Gookooko'oog:
Owls and Their Role in Anishinaabe Culture

Wendy Makoons Geniusz
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Over the last eight years, I have encountered Anishinaabeg[1] who are terrified of owls. In some cases, this fear is so engrained in their consciousnesses that they are afraid to be in the same room with even the image of an owl. Some of these individuals declare that they were "meant to die" or that they "are cursed" when they see an owl. In one extreme case, I met a man who gave written notice to a hospital declaring that he was not to be resuscitated should he die during an upcoming surgery because he had recently encountered an owl in the woods. This was not the way my elders taught me to think about owls, and I began to wonder if I had misunderstood the teachings with which I had been raised. Perhaps, I thought to myself, these individuals were correct, and I too should fear *Gookooko'oo*, 'Owl.'[2] I began this research to learn more about Gookooko'oo and to try to understand the origin of these fears. From this research, I have concluded that Gookooko'oo is not someone to fear, and that those who fear this being only understand a small portion of Anishinaabe teachings about Gookooko'oo. Myths (misunderstandings) about Gookooko'oo include beliefs such as: this being is terrifying and evil; seeing this being is an ill omen that brings bad luck or even death; and this being only interacts with us in negative ways. In reality, Gookooko'oo is used by parents to scare unruly children, is appropriated by evil doers, is a messenger who can give us important warnings, is someone who helps those who have already passed on to reach the other side, and is someone who can be our benefactor.

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1. Anishinaabe, or Anishinaabeg in the plural, is the self-definition of several Algonquian peoples. Since the cultures of these peoples have important differences, in this paper "Anishinaabeg" refers only to those peoples who speak the Ojibwe language.

2. Gookooko'oo is capitalized when referring to Owl, the spirit who represents all owls.

While writing this paper, I encountered elders who were also worried about the misinterpretation of this being's role in *Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin*, 'Anishinaabe culture.' Robert Swanson, an Anishinaabe man from Grand Portage and Special Projects Technician at the Grand Portage Museum, told me that his grandfather saw Gookooko'oo as favorable. He even smoked *White Owl* cigars because he saw the connection between Owl and Tobacco. Swanson also says that his wife, who is part Anishinaabe and also a member of a Northwest Coast tribe which has some teachings about how owls should be feared, teaches their grandchildren not to fear owls and not to fear the log carved to look like an owl, which they have by their woodpile. Dora Dorothy Whipple, an Anishinaabe elder from Leech Lake, and I have spoken several times on this topic, and each time she stresses that usually one should not fear Gookooko'oo, especially if one hears his or her normal cry. My namesake, the late Keewaydinoquay, who was an Anishinaabe medicine woman and an ethnobotanist from Lower Michigan, spoke and wrote about Gookooko'oo. From her writings and recorded class lectures on the subject, it is clear that one of Keewaydinoquay's particular concerns was exposing the myth that Anishinaabe culture teaches us to fear Gookooko'oo. In *Directions We Know*, Keewaydinoquay blames the media for perpetuating such fears. She writes, "a few words should be interpolated about the much maligned owl. This is necessary because of considerable white literature on the subject and the use of owls on TV programs, making them a brooding symbol of death" (1985:31). Kenneth Johnson, Sr., Waasebines, an Anishinaabe man from Seine River First Nations Reserve sees that fear of Gookooko'oo, and other "superstitions," control the lives of some Anishinaabeg. In an attempt to reach a wider audience than this academic paper will reach, Johnson and I are working on curriculum materials for Ojibwe language students which seek to correct misinterpretations that have been made about Gookooko'oo. Statements from these materials are used throughout this paper.

METHODOLOGY

I used new research methodologies to learn about Gookooko'oo, ones which students and elders working with the Masters of Indigenous Knowledge/ Philosophy Program at Seven Generations Education Institute[3] developed

3. Seven Generations Education Institute is nestled between Couchiching First Nation Reserve and Fort Frances, Ontario on Agency 1 Land.

as a means for Anishinaabe researchers to conduct accurate, meaningful research, which will benefit Anishinaabe people.[4] This new approach, called Biskaabiiyang research methodologies, recognizes that we, as Anishinaabe people, have reasons different from non-Native researchers for conducting research on our culture, language, and history. In the case of this research on Gookooko'oo,[5] I am not trying to explain Anishinaabe beliefs to the rest of the world, as previous non-Native researchers of this subject have done. Instead, I am attempting to understand the fears of my fellow Anishinaabeg, some of whom are students with whom I interact on a regular basis, because these fears control and endanger lives.

According to Biskaabiiyang research methodologies, a researcher must begin by understanding possible effects colonization has had on the topic being researched, including the effects colonization has had on the researcher's own views of that topic. The researcher must distinguish between the portions of his or her own beliefs that come from the *Gete-Anishinaabeg*, 'old time Indians,' and the portions that come from the effects of colonization. The researcher then proceeds with the research following the beliefs and worldview, which come from the former. Without making this distinction, we will continue to view ourselves and our culture through the eyes of colonizers, and our research will only perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions about us.

This research of Gookooko'oo makes a tremendous argument for the importance of Biskaabiiyang research because it is an example of how the colonization of Native people and their knowledge can have a detrimental effect on their lives. Colonization has caused many Native peoples to look at their cultures from the perspective of the colonizer. In the case of Gookooko'oo, we have ideas, biases, and prejudices coming from a variety of sources. Movies and other forms of media use owls in "scary" scenes, suggesting owls are sinister beings we should fear. I have heard

4. For more information see: www.7generations.org or Geniusz 2009.

5. As further explained in Geniusz 2009, the use of Ojibwe words is an integral part of Biskaabiiyang Research, especially when discussing beings or topics important to Anishinaabe culture. For example, Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin is used in place of the English: Anishinaabe culture. In the case of Gookooko'oo, this word is used in place of Owl, unless it is a direct quote or it is clear from the source being discussed that a specific kind of owl is described.

several people cite *I Heard the Owl Call My Name,* both the book by Margaret Craven (1973) and the movie by the same name, as an example of the supposed universal fear of owls among all Indian peoples. We can trace neither the extent to which such images have influenced our views of Gookooko'oo nor the extent to which non-Native fears and views of owls have been projected onto Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin, but we need to acknowledge that this is a possible source of these misconceptions. Colonization has also caused many aspects of Anishinaabe and other Native cultures to become lost. In some cases, we only have short versions of what at one time must have been very extensive, in-depth teachings. Fears easily arise from the misinformation passed on through such abbreviated teachings. No matter the cause, many of us are not looking at Gookooko'oo the way that our ancestors did, thereby injuring ourselves by living in fear and by misunderstanding a being who could be of great assistance to us.

Following Biskaabiiyang research methodologies, I began this research by examining my own beliefs about Gookooko'oo, sorting out the portions that were actually Anishinaabe teachings. As a child, I first learned about this being from my Keewaydinoquay and from my mother Mary Siisip Geniusz, who is one of Keewaydinoquay's *oshkaabewisag*, 'traditionally trained apprentices.'[6] These early teachings included a song, the chorus of which is "gookookooningosaa," 'I am afraid of owl,' and a story about a girl who is raised by the *gookooko'oog*. I also remember my mother telling me that when I die, Gookooko'oo would help me "find my way" to the other side. None of these teachings, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, suggest that seeing Gookooko'oo means certain doom. From this perspective I began investigating several myths about Gookooko'oo, which I have heard repeatedly from my academic colleagues and my fellow Anishinaabeg.

Myth: Anishinaabe Teachings Tell Us to Fear Gookooko'oo

Fact: Parents Make Gookooko'oo Appear "Scary"

In the written literature and in contemporary Anishinaabe communities, there are examples of parents purposely making Gookooko'oo appear scary so that children will behave. Sister M. Inez Hilger (1951:58) writes:

> Sensible parents, informants agreed, never ridiculed their children for failures. Children were scolded, but 'too much scolding often made them

6. For more information about Keewaydinoquay see: Geniusz 2005.

> worse.' At times a child was frightened by some masked person; more often by expressions such as these: 'The Sioux will get you' . . . 'The owl will put you in his ears!' 'The owl will put you in his ears, and fly away with your little feet sticking out of his ears!' 'The owl will come and stick you in his ears if you don't stop crying!' If children refused to go to sleep at night, mothers poked their heads out of wigwams and called the owl, saying 'Kō-kō-kō! Now, hear the owl!'

According to Theresa Smith (1995:30, 41, n10), Melanie Madahbee, who grew up in Wikwemikong Reserve, on Manitoulin Island, remembers hearing cautionary stories about Gookooko'oo as a child. Smith writes, "Mothers would frequently tell children that if they did not behave, gookookhoo would carry them away." Robert E. Ritzenthaler and Pat Ritzenthaler (1983[1970]:34) also describe Anishinaabe parents telling their children that if they do not go to sleep right away at night or if they misbehave, Gookooko'oo will take them away from their parents. They add, "An owl mask effectively intimidated young children, and most Chippewa children still fear the owl." Sister Bernard Coleman, Ellen Frogner, and Estelle Eich, who did research in northern Minnesota, say that some of their consultants were told as children that if they did not behave Gookooko'oo would take them. They add, "We were told how important it was for children to be taught to be quiet, for sometimes it could be a matter of life or death" (1961:2, 39).

Kenneth Johnson says that his parents often told him, "*Giishpin gabe-ayi'ii dibikak goshkoziyan*," 'If you stay up too long at night,' "*Gookooko'oo giga-biina'og otawagaang*," 'the owl will hear you and put you in his ear.'[7] This same warning, that Gookooko'oo will put a child in his ear, appears in the written literature (Hilger 1951:58; Coleman, Frogner, and Eich 1961:39). When I asked Johnson why the warning specifically said that Gookooko'oo would put a child in his ear, he said that this was not something about which he wanted to talk because there are still people who use Gookooko'oo in ways that could harm us. I intended to simply leave it at that, and not write too much about this statement in my paper. However, I found a story told to Blackwood (1929:319, 342–343) by an Anishinaabe woman "at the village of Red Lake," which gives an example of this threat happening to a child. Since the purpose of this research is to help my fellow

7. All of these teachings are part of our Ojibwe language curriculum materials. They were created and translated by Kenneth Johnson, Sr. and transcribed by Wendy Makoons Geniusz.

Anishinaabeg and myself understand our beliefs about Gookooko'oo, I think it is important to mention this story and the details because the idea that even a large owl could put a human "in his ear" and take that person away, might sound crazy or even humorous to someone looking at this teaching from a colonized, or non-Native perspective. Dismissing or laughing at what is obviously a widely held teaching among our people will not help us conduct meaningful research. In this story, which Blackwood titles, "The Story of Redfeather," a little boy, who lived with his great-grandfather and was disrespectful toward many animals. He killed smaller animals and wasted them, causing the larger animals to go hungry. At night he made so much noise that he scared away the rabbits and small birds upon which of the larger birds feed. Gookooko'oo, crane, and other birds met and decided to punish him. Gookooko'oo sat outside Redfeather's home and called. Hearing Gookooko'oo, Redfeather's great-grandfather called him inside, but Redfeather said he wanted to shoot Gookooko'oo. The narrator continues, "Then grandfather said,—'The owl has large ears. He puts rabbits and other food in them. He might catch you too. You'd better come in and go to sleep.'" Unmindful of this warning, Redfeather shot Gookooko'oo, but as soon as he shot his arrow, Gookooko'oo flew away with him. Gookooko'oo gave Redfeather to his children, telling them that they should eat him when they grew larger. Gookooko'oo also invited the other birds' babies to a feast of Redfeather when they grew. Redfeather's great-grandfather asked for help to find his grandson, and the spirits told him that he should give a feast and ask Gookooko'oo to bring his grandchild back to him. The story concludes, "So he did, and Redfeather was returned to his great-grandfather, and he promised that he would never again misuse the food that Manabazoo made for the birds."

These childhood teachings are not meant to instill in a person a lifelong fear of everything having to do with Gookooko'oo. The story about Redfeather, for example, is clearly not meant to make children fear all gookooko'oog. It is a teaching story, used to make children behave by warning them of the consequences if they do not. The summary given here, and the short version, which does not cover even two full pages, Blackwood presents, are mere outlines of a story which a skilled storyteller could make into an animated, bone-chilling performance, sure to terrify unruly children into submission, or at least convince them of the importance of being respectful to other beings.

Even the song about Gookooko'oo, mentioned previously, the chorus of which says, "gookookoo ningosaa," 'owl I fear,' does not seem to be a device used to instill a fear of Gookooko'oo into those singing or listening to it. Presentations of this song differ slightly in verses, but each has the same words for the chorus, and each presentation contains some explanation about this being a children's song. The melodies also differ slightly, but none of them are mournful or sound foreboding. Descriptions of when this song is sung also do not suggest that it is meant to warn people about dangerous gookooko'oog. For example, narrator Edwin Burrows (rec., n.d.) describes this song saying, "This is one of the most popular and widely heard of Indian songs today, perhaps because it's an old one, perhaps also because it has become a favorite among children. Formerly, perhaps, a mother sang it, 'the hoot owl will get ya if you don't watch out,' or words to that effect." Frances Densmore (1910:135) writes that Henry Selkirk sang this song for her, and that Selkirk had written it as a child. She continues:

> The circumstances were as follows: His mother had gone to a neighbor's, leaving him alone in the wigwam. He became very much afraid of the owl, which is the particular terror of all small Indians, and sang this song. It was just after sugar making and the wigwams were placed near together beside the lake. The people in the other wigwams heard his little song. The melody was entirely new and it attracted them so that they learned it as he sang. The men took it up and used it in their moccasin games. For many years it was used in this way, but he was always given the credit of its composition.

Keewaydinoquay (rec., n.d.) says, "If there are any songs all Indian people know, these are the owl songs they learn as little children." According to Keewaydinoquay, it is said that the woman who was taken away by the gookooko'oog as a child, a story discussed later in this paper, taught these songs, including the one with the chorus, "gookookoo ningosaa," 'I fear the owl,' to her children. These songs have been passed on through the generations.

Some teachings even warn parents not to use Gookooko'oo to scare children. Hilger (1951:58) notes, "On the Lac Courte Orielle Reservation some parents hesitated to threaten children with the owl, for 'long ago an owl did come and get a child.'" Similarly, Smith (1995:41n10) adds that the parents on Manitoulin were taught not to use Gookooko'oo too often

as a threat because this might cause this being to take the child from his or her parents.

Among the warnings to parents not to use Gookooko'oo as a threat for ill-behaved children, is a story about a little girl who was taken away by Gookooko'oo because her mother kept using the Gookooko'oo as a means of scaring her child. Various versions of this story appear in the written literature. This makes sense, as it was originally an oral story, which would change slightly depending on who was telling it and under what circumstances it was being told. My mother told it to me several times as a child, and she learned it from Keewaydinoquay who called this story, "The Girl Who Was Raised by Owls." It is a story told in communities across Anishinaabe country, as evidenced by the different places these recorded versions were gathered. Coleman, Frogner, and Eich (1961:39–41) gathered two versions of this story from communities in northern Minnesota, and they add that most of their consultants remembered hearing this story from their mothers or grandmothers. Foss (1996) presents a version told by Rose Foss, an Anishinaabe woman from Mille Lacs.[8] Keewaydinoquay (rec., n.d.), from Lower Michigan, also tells this story.[9] In this story, a child is misbehaving, and her mother tells her that if she does not behave, Gookooko'oo will come and take her. Finally Gookooko'oo does come and take the child. In some versions the mother puts her outside of their lodge at night to scare her, and the girl is missing when the mother goes back to get her (Foss 1996; Keewaydinoquay n.d.; Coleman, Frogner, and Eich 1961, version 1) and in another version, the girl is simply taken (Coleman, Frogner, and Eich 1961, version 2). After some years, the exact number varies, the girl is returned to her people. She is in good health, and someone has obviously taken good care of her. In one version she tells her mother about living in a tree with Gookooko'oo and being fed lots of meat (Treuer). In some recorded versions teachings are added to the end of this story. Coleman, Frogner, and Eich add that the mother never again used Gookooko'oo as a means of scaring her children. My mother ends this story the same way when she tells it to me. In her recorded version, Keewaydinoquay includes

8. Treuer presents a retranscribed version originally transcribed by Gilles Delisle, a linguist, in 1970. Foss dictated this story, along with a few others, to Delisle (54).

9. The only version in the Ojibwe language I have found is Treuer 1996, and this version is quite similar to the English versions. The version cited by Keewaydinoquay is an audio recording, although she did produce a written version as well.

some Anishinaabe cultural teachings, which are said to have originated with the people described in this story.

The written versions of this story appear to be short summaries of what could be a lengthy story told to an audience. None of them are more than a couple of paragraphs. I have one audio recording of Keewaydinoquay telling this story, and her version is longer, approximately one hour, and adds more details than any of the other versions I found. As Keewaydinoquay tells the story, the child has an abusive mother who constantly criticizes and threatens her by saying that Gookooko'oo will come and claw her eyes out of her head or come and steal her spirit if she does not do her work better. The gookooko'oog can hear all of this, and they are okay with her telling the child if she is not quiet the gookooko'oog will hear her because that is something lots of Anishinaabeg say to their children, but they are not happy when they hear the mother saying that the gookooko'oog are bad or that they would hurt the child. The gookooko'oog send warnings to the mother to curb her behavior, but the mother turns these warnings into more threats for her daughter. Finally, after being dissatisfied with the way she waited on some guests, the mother orders her daughter to spend the night outside under an old dead tree. The girl obeys. The gookooko'oog are so angry at the mother's actions that they send a large group of gookooko'oog to carry the girl to their home. As in the other versions of the story, the gookooko'oog care for the child very well, and they eventually return her to the Anishinaabeg. In this version, however, they find her a husband, a young Anishinaabe chief. To bring her to her husband, the gookooko'oog dress her in various items that they gather from different Anishinaabeg. The owners of these items, and others, who want the items for themselves, snatch the clothes and jewelry off the woman as she walks with her new husband. The gookooko'oog bring her a cloak made of their feathers, which she wore while living with them, and when the people see gookooko'oog swooping in to clothe this woman, they begin to call the girl a "sorceress." They say this "owl sorceress" is using the young chief and "there is trouble ahead" for both the young chief and the tribe. Keewaydinoquay reports that the story ends happily for everyone, except for those who foretold trouble, which they did find but in "their own malcontent and greed." In general this time is remembered as a time of "peace and harmony for all the people."

As with the story about Redfeather, the story about the gookooko'oog who take the little girl is clearly not a story told to make children terrified of

all gookooko'oog. It is a teaching story, which could be altered, depending on the circumstances, to warn children to behave properly, to warn parents against inappropriate ways to raise children, or to warn parents not to project this terrifying image of a kidnapper on Gookooko'oo. Neither these stories, the warnings given to children, nor the child's song about fearing Gookooko'oo are meant to make children afraid of this being for the rest of their lives.

Johnson says that he is worried about how Anishinaabe parents teach their children to fear Gookooko'oo. In our conversation, he related the warning that his parents gave him as a child about Gookooko'oo, but he also said that he now thinks that this is a dangerous message to give to children. Johnson says:

> Noongom idash gii-gichi-ayaa'aawiyaan mii ezhi-waabandamaan maji-gikinoon'amaadiwinan onowe. Aapaji baatanenidoon gegoo gebisingin gii-abinoojiinwiyaan. Miinawaa owe bezhig: giishpin noondawad waagosh migid gii-tibikak mii wii-maanakamagak imaa ishkoniganing . . . Onawen onji-idiwinan aapaji gidibanimigonan giishpin inendaman apane igowek.
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> As I am old now, I see it as a negative teaching. There are so many things, that these negative teachings had effect on my life as a young child. There are so many, like one about a fox, if you hear a fox at night that is a message about a death in the community or something is going to happen in the community . . .

These superstitions can very much control you if you have your mind set to it.

Johnson's words certainly describe the deep fear of Gookooko'oo, which I have seen in many Anishinaabeg. As with the myth of Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin portraying Gookooko'oo as a terrifying being, other fears of Gookooko'oo appear to be myths, which misrepresent our teachings.

Myth: Gookooko'oo Is a Bad Omen that Brings Bad Luck
Fact: Other Beings Appropriate Gookooko'oo to Cause Misfortune

I have heard my fellow Anishinaabeg say that Gookooko'oo is an ill omen bringing bad luck or even death. There are stories and teachings about Gookooko'oo bringing misfortune, but looking closely at these stories, one can see that it is not Gookooko'oo, but beings who disguise themselves as gookooko'oog, who are actually bringing misfortune in these instances.

There are stories throughout Anishinaabe country and written research on the Anishinaabe of human beings using their spiritual power to force animals to perform certain deeds for them.

Gookooko'oo is sometimes used for this purpose, but so are other animals. For instance, Rebecca Kugel describes an event that took place in February 1839 on the Fond du Lac Ojibwe Reservation. At that time a cow belonging to Reverend Edmund Franklin Ely, a missionary on the reservation, charged a young man, Makwawaian. According to Kugel's interpretation, the Ojibwe saw this incident as Ely, a man with malevolent spiritual powers, using the cattle to do his will. Kugel (1994:232–233) writes, "The Ojibwa had a healthy respect for the abilities of the spiritually powerful to turn that power to evil ends, and they were certain that people who abused spiritual power relied on certain animals to help injure other people. Bears, for instance, were suspect, as were owls." In the case of the cow and in cases involving gookooko'oog, the animals are not acting of their own accord; some human controls their actions.

When humans use Gookooko'oo for malevolent purposes, often a living animal is not even involved. Whipple remembers hearing what she thought was a gookooko'oo at night when she was staying with her uncle. The family brought a medicine man to the house, and he said that someone was jealous of her uncle because he was "well off." The being they heard was bad medicine, which this person had sent. The medicine man had a young man shoot the gookooko'oo. Whipple was just a child at the time, and neither she nor any other children were allowed to see the gookooko'oo. Those who did see it said that when they opened the being they saw that it was just skin filled with medicine. She concludes, "that wasn't a real owl." Densmore (1979[1929]:114) writes: "The skin of an owl was removed, dried, and filled with 'medicine.' It was said this was sent through the air to the lodge of the person to be affected." She says that one person told her that many years before their interview her uncle shot a gookooko'oo, which was on his tipi poles. Densmore writes, "He found it was a dried owl skin and had medicine on its face; then he knew it had been sent to cause starvation in his lodge. He threw the owl skin in the fire and they experienced no harm from it." In an earlier publication, Densmore (1910:105–106) presents a song to be used by someone sending an owl skin to another person. She explains this song comes from an old Midewiwin man, who composed it to help a starving man and his wife who

came to his door. This couple had failed to share their game with all the old men of their village, so they were being starved. To help them he sang this song, which Densmore presents, and sent a stuffed gookooko'oo to the camp where those who were starving the couple lived. "The owl carried the bad medicine and sat at the head of their camp that night, but they did not know it. This owl was just the dried skin of an owl with the medicine inside of it." He sent the man and his wife home with medicine so that they could get close enough to animals to hunt them. Densmore explains that the group of people now plagued by the owl skin could no longer get food, and they nearly starved, but the man and his wife had plenty of meat.

Hilger (1951:121) presents a story she heard from a man living at L'Anse about Gookooko'oo bringing hunters bad luck, but it is clear that the being bringing this misfortune is not a living animal at all. The man says that this event took place about twenty years before his interview with Hilger. He was working across the bay in a place with lots of deer. A medicine man lived near this place. The man says he hunted daily, but he never encountered a deer, although he often saw their tracks. He continues, "Somebody told me that that medicine man was using 'bad medicine' on me." The man noticed that whenever he was in the woods, a gookooko'oo would swoop ahead of him and sit on a tree limb. When he caught up to the gookooko'oo, it would fly farther ahead, always staying on his right. He shot the being, and it fell to the ground. He says:

> I ran up to it and stepped on it. A noise like a human cry came from it three times; it looked at me with its two eyes wide open and died. I stooped to pick it up: there was nothing there except the hide and feathers. I took these home and burnt them. After that I never failed to get deer. Two or three days after I shot the owl, the medicine man took sick. He asked to see me, but I wouldn't go. Four days after that he died. That medicine man had taken the shape of an owl and injured my hunting.

The creature described in this story apparently did bring a hunter bad luck, but it was not a gookooko'oo, only the remains of one used by a human. Sister Laurina Levi (1978:42–43) presents a story, in which the human who uses gookooko'oo in a similar way also dies.[10] In this story the person using

10. Levi does not say who told her any of the stories in her collection, but she does say that many of these stories were told to "teachers of Chippewa Indians on the Bad River Reservation in Odanah, Wisconsin." She adds: "Among the narrators were Joe Wilson, Marie Livingston, Robert Wilson and Caroline Parker." (1978:5).

the gookooko'oo sends it to bring illness to a young boy. When the boy shoots the gookooko'oo, once again, he only finds feathers. Levi continues, "Not long after this incident, an old man, an enemy of the boy's family, was accidentally shot. The Indians believed that if the object sent out by an Indian medicine man was injured or killed in this instance, the owl, the sender would suffer the same fate as the object." In all of these examples, it is not Gookooko'oo who brings misfortune, but a human using this being. It should also be noted, that in many of these examples, those affected are able to correct the situation.

The name sometimes used to refer to Gookooko'oo may suggest that this being is manipulated by other beings. Hewson (1992:234–235) argues that the reason the owl sometimes goes by the same name as the wiindigo in Algonquian languages is that the root of this word really refers to a being who is called upon by a higher power.[11] In his argument, he uses the proto-Algonquian root: **wi:nt*, as in the reconstructed TI verb **wi:ntamwa* "he names it" and the reconstructed TA verb **wi:ntamawe:wa*, "he names it to/for him, he tells it to him." He gives examples of this root in several Algonquian languages, including Ojibwe, for which he has *wi:ntank*, "he names it." Then he brings in the example of the inverse marker **ekw*, as in the Fox verb, **ekwe:w*, which Bloomfield glosses as "by higher powers." This inverse marker appears in other Algonquian languages including Ojibwe: *wi:ntama:ko:we:wisi*, "to be informed in a dream." Hewson concludes, "This opens up the possibility of proposing that the etymology of this word for owl and scary figure is **wi:nt-ekwe:w-a*, an animate that is called or named by higher powers—in the case of the Windigo, driven by demonic powers. To call the owl by this name may relate to the legend, widespread on this continent, that persons about to die hear the owl call their name. If the owl is itself named or called by higher powers, that

11. Others have looked at the correlation between the names for wiindigo and owl, including Dahlstrom (2003) who suggests that the monster version of the word is older and can be traced to proto-Algonquian, but that it switched to the owl version as some Algonquian groups, such as Meskwaki, Miami-Illinois, and Cheyenne, moved south, and encountered the screech owl, who does not live in the arctic and who can have cannibalistic tendencies. She also argues that in the south these groups did not have the harsh winters of the artic, and thus the older meaning of the word (that of the cannibal monster) was forgotten and replaced with the newer meaning of screech owl. Dahlstrom does note, however, that in northern Algonquian languages, such as Ojibwe, the monster version of the word persists.

may well indicate its role as the agent of those powers." Hewson's theory might pertain to humans using Gookooko'oo to attack other humans, but in that case one would have to assume that those humans were of a "higher power" than Gookooko'oo, which would be debatable. His theory definitely suggests the possibility of Gookooko'oo being manipulated by other beings, including ones who wish to send messages.

Myth: Gookooko'oo Causes Death

Fact: Gookooko'oo Brings Messages and Helps Those Who Have Died

Some Anishinaabeg believe that if they see or hear Gookooko'oo, they will not only suffer "bad luck," but they or somebody they know will die. Keewaydinoquay (rec., 1985) began a class lecture on this topic saying, "You may have heard about owl being associated with death, and that's true. But not, that is for the Midwestern people, in the sense that it has been assumed by many anthropologists, and [as it] is now being assumed, because of the anthropologists, by the Midwestern Indians themselves." Keewaydinoquay says she knew an Indian[12] man who shot thirty-two gookooko'oog on his property because he said he heard a gookooko'oo call his family's name, and he thought that if he shot all the gookooko'oog on his property he could stop someone in his family from dying. She adds that by doing this the man was not thinking of all the ways the gookooko'oog were not going to be able to help his family during the coming winter because he had killed them. He had upset the balance of the place where he was living by preventing the gookooko'oog from keeping down the rodent population, thereby putting in jeopardy any food the family had stored.

Nothing from the research I have done suggests that teachings from Anishinaabeizhitwaawin say that Gookooko'oo causes death, but this being can bring messages about death. Whipple says that there is one specific cry that Gookooko'oo makes, which she describes as a screech, which warns of a death in the community. Paul Buffalo, also from Leech Lake, agrees that it is only a certain cry that Gookooko'oo and the screech owl make, which is

12. In the recording Keewaydinoquay does not identify this man as Anishinaabe, but she does say he is an "Indian," and in her other recordings, this identification usually means another Anishinaabe. From the story, it is clear that the man is from a tribe that Keewaydinoquay knows does not teach its people to fear every owl.

a bad warning (Roufs 1997–2008:chapter34). Keewaydinoquay (rec., 1985) agrees that the regular cry of Gookooko'oo does not mean death. She adds:

> Now I am very well aware that anthropologists and even some of our own people say that when you hear an owl it means that someone is going to die. Well, of course somebody is going to die. If you hear a robin somebody is going to die, and if you hear a sparrow somebody is going to die, and if you hear a rooster somebody is going to die, and if you don't hear anything, somebody is still going to die.

She says that people die all the time. She adds that if someone was supposed to die every time we heard Gookooko'oo, then for people living in areas populated by a lot of gookooko'oog, "we would have died seventeen times a day." She continues, "Where I live, you hear owls all the time . . . by now I'd be dead 670 times at least." Although not always acting in this capacity, Gookooko'oo can be a messenger, but this being does not perpetrate the events in the warning.

Gookooko'oo helps those who have passed on get to the Other Side, but that also does not mean that this being brings death. The story Victor Barnouw (1977:13–46) recorded in 1944, which was told by a Midewiwin leader from Lac du Flambeau, to whom Barnouw gives the pseudonym "Tom Badger," describes some of this being's association with death. In this story, Badger describes how Nenabozho's brother made the road to the Sprit World (1977:18). Nenabozho's brother placed four *manidoog*, "spirits," on this road. The first was Otter and the second was Gookooko'oo. The narrator continues:

> The Indians say that the owl's eyes are like a looking glass, and he looks just awful. When he speaks of the owl at the last supper with a dead person, sitting next to the coffin, the Mide priest says, 'When you see your grandfather's eyes shining like glass, don't be afraid of him. Just go up and offer him your tobacco. He'll take it.' They don't say 'the owl.' They speak of him as 'your grandfather.'

Hoffman (1891:171) provides a drawing of Midewiwin scroll showing Gookooko'oo on the road of the dead. Keewaydinoquay explains that, like all beings, Gookooko'oo has a physical purpose, which is to keep the local ecology in balance by eating rodents, and a spiritual purpose, which is to call in the night so that those spirits that have missed the spirit trail can find it. She adds that rather than saying, "Hoo, Hoo," Gookooko'oo really

says, "Here, here; come here; here is the trail; here is the way" (rec., 1985; 1985:33).

Some of the warnings Gookooko'oo brings can help us avoid disaster. When concluding the story about the girl who was taken by the gookooko'oog, Keewaydinoquay says that once the woman went back to the Anishinaabeg, gookooko'oog kept continual vigil around the village, and always warned the Anishinaabeg if another tribe was going to attack. She adds that when the woman's husband was chief, one Gookooko'oo always sat on his shoulder and gave him advice when he was in council meetings. According to Buffalo, it is possible to avoid the misfortune predicted by Gookooko'oo or by some other sign. He explains that if someone sees an ominous warning, that person should go to a "Spiritual Man," who will tell the person what he or she has to do to correct a situation so that something bad does not occur. Buffalo says:

> Because of your lack of something, you see these warnings. You're lacking something. If you get ahead of it, then you can avoid it, by using the Indian method. He'll tell you just what to do, most generally. The spiritualist, spiritualist Indian, that reads it, he'll tell you about just almost everything . . .
>
> There's always a meditation that you can use on that. There is some way to try to avoid that message. Those that understand the signs should try to have a feast over it, and talk it over, and get the message to go away. The sign is just a warning. If you recognize that warning, it may help you. But sometimes you get such a short notice that you don't have time to get there. You don't always have *time* to talk with a spiritual doctor. So the best things is to take interest to those warnings all along.

Buffalo adds that during the spring, when the gookooko'oog are mating, one should not assume their calls are warnings because at that time gookooko'oog are busy taking care of their own business (Roufs 1997–2008:chapter34). Keewaydinoquay (rec., 1985; 1985:33) says that Gookooko'oo can bring messages from those who have passed on to the next cycle. In her class lecture she gives two examples of this having happened to her. Recognizing Gookooko'oo's role as a messenger is important because one of our people may indeed hear Gookooko'oo call his or her name, but Gookooko'oo might be bringing that person a message or trying to warn him or her of something which can be prevented. If one simply fears Gookooko'oo because he or she heard that "an owl means bad luck," then that person will not understand and will not listen to a message brought by this being.

Myth: Gookooko'oo Only Interacts with Us in Negative Ways
Fact: Gookooko'oo Can Be Our Benefactor

In some stories Gookooko'oo interacts with others in a completely neutral role, and in others this being helps or acts like a guardian to other beings. In such stories Gookooko'oo brings no misfortune to anyone. In a version of the story about Nenabozho being swallowed by Name, the Great Sturgeon, told by Delia Oshogay from Lac Court Oreilles and collected by Friedl in 1942, Nenabozho encounters a gookooko'oo while in the belly of Name (Barnouw 1977:77–90). They escape together, along with a squirrel and Nenabozho gives them both some of the fish to eat. Walker (1959:84–86) retells a story which she titles, "Why the Rabbit Has Long Ears,"[13] and in this story Gookooko'oo says that he has some things to help the animals, so he calls a meeting. Rabbit refuses to come, so Gookooko'oo has Rabbit's ears grow until the rabbit relents. In the end, Rabbit's ears have changed, but Gookooko'oo did this for Rabbit's own good, so he would receive what Gookooko'oo had to give. Keewaydinoquay (rec., n.d.) briefly lists a series of things in Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin which are said to have come from Gookooko'oo and may have been first brought to the Anishinaabe by the girl who was taken by the gookooko'oog. She says that the "owl stomp" is a favorite dance among the people: "In olden times it was extremely popular and no celebration or joyous ceremony was complete without it." She describes it as having "unusual" steps and a rhythm different from other Anishinaabe dances. She continues with her list saying, "Most of us know about the practice of gaining owl sight." According to Keewaydinoquay, people today do not bother to learn this, but "we all know that we can go to certain traditional elders with a gift of tobacco and the request to learn how to see in the dark." People with owl sight never get lost in the night and are excellent hunters.

Gookooko'oo is also associated with things that are very important to Anishinaabeizhitwaawin and *Anishinaabe-bimaadiziwin*, 'Anishinaabe way

13. According to her own account, Walker is a non-Native writer who grew up with the Anishinaabeg. Her father was the pastor of the Methodist Church in Charlevoix, Michigan (1959:203). Her text is written for children, and does contain degrading statements about Indians, but I have heard several of the stories in this book from my fellow Anishinaabeg. Walker says that she heard "Why the Rabbit Has Long Ears," from an Anishinaabe woman who she met on the beach near her father's church (1959:203).

of life.' Gookooko'oo can be a helper or guardian spirit. Johnson says this is a better way to think of this being:

> Gaawiin igo memwech daa-izhiwebasinoon. Ingii-noondawaa gichi-Anishinaabe gii-tazhimaad gookooko'oon maagizhaa gaye gookooko'oo daa-niibaa-binesi genawaabamaad anishiinaaben gii-tibikak.
>
> It doesn't necessarily have to be negative. I heard one elder say the owl can be positive because it can be the eagle of the night watching over people.

Other research agrees with this statement. Michelson (1911:249–250) presents a story, told by Julius Brown and Big Bear, both from White Earth, in which Gookooko'oo helps Nenabozho. In this story Nenabozho worked with Gookooko'oo to fight an enemy. Nenabozho was staying at the enemy's lodge, and he asked Gookooko'oo "to come hooting around there in the morning." Gookooko'oo did this, and Nenabozho ran out of the dwelling feigning that he would shoot Gookooko'oo. His enemy followed him, and Nenabozho turned and shot the enemy instead. This started a daylong battle, which Nenabozho won. Then Nenabozho released Gookooko'oo and all the other animals captured by his enemy.

In a story told by Pete Martin from Lac Court Oreilles, collected by Ritzenthaler in 1942, an Anishinaabe man has Gookooko'oo as a guardian spirit (Barnouw 1977:140–141). In this story, another being challenged the Anishinaabe to a contest to see which one of them could live after spending the night in a hole dug in a frozen lake. The narrator says, "About midnight that fellow was freezing, but then a big owl, his guardian spirit, came down and said, 'Grandson, are you cold?'" With the help of Gookooko'oo the Anishinaabe won the contest. Levi (1978:41–42) presents a story in which three Gookooko'oog bring medicines to a group of other animals, and, presumably, the Anishinaabeg. In this story, three gookooko'oog cousins pose as men and live in the woods. When two of them overthrow a wrestler, who has stopped one of the cousins from hunting for food, they take the wrestler's medicine bag. The narrator continues, "Then the owl-cousins gave a feast for all the animals of the forest. During the feast they divided the herbs and roots of the medicine bag among the guests. Each herb and root received the name of the bird or beast who had accepted it."

Within the Midewiwin, Gookooko'oo also acts as a guardian. According to a story recorded by William Jones (1917:546–559), when

Nenabozho started the Midewiwin he called on Gookooko'oo as one of the beings who should help the soon to be created humans conduct Midewiwin ceremonies. Gookooko'oo is a symbol for degrees[14] in the Midewiwin, and the image of Gookooko'oo can be seen on Midewiwin scrolls (Hilger 1951:65; Blessing1977:78–79; Hoffman 1892:240, 255–256). If Gookooko'oo has acted like a benefactor to the Anishinaabeg, then one cannot say that this being is necessarily bad or a bringer of ill fortune. If Gookooko'oo is important to the Midewiwin, something which is so integral to Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin and Anishinaabe-bimaadiziwin, then this being cannot be considered evil.

Myth: The Written Record Gives Many Examples of Negative Anishinaabe Teachings About Gookooko'oo

Fact: Abbreviated Versions of Teachings in the Written Record Lead to Further Misconceptions About Gookooko'oo

In the written record, there are abbreviated teachings about Gookooko'oo which have the capability of causing further misconceptions. Some of these reiterate the myths discussed in this paper, but they do not give enough detail for those reading them to fully understand the teaching being discussed. Along with the one previously described, Hilger (1951:121) presents another story about Gookooko'oo bringing bad luck to a hunter. She writes, "Meeting an owl in the woods, said a L'Anse informant, is a bad omen: 'I was out hunting a few years ago with a man from Flambeau . . . who insisted on shooting an owl which happened to be sitting on a branch along our way; not killing it, he said, would bring bad luck.'" Readers receive no more information, so they do not know if the owl is real or not. They also do not know if the hunter had heard stories about owl skins being used to prevent a hunter from shooting game and simply assumed that all owls around him should be suspect. After presenting the story about Gookooko'oo acting as guardian to an Anishinaabe, Barnouw (1977:141–142) writes, "The hero of this story has an owl for a guardian spirit. Normally, the owl is regarded with fear, but we will find other cases of people having fearsome creatures as guardian spirits. Owls are associated with sorcery and death

14. Sources do not agree on which degree, and Hoffman says that Gookooko'oo is a symbol for two different degrees.

and generally seem to be rather uncanny." He gives three examples. In one, an Anishinaabe man sees a sleeping gookooko'oo wake suddenly. The narrator continues, " 'I couldn't get my eyes off the owl,' said the hunter, 'I felt something hot go through me, and I felt weak. Then I walked away and could still feel those eyes on my back like a hot rag. I thought of what my grandfather used to tell me about owl. I haven't gone near one since.' " (1977:141–142). In this example, readers see one man bothered by one gookooko'oo; they do not have enough details to fully assess the situation. One does not know, for example, what the man's grandfather said about Gookooko'oo, and whether or not these teachings were about actual animals or about gookooko'oog being manipulated by some other beings. In Barnouw's other examples, readers have clearer evidence suggesting that the gookooko'oog are acting under another being's control. In both of these examples an Anishinaabe person sees a gookooko'oo hanging around his or her home, and when the being is killed, an old man in the village also dies. Barnouw ends this commentary with a brief statement: "It will be remembered that an owl is encountered on the road to the other world." That is true, but again this does not suggest that Gookooko'oo is to be feared, as this being assists Anishinaabeg on their way to the Spirit World. Koozma Tarasoff (1980:19–20) also makes a questionable abbreviated statement about Gookooko'oo. He writes, "The presence of an owl on one's house is looked upon as a bad omen, according to several Cree and Saulteaux informants. 'You might get some evil or you might lose someone from your house.' " He just gives us a summary of what a group of people told him, that gookooko'oog can bring bad luck. Readers do not even know who gave him this information. All Tarasoff (1980:vi–vii) tells us is that he gathered this information from elders in southeastern Saskatchewan over a period of twenty months. He follows this statement, by saying that Felix, a medicine man, said that he did not fear owls, adding, "I never have bad luck in my life." He continues, "Peter George, however, contends that some owls on the roof at night are a bad omen. 'Somebody put it there to make a noise at night.' " Although these are all very brief, the statement by Felix does suggest that not everyone in these communities fears Gookooko'oo. The statement by George seems to counter Felix's statement, but the phrasing "somebody put it there," suggests that this gookooko'oo is not acting of its own accord. That assumption might not come readily to most readers,

however, as the whole passage really seems to point to Gookooko'oo being a harbinger of bad things.

Even our own people write abbreviated statements, and others use them as evidence of Anishinaabe cultural beliefs about Gookooko'oo. Michael Pomedli (2002:47–48) begins discussing the issue of Gookooko'oo being a sign of bad luck with a story told by Howard Corbiere. This story is particularly interesting because it was written and presented by Anishinaabe people through the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, an organization based on Manitoulin Island. Yet, as Pomedli rightly notes, this publication suggests that Gookooko'oo is a sign of bad luck. The first statement about Gookooko'oo is ambiguous: "The Ojibwe people call the owl ko-ko-ko, because that is the kind of sound he makes. They believed that he possessed magical powers, which were not always used for good" (Corbiere 1977:2). From this statement, the reader does not know who is using this being's powers. Perhaps a human uses the gookooko'oo to attack another human. The only other statement suggesting that Gookooko'oo brings bad luck is straightforward. The story concludes: "To Ojibwe people the owl is a sign of bad luck—even to this day" (1977:24). With this statement, we have an example of Anishinaabe people saying Gookooko'oo is "bad luck" and writing this statement in a children's book. These individuals clearly wanted their culture represented in this way, but they give no explanation for this statement. This is the last sentence in the book. The story is about a young boy asking his father why the Gookooko'oog can turn their heads all the way around in a circle. The father tells the boy a story about Nenabozho fighting Gookooko'oo. During the fight, Nenabozho twists the head of Gookooko'oo. The narrator continues, "Ever since then, the owl has been able to turn his head all the way around. He can look in front of him and see where he is going. Then he can turn his head backwards and see where he has been. Ojibwe children are warned by their parents never to act like an owl, [*sic!*] because the same thing might happen to them" (Corbiere 1977:22–24). The statement about Gookooko'oo signifying "bad luck" follows this passage. Nothing in the story suggests that Gookooko'oo brings bad luck. Even the statement about Gookooko'oo being able to turn his head around in a circle sounds like a positive asset, rather than something to fear. Children are told not to do this because they may take on this trait of Gookooko'oo, but why would having this trait bring bad luck? Keewaydinoquay (rec., n.d.) argues

that people with some traits from Gookooko'oo are born inapproximately every other generation, and these people are considered fortunate.[15] The story does not explain its final teaching, and, from my experience, that is unusual for Anishinaabe stories. If a teaching is given at the end of the story, that teaching is generally reiterating part of the story. Further, Nenabozho stories are often told over a period of several days. A short one, like the one presented in this book, is often part of a much longer story. If that is the case, perhaps the rest of the story explains this teaching. I have not heard this story myself and have found no other written version of it. Therefore I cannot answer these questions. What I can add, however, is that a statement at the end of a story, like this one, which gives a teaching without any explanation only adds to misconceptions and misinterpretations of Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin. Unfortunately, many of our communities are still caught up in the cycles of colonization and deculturalization, and our own people are making these misconceptions and misinterpretations when they encounter abbreviated teachings. The written record is not our only source of abbreviated teachings. We pass them on ourselves by saying them to one another. Misconceptions and misinterpretations of our culture occur easily when one simply reads, listens to, or gives an abbreviated statement. Without more details, one could easily assume from any of these examples that the Anishinaabeg do indeed think that Gookooko'oo brings bad luck.

Myth: There Is Almost a Universal Fear of Owls Among Indian Peoples

Fact: Many Indian Cultures View Owls in Ways Similar to the Anishinaabe, but Non-Native Cultures Have Teachings About the Importance of Fearing Owls

From my academic colleagues and from Native individuals belonging to other tribes, I have heard that there is an almost universal fear of owls among

15. According to Keewaydinoquay (rec., n.d.), having some owl traits can be considered a great asset. She says that there have been Anishinaabeg with these traits, and other skills learned from Gookooko'oo. Keewaydinoquay says that in approximately every other generation, there is a person born "with copper colored hair and green eyes." 'She continues, "The heads of these persons are remarkably ambiorientated." These individuals glide when they walk; their eyes dilate to see in the dark, and they are "wise beyond their natural years." She concludes by saying that the Anishinaabeg say that in these individuals, the spirits of the girl who was taken by the gookooko'oog and the Anishinaabe man she married "return to encourage the people."

the Native peoples of North America. After looking at the Anishinaabe examples, I started to think that perhaps teachings about other tribal cultures had been misinterpreted or misrepresented as well. In "The Owl and the American Indian," Eddie Wilson (1950) discusses teachings and stories about owls gathered from Native peoples living in many different regions north of Mexico, and these examples suggest that my assumption may be correct. Even when using examples from the same tribe, he demonstrates that teachings about the owl are neither all good nor all bad. In some cases the owl can, under certain circumstances, foretell a coming death, but such an omen can also be undone in some circumstances. Wilson gives examples from several tribes where the owl brings great power to medicine people, including the power to heal. Many tribes consider the owl an important benefactor, and they tell stories about gifts that the owl has made to their people. In his concluding paragraph, Wilson (1950:344) says that these many examples of "a kindly, beneficent aspect of the owl" are frequent, "thus dispelling the idea that the American Indian generally looked upon this creature as a bird of ill omen and evil influence."

Misconceptions and abbreviated teachings about Gookooko'oo do not come from one source, and there is no one way in which they are perpetuated. We certainly see examples in American popular culture of owls bringing ill omen. Non-Native people created many of these pieces of media, but the images and messages in these things are memorable, and could easily influence anyone, especially a young person, from any culture. Perhaps non-Native researchers imposed their own cultural beliefs about Gookooko'oo on their statements about how the Anishinaabe view this being. There are teachings from non-Native cultures about Gookooko'oo being a sign of ill omen. Some of these are quite old, and therefore could be deeply ingrained in non-Native cultures. The writings of Pliny the Elder present one example:

> The eagle-owl is a funereal bird, and is regarded as an extremely bad omen, especially at public auspices; it inhabits deserts and places that are not merely unfrequented but terrifying and inaccessible; a weird creature of the night, its cry is not a musical note but a scream. Consequently when seen in cities or by daylight in any circumstances it is a direful portent; but I know several cases of its having perched on the houses of private persons without fatal consequences. It never flies in the direction where it wants to go, but travels slantwise out of its course. In the consulship of Sextus Palpellius Hister and Lucius Pedanius, an eagle-owl entered the very shrine of the capitol, on account of which a purification of the city was held on March 7th in that year. (1938:315).

In this ancient example, we see clear evidence of one non-Native belief that the owl is a "bad omen." This quote demonstrates that the Romans, a huge influence on contemporary European and American cultures, had the same direful teachings about owls that are attributed to Anishinaabe culture: owls are associated with death; they are bad omens; they should be feared. These are old, well-established beliefs in non-Native cultures. Although we cannot know if they have seeped into or have been projected onto Anishinaabe culture, the similarity exists.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have sought to correct some of the misconceptions commonly associated with Gookooko'oo. That said, I do not want readers to conclude that the problem with these beliefs about Gookooko'oo is that they claim this being is all bad, or that I am claiming that Gookooko'oo is all good. The dichotomy of good and bad is far too simplistic in this case. I have argued that people misrepresent Anishinaabe teachings when they say that Gookooko'oo is evil or causes death, but that the connection of Gookooko'oo (the plural of this word is formed by adding suffix -g) to both of these things attests to this being's great power. Power of itself is neither good nor bad, but it can be dangerous, especially when misused or misunderstood. Whatever the origin of these misconceptions of Gookooko'oo, whether it is the abbreviated writings of non-Native researchers, abbreviated teachings we pass on to one another, the media, or a combination these sources, everyone needs to stop perpetuating them. By fearing Gookooko'oo, we disregard a powerful being who could help us.

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