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An Occupied Language

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WHEREAS By Layli Long Soldier 101 pp. Graywolf Press. Paper, \$16.

The American poet Layli Long Soldier's debut collection, "Whereas," is in part a response to the Congressional resolution of apology to Native Americans, which President Obama signed in obscurity in 2009. There were no Native Americans present to receive the apology, as most never knew an apology was made. In an introduction to the title poem, Long Soldier writes: "My response is directed to the apology's delivery, as well as the language, crafting and arrangement of the written document." She is referring at least to the disclaimer that renders the document's admissions of crimes null in legal matters. It can be argued she is referring to a more general language exercised in American documents, including American poetry. "Whereas" is an excavation, reorganization and documentation of a structure of language that has talked the United States through its many acts of violence. This book troubles our consideration of the language we use to carry our personal and national narratives.

In the same introduction, Long Soldier writes: "I am a citizen of the United States and an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, meaning I am a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation -- and in this dual citizenship, I must work, I must eat, I must art, I must mother, I must friend, I must listen, I must observe, constantly I must live."

Long Soldier's affirmation as a dual citizen is important considering the less than rigorous practice of American literary criticism's strategic and diminishing valuation of a writer's "racial" or "ethnic" identity as part of or in place of a writer's craft. She is usually referred to first as a Lakota or Oglala Sioux poet, as one might be called a concrete or experimental poet. A distinguished black poet recently told me, "Many people have written about what I write about, but none have written about how I've done it." Long Soldier is aware of the American tradition of reading a racial or ethnic identity, especially an indigenous language, as an art form. She has built a poetics that refuses those boundaries, even when she engages with her Lakota identity. Her literary lineage is wide and demanding. "Whereas" is in deep conversation with the work of M. NourbeSe Philip, bpNichol and Gertrude Stein, as well as indigenous works like Zitkala-Sa's "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," Joy Harjo's "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings," Ofelia Zepeda's "Ocean Power: Poems From the Desert" and Simon J. Ortiz's "From Sand Creek."

The aching poem at the heart of "Whereas," "38," recounts the "largest 'legal' mass execution" in United States history: the hanging of 38 Dakota men, ordered by our still-lauded president "Honest" Abe Lincoln days before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. In this poem, grammatically correct sentences reveal and bear the burdens of Long Soldier's poetic endeavor. "38" begins with the following lines: "Here, the sentence will be respected. / I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate." And further down: "Also, historical events will not be dramatized for an 'interesting' read. / Therefore, I feel most responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought."

This harks back to the grammatical precision of the "apology" and how it was crafted to avoid any physical expense. By the end of "38," Long Soldier has problematized the correctness of the sentence, revealing the violent capacity of language and the country whose mouth it fills:

When the Dakota people were starving, as you may remember, government traders would not extend store credit to "Indians."

One trader named Andrew Myrick is famous for his refusal to provide credit to Dakota people by saying, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass."

There are variations of Myrick's words, but they are all something to that effect.

When settlers and traders were killed during the Sioux Uprising, one of the first to be executed by the Dakota was Andrew Myrick.

When Myrick's body was found,

his mouth was stuffed with grass.

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

I read "Whereas" alongside a book called "Architecture After Revolution" (2013) while in Palestine with a group of international writers traveling daily across the borders between Israel and the West Bank. "Whereas" was in my bag and on my mind while navigating the psychological and physical experiences of Israeli occupation of Palestine, which were recognizable to me, having grown up at Fort Mojave, a military fort turned reservation. It is easy to forget that America is an occupied land unless you are familiar with the hundreds of treaties made between the United States government and over 560 federally recognized indigenous tribes across our nation.

"Architecture After Revolution" belongs to a collection of projects envisioned by the Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency in the Palestinian desert town of Beit Sahour, which describes its work as "the radical condition of architecture at the moment of decolonization -- the very moment that power has been unplugged, when old uses are gone and new uses not yet defined." Likewise, Long Soldier's poems are radical in structure and constraint. The white spaces in her poems are not felt as absence but are generative, each as intentionally shaped and as sonic as her text, as with Section 3 from "[R][currency]e SEipa," a visual poem in the vein of Nichol and a semantic playground echoing Stein, laid out on the page in a square, with each line representing one side: "This is how you see me the space in which to place me / The space in me you see is this place / To see this space see how you place me in you / This is how to place you in the space in which to see."

Rather than subverting any particular structure, Long Soldier is leaping into new "not yet defined" spaces. "Whereas" challenges the making and maintenance of an empire by transforming the page to withstand the tension of an occupied body, country and, specifically, an occupied language. Indigenous languages are an integral part of the American lexicon though their systematic silencing continues today; there is no American Arts and Letters without their inclusion. The English-only power structure that once disguised American poetry is shifting, shaped by a generation of poets, Long Soldier among them, imagining their heritage languages and image systems as part of a complex linguistic and literary tradition. In "Whereas," this includes acknowledging writing as a visual act in forms that take on physical boundaries like footnotes, brackets and stitching, disrupted prose blocks, poems shaped and fragmented like long blades of grass, or a poem shaped like a hammer or a box. Long Soldier reminds readers of their physical and linguistic bodies as they are returned to language through their mouths and eyes and tongues across the fields of her poems.

John Berger, in the essay "Once in a Poem," describes poetry as both crossing battlefields and tending the battles' wounded. He believes poems "bring a kind of peace. Not by anesthesia or easy reassurance, but by recognition and the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been." Though the Congressional resolution of apology to Native Americans is void of any gestures signaling sincere repair, "Whereas" ensures that this grief, this absence, will be given presence, be given a body to wonder: "If I'm transformed by language, I am often / crouched in footnote or blazing in title. / Where in the body do I begin."

CAPTION(S):

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