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**“You Could Be White, But It Hurt Like Hell.”
Browning the Apple in Eric Gansworth’s *Apple:
Skin to the Core***

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Apple: Skin to the Core, Eric Gansworth, Native American boarding schools, assimilation, enculturation.

Abstract

This paper analyses *Apple: Skin to the Core*, a Young Adult memoir-in-verse composed by the Onondaga writer and visual artist Eric Gansworth and published in 2020. The aim of this dissertation is to make a close reading of *Apple* from a postcolonial perspective in order to discuss the impact of boarding schools on Native American communities as experienced by the author. Through *Apple*, Eric Gansworth calls for Native peoples to embrace their roots as the way to heal from the past, presenting his journey of reconnection as a source of comfort and hope for the achievement of a brighter future for Native Americans. The slur “apple,” around which the whole work revolves, is essential to understand the author’s position and his explorations of identity. Furthermore, the book’s genre will be discussed in relation to the author’s intentions of writing a book to raise awareness of boarding schools among young adults. The analysis allows me to conclude that *Apple* represents an act of protest against colonisation and assimilation policies, as well as a recognition of the suffering and resilience of the author’s community, and a declaration of hope in this particular context.

Key Words: *Apple: Skin to the Core*, Eric Gansworth, Native American boarding schools, assimilation, enculturation.

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Introduction

Apple: Skin to the Core (2020) is a YA memoir-in-verse composed by Eric Gansworth, an enrolled Onondaga writer and visual artist raised at the Tuscarora Nation. In this piece of literature aimed at a Young Adult audience, the author tells his story: while denouncing the oppression suffered by boarding school survivors like his grandparents, Gansworth gives insight into his family background, shares life events which are relevant in his experience as an Onondaga both in and outside the reservation, deals with his identity struggles, and aims at creating a sense of hope for the achievement of a brighter future for Native communities through his reconnection with his indigenous culture.

The slur “apple” is the concept around which the entire work revolves, meaning “red on the outside, white on the inside.” (Gansworth 2020, 4) This derogatory appellation has its origins in the context of the boarding schools created by the US government in the mid-19th century as part of a set of policies to accelerate the destabilization of Native American identity and assimilate them to the western way of life. Indigenous peoples represented an obstacle for the white man’s intentions of occupying the land and making a profit out of its resources, as they opposed these exploitative practices by the colonists. Among the “effective” solutions to deal with the Natives and ensure that their expansionist plans would come through were the killing, starving, or relocation of these communities to relatively small pieces of land ruled by laws made by the executive aimed at disrupting their culture.

Boarding schools represent just one among the many ways in which the white colonists attempted at erasing their indigeneity and had a particularly profound impact on their identity, their cultural practices, their language, and their mental well-being. These militarised institutions were directed by members of the church in charge of “civilizing” the “Indians,” and were in operation in the US between the 1860s and the 1970s, scarring generations of indigenous children for life, taking their indigenous names, beliefs, traditions, and languages away, making them believe that being an “Indian” was a sin. Thousands and thousands of indigenous children living within the borders of the United States were sent to these schools in order to receive an education similar to that of white American children, claiming it would teach them how to survive in the “white man's world”, the society which aimed at destroying all they knew and all they were.

Departing from the pejorative term “apple,” in his work Gansworth condemns the treatment given to Native American children in these boarding schools, and the several assimilation policies implemented by the executive, as well as the impact these actions had on their indigenous culture. Gansworth presents his relatives’ story as an example of what many Native

Americans had to endure, and his own story as a result of that oppression. The author addresses those Natives lucky not to experience the horrors of boarding schools but who make use of this denigrating denomination against the members of the community who had to go through such terrible events. Gansworth also describes his journey of reconnection, claiming that re-engaging with one's indigeneity, or enculturation, is the only path towards healing from the traumatic experiences his people have gone through: unless they go back to their roots and embrace who they are, they will not be able to prosper. The writer creates a story in which other indigenous people will hopefully see themselves reflected, somewhere where they can find comfort for their suffering as well as gather the strength to improve their current situation. His hope is then that his work can help other Natives with similar experiences.

The main objective of this paper is to explore the impact of the boarding schools system on the Native American community as discussed by Gansworth in *Apple*. This work is read as a tool to raise awareness among its intended young adult audiences about boarding schools and to encourage their reconnection with their indigenous heritage. Through *Apple*, Eric Gansworth calls for Native communities to embrace their roots as the way to heal from the past, presenting his journey of reconnection as a source of comfort and hope for the achievement of a brighter future for Native Americans. Furthermore, the connections between the author's aims and the specific generic features of the work as a Young Adult memoir-in-verse will also be explored. In this YA literary piece, the author combines his passion for writing and painting, including illustrations full of meaning, incorporating both his Tuscarora culture and popular culture, through which the author connects with the reader.

Although earlier works by Eric Gansworth have been studied (Bernardin 2017; Suhr-Sytsma 2019), no previous analyses of *Apple* have been made available yet. Nevertheless, the experience of the boarding schools is a subject widely discussed by other indigenous authors in their works, such as Louise Erdrich (Schacht 2015), and analysed in numerous academic works, (Callan 2005; Cromer 2018; Edmunds 1995; Garrett and Pichette 2000; Smith 2004) which have proved crucial for my own discussion. The first section of the paper will discuss the impact of boarding schools by recounting the author's grandparents' experiences, and the effect of these schools on the Tuscarora tribe. The second section will be devoted to the author's identity struggles and process of reconnection, and how his experiences influenced the composition of this collection.

“Still Here, Still Standing”: Resilience in Times of Adversity

In *Apple: Skin to the Core*, Eric Gansworth denounces the oppression and persecution committed against Native peoples since the early stages of colonisation in North America. Native communities represented an obstacle to the white settlers' occupation and exploitation of the land; thus, colonists carried out inhumane actions so as to erase them, given that “[I]ndians in communities will reproduce / in both form and idea.” (Gansworth 2020, 5) What happened to Native Americans is an example of genocide resulting from settler colonialism, leading to the massacre of those communities that impeded their acquiring the land and its resources to make a profit. (Dunbar-Ortiz 2016) For instance, “[k]illing Indians / directly” (Gansworth 2020, 4) was the most direct solution to the colonists' “problems.” According to Garrett and Pichette, mass killing was seen as “the simplest way to deal with the ‘Indian problem,’ being that tribes stood in the way of free reign over land and all the natural resources that went with it (including gold).” (2000, 4) Further measures to disrupt group identification were eventually implemented, such as “[m]aking group land base illegal.” (Gansworth 2020, 5) As bloodshed was becoming increasingly difficult to justify from their “good Christian” standpoint, more “civilised” and equally disruptive measures were taken by the government. By way of illustration, either tribes were removed from their ancestral territories to other parts of the country, losing their spiritual and cultural connection to the land, or reservations were created to keep the Natives away from their business. (Garrett and Pichette 2000, 4) The U.S. government also resorted to “[w]iping out the original food resources,” (Gansworth 2020, 4) rationing food in Native reservations; the bison, which thousands of Natives depended on as a means of sustenance, (Least Heat-Moon 2013) was replaced by products like flour and grains, an unhealthy change of diet that had detrimental effects on their well-being. (2013) At the beginning of his work, Gansworth criticises these cruel responses by the colonists, pointing at the disruptive nature of such actions that aimed at eradicating them, ignoring their presence on the land for thousands of years and their rights as inhabitants of the land.

Among the numerous forms of oppression faced by Native communities, *Apple's* main focus is placed on the impact of the boarding school system. These schools were part of a set of policies meant to shatter indigenous identity, intending to “irreparably wipe out any traces of indigenous cultures in its charges.” (Gansworth 2020, 333) This new approach was proposed in the 19th century, when two main perspectives can be distinguished: whereas “some sectors advocated outright physical extermination of Native peoples,” “the ‘friends’ of the Indians [...] advocated cultural rather than physical genocide.” (Smith 2004, 89-90) As physical genocide did not prove to be practical enough, cultural genocide could be an alternative to demolish and

repress the colonised peoples. (Shanley 1997, 675) Thus, to carry out this cultural massacre, boarding schools were set up:

[R]emove present juvenile offspring, incarcerate them long enough to open possibilities for future manual labor resources. To minimize bloodshed, call incarceration institution a “school.” (Gansworth 2020, 5)

Native American children would learn, “[i]n a military-style environment, useful trades and insider secrets / of American life not available within the reservation’s confines.” (Gansworth 2020, 5) These institutions became, thus, “the furnace where children of ‘inferior’ races would have an opportunity to observe and replicate the attitudes and behaviors of the dominant majority.” (Carroll 2009, 26) From the 1860s to the 1970s, the period in which boarding schools were officially in operation in the country, thousands of indigenous children were removed from their homes to attend these schools that aspired to “break up and assimilate Native communities.” (Schacht 2015, 65) Presented as an “Opportunity of a Life / Time” (8), the actual mission of boarding schools such as Carlisle was to “‘Kill the Indian, [and] Save the Man’.” (Partnership with Native Americans n.d.) Native American children forcibly taken from their families would be assimilated into European-American culture, indoctrinated with European-American values, (Cromer et al. 2018, 102; Smith 2004, 90) and converted into the Christian faith, abandoning their previous spiritual practices. (Cromer et al. 2018, 102) *Apple* exhibits how the establishment and running of those boarding schools intended to profoundly wound their indigenous identity, and assimilate them into the western society, taking aim at defenseless, innocent children.

Gansworth approaches the boarding school experience by sharing the story of his grandparents, survivors of Native boarding schools. The author’s reflections on one of his grandfather’s photographs, a picture taken during his stay in Carlisle (Gansworth 2020, 11-12), reveal information about the transformation which Native children underwent: all their belongings were confiscated, their hair was cut, and their traditional clothes were replaced by military uniforms. (11) Even their names were changed if theirs were “too traditional”. (12) According to Partnership with Native Americans,

Carlisle and other boarding schools instituted their assault on Native cultural identity by first doing away with all outward signs of tribal life that the children brought with them. The long braids worn by Indian boys were cut off. The children were made to wear standard uniforms [,] [...] given new “white” names, including surnames[,] [...] and forbidden to speak their Native languages. (n.d.)

Furthermore, Gansworth’s grandmother talking through her grandson’s pen unmarks how these

abodes of loss immeasurably had an effect on their identity, and emotional and psychological stability:

[I]t never occurs to you that
you are not being taught how to be an American
but how to lose yourself. [...]
You are being wiped clean so that whatever reservoir
of information you retain, will only reference a certain
version of American culture.” (Gansworth 2020, 13-14)

After having lived through such distressing circumstances, Native self-identity was seriously affected, (Edmunds 1995, 734) and, albeit not all Native children see their experience in boarding schools as something negative, “it is generally the case that much, if not most, of the current dysfunctionality in Native communities can be traced to the boarding school era.” (Smith 2004, 91) At the wake of their arrival in these schools, Native children were stripped of their identity, shamed for being who they were, and forced to adapt to a new reality and to become someone they were not. The boarding school experience traumatised them for life.

Eric Gansworth emphasises the everlasting, disruptive effect which boarding schools had on Native children exemplified in the case of his grandparents. For instance, his grandmother was against her children learning the Tuscarora language, always speaking to them in English, as she did not “[w]ant Tuscarora to leak into the brains and vocabularies of the next generation.” (Gansworth 2020, 25) Similarly, in her house, “[t]radition was considered a threat to [their] futures,” (69) and traditional practices such as beadwork were considered “[b]ackward skills;” (30) Gansworth states that “[t]he ghost of Pratt whispered lessons to her all the time.” (30) This rejection towards their indigenous heritage is the outcome of having been taught for years that “their language, culture, and beliefs were inferior or evil,” (Haag 2007, 157) developing “a deep cultural shame.” (157) Further to this, aftereffects of Carlisle on his grandfather are captured in a photograph taken in the Tuscarora Reservation in 1920, when he was an adult already. His grandfather is wearing “a three-piece suit, leather shoes / shined, and necktie in a perfect Windsor knot,” (Gansworth 2020, 13) unlike other members of the reservation who appear with him in the group shot, most of whom wear sportswear to play basketball. (13) Gansworth calls attention to the fact that, even after Carlisle had closed, his grandfather “stayed disciplined,” (15) as if fearing to reveal “a wild side,” (13) in case government agents returned again, “forcing him to get back on the train to Carlisle for remediation.” (13) According to Miriam Schacht, boarding schools had immensely fractious consequences on these Native children, and consequently on their communities, who still today exhibit afflictions originated by this dark

episode in the United States history (2015, 63). Even terms like Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are perceived as “inadequate in describing the upheaval suffered not just by individuals but by entire communities” (70) that survived the boarding school period. Eric Gansworth employs *Apple* to denunciate the traumatic experiences which thousands of Native children like his grandparents had to go through, being dispossessed of their indigenous identity, and tearing to pieces their mental well-being, causing irreparable damages.

Eric Gansworth appropriates the slur “apple,” constructing his work around that derogatory term and exposing what is hidden behind it. “Apple” is a term which reflects the assimilation forced upon Natives, and which originated in the context of boarding schools. Paradoxically, it is a pejorative denomination created and mostly used by Native people themselves. “As a reminder of what [they] risk, spending too much time / with white people,” “[o]ne day, some Indian / finally bit an apple,” (Gansworth 2020, 4) and after looking at its white interior, came up with this nickname that asserts Pratt’s project had been successful. (22) Eric Gansworth states that the slur, meaning “‘red on the outside, white on the inside’,” (2020, 332) refers to those Natives “who’ve learned to effectively ‘act white when necessary’.” (332) Actually, these definitions suggest their need to continue alive; as the author’s grandmother admits, that was not the life she would have wanted for herself, but it was something that she had to do to survive. (264) This is the reason why Gansworth addresses those Natives who avoided the horrors of boarding schools and who make use of such harmful denominations: they did not have to choose between assimilation or death. In fact, “those who resist[ed] the pressure to assimilate [were] exposed to the imminent threat of death or destruction;” (Callan 2005, 492) therefore, their only way out was to yield to acculturation. Ironically, boarding school victims, because of their having been educated as Whites and not having been able to practice their culture and traditions, became the target of members from their own communities, those Natives who were lucky not to attend residential schools and who “[h]ad time to develop their own metaphors.” (Gansworth 2020, 29) Callan claims that “assimilation is sometimes taken to signify betrayal of the cultural community that one forsakes”, “[but] people who assimilate to escape exploitation or coercion are plainly victims of oppression.” (2005, 475) Eric Gansworth points to this argument: Natives who have endured the boarding school experience, or their descendants, are not the ones to blame, but victims of assimilation policies developed by the white colonists to break them. Thus, this sense of betrayal felt by other members of the community is unjust for the sufferers, as well as unsustainable, and it only serves to fragment Native peoples even more, perpetuating the colonists’ intention of breaking their group identity.

Through his narrative and his own story of reconnection, Eric Gansworth aims at

encouraging Natives to unite and re-engage with their indigenous culture as the way to heal from the past. Gansworth calls for Native Americans to support each other and to strengthen their relationships, as “[o]nly other Indians [can] crack that skin, [and] make it / less valuable.” (Gansworth 2002, 29) Furthermore, he animates those “Apple Indians” to embrace who they are and reconcile with their indigeneity as the path to recover from all that suffering, because only boarding school survivors

[u]nderstood that an Apple, once its red skin was split,
would brown back on the inside, exposed to the light
and air of the family’s stories and bones. (29)

As Poupart vindicates, they as Native Americans “must unite and reclaim the traditions of the Grandmothers and Grandfathers and incorporate these ways to heal [them]selves, [their] communities, and [their] individual perpetrators of violence.” (2003, 96) In order for Native Americans to heal, they must come to terms with their traumas and mourn for everything they have lost. (96) What is more, Gansworth implies that a revitalization of their numerous cultures and languages is within the bounds of possibility if all Natives contribute to it through their enculturation. “After all this time, and all these attempts to wipe [them] out, some things are / on the verge of disappearing, [and] some things are gone;” (Gansworth 2020, 23) however, they “[a]re still / here, still standing, still walking, one resilient step at a time,” (91) reason why they must go back to their roots. “Native Americans were overwhelmed, but they also persisted,” (Edmunds 1995, 728) and enculturation, the learning of their traditional practices, beliefs and values, could be conducive to Native American healing. (Cromer et al. 2018, 109) After centuries of persecution in their own homes, Native peoples have shown resilience in their fight against erasure; nevertheless, unity and reconnection with their indigenous cultures could assist in the collective’s healing from their suffering and traumatic experiences.

By way of illustration, the author deals with the cultural renewal taking place in his community, the Tuscarora Reservation. The author refers to some of his family members, younger generations, who are participants in this cultural revitalization. For instance, Gansworth speaks of his niece, who cooks traditional meals, is in charge of a community farm that grows seeds cultivated for centuries by their people, and passes all this knowledge to the next generations, so that nothing is lost in the passing of years. (Gansworth 2020, 277) He also talks about his nephew’s son, who is learning how to “plant traditionally,” and will eventually join his aunt while attending college, “balancing both of [their] worlds.” (278) Other members of the reservation are also mentioned, like Howdy, who “by the time the twentieth century became the twenty-first, [...] beyond his eightieth year, kept talking and talking, with young and

old alike,” and “[s]pent days developing worksheets for [them], organized by whatever was on his mind at the moment, whatever he felt was important,” (300) trying to help preserve their language. Gilkenson opines that, for Native Americans, “recovery of the past is not only essential to any demonstration of ‘unbroken ancestry,’ but it is also a warrant for their future survival.” (2014, 202) Nagel is of the same belief, claiming that “they go forward by going back,” and that “this process of becoming often involves a spiritual component that for many Indians, perhaps for most, represents the symbolic core of Indianness and is a central part of the ethnic renewal process.” (1995, 960) Eric Gansworth, by means of telling stories of hope and regeneration in his community, intends to transfer such optimistic aspirations to other Native American peoples in order to awaken a spirit of renewal in them, stressing community work based on the belief that, by working together, all these diverse Native peoples will be able to prosper. Everyone can take part in this cultural revival: the elderly can carry all their knowledge, beliefs, and traditions to the next generations, who in turn must do their job in perpetuating the culture and the language.

The slur “apple” is central to Eric Gansworth’s work, through which the author calls attention to the discrimination taking place within Native American communities as a consequence of assimilation policies such as the establishment of boarding schools. Thus, Gansworth appropriates the slur and creates his narrative around it, exposing all the harm done to his grandparents which this derogatory term hides, as well as the consequences which the boarding school system had on Native communities like the Tuscarora Reservation. Thousands of children like his grandparents were taken to these corrupted institutions against their will, alienating them from everything they knew. Such events prevented them from passing down all that heritage to the next generations, as the author illustrates in this work, sharing the story of his grandparents. Nevertheless, *Apple* is also a story of reconnection and hope for a brighter future for Native Americans, in which the author portrays the cultural revitalisation taking place in his reservation hoping it works as a motivation for others.

“Get Back”: Journey of Reconnection

In *Apple: Skin to the Core*, Eric Gansworth shares with the reader his identity struggles while growing up in the reservation. The author felt excluded at three different levels, what impacted his perception of the self and his sense of belonging. To begin with, he was a Native American in a “white man’s world;” (Gansworth 2020, 198) he was an outsider in a “world that trie[d] to eat [them].” (316) Because of him being Native, he has faced discrimination outside the

reservation, having been followed “in stores often enough, for | Browsing with Too Much Melanin,” (256) Skin in the US society is not just a “marker of *other*, it may also have implications for differential treatment.” (Weaver 2015, 8) Furthermore, because of Haudenosaunee clans being matrilineal societies, the author “will always be enrolled Onondaga, the outsider inside,” (Gansworth 2020, 79) living among Tuscaroras; he mentions it several times in the work, and it is something that seems to concern him, because “in a community this small, this tight, | if you are an outsider, you will be reminded.” (78) In addition, the author sometimes feels like an outsider in his own family. For instance, unlike other members of his “fanatically sports-loving family,” (53) he is not interested in sports, and prefers to watch TV series like *Lost in Space* or *Batman*. He also enjoys comics, something that his family finally comes around with when he is an adult, “accept[ing] that [he] will | always be odd man out.” (321) According to Hagerty et al., sociologically, “belonging connotes membership in groups or systems” (1992, 174), but psychologically, “belonging is an internal affective or evaluative feeling, or perception” (174); the author is part of the community, but while growing up he did not feel that way due to his differences with members both of the reservation and his family. Knowing that “to be different is to be separated,” (Gansworth 2020, 98) Gansworth grew “used to going back and forth, being two different people,” (124) hiding behind masks, “the masks we hide behind because of fear.” (Sparks 2015) Because of his feeling excluded, the author pressured himself to try and fit in with the rest, hiding who he really was so as not to look different from the rest. Masks are an important concept in the book, and represent the change of identities the author constantly went through while growing up to fight against his feelings of exclusion.

Exploring his identity, as a teenager the author found himself in between two worlds, but not fully belonging to either of them, a conflict he portrays in *Apple*. Even if he was raised in the Tuscarora Nation, and the community is part of who he is, he was not able to experience his indigenous culture at home, unlike other Native children in the reservation, as a consequence of what his grandparents went through. Although his grandparents “made it back with memories | intact,” (14) two generations later, his family “continue[s] to find those | fragments, pick up pieces and situate them back in the puzzle | frame,” (14) due to the deep impact that boarding schools had on them and their indigeneity. “Traditionally, American Indian culture, traditions, values and beliefs were passed on orally to younger generations by the elders;” (Haag 2007, 155) however, among the repercussions of boarding schools there is the interruption of this transmission of knowledge. Contrastingly, he consumes mostly popular culture, in which Native Americans are not included: there is a lack of representation of Native Americans in the

media and literature, and when they appear, they are mostly misrepresented, portraying stereotypical images of Natives which are not close to reality nor do they represent them in the contemporary context. In the author's own words, Native Americans do not "fit into the imagination of U.S. culture." (Gansworth 2020, 332) In the comics the author read in his youth, if Native American characters were included, they were depicted wearing "Hollywood headbands in their long hair," sitting "Indian / style, cross legged, arms folded on their chests," referred "refer[red] to themselves in the third person," and "ha[d] not discovered / the apostrophe," (102) to name a few. Many stereotypical images of Native Americans are perpetuated in literature and the media, none of which represent these communities' contemporary reality; (Metzger and Kelleher 2008, 36) "viewed as frozen in time, without either past or future," and "regarded as static," (Glikenson 2014, 203) these perceptions are transferred to the screen and to paper. Further to this, "stereotypes exacerbate the identity crisis children and teens already face," (2008, 36) thus, damaging the identity formation of Native children, as in the case of the author. Gansworth's identity crisis, based on his feeling excluded from the rest in different aspects, is further affected by his cultural disconnection. Gansworth found himself between two cultures which did not fully represent him, as he had not been able to experience his indigenous culture properly, nor was the mainstream culture he consumed devised to include him.

Leaving the reservation, the author distanced himself from his community, a change that provoked contradictory reactions in him. Gansworth seems to have a conflicted relationship with the reservation: the people he loves lives there, and it is the place where he grew up; nevertheless, the author is anxious to leave his birthplace, looking at the city lights in the distance, "glow[ing] | suggest[ing] something beyond Dog Street." (Gansworth 2020, 195) In addition, his struggles to fit in only added on to his desire of leaving the reservation,

dream[ing] of other places
where people did not understand
the desire to reinvent oneself,
imagine a different bloodline,
have compassion for the secret
identity and the signal
in the sky [he] scanned
for every night. (117)

The author cannot imagine himself living the reservation life that awaits him in the future if he stays there, (182) a "dark and dreamless home for most" that "stops the urge to roam." (195)

Thus, when an opportunity to study at a community college in the city presents itself, he decides to leave, living his “last Dog Street year.” (225) Nonetheless, he expresses his sorrow, declaring that if the situation in the reservation and the opportunities which the place could offer him were different, he might have chosen to stay and embrace his indigenous culture. (195) As the author claims, leaving the reservation was something he knew he was going to do at some point, as he imagined himself leading a different life than the life the reservation would provide him with, even if it was home. (Gansworth 2020, 333) In a note at the end of the work, he writes down that “for some places in our lives, we feel love and dismay in equal measure, and the reservation road [he] grew up on is such a place.” (333) Because of the lack of possibilities to improve his situation and due to his perception of being estranged from others in his community, struggling to fit in, he decides to leave home. Going away provokes in him contentment and sadness at the same time, as he is moving on to pursue new beginnings, but he is also leaving his family and loved ones behind.

While being away from his people, the author feels the need to reconnect with his indigenous culture, a journey which has a sweet-and-sour taste. Leaving the reservation does not mean he breaks with his indigenous identity, because that would mean rejecting what he is. Actually, being apart from his community seems to awaken in him a desire to re-engage with his indigeneity, to “Get Back” (233), go back to the place where he used to belong to, (233) making “sure to visit at least once a year, to remember [his] home.” (287) *Get Back* was the Beatles’ “attempt to get back to their roots;” (Gansworth 2020, 334) similarly, the poems included in this section are devoted to the author’s going back to his roots, reconnecting with his indigeneity. In any case, Eric Gansworth’s reconnection is not idealised, but a rather bittersweet experience. Because his re-engagement with his indigenous identity makes him realise how disconnected he was from their traditions and culture, and how little he remembers of their Tuscarora language, the author is regretful of his disengagement, even if he is inculpable: he regrets how “so much of [his] culture feels on the verge of vanishing,” what makes him “wonder what part / of that [he is] contributing to with [his] own lack of knowledge.” (Gansworth 2020, 121) He also laments not having learned the Thanksgiving Address properly in school like his niece, to “begin every day, thanking the people, and the animals, / the earth, the water, [and] the air,” nothing like “the white national / holiday appearing every year in November,” (110) and rues not having been born “a little earlier, a little later, wishing / [he] had more discipline and freer timer when [they] found / [their] way back home, on [their] way back home,” (301) losing the opportunity to speak the Tuscarora language fluently like his nephew (301). All these concerns are included in *Get Back*, too, presented in poems which

“examine an irretrievable past through familiar threads, intimate connection, and popular culture.” (Gansworth 2020, 334) Because assimilation and colonisation happened, Native cultures cannot be recovered as they were before the arrival of the white man, nor can Natives fully re-engage with their indigenous identity; therefore, the reconnection presented by the author in *Apple* is not idealised, but it rather meets the reality of thousands of Native Americans today.

Apple is a YA literary work which recounts the author’s story and experiences as an Onondaga living in the contemporary world. As Gansworth could not find a story like his in the books he read in his youth (Gansworth 2020, 38), he decided to create his own; among his creations, *Apple* is a comforting and hopeful writing intended to help other Native young adults going through similar experiences and struggles. (38) Young Adult literature is a genre characterised by “often representing as well as enacting a power dynamic by which young individuals are repressed by the institutions of their societies.” (Suhr-Sytsma 2016, 29) Thus, it is important that multicultural Young Adult literature like *Apple* is produced and made available to the public, so that the non-white youth can also see themselves represented in literature; seeing characters like them in books will tell them that their experiences, realities, and feelings are as valid and worthy as that of any other child. (Metzger and Kelleher 2008, 40) In *Apple*, the author recounts what he has witnessed, heard, and experienced, (Gansworth 2020, 24) choosing “not to be silent.” (24) According to Suhr-Sytsma, “like the protagonists in their pages, [...] Gansworth’s books themselves also break silences;” (2019, 8) in *Apple*, the author is the protagonist who speaks up against the silenced voices and stories of Native Americans. Furthermore, Gansworth’s bicultural reality is reflected in the combination of Tuscarora and popular culture, a fusion present in both his writing and painting. Gansworth claims to have “always engaged a pop culture sensibility because it represented the Rez world as [he] know[s] it.” (Bernardin 2017, 72) For instance, The Beatles are a recurrent figure in *Apple*; to give an example, Gansworth adapts the *Abbey Road* album cover to his reservation context for an illustration included in the “Dog Street” section, (Gansworth 2020, 186-187; 336) which deals with his experiences in the reservation from his adolescence to the moment he left home. (336) The author employs popular culture in *Apple*, a work in which visual works operate together with his poems to convey a message, to connect with the reader; as the author claims, for him “visual and verbal forms are all the same story,” and cultural products like “comics prepared [him] for flexing both sides of [his] voice.” (Bernardin 2017, 71) Thus, *Apple* is a book that combines the written and the visual, incorporating both the Tuscarora and popular culture, creating the kind of literary piece in which he needed to see himself reflected in his youth for

other Native children to feel this inclusion in the literary world.

Apple depicts Eric Gansworth's identity crisis as a descendant of "Apple Indians," showing the impact that boarding schools had on him indirectly. In addition, he conveys his feelings of alienation while growing up in the reservation, and his bicultural reality as a result of centuries of colonisation and assimilation, portraying the reality of thousands of Native Americans today, and giving voice to their struggles. Furthermore, Gansworth shares with the reader his transformation, which takes place after he leaves the reservation and changes his relation with his indigenous culture. Going away from his community, even if perceived at first as an opportunity to move on and prosper, provoked in him a sense of longing, as he was leaving behind everything he knew; then, his journey of reconnection with his indigenous heritage begins, a process which, even if exciting, he knows will never be complete. Nevertheless, Gansworth intends to transmit the encouragement and hope felt in his reservation, where a cultural revitalisation is coming about, meaning to awaken the same feelings in other Native communities so that they work together to achieve a brighter future for their people.

Conclusion

In *Apple: Skin to the Core*, Eric Gansworth denounces the oppression suffered by Native Americans in the hands of the white colonists, and the assimilation of these communities to the western way of life carried out by the U.S. government. By way of illustration, the author explores the impact that Native American boarding schools had on his grandparents, portraying their stories as an example of what thousands of Native children have had to go through inside those institutions. Those schools created to disrupt Native culture and identity were authentic abodes of horror for most of these children, whose experience in residential schools scarred them for life. After spending years of their life there, they could not find their place, as they neither belonged to the western, American society nor was it easy to get reacquainted with the culture they had left behind years ago. The slur "apple" has its origins in this context, created by those Natives who did not attend those institutions and who continued practicing their culture and speaking their language. This derogatory term represents a central concept in *Apple*, and the author employs it to point at the marginalisation which some Native Americans suffer inside their own communities due to events which were out of their control. Furthermore, Gansworth explores his own identity as a descendant of "Apple Indians," conveying his identity struggles and feelings of exclusion, his complex bicultural reality, and his process of enculturation. Gansworth portrays all these concerns in *Apple*, a memoir-in-verse destined at a Young Adult

audience which deals with the reality of contemporary Native Americans like him, giving voice to and representing their experiences in literature. In order to do so, the author combines his passion for writing and painting, which work together to create a message, and includes elements from both his indigenous culture and from American popular culture, through which Gansworth connects with the reader. Thus, it can be argued that *Apple* symbolises an act of protest against the centuries of colonisation and erasure of Native peoples, as well as an act of remembrance of what Natives like his grandparents have had to experience in those institutions created to destabilise their indigenous identity and which profoundly impacted the collective. All the same, it is also a declaration of resilience and hope: they have resisted all this time, but it is necessary to go one step further and reconnect with their indigenous heritage, go back to their roots to heal, and build together a better future for their people.

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