

The final published version of this article appeared in *Social Compass* , vol. 64, 3: pp. 360-375 published by Sage and available here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0037768617713655>

Visions of the great mystery: Grounding the Algonquian *manitow* concept

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the Algonquian *manitow* concept. Manitow is often translated as spirit, god or mythical being, but reflects more complex and culturally grounded ideas about power in animist ontologies. The article suggests that manitow should be translated with care, with attention to a range of meanings. The authors refer primarily to Cree examples from Alberta, Canada, but also take a broader view to consider examples from other Algonquian contexts. Beginning with a discussion of definitions, the article then turns to the concept's theoretical career. The article provides data on the contemporary dynamics of the manitow in the context of Cree religious pluralism, as well as on the emplacement of manitow relations through toponymy, particularly as seen around lakes named *manitow sâkahikan*.

Keywords

Algonquian, Cree, Manitow, Indigenous, North America, Religious Language

Résumé

Cet article présente un aperçu du concept Algonquian *manitow*. Ce concept est souvent traduit comme esprit, dieu ou être mythique, mais il reflète des idées plus complexes et est fondé culturellement sur la puissance des ontologies animistes. Cet article donne à penser que le terme *manitow* devrait être traduit avec grand soin en portant l'attention sur tout un éventail de significations. Les auteurs se réfèrent principalement aux exemples Cree de l'Alberta, au Canada, tout en prenant une perspective plus large en considérant les exemples d'autres contextes Algonquian. Après une discussion sur les définitions du concept, l'article en examine l'évolution des débats théoriques. L'article présente des données sur les dynamiques contemporaines de *manitow* dans le contexte de pluralisme religieux Cree, ainsi que sur la mise en place des relations *manitow* à travers la toponymie, et, particulièrement, comme observés dans les environs des lacs dénommés *manitow sâkahikan*.

Mots-clés

Algonquian, Amérique du Nord, Cree, indigène, langage religieux, Manitow

‘According to tradition, Kitchi-Manitou (the Great Mystery) created the world, plants, birds, animals, fish, and the other manitous in fulfillment of a vision...’ (Johnston, 1995: xv).

Introduction

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Based on the authors' fieldwork and language training in northern Alberta, Canada, this article

provides an overview of the Algonquian *manitow* concept. Manitow¹ is often glossed as spirit,

god, or mythical being, but also reflects more complex and culturally grounded ideas about

power grounded in animist and shamanic ontologies. Ojibway scholar Basil Johnston's quote,

above, shows the multiple contexts (as both a single principal and as a multiplicity; as both

envisioning and envisioned; and, depending on gradation, as either creator [Johnston's Kitchi-

Manitou] or created [Johnston's 'other manitous'])² of this term in its broad use within

Algonquian ontologies, and thus exemplifies some of the theoretical and cosmological issues at

play. Our article especially refers to Cree linguistic, textual and ethnographic examples but also

takes a broader view to consider examples from other Algonquian contexts. In part a discussion

of the concept's theoretical career as a comparative construct, the article moves through a range

of contributions and definitions from Indigenous and Non-Indigenous scholars and analysts. A

central question is the historical relationship of manitow concepts to Christian beliefs and

practices. The article provides extensive data on the contemporary dynamics of the manitow in

the context of Cree religious pluralism, as well as on the grounding and emplacement of manitow

relations through toponymy, particularly as seen in historical and contemporary discourses and

practices around lakes formerly named *manitow sâkahikan* (Manitow Lake), but now frequently

renamed. The article demonstrates the contemporary vitality and importance of the manitows

(including *kihci manitow*, the Great Mystery: the highest spirit or God) and the relations and

practices they inspire. Manitow, we argue, is a concept that cannot (or should not) be translated

¹ While there are many ways to transcribe and spell this term and its cognates in English, we favour *manitow*, following contemporary usage within literary Plains Cree.

² Note that while *kihci manitow* is said to have created the other manitows along with everything else, we are unaware of accounts of *kihci manitow*'s creation. That is one likely reason why *kihci manitow* is described as the Great Mystery.

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in such a way as to close off further meanings. In spite of, or because of, its polysemy, the concept has transcended its original linguistic moorings to become a cypher within the ethnological and missiological literatures.

Definitions and discussion

Providing a definition for *manitow* is problematic, particularly given that one of the purposes of the article is to examine the polysemy evident in the usage of cognate terms by many linguistically related Indigenous groups (and subsequently by anthropologists) across a wide geographic area over a significant period of time. The Algonquian language family historically covers a vast swath of territory from the southeastern USA to the Canadian Northwest. Some Algonquian peoples were among the first to encounter Europeans, while others on their more northerly lands remained independent in important ways into the postwar period. *Manitow* and cognate terms thus refer to a constellation of related phenomena and experiential intersections with fields of power. The extent of temporal variation is difficult to assess and moreover no one ‘pure’ account exists because the earliest external records are themselves biased by Christian perspectives. Overall, it is apparent that pre-contact concepts are operating here; however, available oral-historical data is also coloured by centuries of mission activity, in spite of equally clear evidence that Christianity itself was commonly understood and incorporated within pre-existing Indigenous ontologies in a variety of ways (Westman, 2015). Accordingly, in this article we explore the question of translation as a correlate to the inherent polysemy in *manitow* terminology.

It is useful to consult dictionary definitions for Plains Cree (‘Y’ Dialect), the most widely used dialect in the most widely spoken Algonquian language:

- *manitow*: (animate noun) spirit; (*name*:) God (Wolfart and Ahenakew, 1998: 79);

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- manitow: (animate noun) Sacred power or God; the basic mysterious quality in the universe (LeClaire and Cardinal, 1998: 71).

Closely related terms making use of the same root particles denote concepts such as power, medicine, sacredness, and religion, as well as calendrical units such as Sunday, Christmas, and December (LeClaire and Cardinal, 1998:71). The term manitow itself is generally pronounced [mun-toe] in the northern subdialects of Cree with which we are most familiar³.

Two particles frequently applied to manitow, which we address here, are *kihci* and *kise-*. As well as informal usage, we also attend to dictionary definitions of these terms:

- *kihci*: (noun or verb particle) great, superb, the best... greatly, formally (combining three entries for different grammatical categories in Wolfart and Ahenakew, 1998: 57).

Related terms making use of *kihci* denote respect, reverence, venerability, exceptional size, esteem, blessedness, holiness, sacredness, heavenliness or anything that is gradated at the highest level: such as a bishop, a high court or a university (Wolfart and Ahenakew, 1998: 57; cf. LeClaire and Cardinal, 1998: 41). Thus, among the possible translations of *kihci manitow* are High God, Supreme Being and Creator.

- *kisê-manitow*: (animate noun) God the kind, the compassionate God; (name:) Merciful God (Wolfart and Ahenakew, 1998: 60).

In brief, *kise-* and *kihci* are frequently used in Christian contexts where each serve to focus the discussion on different aspects of God or of spiritual power. Additionally, *kihci manitow* in particular is commonly used in ritual contexts not primarily marked as Christian.

³ Westman has conducted fieldwork since 1996 in Cree-Métis communities north of Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta. Joly has conducted recent doctoral fieldwork (from 2013-2014) among Métis people of Fort McMurray, Alberta.

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In short, *manitow* and its common prefixes (each of which may vary across languages and dialects) are polysemic terms that are exceedingly difficult to translate. As we shall see, apart from having gained a disembodied and decontextualized meaning in ethnological debates, *manitow* remains a meaningful term in common use: both in Indigenous languages and in English/French; among diverse groups of Indigenous Christians as well as in animist rituals (which themselves may show some Christian influences) and also among Euro-Canadian populations.

Manitow practices in the western Cree context

Both oral traditions and accounts of early European traders suggest that relations with *manitows* – and with *kihci manitow* – were important to pre-contact and proto-contact Cree and other Algonquian people. Similar to the scheme Johnston describes for the Anishinaabeg tradition, 19th century traders David Thompson (e.g. 1993) and George Nelson (Brown and Brightman, 1988: 35–36) reported among the pre-missionization Western Cree the belief in the supreme creator as well as a host of lesser *manitows* – ‘divinities’ or ‘inferior angels’ – who in turn each had their sphere of influence with a given species or entity. Nevertheless, *manitow* may or may not have been the most salient master category for describing encounters with non-human persons among the Cree historically. Cree ontologies and worldviews are highly personalized, generally recognizing a ‘living’ dimension to the world and a relational ontology characterized by ‘spirit gifting’ (Ghostkeeper, 1996). Furthermore, the living, gifting world is a communicative world wherein many actions (including singing, drumming, and smoking, as well as silence and contemplation) take on a discursive, prayerful dimension (Darnell, 1991).

Father Roger Vandersteene, a missionary of ethnographic bent active in northern Alberta following WWII, describes witnessing ‘Old Edward’, a Cree Elder, pray in the woods:

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He gets up in the morning and he goes down to the lake shore, and he sings, 'Ah, Ma-a-ni-tou'. And then he goes on his way. Sometimes I've been with him all day, and he will suddenly start to sing, 'Ah, Ma-a-ni-tou' over and over again. He doesn't need a lot of words like we do (quoted in Waugh, 1996: 136).

Musical modes and formal aspects of discourse play an important role in creating the mood for such a prayer, recognizing co-present spiritual entities in nature. Such an approach to spirituality may be more concerned with experiencing and expressing relations with powerful others, than in expressing a set of doctrines and beliefs.

Numerous narratives and rituals reflect both the prior and contemporary importance of manitow thought and manitow practices in northern Alberta. In rituals such as the *wihkohtowin*, feasters, drummers, dancers, and singers direct their prayers and petitions to kihci manitow and other non-human persons (Westman, 2015) as part of a gift-specified relational ontology. The sharing of plants, meat, and other bush resources relate closely to traditional religious values based on reciprocity with people, animals, and spirits (Tanner, 2014). Traditionally, Cree believed in a complex of powers representing the spirits of animals and ancestors. These spirits were a greater part of daily life than the Supreme Being, and accordingly were propitiated through sacrifice. For instance, meat or fat could be put on a fire to thank the spirit of the animal who provided it (Harmon, 1973: 324–326); some Cree and Métis people in northern Alberta continue to carry out this type of ceremony. Similarly, in the spirit of reciprocity, Cree used *manitohkâna* (images of manitows) to provide offerings. For instance, one would leave offerings around a statue at an important fishing site to give thanks for bountiful fish harvests (Harmon, 1973: 320, 324–326). Northern Alberta people used *manitohkâna* and sacred dolls into the postwar period. People would leave a gun or a pan at the statues, in hopes of future hunting success or material prosperity. The manitohkân marked sacred territory within or adjacent to important habitation and ceremonial sites, and also was incorporated within the most sacred part

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of the wihkohtowin lodge, near the altar where sacred bundles are hung, music is played and sacrifices made (Westman, 2015; Vandersteene, 1960).

For many – but not all – Cree people, participating in ceremonies such as the wihkohtowin, where manitows are invoked, need not entail a clear break between Christianity and animist practices. This is, in part, because missionaries almost universally adopted manitow/kihci manitow/kise-manitow terminology to represent Yahweh, the biblical God. The verb phrase *kâtepeyiceket*, which also predates Christianity, is used to represent Elohim, the Lord (‘the owner’). Together with the inherent flexibility of Algonquian religious thought and of the manitow concept itself, such naming practices contributed to a rich blending of spiritualities in which manitow practices may denote Christian principles and/or animist ones exclusively, alternatively or simultaneously, depending on context and intention. This clearly raises the possibility that the message a speaker (e.g. a missionary) intended to convey is not understood in the same way by the hearer, for whom manitow and similar terminology retain a particular set of associations. Such is even more the case due to the fact that both in Catholic and Protestant churches, as well in Cree ceremonies, the Cree language has retained its symbolic and practical importance as a religious/liturgical language: especially manitow terminology, which is deployed even in many bilingual or primarily English religious speeches.

‘Manitow is the god of Abraham!’ Assistant Pastor Emile said this as the climax of a short praising session, which he led in church one night in 2006. Emile’s utterance crystallizes the contradictions and continuities in Cree Pentecostal God-talk. Emile mixes codes both on a formal level (including elements of English and Cree), and also on a thematic level. Similarly, as a young man stated in the church, while holding a bible during his testimony, ‘When I open this

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Word of God, I see my life. Kise-manitow is like a mirror to me'. Thus, one's life and being are aligned with God through the word and illuminated through God's mercy.

While contemporary Roman Catholics may tend to celebrate the association of the biblical God with pre-contact Indigenous traditions through the manitow concept, Pentecostals are often thought of as seeking to demonstrate a disjuncture with the past. Nevertheless, many Cree Pentecostals in Westman's experience show more openness to such discursive linkages than is commonly recognized. In his discussions with pastors, they commonly acknowledged that 'some' of the great medicine men from the past would be waiting for them in heaven, and that people had prayed 'like they knew how' prior to being saved by Evangelical missionaries beginning in the mid-twentieth century. 'You can still pray to the Great Spirit, but in the name of Jesus Christ', was how Emile put it. Across Christian denominations, (kihci/kise-) manitow is generally considered 'the same god' as the biblical deity.

In the small northern communities where Westman has worked, many Pentecostal leaders are adamant that they grew up learning Cree traditions and only rejected *some* of them. As with other community members, many Pentecostals are avid hunters and trappers and view the bush as a place for contemplation and reflection. We will return to the importance of emplacing or *grounding* the manitow concept within a localized relational sphere, following a discussion of the concept's career within anthropological literature.

Overview of the manitow concept in anthropological literature

The concept of manitow has fundamentally influenced the anthropological usage in the Algonquianist tradition and beyond of related concepts such as non-human persons (Hallowell, 2010), with whom one enters into gift-specified relationships. More broadly, the significance of the manitow concept is a matter of long-standing debate in the ethnological literature. This in

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itself raises questions of both translation and interpretation, as well as in phenomenal experience.

Earle Waugh (2001) notes that Cree words ‘move’ in that they are highly flexible and contextual.

Similarly, among the Anishinaabeg, manitow cognates are often translated as ‘spirit’, but can also denote ‘property, essence, transcendental, mystical, muse, patron, and divine’ (Johnston,

1995: 2). The conceptual ambiguity of the term in practice provided fruitful analytical ground for anthropologists to adopt manitow in a variety of ways, following the trends of the discipline. In

order for any such technical vocabulary of religious variation to succeed, we argue, it must allow

Indigenous terms to retain their polysemic values in alternative contexts, so as to permit different potential meanings to manifest themselves in meaning through a particular empirical

utterance. The more we know about the range of meanings for manitow, the more effectively we

can formulate such a vocabulary in conversation with Indigenous people and scholars alike. As

such, we consider the question of translation to be a theoretically crucial one here.

A cognate of the Cree term *kihci manitow* first appeared in the *Dictionnaire Algonquin* in 1671, translated by missionaries as ‘*un grand dieu*, ‘a great god’, that is, one of many’ (Schenck, 2011: 43). However, this conflation of manitow with a high god was problematic for a Tylorian model of unilineal evolution, which placed manitow practices within the category of a primitive religion. Early anthropological accounts of manitow attempted to ‘untangle’ the influence of Christianity on this ‘primitive religion’ (Tylor, 1892: 285), identifying the ‘mistaken attribution to barbaric races of theological beliefs really belonging to the cultured world’ (Tylor, 1892: 284). Deeming the Algonquian manitow a missionary imposition of a Supreme Being thus maintained the distinctions between primitive and civilized religion Tylor’s theory posited.

Following Tylor, early 20th century anthropologists generally assumed that manitow was a Christian imposition (Skinner, 1911; Jones, 1905). William Jones argued that, for the

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Meskwaki, manitow was an ambiguous, ‘active substance’ (1905: 183) whose power could be harnessed by individuals through, for example, cuts in their skin in the sweat lodge (Jones, 1905: 184). By contrast, Paul Radin (1915) maintained that manitow lacks inherent power to act or transform objects, arguing that its meaning is more closely related to the term ‘sacred’ than to an individual actor.

Jones (1905) and Marcel Mauss (1902[1972]) worked in a tradition of universalizing religious categories, in accordance with Tylorian typologies. In his *General Theory of Magic* (1902[1972]), Mauss attempted to universalize *mana* – diffuse power – to describe a category of ‘magic’ or ‘primitive’ religion. Mauss maintained that the Algonquian concept of manitow is ‘basically the same as our Melanesian mana’ due to the fact that manitow also refers to a ‘whole species of spirits, forces and qualities’ (1902[1972]: 141), ‘of the same order as the idea of the sacred’ (1902[1972]: 146). The application of mana-type characteristics to manitow also aligned with later theories of universal thought forms outlined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950: xlii–xliii). Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss criticized Mauss for applying his own categorical understandings of religion to analysis of mana and manitow. Lévi-Strauss tellingly suggests that the mana concept holds as much power in anthropological theorizations (‘imputation to native thought’) as in Indigenous cultures (1950: xlv). That is, as he points out, Mauss highlighted only the contextual definitions of manitow that substantiated his generalized theories.

Responding to their French counterparts, North American anthropologists studying manitow in the 20th century largely focused on ethnographic particularism. Ruth Benedict insisted that there is ‘no relation of the guardian spirit to the idea of mana, or impersonal magic power, due to an attempt at standardization’ (1923: 84). Surveying the concept of a guardian spirit across North American cultures, Benedict concludes that manitow is distinct from other

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spiritual beings and a ‘historical happening of definite time and place’ (1923: 84). Through attempts at standardization, she suggests, anthropologists have denied a concept of ‘religion’ to Indigenous Peoples. She calls anthropologists to put aside philosophical debates and focus on ethnographic material (1923: 6).

Accordingly, the anthropologist’s task turned towards defining manitow in more precise terms. A substantial amount of such empirical investigation occurred among the Cree people around James Bay. In this analytical tradition, John Cooper (1933) revisited the Supreme Being debate and argued against Tylor (1892) and Skinner (1911) to demonstrate that the Algonquian Supreme Being predated the arrival of Christian missionaries. Through interviews with western James Bay Cree individuals, Cooper surmises that there is only one Supreme Being, whose most common name is manitow and who dwells somewhere above; however this differs from many other examples where the Supreme Being would be identified with a cognate of kihci manitow.

The Supreme Being was never seen nor did it have any appearance. Cooper’s (1933) accounts suggest this manitow is active in relation to humans, giving food, life and good health, but its relationship to the socio-moral law was indirect. As such, only prayers for food and health were offered in extreme need, and certain food observances, such as offerings of grease before eating, were made. Ultimately, Cooper concludes that the belief in one Supreme Being is an inherently Algonquian concept, as it predated and differed from Christian notions of God.⁴ In spite of his search for historical and empirical specificity, Cooper’s view here seems to elide to some extent the ethnographic reality of individuals seeking gift-specified relationships with a wide range of non-human persons, not only or even mainly with (kihci) manitow.

⁴ In an interesting twist, Cooper (1933) contrastingly concluded that the introduction of an ‘evil’ counterpart – *Machi-Manitow* – was not an Indigenous construction, but rather of European influence.

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Apart from Cooper's argument that kihci manitow predated the arrival of Europeans, anthropologists largely recognized its definition as an ultimate, omnipotent principal as being of Christian influence. Regina Flannery (1947) highlights how the eastern James Bay Cree believe in a number of nonhuman helpers, including manitow, which, she states, only signified a Supreme Being in missionaries' translations. Flannery (in Long et al., 2006: 481, 470-472) thus argues that manitow is distinct from the Christian God, in that individuals may not address manitow directly nor can manitow directly influence human affairs. Instead, individuals may communicate with the great manitow through prayers of hope (Cooper, 1933: 53). Flannery (1947) and Cooper (1933) both suggest that missionaries incorrectly translated kihci manitow as the Christian God.

Stemming from the tradition of Cooper and Flannery, recent anthropological analyses of manitow focus on syncretism and ontology. John Long (1987) suggests that contemporary manitow narratives are not simply those that existed before or as a result of European influence. Instead, James Bay Cree incorporated Christian influences into their ontological system, which places humans and other-than-human beings within a shared socio-moral order. For instance, a story by Abraham Rickard describes how the Bible held the power to stop a shaking tent ritual and protect people from a shaman's threats (Long, 1987: 21). Long describes how, before missionization, the power of manitow was indirect and non-communicative; yet the adoption of Christianity was seen as another 'channel' to this manitow-power, through books, hymns and prayer requests (Long, 1987: 22). Here, the conflation of kihci manitow with a Christian God is the result of a process of revitalization in which Cree individuals syncretically adopted Christian ideals (Long, 1987: 22).

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Similarly, Kenneth Morrison (2002) notes that interpretations of manitow as a God that dwells 'above' (as argued by Hultkrantz [1967; 1983]) implies a Christian vertical reality misrepresentative of Anishinaabeg ontologies that maintain multiple dimensions and mutual obligations between spiritual beings. Anishinaabeg recognize eight dimensions, with humans at the center, and each of which hold supernatural beings (2002: 42). The highest order is where kihci manitow dwells; however, power and knowledge come from below as well as from above, and are constituted in the exercise of interpersonal ethics and responsibility. Instead of a focus on hierarchy and authority, Morrison maintains that the manitow concept is based on a practice of maintaining all life (2002: 25).

Considering the Cree of northern Alberta, Earle Waugh (2001) suggests that manitow cannot be confined to a simple definition of 'god', vertical or otherwise. In his analysis of the Alberta Elder's Cree Dictionary, Waugh reviews definitions of manitow-type terms, including: a positive entity (kihci manitow); a negative being (*mâcimanitow*); a sacred power, in either concrete or abstract form; God's moon (December); a magnet; a blackcurrant bush; or a medicine (2001: 472–473). The Supreme Being is but one translation of manitow and, he argues, a symbolic gesture to relate Cree spirituality to Christian doctrine: in short, a mistranslation. Waugh notes that the conceptual complexity of manitow is reflective of the flexibility of Cree terminology. A Cree Elder may counsel: '*Namoya awiyak kiskeyitam tansi esi sikâsiyit manito-a*' or, 'No one knows the real name or word for manito' (2001: 473). In this sense, the meaning of manitow is speculative, abstract and highly contextual, essentially impossible to translate.

After over a century of debate, Waugh (2001), like Lévi-Strauss, suggests that anthropologists and missionaries may have placed as much importance on the manitow concept for understanding Algonquian religions as Algonquians did or do. Manitow remains a higher-

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order category for non-human persons, in which many other entities and categories of entities are placed. Words ‘move around in a conceptual universe’ (Waugh, 2001: 474) for Cree individuals.

The fact that western ethnographers ascribed manitow a diverse set of meanings further substantiates its flexible and contextual nature. Manitow has been described as of Christian origin, an Indigenous construction, a universal, a particular, a Supreme Being, a diffuse power or as having no ability to act. Beyond its sources in Algonquian *parole*, manitow is afforded varied meanings to fit analytical trends as it moves through anthropological discourse.

To conclude this theoretical section on manitow as represented in literature: concepts of Christian divinity and Cree spirit are very much wrapped up with one another for many Algonquian people. Prior to the arrival of missionaries, Cree likely believed in the existence of numerous spirits, including a spirit of a higher order: a ‘supreme being’, more remote from human affairs. However, as one authoritative recent study maintains, it was only later that this entity came to be ‘incorporated into the Christian deity and named Kitci Manitu’ (Long et al., 2006: 451). Elements of this incorporation process can be seen in divergent religious traditions today.

This is not merely an anthropological debate. Manitow-related terminology continues to interest speakers of Algonquian languages. The existence of some debate among contemporary Cree Christians about the appropriate translation of names for God is attested to by Mrs. Emma Minde, the late Roman Catholic Elder from Hobbema, Alberta. As Mrs. Minde told Freda Ahenakew, speaking in Cree and recalling a conversation she had had with another elder:

I have even heard you call God the ‘Father of All’ (*mâmax-ôhtâwîmâw*) – at one time I had been confused as to who is this ‘Father of All’. Then finally one woman told me... she had come to visit me here, an elderly woman, ‘Who is that one’, I said to her, ‘Father of All?’ I said to her; ‘that is the Merciful God (kise-manitow), that is what I call him’, she said to me. Now, with that I understand you... when you say ‘Father of All’. But as

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for me, I prefer to hear us say ‘Merciful God’ (kise-manitow) when we talk about God (kise-manitow) (Minde et al., 1997: 14–17).

The term *kise-manitow* denotes specifically the quality of God’s mercy. Mrs. Minde affirms that the words used can matter a great deal in shaping the hearers’ responses and attitudes towards the divine.

Similarly, Waugh asserts that Cree usage of sacred terms is discursive, changing, and based in life experiences and ‘gifts’. Lexical choice may reflect one’s knowledge of Christian, traditional and/or other spiritual worlds:

The way elements of the Cree religious system are understood – like *manito* or shaman or faith – will all depend upon experiences of a ‘gift’-specified kind, and their acceptance by a culture. This makes it very difficult to develop either a publically acknowledged religious history, or a publicly-approved ‘science of religion’, despite the arguments of recent scholarship. The quandary that it leaves for one trained in the History of Religions is obvious (Waugh 2001: 489–90).

Again, this would suggest that *manitow* is basically untranslatable given its inherent polysemy and the many linguistic-cultural-historical contexts in which it is used. Waugh’s argument is that religion is not a homogenous object that can be studied scientifically, but a range of experiential phenomena that must be interpreted in line with cultural/historical context and individual experience and knowledge.

Emplacement of manitow practices and commemorations

Manitow-inspired utterances, practices and relations continue to exert their pull, grounding the religious practices of those who know. Nevertheless, as befits a concept that moves, only becoming apparent in its full raiment to those who know something, the meaning of *manitow* on the landscape is shifting.

Recall the *manitohkân*, a graven image honouring the spiritual character of a particular place or entity. As David Thompson wrote of his time with the Western Woods Cree in ‘The

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<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0037768617713655>

Musk Rat country' (present-day northern Saskatchewan and Alberta) around 1800, the boreal forest landscape is a sacred ecology replete with spiritual significance:

The forests... the Lakes and Rivers have all something of the manito about them, especially the Falls in the Rivers, and those to which the fish come to spawn. The Indians when the season is over frequently place their spears at the Manito stone at the fall, as an offering to the Spirit of the Fall, for the fish they have caught (Thompson, 1993: 212; cf. Harmon, 1973: 320).

Many northern Algonquian people continue to practices similar reciprocal relations based on the principles of 'spirit gifting' (Ghostkeeper, 1996).

Such emplacement of manitow terminology and relationships in Cree cultural landscapes is evident in toponymy and land-use practices across Western Canada. Keith Basso (1996), among others (cf. McLeod (2007) for Plains Cree examples), has emphasized the phenomenological and discursive importance of place names and the stories embedded in them. In the Algonquian contexts, such importance is especially evident with places named manitow. For example, glacial erratics – large boulders strewn across the prairies – and exposed meteorites are sometimes known as manitow stones (McLeod 2007). More generally they evoke a mythological time, as sentinels from an age when the world was set into its current form by the deeds of tricksters and other manitows. This in turn reflects the grammatical status of rocks as animate in many Algonquian languages. There are likely many similar examples of manitow-related toponymy; however, the example we will develop here relates to the naming of lakes. As liminal zones between airy, watery, and chthonic vertical realms, lakes (and their shorelines and wetlands, as well as the creatures that move between these zones) are particularly potent sites for manitow manifestations and commemorations.

Western Canada's Prairie Provinces feature several lakes with manitow-inspired names such as God's Lake, Devil's Lake, Goodspirit Lake, Lac Ste-Anne, Manito Lake and Little

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Manito Lake (the latter refers to a small lake, not a small manitow). On closer investigation each

of these placenames – not merely the last two – and likely many others besides demonstrate

manitow-related toponymy based in the Cree placename *manitow sâkahikan* (Manitow Lake).

What makes these more sacred than other lakes, as in Thompson's and Waugh's examples?

Sometimes the lake itself is remarkable. For example, Little Manito Lake, in Saskatchewan, is a highly saline lake, which also features a large manitow stone – an erratic boulder – on the prairie nearby. The lake is the focus not only of Indigenous healing narratives, but also has been the site of a spa-focused healing, recreation and tourism industry among Euro-Canadian settlers for over a century. In promoting the lake, motifs of Aboriginal spirituality and healing are used consciously to link leisure to sacredness. It is not only images of the Aboriginal past that are manipulated to create the experience of present-day visitors, but also images of the non-Aboriginal past. So visitors can float around, indoors, gazing up at images of Mounties, old-time dancehalls, classic cars and simpler times when bathers generally swam in the lake instead of paying to enter a health spa. Striking a less nostalgic, but more authoritative, note are the large signs displaying the chemical properties of the water, guaranteeing health to bathers. This example is an important reminder that manitow symbolism has relevance in many contexts, not only in academic and religious discussions, but also in examining the ideology of place-making within settler-colonial societies such as Western Canada.

Such hybridity is also present in other examples of manitow-inspired toponymy, in a context more clearly linked to religion. In particular, the degree to which Christianity and traditional religion have both become associated with contemporary modes of being in place can be seen in subtle modifications observed in an elder's stories regarding a place name.

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In many cases, the name is linked to a remarkable event. Referring to a lake in northern Alberta, Elder Martin Okemow told Westman two stories (translated by Janet Netowastenum) about the origin of the place name, God's Lake (*manitow sâkahikan*). The first concerned the appearance of four horses, galloping out of the depths of God's Lake to its surface, then 'they dived again'. In spite of its apparent postcontact provenance (given the presence of horses), Martin's story retains certain Cree mythological structures (including the appearance of terrestrial animals as spiritual entities underwater [cf. Brightman 2002: 83]). Nevertheless, it was understood by Martin and Janet as primarily a Christian story, due to its association with the Four Horsemen in the biblical book of Revelation.

The second story concerned a trapper who heard the sound of spiritual drumming on the waves. The sacred name is thus conferred over water through manifestations of sound (drumming and/or singing) across the waves (this motif appears to relate to a number of other placenames in western Canada such as Calling Lake, Sounding Lake, and Qu'Appelle Lakes).

Martin told me both these stories (in the opposite order) on two occasions. Neither he nor his translators/interlocutors saw the second story as inconsistent with the first. Martin's stories mark the resacralization, within Christianity, of a place that already had 'something of the manitow' to it (Thompson, 1993: 212) in Cree terms.

Martin's second story is strikingly similar to descriptions of the musical origins in toponymy for other lakes whose names include manitow terminology. In the case of Lake Manitoba, the name is linked to its sonorous quality:

Manitoba is generally believed to be of Cree or Ojibway Indian origin. In the narrows of the lake of that name lies an island on whose limestone beach the pounding of the waves produced a roaring sound such as superstition would ascribe to the action of a *manitou*, or spirit, accustomed to beat his drums there. The strait, called *manitowapow* (Cree) or *manito bau* (Ojibway), meaning strait of the spirit, gave its name to the whole lake and the province (C. Meredith Jones, 1956, quoted in Rudnycky, 1970).

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This origin story attempts to explain away the manitow sounds with reference to the physical geography of the lake and its islands. Other versions of the Lake Manitoba placename origin story suggest that the spirit makes a noise in some other way, generally a vocal, rather than drummed, resonance, attributed either to a spirit shrieking or singing (Buchner, 2000; cf. Canadian Board on Geographical Names, 1933). One can see in the translations and descriptions of Lake Manitoba the classic problem of manitow terminology. Is it better translated as spirit, god or simply left as manitow or some variant spelling of an Algonquian word (and if so from which language or dialect)? Furthermore, the question remains as to whether or not this spirit is inherently good, with subsequent word choices (e.g. shrieking vs. singing [Buchner, 2000]) in part dictated by such assumptions.

To take another example of musicality leading to manitow-derived toponymy, we turn to Lac Ste-Anne in central Alberta – another manitow *sâkahikan* more prominent than the northern Alberta case discussed by Martin Okemow. Anderson-McLean (1999) documents narratives that early visitors to this lake were guided to it by the singing of spirits, which denoted a holy place. This indicated the healing power of its waters and designated the lake as a place of peace. During the 19th century, Lac Ste-Anne was the site of both the first Protestant and the first Catholic missions in Alberta, befitting its status as home to a large wintering community of Métis. Prior to this, the lake had been the site of an inter-tribal pilgrimage. According to Anderson-McLean (1999), different tribes made peace when gathering at the lake. Today, Lac Ste-Anne is both a national and provincial historic site. The lake, its church grounds and cemetery remain an important and well-known pilgrimage site, drawing tens of thousands of Indigenous people (and a smaller number of non-Aboriginal pilgrims, including clergy and anthropologists) for several days each July. The highlight of the pilgrimage is the Blessing of the Lake, a ceremony led by

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Catholic clergy and Indigenous elders who enter the water together. Many pilgrims collect the water of the lake for use as a healing draught or balm. The emphasis on the healing character of the water is also seen at Little Manito Lake, SK. Like Little Manito Lake, Lac Ste-Anne is located near a city and is the focus of a tourism industry centring around its beaches and cottages. Unlike Little Manitow Lake, Lac Ste-Anne also remains a home for First Nations and Métis communities on its shores and in the nearby district.

Pilgrimage at Lac Ste-Anne, as many authors have noted (e.g. Anderson-McLean 1999), brings together both Roman Catholic and Aboriginal healing and liturgical traditions. In its contemporary naming, Ste-Anne, Jesus' grandmother, recalls both the female elder and through her the grandmother or wise woman archetype, but also the specific grandfathers and grandmothers (i.e. manitows) who are frequently mentioned and petitioned in Cree praying, singing and drumming (like the singing and drumming that may come across the water from powerful but unseen persons).

It is significant that manitow sâkahikan cases raised some consternation among the Euro-Canadian missionaries and traders responsible for place-naming in the region. The issue of translation of the manitow concept raises its head again. Both God's Lake and Lac Ste-Anne were alternately referred to as Manitow Lake and as Devil's Lake in early historical records, as the names appeared to be in flux. One early missionary account concerning God's Lake mentions the difficulties with windigo manifestations in the area. This missionary called the lake Devil's Lake (*'Lac du Diable'*), a lake, he said, that had well earned its name (Westman, 2008: 129).

Seen through a Christian lens, is the manitow more like a god or more like a demon (or a saintly grandmother)? What do such characterizations signify for the lakes receiving these names or for the people who live on their shores? Of course, such questions have been less important to

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the Cree-speaking people, who have continued to refer to these lakes as manitow sâkahikan.

People in the region now express concern for the preservation of these sacred sites through various forums.

Westman has met several individuals who were born or who lived for part of their lives at God's Lake during the early to mid-twentieth century. Until the 1960s, this lake was an important habitation site for an extended family, and for other families as well. The lakeshore was home to a community of log cabins and seasonal dwellings including tents and wigwams, as well as a small cemetery and several unmarked graves. Some of these graves have subsequently been impacted by industrial activity. The lake provided a focus for summer fishing, ceremonies and other collective activities, with a smaller number of people remaining in the immediate area for winters, as well. This activity meant that missionaries began visiting God's Lake occasionally in the early 20th century. One of the concerns raised by missionaries during this period, at God's Lake and elsewhere, was whether Cree and Métis people really understood Christianity, particularly the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism. We suggest that the use (in some cases non-fluent use) of Cree terminology by missionaries, including the manitow translation as God, does indeed raise issues of how Cree people experienced the practice and ideology of Christianity in relation to their own ongoing and prior traditions (Westman, 2008).

Analytically, similar to other manitow-inspired relational practices, the complexities inherent in naming practices involving manitow sâkahikan demonstrate the complexity of interpreting manitow concepts, histories, practices and legacies in the 21st century. Sacred places contribute to grounding the manitow concept and to the articulation of the religious landscape within the physical landscape through a relational ecology, in which lakes may appear as portals or membranes enabling contact with powerful non-human persons.

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Conclusion

Like other mana-type concepts, with which it has been somewhat arbitrarily grouped, manitow has had a strange career within the anthropological literature. Paradoxically, the term became linked with efforts both to explain cultural change and to define the ineffable and thus came to represent stakes in broader historical-theoretical debates. Nevertheless, manitow has continued to show power to those who understand. Perhaps untranslatable, the term evokes both a constellation of non-human persons and, in some renderings, an immanent force – or Supreme Being. Manitow’s continued flourishing across many tribal groupings, speech communities, and religious traditions is evident of the concept’s ability to *move*, both analytically and in popular appeal. In Johnston’s telling, the Great Mystery itself was inspired to create by a vision. This vision in turn became the exemplar of the visions and dreams through which people come into contact with non-human persons to see into the future, gain knowledge, gather strength and plan for action. In creating and endowing a *living* (Ghostkeeper 1996), *communicative* (Darnell, 1991) world, kihci manitow fulfilled this vision.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the inspiration and support of the First Nation and Métis communities who welcomed us for our ethnographic fieldwork, and the many Cree and Métis individuals who taught us, some of whom are named above. We also acknowledge the insightful comments and suggestions of the editors, of two anonymous reviewers, and of Professor David Meyer. We have drawn on their comments and suggestions in revising the article.

Funding

This research has been funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the University of Aberdeen (*Arctic Domus* project), University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, the Melville Jacobs Research Funds, and the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation.

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