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# Culturally Conceptualizing Trauma: The Windigo in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*

VIKKI VISVIS

**I**NFLUENTIAL TRAUMA THEORIST Cathy Caruth suggests that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (*Trauma* 11). However, despite Caruth’s optimistic vision of psychopathology as a vehicle for cross-cultural dialogue, the theoretical formulations of trauma in current theories tend to privilege Eurocentric discourses and thus are inherently founded on a principle of elision. This Eurocentric perspective is apparent in the works of individual critics such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, both of whom rely on a Western psychoanalytic tradition. Caruth is heavily indebted to Sigmund Freud’s insights in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* while Herman’s work is particularly informed by the theories of Pierre Janet. This commitment to Western psychoanalytic paradigms is apparent not only in the works of individual critics but also in those of theorists who have historicized the concept of trauma. Ruth Leys’s genealogy of trauma and testimony is exclusively informed by concepts derived from Western psychoanalysis, medicine, and literary theory. Similarly, Allan Young’s Foucauldian approach to trauma, which historicizes the specific discourses from which various psychological forms of trauma have been constructed, relies exclusively on North American and European paradigms. Patrick J. Bracken points to this tendency in current discourses of trauma, recognizing that the “supposition is that the forms of mental disorder that have been found in the West, and described by Western psychiatry, are basically the same as those found elsewhere” (41). He posits that “in non-Western settings, idioms of distress are likely to be quite different” (55) and ultimately encourages a deconstructive hermeneutics that reveals discourses of trauma as forms of “ethnopsychiatry: a particular, culturally based way of thinking about and responding to states of madness and distress” (40). This penchant has also been recognized by cultural critics of Indigenous societies, such as medical anthropologist

James B. Waldram. Waldram acknowledges this development in his study of mental health in North American Native cultures, suggesting that "reactions to . . . traumatizing events are shaped by culture, yet cultural analyses of the phenomenon are sorely lacking" (221).

Joseph Boyden's novel *Three Day Road*, which contends with the traumatic event of the First World War, responds to this Eurocentric approach to trauma in a literary context. It does so by conceptualizing dimensions of trauma from a First Nations perspective, particularly through the figure of the Windigo, a cannibalistic human, monster, or spirit, informed in this context by Cree and Ojibway beliefs. *Three Day Road* reformulates trauma by depending on the twin discourses surrounding the Windigo: namely, its status as a distinctly Native "sign" and its place in Western appropriations as an indication of Native savagery. Both discourses are used to conceptualize trauma as a layered construction or what Michel de Certeau would call a "palimpsestic site" (144); specifically, the Windigo as an Indigenous sign and racially charged Western construction reconceptualizes manifestations of trauma as an overwhelming event, a psychopathological response, and an act of cultural imperialism, while it also reconceptualizes the ideological underpinnings of these cultural traumas, particularly the discourse of savagery. At times, the reconfiguration of these dimensions of trauma is accomplished through discursive identification: manifestations of trauma as catastrophe, mental wound, or cultural imperialism are reformulated as devouring Windigos and thus are culturally reconsidered in accordance with a distinctly First Nations cosmology. At other times, this reconceptualization is achieved through discursive subversion: the discourse of savagery implicitly associated with the Windigo in Western constructions, and often relied upon to rationalize the cultural trauma of assimilation in Indigenous societies, is strategically inverted so that its links to violence and abjection are associated with white colonial culture in the form of the First World War and not exclusively with Aboriginal primitivism.<sup>1</sup> Both strategies reconfigure trauma in a way that allows for the possibility of bringing Caruth's intercultural vision to fruition; however, before this aim can be accomplished, Boyden's novel suggests, our assumptions regarding the underpinnings of trauma need to be reconsidered.

## The Windigo as Native "Sign": Trauma as Catastrophe, Mental Wound, and Western Imperialism

Configurations of the Windigo as a Native sign are specific to Algonquian societies. Robert Brightman clarifies that although the Windigo's "constitutive meanings and practices . . . may resemble those of other societies and other times, the mode of integration is distinctly Algonquian and, within this grouping, limited to the cultures of people now identified as Cree, Montagnais, Naskapi, and Ojibwa-Saulteaux" (362). As an Algonquian construction, the Windigo is predominantly offered to us as a narrative; in Waldram's terminology, "what did exist, simply put, was a wealth of stories" in northern Algonquian societies (194). Joseph Boyden's work appears to be indebted to a particular Windigo narrative, namely, James Stevens's account of the Fiddler case in *Killing the Shaman*. This narrative, which was endorsed by the Sandy Lake Oji-Cree community, tells of Jack Fiddler, an ogimaa (chief and shaman) of the Sucker doodem among the Anishinaabe in what is now northwestern Ontario. He is described by Sergeant Daisy B. Smith as "very old, and appears to be troubled with faintness. He falls down and his heart and pulse are very weak on such occasions. . . . He had laid for hours in these spells, and it is with the greatest difficulty that we have aroused him" (Fiddler and Stevens 81). According to his son-in-law's testimony, a female victim suffering from Windigo possession was brought to a Sucker encampment and underwent a ritual killing performed by Jack and his younger brother, Joseph, during which "they got the string in one knot or noose, and strangled her" (89). A hunter named Norman Rae, who witnessed the event (74), informed the Mounties, and Jack and Joseph Fiddler were arrested in 1906 for the alleged murder of a Windigo. Jack Fiddler's suicide while in police custody marked the beginning of the imposition of Canadian law on the Sucker People. Until then, they had been among the last Aboriginal societies living in North America completely under their own law and customs. Jack and Joseph Fiddler's role as Windigo killers, their imprisonment, Jack Fiddler's jailhouse death, and the subsequent loss of traditional Indigenous values are all echoed in Boyden's representation of Niska's father, the tribe shaman. Like Jack and Joseph Fiddler, Niska's father strangles a woman and child who have gone Windigo; he dies in custody; and his death exposes the increasing cultural imposition of Western values. Similarly, Jack Fiddler's tendency to suffer from

“spells” of fainting and unconsciousness are manifested in Niska’s own “visions.”

Boyden’s novel not only relies on the Fiddler tale to inform elements of plot, characterization, and historical context, but also gestures to the darkness associated with the Windigo in Algonquian societies. As Lou Marano explains, “among the eighteenth-century Cree of Hudson Bay, the Witiko appears to have been an Algonkian deity of evil principle. This malign God and his minions were a source of menace and danger to humans and had always to be propitiated” (422). This evil is manifested in the Windigo’s cannibalistic nature and heart of ice, and in its physical characteristics. Basil Johnston’s description of the Windigo’s appearance evokes this inherent horror:

The Weendigo was gaunt to the point of emaciation, its desiccated skin pulled tautly over its bones. With its bones pushing out against its skin, its complexion the ash gray of death, and its eyes pushed back deep into their sockets, the Weendigo looked like a gaunt skeleton recently disinterred from the grave. What lips it had were tattered and bloody. . . . Unclean and suffering from suppurations of the flesh, the Weendigo gave off a strange and eerie odor of decay and decomposition, of death and corruption. (221)

Raymond Fogelson suggests that the Windigo also induces fear because of its capacity to possess others and transform them into cannibalistic monsters (84) — a change that leads to a degenerate madness primarily characterized by homicidal thoughts; as S. Parker notes, “the individual begins to see those round him (often close family members) as fat, luscious animals which he desires to devour” (603). Upon consuming its victims, the Windigo develops a voraciousness that cannot be curbed. Because this “craving will not leave [the Windigo],” critics such as Parker concede that Native societies determined “he must be killed” (603). As Boyden’s representation of this kind of Windigo killing reveals (38–42), the impetus for transformation is not only Windigo possession; starvation pressures can also lead to Windigo metamorphosis.

The dark connotations associated with the Windigo lend themselves to a correlation with trauma, and, indeed, the connection between the Windigo and trauma has precedents. As an object of theoretical study, the Windigo has been approached psychoanalytically and has been linked to trauma. Our understanding of trauma is generally predicated on two terms: *catastrophe* and *wound*. The first, *catastrophe*, refers to

the site of trauma; that is, an event “outside the range of usual human experience” as defined by the American Psychiatric Association. This conceptual model informs, in part, the connection between the Windigo and trauma. Marano argues that colonization and food shortages during fur trading periods in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created a crisis in Native societies that was inherently traumatic, a catastrophe that was ultimately manifested as the Windigo belief system: “I contend that the *windigo* belief complex was the Northern Algonkian manifestation of the collective witch fear that is predictable in traumatized societies, not an obsessive cannibalistic psychosis of individuals” (440). The catastrophe of the colonial encounter, Marano suggests, was a trauma that presented as Windigo paranoia; however, trauma is not simply another word for disaster. Trauma is, secondly, derived from the Greek word for “wound,” specifically a “wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 3). This mental wound has acquired the additional name Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the psychopathology of which is defined as a dissociative response, sometimes delayed, “which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth, *Trauma* 4). Symptoms of Windigo psychosis are implicitly linked to trauma in that both have been described as dissociative disorders; as Morton Teicher suggests in his study of the Windigo, “here the element of dissociation is clearly at work” (88). The compulsiveness inherent in trauma also appears in Windigo psychosis, particularly the repetitive and “compulsive desire to eat human flesh” (5). Moreover, Waldram and Teicher describe Windigo mentality as “hysteria” (Waldram 208) or a “hysterical reaction” (Teicher 90), which is, of course, a nineteenth-century configuration of trauma.

In Boyden’s novel, however, the Windigo is not simply a correlative to traumatic catastrophes and wounds; rather, the Windigo counters Eurocentric assumptions, particularly those implicit in current theories of trauma. Formulations of trauma and traumatic testimony in recent studies invariably privilege Western culture, a tendency that analysts of Indigenous societies in North America have begun to identify. Robert Robin et al. acknowledge the absence of trauma research in Native American groups (243), and Spero Manson et al. reach a similar conclu-

sion, noting that “little systematic study of trauma, and PTSD in particular, has been conducted in these communities” (256). Increasingly, First Nations critics and writers are responding to the need for further cultural specificity in the study of trauma. In *Postcolonial Psychology*, Eduardo and Bonnie Duran recognize the Western psychological worldview as limited and as “in no way address[ing] any system of cognition except its own” (17). Their work exposes assumptions inherent in Indigenous cultures, particularly the importance of dreams, and through a cross-cultural hermeneutics, incorporating First Nations traditions and Jungian psychoanalysis, it addresses treatment options for trauma. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart stresses the need for further cultural specificity; she confirms that “the limited diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder . . . is inadequate in capturing the influence and attributes of Native trauma. . . . Native-specific literature calls for the need to develop precise culturally-based trauma theory and interventions” (8). Developing Brave Heart’s research, Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux and Magdalena Smolewski outline a syndrome specific to the residential school experience that they call HTT (Historic Trauma Transmission). This is a generational, intergenerational, or multigenerational model that shows how traumatic memory can be transmitted through narrative and how trauma itself can be inflicted through asocial behaviour learned from previous generations (76). Native discourses of trauma continue to extend this research. Lloyd Hawkeye Robinson, for example, interrogates these early findings by critiquing Duran and Duran, Brave Heart, Wesley-Esquimaux, and Smolewski for developing paradigms of historic trauma that support a reductive pan-Indianism (12-13).

Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* responds to critiques of Eurocentrism and pan-Indianism by offering a culturally specific model for conceptualizing trauma as a catastrophic event and mental wound. This configuration of trauma acts as a form of cultural reconsideration; rather than approaching trauma strictly in accordance with Western psychoanalytic models or universal Native terms, Boyden relies on a First Nations paradigm in the form of the Algonquian Windigo. In effect, the Windigo acts as a Native sign that is specific, in this context, to the Cree and Ojibway beliefs of Algonquian societies. As Brightman concedes, “an alternative to the material windigo is a semiotic one, taking this . . . term to refer to a socially shared sign phenomena . . . distinctly Algonquian” (362).

The Windigo in Joseph Boyden's novel points directly to the traumatic event of the First World War and its impact on Cree snipers Elijah Whiskeyjack and Xavier Bird. The novel configures their war-time environment in a culturally distinct way, namely, in the form of a cannibalizing Windigo. The First World War is certainly not the only traumatic event that affects the Algonquian community in the novel. *Three Day Road* engages in an epic sweep of the historical catastrophes that influenced Canada's Indigenous populations, such as the fur trading industry and the residential school system. Readers are encouraged not to consider these traumatic events in mutual exclusion. In fact, the residential school is a foundational trauma (in LaCapra's sense) for Elijah, and it distinguishes him from Xavier in that it contributes to his violent response to the war and his gradual degeneration into madness. Like the workings of HTT in Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski's analysis, trauma in the novel "is understood as a cluster of traumatic events and as a causal factor operating in many different areas of impact" (65). However, Boyden's research into Ojibwa First World War hero Francis Pegahmagabow inspired the novel, and, as Boyden recognizes in his acknowledgments, the text pays tribute to "the Native soldiers who fought in the Great War" (353). Pegahmagabow even makes a brief cameo when news of "Peggy's" feats reaches Xavier and Elijah (187). The novel also reconfigures familiar historical events, such as the battles at Vimy and Passchendaele, and situates them as cultural traumas that impacted Canada's Indigenous communities. In keeping with traditional Western representations, the First World War is situated as a site of lunacy and mass destruction: "The wemistikosiw had gone mad with war, and had invented tools to kill each other that were beyond belief" (272). However, rather than conceptualizing the European war effort as a general phenomenon, the novel figuratively depicts it as an implacable and ravenous Windigo that consumes the lives of soldiers and civilians: "It has sucked the life from Saint-Eloi and left it like this, has moved on in search of more bodies to try and fill its impossible hunger" (67). Historical catastrophe, specifically the mass loss of human life, is, then, represented as anathema in a First Nations context.

*Three Day Road* also relies on the notion of Windigo psychosis to reconfigure the psychopathology of trauma as combat neuroses based on Algonquian cosmology. Combat neuroses or "shell shock" is a configuration of trauma that began in England and the United States after the



First World War and reached a peak after the Vietnam War (Herman 9). In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman offers a summary of its psychopathology in relation to the symptoms exhibited by soldiers during the First World War:

Under conditions of unremitting exposure to the horrors of trench warfare, men began to break down in shocking numbers. Confined and rendered helpless, subjected to constant threat of annihilation, and forced to witness the mutilation and death of their comrades without any hope of reprieve, many soldiers began to act like hysterical women. They screamed and wept uncontrollably. They froze and could not move. They became mute and unresponsive. They lost their memory and capacity to feel. . . . Military psychiatrists were forced to acknowledge that the symptoms of shell shock were due to psychological trauma. (20)

The degenerative psychological effects of the First World War have, of course, been explored in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*. However, Joseph Boyden does not consider this catastrophe from the traditional Anglo-Canadian perspective that is apparent in works such as Findley's but as an Algonquian, specifically Cree and Ojibway, experience.

The novel does this by extending the metaphor of the devouring Windigo to suggest that shell shock and the irrationality of war are a kind of "war madness" that like the Windigo "swallows [its victims] whole" (249) by consuming the minds of men. In effect, the distortions of memory exhibited by both Elijah and Xavier are figuratively represented as cannibalistic agencies eating them from the inside out. Xavier's narrative is composed of a series of flashbacks that he attempts but fails to resist: "The struggle to keep memory away is no longer worth it" (24). Similarly, Elijah must contend with unwanted, gruesome nightmares detailing the effects of warfare: "Elijah tells me of his dreams of Graves on fire, waving to him. Elijah sees and smells his blackened body" (261). These dreams conform, in part, to Freud's interpretation of the traumatic nightmare in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Through his observations of soldiers who suffered overwhelming experiences in the First World War, Freud recognized that his patients' dreams were not symbolic, as he had theorized in *The Interpretation of Dreams*; that is, they were not obscure references that concealed repressed motives and latent desires. Instead, Freud acknowledged that the traumatic nightmare discloses actual occurrences. As Elijah's narrative of Graves suggests, this literal

representation of the traumatic event is also a prominent feature of his oneiric visions of the war.

Even though Elijah's traumatic nightmares are literal in the ways that Western, Freudian psychoanalysis suggests, they also conform to the dreams and visions typical of Windigo possession and, thus, also manifest in a distinctly Algonquian context. In his study of Windigo possession, Robert Brightman points to the centrality of dreams:

Closely related to the concept of possession in the ideology of windigo causation is the concept of *pawâmtwin* (Cree), or "dreaming." . . . Two aspects of "windigo dreams" are especially relevant to the question of self-definition of some Algonquians as windigos. First, events in dreams in which the dreamer actively participates are understood in some instances to predestine inexorable events that will transpire, sometimes many years later, in the dreamer's waking experience. . . . Second, beings and events in dreams are explicitly understood as symbolic. Objects and events represent themselves to the dreamer or are perceived as something other than what they are. (366-67)

Dreams experienced during Windigo possession, then, are characterized both by prophetic elements and, unlike Freud's interpretation of the traumatic nightmare, are inherently symbolic as opposed to literal.

The novel adheres to this distinctly Algonquian approach to the oneiric vision; Elijah also has traumatic nightmares in keeping with these same criteria:

Elijah tells me of a dream that begins to come to him every time he closes his eyes and drifts into sleep. A family sits in the snow, cold and starving. They are too tired to move. Elijah can feel their cold, the gnaw in their bellies. Death is everywhere around them in the forest, staring at them from behind trees. But something far worse than death crouches close by. It is felt rather than seen. It waits for the moment when they close their eyes to approach. (311)

Xavier completes the narrative by asking, "Is this an old story of yours, Niska, that's come back to haunt him?" (312). Niska, Xavier's aunt, is a traditional Native healer invested with the role of Windigo killer, and Elijah's dream narrative alludes to the story of Windigo possession she tells at the opening of the novel about the young Cree hunter Micah and his wife and baby girl. Leaving their tribe behind, the family head

into the bush in search of food, only to begin to starve and freeze during the winter months. The result of these starvation pressures is murder and cannibalism. After Micah's wife and baby turn Windigo, they die in a ritual Windigo killing. While Elijah's dream narrative gestures to Niska's earlier story, it also corresponds to the oneiric visions Brightman describes; when read in the context of Niska's narrative, the prophetic and symbolic elements of the dream are apparent. For one, the dream foreshadows Elijah's complete conversion into the Windigo state. He will be consumed by the madness of European warfare, as represented by the Windigo. This madness is tantamount to shell shock. However, as Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski indicate, "there is no single historical trauma response" for the subaltern's war-induced trauma; rather, "there are different social disorders with respective clusters of symptoms" (65). Elijah's Windigo state is part shell shock, part morphine addiction induced by European contact, and part internalized racism learned at residential schools. And this transformation leads to his death at the hands of Xavier, who engages in a ritualistic Windigo killing. In the context of Niska's narrative, the symbolism of Elijah's dream is also apparent. Niska's account of Micah and his family suggests that the "something far worse than death" that "crouches close by" in Elijah's dream is the Windigo (38), an agency that represents, of course, the European warfare that will inevitably consume him. In effect, the novel reveals an alternative configuration of the traumatic nightmare, linked to Algonquian mythology in its implications, and thus complicates Western psychoanalytic approaches to traumatic memory.

Traumatic memory is a monster that both imposes unwanted images, particularly in dream states, and eradicates them in moments of trauma-induced amnesia. As Xavier recognizes after a particularly difficult episode of trench warfare, "I don't remember much after gaining their trench and the hand-to-hand fighting. My mind cracked after Gilberto was killed in front of me, broke further when the big man began strangling me" (223). Niska draws attention to the cannibalistic nature of traumatic memory: "Something far worse is consuming Xavier from the inside. . . . This is a sickness I've not had to face before" (32). This "sickness" of trauma in the form of combat neuroses also leads to a distortion of emotion, specifically a dissociation of feeling, that in the novel is presented as a perverse blood lust. Breeding a taste for human life, the war not only consumes but also excites the desire to consume others. Xavier

particularly recognizes this response in Elijah: “I see how Elijah’s eyes glow, how he is feeding off the fear and madness of this place” (25). This reaction, however, is again associated with an Algonquian archetype when Xavier asks Elijah, “Are you telling me you eat Germans now?” (296). The cannibalistic impulse represents the horror of European warfare, which distorts emotion and morality, but is figuratively represented by the culturally specific trope of the Windigo.

However, the Windigo not only conceptualizes the trauma of combat neuroses from an Algonquian perspective; representations of the Windigo in this work also reveal that the source of this pain is decidedly European. The Windigo is more than a trope for traumatic catastrophes and wounds. There is also a marked causal relationship in this context; the First World War engenders this voracious madness. Xavier recalls a group of Frenchmen he encounters who tally their dead by collecting trophies from their victims, thereby enacting this psychosis: “I’m reminded of those Frenchmen. . . . They put the chill in me. I think that they are *windigos*” (191). The novel explicitly recognizes this causal link, stating “war touches everyone, and *windigos* spring from the earth” (45).

In effect, the Native protagonists in this novel are being consumed by the occurrence and effects of the First World War and by the European imperial culture that underscores it. The First World War is a traumatic event plus a colonial agency that, like the Windigo consumes, and, in this context, devours First Nations cultures and beliefs. Niska points to this connection when she interprets her nephew Xavier’s reluctance to join the European war effort: “Maybe you wanted to enjoy the quiet days of summer before being swallowed up by the *wemistikoshiw* [white men] and their ways” (271). The First World War thus engenders a more insidious form of trauma as cultural imperialism; this is particularly apparent in Elijah’s response to the war. He dons an English accent (31, 71) and supports Western individualism, as opposed to traditional Native kinship relations represented in the novel (294). As he tells Xavier, “it might be better if they separate us” (94). He also rejects Native spirituality — “No Indian religion for [me]” (127) — and supports the notion of racial savagery based on innate biology that was a prominent assumption during Duncan Campbell Scott’s tenure as Deputy Superintendent of General Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932

and was often used to validate cultural assimilation. When asked if he likes killing, Elijah's response reveals this assumption: "It's in my blood" (69). Indeed, the novel suggests that Elijah is affected by Western cultural assimilation both during the war and as a child at the residential school, where he is instilled with Eurocentric discourses and practices (84). However, the First World War is the focus of the novel, and its capacity to devour Native cultures is apparent in its influence on Xavier, who has remained predominately outside of European institutions for most of his life, living in the wild with his aunt, Niska. Time in the French trenches also affects his outlook. Xavier recognizes that he has adopted the Western propensity to organize the world into groups of three: "I too have begun to see the world in threes" (227). This process of assimilation confirms Jack D. Forbes's assessment in *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*; he argues that Windigo psychosis is tantamount to the effects of imperialism.

### The Windigo as Western Construction: Undercutting the Discourse of Savagery

*Three Day Road* may use the Windigo as a trope for traumatic catastrophe, a mental wound, and Western imperialism in ways that complicate Eurocentric psychoanalytic discourses of trauma. However, Boyden also relies on the Windigo to critique Western culture for engendering trauma through cultural assimilation in these particular contexts. The Windigo resists the problematic ideological underpinnings that facilitated European cultural dominance in the context of the First World War. This critique implements the discourse of savagery that is inherent in Western representations of the Windigo. Waldram argues that Windigo narratives are both Native stories, used by Algonquian societies to signify a particular kind of madness and anathema, *and* a discursive construct, used by imperial powers to locate and reinforce the savagery supposedly inherent in Native primitivism. Thus far, my argument has predominantly relied on the former construction, positing that the novel uses the Windigo as a distinctly Algonquian sign to reconceptualize a Western malady on its own terms and, in turn, to encourage a reconsideration of decidedly Eurocentric responses to trauma. However, Boyden's work also gestures to Western constructions of the Windigo, particularly the discourse of savagery inherent

in these European representations, that were often used as ideological rationalizations for these cultural traumas. Critics such as Waldram and Marano have pointed to the constructed nature of the Windigo in Western discourses: Waldram states, "On the surface these seem to be evidence of culture bound syndromes. . . . Upon closer inspection, however, it appears as though these constructions have their origins in the imagination of scholars rather than the cultures of the original inhabitants" (191). These Western discourses, perpetuated by early missionaries, traders, settlers, and later anthropologists, rely on what Cynthia Sugars deems "negative imagery usually associated with Native peoples (hunting, cannibalism, savagery, primitivism, the windigo/sasquatch)" (79). However, this discourse of savagery is appropriated for strategic purposes as a form of counterdiscursive parody in Boyden's work. The novel invokes the negative imagery traditionally associated with the Windigo in Western discourses (its links to violence, savagery, and abjection), but strategically inverts its connotations. In effect, the savagery of the Windigo is associated with white colonial culture (in the form of the First World War) and not exclusively with what is sometimes perceived as Aboriginal primitivism.

*Three Day Road* inverts the discourse of savagery by dealing with the violence that supposedly characterizes First Nations practices and unsettles our expectations by attributing it to Western society. The signs of Indianness that Boyden particularly critiques are scalping and killing. In the discourse of savagery, scalping is traditionally constructed as an indication of Indian barbarity. This assumption is clearly voiced by Commander Breech on the front lines: "And what of this claim that you scalp your enemies like your heathen ancestors?" (312). However, the novel undercuts this assumption by supporting what became conventional wisdom in the 1960s, namely, that Europeans actually taught scalping to Native Americans. As Francis G., a Western soldier, tells Elijah: "Do what my people [Europeans] taught your people [Indigenous cultures] a long time ago. Take the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you" (188). The connection between scalping and Western culture is reinforced when Elijah becomes obsessed with collecting the scalps of enemy soldiers he has killed in battle. However, rather than attributing this act to Native savagery, the novel takes a complex stance on the issue. In part, Boyden's work recognizes the ways in which the tradition of scalping has been absorbed into First Nations

societies and become a culturally identifiable trait. We are told Elijah “turns the dead man on his stomach and removes his sharpened skinning knife from its sheath and pulls the man’s hair back and removes his scalp with careful motions, assuring himself that just as some other Indians consider it a sign of honour in battle, this counting coup and taking scalps, he will too” (193). However, the novel does not allow for a simple association between scalping and Indigenous culture, a parallel that often underscores the discourse of savagery. By needing to “assure himself” of the validity of the act, Elijah recognizes on some level that his actions are problematic. Indeed, the sentence that follows Elijah’s rationale for collecting the scalps indicates the need for this rationalization: “The medicine pulsing in his veins slows” (193). Elijah’s fixation on scalping is not simply situated as a reclamation of traditional First Nations practices that signify honour; instead, it is a marked effect of the morphine addiction perpetuated by European contact during the war. And this addiction is directly associated with the senseless violence of European warfare; Elijah cultivates the addiction to ease the effects of shell shock and exhaustion. In effect, even though the novel acknowledges the ways in which scalping is accepted as a Native sign in Indigenous cultures, it disallows a simple correlation between Indigenous society and scalping by recognizing that Elijah’s perverted determination is primarily the product of the wartime environment, which is an inherently Western endeavor.

Killing as an indication of savagery is also attributed to Western warfare. Rather than reinforcing the notion of the bloodthirsty and ruthless warring Indian, the novel undermines this assumption by redirecting it to European culture, revealing that this culture, in fact, creates an environment of blood lust. This inversion is particularly apparent in the context of the First World War. As Xavier attests, “This war. This is not home. What’s mad is them putting us in trenches to begin with. The madness is to tell us to kill and award those who do it well. I only wish to survive” (322). However, this discursive inversion is not only evident in scenes of European warfare, it is also apparent in episodes where Native characters engage in ritualistic Windigo killings. In this context, narrative aesthetics are used to unsettle the discourse of savagery. Most significantly, the Windigo killings performed by First Nations characters adhere to the realism that characterizes the novel in its entirety. Of course, these realities are not reduced, rendered “‘out there,’ fixed, given,

universal, eternal” (Hutcheon 43). Rather, Boyden’s work unsettles through its use of causality and detail, presenting the cruelties of war as a reality specific to Indigenous societies. Similarly, although violence in Aboriginal communities is not an expression of inherent savagery, it does exist, and is perceived as a fundamental dimension of existence. Niska witnesses the violence of her father’s Windigo killing at the onset of menstruation, and although her “womanhood had come to [her] like a tainted, sick animal, at the moment it should not have” (42-43), the complex realism of the scene indicates both the power of violence to pervert life and the intrinsic connection between life and death.

In addition to realism, Boyden’s reliance on the Gothic tradition further complicates the implications of the Windigo killings. The Gothic is pertinent in relation to First Nations violence, as it was commonly used in early Canadian explorer and settler narratives to designate the presumed savagery and primitivism of Indigenous communities, often in depictions of Windigo psychosis and ritual killings. Critics such as Marlene Goldman have posited that explorer narratives by Samuel Hearne and David Thompson, in particular, rely on Gothic depictions of violence, cannibalism, and, by extension, Windigo psychosis to reinforce the notions of Native primitivism and European superiority. These Gothic aesthetics are reproduced in the novel in the context of ritual Windigo killings; however, rather than investing First Nations characters with the violent savagery traditionally encoded in these aesthetics, Boyden’s narrative inverts their implications, attributing their significance to European colonial agency.

The novel offers three episodes of Windigo psychosis and ensuing ritual killings, each of which progressively exhibits more prominent signs of the Gothic. This progressive emphasis on the Gothic coincides with the characters’ increasing exposure to European culture. The first Windigo killing, performed by Niska’s father, is generally devoid of these aesthetics. The scene does not indulge in grotesquery; the details of the Windigo’s death are limited to a single, relatively innocuous image of quivering feet (42). Even though European settlers arrest Niska’s father for murder, imposing the discourse of savagery through the rhetoric of Western jurisprudence, the novel exposes the innate irony: “they demanded he come to them to discuss his actions so they might decide whether or not he should be considered a murderer. We laughed at this. Wasn’t it the *wemistikoshiw* who were on our land? Was it not they



who relied on us?" (43). Despite their apparent commitment to justice, Europeans disregard their own principles by appropriating First Nations land and exploiting First Nations people for their survival and profit. However, Niska's father also reveals that, at this point, Indigenous communities maintain their belief in their own cultural autonomy. This relative segregation from European societies is also encoded in the absence of Gothic aesthetics. As the novel progresses and overtly charts the effects of violent and destructive colonial initiatives, such as European settlement and the First World War, the violence surrounding the Windigo killings becomes more marked and is signalled through the prominence of Gothic aesthetics.

This shift is evident in the second Windigo killing, in which Niska is asked to strangle a Cree man who has cannibalized his wife:

The windigo's face had turned purple and I was afraid his eyes would pop from his head. His words melted into a long groan and his thick tongue stuck out from his mouth. . . . With a great gush of spittle and blood, the last stinking air in his body left him and spattered onto my rough cotton shirt. His eyes remained open, the whites turned a deep red from the strangulation. (243-44)

Signifiers of Gothic grotesquery are apparent here: the gaping mouth, protruding tongue, and bulging eyes. However, the Gothic in this context does not simply signify Native savagery as traditional explorer narratives would suggest; instead, the novel inverts conventional signification, and uses the Gothic to point to European violence. Niska makes this parallel when she likens Windigo psychosis to European ailments: "The sickness of the *windigo* could spread as surely as the invisible sickness of the *wemistikoshiw*" (242). However, in its representation of the fur trading industry, residential school system, and trading ports, the novel reveals that Windigo psychosis *is* the "invisible sickness" of the *wemistikoshiw*. Through excessive trapping and cultural dislocation, European culture creates the conditions, such as starvation pressures, for Windigo psychosis, and so the savagery supposedly invested in Niska's act is, in fact, directly attributable to European societies. This correlation is particularly apparent in the final Windigo killing, which is performed by Xavier on the front lines. The scene decidedly relies on Gothic aesthetics:

Elijah's eyes go wide for a moment, then narrow to slits. He begins swinging at me with his arms, hitting my head, my nose, my sides, my wounded arm. I scream and squeeze harder. Elijah's tongue sticks out. His face turns dark. . . . His mouth opens and closes, gasping for air. Veins bulge from his forehead. . . . He goes still. His eyes are open, still watching me. (339-40)

Again, images of blood, the gaping mouth, and thrashing body define the scene. They are reminiscent of Samuel Hearne's Gothic rendering of the murder of a young Esquimaux girl during the massacre at the Coppermine River, or Bloody Fall, 17 July 1771, who writhes and thrashes in the face of death much like Elijah. I. S. MacLaren has argued that Hearne's original field notes were later adjusted in the published book-length narrative to satisfy the tastes of European readers who had a hankering for the Gothic and sublime (26). However, in *Three Day Road*, rather than signalling Native primitivism, First Nations violence, as it is encoded in Gothic aesthetics, is exposed as a product of the European blood lust engendered during the war and not as an innate Indigenous characteristic. In keeping with Jennifer Andrews's analysis of the Gothic in Native literature, Boyden's Cree characters exhibit violence and are "preoccupied with evil because many of them have had to face the impacts of Eurocentrism on their communities and identities" (10).

Arguably, by sensationalizing violence in these scenes of Windigo killings, the novel's treatment of Gothic grotesquery is not inherently different from the episodes of military violence throughout the book; both depend on graphic and grotesque renderings. However, a marked political difference does persist. The grotesquery of these scenes is not merely an aesthetic device; traditionally when used to render Indigenous societies, the inherent political aim of the Gothic was to disempower. In fact, Boyden's novel veers close to potentially reinscribing this discursive tradition. This risk occurs because the novel does not simply associate Europeans with the Windigo in its inversion of the discourse of savagery. At times, the Cree characters in the novel are also linked to the Windigo, particularly in the aforementioned scenes of Windigo killings. The novel, then, risks replicating the problematic discourse of savagery by uncritically mobilizing the Gothic sensationalism traditionally used to render Native aggression. However, by inverting the implications of the Gothic and affiliating European culture with its inherent violence in

these episodes, Boyden skirts this problematic reinscription. When killing is associated with Indigenous cultures, it is contextualized within a framework of Native beliefs and revealed as acceptable only as a mode of survival (249) and a point of honour (207). An inherent appreciation for life in death is linked with First Nations culture early in the novel when Niska describes the butchering of a bear, and it acts as a counterpoint to the senseless violence on the European battlefield (35). In essence, therefore, the Windigo underscores these inversions by redirecting the discourse of savagery to expose brutality as an integral aspect of Western cultural practice.

In *Three Day Road*, the Windigo reconceptualizes dimensions of trauma in two distinct ways. By formulating trauma in culturally specific terms as a Windigo, the novel complicates Eurocentric psychoanalytic paradigms of trauma and allows for productive alternative configurations that are ultimately culturally illuminating. And by inverting the discourse of savagery that is inherent in Western constructions of the Windigo, Boyden's work encourages a reassessment of the stereotypes that allowed for the more insidious trauma of Western cultural dominance and assimilation, particularly during the First World War.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The terms "Native," "Aboriginal," "First Nations," and "Indigenous" will be used interchangeably.

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