

# “Grief became my friend, my work:” Mary Todd Lincoln’s Uneasy Union with Memory in LeAnne Howe’s *Savage Conversations* (2019)

STEFANIE SCHÄFER 

This essay<sup>1</sup> examines the politics of service vested in the First Lady role and her affective labors by turning to a contemporary fictional representation of Mary Todd Lincoln. In *Savage Conversations* (2019), LeAnne Howe considers issues involving US national memory, White womanhood, and settler colonial violence. The play imagines Lincoln’s insanity episode in the Bellevue asylum in the 1870s, where, as Lincoln told her doctor, an “Indian” visited her every night, scalping her and wiring her eyelids open. By outlining Mary’s performance of caring widow and her petitioning for compensation for her public service, Howe reveals Mary’s complicity in the Lincoln presidency’s settler violence. The play recalibrates the gendered renditions of (public) service inherent to the narratives of mourning, motherhood, and insanity tied to Mary’s persona and shows the flip side of the care narrative, connecting the long 19<sup>th</sup> century to the First Lady persona of the present.

**Keywords:** first lady, Mary Todd Lincoln, motherhood, settler colonialism, memory culture

---

1. This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 833574.

## The Affective Labors of Public Service: The First Ladyship's National Care Work

*For this year's holidays at the White House, we hope to capture the spirit embodied in the very idea of America: We the People. // As our country gathers for the holidays, traditions may vary, but our shared American values—a belief in possibility, optimism, and unity—endure each season. Room by room, visitors will be reminded of what brings us together during the holidays, and throughout the year. (Jill Biden @FLOTUS on Twitter, Nov. 28, 2022)*

For the holiday season of 2022, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden reiterated the longstanding tradition of the First Lady's role as hostess and caregiver. She oversaw the White House decorations and posted photos on her social media profile alongside a message of greeting. Her efforts might be described as national care work, which sought to include all Americans ("We the People") and revive national cohesion through positive "values." With references to sparkle and cheer, her tweet helped online viewers to a digital holiday feeling, even as they could not physically visit the White House. Her message provided comfort to American citizens at a time of national hardship that pertained to economic insecurity in a looming climate crisis and a global pandemic, and a deepening rift between political camps and public opinion. The First Lady's hope to "capture the spirit" in light, tone, and atmosphere bears witness to the possibilities and expectations tied to her role as a nonelected member of the government and reiterates the workings of public service and sentiment in US politics. Notably, Dr. Biden is the first tenant of this office to retain her paying day job as a community college professor.

This contribution examines the affective labors of the First Lady and the politics of her service in a literal sense: I discuss the emotional ties with the populace as a gendered rendition of public service, which is expected of the President's spouse by virtue of her marriage. Latched onto that status is the role of caregiver and homemaker, all unpaid menial activities. Turning to Kristina Booker's distinction between women's service as humanitarian "spiritualized sense of 'duty,'" and waged servant work (4), the First Lady is an intriguing case for observing the staying power of 19<sup>th</sup> century ideologies: her affective labors are tied to the image of Republican motherhood, to whiteness and settler state survival, but not (never!) to waged labor. Viewed through this special issue's exam-

ination of women and service in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, the First Lady gains specific nuance as a woman at work whose work is to perform the role of domestic caregiver, from the founding of the United States to the present moment, as Biden's 2022 holiday message shows.

My argument turns to a contemporary rendition of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century First Lady and *cause célèbre*, Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882), who has been cast both as pitiable widow and as scheming money grabber and equivocal partner to her husband. LeAnne Howe, a member of the Choctaw Nation, renowned author and academic commentator on settler-indigenous relations in the United States, fictionalizes these readings in her play *Savage Conversations* (2019). In Howe's restaging of history, Mary Todd Lincoln is driven by a pathological craving for attention that effaces settler colonial violence. To contextualize Howe's Mary Todd Lincoln in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the settler colonial present, I first map contemporary First Lady scholarship from a cultural studies perspective.

In US politics and in the American cultural imaginary, the First Lady role idealizes heteronormativity, female domesticity, and care work. These expectations emanate from two entangled factors: first, from the nation's sudden need, after independence, for a national culture and *Ersatz*-queen, and second, from the desire to illustrate transatlantic kinship and maintain trade relations with the British Empire (see Schäfer, *Yankee Yarns*). By 1870, the persona of the First Lady had become a fixture in US political culture and a projection for national sentiment. Domestic writer Laura Langford Holloway's bestselling collective biography, *The Ladies of the White House*, capitalizes on this hyperbolic connection to the White House as home of the nation and the First Lady as auratic mother figure. In the Introduction, Holloway captures American anglophilia and anxiety for recognition, at the same time as she proclaims the outstanding role of first ladies as moral guides and educators to the nation: "We have no 'Queens' or 'Drawing rooms', properly speaking, but 'Ladies' and 'Receptions' have been the synonymous terms whereby we have attested the stability of good morals and refined characters" (8).

The separation of spheres has tied political power to the President while casting his wife as hostess overseeing and impersonating the intricate goodness and refinement of Americans. This is literally set in stone in the architecture of the White House, where the President governs from the downstairs Oval Office and

lives upstairs. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did the First Lady's work find its own space, when Rosalynn Carter founded a First Lady office in the East Wing. Obviously, challenging this paternalistic tradition is an ongoing process, and the election of a non-male or non-heterosexual President remains a future fantasy.

The First Lady, meanwhile, is deeply steeped in white patriarchy and exacts what American Studies scholar Amy Kaplan has described in her eponymous essay "Manifest Domesticity." Kaplan argues that opposite the male white settler figures, white women's work was "nationbuilding from the home," linked in the "cult of domesticity," "the ideology of separate spheres," and the "culture of sentiment." The symbolic power linked to the First Lady persona has a normative and exclusionist effect: the First Ladyship has been described as a "raced-gendered cult" and a "controlling image of white womanhood" (see Handau and Simien 484). From a legal perspective, while she "cannot be considered a federal officer or employee," she "may be a public official for purposes of public-interest-laws" (Wasserman 1217). Her meaning is a cultural one: according to historian Watson, she represents the "ornamental part of the presidency" and serves as a measurement device, as a "barometer for the status of women in society and its shifting views of 'womanhood'" (*President's Wives*, 6 and 20–21; see also Watson, "Reconsidered").

Notwithstanding the problematic weather metaphors here, Watson's work points to the potential of the First Lady persona as a force in popular culture. Her status as unpaid and non-elected public official results in different celebrity politics that goes by representation and style. As seen, for example, in the contrasting reviews of Michelle Obama and Melania Trump (see Schäfer, "The Donald"), the First Lady persona can (fail to) build an emotional tie with different factions of the populace by virtue of her performance of "American womanhood." Media historian Tammy Vigil, in her comparison of Melania Trump and Michelle Obama, has described the First Lady's relation with the public as "consubstantiality" (65). Taken literally, consubstantiality describes a feeling of physical proximity and closeness, a sense that despite being out of sight, the First Lady is somehow felt to be present, as "national matriarch" and "moral guardian" (13, 22). In its religious meaning from Christian theology, consubstantiality designates the coexistence of God with Jesus. Regarding the First Lady role, this meaning connects her to US civil religion, and her mystical being-with the citizens becomes a spectral presence which ascertains the citizens' national belonging.

Hence, opposite the (male) sphere of presidential governance, which wields power over citizens' bodies and lives, the First Lady is vested with affective labors that are both visible during her public appearances as, for instance, hostess, charity supporter, or political campaigner, and also invisible through the sentiment vested in the American presidency as national home.

## **Something about Mary, Part I: The Lincolns and the Memory Wars**

Mary Todd Lincoln's First Lady persona is a *cause célèbre* for examining the affective labors of manifest domesticity and reviewing white privilege. No other First Lady has been written about so effusively. Jason Emerson's analytical bibliography, for instance, spans almost 140 pages of entries ranging from historiographic materials through poetry, film, drama, and websites. For First Lady historian Betty Caroli, Lincoln's prominence was linked to her ambivalent performance; during her time in the White House, she "left observers unsure about whether she had any influence on important decisions, so that merchants, intent on catering to her, permitted her to run up enormous bills" (60).

Caroli links the unfavorable image Lincoln gained in the public eye to her lavish receptions and spending as well as to her "badgering" (75) of her husband, who was viewed, as a consequence, as a henpecked husband and as a pitiable carrier of the burden of national schism. After her husband's 1863 assassination, Mary petitioned repeatedly to Congress for a pension (she was "in office," too) and exaggerated her poverty in newspapers to clamor for support, thus forcing the question of compensation for her job into public debate (Caroli 77). In 1875, her son Robert, knowing she had her life's savings sewn into her garments and worried about her sketchy associations, asked for a court decision on her sanity. After he was given custody, he placed her in Bellevue, a private institution for "a select class of lady patients of quiet and unexceptionable habits" (Caroli 78). Her doctors treated her for "nervous derangement and fever in the head" (Howe 10), and she enlisted allies to help her leave the asylum, ultimately regaining freedom on September 11, 1875, with the help of Myra Bradwell, a socialite and woman trailblazer of the legal profession.

Lincoln's skill at reaching out to the public and building an image as grief-stricken, impoverished widow may well be described as political know-how, but Caroli emphasizes that "in all important ways, [Lincoln] was a failure" (80). This description illustrates the double standard linked to the chores of manifest domesticity.

Americanist Rachel Blumenthal has described this conundrum as “the psychiatric republic” in which “women were deemed mentally unfit for civic life at the same time as they were required to perform domestic and maternal civic duties in cure cultures that would ostensibly ready them for rational democratic subjecthood” (30). Blumenthal examines Mary’s insanity trial in light of the public’s assessment of both Mary and Abraham Lincoln’s characters. She observes that while, like her husband, Mary displayed a “refined sensibility (the sentimentality, sympathy, and, ultimately, melancholia)” (29), the same things that qualified Abraham for political office became the lynchpin in Mary’s insanity trial.

Among historians, Mary Todd Lincoln remains an “enigma,” even to contemporary historians Frank J. Williams and Michael Burkholder. Assessments of her character come in two different frames, as biographer Catherine Clinton writes. While the “poor Mrs. Lincoln school” . . . withhold scorn, heap on the pity” (358), the “hellcat” camp reads Lincoln as “political wife” and key operator of the presidency. Lincoln’s controversial FLOTUS persona thus caters to ideals of white womanhood and 19<sup>th</sup>-century sentimentalism while also harboring misogynistic comments on the First Lady’s power behind the scenes.

## **Something about Mary, Part II: Gar Woman in the Madhouse**

LeAnne Howe’s 2019 play *Savage Conversations* frames these two readings of Mary Todd Lincoln by asking about Lincoln’s complicity in settler colonial violence. It shows a pitiful and bereaved Mary in Bellevue, desperate for human touch and deprived of her sovereignty, but it also unearths her implication in Abraham Lincoln’s darkest episode, the Mankato execution of 1862, which damages President Lincoln’s honored memory and renders him an “ambiguous icon” (Johnston, *Icon*). On December 26, 38 Dakota men were hanged in Mankato, Minnesota. They had been part of what was later called the Sioux Uprising, i.e., the Dakotas’ battle for survival after the government’s broken treaties had brought them to the brink of starvation. Amidst the threat of the Civil War against the US South, Lincoln criminalized the Dakota War, framing it as a punishable disturbance of white Minnesota settlers. The Lincoln government redirected treaty money owed the Dakota to the settlers and worked to force the Dakota out of the state through illegitimate trials. This “cruel logic” (Johnston, “Decisionism” 541) reversed the positions of aggressors and victims. Martinez asserts that “what Lincoln really benefited from was the prevailing assumption that the United States was entitled to Indian land and that any wars erupting between the United States and Indigenous nations were ‘just wars’ by definition,

which implicitly exonerates American forces from any wrongdoing” (25). The government’s dehumanizing treatment of the Dakota is rendered also in a quote attributed to the trader Andrew Myrick, who reportedly quipped “Let them eat grass or their own dung” (qtd. in Russo 100).

LeAnne Howe’s text connects the Mankato Massacre to Mary Todd Lincoln’s professed haunting. To her physician, Dr. Willis Danforth, Lincoln described visits by an Indian:

Nightly, Mrs. Lincoln claims, someone lifts her scalp and replaces it by dawn, sometimes cutting a bone out of her cheek. She attributes the fiendish work inside her head to an Indian spirit. “The Indian,” she says, “slits my eyelids and sews them open, always removing the wires by dawn’s first light. . . . Once [in the asylum], she’s ensconced in a private residence. Mary Todd Lincoln continues to have visions that an American Indian spirit enters her room and tortures her. (Howe 10)

LeAnne Howe stages these nightly visits and makes the character of “Savage Indian,” a ghost of one of the Mankato 38, the counterpart to her Mary Todd Lincoln. In the *dramatis personae*, Howe describes him as

[o]ne of the thirty-eight Dakota men hanged the day after Christmas, 1862, in Mankato, Minnesota. He sits in a chair in a dark corner of her room. His hair is dark brown and shoulder length. He wears a black vigilante town coat, the one he was hanged in. The coat droops open because the hangman’s wife cut off the buttons to sew onto her new frock. (Howe 11)

Mary’s “savage conversation” therefore performs fictional memory work, as it engages the memory cult around Abraham, Mary’s grief and obsession with her reputation, and her white womanhood. In the following, I turn to two aspects that reveal the First Lady’s gendered public service in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its critical reexamination in Howe’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century play: first, the revision of Mary’s First Lady persona, her motherhood, widowhood, and performance of grief. Second, I turn to the character The Rope, who acts as executioner and dramatic choir and who symbolizes a memory loop that collapses (staged) past and present in a scenario of settler colonial spectacle. Heeding Lorenzo Veracini’s assertion in *The Settler Colonial Present* that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, *Savage Conversations* asks its present-day audience to view white women’s manifest domesticity and affective labor as constitutive of our world.

*Savage Conversations* draws attention to US memory politics, to the archive, and to the deliberately neglected story of the Dakota 38 across the centuries. The text is set mainly at the Bellevue Asylum at night during the months of June through September 1875, in Mary Todd Lincoln’s reportedly cluttered room. Scene 3 shifts to Mary’s sister’s house in Springfield after her release on September 11, 1875,

with the final installment, “Mary Todd Lincoln, A Tribe of Ghosts,” set in June 1876. Importantly, even after her rehabilitation, Mary and Savage Indian continue their nightly rituals. The three scenes chronicle the evolution of the relationship between Mary and Savage Indian from “They Speak of Dreams” (scene 1) through “A House Divided” (scene 2) to “An Uneasy Union” (scene 3). The scenes contain short exchanges with descriptive titles that cast the action as a nightmarish ménage à trois, entangling the Lincoln courtship and marriage with Mary’s relation with Savage Indian and the latter’s own linkage to the late President, who signed Savage Indian’s death sentence. The dialogue drifts to the Lincoln marriage and the government’s Indian policies in the Dakota War as personified by two ghosts: Savage Indian and the assassinated president, both dead but hovering in Mary’s chamber.

Abraham is the main topic of Mary’s speech (the opening dialogue is called “Catafalque,” 14). In the chapter “Savage Indian. All my relations,” “Lincoln’s catafalque floats into Mary’s rooms on a pocket of air. Savage Indian lies inside a coffin on the same platform President Abraham Lincoln did on April 19, 1865” (40). This dramatic action presents Lincoln’s funeral procedure as a continuation of his politics and legacy. Lincoln’s death and funeral became an event of national mourning and were part and parcel of what literary scholar Lindsay Tuggle calls “a memorialization frenzy” (23). In the Civil War, saying goodbye to a fallen soldier or loved one often included a last look in a scenario Tuggle describes as “deathbed spectacle” (6), a visit with the dead. The spectacle of Lincoln’s funeral, in turn, went to gigantic material dimensions. Mourners created relics and scrapbooks with images of the President and family, and Lincoln’s blood-soaked pillow was displayed in his death chamber (Hodes 233). The catafalque built for Lincoln is still used today to honor US dignitaries with a lying-in-state (such as Sen. John McCain’s in 2018) to allow national commemoration and sustain the emotional bond between public servants and the citizens. In *Savage Conversations*, it floats into Mary’s asylum chamber, carrying Savage Indian as ghosted stand-in for the Dakota 38 who are not remembered in the President’s spectacular lying-in-state.

Next to participating in and working through the rituals of national grief, however, both Savage Indian and Mary perform their individual mourning in soliloquies: Savage Indian, for instance, “laments” (28–29) and “dreams” (32). Mary, acting the part of termagant widow, argues with Savage Indian about her marriage to Abraham, but she also sings love songs to her deceased husband (37, 45–47). The relationship between Mary and Savage Indian circulates around

Mary's public persona and her efforts to leave the asylum. Her act as impoverished widow and her controversial struggles—for public recognition and for money—is framed in the play with two animal motifs: the nightjar and the gar fish woman.

The nightjar, a bird “with unsightly gaping maw and strange industrial shriek” (Falk 1), accompanies the visits of Savage Indian to Mary and connects to her memories of her husband's caresses in an ironic symbolism. Mary describes the nightjar's “serenading” her in the asylum as Savage Indian comes to visit nightly, “without invitation, You make my room a ceremony as Nightjars sing” (6). She also remembers hearing its song in Abraham's whistling as he left her to pursue extramarital affairs (“for all the days you ran sideways from our home, whistling a Nightjar's tune,” 7). Throughout the text “Nightjar” is capitalized and exacts graphic defamiliarization, such as when Savage Indian tosses Mary's laudanum pot out the window “accidentally killing Nightjars, a wandering skunk, field mice” and then “prays for the dead Nightjars” (51, 52). With this, Mary's inebriation and her interaction with Savage Indian get a surrealist spin that short-circuits the action to the Lincoln marriage. In a final dialogue, when Savage Indian asks Mary “[w]hat manner of wife” she might be, she hides her face in her hands, exclaiming “A woebegone / A bedraggled Nightjar” (72).

The nightjar appears as antidote to the bird associated with romance and love, which goes unmentioned in the play: the nightingale. Mary, after she sings a lonely love song, lets on that Abraham had a lover before her (“She was indeed more beautiful,” 38), and falls into self-pity with her self-description:

I confess . . . I longed for  
The pleasure of your coarse skin,  
Money to spend, kid gloves, chiffon and satin  
Ball gowns with lavish trains properly hemmed.  
Doomed children. (15)

Mary's sexual longing recalls her luxurious taste, in the role as the President's wife and influential socialite, harnessing the feeling of both his “coarse skin” and of “chiffon and satin,” which only he can give her. The afterthought she adds here (“Doomed children”) links her greediness with her motherhood. Howe frames her as suffering from Munchhausen syndrome by proxy, a psychological condition that induces parents or caregivers to feign their children's illnesses in order to gain attention. In her introduction to the play, Susan Power writes, Howe “couldn't be positive of this diagnosis, but as her version of Mary Todd Lincoln began to develop, this possibility informed the world of *Savage Conversations*” (7). To capture a mother figure so obsessed with attention she kills her offspring, Howe's

Savage Indian calls Mary “Gar Woman” in reference to female gar fish who eat their own eggs: “You made me your confessor. / You desire agony, Gar Woman. / You swallow addiction / And grieve and grudge all” (71). Her all-consuming craving for attention is rendered in an opening scene called “Savage Indian Feeds Gar Woman,” when she pleads to be fed, and so he

*Fills her gaping mouth with fescue and sod.*

How does it taste, Gar Woman?

You said,

“If they are hungry, let them eat grass

Or their own dung.”

Trader Andrew Myrick’s words,

Lower Sioux Agency, August 15, 1862, but

Your sentiments spoken more than once. (17)

Through Savage Indian’s words and actions, Mary/Gar Woman embodies the settler nation state, and its disregard for the Native population left to starve under its care. Savage Indian here quotes the trader Andrew Myrick with a twisted version of Marie Antoinette’s naïve quip “Let them eat cake,” which fueled Jacobean terror in post-revolutionary France. As Savage Indian stuffs Mary’s face with “fescue and sod,” he avenges the Mankato 38 while making her chew on her own “sentiments spoken more than once.” In this scene, Mary’s First Lady persona is complicit in her husband’s dehumanizing and treaty-breaking politics; he has neglected the duty and care vested in the President as national *pater familias* and, by extension, she has neglected her motherhood role. When she is read not as bedraggled Nightjar but as Gar Woman, her First Lady’s task of maternal care for the citizens and her historical motherhood in the White House to the Lincoln children are thrown into relief: Mary Todd Lincoln devours her own offspring and becomes a monstrous mother of the nation. Savage Indian’s feeding, as well as his nightly torture by scalping Mary and cutting open her eyes, only enhances her pleasure in this posture (“I faint from the ecstasy,” 21).

In the masquerade of (white) women’s roles played out in the dialogue between Savage Indian and Mary, Gar Woman is the true face of Mary’s self-proclaimed Nightjar. While she acts the part of unseemly nightly bird who tries to serenade despite her shrieking voice, she also lets on that she took (sexual) control of Abraham before her rival could: “I prayed her light would burn out of plague, // But I won him, // Using my mouth. // I swallowed him!” (37). Mary as Gar Woman eats up her loved ones, even beyond death, and even after her release from the

madhouse: In a long final scene called “Mary Todd Lincoln, a Tribe of Ghosts” (68–74), Mary is at her sister’s house in Springfield, Illinois, in 1876. At twilight, the ghosts of Abraham and her dead sons Eddie, Willie, and Tad, appear. “Mr. Lincoln” shakes his head at her:

*She rushes to greet her family. The children recoil in fear and hide behind their father. Abraham Lincoln raises his hand to halt her approach.*

MARY: Mr. Lincoln? What is wrong?

*The four disappear. (68)*

In this scene, the dialogue between Mary and Savage Indian crystallizes key issues of the play by linking the 1875 setting to Lincoln’s future legacy. Mary talks about her role as impoverished widow and about rehabilitation as a member of the social elite. She describes mourning as a companion and as profitable occupation: “grief became my friend, my work” (73). Her “work” of acting the part of grieving widow is the basis for her lobbying to maintain her position in the public eye and to secure funding—and she is very aware of her white woman’s privilege in comparison to Savage Indian’s afterlife as a specimen for medical examination:

MARY

I still see my dress and bloody gloves from that night.

In the future they will one day be on display in the museum in Springfield. Alongside my husband’s.

That is what people will want of me. My sacrifices.

And you,

In the future I see your feathered headdresses,

Boxes of your people’s bones made ready for study.

We are a pair, you and I,

Relics to be studied.

SAVAGE INDIAN

*Pensive.*

Not paired.

MARY TODD LINCOLN

Indeed, paired! In the future they will be staging plays about us. (73)

Mary’s metadramatic commentary here taps into audience knowledge about her own First Lady persona legacy, opposite the actively forgotten memory of Savage Indian. When Mary insists that the two are “paired,” she singles out Howe’s play from all other cultural products about her: The uniqueness of *Savage Conversations* is the unseemly pairing of Mary with the fictional Savage Indian, of the First

Lady in the asylum with her personal torturer and stand-in for her husband's settler colonial violence, and her own uneasy union with memory. The stage props used for this spectacle symbolize this: where Lincoln's dress and bloody gloves from the night at Ford's Theater are preserved and exhibited as specimens of national trauma and loss, Savage Indian's body is excavated and used for medical study. Mary's description of both material legacies as "relics" elevates her plotting to ceremonial action, while desecrating once more the dignity of Native Americans, their burial traditions, and bodily sovereignty in life and in death.

With *Savage Conversations*, Howe thus creates a memory loop. She links the visible memorabilia of Lincoln's assassination (gloves, dress, print culture) to the unseen and actively forgotten settler colonial violence and haunting. In the play, this loop is played by The Rope, a representation of the hangman's noose and Aristotelian chorus to the action. In Howe's play about Mary Todd Lincoln's First Lady persona, The Rope literally ties the knot between past and present, 19<sup>th</sup>-century care work, and cultures of mourning.

### **Something about Mary, Part III: The Memory Loop of Settler Colonial Spectacle**

#### THE ROPE

Out of Fort Snelling's coffin,  
I swing like a fool on holiday  
Backward, forward, and  
Around and around. (22)

According to Howe's character description, The Rope is both "a man *and* the image of a hangman's noose used in the largest mass execution in United States history" (11); he "eavesdrops" on Mary and Savage Indian and "sometimes twirls in the room like a dancer" (11). In episodes throughout, The Rope provides asides, but mostly he is described in the recurring chapter heading, "The Rope Seethes," which is repeated ten times throughout the play. The character's continuous seething expresses anger and threat, rendering the built-in, boiling-point torture level inherent in the persistence of the settler state. Towards the end, the chapter title is enhanced to "The Rope Seethes, remembering the Dakota 38" (61). As the nightly visits carry on, The Rope ties hangman's nooses to the rafters in Mary's asylum room, progressing slowly ("Two down, thirty-six more to go," 26) until his work is finally done.

While as a character The Rope has little action, he is literally woven into the nightly visits of Mary and Savage Indian, uniting their staged and historical personas and their imagined flesh, and repeating the pain of the hanging of the Dakota 38. The Rope connects the past with the present moment: In a footnote to the text, LeAnne Howe links this character to the recent excavation and display of a single hangman's noose used in the massacre at Fort Snelling and to a visit, in 2011, of representatives from the Dakota Nation to the exhibit (30). The Rope's self-description quoted above extends him beyond the plot of the play into US memory and its burial ground and back to the present, "Around and Around." As he throws the nooses over the rafters on stage, he rebuilds the private asylum into a national gallows. The Rope's actions also reframe the memory of Mary Todd Lincoln's persona (as either grief-stricken widow or political hellcat) by highlighting her complicity in Abraham's politics of Indigenous neglect and white settler appeasement.

Importantly, The Rope, as a symbolic memory loop and an executioner's tool, also has the play's last word. In the last scene, Mary and Savage Indian engage again in their nightly routine of scalping and cutting. This routine brings Mary pleasure linked with a new, clearer sight as with her eyes sewn open, she embraces a new vision provided by Savage Indian's disfiguring body work: "At last I can see the world as it truly is," she exclaims, "ecstatic" (19). Her nightly gaze, of course, looks beyond the stage space of her asylum room. Howe has Mary exclaim that she sees the world "as it truly is"—but *what* she sees, she does not say. In the end, Mary asks Savage to keep up his work, asking "Again, please" (73), to which The Rope, observer and chorus figure to the play, simply responds: "Yes" (74).

So how can we read Mary's unexpressed sight and The Rope's final "Yes" in the play's spectacle? Clearly, what Mary sees cannot be imparted beyond the fourth wall. One reading could point to a potential catharsis that leaves the audience to their own established views of Mary Todd Lincoln and the Lincoln presidency. However, Mary's looking beyond the play, beyond history, with eyes cut open, alters the audience's views of the past and present and hinders their cathartic walking away from American history. It impels audiences to deal with what they cannot or maybe do not want to see. And of course, the answer to this scene will lie in the eye of the beholder.

Hence, The Rope's parabolic conclusion ends the action on stage with the spectacle of an eternal memory loop that entangles the present-day audience with the violent past. With The Rope's concluding "Yes," the executioner's tool completes the symbolic memory loop: He has finished his work of hanging up the nooses in

the room of Mary's mind and entangling her in her spectacle routine. He has also forced the audience to look at Mary's antics and complicity in the untold story of national neglect of the Dakota 38 and of Native peoples in America. The Rope forges an eternal memory loop that entangles the present-day audience with the structures the violent settler past built. Next to his stage speech, The Rope's main work, seething, enforces the memory loop's hot and discomfoting atmosphere.

### **Loose Ends: A Conclusion**

With LeAnne Howe's Mary Todd Lincoln suspended in the *Savage Conversations* with her imaginary Savage Indian, the affective labors attributed to First Ladies in the US cultural imaginary are thrown into stark relief. Howe's Mary gets to articulate her job description ("grief became my friend, my work") and act the part of grieving widow. Historically, Lincoln's political and media networking from her asylum cell freed her on September 11, 1875, and her writings on this day have their own ironic ring: "I proclaim/ September 11, 1875, a new beginning/. . . For centuries to come, let freedom ring" (qtd. in Howe 62). Historian Betty Boyd Caroli (61–86, see specifically 77) reads Mary Todd Lincoln's First Ladyship as an exception from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century rule that Presidents' spouses kept to themselves, emphasizing that Lincoln's petitioning to Congress started the ongoing debate over whether First Ladies should receive compensation for their public service.

Howe, who has compared her work as playwright and academic to a performance artist's (Squint 131), links Mary's grief work to her masquerade as national matriarch: Mary's affective labors are the plottings of a termagant wife who harms her own offspring to gain love and recognition. The flip side of First Lady consubstantiality, of the maternal hovering presence in the lives of American citizens, is laid bare in Mary's uneasy union with settler colonial politics. Her nightly viewing exercise reiterates the endemic violence of white patriarchy.

With *Savage Conversations*, the discourse of maternal care linked to the First Lady persona is revealed to be a crutch for white privilege, which, in keeping with the affectionate and disturbing family imagery, pampers white settlers while starving the Native population. When inquiring about the meanings of stories about women and work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it becomes clear that for all the First Lady's unpaid affective labors, she remains a supporter of white patriarchy and settler colonial violence. It bears repeating here that the origins of the First

Lady persona are transatlantic, hinging on a comparison to and distinction from British feudal society that relied on “good morals and refined characters” (Holloway 8). Howe’s artistic intervention, with *Savage Conversations*, casts these ersatz-Queens in another light. It asks its audience to dare to have their eyes opened to an altered view of the lasting endurance of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Works Cited

- “Artist-in-Residence LeAnne Howe.” *YouTube*, uploaded by American Studies Association Official, 12 Dec. 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6F8W\\_iNNIOY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6F8W_iNNIOY).
- Blumenthal, Rachel A. “Mary Todd Lincoln, Elizabeth Keckley, and America’s Psychiatric Republic.” *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2018, pp. 27–55.
- Booker, Kristina. *Menials: Domestic Service and the Cultural Transformation of British Society, 1650–1850*. Bucknell UP, 2018.
- Caroli, Betty Boyd. *First Ladies. The Ever Changing Role, from Martha Washington to Melania Trump*. 5th ed, Oxford UP, 2019.
- Clinton, Catherine. “The Compelling Mrs. Lincoln.” *The Mary Lincoln Enigma: Historians on America’s Most Controversial First Lady*, edited by Frank J. Williams and Michael Burkheimer, Southern Illinois UP, 2012, pp. 349–64.
- Emerson, Jason. *Mary Lincoln for the Ages*. Southern Illinois UP, 2019.
- Handau, Megan, and Evelyn M. Simien. “The Cult of First Ladyhood: Controlling Images of White Womanhood in the Role of the First Lady.” *Politics & Gender*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2019, pp. 484–513.
- Falk, Michael. “The Nightjar’s Shriek: Nature’s Variety in the Sonnets of John Clare and Charlotte Smith.” *John Clare Society Journal*, vol. 36, 2017, pp. 31–48.
- Hodes, Martha. *Mourning Lincoln*. Yale UP, 2015.
- Holloway, Laura C. [Langford]. *The Ladies of the White House*. US Publication Co., New York and Cincinnati, 1870. *Internet Archive*, [archive.org/details/ladiesofwhite00hollrich](http://archive.org/details/ladiesofwhite00hollrich).
- Howe, LeAnne. *Savage Conversations*. Coffee House P, 2019.
- Johnston, Steven. *Abraham Lincoln: Icon of Ambiguity*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- . “Lincoln’s Decisionism and the Politics of Elimination.” *Political Theory*, vol. 45, no. 4, SAGE Publications, 2017, pp. 524–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591716651110>.
- Kaplan, Amy. “Manifest Domesticity.” *American Literature*, vol. 70, no. 3, 1998, pp. 581–606.

- Martinez, David. "Remembering the Thirty-Eight: Abraham Lincoln, the Dakota, and the U.S. War on Barbarism." *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2013, pp. 5–29.
- Power, Susan. Introduction. *Savage Conversations*, by LeAnne Howe. Coffee House P, 2019, pp. 7–8.
- Russo, Priscilla Ann. "The Time to Speak is Over: The Onset of the Sioux Uprising." *Minnesota History*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1976, pp. 97–106.
- Schäfer, Stefanie. *Yankee Yarns: Storytelling and the Invention of the National Body in 19th-Century American Culture*. Edinburgh UP, 2021.
- . "The Donald, FLOTUS, and the Gendered Labors of Celebrity Politics at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2021, pp. 302–07.
- Squint, Kirsten. "Genre-Sliding on Stage with Playwright LeAnne Howe." *Conversations with LeAnne Howe*, edited by Kirsten Squint, U of Mississippi P 2022, pp. 131–52.
- Tuggle, Lindsay. *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War*. U of Iowa P, 2017.
- Veracini, Lorenzo. *The Settler Colonial Present*. Routledge, 2015.
- Vigil, Tammy R. *Melania and Michelle: First Ladies in a New Era*. Red Lightning, 2019.
- Wasserman, Carl David. "Firing the First Lady: The Role and Accountability of the Presidential Spouse." *Vanderbilt Law Review*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1995, pp. 1216–60.
- Watson, Robert P. *The President's Wives. Reassessing the Office of First Lady*. Lynne Rienner, 2000.
- . "The First Lady Reconsidered: Presidential Partner and Political Institution." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1997, pp. 805–18.
- Williams, Frank J., and Michael Burkheimer, editors. *The Mary Lincoln Enigma: Historians on America's Most Controversial First Lady*. Southern Illinois UP, 2012.

## About the Author

Stefanie Schäfer is a scholar of North American Studies, Gender Studies and Popular Culture and currently professor of British and North American Media Studies at Marburg University in Germany. Her ongoing research focuses on Cowgirls and First Ladies and has been funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 program in the project TACOMO (Transatlantic Cowgirl Mobilities). Her second book (habilitation) *Yankee Yarns. Storytelling and the Invention of the National Body in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* was published with Edinburgh University Press in 2021.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).