



HERE THE SENTENCE WILL BE RESPECTED¹

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Abstract

This paper explores embodiment in documentary poetics as a corrective to the homogenizing lens of “lyric poetry” that works to erase, by making abstract, non-standard (non-white) bodies. In particular, it examines the performative aspects of punctuation, line breaks, and stanza patterns in Layli Long Soldier’s book *Whereas*, written in response to the 2009 United States Congress joint resolution to acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States. The paper contextualizes the apology and poem within Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay “The significance of the frontier in American History,” eighteenth and nineteenth-century “dead-Indian” poems, and theories of lyric reading. Layli Long Soldier’s *Whereas* joins other acts of poetic resistance, such as Martha Collins’ *White Papers*, Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, and Phillis Wheatley’s “On Recollection.”

Keywords: *Native American poetry; Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans; Layli Long Soldier; documentary poetry; apostrophe; embodiment; “dead Indian” poems; Turner Jackson; frontier.*

If I’m transformed by language, I am often
crouched in footnote or blazing in title.
Where in the body do I begin
Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas*

¹ This is the first line in the poem “38” by Layli Long Soldier, collected in her book *Whereas*, Graywolf Press, 2017 (40).

Where are the bodies in a line of poetry, in the words of an apology issued via Congressional resolution? Perhaps a Congressional statement is composed in much the same way, and for the same purpose, as a line of poetry, to sort bodies into subjects and objects, presence and absence. Both poem and government are brute instruments whose purpose is to assert a sovereign self (the subject, the *I*, the *you*), create a community among other sovereign subjects (the *we*), and demarcate what is outside of this community-- the object, the non-citizen, the omission.

In a line of poetry, is it the speaker who is embodied and the object of the sentence whose image is shaped to our own mind, fears and desires, as they are absent and can be whatever we want them to be? Or is the speaking *I*, who is outside of time and space, whose authority endures forever in the authoritative text, an absent God, without a body? We might be tempted to ask: if a sentence, if a poem, are only words, why does it matter? Words are not bodies, even though the sole concern of literature and legislation is the body. Without bodies there would be no words--not simply because there would be no way to produce the words, but rather, there would be no need for them. Therefore, which bodies are the ones that stand in for the words, the bodies that order the words to perform them? And which bodies do not really exist because they are not sovereign, not known, are fictions, not poems, because they cannot actually act in response?

As Layli Long Soldier notes in the excerpted text which opens this paper, there is no ready language in which an Oglala Lakota person could be embodied in the imagination of the United States government and the imagination of Americans. In fact, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, just as the creation of the United States depended upon the displacement of American Indians², so the creation of an American poetics was facilitated very much by the dis-

² Long Soldier critically engages with the terms "Native American" and "American Indian" in *Whereas*. I will use the term "American Indian" because in the previous century the term "Indian" was used as an apostrophe in American poetry. I keep in mind this observation from the "Whereas" section:

But the term American Indian parts our conversation like a hollow bloated boat that is not ours that neither my friend nor I want to board, knowing it will never take us anywhere but to rot. If the language of race is every truly attached to emptiness whatever it is I feel now has me in the hull, head knees feet curled, I dare say, to fetal position—but better stated as the form I resort to inside the jaws of a reference (62).

embodiment of Layli Long Soldier and her people in the literary imagination. In poetry, Layli Long Soldier and the Oglala Lakota people are akin to a literary apostrophe, a point of address that does not really exist in the real world, or rather, exists in the real world, but as a manifestation of the speaker's imagination.

The propensity to describe the formation of the American character through this process of disembodiment is articulated as early as Jackson Turner's 1893 essay "The significance of the frontier in American History," in which the frontier is called "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization"(2). In Turner's essay, the transformation of the European colonist into American is achieved through and upon the body of the Native American Indian, in the act of displacing, or replacing, the native body. In the "line" of "Americanization," the frontier

takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. ... he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American (2).

What is striking about this "line of Americanization" is the absence of American Indians. It reads as if all of the previous inhabitants had disappeared, leaving behind their canoes, moccasins, corn, sticks and trails.

The century preceding Jackson Turner's essay produced literature characterized by what scholar Ron Welburn calls the "dying Indian-themed poems" which are, he notes, among the most popular subgenre produced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the United States.³ These poems, by non-indigenous writers, "affirm" the extinction of the American

³ This sub-genre of poetry was brought to my attention by Virginia Jackson in her study *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric*. Princeton University Press, 2023, pp. 37-38. The description of the "dying Indian-themed poems" comes from Ron Welburn's *Hartford's Ann Plato and the Native Borders of Identity* (SUNY Press, 2015).

Indian under the guise of elegy or eulogy. William Cullen Bryant's "An Indian at the Burial-Place of His Fathers" and "An Indian Girl's Lament," literally place the speaker at the grave of the American Indian and at the side of a slain warrior, respectively.⁴ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) written ostensibly to honor "our native Indians" ends with the titular hero welcoming the white missionaries to the land, beseeching his people to "follow their ways," acknowledging the Supremacy of the Colonizer. Wordsworth noted:

When our native Indians, who are fast-perishing from the earth, shall have left forever the borders of our wide lakes... the dim light of tradition will rest upon those places, which have seen the glory of their battles, and heard the voice of their eloquence;---and our land will become, indeed, a classic ground.⁵

Even the African American poet Ann Plato, who quite possibly was a tribal member, creates an imaginary dialogue between a Native American father and his daughter, lamenting the passing of a great people, thereby affirming their extinction in the poem "Our Natives of America."⁶ And Virginia Jackson's *Before Modernism*, a study that posits not only the existence of a "Black poetics" as early as the eighteenth century in the United States, but that it was "in antagonism" with "White poetics," devotes a chapter to the use of minstrelsy by popular American poets such as William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to imagine and perform the extinction of Native Americans by ventriloquizing the last American Indian.

Nearly a hundred years later, in 2009, the United States Congress officially "apologized" to Native Americans, by way of a congressional joint resolution, acknowledging "a long history of official depredations and ill-

⁴ "Poems / William Cullen Bryant [electronic text]." In the digital collection American Verse Project. <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/BAD0508.0001.001>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed December 14, 2025.

⁵ Longfellow, Henry. "The Literary Spirit of Our Country," *The United States Literary Gazette*, 1 April 1824, in *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Poems and Other Writings*, edited by J.D. McClatchy, Library of America, 2000, p. 371.

⁶ Welburn constructs a profile of Ann Plato as a member of the Algonquian peoples of Long Island Sound in the antebellum period, noting that her reputation enjoys modest celebrity in African American literary history (XIX).

conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes.”⁷ The chief engine of this apology was the word “Whereas,” which Layli Long Soldier deconstructs in her 2017 book by that name, in an act that fellow poet and literary critic Dean Radar calls “one of the great examples of rhetorical resistance in American writing.” For, as Radar points out in his 2017 *Ploughshares* review, “The resolution employs the term *whereas* almost poetically, as both anaphora and volta, to enumerate a litany of statements, claims, and promises. Each *whereas* pushes the text along, giving it an incantatory quality.” The resolution, in other words, creates an incantation, a spell, or an enchantment, a magical transformation, rather than an apology with retribution. An apology in which each line begins with the word that means “given that,” this resolution sounds more like an excuse.

One of Long Soldier's greatest issues with the congressional apology, in addition to “the language, crafting, and arrangement of the written document,” was the delivery, or lack thereof (“Introduction,” Long Soldier, 57). As Long Soldier points out in the introduction to the second part of her book, when U.S. President Barack Obama signed the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans on December 19, 2009, President Obama never read the Apology aloud, publicly. Furthermore, “No tribal leaders or official representatives were invited to witness and receive the Apology on behalf of tribal nations” (57). “For the record,” Senator Sam Brownback read the Apology five months later, but to a gathering of only five tribal leaders, “though there are more than 560 federally recognized tribes in the US.” Furthermore, “The Apology was then folded into a larger, unrelated piece of legislation called the 2010 Defense Appropriations Act” (57).

The transformative action of an apology depends precisely on its vocalization, its being placed in the mouth of a physical body. If the Apology is read aloud, and is not heard, if it exists only on paper, if the paper is not delivered specifically to the injured party, so that they can read it, is it an apology?

Long Soldier describes the attributes of an apology in the poem that opens section III of her book “Whereas Statements.” The attributes have less to do with the content of the apology, and more to do with the effect an apology produces in the recipient. In mirroring the language of the Apology, by

⁷ H.J.Res.46 and S.J.Res.14, 2009 and 2010.

beginning with the word “Whereas,” Long Soldier is responding as a recipient to the apology.

WHEREAS when offered an apology I watch each movement the shoulders
high or folding, tilt of the head both eyes down or straight through
me. I listen for cracks in knuckles or in the word choice, what is it that
I want? *To feel* and mind you I feel from the senses--I read
each muscle, I ask the strength of the gesture to move like a poem.
Expectation's a terse arm-fold, a failing noun-thing
I scold myself in the mirror for holding (61)

A true apology (and any true writing), as Long Soldier claims, is an act of embodiment. An abstract speaker cannot hear; an idealized reader or listener cannot feel. Perhaps the point here is that a poem, in and of itself, is necessary but not sufficient, just as a resolution, in and of itself, is necessary but not sufficient. The harm is in treating the poem as if it were sufficient, rather than what it is--an instrument, an occasion, a potential community.

Congress's Apology, it seems, is not an incantation, though it was phrased as one, because it is not calling a presence into being a new entity or recovering an absence, nor is the Apology spoken, chanted, or sung; nor was it performed in a ceremonial ritual. Or rather, the ceremonial ritual in which it was performed was composed entirely of United States government officials, and not of any Native American Indian tribal leaders. The performance was visual. In fact, if we look at a written apology, a government resolution as an act, the act of this Apology further erases the Native American Tribes to whom it is addressed, continuing the acts of annihilation that the Apology purported to be acknowledging. So perhaps the apology is an act after all--an act of erasure. The disclaimer in the apology makes this clear:

“Nothing in this Joint Resolution--

- (1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or
- (2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.”

Somehow, the Apology seems to complete the replacement and displacement of the American Indian as described in Jackson Turner's essay. The American Indian is so thoroughly erased, the Apology implies, there is no need for a native

presence in the presentation of the Apology. There is no call for a response, either, and no mechanism to indicate reception of the Apology.

To better understand the Apology as an act of erasure, we might consider how predicated on the erasure of non-White bodies the American English language is. And here it is instructive to note the work of Martha Collins, who presents herself as a white woman from Iowa, a state that during the antebellum years did not endorse slavery, but also severely discouraged Free people of color from living within its borders. Today Iowa is one of the whitest states in America, and it is often the source of Collins's studies. Her book *White Papers* introduces the limitations of language as a neutral poetic medium in the mouths of "whiteness." For Collins, as well as for Long Soldier, whiteness is metaphor for occupying the dominant position in a speaker of sentences--it is the subject position, and it depends on the physical absence of those spoken about.

Collins writes specifically about the rhetorical strategies of White imagination, and reading her poetic line as the speech of dominant power, one might attend to her pronouns, which banish non-white people to third person and to abstractions.

[16]

Of course there were browns
who weren't black, but we called
them white or didn't call them
or know them, except for Señor
Briseño who taught Spanish.

No one was Latin American then
or Hispanic or Latino, although
we'd heard a name for Mexicans,
and also one for Italians, who lived
in their own section of town.

Of course there were the confusing
other Indians, one of whom my mother
knew: a pastor's wife who wore a sari
so people wouldn't think she
was, you know, what she wasn't.

My mother had a Lebanese friend
who went to our church, but no
one was Arab or Muslim then,
or terrorist, only Communist: our
Other did not live among us except

of course for African Americans,
who were still called Negro or colored,
who were not many in our city but
were just enough to be other than
whatever it was we were.

We the readers comprehend all too well all the offensive epithets that are unuttered, withheld from the text in this poem. The “heard” name for Mexican or Italian needn’t be said because the readers have already internalized the ideas and myths they represent in order to make sense of the world. Here, to “be called white,” like Señor Briseño who taught Spanish, is considered a compliment by the speaker’s community, because it signifies being invited into this community. The same can be said for Church attendance. The pastor’s wife who wears the sari marks herself as foreign, rather than (or precisely in order to avoid) being mistaken for a Native American. That would be “confusing,” as these people are not supposed to exist.

Collins’s opening poem, [I], demonstrates how the Congressional Joint Resolution Apology works as an acknowledgement of guilt, but with the precise wrongdoing embroidered with silence. The silence is a withholding of action.

Because my father said Yes
but not in our lifetimes Because
my mother said *I know my daughter
would never want to marry...*

But mostly because they rarely spoke
of or noticed or even whispered
about and did not of course ...

Because magazines rarely TV
rarely textbooks rarely or not
at all except for figures like

George Washington Carver
who'd lived in our state

Because among the crayons
there was one called Flesh

Because paintings rarely or never
until because books from the library
never until because college literature
not at all the American lit anthology
had only Gwendolyn Brooks
who was not assigned

Because a few years after Brown
v. Board of Education I wrote a paper
that took the position *Yes but not yet*

If the Congressional Joint Resolution is a withholding from accountability, Collins's "White Paper I" is a withholding of reparation. In both poems, the recipient of the apology or the body of the injured party is absent. In the congressional Apology, the Apology was never read aloud and was not signed or presented in the presence of any tribal leaders or members. In Collin's opening poems, non-white bodies are not even named--there are gaps where the words should be.

One might think that the task of Collins' book is justice--Civil Rights, reparation, decriminalizing miscegenation. But before any of these physical actions can happen, the first struggle is to unlearn, as we see in poem 45:

...and although I've gone back
and filled in some blanks
I'm still learning this un-

learning untying
the knot of *Yes but re-*
writing this *Yes Yes*

White Papers makes clear the mechanics of the polite implied racism of what is not said. In these poems, the invisibility of punctuation and line breaks is complicit because of our tendency to view words on the page of these poems

as silent, so that the “speaker” of the poem is a fiction. In the sense that the written *I* is a placeholder, each reader can inhabit the speaking position of the poem. The quiet poem is private, although it depends upon those who read it to accept the underlying assumptions. In this sense, the poem is also communal, as in, it requires a community of subjects. Collin's poem is a private act of confession that invites a community confession.

It might be worth noting that it is often difficult for non-white speakers to use the word *I* in this particular sense: as a possible universal placeholder. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen. An American Lyric* has famously troubled the first-person singular pronoun as universal placeholder when the speaker is not white:

Sometimes “I” is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it.

This makes the first person a symbol for something.

The pronoun barely holding the person together.

Someone claimed we should use our skin as wallpaper knowing we couldn't win.

You said “I” has so much power; it's insane.

And you would look past me, all gloved up, in a big coat, with fancy fur around the collar, and record a self saying, you should be scared, the first person can't pull you together (71).

The first person cannot pull you together because the non-white first person does not exist in the “American” imagination. This has just been demonstrated throughout the entire book, which is composed, in part, of unattributed anecdotes in the second person. These anecdotes of erasure include incidents of invisibility, such as white others simply not noticing the presence of a non-white figure, displacing them from a banking queue or calling a non-white person by the name of the house cleaner. But erasure can also include hypervisibility, such as when the neighbor calls the police to report a man of color attempting to enter his own house, or even being shot at by the police when removing one's hands from the steering wheel of a car to reach for one's driver's license, as directed by the police officer. Insofar as human bodies exist in a sphere greater than one's

family or community, one's own sense of self is not adequate. Thus, when Rankine does invoke the *I*, it is brief and painful:

And still a world begins its furious erasure—
 Who do you think you are, saying I to me?
 You nothing.
 You nobody.
 You.

A body in the world drowns in it—
 Hey you—(142)

In a way, Rankine's *Citizen* is the anti-apostrophe. When her narrative Black body attempts to use the word “I” to refer to herself, it is immediately shut down. Not only can she not speak for others, she cannot even speak for herself.

Insofar as literary canons are created by literary scholars and critics, these agents also have a role in teaching the public how to read non-white bodies who write literature. And sometimes even well-intentioned literary scholars do not accept a non-white speaking *I* in the speaker's own terms. For example, Virginia Jackson's 2023 treatment of Phillis Wheatley Peters in *Before Modernism* appears in stark contrast to her treatment of Emily Dickinson in a 2005 study on lyric poetry, *Dickinson's Misery*. Both studies open with an imagined scene of the individual poet, Dickinson, and Wheatley, respectively. In relation to Emily Dickinson, Jackson warns that it is not the poet who is creating the abstract lyric speaking figure in American poetry; it is literary scholars, and readers trained by such scholars. In the imaged scene of Phillis Wheatley, however, Jackson presents a version the poem “On Recollection” that Wheatley later corrected, and claims, based on the error that was corrected, “Wheatley was not asking Mneme to stand in her place, to be the better poet. She was asking memory to tell a story that has yet to be told: the story of the invention of American lyric” (2). Rather than reading Wheatley as a somewhat deficient lyricist, she might have, instead, understood Wheatley's *I* as the speaker of an Ode, and thus, a public, symbolic figure. But she cannot, or will not, and reads her as an individual, private figure. Perhaps because the speaking figure marks herself as an unfree non-citizen, an

Afric, Jackson admits she has trouble understanding who is speaking.⁸

It is at this point that poetry, prosody, and syntax offer human bodies a way out of the annihilation of abstraction. And this is where Layli Long Soldier's 2017 debut collection *Whereas* is a particularly powerful pedagogical tool. The collection offers a critique of received American history through the poem's "story" of English-language grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure—particularly the sentences used in United States treaties with Native American tribes. Long Soldier is tempering the language in preparation for its use to describe the decimation of the native peoples of the Americas; she is teaching us to read English as a second language, as most Americans have had to do at one point or another—by which, I think, she means that one looks not only at the words themselves, but at how the words comport themselves and are carried into the world.

Before someone tells the story of syntax and grammar, though, they need to appear as a body, and "Wahpanica" performs deep embodiment in a poetic text. The title is a word that translates in English as "to be destitute, to have nothing of one's own." Such a definition asks us to consider the nature of the destitute person's personhood--is this the destitution of a first-person speaker in a poem, who disappears, leaving the outline of a poem as a record of perception? It seems this poem demonstrates that perception is not simply a one-dimensional activity, but one that requires us to circle, in order to observe both the front and the back. In drawing attention, not to the abstract nature of language or the randomness of letter shapes, but to the absence of the

⁸ Jackson's argument goes like this: "But what if Wheatley's and Horton's poetry...and other early Black poets' importance to the history of transatlantic Anglophone poetics is enormous precisely because the idea that 'what is left unsaid is more significant than what is said' is one way of describing the surplus value accorded to *all* (lyricized) poetry for the past two hundred and fifty years? What if these poets and others worked in poetic genres and discourses that rendered their work a record of the ways in which the racialized social antagonism that is modernity's foundation made "subjective expression" the precise 'locus of impossible speech' that came to define the alienated modern lyric subject?" (9). In other words, Jackson is arguing that Phyllis Wheatley alienated herself by creating what Adorno calls an "eloquent absence" rather than willing herself present in her poem. This is in stark contrast to Jackson's treatment of Dickinson, in which Jackson warns that it is not the poet who has created this concept of the speaker, but later scholars and critics, who adopted a form of "lyric reading."

speaker/the presence of the comma, each stanza, as written document, becomes a little theater of absence.

Wahpanica—

I begin a line about white buttes that bend chiseled faces and click stone eyelids at night, but abandon it. Instead, I push my love into this world and mail you a summer letter. From mail-box to door, you read the commas aloud. I've become a wife of bottled water comma black liner at the lash comma and sleeves to the wrist. These weeks alone alone alone comma I pull my body to a table of empty chairs and sometimes I cannot stop the impulse to command. Alone alone I instruct *sit down* comma *eat up* comma and I write in detail to hush an echo comma the rupture of a fault line (43).

By the final sentence of this first stanza, the final “comma” has become a verb: “[to] comma the rupture of a fault line.” In this way, the comma becomes a softening, a blunting force that promises a break that is less than a rupture. The comma becomes two sides of a circle that can open and close to embrace a body, or to await its return, keeping a space for it.

Long Soldier's further examination into the matter of punctuation marks concludes that the punctuation marks are only an incomplete score that the actual human voice must inhabit. Two stanzas down it becomes immediately obvious that written words themselves do not give us enough information to animate them with emotion, with tone of voice. In performing the very destitution of the title of this poem, what it would mean to have nothing of one's own, not even one's physical body (as when one becomes an apostrophe or an abstraction of language), Long Soldier demonstrates that it is grammatically impossible to misread the emotional content.

Then a friend remarks When we speak comma question marks dashes lines little black dots don't flash or jiggle in the air before us comma in truth it's the rise and fall of the voice we must capture to mean a thing in writing. Leaning his head toward a page with some vulnerable line he adds And isn't it interesting how a comma can tip a phrase into sentimentality

*

So I disassemble mechanics comma how to score sound music movement across the page. I watch the compassionate comma slow the singular mind of two lovers. When we cannot speak our minds the comma will cool will sigh it will lick an envelope for us. Because the tongue of the comma is detached, patient (43).

This poem is typical of the manner in which words on a page draw attention to the absence of a speaker in written text, by the way that in Long Soldier's artistic text the written words (or the act of writing) performs embodiment, demonstrating how every text is a work of fiction, in the sense that every text makes believe the black shapes on a piece of paper, or a screen, are an embodied voice. The fiction is that the visible is audible, that the audible is emotional or sentient, as a personality. To accomplish this, the letters and punctuation marks take on agency and prod the pronouns into action in the field of play that is the page. Indeed, we, as readers, enter the page—or the stanza-- as if it were a room.

In Long Soldier's work, the punctuation marks guard the space vacated by the absent body, ensuring that body's integrity and dignity. There is power in such a method, for in drawing attention to the absence of a particular body, we are left with the music that the now-absent body created.⁹

Having established the imprint of a living body in a text, and the words and punctuation marks echoing with the music of the speaker, I would like to end with Long Soldier's poem "38," which examines the tools through which The Dakota 38 were killed by order of Abraham Lincoln the day after Christmas, 1862. This execution was so thoroughly erased from history that the next generations of Dakota did not even know about it.

38

Here, the sentence will be respected.

I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate.

For example, all sentences will begin with capital letters.

⁹ It is the opposite of black face or minstrelsy. In the latter, the figure that is represented is a ventriloquist. The figure doesn't represent itself, but rather, it represents what the reader, the viewer, the puppet master, the slavemaster, wants it to say, or imagines it to say.

Likewise, the history of the sentence will be honored by ending each one with appropriate punctuation such as a period or question mark, thus bringing the idea to (momentary) completion.

We see immediately that the poem's first line carries a double meaning. A sentence is the punishment assigned to a defendant found guilty by a court, or fixed by law for a particular offense. It is also a set of words that is complete in itself, typically containing a subject and predicate, conveying a statement, question, exclamation, or command, and consisting of a main clause and sometimes one or more subordinate clauses. The implication of this doubleness, with regard to the content of the poem, is that by understanding and scrupulously following "what the rules of writing dictate," we will arrive at a just "sentence" (punishment) at the end of the poem. And by reading to the end of the poem, we enter into an agreement to adhere to the judgment of the rules of writing.

In this paper, I have been reading a Congressional resolution the same way I am reading Martha Collins's *White Papers* and Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas*: as documentary, as Long Soldier suggests I do:

You may like to know, I do not consider this a "creative piece."

I do not regard this as a poem of great imagination or a work of fiction.

Also, historical events will not be dramatized for an "interesting read" (49).

This allows me, a reader, to be in a relationship with the speakers, who are not lyricized figures, not abstract. The historical account depends upon my accepting the speaker of the poem to be a particular human being with a body that has seen and heard (about) the events described in the poem, who knows them to be true, and whose motive is an understanding. If I accept this premise, I continue to read with the belief that the history of the Dakota 38, as recounted by Layli Long Soldier, is factual, and that I have a responsibility to hear it; that Long Soldier has a responsibility to tell it. And when the facts of this account differ from the facts presented by Congress, Long Soldier and I will locate the difference and examine it before we proceed. In this sense, a true contract is constructed that is mutually understood and mutually agreed upon. After all, if, at any time, the reader does not agree to the contract, she may stop reading. In this sense, as long as the writer and reader are both present for the language, we see that language is a dynamic construction that depends upon participation. All

written language is, in fact, momentarily complete, and it exists as an act, not as an artifact. As a consequence of this dynamic understanding of language, sometimes, when a word has two different meanings, we pause to consider both:

These amended and broken treaties are often referred to as the Minnesota Treaties.

The word *Minnesota* comes from *mni*, which means water; and *sota*, which means turbid.

Synonyms for turbid include muddy, unclear, cloudy, confused, and smoky.

Everything is in the language we use (51).

Sometimes the misinterpretation of a treaty is deliberate--the trickery of using words that mean two different things in a situation in which the speaker intends for the listener not to know about the secondary meaning. In this way, the speaker does not technically lie. However, the contract is not valid because the two parties were not entering into the contract with the same intention. Sometimes, however, a contract is broken because one party does not follow through.

As might be expected, this poem is preoccupied with the very nature and composition of a poem (as history, as Apology, as witness). Insofar as "Memorials help focus our memory on particular people or events" (52), this poem seems to be a memorial for the Dakota 38. However, "The memorial for the Dakota 38 is not an object inscribed with words, but an act" (52). Can an act be a poem? When, the poem tells us, during the Sioux Uprising, settlers and traders were killed, and the body of Myrick was found "his mouth was stuff with grass," Myrick, who famously refused to provide store credit to starving Dakota people, and who said something to the effect of "If they are hungry, let them eat grass," Long Soldier notes,

I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem. (...)

"Real poems do not "really" require words.

I have italicized the previous sentence to indicate inner dialogue, a revealing moment.

But, on second thought, the words "Let them eat grass" click the gears of the poem into place.

So, we could also say, language and word choice are crucial to the poem's work. (53)

Thus, it could be concluded that a poem such as “38” is composed of bodies, those present and those erased by syntax. We might say that such poems as those offered by Long Soldier, Collins, Rankine, and perhaps even Phillis Wheatley, are not “lyric” if, by lyric, we mean poems that employ an “abstract speaker,” a placeholder *I*. These poems have speakers that are embodied as well; when the speaker is not abstract, the speaker must be speaking to an embodied reader about an embodied subject. The work of the poem is making present what has been hidden or what has not yet existed, with clear intentions that are publicly announced. In such a way, these poems resist erasure. They model an effective, if difficult, literary and civic discourse.

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BIONOTES

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