GRASSESGRASSESGRASSES: RECLAIMING VOICE AND RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY IN LONG SOLDIER'S *WHEREAS*

DOI:10.47677/gluks.v25i03.553
Recebido: 25/07/25
Aprovado: 24/11/25

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes *Whereas* (2017) by Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier as a poetic response to the U.S. government's official Apology to Native Peoples. Through experimental form, visual disruptions, and metalinguistic strategies, Long Soldier critiques the language of the Apology and reclaims linguistic and historical agency. The recurring motif of grasses metaphorically connects land, memory, and cultural survival, while the poem "38" foregrounds the trauma of the largest mass execution in U.S. history, exposing the systemic silencing of Indigenous experiences. Drawing from Indigenous and Black feminist theories, postcolonialism, and the concept of *escrevivência*, the article argues that *Whereas* redefines poetic practice as political intervention. By engaging in intertextual dialogue with writers such as Conceição Evaristo, Márcia Wayna Kambeba, and Gloria Anzaldúa, Long Soldier situates her work within a transnational feminist tradition that centers marginalized voices and resists historical erasure. The study emphasizes how Indigenous women poets use poetry to reclaim voice, rewrite history, and challenge structures of colonial power, turning language into a site of survival and resistance.

KEYWORDS: Layli Long Soldier, Indigenous poetry, *escrevivência*, resistance, feminist poetics

Introduction

In recent decades, poetry written by women has emerged as a powerful tool for reclaiming silenced histories, challenging systems of oppression, and reimagining the condition of women and marginalized communities in the world. This article examines how the Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier, in her award-winning[2] collection *Whereas* (2017b), reclaims voice, memory, and land through a poetic response to the U.S. government's formal Apology to Native Peoples. Long Soldier interrogates not only the content of this apology but the very language in which it is delivered—unveiling how colonial and patriarchal systems continue to

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[2] *Whereas* won the National Book Critics Circle Award (2017) and was a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry (2017)

operate through linguistic obfuscation, passive constructions, and erasures.

Written from the standpoint of an Indigenous woman, *Whereas* is more than a critique of governmental discourse—it is a poetic manifesto that reclaims the authority to speak, remember, and define. Through the recurring image of grass and the careful reconstruction of historical trauma, Long Soldier's poetry denounces both the physical displacement of her people and the symbolic violence enacted on their identities and languages. In doing so, her work contributes to a broader feminist literary tradition in which women poets confront imposed silences and create counter-narratives of resistance, truth, and survival, such as works by Brazilian poets Conceição Evaristo and Márcia Wayna Kambeba, highlighting the diasporic nature of Long Soldier's poetry. This article investigates how poetic form, voice, and metaphor operate in *Whereas* to expose and challenge the long-standing mechanisms of exclusion faced by Indigenous women, while proposing new ways to articulate identity and memory from the margins.

In *Whereas*, Long Soldier crafts a poetic response to the U.S. government's official Apology to Native Peoples. Through a careful dismantling of legal and bureaucratic language, she reclaims voice, specificity, and history for Indigenous peoples. *Whereas* is divided into two main parts; part I, "These Being the Concerns," consists of a series of poems that explore the intersections of personal history, identity, motherhood, language, and Indigenous experience. In an intimate tone, Long Soldier uses varied forms—fragments, prose blocks, minimalist lines—to show how identity and memory are shaped by both personal and collective histories. Part II, "Whereas," takes its name directly from the legalistic repetition of "Whereas" found in the U.S. government's official Apology. In this session, Long Soldier directly confronts the language of the Apology, deconstructing its formal tone and generic phrasing. She reuses the word "Whereas" to frame her own poetic re-statements, reclaiming the term as a site of resistance and response. The poems mimic, mirror, and break apart the bureaucratic syntax, exposing its emotional and cultural emptiness while asserting the specificity of Indigenous life and experience. Throughout the collection, Long Soldier plays with visual form, syntax, punctuation, and silence, often using fragmented layouts, indents, and spacing as a means of disrupting normative reading patterns. This disruption reflects her central critique: that official language often erases, flattens, or silences Indigenous presence and voice. Drawing from postcolonial theory, Indigenous and Black feminisms, and comparative readings, I argue that *Whereas* is not merely a poetic reaction, but an act of reclamation of linguistic and historical agency.

Reclaiming Language, Reclaiming Self: The Stakes of *Whereas*

As bell hooks (1989) emphasized in "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," "language is […] a place of struggle" (p. 15). hooks confirms the assumption that language is at the center of marginalization of peoples of color around the globe. Comparably, much of Long Soldier's *Whereas* questions the uses of language to essentialize, depreciate, condemn, conceal, and obfuscate. From the epigraph of her poetry collection, where she includes a citation by Arthur Sze, "No word has any special hierarchy over any other," Long Soldier's intention of highlighting how the English Language—as well as U.S. Mainstream culture—has depredated Indigenous cultures for centuries becomes evident. Her emphasis on how language has played a role in enforcing stereotypes and destroying Indigenous families and languages, while restricting spaces in which Indigenous peoples could dwell, makes *Whereas* a tool for reclaiming authority over history and questioning the usage of certain terms in official documents. As much as hooks (1989), who questions whether the subject of color must locate themselves "on the side of colonizing mentality" or "continue to stand in political resistance" (p. 15), Long Soldier's answer lies in her understanding that language must be the central focus of discussions about reparations to Indigenous communities.

"These being the concerns" enumerates Long Soldier's concerns around Lakota culture. The title of the session itself appropriates language usually found in governmental bills, as much as the title of the poetry collection, illustrating Long Soldier's intention of turning her work into a complement to Obama's Apology. The poems in the first session revolve around but are not limited to issues assaulting Indigenous communities in the U.S, such as "exclusive private property rights, resource extraction, militarized control of the flow of people and capital (Collis, 2017), as well as a distinct distress regarding the displacement and erasing of Indigenous lands and languages. In a juxtaposition of language and land, the first poem in the collection metaphorically connects language and land with the images of mouth and grass; "Now / make room in the mouth / for the grassesgrassesgrasses" (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 5). The recurrent images of grasses in the poems reflect the collection cover, which depicts a woman, sitting in the middle of a filed with grass almost covering her body. Taken from the film *Modest Livelihood* (2012), the cover metaphorically represents home, land, and foundation—either for the collection and people's identities. Presumably, after a period away, the environment surrounding the place where we live is the first thing we notice upon returning. In view of this, the grass around the reservation might represent Lakota's people culture and identity as much as it represents home. Moreover, as put by

Stephen Collis (2017), “It is the very borderlessness of grass […] that attracts, that holds out against any attempt to master or contain.” Moreover, he adds that grasses’ “persistent growth from below, its strength to break concrete, to return from any desecration and simply grow once more” suggests the strength of the Dakota people’s fight against the injustices committed against them and Indigenous peoples more generally.

The fact that *Whereas* both opens and closes with the image of grasses is central to the collection’s meaning. The recurring grasses underscore place and land—territory that Dakota people have long struggled to protect. In “Steady Summer,” for example, the landscape is again anchored through the presence of grasses, reinforcing how deeply land is tied to memory, identity, and resistance.

> solstice grasses
> see this one’s a natural
> anesthetic he said
> when they fast
> they cannot food
> careful water so slide
> grass needle tips
> around the edges
> of wounds this summer (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 31).

Referencing the longest day of the summer, “Steady Summer” acknowledges the summer solstice as one of the most celebrated cultural events in many Indigenous cultures, which often includes rituals and dances honoring the sun (Kamal, 2015). Here, it is important to highlight the image of the festival participants fasting and dancing, as “a grass chorus moves *shhhh*” (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 31), subtly entwining human ceremony with the natural world. The grasses do not merely frame the scene; they participate in it, becoming part of the poem’s soundscape and spiritual atmosphere. The grasses, therefore, mean “the very manifestation of the land—its undulant and living coat, its indivisible plurality—and it always arises in the context of reverie and desire” (Collis, 2017). In *Whereas*, this association deepens the symbolic resonance of grasses. They evoke both the physical land and the longing attached to it—the desire for home, for cultural grounding, and for the reclamation of traditions and histories that colonization attempted to erase. By embedding grasses in moments of ritual and reverence, Long Soldier suggests that reconnecting with land is inseparable from reconnecting with identity, memory, and collective healing.

Simultaneously, the grasses’ movement and freedom are contrasted to the restrictions imposed in land inhabited by Indigenous peoples, particularly reservation control and territory

reduction—a process similar to the restrictions imposed on Indigenous languages. This juxtaposition becomes more evident in Long Soldier's exquisite representation of these restrictions in her poem "38" by comparing it to complete sentences. The poem exemplifies how language played a primary role in the "largest "legal" mass execution in U.S. History" (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 49), emphasizing the Lakota people's experience of starvation and property denial, while Long Soldier questions the interests involved in the execution of thirty-eight Dakota men in 1862. Long Soldier uses the restriction and artificial structure to construct her poem, claiming "the sentence will be respected" (p. 49), referring to the prose structure of the poem as much to the content—death sentences. Farther down in the poem, she states "I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate. / For example, all sentences will begin with capital letters" (p. 49). By lingering on content rather than form, "38" stands out by its metalinguistic property in disregarding itself as "creative piece" (p. 49). Instead, it focuses on content as not to lose itself in representation, trusting the necessity of being direct, as "Historical events will not be dramatized for an "interesting" read" (p. 49). Collis (2017) interprets this move as, "The sentence… is restriction and imposed structure/artificial order," meaning that the necessity of making oneself understood becomes more imperative than representing meaning poetically. This straightforwardness marks "38" as an attempt to represent—or even recreate—reality, exposing the blunt truth ignored by mainstream U.S. Culture.

Despite disregarding "38" as a creative piece, Long Soldier took two years to write it. In an interviewed by Kaveh Akbar, she expressed her wish "to write about the Dakota 38 for a long time, but didn't know how" (Long Soldier, 2017a). Her attention to every sentence shows her dedication in re-telling the story of the Sioux Uprising; "I felt like that moment was so incredible that the language of re-telling could ruin it if I was not very careful," as she mentions in the same interview. This watchfulness is related to the fact that the poem engages the reader in an educational conversation, which is as much about the historical facts concerning the massacre of Indigenous people as it is about writing poetry.

As the poem goes on its explanations, the reader learns the Dakota 38 "refers to thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Abraham Lincoln" (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 49), directly confronting the largest mass execution in U.S. history, which happened in Mankato, Minnesota, on December 26, 1862. She continues stating that "This was the *same week* that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. / In the preceding sentence, I italicize "same week" for

emphasis" (p. 49, *emphasis in the original*). In these over-explanatory sentences, Long Soldier's use of metalinguistic elements sheds light to the historical facts and the nature of verse composition, emphasizing both the speaker's desperation in making herself heard and her carefulness in conducting every sentence.

Furthermore, the passage shows the invisibility of the Dakota 38; for instance, in the above-mentioned film about President Lincoln's life, Long Soldier indicates that the public is informed about the President's most heroic act—the signing of the Emancipation proclamation. However, the signing and condemnation of the Dakota Indigenous men is completely hindered from the public. This omission is not accidental; it reflects a long-standing pattern in which Indigenous suffering is omitted from national memory to preserve a heroic or benevolent image of state power. By calling attention to this absence, Long Soldier critiques the selective storytelling that shapes public consciousness and determines whose lives and deaths are deemed worthy of remembrance.

Long Soldier's expostulation coincides with Brazilian scholar Djamila Ribeiro's assertion (2017), "Speaking is not limited to the act of uttering words, but to the ability to exist"[3] (p. 64, *our translation*). Ribeiro argues that marginalized communities—particularly Black and Indigenous women—are often denied full subjecthood through the silencing of their stories, histories, and perspectives. Invisibility, in this sense, becomes a form of nonexistence. When Long Soldier insists on narrating the story of the Dakota 38, she is not simply documenting an overlooked historical fact; she is restoring existence, refusing the erasure that both colonial violence and national mythology have imposed. Both Ribeiro and Long Soldier position voice as a fundamental site of resistance: to speak, to write, and to name is to affirm one's presence in a world that has attempted to render that presence negligible.

The speaker in "38" acknowledges their lack of historical expertise, yet the recounting of the hanging of 38 Dakota men after the Sioux Uprising serves as a powerful critique of the reduction of the Dakota territory from a vast "one-hundred-fifty-mile-long strip along the Minnesota River" to a mere "stark ten-mile tract" (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 51).

> Without money, store credit, or rights to hunt beyond their ten-mile tract of land, Dakota people began to starve,
> The Dakota people were starving.

[3] Our translation. Original: *O falar não se restringe ao ato de emitir palavras, mas de poder existir.*

> The Dakota people starved.
>
> In the preceding sentence, the word "starved" does not need italics for emphasis.
>
> One should read "The Dakota people starved" as a straightforward and plainly stated fact (p. 51).

As the above verses illustrate, the most terrifying aspect of Dakota 38 is the government's connivance with the precarious situation of Indigenous populations and their response when Sioux people retaliated. After imprisoning over a thousand people, "thirty-eight Dakota men were subsequently hanged… /[and] what remained of Dakota territory in Minnesota was dissolved (stolen)" (p. 52). The ones that remained were relocated to reservations elsewhere, mostly in South Dakota and Nebraska (p. 52). This forced displacement deepened the rupture between the Dakota people and their ancestral lands, a rupture that Long Soldier's poetry continually returns to. By foregrounding these historical details, Long Soldier exposes the systemic nature of colonial violence: broken treaties, starvation, imprisonment, execution, territorial theft, and exile were not isolated incidents but interconnected strategies designed to dismantle Dakota sovereignty and suppress Indigenous futures.

Grass returns as a powerful theme in "38" when Long Soldier learns about the condition in which Andrew Myrick is found dead. While the Dakota people were starving, Myrick said, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass" (p. 53), only to be later found dead during the uprising with grass in his mouth. When Long Soldier mentions Andrew Myrick's death, with his mouth full of grass, she proclaims to be "inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem" (p. 53). The moment the grass in the mouth becomes a poem for Long Soldier is the moment she recognizes it as a work of art. Consistent with Long Soldier, "*"Real" poems do not "really" require words*" (p. 53, *emphasis in the original*). This provocative statement reframes Myrick's death not as a gruesome detail of war, but as a symbolic gesture—one that speaks through action rather than language. The moment the grass in Myrick's mouth becomes a poem for Long Soldier is the moment she recognizes the gesture as a deliberate, meaningful composition: a form of expression created outside the structures of written or spoken English. In naming it a poem, she asserts that art can emerge from embodied, communal, and historical acts, redefining the boundaries of what it means to create poetry.

In her interview to Kaveh Akbar, Long Soldier comments on how Andrew Myrick's death—and the fact that he had grass in his mouth when he was found—was unforgettable to her; "There are so many layers in that one act—it really was an act of revenge, or vengeance.

And irony. Maybe even justice?" (Long Soldier, 2017a). She replicates this sense of irony and justice in "38" by emphasizing the terrible condition that Dakota people were living at the time, and how the "Dakota warriors" resistance to that act of savagery was a poem in itself. By giving voice to the warriors who were hanged due to the uprising, Long Soldier reclaims and rewrites history. Her intentions become even more evident when she comments on this element in her interview with Kaveh Akbar,

> It seems, from historical accounts, we don't often learn much more besides the most basic facts such as "so and so battled" and "so and so won, and the other one lost." Especially for our people […] In this act, I could see something of myself, my inclinations, my own humanness. It shortened the distance between history and the present. In that regard, I've also been thinking about the effects of history on our language and how we use it (Long Soldier, 2017a).

As the quote suggests, history gives people a naked account of facts, while voices and individuals are lost within. When it comes to the Sioux Uprising, Dakota people's voices and struggles were silenced and hindered from the mainstream public. "38," therefore, more than simply contextualizing history, reclaims the right of the Dakota people to resist the systems of oppression that destroyed their families, languages, and land. As Collis (2017) proposes, "Grass, in this sentency poem, is act and it is poem—and it is counterpoint and pointed response—with, from, and through the land of the Great Plains—to the hollow and too-often betrayed or meaningless "acts" of government proclamations and apologies." As Collis suggests, Long Soldier's poem is more than an artistic expression in form of verses—it's a powerful act of resistance rooted in a geographical context. It challenges the empty language of government apologies by speaking from and with the land, turning poetic form into political critique. Moreover, the poem shows Long Soldier's frustration with the lack of governmental policies to improve Indigenous peoples' lives in the U.S.

Long Soldier's "38" exposes the violence of living at the border, not only geographical, but cultural and linguistic; a "dual citizenship"—the double consciousness[4] of being both a U.S. and Oglala Lakota Nation citizen (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 57). In terms of postcoloniality, it parallels works by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), who wrote in the Preface of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, "I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures […] constantly pulled back and forth across border." Both Long Soldier's and

[4] Du Bois (1969) conceptualized double consciousness "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 3) explanation

Anzaldúa's poetic forms enact the fragmentation imposed by colonialism, where language becomes sites of tension and resistance—a space of conflict and hybridity. Their writings illuminate the psychic and bodily toll of these contested spaces, while asserting the necessity of expression from within them.

In Brazil, many writers also challenge imposed categories and offer poetic strategies for survival, refusal, and reclamation, as it is the case of Conceição Evaristo (2017). In one of her most famous poems, "Vozes-Mulheres" (Voices-Women), which was originally published in *Cadernos Negros* volume 13, Evaristo writes,

> The voice of my great-grandmother
> echoed as a child
> in the ship's hold.
> It echoed laments
> of a lost childhood
> […]
> The voice of my mother
> echoed softly in revolt
> in the back of other people's kitchens,
> beneath the bundles
> of whites' dirty laundry,
> along the dusty path
> toward the favela... (*our translation*)[5]

In this poem, Evaristo illuminates the silenced and accumulated violence endured by Black women in Brazil—violence rooted in enslavement, domestic labor, poverty, and systemic racism. Her intergenerational structure makes clear that these experiences are not isolated moments but part of a long continuum of oppression. Much like Long Soldier's account of the starvation, execution, and displacement of the Dakota people, Evaristo confronts histories that have been marginalized, misrepresented, or erased within dominant national narratives, moving them from the margins to the center of discourse. Both poets reclaim these erased histories by grounding them in embodied voices—the intimate, situated perspectives of women whose stories have often been denied public recognition. By bringing these voices from the margins into the center of their poetic projects, Long Soldier and Evaristo transform poetry into a tool for social change, enabling communities to assert their existence, articulate resistance, and imagine liberated futures through the very act of speaking.

[5] Our translation. Original: *A voz de minha bisavó / ecoou criança / nos porões do navio. / ecoou lamentos / de uma infância perdida. [...] A voz de minha mãe / ecoou baixinho revolta / no fundo das cozinhas alheias / debaixo das trouxas / roupagens sujas dos brancos / pelo caminho empoeirado / rumo à favela.*

Language as Territory: Resistance and Rewriting in *Whereas*

In 2009, President Barack Obama's administration issued the official Apology to Native Peoples for all the atrocities committed against them throughout history. In the document, the government apologized for "a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes" (United States, 2009, p. 1). As in many governmental documents, the use of "whereas" stands out in the Apology; in contrast, by naming her poetry collection *Whereas*, Long Soldier "grind away at the term's legal/contrary/proclamatory elements, stripping away both its denotative and connotative sense of authority" (Rader, 2019). *Whereas* presents a reformation of language which strips words from any hierarchy over one another and gives back to Indigenous peoples the authority over their own languages and history. In the poem "Whereas Statements," Long Soldier responds to the government's empty apologetic statements, and its effortlessness to repair the damages caused in U.S. Indigenous cultures, and rewriters it to re-signify language as territory.

Obama's Apology to Native Peoples' usage of language obfuscate and essentialize the struggles these communities have endured, often minimizing the effects of the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the U.S., while oversimplifying their experiences and identities. According to Collis (2017), "Long Soldier considers the affective impact of this empty statement as it participates in a long history of linguistic obfuscations and justifications of theft and genocide." In this regard, Long Soldier's response to the Apology is directed to its delivery, "as well as the language, crafting, and arrangement of the written document" (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 57). Her collection, therefore, becomes a complement of the official document, highlighting the disuse of an apology when so little has been done to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples in the U.S.

Long Soldier's (re)signification starts on the second part of *Whereas,* titled "Whereas." Composed of 21 entries starting with the word "whereas," Long Soldier's "Whereas Statements" directly respond to Barak Obama's apology statements, questioning the legitimacy of the apology offered by the government. In the section titled "Introduction," Long Soldier explains the context of the Apology to Native Peoples, highlighting that "no tribal leaders or official representatives were invited to witness and receive the Apology on behalf of tribal nations" or that "President Obama never read the Apology aloud, publicly (p.

57). In the first statement, Long Soldier points out that "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" (p. 61). This beginning reflects on the usefulness of an apology that was never given, referring to the lack of tribal leaders to witness the Apology, as well as the lack of an actual event for its delivery.

Long Soldier commences her response by addressing the necessity of language reformation; a process of deconstruction to strip away hierarchy from words. As the speaker goes, "In a note following the entry for *Indian* an Oxford dictionary warns: *Do not use Indian or Red Indian to talk about American native peoples, as these are terms now outdated; use American Indian instead...* But the term American Indian parts out conversations like a hollow bloated boat" (p. 62, *emphasis in the original*). Long Soldier's attention to lexical choices exposes how language—especially when institutionalized—can act as a tool of erasure, softening the violence of historical events or masking the power dynamics embedded in colonial narratives. According to Long Soldier, the term American Indian means nothing to her. In an interview for the *Women's Quarterly,* she discoursed on the importance of acknowledging the differences between Indigenous peoples in the U.S.

> If I were to meet a Hopi woman, for example, we'd introduce ourselves with who we are, where we come from. If I were to say to her, in general terms, "I'm a Native American," without a specific tribal affiliation, she'd likely think, "But who are you?" If I say, "I am Oglala Lakota," this establishes geography, history, community and family for both of us. My inner compass shifts, I feel centered, I feel acknowledged. She and I are not the same; we remain an "other" to each other in some manner; but acknowledging our differences is a gesture of respect. Between us, there's a refusal to accept the generality; we ask for and expect the specific. Immediately, this particular way of relating to one another, engenders a degree of intimacy (Long Soldier, 2013).

As the quote shows, acknowledging the cultural differences among Native peoples makes Long Soldier feel seen. Invisibility, in this regard, is connected to people's ignorance when it comes to Indigenous peoples' cultures, constructed in an educational system that has ignored the history and cultures of the many Indigenous communities, compliant with a governmental system that targeted and tried to eliminate them. Such a lack of knowledge contributes to the maintenance of stereotypes that highly jeopardizes Indigenous communities, like the "bon-savage" image. According to María Porras-Sanchez, Long Soldier's poetry (re)signifies

through words the controlling images[6] imposed by imperialism and colonialism on Indigenous peoples' cultures and bodies, refuting the "bon-savage" narrative (Porras-Sanchez, 2018, p. 131). The term itself restates the otherness of Indigenous peoples around the globe, which in Mariana Torgovnick's words (1990), "take the West as the Norm and defines the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate" (p. 21). The same process of subordination and inferiority affected Indigenous peoples in Brazil, popularized especially by works of José Alencar, particularly *O Guarani* (1857) and *Iracema* (1865), where the fusion of Indigenous nobility and European civility served to fabricate a romanticized origin story for the Brazilian nation. Modeled loosely on the Pocahontas narrative, these novels elevated the figure of the noble savage while simultaneously positioning whiteness as the progenitor of civilization[7]. Not recognizing the diversity of Native peoples contributes to the maintenance of stereotypes, which leads poets as Long Soldier to deny this generalization and again engage in writing poems that resist systems of oppression.

Whereas as a poetic project becomes an act of reclamation of the true meaning of words; as the speaker goes, "WHEREAS I query my uneasiness with the statement, "Native Peoples are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." I shit in my seat and needle in my back" (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 70). Moreover, towards the end of the poem, "WHEREAS the word whereas means it being the case that, or considering that, or while on the contrary; is a qualifying or introductory statement, a conjunction, a connector […] Whereas calls me to the table" (p. 79). Long Soldier's whereas statements propose a refusal of imposed definitions, in which the speaker/the poet converses with the word whereas; "learned to exist and exist without your formality, saltshakers, plates, cloth. Without the slightest conjunctions to connect me" (p. 79). By turning words into bodies, Long Soldier emphasizes how important it is to protect

[6] Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asserts that controlling images—such as the mammy, the matriarch, and the Jezebel—are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life" (p. 69). These stereotypes help sustain the marginalization of Black women by associating them with limiting and oppressive roles.

[7] The literature on the *bon-sauvage* or "noble savage" during Romanticism shows a European imaginary of natives under colonial power in a sentimental setting, in which they are rarely portrayed as "pure non-whites" or "real slaves," but usually mulattoes or mestizos who are affiliated and supportive of European endeavors (Pratt 100). In Brazil, novels like *O Guarani* (1857) and *Iracema* (1865) by José de Alencar (1829-1877) represent the trope and were meant to recreate the Brazilian society formation myth, erasing black Brazilian voices from the construction of "Brazilian" national identity. Not surprisingly, during the time these novels were published, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery was already in progress—achieved fully in 1888. Narratives of exclusion enhanced the feelings of Otherness concerning black Brazilians and, for a long time, helped silence their literary production.

language as much as it is important to protect the body, again turning her poem into action inviting Indigenous peoples to hold their agency over the linguistic frames that shape Indigenous identity and history.

The act of protecting language materializes in Long Soldier's poetic strategies such as in the visual structure of the poems shown below. In the first poem (Figure 1), the speaker censors the words from the governmental apology, keeping them safe from reductive thinking. The censured words appear in the following poem (Figure 2), isolated from one another, according to their position in the original text. By protecting words like *spiritual*, *Creator*, *customs*, *traditions*, the speaker highlights the necessity to avoid deductive thinking, protecting words from generalization and stereotypes connected to Indigenous peoples, cultures, and customs. Protecting words, as one might protect their body, evade common misuse of oversimplified information, violence, and cultural insensitivity from the mainstream public that do not understand what it means to be an Indigenous person, let alone the diversity embedded in it.

Figure 1

Whereas Native Peoples are [ ] people with a deep and abiding [ ] in the [ ], and for millennia Native Peoples have maintained a powerful [ ] connection to this land, as evidenced by their [ ] and legends;

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Whereas the Federal Government condemned the [ ], [ ], and [ ] of Native Peoples and endeavored to assimilate them by such policies as the redistribution of land under the Act of February 8, 1887 (25 U.S.C. 331; 24 Stat. 388, chapter 119) (commonly known as the "General Allotment Act"), and the forcible removal of Native [ ] from their [ ] to faraway boarding schools where their Native [ ] and [ ] were degraded and forbidden;

Figure 2

[spiritual]

[belief] [Creator]

[spiritual]

[customs]

[traditions]

[beliefs] [customs]

[children] [families]

[practices]

[languages]

The popular concept of *Lugar de Fala*, or from the location one might speak, articulates that language is a mechanism of power and with that, the place from where you speak has a significance (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 60). Basing herself on Patricia Hill Collins, and other Black feminists' works, Ribeiro comments that "the place we occupy socially gives us distinct

experiences and perspectives"[8] (p. 69, *our translation*). This place of speech often causes privilege groups to underplay the sufferings of marginalized peoples, as it is explicit in the language of the Apology, which references *Indian* culture, disregarding the differences between the five hundred and sixty distinct communities in the U.S. (Long Soldier, 2017b, p. 57).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010), in her groundbreaking "Can the Subaltern Speak?", also addresses the silencing of marginalized peoples, questioning, "What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? […] Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in the three ways" (p. 266). In this sense, Long Soldier's poetic project may be read as an attempt to disrupt the epistemic conditions that render Native women's voices inaudible in state discourse. Her engagement with Obama's Apology to Native Peoples exemplifies the invisibility of Indigenous women, who remain doubly marginalized by colonial institutions: once as Indigenous subjects, and again as women. This same mechanism operates in Brazil, where Indigenous women continue to be erased from official narratives and rarely consulted in political decisions that directly affect their bodies, lands, and cultures.

Historically, both in Brazil and in the U.S., governmental policies have restricted Indigenous communities. For instance, Bolsonaro's administration policies that led to increased illegal land deforestation, while more recently a bill in Brazil's congress could further limit Indigenous land rights and open their territories for economic exploitation (Paiva, 2021). Meanwhile, in the U.S, Indigenous communities continue to face challenges related to poverty, lack of access to healthcare and education, and environmental issues, often exacerbated by discriminatory policies (Gordon et al., 2022). Towards the end of the "Whereas Statements," Long Soldier recalls a story of a fourteen-year-old girl circulating a petition demanding an apology and reparation; "Dear Fourteen-Year-Old Girl, I want to write. The government has already "formally apologized" to Native-American people on behalf of the plural you" (p. 84), the speaker writes. Long Soldier's response to the girl highlights the lack of action of the government and emptiness of the Apology, granting no improvements in life in reservations.

Whereas deconstructs the sense of authority embedded in the governmental official language with the purpose of giving voice back to Indigenous peoples. In this process of denouncing and reclaiming history and reparation, Long Soldier writers her self, paralleling

[8] Our translation. Original: *o lugar que ocupamos socialmente nos faz ter experiências distintas e outras perspectivas.*

Hélène Cixous' statement that "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away" (Cixous, 1976, p. 875). Long Soldier's movement to write her own body and language into the poem connects her work with other authors of color, such as Conceição Evaristo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and more contemporary Brazilian Indigenous writers like Márcia Wayna Kambeba (2013). In her poem "Ay Kakuyri Tama (Eu moro na cidade)," Kambeba writes,

> I live in the city,
> This city is also our village,
> We don't wipe our ancestral culture,
> Come White man, let's dance our ritual
> […]
> I keep my Indigenous being
> In my identity
> Speaking of my people's importance
> Even living in the city"[9] (p. 23, *our translation*)

In these lines, Kambeba reclaims urban space as an Indigenous space, refusing the assumption that indigeneity belongs exclusively to rural territories or isolated communities. By asserting that "the city is also our village," she challenges the dichotomy that positions Indigenous culture as incompatible with modern life. Instead, Kambeba emphasizes continuity: ancestral cultural practices persist not in spite of urbanization but alongside it, carried within the bodies, memories, and rituals of Indigenous people who navigate contemporary cities. As much as Long Soldier deconstructs stereotypes of what means to be "Indian" for the U.S. government, Kambeba questions what it means to be an Indigenous person today, especially the ones inserted in Brazilian urban settings, therefore challenging the oversimplified and folklorized image of Indigenous peoples often perpetuated in Brazilian popular culture—the idea that an Indigenous person is only "authentically" Indigenous if they remain untouched by modernity, technology, or urban life. Both poets destabilize colonial definitions of identity and assert that Indigenous existence is multifaceted, dynamic, and self-defined. Their works reclaim space—physical, cultural, and discursive—insisting that Indigenous peoples not only survive but also shape the present, whether in tribal lands, reservations, or cities.

In this regard, the poetic work of Layli Long Soldier resonates powerfully with the concept of *escrevivência*, coined by Afro-Brazilian writer and scholar Conceição Evaristo.

[9] Our translation. Original: *Eu moro na cidade / Esta cidade também é nossa aldeia, / Não apagamos nossa cultura ancestral, / Vem homem branco, vamos dançar nosso ritual. [...] Mantenho meu ser indígena, / Na minha Identidade, / Falando da importância do meu povo, / Mesmo vivendo na cidade.*

According to Evaristo, *escrevivência* is the writing of a body, of a condition, of an individual experience that is subjective, but that at the same time reflects a broader reality. In her own words,

> Our *escrevivência* brings the experience, the lived reality of our condition as Brazilian people of African descent — a hyphenated nationality through which I position and express myself to affirm my origins in African peoples, to celebrate my ancestry, and to connect with both African peoples and the African diaspora[10] (qtd. in Duarte e Nunes, 2020, p. 30, *our translation*).

For Evaristo, *escrevivência* is not merely a mode of writing—it is an act of survival that transforms lived experience into political and aesthetic force. The same could be said about Indigenous literature in Brazil, as suggested by Indigenous writer and scholar Graça Graúna, who claims that Indigenous literature functions as a space where silenced and exiled voices converge. These are voices historically marginalized, excluded from dominant literary and historical narratives. By writing, Indigenous authors reclaim narrative authority, preserving their histories and experiences that colonization attempted to suppress. According to Graúna,

> Contemporary Indigenous literature is a utopian space (of survival), a variant of the epic woven through orality; a place where silenced and exiled voices (in writing) converge after more than 500 years of colonization. Rooted in its origins, contemporary Indigenous literature continues to preserve itself in the self-histories of its authors and in the reception by a distinct readership—that is, a minority that cultivates other possible readings within the universe of autochthonous poetry and prose[11] (qtd. in Duarte e Nunes, 2020, p. 16, *our translation*).

Graúna emphasizes that Indigenous literature is grounded in self-histories, meaning that authors' personal, familial, and community experiences shape the work. Just as Indigenous literature preserves silenced histories and asserts presence after centuries of colonization, *escrevivência* foregrounds the lived experiences of Brazilian people of African descent, emphasizing personal and collective memory as a source of cultural survival. By centering the realities of oppression, migration, and diasporic identity, *escrevivência* transforms writing into a means of both self-affirmation and political resistance. Both

[10] Our translation. Original: *Nossa escrevivência traz a experiência, a vivência de nossa condição de pessoa brasileira de origem africana, uma nacionalidade hifenizada, na qual me coloco e me pronuncio para afirmar a minha origem de povos africanos e celebrar a minha ancestralidade e me conectar tanto com os povos africanos, como com a diáspora africana.*

[11] Our translation. Original: *A literatura indígena contemporânea é um lugar utópico (de sobrevivência), uma variante do épico tecido pela oralidade; um lugar de confluência de vozes silenciadas e exiladas (escritas) ao longo dos mais de 500 anos de colonização. Enraizada nas suas origens, a literatura indígena contemporânea vem se preservando na auto-história de seus autores e autoras e na recepção de um público-leitor diferenciado, isto é, uma minoria que semeia outras leituras possíveis no universo de poemas e prosas autóctones.*

approaches—Indigenous literature and *escrevivência*—demonstrate how marginalized communities use literature as a tool of cultural reclamation. In doing so, they construct spaces in which historically silenced voices are amplified, histories are preserved, and identity is both asserted and reimagined.

Long Soldier's poems, Evaristo's works, as well as works by Brazilian Indigenous writers, become a vehicle through which they write their bodies, histories, and communities away from the margins, refusing the silences historically imposed upon them. Reading Long Soldier's *Whereas* as a form of Indigenous *escrevivência,* in which the poet reclaims official language and (re)signifies it through a personal, collective, and historically situated lens, represents a rich way to demonstrate how women writers of color break with literary conventions and confront oppressive systems through a poetics of remembrance and resistance.

Long Soldier uses poetry as a means of reclaiming Dakota history and challenging the dominant narrative, presenting the uprising as a poetic act of resistance. Her poems reclaim the Dakota people's narrative and resist oppressive systems that erased their history and culture. In doing so, Long Soldier connects her work with authors such as Anzaldúa, Conceição Evaristo and Márcia Wayna Kambeba, who explore the complexities of dwelling in multiple spaces and coping with double consciousness, due to the impact of colonialism and racism in their languages and identities. As Indigenous and Black women, these authors face dual marginalization, compelling them to use their work to challenge oppressive narratives and highlighting the experience of marginalized groups and advocating for social change. This type of writing represents an act of survival that transforms lived experience into political and aesthetic force.

By recounting historical injustices such as the Dakota 38, as well as criticizing the emptiness of government's lack of concern with Native peoples, Long Soldier's *Whereas* questions whether an apology—that was never delivered—can be genuine. Above all, she questions whether if an apology is enough, particularly one that comes empty of action, with language that represents a non-binding resolution. As Long Soldier reclaims voice, memory, and land through a poetic response to U.S. government policies, her poetry underscores the urgent need for further action. More than highlighting the diversity of Indigenous peoples in the U.S., it becomes a counter-text that exposes the failures of the official apology, as it simultaneously sheds light to an Indigenous literary tradition often ignored by mainstream media. Her poetry also contributes to a broader feminist literary tradition by confronting

imposed silences and creating counter-narratives of resistance, truth, and survival. While language in official documents serves to marginalize peoples of color, Long Soldier's poems move them away from the margins, centralizing Indigenous people's often erased histories and languages, making her poetry pivotal in order to amplify their voices.

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GRAMAAGRAMAAGRAMA: REIVINDICAR A VOZ E RECONSTRUIR A HISTÓRIA EM *WHEREAS*, DE LAYLI LONG SOLDIER

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa *Whereas* (2017), da poeta Oglala Lakota Layli Long Soldier, como uma resposta poética ao pedido oficial de desculpas do governo dos Estados Unidos aos povos originários. Por meio de formas experimentais, quebras visuais e estratégias metalinguísticas, Long Soldier critica a linguagem da Apology e reivindica agência linguística e histórica. O motivo recorrente das gramas conecta metaforicamente terra, memória e sobrevivência cultural, enquanto o poema "38" traz à tona o trauma da maior execução em massa da história dos EUA, expondo o silenciamento sistêmico das experiências indígenas. Com base em teorias feministas indígenas e negras, no pós-colonialismo e no conceito de *escrevivência*, o artigo argumenta que *Whereas* redefine a prática poética como intervenção política. Dialogando intertextualmente com autoras como Conceição Evaristo, Márcia Wayna Kambeba e Gloria Anzaldúa, Long Soldier insere sua obra em uma tradição feminista transnacional que centraliza vozes marginalizadas e resiste ao apagamento histórico. O estudo enfatiza como poetas indígenas utilizam a poesia para recuperar a voz, reescrever a história e desafiar estruturas de poder colonial, transformando a linguagem em um espaço de sobrevivência e resistência.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Layli Long Soldier, Poesia indígena, Escrevivência, Resistência, Poética feminista