the United States (which is likely to be of dubious factuality to some degree) the “wehtigo” woman murdered her own children:

The woman who is the cause of the present cases of cannibalism turned wehtigo some years ago, and killed and ate one of her children before she was suspected. Having once tasted human blood, she is supposed by the Indians to be endowed with supernatural powers, and they are in such terror of her that . . . attempts have been made to kill her. At intervals of four or five months her cravings for human blood returns and while in these fits it is reported she assails the first person she meets. Most of her children have fallen victims, having been slain with an axe. The half-breeds and Indians are in terror, and it is probable a police force will be sent to Peace river to arrest the man eater.³⁹

According to the newspaper accounts, the woman had lost her human nature by ill fate or some other means—perhaps years before the actual famine crisis. Although the motives for—or truth of—the incident may never be known, this case illustrates how the native people understood famine cannibalism to be related to witiko, either retrospectively in relation to a starvation crisis, or as a direct cause of it. In summary, regardless of the extent to which starvation or alleged cannibalism is actually linked to a witiko condition, there is good reason to believe that, at the very least, the compounded environmental conditions of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, possible overexploitation of game resources, and the increased incidence of famine exacerbated the number of witiko *reports*.

Aside from starvation and famine cannibalism, dreaming was another process believed to culminate in the witiko condition. By means of certain supernatural influences contained in ominous dreams, “power-effects” could residually attach to a dreamer upon return to waking consciousness. In Algonquian cosmology, dreams were regarded as possessing a reality of their own, equivalent to or even dominant over the reality of waking life.⁴⁰ Dreams in which an individual committed anthropophagy were omens of witiko, but although cannibalistic dreams were considered portents of an impending witiko condition,⁴¹ in Algonquian dream ideology, witiko was caused by the events of the dream itself.⁴² The dreamer most notably acquired the witiko condition through deceptive dreams in which the individual was misled into committing cannibalism, but the Cree and Métis of northern Alberta also believed that a deceased relative or acquaintance could curse an individual with the witiko condition through dream visitations. For instance, at Wabasca, some weeks after the witiko inci-

dent in January 1896 at Trout Lake recounted above, Samuel (Dominique) Auger—a brother of the executed man Napanin—was described by Anglican missionary the Reverend George Holmes (to Bishop Young as recorded in his 1896 CMS letter-journal), to have been “brooding over the sad occurrence. He has been telling his fellow Indians that his brother comes to him in his sleep. They in their turn are frightened lest he too should go out of his mind. Some however . . . have come under Christian instruction & he himself has been wishful for some time . . . for baptism. His immediate relations including his own wife had driven him from their camps.”⁴³ Evidently, as Holmes later remarked in 1911, in his memoirs published in the *Bulletin*, Samuel Auger’s dreams of his deceased brother Napanin did not cease, and some time after the Trout Lake incident he was put under the care of Holmes at the St. John’s Anglican Mission at Wabasca, isolated and under guarded protection because of the belief that he was possessed by the Witiko like his brother had been.⁴⁴ NWMP records indicate that the residents of the Wabasca settlement were unsettled and on guard over Auger, who was “reported to be crazy and creating disturbances in the vicinity.”⁴⁵ In response, Sergeant A. H. Griesbach of the mounted police post at Fort Saskatchewan sent the following telegram to Police Commissioner L. W. Herchmer in Regina, Saskatchewan, on 15 March 1898: “Reported lunatic at Wabasca forty miles inland from Pelican Rapids will be murdered same as one at Trout Lake some time ago, if we do not make effort to get him. Could send Anderson with dogs if you authorize. Owing to lateness of season, immediate action necessary.” A telegraphed police order, forwarded back the same day in reply by Herchmer authorized Griesbach to “send Anderson with dogs after lunatic,” and a police patrol was quickly dispatched from Fort Saskatchewan, successfully apprehending the brother and detaining him at the police post in the interest of his protection.⁴⁶ Auger was examined by a doctor, diagnosed with “lunacy,” and sent to Stony Mountain Asylum in Manitoba for treatment.⁴⁷ Evidently Auger recovered from his condition and was reintegrated into his home community of Wabasca, where records indicate he acquired a cash sum to support his common-law wife and children through Métis land scrip grants during the Treaty No. 8 Commission in 1899.⁴⁸

In another incident at Lesser Slave Lake in February 1897, Holmes wrote in a letter to Bishop Young how a young native woman nearby at the HBC trade outpost at White Fish Lake, northern Alberta, “dreamt that her brother, who died some four years ago, came and offered her some human flesh in a bowl made of ice, to eat. Her mother & sister got sick then [upon her waking]. The poor Indians got round then, nursed them & finished up by drumming over them. Gaudet [an HBC clerk at White Fish Lake], fear-

ing I suppose a repetition of the Trout Lake affair, took the two girls into Slave Lake.”⁴⁹

The same incident was reported in the *Edmonton Bulletin* shortly afterward: “Mr. Gaudet, a young clerk of the H.[B.]C. post and three Indians were bringing two married women to Lesser Slave lake to prevent their being killed by their relatives, as happened last winter at Trout lake. These two women were taken with a sudden sickness which the Indians call ‘Witikaw’ or cannibal. The Indians of White Fish lake were frightened, and they have already sacrificed two dogs to save the two young women, but in vain.”⁵⁰ In this instance, the young woman’s cannibalistic dream was reported as the catalyst of the witiko condition afflicting her relations. The dream of a human-flesh offering contained in a bowl carved out of ice contains double witiko imagery in the appearance of the flesh as well as the ice—a witiko symbol representing a frozen heart as the central aspect of the witiko condition.

In general, dreams and visions of ice, the north wind, and the witiko monster were all symbolic harbingers of witiko.⁵¹ In some cases, the Devil of biblical scripture was believed by the Athabasca Cree and Métis to be responsible for witiko possession.⁵² In addition, an individual could acquire witiko through the influence of a spirit guardian (referred to in the Cree language as a *pawâkan*), a type of visionary spirit entity that formed a personal subjective relationship with a human host as an integral part of the religious experience of many Athabasca Cree and Métis. The *pawâkan* was typically sought after and encountered during a vision fast enacted at the onset of puberty, but could also be contacted in dreams and visions throughout life. The *pawâkan* required the performance of specific ceremonies in return for the bestowal of certain powers or abilities such as visions and knowledge, prowess or luck in hunting and trapping, etcetera.⁵³ If a human host acquired a malevolent *pawâkan*, especially the *pawâkan* of ice, the North Wind (*Kewâtin*), or the Witiko itself,⁵⁴ the *pawâkan* was believed to have the power to augment the human host’s personality so that it would operate in congruence with the spirit entity’s malevolent intentions.⁵⁵ In effect, the personal identity of the individual would merge with, or be lost to, the personality of the spirit agent if the vision seeker accepted the *pawâkan*, allowing the entity to subsequently take over the body and faculties of the human host.

Lastly, the witiko condition was believed to be catalyzed through medicine power wielded by an individual bearing antagonistic intentions toward a given person, which would either cause a series of misfortunes culminating in cannibalism or drive the recipient of the medicine attack insane. A sorcerer could indirectly curse a victim by using “bad medicine”

in order to drive game animals away from hunting grounds or traplines—a course of action sometimes motivated by hatred, revenge, or competition for prestige, limited game, or fur resources.⁵⁶ A potential consequence of such a scenario was that a hunter or band facing a medicine attack would be unable to provision the camp with food, resulting in a potentially traumatic period of famine and starvation. If the individual or group under the curse of the sorcerer could not counter the spell or suffer through the famine period, insanity, death, or starvation-induced cannibalism would result, with each scenario potentially culminating in the witiko condition.⁵⁷ Famine cannibals who had survived periods of starvation, whether they purportedly developed the witiko condition or not, would typically be regarded with fear and mistrust by their peers and labeled as witikos by default for varying lengths of time, as evidenced by the Fort Vermillion witiko case cited above.⁵⁸ As a result, a survivor of a famine cannibalism crisis could, by virtue of the conditions of social ostracism imposed by peers, develop neurotic tendencies resembling—or becoming—a witiko condition by means of a self-fulfilling prophecy motivated by a fatalistic belief in sorcery.⁵⁹

By way of an alternative course of action, a sorcerer could directly curse a victim through a medicine attack without generating the intermediary starvation conditions. Again the Trout Lake witiko incident is a case in point. According to Bishop Richard Young's CMS journal, during the construction/expansion of the St. John's Anglican mission at Wabasca in autumn of 1895,⁶⁰ the Reverend Charles Weaver discovered, cut down, and removed a wooden effigy that the local Crees or Métis had erected for a ceremonial rite: "[O]n the head-land on which . . . our mission now stands, in clearing the bush, Mr. Weaver found one of their heathen "munetokans" or idols; a stump of poplar carved into the rough semblance of a head & shoulders, painted with red ochre and with three black horizontal stripes on the breast. . . . I brought the interesting relic back with me to the [Athabasca] Landing."⁶¹ The effigy, referred to in Cree as a *manitôhkân*, was most likely constructed for the *Pâhkak* ceremony, wherein a feast was intermittently held in honor and placation of the "skeletons" (ghosts who had in a previous incarnation died from starvation), in the hopes of warding off periods of famine and the resultant starvation that could potentially spawn witikos.⁶² By removing the effigy, the Anglican missionaries demonstrated a measure of intolerance for the traditional Cree/Métis religion at Wabasca, which Bishop Young confessed to quite bluntly in his CMS journal: "Wapaskaw is a stronghold of heathen darkness & superstition & . . . in planting a mission there we have chosen a spot that sorely needs the comforting, humanizing, and enlightening power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."⁶³

Although there is no direct indication of any reaction to the removal

of the spirit effigy, it is possible that the proselytizing of the Anglican missionaries provoked the anger of the native people in the Athabasca district. By November 1895, the residents of Athabasca were in a panicked state after a Salteaux Indian elder, who was reputed to be a medicine man and an operator of the shaking tent at Moose Lake, some distance from Wabasca, delivered a prophetic warning—seemingly to those who chose Christianity over the “protection” of his religious movement—and spoke of an imminent, apocalyptic crisis that was to come. According to Bishop Young’s 1896 CMS journal:

We had heard last November at the [Athabasca] Landing of a Soto [*sic*] Indian who was practicing medicine with the usual accompaniments of drumming and pretended [communication] with the spirits at one of these lakes called Moose Lake. *He foretold that a Wetegoo would arise who would destroy every one who did not join his religion & come & place themselves under his protection. Many families appear to have done so.* He created a general terror & uneasiness [in this country]. The hunters dare not to go out to their hunting grounds with their families.⁶⁴

Unfortunately, the Anglican records do not clearly detail the ideology behind the Salteaux Indian’s seemingly apocalyptic religious movement. Although no clear relationship can be established between the actions of the missionaries and the declaration of the “Windigo Prophet,” the warning of the medicine man seems to have been reactionary to the advance of Christianity and pointed at those whom he might have perceived as a threat to the practice of indigenous religious traditions. By warning of a cataclysmic visitation from the very monster personifying Cree and Métis cultural anxieties surrounding sorcery and food shortages, the prophet assuredly stoked the fears of the local residents in the Athabasca district and in turn initiated a series of events that sparked a catastrophic crisis of famine. For instance, Catholic missionaries reported that the fear of the coming apocalyptic witiko was severe enough to prevent many residents at Wabasca from leaving their homes to hunt or trap—even up to the point of their own starvation. According to Oblate missionary Father Husson, “Father [Jean-Marie] Dupé left Grouard [Lesser Slave Lake in 1895] to visit Wabasca Lake. He had heard that the Indians were dying of hunger. It was true: the men were too afraid to leave their cabins to go hunting or fishing because of their fear of witigos.”⁶⁵ In a sense, the declaration of the Windigo Prophet had initiated a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Without overstating the issue, however, it is important to note that the prophetic religious movement of the Salteaux medicine man did not frighten everyone in the vicinity. Napanin, for one, did not seem to be swayed by the

collective terror, and some time before his fateful trip to Trout Lake that resulted in his murder in 1896, he discussed with the Rev. Weaver the possibility of having his children raised in a Christian fashion at the Wabasca mission school, which was at that time still under construction.⁶⁶

On 1 January 1896, Napanin (Felix Auger) left with his wife, Catherine Auger, and children on a visit to Trout Lake to visit his Métis father, Baptiste Auger.⁶⁷ Catherine Auger was pregnant at the time, and a visit to her husband's father for the birth of the baby might have been the motive for their journey in a time when the winter was "changeable and at times severe at Wapisca, and the snow . . . about two and a half feet deep."⁶⁸ The journey to Trout Lake, going through some 50 miles of deep snow, muskeg, and forest, would have taken days to complete. Having driven sleds with a team of dogs through the woods in a northwesterly direction, the Auger family had an uneventful first night. But on the second night of the journey, Napanin, who was previously "in good health," saw something in the woods that evidently drove him insane.⁶⁹ According to the Rev. Holmes's report, found in Bishop Young's letter to the CMS in 1896:

At their last camp before reaching Trout Lake, her husband who appeared quite well & ate his supper, suddenly said to his wife "See look at that!" "It is coming to me!" He covered under his blanket and from that moment was a lunatic. He told his wife that one of the children looked to him like a spring moose & he wanted to kill and eat it. The poor woman sat up all night not daring to lie down lest he should kill the children or her. Fancy the poor woman alone in the solitude of those dreary woods this [*sic*] all that terrible night! Next day she proposed that he should go ahead while she drove the dogs. He consented for awhile & then suddenly stopped, saying that something stopped him & could not let him go on. She had then to go ahead. . . . Finally they reached Trout Lake.⁷⁰

Distraught, Napanin arrived at Trout Lake on 3 January 1896 and came across Francis Work Beaton, a Scottish Orkney clerk stationed at the trading outpost of the HBC.⁷¹ Napanin related to Beaton the harrowing ordeal he had gone through the previous night and reported that he had seen the Devil himself. Beaton recorded the following account in his outpost journal:

Trout Lake January 3rd . . . Man arrived here today from Wapuskow Lake who seemed to me to be crazy. I saw him coming and went to meet him at the door. As soon as he came in he told us . . . that last night he camped about 15 miles from here. . . . He told us that . . . he had made camp, and was about to lie down. He was not asleep he

said, but he saw the devil come to him, and from that he was crazy. He said that he must eat his child there. But his wife took away the child. She then took hold of him and he told her to try and pray for him and perhaps God would spare him to see this place. He said it was told him that he must eat them. . . . He said his son appeared to him like a young moose and he wanted to eat him. I did not listen to all he had to say as I thought he was starving and I was busy getting him something to eat, but he ate very little. He seemed to be getting a little better, and then he told us that he knew someone put medicine on him, and that was the reason he was going to be a cannibal. Then he began to cry at the thought of it. The man's name is Napanin. The man's father lives here at the end of the lake. The Indians are all terribly frightened. All the Indians think some one had done something to him with medicine. Yakwemoo is a Great medicine man, and that is why they put him here. The same night they were singing over him and the drums were beating. I expect they will try to drum the devil out of him. I hear that he told the Indians that he had to kill and eat them. He says he sees the devil often since then.⁷²

According to Bishop Young's 1896 CMS journal, the native people of Trout Lake knew full well of the warning of the Windigo Prophet, and as a result, believed that Napanin “was the cannibal the Soto [*sic*] Indian had been prophesying would arise.”⁷³ In a “state of abject terror,” the Trout Lake residents attempted cures on Napanin over the subsequent weeks while his condition steadily deteriorated. According to Beaton, Napanin pleaded for death. As he grew more violent and uncontrollable, he was bound with ropes, which he subsequently broke loose from, and was decapitated with an ax and buried under a woodpile to stop—or stall—his perceived impending resurrection.⁷⁴

It remains unclear whether Napanin believed that the alleged medicine attack he claimed had transformed him into a “cannibal” was instigated by the Windigo Prophet or another person, but the contextual evidence presented here suggests that he may have believed that he was attacked for reasons stemming from his disregard for the prophecy. At Wabasca, the Rev. Charles Weaver later wrote to Hayter Reed, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, on 11 August 1896 that it was his opinion that the Windigo Prophet first instigated the disaster: “An old Medicine Man made the . . . trouble at first by saying a cannibal would come and when this poor man was taken sick at Trout Lake they immediately said the prophecy came true: and a little while since a young man in Wapuskow said it had come true as they had killed him at Trout Lake.”⁷⁵ Although Weaver believed that the prophecy was untrue, his claim that the Windigo Prophet instigated the incident was

surely supported by the beliefs of the native residents of Wabasca and others in the Athabasca district, who were evidently quite terrified for some time after, according to Weaver:

Every little while there is a scare about a cannibal and the people get so excited that at any time there might be another murder. Only about three weeks since the people told us a cannibal was seen near the Post, Hudson's Bay Co. [at Wabasca]. The man in charge was away but I believe his wife and children fled to a little settlement about a mile away; that night there was a scare in Wapuscow many of the people left their tents and fled to a house the door of which they locked. We told the people it was not true and they quieted down the next day and for the present the scare is over. But at these times if anything unusual happened or a strange Indian was seen he might be shot.⁷⁶

It must be noted here that it is not likely possible to precisely specify a "scientific" cause of Napanin's condition, but rather necessary only to consider how Napanin and the native people of Athabasca understood the incident within their belief system. In that system, Napanin clearly became a witiko through a medicine attack, which was in accordance with their ideas surrounding sorcery as it was implicated in the etiology of the witiko condition.

Summary

As the historical examples above demonstrate, the Algonquian etiology of witiko is a component of larger concepts encompassing illness, disease, transformation, spirit possession, sorcery, and healing held by the Great Lakes and subarctic Algonquians. Within this ideology, spirit forces interplay with behavioral and bodily processes in the formation, diagnosis, and treatment of illness. From a modern Western scientific perspective, the notion that medicine attacks and disturbing dreams, for example, are implicated in a seemingly supernatural condition is hardly tenable to say the least; medicine power and dreams, however, play an important role in the subarctic Algonquian belief system, past and present, and the witiko belief system itself, scientific skepticism aside, is in part a catalyst of the witiko incidents throughout history. These incidents, in turn, reinforced and modified the witiko belief system in a self-affirming feedback process.

The Windigo "Psychosis" of Western Psychopathology

Although the symptomatology and etiology of the witiko condition are accounted for by the northern Algonquians in their belief system, witiko

has repeatedly revealed itself as a controversial topic in academic literature because a number of commentators have attempted to place the phenomenon within a Western idiom and epistemology of medicine, psychology, and sociology. Consequently, the witiko condition of the Algonquians has been described by academics using the phrase *windigo psychosis*, which refers to a species of mental disorder believed to affect northern Algonquians. The most diagnostic trait of windigo psychosis is a belief in one’s transformation into windigo, accompanied by an alleged obsession with cannibalism that is only pacified by eating human flesh.⁷⁷

Currently, there is an evident and notable lack of consensus on the witiko condition with regards to its classification and typology as a bona fide psychiatric disorder. Outside of the northern Algonquian belief system, witiko has alternately been described by academics as a culture-bound psychosis, a culturally localized manifestation of paranoid schizophrenia,⁷⁸ a correlate of a scapegoating and witch-hunting behavioral complex leading to “triage homicide,”⁷⁹ and a culturally mediated “performance.”⁸⁰ It is my suspicion that some of the apparent disagreement on this subject is the result of incomplete literature reviews and lack of communication between the various academic disciplines.⁸¹ In the hopes of addressing the substantial lack of consensus, this article shall now turn to a discussion of my own findings on witiko. It is my hope that this discussion shall, in part, add a measure of clarification to this controversial and misunderstood subject.

Results from My Northern Alberta Study

To reiterate, my research on witiko was originally inspired by my grandmother’s story of the Trout Lake witiko incident. Upon initiation of my research, I decided to use the province of Alberta as a geographical region within which to conduct a sample collection of information on witiko.⁸² With this sample limit in place, I conducted a thorough search of archival records, publications, and academic literature. A portion of the study involved conducting interviews with contemporary Cree and Métis residents in northern Alberta to gather witiko stories. In some instances, I was able to corroborate historical records of witiko case studies with oral accounts given by interviewees.⁸³ To gather the stories, I adhered to a traditional protocol of tobacco and gift distribution, as stipulated in the cultural traditions of the northern Alberta Cree and Métis, and followed ethical guidelines around the protection of personal identities and the dissemination of sensitive information.

The material presented below is a brief summary of some of the information I gathered that was relevant to the overall discussion on the witiko

phenomenon and is presented here in the hopes of clarifying a subject often-times contested by Algonquianists and ethnohistorians.

Support for the “Triage Homicide” Hypothesis

One witiko case on record in my study seems to lend support to Louis Marano’s hypothesis that persons defined (and in some cases executed) as witikos were regarded as such by others for reasons having nothing to do with any compulsion to commit cannibalism.⁸⁴ In 1900, medical doctor O. C. Edwards accompanied the Treaty No. 8 Commission into regions of Athabasca to gather adhesions to the treaty from Indian bands that had not been contacted the previous year. In his journal-report for the commission, Edwards described a man he found on board a steam-engine paddle-wheeler ship near Fort Chipewyan, Athabasca. In Edwards’s estimation, the man was severely ill and dying of a lung infection:

When I went aboard I found the sick man dangerously ill [with pleuropneumonia in the left lung]. The Purser had nursed him as best he could but no one else on board seemed to lend a hand. The sick man had been delirious and anyone with Indian blood in him would run away from a “wendegoo” or crazy man. . . . July 3—I took charge of the man and remained in attendance till he died at 5 a.m. During the day a grave was dug and the man buried near the spot where the steamer was lying. The grave was snugly covered with logs and a cross put at his head, and near by on a tree Sergeant Anderson carved an “In Memoriam” with the man’s name on a tree. He was a Chipewyan Indian.⁸⁵

In this instance, Edwards noted the reluctance of the native people on board the boat to assist, in their fear that the patient was becoming “wendegoo”; based on Edwards’s observations, however, it appears that the Chipewyan man was not experiencing any symptoms of witiko, other than a delirium that may have *resembled* a witiko condition. This case seems to be in agreement with Marano’s thesis, and in addition, supports the claim of Robert Bell, a geographer who, in a report delivered to the Bathurst and Rideau Medical Association of Ottawa in 1886, stated that it was his opinion that many Indians had been defined, scapegoated, and executed as witikos because of delirium: “The Indian doctors do not understand the nature of delirium. When a patient becomes delirious, as in fevers, etc., they say he is about to ‘turn windigo’—that is, to become possessed of an irresistible desire for cannibalism. It was then the doctor’s duty to knock the patient on the head. Many a life has been sacrificed in this way.”⁸⁶

*Euro-Canadian Eyewitness Reports
Confirming the Witiko “Condition”*

Contrary to Marano’s argument, however, some cases identified in my study were reported by Euro-Canadian eyewitnesses and seem to lend support to Algonquian interpretations of witiko. One case, that of Marie Boucon—a Cree woman who defined herself as a witiko at Little Red River—was reported by the Sisters of Providence at the Fort Vermillion Catholic Mission in northern Alberta in 1910. According to the sisters, Marie Boucon was on the verge of being executed by her Cree band members before the NWMP apprehended her and sent her to the Catholic Mission for medical care. Boucon declared that she was a witiko, violently attacked a number of individuals in the mission, and asked the police to guard her with a gun one evening because she declared she was on the verge of cannibalizing someone that night. Boucon was kept under the care of the sisters for four years before finally being declared incurable and sent to a psychiatric institution in Calgary, southern Alberta.⁸⁷ So, contrary to the claims that doctors have studied no cases of witiko, this woman seems to have been under the care and supervision of medical doctors in Calgary.⁸⁸

Robert Brightman has already noted the case of the woman hospitalized at the Charles Camsell Hospital in Edmonton for an alleged witiko condition, reported by Dutch Oblate missionary Rogier Vandersteene at Wabasca. In that particular case study, reports of ice in the viscera, refusal of conventional food, anxiety, and cannibalistic impulses were reported firsthand by Vandersteene. Although this case has been mentioned previously, it is worth mentioning here for its provenance and because the case was brought to the attention of medical doctors.⁸⁹

The most compelling record in my study substantiating Algonquian interpretations of witiko comes from the diary of Francis Work Beaton, the Orkney HBC clerk situated at the Trout Lake outpost in the winter of 1896. After initially coming across Napanin and relating his initial impressions (detailed above), Beaton was able to compile the following report over the course of a number of weeks:

Jan. 6. 1896. I went to see the sick man today. He is a pitiful looking devil. They had him with about 6 blankets & still he was nearly freezing. I can do nothing for him. . . . Sunday 12. I went to see him today. He looks worse than ever. I gave him a dose of castor oil. *He says his heart is freezing. He is always saying that he is going to be a cannibal. . . . He wants them to kill him all the time before he gets worse. . . .* Jan 20. Francois [Auger] came here and asked me if I would read some prayers for the sick man. I went with him. I found a great change come over

him. He looked very crazy & I asked him if he knew me & he said yes. I read a few prayers out of the prayer book. He seemed to be getting worse all the time. *He does not look like a human being. He seems to be terribly swollen in the body and face. I do not know how this will end. The sight of him is enough to frighten any person.* The poor Indians slept very little here for the last 19 days. Since he arrived they have been watching him all the time. . . . Jan 21. Francois came for me last night & I went with him. I told him we ought to take some ropes with us and tie him with if we could. The man seemed to be getting worse. . . . *The sound of him was terrible. He was calling like a wild bull.* We tied him with the ropes & I left them to come & get more rope, but could not find any that was of use. I went back again about 3 am in the morning. When I got back the lines were breaking that was [*sic*] on his arms. The Indians asked me what we should do. They said that when he got up he would kill us all. I told them if they was [*sic*] to do anything to do it as I had no more lines to tie him with.⁹⁰

In the opinion of Beatton, Napanin's execution was justified in part by his observation that Napanin was behaving very violently and was on the verge of committing homicide. Days after the execution, Beatton's first-hand eyewitness account was substantiated by other eyewitness testimony, given by Napanin's wife Catherine Auger,⁹¹ and later by an account from a Cree eyewitness; this account is preserved in oral tradition among the contemporary residents of Trout Lake, Alberta. Métis elder Bernard Cardinal of Trout Lake, for instance, told the following story to me in April 2005, transcribed here from a videotaped recording:

An old guy . . . Edward _____⁹² used to tell us . . . about it. He [Napanin] came from Wabasca. I don't know if he'd had any kids, but anyway he got to Trout Lake here.⁹³ He got sick on the way.⁹⁴ Coming. He got here and he got worse. And there were only two families here, living in a tepee. And that old guy was only twelve years old [when he was an eyewitness]. He cried. . . . He was upset. . . . He said "My dad took him," he said. And they had him [Napanin] in a little cabin, not far from here. That's where they kept that witiko. And they took all the board parts from both sides of the cabin and there were logs under, underneath, like this [gestures], eh, where boards were for the floor.⁹⁵ He got worse at nights, that's the time he got worse, at nights. *His body would get bigger and bigger, swell all over.*⁹⁶ And that's when they start boiling that bear grease. And while it was boiling he drank that. And when he finished drinking his body got slimmer and he threw up. And that old guy said he could see all kinds of paint when he threw up, he

says.⁹⁷ They kept him there about for two nights, I think. *He kept asking these two guys, these two old guys to kill him, huh.* But he didn't want to kill their families. He didn't want to kill them. And his nephew came down. I don't know where from; anyways, his nephew came down.⁹⁸ That's the one that killed that witiko. They fought outside. Wrestled. The one that gets on the ground, that's the one that who had his head cut off. So that witiko got to the ground, and finally that's where that guy chopped him. Not on the sharp . . . sharp [side of the ax?] . . . just the other way; I don't know how he cut it. *And he stood up. After his head got, was cut off. He stood up. And that old man says just blood, just flying all over, he says. Finally he fell down.* And before he died, he says, “In two days time if a priest doesn't come, I'll come back.” So a priest came by plane.⁹⁹ Never been a priest down here before [then]. But that's where they buried him. I don't know if that old man was there when they buried him. *I was only about eighteen years when I look, look for that grave. It must have been a long time, 'cause it wasn't covered with dirt. Just logs.* They were like this [gestures: rotted] already. And a big [gestures] willow, right in the middle of that grave. And I couldn't find the head; where it was buried. It must have been covered with dirt, huh, because that was a long time ago. . . . Maybe that's why we couldn't find it, and there's been lots of guys looking for it.¹⁰⁰

As it stands, barring the possibility of an elaborate hoax, Beatton's firsthand testimony corroborates the above account on many points and remains to be accounted for by those who dismiss the witiko condition as an exaggeration or a complete fabrication. The behavioral inputs in the Trout Lake case match closely the inputs in numerous other Algonquian accounts, making this case paradoxically the most convincing and the most perplexing.

As these three cases demonstrate, Euro-Canadian eyewitness accounts agree with testimonies delivered by Algonquians that certain individuals self-identified as witikos, exhibited violent behavior, and declared cannibal impulses; the surviving Euro-Canadian accounts, in turn, are substantiated by numerous other Algonquian reports across Canada.¹⁰¹ As correctly summarized by Robert Brightman:

The internal consistency of the white and Indian accounts indicates that some Algonquians experienced a disorder characterized by cannibalistic impulses and ideation. It could be the case that all these accounts, Indian and white alike, are fallacious, although the parallels between the two groups of narratives would then be difficult to account for. The cases by whites should lend greater credibility to the

Algonquian accounts for those suspicious of Indian testimony. Rather than privileging each group's capacity for observation, we need to recognize the consistency is clearly greater than random and that each discourse reciprocally validates the other.¹⁰²

*Evidence for Witiko Anthropophagy:
The Confession of Swift Runner*

The criminal investigation and trial depositions of the Swift Runner (Kaki-si-ku-chin) homicides documented by the NWMP validate the claim to witiko cannibalism, defined here as anthropophagy committed in a contextually unnecessary context.¹⁰³ Swift Runner was a Cree trapper who serially murdered and consumed the bodies of his wife and five children at Tawatinaw, near the Athabasca Landing trading post in north-central Alberta in the winter of 1878. Swift Runner was the first person hanged under the auspices of the NWMP (fig. 2), giving the Swift Runner witiko case a unique position in the history of Canadian jurisprudence.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the Swift Runner account is the most compelling (and the only) known case in my study with which to make a compelling argument for witiko anthropophagy.

The depositions of the Swift Runner case were first identified by Teicher,¹⁰⁵ and subsequently commented on by Marano,¹⁰⁶ who claimed that all instances of cannibalism were committed in a famine context, as Swift Runner was unable to provision his camp with food for an extended period of time in the winter of 1878. Recently, however, I was able to locate the confession of Swift Runner, recorded by Father Hyppolyte Leduc at the St. Albert Catholic Mission near Fort Edmonton in 1879. Upon examination, the deposition reveals itself as a description of what appears to be contextually unnecessary anthropophagy. Prior to Swift Runner's hanging, Leduc was able to extract and record a confession from Swift Runner regarding the fate of his family, and in particular the fate of his last child, here duplicated in translation from the Cree language to French and then later into English: "At that moment the devil [witiko?] suddenly took possession of my soul; and in order to live longer far from people, and to put out of the way the only witness to my crime, I seized my gun and killed the last of my children *and ate him* as I had done the others. Some weeks later I was taken by the police, sentenced to death, and in three days I am to be hanged."¹⁰⁷

What is notable in this instance is Swift Runner's declaration that he was able to hunt a number of ducks for food, and was, at the point of this act, not in a position of desperation *or starvation*. As correctly noted by Brightman, why Swift Runner eliminated this witness by *eating him* remains to be accounted for and strongly implies a measure of fatalism toward the



Figure 2. Photograph of Kakisikuchin (Swift Runner) in chains (left), next to an unidentified North West Mounted Police officer at Fort Saskatchewan, prior to his execution by hanging in 1879. Photo credit: Library and Archives Canada, George M. Dawson, PA-051141. Reproduced with permission



Figure 3. The recovered remains of Swift Runner's wife and children, photographed by the North West Mounted Police after the preliminary investigation, which confirmed that the bodies had been cannibalized in the winter of 1878. Photo Credit: Library and Archives Canada, George M. Dawson, PA-051144. Reproduced with permission

witiko condition.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, this case does not substantiate the claim to a windigo *psychosis*; all of the murders except for the last *were* contextually motivated by starvation. Swift Runner's fatalistic resignation to cannibalism, sustained by a belief in the inevitability of a witiko condition, is an explanation for why he committed such acts rather than obtain conventional foodstuffs, as Brightman demonstrated was possible in this instance.¹⁰⁹

In summation, the depositions in the Swift Runner case may be the most substantive extant records of witiko anthropophagy; nevertheless, the depositions also stand as the *only* record on hand in my study (and elsewhere in the known literature¹¹⁰) demonstrating from a *verifiable firsthand account*¹¹¹ (fig. 3) what appears to be contextually unnecessary anthropophagy.

The conclusion I make here is that the claim for nonfamine or "witiko" anthropophagy is not conclusively founded; can a sweeping conclusion be made based upon *one* single substantiated case and a small number of other unsubstantiated firsthand testimonies that point to "witiko anthropophagy"? The notion that Algonquians willingly (or otherwise) acted on an enigmatic cannibalistic impulse and *actually* consumed human flesh in a contextually unwarranted context is not supported with a satisfactory

amount of evidence; it is yet to be determined by other substantiated historical cases/stories whether or not witiko anthropophagy was a recurrent act committed in historical witiko cases, and if so, at what level of frequency.

Swelling as a Symptom of the Witiko Condition

Three instances were identified in my study (and three other cases have been identified elsewhere)¹¹² where eyewitness reports mention the presence of bodily swelling in cohort with other symptoms and behaviors resembling the Algonquian witiko condition. As it stands, the reports of swelling remain unaccounted for in cohort with the other symptoms, and although the phenomenon may be explained by way of instances of intentional poisoning, allergic reaction, or a number of biologically-based illnesses, these reports are problematic with regard to past explanations for the witiko condition because they remove the phenomenon from the exclusive realm of clinical psychiatry and take it into the sphere of physiology. Accounts of bodily swelling are mentioned in firsthand witness depositions such as the Marie Courtereille witiko case of 1887 at Lesser Slave Lake, the Trout Lake case of 1896, the Moostoos case of 1899 at Smoky River near Lesser Slave Lake, and in the Odjibwekive case of 1900 at Poplar River, among others.¹¹³

In analysis, the inputs in these cases render Brightman’s “performance” hypothesis somewhat problematical with regards to the instances where swelling was reported. Although many witiko cases would seem to conform to Brightman’s fatalism/performance hypothesis (a thesis I agree with on many points), a problem that needs to be addressed when these symptoms are present is how, in any given instance, an individual could *willingly produce them* to manifest in cohort with the “windigo performance.”¹¹⁴ While ingestion of toxins (intentionally or by poisoning by others) is a remotely possible explanation, such occurrences have yet to be verified in the historical record and would, if evidence of them were discovered, be highly contentious. While it is tenable to suppose that an individual who was experiencing symptoms of swelling or edema (caused by any number of medical conditions, for instance) could believe that such illness was evidence of a witiko condition, extant case evidence wherein victims manifested swelling *after* announcing their witiko condition (as in the Trout Lake and Moostoos cases, where the witiko condition was announced weeks or *even months* before the swelling was seen and reported) remains to be accounted for.

Also problematic is the absence of evidence for any coherent criteria used by Algonquians to determine, subjectively, the precise course of trajectory any personal illness would take and whether an illness would, or would not, eventuate in a witiko condition. In other words, why was swelling reported in these witiko cases and not tuberculosis, smallpox, or measles,

for instance? In consideration of the above evidence these particular cases remain unaccounted for by any current explanation in the literature.¹¹⁵

Multiple Witikos

Lastly, two cases in my study (in addition to other reports)¹¹⁶ wherein two or more individuals were reported to manifest symptoms and behavior resembling the witiko condition *simultaneously, in the same locale* immediately render problematic the hypothesis invoking paranoid schizophrenia (or other mental illness) in a culturally localized manifestation as an explanation for witiko. The first of such instances is taken from *Edmonton Bulletin* reports documenting the well-noted Moostoos witiko homicide and trial:¹¹⁷

When Moos-toos become [*sic*] affected they killed him. . . . The excitement aroused by Moos-toos was sufficient to unbalance the mind of Nap-as-sis, a member of the hunting band, *who also turned weitigo* and attempted to kill and eat a 10 year old Indian girl, who was with the party. The Indians had captured and were about to kill him when Corp. Phillips arrived on the scene from the Slave lake post, and by his prompt and determined action prevented any further trouble. . . . At the lake Nap-as-sis, who had recovered his mental equilibrium, was examined by a doctor and pronounced perfectly sane. He was therefore discharged.¹¹⁸

Subsequent to the release of Nap-as-sis, the following report appeared in the *Bulletin*: “THE Indian who turned ‘weitigo’ at the lake [Nap-as-sis] and was brought in by the police and examined and allowed his liberty as he appeared sane, was reported to have lapsed into his previous condition of lunacy, and to be raising some commotion at the west end of the lake.”¹¹⁹

The second instance of a “multiple witiko” case study is derived from a firsthand eyewitness account recorded in a letter written by N. Brisette of Lesser Slave Lake and published in the *Edmonton Bulletin*, which details the White Fish Lake witiko incident discussed above:

These two women were taken with a sudden sickness which the Indians call “Witikaw” or cannibal. . . . Four men watched over them for three nights. They could hardly hold them when they were taken with fits. So they resolved to bring them to Lesser Slave lake. The justice of the peace gave an order to send them to the Roman Catholic mission, where good care is given them. The two young women passed the night all right. They took a light supper and slept well. Next morning, the 22nd inst., they seemed a great deal better. Their father arrived that

day and found them talking, laughing, and enjoying themselves. Today, the 23rd, they seem to be stronger. They are visiting about the place. We expect that after a few days they will be able to go home to White Fish lake.¹²⁰

It remains to be explained by anyone invoking paranoid schizophrenia—or any mental illness for that matter—as an explanatory device how two or more persons spontaneously suffer from the same paranoid delusions that follow the same trajectory spontaneously in the same locale (i.e., how do mental illnesses become *contagious*?). Furthermore, a problem that requires explanation is how in these instances the individuals were “cured” by simply being in a doctor’s or missionary’s presence. Although schizophrenia may be suggested as a possible explanation for *some* cases, instances of multiple, simultaneous witiko outbreaks are only remotely accounted for by mental illness. In all, as these cases and those listed above demonstrate, the argument for a windigo psychosis, culture-bound or otherwise, is poorly substantiated by the evidence presented in this article.

Conclusion: What Was Witiko (Not)?

Whatever witiko may have been, I concur with Richard Preston that the windigo psychosis of Western psychopathology is not an accurate approximation of the reports of the Algonquian witiko condition found in either oral traditions or historical reports and trial depositions.¹²¹ However, the evidence presented here suggests that a witiko “condition” resembling the Algonquian reports is historically verifiable.¹²² It may be appropriate to suggest that an inclusive approach be taken with regard to the witiko case studies, each of which must be assessed on a *case-by-case basis*. Regardless, the phenomenon on the whole is here described as resulting from a cultural anxiety surrounding starvation and cannibalism, accompanied by the belief in the transformative powers of dreams, sorcery, and the witiko monster itself, which in turn resulted in the consummation of a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. Such beliefs and behaviors lost cultural reinforcement with the introduction of a modern agricultural industrial economy, Canadian laws and institutions, and a conformity to Christian values and cosmology. Witiko appears to have been more of an *anxiety* about turning into a cannibal (a person abhorred by Algonquians as an embodiment of evil) than it was a psychosis causing one to have (and *act on*) cannibalistic impulses. In essence, witiko reveals itself to be a social construction of the cultural world it was found within, supported by a collectivity of people who subscribed to the same cosmology.

It is suitable to suggest that the evident difficulty in accounting for the witiko phenomenon from within a Western perspective is, in part, the result of a reluctance to include Algonquian etiology in the discussion of the witiko condition.¹²³ The surviving historical information (and oral traditions) on witiko suggests that the specific causes declared by Algonquians—namely, cannibalism, dreams, and sorcery—are, *potentially* in cohort with other clinical conditions understood in Western medicine and psychiatry, precisely the dynamics that must be taken into consideration.¹²⁴ It is not necessary or appropriate to consider any empirical or “objective” effects these causal dynamics may have, but rather how they are components of a coherent belief system within a uniquely Algonquian cosmology and how the belief in the irresistible power of these forces influenced the personal consciousness, behavior, and subjective perceptions of persons existing within Algonquian “internal models of reality,”¹²⁵ and generated and shaped certain behaviors and experiences that can be classified as witiko.

In conclusion, it appears as though the witiko phenomenon and condition, on the whole, has yet to be properly accounted for within a Western paradigm. I suggest that the perspective of the northern Algonquians must inform any further consideration of the witiko phenomenon. Long before any current debate, George Nelson, whose nineteenth-century writings have been of ongoing interest to fur-trade scholars for their inclusive treatment of native people and their beliefs, clearly articulated the perplexity of witiko (from his own Euro-Canadian perspective) in a letter-journal in 1823. It is apparent from Nelson’s own writings that he struggled to account for the witiko phenomenon (as this author has) within his own epistemology and idiom of experience:

There is such a singular, strange, incomprehensible contradictoriness in almost all these cases, and many I have heard, that I do most verily believe they are denunciations, witch or wizardisms: in any other manner they are not rationally to be accounted for, unless we suppose all those who feed on human flesh to be thus possest—then it is natural to man in those cases; but why then not the same with us as with these people?¹²⁶

Presently, it seems the closest approximation we have to a proper understanding of the witiko phenomenon comes from the northern Algonquians themselves. Otherwise, witiko uncharitably remains a mystery.

Notes

Foremost, this article is dedicated to two important Métis elders. First, to Marie Carlson (1921–2002), without whom neither the story that inspired this article nor the inspiration to write it would have come to me; her story was a valuable inheritance she left behind for me to discover. Secondly, this article is dedicated to the memory of Bernard Cardinal, who passed away tragically shortly before this article was completed. Cardinal lived a traditional lifestyle well into his eighties and still happily managed traplines and enthusiastically shared the traditional stories and life-ways of his people in his elderly years; he was a metaphoric library of traditional Métis and Cree ethnographic knowledge, and I intend to share more of his knowledge in my subsequent writings. Without the gift of his stories, his kindness, and his seemingly endless generosity, this project would not have become a reality. He will not be forgotten either by me or others whose lives he touched. This article is also dedicated to the memory of Felix Auger/Napanin (ca. 1861–1896). Interestingly, I have recently discovered that Auger was an ancestral relation of my grandmother, and it is my hope that this article illuminates something of his life and demonstrates that the witiko phenomenon was, as understood by the Cree and Métis, not fictitious. I would like to thank Jennifer S. H. Brown for her insightful comments and suggestions for this article; Robert Brightman, whose exemplary writings and personal feedback provided the inspiration to make a contribution to this topic; Patricia McCormack, Chris Andersen, and Clint Westman for their guidance in this research; Shawn Smallman, Grace Dillon, and Anne Lindsay for their kind support, generosity, and advice; and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. Lastly, I would like to thank Wayne Beauchamp, Don Carlson, Shirley Serre, Joyce Johnson, all of my other family and friends who had a connection to this project, and, most importantly, my partner, Anoch Daniels, who put much of her work on hold and assisted me throughout the entirety of this project. Any errors in this text, unless otherwise noted, remain my own.

- 1 See, for example, Robert A. Brightman, “The Windigo in the Material World,” *Ethnohistory* 35 (Fall 1988): 346–51, and the evidence presented in the text of this paper.
- 2 See James B. Waldram, *Revenge of the Windigo: The Construction of the Mind and Mental Health of North American Aboriginal Peoples* (Toronto, 2004), 18, 194; Peter J. Guarnaccia and Lloyd H. Rogler, “Research on Culture-Bound Syndromes: New Directions,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 156: 1322–27; Wen-Shin Seng, “From Peculiar Psychiatric Disorders through Culture-Bound Syndromes to Culture-Related Specific Syndromes,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 43 (December 2006): 568; and others appearing in print and on the Internet. Papers such as these use Louis Marano’s writings (see note 79) as support for assertions that windigo psychosis does not exist, and by implication, that a windigo *condition* does not exist either (see note 11). While papers written prior to Robert Brightman’s article (“The Windigo in the Material World,” 1988) are excused from this critique, such writings as those listed above, and others composed *post facto*, postulate, without clarification or new evidence, that windigo is a discredited artifact of cultural anthropology. Despite evidence to the contrary, this is still a prevalent and tenaciously held position. It is assumed here that continual references to Marano’s hypothesis for explanations of windigo

are the result of incomplete literature reviews (by unintentionally ignoring or deliberately excluding Brightman's foundational article on the subject) or of a desire to perpetuate the idea that windigo behavior is nothing more than a fabrication, in either historical records or oral traditions. While this position has a measure of moral and political legitimacy to it ("windigo psychosis" as such expounding notions of "Orientalism" on northern Algonquian cultures, i.e., exoticizing them as "savage cannibals"), when measured against the facts and evidence it has only limited applicability. Superficially, just because the evidence supports the historicity of "windigo" behavior, this notion, in and of itself, cannot be used to exoticize northern Algonquian cultures as "savage" or "cannibalistic"; windigo behavior and cannibalism were, and still are, abhorrent and repugnant to the cultures and societies belonging to the northern Algonquian linguistic grouping. See Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life among the Lake Superior Ojibway* (St. Paul, MN, 1985 [1850]), 356.

- 3 The title of this article can be interpreted in two ways: Aside from the ideal of "reviving" witiko from skeptical dismissals, in reference to the "revivalist" or "apocalyptic" prophetic religious movement invoking the witiko (as discussed in the body of this paper), the title can also be understood as referring to "revitalization" movements throughout history, such as the Ghost Dance of the American Plains. In this instance, the revitalization movement refers to the use of witiko as symbol for a cataclysmic force that was believed to be coming to visit the local native residents of Athabasca (in the form of Christian missionaries and settler societies, etc.), and alternately, for a cataclysmic force that was going to rise up and destroy the perceived "interlopers." In this case, "reviving" witiko implies a revitalization movement where the impetus to return local beliefs and culture patterns to a "primordial" or "pristine" state was catalyzed by a predominant fear of the witiko monster—and its metaphorical havoc—reflected in cultural breakdown, the loss of land, proselytization, and oppressive colonialism. See Michael Harkin, ed., *Reassessing Revitalization: Perspectives from North America and the Pacific Islands* (Lincoln, NE, 2004). An interestingly similar movement is discussed in an article by Jennifer S. H. Brown, "The Wasitay Religion: Prophecy, Oral Literacy, and Belief on Hudson Bay," in Harkin, ed., *Reassessing Revitalization*, 104–23. Like the Athabasca Windigo Prophecy, the Wasitay movement was a revitalization movement evoking windigo imagery.
- 4 The "Algonquian" nations described in this study are a diverse grouping of indigenous societies with unique culture patterns and beliefs, and are only categorized together linguistically for the similarities in their languages, and, for the purposes of this paper, their shared belief in the witiko (windigo) monster in its varying incarnations. The Algonquians referred to in this paper include the Cree peoples (of the Plains, Woods/Rock, Swampy, Moose, and Eastern dialects), the Ojibwa (Anishnabe), Saulteaux, and, with respect to the region covered in this discussion, the Métis of northern Alberta, who were (in many cases) culturally, genetically, and legally indistinct from the Athabasca Crees prior to the Treaty 8 Commission of 1899. See G. Neil Reddekopp and Patricia Bartko, "Distinction without a Difference? Treaty and Scrip in 1899," in "Treaty 8 Revisited: Selected Papers on the 1999 Centennial Conference," ed. Duff Crerar and Jaroslav Petryshyn, special issue, *Lobstick: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Creative Thought, Social Commentary, Scholarly Research, and*

Debate 1 (1999): 213–28; Patricia Bartko, “Lesser Slave Lake Aboriginal Population Circa 1899: The Community Quandary—Choosing between Treaty and Scrip,” in “Treaty 8 Revisited,” 259–76; and David Leonard and Beverly Whalen, eds., *On the North Trail: The Diary of O. C. Edwards* (Edmonton, AB, 1996), xii.

Across Canada, windigo is known by a variety of terms: *wihtikôw* (northern Alberta Cree and Métis), *atoosh* (James Bay Cree), and *wintikô* (Ojibwa), among others. Legendary monsters cognate to the Witiko include *Chenoo* of the Micmac—see Harold McGee, “Windigo Down-East, or the Taming of the Windigo,” in *Proceedings of the Second Congress, Canadian Ethnology Society*, vol. 1, ed. Jim Freedman and Jerome H. Barkow (Ottawa, 1975), 110–32—*Wechuge* of the Beaver—see Robin Ridington, “Wechuge and Windigo: A Comparison of Cannibal Belief among Boreal Forest Athapaskans and Algonkians,” *Anthropologica* 18 (1976): 107–29—and *Stoneclad* of the Cherokees—see Raymond Fogelson, “Windigo Goes South: Stoneclad among the Cherokees,” in *Manlike Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence*, ed. Marjorie M. Halpin and Michael M. Ames (Vancouver, BC, 1980), 132–51.

- 5 The notion of a Western framework may suggest a viewpoint that is too generalized or monolithic. While the indigenous people discussed in this article certainly exist within the idea of the West, what I imply by this idiom is a Western, nonindigenous epistemology, primarily founded upon scientific enquiry, materialism, positivism, and a rationalism that discounts notions of supernatural phenomena, the nonmaterialistic aspect of human consciousness, spirit entities, monsters, and spiritual “power” or indigenous “medicine.” I understand that not all Westerners ascribe to such a viewpoint, and as such, this paradigm may not encapsulate, or correctly describe, their own viewpoints or beliefs. The usage of the term *Western* in this article refers solely to the current Western scientific paradigm, and not to “Westerners” (nonaboriginal Europeans or North Americans) themselves, whether or not they ascribe to such a perspective.
- 6 In her lifetime, Marie Carlson served with the Métis Association of Alberta (a political organization representing the provincial Métis and nonstatus Indian population), worked as a camp cook in the Canadian arctic and switchboard operator for Alberta Government Telephones, and campaigned for office in the legislative assembly of the government of Alberta (the first aboriginal woman to do so—Joyce Johnson, personal communication, 2005).
- 7 *Edmonton Bulletin*, Feb 24, 1896, p. 1.
- 8 “Wapiska Lakes,” *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 April 1896. Emphasis added; cf. “A ‘Wehtigo’ Murdered,” *Manitoba Free Press*, n.d., 1896. According to other accounts by eyewitnesses and others, as cited in this article, the body was decapitated and buried—not cremated. Moreover, Napanin arrived at Trout Lake in the beginning of January, according to the numerous other sources cited herein, and not at the end of January as the *Bulletin* reported.
- 9 Joseph E. Guinard, “Witiko among the Tête-de-Boule,” *Primitive Man* (now *Anthropological Quarterly*) 3 (1930): 69; cf. Rogier Vandersteene, “Some Woodland Cree Traditions and Legends,” *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 1 (1969): 63.
- 10 Alternately, Witiko is sometimes described humorously in the *atâyohkewina* as a comical trickster figure, counterpart to the Cree culture hero Wesakecâhk—

- see Anne Anderson, *Legends of Wēsakēchā* (Edmonton, AB, 1976), 26–28 and James Stevens, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto, 2003), 29–30.
- 11 In this article, witiko (windigo) is described using the neutral term “condition” to avoid preferential treatment of either Algonquian or Western scientific epistemological frameworks.
 - 12 See Regina Flannery, Mary E. Chambers, and Patricia Jehle, “Witiko Accounts from the James Bay Cree,” *Arctic Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (1982): 55–78 and Howard Norman, *Where the Chill Came From: Cree Windigo Tales and Journeys* (San Francisco, 1982) for a discussion of Cree windigo legends and stories. The *atâyohkewina* and the *kayās acimowina* are both extremely rich and multifaceted bodies of Cree and Métis oral traditions. While brief segments of the *kayās acimowina* are described and cited in this article, a comprehensive study of oral traditions on witiko would constitute a work unto itself, particularly in corroboration with historical records. While this article treats almost exclusively with references to witiko in surviving written historical records, I have recorded and transcribed several oral stories by a variety of Cree and Métis elders from northern Alberta, and am in the process of collecting more. An article or book is forthcoming on this material (provisionally titled “Windigo: Emerging from the Shroud of Legend”), in which a number of transcribed oral stories and archival materials will be cited and accompanied by a discourse analysis of the oral stories and their meaning in connection with historical documents. The wealth of material pertaining to this topic is simply beyond the confines of this article to explore.
 - 13 See Nathan D. Carlson, “Reviving the Wíhtikôw: Cannibal Monsters in Northern Alberta Cree and Métis Cosmology,” thesis, University of Alberta, 2005, 76.
 - 14 See Morton I. Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis: A Study of Relationship between Belief and Behaviour among the Indians of North-Eastern Canada* (Seattle, WA, 1960) and John Robert Colombo, *Windigo: An Anthology of Fact and Fantastic Fiction* (Saskatoon, SK, 1982). Although the majority of Euro-Canadian accounts are secondhand, some are derived firsthand, as discussed in this article.
 - 15 For example, see Library and Archives of Canada (LAC), record group (RG) 13, vol. 1417, file 138; Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA), accession number (acc.) 79.266/126, box 1; PAA, acc. 83.1, box 2d/157; Thomas Fiddler and James R. Stevens, *Killing the Shamen: Cree Legends of Sandy Lake* (Manotick, ON, 2003); Guillaume Charette, *Vanishing Spaces: Memoirs of Louis Goulet* (Winnipeg, MB, 1980), 136–38, 175–77; cf. Sydney L. Harring, *White Man’s Law: Native People in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Jurisprudence* (Toronto, 1998).
 - 16 See Lou Marano, “Windigo Psychosis: An Anatomy of an Emic/Etic Confusion,” thesis, University of Florida, 1981, 1.
 - 17 Although many Crees and Métis in Athabasca continue to believe in the witiko phenomenon, there are others who no longer ascribe to its possibility. For example, two Cree elders from Wabasca stated in a northern Alberta community newspaper that although the witiko condition did exist in the past, they were “not so sure anymore.” Further, when elaborating on this, one elder stated that it was the influence of the Catholic Church that was responsible for the disappearance of the witiko condition. See “Windigo: Legend or True?” *Fever* (Wabasca, AB), 11 August 2005, 7–8. Accordingly, while many local

- people still believe in witiko, the belief complex as a whole was *only collectively ascribed to prior to the twenty-first century*. Although my article supports the historical existence of the witiko condition, I have made this statement in consideration of those who have converted to other religious belief systems, such as Catholicism, or abandoned religious belief systems altogether.
- 18 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 280/1a, box 52, 1896.
 - 19 Jennifer S. H. Brown and Robert Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed: George Nelson on Cree and Ojibway Religion and Myth, 1823* (Winnipeg, MB, 1988), 85.
 - 20 Seymour Parker, “The Wiitiko Psychosis in the Context of Ojibwa Personality and Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 62 (1960): 603; Brown and Brightman, *Orders of the Dreamed*, 88–94, 165; Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 64.
 - 21 See Richard Preston, “The Witiko: Algonkian Knowledge and Whiteman Knowledge,” in *Manlike Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence*, ed. Marjorie M. Halpin and Michael M. Ames (Vancouver, BC, 1980), 128.
 - 22 Parker, “The Wiitiko Psychosis,” 603.
 - 23 Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 93–103.
 - 24 See Ruth Landes, “The Ojibwa of Canada,” in *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive Peoples*, ed. Margaret Mead (New York, 1938), 126; Brown and Brightman, *Orders of the Dreamed*, 165; Marano, “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis; Louis Marano, “Windigo Psychosis: An Anatomy of an Emic/Étic Confusion,” *Current Anthropology* 4 (1982): 385–412.
 - 25 See Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*.
 - 26 Vivian Rohrl has suggested that the ingestion of animal grease was intended to treat a vitamin deficiency that could cause a psychosis resembling witiko—see Vivian J. Rohrl, “A Nutritional Factor in Windigo Psychosis,” *American Anthropologist* 72 (1970): 97–101. This hypothesis has been critiqued by Jennifer S. H. Brown, “The Cure and Feeding of Windigos: A Critique,” *American Anthropologist* 73 (1971): 20–22 and Harold Franklin McGee, “Windigo Psychosis,” *American Anthropologist* 74 (1972): 244–46.
 - 27 Brown and Brightman, *Orders of the Dreamed*, 92–93.
 - 28 Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 93–103. Another practice believed to facilitate the melting of the ice was the sweat lodge, as in the Trout Lake case of 1896. See Emile Grouard, “Souvenirs de mes soixante ans d’apostolat dans l’Athabasca Mackenzie, oeuvre apostolique de M. I. Lyons,” in *La liberté*, trans. Clint Westman and Gabriel Asselin (Winnipeg, MB, 1922), 329.
 - 29 See Brown and Brightman, *Orders of the Dreamed*, 93, 94; “Wapiska Lakes,” *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 April 1896.
 - 30 Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 93–103; Carlson, “Reviving the Wihtikôw,” 125.
 - 31 Robert Brightman, *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships* (Regina, SK, 2002), 142–47.
 - 32 Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi* (Norman, OK, 1935), 37.
 - 33 Marie Merasty, *The World of Wetiko: Tales from the Woodland Cree*, ed. Candace Savage (Saskatoon, SK, 1974), 1; Richard Preston, “Ethnographic Reconstruction of Witiko,” *Papers of the Ninth Algonquian Conference*, ed. William Cowan (Ottawa, 1978), 62.
 - 34 See Charles A. Bishop, “Northern Algonquian Cannibalism and Windigo Psychosis,” in *Psychological Anthropology*, ed. Thomas R. Williams (The Hague, Netherlands, 1973), 237–48.

- 35 Leo G. Waisberg, "Boreal Forest Subsistence and the Windigo: Fluctuation of Animal Populations," *Anthropologica* 17 (1975): 169–85; James G. E. Smith, "Notes on the Wiitiko," *Papers of the Seventh Algonquian Conference, 1975*, ed. William Cowan (Ottawa, 1976); Brightman, "The Windigo in the Material World," 337–79.
- 36 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 10 March 1888, 4.
- 37 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 281/327, box 59, 1887.
- 38 *Ibid.*; *Edmonton Bulletin*, 10 March 1888, 4.
- 39 *Atchinson Daily Globe* (Kansas), 17 March 1888. There is no known account of this woman's arrest, incarceration, or trial, despite the fact that the previous year (1887) in the Athabasca district, Michel Courtereille of Lesser Slave Lake had been arrested and imprisoned for murdering his wife Marie, a suspected witiko—see "Supreme Court," *Edmonton Bulletin*, 22 October 1887.
- 40 Brightman, *Grateful Prey*, 99.
- 41 Brown and Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, 91.
- 42 Brightman, *Grateful Prey*, 99.
- 43 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 280/1a, box 52, 1896.
- 44 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 5 March 1911, 8.
- 45 LAC, RG 18, vol. 150, file 228–98, 1898.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 Dominion of Canada, *Sessional Papers, Volume 12—Third Session of the Eighth Parliament of the Dominion of Canada*, Session 1898 (Ottawa, 1899), 592.
- 48 LAC, RG 15, vol. 1334, reel C-14946, "Auger, Dominique."
- 49 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 281/148, box 56, 1897.
- 50 "Lesser Slave Lake," *Edmonton Bulletin*, 15 March 1897.
- 51 Brown and Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, 167.
- 52 Vandersteene, "Some Woodland Cree Traditions," 56; Carlson, "Reviving the Wihtikôw," 118–20.
- 53 Brightman, *Grateful Prey*, 76–102.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 153–56.
- 55 R. H. Cockburn, ed., "Like Words of Fire: The Lore of the Woodland Cree from the Journals of P. G. Downes," *The Beaver* 315 (1984): 41.
- 56 Brown and Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, 169.
- 57 Merasty, *World of Wetiko*, 1.
- 58 See Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 356.
- 59 See Brightman, "The Windigo in the Material World," 373.
- 60 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 17 October 1895, 1.
- 61 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 280/1a, box 52, 1896.
- 62 Brown and Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, 196.
- 63 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 280/1a, box 52, 1896.
- 64 *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
- 65 See Jean LaBissoniere, *Providence Trail Blazers* (Edmonton, AB, 1978), 86.
- 66 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 280/1a, box 52, 1896.
- 67 See LAC, RG 15, vol. 1334, reel C-14946, "Auger, Catherine."
- 68 "Wapiska Lakes," *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 April 1896.
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 280/1a, box 52, 1896.
- 71 Beaton's ethnic background is ascertained from a land scrip application he filed for his Métis children at Lesser Slave Lake in 1899. Although Beaton

- declared he was solely of Scottish/Orkney descent, his children were candidates for scrip grants by way of their Métis or mixed ancestry mother, Emma Shaw—see LAC, RG 15, vol. 1335, reel C-14947, “Beaton, Francis.” Marano (incorrectly) argued that Beaton was likely of Métis ancestry, and thus his testimony was fabricated in part by his own belief in Windigo; see Marano, “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis, 169. Brightman argued that even if Beaton was Métis, his writing demonstrated a Euro-Canadian cultural background, and that his writings should exhibit consistent fabrications was only “marginally tenable”—Brightman, “The Windigo in the Material World,” 350.
- 72 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 281/5, box 53, 1896. A typewritten copy of the original letter contained a misspelling of the name “Napanin.” It was rendered “Mapanin,” and this distortion was duplicated, unknowingly, by Marano in “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis, 167 and Brightman in “The Windigo in the Material World,” 350. Cf. LAC, RG 18, vol. 152, file 271-80, 1896.
- 73 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 280/1a, box 52, 1896.
- 74 LAC, RG 18, vol. 152, file 271-80, 1896; Grouard, *Souvenirs de mes soixante ans d'apostolat dans l'Athabasca Mackenzie*, 329-31.
- 75 LAC, RG 18, vol. 152, file 271-80, 1896.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 First identified by John M. Cooper, “The Cree Witiko Psychosis,” *Primitive Man* (now *Anthropological Quarterly*) 6 (1933): 20-24, Guinard, “Witiko among the Tête-de-Boule,” and Emile J. Saindon, “Mental Disorders amongst the James Bay Cree,” *Primitive Man* (now *Anthropological Quarterly*) 6 (1933): 1-12, windigo psychosis was discussed in a series of writings by Irving Hallowell: “Culture and Mental Disorder,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 29 (1934): 1-9, “Psychic Stress and Culture Patterns,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 92 (1936): 1291-1310, and *Culture and Experience*, (Philadelphia, 1955); Ruth Landes: “The Personality of the Ojibwa,” *Character and Personality* 6 (1937): 51-60, “The Ojibwa of Canada,” “The Abnormal among the Ojibwa Indians,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 33 (1938): 14-33, and *The Ojibwa Woman* (New York, 1938); and Teicher: *Windigo Psychosis*. Teicher discussed this subject within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. He conducted an extensive review of windigo accounts and compiled a monograph detailing seventy cases, hypothesizing that the belief system of the Algonquians generated and determined the course of the aberrant behavior and cannibalistic compulsion categorized as windigo psychosis. Windigo psychosis was also discussed through the medium of psychoanalysis in Parker, “The Witiko Psychosis”; J. Anthony Paredes, “Case Study of a ‘Normal’ Windigo,” *Anthropologica* 14 (1964): 97-116; William M. Bolman and Alan S. Katz, “Hamburger Hoarding: A Case of Symbolic Cannibalism Resembling Whitico Psychosis,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 142 (1966): 424-28; and Thomas H. Hay, “The Windigo Psychosis: Psychodynamic, Cultural, and Social Factors in Aberrant Behaviour,” *American Anthropologist* 73 (1971): 1-19. Alternately, witiko was discussed in terms of structuralist theory—see Raymond Fogelson, “Psychological Theories of Windigo ‘Psychosis’ and a Preliminary Application of a Models Approach,” in *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology: Essays in Honour of A. Irving Hallowell*, ed. Melford E. Spiro (New York, 1965), 74-99; McGee, “Windigo Down-East, or the Taming of the Windigo”; and David H. Turner, “Windigo Mythology and the Analysis of Cree Social Struc-

- ture,” *Anthropologica* 19 (1977): 63–73. Biological and environmental variables were also considered and debated; see Fogelson, “Psychological Theories of Windigo ‘Psychosis,’” 74; Rohrl, “A Nutritional Factor in Windigo Psychosis”; “Comment on ‘The Cure and Feeding of Windigos: A Critique,’” *American Anthropologist* 74 (1972): 242–44; Brown, “The Cure and Feeding of Windigos”; McGee, “Windigo Psychosis”; Bishop, “Northern Algonkian Cannibalism and Windigo Psychosis”; Smith, “Notes on the Wittiko”; and Waisberg, “Boreal Forest Subsistence and the Windigo.” An apparent lack of meaningful evidence supporting the existence of the windigo psychosis led some commentators to critique the past literature, noting that the witiko reports of Algonquians and fur-trade era accounts were not substantive enough evidence to support the claim for a clinical psychiatric disorder—see John J. Honigmann, *Personality in Culture* (New York, 1967); Preston, “The Wittiko: Algonkian Knowledge and Whiteman Knowledge”; and Ridington, “Wechuge and Windigo.”
- 78 Some writers have refuted the claim that windigo psychosis is a disorder *sui generis*, and instead have argued that windigo is merely (and singularly) a culturally localized variant of paranoid schizophrenia. See, for example, William Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology*, 7th ed. (Orlando, FL, 1997), 138–41.
- 79 Marano’s thesis regarding triage homicide (see “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis) has been influential with regard to general opinions surrounding the topic. Arguing that the Algonquians had succumbed to a type of “witch hunting” mania as a result of the traumas surrounding starvation, famine cannibalism, and epidemic diseases in the fur-trade era, Marano concluded that those persons who had been executed as witikos were killed for reasons having nothing to do with any compulsion to eat flesh, but rather, were regarded as witikos *post mortem* by their executioners in justification of euthanasia, senilicide, triage homicide, and the prevention of famine crises. Marano dismissed the windigo psychosis as a fabrication of anthropologists who accepted the historical windigo reports at face value and suggested windigo was created as a symbol of starvation and cannibalism, as manifest in persons who posed a liability to the survival of Algonquian bands. By taking a skeptical reading of the documentary sources on witiko, Marano suggested that reports made by the Algonquians themselves could not be trusted in their entirety, and furthermore, the seeming lack of any concrete documentary evidence by Euro-Canadian eyewitnesses supported the claim that the witiko condition was a fabrication of the Algonquians and windigo psychosis a fabrication of academics. Marano’s seminal work was initially praised (see M. Jean Black, “Comment on Windigo Psychosis,” *Current Anthropology* 23 [1982]: 385–412), has since become highly influential, and remains today one of the most widely read and accepted writings on the topic. For instance, see Waldram, *Revenge of the Windigo*, 18, 194.
- 80 In a characteristically articulate paper, Robert Brightman challenged Marano’s thesis as being an insufficient explanation for the historical witiko accounts. Although there were certainly instances where Algonquians had been executed for reasons having nothing to do with cannibal compulsions, Brightman noted there were a number of instances where Euro-Canadians (such as George Nelson, Alexander Henry, and David Thompson) delivered firsthand eyewitness testimony where the behavior of Algonquian persons identified as windigos matched the reports given by Algonquians themselves (“Windigo in the Material World,” 346–51). Brightman referred to witiko as a psychiatric

- disorder rather than a psychosis and coined the phrase *windigo performance* to describe witiko as a type of culturally mediated theatrical performance motivated by fatalistic resignation to witiko ideology and the transformative power of dreams, cannibalism, and sorcery (373).
- 81 Note, for instance, the curiously absent references to Brightman’s article (“Windigo in the Material World”) in Waldram’s literature review in “Revenge of the Windigo,” 190–211. Also see note 2.
- 82 The decision to use the boundary of Alberta was mainly arbitrary, and was only influenced by my own knowledge of the region, the relative lack of commentary on the witiko phenomenon in that region, my familial connection with the native residents of that place, and a desire to make a contribution of a relatively obscure facet of history to the province of Alberta. I understand that the boundary has no bearing on witiko ideology, other than, perhaps, the local belief that witiko could be caused by dreams of deceased relatives, an idea which, to my knowledge, has not been found or discussed in any other region as of yet.
- 83 For instance, see Carlson, “Reviving the Wihtikôw,” 115–43.
- 84 Marano, “Windigo Psychosis,” *Current Anthropology*.
- 85 Leonard and Whalen, *On the North Trail*, 77–78.
- 86 Robert Bell, “The ‘Medicine-Man’, or, Indian and Eskimo notions of medicine” (paper read before the Bathurst and Rideau Medical Association, Ottawa, 20 January 1886. Published in Montreal), 9.
- 87 LaBissioniere, *Providence Trail Blazers*, 74–75. I must thank Norm Blaskovitz, of Edmonton, for originally bringing this case to my attention.
- 88 Waldram, *Revenge of the Windigo*, 18. In fact, I have garnered from historical records the names of six people who were allegedly hospitalized for a witiko “condition.” A colleague of mine attempted to access these records, but was refused by the Provincial Archives of Alberta (Shawn Smallman, personal communication, 2007). A discussion on this material may be forthcoming.
- 89 Vandersteene, “Some Woodland Cree Traditions,” 55–63; Brightman, “Windigo in the Material World,” 346–51.
- 90 PAA, acc. 70.387, file A. 281/5, box 53, 1896. Emphasis added. Francois Auger was a relative of Napanin.
- 91 Ibid. and “Wapiska Lakes,” *Edmonton Bulletin*, 16 April 1896.
- 92 This Cree elder, whom I deliberately have not named, was a resident of Trout Lake who purportedly lived to be over 100 years of age. The eyewitness related this story to Cardinal when Cardinal was a child. I have discussed this story with Cardinal on two occasions: 16 April 2005 and 20 June 2008.
- 93 When I asked Cardinal if “the witiko” had any children, he was uncertain. But prior to the interview recording, he mentioned the names of four people who were (or may have been) his children: “John,” “Francis,” “Edward,” and “Sam.” Three of these names bear similarities to the names of the children listed by Catherine Auger on her Métis scrip application: “Jean,” “Francois,” “Edouard,” and “(Adam) Peter.” Personal communication, 16 April 2005 and LAC, RG 15, vol. 1334, reel C-14946, “Auger, Catherine.”
- 94 With reference to the illness that made the witiko “sick,” Cardinal stated that it had been caused by “bad medicine” that had been put upon him by another individual. This medicine began to affect him on the trip between Wabasca and Trout Lake. Personal communication, 16 April 2005 and 20 June 2008.

- 95 The witiko, according to Cardinal, had been bound hand and foot with ropes that were tied on the other end to rows of logs that formed the base of the floor of the cabin. Personal communication, 16 April 2005.
- 96 Cardinal stated that when the witiko increased in size, a sound could be heard, a “snapping” or “popping” sound that was similar to the sound of ice breaking. Personal communication, 16 April 2005 and 20 June 2008.
- 97 As noted above, bear grease was administered as a traditional cure that would cause the “ice” in the chest or viscera to become expelled. The notion that this “witiko” expelled “paint” suggests perhaps that the cure may have been efficacious for a short duration, marked by the witiko becoming slimmer, but was ultimately ineffective, as the ice in the viscera was not removed from the body.
- 98 I am uncertain who the nephew was, or whom he was the nephew of.
- 99 According to Clint Westman, an anthropologist who also interviewed Cardinal about the witiko incident for a different study, the reference to a “plane” was an anachronistic story device used to indicate the urgency of the situation, and should not be an indicator that the account is inaccurate. Personal communication, 2007.
- 100 Cited from Carlson, “Reviving the Wíhtikôw,” 133–34. Emphasis added. On 20 June 2008, Cardinal guided me to the location of the grave. Cardinal stated that a fire had swept through the region in the 1940s and had burned away all traces of the gravesite, which was previously marked with a barbed-wire fence around the perimeter. Personal communication, 20 June 2008.
- 101 Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*.
- 102 Brightman, “Windigo in the Material World,” 351.
- 103 In other words, in a context where there was conventional food on hand.
- 104 LAC, RG 13, vol. 1417, file 138, “Ka-ki-si-kut-chin ‘Swift Runner,’” 1879.
- 105 Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 85–88.
- 106 Marano, “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis, 124–35.
- 107 *Saskatchewan Herald*, 9 February 1880; cf. PAA, Missions de la Congregation du Oblats de Marie Imaculéé, No. 70, Juin 1880, Oblate Collection, and Colin A. Thompson, *Swift Runner* (Calgary, 1984) (emphasis added).
- 108 Brightman, “Windigo in the Material World,” 353.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 There exists a small number of known documented witiko cases in which Algonquians reported, allegedly from their own firsthand experiences, instances in which band members or relatives committed cannibalism in a nonfamine context (see Brightman, “Windigo in the Material World,” 351–61). If these reports are accepted as factual, then windigo cannibalism was a historical reality. Nevertheless, these cases likely cannot be verified by any outside means, making the Swift Runner incident the most compelling case to make the claim for windigo anthropophagy. As Brightman correctly argued, cases involving windigo cannibalism compose a small percentage of the entire known body of case studies, and such cases, involving starvation and alleged homicides, by their very nature, would not likely be reported or, more importantly, recorded. Essentially, the argument for windigo cannibalism is drawn from inferences, if Algonquian testimony is accepted as factual. Again, Marano’s hypothesis may be a proper explanation for some cases, but one should not summarily disregard Algonquian testimonies because one surmises that these claims are devoid

- of objectivity, in cohort with the extant firsthand Euro-Canadian eyewitness documentation. Irrefutable evidence for windigo cannibalism is still required through the means of historical inquiry.
- 111 In other words, a firsthand account delivered by someone who claimed to have eaten human flesh in a contextually unwarranted context that can be confirmed by external documentation or evidence. In this instance, Swift Runner’s testimony is supported by evidence delivered by the NWMP (see LAC, RG 13, vol. 1417, file 138, “Ka-ki-si-kut-chin ‘Swift Runner,’” 1879) and also by a photograph that shows the cannibalized remains of Swift Runner’s family (fig. 3). See LAC, George M. Dawson/PA-051141 and LAC, PA-051144.
- 112 Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 64–65; Professor Shawn Smallman, a colleague at Portland State University has also identified two additional cases of this type (*personal communication*, 2008).
- 113 “Supreme Court,” *Edmonton Bulletin*, 22 October 1887; LAC, RG 18, vol. 152, file 271–80, 1896; *Edmonton Bulletin*, 6 April 1896, 1; Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 64, 93–103.
- 114 Brightman, “Windigo in the Material World,” 369.
- 115 Marano suggested that both Moostoos and Napanin were suffering from acute kidney failure, which in turn caused edema; see “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis, 170–71. Acute renal failure typically results in coma and death within days if untreated; Napanin announced his witiko condition *two weeks before* his swelling was reported; Moostoos was talking about “going windigo” months before the swelling. It is, nevertheless, outside the scope of this article to suggest any link between a specific pattern of physiological illness (in six curiously similar witiko cases) and the witiko condition. A discussion on this topic shall be forthcoming at a later date.
- 116 See Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*; cf. Ruben G. Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, vol. 8 (Cleveland, 1901), 31–33.
- 117 See Teicher, *Windigo Psychosis*, 93–103; Marano, “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis, 135–48; and Carlson, “Reviving the Wíhtikôw,” 154–81.
- 118 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 20 April 1899. Emphasis added. A statement made by Corporal Phillips of the NWMP, preliminary investigator in the case, on 30 March 1899, substantiates the report. See Marano, “Windigo Psychosis,” thesis, 139.
- 119 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 27 April 1899 (supplement).
- 120 “Lesser Slave Lake,” *Edmonton Bulletin*, 15 March 1897.
- 121 Preston, “The Witiko: Algonkian Knowledge and Whiteman Knowledge.”
- 122 Witiko may have been a species of what Ian Hacking refers to as a “transient mental illness,” specifically, an “illness” that occupies a specific sociocultural “niche.” In this category, in “Western” society are anorexia nervosa, bulimia, dissociative identity disorder, and dissociative fugue. Using case studies of fugue disorder in the late nineteenth century, Hacking discusses how transient mental illnesses are not, strictly speaking, true universal mental disorders (although they have real negative consequences), but rather are social constructions that are generated and sustained by the conditions peculiar to their niche. When the conditions of the niche are no longer present, the illness loses reinforcement from the cultural conditions that generated it, causing it to decrease in frequency, and eventually disappear altogether. Regardless, what is immediately problematic with regard to witiko is the fact that there is no (as of yet) examined record in any medical literature documenting a witiko case

from the perspective of a medical doctor, making the classification of witiko as a transient mental illness, or any definable illness understood by Western doctors for that manner, highly contentious. Although the apparent disappearance of witiko cases in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seems to be in congruence with Hacking's postulation, no conclusions can be drawn here. Ian Hacking, *Mad Travellers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illness* (Charlottesville, VA, 1998).

- 123 McGee, "Windigo Down East," 112.
- 124 Brown and Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, 171. I suggest here that Algonquian etiological theory be taken into consideration; this, however, does not rule out the possibility that *some* persons exhibiting witiko behavior may have been suffering from illnesses understood in Western medicine or psychology, such as paranoid schizophrenia. However, this hypothesis cannot explain the entirety of the phenomenon.
- 125 R. L. Gregory, "On How Little Information Controls So Much Behaviour," in *Towards a Theoretical Biology*, vol. 1, ed. C. H. Waddington (Chicago, 1969) and "Information Processing in Biological and Artificial Brains," in *Principles and Practice of Bionics*, ed. H. E. Von Gierke, W. D. Kiedel, and H. L. Oestricher (Slough, England, 1970), 73–80.
- 126 Quoted in Brown and Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, 90.