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The Intricate Voice of a Silent Statue

When Emma Lazarus penned her famous poem “The New Colossus,” she instilled life into an unfamiliar, foreign-made statue, defining a welcoming motherly persona for Lady Liberty. By framing the Statue of Liberty as a champion for the “huddled masses” (line 11), Lazarus depicted America as an accepting home for immigrants from all across the globe. However, not all Americans shared Lazarus’ enthusiasm towards foreigners, and to this day, immigration policy remains hotly debated. On January 28th, 2017, Richard Spencer, a white nationalist and leader in the alt-right movement, attacked Lazarus’ poem on Twitter, stating, “It’s offensive that such a beautiful, inspiring statue was ever associated with ugliness, weakness, and deformity” (Reilly). This nativist sentiment—that America is being polluted by an influx of immigrants—is far from new. Historically, a wave of outsiders pouring into the U.S. often met a radical, nativist countermovement to “take America back” from its immigrant populations (Lieven 84). The Statue of Liberty inspired generations of immigrants to try their luck on American soil, but as foreigners poured in from a variety of cultural backgrounds, the flood of unfamiliar faces drew skepticism and concern from some of America’s existing population. The Statue of Liberty rose to prominence as a pro-immigration icon, but because of its pervasiveness and polarizing public stance, the monument inadvertently catalyzed the rise of an anti-immigration nativist movement.

Lazarus, among other writers and artists from the nineteenth century onward, displayed the power of creative expression in moving public perception. When Frédéric Bartholdi, the sculptor of the Statue of Liberty, first gifted the work to the United States, the statue lacked

significance to America's people and culture. To drum up interest for funding purposes, the U.S. government requested an original work from Lazarus, and inspired by her involvement with refugee communities, Lazarus created her renowned poem, which would go on to define the popular idea of the Statue of Liberty as a pro-immigration icon (Berenson 6). The statue took on a welcoming persona in the poem, becoming a "Mother of Exiles" (line 6) for "the wretched refuse of [another country's] teeming shore" (line 12), a protector for people of any socioeconomic background who wished for a chance at a new life. Through her efforts, Lazarus converted an empty, purposeless piece of sculpted copper to an inspiring pro-immigration symbol with popular relevance. However, the nativist movement later expanded their own symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, using artwork and literature to redefine the Statue of Liberty much in the same way that pro-immigration advocates framed the monument prior to its arrival in New York. Delving into the nativist history that underlies the Statue of Liberty unearths a complex push-pull interplay between pro-immigration and anti-immigration forces that popular depictions of the Statue of Liberty elide.

Nativism, as an ideology, appeals to emotions rather than logic, using fear and anxiety to depict immigrants as threatening to American sovereignty and values. The nativist movement's roots can be traced back to the 1780s, when a group of people used personal experiences and their own arbitrary standards to decide if a person was truly American (Knobel xvii). Nativism's arbitrary nature, which can vary from person to person, leads to a lack of objectivity, structure, and specificity in who it seeks to oppose, and as a movement, it changes to match contemporary fears and prejudices in order to maintain support. In the U.S., the movement evolved in the late eighteenth century as it found conflict with foreigners in regards to job availability, cultural differences, and political interests, among other topics (Knobel xxvi). More generally, the

nativists sought to influence susceptible non-nativists by validating the apprehensions they either consciously or unconsciously held towards immigrants, evoking fear in an attempt to mobilize this silent audience against alien groups. These influences sought to shift how the public perceived immigrants by emphasizing a threat to America's sovereignty and core values (Zukerman 197).

The Statue of Liberty and the publicity it generated, spearheaded by Lazarus' poem, catapulted immigration to the forefront of American policy, and the nativist movement piggybacked on the statue's popularity to spread to a wider audience. At the unveiling of the statue in 1886, Chauncey M. Depew gave a speech that adjusted the invitation Lazarus' poem presented to foreigners, warning that "those who come to disturb our peace and dethrone our laws are aliens and enemies forever" (Vecoli 47). While Depew targeted his words towards possible anarchists and radicals, the public perception soon generalized and stereotyped this characterization in a nativist fashion, arbitrarily assigning these traits to Irishmen (Vecoli 47). This led to legislation allowing the government to deny entry to anyone the government deemed a risk to its current command. The nativist movement, through an event held for the newly unveiled champion of immigrants, preyed on fears that foreigners would bring disorder to America's political structure, showing how influential nativist rhetoric can be to popular perception.

With a similar approach, the nativist movement looked towards its own artists and writers to create publicity for the nativist cause. In response to a surge of European immigrants in the late 1800s, namely Italians, Slavs, and Eastern European Jews, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, wrote a poem titled "Unguarded Gates," in which he pleads for the Statue of Liberty to "stay those who to thy sacred portals come / To waste the gifts of freedom" (Vecoli

49). Aldrich's poem reimagined the welcoming Lady Liberty instead as a towering guardian to rally behind, a being to inspire security for those in fear of an immigrant uprising. The persona Aldrich's poem creates for the statue directly contrasts that of Lazarus's; while Aldrich describes the statue as defending "portals," Lazarus shows the statue as "[lifting her] lamp beside the golden door," giving light and granting access rather than taking it away (line 14). By choosing the word "waste," Aldrich emphasizes the nativist belief that foreigners are not capable of appreciating the opportunities that America has to offer and degrade American societal values. Ironically, while these nativists tirelessly persecuted immigrants, they felt that they were the ones being abused.

In response to, and perhaps even in retaliation against, the pro-immigration movement, nativists repurposed the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of American superiority and core values, victimizing Lady Liberty to draw out political support. Cartoons issued in the late 1800s by the satirical magazine *Judge*, a periodical intended to appease the bigotry of the American middle-class, provide a clear example of how nativist media perceived immigrants as abusing America's resources and culture. For example, one such cartoon titled "The Proposed Emigrant Dumping Site" illustrates Lady Liberty raising her robes and scowling in disgust as European garbage ships pour boatloads of immigrants on her island and feet (Berenson 109). The boatloads of immigrants represent, both figuratively and literally, the "wretched refuse" of Lazarus' poem (Vecoli 48). In the cartoon, Lady Liberty represents Americans and American values, and by depicting the overflow of European immigrants, the cartoon seems to say that both the American people and their beliefs are being crowded out by the influx of immigrants. Lady Liberty's frown and withdrawn body language also emphasize disgust for the European immigrants, as if they are lesser beings when compared to the more sophisticated Americans. The Lady Liberty portrayed

in this cartoon differs dramatically from Lazarus' previous notions, particularly in its physical demeanor. While Lazarus' "mighty woman" with "conquering limbs astride from land to land" demonstrates confidence and composure, *Judge's* reserved, hunched-over statue exudes fear and distaste towards the unfamiliar incoming immigrants. By showing how immigrants encroached upon a repulsed Statue of Liberty, nativists intended to create a divide in their audience's mind between those who cared about the Statue of Liberty and the America it represented and those who sought to harm the statue and its national meaning. Using the Statue of Liberty as a victimized symbol, the nativist propaganda built enmity against immigrants and gathered popular support that ultimately culminated in Congress passing the Immigration Act of 1924, which prevented any Asian immigration and heavily reduced the influx of European populations (Berenson 121).

As one of America's most recognizable symbols, the Statue of Liberty in popular culture stands as a one-dimensional champion for liberty, equality, and opportunity; yet its polarizing uses in the past exemplify the monument's symbolic malleability and complicated modern meaning. In his book *The Statue of Liberty*, Edward Berenson articulates this symbolic malleability by describing the statue's status as a "hollow icon"—an icon that can stand for multiple values and even ones that directly conflict (145). The monument's "hollow" nature provides a platform to project ideologies that, for better or for worse, play an essential part in the statue's history. Knowing how nativists have repurposed the statue in favor of their fight against foreigners, the scholarly discourse cannot herald the statue as a pure symbol in support of immigration. Even then, some may dismiss the nativist rhetoric and history tied to the Statue of Liberty as illegitimate, arguing that the nativists forced their context on the Statue of Liberty without foundation on established American principles. However, in questioning the legitimacy

of the nativists' Statue of Liberty ideology, we must also consider how the Statue of Liberty came to hold its welcoming, pro-immigration persona. Lazarus was by no means involved in the creation of the Statue of Liberty; yet through her 1883 poem, her interpretation has remained the defining perception of the monument before the statue was even unveiled in 1886. Is it fair to discount Lazarus' interpretation because it was not how the statue was "originally intended" to be? By all accounts, Lazarus herself forced context onto a statue that, until her poem, had no significance to the American people as a national symbol. Both pro- and anti-immigration movements competed to redefine a monument of abstract liberty into a specific national message. Though they pursued the method for different ends, both movements took advantage of the Statue of Liberty's pervasiveness in American culture, and in doing so, projected a conflicting mix of ideologies through the statue that would come to symbolize Americans as a whole.

America's immigration policy has fluctuated drastically since the Statue of Liberty first looked out onto New York Harbor, but decades later political advocates for and against immigration still call upon Lady Liberty's symbolism to express their positions for modern causes. For example, in 1994, the California legislature introduced a ballot initiative, Proposition 187, that would require state-wide citizenship screening and would prevent any illegal aliens from taking part in state public education, non-emergency health care, cash assistance, and other tax-supported benefits (Martin 255-256). Nativist rhetoric surged in support of the proposition, and once again, the Statue of Liberty played a lead role, this time to encourage voters to pass Proposition 187. A cartoon circulating at the time depicted a pregnant Lady Liberty with "children of illegal immigrants" written across her body, as she exasperatedly comments, "give me a break" (Gabriel 570). The depiction shows Lady Liberty as having to support children that

are not her own, which resonated with Americans who did not want their tax money supporting illegal aliens. Additionally, in discussing the implications of the Statue of Liberty's pregnancy, one might perceive that the artist wanted to show a violated American symbol, mirroring the statue's role as a victim in nativist propaganda over 100 years earlier; Lady Liberty's pregnancy is forced and unwanted, and the artist intends to compare that with the unwanted burdens and desecrated American values that result from immigrant populations. Ultimately, in July 1999, a federal district court judge ruled that the initiative was unconstitutional and prevented its implementation (McDonnell). However, this situation provides a well-documented modern example of anti-immigration actions resulting from the nativist portrayal of the Statue of Liberty.

Even more recently, following U.S. President Donald Trump's bans on travelers from predominantly Muslim countries, many American leaders have spoken out against the President's stance on immigration, invoking the Statue of Liberty's historical symbolism as an icon for their dissent. On January 27th, 2017, Trump issued Executive Order 13769, which temporarily disallowed travel from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen (Kertscher). He issued the ban on the grounds of protecting America from terrorism, yet his sweeping generalizations have prohibited refugees in peril from escaping those countries as well, causing an uproar in political figures that include former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Congressional Representative Keith Ellison, and former presidential candidate Evan McMullin (Reilly). These figures, and countless others, have called upon the Statue of Liberty and the pro-immigration tradition behind it, using Lazarus' famous words to denounce Trump's recent policies. While Trump claims to have American security as his major interest, immigrants from the seven banned countries have caused zero deaths via terrorist attacks; yet the countries that the 9/11 terrorists originated from—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates—

have free travel across U.S. borders (Kertscher). Whatever the motivations for the ban, the long-lasting impact of America's nativist roots show heavily in Trump's impulsive, emotionally driven action.

The Statue of Liberty is a complex and storied symbol, imbued with meaning through both the pro-immigration and nativist ideologies that used its prominence to vie for popular support. While the American public generally views the Statue of Liberty as an unwavering champion for the lost and weary, this oversimplified rendition can lead to a narrow-minded, romanticized view of our immigrant past. As we interact with popular narratives and symbols in our everyday lives, it is essential to work past our impulsive emotional reactions. While we may initially view certain narratives in a one-dimensional way, agreeing or disagreeing in an instant, we must widen the scope of our thinking to encompass multiple perspectives and interpretations. Only then can we understand the complex, ideological conflicts that may lie underneath a clear-cut surface. The contrast between the Statue of Liberty's popular portrayal and its actual historical uses provides a case study for these underlying conflicts that started prior to its unveiling and still continue to this day. As an audience, we must make it our goal to understand the nuances in our discussion of symbols and narratives so that we can accurately interpret them and perhaps even reimagine them in support of our own goals.

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