**Title: LeAnne Howe interviewed by Padraig Kirwan**

LeAnne **Howe**, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, is the Eidson Distinguished Professor of American Literature in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Georgia. She has written poetry, fiction, screenplays, plays, creative non-fiction and critical essays. Her writing is primarily concerned with the experiences and the perspectives of American Indian people and communities. These themes—and many others—are explored in her novels, Shell Shaker (2001) and Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story (2007), and the collection of poetry that she published in 2005, Evidence of Red. She has received many awards and commendations, all of which are testament to the ground-breaking nature of her work: *Shell Shaker* was the recipient of a Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award (2002); the French translation of the book, Equinoxes Rouge, was a 2004 finalist for Prix Medici Estranger; Evidence of Red was the winner of the Oklahoma Book Awards in 2006. More recently, Choctalking on Other Realities (2013), a book that Howe describes as “three parts memoir, one part tragedy, one part absurdist fiction, and one part ‘marvellous realism’”, won the inaugural Modern Language Association Prize for Studies in Native American Literatures, Cultures and Languages in 2014. The MLA selection committee wrote: “*In Choctalking on Other Realities*, LeAnne Howe integrates high theory with travel narrative, personal reflection, humour, and analysis to craft a formally innovative work of anticolonial literary and cultural criticism that teaches its audiences about the inner workings of Indigenous epistemologies.” Along with being the recipient of a United States Artists (USA) Ford Fellowship, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers’ Circle of the Americas, Howe also received the 2015 Western Literature Association Distinguished Achievement Award, a prize that “honours transformative contributions to the field of Western American literary studies.”

Her interviewer, Padraig Kirwan, is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, Goldsmiths, University of London. He has published essays in *NOVEL*: *a Forum on Fiction*, *Comparative Literature*, and the *Journal of American Studies*. His book, *Sovereign Stories: Aesthetics, Autonomy and Contemporary Native American Writing* (2013) examines the fiction and poetry of several Native American authors, including that of LeAnne Howe.

Howe’s work might be described as enlivening, eclectic and often hectic, and, more often than not, she brings together a plethora of stories concerning the historical and contemporary experiences of the Choctaw nation. Various geographical, spiritual, familial and narratological spaces are revealed or plotted during the course of Howe’s narratives, and, as a consequence, images that relate to the act of mapping, the basis of storytelling, and the subject of community and place become recurring motifs throughout her writing. Concerned with the ways in which Choctaw lifeways have been mapped out across time, Howe appears to be especially interested in the representation of travel, exchange, contact, and consumption not only in pre-contact and post-contact America, but within the global village. Rather than compartmentalizing past and present-day experiences into discrete, autonomous spaces, her critical essays and fictional storylines establish a kaleidoscopic perspective that provides the reader with a powerful sense of the connectedness that informs and shapes events in the Choctaw world and beyond. Accordingly, Howe focuses on moments of exchange and trade between the tribes and, latterly, between the tribes and the colonizers, and her writing pays considerable attention to transactions that occur in a number of key locations: narrative site, bodily sites, spiritual sites, national and international sites and so on. As such, her books, poems and essays examine and reflect on the tribes’ relationship to place, to the spirit world, to cosmological forces, to the American continent and to the world. A crucial aspect of this exploration of Choctaw presence is the interrogation of movement within, and between, key sites inhabited by indigenous peoples, and her work often deals with the question of sovereignty, continuance and self-determination across a number of contested, and often overlapping, spaces.

Howe’s coinage of the term ‘tribalography’, and her continued engagement with a creative vision of communal values, has helped her readers to better understand, and focus on, the web of being that orders the Choctaw world. By engaging with Howe’s multi-layered, multi-pointed canvases, a new generation of Native Studies scholars have delved into many of the complexities of the Choctaw worldview, underlined continued indigenous presence, examined the meeting point between indigenous peoples and colonial ‘path-finders’, differentiated between confirmatory and detrimental forms of exchange and communication (in both pre contact and post contact times) and, above all, considered the ways in which indigenous writers shape the world through their fiction. Howe’s writing demonstrates how, exactly, a web of contiguous, interrelated stories might map out moments of cross-cultural contact, colonial movement, consumption, and (inter)national trade. In doing so, she underlines the extent to which colonization is reliant not only upon particular forms of commerce and exploitation, but also trade, tyranny and movement within a given territory.

Goldsmiths, University of London, 31 October, 2016

**Padraig Kirwan**

*What have been the main incentives and motivations for you as a writer? Have you found yourself returning to the same well, so to speak?*

**LeAnne Howe**

Let me begin by saying, I’m really grateful to you for asking these questions. I’m really honoured that you’ve seriously engaged with my work. I can’t think of anything better! I mean that sincerely, from my heart.

*It’s always a pleasure!*

Let me start, then, by saying that my reasons for writing *Shell Shaker* (2001), *w*hich really kicked off my career nearly seventeen years ago, was that it occurred to me as I was travelling around with short stories and things of this nature, and poetry, that no one seemed to know anything about Choctaw people. Nothing. They had never heard of the tribe...

*Wow!*

This is in the U.S. of course. No one knew where our tribe came from; they had never heard of Choctaws, they couldn’t think of a Choctaw work that was integrated into the English language. Nothing. So, I began to think about that, why that was, and what could I do to help to introduce Choctaws, in the past and present, to a broader, mainstream audience. So I began working on *Shell Shaker*, and it was ten years before I got it to a publisher. It was ten years in the making: I went to the Smithsonian Institution on a Native American Internship. At the time I wanted to look at Cyrus Byington’s notes on changes in the Choctaw language. Later I went to the Newberry Library in Chicago as part of Indian Voices in the Academy, investigating Karpinski Map Collection; I worked in Jackson, Mississippi archives where I met Pat Galloway, who was really an expert in eighteenth century Choctaw history...an expert in French writings in the eighteenth century, so I was lucky I met her Pat Galloway said ‘you have to go there and look at the maps, look at where people were.’ That really began that process of pushing me to become a better writer and a better historian of my own people.

*I see.*

And that was significant. Writing itself, the craft of writing? I used to think I was a minimalist [*laughs*].

[*Laughs*] *Really?*

Yeah, I’m a minimalist... No, I’m *nothing like* a minimalist [*laughter*]. Basically, I told this story [*Shell Shaker*] and it had to be told out of time, because I had to start with the twentieth century, and move in and out of that [in order] to be able to interest people about how we are in the present and in the past—how we’re shaped by our past. All of that is to say that that was my impetus for writing [*Shell Shaker*]. I have continued to go back to Choctaw people with *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* (2007), in which I went back to look at the way that Indians play baseball. Then, looking at it, I thought ‘you know, we *invented* the American pastime.

*Yes!*

That has raised a lot of eyebrows, but then you [can] look at our lifeways mapped on to baseball: playing the game counter-clockwise; having the ball man in the centre of the game; a game without time; a game that runs in four directions; a game that takes people home, which is the returning home, the art of return—which happens at all these mound complexes. That really interested me. So, I wrote a book about baseball. [*Aside*] Something I didn’t know anything about, to tell the truth! Since then I have continued to work on telling Choctaw stories, certainly. In my scholarship, tribalography comes out of looking at the ways Native people, certainly Choctaw people, tell stories. One thing leads to another; we don’t leave out the French in our stories, we don’t leave out the Irish in our stories, and we don’t leave out mainstream, white people, in our stories either. Or black people, or Asian people. We’re supposed to tell stories that include *everybody*. Hence this idea about unity in my work. So, I’m still returning to that well. Although... I’ve just finished a manuscript called *Savage Conversations* about Mary Todd Lincoln and the savage that she invented, an American Indian that she said nightly tortured her. The novel that I’m working on now is set in the Middle East, in Bilad al-Sham in 1913—with a Choctaw man going as a Christian missionary—and I’ve not gone to that well. He gets caught up in the Arab Revolt of 1916, and fights alongside the Arabs. Then his relatives come looking for him nearly a century later, or rather, his legacy there. So, I find that my own tribal stories are really the base, the core narrative, from which I try to reach out to other parts of the world.

*There’s so much in that answer! And it’s fantastic to listen to you talk about those influences. To go back to your opening point, it always surprises me, as someone who works in the field of Native American literature that so many Americans are unfamiliar with the literature, and are unfamiliar with the tribes. Unfamiliarity with tribal lifeways and art might be expected further afield, but, to hear you say that your initial experience was that American people knew very little about the Choctaw, or about tribal lifeways, and didn’t understand how integrated tribes are to the whole in the U.S. is always shocking.*

It *is* shocking, isn’t it?

*It really is.*

That brings me to the other side of that story, which relates to acts of giving. That’s embedded in *Shell Shaker* in the fact that the Choctaws heard about the potato famine—the Irish potato famine—in 1847, they heard about it. In Skullyville they give money [to the Irish], they give what they can, and donate this money for the Irish famine relief, for the Irish people. People they have never seen or heard of... maybe they had met people who said ‘well, I’m from Ireland’ or who had Irish ancestors, but they, the Choctaws hadn’t been to Ireland in 1847! But that relationship of giving is something that I write about in *Shell Shaker*, and it becomes part of a bigger narrative and the reason that James Joyce becomes a character—I’m trying to give homage to Irish storytelling, and the relationships that we have with Irish people. So, I mean, as a result, you and I are doing a book on transatlantic exchange [*Transatlantic Reciprocity: The Choctaw and the Irish*] between the Irish and the Choctaw. And this gift that keeps on recurring between our two nations is significant and very powerful, and very personal to Choctaw people.

*Indeed*.

I just gave a talk in Durant in our tribal complex, earlier on this month, about that 1847 gift. All of the Choctaw women in the audience—there were two hundred and seventy five women—they all knew about it. They all had talked about it. They all knew what that gift meant *ima*, to give without strings. And I was *so* proud of the community at that point; ‘yes, we know. We’re supposed to give.’ And that’s the role of women. It tickles me that you and I are able to create this book, and to think a little more deeply about what these gifts are signifiers of.

*Definitely. Following on from that, and following on from this idea of international connections, you do seem to travel quite a bit, as so many internationally well-known authors are compelled to do. Do you find that your time as a Fulbright Scholar in Jordan, and your time spent giving lectures and readings abroad, inform your work?*

Absolutely. Absolutely. Working with people who are different from you is ‘Tribalism 101.’ This is what our people, and the installation of the mantel that a person carries as a traveller [does]: be the creative expression of your tribe, but also learn and return that knowledge to your community as the *fani mikos* of old would do. To learn about what the other person’s point of view is, then return home and tell [your own community about] how other people live and feel about their lives. That’s tribalism. And it’s something I think that comes from our deep, deep cultural ecology in the southeast. I think of myself—[*aside*] if it’s not too much a case of bragging—I think of myself in this old-fashioned way: my job as a writer is to learn from other people, and to express that back to my own community, or the country that I live in, or even to the stories that I tell, and that kind of exchange makes me a better writer.

*That’s so interesting, because that’s very much part of what we are doing in our own project, but there is of course a long history of those types of exchanges, and it’s fascinating to me that your work ties in with that. Of course, it ties in with many themes and forms!*

[*Laughs*] Thank you.

*You tend to work with a plethora of literary forms and scholarly or storytelling mediums; as well as publishing award-winning collections such as* Evidence of Red: Poems and Prose *and fiction such as* Shell Shaker*, you have also written critical essays, performed in one-woman adaptations of your own work, and been the screenwriter for documentaries such as* Indian Country Diaries: Spiral of Fire*. How important is variation to your process as a writer and an artist?*

Well, it’s kind of the case that one thing leads to another. This [is my] idea of tribalography, of adding to your own sense of your work. So, for me, writing a play about a particular subject just seems [*pauses*]... It’sa different way to tell a story, but is also a way to engage a very different kind of audience. In fact, *Sideshow Freaks and Circus Injuns* just received funding for a production in August 2017 in Toronto. That play has its roots in my aunt Euda’s performing Indian in the circus. We found that synergy and noted that when the exhibitors put on the World’s Fair in St. Louis in 1904 they destroyed sixteen mounds to put up a Ferris wheel![[1]](#footnote-1)

*They really did that at the time? I never knew that! The disrespectfulness and the lack of cultural understanding still shocks meto the core.*

Oh yeah. And that’s even beside the fact that Monique [Mojica, Guna & Rappahannock playwright and performer] and I had relatives who went into the circus [as performers]. But the other piece of that story, land-wise, is that mounds sites around the United States became hosts to the nineteenth and twentieth century circuses.

*That’s an amazing historical detail. It’s so disturbing too. Is Monique working closely with you on that project?*

Yes, we are co-creators of the play, *Sideshow Freaks and Circus Injuns*.

*We’ll be watching out for that! Speaking of collaboration, did you realise how important the term ‘tribalography’ would become when you first coined it, or envisage a time when the concept would be the focus of a special edition of a journal such as* Studies in American Indian Literature*? Is it now hard to fathom why the embodiment of tribal understandings had been overlooked for so long?*

Well, I’ll answer the first part. *No*, *I* *didn’t*!

[*Laughs*].

I thought I was kind of clever but not so clever! Nancy Shoemaker, at the time, had invited me to write an essay for her book *Clearing a Path*, which is about ways of thinking about Indian history and, for me, Indian story. So, I looked at all my contemporaries, right? I looked at the way in which they were telling stories in their novels or poetry, and always they were adding to other stories. There were openings, and they were adding. Almost all Native literature engages the white man, the black man, the black man and woman... They were engaging the world around them. I asked myself ‘why is that Natives are nowhere in white mainstream literature. Nowhere! We don’t exist for those authors. So, I was trying to take that high road, and say ‘look, we’re perfectly competent in telling stories that engage you. But, you leave us out of the stories. And we’re left out of America’s stories. That was the whole impetus for tribalography. I was surprised that people took it as seriously; it took a long time for it to catch on—it came out in 2001, something like that. I’ve been very pleased that scholars, young scholars and old scholars—[*aside*] well, not so many old scholars but younger scholars!—have said ‘well, this is a way to think about Native stories. So that’s been really delightful: that I’ve been helpful to people trying to understand the way that Native people tell stories, and *what we want*. We want, I think, reciprocity. We want that reciprocity.

*That comes through so clearly in your work and projects.*

Again, I’m going to mention our book [*Transatlantic Reciprocity*]! This is something that you and I are engaged in: trying to show reciprocity in action. The Irish have engaged with the Choctaw and continue to have a reciprocal relationship with us. Doesn’t that seem right to you?

*Yes, it’s entirely apposite. And thinking about reciprocity in regards to the term [tribalography], I think that it’s useful to think not only about its critical generosity, which is very much in keeping with the manner in which you mobilise connection points in your work. I think that’s why your critical work is so easily adaptable, and so very useful for scholars. To return to the second part of the question for just a moment: I’m conscious that so many tribal writers were working on questions concerning embodiment, were thinking about tribal lifeways and understandings, but that there wasn’t perhaps a specific phrase that pointed towards that reality in a certain way, or a unifying phrase which might have been useful to critics from various tribal backgrounds. Do you think that is why tribalography becomes so manifestly useful in the twenty-first century?*

Yes. I mean, I turn to someone like Jill Doerfler, who is a professor at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, who has seriously used tribalography to describe Anishinaabe stories. I thought that works absolutely perfectly, to my mind, to explain how their stories work and worked within the community. I’m gonna back up here a little; in 1987 Roxy Gordon and I wrote *Indian Radio Days*, which was a play.

*Okay...*

We performed it with our friends; we performed it all over Dallas. When I got the University of Iowa—I was living there, and I worked at the international education centre—we formed ‘Wagon Burner Indian Troop’...

[*Laughs*]

...and we went all over the Mid-West performing *Indian Radio Days*. But I always said, and Roxy always said (he’s passed away): ‘take the play and make it your own.’ So, if the Lakota and Dakota in North and South Dakota want to perform this play, they have to change some of the site gags to be specific to their own tribes. Well, that’s precisely what happened. The Lakota, the Dakota out at Vermillion, SD, picked up the play. It’s gone all over the country, with people knowing that the playwrights want them to rewrite sections that could fit their own tribe experiences. So, that was very influential to me when looking at the idea of a tribalography. For Jill Doerfler to use it just makes sense to me; it just feels right to take these concepts and work with them within their own community, and then make them *your* own. And so that’s my sense of the theatrical movement that happened, the way that tribalography has spread, and how base and ball is played: ‘take this game and make it your own.’

*I like that notion of performance and how these things work out in various contexts.*

Yeah!

Now, in 2015 the folks in the Western Literature Association when they decided that you should receive the Association’s Distinguished Achievement Award. What does it mean to you to be placed alongside authors such as Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, Joy Harjo, William Kittredge, Rudolfo Anaya, and Joan Didion?

I. Was. Astounded! Shocked...

*It was so well-earned, and a lovely moment of recognition.*

I was so honoured to be in the good company of those amazing writers that I couldn’t really believe that they meant me! I felt humbled. I really was humbled and grateful to be included in that kind of company. And, you know, these are—if you don’t get your head inflated!—moments that are really meaningful to a writer. Then you come home, and you get back to work, and you and I are working on our books and other projects...trying not to be too disgustingly over confident!

*You never are!* [*laughter*]

I hope not [*laughter*]...

*To save you from having to be too deferential we’ll move on. Are there any particular authors who you would describe as being specifically important influences to your own work?*

Well, of course, you know there are so many writers that I love: Sherwin Bitsui, Susan Power, Louise Erdrich, Heid Erdrich’s poetry is *amazing*! She just knocks my socks off. But I’m also compelled by Native scholars like P. Jane Hafen, Brenda Child, Jeani O’Brien—especially her book *Firstings and Lastings*—and I read these folks widely. Layli Long Soldier is a new and upcoming Native poet; Natalie Diaz is an amazing poet and so is Joan Naviyuk Kane, and of course my good friend Joy Harjo... All of these writers are important to me. But, you know what? I think that one of the writers that I have read, and continue to read, and be astounded by, is the late French writer Marguerite Duras.

*I haven’t read her work.*

Well, she has a minimalist style [*laughs*].

*Unlike your own style!* [*Laughter*]*.*

I write nothing like her, I wish I could. But I just remember thinking her work was poetry, fiction, a screenplay, and so much is said in images. So, I was reading her, reading the work, the fiction, as... in fact she says in one of her novels, maybe *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* that “this is a film.” And I thought, ‘wow! That really is interesting to me’; she saw the work in cinematic ways. I’ve been very interested in her, and how she came to that. We have many literary ancestors. And I know you do too—have many people who shaped you as a writer. I know that you’re compelled by Seamus Heaney. Aren’t we all? Aren’t we all? Aren’t we lucky to have lived in these times, with such amazing ancestors?

*Most certainly. It makes a lot of sense to me when you talk not so much about minimalism, perhaps, but rather the image itself, and even that imagist sense of capturing something specific. In your own work,* Shell Shaker *and* Miko Kings*, your descriptions are very often focused on framing or seizing one particular image, or one particular moment. I’ve been fortunate enough to hear you talk about your work a few times, and to hear you reading. Having done so, I think that the idea of the broad sweep and that sense of the cinematic, which naturally includes the specific—images, moments brought into stark relief—is indeed very much part of your work. That makes perfect sense. Of course, with that, it really is the case that the interweave between indigenous story, critical theory and tribal history is vital to any understanding of Choctaw literature, isn’t it?*

Right! Also, I’m interested in your work and the work of other non-Native scholars, such as Chad Allen, Dean Rader, David Stirrup, and the great non-Native women scholars who are working in the field such as Susan Bernardin, Penny Kelsey, Patrice Hollrah, and Lisa Tatonetti. I also read the work of younger scholars in our field—well they seem young to me: Jodi Bird, Kirstin Squint, and younger still, the strong PhD candidates that are up and coming such as Eman Ghanayem and Melissa Slocum. You are all, to me, part of the orbit of my literary world, because I read all of you. And I’m grateful for the great work that’s going on. So, in some ways, I can’t think of a better century to working in Native Studies.

*On that note, the past twenty years have seen a real proliferation in terms of the number of scholars working in the field of Native American Literary Studies. What do you think the next twenty years might hold?*

Well, I hope I’m cognizant enough to notice! Undemented, as they say! I also hope that I’m still part of the conversation too! You know, I think that there is a real synthesis going on currently between music, film and video that is at work in Native culture. And, of course, we can just look at what happened today: Bob Dylan winning the Nobel Prize for Literature! When I think of Dylan, I think of one song as being emblematic, and that’s the track that says ‘you have to serve somebody...’

*It might be the devil, or it might be the Lord...*

[*laughs*] ...that’s an expression of literature, really. And Native literature is about serving someone; look at what our stories about being in service have done over the last several hundred years. That story of being in service is how you and I connected over the Irish and the Choctaw being in a relationship. The Choctaw held fast to that idea of being in service: “send money, they’re starving.” Choctaws sent money to countries all over the world. Sometimes we sent food. When 9/11 happened in New York...a giant group of people sent trucks, all kinds of implements, firemen...; we sent money and people to help. That’s being of service. And, in some ways, Bob Dylan winning the Nobel Prize reminds us that literature and literary production—in whatever form it takes—and music, film, poetry, and story is really the next synthesis. Trans-genre is really where it’s going. I may not be on the cutting edge of other trends, but that’s what I see now.

*That’s fantastic. Interestingly, some colleagues and I were contacted by various media outlets prior to the announcement of the Nobel Prize committee, and asked whether we would like to speak about the work of one of the ‘likely winners.’ Ngugi Wa Tiong’o, Haruki Murakami, Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates and others were mentioned, but no one mentioned Bob Dylan!*

Oh, so they didn’t think of him? Regardless, it is so exciting, and today is such a great day! I can’t wait to get to my class at the University of Georgia; we’re working with sound poems and I’ve been pushing them to work with sound. And now Bob Dylan wins the Nobel Prize for literature today. So, I’m going in, fully armed! [*laughter*]

*Teaching opportunities just fall into your lap sometimes, don’t they?* [*laughter*] *On a slightly separate note, there is a wonderful moment in* Miko Kings *where Ezol Day, the young spirit who has returned to Ada, Oklahoma says “Choctaws and Chickasaws are renounced for their ability to rebuild. . . . We seem to manifest nature itself, as re-creators” (34). Occasions of travel—be it across time or space—and instances of recreation are vital to your writing, aren’t they?*

[*Nods agreement*] And, guess what? The Choctaws are building new mounds in Oklahoma as we speak. As we are talking, they are building three new mounds and a new tribal complex. Now, mound building hasn’t happened in, well, two thousand years. But it’s happening now, and the vision and the community at large, in seeing itself as being confident enough to build new mounds is pretty astounding! So, when I gave a recent talk to Choctaw women in Durant, Oklahoma, I looked across at the women there, and I said ‘well, I have to say that I am thrilled to be here because fifteen years ago I wrote that the Choctaws were going to build a mound over a terrible leader when I wrote about *Shell Shaker*’sRedford McAlester, and here we are today building three new mounds.’ And they were, like, ‘oh yeah.’ [*laughs*]I shouldn’t have brought up the bad guy, but I did, in a very vague way! [*jokes*] oh, I just had to brag to everybody there.

*It’s a nice segway of sorts, in-so-far-as in this current moment we’re dealing, internationally, with a growing sense of isolationism, politically, and the notion of ‘the bad guy’ is extremely current, given the rise of populism and so on. Your writing focuses not only on Choctaw lifeways, but also points of connection that may help us to think about recreation and so on. Do you think those perspectives might help us to fight against those who want to pull up the draw bridges, build the wall, or fight whatever version of isolation we’re faced with.*

I honestly don’t know, but I’m going to put my faith, at this moment in time, in the American people. We are *not* isolationists at heart; we are a nation currently being placed under stress by vulgar harbingers of death. In every instance—and this is what makes the Nobel Prize in literature so important—our art speaks to us about being our highest selves, being a lover of humanity. And I believe that the American people will not stand for isolationism, and we’re not going to build stupid walls! I just came back from Mexico, and the Mexican people are really so sweet about it but they’re hurt by the way that these characterizations by Donald Trump misrepresent Mexican people. People on the bus who you talk to, they’re hurt by this, and they know that are not these stereotypes. And *I know* that the American people will not, will *not*, build another stupid wall. I know they’ve started building it, but I don’t think it’s going anywhere.

*That’s good new news. You reveal a lot in* Choctalking on Other Realities *(2013), be it about your time on Wall Street, early forays in writing, and trips to Japan and elsewhere. Writing is obviously an intensely personal act for you as well.*

Yeah, but don’t you think it is for all scholars and writers? It’s intensely personal because we want to get our ideas across, don’t you think?

*Yes, yes I do.*

It’s very personal, and yet I feel as though (and maybe this is just because I’m so damn old!) that I’ve got something to say now, something that I might not have been able to say twenty years ago. So, I’m hoping that my new work will be able to sustain itself into the twentieth century. [Hopefully it will do so because I write about] the Middle East or the ways in which Mary Todd Lincoln—who was very much the Donald Trump of her day—invented a stereotype of an American Indian that tortured her every night; she never met any American Indians that I find in my research, but she invents this savage in her mind, and in her imagination this figure cuts her up, that scalps her, that cuts a bone out of her cheek...[[2]](#footnote-2) So, really, in history we can find these bellicose Trumps. Of course, was in the asylum, and the doctors there hoped to cure her of her delusions. We haven’t gotten there yet with Trump, but perhaps one day!

*Well, hopefully! Of course, those invisible presences are so prominent in the nineteenth century, and the literature. One thinks of Hawthorne and others. The notion of the haunting is so often there. Speaking of visibility, you’ve published with Aunt Lute for a long time now. Is there a particular form of solidarity to be found in working with a publishing house that has championed the work of amazing feminist authors and critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Paula Gunn Allen and Audre Lorde? Has that been a very productive relationship for you?*

## It absolutely has. Aunt Lute is terrific to work with. They’re currently bringing out a new anthology by South Asian women writers [*Good Girls Marry Doctors* edited by Piyali Bhattacharya](http://auntlute.com/7694/new_release/good-girls-marry-doctors-edited-by-piyali-bhattacharya/). I recommend it. As for me I wanted to put my money where my mouth was. Be at a house that valued women, so Aunt Lute was the perfect place, and has been the perfect place, for me to publish. Choctaw women are at the centre of their homes and house, so it just seemed like a great place to strike up a relationship. Aunt Lute has been an amazing publishing house to be with for almost twenty years now. I joined up in 2000, so I guess it’s almost seventeen years now, and [during that time] Aunt Lute’s concerns have been my concerns; having the stories of women, in the centre of the universe, is at the heart of their mission. Isn’t that cool? And, by the way, they are one of the few feminist presses that have survived.

*That’s so true. When you think about it, there were a number of presses on the West Coast, in particular, and a number of them have gone to the wall.*

They’re gone, except Aunt Lute...

*Why do you think that is?*

I think it is because they’ve systematically been driven out of business by distributors.

*So it’s ideologically driven?*

It’s systematic, and you can guess how and why. There’s a movement to try and drive all of these small presses out of business. Kill competition especially women’s centered work. They’ve done a hell of a job, you know. I’ll just say from my own point of view, if you look at these mega-conglomerates, there’s no house, there’s no book store.... You never know what might be available then, and by closing, or by helping to drive small independent book stores out of business, you also take the presses with you. I think that’s on purpose. I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but if [a large conglomerate owns] the distribution, then how will small presses survive?

*I’m glad to say that we have a new independent bookstore called The Word in New Cross beside Goldsmiths. It’s the first one that we’ve had in the neighbourhood in some time.*

Hooray!

*Hopefully it’s a sign of things to come. The millennials are so wary of the big corporations.*

*LH*: The millennials here are starting their own publishing houses, and they are doing great. They *are* the future, and I think that will help, and a lot of the millennials driving those initiatives are women, and it was women who organized small presses in the past. So, it’s happening, but it is slow.

*Well, as Hilary Clinton has argued, a revolution takes twenty years of hard work, right?*

[*Laughter*] Thank you so much for this chat.

*It’s been a pleasure, and great fun, as always. Thank* you*!*

1. Howe’s Choctaw ancestors amongst of a number of ancient mound civilizations in southeastern North America, and those mounds continue to be revered sites. Nanih Waiya, located in Mississippi, is the mound that the tribe hold most sacred. Of unknown age, that large structure is believed to be the site of the tribe’s origin, and it is central to Choctaw creation story. In that story, the tribe—as well as the Cherokee, the Creek (Muscogee), the Chickasaw and the Seminole—emerged from Nanih Waiya, or the ‘leaning hill’. Other mounds, such as Spiro Mounds in Oklahoma are also of importance to the tribe. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Historians and biographers are somewhat divided on the personality and mental state of Mary Todd Lincoln. Although she is primarily seen as preening, self-regarding and overly exacting—with very good reason—Lincoln is seen by some as a woman who suffered from disabling poor health, mental infirmity and the rigors of a bitterly hard life (she lost three sons to early deaths amongst other tribulations). For instance, around the time of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum’s special exhibit, "Mary Todd Lincoln: First Lady of Controversy”, *Newsweek* ran an article that included a quotation from Jason Emerson, author of The *Madness of Mary Lincoln* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), in which he said that Abraham Lincoln’s wife “suffered from bipolar disorder throughout her life.” The article also pointed out that several “prominent historians disagree” with Emerson’s opinion. One of them, Jean Baker, author of *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (W.W. Norton 2008), told *Newsweek* that Mary Todd was “neurotic and narcissistic,” and that she wouldn’t quite “go with this insanity bit” (“‘Hellcat or Helpmate’: A Look at Mary Todd Lincoln”, *Newsweek*, 09/19/07. Online. http://europe.newsweek.com /hellcat-or-helpmate-look-mary-todd-lincoln-100149?rm=eu). Troublingly, Mary Todd Lincoln put many of her pains down to the workings of a malevolent American Indian spirit, which she claimed was attacking her. During the trial that ultimately led to her incarceration in an asylum her physician, Dr Willis Danforth, testified that she believed that the spirit in question “was working in her head and taking wires out of her eyes, particularly the left one.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)