

POETRY, POLITICS, AND AN AMERICAN DREAM

By Alicia Ostriker

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What does poetry have to do with politics? For many people, nothing at all. But in my own career as a poet and critic, poetry and politics have repeatedly converged.

When I had the honor of being named New York State Poet in 2018, I thought immediately of a deeply political poem that actually shaped history, and that happens to be the perfect refutation of W.H.Auden's notorious claim that "poetry makes nothing happen." The words of Emma Lazarus, engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, are so familiar that many people suppose they have always exemplified the American dream. The actual story is more interesting.

The statue was a gift from the people of France to the people of the United States entitled "Liberty Enlightening the World," and was intended to celebrate the friendship between France and the USA, two nations that had overthrown monarchies and established republics. Dedicated in 1886, the tablet held by the statue is inscribed JULY IV MDCCLXXVI, the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence; the broken shackle and chain at the statue's foot was to commemorate the end of slavery.¹ It had nothing to do with immigration.

Lazarus, a successful American Jewish author, was invited to submit a poem to be used to raise funds for the pedestal. At first she demurred. But a friend suggested that such a poem could offer hope to the flood of despised immigrants arriving on our shores, many of them Jews fleeing the pogroms of Russia and eastern Europe. We need to remember that nobody wanted these people—they were peasants, dirty and probably diseased, probably criminals, they smelled bad, they didn't speak English. Does this sound familiar? These are standard

accusations made by parties who reject immigration, in all times and places. But Lazarus was already involved in visiting Ward's Island, advocating for housing, health and employment for destitute refugees kept there in miserable conditions. "Until we are all free, we are none of us free," she wrote. She had been politicized by events. Now she wrote the poem we all know, a Petrarchan sonnet entitled "The New Colossus:"

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Redefining America's greatness not as military might but as world-wide welcome and freedom, Lazarus' poem succeeded, surely beyond the poet's wildest dreams, in changing the meaning of the statue, the meaning of the port of New York City, and the meaning of the United States of America. It defined us as a nation of immigrants, whose core value was that its people could "breathe free."

My grandparents came to this country at the turn of the twentieth century, just after the moment that inspired the poem. They were escaping poverty and violence. None of them ever became rich, but they survived. For them, the escape from an old world of monarchy, aristocracy, tyranny, and the dream of a new world of freedom and safety, came true. My parents in turn taught me that I should be proud of being American, not because we were "the greatest," whatever that means, but because we were the melting pot. We were a democracy that gave hope to the hopeless. We were the land where prejudice and hatred might one day be eliminated.

That day has not yet come. Many Americans whose own ancestors were immigrants prefer a wall to a door. Americans whose ancestors were kidnapped and brought here by force, as slaves, do not experience “world-wide welcome” here. Nor do Americans whose ancestors lived here before Europeans arrived and began stealing their land. Yet the promise of inclusion remains an ongoing key to our history, which is why the USA continues to attract immigrants.

It is also why American poetry increasingly through the twentieth and on into the twenty-first century has become a place for the voiceless to find a voice. Whitman heard “varied carols.” Langston Hughes wrote “I too sing America.” Today, American poetry is a thoroughly hybrid phenomenon. The margins have moved to the center. Women poets took the stage in the 1960’s and ‘70’s. The Nuyorican Café in New York City since 1979, the Cave Canem community of Black poets since 1996, and other organizations supporting “outsider” poets, have changed the course of the river. A suite of New York City poems in my recent book *Waiting for the Light* highlights the Spanish spoken in my upper west side neighborhood. Afro-American, Native American, Asian, Irish, Italian, Jewish, Latinx, gay and trans men and women are all part of the collective song we offer to the world.

As New York State Poet, I wanted to support the idea of welcome represented by Lazarus’ poem. I liked giving talks about it and what it represented. Then In 2019 I and my colleague Mihaela Moscaliuc, who came here from Romania, began collecting translations of “The New Colossus” by American poets of widely varied ancestries and mother tongues. At the present time, we have gathered over forty translations, in languages ranging from Arabic and Bengali to Uzbek and Yiddish. [These translations are all available online](#), along with statements by each poet saying something about the immigration experience and in a few cases including a recording of the poet’s voice. Our host is, appropriately, the American Jewish Historical Society, which has its own Emma Lazarus exhibit.

We hope these translations will find a wide readership, be adopted by other organizations such as the new Statue of Liberty Museum, and be used by educators. Globally, we hope that people everywhere in the world will have access to the poem in their own languages, and understand that the American dream of worldwide welcome is still alive.

As I am about to rotate off the position of New York State Poet, let me conclude with a poem of our own time that connects directly with the ideal expressed by Lazarus. After the disaster of 9/11, there was an explosion of poetry throughout this country. Thousands of poems old and new were written, posted, shared; ideas of poetry as testament, grieving and healing were everywhere.

Of those thousands, an extraordinary example is Martín Espada's "Alabanza." Espada is a Puerto Rican- American poet known for his engagement with issues of social justice. But he is both political and lyrical, and at times, as the poem "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100" shows, mystical. "Alabanza"—a word meaning praise—is dedicated "*for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center*." Here is the opening:

Alabanza. Praise the cook with a shaven head
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye,
a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.
Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.

Alabanza. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish
rose before bread. Praise the bread. *Alabanza.*

Espada introduces us to a busboy, a dishwasher who worked that morning because he needed the overtime, a waitress singing along with the radio: New Yorkers at work beneath the media's radar. The poem's climax and ending arrive "After the thunder wilder than thunder, / after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows:

for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo,
like a cook's soul. Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us
about the bristles of God's beard because God has no face,
soul I say, to name the smoke-beings flung in constellations
across the night sky of this city and cities to come.
Alabanza I say, even if God has no face.

Alabanza. When the war began, from Manhattan and Kabul
two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,
mingling in icy air, and one said with an Afghan tongue:
Teach me to dance. We have no music here.
And the other said with a Spanish tongue:
I will teach you. Music is all we have.²

In his celebration of immigrant experience Espada manages to fuse realistic contemporary detail with fantasy, deep time, and the offerings of the spirit, which are multiple and global. The cook's tattoo means "listen" in several cultures. Baseball enters the poem with the Puerto Rican right fielder Roberto Clemente. Myth enters with a vision of Manhattan "from a hundred and seven flights up" as Atlantis. Spirituality enters with an imaginary "chant of nations" and the cook's soul. At the core of the poem is the poet's dream of inclusion. In our current divided days, may our poetry continue to sustain that dream.

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¹ [A good Wikipedia article](#) describes the poem's origins and symbolism.

² *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems, 1982-2000* (Thriftbooks, 2004).