

7. AS LONG AS THE HAIR SHALL GROW

Survivance in Eric Gansworth's Reservation Fictions

SUSAN BERNARDIN

Hair matters, as that iconic countercultural musical *Hair* proclaims, whether

long, straight, curly, fuzzy
Snaggy, shaggy, ratty, matty
Oily, greasy, fleecy
Shining, gleaming, streaming
Flaxen, waxen
Knotted, polka-dotted
*Twisted, beaded, braided.*¹

The ways we wear our hair — permed, cropped, buzzcut, mohawked, mulleted, bobbed, bearded, or dreadlocked — announce our allegiances. Hairstyle can signal membership in specific groups — the Marine Corps, Rasta, or Hasidic Judaism — or signify resistance to group identifications. It can validate or disrupt assumptions, invite or exclude, and appropriate or reclaim. Hair then works as a signpost — albeit a notoriously unreliable one — for cultural, social, and political identifications and is capable of eliciting a host of conflicting responses. In U.S. popular culture there is arguably no more recognizable, no more over-determined hairstyle than that of the “Indian braid.” Simulated in a weary procession of TV and film Westerns, coined in nickels, and donned in elementary school “cultural” activities, braids have long served as visual shorthand for “Indianness.” Consider, for example, a website devoted to “Indians” that proclaims, “Thanks to the Native American, how to braid hair is an important part of every little girl’s repertoire of hair styling.”² Indian braids thus function metonymically, calling forth the body of assumptions, stereotypes, and inventions that oddly *still* define Native peoples in mainstream American imaginations. All that’s missing is the feather.

Banking on the ways hair gets wrapped up in socioeconomic, cultural, and personal significations, Eric Gansworth engages the movable border between story and stereotype. He scrambles worn patterns of telling an "Indian story" through the stories of his characters who live on and off the Tuscarora reservation, home to "a thousand people, all sharing the ins and outs of their lives with each other, either willing or unwilling."³ An enrolled member of the Onondaga Nation, Gansworth grew up on the Tuscarora Reservation in western New York and now lives a few miles down the road in Niagara Falls—close in physical distance but another "territory" altogether.⁴ Comprising one large story, Gansworth's works to date, including paintings, a volume of poetry and paintings, and three published novels, explore how "the weird lives of my characters play out in this landscape of diminishing land and an immovable wall of water."⁵

His work explicitly grounds itself in the generational aftereffects of land loss: New York State Power Authority's efforts to expropriate a sizeable land base of an already-hemmed-in reservation in 1957. The Tuscarora Nation fought this expropriation to the U.S. Supreme Court, whose 1960 ruling in favor of the New York Power Authority granted that organization the right to take 550 acres to create the Lewiston Reservoir for the massive Robert Moses Power Generating Station.⁶ This traumatic, tangible loss explicitly initiates the narrative action in both his first and third novels, and the reservoir itself (or "dike" as the characters typically call it) figures as a narrative locus in both texts.⁷ Against this story of "losing things again and again," of losing land promised "in perpetuity," Gansworth's characters, especially in his third novel *Mending Skins*, actively rearrange the patterns of their lives.⁸ The novel's multiple scenes involving the cutting, keeping, and growing of hair beckon us to its own intricate braided design. Through its ensemble cast and woven composition, *Mending Skins* suggests how Native peoples reimagine patterns of loss into new stories, especially through humored stories of survival. In doing so, this novel generates broader meditations on loss and forgetting and on memory and continuance.

Part 1: Hairtraps

In his essay "Identification Pleas" Gansworth ponders the messy politics of identities imposed by outsiders and confronted by insiders when he experiences

a "delay" at the U.S.-Mexico border. Having pulled out his wallet only to discover that his driver's license is not in it, Gansworth tries his luck with a Tribal ID card. The border officer's smirk accompanies his dismissive question: "Do you have any real ID?"⁹ In comic turns Gansworth considers America's ongoing fixation with visual markers of Native identity. Why, his essay wonders, do Native people still have to negotiate others' demands for "proof," for visual badges of authenticity? After calling himself "ethnically ambiguous," a "walking, breathing Rorschach test," mistaken for Latinos, Russians, Italians, and everyone in between, he turns to the one foolproof signifier of "Indianness": the braid.¹⁰ His own shaggy, unruly hair, which his brothers once deemed a cross between Jerry Garcia and *Saturday Night Live*'s legendary character Roseanne Rosannadanna, is offered up as a case study for the politics of hair on and off reservations. After Gansworth began growing out his job interview haircut, he received in the mail a photograph from an archivist working on Carlisle Indian School materials. The boarding school photograph displays his grandfather at the age of twelve, "look[ing] out onto the future" with hair "short, clipped, blunt."¹¹ Gansworth pairs this image with the only other photograph he has ever seen of his grandfather, one of a five-year-old boy with hair "that streamed wavy and thick from his head, past his shoulders."¹²

From seventeenth-century Puritan conversion efforts in Massachusetts through the long era of boarding schools, punitive rituals of cutting Native children's hair survive in memories and stories.¹³ The exhaustive archive of before and after photographs taken at boarding schools simulated students' transformation into domesticated subjects. Defined as an "excess" of threatening difference, long uncut hair presented school administrators with one of their most dramatic opportunities for visual "uplift." As a rite of passage at the schools, the cutting of students' hair comprised an ordinary scene of "instruction" in boarding school histories. That some schools punished runaways by shaving their heads underscores how hair served as a favored colonial tool for humiliating and controlling indigenous children.¹⁴ Gansworth's description of his hair, its texture, growth, and changing style, resides within and against narratives of loss, resistance, and affirmation dictated by histories of dominance. The act of growing out one's hair or of tying it in a long braid thereby can signal cultural defiance, resistance, and affirmation. Gansworth's brother, for example, whose AIM shirts vie in number with his Grateful Dead ones, "has kept his long hair forever, for him this is a way of life."¹⁵

But that long hair can also be a trap. "Ceci n'est pas un indien" Gansworth seems to have realized from his early encounters in the "Indian academic community."¹⁶ At a Native American poetry reading he recounts that "the more I looked around, the politics of hair seemed to have grown into some absurd hierarchy, people trying to out-Indian one another with all sorts of visual landmarks, secretly eyeing the braids of others, comparing, calculating whose was longer, thicker, more impressive, who had more ribbon shirts, more turquoise, accumulating identity in acquisition."¹⁷ Hair apparent to an authenticity contest that he refuses to participate in, Gansworth cuts off his braid but concedes that he still keeps it in his office desk drawer "to remind me of where I have been."¹⁸

Yet back at that zealously policed border, he notes that the braid is seventeen hundred miles away and, "braidless and hairy, I am not legitimate enough for my ID."¹⁹ When his faded gym card succeeds where his tribal ID could not, Gansworth is allowed to cross the border into the United States, a permission that offers him small consolation. That his appearance fails to "signify" to that border agent and that his membership at a gym trumps his membership within a Native nation confirms what he already knew: identifying as Native in or against "our America" also means inhabiting the relentless ironies of a postcontact world.

Gansworth's fictional characters also inhabit these ironies as some alternately (and inadvertently) pose for the expectations of others, while other characters more readily refuse to be thus framed. From the beginning of Gansworth's novel *Mending Skins*, for instance, we learn that image is everything.

The novel opens at the Seventh Annual Conference of the Society for the Protection and Reclamation of Indian Images, or SPRY, "an organization dedicated to the eradication of clichéd and stereotypical images of Indians in whatever mass-market ways that have crept into the national psyche, by exposing these images for what they are, and by then providing positive alternatives."²⁰ These opening words come courtesy of T. J. Howkowski, the "son" of a central character in Gansworth's novels — Fred Howkowski, also known as Plastic Fred or Frederick Eagle Cry.²¹ Looking like he had "fallen straight off a nickel," T. J. works as a theatre professor and as an actor, stuck endlessly replaying the role of Chief Broom from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.²² He applauds his friend and keynote speaker Dr. Anne Boans for having the

"keen eye of a cultural observer who is able to see the idiosyncrasies within a group identity and yet be distanced enough from it to offer sharp, pointed, accurate, and often hilarious commentary on the marginalized viewpoints of modern Native America."²³

Yet Annie, as her mother Shirley Mounter calls her, is hardly hilarious. In jargon-laced academic discourse, Boans delivers a humorless lecture titled "Threads: The Hair-Ties that Bind" complete with slides drawn from "my personal collection, of our visual national obsession with stereotypical images of Native America, particularly as manifested in images of braids, as somehow representing the pinnacle of Native identity."²⁴ In her indignant recitation of cheesy commodities and Indian hair kitsch, Boans is quick to point out the ironies of stereotypical art and equally quick to chastise Native artists for their complicity in perpetuating it.

For example, she chides the indigenous maker of a black velvet painting featuring a braided Jesus at the Calvary, trudging with the cross on his back alongside a braided Indian on horseback. Titled *Jesus and the End of the Calvary Trail*, the painting twins the two figures with their braids but also twins iconic religious and popular cultural images. Noting that she "did not dare ask him [the painter] for further clarification" and "fear[ing] any dialogue," Annie upbraids the artist while refusing to consider the painting's own tricky humor and multivalent points of view.²⁵

Notably, Annie's lecture ends here for the readers: her mother Shirley Mounter, the novel's most prominent narrator, cuts in on the lecture three years later, revising her daughter's version of the story. By claiming, for instance, that her daughter had strong-armed the artist into reducing the price of the painting, Shirley alerts us to the multiple strands of perspective required for a telling of the full story. And it is telling that Shirley chooses to point out Annie's inability to imagine different ways of telling the story of this image. The painting pairs an iconic Judeo-Christian image from one of the Stations of the Cross with James Earle Fraser's monumental sculpture *The End of the Trail*, first exhibited at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. The sculpture quickly inspired an industry of mass-produced images and products, from postcards and paintings to knock-off sculptures of the noble but doomed Indian. A sculptural analogue to Edward Curtis's photographs, *The End of the Trail* enshrined nostalgia toward Native defeat and disappearance

as the preferred tropes for signifying “Indianness.” Even today, “The End of the Trail” remains a fixture in the American popular cultural landscape. Annie interprets the painting as particularly troubling in its unthinking participation in this representational “romance” of Native extinction.

Yet the narrative encourages us to consider how this painting instead might resurrect other points of view and interpretations. For example, what if Annie considered the irreverent humor of recasting Jesus as at the end of his trail or of “Indianizing” Jesus with those braids? What if the artist were commenting on the entwined histories of missionizing and colonization? Of the play between “Calvary” and the U.S. Cavalry? What if the black velvet was a tip-off that the painting trafficked in parody?

A painting, albeit not in black velvet, yet also entitled *End of the Calvary Trail* occupies the bottom left panel of a triptych printed on the page before the prologue. Gansworth’s triptych, titled *Patchwork Life*, acts as the novel’s narrative frame, its visual commentator, and its driving metaphor. Comprised of nine separate but interrelated panels, the painting invites readers to imagine the stories suggested by the provocative, at times puzzling, images. Like a game of tic-tac-toe, the panels can be “read” through differing sequences of three stories, with each sequence testing out possible strands of meanings in the novel. As its title suggests, the triptych’s design mimics that of a patchwork quilt design: each panel offers up its own story while also contributing to the meaning of the panels adjoining it and to the work as a whole.

In doing so, each panel elicits a “both/and” interpretive approach, refusing binary readings in favor of rich, often contradictory, responses. For instance, the rightmost center panel presents an object that circulates in the narrative’s action: a bottle opener that Annie’s husband Doug had added to her ironic collection of Indian kitsch. In her slide show she describes the bottle opener as a “Lakota in war bonnet, mouth wide open, presumably in full war cry, thick braids trailing out from beneath this explosion of feathers surrounding his face.”²⁶ The bottle opener is an artifact, a commodity, but also a practical item used by characters in the narrative. Annie’s description seemingly fits this image of a hand holding the “Indian head” while the other hand inserts a bottle into his “mouth.”

Yet the panel’s associations are also shaped by the panel directly below it, which shows a hand, palm open, offering up a cut braid to the full moon.

While these two panels invite comparison because of their similar compositional arrangement, the bottle opener panel conceptually interacts with the panel adjoining it, the centerpiece panel of the triptych, featuring the lower half of a man’s face, his mouth stretched wide to accommodate the gun awkwardly grasped by his hand. Visually these three panels are unified by the full moon in the background of each, with the latter two most particularly by the shared language of hands and in the echoing, similar shapes of the gun and bottle opener. Together, these three panels create a constellation circling around identity, loss, violations, and violence.

The presence of a full moon in each of the nine panels gives the nod to the central image of Gansworth’s volume of poetry and paintings *Nickel Eclipse: Iroquois Moon* (2000). His paintings for *Nickel Eclipse* map the progression of a lunar eclipse through its superimposed image of a vintage Indian-head nickel. Predictably designed by James Earl Fraser, the sculptor of *End of the Trail* fame, the nickel features on one side the classic profile of an Indian chief, the word “liberty” hovering above his head; the reverse side is its partner in extinction—the bison. The titles of the thirteen ink-and-watercolor paintings work in concert with images drawn from the Haudenosaunee calendar that surround, frame, or overshadow the nickel moon. The Haudenosaunee cyclical lunar calendar provides a frame of reference to its longevity as measured against a traumatic but passing era of catastrophic events. In each painting multiple referents edge against and across each other to underscore the struggles but also the tenacity of Haudenosaunee people coming out from under the shadow of an overbearing outside culture.

Gansworth’s triptych also carries another signature feature of his paintings. Although not discernible in its reproduction in the book, *Patchwork Life* is painted in purple and white, the two colors that dominate his palette. Purple and white are the colors of wampum—the language of shells woven into the belts that carry in them Haudenosaunee world view, history, and epistemology.

As visual texts whose stories must be known in order to be told or read, wampum provides Gansworth with the primary structural device of his work. The painting’s colors, in concert with the stylized wampum designs bordering the triptych’s panels, forecast the storied interaction of text and image in *Mending Skins*. The contrasting bead colors of dark and light suggest how

the novel and the painting work to tell the same story from alternate, or altering, perspectives. For example, the novel's narrative design elaborates on the visual template offered by *Patchwork Life*. Organized into thirds, the novel unfolds in three major sections individually framed by one third (or three panels) of the triptych. Each of the three sections contains three chapters, and many of the chapters are dated by the passage of three or nine years. In its visual and narrative composition, *Mending Skins* announces to those who know its Haudenosaunee frame of reference. These formal patterns of threes and nines allude to Haudenosaunee clan divisions and primary cultural values as signified, for instance, by the Three Sisters. The power of "three" is amplified by the novel's strategic braided design. Braiding, "the interweaving of three or more strands, strips, or lengths in a diagonally overlapping pattern," serves as both technique and metaphor in the triptych and, by extension, in the novel's entire design. The triptych's refusal to "fix" its meanings within a single panel, reinforced by the novel's multivalent chapter titles and entwining storylines, launches a narrative that is always in motion. Haudenosaunee principles and American popular culture and stories of survival and victimry entwine and separate, entangle and unknot.

Patchwork Life includes wampum belts as the outer and inner borders separating each individual panel. Yet those borders are not firm but rather are involved in making connections and braiding stories. Their narrative analogues are two designated "border" stories, separating parts 1 and 2 and parts 2 and 3 of the novel. As border texts they offer up an excess of stories: in the first case the dead voice of Fred Howkowsi, narrating his burial on the reservation; in the second diverse voices from Gansworth's fictionalized Tuscarora reservation describe their reactions to the fire consuming the home of character Martha Boans. Both stories serve as textual counterparts to the visual border design of *Patchwork Life* through their meditation on acts of collective forgetting and memory.

The first border story offers a voice submerged but significant to the entire novel: the story of Fred, who "survived" the Vietnam War but couldn't survive the peace, especially in Hollywood, where he had moved to become a movie star.²⁷ A reservation celebrity whose absent presence is shown in the proliferation of the peach-colored Plastic Fred "braves" so popular among the children, Fred commits suicide far from home. This story occupies the

centermost panel of the triptych. Titled *Last Supper*, the panel grimly references the excessive ugliness of suicide—a gun in the mouth. It also references one of da Vinci's most famous paintings and the event that it represents: the last gathering of Jesus and his disciples the evening before Judas's betrayal. Connections between Fred's suicide and themes of loyalty and betrayal among his friends are spun out much more explicitly in Gansworth's fourth and still unpublished novel *Extra Indians*.

However, the cross-references linking this panel and *End of the Calvary Trail*, as well as the panel directly above it, *Plastic Fred*, gesture toward other elements of this unassimilable story. *Plastic Fred* presents Fred's plastic cinematic alter ego marching in mechanical fashion across the panel. Circling behind him is an image of a full moon overlapping a circular chamber of a gun that highlights the symmetries of their composition. Out of step with Hollywood's cyclical disinterest in "Indian" movies in the 1970s, Fred had changed his name to Frederick Eagle Cry in a last ditch effort to get a speaking part. These three panels raise questions about the relationship between representational and psychic violence, between self-sacrifice and self-destruction, and between the myths people are willing to live and die by.

Taken together, the two border stories "tell" us what's most at stake in this narrative: the presence of loss and the threat of forgetting but also the presence of shared humor, hard-earned wisdom, and adaptiveness. The first line of "Burying Voices" is forgetting. In this narrative Fred speaks of the ways in which his family, friends, and acquaintances will go about forgetting and remembering him. Fred's story, its pain and despair, cannot be fully recovered. He candidly addresses how those who have outlived him will engage in survival strategies of their own, strategies of protective memory loss. In "Burying Memories" the fire wipes out Martha's "family pictures, furniture, and a hundred years' worth of stuff that made up her family's history."²⁸ Yet the community's response to the sight, sounds, and smells of the fire not only speaks to the ubiquity of house fires on the reservation but to its sense of shared history. For example, Fiction Tunny immediately turns to her beadwork "to see what I might be able to raffle off to benefit whoever it is, if need be."²⁹ Martha's house fire is braided into the stories of other house fires and of all the versions that will be told of this and future fires. Like the stories of "police evicting us from lands that were supposed to be ours forever," these

burning stories will be stitched together to create the patchwork story of the People.³⁰

Fred's fate, like those of the characters he had tried to play in Hollywood, dances at the edge of the tragic endings still assigned to Native peoples in American popular culture. It is perhaps fitting then that Annie has dedicated her research to Fred's "career," beginning with a dissertation titled "Silent Screams: The Indian Actor as Angry Landscape in the American Western." Annie herself is trapped by such emplotments: her repeated dismissals of anything she deems stereotypical are belied by her own fixation with limiting ideas about Native identity. Annie's story is mostly spun by her mother, whose narration shapes parts 1 and 3. Throughout the novel Annie's lack of self-awareness reveals itself in her shifting, contradictory attitudes toward "Indian hair." Having inherited her mother's flaming red hair, Annie complains that it "screamed 'white people' as far as she was concerned. Every time she looked into a mirror, she saw the way I've made her career as a 'professional Indian' just that much harder."³¹ In high school Annie permed her hair, saying she "hated how long and straight her hair was, that it was too 'Land O'Lakes Indian girl,' whatever that meant," subsequently dyeing it black.³² Later she grew out her hair and "kept it in a thick braid coiling down to the small of her back, heavy and rusty, like copper cable."³³

In the paired chapters charting Annie and Doug's perspectives on their crumbling marriage, she scoffs at the story of how her mother and friends had cut their hair in mourning and protest over the coerced loss of their homes during the seizure of Tuscarora land for the reservoir: "Well, I would never cut off my braid for something as stupid as that. All that hokey Indian romanticism bullshit."³⁴ Annie's outburst startles, not only because of her single-minded reading of braids but also because of her dismissal of her mother's generation's efforts to save Tuscarora land. As she "smoothes her braid" and speaks to friends and family members gathered at the reservoir, Annie insists that her family's submerged land "doesn't mean anything to me. I wasn't even born then."³⁵ Yet her brother Royal's memory that their father "tried real hard to get my ma not to do it" points to other readings absent from Annie's perspective.³⁶ Shirley's abusive, alcoholic husband always said how he loved her hair "when what he really loved was grabbing it and hanging onto me by it."³⁷ Royal's added comment that "it [cutting her hair] was

the only way she could get on with things" is best understood by its reference to the story that launches the novel, the loss of Shirley's home on the reservation.³⁸ In the midst of the land expropriation fight, Shirley's husband had sold the family house one night to his friend Barry Boans. The loss of the house—the "first pulled thread" in the novel—and their ensuing move to the city away from the reservation richly contextualize Shirley's decision to cut her hair.³⁹

Part 2: Shearing Histories

Stuck in a pattern whose broader ironies and lessons she neither discerns nor understands, Annie offers a cautionary tale for characters in *Mending Skins*, most notably her mother and soon-to-be-ex-husband Doug. Her adherence to a script of "either/or" rather than "both/and" leaves her with an inflexible, humorless outlook on herself, the reservation community, and the "outside" world. In contrast, Shirley offers a capacious, dynamic narrative of personal, familial, and community events on the reservation from 1957 to 2002. Her efforts to identify the many threads comprising her family and community's story begin with explicit reading instructions: "These stories fold, cross over, split, and reassemble themselves."⁴⁰ Most particularly, Shirley's stance toward fashioning stories, acknowledging their partiality while urgently bearing witness to her world, enacts the visual soundtrack of *Patchwork Life*. In recognizing but ultimately resisting predictable plotlines of an "Indian story," she carries out most explicitly the novel's design. One of the panel paintings informing her opening story about displacement to the city is "Needle's Eye." In it a giant human eye stares at a needle whose thread is showing the first signs of unraveling. The placement of the needle and its eye in the panel sharpens its references to Shirley's broken marriage and traumatic separation from her reservation home. Its jarring, unsettling resonances also call to mind Margaret Atwood's pithy poem:

*You fit into me
like a hook into an eye
A fishhook
an open eye.*

Yet amid stories of loss, longing, and mourning, Shirley refuses the posture of victimry. "No matter the miseries," to paraphrase Gerald Vizenor, she

"takes on the world with wit, wisdom, and tricky poses." After Martha loses her home to that fire, Shirley takes her in. The only possession remaining to Martha is a "piece of sewing she'd been working on, but it was only the front of the blouse she'd been making."⁴¹ In her efforts to rescue Martha and to help her reclaim the lost fragments of her life, Shirley remembers her own strategies for working through distance, loss, and separation. After Tommy Jack, Fred's army buddy and best friend and also Shirley's lover (and possible unwitting father to Annie), returns to Texas following Fred's funeral, Shirley takes the clothes that he had left with her and transforms them. Claiming that it "was the first time I consciously destroyed something to preserve it," she "cut and rearranged and sewed" his socks, boxers, and jeans "into their new life."⁴² In a narrative replete with unkind cuttings—of land, of relationships, and of hair—Shirley instead envisions the creative possibilities: "The patterns I chose were complicated for such a small piece of work, but that was the way of things in our lives. His jeans now overlapped his boxer shorts in small, folded blue diamonds surrounding white centers."⁴³ Taking her scissors, Shirley cuts up the parts of her past most in need of reimagination, rearranging them into new, healing patterns of memory: "I had become a whiz at transforming one useless thing into something that would live on."⁴⁴

Shirley's creativity with scissors grows over time, complementing her growing unwillingness to participate in dead-end rituals unworthy of remembrance. After practice in cutting up old patterns of her life with Tommy Jack and patching them together in more resilient ways, Shirley embarks on her most ambitious sewing project: her absent husband's closet of clothes. His decades-long disappearing act had long seemed to trap her in tired, tragic patterns of victimry, abandonment, and bitterness. So she grabs up those scissors: "I just made sure he couldn't wear them anymore if he ever came calling for them, and I started hacking away with scissors, and not only the seams, mind you, but anywhere, randomly, so, even if he thought he was going to find some woman he'd been shackled up with to sew them for him, there wouldn't be much left for her to work with."⁴⁵

As both weapon and tool scissors achieve the paradox of destroying in order to mend and ultimately to heal: "My scissors worked their magic on his clothes but also on me that day. The fragments falling randomly to my floor began to take on new shapes, relate to one another in different ways."⁴⁶ The

scattered fragments of clothes unlock for her alternative memories and stories of shared family life. Like the patchwork painting, Shirley refuses to be stuck in one pattern, instead opting for the unfolding of imaginative possibilities. Out of those fragments she forges new destinies, not just for the clothes, remade into quilts for her children, but for herself. With newfound confidence from her creative acts, Shirley states, "My passions grew for fabric that would wrestle my dreams into tight-woven reality."⁴⁷

Recalling that over the years she and Martha had "really stitched our friendship together in the years of continually waiting for our men to return," Shirley offers Martha this same gift of creative self-reconstruction.⁴⁸ In the face of Martha's unremitting grief following the fire, mourning for what she has lost, Shirley tells her that "this blouse don't have to be lost forever." Grabbing the blouse front out of Martha's hands, Shirley recounts that "I grabbed my scissors and sliced straight into it [the blouse front]."⁴⁹ Shirley then gets out her own box of cloth scraps because "there were some remnants in there that would complement this piece and hers. I threaded the eye with a good strong line, knotted it, held it to her, and invited her into the box. She picked it up and began reconstructing her life in the way only a woman who has lost nearly everything can."⁵⁰ The novel's title, with its multiple word plays, motions to this moment: Martha's new blouse will be stitched together out of bolts of slightly mismatched fabric. Observant eyes will discern the patchwork shirt and trace the seams that have put Martha back together. Sewing as survival? Shirley's hard-won wisdom is rooted in her adaptativeness, wry humor, resilience, and above all, in her sense that "family extends out in all directions to and from you out here." Extending the novel's metaphors a bit more, Shirley recognizes that part of being alive entails the "gradual process of tanning your own hide . . . taking all the scraps and stitching them back together into some recognizable form and throwing out the parts that aren't too useful."⁵¹

Whether "Tanning Hides," "Mending Skins," or "Cutting Patterns," as Cansworth's chapter and section headings remind, the characters in *Mending Skins* are given the task of refashioning the damaged pieces of their lives, histories, and stories into stronger material. Those most adept at adapting include Martha's son Doug Boans, who narrates the unraveling of his marriage to Annie through the language of hair. Annie had been attracted to his "killer braiding

skills."⁵² However, later she wishes to replace him with T. J. Howkowski, who, according to Shirley, "kept a shiny black braid in the way my daughter claimed to hate on her husband these days, not a hair out of place, nothing coming untucked."⁵³ In Shirley's account, "One day she [Annie] had just come home without the braid during their marriage and everything was just gone."⁵⁴ Her hair then "hung crooked and short in a cut."⁵⁵ Later he discovers that she had stashed her braid in a "pool cue sheath."⁵⁶ Her decision both to hold and hide her cut braid and to preserve it but also to shield it from her husband's scrutiny encapsulates her conflicted allegiance to remembrance and forgetting, to her unresolved stance on identity and authenticity.

Out of sight but never out of her mind, the braid travels with Annie as she drives to the reservoir intent on jettisoning both her marriage and her collection of artifacts. Doug catches up with her there, confronting her and T. J. among the crowd of regulars partying at the reservoir. Everyone watches as she methodically lines up her army of kitschy Indian figurines and shoots each one into tiny fragments that rain down into the water. When Annie had first brandished the revolver, hidden in with the braid in her pool cue sheath, a spectator had called out, "Yo, Annie get your gun."⁵⁷ This quick-witted reference to the musical and the person who inspired it — Annie Oakley, sharpshooter and regular in Buffalo Bill's *Wild West* show — perfectly complements Annie Boan's paradoxical investment in the images she abhors. Doug also recasts her "performance" at the reservoir after she derides him for his apparent lack of irony toward Indian stereotypes. When Annie complains, "You don't even know I kept this junk around for its ironic qualities," he retorts, "No images? What would you have to study then? Save the lecture for your students and multicultural sensitivity seminars."⁵⁸

Though Annie had shared a laugh with the crowd when she first heard the line "Annie, get your gun," she sets herself apart from the community assembled in this scene. As Doug considers how the story of Annie with her revolver will make its rounds on the reservation, he imagines his customers asking him if "Annie got his gun, and they might have a laugh about it, because that was what true Indian survival was about."⁵⁹ Later he imagines the many future tellings of the "Annie get your gun story." He knows, however, that Annie "wouldn't see the humor in it, though she'd published a little book on Indian humor in contemporary Native American art just last year."⁶⁰ Rez-raised

Doug had been so intent on "teaching her the language of home" and of "giving her a place among her people" that her annual anniversary gift had included not only an object d'Indian art but also a payment toward a trailer on the reservation.⁶¹ But he can't teach her how to develop a sharper sense of survival humor, the kind that connects rather than separates and that makes one feel at home rather than displaced.

In an earlier reservoir scene that had forecast this very public entanglement, Doug silently noted Annie's unsuccessful efforts to engage in reservation humor: "Even when she got reservation humor and snapped off a good one that cut sharp, she usually apologized somehow, canceling out the effect."⁶² In the moment following her foray into reservation humor, Doug tells her, "Your braid's coming a little frayed."⁶³ Doug knows what Annie might someday learn that "comedy is worth more than tragedy any time where survival is at stake."⁶⁴ Like the crowd at the reservoir, he also knows the truth of Vine Deloria's words: "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that people can survive."⁶⁵

Despite her cutting words in the second reservoir scene, Annie also has not yet learned the lessons offered by Shirley, or even Martha, who had infuriated her daughter-in-law by cutting up her stash of ancient, out-of-date clothes in order to make a quilt. Shirley reminds us that "Martha and me, we were always sharp women."⁶⁶ As Annie begins to drive off, speeding into an uncertain future off the reservation, Doug reassures her, "I'll still be here, your home will still be here."⁶⁷ Despite her urgent pleas for autonomy, he again voices the implicit refrain of *Mending Skins*: "Well, we're still here."⁶⁸ And he grabs the pool cue bag.

In a pivotal bus scene from the film *Smoke Signals*, Victor Joseph instructs his traveling companion Thomas Builds-the-Fire on how to be "Indian" — no smiling and definitely no braids. He exclaims, "You gotta free it. An Indian man ain't nothing without his hair."⁶⁹ Not much later, however, Victor cuts off his own long hair, acknowledging and mourning the death of his father and the long stretch of separation between them. After his confrontation with Annie and T. J., Doug "grabbed his braid and cut through it, one stroke at a time, feeling the pull and then the release as it let go. If she could have seen this, Annie would have called him a stereotype, cutting his hair in loss like that.

She would forget that she had done it first. When she came home with her trendy haircut that first time, she claimed the braid was not what a woman in her position should be wearing, and yet she had kept it all those years, like the clothes, unable to let go of their other life.⁷⁰ The pull of letting go and hanging on, of forgetting and remembering, plays out in this scene as Doug takes out her braid from the bag and joins it to his own:

He tried unweaving the two braids and reweaving them together as one, coils of his black braid layered into her beautiful copper lengths, but the wind strengthened, blowing strand after strand away as he worked, until all he held were a few lengths shining in the setting sun, some from each of their heads. All the while, he wondered if there would be any fry bread left for his lunch the next day and if anyone had any good jokes at his table that night, telling them even in his absence. He opened his palm and let the wind take most of the remaining threads of their lives together out across the water, toward the city.⁷¹

At the most tangible site of land loss and broken promises on the Tuscarora Reservation, Doug motions toward survivance. In response to her question posed years earlier about why they always had to come to the reservoir on their anniversary, Doug had replied that it "is the place where you come to remember all the things you cherish and how easy you can lose them."⁷² As the locus for the power of collective memory and the perils of forgetting, the reservoir embodies what Doug's act entails. The reservoir occupies tricky terrain in Gansworth's fiction: a place seemingly defined by loss and displacement and a place to swim and hang out for Gansworth's postreservoir generation. Doug's act asks us to consider what is worth holding onto and what is worth letting go. What do we need to remember? And what props do we need to do so? Echoing "Fraying Threads," the bottommost right panel in the triptych, Doug's gesture tugs at conflicting motions of presence and absence. After his efforts to conjoin and preserve these two full braids fail, he opens his palm to let them go. That he does so right after wondering about the jokes he's missing that night at the dinner table and the availability of leftover fry bread for his next day's lunch directs us to his own great "sewing" abilities. His adaptive resilience ensures survivance.

Gansworth's first novel, *Indian Summers*, concludes in part with its main

character, Floyd Page, engaged in a ritual of burning a pile of notebooks at the reservoir's edge. He had tried writing down the stories of his family, home, and community after a bout with memory loss, notably caused by hitting his head on one of the rocks marking his family's submerged home under the reservoir. Like Floyd, Doug has to let go in order to hold on. As Floyd declares about the rocks he had dredged up from the reservoir bottom, "We don't need them to keep our pasts. We're the only connections we need to get on in this world."⁷³ A dance of unburdening and remembrance, Doug's braiding ritual is echoed by the "final" commemorative act of the novel: Doug gives Shirley the remaining hair strands once he completes the story we have just heard. In turn, Shirley "crisscrossed them" in her Bible, placing them for safe-keeping on the color plate of Jesus bleeding at the crucifixion. She inscribes "Annie's hair, May 21, 2002. Just in case someone ever needed to know."⁷⁴ Back on that Calvary Trail, anything can happen.

Coda: Here and Beyond

In his recently released mixed-genre work *Breathing the Monster Alive*, Gansworth extends the semiotics of hair woven throughout his reservation fictions into broader cultural imaginations. An interrelated exploration in painting, poetry, and essay, *Breathing* meditates on childhood fears writ large in the American landscape. As a young boy on the Tuscarora Reservation, Gansworth had conflated the setting and storyline of an early 1970s docudrama, *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, set in rural Fouke, Arkansas, with his own densely forested reservation home. That rooted terror, long dormant but raised to the surface upon watching the film as an adult, compelled Gansworth to treat seriously what at first glance seems laughable. In other words, he pushes past readers' grinning skepticism to tackle the "hairiest" subject of all: Bigfoot, that is, Sasquatch or the Fouke Monster. Noting the presence of this figure in indigenous stories as well as its more recent incarnations, not just in North America but elsewhere in the world, Gansworth pursues the permeable lines dividing dream and waking life, childhood and adulthood, religion and myth.

For example, in one of his "persona poems" inspired by a teenage boy featured in the actual film, Gansworth draws attention to generational, gendered, and cultural lessons learned through ritual acts of grooming. In "Jasper Applebee Shaves for the First Time," we learn that the father shaves twice a day,

sometimes three if circumstances warranted.⁷⁵

Turning to his son, the father intones,

Boy . . . it's time
 rubbing thick soap from brush and mug
 onto me, pushing my chin back
 until I can barely see
 myself in the mirror, this is
 what separates us from the beasts.⁷⁶

While the father shaves, "nodding at the removal / of hair I had not yet noticed," he motions to his son:

[He] hands the blade to me and says
 it is my turn, so I imitate
 his strokes on the left side and after
 I have completed the ritual and rinsed
 my tingling face, he digs back in the drawer
 pulls a small vial of sharp alcohol scented
 with musk, splashes some into his rough
 calluses, slams his open palms onto my face
 and finishes me, exclaiming: You will never feel
 more like a man than you do at this moment,
 and I wait for it to pass.⁷⁷

In a scene of hovering violence, the blade scraping the barely discernible hair on the face, the son silently resists his father's scene of instruction. Gansworth contemplates here a rite of passage for boys, a moment in which cultural codes of masculinity are reinstated by the consummative act of shaving. This transition from one category to another — from boy to man — is firmly drawn by the father, who teaches his son that shaving "separates us from the beasts." As he "finishes" off his son, the father reminds him what he should have learned that day: pride and confidence in that "moment" of becoming a man. Yet what the speaker remembers is that roughness of the "open palm" and that sting of "musk" on his face. In Gansworth's hands shaving is defamiliarized to suggest its monstrous contours. In doing so, he calls to mind

similar acts of cultural self-scrutiny, such as Horace Miner's classic parody of ethnographic discourse. In "Body Ritual among the Nacirema," Miner recasts this "daily body ritual which is performed only by men" as "scraping and lacinating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument."⁷⁸

The painting that accompanies this poem not only shares the poem's title but shares the poem's play on the permeable borders between boy and man and between man and beast. The dominant right-hand panel reveals half of a young man's well-shaved face staring ahead into his future. In the narrow panel adjoining this one, the hairy presence of the "monster" is barely discernible behind an imposing, unsheathed razor that dominates the panel and with its long blade gleaming. The dark background and shadows cast over the young man's face suggest just how permeable are the borders that so many humans zealously maintain. In the three-paneled painting *Between Fear and Faith*, Gansworth makes his point more explicit. The lower left panel adjoins panels featuring the "boggy creek" and a house whose TV antenna brings in the scary movies that will make the frame of window light indispensable against the outer darkness of the night. In an ironic visual nod to one of Michelangelo's masterpieces, *The Creation of Adam*, the diagonal composition of the panel spotlights two hands reaching out to the other. While the lower left corner shows a hand not unlike Adam's, the upper right corner, where God's hand should be, instead proffers a hairy hand whose index finger reaches down to touch the "human" one. The symmetry of the two hands underscores their similitude, despite the excess of hair on the one. In its sly irreverence and tricky humor, the panel does more than reimagine one of the most iconic artistic works in Judeo-Christian culture. It unbraids stories that tie meaning together in only one way, that offer only fixed perspectives and single points of view. Throughout *Breathing the Monster Alive*, Gansworth enlarges the focus of his previous works, challenging us to heed the questions and transform the patterns of faith and fear, belief and invention, and us and them.

A Gansworth painting entitled *The Very Cold Moon* refers to the very last month in the Haudenosaunee lunar calendar and the last of the images accompanying the poetry of *Nickel Eclipse: Iroquois Moon*. In this image a huge illuminated moon, its surface the "Indian" side of that early twentieth-century nickel, is cradled by antlers. The sharp points of the antlers scrape against

the indian head, that frozen emblem of a vanished people. Yet that image of the permanently braided indian gets rehung by the elements surrounding it. Strings of icy wampum beads drape the antlers in distinctly braidlike patterns. At the top right edge of the nickel moon, the word "liberty" has been supplanted by the word "survival." Recasting the nickel's original message of indian demise in the face of American freedom, Eric Gansworth asserts here the much older story of Native survival. As his reservations fictitious insist, even on the coldest winter night, the growing life of the People will be sustained.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Bud Hirsch, whose work featured the best instances of tricky humor and survival. My thanks to Eric Gansworth for sharing music and conversation and for making me watch *The Legend of Boggy Creek*.

1. Lyrics from "Hair," the anthem of the rock musical *Hair*, which premiered on Broadway in 1968.
2. See "Indians.org" at <http://www.indians.org/articles/how-to-braid-hair.html> (accessed August 8, 2006).
3. Eric Gansworth, *Mending Skins* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 131.
4. See Eric Gansworth's first novel, *Indian Summers* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998), for an extended narrative consideration of the many borders demarcating reservation and off-reservation points of view and the multiple articulations of the concept of "territory."
5. Eric Gansworth, e-mail communication to author.
6. For two non-Tuscarora representations of this history, one a touristic/educational Web site, the other an official Web site of hydroelectric power in this region, see "Niagara Falls History of Power," <http://www.iaw.on.ca/~falls/power.html>, and New York Power Authority, "Niagara Power Project," <http://www.nypa.gov/facilities/niagara.htm>. While the first Web site does include a brief mention of the appropriation battle, the latter does not mention it at all. Instead, its brief history details that "in 1957, Congress passed the Niagara Redevelopment Act, which granted the Power Authority a federal license to fully develop the United States' share of the Niagara River's hydroelectric potential. Within three years — on exactly the day predicted by Robert Moses, the 'Master Builder' and then chairman of the Power Authority — the Niagara project produced first power."
7. Tuscarora artist-curator-photographer Jolene Rickard also foregrounds the im-movable presence of the Lewiston Reservoir in her works, including her installation

from 2001 titled *Contact Narratives: An/Other Sacrifice*. In her artist's statement accompanying this work, Rickard notes that, while "millions of gallons of water pound over the brink [of nearby Niagara Falls] every minute" and "a five square mile reservoir sits on the western edge of our community filled with fresh water, we haul water into our homes from fire hydrants" (20). As a staging ground for collective memory, *Contact Narratives* illustrates that, "for the people of the Tuscarora nation, the reservoir is a constant reminder, like a thorn in our foot, of personal greed prevailing over communal gain. Millions of gallons of water sit behind a 100 foot thick wall on our land and our wells are dry or polluted" (20).

8. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 17.
9. Eric Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," in *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. Marijo Moore (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003), 273.
10. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 273.
11. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 275.
12. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 275.
13. For example, see Jon Allan Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, *American Indian Education: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). New non-Native- and Native-authored studies of the Indian boarding schools published in recent years have added enormously to our understanding of this era. In addition, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Brenda J. Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Brenda J. Child, Margaret L. Archuleta, and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, eds., *Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences, 1875–1928* (Phoenix: Heard Museum, 2000); and Clifford E. Trafzer, *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006). Gerald Vizenor writes in *Manifest Maniners: Postindian Warriors of Survival* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1994), that "English, that coercive language of federal boarding schools, has carried some of the best stories of endurance" (106). From Gertrude Bonnin to Laura Tohe and Francis LaFlesche to Leslie Silko, Native writers have articulated boarding school experiences in memoir, poetry, and fiction. Most strikingly, they have refused narratives of victimry in favor of stories of resistance and survival. For the role of boarding schools in the development of Native literary traditions in English, see, for example, Amelia V. Katanski, *Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding School Experience and American Indian Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005).
14. For a comparative view of hair cutting and head shaving in other colonialist "educational" settings, see the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and the book that inspired it, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996) by Doris Pilkington (also known as Nugi Garimara).

53. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 130; emphasis added.
54. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 149.
55. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 148.
56. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 149.
57. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 157.
58. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 157.
59. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 158.
60. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 162.
61. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 98–99.
62. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 99.
63. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 99.
64. Carter Revard, *Family Matters, Tribal Affairs* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 90.
65. Vine Deloria, "Indian Humor," in *Nothing But the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature*, eds. John L. Purdy and James Ruppert (Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 53.
66. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 140.
67. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 159.
68. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 159.
69. In a recent documentary, *Half of Anything*, Sherman Alexie is one of four interviewees asked only half facetiously, "What is a real Indian?" In his ensuing comment Alexie turns to his hair—and its shift from mullet to shorn—as a way of talking about reservation identity and messing with the politics of "authenticity." This 2006 film was directed by Jonathon S. Tomhave and produced by Native Voices at the University of Washington.
70. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 161.
71. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 162.
72. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 87.
73. Gansworth, *Indian Summers*, 198.
74. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 163–64.
75. Eric Gansworth, *Breathing the Monster Alive* (Treadwell NY: Bright Hill, 2006), 27.
76. Gansworth, *Breathing*, 27.
77. Gansworth, *Breathing*, 27–28.
78. Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," *American Anthropology* 58, no. 3 (June 1956): 505.

15. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 277.
16. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 276.
17. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 276.
18. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 277.
19. Gansworth, "Identification Pleas," 277.
20. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 3.
21. Fred is not his biological father but for several years had assumed that responsibility before giving guardianship over to his best friend and army buddy Tommy Jack McMorsey.
22. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 50.
23. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 4.
24. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 5.
25. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 9.
26. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 6.
27. See Jim Northrup, *Walking the Rez Road* (Stillwater MN: Voyageur Press, 1993), 8–9.
28. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 119.
29. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 109.
30. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 105.
31. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 135.
32. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 148.
33. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 148.
34. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 91.
35. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 91.
36. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 91.
37. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 20.
38. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 91.
39. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 12.
40. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 12.
41. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 119.
42. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 123.
43. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 123.
44. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 124.
45. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 125–26.
46. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 126.
47. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 127.
48. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 125.
49. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 127.
50. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 128.
51. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 50, 134.
52. Gansworth, *Mending Skins*, 88.