

Karl Plank

SENTENCES

After Layli Long Soldier

This is a sentence: a sequence of words or a statement that is complete.

This, too, is a sentence: the pronouncement of a punishment that states the conditions under which one will live and be regarded for a period of time.

The first describes a unit of grammar; the second, an instance of its practice, as when an authority utters a sentence that judges another as guilty, lacking something necessary, or different from what is desired.

We associate the first with teachers, writers, and linguists, but the second with judges and officials of government who have power to use *sentence* as a verb.

When authorities use *sentence* as a verb, they employ it to say *you are*, for example, *a prisoner, an alien, someone unwelcome in our company, one of the shameful, one of the dead*.

You will live there and not here or *You will live in this way* fairly paraphrase what authorities mean when they use *sentence* as a verb.

Though these have subjects and verbs, such sentences are incomplete in ways that matter, saying at once too much and not enough.

A sentence may be technically complete, but not just or true or whole.

Juan Francisco Trevino, the governor of New Mexico in 1675, sentenced 47 Pueblo medicine men to be flogged, humiliated, imprisoned and sold into slavery for practicing sorcery; he sentenced some of these to death, hanging them in Jemez, Nambé Pueblo, and San Felipe.

The governor used *sentence* as a verb to make *sorcery* a form of *idolatry* and to make those who practiced it dead men.

The Pueblo medicine men had their own sentences to speak, such as *When Jesus came, the Corn Mothers went away*.

One of the punished, the Tewa Popé, led the Pueblo revolt of 1680 so that the Corn Mothers might return.

The preceding sentence also means that he drove out the Spanish, the friars, and their ways to please the Corn Mothers.

This lasted for a period of twelve years until *La Reconquista*.

With *La Reconquista*, Don Diego de Vargas, the new governor, renamed the mission's wooden madonna *La Conquistadora*, or *she who conquers*.

A panel of the bronze doors of the basilica in Santa Fe shows the rescue of the wooden madonna, a building on fire, and the date 1680, but does not refer to the Corn Mothers.

A tour guide at the Taos Pueblo says "some say we have been here for a thousand years, but we believe we have been here since *time immemorial*."

What *some say* and what she says are different kinds of sentences.

She means that the story of their being here goes back to the beginning, beyond remembered time.

This story speaks of the Mothers planting seeds in the underground and seeds growing and breaking through to light.

The Mothers followed the growth to emerge from *Shipapu*, the center of the world beneath the earth's surface.

Before the revolt, Popé sent out runners to the pueblos, each runner bearing knotted ropes.

The Pueblo were to untie one knot each day until there were no knots left.

At that point, they would know it was time to revolt.

Some sentences are spoken this way, without words.

A knotted rope is also a ladder.

In the pueblo, ladders lead down into the *kiva*, the chamber beneath the ground where one speaks as the subject of sentences not heard by others above.

The *kiva* is *Shipapu*, the place beneath, from which the Mothers emerged.

Ladders lead to *time immemorial*.

Like the Corn Mothers themselves, the other story surfaces from the *kiva* that is underground.

The other story makes ordinary sentences incomplete.

Those who use *sentence* as a verb cannot coexist with the *kiva*.

Their sentences are superficial.

It should not surprise that *kivas* were desecrated and destroyed during the *Conquista*, sentenced to perish.

It should not surprise that they did not perish.

The dead also go under the ground.

It is where we go, the living and the dead, to complete our sentences.

We go to the world that is *under* to find beginnings and ends, to hear the words the Mothers, the very old, and the fallen say for themselves.

These are not historical statements about Pueblo and *Conquistadores*, as much as warnings to ourselves:

That there is always another word spoken elsewhere

(That our sentences need this word)

That the earth cracks open, in portals to hidden sanctuaries, to reveal what is deep and beneath and beyond

What is emerging.