

March 2019

“It’s my time to talk”: The Point of Protest in Eric Gansworth’s YA Fiction

Mandy Suhr-Systema

Emory University, mandy.sue.suhr-sytsma@emory.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl>

Recommended Citation

Suhr-Systema, Mandy (2019) ““It’s my time to talk”: The Point of Protest in Eric Gansworth’s YA Fiction,” *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol1/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SOPHIA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research on Diversity in Youth Literature by an authorized editor of SOPHIA. For more information, please contact amshaw@stkate.edu.

Eric Gansworth's interconnected young adult novels *If I Ever Get Out of Here* (2013) and *Give Me Some Truth* (2018) are set in the mid 1970s and early 1980s, respectively, on and around the Tuscarora Indian reservation where Gansworth, an enrolled member of the neighboring Onondaga nation, grew up. As they focus on the experiences of their young Tuscarora narrators, both novels portray the limited external effects and profound internal impacts of their antiracist and anticolonialist activism.

In *If I Ever Get Out of Here*, the narrator/protagonist, Lewis, stages a one-person protest when, after months of daily pummeling by racist bully Evan Reiniger, he refuses to return to school until the administrators do something to stop the abuse. Eventually, they do. But the victory rings hollow for Lewis both because the school only budes when a White family gets involved and because the bully's "punishment" is paid "vocational training" at his father's company (246). In contrast, had the White family not intervened, the school would have sent the truant Lewis to a reformatory (246). Before launching his protest, Lewis thinks, "I could believe all I wanted that offering a reasonable explanation to someone in power would set the world right, that rules were in place so everyone was treated equally. But the truth was, no one was ever treated all that equally," and the influence of the Reinigers, big financial boosters of the school, "was as real as the influence the sun had over all the planets, keeping them in their orbits" (224). While Lewis escapes his daily beatings, the systemic inequality shaping his universe remains in place.

Give Me Some Truth further illuminates that inequality by revealing additional disparities between Lewis's and Evan's families. We learn, for instance, that Evan's uncle Jim used his connections to dodge the Vietnam draft and secure a good maintenance job with the school

district; Lewis's uncle Albert, by contrast, was drafted into the war and, upon returning from combat, scrambles for odd jobs as a handyman to supplement his meager disability check.

Give Me Some Truth is alternately narrated by Lewis's friends/bandmates Carson and Maggi. In this novel, high school senior Carson is the one who initiates a protest against a well-connected racist bully, namely the White owner of a local restaurant. Giorgio "George" Custard dresses up like General Custer and refuses service to American Indians at his diner, Custard's Last Stand. Inspired by his older brother and his reading—including Vine Deloria Jr.'s book *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and the Mohawk newspaper *Akwesasne Notes*—Carson recruits dozens of Tuscarora adults to join him in a peaceful protest at the restaurant.

Carson's protest, like Lewis', largely fails to change the White individuals and institutions it targets. Newspaper coverage of the protest—which, despite Carson's careful plan, turns violent on both sides—leads to Custard losing his vendor table at the school's Battle of the Bands event, but it also leads Carson's home economics teacher and Custard's wife, Mrs. Marchese, to fail Carson, thereby disqualifying him from the music competition and derailing his graduation. Mrs. Marchese eventually changes her mind about failing Carson, too late for him to participate in the Battle of the Bands but in time for him to graduate; however, again paralleling Lewis's situation, it takes the intervention of a White character to change Mrs. Marchese's mind and Carson's fate. That White character is Evan's uncle, Jim.

Jim, like Evan and Custard, is a consistent jerk. He does not use his privilege to confront Mrs. Marchese about her unfair treatment of Carson out of a new commitment to equity. Rather, to put it in Carson's crude words, he is "trying to get into Maggi's pants" (362). The thirty-something Jim meets and initiates a semi-secretive relationship with the fifteen-year-old

Maggi early in the novel after she joins Lewis in working as a student employee for the school's maintenance crew. Since Carson and Lewis are Maggi's friends, Jim thinks helping Carson out with Mrs. Marchese and letting up on his bullying of Lewis at work (he had picked up where his nephew Evan left off) will help him in his quest to convince Maggi to give him her virginity.

Unlike Lewis and Carson, Maggi does not stage a "protest" as that term is typically understood. Instead, throughout *Give Me Some Truth*, she marshals a series of interpersonal protests—targeting her mom, Carson, and, eventually, Jim—that challenge the boundaries with which others confine her. She protests her mother limiting her artistic expression to traditional beadwork tourists will buy at the family's vendor table, first by sketching "new interpretations of our Traditional art" and later by actually creating that art, using photography and fabric along with scrap beads and wood (17). She even convinces her mom to display her work. Maggi also protests Carson's high opinion of himself, and is at least somewhat successful on this front, too, helping Carson to see the arrogance behind his assumption that Maggi is attracted to him and the way he expects more of Lewis than he gives in the boys' friendship. Maggi's protest against Jim has more mixed results. We are just five pages from the end of *Give Me Some Truth* when she breaks off that relationship, having finally come to see Jim's manipulative exploitation for what it is. She's victorious in that she escapes a toxic relationship, but she has not, as far as we can tell, changed Jim, who is likely to keep capitalizing on his privilege, keep up his bigoted workplace banter, and keep preying on Native girls who he likes "young, dumb, and looking for fun" (282).

By the end of *Give Me Some Truth*, Jim hasn't changed, the Reinigers haven't changed, Custard hasn't changed, the school hasn't changed, and the vast majority of White folks in the

area haven't changed. During his confrontation with Mrs. Marchese, Carson thinks that rather than being bothered by Custard's overt racism, starkly exposed in the newspaper coverage of the protest, his customers will probably consciously choose to identify with it. Carson is right. At the end of the novel, Custard's business is booming, emblematic of the explicit and implicit racism that remains a central pillar of the economic, educational, and governmental institutions along with the interpersonal relationships of this universe. To return to Lewis's metaphor, the planets remain in their orbits, kept there by the influence of those in positions of power and the ideology of settler logic and White supremacy undergirding that influence.

Why do Gansworth's YA novels depict failure? Scholars of American Indian history often talk about the period in which these books are set as a time of relative success, with the activism of the American Indian Movement and other Red Power groups leading to several legislative and legal victories for Indigenous self-determination (Calloway; Fixico; Gover). So why not let Lewis, Carson, and Maggi in on these hard-won victories of their real-life historical counterparts?

The novels themselves suggest two answers to this question. First, showing failure highlights the need for an ongoing fight. All of those historic victories of the late twentieth century, while important, were limited. The colonial governments of the United States and Canada have only ever *partially* recognized Indigenous sovereignty when they have recognized it at all. *Give Me Some Truth* gives us the truth that racism and colonialism are still the predominant reality in 1977, 1980, and 2018. As Carson says in his protest recruitment speech, "There's all kinds of places like Custard's" and "it doesn't end there" (248-49). He lists Columbus Day, the "Founding Great White Fathers" lie, the "silence about our almost being

wiped off the face of this planet," and "the Boarding Schools" (249). And, he observes, "We live on a reservation, where the government still tries to find ways to make us disappear" (250). The connections he draws underscore the pervasiveness of colonialism.

Lewis draws similar connections across time in *If I Ever Get Out of Here*, thinking, once Evan has begun his bullying campaign, "There was no way I could explain [to White school friends] what this panic was, that almost five hundred years of my people being wiped out by their people had found its way onto my doorstep at last" (196). Five hundred years of genocide cannot be overturned with a single protest. In reflecting that reality, I do not read Gansworth's YA titles as portraying protests as a waste of time. Instead, these novels suggest that it will take many protests, along with other tactics, to chip away at colonial reality. As Carson is inspired by the many protests he reads about in *Akwesasne Notes* and as his Tuscarora community is inspired by him, Gansworth's readers might be inspired by these books to join the necessarily ongoing fight as activists and allies. While colonialism and systemic racism hold fast, a few White characters in these books do actually come to recognize and begin to resist anti-Native racism. All of them are teenagers. The novels thereby suggest to their young non-Native readers that they not only can change themselves and work with Native people to change the system but that they had better do so because adults will not.

A second reason these novels may show protests failing to change White individuals and institutions is because they want readers to focus instead on the powerful changes the protests affect in the Indigenous protesters' own lives. In his book about American Indian intellectual traditions, Robert Warrior (Osage) encapsulates a key thread of Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins*: "The time was coming, [Deloria] predicted, when the politics of confrontation would have

to end and the work of building communities would have to begin” (Warrior 89). For Carson, external confrontation not only precedes but also enables internal renewal. He is built up personally and fosters rebuilding in his community through his protest. The political awakening (including via reading Deloria) that leads him to protest also leads him to recognize and resist his internalized racism (and his related comfort in being able to blend in as a “ChameleIndian”) and his complicity in oppression, including his silence about Evan’s abuse of Lewis and his own dad’s abuse of his brother. For Carson’s personal empowerment, the speech he gives to recruit people to protest seems as important as the protest itself. In that speech, after listing multiple forms of genocide, Carson gets “quieter,” adding, “And sometimes... we help, by closing our eyes. We let them dismiss us. Erase us” (250). In saying this, Carson refuses to be dismissed any longer. This newfound pride in his Tuscarora identity and commitment to his Tuscarora community drive his actions from this point forward.

After Carson’s protest, at the Battle of the Bands, Lewis, too, gives a speech—and sings songs—illuminating interconnected manifestations of colonial erasure and racism. He draws a direct line from Evan’s bullying to Custard’s violent racism to Mrs. Marchese’s unfair punishment of Carson before he and his bandmates, minus Carson, launch into John Lennon’s “Gimme Some Truth” (312-19). While Lewis performs for a different crowd, the mostly White audience gathered at the school for the event, he, like Carson, is empowered by speaking out. Lewis’ performance seems unlikely to have a lasting impact on the White audience members. Some cheer, but others walk out, upset, Maggi speculates, because Lewis projects an image of the Statue of Liberty giving the middle finger to an Italian flag. This is one of Lewis’s attempts to garner empathy from immigrant-descended audience members for Indigenous people who

face Custard's daily celebration of an infamous Indian killer (317, 320). Mrs. Marchese hears Lewis's speech, but it is Jim's intervention, not the speech, that changes her mind about failing Carson. The speech may not change the audience at all, but it changes Lewis dramatically. Both Carson and Maggi comment on how Lewis is more confident and courageous in his own skin after the performance than they have ever seen him before (378, 393).

Of Gansworth's three narrators, Maggi has the most to say about the difficult and empowering struggle to recognize, listen to, and speak her own voice. When she is finally about to break up with Jim, he starts to interrupt her, but she stops him: "'No,' I said, 'It's my time to talk'" (398). As she talks, her "inner voice" that has been getting louder and clearer in the final chapters of the novel gets more insistent yet, telling her "that a thirty-year-old guy *shouldn't* find a fifteen-year-old that interesting, no matter how mature she was" (399, emphasis in original). While she does not say these words aloud, she does become more assertive as she continues the conversation with Jim, thinking as she does, "my new voice" was "easier to access" (399). Maggi certainly has a voice at the start of *Give Me Some Truth*—a strong and sometimes sassy voice—but throughout the novel we see her moving toward a more authentic, self-reflective, and truly confident voice. She develops her voice by using it, expressing herself in a diary, in her multimedia visual art, and by singing and drumming in Carson's band. In the final scene of the novel, talking with Carson, Maggi thinks, "I liked being in a band with [Carson], the way I was able to find my own voice in it. And from now on, I'd have time to discover the range of that voice" (402). Maggi has space to explore and expand her voice because she is free from the centuries-old colonialism/patriarchy confines that structured her relationship with Jim, she is refusing to jump right into another potentially confining relationship with Carson, and she is

committed to continuing her journey of self-expression through every avenue she can find. For Carson and Lewis as well as Maggi, personal decolonization is a long and multifaceted process. Maggi's self-reflection about this process can help Gansworth's young Indigenous readers join his characters in pulling away the layers of colonizing noise in order to find, listen to, and speak their empowered and empowering truths.

Gansworth's powerful fictional protesters have plenty of real contemporary counterparts. From protecting water and revitalizing language to calling out cultural appropriation and demanding justice for murdered and missing Indigenous women, Indigenous youth today are leading activist movements across North America. They're also on the frontlines of the intimate everyday oppression Native people experience in schools, sports, and everywhere else. Gansworth's novels help us better appreciate the challenges as well as the rewards of these many kinds of protest. In illuminating the importance of self-expression as both a means to and a meaningful end for protest, these books also encourage us to approach protest more expansively and with a keener eye to the nuanced role self-representation plays there.

Like the protagonists in their pages and the contemporary Indigenous youth activists whose experiences resonate with these novels, Gansworth's books themselves also break silences, asserting Native presence in spaces where erasure remains the norm. In her 2016 *American Indian Quarterly* article "Silenced: Voices Taken from American Indian Characters in Children's Literature," Dawn Quigley (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) examines the silencing of Indigenous voices both in the non-Native-authored children's books about Native people that still dominate school curricula and in the conversations Native educators attempt to have with their White colleagues about this problem. Quigley writes, "Our K-12 students will absorb the

perception of American Indians by the books they read in school. It's no wonder, then, that many children believe Indigenous people are either noble savages, silent 'squaws', or, worse, dead remnants of history" (369). Aligning herself with Debbie Reese and Laura Beard, Quigley asserts, "educators must select texts that reflect an accurate view of American Indian characters" (369). She further argues, "To accurately teach about a culture, one needs to access and study works *by* authors from the culture; one who has a lived experience is the one to authentically present the culture and is best able to give a voice to a character" (369, emphasis in original).

Gansworth gives us characters—Lewis, Carson, and Maggi—who are empowered through the process of finding their voices. They eloquently speak out against dominant representations of Indigenous people used to justify exclusion, exploitation, and violence. And they speak up for the resilience, vibrancy, and beauty in themselves and in their Tuscarora nation. As characters in young adult literature, their voices also speak into the silence that, as Quigley observes, still pervades the children's literature and education landscape. This silence dominates despite there being plenty of great Indigenous-authored children's and YA texts available, texts Quigley and Reese promote on their respective blogs. By sharing not just one but three compelling Indigenous voices through his distinctive young narrators, Gansworth reveals the multifaceted power of Indigenous narratives and leaves readers thirsting for more.

Works Cited

- Calloway, Colin. "Self-Determination and Sovereignty, 1970-2010." *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. 5th ed. Bedford, 2016, pp. 502-571.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Macmillan, 1969.
- Fixico, Donald. "Federal and State Policies and American Indians." *A Companion to American Indian History*. Ed. Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury. Blackwell, 2002, pp. 379-396.
- Gansworth, Eric. *Give Me Some Truth*. Scholastic, 2018.
- . *If I Ever Get Out of Here*. Scholastic, 2013.
- Gover, Kevin. "Statues as Sources of Modern Indian Rights: Child Welfare, Gaming, and Repatriation." *Treaties with American Indians: An Encyclopedia of Rights, Conflicts, and Sovereignty*, edited by Donald L. Fixico, ABC-CLIO, 2008, pp. 109-29.
- Quigley, Dawn. *Native Reader*. Blog. Dawn Quigley, <http://nativereadermn.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 17 Oct. 2018.
- . "Silenced: Voices Taken from American Indian Characters in Children's Literature." *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 4, Fall 2016, pp. 364-378.
- Reese, Debbie. *American Indians in Children's Literature*. Blog. Debbie Reese, <https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>. Accessed 17 Oct 2018.
- Warrior, Robert. *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.