

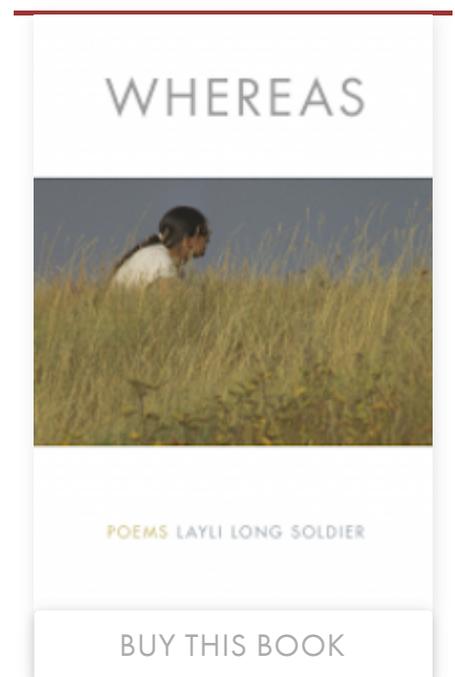
Interrogation and Transmigration: On Layli Long Soldier's "Whereas" and Mai Der Vang's "Afterland"

By Mark Trecka



APRIL 20, 2017

MANY OF OUR MOST heated national conversations hinge on conflicting ideas about America's "greatness." But underpinning that disagreement are insidious questions of belonging: Who belongs in the United States, and who decides? How is such belonging measured?



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i nket bans on refugees, we are reminded
c mplexity of these questions.

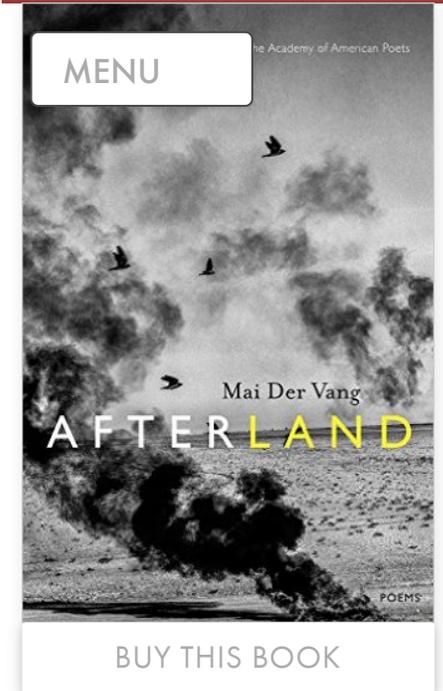
When US Customs and Border Protection aids in the removal of Indigenous people from federal lands, as they did earlier this year at the Oceti Sakowin resistance camp on the site of the hotly disputed Dakota Access Pipeline, we are reminded of the starkly ironic answers that history has offered.

When Sioux protestors and allies were evicted from federal lands in Cannon Ball, North Dakota, on February 22, 2017, they set fire to their own camps. They burned dozens of tipis that they had occupied for months while protesting the construction of the pipeline, and burned a powerful image into the country's memory, offering a promise of continued resistance.

This is the territory in which the poet Layli Long Soldier writes. This is the moment at which her debut collection, *Whereas* (Graywolf), arrives.

Long Soldier is preoccupied with a particular type of language: the language of history's ironic answers, offered again and again to the Lakota Nation. It is the legal language of broken treaties, resolutions proposed too late, and symbolic apologies.

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ention to how bodies undergo that
 Long Soldier is a member of the Oglala
 tion, a people who have been removed
 f lands, who were murdered by the state,
 and who had their language all but totally erased.
 In a sense, what has eventually come to stand in
 the place of that all-but-erased language are
 treaties, resolutions, and "whereas" statements
 authored by those who perpetrated the removal,
 the murder, and the erasure.

Late last year, Long Soldier told *PBS NewsHour* that she has never considered herself to be a political writer. Indeed with her first volume of poetry, she implicates the line between the political and the personal, writing with apparent concern for both, but also looking at the ways in which one is imposed upon the other.

Throughout *Whereas*, Long Soldier alternates between scrutiny and more tender, intimate passages that equally reinforce her project of interrogation. She opens "Part I" with a brief and dreamy entreaty: "Now / make room in the mouth / for grassesgrassesgrasses." There is something seemingly sweet about it, like a child's afternoon game. Later, Long Soldier reveals the source: the hanging of the Dakota 38, a group of Sioux men who fought against the state in 1862 over concerns about living conditions and the denial of provisions to their people. Warriors fighting in what was termed the Sioux Uprising executed traders and settlers, famously stuffing grass into

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t saying, "If they are hungry, let them eat

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Long Soldier writes: "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. / There's irony in their poem. / There was no text. / 'Real' poems do not 'really' require words." This assertion smolders throughout *Whereas*. Long Soldier calls into question the necessity of language itself.

In "Dilate," Long Soldier writes of a birth: "Placed / on my chest warm fragile / as the skin of nightfall she was heavier than imagined her eyes / untied from northern poles from hard unseen winter months [...]" Long Soldier writes tenderly, intimately, structuring the poem as if to emphasize the feel of the skin, the body, the origin of the eyes. "All is experienced / throu / g / h / the / body / somebody told me," the text arcing outward on the page. There is something other than tenderness and intimacy in these lines. The assertion of somatic experience infiltrates the collection, contextualizing Long Soldier's assertions of her identity.

In the introduction to "Part II," 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

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1 .” This too is contextualized by her
 6 ertion, “All is experienced through the
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In “Three,” Long Soldier writes: “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.” The lines of this poem form a box on the page, in which the negative space is the center of attention. Long Soldier draws us in to this empty space, again and again, forcing us to confront the unreadable.

The second half of the book is an extended prose poem, the title poem, that plays with the format of resolution. By way of a series of “Whereas Statements,” Long Soldier constructs an extended ironic response to legal language as it concerns Native Americans, generally, and specifically to the official apology offered to all Native Americans, which was signed by President Obama in 2010.

In the first of these, she writes: “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.” The 2010 presidential apology to Native Americans was essentially a formal resolution, a document signed and attached to a defense bill. As the fragmented body “moves straight through” her, Long Soldier

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understand an apology in the absence of a
y?

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In the "Whereas Statement," she conjures Derrida:

His mother, who spoke in his place for his pain and as herself for her own, did this as one-and-the-same. Yet he would propose understanding the word mother by what mother is not, the différance. Forward, back. I lift my feet / my toes touch ground as I'm reminded of the linguistic impossibility of identity [...]

Soon thereafter in "Resolutions," Long Soldier explains that "in many Native languages, there is no word for 'apologize,'" and she reproduces that official US apology to Native Americans (made in the absence of Native Americans), omitting the term in question:

**The United States, acting through Congress—
[REDACTED] on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native Peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native Peoples by citizens of the United States.**

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1. She leaves us with a black mark, a
 ce, in which the duality of identity is
 ed, a shifting sense of citizenship.

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Throughout *Whereas*, the oscillation between the conceptual and the personal draws attention to the limits of language. In the 12th "Whereas" statement, Long Soldier, fatigued, calls her father to ask how to say "tired" in Lakota. He tells her: "If you want to say 'really tired,' it's 'lila bluḡo.'" She has taken a rest from interrogating language to tell us that she is tired of the task, which is endlessly turning back in on itself. While she has elsewhere questioned the necessity of language, here Long Soldier is exhausted by its inescapability, by the inevitability of connotation.

Really, I climb the backs of languages, ride them into exhaustion — maybe I pull the reins when I mean go. Maybe kick their sides when I want down. Does it matter. I'm lila bluḡo. Stuck, I want off. Let loose from the impulse to note: *Beware, a horse isn't a reference to my heritage.*

α

Less formally experimental and considerably more lyrical than *Whereas*, Mai Der Vang's debut *Afterland* (Graywolf) draws just as effectively upon a complex history of threatened identity and language. In Vang's case, the history is the Hmong exodus from Laos. Her primary concern is

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ang is disinclined to step out of the
 the poems' narratives. *Afterland's* voice
 transmigrate, riding the trance of
 rom one image to the next.

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In "Original Bones," she writes:

I wander the earliest days
 When I had a written language

Before 1952 when missionaries
 In laos wrote one for me

Before 1959 when a phantom script
 Came to the *mother of writing*

Before 1986 when I drew
 The letters of mai der

I showed up in southern china
 A few millennia back

Uncooked people
 Led to war.

Like Long Soldier, Vang's narrative hinges on survivance and the unfolding effects of colonial projects. Also like Long Soldier, Vang's poems are haunted by the forced permutations of language. While the Lakota were removed from their lands again and again, their language threatened and stolen, Mai Der Vang's Hmong ancestors were

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Vietnam War, many of those Hmong
to the United States, but owing to
complicated refugee policies most were unable to
bring their families with them until at least half a
decade later. What the Hmong received in the
United States was far less than a hero's welcome.

Afterland explores the pain and fragmentation that characterizes this history. In "Transmigration," she addresses "Spirit," whom she implores to join her as she flees "this jungle," warning: "Among the foliage, we must be ready to see / the half-decayed. You must not run off no matter how much / flesh you smell." She goes on, saying there will be thousands like them. Spirit must follow her "to the roads / and waiting pastures of America." But that is not a yearning look ahead. She is mournful, resolved: "We will not ride the water today on the shoulders of the buffalo / as we used to many years ago, nor will we forage / for the sweetest mangoes. // I am refugee. You are too. Cry, but do not weep. // We walk out the door." Declarative and brief, each line is written as though delivered in one or two breaths. Vang's use of internal rhyme — buffalo, ago, mangoes — feels intuitive, even improvised, as though she were discovering and picking up similarly shaped stones.

Vang layers symbol upon symbol, cross-hatching the elegiac and the hallucinatory. In "The Hour

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kills in this citadel season. // I drink
 st of bees, / sip their stings as ginger / on
 e." Vang's work moves in the realms of
 appeal where meaning is revealed
 cumulatively. Her ambient revelations read more
 like incantations, and *Afterland* is that much more
 beautiful and abstruse for it: "I knew // the lights
 would shine clearer / If I closed my eyes, just as //
 I knew the Pacific would teach / Me to sleep
 before tying my // Name to the flaming. Here I /
 Am now at the end of amethyst, // Drizzling
 another lost sunrise / Inside the quilt of my hand."

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But *Afterland* does not deal in ancestral memory at the expense of the ancestors themselves. In "Matriarch," the speaker's grandmother points at the television while watching Rocky and Rambo, the latter of whom is "carnage cloaked in her homeland mud." This matriarch is not estranged from truth, she is not lost; she is active within her particular displacement. She does not quite mistake one character for the other, but rather she "knows // Them as one, their howling stare before they yield, / The way their eyes turn lunar, rogue as dead stars // Thrown back to the graveyard in heaven." There is a certain grace to the way that the grandmother navigates her displacement, but she is displaced nevertheless, and absence prevails: "In the / Afterwar, there are no more terraces, no more hills, // No hand to sweep the hearth, but always, there remains / A man omitted, and that she knows as well."

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ε sketches a portrait of a ragged urban books complete with rent paid "to the next door." Someday, she tells us, she give forklifts / crawling in the lumberyard." In these few lines, the incantational mode recedes slightly, and one detects the speaker's point of view: "Rusted sedan, wire zipline / to stapled roof, retired / shopping cart missing wheel. // My parents fled for this." While this and a few other moments of relatively candid observation provide a lean but necessary grounding for the reader, it is Vang's loss of balance which is her strength. She teeters and ultimately tumbles headlong into the realms of memory and dream, expertly crafting fine and elegant passages on her way.

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She honors the absent shaman whose mud she'll never smell and whose trance she'll never enter, but soon enough dispenses with such directness: "Thumb bells rattle drum / split horn egg. Ladder unfolding / as a bridge. I've watched you ride away / on a timber horse to the afterland."

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Mark Trecka is a Chicago-born writer, artist, and performer. His writing has appeared in The New Inquiry, Beacon Press's Broadside, Salon, The Creators Project, and elsewhere. He lives in New York's Hudson Valley.

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