

THE WORLD OF WETIKO: AN INVESTIGATION

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Tragically, the history of the world for the past 2,000 years is, in great part, the story of the epidemiology of the wétiko disease.

Jack Forbes (2008)

These people—whom we can call the obscurantist elites from now on—understood that, if they wanted to survive in comfort, they had to stop pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world.

Bruno Latour (2017)

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the Algonquin concept of wetiko, or windigo—a ruthless cannibal spirit—to explain the state of America today. Native American scholars such as Jack Forbes and Basil Johnston suggest wetikos really exist, and that their insatiable hunger and psychopathic lack of regard for others is at the root of globalization, neo-liberal economics, the destruction of the environment, and the widescale oppression of the world's people. This paper investigates the relationship between modernism and wetiko, and proposes an origin to the wetiko mindset, asking whether it is archetypal, and therefore potentially present in all of us, though more actualized in some. Finally it asks how indigenous societies have historically guarded against wetiko and how we can learn from them to resist wetikos now, since if we fail to confront them, they will eat us all alive.

KEYWORDS: Wetiko; Native American culture; Globalization; Environmental Destruction

In this paper I want to explore a concept in Algonquin folklore which I believe can be of great help in understanding the evolution of the United States of America into what it is today: a country with a bloated military budget and a brutally militarized police force, governed via a political system hamstrung by lobbying and astronomical campaign financing, where corporations have the legal rights of people, but where people seem to have very few rights to

respectable wages, healthcare, housing, or education, and where the land and its creatures have no rights at all. The concept in question is that of wetiko, or windigo.

The wetiko exists in the traditions of all the Algonquin nations, which include the Abenaki, Algonkin, Blackfoot, Cree, Mik'maq and Ojibwa. There are at least 45 recorded variations of the name, including *wendigo*, *windigo*, *wheetigo*, *windikouk*, *wi'ntsigo*, *wi'tigo*, *wihtikuu*, *wittikka*, *atchen*, *chenoo*, *atuush*, *kewahqu* and *kewok*. (Pitt 2003) A wetiko is a ruthless cannibal spirit whose hunger is insatiable. Traditionally it was believed to inhabit the deep Northern woods on the border between the US and Canada, where it preyed on people who were weak, hungry and alone. (Brightman 1988, Brightman 2015, Carlson 2009, Forbes 2008, Kidwell et al 2001, Johnston 1995, Pitt 2012) Tradition teaches that the wetiko has a heart of ice.

In the early 20th century, the psychiatric profession became interested in wetiko, and coined the term 'windigo psychosis,' explaining away belief in wetiko through Western psychology, as a culture-bound mental illness: "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." (Carlson 2009) Thus windigo/wetiko was explained away, as merely a psychological disorder characterized by delusions. More recently however, Native American scholars such as Jack Forbes (2008) and Basil Johnston (1995) have done the opposite: they use the concept of wetiko to explain the psychosis that passes for sanity in the West.

Forbes and Johnston propose that wetikos really exist, and that they have now taken over the entire world. They suggest the insatiable hunger of wetikos and their lack of regard for others is at the root of globalization, neo-liberal economics, the destruction of the environment, and the widescale oppression of the world's people. I can find no better explanation for what is happening in the world today.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Before I proceed to my investigation of wetiko, however, I want to briefly explore the topic of cultural appropriation, and why I hope that this paper is not a case of it. In general, I am interested in finding out how we (the beings of earth) got to

where we are, on the brink of our own extinction. But I am hampered in my ability to reflect usefully on this by the fact that I am located in the system that has got us to this moment—the system of modernity. This is a significant epistemological problem.

Jack Forbes (2008) asserts that “wétiko disease has so corrupted European thinking (at least of the ruling groups) that wétiko behavior and wétiko goals are regarded as the very fabric of European evolution.” (p 43). For example, he points out that European writers rank societies with despotic rulers, large slave populations, rigid social class hierarchies, and imperialistic aggressive foreign policies as civilized, while they evaluate non-aggressive, earth-based people like his own as barbarians. In contrast, he asserts that Native American philosophy is based on a “way of living that incorporated profound respect for the sacredness of all living things” (p. 19), and “the recognition that all living creatures are brothers and sisters”. (p. 11) David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) present similar assertions made by the 18th century Wendat statesman Kandiaronk about indigenous American ways.

Paul Levy (2013) calls wetiko “a psychic virus” (p. 12) and writes that “when the wetiko virus takes over a system, whether it be a person’s psyche, a group of people, or a nation, it institutionalizes its own ‘perception management’ system in order to limit, manipulate, and control its subjects’ viewpoint so as to maintain a wetikoized ideology.” (p. 55) Similarly, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) writes that modernity “imposes its own meanings as neutral and objective representations of reality” (p 21). Therefore, we will need to get outside of modernity in order to find other, potentially more insightful and helpful meanings and representations of reality.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Danowski (2018) urge us to consider indigenous perspectives from the Americas not as *culturally-specific*, but as reflecting and expressing realities as valid for humanity as those putatively universal perspectives produced by modernity. Further, they assert that since Amerindians have already experienced the end of the world—when their lands were colonized and their populations 95% destroyed—their survival can offer valuable lessons on how to live through the Anthropocene, particularly as we need to explore ways of being that are the opposite of modernity’s projects of growth and progress.

However, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) warns against romanticizing

indigenous people and their views, and cautions that stepping out of the worldview of modernity takes time and struggle, since “whatever we imagine when we are still invested in modernity will always only be a different version of modernity that secures the entitlements and enjoyments modernity affords us now.” (p 121) Australian Aboriginal writer Tyson Yunkaporta (2019) also warns that the English language “inevitably places settler world views at the center of every concept, obscuring true understanding”, and cautions

The most remarkable thing about Western civilization is its ability to absorb any object or idea, alter it, sanitize it, rebrand it, and market it. Even ideas that are a threat can be co-opted and put to work. The Romans did it with Christianity—an ideology of the poor and enslaved that threatened the foundations of empire... In the same way that plants can be tweaked at the genetic level to become the intellectual property of one company and then replace all similar crops in a region, ideas can be reengineered to serve the interests of the powerful. It's not a conspiracy; it's just power doing what power does. (p 65)

There is much potential, therefore, for me—or you, the reader—to misunderstand, mis-take or over-generalise the views of the indigenous authors whose works we are learning from. However, striving for perfection is also one of the elements of modernity, and indeed linked to *wetiko* through its connection with the death drive (Woodman, 1982). This paper will therefore be imperfect.

HISTORICAL REALITY OF WETIKO

The concept of *wetiko* existed in Algonquin oral history before the arrival of the first European settlers. According to Nathan D. Carlson (2009), the first European-written account of a *wetiko* was written in 1636, by Paul le Jeune, a Jesuit missionary, who lived among the Algonquin near Quebec.

Carlson explains that *wetiko* was both a character in the mythological tales of the Athabasca Cree/Métis people, and also a known condition, with symptoms, a prognosis and various (more or less effective) cures. “The most diagnostic indications of *wetiko*... 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.” The most common cure was for the infected person to ingest hot fat or alcohol until they vomited up the ice. If the cure did not work, the person would be bound, ostracized or killed. (Carlson 2009)

The real danger of wetikos was not just that they could kill and eat others, however. The real danger is that wetiko is contagious. A wetiko can possess a person, making them into another wetiko: “The lone hunter who encounters the Windigo is seized with its spirit and may begin to kill and consume his relatives.” (Kidwell et al, 2001, p. 88) Thus wetiko spreads. In most traditions, people are caught by wetikos under specific circumstances which have weakened their usual physical and psychological/spiritual defences and separated them from protective community. This is encouraging, since it seems that if one’s spirit is strong, and one is embedded in a supportive community which fosters the right lifeways, one is less likely to be caught by a wetiko.

Carlson, himself descended from a Metis grandmother, emphasizes that wetiko cannot be explained away by psychologizing it, anthropologizing it, or seeing it as a cultural performance. Instead, “any reckoning of the witiko phenomenon must entail a fair-minded consideration of northern Algonquian ... 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.” (p 356, my emphasis.)¹

THE DISEASE OF WETIKO

Jack Forbes (2008) is convinced that wetiko explains “the central problem of human life today” and is “the greatest epidemic sickness known to man”. This sickness, he says, is “the disease of aggression against other living things and, more precisely, the disease of the consuming of other creatures’ lives and possessions.” (p. xvi) For Forbes, wetiko is a real sickness, possibly one caused by an actual virus that is physically transmitted. He writes that,

imperialists, rapists and exploiters are not just people who have strayed down a wrong path. They are insane (unclean) in the true sense of that word. They are

¹ There are enormous metaphysical implications in believing in the *reality* of windigo, which are, sadly, beyond the scope of this paper. It would require us to admit of the possibility of other-than-human people, monsters, and psychic contagion or transmission of affect along the lines of that described by Lisa Brennan (2002). Brady DeSanti (2018), a member of the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe tribe of Wisconsin, cautions us not to under-estimate wetikos, laconically remarking that it “becomes clear after learning about the windigo that while the Ojibwe universe may bustle with innumerable kinds of people, all of them are not favorably inclined towards harmonious relations.” (p 7)

mentally ill, and, tragically, the form of soul-sickness that they carry is catching...the wetiko disease, the sickness of exploitation, has been spreading as a contagion for the past several thousand years. And as a contagion unchecked by most vaccines it tends to become worse rather than better with time. (p. xviii-xix)

Forbes argues that love is the norm for humanity, and that brutality is an aberration, and states,

I have come to the conclusion that imperialism and exploitation are forms of cannibalism and, in fact, are precisely those forms of cannibalism which are most diabolical or evil...Cannibalism, as I define it, is the consuming of another's life for one's own private purpose or profit....Thus the wealthy exploiter 'eats' the flesh of oppressed workers, the wealthy matron 'eats' the lives of her servants, the imperialist 'eats' the flesh of the conquered, and so on... the wealthy and exploitative literally consume the lives of those they exploit (p. 24-25).

Paul Levy (2013), a non-Native American and self-confessed non-scholar, who amplifies Forbes' work within a Jungian framework, characterises wetiko as ontologically real but non-local and atemporal. (p 5) By this he means that it is archetypal, arising from the collective unconscious, in which the potential for human evil is ever-present. Levy warns that all of us have the capacity for wetiko, and that we must struggle with it. It can never be eradicated. For Levy, wetiko is not an actual virus, but a thought virus.

Whether it is a real virus, a thought virus, or an archetypal force, wetiko destroys our capacity for empathy, so that we prey on others. By destroying our sense of responsibility to the other, wetiko reduces a person to a state of mere being, in Emmanuel Levinas's terms (Bernstein 2002), and thus exiles them from their own humanity. Reading Levinas' description of the choice between being and humanity in the context of the writings of Native American philosophers like Forbes, who describe the respect their people practice for the other creatures of the world, is striking. Particularly in the arena of eating, Native American lifeways teach that one does not just take, hunt, kill, eat. Instead, the hunter or gatherer must make ask permission, make offerings, practice restraint and express gratitude.

Basil Johnston (1995) writes that the threat of the Weendigo worked to encourage the exercise of moderation in Ojibwe cultures, and explains,

As long as men and women put the well-being of their families and communities ahead of their own self-interests by respecting the rights of animals who dwelt as their cotenants on Mother Earth, offering tobacco and chants to Mother Earth and

Kitchi-Manitou as signs of gratitude and goodwill, and attended to fulfill and live out their dreams and visions, they would instinctively know how to live in harmony and balance and have nothing to fear of the Weendigo. If all men and women lived in moderation, the Weendigo and his brothers and sisters would starve and die out. (p. 223)

Even though the Other is prey, there is a relationship of respect and concern. This is what it means to be a human being. (Mueller 2017, Kimmerer 2013, Berkes 2018) The wetiko, by contrast, is a creature of pure being—it exists to eat, and it has never consumed enough. The Other does not exist for the wetiko, he or she is merely food.

WETIKO PSYCHOSIS

“The pain of others meant nothing to the Weendigo; all that mattered was its survival.” (Johnston 1995, p. 222) In this, the wetiko is strikingly similar to a psychopath. And indeed Forbes writes of ‘wetiko psychosis’. In this, he is using the term differently from the use it has been put to by psychiatry: instead of implying, “it’s all in their minds, but not actually real”, Forbes’s use of the term seems to indicate “it’s real, and it affects their minds, turning them psychopathic”.

Forbes describes the wetiko as a predator, and lists key characteristics of the wetiko personality. These include “greed, lust, inordinate ambition, materialism, the lack of a true ‘face’, a schizoid (split) personality, and... arrogance” (p. 52). He states that “we are made to be crazy by other people who are also crazy and who draw for us a map of the world which is ugly, negative, fearful and crazy.” (p. 7) In this he comes very close to psychoanalytical studies of psychopaths.

Psychologist Elizabeth F Howell defines psychopaths as follows:

Psychopaths are unable to love in the way that requires accepting the other person as separate and agentic. Their relationships are instrumental and exploitative...They are motivated by power, not affection; they strive for control and domination, and...their inner and outer worlds are populated by predatory-prey relationships. (Itzhowitz and Howell 2020, p. 40)

Interestingly, psychopaths are found in the executive ranks of corporations at a rate four times higher than in the general population (Itzhowitz and Howell 2020, p. 32.) This fact adds weight to the idea that wetikos have taken over the world, and that they have thrived in—or most likely created—the ruthless globalized capitalist economy that is ravaging the world. Writing of the Paris Climate Accord and the Trump government’s decision to withdraw from it, Sheldon Itzhowitz

remarks,

One must ask: Who stands to gain, or profit from our refusal to adhere to the agreement and continue polluting the environment; the fossil fuel industry, the automotive industry? Then there are the powerful lobbyists, paid handsomely to influence congressional votes to help ensure the enrichment of the industries employing them. We see our leaders, corporations and lobbyists, evidencing psychopathic traits of having no conscience, no strong sense of morality or empathy. Their endgame is their own benefit and the benefit of their shareholders only. Even when it puts all of humanity and wildlife at risk. (Itzhowitz and Howell 2020, p. 33)

Itzhowitz's psychopaths and Forbes' wetikos would appear to be strikingly similar. The answer to Itzhowitz's question is that wetikos are the only ones that stand to gain. Though with their frozen hearts and insatiable appetite, they are still never satisfied—like capitalism, they continue to expand, consuming more and more, and never having enough.

WETIKO AND MODERNITY

So far, I have described the phenomenon of wetiko as exceptional, related to psychopathy. And located in particular individuals. However, indigenous scholars point out that in fact, modernity *as a system* is psychopathic. For example, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) writes that “modernity cannot exist without expropriation, extraction, exploitation, militarisation, dispossession, destitution, genocides, and ecocides” (p 18). Furthermore, “modernity is not a corrupt project of the West that needs to be defeated and replaced with a more righteous and virtuous non-Western alternative, but rather something that is now (unevenly) part of all of us, conditioning the ways we experience reality” (p 17). Modernity, the modern ego, and the wetiko are linked. This is not to say that all modern people are wetikos, but it is to suggest that the thought habits and behaviour patterns of wetiko are found in all of us, since we live in a wetiko system.

WHERE DID WETIKO ORIGINATE?

Interestingly, Forbes does not see wetiko as indigenous to America. He proposes that it arose in the Middle East, spread through the Roman Empire with its brutal emphasis on law and order, and eventually arrived in the Americas. This raises questions. If wetiko is not American in origin, then how did it get into Algonquin

mythology before contact? Forbes cites evidence that Norse and Celtic settlers reached Labrador and Newfoundland in around 1009 and that Inuit captives were taken to Norway in 1420 (p. 29). Did those first contacts with Norse and Celtic settlers in the far north bring wetiko to the Northern American continent? Or was Columbus the first wetiko to arrive, bringing not only smallpox, measles and other diseases fatal to the natives, but also wetiko, which then migrated up to the Northern territories occupied by the Algonquin?

If we take at face value Forbes claim that wetiko arrived with Europeans, we should be able to find evidence for its spread through the population of the Americas after contact. I believe we can see circumstantial evidence of such a spread in the rapid eradication of beaver in North America, as they were hunted for the fur trade in the seventeenth century. Alice Outwater (1996) describes how, when the first Europeans arrived in North America, the Indians were using flint knives, bone awls and skin or stone kettles. The only thing they had to trade for European goods were furs. In particular, the Europeans wanted beaver pelts, since beaver had already been hunted to extinction in Europe. Native American hunters started killing beaver in such enormous numbers that by 1700, beaver had effectively been exterminated along the Eastern seaboard of the US, and by 1840 they were gone everywhere. The hydrological ecology of North America was permanently damaged as a result.

This is a story about the extermination of beaver. But it is also a story about a people who previously lived a subsistence lifestyle becoming suddenly so hungry for goods that they become willing to hunt in a way that departs from centuries-old traditions of respect and sacred reciprocity. This story shows the rapid spread of a new mindset, and it locates the vector of that spread in the Indians' contact with European fur traders. Is it perhaps the story of the rapid viral transmission of wetiko?

For Forbes, wetiko arrived in the Americas with Columbus, who was a wetiko. Forbes states "he was mentally ill or insane, the carrier of a terribly contagious psychological disease, the wetiko psychosis." (p. 22). According to Forbes, when Columbus wrote about the people of the West Indies, he said:

They are artless and generous with what they have, to such a degree as no one would believe but him who had seen it. Of anything they have, if it be asked for, they never say no, but do rather invite the person to accept it, and show as much lovingness as though they would give their hearts...And as soon as I arrived in the

Indies, in the first island that I found, I took some of them by force... Their Spanish Highnesses may see that I shall give them... slaves as many as they shall order to be shipped. (p. 21-22)

Columbus's response to meeting these generous, loving people was to capture and enslave them. He could see them as nothing other than a means to his own gain. He did not see them as human at all.

Sylvia Federici (2004) also describes the atrocities committed by Columbus. For Federici, the problem of such atrocities originated in the rise of capitalism: "a system where life is subordinated to the production of profit" (p. 16). In other words, a wetiko system. She points out "the continuity between the subjugation of the populations of the New World and that of people in Europe, women in particular, in the transition to capitalism", and states that "by the 16th century, a ruling class had formed in Europe that was at all points involved—practically, politically, and ideologically—in the formation of a world proletariat, and therefore was continually operating with knowledge gathered on an international level in the elaboration of its models of domination" (p. 219-233). This describes a wetiko class.

If Forbes and Federici are correct, and wetiko was imported to the Americas from Europe, we must look to Europe for its origins.

EUROPEAN ORIGINS OF WETIKO

Jason Moore (2016) proposes a fundamental change of mind-set in the West of Europe in the 16th century, with the shift in focus from land productivity to labor productivity. In other words, at that time we stopped framing our relationship to the earth as one in which the land (in its beneficence) produces and we (gratefully, attentively) tend the land, and began framing it as one in which human labor produces while the land is merely a raw material for that production. Along with this shift went the gradual proletarianization of peasants, the enclosure of the commons, the extermination of the witches and the cunning folk (Federici 2004, Wilby 2005), and the idea of "cheap nature" viewed as free raw material/resource. This new instrumentalist mind-set was the beginning of capitalism, and for Moore, it marks the start of the problem.

Forbes, however, believes wetiko antedates capitalism, and that it can be applied to any economic system based on exploitation (e.g., feudalism, communism). Federici herself situates capitalism within a longer arc of

exploitation and struggle against exploitation, as “the response of the feudal lords, the patrician merchants, the bishops and popes, to a centuries-long anti-feudal struggle” (p. 21-22) She situates the anti-feudal struggle in the broad context of the history of serfdom between the 5th and 14th centuries AD, which was itself a response to the breakdown of the slave system on which imperial Rome was built. Jack Forbes suggests wetiko originally spread with the expansion of the Roman Empire. The violence of imperial expansion created the conditions of despair and oppression and the shattering of social structures that foster susceptibility to wetiko.

Federici demonstrates that much of the history of Europe was traumatising to its people. Indeed her thesis is that the witch-burnings were part of a concentrated strategy employed by the ruling class to break the people and their resistance to domination. She claims that it was this same strategy that was carried to the Americas, with the same aim of crushing the people.

Resmaa Menakam (2017) writes that “whenever one group oppresses, victimizes, brutalizes or marginalizes another, many of the victimized people may suffer trauma, and then pass on that trauma response to their children...” (p. 38) He emphasizes,

Unhealed trauma acts like a rock thrown into a pond; it causes ripples that move outward, affecting many bodies over time. After months or years, unhealed trauma can appear to become part of someone’s personality. Over even longer periods of time, as it is passed on and gets compounded through other bodies in a household, it can become a family norm. And if it gets transmitted and compounded through multiple families and generations, it can start to look like culture. But it isn’t culture. It’s a traumatic retention that has lost its context over time. Though without context, it has not lost its power. (p. 39)

Menakem suggests that the English colonists who came to America were traumatized before they got here, asking “Did over ten centuries of medieval brutality, which was inflicted on white bodies by other white bodies, begin to look like culture?” (p. 61)

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker (2008) have investigated the early history of Christianity and discovered that it was profoundly skewed by trauma resulting from the Roman Empire’s strategy of brutal forced conversion. They discovered that the crucifixion—an image of someone tortured to death—

only became the central icon of Christianity in around 965 AD. Previously the iconic images of the religion depicted the ‘peaceable kingdom’ that Christians should try to cultivate on earth. The first crucifixion icon was carved by Saxons one century after the forced conversion of their people from their own pagan traditions to Roman Christianity, at sword point. Brock and Parker write, “Latin Christianity came to [these people] accompanied by death”. (p. xx) This clue gives a glimpse into the mechanism of spread of wetiko through the trauma field of the Roman empire, as well as illustrating the long term influence of trauma, in this case spanning a thousand years, and permeating a global religion. Once we start the game of trauma dominoes, however, the question repeats itself. How did wetiko arrive in the Roman empire?

Many writers posit that humanity’s problems began with the invention of agriculture. Writers from Jean Jaques Rousseau to Derrick Jensen describe a line of inevitable progression from a state of idyllic hunter-gatherer existence to a hierarchical, property-based, agricultural society in which some enjoy prosperity and power and the others serve them. This evolution is presented as inevitable and universal. However, David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) deconstruct this Garden of Eden/Fall myth and insist that it is simply not true. They argue that societies from the dawn of time have made *conscious* decisions about social structures and organisations, and that some of them have *chosen* to create limits on the power that some could wield over others.

Elaine Aaron (1995) suggests that the urge to dominate and use others originally arose from the domestication of the horse on the central Asian steppe. She posits that the rush of endorphins resulting from the experience of travelling at speed and being able to dominate people travelling on foot was addictive. The thrill was so great, she suggests, that men became willing to cause suffering to a horse in order to profit from its energy. This resulted in the development of a dominator mindset that quickly led to dominating other people (initially women) and a life based on raiding and taking slaves. Aaron’s hypothesis is persuasive, postulating a real potential zero point for the *ex nihilo* arising of wetiko². It seems equally likely, though, that wetiko is part of the human repertoire. If this is the

² Others have suggested that races of reptile aliens brought such behaviour to the planet, but that is beyond the scope of my enquiry.

case, it raises other and potentially more useful questions, such as: What circumstances promote the flourishing of wetiko, and what circumstances inhibit it? And, more crucially, how did we create a society in which wetiko is rampant?

THE FOUNDATIONAL FANTASY OF THE WEST

In *Exhausting Modernity*, Teresa Brennan (2000) combines Kleinian psychology with Marxist analysis and the writings of Augustine to describe the ‘foundational fantasy’ of modernity—which corresponds strikingly to Forbes’ definition of wetiko. Brennan describes the infantile ego, dependent on the mother’s breast for nourishment. Puny and powerless, it is envious of the breast and wants to reverse what it feels to be an unbearable relationship of domination. Denying its dependency, it fantasizes about dominating and possessing the breast, and devouring it entirely, destroying it in the process. The fantasy creates a subject/object split whereby the ego considers itself subject and the breast the object—an object which exists solely for its gratification. This fantasy gets projected onto the earth: we see ourselves as powerful and creative, and the earth as mere backdrop, there for our use, to serve our ends.

Brennan posits that the fantasy itself pre-exists capitalism, but that it has “hardened” in the last 300 years with the spread of modernism and capitalism. She proposes that “the effects of the foundational fantasy are felt more strongly as the fantasy is acted out technologically” (p 69) and that “the extent to which the foundational fantasy takes hold psychically depends on the extent of its material enactment” (p 136). In a society with the technological means to satisfy the desires of the foundational fantasy, it proliferates, creating a recursive system in which wetiko gets progressively stronger. This is because the materialisation of the foundational fantasy through technology “alters the physis in ways that make it harder to act if not think outside foundational terms”. (p 166) Brennan suggests that we absorb the foundational fantasy by osmosis:

If omnipotent impulses are out there in the social, they wash through the psyche, especially the infant psyche, which is unshielded from the impact of affects from without; unprotected against, say, anxiety or other energies and feelings which the infant mistakenly takes to be its own. In other words, the affects and impulses preexist the infant. We are born into them. (p 8)

And this is how wetiko spreads. By now, in the West, and indeed in all parts of the globe run by the economy of the West, the wetiko mindset has become so

pervasive that it is almost impossible to imagine a different way. The seeds of the fantasy may, as Brennan says, be a thousand years old, but they have only really taken hold in the last 300 years, since “a modern and profoundly Western economy has made omnipotent fantasies into realities” (p 9-10). If the potential for wetiko is universal, then we should expect to find evidence for it—and warnings against it—in indigenous cultures across the world.

UNIVERSALITY OF WETIKO

Tyson Yunkaporta (2020) writes that Australian Aboriginal societies have stories that tell of a troublemaking ancestor called Emu, who brings into being “the most destructive idea in existence: I am greater than you; you are less than me.” (p 26) Describing this idea as the source of all human mystery, he writes that,

Aboriginal society was designed over thousands of years to deal with this problem. Some people are just idiots—and everybody has a bit of idiot in them from time to time, coming from some deep place inside that whispers, “You are special. You are greater than other people and things. You are more important than everything and everyone. All things and all people exist to serve you.” This behavior needs massive checks and balances to contain the damage it can do. (p 26-27)

Of such narcissists, he observes:

They destroy the basic social contract of reciprocity (which allows people to build a reputation of generosity based on sharing to ensure ongoing connectedness and support), shattering this framework of harmony with a few words of nasty gossip they apply double standards and breakdown systems of give and take until every member of a social group becomes isolated, last in a Darwinian struggle for power and dwindling resource is that destroys everything. Then they move on to another place, another group. Feet feel free to extrapolate this pattern globally and historically. (p28)

Yunkaporta emphasizes that all of us have the potential for this—a potential that must never be under-estimated, and which any sensible society takes steps to inhibit. Of the wetiko system of modernity he notes,

If you live a life without violence, you are living an illusion: outsourcing your conflict to unseen powers and detonating it in areas beyond your living space. Most of the southern hemisphere is receiving that outsourced violence to supply what you need for the clean, technological, peaceful spaces of your existence...Your notions of peaceful settlement and development are delusions peppered with bullet holes and spears. (p199)

At the other side of the world, the highland Scots writer Alastair McIntosh (2004) draws parallels between his own people's traditional worldviews and struggles for land-rights and those of Native Americans. He writes that traditional life in the highlands ran on a "vernacular economy" in which "people understood themselves to be responsible for one another" (p 27). But the traditional way of life defined by reverence has fallen by the wayside: "People know that something is wrong. But it's hard to see what it is, and the world goes on, after a fashion." (p 31)

McIntosh recounts a conversation he had with an old highland crofter who was moved by a TV documentary about Native Americans, because he saw such clear parallels between their experience of colonization and his own:

They said that their culture is dying. They said it's because the Circle, the Sacred Hoop, has been broken.... Well, I'll tell you this, Alastair. I'll tell you this, my boy! It's the same for us. It's the same for the Gael. At least that's what I think, because when I heard them on television, those Indians, I understood instantly what they meant.

And then he sings his song in Gaelic. He translates a verse for me into the English:

The Circle is broken and I cannot raise a tune
The faeries have left and they will not return
When the faeries danced on the land the Circle was whole
And then you could raise a tune. (p 51)

This song about faeries reflects the fact that Celtic tradition was mythopoetic, animistic, shamanic and bardic. This tradition was culturally maintained by the bardic schools, which McIntosh describes as "the indigenous universities of life". (p 67) It was deliberately destroyed during the 17th century by King James, in order to unite Britain and create a single 'United Kingdom'.

Observing that by the 1970's, "the time-inculcated sense of responsibility towards place" (p 37) and the incentive to respect nature, were being lost in the Highlands, due to industrialization and modernization of the traditional fishing industry, he writes:

The harmony with nature that we've come to associate with settled indigenous peoples has been in part a learned harmony. It has been kept in place by technological limitations, by totemistic respect for other life and by taboos against disrespect. But the fact that some societies have managed to achieve ecological harmony in the past is important to us today. It offers hope, showing that

sustainable ways of life can, indeed, be compatible with human well being. (p 39)

For McIntosh, the domination system is “an emergent property of ordinary human failings and commonplace darkness. The ‘monster’ is created bit by bit by individuals, but its emergent properties transcend us all. This, perhaps, is what our forebears meant by ‘the Devil’. (p 109) For McIntosh, therefore, the potential for wetiko is in us all, and will dominate if it is not kept in check by the countering presence of a life-honouring spiritual system and a caring collective in which we are embedded.

MODERN DAY WINDIGOS

Johnston (1995) writes that wetikos have not died out or disappeared. “The Weendigos may or may not roam the north in winter any longer as they were once believed to do, but their spirit and the ideas they embody live on in the modern world...they have only been assimilated and reincarnated as corporations, conglomerates, and multinationals”. (p. 235) The Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke (2017) has also referred to our current system as “the *wendigo* economy.

Johnston suggests that the term “weendigo” may be derived from “ween dagoh, which means ‘solely for self’, or from weeninn’d’igooh, which means ‘fat’ or ‘excess’. According to Johnston, one way that people become infected by wetiko is via their own greed and love of excess.³ He relates stories of wetikos and their insatiable hunger, and notes that the more the wetiko eats, and the bigger it grows, the more it wants and needs. Here is an example: Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has an estimated fortune of just over \$200 billion.⁴ This is such a staggering amount of money that it is hard to grasp what it means, but a rough calculation might help. The median salary of Amazon workers is \$35,000. So it would take one of those workers more than five and a half million years to earn Jeff Bezos’ fortune. Bezos has more money than he could ever spend, and yet he does not share it with his employees. On September 10th 2020, Washington Post journalist Christopher Ingraham tweeted, “If Jeff Bezos gave all 876,000 Amazon employees a \$105,000 bonus, he’d be left with exactly as much money as he had

³ Johnston also states that ruthlessly hunting and killing wetikos can make you a wetiko.

⁴ According to Google.

at the start of the pandemic.”⁵ And yet, instead of sharing his fortune with the workers who have made the money for him, Bezos consumes them, in classic wetiko fashion. Like a wetiko, he can never have enough.

According to an article in *The Atlantic* (Evans 2019), Amazon imposes mandatory 12 hour shifts and ruthless productivity quotas on its employees, which result in a rate of serious injuries reported in 2019 as being “more than double the national average for the warehousing industry: 9.6 serious injuries per 100 full-time workers in 2018, compared with an industry average that year of 4.”⁶ Injured workers interviewed for the article “spoke with outrage about having been cast aside as damaged goods or sent back to jobs that injured them further... “For Amazon,” [one worker] said, “all they care about is getting the job done and getting it out fast and not realizing how it’s affecting us and our own bodies.”

A former senior operations manager with leadership roles at multiple facilities is reported as saying, of Amazon’s production targets, which are linked to executive advancement, “It incentivizes you to be a heartless son of a bitch.” That sounds remarkably like a wetiko.

WAR WITH WETIKO

Of the current world situation, Viveiros de Castro and Danowski write that “it is not [collective] suicide we are dealing with, but the murder of one part of the species by another part of the same species.” (p 176) They quote Bruno Latour, who defines the two opposing side as “humans (the moderns who believe it will be possible to go on living in the unified, indifferent nature of the Holocene) and Terrans (the people of Gaia)” (p 181). While they stress the seriousness of this civil war, which potentially represents the end game of the human species as well as all the other species with whom we share the planet, Viveiros de Castro and Danowski acknowledge that it is not necessarily easy to clarify who the Terrans are and who the humans are:

Today, many of us (us humans, and the non-humans we have enslaved or colonized) are victims and culprits all at once, in each action we engage in, at the push of every

⁵ https://twitter.com/_cingraham/status/1304077503560994818?lang=en

⁶ Based on internal injury records from 23 of the company’s 110 fulfillment centers nationwide.

button, with every portion of food or animal feed we swallow—even if it is as obvious as it is essential that we do not confuse McDonald's itself and the teenager conditioned into consuming junk food, or Monsanto and the small farmer obliged to spray his genetically modified corn with glyphosate, let alone the pharmaceutical industry and the cattle force fed with antibiotics and hormones.” P 176

They note that, while not exonerating ourselves through strategies of denial, it is useful to call out the corporations, banks and governments who are most immediately responsible for the accelerating disaster we are in⁷. Viveiros de Castro and Danowski simultaneously acknowledge that all of us are participating in a wetiko system, and emphasize that this system is being created by the real wetikos.

But if wetikos have taken over the earth, creating a system which has structured our thoughts and perceptions so thoroughly that most of us cannot, without much difficulty, think outside of wetiko, then the question is, can wetiko be resisted?

RESISTING WETIKO

At this point in this paper, I am supposed to write about how we can wake up and resist wetiko, presenting optimistic solutions in a way that holds out some plausible possibility of us saving ourselves. The literature is full of such statements. Usually they invoke a new environmental consciousness, a new spiritual and ethical awareness, and a new planetary paradigm.

For example, J Baird Caldicot (1994) writes that “we have both a mandate and an opportunity to facilitate the emergence of a global environmental consciousness that spans national and cultural boundaries... A new scientific paradigm is emerging which will sooner or later replace the waning mechanical worldview and its associated values and technological esprit ... One might therefore envision a single cross-cultural environmental ethic based on ecology and the new physics and expressed in the cognitive lingua franca of

⁷ Such as the ninety corporations responsible for two thirds of greenhouse gas emissions, as well as companies such as Monsanto, DuPont, Bayer, Cargill, Nestle etc., who deserve a mention for their various contributions “to the lasting perturbation of the geo-chemical cycles of soil and water, to massive environmental pollution, to the dissemination of food that is harmful to human health”, and finally the banks, and the governments of countries including the US, which have promoted deforestation and extraction and blocked climate negotiations. (189).

contemporary science.” (p 11-12). Indeed one might!

Similarly, Joanna Macy (2014) writes, “it is crucial that we know this: *we can meet our needs without destroying our life support system*. We have the scientific knowledge and the technical means to do that... We can exercise our moral imagination to bring our lifestyles and consumption into harmony with the living systems of earth. All we need is the collective will.” (p 3-4) Indeed! Naomi Klein (2014) summarises,

Fundamentally, the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis—embedded in interdependence rather than hyper individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy. This is required not only to create a political context to dramatically lower emissions, but also to help us cope with the disasters we can no longer hope to avoid. Because in the hot and stormy future we have already made inevitable through our past emissions, an unshakable belief in the equal rights of all people and a capacity for deep compassion will be the only things standing between civilization and barbarism. (p 462)

All these statements are sincere, but in the light of the failure of COP 26 the most appropriate response might be, in the argot of my small California town, “no shit”. We all know what needs to be done. But we are (collectively) not doing it.

At the Geography of Hope conference in 2017, indigenous Aleut elder Illarion Mercurieff cut through all manner of theorizing, stating simply that his elders have told him that the solution for humanity lies in a shift from the head to the heart, and that this is needed *now*. He writes,

Humans are trying to deal with these issues with the mind alone and not with the heart. The heart tells us to focus on making our dreams of peace and harmony or reality; The mind keeps us focused on the problems. Indigenous Elders ask the question: What are you choosing to focus on? Why are you choosing to focus on that which you are trying to move away from or that which you are trying to move towards?” Because, they say, what we choose to focus on becomes our primary reality. (I. Mercurieff et al 2018, p 31)

But in the world of *wetiko*, focusing on our dreams of peace and harmony is not as easy as it sounds. Even formulating such a dream is hard. Rob Hopkins (2020) has found that it is easier for people to imagine the end of the world due to climate collapse, than it is for them to imagine the better world they would like to live in.

In terms of alternative futures, Kate Soper (2021) argues for an “alternative hedonism”, urging that “new forms of desire—rather than fears of ecological disaster—are more likely to encourage sustainable modes of consuming”. (p 50) David Fleming (2016) also writes of a post-collapse utopia in which small scale living would provide opportunities for new values and a paradoxically better life. These authors consider that adopting policies of degrowth, and life ways grounded in values of humility, simplicity and frugality, would actually make us happier, and argue that such happiness could create more of a pull for change than arguments based on doing without, or settling for less.

A POLITICAL STRATEGY AGAINST WETIKO

Bruno Latour (2017) has come closest to setting out a practical political strategy for resisting wetiko in his book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. He starts by acknowledging the reality of wetiko, though he does not call it that, when he writes:

It is as though a significant segment of the ruling classes (known today rather too loosely as ‘the elites’) had concluded that the earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else. Consequently, they decided it was pointless to act as though history were going to continue to move toward a common horizon, toward a world in which all humans could prosper equally. From the 1980s on, the ruling classes stopped purporting to lead and began instead to shelter themselves from the world. (p 1)

Latour hypothesizes that the global elites know perfectly well that the current trajectory of modernism is going to be paid for, and that they have decided that a) they are going to sacrifice the rest of us in order to protect themselves and b) climate denial is their main strategy for achieving this.

Latour goes on to explain how modernism has created a polarity in which the Global is opposed to the Local. The Global stands for the expansive projects of modernism. The Local does not stand for “some primordial habitat, some ancestral land, the soil from which native populations have sprung” (p 26). It is merely defined as the anti-Global, the “Local-to-be-modernized” (p 29), that which must be left behind in order that we may advance. Thus those who protest against the projects of the Global can be cast as antiquated, reactionary, whiners

etc.⁸.

In futile resistance to the Global, there is a current regression to a version of the Local that he terms the Local-minus, in the form of populist ethno-nationalism, and the urge to close ethnic borders. There is also a new pole (added by the Trump regime): the “Out-of-This-World”, which opts out of the realities of earth, denies climate-change, and attempts to live “explicitly outside of all worldly constraints, literally, like a tax haven” (p 36).

Latour points out that the Left and the Right operate within the polarized system the elite wetikos have imposed: as though one must choose between the Global and the Local. No other choice is offered. The Greens have tried to present an alternative, but they have failed by opposing “economics to ecology, the demands of development to those of nature, questions of social injustice to the activity of the living world”, which frames the debate as “ecologise or modernize”. (p 46)

In order to actually fight the wetikos, since this *is* a war, Latour urges that we need to get upstream of the Global/Local binary, and force a new polarity: for or against the “Terrestrial”—which includes all the humans, as well as all other beings active in the ecology of earth. This new binary would enable us to recruit allies from the Right and the Left, remembering that our adversaries are our only potential allies. He cautions that the return to the earth involved here must not be confused with the projects of populism and nationalism, and refers to movements like Occupy and the French ZADistes as examples of movements that are re-politicizing what belonging to a land means. “To resort to a cliché, we don't have to choose between workers' wages and the fate of some little birds, but between two types of worlds in which there are both workers' salaries and little birds.” (p 57)

The Terrestrial does not allow the kind of detachment from reality that the Modern imposes. It no longer allows the world to be seen as a mere resource to be exploited. It no longer allows indifference to the plight of people sacrificed for modernization. It does not deny, but rather redefines the goal of progress and

⁸The distinction is reminiscent of Anna Tsing's (2015) observation that capitalism presents a (false) totalizing narrative with only two choices: progress or ruin. The polarity of course leaves out all the other ways of being local and global that do not enter into the modernist agenda.

science, in ways that include the earth as an actant, and ask how we can respond to its actions, so that it also allows us to recruit Moderns.

Latour notes that debates about whether or not we should be anthropocentric in the Anthropocene presupposes that there is a center, and that either humans or nature should occupy it! But in fact, there are multiple centers on earth, all of which need to be negotiated. “Saying ‘We are earthbound, we are terrestrials among terrestrials,’ does not lead to the same politics as saying ‘We are humans in nature.’” This first position is, of course, the one inhabited by the Native American and indigenous philosophies I have been discussing.

CONCLUSION

Latour’s political project offers useful and practical ways of re-framing the political debate in order to save the earth from wetikos. (Ironically, it is modernist in its attempt to form an agenda, drive a solution, and save at least some aspects of our way of life.) Others, however, including Jim Bendell (2018), Anna Tsing (2015), and Pablo Servigne and Raphael Stevens (2015), consider that it is too late to save anything: we have passed various tipping points, and collapse is now inevitable. Anna Tsing points out that there *will* be life in the ruins of capitalism (ie post-collapse) but that it will be contingent, shifting, local, and ephemeral. It will not be scalable. There will be no grand solutions.

Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) urges the end of modernism, as a system that oppresses first nations people, the poor, women, and the people of the global south—and reminds us that we cannot find solutions to the problems caused by modernity from within modernity. She quotes a Brazilian proverb that says one cannot swim when the water is ankle deep, nor can one swim when it is knee deep, but when it is waist deep one will be able to swim. This proverb indicates that although we do not now know what to do now, we may know what to do when the system of wetiko finally collapses in on itself. The irony is that the wetikos themselves will still be there, in their bunkers, with their armed guards and their weaponized AIs.

Ultimately, therefore, this paper ends with no solution. Some psychopathologies cannot be cured, and sociopathy is one of them. The trauma that wetikos inflict creates the conditions for more wetiko. Wetikos replicate. And Alastair McIntosh (2004) mentions the ‘glamour’ with which wetikos hypnotise

us, so that we follow their lead and swallow their propaganda. The thought-patterns and behavioral habits of wetiko have been inculcated into all of us who live in the West, and they are hard to escape.

One thing is sure: only if we take wetiko seriously, and address it within ourselves and in our society, will we be able to save the planet and each other from these murderous, psychopathic, cannibal spirits who have taken all of us hostage. They are not a metaphor, nor are they a culture-bound syndrome existing in the culturally-specific imagination of the Ojibwe. They are real. If we fail to confront them, they will eat us all alive.

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