Pakwâciskwew, the Wilderness Woman, as she is known in English, is one of the few female other-than-human beings in Northern Algonquian cosmologies. Once considered by these Aboriginal peoples an important figure encountered by men on their dream quests, today she has slipped almost into oblivion. She appears briefly, if at all, in published work and apparently only a few elders remember her stories. But there are still those alive today who have heard her sing. She is sometimes associated with a distinctive flower scent. And some stories tell of men who felt the sting of her powers when they have been unprepared to deal with her.

From the earliest years, young Northern Algonquian boys (and sometimes girls) were oriented, by their parents, grandparents, and other elders, to the idea that, in their teen years, they would embark on at least one vision quest. Fundamental to these worldviews was the idea that natural phenomena and characters in Northern Algonquian cosmologies (other-than-human beings) had a very real existence. Many of these entities were patrons of important human institutions, such as the wabano (medicine lodge). These vision quests—where young men fasted and retreated into the bush in isolation to dream—were the traditional occasions upon which dream blessings from spiritual beings were granted. (Women did not often undertake the same vision quests, although they were often encouraged to search for visions while sequestered in their menstrual huts—isolated dwellings into which girls and women were ushered during their menses, a time when they were possessed of too much power to be around others.) The collective term for the spiritual entities discussed here is bawaaganag (spirit or dream helpers)—also
recollec ting

referred to by early scholars such as A. Irving Hallowell as pawaganak). Overall, the bawaaganag were benevolent and, through dream revelations, they helped human beings to accomplish things they could never do without assistance (such as being able to hunt extraordinarily well, attain exceptional ability as healers, communicate with other spiritual beings, or have other great powers). If a bawaagan appeared to a young man during his dream fast, that being would bless him and usually act as his guardian spirit and helper throughout his life. Some boys were visited in their dreams only once and by one bawaagan. Others continued to dream and receive more bawaaganag—these boys would grow up to be talented and powerful shamans. And still others dreamed of nothing (a sure sign that they were doomed to mere bare-bones survival in their lifetimes). These fasts were important events, and training began early in the life of a child. They involved making children comfortable with enduring physical deprivation and facing fears. There were serious consequences for visitations from spiritual beings before a boy was prepared, just as there were great blessings awaiting those young people who were strong enough to walk together with these beings. Improper behaviour on the part of a human could cause the bawaaganag to turn on them in anger, so it was very important never to cause offence. Pakwâciskwew was a classic example of this. 2

An examination of oral histories and the few existing written records relating to her help to trace her features, the key attributes of her narratives, and her defining characteristics, and places these narratives within the context of other other-than-humans in Northern Algonquian worldviews. Her rediscovery and reintegration within these worldviews demonstrate that she is, in fact, essential to a well-rounded view of these cosmologies. This examination discusses the Wilderness Woman within the context of other powerful Northern Algonquian female personages, both human and other-than-human, and attempts a positive and sophisticated approach to interpreting this complex being.

Cree scholar and storyteller Louis Bird is from Peawanuk, Ontario. He grew up in the community of Winisk, amid the legends and stories of his people, the Omushkego (Swampy) Crees. Bird explains that Pakwâciskwew was “fearsome and beautiful at the same time. . . . Physically, the way they described her, they say she was the most beautiful woman there was—an indescribably beautiful woman. She could travel, she could take you wherever you wanted to go, and she could show you things that you had never seen. And she could bring very beautiful blissful joy—you
could be so happy with her. It’s like nothing in this world that you had ever experienced. They say it was more than sexual pleasure—it was an indescribable pleasure. Besides being beautiful, she smelled good. So that’s a little description about this woman.”

The Sandy Lake Crees told a story of her counterpart, Bo-kwatch-ikway, which surfaces in Chief Thomas Fiddler’s *Legends from the Forest*, edited by James R. Stevens. Here, too, she is a “gorgeous woman who would have a man’s child immediately after he made love to her.”

Yet the Wilderness Woman had another side. As Maureen Matthews says in her CBC documentary “Mother Earth,” although “you know she’s around when the air fills with the scent of beautiful blossoms,” and she was more beautiful than any mortal woman, she was “jealous and sometimes sexually aggressive. Her presence explains deaths on the trapline.”

As Louis Bird explains, “She could exist in a person’s mind if he developed this during his dream quest. Only those who ventured into that [particular] dream quest could have her. When you prepared to be a mitew [shaman], many things were offered to you, as a young person. . . . Here is a short explanation from an old man. I asked him, ‘What is this Wilderness Woman? Did she actually exist?’ And he says, ‘Actually she came to the mind of a person who was practicing to have that vision—they could visualize her after awhile. In the wilderness during the summer time, before you saw her, you could smell the beautiful fragrance of flowers. And then she materialized there where there’s beautiful flowers—that’s where she appeared to you. And she led you to enjoy that fantasy world where she lived.’ To the people who experienced her, it was something irresistible.”

The art of gaining what Louis Bird calls “mindpower” through dreams was a multiphased process that might take years of training and careful supervision. Children as young as age five would begin to work closely under the guidance of an elder to obtain dreams—conquering fears, learning how to go into a half-sleep to summon visions of animals and win their trust. “Once he could communicate with things like animals, he was on his way. . . . Every animal that he was afraid of he had to summon during these dream quests. . . . By the end of five years he would be comfortable with them all.” In the same way, a boy learned to deal with the elements—the wind, water, fire—all things that could hold danger. An example involved dealing with thunderstorms. Bird says,

People tried to form it in their mind as a being—and this form was called a thunderbird. . . . But it depended on the individual
how much and in what way he could use these powerful forces through his dream quest, or how much he would be able to avoid its dangers. . . . You were trying to create the dream, to contact things by your mind, so you could understand. The person who methodically developed this in his dream quests could not be overcome by anything. 

The key to receiving blessings, and not troubles, from Pakwáciskwew lay in a man’s strength and training. If he was not trained to acquire sufficient mental acuity, or if he dreamed her when he was too old, she could take over his mind, causing him to spend less and less time feeding his family and being a part of the real world. Insanity could ensue, and families could starve. Louis Bird says,

It was a risk to acquire the vision of her on your own—you had to have the guidance of an experienced elder who knew about this thing. If you did it on your own, or if you were too old—over twenty—it was not advisable for you to try to gain much of this thing. Aiming to get to the Wilderness Woman was very dangerous because it required a lot of fasting and many denials of this physical world. You even had to deny yourself your friends. Then you had to get out to the bush for a long time, go through the other regular procedures, and then go to the level where you could reach that point—where you could encounter the Wilderness Woman. If you were alone, you could get the wrong method of contacting this thing in your mind, and the Wilderness Woman became dangerous—over-possessive of you—and you began to lose your mind. You forgot the actual material world. She became the key person in your life, and you forgot about your friends, and your wife, and your children—you just wanted to be in the bush all the time. And every time you were in your home, when you were trying to provide for your family, she would come to you, she would be there. She would come and demand that you go to her. And that’s where it was dangerous because, if you refused, she threatened you, and you got scared.10

A similar pattern appears in Rae’s account of Bo-kwatch-ikway. Man Always Sitting was married. He began leaving his wife for longer and longer periods—one day, then two, then three and four days at a time.
One day his suspicious and curious wife happened upon her husband in a canoe with “a beautiful woman all dressed in red clothes.” The wife turned away and when she looked again, the two were in the channel beside her. The two females confronted each other briefly and “in the wink of an eye,” Bo-kwatch-ikway was gone, her paddle floating in the water. Man Always Sitting told his wife that he and Bo-kwatch-ikway had three children and then, in Rae’s words, he “just quit travelling with Bo-kwatch-ikway after that. Bo-kwatch-ikway was always jealous of a man who got married.” Interestingly, Rae corroborates the idea that this personage did not necessarily bring harm or insanity to every man who encountered her. “My father said he travelled with Bo-kwatch-ikway but they never had any children. He already had two wives and he didn’t want three!”

While Louis Bird describes Pakwâciskwew with gentleness, smiling at her memory when he smells narcissus blooms, and talking of the marvels that she could offer a strong and properly trained man, Stan Cuthand, another Cree scholar, missionary, and educator, is somewhat more astringent:

Pakwâciskwew is a woman in the wilds. Pakwâci means a ‘wild animal,’ not in the sense of ‘wild women’ in today’s world, but wild in the sense that she lives by herself in the forest. There was an Alex Halkett, who used to work north of the La Ronge trap line. He stayed there all winter by himself, and I said, ‘You shouldn’t stay by yourself.’ He says, ‘At night, I could hear a woman singing.’ And I say, ‘That’s a very bad sign. You should have somebody with you.’ ‘Every night,’ he said, ‘I could hear this woman singing.’ And I said, ‘Did you see her?’ He said, ‘No.’ So one winter, he was crossing a stream, and he fell through the ice, and his matches were wet, so he wrapped himself in a blanket and died there, froze to death. That was a bad sign to hear this woman singing. They call it ê-amacisot. Ê-amacisot means that you hear the spirits, which means sometimes death. So that’s the story of Pakwâciskwew.

The Wilderness Woman appears in anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell’s unpublished paper, “Disease and Its Causes.” Hallowell was writing in the 1940s of the Ojibwe people who lived along the Berens River in Manitoba. He called her, Wild Woman, Pigwadjiiikwe, and wrote, “This being
is said to be anthropomorphic in form but to dwell between earth and sky. She has yellow hair, rosy cheeks and is very pretty. Usually men who dream of her never desire to take a wife. She is frightfully jealous and if they do venture to marry it is believed that their wives will sicken and die and the same fate will befall their children.” Hallowell’s description of the Wild Woman as a blonde is interesting and reflects a contemporary perspective that his Ojibwe informants offered Hallowell. When I asked Louis Bird about her hair colour, however, he gently corrected this somewhat narrow description. “Well, of course, her hair was any colour a man wished it—dreamed it—to be.” Hallowell discussed one of his informants’ bachelor status and the conclusions drawn by his neighbours as an explanation. “As a young man one of my informants used to trap alone. People teased him about this saying that he must have Pigwadjikwe for a wife. He resented this very much and claimed that he never dreamed of this pawagan. Thus, the belief in Pigwadjikwe affords an explanation of solitary hunting and trapping on the part of individuals which is a departure from customary practices.”

Robert Brightman also collected some contemporary perspectives of Pakwâciskwew when he raised the question of stories about her from Cree men living at Pukatawagan. The following is a transcript of one story from Brightman’s research notes. The discussion embodies elements of Hallowell’s explanation of solitary hunting and trapping on the part of men and explanation of bachelorhood.

Pakwatiskwiw . . . Pakwaciskwiwiw
Oh, yeah, yeah. You dream about a woman, ah?
I heard that, I seen the guy, too.
He was always living alone.
He had this woman.
He lives with that woman.
Well, when another guy come in, that woman she takes off.

Anyway this guy was fasting with his brother.
He was always alone, this guy.
“Hey, I’ll go with you trapping.” [B. speaking].
No, the guy didn’t want him [as a partner].
But he [B] said to him, “You gotta learn me how to trap.
You’re always alone.”
“Oh,” he said, “okay.”
[At winter trapping camp]
Anyway all the time his brother [the solitary] would wake him up.
“C’mon, let’s go. Get up.”
Always had his plate cooked already.

So . . . they stayed there about a month.
One night he [the brother] woke up.
Oh this was [early?] just in the morning, yeah?
Before he usually . . .
The woman gets up . . . and come and cook in the house.
He heard stove noise [cooking], all that . . .
“My brother’s up early.”
He seen a woman cooking.

“Ah,” he said [to himself], “I didn’t wake . . . I didn’t know them . . .
Somebody came in last night [to the camp] with a family.”
He went back to bed.
Ah, he fall asleep again, and his brother got him up.
“C’mon get up, let’s go.”

He got up and the meal was all ready, every morning like that.
Got up.
He didn’t say a word.
He didn’t see anybody inside, to sleep.
“Ah, shit, they’re gone already?”
They came in late last night, [but] they’re up, they’re gone.”

So he went out and piss.
Check where the dogs were tied up.
The dogs [theirs] were tied up.”
There’s no sign of [supposed visitors’] dogs tied up.
Anyway . . . after daylight he went and check again.
No sign of anything.
Tobaggan or anything.

Well it’s only after that the guy said, “I’ll take you home.
You’ve seen my woman is not cooking for us anymore.
I got to take you home.”
The implication here is that on some subsequent occasion the woman failed to appear, thus prompting the dreamer to get rid of his intrusive \(\text{younger Brother}\).\(^7\)

Louis Bird has, in his own life, experienced the damage that can be wrought by allowing the Wilderness Woman to run rampant:

My great uncle got hurt from the idea of the Wilderness Woman. He did that. He went against the rule. He was told not to follow the old traditional practices because he was already a Christian—he was baptized in a Catholic Church. But when he was young there were many people who were involved in this traditional practice and he was fascinated by it. So he went against the will of his grandfather and parents and tried to condition himself—he was aiming to reach the point where he could get the Wilderness Woman experience. He was not yet a married person. So he managed to get to that stage by himself, without the precautionary measures. And then the time came when he got to be married and had children—that meant a lot of home activities to support his wife and family. But very often he has gone into the bush for long periods, without bringing food home, and he got in trouble with his wife. She says, “How come you’re always in the bush and you don’t bring home the food? You know your kids are now starving.” He didn’t want to say that there was a person out there, because she wouldn’t believe that. And that’s when his wife forced him to stay home with her and look after his children. Apparently the Wilderness Woman came for him—she went to his home and spoke to him from outside his tipi. And he had to make an excuse to run outside so he could see her and try to hush her away. He would tell her, “Wait, wait—I first have to do this thing in my home, for my family.” And then the Wilderness Woman says, “If you want me, you deny them. You come with me to the wilderness and never mind this other stuff.” And that’s where the trouble began. So he was trying to satisfy his real family and the Wilderness Woman—but he didn’t know how to satisfy both. That’s where he began to lose his mind—to go crazy. One time I saw him myself. We were sitting on the shore of the river with other children, my cousins and my sister, just on top of the riverbank. We were playing, and
the old people were coming in a canoe. Then all of a sudden the old man, who was in the front of the boat, began to paddle away from the shore. And he says, “Wilderness Woman! There she is! Wilderness Woman!” And he really went crazy. And the old lady was mad. She says, “What do you mean? These are your grandchildren!” That’s what I mean when I say it was dangerous. He was trying to get away from her then, and he had a big struggle to try to make her disappear from his mind. So what he did was, he turned to Christianity. He prayed more deeply, and all that, and he managed to get away from that, so he was alright. He died as a normal elder. 18

An interesting clue we have regarding Pakwâciskwew lies in Louis Bird’s discussion about people dreaming of humans themselves “to understand their potential benefits and dangers . . . And if a man tried to understand this, he tried to make it into the form of a woman. And that was a very dangerous thing to do. Many men who were about to be fully grown dreamed this stuff because their bodies felt desire and they wanted to know what this was about. So they dreamed about that menstrual blood, and they dreamed it in the form of a woman—the most beautiful woman. And if they won that woman’s love, they thought they had acquired something. But this dream could be very negative and destructive.” 19 Just as Algonquian men dreamed to understand and conquer the mysteries and dangers of nature, personifying animals, birds, fish, and the elements in order to form relationships and friendships, so too did they dream about women. Menstruating women were, of course, seen to have enormous power within Cree and Ojibwe worldviews.

Aside from being a malevolent force, Pakwâciskwew seems to have been important for teaching young men to develop their own strengths and understandings—around women, relationships, puberty, and their own sexuality. She can be equated with any of the other (potentially dangerous) forces of nature that men needed to conquer in order to survive. Certainly, too, the idea of other-than-human beings offering both blessings and harm to individuals is prevalent in Cree and Ojibwa lore. An example of this is the Trickster, Wisakaychak, the other-than-human culture hero who could bless or curse Aboriginal people. 20

When I discussed parallels between Pakwâciskwew and other female spirit beings with my friend, Robert Brightman, a much more malevolent being immediately came to his mind. He connected the lethal erotic
aspects of the Wilderness Woman mythology to the cosmology around the beautiful, sexual, but highly malevolent underwater panthers, the *misipisiwak*, which Brightman describes as “malignant feline beings with horns and long tails.” The *misipisiwak*, who dwell near rapids, were motivated by jealousy. Appearing to men in dreams, in the form of beautiful women, they offered “blessings” (namely excellent hunting skills or medicine power). If the man accepted these gifts, his wife and children would successively die through illness or accident. Men were cautioned never to dream of these panthers, although sometimes they came in disguise, making the acceptance of gifts inadvertent. Unlike Pakwâciskwew, these beings could present themselves to both men and women (appearing in the latter case disguised as handsome men). First-person accounts of *misipisiwak* dream experiences are rare in the written ethnographic record. However, stories about them are much more prevalent in the written records than those about the Wilderness Woman.

Hallowell also compared the Wild Woman to the *misipisiwak*. In the tales he was told by his informants along the Berens River, she was lethal. Hallowell noted a story about an “old man at Poplar River who used to trap by himself year after year. He would leave in October and not return until Christmas. Then he would go off again and not come back until after open water (May). He had four wives but not one of them lived more than two years. All his children died, too. Everyone said that this was because he had dreamed of Pigwadjikwe and that she would not give him up.” Hallowell concluded that the association of Pigwadjikwe with bachelorhood (underscored by jealous deaths of wives and children), “parallels the belief in *mâciptji*.”

William Berens, Hallowell’s informant, interpreter, friend, and mentor, told Hallowell about an unsettling dream experience he, as a young man, had of the Great Lynx. The experience was upsetting to the point that he was extremely reluctant to enter into marriage, because he did not want his wife and children to die.

There is a lion that lives in the water — *micipijiu* [*mishibizhiw*]. Cubs [were] seen one time playing near the rapids of that name. [It] may have something to do with bossing the fish. [It’s] bad to dream of, especially for a female. [She’ll] live to be a bad woman, should a girl dream of this creature.
W.B. dreamed of [it] before he was married (several times). Means illness. After marriage, once when [his] boy was sick, [he] dreamed of the lion. Went to see a man who told him just what the dream was without W.B. relating it. [The man] said he would try to help. The next night, W.B. dreamed he had a big fight with this creature, but it left no marks on him, not even a scratch, and he conquered. [He] told the man, who said everything would be ok now. The boy got better. 

While these other-than-humans provide context for Pakwâciskwew, she remains a unique entity. Unlike the misipisiwak, she did not always wreak havoc on the lives of men. With proper guidance and conditioning, men were free to enjoy her blessings while living full and satisfying lives with their families. Louis Bird is clear that once a man had amassed sufficient mindpower and knew exactly how to dream this woman safely, she could offer him delightful experiences. 

Although Hallowell was clear about her potential for malevolence, he also conveyed that the term pawagan was used by the Berens River Ojibwe people who described her to him. 

She falls squarely within Aboriginal perspectives around the art of developing mind power through dreaming in order to conquer fears and master challenges. She also falls squarely within the ways that Cree and Ojibwe peoples viewed human women. Women were considered to have great powers and the power and danger of a menstruating woman was so great that there were taboos placed around her. She was forbidden to make physical contact with food, or even step over food that lay on the ground, or with hunters, as this would destroy the hunt. 

It was as imperative for young boys to learn about women and sexuality was as it was for them to learn about environmental challenges, if they were to lead safe and good lives.

Historical records reveal fascinating human and other-than-human female personages, some with great power. A fascinating example is a dream that the Ojibwa leader William Berens had as a young man. He told anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell about the experience, saying that he had been having a poor hunt when he lay down to sleep and dreamed of a long trail running north. In his dream, he followed this path until he saw two beautiful women dressed in white. One was setting a table for him and he walked towards her. As she explained to him that the food on the table was for him he awoke and, despite the fact that he had just set many steel traps that would ensure that his walk was dangerous, he began travelling north. When he reached a deadfall, he found a fisher. He said to Hallowell, “It was a female. I knew what my dream meant
then.” A female creature had provided food for him both in his dream and in reality.²⁹

On another occasion in the 1930s, Berens told Hallowell a powerful, mystical experience he had, once again, with a beautiful female being—this time, an angel who visited him in the middle of the night. Although she frightened him badly at the time, he knew that she was there to warn him that something very important was going on. The next day, by sheer fluke, he was offered a ride by dogsled to Berens River and, although he had no food prepared and was not ready for the trip, he seized the opportunity because of his encounter with the angel, who had prepared his mind to be open to possibilities. Once he arrived in Berens River, he found that his sister was extremely ill and had been asking for him for many days. Although she died ten days later, William was able to spend valuable time with her.³⁰

Another experience of William Berens provides an excellent example of a beautiful woman causing mayhem. He told Hallowell that he was bewitched—taken over by a spell in which he fell in love with a young woman. Berens encountered the young woman while working on a surveying job up the Berens River and he became instantly smitten by her “light skin and flashing black eyes.” William was too shy to talk to her, but the next morning, as he was leaving, the woman reached out and touched him. That night, in a dream, he saw her walking towards him on the water, asking him to go and meet her. In a crazed state, Berens rushed out of the tent and called for a boat. Although he tried to get leave from his boss the next day, his request was denied, and it was then that he realized his vest was gone. Hallowell recorded, “Where it got to he never knew. Was sure he had it on when he started. Whole thing was the result of a love charm as he could not stop thinking about the girl for several days. Put into effect when she touched him. Must have had medicine in her hand.”³¹

Walter Green, an elder living at Berens River, described to me a dream he had that, once again, reflects the idea of a beautiful and powerful female being. In this case, Walter, at the time a young boy who desperately wanted to learn to play the organ, dreamed of a female angel. It was clear, as he described the encounter to me, that this dream was one of the most powerful events of his life, for it was in this dream that Walter learned to play the organ. He explained,

Boy, I used to wish I could play [the organ]. . . . But one night when I was sleeping I had a dream. Somebody came to me—like
an angel, you know—a lady. So she took me and grabbed my hand and said, ‘Come on over this way.’ Her face was just beautiful and there were flowers all around her. So she took me out and we came to a great big building like marble, you know? And she took me into that building. We walked for a long way and, while we were walking, she turned to one room and said, ‘This is the place.’ And I looked around and saw an organ—a pipe organ. So she said, ‘Is this what you want to play?’ I said, ‘Yes, very much.’ And then she sat down and I sat down beside her and first she played Jesus Loves Me—do you know that song? Then she played it twice. Then she said, ‘Okay, you play.’ So I sat down and I played for a long time. That’s how I learned. When I was fourteen, I played the organ in the church, prayer meetings, wakes.

Of course there are many stories of the power of human women—medicine women, wîhtikôw killers, helpers of men who were experiencing danger, bringers of havoc. As Louis Bird explains, “There were some women who were very good shamans . . . because they were gifted to be medicine women—they were gifted to be healers. . . . To be seers, to develop intuition. . . . There are extraordinary stories about women in the past—our women, our ancestors, our great-great-grandmothers . . . women could feel things ahead of time—they could see and have visions. They didn’t go out on dream quests like men did because they already had it gifted to them. They were very accurate when they described what was going to happen.”

Finally, there are tales of female animal personages encountered by men in the bush. Tales such as Clothed-In-Fur present narratives of these encounters and relationships. In the Ojibwe story, Clothed-In-Fur, a handsome man, disgusted by the advances of the Foolish Maidens, flees them (with great difficulty) and, on this journey, meets a woman. Although this woman, who feeds him a delicious meal of beaver, is in human form, Clothed-In-Fur soon realizes that she is, in fact, a wolf. Throughout the story, the pattern repeats—the man meets and marries women who feed him beaver and subsequently reveal that they are animals of various species. Finally, Clothed-In-Fur marries a woman who is a beaver, and he lives with her and her beaver family.

Regrettably, Pakwáciskwew has all but vanished from Cree and Ojibwa cosmologies, along with many other aspects of mîtew and traditional avenues to power. Through the art of dreaming, young men were faced
with the tasks of conquering their fears and developing partnerships with many fearsome beings in the natural and the spirit world. This entity, like so many of these forces, had the potential to make life wonderful or to create a living hell for a man, depending upon his training, abilities, and strength of mind. Yet today all that remains among most of the people who still know about her is predominantly negative and dangerous. Perhaps this can be related to the increasing presence of missionaries, many of whom will have influenced Aboriginal perspectives by their patriarchal attitudes towards women. Within the historical record women’s voices are silent on the subject Pakwáciskwew. Many of the anthropologists who worked with Northern Algonquian people were men and this would have been a strong barrier to women coming forward with stories—especially stories of a sexual nature. Hallowell, doing his fieldwork among Ojibwe communities along the Berens River in the 1930s and 1940s, was very cognizant of this problem. For this reason, in the summer of 1934 he went to some lengths to bring a female graduate student, Dorothy Spencer, with him, hoping that she would be able to interact with the women somewhat more intimately and openly than he and collect some of their stories. Unfortunately, however, because the woman who was to interpret for her had moved away, Spencer was only able to collect a handful of stories.35

At the same time, Christian missionaries might have influenced the dichotomy of perceptions of Pakwáciskwew. Within Euro-Christianity, there are myriad examples of beautiful and sexual women leading men to ruin. Rudely juxtaposed to the European idea of the angel in the house lay the enticing whore. This mindset may well have caused a gradual shift towards more overwhelmingly negative views of this personage (certainly missionaries will have been uncomfortable with the idea of dreaming about menstrual blood in order to create meaning and understanding around sexual feelings). I remember the day I mentioned Pakwáciskwew to someone who was acquainted with her. What contrast there was between the gentleness and humour in Louis Bird’s tone when he spoke of her, and the hardness and judgement in this person’s voice when she said, “Oh, Susan—she’s just a slut!” What is clear, however, is that this female other-than-human had a vital role in the lives of young men and that a substantial understanding of Cree and Ojibwe cosmologies certainly requires an acquaintance with her.

Northern Algonquian people recognized the spiritual power of women in all spheres of life—in what Europeans would refer to as the secular
and the sacred (categories that blended within Aboriginal worldviews). The knowledge, training, and respect required for encounters with this other-than-human female being has implications for ways that Cree and Ojibwa men viewed their relationships with human women.