



Native Voice

Eric Gansworth brings Native culture to the public consciousness through his work as a writer, an artist and a professor of English.

BY: AUDREY R. BROWKA PHOTO: SHAUN M. MACIEJEWSKI

Eric L. Gansworth lives life as an outsider. As a child, he and his family were the only Onondaga Indians on Niagara County's Tuscarora Reservation. The two nations share similar cultures although their heritages are different. "It wasn't necessarily a daily presence but we were aware that we were different from everyone else," recalls Gansworth.

Today, Gansworth continues to hold on to his deep-rooted Native heritage while he lives and works within a much larger and more dominant American culture. He explains, "It's as if I float among different groups but do not necessarily belong to any one of them."

But it provides the perfect vantage point for Gansworth's work as a writer and an artist.

"Once you are inside something you develop blind spots and lose perspective," says Gansworth. "Although being an outsider is difficult for a lot of people, and I'm not suggesting it isn't for me, it's also been tremendously advantageous for what I do."

The Canisius College professor of English and Lowery Writer-in-Residence is a celebrated storyteller. His writings are published in three novels, two collections of poetry, an anthology and a cross-genre book, which includes essays, poems and paintings. In November, he debuted his first full-length play, entitled "Re-Creation Story," at the Native Theater Festival in New York City. His poetry collaboration with social documentary photographer Milton Rogovin is due out in fall 2009. And his newest book, *Extra Indians*, is under review.

Gansworth's books also feature his own artwork, which is equally celebrated. Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, the Burchfield Penney Art Center and the Castellani Art Museum have all exhibited his paintings. His current exhibit is a six-month solo show at Colgate University, entitled "Cross-PolliNation."

"In Western culture, artists tend to specialize," explains Gansworth. "Novelists stay novelists. Painters stay painters. That's not true in Indian culture. There is actually a long history of Indian artists who go forward equally in a variety of artistic genres."

Gansworth's art and writing enhance and enrich each other, adds colleague Mick Cochrane, PhD, professor of English and Lowery Writer-in-Residence at Canisius College. "His writing is highly visual and his paintings tell a story. In every form, his work is utterly convincing - it all feels true."

Perhaps that is because Gansworth draws on his own personal experiences. His prose and poetry are set on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation, which encompasses just a few square miles but is "thousands of cultural miles away from Western New York," says Gansworth. His indigenous characters are impoverished and they live in small, neglected homes, much like Gansworth did as a child. It had only one electrical outlet and no running water. He recalls "extension cords snaked around the house and trips outside to the water pump in mid-January."

Beyond the material surroundings, however, Gansworth's protagonists live lives rich in things that matter most to him and the Indian community. They hail from large extended and tightly-woven families. The Tuscarora Reservation remains the central point of their world. And they adhere tightly to their tribal history and heritage, despite mainstream pressures and perceptions. Therein lies the universal premise of Gansworth's work.

"I write about contemporary reservation life and how its people navigate two different identities, simultaneously," explains Gansworth. "It's something that everyone who is part of an Indian community deals with every day."

Gansworth is one of only a few indigenous writers regionally. That alone makes him an important literary voice. But there's an added value in his work. It brings the native culture into the public consciousness.

"Many of the attitudes about our people are those of misunderstanding," says Joanne Weinholtz, a Tuscarora culture teacher at Niagara-Wheatfield's Tuscarora School. Weinholtz grew up near Gansworth on the reservation and has invited him to speak in her third through sixth grade classes. "Eric's stories and poems help to dispel those misunderstandings. They reflect our way of thinking, our way of life, our history, our culture and our values."



"Inspiration: The World Before"
Oil on canvas/Eric Gansworth, 2006

Not everyone agrees. Gansworth acknowledges that members of his family, friends and the greater Indian community are reluctant to read his works. Some are uncomfortable because his fiction depicts life on the reservation. Others prefer not to re-live the sadness, losses or anger they suffered personally and as a tribal community throughout history.

"In some ways what I do is a reminder to them of a difficult time in their lives, and I certainly understand and respect that," says Gansworth. He briefly considered writing about a fictional reservation but realized his writing was too entrenched in his Tuscarora history. It's a lesson that Gansworth now emphasizes to students.

"The closer their characters appear to be real people, the more convincing their ideas and writing will be," says Gansworth, whose vividness and candor in his own writing have earned him numerous literary accolades.

His poem "Holding the Shell to My Ear" was nominated for a prestigious Pushcart Prize, which honors the best poetry, short fiction and essays published annually by small presses. His novel *Mending Skins* won the PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles National Literary Award, which recognizes excellence in multicultural literature. And *A Half-Life of Cardio-Pulmonary Function*, Gansworth's most recent collection of poems and paintings, ranked number three on the National Book Critics Circle spring 2008 "Good Reads List." Compiled by America's leading literary critics and celebrated authors, the Good Reads List offers an alternative to standard bestseller lists.

Gansworth is humbled by these literary reviews but also finds them ironic, particularly since he never considered college as an option. "I couldn't afford to pay for the SATs so I never took them," he recalls. "I was actually going to take a roofing job after high school."

But he later learned that the neighboring Niagara County Community College (NCCC) didn't require SATs and so he enrolled in the electroencephalography (the study of brain waves) program.

"My family was very attracted to the idea of people working in hospitals," he says. "That was very prestigious to them so I decided that this degree would get me work in a hospital."

Gansworth never worked in a hospital, however. Rather, he continued with his college education and pursued the discipline he felt driven to since he was a child - creative writing. Gansworth earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English from the State University College at Buffalo. He later returned to NCCC to teach freshmen composition, creative writing, American literature and American Indian literature.

Gansworth's first introduction to Canisius came in 2001 when, "Keith Burich literally just showed up at my office door one day," he says.

Keith R. Burich, PhD, professor of history at Canisius, went to NCCC to invite a colleague to speak in his Native American history class. Burich's colleague referred him to Eric Gansworth, who accepted his invitation.

"As I introduced Eric to the class, he marched down the tiered steps wearing sunglasses, a black leather motorcycle jacket and motorcycle boots," recalls Burich. "He spun around and started to recite his poetry. The poems were very personal and very powerful. It was obvious he had an enormous amount of talent and I knew in a matter of minutes that we had to hire him at Canisius."

Gansworth spent his first year at Canisius as a visiting professor of English. The following year, he became an associate professor and later full professor in the department. He considers his work at the college and the students he teaches among the highlights of his career.

"I couldn't ask for a more satisfying job," he says. "I went from teaching at a school where creative writing is offered for people interested in writing for fun, to Canisius where students are serious and excited about what they're doing."

One of those many students was **Janet M. McNally '02**. The English major and creative writing minor is one of only 18 fiction writers from New York State to recently receive a prestigious, unrestricted fellowship from the New York Foundation of the Arts.

"Eric noticed that I had a greater talent for writing than I realized," says McNally. "He mentored me, he gave me guidance and he provided me with the confidence I needed to be who I am today and to do the work that I do."

Gansworth's contributions to the department have helped grow the college's creative writing minor and strengthen the English Department, overall. Students not only learn to write creatively from someone who does it most successfully, they also receive "a unique perspective about Native history, heritage and culture," says Cochrane. "The new courses he introduced, in film and literature and the graphic novel, have become exceptionally popular among English majors."

Although the writer and artist in Gansworth prefer to remain on the periphery, the educator in him is actively engaged in teaching the next generation of creative writers. So in a sense, Eric Gansworth's two identities are one here and that makes this professor an integral part of the college community. ■