The Wiitiko:
Algonquian Knowledge and Whiteman Interest

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"I have known a windigo; he was my cook in the tundra. He made excellent bread, but I cared less for his meat sauces." (Rousseau, 1952).

This paper constitutes an opposition between satire and scholarship, mediated by hope and moderated by brevity. The title suggests that the Algonquian-speaking Indians have considerable knowledge of the Wiitiko, but that Whitemen have not yet been successful in making coherent sense, in their own terms, of this phenomenon. This paper is a preliminary essay on the structure of knowledge; Algonquian knowledge and Algonquianists' knowledge are compared on a common topic.

The monstrous person of the Wiitiko is commonly characterized as a fearsome and depraved cannibal whose appearance sometimes approximates that of the Sasquatch, and who inhabits the forests of eastern subarctic Canada and the pages of the Algonquianist literature. Algonquianists have worked bravely without first-hand experience or evidence, describing and (usually at a safe remove from the Boreal Forest) trying to analytically categorize and explain the phenomena. Why are we so interested in a phenomenon for which the evidence is exiguous and the potential for further evidence is unlikely? It is entirely reasonable in principle, for we are interested in many things (gods, spirits, souls, deep structures, and history, for example) with similar problems of evidence. Buy why the Wiitiko?

Are we erecting a myth of inhuman savagery in order to rationalize colonial dominance over "our" natives? Men have long been defined as soul-less beasts fit for the labour of colonial empire and perhaps for salvation. Cannibals have been particularly apt subjects for this interpretation of natives. But this century has produced strong counter-interpretations, and we are more likely to find self-castigation for introducing savage conditions to the native populations, whereby the Wiitiko, for instance, would be really Our Fault (see Bishop 1973) instead of an indigenous beast. One consistently notable thing about our writings on the Wiitiko, is that they are full of drama.

Bishop has argued for a dramatic rise in Wiitiko cannibalism, caused by a dramatic increase in the incidence of starvation, in turn caused by a dramatic drop in the carrying capacity of the human ecology, caused by a dramatic increase in killing of large game to feed European colonial agents and Indian migrants into the fur trade. This is only a superficially plausible explanation, since some cannibalism may in some instances be caused by a single materialist aspect of starvation. But the Wiitiko phenomena constitute a more treacherous problem. We are not here faced with a simple task of filling empty stomachs, but rather with the elaboration of an implicitly symbolic system of belief. It is implicitly symbolic because what scholars regard as symbolic phenomena (a psychotic episode of "insatiable craving" or a giant, hairy wildman in the bush, stalking human food), the
Algonquian-speaking Indians regard as in some sense constituting real persons and events in the environment. Bishop could be ecologically correct (although Waisberg 1975 provides a rather contrary argument) but he is probably historically, culturally, and psychologically wrong. A major reason for this is that he fails to consider the ecology of mind.

But when we read what others have said about the mind in relation to Wiitiko, we find some speculative excesses of 'mentalism' that make me wonder how we can get ourselves into such a conceptual muddle. Fogelson finds his drama in emotional states of "insatiable craving" and "antisocial appetite" (1965: 77), and although he thinks that there are some "subtle psychological implications" (1965: 78) I was unable to find any such discussion. Rather perversely, I have abstracted from his paper what can be found as the basis for a Psychological Theory of Wiitiko:

1. It occurs without starvation, as a group frenzy.
2. It occurs at the point of extreme starvation, as a solitary act.
3. It is an evil spirit, or possession by the evil spirit.
4. It is a human with a malevolent soul, or a person who has lost humanity.
5. It must be burned to ashes, to prevent regeneration.
6. It may be killed with an axe blow in the head.
7. These people are not molested, but rather are pitied.
8. It occurs only in men.
9. It occurs in women.
10. It is a mental disorder.
11. It is a transformation of being to a non-human order.
12. He remains, solitary, in the bush.
13. They live in lodges, at some distance from the rest of the tribe.
14. "He lives among the savages like a timid head of game" (Kohl 1860: 356).
15. "Strangers become metamorphosed in her eyes into wild animals—wolves, bears, lynxes" (Saindon 1933: 11).
16. "His family around him look like luscious beavers heavy with fat" (Landes 1938: 25).
17. One becomes Wiitiko through a vision quest, starvation, or sorcery.
18. Wiitiko belief is a case of Freudian displacement of aggression.

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19. Wiitiko belief is a case of Freudian oral fixation.

20. The belief determines the behaviour.

21. The behaviour determines the belief.

22. and so on, and on.

It is not surprising that Fogelson decides to try to differentiate types of Wiitiko. What is surprising is that his first illustrative case of Wiitiko does not involve cannibalism in ideas, motives, or acts. Therefore;

23. Wiitiko does not necessarily include aspects of cannibalism.

Clearly, the plot has thickened. Wiitiko is not necessarily a cannibal; he may be only a murderer of his fellows, urged on by dreams, melancholy, and brooding; still clearly bestial, but possibly manifesting the desperate plight of the colonial oppressed. Perhaps our interest is a mixture of liberal guilt and the less self-aware motives of our colonial past, atavistically urging us to cherchez les bêtes.

But I think that there is a more likely and important sort of atavism to question in our motives. Are we simply finding the familiar in exotic settings? Ethnography, diffusion studies, and other work in the first half of this century has been characterized as a search for cultural inventories set in terms of our own traits, or at least our own categories and concepts. And the wild man of the wilderness, often a hairy and solitary being who lurks just out of sight, is one of the oldest and most persistent folk beliefs in Western culture. Faced with a New World, and a New Wilderness, we might be expected to show considerable interest in a New Wildman. We have certainly carried with us a traditional perception of primeval or virgin forest, as embodying the opposition of nature to culture. The boreal forest winter is perceived as a continuous blast fraught with dangers, "...a region so harsh in its natural aspects as to affright the sensibilities of some who feel its desolation, yet exerting an almost irresistible allurement upon the wandering instincts of others..." (Speck 1935: 33). But we do not have good evidence that the Indians view it in this way, and some strong suggestions to the contrary (Preston 1975, Chapters 5, 8). The separation of nature and culture, and the notion of the forest as magically inimical to man, are probably much more Western than Algonquian, and so we may chronically and uncritically find these familiar aspects in new forests, whether or not they are there for the Indians who have occupied the area.

Not only are we likely to seek inimical wildmen in the bush, since this is a part of the traditional knowledge that we bring to the new situation; we are also following the dictates of our intellectual milieu of inquiry, testing existing knowledge (the familiar) against new data (the exotic settings). There is, however, a new intellectual milieu of the past few decades, less intuitive and more analytical, less data oriented and more concerned with logical parsimony. Fogelson's model building is a case in point. Model building may be in the form of algebraic equations or flow charts, structural paradigms or cognitive frames, or it may be more essayistic in its use, as with Freudian
interpretations.

But to me, at least, models of Wiitiko are a retrograde step in approaching the problem. They are too facile, or have a superficial plausibility, because they are expressions of our own ecology of mind, too little a refraction of the phenomenal world of Algonquians. Or to put it another way, they are too easy to be real. I'll half-seriously volunteer an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONS</th>
<th>Wiitiko</th>
<th>Humans</th>
<th>Trickster</th>
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<tr>
<td>VALUES</td>
<td>evil-natured</td>
<td>self-con-</td>
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<td>long-ago</td>
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<td>self-aware,</td>
<td>innocence,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>aggression</td>
<td>understanding</td>
<td>blundering</td>
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<tr>
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<td>meat-animals</td>
<td>acquaintances</td>
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<td></td>
<td>moss, rot</td>
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<td>ordinary</td>
<td>unformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITUATION</td>
<td>danger</td>
<td>safety</td>
<td>accidental</td>
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These components seem to me to be appropriately arranged, and I have set Trickster into the matrix because I thought he was good leavening for an otherwise ghastly representation of the world; he balanced domains in a more satisfying fashion. In this arrangement, the cultural domain mediates between the wild and the natural domains, or in more obviously Western terms, society is perched uneasily between Hell and Eden. The model is suggestive, but of extremely modest explanatory value.

In a similar vein, I offer a more desperate, schematic, psychiatric plot with a bit of structure thrown in for effect:

The Windigo psychosis is an Algonquian re-enactment of Freud's primal parricide. Freud has told us that what began in relation to the father is completed in relation to the group, and to the extent that the primal parricide is psychologically real, the lure of the Wiitiko for our psyche is simply our search for our lost, primal selves, lurking just out of sight of society and waiting for an unguarded moment when we may snatch a recapitulation of the Oedipal fête. We imagine the Wiitiko, lost in space and time, in the Boreal Wilderness, waiting to grab the next hapless Algonquian that he can get his brutish hands on. Where has the Wiitiko come from? Why, he was from humans to begin with, but became separated, and liminal, and then...Oops! Wiitiko has

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inverted the Turner-Gennep sequence and is reincorporating human society, piece by piece. And fecalizing it.

Freud's ghost should be smiling at the scene, to see old society being eaten by the young-primeval natural man. Oedipus wins again. But the Indians lose again. The plot is absurd, if rationally plausible; not worth a pile of Wiitiko droppings (which is the outcome of this little explanatory model), and leaves us where this paper began, wondering why we write so much, and make such a mess, on a topic about which we know so little.

Fernandez (1971) has suggested that human beings feel the press of their own domestication, and that this feeling tends to bring out the beast in every man, causing us to relate in symbolically significant ways to beasts "out there" in the world. Perhaps Fernandez has penetrated to a subtle motive in Western minds, but what about Algonquian minds? The Wiitiko problem remains a frustration; we think and read, and reflect, and yet cannot get ahold of it. Wiitiko remains just out of sight, and remains a failure of the intellectual enterprise. We are subjectively drawn to the problem, and then we back off into method and distance from the bush, the feelings, the culture, the phenomenal world of the Algonquians. What is back in the bush?

If we are not likely to get first hand evidence, there is still plenty of secondary evidence to be obtained. Many Algonquians are both knowledgeable and interested in the topic, and their words may inform the problem significantly. Beyond this, we have a vast collection of oral tradition that is already written down, relating directly to the Wiitiko and also relating indirectly, depicting notions of hardship, crisis, loss of control, starvation, metamorphosis, and other components of the symbolic system that contains Wiitiko.

Interpretation of the evidence requires at least two approaches: we need sufficient self-awareness of our own symbolic system to be able to differentiate our subtle expectations from our appropriate interpretations of the Algonquian system. A good place to start is with our own wild man heritage, for which there is good literature (Dudley & Novak 1972). For example, White has explained that our notion of the beast within everyman is in all likelihood a transformation of the old notion of the wildman of the wilderness, more or less displaced, as the wilderness becomes known, to the interior of everyman. Fernandez' idea of "the beast within" then appears to be as much a (Western) historical artifact as the older wild man, and must therefore be just as suspect as our basis for cross-cultural explanation. And it is worth noting that this same notion is the basis for Freudians, Jungians, and "other contemporary culture critics who, like Levi-Strauss, lament the triumph of technology over civilized man and dream of the release of the lost child or the noble savage within us". (White 1972: 7).

The second approach is one that proceeds from a facility with the use of imagery in the expression of emotions. This ability is well-developed in literary traditions. For instance, Blackwood's memorable account of The Wendigo (1910) is fictional, but conveys our Western sense of the Wiitiko with astonishing accuracy and completeness. Blackwood's resources were his literate and imaginative mind, and information given him by a friend who had worked in the fur-trade in the Eastern subarctic. One wonders what he might have been able to do if he had spent a period in the north as participant observer, and had been familiar with the ethnological writings (a more accurate term than ethnological literature) on

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the area. This suggests that literate skills, and a poetic mind, could actually save us from 'mentalistic' distortions if combined with a critical, comprehensive, ethnographic grasp of the evidence to be interpreted.

When we have accomplished this much, perhaps it will be time for models and structural comparisons, and psycho-sexual interpretations.