

Fishkin Prize 2021

Preface to “Recognition, Resilience and Relief: The Meaning of Gift”

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In 2011, following months of correspondence about her novel *Shell Shaker*, the author and artist LeAnne Howe (citizen of the Choctaw Nation) kindly offered to meet my students and to speak at Goldsmiths, University of London. LeAnne’s generosity during that visit—and ever since—led to countless conversations and exchanges. A few years later, when she was visiting London once again, LeAnne and I spoke about a powerful connection that exists between our two communities, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and the citizens of Ireland. Like many people at home, we both knew the story of the financial aid sent from the tribe to the Irish in 1847, one of the most terrible years during the Great Irish Famine. LeAnne and I had heard various accounts of this truly incredible act of solidarity and had separately thought about its resonances in our lives, our work as scholars, and, we discovered, our friendship and collaboration. Yet, up until that moment we had never spoken about the Choctaw gift, nor had we written about it. We resolved to change that in 2014 or 2015 (I am being slightly ambiguous there, partly because I cannot truly recall the exact date and partly because the later date will reflect more positively on the length of time it took us to write our book, *Famine Pots: The Choctaw–Irish Gift Exchange, 1847–Present*).

At that point in time, we decided to edit a collection of creative and critical essays that would not only consider the historical context surrounding the famine aid sent from Indian Territory, as it was then known, but also the enduring legacy and significance of the Choctaw gift in our time. LeAnne and I both wished to think through the ways in which the Choctaw famine aid spoke to continuance, resilience, empathy, and solidarity even though it became necessary via a moment of hunger and death. Reflecting on the history of English and British colonialism as well as the collective traumas that follow relocation, depopulation, and language loss, *Famine Pots* would,

we vowed, celebrate the gift as a symbol of resistance and resurgence as well as a moment when dire need was recognized and responded to. Joined by a truly amazing retinue of writers, poets, and academics, including Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Philip Carroll Morgan, and Jackie Rand, we examined the gift from various angles in *Famine Pots*.

We continue to do so, not least because this moment in our shared history speaks to several of the most pressing issues of our time, including food sustainability and ethical production; immigration and the mass moment of people during times of famine and war; paths to intergenerational justice and decolonisation; and forms of empathy and connectedness in transnational, transatlantic, and even global contexts. As such, the story of this unique connection spreads out in affecting and myriad ways. Most recently, the remarkable relationship between the Choctaw Nation and Ireland was cited countless times by Irish people as they donated funds to the Navajo and Hopi Families Covid-19 Relief Fund appeal. We are delighted to say that the work that we are doing has evidently been valued by others considering what it tells us about not only the Choctaw donation, but also about how we live our lives today. Supported by grants from the British Association of American Studies (BAAS) and Goldsmiths, University of London, aspects of this research have been acknowledged by organizations as varied and wonderful as the American Studies Association (ASA) and Gourmand International (the latter presented *Famine Pots* with a Special Award in 2022 in acknowledgement of the book's relevance to conversations surrounding food systems and Indigenous practices). The Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for International Scholarship in Transnational American Studies was foremost amongst those moments, and I would like to thank everyone involved in the administration and awarding of that accolade. I sincerely hope that the inclusion of my words from *Famine Pots* in the current edition of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* will both add to and sustain the conversations that myself, LeAnne and others continue to have about the Choctaw gift. The exchange—or, rather, exchanges—continue ...