

Fractured Words and Promises

In *Whereas*, Layli Long Soldier states that her work is a formal, sentence-bound form of poetry, mimicking the bureaucratic language and formality used by the U.S. government in their official works and apologies. By adopting this format, she exposes the inadequacies and contradictions within these statements, using the constraints of language to showcase the limitations of institutional apologies. In that same introduction, Long Soldier subtly breaks the formal structure she adopts, mirroring how the U.S. government promises one thing but delivers another. This intentional disruption highlights the government's hypocrisies and the disconnect between their words and actions. Moreover, by using this formal approach, Long Soldier showcases how Native Americans have been pigeonholed into stereotypes that reduce their identity to one-dimensional portrayals. Layli Long Soldier introduces a character who acts as the polar opposite of these stereotypes, someone who critiques and questions Native identity from within—further revealing how these restrictive narratives constrain and distort the lived experiences of Native communities.

Layli Long Soldier establishes a deliberate tone of restraint and respect for language, rejecting conventional storytelling techniques to maintain the integrity of historical events. Soldier begins by stating, "Here, the sentence will be respected," and emphasizes that this is not a "creative piece" where "historical events will not be dramatized for an 'interesting' read" (Soldier 38). When Soldier recounts the tragedy of the Dakota 38, she maintains the formal structure and tone she promised earlier, ensuring that the retelling is devoid of dramatization and embellishment. However, when she shifts to describe the Dakota's retaliation against Myrick—a trader whose infamous words "Let them eat grass" and had dismissed the starvation of the

Dakota people—she deliberately breaks the established structure. The sentence fragments, “When Myrick’s body was found,”, and the next line shifted all the way to the right, ‘his mouth was stuffed with grass,” disrupts the formality, echoing the irony of his death and symbolizing the consequences of his dehumanizing words (Soldier 53). This break in form not only emphasizes the gravity of the event but also exposes the limitations of language to encapsulate the pain endured by the Dakota people.

Layli Long Soldier introduces the concept of being pigeonholed to highlight how Native Americans are often reduced to narrow, stereotypical portrayals, limiting the diversity as well as the complexity of Native identities. She describes this pigeonholing as a “stagnant place,” where Native Americans are confined to a static role within the ‘new world’s’ system, expected to remain within predetermined boundaries and preconceived identities, unable to break free from the constraints imposed by the system (Soldier 71). In tandem with her poetry describing the stagnant, enforced identity of Native Americans, Soldier introduces the following piece with the line: “Whereas a string-bean blue-eyed man leans back into a swig of a beer work-weary lips at the dark bottle keeping cool in short sleeves and khakis he enters the discussion”(Soldier 72). This image is a stark juxtaposition to the stereotypes imposed on Native people, who are often portrayed as being physically strong yet battling issues like alcoholism and unemployment on reservations. The man’s work-weary lips contrast sharply with the stereotype of Native Americans as jobless, and his casual attire—short sleeves and khakis—signifies a level of acceptance and normalcy that is often denied to Native people. The man’s seamless entry into the conversation further highlights this disparity, as it emphasizes his inherent privilege to participate without being pigeonholed or judged based on preconceived notions of his identity.

Through *Whereas*, Layli Long Soldier deconstructs the language of institutional apologies, exposing their inability to fully address the depth of historical trauma faced by Native Americans. By mirroring and then breaking from formal government rhetoric, she highlights the limitations and contradictions of these statements. Her juxtaposition of stagnant Native stereotypes with the casual privilege of others underscores systemic inequalities perpetuated by language. Ultimately, *Whereas* becomes a powerful critique of historical wrongs and a reclamation of Native voices and narratives.

Works Cited

Long Soldier, Layli. *Whereas*. Picador/Pan Macmillan, 2019.