
A “Love” Letter to the U.S.

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Abstract

In this love letter, I use archival materials and the founding documents of the United States to trace my personal journey with American disillusionment. The concept of the American Dream appears throughout as a symbol of dangerous nationalism that contorts the violence upon which American society depends. Using various materials to capture my misgivings with the American Dream in the form of a love letter, I call attention to the colonial fantasies and imperial violences that make possible American nationhood, and thus start the process of grieving the idea of America that I was taught to believe in.

Keywords

American Dream, nationalism, borders

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!"¹

On Ellis Island, there is a sonnet that stands at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. The plaque has been rubbed shiny, touched by millions of hands, and it reads in a way that represents a sense of boundless optimism that has become synonymous with America. The statue herself is a beacon on the New York City skyline; a mighty woman with a torch (Lazarus, 1883); a golden door to the American Dream and all who strive to make it a reality, whether they be the bootstrappers (the settlers) or the dreamers (the Others)—two iterations of the same story of a larger-than-life dream. But the similarities between these two groups end here, with each eyeing one another warily from the opposite side of a colonial border.

In some ways, we have come a long way since Emma Lazarus wrote "The New Colossus" in 1883; but in other ways, we haven't come far at all. Asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants still come to this Island, moved by the American Dream and Lazarus's poem, but the revisionist blinders of American citizenry seem to have forgotten these same words on the Statue of Liberty. This isn't surprising. "The New Colossus" is rarely read in its entirety within the U.S. educational system and there is little focus on Emma Lazarus as a poet and historical figure. In the U.S. history books, there are the (white) men who sign the papers and the one (white) woman whose words inspired millions, but it is only the men that sign the papers who we study.

In the same year as Lazarus wrote "The New Colossus," she wrote another poem—a much lesser-known one, entitled "1492." This poem would not grace the entrance of any national park and it would certainly not be covered in classrooms across the United States. 1492 is a two-part description of the earliest days of colonization in the territory that would later be known as the United States. The year is known well enough by school children and adults alike, in the form of a nursery rhyme—"In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue" (Marzollo, 1991). As children, we recited it in classrooms, but few educators and textbooks provided a historically accurate depiction of how America came to be—a well-documented epistemology of ignorance within the United States.

I know the nursery rhyme as well as I know the back of my own hand. We played "Pilgrims and Indians" in elementary school after our unit on early American history. Everyone thought I should be an Indian, but I wanted to be a pilgrim like my friends. In the year 1492, I know Columbus sailed the ocean blue, this two-faced year. The children of the prophets Lord, Prince, priest, and people. All spurned by zealot hate (Lazarus, 1883). I understand 1492. I just don't understand why I still remember that damn nursery rhyme.

Even in 1883, Lazarus and many others understood the deep hypocrisy of the United States—a wrench thrown into the arguments of those who say, "It was a different time." Even in 1883, Lazarus hinted at the kind of dissonance that requires continued effort to uphold the American nation. On one hand, you have the words of Emma Lazarus; *Libertas*, a mighty woman with a torch (Lazarus, 1883); the American Dream and its siren song, forever pulling us back instead of propelling us forward. On the other hand, you have the unresolved fate of the children at the border, an unending opioid crisis targeting underserved agricultural and mining communities, police brutality against Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous people,

¹ Lazarus, 1883.

legal precedent to take Indigenous children from their cultures and communities, and children shot to death with AR-15's before they can even learn that, in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Holding these contrasting truths together feels like balancing on razor wire. I believe in the ideals that Emma Lazarus wrote, but I cannot make them right with the reality I know.

I need to know,
I need to know,
mother of exiles,

*Is a dream still a dream if it is founded on a
nightmare?*

Before Emma Lazarus wrote beautiful words, and after Columbus sailed the ocean blue, a gathering occurred, the first of its kind. On July 4th, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was written by the men who signed the papers and would go down in history as the founders of American society. They wrote to us:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.²

I know these words. We learn them in fourth grade, memorize them, automatons of patriotism, our hands over our hearts, pledging our allegiance to a flag. A symbol of an idea, but what do children understand of what it means to pledge allegiance? I'm older now, an adult; but the older I get, the less I understand. I try to trace the map of US history—where did the lies start? Were these truths self-evident, or did someone assure me that they were? Does it matter? The state derives its power from us, the people, the dreamers, the bootstrappers, the huddled, weary masses. The men who signed the papers told me that their truths were universal, so they must be.

These men set the scene, they lit the lights and

raised the curtain for us all to see what could be with an American dream. But how can that be? When Langston Hughes wrote so eloquently:

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars,
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.³

Who should I believe? The men who signed the papers or the man who assured me that America was never mine. Maybe it doesn't matter who's right, but I read the history and find no clarity or comfort. Perhaps it is my mistake; to look for comfort in the dusty repositories of national archives.

This amnesia, American amnesia, is disorientating. I can't find the thread of its beginning. A nesting doll of national shame. I visited my childhood home, an unassuming suburban street in Michigan like so many others. I found all my old books, dusty picture books, and Junie B. Jones. Among them is an old social studies book, for elementary school-aged children to learn United States history. In a chapter about slavery, this textbook, designed to *teach*, calls enslaved Africans “workers.” This company supplies textbooks all over the United States. I imagine the route of each textbook crisscrossing all over the map of the country, creating a new generation of learned ignorance. I venture to the website of the publishing company, to voice my concerns, and am greeted by a professional landing page “Sorry. We seem to be having some difficulty finding this page.”

It seems so benign, sorry.

I went looking for clarity in national archives, but I found it in my childhood bedroom. Maybe this is the beginning thread I was looking for.

Sorry.

In my childhood bedroom, I am reminded of Renée Bergland (2000), who speaks of a national

² U.S. Const. Preamble.

³ Hughes, 1994, p. 189.

amnesia that works within the American identity. She invokes Freud to describe this strange ability to look the other way in the face of hypocrisy, genocide, and oppression: it is uncanny (Bergland, 2000, p. 5). She also speaks of a haunting, the ghost of conquest, the ugliness of it, written plainly on the page (p. 6). I open the textbook again and hope that the ghosts can escape off the page and out of the open window, but perhaps this is my privilege. Ghosts are not here to be liberated; they are a solemn reminder that history is never past. Instead of ushering the ghosts out the window, I sit with them, touching the worn spine of the textbook. For the U.S. patriotism machine to continue, we must willfully bury the conquest, deep inside the earth, so we no longer have to gaze upon the horror that has been wrought, all for that damned dream. Instead of looking the other way, I want to look it in the face. So, I sent an email to the publisher.

I still haven't heard back from them.

Adams (1931) was the first author to write about the American Dream. That damned dream. An idea of a thing made real by bootstrappers, whispering a gentle seduction in our ears, that all of this could be ours!

If we simply defy the laws of gravity and
 Pull.
 Ourselves.
 Up.

But I cannot defy the laws of gravity. I am a mere mortal. But Adams writes so convincingly, of "a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (p. 404). It is indeed fortuitous that Adams was born into a wealthy Brooklyn family of stockbrokers.

It is usually the fortuitous,
 the men who sign the papers, and write the
 textbooks,

who tell us that everything is within our grasp.

After all,
 All you have to do is defy gravity.
 But what do they know of gravity?

They were born suspended in the air, by money,
 luck, and a good name.

Back in my childhood bedroom, I continue to consider haunting in all its iterations. Not necessarily the things that go bump in the night but keep you up all the same. Ghaddar (2016) describes this in their article, "A Spectre in the Archive." They explain that the spectres of America's colonial past are embedded in the American consciousness, our collective psyche; thoroughly haunted (p. 20). We are surely haunted, but I cannot know to what degree every American feels as such. This is perhaps the greatest problem, urging people to look at the wretched ghosts that are a part of our national history and fight the urge to look away.

In Gordon's (2008) "Ghostly Matters," they make one such distinction. They say that "haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" (p. XVI). If the U.S. were well and truly haunted, something would be changed, producing something to be done. What will be the haunted straw that breaks the camel's back of American apathy? Something that thrusts the American conscience out of neutral? But we have had no shortage of such events already, events that have haunted us so profoundly that they must have prompted some sort of change. Perhaps this is a user error, but I'm looking for systemic change, policy amendment, something tangible—that feels alive. Instead, I'm greeted by "thoughts and prayers."

Yellow prayer hands emojis
 on social media posts of school shootings
 while on a 15-minute break before clocking
 back in for another shift
 put on your customer service face, and keep
 smiling, keep smiling, keep smiling!
 for another shift, and another shift,
 people are dead, this is true,
 but the rent is still due.

I'm homesick for the idea of a place that never existed. It has nothing to do with geography, proximity, or fond memories. But it has everything to do with the idealism of a dream. The natural inclination when one experiences homesickness is to return to the place that you're missing. I don't know how you return to an idea of a place, there's nowhere to return to and you can't visit the conceptualization of the United States. There is no such place on any map, so I made my own. It's not a place, but a complicated spiderweb of memories that only exists in my mind's eye. A soybean field planted as far as the eye can see. Sweet corn and cherries 2/\$8 on the side of the road. A regional love of superman ice cream and Vernors soda. But these moments are supremely overshadowed by the hypocrisy of it all. The U.S., The United States, The States; I love you, I love you, I love you; it feels more like a threat than a promise. To pledge allegiance, or else. This kind of love is a one-way street, and like most affairs of the heart, it's extraordinarily painful. You can love the U.S. all you want, but it might not love you back. It's like loving an abuser; throwing a punch with one hand and caressing you with the other.

I hate you, I hate you, I hate you
 But I can't leave,
 Because no matter where I go,
 I am still of you.
 Wherever you go, there you are.
 Red, White, and Blue.

I leave my dusty childhood bedroom to go back to school. The bus that goes from Detroit to Toronto is large and spacious. It's usually empty and I am usually the only passenger who rides the bus from end to end. The bus takes the tunnel instead of the Ambassador Bridge, bringing me deep under the Detroit River. I watch the gray tile whizz by, waiting for my favorite part—the demarcation between the U.S. and Canada. There is a dotted line, on the left side, the Canadian flag, and on the right side, the American flag. The dotted line makes me think that there might be

some fluidity between the two countries, but I know this isn't true.

Under the water of the Detroit River, I consider that colonial borders are subaltern in a whole myriad of ways, but they are also a solid living thing. The bus comes out of the tunnel, and I am thrust into Windsor for Customs and ushered back onto the bus. As we move through Windsor to the highway, there is a street where you can perfectly see the Detroit skyline, dotted with American and Canadian flags, a nod to our neighbors to the North on the other side of the Detroit River, and I get it—“the feeling.” It's difficult to describe it, but I feel it, a heaviness in my chest, just under my throat.

Leaving the U.S. is always bittersweet, it feels nostalgic and painful, like rereading old love letters, or the first taste of a candy you haven't eaten since your youth. This paper is not academic writing, it is a love letter to someone who deeply hurt me, and I want them to know exactly how. This isn't a heat of the moment love letter that you pen in the minutes after the breakup, with tears dotting the page. This is the calculated letter that you write after time has allowed you to know exactly what you want to say. There is emotion, but not sentiment. It's sharp and fully realized. It took me two years outside the U.S. to write this letter, while I had the privilege of pursuing my Ph.D. in Toronto, ON.

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