

A Creature Without a Cave: Abstraction and (Mis)Appropriation of the Wendigo Myth in Contemporary North American Horror

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Abstract

This article analyses prominent examples of the Wendigo myth in modern North American horror media and the implications of misappropriation by non-Indigenous creators for non-Indigenous audiences. This article's cross-media analysis covers television, film and game media; *Teen Wolf* (2011–17), *Supernatural* (2005–20), Bruce Wemple's *The Retreat* (2020) and SuperMassive Games' *Until Dawn* (2015). This analysis will trace the process of these media, made by non-Indigenous white creators, removing the Wendigo's indigeneity and placing it within fictional settings as an antagonist. I have named this observation of the Wendigo *the 'Caveless Creature' phenomenon*. The paper concludes that employing the Wendigo as a caveless creature is a common practice within horror as it easily creates a villain for white protagonists to defeat repeatedly. This construction is problematic in the horror genre as it presents an Indigenous antagonist that poses a threat to white culture for its otherness and indigeneity – while at the same time, misappropriating, discarding and demonising the Indigenous culture the myth comes from, at whim. Although this article is specifically observing the Wendigo, I argue that it is one of many caveless creatures, and the treatment of them by creators of non-Indigenous horror genre should be analysed in the future.

Keywords: Wendigo, North American horror fiction, Indigenous monsters, appropriation of horror mythology, horror antagonists, cannibalism, twenty-first century horror

Introduction

This article aims to be a [cross-media analysis](#) of the Wendigo myth (also known by numerous other variants) in popular culture and its schematic implementation within the [horror genre](#). The first half of this paper will be dedicated to mapping out the Western conceptualisations of the myth in the horror genre. The second half will examine differing examples of the myth, and the pattern of problems I observe within the representation of the myth within contemporary North American horror media. I will analyse various media, including: *The Retreat* (dir. Bruce Wemple, 2020), *Until Dawn* (Bowen and Byles, 2015), and an array of recent supernatural-horror television series; *Supernatural* (2005–20) and *Teen Wolf* (2011–17).

I have theorised a term from my observations in this article specific to the horror genre: the ‘Caveless Creature’. Although there are many more mythological figures that fit into this genre, I will explain how the caveless creature is constructed and used as an object within the horror genre, then exclusively focus on the Wendigo as an example of it in this paper.^[1] The term ‘caveless creature’ is born out of my observations into the absence of the Indigenous people or an Indigenous mouthpiece – outside of the [antagonistic](#) figure – within North American horror media. This is a term for the process of taking a mythical Indigenous creature (here, the Wendigo) from its cultural context and its movement by non-Indigenous creators (a large majority being white) into a space of the horror genre that displays negative or antagonistic qualities. This term only applies to a specific type of horror antagonist due to one element: caveless creatures allegorically represent non-Indigenous perceptions of the creatures’ origin culture and [indigeneity](#) itself.

It is important to analyse caveless creatures such as the Wendigo as investigation into them opens up discussion into a reoccurring problem with horror media. This article seeks to highlight that these misrepresentations – of the culture, its [mythology](#) and its purely antagonistic quality – that it is attached to feed back into the horror genre’s contemporary consensus of the Wendigo. Since contemporary media tends to only repeat the same superficial aesthetic points about the Wendigo seen in older non-Indigenous media presentations of it, a more troubling issue arises: audiences’ perceptions of both it and Indigenous peoples as a whole become negatively skewed based on misrepresentation. Due to this, the Wendigo and the caveless creature is a symptom of a larger

problem within horror. In investigating the Wendigo in particular, I have also distinguished three prominent issues with the horror genre's consensus of it; namely, it is: a) a figure of monster-hood, b) an antagonism and c) an allegory for Indigenous culture and Indigenous peoples in horror fiction. The former two are ostensibly harmless; however, the third shifts the Wendigo from a seemingly decorative aspect with no impact on the story to a curated and volatile construction within horror narratives.

I propose that caveless creatures are depictions of the culture they are appropriated (or [misappropriated](#)) from and viewed as antagonists to the non-Indigenous landscape of the West, its culture and its people. Furthermore, these writers are often white and have no affiliation with Indigenous culture while writing to a mainly white demographic of their American audiences. The Wendigo thus serves a purpose in the horror genre as an instrumental object of contrivance with the purpose to scare (Western white audiences). As a tool and feature, application of the caveless creature in horror voids positive meaning and personhood to Indigenous peoples and demonises them within these narratives. There are already marginalising and reductive cultural perceptions of indigeneity in North America, such as 'the mystical native' that is only allowed to aid (Waldie, 2018: 74). This construction exists within horror media and is especially prominent when positioned alongside its opposite (the destructive caveless creature). For Indigenous people, Western pop culture misrepresents Indigenous culture so much that these extremes are sometimes the only available ways to exist within these stories at all. Like the mystical native, the caveless creature still limits and restricts the Indigenous person's ability to actively participate within the narrative – which takes place on their homeland and with their tradition supposedly at the centre of its conflict (in the creature) – as they only serve to either act as an aid or destroyer in relation to the white characters' goals or obstacles, dependent on the story's whim. Thusly, the Wendigo in these horror narratives becomes the supernatural foe that is only allowed to be what the narrative wants it to be in relation to its main focus of white people and non-Indigenous white culture.

My conclusion is that various media exemplify the horror genre's appropriation, or – as I argue – misappropriation, of the Wendigo as a caveless creature to scare their target demographic (non-Indigenous/white

people). There is a pattern of these misrepresentations as all the texts I observe all abstract the Wendigo and appropriate it with similar lack of care to its Indigenous roots. The impact this has on Indigenous society/culture is that they remain absent from the stories North American audiences are presented with. More worryingly, considering how there is a history of associating harmful stereotypes of Indigenous people to the destructive Wendigo, as Nazare pointed out in his examination of Algernon Blackwood's 2019 *Wendigo*, this can perpetuate these harmful stereotypes becoming widespread around Indigenous people within public discourse (Nazare, 2000: 30). This is a problem I have identified as inherent and possibly exclusive to North American white fiction stories. The harmful ideological associations of the Wendigo and Indigenous people are not present in Indigenous stories – as Joe Nazare's *The Horror! The Horror!* points out by comparing selected stories from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture (2000). While it is not this paper's aim to delve into that topic, I do propose that there should be a more critical analysis of the genre's tendency to implement caveless creatures to scare as the Wendigo is not the only example of this practice. Moreover, my analysis of the selected media texts and conclusion points to needing more examination into examples of Indigenous work around the Wendigo, both critically and as fiction media. I believe comparison of non-Indigenous fictions and how narratives written by Indigenous authors present what I believe is a more situated and embedded creature within its cultural context as opposed to a caveless one to highlight the problems I observe with North American horror media's portrayal of this caveless creature.

A brief address of limitations

This paper is aware of its limitations in terms of research knowledge on the Algonquian, Cree and other Indigenous cultures and myths available. Since Indigenous lore is not extensively documented outside of the insular Indigenous communities, the verification of it gives rise to many complications (Waldie, 2018: 70). I also understand the writing of this article is comprised of implicit biases, as I am not an Indigenous scholar and my array of critical sources used within this paper are primarily North American (i.e. Western in origin). More specifically, I understand that my ideologies and theorisations are also informed and formed by Western academia and scholarship. For this reason, this article's concern is not to try and generalise or simplify in efforts to piece together a narrative of the

Algonquian and Cree myth. However, what I do think this article can achieve is an informed investigation into the deliberate manipulation of the Wendigo myth in horror.

The Horror! The Horror! And guess what... more horror!

This article seeks to highlight and expand upon the work of Joe Nazare – specifically, horror’s ‘handling’ of mythology juxtaposing contemporary Indigenous writers (Nazare, 2000: 24). Nazare investigates the question: ‘what happens when one’s cultural mythology is appropriated by another?’ (2000: 24). He observes this trend within North American horror fiction written by white authors of the twentieth century and their usage of the Wendigo. The Wendigo is exclusively portrayed as an antagonist to white people, not as a ‘protector’ of Indigenous land (Waldie, 2018: 26). Nazare’s work investigates whether the genre only serves to promote white cultural continuity and survival, and its main goal of entertainment for Western audiences, by continuing the practice of making the Wendigo a destroyer (2018: 26). He firmly believes the mythological figure is appropriated by the horror genre (2018: 28). Not only is the Wendigo disallowed extensive treatment as a figure of cultural significance, but it is also the main antagonist in these horror stories. The genre abstracts the creature from its cave within the larger implications of misappropriating its cultural context too. This treatment is so deeply entangled with white contemporary horror fiction, as ‘white culture seeks to be titillated by [cultural indigeneity]’ (2018: 31). These narratives, their creators and their consumers see native spiritual life as a ‘curious artefact’ to wield inside and outside of the narratives they enjoy (2018: 31). Therefore, the Wendigo as a caveless creature is a feature used to sideline Indigenous peoples in favour of whiteness.

The allegory of the cave starts with abstraction

The caveless creature is one of many features of Indigenous culture that are sacrificed in service of promoting the superiority of white people within these stories. The problem is that this is a recurring practice, and one that is done knowingly because these narratives prove commercially successful. In their quest to scare and be profitable commercially, these franchises routinely abstract indigeneity and eviscerate it from the creature or object used within the horror text. As a result of observing this,

it becomes apparent that the success of a horror fiction partly lies in how well they can exploit Indigenous culture. The Wendigo is a 'terrifying cannibal ice monster that has its genesis in stories of people forced into cannibalism by the long winter' (Smith and Fiore, 2010: 68). Smith and Fiore detail that, among the Cree and northernmost Ojibwa, it is a feared creature because it is understood as both a 'mythic character' and as a threat to humans (2010: 68). In *Landscape as Narrative, Narrative as Landscape*, North American horror fiction's conceptualisation of the Wendigo is:

It will stalk you over the snow fields, and if you are attacked, rather than killing you, it might infect you with [Wendigo] sickness by biting you. Once ill, you might eventually 'go [Wendigo] yourself, fall into despair, become gluttonous, or develop a taste for human flesh...'

(Smith and Fiore, 2010: 68)

However, irrespective of factors like medium, genre, artistic licence, viewer engagement and player participation, abstraction of the myth from this focal point of monster-hood is problematic. Horror media's use of the Wendigo occurs to set up the backdrop of iconography and uniqueness in setting and narrative of the horror story. The Wendigo is scary enough and proven profitable enough that it is worthy of continued misappropriation. It is also easy enough to focus on superficial elements only related to its monster-hood or loose cultural touchstones that previous horror media continually use to introduce audiences to it (such as the cannibal element in the popular choice of the human-turned-Wendigo scenario). Focus can also be put on the attacking of the human psyche, making it an antagonism, when connected to typical Western themes within horror, such as the formation of self, youth and survival before/during adulthood. I argue that these are both intentionally continued practices because they are necessary to the horror genre. For horror to continually have stories that are striking and profitable. they must evoke fascination with 'out-of-the-ordinary' Indigenous magic while also provoking fear in their audiences (Waldie, 2018: 69). Thus, the rich cultural background of the Wendigo is discarded, and it becomes a figure of monster-hood with one simple purpose: to antagonise. Due to its status as Indigenous, it is an unknowable threat to Western white-culture audiences. That is not to say that the magic of the mythical Wendigo or the Indigenous people is unreal,

but the type of superficial understanding of magic and mysticism that these horror texts gather and seek to market to audiences is.

Before the break, cannibalism!

Television horror has partaken in the abstraction and misappropriation of the Wendigo myth to bolster their stories with scare-ability. In the short episodic format, usually 20 to 30 minutes, these programmes quickly construct and deploy the Wendigo, then let it rampage through their stories – particularly, programmes such as *Teen Wolf* and *Supernatural* aimed at a young-adult demographic.

In *Teen Wolf*, the Wendigo myth is already misunderstood by the show, where it is portrayed as a species of man-eating shapeshifter. It is first introduced within the episode *Muted* (4.3). The indigeneity of the Wendigo is only mentioned sparsely as a proverbial stamp of approval to the haphazard computer research gathered by a teenager, Stiles Stilinski. This is to confirm suspicions of the cannibalesque mutilations by Sean Walcott (part of a family of Wendigos), who cannot last a full day without feeding on a human due to his insatiable hunger. It is important to note that the Walcott family are white and there is no presence of any Indigenous characters within the episodes. The Indigenous culture is relegated to an expository backdrop of these episodes, whereas the gory killing and feasting of the Walcott's takes centre stage. Not only is the myth's initial concept and Indigenous cultural context poorly handled and inconsistent within the show, but it is also conflated and then, in the fifth season, merged with the Chimera myth (another caveless creature misunderstood within the show).

One critic commentating on the series wrote of the fifth season: 'Hello Sean, and goodbye. We hardly knew you' (Pavlica, 2014). The comment 'our first Wendigo came and went' is profoundly recontextualised in how quickly it is introduced, given context and thrashed at the wayside of the story. Understanding the misappropriation of the narrative from its cultural context and the erasure of that culture from the show makes this offhand observation of the show more abstruse (Pavlica, 2014). We hardly know of Sean as a Wendigo himself, and little is done on the show's part to concretely explain a consistent lore around the Wendigo, the Walcott's as a family of them, and the Chimera. Instead, a butchered mash of the two

myths is fused into Sean's character, who is abandoned along with the Wendigo storyline. They are both unimportant after serving the purpose of antagonising the story's majority-white cast. However, this becomes more disquieting when considering that even more marginalised is the culture that provides his character's power and presence in the first place.

Supernatural also runs into this issue. Introduced in the second episode of the first season, *Wendigo* (1.2), the lore calls upon Cree origins. The Wendigo in *Supernatural* is understood as the product of human cannibalism. The usual strengths of a Wendigo are also befitting of North American media's typical portrayal of them: super strength, super speed and vulnerability to fire. They are humanoid in appearance, tall and have elongated limbs. Sam and Dean, the [protagonists](#) of the show, describe the Wendigo as follows:

'Wendigo' is a Cree Indian word. It means 'evil that devours.' They're hundreds of years old. Each was once a man, sometimes an Indian or other times a frontiersman or a miner or hunter. [...] During some harsh Winter, a person finds themselves starving, cut off from supplies or help – becomes a cannibal to survive, eating other members of his tribe or camp. [...] If you eat enough [human flesh], over years, you become this less-than-human thing. You're always hungry.

(*Supernatural*, 2005: 1.2)

An issue with the show's depiction of the myth lies in what accompanies the Wendigo and the lack of Indigenous voice throughout. The Wendigo is the first supernatural being hunted by the brothers within the series. However, despite abstracting facets of Cree myth to briefly explain the Wendigo, the viewer is introduced to it through Sam and Dean (both white). The two protagonists learn of the monster as they would any other, but there is no presence of Cree people or resources to contextualise the myth. Furthermore, the only depiction of a native person in connection to the Wendigo in the show is an 'unnamed Cree woman' with no lines; she is believed to be a Wendigo but dies shortly after.

In an episode of season five: *Two Minutes to Midnight* (5.21), Sam comments that they used to hunt 'simpler things' like the Wendigo. In analysis of this comment, as a piece of unwitting subtext, it provides insight into how the show – and, by extension, television – see the

Wendigo. Against the white protagonists, the Wendigo is an obstacle and object of horror to overcome and triumph over. It is depicted as a malevolent being, and while that is the case for the mythos in its Cree and other Indigenous contexts, these series see it as a simple mechanism in the larger schematic of horror – a creature to scare for a few minutes on-screen and nothing more. In the interworking of these episodes, little apart from superficial detail is given to keep the mythology consistent enough to provide intrigue and scare. *Supernatural's* Wendigo is problematic as it is introduced as the titular threat to white culture, but easily overcome and conquered in these neatly packaged television episodes by its white protagonists. This occurs in the complete absence of Indigenous characters and knowledge; when it is no longer impressively scary and unknowable, the lack of cultural significance makes the Wendigo easy to defeat and end the story without loose ends. This makes the Wendigo a terrifying object of horror with gravity and severity in its (alluded to) centuries-worth of context. Yet, it is also a disposable creature, from an equally disposable cultural background, that can be conveniently shunned back into its cave only to be abstracted once again on the whim of the show.

Unlike *Teen Wolf*, *Supernatural* includes other objects derived from Indigenous culture – specifically, the Anasazi people's protection symbols. *Supernatural* conflates this understanding with various Cree mythos and its own creative licence to create lore – a common practice of horror. The show uses almost entirely its own construction of lore to interlink these cultural artefacts to the Wendigo, in turn, inventing its own mythology using more items of Indigenous culture as decoration to do so.

Survival... but at what cost?

This section will analyse *The Retreat*, directed by Bruce Wemple, as it exemplifies the goal of horror to create narratives that scare and centre whiteness. Wemple's film understands the Wendigo as both a physical being and a spiritual force that controls lesser animal-like mini versions. The film hybridises these forms from varying mythos to attain both the jump-scare and abstract cosmic horror. The story takes place in the Adirondack High Peaks (upstate New York), which is a completely different area to the region to where most Indigenous Wendigo myths are centred.

Exposition of the myth takes place at the dinner table, where Marty (an elder white man) explains the myth of the Wendigo to the protagonists – two best friends (Gus and Adam) – after they arrive at the lodge. One of the first things we see on-screen is a framed picture with the quote: ‘Give it your heart, your soul, and you’ll never really leave the forest’ (Wemple, 2020). This immediately links the following narrative to the idea of succumbing and becoming indentured to an unnatural force. Although the picture is light and picturesque, the quote invites the viewer to be wary. The film’s scare element of the Wendigo comes from the sheer vulnerability humans must be in to find it. As the film progresses, Gus is alone, lost, disorientated and exhibiting signs of hypothermia. Gus becomes more unreliable as a narrator, and these signs of delusion become murky whenever the Wendigos is present, blurring the lines of reality. His physical ailments compound with other erratic and less verifiable signs of delusion (through thoughts and images of murder and cannibalism) each time the Wendigo is shown on-screen in interspersed cut scenes. It is understood to be a creature that preys on the weak and transforms them into depraved, wild and savage beings without personhood and compassion.

The threat here is the subjection of man by an Indigenous foe – specifically, the prospect of man-on-man violence due to the human capacity to sacrifice friends and loved ones to assure self-preservation and survival. However, I believe this comment from the film is unintentional and ironically allegorical to the film’s evocation of a caveless creature. The film’s use of Indigenous culture mirrors the protagonists’ cannibalistic acts within it. I believe this also speaks to Western media’s colonial approach to using caveless creatures. The figure itself is a spiritual creature that promotes selfish and destructive behaviours in humans and eats them to ensure its survival, thus turning them into the same thing. The caveless creature here is an example of the horror genre’s continual use of Indigenous culture to promote the narratives of threats to whiteness at the expense of the Indigenous; or the cannibalisation of a culture to ensure box office promise and survival of the genre made largely for, and by, white people. This cannibalism is perpetuated by North American horror media and contributes to the larger problem of the Western representations of Indigenous culture as a product to use and abuse for their story’s aim – which only highlights the colonial element to how North American horror media approaches Indigenous culture. This film – and Western media in

general – continually divulge in using caveless creatures to scare by sacrificing their origin cultures for white-focused stories and narratives of self-preservation as these stories are profitable for the predominantly white audience they are targeted to.

Furthermore, treatment of native Americans and their indigeneity is telling of the film's conceptualisation of the Wendigo's importance. It is deemed unimportant to make the Wendigo scarier and serves to make it a mere 'urban legend', a distant warning, as Marty states, among the Indigenous people of the forest (Wemple, 2020). The Wendigo is summarised perfectly by the [deuteragonist](#) Adam: 'oh, the cannibal thing?' (Wemple, 2020). Centuries-worth of cultural context is overlooked in place of the Wendigos most likened purpose to a horror monster, the aspect of cannibalism and flesh-eating as a threat to non-Indigenous tourists. All the characters laugh as the mythos is explained. They arrogantly reduce the entirety of the monster to its most disturbing and antagonistic qualities that relate to humans. More emphasis is put on describing the monster as an object of superstitious fear. It is a threat for our travelling white tourists as it 'possesses a human and makes them a monster', rather than as a protector of Indigenous communities, indigeneity, and a mythological rectifier for undesired traits that would harm a tribe (Wemple, 2020). Even the condition of Wendigo psychosis is mocked, relegated to something that 'makes people go crazy' or think they are possessed (Wemple, 2020). Marty as the white narrator of this segment serves as the authorial voice in the scene – and establishes the Wendigo as an Indigenous figure of monster-hood and an antagonism for white people – for both the characters and the viewer. He states, 'the native Americans say it protects the forest, but for the most part, it's a monster' (Wemple, 2020). Marty here exerts this white authority as the sole source of wisdom. He dismisses the Indigenous context due to his own disbelief in its verity as a white man disconnected from Indigenous culture. This entire conversation and exposition are a few short minutes, but it informs all subsequent appearances of the Wendigo for Gus and the viewer. This exemplifies my third categorisation outlined in my introduction: that the Wendigo is an allegory for Indigenous culture and Indigenous peoples in horror fiction. It is particularly problematic as the lack of regard for Indigenous people preserves and propagates the harmful stereotype that they are simply superstitious to its predominately non-Indigenous white North American audience.

As well as the use of the Wendigo, *The Retreat* also evokes multiple cultural practices and artefacts of Indigenous communities as plot devices. Akin to *Supernatural's* Anasazi symbols, *The Retreat* features psychedelics made from a mixture of Peyote mushroom tea. The 'Peyote-shrooms-Ayahuasca mix' Gus mentions – which is a notable muddling of two different Indigenous cultures together here – is in order to 'trip' (Wemple, 2020). There is no real background given on the tea, and the scene in which Gus and Adam both drink it serves to highlight Gus's impulsivity and ignorance to cultures beyond him in service of his own satisfaction. This scene, using the tea mixture to push the narrative forwards, serves the function of foreshadowing when Gus is seemingly overtaken by the Wendigo spirit. After this point, the physical and mental manifestations of the Wendigo wreak havoc on Gus and his fragile mental state – especially after he believes he has killed Adam and eaten his remains. These scenes of mental turmoil are interspersed between shots of what is indicated to be the Wendigo spirit, enacting its malevolent will on Gus from far away. Gus's slow dissent into madness shows his disturbed and distorted versions of the same event, in which he kills/does not kill and eats/does not eat Adam. The Wendigo, however, fades into the background of the story. After its initial purpose is fulfilled, scaring the audience through jump-scares, it lacks necessity to the narrative and is subsequently dropped. The only times physical Wendigo appear in the film after the halfway point is in a cut-scene where Ryan (a hedonistic side character disliked by the protagonists) is cornered by three mini-Wendigos. The scene shows that the creatures may have been physically real and give a final scare to the audience in the closing act.

The colonialist trolly problem

I will continue this analysis of the caveless creature in the video game *Until Dawn*. Discounting the game's description of the Wendigo as a creature of terror and antagonism, the Wendigo's lore in *Until Dawn* is vague. The context is heavily dependent on the Wendigo's ability to frighten, and very little detail is given to its traits, drives and characteristics. This deliberately sparse framing of narrative allows the creature to be cosmic and disturbing as it is both alien and inexplicable to the white characters. Although the enigmatic allure works to place the Wendigo in the game, there are large implications when the creature's context is observed alongside other aspects of Indigenous culture. The

most noticeable example are totems. More than any other media I have previously analysed in this article, *Until Dawn* demonstrates the paradoxical issue of presenting Indigenous culture and Indigenous peoples within media as one of the two extremes I mentioned earlier, where Indigenous people can only fit into the ‘dangerous opponent or the helpful guide’ archetype (Waldie, 2018: 74). The game’s status as one of the ‘game-like films’ or cinematic games allows it to blur the line between various types of media (Allison, 2020: 275). However, it also represents the problematic elements of both genres by making the creature both take the place of Indigenous people within these stories, and be the only mouthpiece for Indigenous people. The Wendigo being the sole presence of indigeneity means it fulfils the aforementioned categorisations I outlined in my introduction (monster-hood and antagonism), and there is not even the opportunity for a helpful guide mystical native character to contrast it. Therefore, these seemingly harmless features that horror media routinely choose to utilise when constructing a horror antagonist – such as for caveless creatures – present the problem of viewers negatively associating Indigenous people themselves with it outside of engaging with the film or game.

Until Dawn follows a group of eight teenagers venturing a secluded cabin on the fictional Blackwood Mountain: an allusion to one of the first examples of the Wendigo within North American horror fiction (Algernon Blackwood’s *The Wendigo*). The introductory highlights familiarise us with the characters and state that this trip is on the anniversary of the group’s two friends disappearing in the same spot the previous year. The game features eight playable characters who are based on the performances of recognisable film and TV actors, and, again, a majority-white cast. The characters take after stereotypical teenagers in slasher movies; ‘the dumb jock, arrogant rich girl, flirt, nerdy class clown and alpha male’ (Allison, 2020: 287). The game can be classified as an interactive drama game, offering ‘branching narrative trees and multiple possible endings’ (Lavigne, 2018: 15). Although ‘agency is always a mirage’, I do think it is interesting that, within this agency, you can choose how much of the Wendigo myth you end up figuring out using collectable totem items (2018: 16). One example is the documents players can find within the Sanatorium and within the caves of the mines, which explains how the white workers and mentally ill patients forced into cannibalism turned into Wendigos. As a player, you do not need to understand the Wendigo, or

Indigenous culture, to progress through the game. Instead, the horror conventions function better when players proceed in ignorance.

Something particularly interesting is the irony entangled with *Until Dawn's* Wendigo. Land dispute or an absence of Indigenous peoples are the backdrop of these stories, and the Wendigo arises as a physical manifestation of white culture's view of Indigenous people in this fight for land and survival. Nazare's (2000) notation of Carol J. Clover's *Clover's Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992) and feminist/psychoanalytical approach to contemporary horror is important here (2000: 34). He comments on Clover's identification of modern horror with the 'settler-verses-Indian' stories of the 1930's and 40's Westerns (Clover, 1987: 33). *Until Dawn* overlaps three problems: the Wendigo as an antagonistic figure, Indigenous people being removed from their native land, and the white tourists using Indigenous cultural knowledge to preserve their own safety. The game's Wendigo takes centre stage amid the ongoing conflict between the Washington family, who purchased the mountain, and the Indigenous people who have left it since their homeland was bought to create a skiing resort attraction for tourists – with the only defender being the Wendigo itself. The 'demonisation' of the Wendigo that Nazare concluded when observing horror fiction, is a culmination of the aforementioned issues that are present within the game (Nazare, 2000: 34). *Until Dawn* specifically highlights the genre's usage of the Wendigo as allegory for Indigenous people. We are offered no alternate or opposing voice from Indigenous people, only the Wendigo, contrasted against the myriad of white characters that we play as – all with qualities of heroism. Seemingly, all of the original inhabitants of the mountain were driven off, leaving no Indigenous people to communicate the myth or display any traits other than the violence of the Wendigo. The Wendigo displays the difference between the inferior Indigenous monster/guide and the superior white protector/saviour. Here 'there is no room for the other to be the hero', the other being anyone not white, as the only representation of the other is as the monster – an uncontrollable unplayable NPC (Non-Playable Character) (Waldie, 2018: 70).

Until Dawn exemplifies a struggle by which present, living owners (the white characters) must battle dead, former owners (the Indigenous Wendigo) (Clover, 1987: 163). This struggle 'haunts our national consciousness' in the West and modern North American horror media

often illustrates this tension (1987: 163). Nazare notes that horror fiction is perhaps a chance for contemporary horror viewership to wrestle with and exorcise (themselves) of the 'demons of guilt' (Nazare, 2000: 34). The lore of the game does show some signs of superficial research, as 'it is set within Alberta, Canada, where Cree is the most populous Indigenous culture (Waldie, 2018: 67). However, *Until Dawn's* main source of knowledge regarding this conflict is 'is a grizzled, white stranger' who is referred to only as 'the Stranger' in-game (Allison, 2020: 68). The mythos avoids 'reflexive aspirations' by utilising a largely white cast in the hero role, marginalising opportunities for Indigenous voice in the game (outside the villain role) and refuses to acknowledge reflection on capitalist consumption or promotion of colonial occupation that it is also complicit in (Waldie, 2018: 67).

Moreover, the deliberate centring of the white cast as the protagonists becomes more problematic with their ability to wield Indigenous artefacts. They can use totems and other artefacts with no aid or former knowledge of them, which is impossible (Waldie, 2018: 75). The totems act to show the white tourists using Indigenous cultural knowledge to preserve their own safety, but the knowledge and craft of totems are usually guarded within individual Indigenous communities. However, the game places heavy emphasis on the non-Indigenous protagonists and gameplayers easily finding and discovering clues embedded in the environment through totems despite having no Indigenous context. This only highlights the colonial enterprise to steal Indigenous power by making the white characters 'wielders of power' in direct contrast to the antagonist other, the Wendigo – a powerless NPC (Waldie, 2018: 75). *Until Dawn*, and contemporary horror, are in a perpetual cycle of repeated seizing and consuming of Indigenous culture to advance their own interests, be it gameplay, narrative or cultural perception (2018: 76).

Finally, I will directly expand on my third point about the Wendigo; it is an allegory for Indigenous culture. I will highlight Waldie's notation that horror video games utilise conventional stereotypes to replicate the hegemonic power structures surrounding the authors who create them – and that is true for *Until Dawn* (Waldie, 2018: iii). Although the central storyline centres on Indigenous cultures, players are positioned to play as one of the almost exclusively white characters. The game sets the creature and Josh, who was previously a playable character (up until he is turned

into a Wendigo himself), as the unplayable NPC antagonists. The Wendigo is deliberately rendered inarticulate as an NPC, but through Josh's transition into one, this construction of *Until Dawn's* antagonists, as an unplayable beast that cannot and are not allowed to articulate, bears similarity to an observation made by Nazare on the literary tradition surrounding the Wendigo.

In retrospect, the disavowal of Native American language and literary tradition, the positing of the Native American as brooding bogeyman and howling, inarticulate fiend of the wilderness clearly served as a pretext and justification for cultural domination (Nazare, 2000: 25)

Contrastingly, characters like Emily – who is played as being stabbed in the eye by a Wendigo – naturally make us side with the white characters since we (playing as them) want to protect them, needing them to stay alive to continue playing and against the Indigenous by simple virtue of playing the game. Furthermore, engagement in the misappropriation of Indigenous culture serves as an antagonism; however, it is problematically entangled as it is a 'core mechanic' for the game, since there are no stakes without the Wendigo (in all of its misappropriated glory) serving as the creature to escape from (Waldie, 2018: 63). The player, playing as white non-Indigenous characters, must reclaim the mountain from the monster, which re-engages colonial ideologies (2018: 26). Within the chapter *Race as Monstrosity*, Waldie states that *Until Dawn* situates its primary conflict as a 'battle of the protagonists versus a monstrous, mystical other': the Wendigo (2018: 67). The Wendigo is a foe of convenience in place of any other horror antagonist, when it could be of colonial occupation within these narratives that would provide interesting commentary to the Western relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Instead, these contemporary media chose to use it simply to scare and engage Western non-Indigenous audiences (2018: 68).

The game's narrative evades further analysis into its categorisations by establishing the Wendigo as a monstrous creature – once human but no longer, and beyond redemption or saving from the audience. *Until Dawn* shows awareness of the genre's evocation of caveless creatures as an allegory for Indigenous culture, by bearing similarity to its predecessors in the way it depicts the Wendigo. The subtly demonising rhetoric

throughout transforms the Wendigo from native myth to a 'descriptive template for the Indian savage' in a similar way to Blackwood's original short story (Nazare, 2000: 30). The Wendigo's savage monstrosity is continually mentioned, along with how evil it is. This fulfils the expected expectation of fear and danger in horror. Whether it is combating the Wendigo or co-opting revered, private objects not meant for outsider consumption, the game is imbued with colonial imagery. Alongside others, the Wendigo as a feature of the game highlights the superiority of whiteness. The misappropriation of the Wendigo demonstrates one of two binaries of horror's perception of Indigenous culture: 'monstrous other' or 'a decorative overlay' (Waldie, 2018: 95). The antagonistic positioning and shallow utilisation of Indigenous culture only reinforces the idea that indigeneity is lesser than the central, white characters, while also exacerbating the malevolence of the Wendigo and Indigenous culture.

Overall, to play in the game, both the virtual and real-world game within the landscape of contemporary Western media, we must sacrifice Indigenous culture and characters of colour to win.

Where do we go from here?

This paper has analysed how different media forms display the horror genre's position towards caveless creatures and Indigenous culture. This article has specifically investigated the Wendigo myth's formation within the horror genre in North American horror media. Horror within this article has been revealed as a genre that establishes its own misappropriated consensus for myths and deliberately frames the cultural context of caveless creatures like the Wendigo to suit its own aims.

I also believe that there are numerous other caveless creatures to be observed. Outside of the Wendigo, I did come across other Algonquian creatures such as the Odziozo, Baykok and the Moon Rabbit (the last a controversial one since it is not a scary figure) that I believe warrant investigation. I propose that analysis should also be extended across various Indigenous cultures, such as Inuit, Cherokee and Lakota tribes and their respective individual communities. One creature that I am incredibly fascinated and excited to see more discourse on are Skin Walkers (known as yee naaldlooshii). They are often entangled with conversations of the Wendigo; however, these creatures find their origins

in Navajo culture. I also believe there is even possibility to expand the geographic and ethnic marker for the definition beyond Indigenous to include creatures such as the Huay Chivo from Mayan culture – a half-beast creature, with burning red eyes, specific to the Yucatán Peninsula.

So, where do we actually go from here? Horror, as well as other speculative genres, is a budding, increasingly popular form in Indigenous film and fiction. Outside of observing the caveless creatures present within horror media, recentring Indigenous writers within this discourse is necessary. Observation of the problem, like this paper, can still fall into the trap of continuing to sideline Indigenous people too. Nazare pointed to Indigenous writers who better structure the Wendigo within their texts and focus on the intimate relationship Indigenous peoples have with the creature. These texts render the Wendigo with regard and do so without the framing of this relationship as delusion or mocked superstition as the texts I have observed. The genre has grown, and I believe these authors tackle the problems of the caveless creature with an opposite construction – a ‘situated/embedded creature’, if you will. As I have previously explained how I arrived at the term ‘caveless creature’, by contrast, a situated/embedded creature is not superimposed into the story; instead, the story is constructed around its qualities – within these Indigenous stories, it is one with the land it is surrounded by. Often these stories take place from the perspective of Indigenous people and within the small communities of Indigenous tribes. I suggest looking to the work of Indigenous writers and filmmakers such as Grace L. Dillon’s *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012), which collects contributions by Native American, First Nations, Aboriginal Australian and New Zealand Māori authors. To re-centre Indigenous voices in critical discussion, I would suggest Billy J. Stratton’s 2016 *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones* and William Lempert’s *Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind: Alternative Futuring in Native Science Fiction Film* (2014), which provoke intrigue into gothic noirism and interrogating the embracement of the horror genre as a native writer. Although they are not the prevailing and dominating texts of the genre commercially speaking, and are probably not media that the average media consumer viewer is engaging with, they do open up new possibilities for the Wendigo in contemporary discourse, ones that are not appropriative or flattening but centred and grounded in also exploring the rich cultural cave this creature comes from.

Horror as a genre largely promotes colonial narratives of occupying what serves preservation and continuation of the genre's white characters creators and consumers. My investigation into this topic also hopes to steer more discourse into capitalism's role in the genre's repeated cannibalisation of Indigenous culture that is only heightened by the high turnover of media content within the contemporary landscape. Observation of the Wendigo as a caveless creature reveals a more parasitic landscape of horror within the genre – one that is as ruthless and monstrous as the creatures like the Wendigo it uses to scare us.

Notes

[1] There are more creatures that fit into this category other than the Wendigo, such as the Deer woman and Bigfoot among others. I will outline these later on to name some that have surfaced many times within modern media.

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Glossary

Antagonist: A person actively opposing someone or something any given fictional story.

Anthology: A collection of literary works.

Author: The creator of a fictitious artefact in any given media form.

Cross-media analysis: The observation and comparison of multiple media artefacts.

Deuteragonist: The secondary protagonist in any given fictional story.

Horror: A genre of fiction that prioritises frightening or scaring its audience.

Indigeneity: The fact for originating persons or cultures naturally in a particular place, here understood as Native American.

Misappropriation: Misrepresentation or misconstruction of an established idea.

Mythology: A traditional story or epic concerning the early history of a people, nation, event, culture or social phenomenon.

NPC: A non-playable character in game media.

Protagonist: The primary leading character in any given fictional story.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Johnson, F.A. (2022), 'A Creature Without a Cave: Abstraction and (Mis)Appropriation of the Wendigo Myth in Contemporary North American Horror', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Special Issue | Reeling and Writhing: Intertextuality and Myth, <https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/906>. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.