

Manitous

Manitous are spirits in the belief system of Anishanaabe (Ojibwe) and other Algonquian peoples of North America. There are numerous manitous, no one representation accounts for all manifestations of the phenomenon. The complexity of the Ojibwe language makes translations into English imprecise and suggests that the simple equation of the terms “manitou” and “spirit” is insufficient to capture all possibilities. Illustrating this complexity, Basil Johnston offers multiple definitions: “Mystery, essence, substance, matter, supernatural spirit, anima, quiddity, attribute, property, God, deity, godlike, mystical, incorporeal, transcendental, invisible reality” (242).

One reason why Western conceptions of the manitou are problematic has to do with accounts of contact by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European explorers to North America. Hearing the Indigenous peoples refer to them as “manitou,” and limiting their understanding of that term to “God,” these early explorers believed that First Nations peoples thought of them as gods. However, while one might translate the term *manitou* as “god,” one should not mistake manitous for gods. Manitous are not divinities in the Western sense, although they do command reverence and respect. Haefeli cites mistranslation to account for the confusion: “The native accounts never claimed the Europeans were gods in any Christian sense of the term. Instead, their words (in this case Manitou) reflected an understanding of the power and danger of the encounter that the actual experience confirmed” (Haefeli 407).

One of the more interesting treatments of the manitou occurs in Brian Moore’s 1985 novel *Blake Robe*, adapted by Director Bruce Beresford in the film *Black Robe* (1991), which takes up the theme of contact, casting a convincing Lothaire Bluteau as young seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary Father Jean Laforge. The Wendat (Huron) characters who guide him

on his journey through remote Quebec speak of the proselytizing priest as a manitou, not a god: he is considered either as a benign but problematic spirit or an evil and dangerous one, depending on the political disposition of the observer.

Manitou is not the One True God; manitous are not angels or stewards of the One True Manitou. Neither are they evil spirits, though some are monstrous. Following tradition, Basil Johnston categorizes them “according to the sequence in which the manitous appeared and performed services in the development and growth of the [Ojibwe] nation” (xiii). Kitchi-Manitou is the creator of the physical world and the beings in it. Muzzu-Kummik-Quae is Earth Woman or Mother Earth. The manitou Ae-pungishimook, the West, who is old age and death, mated with the human woman Winonah to produce four half-manitou, half-human sons: Maudjee-kawiss was a great hunter and warrior and the first leader of the nation; Pukawiss brought the people dance and theater; Cheeby-aub-oozoo gave the people vision, dream quest, music, and poetry; Nana’b’oozoo, fourth and youngest son, is an everyman, “the prototype of all Anishinaubaek and of all human beings” (B. Johnston 116). Additional manitous are associated with places or seasons, such as forest manitous and meadow manitous, Maundau-meen, the Spirit of Corn, and Gawaunduk, the Spirit of the Spruce; the nebaunauquaewuk and nebaunaubaewuk, mermaids and mermen; manitoussiwuk, or sprites, such as the maemaegawaehnse (little people) who guard over children; and auttissookaunuk, the muses of the north, south, east, and west, who help storytellers. Personal manitous, such as Thunderbirds and Eagles, influence destinies and serve as the patrons of individual people. Pauguk, the Flying Skeleton or “outcast,” is so called by the manitous of the underworld who would not accept his spirit after death because of the crime he committed in life. **Windigo** (Weendigo), the cannibal Giant, serves to warn against greed and excess. These are a few of many manitous (see B. Johnston for amplification).

Excellent examples of how Ojibwe people conceived of manitous as natural elements of their everyday lives can be found in the oral stories of Maggie Wilson, which relate the history of the Rainy River Ojibwe of northwestern Ontario and northern Minnesota in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-centuries. “She Knew That This Woman She Dreamed Was the Bear,” for example, speaks of *manitokaso*—taking on the spiritual power of a manitou “by one’s own authority” (216)—as an ordinary practice. Wilson’s stories are refreshing because they are memoir in contrast to horror films and novels that misrepresent manitous as evil spirits or the ghosts of dead Indians.

The standout Hollywood offering is Director William Girdler’s *The Manitou* (1978), adapted from Graham Masterson’s novel. It features an accomplished cast: Tony Curtis, Susan Strasberg, Michael Ansara, Stella Stevens, and Burgess Meredith. Let the plot synopsis offered by the film company suffice: “A psychic’s girlfriend finds out that a lump on her back is a growing reincarnation of a 400 year-old demonic Native American spirit...an ancient evil and enraged beast known as THE MANITOU.” Masterson’s novel was published in Great Britain in 1975 and in the United States in 1976, first in a series that has established precedent for many subsequent applications of the manitou motif. In the debut novel, pseudo-psychic Harry Erskine outsmarts the evil sorcery of Misquamacus, the greatest medicine man to ever live, who now is trying to reincarnate through the tumor on Harry’s girlfriend’s neck so that he can exterminate the white race. Victorious, Harry moves on in Masterson’s follow up novel *The Djinn* (1977) to perform the same service, this time dispatching another culture’s evil spirit, the Islamic **djinni** or **genie**. Masterson’s novels appeal because they are outlandish and exciting, which is sufficient for many fans. Masterson’s follow-up exploitation of the djinni brings to mind Darlene Johnston’s research, which praises one seventeenth-century French missionary for translating

“manitou” as “Genie” and recognizing that manitous are not de facto evil (12). The comparison between manitous and djinn is apt. Whether or not Masterson was aware of this linkage, the pattern of appropriating the beliefs of other cultures as myths and transforming myths into monsters is a longstanding template for commercial success. Masterson renews this pattern in *Revenge of the Manitou* (1987), which exploits the Windigo manitou motif paralleling the **vampire** tradition, and again in *Burial: A Novel of the Manitou* (1994), in which Misquamacus returns from the underworld with back up: a **voodoo** priest who shares his lust for revenge against the white race. Masterson’s proponents praise these tales for bringing the colonial abuses of the past to light in gritty detail.

The revenge motif often appears in literary treatments of this figure, as in prolific pulp writer Guy N. Smith’s *Manitou Doll* (1985), and in Ernest Hemmingway’s “Judgment of Manitou” (1916), written when the Nobel Laureate was still in high school. Rather than holding one group accountable for transgressions against another, however, Hemingway invokes the manitou as a governing spirit that punishes an individual crime. The reputation of manitous fares better in young adult fiction, which preserves the manitou as guide, guardian, or Great Spirit. Notable examples include Charles De Lint, *The Dreaming Place* (1990) and Stella Calahasen, *Dream Catcher* (2009). Manitous exhibit their staying power even in Kindle publications, where Lexus Luke’s *Manitou: The Sky People Saga* advertises its intention to rival J. K. Rawlings’ Harry Potter series. **Grace L. Dillon**

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