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Introduction

*Of the evil beings who dwelt on the
periphery of the world of the Anishinaubae peoples,
none was more terrifying than the Weendigo.
It was a creature loathsome to behold and
as loathsome in its habits, conduct, and manners.*
(Basil Johnston 221)

Entire worlds can be embedded within one single story. Cosmologies, histories, politics, ethics as well as resistance. For the Indigenous peoples living on Turtle Island – now widely called North America, storytelling is a form of cultural expression but also transmitting knowledge and thereby preserving their history, culture and sovereignty. The Wendigo (also spelled Windigo, Wétiko and other variants) is a powerful creature in many North American Native stories – a monstrous being that embodies greed, cannibalism, and imbalance.¹ Different stories of the Wendigo exist within the many Indigenous tribes living on the North American continent. In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer states that in Anishinaabe cosmology, for instance, the Wendigo is “the villain tale told on freezing nights in the north woods” (304)². A Wendigo does not merely depict a supernatural monster; rather, it is a transformed human being who, driven by extreme hunger, fear, and greed has become a cannibal³. “Windigos are not born, they are made” (304) reflects the abandoning of relational responsibilities, when a human becomes consumed by insatiable desire and greed, and the balance between the human and more-than-human living world is lost (Johnston 222-223; Kimmerer 305). The Wendigo tale is therefore meant to teach restraint, responsibility and resistance.

Louise Erdrich’s poem “Windigo” in *Jacklight* (1984), Basil Johnston’s “Weendigo” in *The Manitous* (1995), and Winona LaDuke’s “Wiindigo” in *Last Standing Woman* (2023), offer insight into the mythological narrative about the supernatural being. Descriptions across

¹ Henceforth, this thesis uses the term ‘Wendigo’ for all variants that refer to the cannibalistic monster, except in direct quotations and when referring to concepts like *Windigo economy* and *wétiko disease*.

² See chapter 1.5. for more information about the Anishinaabe

³ See chapter 1.1. for an examination of the term “cannibalism” and what it means in an Indigenous American context

these texts emphasize the creature's defining characteristic: a relentless, insatiable hunger. Johnston illustrates the Wendigo's hunger as trapped in a cycle of overconsumption: "the more it ate, the bigger it grew; and the bigger it grew, the more it wanted and needed" (222). Here, the appetite extends from physical hunger to moral excess, as the monster is unable to practice restraint and reciprocity as a result of its greed for more. Subsequently, alongside the story's function as a cautionary tale, the Wendigo narratives and poem also imply significant critique of societal and ecological degradation. Traditionally, they warned against greed, selfishness, and taking too much without giving back, as overconsumption posed a threat to the collective well-being within a community (Kimmerer 307). In societies where survival depended on sharing and balance, the Wendigo narrative would prevent "that within us which cares more for its own survival than for anything else" (Kimmerer 305) to emerge. Within Anishinaabe cosmology, the Wendigo's hunger has meanwhile extended to consuming whole environments in the need to satisfy its appetite for power and property (Walker 58). In the primary texts chosen for this thesis, the Wendigo is used as a metaphor in reference to colonial violence, extractive capitalism, and ecological destruction.

Indigenous authors like Robin Wall Kimmerer, Jack D. Forbes, and Winona LaDuke have applied the Wendigo in reference to colonial capitalist power systems and their consequences for Indigenous cultures and the environment, thereby supporting the analysis of the primary sources through factual knowledge. Jack D. Forbes conceptualizes the related Cree term *wétiko* as a disease of cannibalism – defined not only metaphorically, but literally as the consumption of other beings for personal gain (xix, 24). Specifically important in the context of this thesis is Forbes conception of Anglo-American imperialism as a "form of cannibalism designed to "eat" Indians and also consume the Native people's land and resources" (25). Exploitation of others, imperialism and environmental destruction become forms of cannibalism (24-25). In her chapter "Windigo Footprints", Kimmerer describes the extensive presence of the Wendigo in the contemporary world and LaDuke underlines ecological devastation through deforestation in *Last Standing Woman* and demonstrates Wendigo behavior on a larger scale through case studies in her work *All Our Relations* (1999). Although rooted in Native American storytelling, many warnings against western systems of power and consumption that have expanded across the globe are embedded in the Wendigo story. The Wendigo therefore provides a unique lens through which this thesis will analyze the intersections between Indigenous mythology and wisdom, modern colonialist capitalism and environmental collapse. The Wendigo becomes a warning for societies that prioritize economic

accumulation and profit over reciprocity, and exploitation of more-than-human nature over a balanced relationship with it.

Before continuing, I would like to state that I am a European student with no Indigenous American heritage. My positionality as a non-Indigenous reader shapes this analysis as I find myself within the colonial and capitalist structures that these texts critically engage with. Rather than approaching the Wendigo as a universalizing metaphor, this thesis understands the spiritual being as culturally and historically situated in the narratives that Indigenous American authors and scholars themselves have used to articulate critiques of colonial violence, extractive capitalism and ecological destruction. The readings presented do not aim to define the Wendigo beyond the contexts in which it is narrated in the primary texts, and neither to distance the figure from Indigenous epistemologies. This thesis therefore examines the Wendigo texts written by Indigenous American scholars as a critique of the European power structures that continue to disrupt the lives of many Native American communities.⁴

The reason for writing this thesis originates in an academic interest in Indigenous American literature and a personal engagement with environmental protection. Throughout recent decades, the accelerating destruction of ecosystems and the role of capitalism in global warming through extractive practices and fossil fuels has become increasingly visible. When I was little, we were able to sledge in our own garden at least half of the winter days because there was abundant snow. Now we are lucky if that occurs a few days per year. Climate catastrophes like summer storms and intense rainfalls used to be a rarity; meanwhile, there are no summers without them. Rivers overflow their banks, fallen trees are the result of storms that hit more strongly than ever before. There are months with hardly any rainfall, and then there are months when it hardly ever stops. Every year, temperatures hit new records. Everything is out of control, it seems, and it has become undeniably obvious within these few years I have been on this planet. How do we turn this around? How can I contribute to saving the life on Earth that is relentlessly exploited and destroyed at the hands of humans? These are the questions that have pushed me towards writing this thesis, as I feel to find answers within the research that I have conducted in relation to it.

The first book I read in connection to my topic was Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which articulates Indigenous epistemologies grounded in relationality – understood as land-based interdependence – and reciprocity. Kimmerer's work contrasts the western perception of nature as a resource from which to unconditionally take by presenting

⁴ See chapter 1.4. for a more detailed explanation on the ethical framework this thesis works with.

cosmologies that foreground the interconnection between human and, as she calls it, more-than-human life (190)⁵. This perspective challenges the dominant western worldview in which humans are central and has therefore had a great impact on which direction this thesis follows conceptually. *Braiding Sweetgrass* has offered the personal and theoretical input for the questions and frameworks the thesis is based on.

By examining this topic, I intend to share worldviews that have long existed within Indigenous American cultures but have been systematically silenced. These alternative societies are not utopian ideals – they already exist, and they have existed for thousands of years in Indigenous American cultures (McGregor et al. 37). The thesis recognizes what has been erased and suppressed by colonial and capitalist forces and argues for its relevance for the survival of life on the planet. The aim is for readers to attain a sense of responsibility that emerges when Earth is understood as a relation rather than a resource.

The methodological approach which guides the analysis of the three primary texts – Louise Erdrich’s poem “Windigo” in *Jacklight* (1984), Basil Johnston’s “Weendigo” in *The Manitous* (1995), and Winona LaDuke’s “Wiindigo” in *Last Standing Woman* (2023) – is based on close reading, thematic analysis, and ethics. Key concepts through which the primary texts are examined will be introduced as well as the main texts that provide this theoretical background knowledge. The analytical strategies that explore the primary literature will be presented. It will become clear how the three texts are interpreted and most importantly, how they can be examined as a critique of settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, and ecological imbalance. Throughout the thesis, the vulnerability and controversy that exists around this topic is considered. As the narratives of which the origins lie in multiple Indigenous American tribes, the views and interpretations may also differ; therefore, I aim to remain strictly analytical and hope to not offend anyone. The connections I draw between the Wendigo narratives and the historical as well as current challenges Native Americans have been and are facing are rather interpretive than factual.

Offering an overview of my argument, I first posit that the Wendigo, as it appears in Indigenous epistemologies and contemporary scholarship, functions as a central metaphor for moral, relational, and ecological imbalance. By moving the figure beyond its mythological origins, it becomes a critical lens through which ongoing settler colonialism and extractive capitalist structures are examined. By analyzing literary and theoretical texts, this thesis

⁵ When writing about plants and other-than-human animals and plants, I am referring to them as “more-than-human life”, to honor their lives and to honor Kimmerer’s work, who uses the same term.

demonstrates that the Wendigo's original form of a cautionary tale extends to a conceptual framework that exposes the destructive logics of overconsumption, dispossession, and the loss of reciprocal relationships. The theoretical framework establishes the Wendigo within Indigenous epistemologies, where it operates as a cautionary figure warning against greed, excess, and relational imbalance. Drawing significantly on Robin Wall Kimmerer's notion of reciprocity and Jack D. Forbes' concept of the "wétiko disease", I suggest that the Wendigo represents an ever-prominent condition in the contemporary world of insatiable consumption, that maintains to sever relationships between humans, the land, and more-than-human beings. Utilizing Patrick Wolfe's characterization of settler colonialism as a persistent "logic of elimination"⁶, alongside Indigenous environmental justice scholarship, I further situate this condition within ongoing structures of dispossession and ecological destruction. Thus, the theoretical framework mirrors the central claim of this thesis: that the Wendigo functions both as a cosmological warning and as an analytical concept through which contemporary crises can be understood.

The analysis begins with Basil Johnston's narrative, which foregrounds the figure as a cautionary element within Anishinaabe storytelling. Along the lines of Indigenous cosmological frameworks, I illustrate how the Wendigo emerges from excess and the loss of relational responsibility, emphasizing the dangers of insatiable desire and moral imbalance. By closely reading Johnston's text, the Wendigo reflects the consequences of overconsumption and excessive indulgence, extending the narrative's function of a cautionary tale to a warning of contemporary structures of consumption that severely impact relationality and ecosystems, as a result of the disconnection between humans and their surroundings.

Following Johnston's "Weendigo", Winona LaDuke's Wendigo narrative situates the monstrous being within a more contemporary framework, highlighting the structural forces that enact Wendigo behavior rather than individuals that have failed to maintain moral balance. She constitutes the figure as a critique of settler colonialist and extractive activity, drawing on case studies of environmental injustice on Indigenous lands. The Wendigo thus becomes a metaphor for systematic exploitation, highlighting the continuation of colonial logics in contemporary economic practices. Moreover, I argue that LaDuke foregrounds Indigenous resistance as a necessary response to these ongoing forms of dispossession.

"Windigo", a poem written by Louise Erdrich, offers a more introspective and transformative interpretation of the cannibalistic being, shifting the focus from structural

⁶ This concept will be more closely examined in Chapter 3.2.

critique to the tension between monstrosity and humanity. She portrays the Wendigo as a monster with a human at its core, and thereby emphasizes the connection between the Wendigo condition and human nature⁷. The poem foregrounds both the destructive effects of insatiable consumption as well as the persistence of the human within the monster; the potential of renewal and change is conveyed through the return to a pure human body at the end of the poem.

The three primary texts operate across different registers – mythological narrative, historical novel, and poetry – allowing for an analysis of the Wendigo as unifying metaphor that expands over Indigenous epistemologies to critiques of colonial and capitalist systems. Simultaneously, alternative modes of living are proposed through the presentation of Indigenous ideologies that are grounded in reciprocity, responsibility and relationality with the land and more-than-human beings.

Research Objective

By bringing contemporary Indigenous American critiques of colonial and capitalist structures into conversation with the Wendigo narrative, this thesis asks how Indigenous American Wendigo stories function as a narrative framework for critiquing ecological imbalance and insatiable capitalist growth by illuminating the enduring links between colonial structures and the contemporary climate crisis. The Wendigo visualizes these links: it reminds us of what happens when we forget our relations, when we consume without giving back and when we silence the voices that could have warned us of the consequences.

⁷ The Wendigo condition is what Jonnelle Walker, an Anishinaabe scholar, describes as: “Wendigos survive by consuming the life of others without reciprocity, care, consent, or regard in the name of personal gain or profit”, and it was something “that you caught like a disease or that grew within yourself like a cancer” (54).

1. Theoretical Framework

The approach to the Wendigo texts draws on three theoretical frameworks, from which the majority is authored by Indigenous American scholars: Indigenous epistemologies, settler colonial theory, and Indigenous environmental justice. Each lens provides a deeper understanding of how the literary representations of the Wendigo can be applied as a critique of the destructive forces of ongoing colonialist structures and capitalist overconsumption. The three Wendigo texts are approached as literary interventions that respond to the intertwined crisis of colonial violence, environmental destruction and the loss of Indigenous sovereignty. By situating these narratives within contemporary Indigenous theoretical discourse that examines ongoing colonialism and capitalist structures, I argue that Indigenous American storytelling is a vital source for ecological and philosophical knowledge. These stories do not merely critique western capitalist systems, they also provide the possibility of change and renewal by presenting alternative ways of relating to the land and community. This chapter outlines the framework that guides the analysis of the Wendigo as a metaphor for settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, and ecological devastation across three primary texts: Louise Erdrich's poem "Windigo" in *Jacklight* (1984) Basil Johnston's „Weendigo" in *The Manitous* (1995), and Winona LaDuke's "Wiindigo" in *Last Standing Woman* (2023). These texts are examined through concepts from Indigenous epistemologies, settler colonial theory, and environmental humanities. The three frameworks enable a reading of the Wendigo within the context of environmental degradation, capitalist overconsumption, and the long-term effects of ongoing colonial structures. The Wendigo, then, operates as more than a mythological monster; it functions as a critical lens through which the moral and ecological consequences of western capitalist -and colonial systems can be examined. The theoretical perspectives introduced in this chapter provide the methodological foundation for the analyses that follow. Rather than remaining separate from the primary texts, these frameworks will be incorporated into each close reading. By establishing these conceptual tools, the subsequent chapters are able to draw on them directly in order to examine how the Wendigo functions as a figure through which contemporary structures of power, overconsumption and environmental destruction are critiqued.

1.1. Cannibalism

Before presenting the three main theoretical frameworks this thesis will be using for the analysis, the key term cannibalism needs to be briefly introduced. Cannibalism occupies a central place in this thesis, not primarily because of its meaning in European colonial discourse, but because within Indigenous American frameworks such as the Wendigo stories it names a form of insatiable, exploitative consumption that destroys reciprocal relations between humans, land, and more-than-human life. In this thesis, I refer to cannibalism as a relational and ethical failure marked by greed, excess, and the consumption of others for personal gain. Drawing especially on Robin Wall Kimmerer and Jack D. Forbes, I use cannibalism as a concept through which colonial violence, extractive capitalism, and ecological destruction can be understood. The European colonial discourse of cannibalism remains relevant as historical context, but it not the primary framework with which the term is examined in this thesis.

Within Indigenous American frameworks, cannibalism functions as a warning against insatiable hunger and the breakdown of reciprocal relations. Robin Wall Kimmerer's reflections on the Wendigo are useful here because they shift the focus from cannibalism as a colonial accusation to cannibalism as a relational and ethical failure. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she notes that "cautionary Windigo tales arose in a commons-based society where sharing was essential to survival and greed made any individual a danger to the whole" (307). Cannibalism, in her view, refers to more than bodily consumption, namely, to a form of hunger severed from reciprocity and collective responsibility. Kimmerer's conception of cannibalistic consumption provides an important bridge to Jack D. Forbes' discussion of the Wendigo, which similarly reframes cannibalism as a structure of exploitation rather than a literal act alone.

Forbes' reconceptualization of cannibalism as a structure of predatory relation is particularly important for my thesis. Forbes defines the 'wétiko' as a Cree term referring to a cannibal, or more specifically to "an evil person or spirit who terrorizes other creatures by means of terrible evil acts, including cannibalism" (24). In *Columbus and Other Cannibals* (2008), however, the significance of the concept exceeds its literal meaning and becomes a way of naming exploitation itself. In C. Richard King's reading of Forbes, the Wendigo is "the sickness of exploitation", and describes the condition marked by "excess, greed ... arrogance, and deceit" (115). Cannibalism in this framework is no longer confined to the consumption of flesh; instead, it refers to a way of being in the world in which the lives of others become available for use, extraction, and destruction. The extension of cannibalism into a way of being allows colonialism itself to be understood as cannibalistic. If cannibalism is not only the eating

of human flesh but also the relentless consumption of the lives, labor, land, and resources of others, then the European colonizer begins to resemble the cannibal. From an Indigenous perspective, colonialism can be read as a profoundly cannibalistic structure: it consumes Indigenous territories, dismantles reciprocal relations to land, and transforms human and more-than-human life into property.⁸

Because the term “cannibalism” is heavily burdened by colonial history, it is necessary to acknowledge that it was also used very differently within European discourse. In the context of the Americas, cannibalism became a powerful sign through which Indigenous peoples could be rendered savage, irrational, and therefore available for conquest. As C. Richard King argues in his article “The (Mis)uses of Cannibalism in Contemporary Cultural Critique”, cannibalism after 1492 must be understood as “a symbol, as a tool, as a weapon” that functioned as a privileged marker of cultural difference (109). The category of the cannibal thus did not merely describe an ‘other’ already assumed to exist; rather, it actively produced that ‘other’ in a form useful to colonial expansion. The term ‘cannibalism’, therefore, has to be perceived as part of the ideological vocabulary of colonialism within the framework of this thesis. Furthermore, its perception within colonial history reveals how the term was weaponized against Indigenous peoples and why its Indigenous reworking is politically significant.

Shirley Lindenbaum, an Australian anthropologist, asserts that the onset of cannibalism discourse coincided with the encounter between Europeans and the Native population of the Americas and became a defining feature of colonial experience in the New World (475). The cannibal was one of the figures through which Europe imaged itself as civilized and morally ordered in opposition to those it defined as primitive and savage. Consequently, cannibalism helped organize the very distinction between the civilized self, which Europeans considered themselves to be, and the barbaric ‘other’. What mattered in this process was not only the production of Indigenous difference, but also the concealment of colonial violence. Lindenbaum notes that postcolonial scholars have understood the figure of the cannibal as part of a larger logic of projection, in which colonial powers displaced their own exploitative appetites onto the people they sought to dominate (476). Her insight is crucial, since it helps explain why Indigenous decolonial scholars such as Forbes can turn the accusation of cannibalism back against colonialist structures themselves.

Cannibalism carried legal, political, and economic consequences. Evan C. Rothera, an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas, demonstrates how cannibal discourse was

⁸ This reading of colonialism will be examined in chapter 2, 3 and 4.

inextricably tied to the material realities of colonization. He illustrates that European representations of Indigenous cannibalism were deeply entangled with attempts to justify enslavement, since their designation as cannibals could serve as grounds for their subjugation (Fo 28; qtd. in Rothera 3; 14). These distinctions gained particular significance “when it became permissible to enslave Indians who were cannibals” (Rothera 14). Once Indigenous peoples had been placed within the category of the cannibal, they could be treated as populations whose domination was not only acceptable but necessary, underlining Lindenbaum’s argument of the European conception of the barbaric ‘other’ which contrasted the civilized self. The accusation of being cannibals functioned to transform entire groups into objects of suspicion and punishment; as a result, Rothera points out that whole populations could be reduced to human-flesh-eating monsters and enslaved, regardless of the complexity or unreliability of the original claims (34). The colonial representation of the Native American population as cannibals thus helped legitimize conquest, enslavement, and colonial domination.

For this thesis, then, cannibalism matters as a concept that can be turned back against colonialism itself. It functions as an Indigenous analytic of greed, exploitation, and ecological as well as relational destruction. Through the Wendigo frameworks of Kimmerer and Forbes, cannibalism becomes a concept that names the consumption of land, labor, life, and community under settler colonialism and extractive capitalism. The colonial discourse of cannibalism provides the historical backdrop against which this reversal becomes legible, but it is the Indigenous understanding of cannibalistic consumption that structures the analysis in the chapters that follow.

1.2. Indigenous Relational Epistemologies

Indigenous epistemologies provide a crucial foundation for understanding all the dimensions of Wendigo narratives. Robin Wall Kimmerer’s notion of reciprocity challenges the dominant western perception of nature as a passive resource available for unlimited exploitation. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she introduces epistemological concepts like the “Honorable Harvest” – a set of unwritten guidelines that apply when taking from the Earth, ensuring a healthy and balanced relationship between human and more-than-human life (183). Central to this worldview is the idea of a “gift economy”, in which reciprocity functions as the primary currency, and ownership requires responsibility for what has been given to you, thereby

reminding her readers to never take the gifts from the Earth for granted and always give something in return (24, 28). As she explains, Indigenous environmental philosophy understands the living world “not as a collection of exploitable resources, but as a set of relationships and responsibilities”, underlining that within this philosophy, “we inhabit a landscape of gifts peopled by nonhuman relatives” (27). Her framework enables an interpretation of the Wendigo as an embodiment of western capitalist logic – a creature that takes but gives nothing back, highlighting the contrast between a *gift economy* and extractive systems. Kimmerer’s conception of reciprocity is not merely symbolic but carries didactic meaning as well, as it is referring to the ethical and moral limits of human consumption. She emphasizes that an *Honorable Harvest* means to take the gifts that are provided, but “taking coal buried deep in the earth, for which we must inflict irreparable damage, violates every precept of the code”; coal, from Kimmerer’s perspective, is “by no stretch of imagination” given to us (187). Instead of breaking open the Earth’s surface, she says, we must use the energy that Earth provides us with and not waste it – we should do our best to use the energy we have taken wisely. We ought to ensure that we only take as much as we need, and that the energy we have taken will in some way be returned to the Earth (187). Her example of coal mining renders giving back what has been taken impossible, as the Earth’s surface cannot be repaired. The *Honorable Harvest* concept is thus presented as protection against the insatiable hunger of the Wendigo. In the modern world, Kimmerer suggests, we could apply this unwritten set of guidelines within our daily purchases by asking: was the “purchase worthy of the lives consumed?” (195). Taking only as much as needed and treating one’s surroundings responsibly are the ground rules of the *Honorable Harvest* to which we must return to ensure long-lasting survival of all species who still inhabit the planet.

Gregory Cajete adds to Kimmerer’s perception of the relational ethics on which Indigenous knowledge systems are founded, which he defines as “Native science” in his essay “Native science and Sustaining Indigenous Communities”. He calls for a return to “participatory” science to recreate balance between science and technology and its dramatic effect on socio-economic situations (17). Native science is based on place-based ethics, entailing a close relationship between the peoples, animals, and the land on which they live. For Cajete, Native science must become the basis of modern-day technology, “if we are to face the monumental environmental, social, and spiritual challenges of the next millennium” (18). Concepts such as the Lakota expression “Mitakuye oyasin” – “we are all related” – illustrate how Indigenous communities understand both human and more-than-human beings as part of an intertwined and interdependent ecosystem (19). These oppose western views of domination

and exploitation, serving as an alternative knowledge system in which all living beings are seen as equal. Similarly, in *All Our Relations*, Winona LaDuke critiques extractive economies, by focusing on the effect of these practices on Indigenous communities and nature. She provides alternative economies that rely on relationality and land-based energy systems that prevent destroying life. Her work is particularly important with regard to western economies interpreted as Wendigos, systematically “eating away” at Indigenous lives, but also their land, ultimately destroying Indigenous territories as a whole (15, 38, 62, 178). Through concrete case studies in which reciprocal relations are severed by western governments, LaDuke highlights the impact extractive capitalism has on Indigenous health, their land, and culture.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s work also offers a vital framework for analyzing the Wendigo narratives through her writing on Indigenous resurgence and relationality. *As We Have Always Done* (2017) underlines the importance of the connection between humans and more-than-human beings in Native American epistemologies. Settler colonialism and extractivism have disrupted and continue to disrupt these relations with the community and the land (Greer 61-64; Simpson 8). Gregory Cajete similarly argues that Indigenous communities “evolved in response to the requirements of surviving in particular environments and maintaining sustainable relationships therein”, illustrating how their traditions were adapted to the specific ecological surroundings they lived in (21-25). They thereby ensured that they were not imposing themselves on an area, but rather, interacted with the landscape. The disruption of these relationships through colonial displacement forced them to adapt to western forms of living, as the knowledge they shared with their ancestral lands was, as a result, lost (25). As Daniel R. Wildcat asserts, “the truth is that today many American Indians and Alaska Natives are living in ways and places that, strictly speaking, they did not choose, but that the US government’s policies and laws chose for them” (33). The Wendigo symbolizes the consequences of these violent disconnections that have been forced onto the Native populations of North America, as the Native peoples had to shift from their sustainable way of living to Wendigo economics. Extractive, capitalist systems undermine the reciprocal relationships on which Indigenous American epistemologies were built – like a Wendigo, consuming the Native American culture and people (Kimmerer 308). Glen Coulthard, in *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014), introduces the concept of “grounded normativity” which is an ethical framework that is established through place-based knowledge and practices of Indigenous American communities “that structure [their] ethical engagements with the world and [their] relationship with human and nonhuman others over time” (13). Grounded normativity can be viewed as the foundation of Native American political structures, economies and nationhood (Coulthard 13;

Simpson 22). His rejection of western reconciliation models is particularly significant in the final chapter of this thesis, as he argues that Indigenous resistance must derive from these land-based, non-capitalist practices.

Indigenous relational epistemologies provide the conceptual frame for understanding the risks the Wendigo narratives articulate. The concepts introduced in this chapter present the groundwork of Indigenous American communities that constrain consumption and desire in order to prevent excess and create balance⁹. Indigenous environmental philosophies therefore serve as a theoretical groundwork for this thesis, as they introduce the foundational ethical principles on which Native American communities were built, and also exposes why the Wendigo was feared, as the monster opposes their morals. “Indigenous cultures have been characterized as “cultures of gratitude””, Kimmerer notes, in which the appropriate response to the gifts of the Earth is the responsibility to give something back (31). These frameworks demonstrate that the insatiable hunger of the Wendigo causes the loss of relational responsibility, thereby functioning as an opposition against the systematic destruction at the hand of a settler colonial and capitalist system. Indigenous epistemologies establish the ethical foundations that oppose desire, consumption and exploitation. In order to account for the historical forces that have disrupted these systems of restraint, settler colonial theory is incorporated in the thesis’ framework. The following chapter will examine how invasive European structures stole the land and their culture from Native American peoples through displacement, assimilation and murder, with the goal of perpetuating their extractive practices and installing their own culture on the emptied territories. Thus, reciprocity was essentially systematically dismantled rather than lost.

1.3. Settler Colonialism and the Structure of Hunger

Settler colonialism theory provides an understanding of how the collapse of relational ethics – symbolized through Wendigo characteristics – was produced through a system of dispossession and elimination. In the context of the colonization of the Americas, settler colonialism refers

⁹ George Bataille argues that surplus energy inevitably exceeds systems of utility and must be expended rather than conserved: “The excess energy (wealth and resources) can be used for the growth of a system ... but normally it must be spent, willingly or not,” and he further claims that “man is the most suited of all living beings ... to consume intensely, sumptuously, the excess energy” (Bataille, qtd. in Connolly 108). In this sense, the wasteful expenditure of excess is not accidental but constitutive of human existence, standing in contrast to Indigenous epistemologies that emphasize restraint, reciprocity, and the ethical regulation of consumption.

to a system of oppression and domination in which a group of people settles down on the land of another population. The ultimate goal, however, is to not only live on the land of someone else – share it – but rather to establish an entirely new society on that territory (Wolfe 388). The Native population stands in the way of implementing the cultural and political structures of the settlers, which leads to the attempted elimination of the Indigenous people (Whyte 5). Patrick Wolfe is a non-Indigenous scholar, whose work “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” is highly relevant for supporting the argument of this thesis. He adds cultural assimilation and removal to elimination within the settler colonial context – which were essentially introduced to ensure the disappearance of Indigenous peoples from the sought land (Wolfe 388). Jack D. Forbes’ *Columbus and Other Cannibals* is particularly important for this part, as he introduces the concept of the “wétiko disease” (Forbes xix). For him, European colonialist systems are like a disease spreading across the lands, contaminating more and more people with an insatiable hunger for the lives and lands of others. The *wétiko disease* describes the internalization of a worldview in which taking without giving, consuming without a limit, and exploiting without a conscience becomes the norm. Forbes furthermore challenges the common belief that violence is an inherent feature of human nature; instead, he argues that these ideas have historically been perpetuated by societies which were engaged in imperialism and exploitative systems (36). “Wétiko societies”, then, normalize the exploitation of all sorts of life as a necessary practice in order to consistently accumulate wealth and power. He mirrors these Wendigo characteristics with those of colonial expansion, as well as the violence and greed that comes with it (Forbes 39). This violent logic has also been identified in critical analyses of capitalism more broadly, which trace its emergence to processes of dispossession that forcibly separated communities from their land and means of subsistence (Coulthard 7)¹⁰.

¹⁰ Coulthard engages critically with Marxist political economy, particularly its analysis of dispossession and accumulation within settler colonial and capitalist structures, while emphasizing that such frameworks remain limited in their ability to account for Indigenous struggles for land and sovereignty. As Coulthard notes, Marx’s primitive accumulation concept applied for analyzing the connections between colonial power systems and contemporary capitalist structures, has frequently been approached critically or rejected by Indigenous studies scholars (Coulthard 7-11). In this context, Russell Means’ rejection of Marxism needs to be observed. According to him, Marxism’s revolutionary idea to “overthrow” capitalists and redistribute the money fairly perpetuates the industrial system which produces capital in the first place. Hence, what Means argues is that this revolution would rather be a continuation of the destructive system that already exists, and if Native Americans were to become Marxists, they would have to lose their cultures and become a part of the industrial western world (“Revolution and American Indians: “Marxism is as Alien to my Culture as Capitalism”, by Russell Means 1980).

The consequences of this colonial logic are further examined by Winona LaDuke, who asserts that Indigenous territories are consistently targeted for environmentally destructive industries, including nuclear waste storage, resource extraction, and military activities close to or on reservations (3). Ecosystems are devastated alongside Indigenous communities, as their relationship with the land is severed; the people's health is moreover suffering under these dispossessive and exploitative patterns, consequences that reinforce what Forbes has exposed as Wendigo behavior. Forbes's colonial wétiko and the Wendigo narratives align closely, connecting the political critique with the mythological creature – a monster with an insatiable appetite, consuming everything in its path, and eventually even itself. Wendigo behavior is therefore a produced condition that arises from insatiability, greed, and imbalance. Within this framework, the Wendigo appears as a condition produced by colonial structures. Forbes depicts the Wendigo as a cannibalistic disease embedded in European colonial structures, explained through systems of greed and consumption, always seeking power and profit (xvi). Walker's "Wendigoscene" parallels Forbes' arguments by identifying colonization itself as a Wendigo force, causing ongoing "loss symptoms" such as depression, addictions, and even suicide (61). Robin Wall Kimmerer adds to these analyses with her concept "Windigo economy" or "Windigo economics", a system that emerges from the relentless extraction of natural resources, thereby severing the reciprocal relationship between humans and the surrounding more-than-human world. She describes contemporary capitalist economies as system driven by "fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption" (308), in which the pursuit of profit encourages taking without limits and, furthermore, it celebrates these forms of self-interest that Indigenous traditions asked to restrain. The ideology of infinite growth has driven the planet to its limits, but maintains its destructive logic regardless – a structure clearly resonating with the Wendigo figure's insatiable hunger (308). These interpretations position the Wendigo as a systematic structure, aligning the image of the monstrous being with the political economy of settler colonial capitalism.

The Wendigo has been conceptualized as a disease and an economy, both driven by insatiable hunger. Similarly, Glen Coulthard views settler colonialism as a structure that is maintained through economic systems as well as political institutions (7). His arguments are examined in the last chapter of this thesis, in which Indigenous resistance and resurgence are central. When it comes to decolonization, Coulthard argues that a politics of recognition remains focused on preserving the access to Indigenous lands for settlers, rather than recognizing those resources as someone else's. He thereby challenges the system within colonialist structures that attempts to reconcile with Indigenous populations; decolonization,

according to Coulthard, can only happen by rejecting settler-colonial structures of recognition and returning to different systems. A shift towards “a resurgent politics of recognition that seeks to practice decolonial, gender-emancipatory, and economically nonexploitative alternative structures of law and sovereign authority grounded on a critical refashioning of the best of Indigenous legal and political traditions” (179). In this sense, decolonization cannot be reduced to economic redistribution, but must confront the interconnected structures of domination that operate through racial, gendered, and state power that perpetuate colonial structures (14). Coulthard states that “a system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living out lives in relation to one another and the natural world in a nondominating and nonexploitative terms” (13), and determines these place-based ethics to be the foundational groundwork of Indigenous decolonial practice.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is as essential as in the previous chapter on Indigenous American epistemologies, in which her work underlines the importance of the relationship between humans and more-than-humans. She emphasizes the profound environmental transformations caused by colonial settlement in her own homeland. Centuries of industrialization on Indigenous lands, infrastructure construction and deforestation have significantly altered the territories (2-4). Yet, despite these substantial changes and hardly recognizing the land anymore, she continues to call this land her home and wants to protect it at all costs (21). Glen Coulthard’s and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s arguments frequently align, especially in terms of the resurgence of Indigenous practices. In *As We Have Always Done*, she complements Coulthard’s argument of rejecting reconciliation within colonial boundaries; rather, decolonization requires a return to Indigenous modes of governance, politics and relationality, whereby western colonialist and capitalist systems are completely rejected (Simpson 21-23). Reciprocity is broken when the land is no longer a relation but a resource available for exploitation. Simpson’s description of reciprocal relationships is contrasted with the colonialist’s Wendigo behavior, consuming the land with an insatiable hunger, without giving back to Earth. The monster we have unleashed, according to Kimmerer in her chapter “Windigo Footprints”, emerges in capitalist systems that reciprocate differently, as they provide money to those who comply with these exploitative structures – money that will allow one to purchase even more. Private property, thus, is the promise of success and satisfaction within a capitalist worldview (Kimmerer 308). Colonial and capitalist systems are exactly what the Wendigo narrative warns against with their extractive, exploitative practices that will consume until there is nothing left.

This introductory chapter provides a broad understanding of the Wendigo narrative as political critique. The Wendigo narratives are extended to much more than cautionary tales from Indigenous tribes of North America. Within settler colonial theory, hunger is no longer understood as a metaphor alone, but a structural condition established and maintained through colonial expansion, dispossessing Indigenous people of their land, and assimilate them to European systems to ensure capitalist growth. This theoretical framework is essential for the analysis of the Wendigo logic as a system that operates beyond its original meaning – slowly spreading across the land and becoming the very foundation of economic and political structures. Understanding the Wendigo as a structural force linked to settler colonialism and extractive capitalism reveals how hunger for land and property becomes normalized within these economic systems¹¹. In addition to land dispossession and resource extraction, settler colonialist structures have resulted in dramatic ecological consequences that threaten the lives of Indigenous people, the life on their lands and, eventually life on the whole planet. These consequences include biodiversity loss, pollution, and subsequently, global warming and climate change, all of which disproportionately affect Indigenous communities whose livelihoods remain closely tied to their environments. Many Indigenous American nations have witnessed the disappearance of animals, the contamination of water sources, and the destruction of surrounding ecosystems that once sustained their cultures and economies (Hogan 203; 207). The continuation of the process of forced displacement through vast environmental changes is a result of colonial and capitalist systems.

1.4. Indigenous Environmental Justice and the Consequences of Greed

Indigenous environmental justice scholarship extends far beyond the unequal distribution of environmental harm that is mostly central in western environmental justice discourse. The consequences of colonial hunger are highlighted, illustrating how extractive practices and the dispossession of Indigenous people from their land have generated an ongoing environmental crisis. According to Indigenous American environmentalists, environmental justice cannot be

¹¹ Russell Means articulates settler colonialism not only as territorial occupation but as a civilization logic grounded in what he describes as a “European concept of legitimate thinking”, where written abstraction replaces lived relationality. He argues that European-derived systems of knowledge, including science, Marxism, capitalism, and state structures – function as mechanisms of cultural genocide because they abstract, categorize, and ultimately sever relational ties between people, land, and more-than-human beings. (Russell Means, 1980).

separated from the restoration of relationships with the land and more-than-human lives (McGregor et al. 36). An analysis of environmental justice within Indigenous American contexts therefore requires the recognition of ongoing processes of settler colonialism that have disrupted, and continue to disrupt these relationships on which many Indigenous American communities are built. Endless resource extraction and displacement have resulted in the loss of reciprocity and relational ethics, severing the bond between humans and the land that secures their survival (McGregor et al. 36; Whyte 154, 155). The disruptive impact settler colonialism has had on Indigenous people and their relations has thus led to the environmental crisis many Native American populations are faced with today. Winona LaDuke's *All Our Relations* illustrates how colonial and capitalist extraction materializes in eight concrete case studies in which environmental injustice towards Indigenous communities becomes evident. For instance, she documents the Mohawk community of Akwesasne, where industrial development along the St. Lawrence River transformed a once vital water source for the people into a contaminated site. Companies like General Motors, Reynolds, and Domtar established facilities near the reservation that emitted substantial amounts of toxic substances into the environment during the 1950s, causing the water and soil around the reservation to become poisoned, whereby the community was stripped from its vital food and drinking sources (LaDuke 14-15). The impact these activities have is extensive, as it destroys ecosystem, but it also undermines Indigenous livelihoods by contributing to the loss of their traditional subsistence practices on which they relied for millennia. The rapid changes they are forced to adapt to illustrate a further consequence of colonial and capitalist structures imposed on Native American peoples as it consistently prioritizes profit over the relationships with human and more-than-human beings.

For Kyle White, environmental injustice is a continuation of the settler colonial period. According to him, Indigenous peoples have been living in a state of a climate crisis since the European arrival on the American continent, as colonialism initiated the systematic degradation of ecosystems that sustain Indigenous life (Whyte 154).¹² The rapid loss of familiar ecosystems

¹² This process of destruction can also be referred to as the "Columbian Exchange" which was "the exchange of diseases, ideas, food, crops, and populations between the New World (America) and the Old World (Eastern hemisphere) The deaths among Indigenous peoples as a result of unknown diseases brought from Europe exceeded the Black Death victims of 14th century Europe by far (Nunn and Qian 163-164). Newly introduced species challenged the sustenance of native species, endangering the health of existing ecosystems. The ever-increasing need for "food, fuel and materials for survival" (He 186) on which settler-colonialism depended, caused severe environmental loss as a result of exploitation and pollution (186).

is inextricably tied to the Native Americans' consequential inability to preserve their old livelihoods and relational cultures. Environmental harm is therefore embedded in the same extractive structures that can be portrayed as Wendigo systems, as it represents both the insatiable hunger for land and resources as well as the pollution that inevitably follows. Within the framework of environmental harm, the Wendigo becomes a symbol for overconsumption that causes ecological collapse and continually threatens Indigenous American lives and futures. Extractive capitalism, accordingly, combines the logics of settler colonialism and Wendigo traits.

Winona LaDuke's case studies of extractive capitalist practices that destroy habitats and thereby lets Indigenous people suffer, resonate with Kyle Whyte's argument that climate change is an "intensification of environmental change imposed on Indigenous peoples by colonialism" (153). Industrial pollution, hydroelectric projects, nuclear testing, as well as tourism exemplify extractive systems that prioritize short-term profit over ecological and social health (LaDuke 14; 18; 62; 98). Colonial expansion historically introduced rapid ecological transformations, as earlier mentioned: large-scale agriculture, the clear-cutting of forests, and infrastructure that began to spread. Such changes disrupted the ecosystems on which Indigenous cultures were built and which their communities relied on. Climate change, according to Whyte, therefore represents not a new phenomenon for Indigenous peoples but rather an ongoing interruption of their lives as a result of colonial patterns that began with the European invasion of the Americas (154). Rooted in the European economic system before being implemented in the American economy, extractive activity is connected to the colonial expansion of European systems over the American continent (Greer 74). By systematically exploiting both the native people and their land, the social and natural imbalance that is inherent in these respective western economic activities becomes clearly visible (Greer 74; Whyte 5, 6). These practices enact Wendigo economics by converting land and life into consumable resources – evident in the mass slaughter of buffalo, large-scale deforestation and mining – all altering the environment extensively.

Deborah McGregor and her colleagues' approach to Indigenous environmental justice frames the crisis not as just one of ecological degradation but as a deterioration of relationships with the land, too (35-36). Their work underlines that justice includes restoring these relationships and responsibilities towards the land and the more-than-human world. McGregor and her co-authors state that Indigenous peoples can offer aid in enforcing the necessary changes requires to stop global warming; unfortunately, these community members who know millennia old practiced, sustainable lifestyles, remain mostly unrecognized (McGregor et al.

37). Listening to the those able to teach the world more sustainable ways of living would contribute to solving the climate crisis. Melissa K. Nelson extends to this in her conclusion of *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (2018), explaining the interconnection that exists between cultural and biological diversity. She views the planet's ecosystems as sacred and spaces of relationality where humans are responsible for valuing and protecting the balance (256). The Wendigo, in this context, presents western resource extraction: taking without giving back and disrupting these balanced systems between the human and more-than-human world that were highly valued by many Indigenous American tribes. Within multiple Native American worldviews, planet Earth is "alive and imbued with spirit" (McGregor et al. 35); the perception of Earth as a living being requires certain obligations and responsibilities to maintain a healthy balance between humans and nonhumans (35). Robin Wall Kimmerer explains that within her community, the natural world is part of a *gift economy*, in which humans receive sustenance from the Earth and are therefore obligated to give something in return – to return sustenance to Earth as it were (29). She furthermore contrasts Indigenous environmental philosophy with dominant western frameworks, in which these reciprocal relationships are replaced by systems of extraction – *Windigo economics*, Kimmerer calls them. She explains that while the western materialist worldview tends to interpret landscapes as a "collection of exploitable resources", her communities' philosophy regards them as a "set of relationships and responsibilities" (27). In this perception, the more-than-human living world is equal to the human world, each taking care of the other to ensure sustenance for both, a structure that is opposed by western capitalism. Therefore, Indigenous environmental justice underlines how extractive and exploitative behavior – largely enabled by settler colonial structures – creates moral and ecological disorder. The colonial period and the rise of capitalist-industrial systems disrupted Indigenous American reciprocal relationships with the surrounding living world through mass extinction, displacement, and assimilation, undermining Indigenous capacities for environmental stewardship (McGregor 109; Whyte 155, 159).

Indigenous environmental justice scholarship extends the analysis by foregrounding the ecological consequences of colonial hunger. The current climate crisis, the mass extinction of more-than-human animals and plants as well as the unequal distribution of environmental harm over the planet emerge as the outcomes of extractive systems that sever the relationships between the people and the land. The responsibility of these destructive forces is simultaneously dissolved by rendering the balance between humans and the more-than-human world redundant. Within this cultural context, the Wendigo functions as a figure that reveals the interrelation between ethical and moral failure and ecological collapse. By bringing

contemporary Indigenous American critiques of colonial and capitalist structures into conversation with the Wendigo narratives, this thesis examines how Indigenous American Wendigo stories function as a framework for critiquing greed and insatiability embedded in capitalist systems. Furthermore, the theoretical groundwork on which this thesis builds strengthens the argument of the Wendigo, a mythological figure that illuminates the enduring links between colonial structures and the contemporary climate crisis.

The three theoretical perspectives – Indigenous epistemologies, settler colonial theory and Indigenous environmental injustice – establish the Wendigo as an analytical figure through which moral failure, colonial structures and the resulting ecological destruction can be aligned. After constituting the ethical groundwork of the arguments made in this thesis, the study uses the theoretical framework to read Louise Erdrich’s poem “Windigo” (1984), Basil Johnston’s “Weendigo” in *The Manitous* (1995), and Winona LaDuke’s “Wiindigo” in *Last Standing Woman* (2023) and examine how each of the fictional texts critique contemporary systems of power and consumption.

1.5. Ethics

Engaging with Indigenous American narratives and epistemologies requires careful ethical consideration, particularly as I approach this material from a non-Native background and therefore lack direct cultural and experiential reference points. This positional distance necessitates an awareness of interpretive limits and the potential risks of misinterpretations and misrepresentations, especially when working with traditional, mythological concepts such as the Wendigo, which are deeply embedded in specific cultural, spiritual, and epistemological contexts. In this thesis, the analysis of the Wendigo remains culture-specific and avoids generalizations beyond the contexts in which it is articulated.

As aforementioned, the analysis is grounded primarily in Indigenous American scholarship to ensure that interpretations remain situated within Native American scholarship. Restricting the analysis of the Wendigo, as well as concepts such as *gift economy* and *wétiko disease*, or an *Honorable Harvest* to Indigenous-authored literary works is particularly important in this regard. Rather than introducing new or external interpretations that move beyond the Indigenous framework in which this thesis is situated, I build my arguments upon existing research of Indigenous scholars, extending their arguments into literary-critical contexts. Indigenous epistemologies are therefore approached as knowledge systems in lived

relations and responsibilities. Nonetheless, the risk of misinterpretation cannot be fully eliminated, and generalizations may occur by mistake. Concepts that are rooted in lived practice and oral traditions – originally, the Wendigo was a tale that was told, not written – may be altered when examined in an academic context.

The three primary texts – “Weendigo” from *The Manitous* by Basil Johnston, “Wiindigo” from *Last Standing Woman* by Winona LaDuke, and “Windigo” from *Jacklight* by Louise Erdrich – are foundational for my thesis’ aim: to examine how the Wendigo in Indigenous storytelling conveys a critique of settler colonial structures, extractive capitalism and the destruction of ecosystems. All three narratives are related to Anishinaabe traditions, yet the term “Anishinaabe” itself is neither singular nor homogenous. The Anishinaabeg (plural form of Anishinaabe) originally inhabited the area west of the Great Lakes. Scholars such as Rebecca Chartrand identify three peoples who consider themselves Anishinaabe: “Odawa, the Ojibwe, and the Potawatomi”, all of whom speak the same language – Anishinaabemowin, also called Ojibwe (Chartrand 146). Johnston adds the Algonquin when referring to the people who called large parts of the northern territories of the American continent their home (235). First Nations Saulteaux, Nipissing, Chippewa, as well as Mississauga also belong to the Anishinaabe people, Karl S. Hele asserts in an article about the Anishinaabe, which was published in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. As a result of colonization, the Anishinaabe people now inhabit territories that extend to “Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in the north; and Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Kansas, and Oklahoma in the south” (Chartrand 146). Displacement, elimination, and the relocation to reservations within the colonial period and beyond have altered the Anishinaabe lifeways as they have caused 99 percent of their ancient territories to be rendered to settler ownership (Pitawanikwat 8, qtd. in Chartrand 146). The texts are each approached as a distinct articulation shaped by a specific literary and cultural context. The comparative dimension of this study therefore focuses on both shared epistemological groundings – such as relationality and reciprocity – and important differences in how these are expressed in the genres.

The primary texts are approached from an interpretive rather than factual angle. The readings developed throughout my thesis – especially those that conceptualize the Wendigo as a condition linked to overconsumption, relational imbalance, and ecological destruction – are presented as one possible analytical framework in which to examine the cannibalistic creature. The readings are positioned within and shaped by central concerns of this thesis. The Wendigo is not treated as a fixed or universally defined figure, but as a concept that shifts across texts, while remaining deeply rooted in Indigenous American storytelling – from Johnston’s moral

cautionary tale to LaDuke's critique of extractive colonial activity on Indigenous lands and Louise Erdrich's introspective poetics in which restoration and resurgence can be read. This thesis attempts to combine and differentiate the primary texts by analyzing them within the same theoretical frameworks.

The figure of the Wendigo as a literary representation and a lived reality is examined¹³. The analyzed texts engage with themes of land dispossession, Indigenous sovereignty, and ecology; however, they are not perceived as direct representations of Indigenous life. These narratives are understood as containing strategies to convey ethical and ecological concerns by using the Wendigo as a metaphor for these issues. Metaphor, imagery, personification and other literary devices that are employed in the narratives are interpreted to strengthen the arguments and concerns underneath the ancient stories of the cannibalistic monster. Consequently, the extension of concepts such as *Windigo economics* remains interpretive and situated within the analytical framework of this study, rather than being presented as an inherent or universally accepted category of Indigenous wisdom and thought.

The temporal framing of the texts also requires ethical consideration. The texts' content is therefore not restricted to the time-period of their publication; rather, the thesis recognizes the narratives as the telling of continuing processes that are never resolved – quite the opposite. I aim to emphasize the recent and current experiences of Anishinaabeg and other Native American communities as a consequence of ongoing settler colonialist, and capitalist systems that affect their lives. At the same time, positioning the literary narratives in contemporary contexts of capitalist overconsumption, extractive activity, and exploitation of more-than-human -and human lives carries the risk of overgeneralization, which is why such connections remain grounded in Indigenous scholarship and are cautiously argued for. Henceforth, the connections drawn between the textual analysis of the primary sources and the contemporary conditions exposed in recent theoretical scholarship are carefully examined and originate from the arguments of Native American authors.

Finally, my research acknowledges that its interpretations are inherently contingent and not fixed. Other readings of the texts – particularly those grounded in community knowledge and language-specific understandings – may differ significantly from those presented here.

¹³ Following Marshall Sahlins, the Wendigo can be understood as a meta-person here: a non-human person-like being endowed with agency and intentionality that participates in a shared social world with humans. Instead of functioning as a symbolic figure, the Wendigo emerges with an immanent cosmology in which human and more-than-human beings shape social and moral relations (256).

This thesis aims at participation in conversations surrounding the ongoing effects of settler colonialist -and capitalist structures on Indigenous lives and lands, thereby situating its analysis within these contemporary realities. Within the critical discussions, I am aware of the ethical responsibility my study carries by analyzing this specific, complex, and vulnerable topic and remain attentive of my own limitations.

2. Basil Johnston's "Weendigo" (1995)

Basil Johnston was an Anishinaabe writer whose work was dedicated to preserving and communicating Anishinaabe knowledge systems. Sam McKegney, a scholar whose article on Indigenous writing and residential schools for which he interviewed Basil Johnston, states, "Johnston has been committed, over the past forty years, to ensuring the survival of elements of Anishinaubae culture that the Canadian government and Christian churches sought to eradicate through the disastrous policy of residential schooling, of which Johnston himself was a victim" (264). Many of Johnston's published works, among others, *Ojibway Heritage* (1976), *The Manitous* (1995), and *Honour Earth Mother* (2003), revolve around spiritual and social traditions of the Anishinaabeg, aiming at the perseverance of these worldviews (264). Throughout his literary career, Johnston emphasized that Indigenous peoples should be understood through their own beliefs, values, and worldviews rather than through external interpretations (Murphy 97). Paul M. R. Murphy, who examines Johnston's literary works in his research "An Elaborate Educational Endeavour: The Writing of Basil H. Johnston", characterizes them as seeking to foster an understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. He furthermore argues that Johnston's literature consistently presents a holistic worldview centered around harmony and balance, encouraging readers to consider both their responsibilities toward others and their relationship with the wider environment (97-98). This educational aspect is fundamental to Johnston's *Wendigo*, which presents the figure not only as a terrifying monster of the Anishinaabe peoples, but uses it to communicate teachings about reciprocity, responsibility, and the consequences of abandoning these principles. His narrative therefore functions simultaneously as cultural preservation, moral instruction and also as social critique. Anishinaabe teachings are conveyed in form of traditional storytelling and the cautionary tale, a genre which articulates ethical principles and values in a memorable and emotionally resonant manner.

Basil Johnston's "Weendigo", a chapter in his book *The Manitous* (1995), provides a foundational narrative for understanding the Wendigo within Anishinaabe storytelling. Johnston introduces the cannibalistic monster of the Anishinaabe as originally a mythological being who dwelt the northern woods of the continent. Furthermore, the moral and cosmological warnings embedded in the narrative reflect the ethical structures of the community from which the monster emerges. Johnston situates the Wendigo in a framework of relationality and reciprocity, and presents the consequences when these principles are neglected. This chapter

examines the narrative as both a cautionary tale and a conceptual framework through which broader patterns of overconsumption and imbalance are exposed. Beginning with the process of becoming a Wendigo, the analysis determines how the figure is constructed through literary strategies that articulate moral and ethical values of the Indigenous communities the story was told in. It subsequently follows Johnston's expansion of the Wendigo from an individual condition to a structural force of overconsumption and greed, before considering the environmental implications found in his depiction of modern "mechanical" Wendigos. This thesis therefore reads Johnston's Wendigo as a warning that extends far beyond its original contexts. Through discussions of colonialist structures, extractive practices of capitalism, ecological destruction and its effects on Indigenous lands and communities, the Wendigo becomes a large-scale force that destroys everything in its path. The significance of Johnston's narrative lies in the critique it articulates through its literary form. Unlike non-fiction discussions of colonialism, capitalism, environmental degradation, Johnston's story embodies these processes in the figure of the Wendigo. The narrative hence transmits Anishinaabe teachings about balance and reciprocity while also enabling readers to recognize Wendigo behavior in contemporary social and ecological systems.

Through literary strategies, Johnston constructs the Wendigo's destructive behavior as both a moral warning and a broader critique of imbalance and overconsumption. His "Weendigo" chapter in *The Manitous* uses multiple literary devices to communicate the moral, ethical, and ecological lessons: metaphor, personification, imagery, repetition as well as allegorical readings and dialogue are applied to construct the Wendigo as both a moral figure and an evolving force of colonial capitalism. These literary strategies are central to this thesis because they reveal how the Wendigo operates not merely as a monster within Indigenous storytelling, but as a conceptual language for critiquing extractive forms of consumption. Importantly, Johnston's literary devices do not merely illustrate these critiques, they reproduce the logic of Wendigo behavior. Repetition, for example, mirrors compulsive accumulation, imagery visualizes excess, and personification indicates the moral relations between humans and the more-than-human world. The narrative's form therefore becomes inseparable from its ethical and political argument. His narrative links moral imbalance to ecological destruction, thereby anticipating contemporary Indigenous critiques of colonial capitalism and the environmental crisis it produces.

2.1. Becoming a Wendigo

*“Born of our fears and our failings,
Windigo is the name for that within us
which cares more for its own survival
than for anything else.”*
(Kimmerer 305)

Within Anishinaabe and related Indigenous American frameworks, Wendigos are not a separate species; they are exaggerations of humans, as Johnston has written. Behavior has made them what they are, as they were not born as monsters: “The Weendigo was born out of human susceptibility. It was also born out of the conditions that men and women had to live through in winter” (Johnston 224). Kimmerer explicitly subscribes to Johnston’s description when she writes that “Windigos are not born, they are made” (304), thereby clearly stating that in Native American cosmology, the transformation takes place as a consequence of moral misbehavior rather than being caused by inherent, monstrous traits.

This emphasis on transformation is conveyed in Johnston’s narrative through literary strategies. He introduces the Wendigo as the most horrifying creature within Anishinaabe cosmology: “Of the evil beings who dwelt on the periphery of the world of the Anishinaubae peoples, none was more terrifying than the Weendigo” (221). The phrase “periphery of the world” is significant because it spatially positions the Wendigo outside moral order. The creature is constructed as physically distant and ethically removed from the relational structures that sustain Anishinaabe life. Horror thus emerges from its separation from reciprocity and kinship. The monster in the narrative is more than a mythological creature – it conveys moral and ethical values which are highly important in Anishinaabe and other Indigenous American cosmologies and thereby serves as a cautionary tale with didactic functions.

Following Johnston’s and Kimmerer’s descriptions of the monster, humans developed into a Wendigo when food was scarce, and starvation would induce them to take more than appropriate – this behavior, subsequently, jeopardizes the community’s collective survival. Metaphor is predominant in Johnston’s rendition of this process. It is visible in the reflection of the Wendigo’s size, its hunger and cannibalistic traits in human selfishness and tendency to excessive consumption. Its physical exaggeration – being “five to eight times above the height of a tall man”, however, weak in “girth and strength” (221) – functions metaphorically,

exposing how greed is followed by desire, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of excess. The contradiction between enormous height and physical weakness destabilizes conventional associations between growth and power. Johnston constructs a body that expands without gaining substance, suggesting that accumulation ultimately produces emptiness rather than fulfillment. The Wendigo's body can therefore be read as a metaphor as a visual metaphor for capitalist excess, limitlessly enlarging while simultaneously hollowing itself out: "As the Weendigo ate, the bigger it grew, and as it grew so did its hunger" (222), underlines the moral critique conveyed through growth and the resulting, excessive size and furthermore, indicates an endless cycle of human indulgence, repeatedly consuming too much but never being satisfied. The cyclical syntax of the sentence formally reproduces the logic of addiction and accumulation. Through repetition of "grew" and the mirrored sentence structure, Johnston creates a rhythm in which desire endlessly reproduces itself. The language itself performs insatiability. Read through the work of later Indigenous theorists such as Kimmerer and Forbes, this pattern can be linked to critiques of capitalist economies structured around infinite expansion.

In societies where the Wendigo story is told, caring for each other is prioritized over an individual's needs. Cautionary Wendigo tales emerged "in a commons-based society where sharing was essential to survival and greed made any individual a danger to the whole" (Kimmerer 307). In Johnston's narrative, dialogue reinforces these communal ethics by directly voicing collective responsibility, embedding moral instruction within spoken language: "Not too much, think of tomorrow, next winter. Kegoh zaum! Baenuk! [think of others! Balance, moderation, self-control]" (222-23). The fragmented, imperative structure of these commands gives the dialogue ritualistic authority. The warnings reinforce the urgency of restraint – Johnston embeds communal ethics directly into the sound of spoken language. While dialogue is significantly more present in Winona LaDuke's narrative, Johnston grounds his narrative in the moral and ethical values of his tribe, thereby emphasizing how essential these moral warnings are. In this case it functions more like a condensed moral directive: the failure to adhere to these warnings marks the beginning of the transformation into a Wendigo. As starvation was a common struggle during winter in Potawatomi (a people that belongs to the Anishinaabe communities), the origin of the Wendigo may lie in the cold winter months, when food was scarce. Kimmerer asserts that the emergence of excessive fur trade may have affected the rapid spreading of the mythological tale, as animal populations were significantly decimated for their warm fur. As a result, meat became a rarity as well. These conditions urged humans to choose a Wendigo path, as cannibalism seemed the only way to satisfy one's hunger

(304). In her culture, Kimmerer continues, becoming a Wendigo means the banishment from the reciprocal system and being left alone, with no one to care about you anymore. A state of being without anyone to share anything with and no gifts to receive and return is considered a “terrible punishment” (307). Kimmerer’s work therefore clearly aligns with Johnston’s narrative, depicting the Wendigo as an embodiment of uncontrollable hunger – a hunger that grows indefinitely: “The more the Windigo eats, the more ravenous it becomes. It shrieks with its craving, its mind a torture of unmet want” (Kimmerer 305).

Rather than functioning as a hyperbole, the Wendigo’s endless hunger constitutes a literal characteristic within Anishinaabe cosmology. The repetitive structure of “the more it ate, the bigger it grew; and the bigger it grew, the more it wanted and needed” describes the ever-growing hunger of the monster, resulting in cyclical overconsumption. Unconditional hunger is what drives the Wendigo to cannibalism. Rather than functioning as a simple moral symbol, Johnston’s Wendigo develops allegorical dimensions through its repeated association with expansion, insatiable hunger, and the erosion of restraint. The monster’s transformations from a starving human into being defined entirely by consumption allows the narrative to exceed the boundaries of cautionary folklore. Johnston’s cyclical descriptions of growth and desire invite an allegorical interpretation, through which the Wendigo is understood as signifying broader systems of excess and accumulation. The allegorical structure allows the Indigenous theorists such as Forbes and Kimmerer to extend the figure into critiques of colonial capitalism. As a defining characteristic the allegory operates to externalize moral and ethical failure and the consequences. In Johnston’s narrative, the disproportionately expanding body of the Wendigo becomes a manifestation of self-interest, is viewed in in my thesis as an illustration for how indulgence entails excess. According to Johnston, the Wendigo “exemplifies human nature’s tendency to indulge its self-interests, which, once indulged, demand even greater indulgence and ultimately result in the extreme – the erosion of principles and values” (224).

In Johnston’s narrative, consumption itself becomes “torture”, because no matter how much the Wendigo eats, it never satisfies its hunger. The endless torture of hunger is cast as an addiction that ultimately destroys the Wendigo, as well as the human within; furthermore, and this is especially emphasized in Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the Wendigo’s hunger not only consumes itself but also its environment. “Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind” (305). The Wendigo’s emergence as a result of human susceptibility, as Johnston writes, is a critical argument in Kimmerer’s description of the Wendigo’s consumption as referring to various forms of eating. The loss of reciprocity and the disregard for social relations

initiates the process of becoming a Wendigo. While in the original stories, starvation is what drove people to greed and selfishness, the most evil Wendigos are embodied by imperialist and exploitative systems. Jonnelle Walker, whose article “Wendigoscene” introduces various Wendigo narratives, writes that the Wendigo condition “grew within yourself like cancer” (54); like a life-threatening disease you caught. Once within a person, the Wendigo disease contaminated other humans and spread rapidly (Forbes xix). Johnston’s emphasis on repetition and accumulation mirrors this process, as the recurrence of growth and consumption reinforces the inevitability of excess once restraint is abandoned. Walker’s cancer metaphor therefore resonates with Johnston’s depiction of Wendigo transformation as a gradual process. When moral and ethical values are neglected, the Wendigo evolves and reproduces itself (Johnston 224). As a result, exploitative behavior is normalized, gradually dissolving relational balance until overconsumption becomes inevitable.

Relationality is a key concept in many Indigenous American communities; if these relationships with the land are severed, so is the balance that exists between the human and more-than-human worlds (Kimmerer 24; McGregor et al 35; Simpson 41). When relationality disappears, the Wendigo appears (Walker 58). The Wendigo is incapable of having healthy, balanced relationships with surrounding lives because of its isolated life without reciprocity, and its insatiable appetite for more. Reciprocity exists in a *gift economy*, which Kimmerer connects to good relations; a Wendigo economy, on the other hand, renders these relations unimportant, as growth always supersedes the natural law of limits (308). Johnston’s early descriptions of the Wendigo focus on the transformation of the individual under starving conditions; later, he expands the figure beyond the solitary cannibal who dwelled in the wintery forests of North America. He explicitly introduces “mechanical Weendigos” as monsters that lay bare the forests, leaving behind nothing but destruction and bleakness through logging and other extractive activities (236). In this reading, the Wendigo shifts from being a figure of moral imbalance to a structural force that operates through modern technology, with the goal of fulfilling the demands of the never satiable Wendigos (236). Imagery is a central literary device that prepares this shift from individual to ‘structural Wendigos’. In Johnston’s “Weendigo”, it is used to immerse the reader in the horror of the monstrous being, both the ancient and modern form. Sight, sound, and touch are evoked when describing the forest’s destruction – the pain of trees becomes palpable to the reader, thereby collapsing the boundary between human and more-than-human suffering. Through personification, Johnston strengthens the understanding of ecological loss; within many Native American worldviews, the natural world is treated as filled with sensitive, living beings. The axes and saws “bit into

the flesh of spruce, pine, and cedar Then, finally, the crashes thundered throughout the bush” (236). The anthropomorphized forest, alongside the violent enunciation, transforms deforestation from resource extraction into the infliction of harm on a network of living beings, representing the all-consuming characteristic of the Wendigo. Verbs such as “bit” evoke predatory consumption, directly linking logging practices to the Wendigo’s cannibalistic appetite. At the same time, the auditory imagery of “crashes thundered” amplifies the scale of destruction, forcing the reader to experience ecological devastation as sensory violence.

Cannibalism in the modern world, Jack D. Forbes argues, no longer refers to literal flesh-eating alone. Forbes’ wétiko consumes life as well; however, the meaning of insatiable hunger has altered in *Columbus and Other Cannibals*. This work is important within Johnston’s Wendigo context, as Forbes extends cannibalism in the modern world to colonial and capitalist extractivism – as another form of ‘consuming’ life. His conception of Wendigo cannibalism is defined as “the consuming of another’s life for one’s own private purpose or profit” (24). In his framework, the Wendigo’s cannibalistic traits and greed stand for exploitation, imperial conquest, and environmental destruction. Forbes explains Wendigo cannibalism by exemplifying human relations, in which these characteristics become evident. “... the wealthy exploiter ‘eats’ the flesh of the oppressed workers, ... the imperialist ‘eats’ the flesh of the conquered, and so on” (24). What Johnston presents as a warning within Indigenous communities, Forbes voices as a critique of societies that consume without reciprocity. The Wendigo condition therefore extends from eating flesh to consuming lives in a broader sense: consuming the potential futures of lives as well as consuming land and culture, without any regard for reciprocal relations. While the original habitat of the Wendigo are the northern forests of the American continent, its presence has significantly extended over the past centuries. As Johnston has noted, the Wendigo has been incarcerated in large companies and multinationals, or as Kimmerer has asserted, “a new breed of Windigo that insatiably devours the earth’s resources” (Johnston 236; Kimmerer 306). Meanwhile, the Wendigo appears more like a sickness that contaminates more and more people within Forbes’ and Walker’s arguments, and Kimmerer adds to this by stating that “the (Wendigo) footprints are all around us, once you know what to look for” (306), reinforcing the perception of the Wendigo as a modern, industrial force. Here, repetition becomes a crucial literary device, as imitates industrial excess: “Train after train, shipload after shipload of timber”, uses a syntactical construction that reinforces violence and excess, as no matter how much was consumed, the Wendigo was not satiable. Johnston establishes a clear picture of limitless consumption by

using repetitions of quantity, speed, and size, highlighting the inevitability of devastation once reciprocity is abandoned.

Through a strategic application of literary devices, Johnston transforms the Wendigo from an ancient cannibalistic monster into a warning against greed, excess, and the resulting ecological destruction. By examining Johnston's "Weendigo" within a theoretical framework of Wendigo interpretations by other Indigenous American scholars, it becomes more than a cautionary tale. The Wendigo transforms into a diagnostic figure – a condition that evolves out of human susceptibility, relational imbalance and greed. Kimmerer, Forbes and Walker critically engage with the Wendigo figure and extend Johnston's narrative by indicating the social and ethical consequences when reciprocity and relationality are neglected. Johnston and Kimmerer present the cannibalistic monster as a threat primarily directed towards more-than-human life. In other works, like that of Forbes, military, religious, and sexual violence against Native American peoples is also rooted in the Wendigo condition. This chapter has remained strictly focused on extensions of Johnston's "Weendigo" tale, without invoking specific historical events that align with Wendigo behavior. The following two chapters will further the analysis of the Wendigo and use the previous chapters as a framework to analyze settler colonialism, extractive capitalism and ecological collapse caused by the Wendigo.

2.2. Colonized by the Wendigo

*"In 1850, 50 million buffalo ranged the prairie systems and left it in excellent shape.
Today, a century and a half later, the environment is quite different.
Industrialized agriculture has transformed the land, life, and water.
Forty-five million cattle live in the same ecosystem now.*
(LaDuke 143)

Basil Johnston's narrative begins with describing how the Wendigo emerged: when humans were on the verge of starvation, and hunger caused them to become greedy, isolated cannibals. Building on Johnston's depiction of the Wendigo as an embodiment of excessive consumption, his narrative expands the figure from an individual condition to a structural force. His modern Wendigo leans towards a shift from individual moral failure to whole systems that have lost balance. This expansion gives the narrative an allegorical structure that allows Wendigo behavior to be read as extending beyond monstrous individuals to political and economic system themselves. Modern Wendigos, Johnston argues, operate on an industrial scale and

through extractive practices that devastate landscapes (Johnston 236). As already mentioned in the previous chapter, with the spreading of the Wendigo condition in its modern form, excessive consumption is normalized, as well as exploitative behavior. Johnston's depiction of the shift from the starving cannibal that dwelt the wintery forests to the mechanical Wendigo establishes a narrative shift that allows for a reading of colonial and capitalist practices as a continuation of the disordered condition first associated with the monstrous being. This narrative connection is reinforced through verbal imagery and personification, allowing systemic violence to be experienced as embodied harm. The depiction of industrial extraction – where axes and saws “bit into the flesh of spruce, pine, and cedar” (236) – transforms logging into an act of violence, aligning extractive capitalism with the cannibalistic traits of the Wendigo. The metaphor of the forest's “flesh” collapses distinctions between human and environmental suffering, reflecting Indigenous epistemologies in which land is not an inert object but a living relation. Johnston's personification therefore carries theoretical significance: it formally resists capitalist language that reduces ecosystems to resources. In this sense, the Wendigo represents more than an individual's failure of maintaining balance; it becomes a pattern of normalized overconsumption, forced onto Indigenous peoples by dominant settler colonialist structures.

Colonial discourse itself reinforces this logic through dehumanizing narratives. Michelle Lietz, a non-Indigenous scholar, states that colonizers in the Americas frequently applied the term “cannibals” when referring to the Indigenous peoples, reducing them to being uncivilized savages. Through this characterization, Europeans justified land theft and genocide, as a means to protect and ensure the survival of what they perceived as “civilization”, similar to Forbes' description of *wétiko societies* (Forbes 39; Lietz 6). Settler colonialism's continuous justification of displacing or killing Indigenous Americans as civilized behavior, closely aligns with what Patrick Wolfe has described as the European ideological thinking of themselves being able to “use the land better than they could” (389). Settler colonialism requires land seizure and the implementing of new structures, new habits and rules. According to Wolfe, this has mostly happened at the expense of Indigenous lives, their land and the connected ecosystems. European settlers came to North America for private property and hence their aim was to substitute the Native population and land with themselves and their agriculture, chasing the ultimate goal of taking the entire territory (Wolfe 388). He therefore defines settler colonialism as a structure that is centered around land ownership, and in order to attain territory, the elimination of the Native population on the respective land is required. Elimination can appear as a way of “miscegenation, ... native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion,

resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and ... frontier homicide” as well as removal (388, 391). Read in relation to settler colonial elimination, the Wendigo in Johnston’s narrative becomes a metaphor for these eliminations, where moral consciousness is neglected in favor of power and profit at the cost of Indigenous lives. Assimilationist policies have functioned as elimination strategies: legislation has disrupted tribal sovereignty and disintegrated their land into smaller pieces of property, thereby transferring territory to individual Indigenous owners more efficiently than violent massacres alone (Wolfe 400, 402). A replacement of the ancient Indigenous lifeways to make space for societies founded on extractive logics closely aligns with the warnings embedded within Johnston’s narrative: once balance and relationality are abandoned, consumption becomes relentless, as the Wendigos have lost consideration for any other life, allowing them to continuously attempt to satisfy their insatiable appetite. The main target has been to fully eradicate Indigenous language and culture and replace them with the settlers’ own, enabling a shift from community life to profit-driven individualism. “The magic of private property ownership would propel Indians from the collective inertia to tribal membership into the progressive individualism of the American Dream” (400), Wolfe describes the program that was established to divide Indigenous lands into many single parts. Ancestral land was consequently sold to settlers, as through the implemented legalities by settler societies, European settlers’ wish to buy was always prioritized over the Indigenous demand not to sell (Lietz 13-14; Wolfe 391)¹⁴. Viewed through a Wendigo framework, these colonial mechanisms forced Native populations off their land into small reservations, consuming their traditional lifeways and the lives of their more-than-human relatives for the benefit of agriculture, timber and urban space.

The increase of European settler colonialist practices on Indigenous lands exemplifies the Wendigo logic – perpetually taking more and overconsuming. Johnston’s use of repetition – “train after train, shipload after shipload of timber, logs, and pulp were delivered” – strengthens the perception of the scale and inevitability of this extraction, by emphasizing that no matter how much is taken, it is never enough. The repetitive sentence structure imitates industrial rhythm and mechanical movement, thereby representing the relentless activity of capitalist

¹⁴ This allotment program that was implemented in 1887 when the Dawes Severalty Act ultimately caused two thirds of Indigenous lands to be ceased by white settlers. The latter justified this event through arguing that they hereby provided the Indigenous people with opportunities that before were only accessible to the “White man” (Wolfe 400).

extraction embedded in the phrase. The accumulation of nouns: “timber, logs, and pulp”, creates linguistic excess, mirroring the overconsumption the narrative critiques. Simon Scott, a professor of anthropology and sociology at the University of Ottawa, draws connections between Indigenous peoples, Marxism, and capitalism in his research; his work underlines Johnston’s repetitive structure that indicates ever-expanding extractive practices by asserting that “around the world, indigenous lands are expropriated by states and capitalist corporations, in order to channel natural resources from above and below the ground into ever-widening streams of capital accumulation” (6)¹⁵. This insatiability, then, reflects the Wendigo’s appetite that is limitlessly growing, intensified through the application of repetition and imagery. When the Europeans invaded the North American continent, they brought their culture and politics with them and made it their goal to implement them everywhere they went (Wolfe qtd. in Greer 62). From a Wendigo perspective informed by Johnston, Forbes, and Kimmerer, settler colonialism perpetuated Wendigo behavior until it became the economic and political order in North America. Forbes adds to this by arguing that the perception of civilization in European contexts, is, in fact, the Wendigo disease. In this civilization, the exploitation of land and humans is conveyed as a “necessary way of life” (39). Within Johnston’s narrative, this Wendigo worldview is portrayed through the never-ending cycle of extraction, underlined through his use of imagery in the emptying of the forest. Repetition of quantity, speed, and scale function as a literary device that mirrors industrial expansion, transforming narrative form into a reflection of capitalist accumulation. Here, Johnston’s modern Wendigos invite a reading that extends beyond the individual monster to larger, social, and economic formations always in search for more wealth and power at the cost of others. This Wendigo dimension aligns with Dennis Martinez’s critique of capitalism as system that cannot mitigate its consumption without starving. He is an ecologist and Indigenous rights leader of Indigenous American heritage, whose essay in *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* contributes highly to this thesis’ draw on how capitalist economies function (Nelson and Shilling x). Martinez’s argument even stronger resonates with Johnston’s description of the Wendigo’s cyclical growth, when projecting this exact cycle onto capitalism: “This is due to an economic phenomenon known as the “rebound effect”: the greater the efficiency of production, the more products will be

¹⁵ He further aims to demonstrate how Indigenous peoples are largely forced to become part of the working class, as their communities are altered under the relentless expansion of capitalist extraction. He thereby notes the alignment between Marx’s primitive accumulation and the way Indigenous peoples are transformed into laborers under the power of western structures (6).

developed, the cheaper and more plentiful the products due to increased efficiency, the more products will be consumed (and wasted)” (148). He concludes then, that just like the Wendigo, present capitalism and sustainable production could not be less compatible, as its survival depends on limitless consumption and constant expansion (150). Forbes argues that societies structured around exploitation and imperial expansion depict exactly what he refers to as *wétiko societies*, even when they consider themselves civilized (39). The Wendigo is thereby no longer defined by mere insatiable hunger but the willingness to destroy other lives, cultures and land to achieve one’s target regardless of the consequences. The metaphorical construction of the Wendigo’s disproportionate body – large yet lacking balance – can be extended to these systems, which grow endlessly while eroding moral and ecological limits. While initially, Johnston’s narrative conveys the transformation into a Wendigo as caused by mostly natural symptoms like hunger, later, Wendigo behavior becomes a choice. Within this framework, modern capitalist actors can be understood as “Wendigos by choice”, destroying communities and entire ecosystems as a collective power; their technology operates to satisfy their never-ending hunger for private property and resources (Johnston 223; Kimmerer 307). The cyclical structure of growth and hunger characterizes Johnston’s Wendigo; consumption inevitably leads to more consumption, and thereby directly parallels the seemingly infinite expansion of colonial territories and capitalist economies.

Settler colonial expansion is frequently linked to large-scale Wendigo behavior by Indigenous American theorists. Robin Wall Kimmerer situates the Wendigo within economic structures, by contrasting *gift economies*, which are founded on reciprocity and gratitude, with what she calls *Windigo economics*, the result of constant accumulation and the world’s obsession with private property (307). She asserts that in a Wendigo economy, what was once prevented at all costs is now seen as success – a qualitative life is meanwhile driven by self-interest and overconsumption. “We continue to embrace economic systems that prescribe infinite growth on a finite planet”, Kimmerer states, fearing that “what Native peoples once sought to rein in, we are now asked to unleash in a systematic policy of sanctioned greed” (308). She characterizes this shift as a world entirely reversed: selfishness and greed are celebrated in modern western societies, while restraint and reciprocity lose their value. “The dark side made to seem light”, she asserts, as the Wendigo is eating us in our profit seeking lifestyle (308). The Wendigo, in Kimmerer’s context, masks its ever-hungry cannibalistic trait by making us believe that property and accumulation is what we want, when in reality, it evokes a hunger inside of us that will never be satisfied. Kimmerer’s fear of a world turned inside out is affirmed by Martinez who describes modern consumer culture as driven by manufactured

dissatisfaction, ensuring continuous demand and reinforcing cycles of overconsumption. People are manipulated into individualistic and selfish thinking as the most important thing has become the buying and owning of material goods (148-149). Forbes complements these previous arguments by emphasizing the destructive impact of the Wendigo disease in its conquest for more land and resources – consuming the life of another to attain profit (24). Wendigo cannibalism, in this framework, becomes a system and distances itself from its original isolation, spreading throughout the land, relentlessly consuming other peoples' lives and land while being fully dependent on the severing of relations, of reciprocity, and balance. The logic behind colonial systems has become normalized structures where the exploitation of life and land for the benefit of a few is tolerated, even celebrated, following Kimmerer's view on Wendigo economies.

Building on Kimmerer's *Windigo economics*, Winona LaDuke's work can be similarly connected to contemporary systems of exploitation. In her nonfiction book *All Our Relations*, she illustrates the dramatic consequences corporate and governmental structures have on Indigenous American livelihoods. The "forces of colonialism, assimilation, globalization, and all that eats cultures" are devouring valuable ecological systems on which Indigenous communities depend (27). LaDuke's case studies explore how industrial societies have impacted Indigenous peoples of North America; in recent decades, those forces of capitalist growth disproportionately use the Native land left as sacrifice zones¹⁶ for their waste and their mining activities, as the land they have already stolen appears not to be sufficient. Land theft and displacement become evident in LaDuke's chapter on "Buffalo Nations" (139-166), a historical but also contemporary example of the logic that has shaped colonial development in North America. The slaughter of the buffalo herds on the North American plains illustrates the structural nature of colonial extraction that is still present today. In the early 19th century, 50 million buffalo grazed the plains, shaping the prairie's ecosystem and sustaining the subsistence practices of tribes living on these territories (LaDuke 140, 142). Buffalo hunting in the 1870s was encouraged by the American government as a strategy to weaken Indigenous nations and to force them off their lands into reservations by destroying their major food source. As LaDuke notes, "to settle the vexed Indian question", hunters killed the buffalo and then

¹⁶ Indigenous thinkers like Winona LaDuke and Ward Churchill have used the term "sacrifice zones" or "national sacrifice areas" to refer to the Euro-American culture's way of wasting lands and peoples for industrial and economic progress. Within these western societies, rendering lands eternally uninhabitable, is considered to be the logical price that has to be paid in order for energy resource extraction to continue (Juskus 10).

claimed the land (142). Within only a few decades, the immense herds were almost extinct. The termination of the buffalo enabled the restructuring of the plains – centered around cattle ranching and industrial agriculture – with its original inhabitants displaced or killed. The systematic destruction reflects the insatiable hunger for land and profit that Johnston associates with modern Wendigos. The near extinction of the herds allowed the plains to be transformed into a cattle-based economy, largely controlled by non-Indigenous ranchers (143) – metaphorically, the Wendigo disease spread.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson underlines how colonial systems have consistently destroyed Native lands through cultural and spiritual disconnection: “... without our permission and without our consent, we have been systematically removed and dispossessed from most of our territory” (4). These stolen lands belong to Wendigos now, sold as private property. The severing of relations that Simpson describes is foreshadowed in the personification of the land in Johnston’s narrative, where the destruction of the forest signifies not only ecological loss but the breakdown of relational networks. Simpson notes the dramatic, cumulative ecological devastation settlement has caused on Indigenous lands, as infrastructure and industrial development caused fish populations to decline, forests to disappear and the ancestral food sources of Native populations to shrink. Apart from a small reservation, most of the land that once belonged to her tribe is now in the hands of non-Indigenous settlers (4). Essentially, the trauma settler colonialism has inflicted on the First Nations’ peoples is intergenerational, as the government continues to neglect their voices and cultures and maintains to take from them to fulfill their limitless hunger for more territory (5, 7). Settler colonialism must therefore be understood as an ongoing system rather than a historical period that is over. As Johnston speaks of the reincarnation of modern Wendigos, this chapter has examined the work of scholars of Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage who discuss the same self-perpetuating trait of colonialist structures, embedded in overconsumption and relentless territorial expansion. The system shows no restraint; within the Wendigo framework, it describes a normalized condition that reproduces itself within humans and institutions, securing its continuity.

Environmental degradation is the inevitable outcome of a profit -and accumulation - centered system. Kimmerer and Martinez similarly conclude that sustainability is incompatible with an economic system that relies on constant growth, continuous resource extraction, and faith in future technological solutions that will solve the crises eventually, even if ecological limits have been reached already (Kimmerer 47; Martinez 148). When the land is treated as a commodity rather than a relation, limits are not viewed as responsibilities, when one should

start to give back. Instead, capitalist systems move beyond limits through the complete severing of relations which enables them to expand extraction and disrupt the planet's systems to such an extent that a return to moral and ecological balance seems impossible. Global markets, as Kimmerer has explained, want to evoke insatiable appetite within us to ensure everlasting consumption (308). Johnston's Wendigo depicts exactly that: growth demands further growth, thus extraction has to expand, and as a consequence, environmental destruction becomes justified.

2.3. Warnings of the Wendigo

*The trillium, bloodroot, hepatica, bellwort, trout lily, ginger, and wild leeks
are all smiling their last into the spring sun,
which will burn them out when summer comes to a forest without trees.
They trusted that the maples would be there, but the maples are gone.
And they trusted me.
Next year this will all be brambles –
garlic mustard and buckthorn,
the invasive species that follow Wendigo footprints.
(Kimmerer 374)*

Extending this structural reading, Johnston's portrayal of modern Wendigos culminates in a large-scale destruction of the natural world, positioning ecological devastation as a direct outcome of Wendigo behavior. In contrast to ancient Wendigos, who consumed individual humans, the mechanical Wendigos devour entire landscapes, whole forests, leaving behind "death, destruction, and ugliness where once was life, abundance, and beauty" (Johnston 236). The triadic structure of "death, destruction, and ugliness" intensifies the sense of irreversible loss through accumulation. Johnston juxtaposes these terms against "life, abundance, and beauty", creating a strong binary between reciprocity and extractivism. The sentence's symmetrical structure reinforces the scale of transformation, emphasizing that Wendigo consumption reverses ecological balance entirely. This shift from individual to systemic consumption resonates with Linda Hogan's observation that, following the European invasion, Indigenous relationships with the land were profoundly disrupted, resulting in the breaking of the "natural laws and [their] agreements with non-human life" (192). Johnston's use of

imagery, metaphor, and personification constructs the ecological destruction that is extended from the Wendigo's cannibalistic traits to the land itself. Within this context, the land itself becomes the victim of the cannibalistic consumption. Environmental collapse, in Johnston's narrative, is presented as an inherent trait within the insatiable modern Wendigo structures. Johnston constructs this ecological critique through the same literary devices that define the Wendigo's excessive hunger, thereby ensuring continuity between the Wendigo's bodily hunger and environmental destruction. Imagery is central, as the "clash of axes" and the whine of saws" (236) evoke sound, while the cutting into the trees' "flesh" (236) immerses the reader into the pain of the forest. The harsh auditory imagery reproduces the violence of industrial extraction at the level of sound. Words such as "clash" and "whine" carry tonal qualities that interrupt the natural atmosphere of the forest, symbolizing the invasive presence of colonial industry. This sensory language resonates with the horror associated with the Wendigo and transfers its meaning onto ecosystems, highlighting the inevitable result of compulsive overconsumption with disregard for reciprocity.

Through personification, Johnston transforms the forest into a living entity. The anthropomorphized forest that is injured and ultimately destroyed for the Wendigo's hunger reframes deforestation as harm inflicted upon a network of living beings rather than simple resource extraction. Read through Indigenous Wendigo theory, extractive capitalism appears as a Wendigo-like system because of its moral failure and its role in producing ecological damage. Johnston's personification performs the very relational worldview that is conceptualized in Indigenous epistemologies. By granting the trees bodily vulnerability and sensory presence, the narrative linguistically restores this relation between humans and the more-than-human world. The literary devices become politically significant, as they resist the grammatical and conceptual distancing through which extractive systems justify exploitation. The depiction of trees as sensitive, living beings strongly resonates with Robin Wall Kimmerer's argument that it depends on how we learn to view life ultimately determines how we treat it. She explains in "Learning the Grammar of Animacy", a chapter of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, that treating more-than-human life as "it" distances humans from the respective living beings and thereby the responsibility we feel for their lives. Melissa K. Nelson determines the linguistic separation between the self and "other" to be one of the core features of western Cartesian dualism; on the contrary, Indigenous environmental ethics closely relate to responsibility and justice – in this sense, our (human) well-being is dependent on taking care of the "others" (252). According to Kimmerer, humans would reconsider exploiting our surroundings if they were seen as a family-member (57). Johnston's imagery gives value to the

trees, opposing the grammatical “it” through which the western world defines the natural world in order to exploit it. Kimmerer explicitly states that how we are raised and are taught how to perceive the living world around us is determining. From her point of view, children treat animals and plants as human beings until they are taught that it is wrong: “When we tell them that a tree is not a who, but an it, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying it makes a living land into ‘natural resources’” (Kimmerer 57). Through employing personification, Johnston resists the conceptual condition of the western language that enables extractive violence and warns the reader of the outcome when reducing the natural environment to resources.

The land is a living network of relations within Indigenous American epistemologies. The planet is viewed as a composition of more-than-human life, equal to human life, which strongly contrasts the western perception of their surroundings as natural resources. Rather, this worldview creates reciprocal obligations between humans and other life (Kimmerer 27-28). Environmental harm, within many Indigenous American frameworks, is an ethical violation of these relations – mirroring Johnston’s depiction of forests as family members – transforming deforestation from resource extraction into a breach of relationality. The ethical distance that has been established between humans and other living beings disables any form of a sustainable planet – wildlife has been reduced to small numbers to make way for animal farming; or, their habitat has been stolen to build hydro-electric dams to provide energy for ever-expanding infrastructure. Hogan notes the aspects of capitalist economies that nobody wants to know: “... driftnets that pull miles of living animals from the oceans, ... the trees orangutans and others need for their lives are now being felled for palm oil, previously cut for lumber” (Hogan 203). However, the western world’s exploitation is not restricted to animals living freely: “Economic factors have resulted in an even greater loss of compassion than we want to imagine”, Hogan continues, “[w]e need to know about the inhumane treatment in factory farms, and the other long lists we read each day that violate the life force for financial gain (203). In this context, Kimmerer’s *Honorable Harvest* needs to be reintroduced, as contemporary systems of extraction have more likely become a dishonorable harvest. “We take what doesn’t belong to us and destroy it beyond repair”, Kimmerer states, referring to the uncountable damages western extractivism has caused on the planet (185). It is the Wendigo’s disregard for reciprocity and relational responsibility in Johnston’s Wendigo narrative that causes inevitable ecological damage.

The concept of the *wétiko disease*, coined by Jack D. Forbes, serves as an interpretation of Johnston's portrayal of the extractive practices of modern Wendigos. *Wétiko societies* normalize destruction in their compulsive overconsumption and relentless exploitation of life, may that be human or more-than-human life (36, 39). From Forbes' perspective, societies in which the disease has spread are the societies that Europeans refer to as civilizations: "They are the ones where exploitation of others is accepted ... as a proper or at least necessary way of life" (39). Within Forbes' concept of the *wétiko*, the disappearing forests in Johnston's narrative expose what he describes as the foundational logic of *wétiko societies*. Forbes further warns against the acceptance that exists towards exploitative civilizations, which he perceives as part of the Wendigo condition. The repetitive structures found in Johnston's Wendigo narrative strengthen Forbes' argument, as the continual movement of the trains and ships transporting more and more timber and logs create the impression of a system incapable of stopping itself. Repetition, here, emphasizes the compulsive temporality of capitalist expansion, where accumulation continuously generates the need for further accumulation. In Forbes' *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, ideologies in which violence and exploitative behavior is inherent in human nature are distributed – usually by the ones in power – as it is to the benefit of their greed and ambition that others are exploited (36). His view on modern societies that naturalize the maltreatment of humans and more-than-humans exposes Johnston's Wendigo as a large-scale system that will continue to consume to satisfy its need for profit and power. The warnings of excess voiced in Forbes' work are strengthened by Johnston's application of repetition: the recurrence of actions – cutting, transporting, consuming – expose the prominent nature of relentless destruction in western economies. The Wendigo's hunger conveyed through the transportation of logs – "train after train, shipload after shipload", mirror excess, as "quantities always fell short of the demands of the Weendigoes" (236). Extractive capitalism deliberately transforms ecosystems into commodities to satisfy its insatiable appetite for profit¹⁷.

Modern Wendigo behavior and its dramatic effect on the environment becomes very explicit when examining Winona LaDuke's case examples of extractive activities on

¹⁷ In *The Extractive Zone* (2017), Macarena Gómez-Barris refers to this transformation of land into commodities as similar to the colonial gaze and the extractive view, through which "the re-organization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractable data and natural resources" is facilitated and normalized. She furthermore emphasizes how this particular worldview benefits capitalist expansion on Indigenous territories, on which valuable resources are still abundant (5-6).

Indigenous lands in North America. Frequently, these territories, on or under which natural resources were detected and sought by capitalist economies, are treated as expendable areas after having left them empty and destroyed (84). She documents the scale of these sacrifice zones when naming to the Native American reservations in North America that have been suggested for 16 dumping sites of nuclear waste, and that “over 100 proposals have been floated in recent years to dump toxic waste on Indian communities” (3). LaDuke’s examples strengthen Johnston’s interpretation of the Wendigo as a landscape-devouring being that consumes on an industrial scale in the contemporary world. Rather than ensuring survival in these areas, the modern Wendigo’s consumption is directed towards accumulation, leaving Indigenous territories uninhabitable. While the collective target is survival, “the common good has been redefined as maximum corporate production and profit” (LaDuke 199). The consequences for the people and more-than-human beings who belong to the land are devastating – as the extractive systems destroy habitats beyond repair, they also sever the relationships to that land. Settler colonialism, then, has left Indigenous homelands “devastated by settlement, industrial development, the construction of highways and roads, ... and four centuries of dispossession” (Simpson 2), leaving the land that was once home to large numbers of Indigenous tribes and communities “stolen, clear-cut, subdivided, and sold to settlers from Europe” (4). As the Nishnaabeg peoples’ strength was rooted in land connections, the colonizers’ main goal became the breach of the intimate relations – to take from the people their knowledge and survival practices. This was achieved through commodifying land and Indigenous bodies as capital, thereby rendering them available for exploitation.¹⁸ Ultimately, the Michi Siaagiig Nishnaabeg people, who originally inhabited vast areas around Lake Ontario in Canada, were eliminated from the northern lands bordering Lake Ontario through murder and assimilation (41). Simpson’s arguments reinforce the perception of ecological destruction being inextricably tied to the relational disconnection which settler colonialism and extractive capitalist structures have imposed on Indigenous peoples.

In Anishinaabe cosmology, being disconnected from the land evokes the Wendigo condition (Walker 58). Within this theoretical framework, as extractive capitalist activity renders Indigenous land permanently uninhabitable, it also generates the Wendigo’s hunger. This connection relates to Forbes’ work on European settler colonialism that “brought

¹⁸ This is what Marx has defined as primitive accumulation: the beginning of the accumulation of capital, which is founded upon dispossessing laborers from all sorts of property, rendering them to sell their own bodies, as their own means of production have been undermined (364).

unimaginable death, destruction, exploitation and greed” to the Americas, showing that the growth of the Wendigo is structural – its hunger consistently remaining in proportion to the size of its body (Forbes 24; Johnston 222). The spreading of the Wendigo disease, then, in connection to the disruption of relations through extractive practices, sustains long-term environmental injustice, bringing with it the increasing ecological degradation in proportion to the Wendigo’s growth. Particularly in recent decades, extractive Wendigo economics have started to dominate even the last Indigenous territories that are left on the North American continent (Greer 61). As the colonial period has already stolen most of the land from Indigenous stewardship, current extractive practices that continue this logic in a different form are considered an intensification of colonialism which caused environmental change over the past centuries. Climate change in its contemporary scale and pace, Kyle Whyte and other Indigenous environmental scholars argue, is an escalation of the structures introduced in the early colonial period (McGregor et al. 36; Whyte 154-155; Whyte 1). “Colonialism”, Whyte states, “often paved the way for the expansion of capitalism” (154). In this context, he furthermore adds to Winona LaDuke’s case studies, especially with regard to the health issues among Indigenous communities that followed continuous displacement and rapid changes within their familiar environment – alterations in their lives that were forced onto them by colonialism. These fast-paced changes made adaptability almost impossible, and subsequently rendered Native American peoples, once highly capable of handling changes in their natural surroundings, “vulnerable to harms, from health problems related to new diets to erosion of their cultures to the destruction of Indigenous diplomacy” (154). Whyte hereby situates the global ecological crises planet Earth faces today within the same capitalist extractive logic as the modern Wendigo’s limitless consumption in Johnston’s narrative is framed.

Through the analysis of Johnston’s literary devices and their correlation with the theoretical framework, the Wendigo transforms from a spiritual monster into a symbol of environmental destruction, consuming the land because of its insatiable greed. Forests, rivers, more-than-human life and, as becomes further visible through the theoretical work by Indigenous American authors, Indigenous lives are attacked by Wendigo activity. The Indigenous scholars whose work has been examined in this chapter critique extractive capitalism and call for Indigenous relationality, aiming to prevent the Wendigo disease from contaminating the places where reciprocity is still lived. Ultimately, Johnston’s literary strategies generate the thesis’ political and ethical argument. They construct the Wendigo as a figure of limitless accumulation, allowing Indigenous theoretical critiques of settler

colonialism, capitalist extractivism, and ecological destruction to emerge directly from the narrative's language and structure rather than being externally imposed upon it.

3. Winona LaDuke's "Wiindigo" (2023)

Winona LaDuke is an Anishinaabe author and activist. Steven Salaita, an assistant professor of Multicultural Literatures at the University of Wisconsin, refers to her as "one of the most recognizable tribal figures in modern America" (21) in his article "Digging up the Bones of the Past: Colonial and Indigenous Interplay in Winona LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman*", which was published in 2002. Moreover, he argues, her work within environmental and land reclamation activism is widely known, however, her fictional novel *Last Standing Woman* – has received limited attention (21). The novel foregrounds the encroachment of settler colonialism onto Anishinaabe land and highlights how this produces a long-term structural conflict over land, resources, and political authority between Indigenous peoples and settlers. A large range of textual features that illustrate ways of consumption, and critique, as well as the abundance of themes and characters the book is established upon makes it a challenging piece of literature to read (22). Similarly, Hsinya Huang, a professor of American and Comparative Literature at the National Sun Yat-Sen University in Taiwan, asserts that LaDuke extends Anishinaabe "tribal vision" in *Last Standing Woman*, by situating Indigenous history within a broader narrative of colonial invasion, environmental exploitation, and cultural survival across time; importantly, Huang states, what distinguishes LaDuke from other Indigenous authors such as Louise Erdrich, is her specificity "in dates and places" (40).

Winona LaDuke's "Wiindigo" in *Last Standing Woman* situates the Wendigo within contemporary Indigenous struggles over land, resources, and environmental justice. She presents the mythic monster in ways that allow it to be read as a metaphor for extractive capitalist and settler colonial greed. Unlike Basil Johnston, who mainly emphasizes moral and spiritual imbalance found in individuals, LaDuke extends and systematizes the Wendigo's appetite which is depicted in social, legal, and economic systems that perpetuate ecological and cultural damage in a human being: The Wendigo emerges through the actions of a lumberman, who represents a larger system of extraction. The narrative focuses on Namebin and his ancestral forest, illustrating how the lumberman's relentless exploitation embodies the Wendigo condition, in which consuming another's life for private profit reflects the structural greed of settler colonialism. LaDuke emphasizes the disruption of relationality central to Anishinaabe epistemologies, where human and more-than-human life are interconnected and each's wellbeing is maintained through reciprocal relations. Throughout the story, the Wendigo emerges as more than an isolated being and can be understood as a system that consumes entire

forests, the wildlife within, and by doing so, the Indigenous knowledge systems related to this land are also undermined, ultimately ‘eating’ Indigenous culture.

The Wendigo’s systemic and extractive violence is exposed through literary strategies LaDuke uses in her narrative. In the “Wiindigo” chapter she employs literary devices including metaphor, imagery, personification, repetition, symbolism, and dialogue – to construct the Wendigo as a manifestation of settler colonial capitalist and ecological destruction. The analysis of these literary strategies is central to this thesis because they reveal how the Wendigo operates not merely as a mythological cannibal, but as a force that is reproduced through legal, economic, and political systems of extraction. In this sense, the devices represent the logic of Wendigo overconsumption. For instance, repetition reflects the endless cycle of extraction and accumulation, while imagery visualizes the relational connections between the Indigenous communities and the more-than-human beings. Personification positions forests and animals as relatives rather than resources, and dialogue exposes the epistemological conflict between Indigenous relationality and imposed colonial legal authority. The narrative’s form becomes intertwined with political and environmental critique that is embedded in it. Through these literary strategies, LaDuke transforms the Wendigo into a contemporary figure of ecological injustice, exposing how extractive capitalism consumes Indigenous lands, cultures, and systems of traditional knowledge.

First, overconsumption and the disruption of reciprocal relationships are examined in order to show how ecological and cultural balance are intertwined, and thereby both threatened when these responsibilities are disregarded. Furthermore, the legal, economic, and political structures presented in LaDuke’s fictional novel expose how their implementation facilitates continuous extraction, framing settler colonial systems as modern extensions of the Wendigo’s appetite. Environmental degradation, the displacement of Indigenous communities, and the elimination of Indigenous knowledge and traditions as consequences of the modern Wendigo’s hunger are examined in the final chapter. While non-fiction could document these processes as historical, legal, or economic facts, LaDuke’s fictional novel translates them into a culturally embedded moral and spiritual system in which extraction becomes “consumption” and colonial capitalism becomes a living presence. The narrative thereby invites a reading of the Wendigo as a lens for understanding the ongoing effects of settler colonialism and Indigenous peoples and their territories.

3.1. Feeding the Wendigo

“Mitakuye oyasin.”

“We are all related.”

Lakota expression (Gregory Cajete 19)

Winona LaDuke’s “Wiindigo” is deeply rooted in Anishinaabeg epistemologies, centering relationality, reciprocity, and responsibilities toward the non-human natural world. In this worldview, forests, rivers, the lake and more-than-human beings are spirited beings who secure human survival by offering themselves to them for moderate consumption; in return, they are not regarded as resources available for exploitation, but their gift is given back somehow, as their wellbeing is closely connected to human wellbeing. Simpson writes that in her community, people are supposed to give what they do not need to ensure the maintenance of deep-rooted relationality between land and its inhabitants (8-9). This connection that exists within many Indigenous communities directly opposes the logic of the Wendigo, whose defining characteristic is the disruption of relational balance through insatiable consumption. The perception of the great pines as grandfathers in LaDuke’s narrative embodies Anishinaabe cosmology and reflects on many other Indigenous American values, emphasizing the intergenerational knowledge and the caring for each other, which is disrupted by the logging practices of settlers.

“The cannibal is here again” (61) introduces the reincarnated Wendigo, referring to the lumberman who wants to cut the trees off Namebin’s land. The modern Wendigo is read as reflecting not only colonial systems that neglect Indigenous voices, but also the greed within settlers and the tireless seeking for land and profit. LaDuke initially constructs this transformation through imagery and metaphor, which reveal the ecological consequences of extraction and position industrial logging within the logic of Wendigo consumption. Animals and trees are depicted as sentient beings, affected by logging activities: “The animals behaved differently now, moving nearer to the Minnogeeshig family camp, the logging companies close on their tracks. The logging companies had moved onto the reservation with the blessing of the Indian Agency and now began a feeding frenzy that would last for decades” (59-60)¹⁹. Through

¹⁹ In the 19th and early 20th century, Indian Agents were non-Native officials appointed by the U.S. federal government to manage relations with Indigenous communities at the local level. Their role was presented as twofold: on the one hand, they were supposed to supervise and sometimes advocate for Native peoples; on the

imagery, LaDuke visualized ecological disturbance before the forest itself disappears: The movement of the animals toward to camp signals that the balance between human and more-than-human life has already been disrupted by logging activities. The violation of the reservation border, which already restricts Indigenous lifeways to be lived, emphasizes the disruption of relationality, as every step the Wendigo takes reflects insatiable colonial greed. Moreover, the metaphor “feeding frenzy” transforms logging from an economic activity into an act of consumption. By describing extraction through the language of feeding, LaDuke establishes a comparison between lumber companies and the Wendigo’s insatiable hunger. “Native environmental philosophy acknowledges that our human lives are utterly dependent on the lives of other beings and thus our first responsibility is gratitude” (31), Kimmerer states in connection to her concept of *gift economies* as a response to the question of “how does one respond to a world made of gifts?” (29). Therefore, taking from the land without returning the gifts undermines the relationship between the human and more-than-human world, a principle that becomes clearly visible in “Wiindigo”, when the large-scale logging activities render these relational ties unimportant. Consequently, Kimmerer argues, “we find ourselves in an era when centuries of overconsumption have depleted natural resources and left human societies materially and culturally impoverished by a deep disconnection from the living world.” (31). LaDuke’s depiction of relentless extraction exemplifies precisely this condition, illustrating how the severing of relational bonds on which many Native American cultures have built their lives, cultures and values, results in ecological degradation but also the loss of culture.

The principles of *gift economies*, as Kimmerer calls them, are conveyed through imagery in LaDuke’s narrative; it is shown both how these economies are lived by Indigenous communities and how they are violated by settler colonialists. The epistemological grounding introduced by Kimmerer strongly opposes settler colonial extractivist structures in which accumulation and ownership are central (Kimmerer 308; McGregor et al. 35). LaDuke’s narrative exposes how the responsibilities within a *gift economy* are replaced by economic logics, transforming relational ethics into commodities. This shift mirrors the transformation identified earlier, in which the Wendigo emerges not as a singular being but as a large-scale

other hand, they were responsible for implementing federal policy and encouraging the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into Euro-American society (Prucha x, Schreiber 109; qtd in Stanton 649-650). These agents were harmful to Native communities because, despite the appearance of advocacy, they primarily served the interests of the government. In practice, Indigenous agency was restricted, as Native peoples were subjected to policies of relocation, assimilation, and external control rather than being allowed to determine their own political and cultural futures (Stanton 651-652).

force that is reproduced through implemented economic and legal structures. Personification strengthens the moral critique by giving the land and its more-than-human inhabitants agency and narrative presence, allowing the reader to read and feel their suffering. While the trees are resources to the lumbermen, they are family to the Indigenous community. LaDuke personification culminates in the statement that the “large white pines that were the grandfathers to the Anishinaabeg” are carefully circumvented by the roads of the communities (60). Through personification, she reframes deforestation as familial violence rather than resource use, intensifying the moral critique embedded in the narrative. By referring to the trees as “grandfathers”, LaDuke also situates the forest within an intergenerational structure of memory, ancestry, and knowledge transmissions, thereby intensifying the violence of their destruction. The Wendigo consumes everything in its path, eating away the family of the people who had taken care of the trees for hundreds of years. In “Wiindigo”, this violation is not abstract but materially experienced, as the lumberman’s actions sever the reciprocal relationships that sustain both human and more-than-human life.

The lumberman’s actions closely align with what Jack D. Forbes has described as the *wétiko disease* – relating to the western tendency of turning everything into a purchasable commodity and by doing so, they consume Indigenous people and their cultures, dispossessing them of their land and selling it as property (25). Forbes’ conception of the *wétiko disease* is articulated through the legal paper, that permits the lumberman to log the trees of Namebin’s land; moreover, the disappearance of the forest entails the dissolution of the Native community, as it is divided from their ancestors²⁰. Winona LaDuke depicts this form of consumption through logging permits and corporate expansion, extending the Wendigo condition to political and economic processes of greed. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *As We Have Always Done* further clarifies the rupture caused by settler colonialist practices on Indigenous lands in North America. Removal and land dispossession ultimately resulted in relational ties to dissolve, as the people could no longer practice their land-based ethics (4). Forbes’ conception of the *wétiko disease* becomes visible her work, as it has forced Indigenous peoples from their land, only to log the trees and divide it into territories to be sold as private property. Settlement has destroyed the connections with the land and transformed everything perceived as gifts into natural

²⁰ LaDuke’s narrative could be critiqued for generalizing the lumberman and the workers as Wendigos and not differentiating between the positions in western society. It does not mention the relationship between the capitalist owner and the exploited worker, even though it is unlikely that the people logging were the ones who gave the order or who forced the legal document.

resources (8). The destruction of the forest in “Wiindigo” is read as a *pars pro toto* for the process of land dispossession and the simultaneous disappearance of land-based ethics. Similar to Johnston’s narrative, it is the excessive cutting of trees that aligns with Wendigo activity in LaDuke’s narrative. The lumber companies are presented as devouring forests with an insatiable appetite for timber, described as a “feeding frenzy that would last for decades” (59). The phrase “feeding frenzy” evokes animalistic and uncontrolled consumption – LaDuke’s narrative strengthens the dehumanizing logic of extractive capitalism and aligns industrial logging with monstrous appetite. When Namebin observes the logging, he shakes his head and exhales, “so much greed, so much greed” (60). The repetition mimics the cyclical and relentless nature of Wendigo greed and consumption, thereby highlighting the extent and persistence of Wendigo activity in his environment. Overconsumption is one key characteristic of the Wendigo, clearly emerging in LaDuke’s “Wiindigo”.

The Wendigo’s hunger is transformed into an appetite on an industrial scale. Not only the number of trees cut mirrors Wendigo consumption, it is also the speed at which the lumbermen let the forests disappear. “Teams of men and horses moved the great pines from their homes in the woods to the lakes and then down the river ... further south and far from the reservation” (59-60). However, even after consuming entire forests, the lumbermen’s hunger is not satisfied, as “they kept on cutting” (60), indicating the continuous cycle of extraction without stopping and most importantly, without returning what is taken. As ancestral land is stolen, the Indigenous people lose the epistemologies and knowledge systems that depend on and are connected to the interaction with that place; as a result, the narrative presents extractive capitalism as displacing relational responsibility.

Indigenous epistemologies in the narrative challenge the inevitability of colonial capitalist systems, referring here to systems that are structured around land seizure and resource extractions. *Gift economies* – systems founded upon reciprocal exchange – actively resist the Wendigo logic of infinite consumption and thereby serve as alternatives to the endless growth that is prominent in western capitalist structures, where overconsumption and relentless accumulation have been normalized (Kimmerer 31). Anishinaabe resistance is embedded in the “Wiindigo” narrative, demanding a return to relational systems that sustain life over generations. The refusal to accept authoritarian power and hierarchy is initially articulated through Namebin’s behavior, later through communal action. LaDuke presents the protection of the land and more-than-human relatives as an obligation – as taking care of one another is

one of the ground rules of reciprocity. From this perspective, resisting settler colonial capitalism, is understood as interrupting Wendigo behavior.²¹

Whereas Johnston's Wendigo exposes the moral consequences of overconsumption, LaDuke portrays the Wendigo through everyday colonial practices that affect Indigenous land and lives. Her narrative does not explain how one becomes a Wendigo; rather, she determines the lumberman to be the cannibal. She therefore exposes, through the Wendigo character, how Wendigo systems are perpetuated within human beings – this allows for a shift from grounding the cannibalistic being in Indigenous epistemologies alone to a lived condition that continues to threaten Indigenous survival.

3.2. The Wendigo Economy

*We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills,
and the winding streams with tangled growth as “wild”.
Only to the White man was nature “wilderness” and only to him
was the land infested by “wild” animals and “savage” people.
To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded
with the blessings of the Great Mystery.
Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy
heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it “wild” for us.
When the very animals of the forest began fleeing;
from his approach, then it was that for us the “wild west” began.*
Luther Standing Bear (in Forbes 23)

In *Last Standing Woman*, settler colonialism emerges as a historical process of land dispossession and seizure, but also as an institutional system that normalizes overconsumption, displacement, assimilation, and ecological destruction. Winona LaDuke situates the Wendigo within these colonial characteristics to expose its impact on Indigenous communities. Jack D. Forbes' portrayal of societies being contaminated with the *wétiko disease* has been examined in the previous chapter on Indigenous epistemologies; however, it is highly important in a settler colonial context as well, which is central to this chapter. In LaDuke's and Forbes' work,

²¹ See the Chapter 3.2 as well as Chapter 5.1. for a deeper analysis of resistance in LaDuke's narrative.

individual greed is extended into large-scale exploitation and overconsumption. The pursuit of private property by the individual has developed into a meanwhile normalized system of extensive resource extraction and limitless production and consumption. Both LaDuke and Forbes draw on the normalization of dispossession and relentless resource extraction within colonial systems, in connection to Indigenous communities who continue to experience the Wendigo condition on their territories. Forbes refers to what Europeans consider ‘civilized societies’ as “wétiko dominated societies”, in which the “exploitation of others is accepted ... as proper or at least necessary way of life” (39).

The disregard for Indigenous land stewardship becomes evident in LaDuke’s narrative through the lumberman’s legal document, granting him access to Namebin’s land and timber without Namebin’s consent. Consent was given to the lumberman by the Indian agent, who is supposedly representing the Native American community in the narrative, but who is, instead, deliberately selling their trees for them (63). This scene receives a deeper understanding when dialogue is applied, revealing how legal language functions as a vehicle of what can be understood as Wendigo violence, translating extractive authority into seemingly legitimate action. A close alignment between Forbes’ conception of *wétiko societies* and Namebin’s stolen land is visible, exposing the destructive, exploitative characteristics of settler colonial structures. Dialogue plays a substantial role in establishing critique towards capitalist extractivism in the narrative. Namebin recognizes the violence enacted by the lumberman, albeit not direct physical violence against humans. When the lumberman arrives at Namebin’s home, he justifies his actions through bureaucratic language: “I have the papers that say I can take the trees off your land. I have the papers” (62). The repetition of “I have the papers” emphasizes his reliance on legal documentation as the ultimate source of authority. Significantly, the interpreter reduces the statement to its essential components: “White man says he can take the trees. White man wants the trees. White man has paper” (62). The claim reveals the logic of underlying settler colonial extraction: desire, possession, and entitlement. The paper itself becomes more important than the relationship that connects the Anishinaabeg to the land. The dialogue further exposes the incompatibility between these worldviews. While the lumberman believes that the paper grants him ownership over the trees, Namebin evaluates the situation according to responsibilities toward the land and its inhabitants. Consequently, when Namebin examines the document, “[h]e understood the intent of the paper. He understood the cannibal” (63). Through this brief dialogue, LaDuke collapses legal language and violence by revealing how the papers become a vehicle for Wendigo consumption. In LaDuke’s narrative context, the Wendigo’s hunger exceeds its literal meaning and can be interpreted as

systemic – consuming land, forests and Indigenous cultures by depriving them of everything that makes them who they are. The critique embedded in the narrative culminates when Namebin burns the paper and the lumberman responds: “Your trees are mine. And your trees are coming down” (63). The possessive language exposes the extractive logic at the heart of the Wendigo condition. The trees are no longer regarded as living relatives or “grandfathers”, but as property to be consumed.

“The cannibal is here again” (61): Namebin’s observation in “Wiindigo” indicates how the monster’s greed manifests and does not cease. The phrasing “again” suggests repetition, but also transformation, as the Wendigo reappears in new forms. The adverb “again” also collapses temporal boundaries between historical and contemporary colonial violence, suggesting that the Wendigo is not confined to Indigenous oral traditions but continuously reproduced through modern extractive systems. Embodied by the lumberman in LaDuke’s narrative, historical cannibalism is linked to the contemporary extractive practice of deforestation. The text notes that for decades, European settlers have exploited the forests surrounding Namebin’s home, causing wildlife to flee closer to the Native communities, with “the logging companies close on their tracks” (59). Through imagery, LaDuke illustrates how ecological disruption precedes human displacement, as animals are forced into Indigenous spaces, signaling the approaching destruction of both environmental and cultural worlds. Rather than depicting the extractive practice as one singular moment in history, LaDuke frames it as an ongoing colonial condition Namebin and his community find themselves in, thereby emphasizing the continuity of these extractive structures. This persistence she conveys through repetition when referring to the cannibal’s appearance and the imagery that illustrates the predatory behavior of the lumbermen towards the animals reflect what Martinez identifies as capitalism’s accelerating pace of production, which continues to degrade the environmental basis of life (142-143). Neoliberal capitalism’s ignorance towards environmental destruction becomes particularly evident in their “industrial land management methods that are exacerbating climate change through unanticipated harmful cascading events” (145). Modern colonialism, in this sense, is like a faith-founded religion, Martinez continues, in which optimism has no boundaries, led by the belief in infinite progress and domination, regardless of costs and limits. This never-ending progress requires land for large-scale logging, mining, and agriculture – “the poor, Indigenous, and closely related peasant ... communities who occupy so-called “empty lands”” (145), are the victims of these land seizures (145). The Wendigo in LaDuke’s narrative can be viewed as a direct representation of what Martinez

refers to as neoliberal capitalism, whose survival depends on the continuing eating and taking life and livelihoods of others.

The material consequences of this cannibalistic behavior are explicitly demonstrated in Winona LaDuke's theoretical work, *All Our Relations*, through concrete case studies of extractive practices that affect Indigenous peoples. As Indigenous scholars like Simpson and LaDuke have argued, colonial dispossession occurs continually, it has merely taken a different form, just like the Wendigo in Johnston's narrative. "So much greed, so much greed", Namebin utters, asking himself when the monster would stop eating the trees off his land (60). "Greed" is repeatedly mentioned by Namebin, articulating the cyclical and relentless nature of Wendigo consumption and simultaneously critiquing the excess. LaDuke's named examples emphasize the everlasting extraction of natural resources, as the Wendigo's hunger is never satisfied. Hydro-Quebec²² exemplifies the modern Wendigo's destructive force, letting whole waterfalls disappear for its survival: "Larger than the Niagara Falls, Patshetshunau (Churchill Falls) seemed infinite", before the Premier of Newfoundland established a power-plant at Patshetshunau in cooperation with Quebec. "The Great Falls ... are now silent. The long chute is dry, a result of ... the greed of Hydro-Quebec", LaDuke writes in her chapter on "Nitassinan" (49-74), the original name of Newfoundland. The silence of the Falls symbolizes more than environmental loss; it suggests the erasure of ecological presence, sound, and movement under extractive capitalism: The contrast between the former vitality of the Falls and their present silence mirrors the transformation already witnessed in "Wiindigo", where the forest is not only removed, but stripped of its sensory presence, as its sounds are replaced with the sawing of machines and the movement of logs by horses and men.

Also resonating with insatiability and destruction, in LaDuke's case study of Hydro-Quebec, the powerplant is not enough for the Wendigo, which closely aligns with Namebin's observation of the lumberman's insatiability. Every river in the vicinity of the exploited Falls has been interrupted by dams, resulting in dramatic ecological consequences. Where once was a river, is now a lake held up by a dam. "The black spruce forest that was drowned in the flooding died slowly. Natural processes of decay seemed to pull ... mercury out of the soil." These transformations are not presented as mere environmental damage, but are read as the inevitable outcomes of settler colonial expansion – the expansion of Wendigo economics, in

²² "Hydro-Québec generates, transmits and distributes electricity, mainly using renewable energy sources, in particular hydroelectricity. It is one of the biggest electric utilities in North American" (Hydro-Québec 2012, qtd. in Schiehl and Raufflet 244).

which the land is rendered disposable once it has been consumed. LaDuke describes this process as the response from Mother Earth, because humans are not supposed to disrupt the natural flows of water – “the forest killed the water” (61). The inversion embedded in the phrase is especially striking: rather than colonial extraction being identified as a source of destruction, the damaged forest itself appears to “kill” the water, illustrating how ecological systems become distorted and turned against themselves as a result of Wendigo economics. The imbalance caused by Wendigo behavior in this case has an uneven effect on the population, reflecting the Wendigo’s disregard for others. For instance, the Innu, a people living in Nitassinan – today’s Newfoundland – whose land was invaded for the electric power-plants, suffered immensely as they lost the land on which their survival largely depended. Nevertheless, Hydro-Quebec continued the building of dams in Nitassinan, before it had consumed enough on these territories and moved to James Bay – Cree land, only to eat more (LaDuke 61). Extending their system further and further onto another’s territory represents settler colonial expansion, as access to land, according to Patrick Wolfe, is its primary characteristic of settler colonialism (388). Within this cycle, the Wendigo always needs more land for extraction, perpetuating its destructive logic.

The normalization of exploitation, as clearly marked in the example of Hydro-Quebec, reflects what Kyle Whyte exposes as the containment of Native American’s self-determination, secured through reiterated destruction of the relations with the land that is tightly knit with their culture (7). In “Wiindigo”, the lumberman’s authority over Namebin’s land is not rooted in relational accountability; instead, colonial systems have legally allowed him to steal the land from Indigenous hands and by doing that, Namebin’s ability to make his own decisions regarding his land is rendered insignificant. Through applied imagery, the reader feels the Wendigo’s movement before it arrives, destroying the trees – moving closer onto the family members of Namebin’s community. The sounds of the machines, approaching the reservation in a rapid pace signal that control over the land has already shifted before any visible confrontation occurs. The legal paper permit for logging on Indigenous lands expresses the cannibalistic traits of settler colonial systems, consuming self-determination; by implementing institutions that curtail Native American sovereignty through land dispossession, displacement etc., colonialists eventually ensure that they are no longer able to combat environmental change on their lands, Whyte argues (7). Wendigo economics can therefore be understood as institutional forces, hidden behind modern corporations and legalities, with the same ultimate goal as the first settlers on the North American continent – the disappearance of Indigenous American people, which Patrick Wolfe explains through the *logic of elimination*.

Wolfe's concept appears when examining the extractive activities in LaDuke's "Wiindigo". Elimination, in a North American colonial context, no longer means genocide only, as distinct ways of killing were added; it operates through ecological transformation and territorial displacement, which challenges Indigenous survival. As Wolfe notes, "Indigenous people obstructed settler's access to land, so their increase was counterproductive" (388). Race was therefore not the primary reason for eliminating the Native, it was land – Native land the settlers sought and hence, their main target was to replace the original inhabitants of the land altogether (388). The *logic of elimination* reflects LaDuke's narrative as well as her case examples, in which Native life is rendered irrelevant, if anything, in the way. Wolfe continues by stating that "modernity cannot explain the insatiable dynamic whereby settler colonialism always needs more land" (395). The land Indigenous Americans tended as wild, living nature which they considered themselves a part of and was shared equally with other beings, settlers transformed into agricultural land from which they could limitlessly extract resources.

In LaDuke's "Wiindigo", this transformation is condensed in the image of trees being removed, as "teams of men and horses moved the great pines from their homes in the woods to the lakes and then down the river ... further south and far from the reservation" (59-60). However, even after consuming entire forests, the lumbermen's hunger is not satisfied, as "they kept on cutting" (60), indicating the continuous cycle of extraction without stopping and most importantly, without returning what is taken. Displacement, then, operates on human populations and their more-than-human relatives, severing relational ties. By gradually eliminating Indigenous agriculture and ways of caring for their surroundings, Native American culture was aimed to be dissolved altogether (Wolfe 395). LaDuke's documentation of Indigenous lands being targeted for nuclear waste storage further underlines the inconsideration for Indigenous lives from an extractive capitalist perspective. Her research shows that "[r]eservations (in North America) have been targeted as sites for 16 proposed nuclear waste dumps" and sacred places have been repeatedly targeted for resource extraction (3). These examples extend the Wendigo metaphor beyond logging, revealing how settler colonialism continually identifies Indigenous land as expendable space. The forests in "Wiindigo" can be similarly perceived as sacred sites, inhabited by trees that are family to the people, who are also irresponsibly consumed by the Wendigo. Such practices illustrate how elimination operates through ecological degradation, transforming Indigenous homelands into what some federal government representatives of the western world have determined to be "national sacrifice areas" (LaDuke 84). These activities and processes of destruction are constituted and perpetuated by the economic structures that dominate on the planet's surface. They disregard

and restrict Indigenous American land-care practices while intensifying ecological breakdown through extensive industrialization (Martinez 146). Read through Wolfe's framework, elimination is not restricted to physical passing, but extends to ecological and cultural death, undermining the conditions necessary for Indigenous life to thrive.

3.3. The Wendigo's Appetite

*Only when the last tree has died
and the last river has been poisoned
and the last fish has been caught
will we realize
we cannot eat money*
Cree expression (Linda Hogan 204)

Indigenous environmental justice shares the pattern of environmental justice, but extends the conception of ecological harm being unequally distributed over the planet. Environmental injustices like the climate crisis, according to the McGregor et al., "are ... inevitably tied to, and symptomatic of, ongoing processes of colonialism, dispossession, capitalism, imperialism, globalization and patriarchy" (36). Indigenous peoples in North America have century-long experience with settler colonial and extractivist activity in their homes, and the ecological loss they are faced with today is therefore inextricably related to colonial structures that continue to affect their lives (McGregor et al. 36; Whyte 1). LaDuke emphasizes the structurally produced environmental degradation, disproportionately affecting Native American communities whose lands are repeatedly targeted for extractive projects. Through bringing the tale into conversation with Indigenous environmental justice that examines harmful extractive practices on Indigenous lands or in close proximity to reservations, it becomes increasingly evident how climate change is a continuation of settler colonialism's logic of overconsumption and its disregard for others – aligning closely with Wendigo characteristics.

Kyle Whyte's argument that settler colonial institutions repeatedly undermine Indigenous peoples' ability to adapt to climate change provides a crucial framework for reading LaDuke's "Wiindigo". Capitalist structures, like large-scale logging or polluted water as a result of extractivism, cause significant interruptions in ecological systems; they change the landscape at a rapid pace, making it difficult for Indigenous peoples to adjust their millennia-old knowledge of the land and life to the environmental situation that is forced onto them (5-

6). The colonial authority – represented by the lumberman – in the Wendigo narrative supersede Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. The lumberman’s right to extract from Namebin’s land is secured through institutionalized paperwork, without any consideration for consent or stewardship. This superiority, as well as ignorance, is furthermore emphasized through the dialogue between the lumberman and Namebin, only enabled through the presence of a translator, which exposes the inability of the white settler to see Indigenous values as he refuses to understand Namebin: “The lumberman spoke now. ‘Mr. Minnogeeshig’, he said abruptly in his harsh, awkward white man’s language, irked by the silliness of the Indian’s veiled words and secrets. ‘I have the papers that say I can take the trees off your land. I have the papers.’ The interpreter translated for Namebin. ‘White man says he can take the trees. White man wants the trees. White man has paper’” (62). The dialogue underlines the linguistic difference but also the epistemological conflict, where Indigenous knowledge is diminished through colonial structures. In Johnston’s narrative, imbalance is produced through human relations with the environment; LaDuke relocates ecological and cultural destruction within modern governance, through which settler colonial law functions as a tool of violence from a Native American perspective.

LaDuke’s work on Indigenous environmental justice, articulated in the case studies in *All Our Relations*, reinforces the environmental justice reading of her “Wiindigo” chapter, showing that Wendigo behavior is highly prominent in contemporary extractive capitalism. Potentially lethal activities required for extractive capitalism to thrive are frequently conducted on Indigenous lands – as already mentioned in the previous chapter, often termed “national sacrifice zones”. Projects like hydroelectric dam building, nuclear waste storage as well as aluminum and coal extraction are not evenly distributed over the continent; they follow a colonial appetite in which Indigenous territories are treated as disposable (Juskus 10). The Wendigo’s consuming of the forests in “Wiindigo” can be projected onto a larger pattern of European settler behavior, yielding Indigenous land to industrial and developmental areas regardless of the environmental consequences. LaDuke has documented, for instance, the devastating consequences of aluminum mining on Akwesasne Mohawk lands in the 1970s. Toxic fluorides were emitted from these extractive activities into the surrounding air, contaminating the soil and water sources of the communities who lived on the land, and restraining them from their natural food sources. In fact, the Akwesasne Mohawk reservation was determined the most contaminated around the Great Lakes by the Canadian government (LaDuke 15). The relationship the Mohawk had with the land was severed as extractive industries was consuming it and filling it with toxicity, and the poison ultimately reached

Indigenous bodies (15). About 20 years later, when PCBs, the toxic elements in hydroelectric and mining projects, were banned; clean-up organizations, in corporation with large extractive companies, preferred containment over treatment – as it would significantly lower the costs – and therefore merely covered the contaminated soil with sand. This was presented as a solution, yet the toxic waste continued to leach into the river (17-18). The Mohawk used to have fish as their primary food source; now, the extractive companies have rendered them dependent on other food sources, as their traditional food source has been destroyed. As a result, LaDuke states, more than half of the Indigenous peoples on the Akwesasne reservation suffer from diabetes, and their food intake has shifted from mainly fish to spaghetti (18). Mining does invisible damage in contrast to logging, where the ecological consequences are blunt. The former, however, is significantly more destructive, as it infiltrates ecosystems and human health simultaneously. Trees can regrow, if allowed; the soil, on the other hand, once poisoned with lethal toxics, demands multiple decades to heal and produce edible food for humans again. Extractive industries remove valuable materials on which the peoples of the territories depend and feel connected to. The logging in “Wiindigo” disrupts a source of subsistence of Namebin’s community and their spiritual relationship with the land; LaDuke’s example of aluminum mining extends to physical harm, as it contaminates water and food sources, causing sickness and death among the Indigenous peoples whose survival depends on these resources. In *Last Standing Woman*, the Wendigo’s association with cannibalism is transformed into a metaphor for modern extractive practices on Indigenous lands. Although literal cannibalism is not depicted, the recurring image of the “cannibal” evokes a destructive force driven by insatiable consumption. Industrial exploitation of land and humans becomes Wendigo-like in this framework, poisoning the land and water that sustains Indigenous communities and is thus figuratively consuming Native people through environmental destruction.

The previous example of the extractive activity on Mohawk territory, which consequently rendered these lands uninhabitable, highlights structures of land dispossession and the forced dependence on capitalist systems. Robin Wall Kimmerer’s reflections on reciprocity and *Honorable Harvest* are essential in an Indigenous environmental justice context, as through these concepts she presents the exact opposite of relentless extraction and seeking maximum profit: Native American ecological structures are grounded in returning the gift, always ensuring a balance between what humans take from the Earth and what they give back (31; Kimmerer in Nelson 44-45). The principle of reciprocity contrasts the environmental violence depicted in LaDuke’s “Wiindigo”, as well as in her case studies on extractive capitalism. Both her Wendigo figures portray extraction with an insatiable appetite and without

relationality or repair – hence without returning what they took. Kimmerer explains that “[i]n Potawatomi, we speak of the land as emingoyak: that which has been given to us. In English, we speak of the land as ‘natural resources’ or ‘ecosystem services’, as if the lives of other beings were our property” (383). The cutting of the “grandfathers” – the large pines on Namebin’s land – reveals this western worldview Kimmerer refers to; it is closely related to the poisoning of Mohawk food sustenance, as both cutting and poisoning represent a violation of the reciprocal relationships, according to which many Indigenous peoples lead balanced lives with their surroundings (Kimmerer in Nelson 33). In this sense, Kimmerer’s notions of environmental harm align strongly with LaDuke’s case studies as well as her narrative of the Wendigo, allowing settler colonial capitalism to be read through a lens of Wendigo behavior.

Beyond contamination and resource extraction, Indigenous environmental justice scholars emphasize that environmental degradation must also be understood as a crisis of relationship and knowledge systems, as has already been implied in my analysis of LaDuke’s Mohawk example, where relentless extraction forces Indigenous people to lose their traditional way of living with more-than-human nature. While land is perceived as a relative by the Indigenous people in LaDuke’s “Wiindigo”, it is transformed into a commodity by European settlers²³. Deforestation entails the loss of relatives from Namebin’s perspective – the logging activities in the narrative therefore produce environmental injustice, as it substitutes relationality with property. This injustice, according to Kimmerer, emerges from the Wendigo condition, in which the monster within us “tricks us into believing that belongings will fill our hunger, when it is belonging that we crave” (308). LaDuke’s narrative echoes Kimmerer’s distinction between belonging and belongings and thus highlights the substantial differences between cosmologies. The worldview of the lumberman is portrayed as the one responsible for ecological degradation and ultimately, environmental injustice. Relationality, then, is presented as providing a feeling of belonging, being connected to the planet and the other living beings; whereas purchasable commodities evoke the opposite: an insatiable appetite that never ceases, no matter how much we ‘eat’.

Relationality and Kimmerer’s introduced concept of the *Honorable Harvest* align closely with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s arguments about Indigenous knowledge systems

²³ Donna Haraway expands kinship beyond genealogy, writing that her purpose is to make “‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy” (161). She further suggests that “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense” and calls for “better care of kinds-as-assemblages,” (162) which frames kinship as an ethic of relationality and responsibility that exceeds human family structures.

being founded on place-based ethics, maintaining close and personal interaction with the local environment (41). Settler colonialists' one major target was to remove Indigenous people from their lands, which inevitably resulted in the disappearance of place-based knowledge that enabled a balanced and sustainable relationship with those respective lands. The severing of the intimate relation between Indigenous bodies and the land benefitted the colonizer, as it was this very connection that had empowered the Native people (41). Native Americans' conflict with climate change has frequently been described as an "intensified episode of colonialism" by scholars of Indigenous American heritage (McGregor et al. 3; Whyte 1, 5; Whyte 155; 6). Whyte subscribes to Simpson's argument of a place-based ethics by stating that environmental change caused by colonial activity forced Indigenous peoples into reservations and unknown ecosystems, often a long distance away from their familiar environment (155). Kimmerer notes that not only Indigenous people become climate refugees: their nonhuman family, like maples, have to leave their homes in search for survival, as their homelands are destroyed "for the price of cheap gas" (173). Territories are damaged and knowledge disappears. Whyte's and Kimmerer's insights into environmental degradation as a consequence of colonial occupation deepen the understanding of LaDuke's "Wiindigo", as large-scale deforestation removes the resources which Indigenous knowledge is based on. Simpson grounds the continuous struggle for relations in the ongoing displacement and disconnection, as many Indigenous people try to resist the western systems that attempt to eliminate their ecological knowledge systems (21). The repetitive cycle through which extractive disruption occurs aligns with the Wendigo in LaDuke's narrative; as Namebin utters, "the cannibal is here again" (61), highlighting the extensive harm the Wendigo inflicts while feeding on Native American lands.

Johnston's narrative emphasizes spiritual and moral imbalance that emerges from human excessive consumption; LaDuke adds to this by embedding the Wendigo within modern extractive economies and the legal system through which the exploitation of nonhuman and Indigenous American lives remains justified. Although Johnston also refers to modern Wendigos as multinationals and conglomerates, LaDuke's "Wiindigo" chapter stages the monstrous being through a concrete encounter between the human Wendigo and a Native American man, which is structured through settler legal documents, translation, and extractive authority. By conveying the Wendigo figure through a direct, personal encounter – the lumberman approaching Namebin – its effect is intensified and the consequences of Wendigo intrusion on Indigenous lands depicted more accessible and less abstract. It renders settler-Indigenous land confrontation more visible than Johnston's narrative, which remains impersonal and more descriptive, making LaDuke's intimate narrative essential in an

environmental justice context, which highlights the unequal distribution of ecological degradation between the world's populations. By situating the Wendigo within structures of ecological violence, LaDuke exposes the relevance of Wendigo narratives for understanding the prominence of environmental injustice Indigenous American communities are confronted with.

4. Louise Erdrich's "Windigo" (1984)

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, is described by HarperCollins Publishers as an award-winning author of novels, poetry collections, children's books, and a memoir. Her poem "Windigo" appears in the poetry collection *Jacklight* (1984). Critical responses to *Jacklight* emphasize its distinctive cultural and linguistic positioning. Elaine Jahner argues that the collection emerges from the Turtle Mountain context, a region shaped by the intersection of Indigenous and European cultural traditions. She suggests that Erdrich's poetry reflects both local patterns of expression and the everyday experiences of a community that is often absent from dominant literary representations (30). Richard K. Waters similarly highlights the resistance embedded in Erdrich's poetry towards being reduced to a narrowly defined category of "Indian" poems. Instead, he asserts, that the poems engage a wide range of concerns, including questions of identity, place, gender, and cultural belonging. According to Waters, Erdrich "intends to develop a connection between hunting and sexuality ... which explains that one Chippewa word means both hunting and flirting, while another can mean either rape or killing" in *Jacklight*, an interconnection that becomes highly evident in the "Windigo" poem. Waters moreover underlines the importance of hunting imagery throughout the whole poem collection by describing it as a recurring framework through which questions of selfhood, desire, and relationality are explored. Within this context, "Windigo" is approached as a poetic text that differs methodologically from the narrative forms used by Basil Johnston and Winona LaDuke. Erdrich's poem relies on condensed imagery, metaphor, and symbolic association, whereas the other texts explicitly articulate and critique the Wendigo condition in addition to the literary devices employed.

Louise Erdrich's "Windigo" reconfigures the Wendigo as both an external threat and an internal condition, foregrounding the fragile boundary between human and monster. Unlike Basil Johnston, who first emphasizes individual moral failure and then extends the Wendigo condition to a form of conglomerates and multinational corporations, and Winona LaDuke, who situates the monster within large-scale systems of extractive capitalism and settler colonialism, Erdrich's poem focuses on the internal process of the Wendigo, by presenting the creature as "a flesh-eating, wintry demon with a man buried deep inside of it". This fusion of human and monster renders the distinction between human and monster invisible, which could insinuate that both are inherent parts of a human being, as Kimmerer has already suggested when arguing that "Windigo is the name for that within us which cares more for its own survival than anything else" (305). The Wendigo condition can therefore be understood as

emerging through a rupture of relationality, as when one's own self-interests are prioritized over the common good. The poem's imagery of coldness, consumption, and predation links this internal imbalance to broader colonial violence, including land dispossession and the disruption of Indigenous communities. Through poetic language and the internal perspective which the poem offers, the Wendigo's insatiable hunger is read as operating within individuals and across systems that destroys culture and environments by consuming human and more-than-human life.

The poem's representation of the Wendigo as an internalized condition is analyzed first in order to show how moral imbalance and the severing of reciprocal relationships produce monstrosity and cannibalism. Moreover, the imagery of predation and environmental devastation reflect on the effects of settler colonialism as well as of extractive capitalism on Indigenous lands and communities. The Wendigo logic is thus extended from the individual to a structural level of consumption. Finally, and this is the most significant contrast to the previous narratives, Erdrich's poem suggests the transformation of a Wendigo into a human – relational balance is restored in the process. This transformation positions the poem not only as a critique of colonial and capitalist excess but also as a vision of renewal and return grounded in Indigenous epistemologies.

Through poetic and narrative strategies, Erdrich constructs the Wendigo as both an internal condition and as a figure through which colonial and ecological violence can be understood. She employs imagery, symbolism, repetition, but also allegory, contrast, and dialogue to depict the tension between relationality and isolation, humanity and monstrosity, warmth and emotional coldness. These literary devices are essential to the chapter's analysis because the poem's critique of colonial violence and overconsumption emerges through its sensory and symbolic construction of the Wendigo condition. Erdrich's poetic form emphasizes instability and transformation: imagery of ice, hunger, darkness and predation conveys the emotional and ecological consequences of relational rupture, while recurring contrasts between warm and cold, as well as night and morning reinforce the possibility of renewal and restored balance. The close reading of Erdrich's poem suggests that the Wendigo functions as a psychological condition, a metaphor for colonial and capitalist violence, and a warning against forms of consumption that sever relational ties between humans, communities, and the more-than-human world.

4.1. Facing a Wendigo

*The Windigo is a flesh-eating,
wintry demon with a man buried deep inside of it.
In some Chippewa stories,
a young girl vanquishes this monster
by forcing boiling lard down its throat,
thereby releasing the human at its core of ice.*
(Louise Erdrich, “Windigo” in *Jacklight*)

In “Windigo”, Erdrich describes the monstrous being through an Indigenous cosmological framework, rooted in Chippewa nation culture, in which humans are understood as existing within networks of reciprocal relationships with human and more-than-human beings. Within this worldview, monstrosity does not emerge as an inherent trait but as a consequence of disrupted relationships and spiritual imbalance. Through poetic language, Erdrich materializes this process of relational rupture in the figure of the Wendigo, whose monstrous exterior conceals a human presence within. She moves beyond Basil Johnston’s and Winona LaDuke’s Wendigo narratives; she turns her poem inward, articulating the inner thoughts of the monster and its victim. The poem depicts the cannibalistic being containing a human presence within, foregrounding Indigenous American views of monstrosity, where the monster functions symbolically as an embodiment of an imbalanced relationship with surrounding life. This coexistence of humanity and monstrosity is already established in the poem’s opening line, where the Wendigo is introduced as a “flesh-eating, wintry demon”, immediately juxtaposed with its human core: “with a man buried inside of it”. The verb “buried” is significant here, as it implies that the human within the Wendigo is suppressed rather than erased, suggesting that humanity remains present beneath the monstrous exterior and may therefore be recovered. By placing these seemingly opposing identities within a single figure, Erdrich destabilizes any clear distinction between human and monster. Therefore, rather than inherently evil, the Wendigo is perceived as a condition produced by severed reciprocity.

Unlike LaDuke’s Wendigo, who is fully human, Erdrich’s Wendigo is a cannibalistic monster with a human at its core. In Johnston’s narrative, the Wendigo is both an exaggeration of a human – which closely aligns with Erdrich’s portrayal, indulging on self-interests – but also as conglomerates and large industrial companies, hence a Wendigo on an extractive scale. Despite the similarities with Johnston’s Wendigo, Erdrich distinguishes her Wendigo by

foregrounding the possibility of transformation. While Winona LaDuke depicts this change through collective Indigenous resistance, Erdrich implies a change of the Wendigo itself, hence a transformation of the human at the Wendigo's core. Through the employment of literary devices such as imagery, repetition, and allegory, Erdrich's poem conveys the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities through its predatory systems. Images of coldness, hunger, and environmental decay emphasize the consequences of relational rupture; repetitive phrases underscore the persistent and cyclical nature of the Wendigo condition; and the figure of the Wendigo itself functions as an allegory for greed, extraction, and colonial violence. Land theft, assimilation, and child removal are themes she addresses through in poetic language. This becomes particularly visible in the Wendigo's direct confrontation with the child – "*New one, I have come for you*" – which evokes both physical violence and the historical removal of Indigenous children from their communities. This intimate encounter is read as an allegory for violent encounters, linking the Wendigo's predation with the structural harm European and American systems have inflicted on Indigenous American communities since the colonial period.

Wendigo narratives rooted in Indigenous American cosmology, serve the purpose of cautionary tales, attempting to minimize excessive behavior and maintaining balance: "Creation stories offer a glimpse into the worldview of a people, of how they understand themselves, their place in the world, and the ideals to which they aspire", Kimmerer explains when arguing that the Wendigo story is not primarily to frighten people, as it also conveys the reason why many Native American peoples treat the land and one another the way they do (305). The Wendigo's hunger, then, extends beyond physical appetite, as it exposes the fears and ideologies within the tribes where Wendigo stories are told. Kimmerer's argument that the Wendigo exists within us all – a part of us that "cares more for its own survival than for anything else" – is essential for the analysis of Erdrich's poem (305): The internalization of the Wendigo condition is mirrored through Erdrich's use of first-person narration, which can be read as the Wendigo's voice being embedded within the human already. The human core underneath the monster's cover can be aligned with Kimmerer's description of the common Wendigo trait in humans, which is activated when insatiability for property and/or profit detaches humans from communal and ecological responsibilities. At the same time, the poem operates as an extended allegory, where the Wendigo's voice, its pursuit of the child, and the intimate encounter between the two extend beyond literal confrontation – it articulates the consequences of greed and overconsumption. The child symbolically embodies vulnerability and the possibility of change, while the monster depicts the destructive impulses that arise

when humans prioritize self-interest over care for others and the environment. Through this lens, the poem positions the Wendigo as a symbol of moral and ecological disruption by linking personal choices to broader communal and environmental consequences.

The imagery of coldness in the poem reflects the consequences that had been warned against in many Indigenous American communities, before European settlers arrived. When the Wendigo describes its “wintry arms”, Erdrich immediately associates the creature with frost and isolation. The image establishes a frozen atmosphere that contrasts sharply with the reciprocity and interdependence central to Indigenous worldviews. As Robin Wall Kimmerer explains, “Cautionary Windigo tales arose in a commons-based society where sharing was essential to survival and greed made any individual a danger to the whole” (307). Erdrich’s poem illustrates the banishment of reciprocal relations through a cosmological lens: the cannibalism indicates what occurs when relational obligations are replaced with unrestrained appetite. This moral and relational rupture is symbolized by the Wendigo’s “core of ice”, a metaphor that articulates its emotional detachment from reciprocity and community. Imagery further connects moral imbalance with the ecological destruction, as the barren landscape operates on a symbolic level as the result of unchecked consumption. In the poem, the landscape feels the presence of the insatiable being, emphasizing how nature is consumed by ethical failure: “[E]ach leaf shivered from the bushes we passed until they stood, naked, spread like the cleaned spines of fish.” In this passage it becomes evident what a significant impact the Wendigo’s presence has on its natural surroundings, conveyed through sensory imagery, consuming everything in its path until there is nothing left. The slow movement of the line mirrors the spreading contamination of the Wendigo’s coldness, extending its destructive presence gradually across the landscape. Erdrich incorporates auditory elements, foreshadowing the Wendigo’s attendance before it has arrived – “In the hackles of dry brush a thin laughter started up.” Sensory imagery therefore emphasizes the horrific experience of meeting a Wendigo. The Wendigo’s hunger does not restore the warmth that the monster seeks; instead, it intensifies an insatiable appetite, thereby perpetuating the cold it feels internally. Imbalance and the severing of reciprocity, thus, produces a continuous frozen body. When analyzing the cold in relation to Johnston’s narrative, his description of increasing size and hunger aligns with Erdrich’s wintry demon, which becomes colder and colder as it consumes more and more. The warmth of reciprocity is substituted with the cold of excess.

The severance of relation is what transforms a human into a Wendigo in Anishinaabe storytelling. “Wendigos survive by consuming the life of others without reciprocity, care, consent, or regard in the name of personal gain or profit”, Jonnelle Walker states, affirming the

disconnectedness between relational warmth in Erdrich's poem and the cold, unfulfillment of relentless searching for profit (54). "Copper burned in the raw wood" can be interpreted as a promise of warmth; "you saw me drag toward you", the poem continues, articulating an attempt of an intimate encounter, ending with, "You dug your hands into my pale, melting fur". These lines demonstrate the process of the Wendigo's ever-growing hunger, which will never be satisfied and will always ensure the monster's heart remaining cold. The adjective "melting" subtly anticipates the later transformation of the Wendigo, implying that contact and warmth begin to destabilize the monster's frozen condition even before the poem reaches its ending. Unlike Johnston's and LaDuke's narratives, where extraction operates on the level of land, the rupture in Erdrich's poem inflicts intimate pain, indicated through the predatory phrases in the poem like, "You knew I was coming for you", thereby also repeating Kimmerer's assertion of the activated Wendigo condition.

The "you knew" in the previous phrase manifests the inevitability of the Wendigo condition, yet this inevitability should be understood as cosmological awareness rather than a destined emerging of the Wendigo within every human being. The recognition embedded in the poem reflects shared knowledge systems in which signs of imbalance are legible and hence can be prevented. From this perspective, the poem suggests a choice given to us when the Wendigo approaches; the choice to give in to greed and relentless consumption or remain balanced and show restraint. This understanding aligns with Jack D. Forbes' conception of the Wendigo as a contagious disease that consumes lives for one's own individual's purpose, neglecting any responsibility for others. He shares Erdrich's view on the Wendigo condition, slowly spreading by advancing people and contaminating its disease. Although his analysis of the *wétiko disease* often extends to the political and economic systems on which western societies are built, as has been examined in the previous chapters, his perception of the cannibalistic disease is rooted in Native American cosmology. Resonating with Kimmerer's Wendigo economics and Walker's arguments, a person that has caught the disease is unable to recognize limits, may these be relational, ethical or ecological (Forbes 113; Kimmerer 308; Walker 54). In the poem, the sickness is conveyed through the physical descriptions of the Wendigo, whose cold body demands the warmth of human flesh and whose steps towards the child illustrate the self-destructive, insatiable appetite within the monster – ultimately exposing the warning embedded in the poem: even when consumption expands, one's body remains empty and cold inside nonetheless.

Expanding on the perception of the Wendigo condition as a choice, Erdrich introduces the possibility of change. Towards the end, her poem appears to confront the inevitability of

the Wendigo condition and demonstrates resistance. The concealed human core is interpreted as refusing the naturalization of excess, which has been discussed in the previous chapters within the context of settler colonialist and extractive capitalist societies, in which the Wendigo's insatiable hunger has been normalized. The human inherent in the Wendigo therefore complicates the notion of insatiability as a common human trait. The Wendigo approaches humans, and attempts to contaminate them with its sickness (Forbes 100). However, according to Erdrich's poem, it is the human who decides their fate. Relationality is violated through the imbalance the Wendigo symbolizes in Native American cosmologies. The presence of the human in the monster, as indicated in Erdrich's "Windigo", exposes the ethical awareness that persists despite the condition. The communal values and ethical principles like reciprocity which Kimmerer identifies are transmitted through Wendigo stories; thus, one could argue that awareness of the Wendigo condition remains embedded within many Indigenous communities. The line "You knew I was coming for you", clearly conveys this, illuminating awareness on both sides, Wendigo and victim; importantly, the agency is therefore also given to both.

Through dialogue, Erdrich gives the Wendigo and the child a voice, enabling both characters to make choices: "*New one, I have come for you, child hide and lie still*", indicates both the Wendigo's hunger for the child's flesh but also its wish to resist its insatiable hunger by telling the child to hide. Here, the poem suggests potential change – a possibility to restore relational balance. Repetition in the narrative structure further underlines the repetitive cycle of the struggle against nature in which the Wendigo finds itself. The tension between the Wendigo's monstrosity and its human core, is articulated through the contrasts between warmth and cold as well as night and morning. She uses sensory imagery to emphasize the contrast between warm and cold: "Then your warm hands hummed over and shoveled themselves full of the ice and the snow", is a phrase that exposes the frozen, isolated being and its vulnerability for tenderness and warmth. "I would darken and spill all night running" evokes the relentless hunger of the Wendigo, always being on the move while searching for more, but never finding satisfaction. The verb "spill further conveys excess and loss of containment, suggesting that the Wendigo's appetite continuously exceeds its own boundaries and ultimately destabilizes itself. The poem resists the endless cycle of hunger by returning to relationality. The dark and cold is warmed by the sun, and the running finds an end as the protagonist is brought back home, inviting a reading of the scene as a symbolic end of colonial hunger and continual capitalist extraction. "[U]ntil at last morning broke the cold earth and I carried you home"

indicates a breaking free from the Wendigo condition, with morning symbolizing renewal and the restoration of relational balance, and home portraying a place of balance and reciprocity.

The agency distributed between the Wendigo and the ‘you’ reinforces the ethical framework Kimmerer presents when writing about ideals and restraint. Awareness precedes action, as the poem illustrates, establishing a border between the Wendigo’s hunger and the child that may be about to be contaminated by it. Erdrich thereby includes a cautionary aspect in her writing, articulating the maintenance of moral balance through consciously refusing the Wendigo condition. The restorative and resurgent ending of the poem distinguishes Erdrich’s approach to a Wendigo-free future, from LaDuke’s “Wiindigo” narrative, in which political resistance is prominent, or Johnston, who is reluctant to introduce any kind of change towards the end of his story. LaDuke’s and Johnston’s texts convey the inevitability of the Wendigo, portrayed through settlers, conglomerates, and lumbermen, who will always seek to extract and exploit as much as possible. In Erdrich’s poem, however, the Wendigo is freed from its insatiable hunger. The remaining traces of humanity, the melting fur, as well as the switch from the cold, icy night and the morning that breaks the wintry climate all indicate a change and a transformation. Resistance is thus depicted as weakening the Wendigo’s power and disrupting its destructive habits. The closing of the poem reinforces the principles of Indigenous cosmology informing in the text: balance is never guaranteed nor permanent; instead, it must be constantly cared for and upheld through relationality and responsibility for each other. Ultimately, the Wendigo condition, as portrayed in the poem, emerges when responsibility is abandoned. In contrast to the other narratives, restoration is possible, even when contaminated with the Wendigo condition. Erdrich’s “Windigo” therefore articulates, once more, the argument of this thesis –that the Wendigo signifies moral, relational, and ecological imbalance, particularly visible within colonial and capitalist structures, which the next chapters will address. Simultaneously, the poem supports the argument advanced in this thesis: that alternatives to colonial and capitalist systems can be found in Indigenous modes of relating to land, community, and responsibility. These alternatives could generate a potential reversal of western lifeways and returning to the economic structures that have existed long before colonialism, when people feared the Wendigo condition instead of celebrating it. While Johnston and LaDuke primarily expose the destructive logic of the Wendigo, Erdrich images a path beyond it. Her poem therefore serves as a crucial intervention in this thesis, showing that the restoration of reciprocity can undo the condition of imbalance embodied by the Wendigo and offering a literary vision of decolonial renewal.

4.2. The Wendigo's Reach

*For the Ojibwe,
history and legends are passed down orally.
There are the stories of Wiindigo,
a giant monster, a cannibal, who killed and ate our people.
Colonization was our Wiindigo.*

(Bezhigobinesikwe Elaine Fleming, qtd. in Walker 60)

In “Windigo”, Louise Erdrich transforms the mythic cannibal into a figure that embodies the intertwined logics of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism. The Wendigo’s coldness in the poem, images of consumption as well as the “man buried inside” the monster, visualize the mechanisms by which colonial and capitalist structures consume both people and land. Erdrich positions the cannibal as a structural force, revealing the destructive appetite of settler colonial structures through poetic language. Building on an allegorical framework, the poem’s imagery and narrative can be read as extending the Wendigo condition beyond the individual to larger and capitalist structures. The monster’s movement through the landscape and its act of taking the child reflect processes of dispossession, child removal, extraction, and the severance of relational ties. The poem articulates the Wendigo as a being through which systematic forms of violence and overconsumption become visible.

My reading of Erdrich’s “Windigo” aligns closely with Patrick Wolfe’s theory of settler colonialism, which frames it as a persistent *logic of elimination*, aimed at territorial access, extending from classifying people into racial groups to stealing their land through processes of assimilation and elimination. According to Wolfe, and everyone aforementioned, obtaining territory was the dominant motive behind the colonial events on the North American continent (388). This *logic of elimination* does not only operate through the stealing of land and implementing new systems, but also through systematic removal of Indigenous children, a practice that sought to sever cultural continuity and relational belonging. Erdrich addresses this aspect of history through the Wendigo’s pursuit of the child – and the phrase “I stole you off”, which closely resonate with the historical reality of boarding schools and forced child removal. The systematic assimilation of the Native population through forcing them onto reservations and taking their children to boarding schools “attacked every aspect of Native American life – religion, speech, political freedoms, economic liberty, and cultural diversity” (John Wunder,

qtd. in Wolfe 400)²⁴. Just as land was dispossessed at the hand of European colonizers and settlers, the poem also suggests that human relations are targeted, as the Wendigo's movement toward the child reflects a form of extraction that extends beyond resources; this reading of the poem reinforces the link between territorial expansion and the disruption of Indigenous community relationships. The intimate, almost personal tone in these lines mirrors how colonial violence operates through a direct severing of familial and communal relations on which many Indigenous communities were grounded. Ultimately, the colonizer's goal was to break the ties between the child and its ancestral traditions to ensure that European-American culture would prevail over the Indigenous (Whyte 155; Wolfe 388). By stealing and 'consuming' everything the Indigenous population relied on, the European Wendigo has forced them to adapt to western lifeways.

The Wendigo's movement through the frozen landscape reflects the destructive spread of colonial extraction and mirrors the structural elimination which Wolfe introduces. Once part of a relational ecosystem, the world of native plants is reduced to residue, frequently 'eliminated' for agricultural space. The poem is read as an articulation of land dispossession through the dying of plants, as they are seen as relatives by the Native population, thereby using imagery to emphasize how the Wendigo's predation extends beyond humans to the environment, which in Indigenous America views, is part of the spiritual world and filled with life. Its imagery connects moral imbalance with the ecological consequences caused by Wendigo behavior: "I stole you off, a huge thing in my bristling armor. Steam rolled from my wintry arms, each leave shivered from the bushes we passed until they stood naked, spread like cleaned spines of fish." In the poem, the landscape feels the ethical and moral failure of the insatiable being, which is articulated through the Wendigo kidnapping the child, and the more-than-human beings that surround the event are slowly consumed as well. The imagery of the Wendigo's cold arms, spreading death, aligns the monster with structural greed and extractive capitalism, visually demonstrating how the from Europe derived, on the American continent implemented systems have impacted the relational and natural worlds of the Indigenous peoples of North America. This is emphasized by Wolfe and Simpson, who argue that settlers did not merely aim at killing the Indigenous people on the land in question; they wanted to eliminate Indigenous ways of production and destroy the ecological systems that sustained

²⁴ John R. Wunder examines the attacks on Indigenous American culture between the 1920s and 1960s in his work *"Retained by The People": A History of American Indians and the Bill of Rights*, which was published by the Oxford University Press in 1994.

them, ultimately replacing them with European infrastructure (Wolfe 395; Simpson 41). In this sense, the Wendigo in Erdrich's poem is understood as a symbol for replacement for what existed before it arrived and the consumption of what it cannot inhabit, creating new conditions for its own self-reproduction. The Wendigo's insatiable appetite mirrors industrial extraction: the monster consumes everything it touches, leaving the landscape barren.

From the eighteenth century onward, settler colonialism became a force that significantly cut into Indigenous lands. The displacement of Indigenous peoples was not a prominent trait of the early years of colonization in the Americas. Pushing the Native population from their lands was not essential until the era in which mining, large-scale agriculture and new railroad systems emerged (Greer 70-71). This logic of dispossession has meanwhile taken new forms – in modern times, the relentless hunger of capitalism for natural resources perpetuates the invasion into Indigenous lands that are left, seeking to extract timber, minerals, hydroelectric power and fossil fuels. Contemporary extractivism, thus, is responsible for the continuation of land dispossession beneficial only for its own purposes (74). Erdrich's poem, similar to the previously introduced Wendigo narratives, employs imagery of barren forests to portray the consequences of extractive practices. Mining, the extraction of fossil fuels, and hydro-electric projects render the land uninhabitable and therefore endanger the life of the Indigenous people whose home is destroyed, resonating with the Wendigo's insatiable hunger that transforms the natural world into a place without reciprocity or relationality.

Colonial appetite and capitalist overconsumption are frequently linked by Indigenous scholars, drawing a connection between the initial structures of colonialism, gradually leading to modern capitalism as an expansion and intensification of the colonial logic (Forbes 85; Whyte 154). Forbes notes the naturalization of greed in western narratives, as Europeans consider their own societies to be civilized, while Forbes views them as infected with the *wétiko disease*. Within a settler-colonial context, the western perception of other societies being uncivilized and primitive was used to justify mass-murder, assimilation and displacement of the Native populations in North America (Forbes 39; Lietz 6). Materialism is key in European societies, where commodification accumulates wealth; according to Forbes, materialism is the foundation on which European 'civilization' is built: "The creation of such material products or their accumulation is, of course, closely associated with imperialism and stratified social systems", he continues, drawing the connection between the accumulation of wealth and the imperial, capitalist systems that evolved as a result, based on the exploitation of people (39). Greer subscribed to his argument by asserting that imperialism and extractive capitalism are "coexisting and overlapping versions of colonialism, that came to the fore at different times,

and that never entirely disappeared” (64). The Wendigo logic behind these systems can be clearly interpreted as an ever-lasting hunger of capitalism that will never be satisfied, and the continuing, partly lethal effect Wendigo economics, with its roots in colonialism, has on the Indigenous population. The insatiability reflects the poem’s articulation of endless movement and pursuit of the child, where the Wendigo “would darken and spill, all night running”. Erdrich’s poem extends the Wendigo’s reach from ethical – humans, to environmental – plants and animals. Its relentless consumption reflects on settler colonial systems, which have devastated both the land and Indigenous communities as they ate without restraint or reciprocity. Extractive capitalism, just like the Wendigo, can never fulfill its hunger and hence, must search for more relentlessly, because the system would otherwise collapse – it would literally starve.

In addition to Jack D. Forbes and Kyle Whyte, from whom the latter’s work is more focused on environmental degradation within Indigenous contexts, Dennis Martinez and Robin Wall Kimmerer also elaborate on capitalism, of which the structures are largely rooted in settler colonial systems. Martinez argues that neoliberal capitalism is inherently unsustainable because it depends on continuous growth, resource extraction, and rising consumption, while even its “green” solutions reproduce the same destructive economic logic and rely on a faith in technological repair despite ecological limits (147-148). In order for capitalism to grow unconditionally, Kimmerer argues, a detachment from relationality is required. She highlights the ethical and linguistic dimensions of this overconsumption: by treating the land and all living more-than-human beings as “it” rather than “who”, the western world has enabled exploitation of the more-than-human world, as relations were severed. Reciprocity is rendered irrelevant within capitalist societies, allowing people living in the western system to not care and not feel responsible for more-than-human life and consume without regard for others (Kimmerer 57). “The consumption-driven mind-set”, she further argues, “masquerades as ‘quality of life’ but eats us from within. It is as if we’ve been invited to a feast, but the table is laid with food that nourishes only emptiness, the black hole of the stomach that never fills. We have unleashed a monster” (308). Kimmerer mirrors the emptiness that is also evident in Erdrich’s poem, and the insatiability that becomes apparent in Johnston’s and LaDuke’s narratives. Kimmerer’s *Windigo economics* and Forbes’ *wétiko societies* concepts merge, connecting the loss of reciprocity and insatiability with the relentless need for accumulation. The Wendigo in Erdrich’s poem mirrors precisely this logic – a monster that consumes without accountability, leaving a cold, emptied world without relational care.

Due to the poem's imagery of predation and the tension between monstrosity and humanity, Erdrich's Wendigo – like the other Wendigo texts analyzed for this thesis – can be interpreted as a condition of consumption, extractive systems and the underlying colonial expansion, conveyed through the monster's hunger. The Wendigo's human core reflects a broader argument advanced by Indigenous scholars who have interpreted the monster within the contexts of destructive economic systems brought to their lands by Europeans (Forbes 37-39; Johnston 235-237; Kimmerer 306-309; LaDuke and Cowen 244). Rather than portraying a mythological, cannibalistic creature only, the Wendigo becomes an allegory for a condition of limitless consumption and an ever-growing hunger for property – closely resonating with contemporary capitalist structures. Winona LaDuke's case studies present recent and current extractive activities on or in close proximity of Indigenous territories. Thereby, her work strengthens the structural connection between colonial greed and modern extractive capitalism, which continues to affect Indigenous lives. As Simpson notes, over the past two centuries, Indigenous peoples have been experiencing land dispossession, displacement, and have furthermore seen their lands divided, deforested and appropriated for industrial purposes (2, 4). Erdrich's imagery of fearful, cold leaves and unprotected bushes subscribes to Simpson's description of the reality of Indigenous life in North America. It also extends the meaning of the Wendigo – originally a cannibalistic, flesh-eating monster – to a consumer of the land itself, now leaving ecological death on its path.

Winona LaDuke asserts that these activities are mostly set on Indigenous territories which are targeted for mining, hydro-electric projects, nuclear testing etc., emphasizing how extractive capitalism continues the destructive habits of colonial systems – in a different form and different scale – however, with the same logic, namely the prioritizing of resource extraction and profit over Indigenous survival (1-3): Yucca Mountain, sacred to the Western Shoshone tribe, was determined an atomic testing site by the government in 1951. Nuclear weapons were exploding at high rates over the next 40 years, exposing the Indigenous peoples to high radiation rates in the air. The number of cancer cases, as a result, peaked in the area, but that was not published before 1997 (98). Nevada, on western Shoshone territory, is not the only place where nuclear waste is dumped. Ojibwe land in northern Ontario was proposed to become a nuclear dump site, a Native community who had already suffered from mercury contamination because of dams for which their community had to be displaced (101-102). Another example is Prairie Island, home to the Mdewakantons Dakota, close to whose land were forced two nuclear reactors. As a result of a leak of radioactivity in 1979, the inhabitants have almost all lost at least one family-member to cancer (106-107). These cases reveal the

pattern of how Indigenous lands, with the people who live there, are treated as expendable, if the state or a corporation profit from it. LaDuke's records of real-life experiences reproduces the *logic of elimination* that Wolfe defines in "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" (388). Instead of acquiring land through assimilation, displacement, or murder, contemporary western structures eliminate the Native people by poisoning their environment and contaminating their soil – consuming what their lives depend on.

In Erdrich's poem, the third stanza can be interpreted as addressing the indirect assault on the lands and people: the "copper burned in the raw wood", indicates warmth, which can be seen as the promises of settlers to the Native population, never to be fulfilled. The Wendigo's invitation, "Oh touch me, I murmured", complicates this encounter, suggesting that colonial and capitalist systems do not rely solely on force but also on seduction, drawing individuals into exploitative structures through the promises of warmth and fulfillment. Kimmerer notes how the American Dream that was offered to Native Americans, which entailed the loss of collectively held land and instead, provided them with the right to private property (18). Yet the line also demands attention on its own terms: the Wendigo speaks softly, "murmured" rather than commanded, presenting itself not as a violent monster but as an intimate presence seeking contact. The danger therefore lies not in open aggression but in the creation of desire, as the creature invites the child into a relationship with it. This perception is intensified by the intimacy of "and licked the soles of your feet", which renders the encounter deeply bodily and invasive. The image is particularly unsettling because the Wendigo adopts almost submissive posture at the child's feet, while simultaneously asserting control over the encounter. By targeting the soles of the feet – the body's point of contact with the earth – the gesture also suggests a disruption of belonging. The invitation to touch the Wendigo, then, implies the attraction to what colonial capitalist structures assure, until one's hands are dug into the Wendigo's "pale, melting fur". Rather than functioning merely as a symbol, the Wendigo's body itself becomes unstable and transformative. The adjective 'melting' suggests that the creature cannot be securely grasped; instead, the child's hands disappear into it, blurring the distinction between human and monster. Contact becomes entanglement, raising the possibility that the Wendigo's power lies in drawing others into its own state of being. This mirrors Forbes' conception of a disease, contaminating more and more people.

The next stanza reveals the true face of the Wendigo in "I stole you off, a huge thing in bristling armor". The phrase is striking because it carries echoes of child abduction to boarding schools, continuing the poem's fusion of intimacy and violence. At the same time, the Wendigo presents itself as 'a huge thing', momentarily obscuring the "man buried deep inside",

referenced in the epigraph. The creature appears caught between human and monstrous identities, suggesting that the horror of the Wendigo is not rooted in what it consumes but the way it distorts personhood itself. The suffering and death conveyed through the barren trees and bushes, resonates with overconsumption and exploitation. By foregrounding LaDuke's case studies by as well as the theoretical work on settler colonialism and capitalist systems, Erdrich's poetic Wendigo can be read not simply as a reflection of real-world structures of consumption and extraction, but also as a figure that makes such processes experientially tangible. Through seduction, bodily contact, transformation, and environmental devastation, the poem imagines how destructive forms of desire operate, inviting readers to feel the unsettling intimacy through which consumption and relational breakdown occur.

4.3. The Wendigo's Path

*These men (the buffalo hunters) have done...
more to settle the vexed Indian question than
the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years.
They are destroying the Indian's commissary....
Send them powder and lead if you will, but for the sake of lasting peace
let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo are exterminated.
Then your prairie can be covered with speckled cattle
and the festive cowboy who follows the hunter
as the second forerunner of an advanced civilization.*
(General Philip Sheridan, Commander of the Armies of the West,
in remarks at the Texas legislature, 1875, qtd. in LaDuke 141)

Indigenous environmental justice emphasizes that the environmental crisis' impact on their communities must be understood within the long history of colonial dispossession and the exploitation of the Native people and their lands. Climate change, particularly affecting previously or continually exploited populations, like many Indigenous tribes in the Americas, is therefore inseparable from processes of colonialism, extractive capitalism as well as continuing dispossession (McGregor et al. 36). This perspective aligns closely with broader Indigenous scholarship that situated environmental degradation within colonial structures instead of examining it as an isolated phenomenon. Louise Erdrich's "Windigo" provides a

poetic lens for understanding this destruction. Through the Wendigo's predatory journey, the poem portrays how colonial and capitalist greed devastate both humans and ecosystems, with the Wendigo's path operating as an allegory for environmental collapse. The Wendigo's path is perceived as a mirror for historical processes like the buffalo extermination: the relentless hunger of the monster consumes everything, leaving a barren, dead land and renders the communities vulnerable in their own homes. The imagery applied in the poem conveys how extractive greed transforms the land into an uninhabitable place, where the relational ethics between humans and more-than-humans no longer exist. Through the Wendigo – a cannibalistic, insatiable monster from Native American mythology that consumes without restraint – Erdrich's poem portrays the destructive environmental logic embedded in colonial systems that transform land, relentlessly extract resources, and sever the relationship the people have with the land. In "Windigo", the monster's coldness and the frozen, icy landscape metaphorically illustrate the ethical emptiness of colonial greed. As consumption occurs without reciprocity in western societies, the relationship between the people and the land is cold, or, non-existent. The Wendigo, in a more modern context, devours not only human bodies, but everything in its path to satisfy its hunger, clearly mirroring the colonial and capitalist willingness to destroy in order to attain wealth and accumulate profit.

Kyle Whyte provides a theoretical groundwork for this section and complements the argument made by McGregor and her co-writers. He similarly frames human-caused climate change as inseparable from colonial history by determining colonialism "the groundwork for industrialization and militarization – or carbon-intensive economics – which produce the drivers of anthropogenic climate change, from massive deforestation for commodity agriculture to petrochemical technologies that burn fossil fuels for energy" (154). Large-scale land transformation, rooted in colonial structures, continues within the logic of industrial, extractive capitalism. These fundamental alterations of ecosystems on which Indigenous peoples depend happen at such a rapid pace that their ability to adapt to these changes is undermined, and furthermore disable them to maintain their long-existent knowledge systems of their environment on which their relational practices with the respective land are founded (154). Erdrich's poem expresses the by Whyte introduced disruption of Indigenous lifeways through the imagery of devastation. As the Wendigo moves through the landscape, it devours all life from the ecosystems it passes. Erdrich employs personification to animate the landscape, as it feels the cold the Wendigo carries. The phrase "each leaf shivered" suggests that the vegetation physically responds to the monster's presence, transforming the environment into an active participant. The bushes are left "naked", a term that conveys exposure and

vulnerability, before they stand “like the cleaned spines of fish.” This phrase is particularly violent because it imagines the landscape as the remains of a consumed body. Rather than merely describing environmental damage, Erdrich’s poem presents nature itself as something already eaten, extending the Wendigo’s appetite beyond human victims. Both plants and animals are referred to in this passage, using the image of fishbones as a metaphor for the barren bushes the Wendigo has killed with its touch. This ecological destruction is preceded by moments of warmth, which can be either interpreted as the warmth promised by settler systems, or richness and abundance in the natural environment, as “the sumac pushed sour red cones through the air. “Copper burned in the raw wood”. Before the devastation occurs, Erdrich dwells on vivid sensory imagery: the bright color of the sumac and the glow of copper create an atmosphere of warmth and vitality that sharply contrasts with the coldness associated with the Wendigo. The movement from warmth to freezing destruction mirrors the monster’s passage through the landscape, transforming a living environment into one marked by loss. The poem transforms abstract structural greed into intimate, sensory experience, showing that extraction and overconsumption are physically and emotionally felt. Environmental injustice, then, can be viewed as a direct effect of colonialist and modern capitalist systems – portrayed in the poem as the Wendigo – that perpetrate the vulnerability of ecosystems and ultimately leave a destroyed and dead habitat that once flourished with life.

Barren, naked, and uninhabitable spaces as a consequence of extractive capitalist activity are revealed by Winona LaDuke’s *All Our Relations* in great abundance. Her work documents environmental destruction on Indigenous territories, thereby situating the ecological crisis within the broader structures of colonial exploitation. She demonstrates how industrial projects such as mining, hydroelectric dams, and nuclear waste disposal are disproportionately located on or close to Indigenous lands, rendering their lives unimportant; these destructive activities strengthen Forbes’ argument of Wendigo societies perceiving the Native population as primitive, savage, and uncivilized, making their exploitation justified (39). Erdrich’s poem resonates with these real-world examples. The Wendigo’s consumption is without limit – dead landscapes and frozen earth echo the poisoned rivers, logged forests, and decimated wildlife that LaDuke documents in her case studies. The Wendigo’s intimate invitation complicates the encounter by framing colonial violence through seduction rather than force alone. It mirrors how colonial systems disguise exploitation as contact, exchange, or even care – in their ideological thinking of ‘civilizing’ the wild – while in reality asserting domination and control, and ultimately destruction (Forbes 39; Lietz 14-15). The previous chapters have introduced the Mohawk reservation as the highest contaminated region in the Great Lakes area as a result of

the emission of toxic fluorides into the air, poisoning water and soil. In addition, hydro-electric Quebec restricted traditional lifeways of the people of Nitassinan in today's Newfoundland, by drowning forests, drawing mercury out of the Earth, making the surrounding water undrinkable. It furthermore forcibly contained natural ecosystems, as the dams stopped the rivers from determining their own path, as the Native population had let them. Nuclear waste disposal near Shoshone territory has caused cancer rates to peak among the peoples, highlighting the disregard for Indigenous lives in modern colonial North America. Just as the cannibalistic monster strips the landscape and spreads death and coldness wherever it moves, as depicted in Erdrich's poem, colonial industries poison ecosystems and thereby disrupt the Indigenous relationality with the land.

Sustainability is a moral choice, Dan Shilling argues; the way in which a species treats its surroundings is how sustainability can begin. While Indigenous peoples on the North American continent did exploit and manipulate parts of the land to their advantage, they maintained a balance with the Earth for 13000 years before the Europeans arrived (4). Their knowledge systems may have been rooted in stories rather than scientific facts, yet, they managed to not cause a severe disruption in ecosystems for multiple millennia, whereas the contemporary occupants of the American continent, who arrived only half a millennium ago, have damaged the ecological systems to a large extent (8). LaDuke further illustrates the destructive logic through the near-extinction of the buffalo herds, which reflects the insatiable hunger within the Wendigo. In this chapter, the mass-killings of buffalo, once roaming the North American Plains in higher numbers than the wildebeest herds on the African continent, resonates with the Wendigo's relentless consumption of ecosystems. In the early 19th century, millions of buffalo grazed on the Plains and played a vital role for the prairie's ecosystem, while also sustaining the subsistence and culture of many Indigenous nations who lived on the plains (LaDuke 140). Their presence maintained the biodiversity on the Plains and supported one of the largest grasslands in North America. Within a mere few decades, however, large-scale hunting, initiated as more settler land and agricultural space was sought, dramatically reduced the vast herds, and the land that once thrived was left scattered with carcasses, bison populations intended to be replaced with cattle and monoculture. Towards the end of the 19th century, roughly 50 million buffalo were gone (142-43). The mass-slaughter of buffalo caused widespread ecological disruption, as their existence entailed the wellbeing of the surrounding ecosystems. The prairie's system they had cultivated for many thousands of years began to deteriorate, and their disappearance resulted in the expansion of industrialized cattle farming that continued to change the land through monoculture, soil erosion and aquifer

depletion (143; 146). “Desertification”, the consequential outcome of bison being replaced with cattle, “is attributed largely to overcultivation of land, overgrazing of livestock, deforestation and improper irrigation technique”, LaDuke states, while also referring to the loss of spirituality and traditional culture and knowledge of the people who lived with the animals. “At its foundation”, she continues in relation to the buffalo slaughters, “... is a spiritual mistake: killing without reverence” (147). The imagery employed in “Windigo”, depicting dead landscapes along the path of the Wendigo’s consumption, reflects the real, inevitable ecological consequences that emerge when natural ecosystems are destabilized.

Indigenous environmental philosophy contrasts the exploitative worldview so prominent in colonial and capitalist systems – taking without restraint is opposed with relationality and reciprocity, valuing the lives of the humans and more-than-humans equally and thereby securing a balance between the two (McGregor et al 35). The Wendigo’s predatory behavior disrupts the relational ethics along which many Native American communities treat their surroundings. “... through the lens of traditional Indigenous philosophy, the living world is understood, not as a collection of exploitable resources, but as a set of relationships and responsibilities. We inhabit a landscape of gifts peopled by nonhuman relatives, the sovereign beings who sustain us, including the plants” (Kimmerer 27). Read through Indigenous critiques of colonialism and capitalism, the modern Wendigo appears embedded within the extractive logics of colonialism and capitalism and treats the relatives Kimmerer refers to as consumable objects – as commodities, there, for human profit. The ecological devastation described in the poem therefore illustrates the consequences of abandoning relational ethics in favor of extraction and domination. Through applying imagery, “In the hackles of dry brush a thin laughter started up”, where the environment itself seems to register disturbance, Erdrich suggests that nature is highly responsive to Wendigo activity that causes imbalance. The image is alarming as the source of the laughter remains unclear. By attributing laughter to the dry bush, Erdrich blurs the boundary between landscape and living being, reinforcing an Indigenous understanding of the natural world as animate and relational. The environment appears to sense the Wendigo’s arrival before its destructive effects become fully visible, and thereby, the poem creates an atmosphere of foreboding that permeates the poem.

The Wendigo represents the exact opposite of the restraint Dan Shilling has complemented Kimmerer’s argument with, when referring to the balance Indigenous societies maintained over thousands of years (Shilling 12). The imagery of stripped landscapes in Erdrich’s poem warns of what happens when restraint and reverence are replaced with exploitation. Gregory Cajete further develops this relational framework by highlighting how

essential the broader community of life is for Indigenous knowledge system. Their knowledge is grounded in an understanding of humans being part of this community. Like Kimmerer and Shilling, Cajete stresses the interconnectedness between humans and the more-than-human natural world – more-than-human nature is perceived as an active participant in communal existence, as human life depends on the surrounding ecosystems (19). The Wendigo's coldness in the poem indicates the breakdown of the intertwined and interdependent ecological community that Cajete describes, where humans, more-than-human animals, plants, and the land itself participate together in sustaining life.

However, unlike many narratives that portray the Wendigo solely as an unstoppable, insatiable force that eats its way across the planet, Erdrich's poem introduces the possibility of transformation – not the transformation into a Wendigo, but the transformation of a Wendigo back to a human being. The poem references a traditional story in which a young girl defeats the monster by forcing boiling lard down the cannibals' throat, and thereby causes the ice under which the human is trapped to melt: "In some Chippewa stories, a young girl vanquishes this monster by forcing boiling lard down its throat, thereby releasing the human at the core of ice". The monster humanity, then, can be restored once its frozen heart is thawed. In the context of environmental justice, this transformation symbolizes the potential for change within human systems if they started resisting the Wendigo economy which has been widely installed and is currently perpetuating ecological destruction. Multiple Indigenous scholars have argued that Indigenous knowledge systems which are built on balanced relationships with the planet can help imagine alternative systems and futures (Whyte 153). McGregor and her colleagues similarly emphasize that Indigenous perspectives offer vital insights regarding the current ecological crisis on Earth, as these worldviews prioritize balance rather than profit (37). By confronting the destructive logic of the Wendigo and revealing the human core within it, Erdrich's poem suggests that the path toward renewal and restoration requires a fundamental shift within the systems that produced environmental imbalance in the first place.

5. Indigenous Resistance and a Chance of a Sustainable Future

Our relationship with the land cannot heal until we hear its stories.

But who will tell them?

(Robin Wall Kimmerer)

Indigenous resistance emerges from a reciprocal relationship between humans and the land – one that stands in opposition to the extractive logic of colonial capitalism. Contrary to western logics, their epistemologies are mostly rooted in enduring way of living that prioritize relationality, responsibility, and collective survival. As Simpson notes, Indigenous nationhood is grounded in the understanding that Earth sustains all of the living world, and often termed “natural resources”, are in fact gifts that require care and reciprocity (8-9). This directly rejects extractive logics of colonial capitalism, which, throughout this thesis, have been conceptualized as the Wendigo condition – a system driven by accumulation, disconnection, commodification, and insatiable consumption.

This chapter explores both the persistence of the Wendigo condition and the possibilities of resisting it. It moves beyond three analytical levels: Indigenous political and environmental theory, literary representations of the Wendigo in the primary texts, and contemporary Indigenous struggles against colonial capitalism. Bringing these levels into dialogue demonstrates how the Wendigo functions as a literary figure as well as a framework for understanding ongoing structures of dispossession and possibilities of resurgence. The first section examines how colonial structures of dispossession continue to shape Indigenous realities, demonstrating that the Wendigo remains an active force within contemporary economic and political systems. It furthermore depicts how the narratives and the poem as well as Native American scholarship suggest resistance to these systems of power that continue to destroy their lands and relations. The second section shifts the focus toward Indigenous resurgence, highlighting how place-based knowledge practices of reciprocity offer alternatives to these Wendigo structures. Scholars like Wildcat emphasize that sustainable futures depend on restoring the relationship with the land and re-centering knowledge grounded in lived, ecological experience (436). This chapter therefore argues that while the Wendigo perpetuates its all-consuming activities in modern forms, Indigenous resistance and resurgence articulate pathways toward restoring balance and sustaining life, not only for Indigenous communities but for all life on planet Earth.

5.1. Resisting the Wendigo Condition

“Beavers are the only ones allowed to make dams in our areas.”

Cree saying (in Winona LaDuke 30)

Indigenous resistance must first be understood in relation to the systems it opposes. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains, Indigenous lifeways are “designed to generate life – not just human life but the life of all living things (3), forming “an ecology of relationships in the absence of coercion, hierarchy, or authoritarian power” (8). This understanding is crucial because it reframes Indigenous resistance as an active continuation of life-sustaining systems that have existed long before colonial invasion. Such systems are grounded in the principle that the Earth’s gifts must be reciprocated – that communities should “give more than [they] take”, in order to sustain life for future generations (8-9). It is the close connection between Native American people and the land, which they regard as their family, that constitutes the very foundation of Indigenous resistance, Simpson states (9). These ideologies stand in direct opposition to extractive colonial structures that are still as prominent on Indigenous lands as in the past two centuries; therefore, as Simpson emphasizes, resistance remains an ongoing “struggle because we are occupied, erased, displaced, and disconnected. Struggle because our bodies are still targets for settler colonial violence” (21). The ongoing condition reflects what Glen Coulthard conceptualizes as the persistent structure of colonial dispossession, in which Indigenous lands are continuously appropriated within capitalist systems. According to him, settler colonialism is an enduring relation grounded in the expropriation of land that sustains modern capitalism, as it provides ever-new territory for accumulation and profit (13-14). What Coulthard’s framework makes visible here is that dispossession is not incidental to capitalism, but foundational to it. As long as new land can be taken and exploited, the system sustains itself – in this sense, colonialism is a precondition for capitalism. The persistence of these structures can also be understood through the thesis’ central literary figure: the Wendigo. Reading colonial capitalist through the Wendigo reveals how Indigenous writers represent extraction and accumulation as forms of insatiable consumption.

Important for the struggle of Indigenous resistance against colonial capitalism, is the fact that it is not only material but relational: according to Coulthard, it is “a struggle ... oriented around the question of land ... as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations” (13), which he terms grounded normativity. This position both reinforces and deepens

Simpson's claim: where Simpson foregrounds lived experiences and relational disruption, Coulthard provides a structural explanation for ongoing dispossession, and also, how to resist it. These western political systems – *wétiko societies* according to Forbes, *Windigo economics* in Kimmerer's work – that have spread over the North American continent, continue to expand at the cost of Indigenous people and cultures (LaDuke 15, 18, 70). The struggle Simpson refers to can be directly juxtaposed with the Wendigo's insatiable consumption. As Johnston describes, the Wendigo grows at it consumes, its hunger never satisfied – a monstrous being that “represented not only the worst that a human can do to other human beings and ultimately to himself or herself” (222), but exemplified selfishness and greed, indicated through its name which could mean ““solely for self” ... or excess” (222). Basil Johnston's explicit connection between the monstrous being and modern capitalism, arguing that the Wendigo has been “reincarnated as corporations, conglomerates, and multinationals” (236), aligns with Coulthard's critique of capitalism: both frameworks identify limitless accumulation as the core feature of modern colonialism.

The connection between colonial capitalism and the Wendigo condition becomes particularly visible in LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman*, where literary representations of resistance complement the theoretical critiques discussed above. This continuity is not only articulated through explicit references to cannibalism, but is also embedded in the narrative's structuring of resistance and escalation. While Johnston's narrative frames potential resistance as an individual moral correction, LaDuke expands this into collective action, based on relational responsibility. Also, in contrast to Erdrich's poem, where resistance is portrayed through the transformation of the Wendigo back to its initial human form, LaDuke's narrative presents resistance through communal action. As examined in chapter 3.2., dialogue intensifies moments of confrontation and resistance. It starts with Namebin's burning of the legal paper which allegedly gave permission to the lumberman to cut off the trees on Namebin's land; towards the end of the narrative, resistance becomes more extensive. “Maybe fifty Indian men and women armed with Winchester rifles, sturdy in their canoes on the river and holding the shores” (64). It is no longer Namebin alone who rejects the settlers' activity on their land. The Wendigo in LaDuke's narrative, accustomed to limitless consumption, is situated as a destroyer of land but also an invader of sensory and relational space through the employment of literary devices. It is depicted as the insatiable European settlers who perpetuate their greed through the territories and spiritual spaces of Indigenous American people, always in search for property and profit.

The narrative subsequently translates these abstract structures of dispossession into a concrete literary confrontation between Indigenous communities and the forces of extraction. Namebin's declaration – "The cannibal is here again" (61) – exposes colonial extraction as a form of consumption that mirrors Wendigo hunger. Simultaneously, the narrative foregrounds resistance: the Indigenous community sabotages logging operations and reclaims control over the land – "Them Indians have taken over the lake", a foreman says to the lumberman – "They've blocked the logs, all of them, with their canoes and rafts" (64). The act of resistance in LaDuke's narrative exemplifies what Coulthard would describe as practices of grounded normativity – forms of resistance rooted in place-based relationality. He explicitly cautions against strategies that seek justice solely through inclusion within colonial frameworks, arguing that these risk reproducing structures of domination (12). The community's refusal in *Last Standing Woman* highlights the importance of the relationship between the Native peoples and their land, as they are actively interrupting the logic of dispossession. Indigenous people respond to the deliberate selling of their lands without consent and refuse to have this process normalized. In this example, they resist and disrupt Wendigo behavior, demanding recognition of their sovereignty and the relationship with the land that is stolen from them. It exemplifies what Winona LaDuke describes as standing up "to the land eaters, the tree eaters, the destroyers and culture eaters" (3) in her book *All Our Relations*. While LaDuke represents resistance through fiction, similar forms of refusal continue to characterize contemporary Indigenous opposition to extractive projects. Such resistance is not limited to singular acts but reflects broader Indigenous refusals of extractive systems. As LaDuke shows, communities reject environmentally destructive projects – whether the building of hydro-electric dams or providing space for nuclear waste dump sites on their lands – even when they are faced with immense financial pressure: "some of the poorest people ... are refusing to accept 91 million dollars ... because they want their land" (100). Refusing the Wendigo challenges capitalist valuation, asserting that land cannot be reduced to property or a commodity, but is instead, a responsibility rather than an object of ownership.

Moving from literary representation to Indigenous scholarship further illustrates that the forms of resistance depicted in the narrative are grounded in broader Indigenous intellectual traditions. LaDuke's perspective on land dependency in Native American communities is reinforced by scholars such as Daniel R. Wildcat, who argues that Indigenous knowledge systems emerge from the lived relationship with specific places rather than universal models and science. Indigenous peoples' wisdom is founded upon experiences with the land, animals and ecosystems they are surrounded by (420). In contrast to western frameworks that seek a

single path to progress, Indigenous traditions resist the “ideas of universal homogenous world history” (434), emphasizing instead localized, experiential knowledge. Coulthard’s “grounded normativity” can be read as extending Wildcat’s critique of universal knowledge systems. Whereas Wildcat focuses on how knowledge emerges from lived relationships with a place, Coulthard asserts that these land-based practices also structure ethical and political life of many Indigenous communities, suggesting them as alternatives to dominant western models of governance (Coulthard 13; Wildcat 420, 434). Wildcat further notes how the lives of many American consumers is determined by and shaped through technological influence which extends the distance between them and the living world. According to him, technological expansion and the continuous western urge to reconstruct and control the outside world causes humans to lose their humanity – in his words – “their own authentic intelligence that comes from direct experience in the natural world” (436). The alienation western societies experience has become as existential crisis: modern societies, Wildcat argues, are engaged in “ecological suicide” (39), destroying the systems upon which human life depends. Kyle Whyte similarly critiques dominant frameworks such as the “Anthropocene”, arguing that they obscure the fact that the ecological crisis is not caused by humanity as a whole, but by specific colonial and capitalist systems (159)²⁵. In *Red Alert – Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*, Wildcat states that globalization has caused many humans who live according to western structures in the 21st century, to gradually grow apart from the places they inhabit. As a result, “those of us living in modern industrial ... societies give every indication of attempting ecological suicide on a global scale” (39), as these societies are responsible for the mass extinction of more-than-human beings whose survival is vital to human life.

²⁵ “Anthropocene” is used by western scientists to define the period of the planet in which human activity has caused a significant impact on its soil and climate. Meanwhile, the term widely occurs in relation to the crisis future generations will be facing. In *The Extractive Zone* (2017), Macarena Gómez-Barris aims to decolonize the term “Anthropocene”, as it makes all of humanity responsible for the planetary crisis. It is colonial capitalism, through “dispossession, enslavement, and ... producing the planet as a corporate bio-territory” that has excessively consumed the planet’s resources (4).

5.2. Relationality, Resurgence and Healing from Wendigo Economics

“Killing the Wiindigo today is possible.

*Like in the past, it relies upon cooperation among people determined to survive,
and it relies upon finding the Achilles heel of the current system.”*

(LaDuke and Cowen 255)

Whereas the previous section focused on resisting the Wendigo condition, this section examines Indigenous resurgence as a constructive alternative to extractive systems. The discussion therefore shifts from forms of opposition to the relational practices and knowledge systems that sustain ecological and cultural continuity. In contrast to Wendigo economies, Indigenous knowledge systems articulate fundamentally different relationships to the land. “[W]hat we want is what you need, too”, LaDuke cites Danny Billie in *All Our Relations*, addressing the challenges the Seminoles in Florida are facing as a result of extractive practices on their lands, “it’s what this society needs if they want to continue to stay alive on this earth” (44), he then continues, arguing that the consequences of western structures do not merely affect the Seminoles or the almost extinct panther, which inhabits the same territory as the Seminoles, but the American continent as a whole. His statement reframes Indigenous resistance as other than oppositional; it is argued here, that what Indigenous peoples aim for is not about their communities only, it essentially concerns the whole planet. For collective survival, Indigenous knowledge systems offer necessary alternatives to western capitalist consumerism.

The following examples illustrate how Indigenous communities enact relational alternatives to the extractive logic associated with the Wendigo condition. Indigenous ways of life are grounded in reciprocity and responsibility. Among the Innu, a people largely inhabiting areas in what is today called Quebec, “[w]hen we hunt we must show respect for the animal masters” (51), LaDuke quotes Daniel Ashini, who argues that the communities observe their surroundings carefully to ensure that animal populations remain stable under their hunting activities. In Innu culture, not respecting the animals is followed by scarcity, and scarcity, in the context of this thesis, risks the Wendigo condition to emerge. Therefore, Indigenous communities like the Innu “work with the land and allow the animals to remain on their own path” (53). Innu practices illustrate a fundamentally different economic logic – one that prioritizes balance rather than growth. Instead of extracting from the land, these systems

operate through ongoing relationships of care and responsibility. Similarly, the recognition that “the buffalo have the right to be here, they were here before we were; this is their land as well” (Birgil Kills Straight, qtd. in LaDuke 139), challenges anthropogenic hierarchies and asserts a shared belonging between human and more-than-human life. The Oglala Lakota, an Indigenous tribe residing in South Dakota, consider the buffalo extended families on which they rely. When settlers from Europe slaughtered the buffalo until they were almost extinct, the spiritual health of the people was equally harmed. These mass-slaughters indicate the consequences of the Wendigo logic, when ecological destruction is accompanied by cultural devastation. Today, in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, herds are restored under Native American protection, and as a result, collective mental health among the Lakota is gradually returning as well (139). The people have actively resisted the Wendigo invasion and secured their relation with the buffalo, which give them life.

Kimmerer’s *Honorable Harvest* teaches that “[t]aking without giving back is considered a breach” (34). The principle of the *Honorable Harvest* frames humans as participants in a complex web of life, with responsibilities to maintain balance and continuity. The Wendigo, as both myth and metaphor, embodies the destructive logic of limitless consumption and relational disconnection. Erdrich’s *Windigo* captures this vividly: the monster contains a human at its core, suggesting that even the most destructive forces can be transformed through reciprocity and care, when interpreting her Wendigo as a larger colonial capitalist system. Indigenous work on resurgence provides a framework for this transformation. Wildcat, for instance, observes that contemporary societies have “lost the knowledge that grew out of direct experience with plants, animals, and geographies – that is, ecosystems” (436). Modern industrial life separates humans from their natural surroundings, eroding ecological understanding and place-based knowledge. Contrary to this lifestyle, many Indigenous communities cultivate, or used to cultivate deep and reciprocal relationships with the lands their inhabited. Among the Seminoles, Innu, and Lakota, hunting and harvesting are guided by responsibility and respect for more-than-human lives, such as buffalo, panther, and others (LaDuke 44, 51, 139). When these ethical practices are upheld, ecosystems and communities thrive; when violated, however, scarcity and imbalance spreads, and the Wendigo condition emerges.

The possibilities of resurgence outlined by Indigenous scholars are also reflected in the literary texts and poem examined throughout the thesis. In Erdrich’s poem, the human within the monster is released from its violent features. Indigenous lifeways are paralleled in this depiction of resurgence, where ethical and ecological wisdom restore both ecosystems and

cultural health. “Then your warm hands hummed over and shoveled themselves full of the ice and snow. ... and I carried you home, a river shaking in the sun”. The imagery in the poem’s final lines marks a significant departure from the coldness that has dominated the Wendigo’s journey. The child’s “warm hands” are associated with vitality and life, standing in direct opposition to the ice and snow that characterize the monster. The phrase “hummed over” reads as an active, almost restorative energy, as if the warmth carried by the child begins to unsettle the Wendigo’s frozen state. Throughout the poem, the Wendigo has been associated with winter and death, yet the river introduces movement and renewal. Instead of depicting the monster’s defeat through violence, Erdrich imagines transformation through thawing. The image also recalls the epigraphs, which explains that a human being lies trapped beneath the Wendigo’s icy exterior and can be released when the ice melts. By concluding with a river and thawing ice, Erdrich refuses an apocalyptic vision; rather, she gestures toward the possibility of restoration and the re-establishment of relationships that have been damaged by consumption and exploitation.

Together, the literary texts and Indigenous scholarship examined in this chapter converge on a shared argument: ecological and social survival depend upon restoring reciprocal relationships with the living world that surrounds humans. Kimmerer similarly states an urgent need for change in *Braiding Sweetgrass*: “We face a tremendous challenge”, Kimmerer writes, “and a tremendous need to reclaim the ethic of the Honorable Harvest, ... as constraints and guides on human’s unrestrained consumption of the living world, be it water, fossil fuels, minerals, forests, soil, or plants” (35-36). Accordingly, Kimmerer’s *Honorable Harvest*, in prescribing reciprocity, restraint, and gratitude, provides strategies to sustain life systems for future generations. Indigenous resurgence is inherently place-based; it maintains and restores knowledge, like the *Honorable Harvest* or *gift economy*, rooted in specific lands, ecosystems, and relational networks, which then enables collective self-determination and ecological resilience (Whyte 67-68). Wendigo economies, defined by insatiable growth and disconnection, are antithetical to Indigenous relational lifeways. LaDuke and Cowen describe the restoration of ancient seeds, food systems, and governance as acts of resistance and a revival of Anishinaabe economies – a process they define as “fighting the Wiindigo and winning” (255, 259). Indigenous lifeways, grounded in reciprocity and ethical engagement with more-than-human lives demonstrate that social, ecological, and spiritual flourishing are inextricably connected. Societies that prioritize greed and relentless profit accumulation are hereby opposed by relational Indigenous practices that foster resilience and sustainable continuance. LaDuke and Cowen’s illustration of winning against Wendigo economies mirrors Erdrich portrayal of

returning from the monster to a human being. In this sense, restoration and the destruction of the Wendigo condition align through processes of decolonization and resistance. The Wendigo condition, meanwhile distributed extensively across the planet, needs to be refused in order to let the Earth heal and secure life for the generations to come.

Conclusion

This thesis explored how the Wendigo, as articulated in the works of Basil Johnston, Winona LaDuke, and Louise Erdrich, can be understood as a conceptual framework for reading settler colonialism and extractive capitalism as interconnected systems of consumption. By analyzing the Wendigo across literary and theoretical contexts, I argued that the cannibalistic monster embodies a condition of insatiable hunger, relational disruption, and ecological destruction that extends far beyond its origins in Indigenous American storytelling. The Wendigo moves from a mythical figure to a structural condition, becoming a way of naming overconsumption, dispossession, relational breakdown, and ecological degradation that continues to shape Indigenous life and land today. In doing so, I have argued that the cannibalistic being is a critical lens through which ongoing colonial violence, capitalist transformations, and the subsequent environmental harm can be read.

By bringing contemporary Indigenous American critiques of colonial and capitalist structures into conversation with Wendigo texts, this thesis has asked how Indigenous Wendigo stories function as a narrative framework for critiquing ecological imbalance and insatiable capitalist growth. More specifically, it has examined how these narratives illuminate the enduring connections between colonial structures and the contemporary climate crisis. The Wendigo, as it appears across Johnston, LaDuke, and Erdrich, visualizes these interlinked systems. I argue that Wendigo texts can function to examine the logic of colonial capitalism as one of insatiable hunger – what Johnston conceptualizes as moral collapse, what LaDuke exposes through lived experiences of extraction, and what Erdrich renders embodied predation and ecological devastation. The Wendigo reveals that the ecological crisis is not directly an outcome of modern systems, but the continuation of long-existing and still perpetuating colonial structures; the texts read colonial capitalism as a system defined by accumulation without limit, thereby mirroring the Wendigo's insatiable appetite.

Simultaneously, the Wendigo narratives and poem selected for this thesis have pointed towards forms of Indigenous resistance and relational restoration. All texts persist on concepts such as reciprocity, relationality, responsibility, and the possibility of re-establishing ethical relations with the more-than-human world. The approaches differ significantly: Basil Johnston emphasizes the extent to which Wendigos have destroyed the planet and should be stopped; Winona LaDuke presents active resistance to extractive practices on Indigenous lands; lastly, Louise Erdrich makes the impossible seem possible, when the Wendigo in her narrative retrieves its human form and loses its all-consuming trait when it returns home.

To bring this thesis to an end, I suggest that the Wendigo framework which I have used for my arguments is urgently necessary at a time when social, political, and ecological crises are intensifying on a global scale. Across the examined works, the Wendigo exposes the deep structural connections between colonialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation which are frequently examined separately in dominant academic discourse. It makes visible the conditions under which destruction is rendered ordinary and thereby exposes the world in which relational accountability has been replaced by accumulation, and in which survival is measured through expansion rather than reciprocity. Yet, precisely in naming this condition, the Wendigo narratives also point beyond it. If the monster is produced through the severing of relations, then its undoing lies in their restoration. Importantly, this is not a speculative possibility but one already articulated within Indigenous American knowledge systems, which consistently foreground reciprocity and relational care as the basis for survival. As has been demonstrated throughout the thesis, Indigenous scholars have long named both the problem and the solution by explicitly identifying the prominence of the Wendigo condition within western societies and strongly urging to resist it. Refusing the Wendigo, then, is necessary for collective survival. The question this thesis ultimately leaves open is whether we, by this I mean the people who live within western economy systems, are willing to recognize Wendigo economics as the logic we continue to live by – or whether we are prepared to stop.

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Abstract

Abstract in English

This thesis examines the Wendigo figure in Indigenous North American storytelling as a critical framework for analyzing the interconnections between settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, and ecological destruction. Drawing on works by Basil Johnston, Winona LaDuke, and Louise Erdrich, as well as theoretical contributions from Indigenous scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer, Jack D. Forbes, and Daniel R. Wildcat, the study argues that the Wendigo embodies a condition of insatiable consumption, relation disruption, and the consequential environmental degradation. Through close reading and thematic analysis, the thesis demonstrates how the Wendigo moves beyond its epistemological origins to function as a metaphor for systemic exploitation and moral imbalance within colonial capitalist societies. Simultaneously, the narratives and the poem foreground Indigenous worldviews rooted in reciprocity and relational ethics, offering alternative modes of living with the human and more-than-human world. By situating the Wendigo within both cosmological and contemporary contexts, this thesis highlights its relevance as a conceptual tool for understanding ongoing colonial -and capitalist structures as well as environmental destruction; at the same time, it imagines pathways toward relational restoration through the resistance of Wendigo economics.

Abstract in German

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Wendigo-Figur in indigenen nordamerikanischen Erzählungen als analytischen Rahmen zur Betrachtung der Verflechtungen zwischen Kolonialismus, extraktivistischem Kapitalismus und ökologischer Zerstörung. Zur Analyse werden literarische Texte von den indigenen Autor:innen wie Basil Johnston, Winona LaDuke und Louise Erdrich sowie die theoretischen Ansätze indigener Wissenschaftler:innen wie Robin Wall Kimmerer, Jack D. Forbes und Daniel R. Wildcat herangezogen. Es wird argumentiert, dass der Wendigo einen Zustand unstillbarer Gier, unterbrochener Relationalität zwischen Menschen und deren Umwelt und daraus resultierender Umweltzerstörung verkörpert. Durch genaues Lesen der Lektüre und thematische Analyse zeigt die Arbeit, wie sich das mythische Wesen über seine epistemologischen Ursprünge hinaus zu einer Metapher für systematische Ausbeutung und moralisches Ungleichgewicht innerhalb kolonial-kapitalistischer Strukturen entwickelt. Gleichzeitig stellen die untersuchten Erzählungen indigene Weltanschauungen in den Vordergrund, die auf Reziprozität und relationale Ethik basieren und alternative Formen des Zusammenlebens zwischen menschlicher und nicht-menschlicher Welt aufzeigen. Indem der Wendigo sowohl in kosmologischen als auch zeitgenössischen Kontexten verortet wird, verdeutlicht diese Arbeit seine Funktion als konzeptuelles Mittel zur Analyse fortbestehender kolonialer und kapitalistischer Strukturen sowie die daraus folgenden Umweltkrisen. Zugleich werden Perspektiven auf die Wiederherstellung relationaler Beziehungen durch Widerstand gegen “Wendigo economics” vorgeschlagen.