

*Curatorial essay accompanying the Cinema Lounge: Steven Loft on Adam Garnet Ruffo's A Windigo Tale – screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on Aug. 1, 2012.*

*win-di-go*

*noun* /ˈwɪndɪˈɡoʊ/

wendigoes, plural; wendigoes, plural; windigoes, plural; windigos, plural

1. (in the folklore of some northern Algonquian peoples) A cannibalistic giant; a person who has been transformed into a monster by the consumption of human flesh.

Two disparate narratives interwoven. A story within a story, each a journey of individual and communal discovery, of dislocation, destruction, abuse, pain, and ultimately, of hope.

Against an idyllic autumn backdrop, Harold embarks on a road trip north with his grandson Curtis. Hoping to turn the troubled youth around, Harold brings him slowly to realizations of pain, loss and reconnection through the contemporary tale of an insatiable and malevolent spirit.

In an isolated community, Lily returns home after a 15-year absence and reunites with her estranged mother, Doris, and her community. But Lily's growing realizations of her mother's horrific secret and their connections to her threaten to overwhelm and consume her, and those around her.

*A Windigo Tale*, the first film by acclaimed author, poet and professor Armand Garnet Ruffo is a gripping and potent psychological drama, depicting the intergenerational scars left by residential schools: the darkest chapter of Canada's genocidal history with the Aboriginal peoples of this land.

We all know...or should know...that agonizing history. Government sanctioned, church-run residential schools took thousands of Aboriginal children away from their homes, their families, and their communities. This system forced the children to adopt Christianity, reject their languages and cultures: their hair was cut, the clothes they arrived in were burned and they were punished for speaking Aboriginal languages or practicing their cultural traditions. Countless children were physically, emotionally and often sexually abused and many were killed through neglect, disease and abuse. Most had trouble reintegrating with their families and communities when finally returned to their parents. The impact of these atrocities on succeeding generations is only now acknowledged. These are hard stories to tell.

Aboriginal people and communities are just now beginning to express their fury, rage, and shame. Despite apologies by the churches and the Government of Canada, and countless reports on the subject, the depth and impact of this perverse history continues to be unknown, and little understood, by many Canadians.

Rather than attempting to close the door on the past, looking only to the future of communities, the terrible facts of the residential school system must be made a part of a new sense of what Canada has been and will continue to be for as long as that record is not officially recognized and repudiated. Only by such an act of recognition and repudiation can a start be made on a very different future. Canada and Canadians must realize that they need to consider changing their society so that they can discover ways of living in harmony with the original people of the land.

The future must include making a place for those who have been affected by the schools to stand in dignity, to remember, to voice their sorrow and anger, and to be listened to with respect. With them Canada needs to pursue justice and mutual healing; it must build a relationship...<sup>1</sup>

Ruffo understands he is on fraught ground. Real life “survivor’s stories” are harrowing, tragic and terrifying. The abuse at the hands of the priests and nuns (and by extension the government) is nothing short of abhorrent. It should disgust us all. But how to engage with such a painful subject? For Ruffo, the “goal was to make an engaging movie while simultaneously being respectful to the people who attended the schools – many of whom did not survive – and their experiences. To do so, I chose to return to the mythic roots of narrative itself, and I therefore drew inspiration from specific Anishinaabe storytelling traditions.”

By placing the spectre of the Windigo at its centre, Ruffo re-imagines the legacy of the schools from a metaphorical, yet real perspective. "It's an insatiable creature that devours people, animals," Ruffo says. "As a child, I knew about the windigo. It was only later I realized its metaphorical significance." In Ruffo's hands, this creature embodies the violence, the pain, the abuse that so any Aboriginal people in this country have, and continue to feel. It's a story that must be told. Residential school survivor Garnet Angeconeb puts it this way, "(M)y understanding of what reconciliation means has evolved since that

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1985), Volume 1 - Looking Forward Looking Back  
PART TWO False Assumptions and a Failed Relationship  
Chapter 10 - Residential Schools

time. To me, it's all about relationships and communication. Often, we're too afraid of each other to speak our truth openly."<sup>2</sup>

Ruffo articulates the anger, the challenge and the hope implicit in this statement in his thoughtful and cinematic reflection. His is a story of fear, tragedy and death, but also of redemption, reconciliation and hope. Reconciliation is a discursive and reciprocal act. It is contingent on informed and meaningful engagement and based in notions of justice, ethics and empathy. It starts with conversation.

Today, the few history books that have been amended to include mention of Indigenous peoples speak of the tragic loss of Indigenous cultures over time. They speak of this "loss" as a romantic part of our history where the strong, noble Indian chief on his horse looks across the horizon and realizes that the ways of his people are fading away with the coming of European trains, traders and technologies. This sort of representation may even invoke feelings of melancholy in Canadians who long for the simplicity of the old days. But it belies the truth about Canada and its direct and intentional "obliteration" of Indigenous peoples, cultures and territories.<sup>3</sup>

The power of work such as Ruffo's *A Windigo Tale* lies in its ability to relate to its viewers the underlying tragedy of the residential school system, and to offer the hope that comes from healing and reconciliation.

In the character of Harold, the Grandfather, Ruffo re-imagines a conceptual space for a re-attachment to land, culture and philosophy that many argue has been denied to Aboriginal youth. He teaches his grandson, not by cajoling or "disciplining", but by teaching, by storytelling and by re-acculturating the young man. As Jeff Corntassel writes, "Indigenous peoples must confront existing colonial institutions, structures, and policies that attempt to displace us from our homelands and relationships, which impact the health and well-being of present generations of Indigenous youth and families. Indigenous resurgence means having the courage and imagination to envision life beyond the state."<sup>4</sup> Ultimately this is a story of redemption, not personal redemption, but cultural redemption. The ability of a culture to withstand

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<sup>2</sup> Garnet Angeconeb, "Speaking My Truth: The Journey to Reconciliation" in *Speaking My Truth*

<sup>3</sup> Pamela Palmater, "Harper's manifesto: Erasing Canada's Indigenous communities", in *rabble.ca*, <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/pamela-palmater/2012/09/harpers-manifesto-erasing-canadas-indigenous-communities>, accessed Sept. 13, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Corntassel, "Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination" in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 1, No.1, 2012, 88, 89.

genocidal policies, victimization and violence, and emerge, what Gerald Vizenor coined 'survivance', an amalgam of "resistance" and "survival".

Residential school survivors, their families and communities, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, artists like Armand Garnet Ruffo, and Aboriginal people across this country are trying to get the conversation started.

### **Background on Steven Loft**

Steven Loft is a Mohawk of the Six Nations with Jewish heritage. He is a curator, scholar, writer and media artist. In 2010, he was named Trudeau National Visiting Fellow at Ryerson University in Toronto, where he is continuing his research into Indigenous art and aesthetics. Formerly, he was Curator-In-Residence, Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada. Previous to that, he was the Director/Curator of the Urban Shaman Gallery (Winnipeg), Aboriginal Curator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Artistic Director of the Native Indian/Inuit Photographers' Association. He has curated group and solo exhibitions across Canada and internationally and has written extensively on Indigenous art and aesthetics for various magazines, catalogues and arts publications and lectured widely in Canada and internationally. Loft co-edited *Transference, Technology, Tradition: Aboriginal Media and New Media Art*, published by the Banff Centre Press in 2005 and is the editor of the upcoming volume *Coded Territories: Indigenous Pathways in New Media*.

### **Background on Armand Garnet Ruffo**

Armand Garnet Ruffo's body of work includes critical essays, short fiction, poetry, plays and recently film. "*A Windigo Tale*," his screenwriting and directorial debut, most notably won Best Picture and Best Actress at the 35th American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco in 2010; Best Picture at the Dreamspeaker's Film Festival in Edmonton, Alberta, 2010; and Peoples' Choice Award at the Baystreet Film Festival in Thunder Bay, Ontario, 2010. He is the author of two collections of poetry, *Opening In The Sky*, and *At Geronimo's Grave*, winner of the Archibald Lampman Award for Poetry, and the acclaimed creative biography *Grey Owl: the Mystery of Archie Belaney*. Born in Chapleau, northern Ontario, with roots to the Sagamok (Ojibway) First Nation and the Chapleau Fox Lake (Cree) First Nation, he currently lives in Ottawa and teaches Aboriginal Literature and Creative Writing in the Department of English at Carleton University.