

*Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh**

'Listen: Still, the Echo of Loss'

Choctaw and Irish Transcultural Engagement in the Poetry of LeAnne Howe and Doireann Ní Ghríofa

Abstract

This article discusses a sequence of poems in which Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe and Irish poet Doireann Ní Ghríofa “call and respond” to each other across history and space. It will suggest that through their willingness to listen, embrace of linguistic hybridity and determination to remain open to the nuances of history, the poems truly embody what Francine Rosenbaum describes as “transculture in narrative” (Rosenbaum 2018).

Key words

Choctaw, Irish, poetry, colonialism, liminality.

In 2016, Irish poet Doireann Ní Ghríofa was invited by Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe and Dr Pádraig Kirwan of Goldsmiths, University of London, to collaborate on a project to explore the resonances between Irish and Choctaw culture and history. The result was a sequence of poems in which Howe and Ní Ghríofa “call and respond” to each other across history and space. Howe describes the texts as embodying “empathy and dialogue between culturally distinctive communities”, who are bonded through their shared experiences of colonial dispossession¹. The poems are trilingual, with English, as Ní Ghríofa explains, forming “a bridge between our native languages”². Linguistically, the poems thus acknowledge both the damage wrought by the imposition of the English language by the colonizers, but also the resilience of the native languages

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¹ L. Howe, “Famine bonds: Choctaw and Irish Poets Combine”, *The Irish Times*, 23rd June, 2017. [<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/famine-bonds-choctaw-and-irish-poets-combine-1.3130918>]

² www.doireannnighriofa.com

which continue to serve as a conduit to the past. Nor is the shared history without its complications, however. In spite of the sense of kinship that continues to suffuse cultural exchanges between the Choctaw and Irish nations, the reality, Ní Ghríofa notes, is that many of the Irish who fled from hunger in the 19th century became themselves complicit in the repression of native peoples once they established themselves in America³. It is in engaging with these complexities of history that the poetic voice can be at its most effective, as it seeks to create an imaginative space in which all voices and perspectives can be heard. James Conroy describes poetic language as standing at “the interstices of the world and the word, the personal and the public, and the local and the universal, and in doing so has a crucial role to play in maintaining discursive openness”⁴. This article will assess this use of the poetic voice by Howe and Ní Ghríofa to maintain an openness in their encounters with both Irish and Choctaw experiences of colonialism. It will suggest that through their willingness to listen, their embrace of linguistic hybridity and determination to remain open to the nuances of history, the poems truly embody what Francine Rosenbaum describes as “transculture in narrative”⁵.

The connection between the Choctaw and Irish nations dates back to the 19th century. After the signing of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 by President Andrew Jackson, five native American tribes, including the Choctaw, were forcibly removed from their homelands in Mississippi to Oklahoma, over 800 kilometres away⁶. The term “Trail of Tears” has become synonymous with the harrowing journey⁷, with estimates suggesting that up to 6,000 Choctaw people lost their lives-15% of the tribe’s total population – as a consequence of freezing temperatures, starvation, disease and the incompetence of officials charged with facilitating the mass movement⁸. Meanwhile, in Ireland, a series of devastating famines throughout the 1840s resulted in the deaths of one-and-a-half million people and the emigration of over a million more between 1845-1851⁹.

³ D. Naimon, “Between the Covers: Interview with Doireann Ní Ghríofa”, 2021. [<https://tinhouse.com/transcript/between-the-covers-doireann-ni-ghriofa-interview/>]

⁴ J. Conroy, *Between and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education and Democracy*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 2004, p. 143.

⁵ F. Rosenbaum, *Migrazioni di parole. Percorsi narrative di riconoscimento*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2018.

⁶ M. Lyons, “The Trail of Tears”, *History Today*, May 1, 2023, p. 26.

⁷ D.K. Krebs, “The Trail of Tears”, *Torch Magazine*, Fall 2020, pp. 25-9.

⁸ P. Kirwan, “Recognition, Resilience, and Relief: The Meaning of Gift”, in L. Howe and P. Kirwan, eds., *Famine Pots: The Choctaw-Irish Gift Exchange, 1847-Present*, Cork University Press, Ireland, 2020, p. 10; P.C. Morgan, “Love Can Build a Bridge: The Choctaws’ Gift to the Irish in 1847”, in Howe and Kirwan, eds., cit., p. 46.

⁹ I. Gibson, “Foreword”, in J. Percival, *The Great Famine: Ireland’s Potato Famine, 1845-1851*, BBC Books, London, 1995, p. 6.

In spite of their own suffering and the extreme poverty in which they found themselves living, and only sixteen years after their displacement, the Choctaw Nation voted to send a donation of \$172 to the Irish Famine Relief Fund, a huge amount in contemporary terms. Kirwan quotes from a letter published in *The Freeman's Journal*, on June 19, 1847, which describes the Choctaw gift as motivated at least in part by perceived commonalities in the suffering of the two peoples under colonial rule: "They have given their cheerful hand in this good cause though they are separated from you by miles of land and an Ocean's breadth"¹⁰. Philip Carroll Morgan, Choctaw poet and historian, notes that the cultural extinction policies enacted against the Irish and Choctaw, and the racist language used in official discourse to describe them (both groups were commonly denigrated as "savages" by British and Anglo-American commentators) contributed to a feeling of solidarity between them. However, more important than this, he suggests, is the sense of shared values among two nations forged on strongly kinship traditions¹¹. This shared history of oppression and gratitude for the generosity shown to Ireland has continued to be acknowledged and nurtured through official acts of commemoration and cultural exchanges. In May 1995, President Mary Robinson visited the Choctaw Nation, the first president of any country to do so, and reflected on the significance of the gift: "This gesture by the Choctaw people, coming at a time when Ireland was facing the greatest calamity in its history, was and is extraordinarily special"¹². Robinson's visit initiated a series of engagements between the Irish and Choctaw nations that has continued to the present. Subsequent presidents have repeated their gratitude to representatives of the Choctaw Nation, a plaque outside the Lord Mayor's residence in Dublin commemorates the Choctaw gift, and a scholarship scheme for Choctaw students to study in Ireland was announced in 2017, by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar during a visit to the Choctaw Nation¹³. Public works of art have also been commissioned to remember the gift, most significantly a sculpture designed by Alex Pentex and entitled "Kindred Spirits", which was unveiled in Middleton, County Cork, in 2017. Comprised of nine 20ft eagle feathers arranged in a circle, the sculpture is described by Joe McCarthy as "a metaphorical representation of a bowl filled with food, presented to the hungry"¹⁴. The unveiling was attended by Choc-

¹⁰ P. Kirwan, cit., p. 23.

¹¹ P.C. Morgan, cit., p. 47.

¹² Quoted in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. xxii.

¹³ C. Kinealy, "An Ocean of Benevolence", in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 72.

¹⁴ Quoted in B. Roche, "Cork sculpture recalls generosity of Choctaw Nation during Famine", *The Irish Times*, June 13, 2017 [<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/cork-sculpture-recalls-generosity-of-choctaw-nation-during-famine-1.3118580>]

taw Chief Gary Batton, who celebrated the continuing bonds between the Choctaw and the Irish as a result of the gift: “Your story is our story. We didn’t have any income. This was money pulled from our pockets. We had gone through the biggest tragedy that we could endure, and saw what was happening in Ireland and just felt compelled to help”¹⁵. In an interview, Pentek explained that his sculpture sought to embody the cyclical nature of history, with the generosity of the Choctaw Nation to the Irish people coming so soon after their own terrible suffering during the Trail of Tears. As an artist, he was responding to what he described as: “blurred boundaries and interconnectedness”¹⁶.

In a bid to further explore these connections, Howe and Kirwan published *Famine Pots: The Choctaw-Irish Gift Exchange, 1847-Present*, an edited volume of academic essays and reflections that sought to explore the cultural bonds forged between the Irish and Choctaw nations as a result of the initial gift. In their introduction, the editors note what they call the “deep ecology of the relationship between the Choctaw and the Irish”, suggesting that the traumatic impact of the Trail of Tears and the Great Famine continues to shape the ways in which the two cultures frame their sense of history and identity. The prominence of oral storytelling in both traditions is also cited as facilitating a cyclical approach to the past: “a means of recollecting, framing, and even embodying past histories and contemporary relationships to place, community and language”¹⁷. Essays included in the volume range from personal reminiscences by members of the Choctaw nation on the almost folkloric status now enjoyed by the Choctaw gift, to historical analyses of the interconnections that spanned the Atlantic over the course of the nineteenth century. Sprinkled among the academic essays are the sequence of poems by Howe and Ní Ghríofa, suggesting a conversation about history, culture and identity that is ongoing and occurring in the spaces above and between the historical research. The location of their poems in the liminal spaces between chapters suggests a freedom to explore resonances and voices that are perhaps not always given the chance to intervene in debates about historical events and their impact on cultural memories.

The volume begins with Howe’s “Homeland”, a short and concise poem that roots Choctaw identity in both their history of dispossession and the resilience they derive from the ongoing connection with their ancestors:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Quoted in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. xxiii.

¹⁷ Howe and Kirwan, cit., pp. xix-xx.

In the beginning, some say the Choctaw people came up out of the mound at Nanih Waiya singing

Issa bal-a-li haa- took Ik-sa illok isha sbkeen

...

Because you are holding onto me I am not dead yet.¹⁸

Nanih Waiya is a sacred place for the Choctaw. An earthen mound, dated by archaeologists to the first century CE, the site is central to their myth of origin, with stories suggesting that the Choctaw first emerged from the mound, where they had been nurtured by Mother Earth¹⁹. These lines root Choctaw identity in the earth and traditions of their ancestors. However, the Choctaw lost control of Nanih Waiya when they were forced to migrate during the Trail of Tears, so that the mound simultaneously becomes a symbol of their dispossession. This ability to embody contradictory ideas is further reflected in the language of the poem, which moves from English to Choctaw, acknowledging the survival of the native language but indicating also that it has been overtaken in the contemporary world by the English of their dispossessors. Nonetheless, the message of the poem is that of endurance: because the origin myth is remembered and the Choctaw language still heard, the voices of the ancestors survives to the present day, as long as there are those who will work to preserve them. Interestingly, Howe has suggested that this capacity to inhabit both past and present is not only a cultural tradition for the Choctaw, but is in fact rooted in their linguistic structures: "Choctaw language is almost always present tense and moving... speech acts create the world around us. And those are primary, foundational. We can look at verbs and verb tenses, especially in Choctaw, as a way of moving the mountain through the act of speaking... especially the voices of women"²⁰.

Howe returns to the dispossession of lands and the specific ability of women to articulate cultural loss in "Ishki, Mother, Upon Leaving the Choctaw Homelands, 1831", an angry and emotional poem reflecting on the huge loss suffered by the Choctaw people as a consequence of the greed and violence of the colonizers:

Right here my body was a cycle of giving until
Torn from our homelands by the Naholla, and

¹⁸ L. Howe, "Homeland", in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 1.

¹⁹ J. Cummings, "Nanih Waiya", *Mississippi Encyclopaedia*, 2017 [<https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/waiya-nanih/>]

²⁰ K.L. Squint, "Choctaw Aesthetics, Spirituality, and Gender Relations: An Interview with LeAnne Howe", in *Melus*, vol. 35., no. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 219-220.

Andrew Jackson, the duteous seamster
Intent on opening all veins.²¹

The poem emphasizes the natural affinity between the Choctaw and their lands, embodied by the cycle of life rooted in the female body, until this connection was destroyed by President Andrew Jackson, who was driven only by avarice. “Naholla”, she explains, means “stingy”, an insult in Choctaw culture, for whom the accumulation of possessions symbolizes selfishness rather than attainment²². The poem recalls the physical pain experienced by those who are torn so brutally from their heritage:

Right here there’s a hole of sorrow in the center of my chest
A puncture
A chasm of muscle²³

However, it is from this same locus of pain that the poet sites resistance. As long as the Choctaw remember and communicate their loss, then their culture will endure into the future:

Right here I will stitch my wounds and live on
And sing,
And sing,
I am singing, still.²⁴

The final lines of the poem signify the resilience that Howe locates in the voice, the repeated lines suggesting a crescendo and even an increase in momentum. The reference to stitching, traditionally a skill associated with women, is also interesting, as it identifies women as both the repositories of cultural memory and the generators of the future: “women run things in our communities. I think we still are people who have maintained our culture as we change to meet the new centuries sprawling before us”²⁵. This confidence that past and present are permeable and can fruitfully coexist into the future is embodied by the pause Howe incorporates into the final line: she is singing, still, in spite of everything she has had to endure.

In this context, it is notable that Ní Ghríofa’s first response to Howe

²¹ L. Howe, “Ishki, Mother, Upon Leaving the Choctaw Homelands, 1831”, in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 107.

²² Quoted in K.L. Squint., cit., p. 214.

²³ L. Howe, “Ishki, Mother, Upon Leaving the Choctaw Homelands, 1831”, in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 107.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

²⁵ Quoted in K.L. Squint., cit., p. 220.

is a co-written poem, entitled “Glaoch/ Singing, Still”, the title reflecting the process by which the poets call and respond to each other. Rather than impose her own perspective on the conversation, Ní Ghríofa begins by pausing to understand the many voices Howe is conjuring from the earth:

Éist. Éist.
An gcloiseann tú é?

Éiríonn guth ón gcré.
Cór.

Listen.
Can you hear it?

From the land, a voice lifts.
It becomes a chorus.

*Because you are holding onto me. I am not dead yet.*²⁶

Ní Ghríofa’s faith in the soil as a repository of voices, past and present, “a multi-layered text in which present realities and past experiences can coexist”²⁷, is a common theme in Irish poetry. It is articulated most clearly in the work of Séamus Heaney, who often attributes his poetic inspiration to his physical connection with the earth: “poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds”²⁸. The voices that emanate from the land (“clay” in the Irish lines) are thus an authentic link to the past. Michel Foucault uses the term “heterotopia” to suggest spaces that can accommodate multiple perspectives which both intersect with and undermine the authority of dominant representations: “juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”²⁹. This image is an appropriate one for Ní Ghríofa’s poetic engagement with history as she is conscious of allowing multiple, even contradictory perspectives to be heard, rather than imposing an authoritative interpretation on the events of the past. In all her poetry, she is drawn to spaces and voices that

²⁶ L. Howe and D. Ní Ghríofa, “Glaoch/ Singing, Still”, in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 39.

²⁷ A. Ní Éigeartaigh, “Vowels ploughed into other; opened ground”: Digging through History in the Haunted Landscapes of Séamus Heaney’s Poetry”, *Messages, Sages and Ages*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 32.

²⁸ S. Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002, p. 14.

²⁹ M. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, Spring 1986, p. 25.

lie just beyond the physical: liminal locations in which past and present can coexist. Thus even as she listens to the chorus rising from the earth, and repeats Howe's invocation, she is conscious that her own response must be tempered by a respect for the silence that is sometimes the only adequate way to communicate the impact of historical trauma:

I call.
 Druidim mo bhéal.
 I quieten. I wait.

Silence.
 Tost.

Then,
 Ansin,
 ón dtost,
 cloisim guth.

Éist.
 Listen.
 From silence,
 a voice lifts.³⁰

There are a number of ways in which we can read this use of silence. The most straightforward is its reference to the history of dispossession that robbed both the Choctaw and the Irish of their lands. Their native languages have also been repressed, as evidenced in the need to translate the Irish phrases into English. However, the silencing could also relate to the imposition of dominant narratives of history, which marginalize voices and experiences that do not conform to the hegemonic perspective. Ní Ghríofa has written widely about the underrepresentation of Irish women in Irish history³¹, but in this context, her concern is with overly simplistic interpretations of the past that attempt to hide or elide troubling contradictions. In an interview, she expresses the responsibility she felt to acknowledge also the collusion of Irish immigrants to America with the ongoing repression of native people: "history is always so complex and there's always so many layers of narrative, of telling of individual experiences, and of different lenses through which to view the histories

³⁰ D. Ní Ghríofa, "Glaoch/ Singing, Still", in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 40.

³¹ See A. Ní Éigeartaigh, "I Feel it so Strongly here, her Echo': Performing Grief and Releasing Ghosts in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*", in A. Ní Éigeartaigh, *The Graveyard in Literature: Liminality and Social Critique*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2022

that we read of... I'm very interested in the ways in which colonialism tricks the colonized into performing on its behalf into complicity"³². Although it is tempting to align Choctaw and Irish experiences of colonization, over-emphasizing empathy at the expense of truth does a disservice to the complexity of the connections between them. Irish historian Roy Foster has criticized what he calls the "narrative drive" among historians, eager to impose a neat structure on the past. He calls instead for a perspective that can "make room for alternative truths and uncomfortable speculations"³³. This is precisely what Ní Ghríofa is facilitating by immersing herself in the liminal space created by the silences that hover on the edges of official narratives of history.

Ní Ghríofa returns to this warning that we must listen to what the voices of the past can tell us, while acknowledging that our own perspectives can only ever be partial, in "An tAmhrán Ocrach", which translates as "The Hungry Song":

The past can be seen only
through a keyhole we peer through,
to find this narrow, shadowed view
of those who wait there,
a murmuring heard
from the other side
of the door.³⁴

The English verses of the poem reiterate the theme of silence and the importance of listening so that the voices of the past can be heard. However, it is in the Irish language verses that the potential of poetry to offer a liminal perspective becomes evident. Ní Ghríofa has often discussed the richness her bilingualism gives her poetic voice, as well as the sense of a tangible link to the words her ancestors would have spoken. The brutal suppression of the Irish language by the English is one of the most visible ongoing legacies of colonialism, with the consequence that poets who write in the Irish language rely on translation to be accessible to the majority of their readers. Translations, Ní Ghríofa explains, inevitably create a barrier to absorbing the full meaning of a phrase: "Translations, no matter into or out of which language, are notoriously slippery eels. You can't grasp a translation and say this is exactly as this utterance occurred first of all in its first language"³⁵. Molly Ferguson suggests that reading a

³² Quoted in D. Naimon, cit.

³³ R. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland*, Penguin Books, London, 2001, p. 21.

³⁴ D. Ní Ghríofa, "An tAmhrán Ocrach", in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 163.

³⁵ Quoted in D. Naimon, cit.

work through its translation is akin to the text being mediated through a ghost, with the intent of the original language hovering just out of reach but nonetheless colouring our interpretation with its presence: “Translations are merely shadows of the Irish language poems they interpret, and English-only readers have an acute awareness that something is irretrievably lost in translation”³⁶. Having access to poems only through translation is therefore, she argues: “to acknowledge the profound rupture of the imperial project”³⁷.

On the other hand, it is possible to suggest that whereas English as an imperial language operates to fix meaning, the Irish language can exploit its ephemeral status to suggest shifting and unfixable perspectives, in a way that is similar to the capacity of the Choctaw language to balance past and present. The Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill argues that because Irish belongs to the pre-industrial world, it has never lost its capacity for subversion and play:

Irish is a language of enormous elasticity and emotional sensitivity; of quick and hilarious banter and a welter of references both historical and mythological; it is an instrument of imaginative depth and scope, which has been tempered by the community for generations until it can pick up and sing out every hint of emotional modulation that can occur between people³⁸.

Ní Ghríofa exploits the layers of meaning that can be hidden from non-Irish speakers in her poems to suggest an act of resistance, located just out of view of the dominant language. While her English-speaking readers are peering through the keyhole for a glimpse of the past, for example, her Irish-speaking readers are struck by an aural coincidence:

Poll eocrach
Poll ocrach³⁹

Pronounced identically, “poll eocrach” means keyhole, while “poll ocrach” means hunger hole. When we peer through the keyhole, therefore, we are both hungry to learn more about our past, but also conscious of the hunger that characterized the experiences of our ancestors. A further resonance is that of feeling unfulfilled. Ní Ghríofa is

³⁶ M. Ferguson, “The Subversion of Supernatural Lament in the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill”, *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 42.6, p. 651.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 652.

³⁸ N. Ní Dhomhnaill, “Why I Choose to Write in Irish, the Corpse That Sits up and Talks Back”, in S. Sailer, ed., *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, University Press of Florida, Florida, 1997, p. 47.

³⁹ D. Ní Ghríofa, “An tAmhrán Ocrach”, in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 163.

warning us here that our attempt to access the past will only ever be partially successful. However, by incorporating this linguistic trick into her poem, she is also suggesting that rather than becoming fixated on fact, we should liberate our minds and allow ourselves to be open to the possibilities that can arise when we acknowledge that there is much that exists outside our own limited sphere of knowledge. Nathan Suhr-Sytsma describes this as “the ethical stance of unknowingness”⁴⁰, suggesting someone who is receptive to encounters with the other and willing to accept new insights without being able to fully understand or rationalize them. In the same way that the past and our engagement with that past will always be two different things, Ní Ghríofa wants the reader to be aware that there will always necessarily be a gap between words and the meanings they express. Reflecting on a collection of poems she translated herself, she explains that incorporating tricks into her writing is her way of warning readers against presuming that any text is a reliable record: “The reason I did that was because I really wanted the reader to be alerted to the fact that these are not the same poems. This is a different entity. This is an attempt, a negotiation, and that there are always ranges, losses, and gains that operate in that process of translating from one language to the next”⁴¹. This can be extended to her treatment of history, specifically the argument that any perspective on the past will always be contaminated by the needs of the present.

In an interview about her novel *Shell Shaker* (2001), which moves between the present and the 1830 Choctaw removal, Howe also cautions about making easy assumptions about history, particularly among those who have always assumed the right to narrate the past from their own perspectives: “Think about your perceptions of native people. Perhaps the images you have of us, the stereotypes, and even the histories you’ve read might be incorrect”⁴². It is perhaps to mitigate against this misreading of the past that Ní Ghríofa and Howe incorporate so much silence into their texts. Conroy argues that poetry makes a crucial intervention into our understanding of history by insisting that what is not said is as important as what is said. The reader of a poetic text is thus charged with mindfully engaging with the text in order to develop a critical perspective that challenges inherited meanings and seeks to develop new insights:

poetic metaphor – and after all, without metaphor there is no poetry
– requires that we suspend our thoughts about how particular words are

⁴⁰ N. Suhr-Sytsma, “Haiku Aesthetics and Grassroots Internationalization: Japan in Irish Poetry”, *Éire-Ireland* 45-3-4, 2010, p. 267.

⁴¹ Quoted in D. Naimon, cit.

⁴² Quoted in K.L. Squint., cit., p. 214.

normally used and come back to them afresh to look at what they now tell us about some thing in the world... The metaphor in which poetry consists is perennially straining at the edges of meaning in its attempt to exact a little more truth.⁴³

In their final poems in the sequence, Howe and Ní Ghríofa return to the theme of silence as a multi-layered text capable of accommodating and preserving multiple dispossessed voices. Howe's poem "Nakfi, Brother, as He Helps Sister Load the Cart", comprises of a single line:

Our leaving will be sung in every church pew like a hymn.⁴⁴

Read as a promise, or even a threat, Howe repeats her opening statement that as long as the story of dispossession is told, the voices of the dead will never be forgotten. This refrain is echoed by Ní Ghríofa in "Listen: Still, the Echo", her final contribution to the exchange. The title of this poem reiterates the importance of listening, demonstrating Ní Ghríofa's attention to Howe's words by repeating the word "still", which also works as a reference to the stillness required if the poets are going to have a meaningful conversation about their enjoined history. Allowing the title to run into the first line highlights the importance of acknowledging incidences of loss that continue to structure how cultures, like the Irish and Choctaw, engage with their history:

Listen: Still, the Echo
Of loss.⁴⁵

Ní Ghríofa emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the trauma of the past, linking the exploitation of Irish land by the English with the Choctaw dispossessions and allowing herself to articulate her anger about what was inflicted on the Irish people by acts of wilful cruelty during the famine:

Sing. Tell us again. Remind us
how many tonnes of grain they chose to export,
how much beef, how much pork.⁴⁶

⁴³ J. Conroy, cit., p. 151.

⁴⁴ L. Howe, "Nakfi, Brother, as He Helps Sister Load the Cart", in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 161.

⁴⁵ D. Ní Ghríofa, "Listen: Still, the Echo", in Howe and Kirwan, cit., p. 205.

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 205-6.

She also reminds her readers again that their most significant loss was that of their language, stolen by the English as if it was no more important than the meat they also exported (another play on the word “tongue”):

Tell us
how among their biggest exports
from our land was Tongue.⁴⁷

However, like Howe, she concludes on a note of resistance, because as long as cultures speak up for themselves, commemorating their dead, inviting the living into an ongoing conversation about identity and, most importantly, nurturing the relationships they have developed with other cultures, then the attempts by the colonizers to banish difference will fail. Victor Turner uses the term “communitas” to describe the strong bonds that can be forged by those who find themselves excluded or exploited by dominant narratives and institutions. Fostered by a willingness to listen and accommodate differences rather than trying to impose a single interpretation or identity on its members, a communitas functions as a liminal space in which differences are accommodated and seen as a sign of strength rather than weakness:

representing the desire for a total, unmediated relationship between person and person, a relationship which nevertheless does not submerge one in the other but safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness. Communitas does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms.⁴⁸

This openness to other perspectives and willingness to adopt a hybrid, multilingual voice is central to the encounters with history conducted by Howe and Ní Ghríofa. Their willingness to “call” and “respond” to each other through time and space is also at the centre of the ongoing cultural collaborations between the Choctaw and Irish nations. In his foreword to Howe and Kirwan’s collection of essays, Irish President Michael D. Higgins reflects on the significance of the Choctaw gift to the Irish people, emphasizing that the practical financial aid and the demonstration of empathy were equally meaningful, and continue to serve as an example of what is needed in the contemporary world as it faces a series of global crises: “No humanitarian crisis, no incidents of mass displacement, happens in isolation. Such crises call for a profound understanding of – and

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 206.

⁴⁸ V. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974, p. 274.

empathy across – our shared humanity”⁴⁹. In a fitting conclusion to this article, which has assessed the importance of empathy in our engagement with history, it is worth noting that the Irish people took the opportunity in 2020 to donate over €2.5 million to Native American tribes, who suffered disproportionately during the covid-19 pandemic⁵⁰. Commenting on the donation, which was primarily crowdfunded, organizers cite the ongoing gratitude felt in Ireland for the Choctaw gift as a key motivation: “acts of kindness from indigenous ancestors passed being reciprocated nearly 200 years later through blood memory and interconnectedness”⁵¹. As Howe and Ní Ghríofa promise each other in their transcultural conversation:

*Because you are holding onto to me, I am not dead yet.
As long as you speak of us, you will not forget*⁵².

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⁵⁰ R. McGreevy, “Irish people donate €2.5m to Native American tribe devastated by coronavirus”, *The Irish Times*, November 20, 2020 [<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/irish-people-donate-2-5m-to-native-american-tribe-devastated-by-coronavirus-1.4414963>]

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