

# Memorializing Indigenous History: A Comparative Study of Canadian Settler Poet Laurie D. Graham and Oglala Lakota Poet Layli Long Soldier

Sarah Caley<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English and Film Studies, Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario

**ABSTRACT** When contemplating the history of Indigenous-settler relations in North America, it is important to consider whose stories are being privileged, and why. This paper will offer a comparative study of recent works by Canadian settler poet Laurie D. Graham and Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier, both of whom address stories of nineteenth-century colonial violence against Indigenous people on either side of the Canada-US border. Both poets address similar Indigenous-settler dynamics relating to the government takeover of Indigenous lands, but use different literary techniques to do so. In her poems “Battleford Gravesite” and “Visiting Pihtokahanapiwiyn’s / Poundmaker’s Grave,” Graham writes about the 1885 Northwest Resistance in Saskatchewan, and the events which lead up to the hanging of eight Indigenous men—the largest mass hanging in Canadian history. In her poem “38,” Long Soldier writes about the 1862 Sioux Uprising in Minnesota, and the eventual hanging of 38 men—the largest mass hanging in American history. Both poets question the memorialization of Indigenous history; however, Long Soldier ultimately takes her process of remembering further than Graham by suggesting that memorialization should consist of both written words and embodied actions. By looking at these works together as a non-Indigenous person, I will investigate the role and value of memorialization of colonial history and consider what poetry can offer in conversations about Indigenous history and reconciliation in North America.

## INTRODUCTION

When contemplating the history of Indigenous-settler relations in North America, it is important to consider whose stories are privileged, and why. Recent works by Canadian settler poet Laurie D. Graham and Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier demonstrate in very different ways their remembrances of two similar stories of nineteenth-century colonial violence on either side of the Canada-US border. In her poems “Battleford Gravesite” and “Visiting Pihtokahanapiwiyn’s / Poundmaker’s Grave” from her book *Settler Education* (2016), Graham writes about events that occurred at Frog Lake and Battleford, Saskatchewan in connection with the 1885 Northwest Resistance. She focuses on how the Cree people were starved, Chief Poundmaker was wrongfully arrested, and eight Indigenous men were hanged for their involvement in the Resistance. This hanging was the largest mass hanging in Canadian history. Long Soldier’s poem “38” from her book *Whereas* (2017) focuses on how the Dakota people were also starved in the 1860s following the signing of a treaty, and how 38 men who participated in the subsequent Uprising were arrested, resulting in the largest mass hanging in American history. Both poets reflect on pertinent questions surrounding the memorialization of Indigenous histories, but Long Soldier ultimately takes her process of remembering further than Graham by suggesting that memorialization should consist of more than just the written word; memorialization should also involve embodied action. By looking at these two works, I will investigate the role, value, and method of memorializing colonial history.<sup>1</sup> These two poets ask us to question how and why memorials are made, and prompt us to think about what is and is not memorialized. I will also consider the role of authorial self-positioning with regard to memorialization. Ultimately, I will investigate the role of memorialization in a climate that remains colonial, and illustrate what poetry can—and cannot—offer these conversations about Indigenous history and reconciliation in North America.

## Laurie D. Graham and Acknowledging Uncomfortable Truths as a Settler

It is first important to understand the details of the historical events addressed in these poems. On the Canadian side of the border, Laurie D. Graham writes about the 1885

<sup>1</sup> I am a Canadian settler of European background located in the Haldimand Tract, on the traditional territory of the Anishnaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Neutral peoples.

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Address correspondence to  
cale6980@mylaurier.ca

Northwest Resistance in Saskatchewan, fought mainly by Métis and Plains nations in reaction to treaties that decreased their ability to govern their own lands (Beal and Macleod, 2019). In "Visiting Pihtokahanapiwiyn's / Poundmaker's Grave," Graham writes about Cree Chief Poundmaker, who opposed the signing of Treaty 6 because he thought that the terms were unjust. After Poundmaker's people reluctantly signed the treaty and moved to a small reserve near Battleford, the Canadian government failed to provide the treaty's promised supplies and Poundmaker's people began to starve (Dempsey and Filice, 2019). Poundmaker is now known for attempting to negotiate peacefully, but because some members of his band participated—against his wishes—in revolts in Battleford and Batoche, he was arrested for treason and sent to prison (Graham, p. 111). It is believed that Poundmaker contracted tuberculosis during the time he served at Stony Mountain Penitentiary in Manitoba, and died shortly after his release (Dempsey and Filice, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

In "Battleford Gravesite," Graham discusses the 1885 hangings of six Cree and two Assiniboine men who, motivated by their growing desperation and starvation, participated in an invasion of the Frog Lake settler village in what was then known as the District of Saskatchewan. This revolt was led by Plains Cree Chief Big Bear's War Chief, Wandering Spirit (Pannekoek, 2016). Although Chief Big Bear, wanting to avoid violence, had also reluctantly signed Treaty 6, Wandering Spirit led his warriors to capture and kill nine settlers (Beal and Macleod, 2019). The Canadian government sentenced Wandering Spirit and seven of these warriors to death. Along with Poundmaker, Big Bear was sentenced to Stony Mountain Penitentiary for treason, and also had to be released due to failing health (Pannekoek, 2016).<sup>3</sup> He died not long thereafter.

Both Graham and Long Soldier challenge the ways in which these stories have been remembered by the settler-colonial histories of Canada and the United States. Most notable in Graham's poetry is her imagery of looping, which conveys the Canadian settler's difficulty in learning and reckoning with colonial history. For instance, circular imagery appears in the final line of "Visiting Poundmaker's Grave." After Graham's speaker has reflected on how to respect the gravesite, Graham writes: "There's a looping everywhere" (p. 57). This image is crucial both to this poem, as well as "Battleford Gravesite," because it introduces a recurring motif of bringing the events of the past into the present. In "Battleford Gravesite," Graham describes the town of Battleford, and juxtaposes present and past events that have happened there through specific images of recurrence. For example, she represents the 1885 hanging of the six Cree and two Assiniboine men through the image of "[t]he eight poles above the scrubline in your photo" (p. 49). With this line, she conjures an image of the past, but layers it onto a present view. The present perspective is also coming from a place of privilege, as the settler speaker is able to just stand in front of the poles and take a photo—there is no personal risk at stake. In the region of Battleford, which has both recently and historically been a site of racial tension and violence, there is an undeniable element of physical risk that does not threaten a white settler in the same ways that it might threaten an Indigenous

person.<sup>4</sup> It is also significant that Graham directly addresses her reader by using the second person possessive pronoun "your," pulling the reader into assuming the position of the gazing settler. If the reader is a settler, this line should make them aware of both their ability to distance themselves from Indigenous history, and the ethical consequences of this distancing. Here, distancing works against the call to action that Daniel Heath Justice says is key to reckoning with the uncomfortable truths of colonialism, past and present (2018, p. 16). In Graham's case, she reckons with what it means to be a settler as a way to acknowledge this discomfort, but also as a way to recognize her privilege.

Further on in "Battleford Gravesite," Graham describes how the location of the eight men is "[b]eyond the fort site, behind the campsite, down in the valley overlooking ball fields, / angled at the river, away" (p. 49). These men are not memorialized at Fort Battleford or at the Frog Lake National Historic Site. They are quite literally tucked away, and mentioned only as the cause of the attack on the settler village. This lack of memorialization is something that Graham often struggles with in her work. She frequently notes a lack of signage in sites of colonial violence and trauma, such as when she is attempting to find Poundmaker's grave: "The signs are unreliable" (p. 55). This calls attention to how Graham was taught, as most settlers are, to think about our country's history as a line of progress that often does not take an Indigenous point of view into account. Thus, when the signs do not take Graham in the direction that she is used to, she does not know how to follow them. She calls direct attention to this uncertainty in "Battleford Gravesite" when visiting the site of the hangings, admonishing herself—and the reader—to "[s]how some respect and keep your distance. Though with no paved route, / no federal plaque, you don't know what respect is" (p. 49). Here, Graham explicitly contemplates the need for memorialization and how best to carry it out. She further explores settler ambivalence by suggesting that settlers feel that we should show respect by "keeping our distance," while simultaneously desiring a paved route to follow. Here, she presents two predominant ways in which Indigenous history is remembered by Canadian settlers: it is either distanced from us, or given to us as a prescribed way of remembering, a direct route to follow. Notably, neither of these methods of remembering involve a concrete interaction with Indigenous perspectives. At the Frog Lake National Historic Site, for instance, there is a plaque at the cemetery to commemorate the nine settlers who were killed. It lists all of the settlers' names and professions, but simply lists the Indigenous men as "rebels" ("Frog Lake National Historic Site," n.d.). The only Indigenous name the plaque mentions is Big Bear, the chief who was opposed to the attack. This original plaque does not even mention the hanging. There is a newer plaque that exists not at the National Historic Site, but on Fish Lake Road, in Frog Lake, Alberta, which acknowledges that the Cree people had been treated unfairly by the government; however, this plaque only mentions that six Cree men were hanged, and does not mention the two Assiniboine men. These two attempts at memorializing the 1885 events at Frog Lake are exactly what Graham's speaker is referring to when she says that we "don't know what respect is" (p. 49). How should one know how to respect these eight men when we are not even told their

<sup>2</sup> In May 2019, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau finally visited the Poundmaker Cree Nation near North Battleford to exonerate Chief Poundmaker's conviction of treason, which has been appreciated by his ancestors as a step towards reconciliation (Stefanovich, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> To date, Chief Big Bear has not been exonerated.

<sup>4</sup> Battleford, Saskatchewan is not only a historical site of violence for its significance in the 1885 Northwest Resistance, but it also has a recent history of violence against Indigenous peoples, as can be seen in the 2016 case of Colten Boushie (Hubbard, 2019).

names? In the face of this uncertainty, Graham looks up their names, and weaves them into her poem: “November 27, 1885, eight in the morning: Wandering Spirit, / Round the Sky, Bad Arrow, Miserable Man, Iron Body, Little Bear, / Crooked Leg, and Man Without Blood” (p. 53). This act of naming allows Graham to acknowledge that there are gaps in the history she has been taught, and that she must be open to learning what has been hidden by these memorials. However, while Graham’s willingness to continue learning is important, her textual and linguistic form of memorialization can only go so far. Even when her speaker calls upon the reader to “sing their names out the window of your motel room” (p. 53), this performative linguistic act has questionable value if no one else will be there to listen, interact, and respond. In reading Graham’s poetry alongside Long Soldier’s, it becomes clear that forms of memorialization that are solely linguistic do not do enough of the work that needs to be done if reconciliation is to be engaged in seriously. Although reconciliation may seem like a desirable goal for settlers, much like linguistic forms of memorialization, it has limitations. This is because, as Jeff Corntassel argues, “[r]econciliation without meaningful restitution merely reinscribes the status quo without holding anyone accountable for ongoing injustices” (2012, p. 93). Reconciliation alone is a contested concept, because of its tendency to continue to serve colonial desires instead of Indigenous ones. This is why Leanne Betasamosake Simpson suggests Indigenous resurgence as a way of centering Indigenous experience in efforts of decolonization, because “[w]e cannot just think, write, or imagine our way to a decolonized future” (2017, p. 162). Therefore, Indigenous resurgence, as well as the memorialization of Indigenous histories, requires forms of embodied action.

## LAYLI LONG SOLDIER AND EMBODIED ACTION AS INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE

This is where Layli Long Soldier’s poem, “38,” takes memorialization one step further by actively questioning the limits of language, and pushing remembrance to include embodied and community-based action. This poem tells the story of a group of 38 Dakota men who were hanged for their involvement in the 1862 Sioux Uprising in what is now known as Minnesota. Long Soldier explains that the Sioux Uprising occurred because the United States government did not deliver money as promised to the Dakota people in the Minnesota treaties. Because these treaties restricted the Dakota people’s hunting land, the Dakota people experienced starvation, and thus resisted this unfair treatment.

In 2009, President Obama signed Senate Joint Resolution 14 of the 111th Congress, the United States’ official apology to Native American peoples. This apology was presented privately, with no Native Americans present to receive it, and did not make major news headlines, as most people hardly even knew that it had happened (Diaz, 2017). Long Soldier has said that her 2017 book, *Whereas*, was written partly as a response to the delivery of this apology and its language, as she explained in a 2017 interview:

*I read the apology, and then I was like, “Oh my gosh, the language—it’s so careful.” It’s so carefully crafted. I mean, my goodness, these guys are poets. I mean, very astute and very aware of what each phrase—how do I say it—what each phrase may carry, the implication of each phrase. (Tippett, 2017)*

In response, Long Soldier’s poem redeploys the formal wording of this apology to call attention to the limits of the language that often surrounds Indigenous history, and to explore how it can hide truth rather than confront the past with openness and honesty, ultimately allowing her to rewrite the history of the Dakota 38. In this poem, Long Soldier directly acknowledges that she is conforming to ‘standard English’ rules. At the same time, she exploits linguistic ambiguity to undermine the legitimacy of colonial ‘sentencing.’ She begins the poem by saying “Here, the sentence will be respected” (Long Soldier, 2017, p. 17). This line, with the idea of the “sentence,” not only illustrates that she will be using the language of the settler government, but also calls attention to the sentencing of the Dakota 38. As readers, we are invited to contemplate which ‘form’ of the sentence deserves our respect: the grammatical form or the legal form. Long Soldier similarly expresses and at the same time disrupts governmental language later in the poem, writing “As treaties were abrogated (broken) and new treaties were drafted, one after another, the new treaties often referenced the old defunct treaties, and it is a muddy, switchback trail to follow” (p. 19). By writing the word “broken” in parentheses behind the word “abrogated,” Long Soldier shows how legal terms deliberately obscure easy understanding, thus making it easier for the government to hide behind language and not fully reveal the truth of how their words will affect Indigenous lives. While Graham’s personal reckoning with the gaps in the histories she has been taught as a settler demonstrates how colonial practices can obscure access to the past for everyone living in a colonial state, Long Soldier’s purposeful deconstruction of government language as an Indigenous woman shows that these colonial practices continue to impact Indigenous lives today. The very fact that Long Soldier responds directly to the 2009 Obama apology in *Whereas*, while in “Battleford Gravesite” and “Visiting Poundmaker’s Grave” Graham makes no mention of Prime Minister Harper’s 2008 apology to residential school survivors, emphasizes how the continual colonial obscuring of truth carries a greater weight within Indigenous lived experiences.

Long Soldier also shows how colonial violence itself functions as a kind of government sentence over how Indigenous people will live and die. This is especially notable when she describes the starvation of the Dakota people in the 1860s: “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. / The Dakota people starved” (p. 20). Here, the poem outlines how the United States government made it impossible for the Dakota people to hunt or buy food, effectively “sentenc[ing]” them to starvation. This act makes clear that the government’s ultimate goal was to rid the area of Indigenous people, no matter whether they were starved or hanged. The use of the different tenses of the verb “to starve” highlights how the government never intervened, even as the starvation progressed, resulting in the process reaching its willful completion. The words we choose to use when speaking about Indigenous history can be extremely revealing, as Long Soldier says, “Everything is in the language we use” (p. 19). Because of the trickiness of language that is exposed in this poem, Long Soldier suggests that memorialization and the address of Indigenous grievance should take more than a linguistic form, and also translate into physical actions.

As an example of a memorial action, Long Soldier cites the Dakota 38 + 2 Memorial Riders, supporters who ride horses from Lower Brule, South Dakota to Mankato, Minnesota every December to

honour the memory of the men who were hanged. She then returns to the past, looping back once again, to tell how a trader refused store credit to the starving Dakota by saying: “If they are hungry, let them eat grass” (p. 21). When the Dakota killed the trader during the Sioux Uprising, they filled his mouth with grass. Long Soldier says, “I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem” (p. 22). This further expands the notion of the poetic to include embodied responses to injustice. The response here takes two forms: that of Long Soldier’s rewriting of colonial policies to clarify what is obscured, and that of reading the Dakota actions themselves as ones of political and poetic significance. Daniel Heath Justice writes about how Indigenous literatures come in many different forms besides words on paper, such that “it doesn’t seem much of a stretch to think of our literary traditions as being broadly inclusive of all the ways we embody our stories in the world” (p. 22–23). In the instances of both the Dakota 38 + 2 Memorial Riders and the Dakota warriors, these actions create what we might think of as poems through their connection with lived experience, as well as their physical embodiment of important histories. The creative nature of these responses to conditions that threaten Indigenous resilience is articulated by Kyle Whyte in his idea of “collective continuance”: “a society’s capacity to self-determine how to adapt to change in ways that avoid reasonably preventable harms. Adaptive capacity is similar to what is often meant by the concept of social resilience” (2018, p. 131). It takes Long Soldier’s eye for symbolism to draw out the significance of a physical, nonverbal action; thus, the written word and poetic action work together to address colonial histories. Ultimately, Long Soldier argues that the choice of language, and the interaction between that language and concrete actions of memorialization, is what matters for remembering and respecting Indigenous histories.

## WHY THIS MATTERS TODAY

Though both of these works by Graham and Long Soldier discuss Indigenous histories of the nineteenth century, it is important to consider what their ideas about memorialization can tell us about how we should be acting in the present. Violence against Indigenous people continues to happen today, including in the region of Battleford, Saskatchewan, where Graham’s poems are set. In 2016, Colten Boushie, a member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation, was shot and killed after he and his friends drove onto Gerald Stanley’s farm; an all-white jury found Stanley not guilty of second-degree murder (Quenneville, 2020). This event, along with ongoing issues such as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis and the revealing of racism in the RCMP and Canadian healthcare systems, demonstrates how Indigenous people still face systemic racism in Canada and how Indigenous calls to recognize ongoing colonization are still not being heard or respected. Also, to recall Long Soldier, it is significant to note that Gerald Stanley’s trial never made it to sentencing, in contrast to the hasty punishment meted out to the six Cree and two Assiniboine men in Saskatchewan, and the 38 Dakota men in North Dakota over a century earlier. Indigenous people also continue to experience dispossession and exploitation of their land, as seen in instances like the conflicts over the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock Indian Reservation and the Coastal GasLink pipeline in Wet’suwet’en traditional territory. In both of these cases, Indigenous land protectors opposed the construction of natural gas pipelines on their traditional lands and advocated against the devastating environmental effects of these projects. At

Standing Rock, protestors faced “[m]ace, rubber bullets and other threats from law enforcement,” as well as arrests and inhumane treatment in jails (Levin, 2016). And in Wet’suwet’en territory, the RCMP arrested protestors and enforced a court order against those blocking the construction site (Wright, 2020).

## MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

These brief examples of twenty-first century colonial violence show how Graham’s and Long Soldier’s ideas about memorialization are important not just when discussing the past, but also when participating in contemporary conversations of reconciliation. Current issues of Indigenous-settler relations may seem daunting to most settlers, and we might feel unsure as to what this relationship should look like. Graham’s poetry shows how it is important to recognize this feeling and learn from it. We will not find all the answers to Indigenous-settler relations easily, but if we acknowledge our uncertainty without defensiveness, it gives us the room to stay open minded instead of remaining trapped in the same colonial ideology. It gives us the ability to actually listen to Indigenous people—like Long Soldier—who suggest that we must go further than Graham’s acknowledgements, by using carefully chosen words in concert with meaningful actions to think about Indigenous history, and therefore also the present. This tandem approach can be unexpectedly liberatory for settlers in particular; for, approaching the past with humility enables a feeling which Yankton Sioux activist and politician Faith Spotted Eagle describes as “freedom from denial” (Wo Lakota, 2013). This approach need not create defensiveness or guilt in settlers, but rather allows us to feel a liberation in our relationship with the past, which Spotted Eagle explains is key to “[coming] together on common ground” (Wo Lakota, 2013). The way we memorialize the past matters because it ultimately informs the way we think about these same issues today. If we can change the way we think about and act on these issues now, as these poets ask us to, then perhaps we might be able to change the future for the better.

## CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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