Reimagining Freedom, Repeating Silence: Racial Exclusion in the Declaration of Independence, "I Hear America Singing," and "The New Colossus"

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"Since freedom embodies not a single idea but a complex of values," writes historian Eric Foner, "the struggle to define its meaning is simultaneously an intellectual, social, economic, and political contest."[1] In his book *The Story of American Freedom*, Foner explores how the concept of freedom has been a central aspect to the American identity and how that idea of freedom has evolved throughout the course of history. The first definition of American identity emerged during the Revolutionary Crisis in the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776. The Declaration established the principle of American sovereignty and outlined natural rights that the government would protect. Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" (1860) emerged decades later, and celebrated democracy and the industrialization of America. Following that came Emma Lazarus's 1883 "The New Colossus," which reimagined the Statue of Liberty as a welcoming beacon for immigrants and reshaped America's stance on foreigners. Although written in different time periods and out of different contexts, all three texts were important pieces of literature which reshaped the definition of American freedom. However, the texts failed to address race, which ultimately failed to include an entire audience of African Americans and prevented America from granting freedom for all.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was born to wealthy plantation owner Peter Jefferson and established socialite Jane Randolph on April 14, 1743. Throughout his youth, Jefferson received a formal education common to the era and studied languages and topics like history and math. Jefferson studied at the College of William and Mary and apprenticed under jurist George Wythe in Williamsburg. In 1769, Jefferson served in Virginia's House of Burgesses as a representative to Albemarle County until June 1775, when he departed to Philadelphia to serve as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress.[2]

Whilst Jefferson climbed the ranks of the political scene in America, the rest of the colonists were oppressed by their British rulers. The British Empire passed a series of acts and taxes to secure funds

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[1] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, First edition, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), xv, [LIBRARY].
[2] Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 1970), 3-15, [EBSCO].

following the costly French and Indian War. Examples of acts passed in this period include the Stamp Act (1765), which was "an act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, and other duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America"[3] and taxed paper goods such as playing cards and newspapers. Although successfully repealed in 1766, the Stamp Act sparked the idea of 'no taxation without representation.' Jefferson referenced the Stamp Act in the declaration when he wrote "For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent" as part of the "train of abuses."[4] With each new act, the American colonists grew increasingly frustrated with Britain. The Boston Massacre of 1770 was the catalyst for revolution in the colonies. Following the Boston Tea Party of 1774, the Intolerable Acts were passed within the same year. The Boston Port Act, part of the Intolerable Acts, closed Boston harbor until the colonists paid off the appropriate price of tea. Jefferson discussed this in the list of grievances as "cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world."[5] Likewise, another aspect of the Intolerable Acts, the Massachusetts Government Act, limited Massachusetts local governments and placed the colony under the careful surveillance of the British crown. Jefferson referenced it in the Declaration with the grievance of "...suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever."[6] The Second Continental Congress' final attempt at reconciling with King George III and avoiding war through the Olive Branch Petition in 1775 failed. The Congress tasked Thomas Jefferson with writing a document that would ensure America's independence from Britain. Jefferson penned the document between June 11 and June 28 of 1776, with edits made by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. The Second Continental Congress voted to approve Jefferson's Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.[7]

The Declaration of Independence consisted of three parts; the preamble, the list of grievances- or "train of abuses" as Jefferson put it- and the resolution. Within the preamble, Jefferson clearly established

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[3] Great Britain Parliament, *The Stamp Act,* (March 22, 1765), [Yale Law].
[4] Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776, FYS: American History Through Poetry, [WEB].
[5] Jefferson.
[6] Jefferson.
[7] Peterson, 91-92.

the separation between the colonists and the British by referring to Americans as "one people," and the British as "another."[8] The preamble also outlined the natural rights guaranteed to every man. The list of grievances provided 27 examples of tangible evidence which promoted the necessity of America's separation from Britain, thus solidifying the theme of sovereignty. The conclusion of the Declaration reviewed the previous attempts the colonists had made at compliance but stressed their dire need for independence from tyranny. More specifically, it served to officially sever any "political connections" and declared America a nation utterly free of British rule.[9]

Just a year prior to his death on July 4, 1826, Jefferson clarified in a letter to Henry Lee that his purpose for writing the Declaration of Independence was "to place before mankind the common sense of the subject."[10] He did not try to invent new ideas but rather tried to establish a justification for American independence rooted in Enlightenment thinking and already existing American beliefs. Not only did Jefferson establish sovereignty, but according to Foner, he emphasized natural rights, "among which liberty was second only to life itself."[11] However, Jefferson failed to include all American people in his definition of freedom. Although he wrote that "all men are created equal," his use of the word "men," rather than humans or persons, led to the belief that the text excluded women from natural rights.[12] In the Declaration of Sentiments, Elizabeth Cady Stanton rewrote the phrase from the Declaration of Independence to include women: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal."[13] This document served as the foundation for the Seneca Falls Convention in July of 1848, where female activists gathered to demand legal, social, and political rights for women. Stanton's view on the Declaration of Independence proved how figures across American history have viewed the Declaration as exclusive of all American people. Although Jefferson respected women, he ultimately did

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[8] Jefferson.
[9] Jefferson.
[10] Thomas Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825," *Founders Online,* National Archives [National Archives].
[11] Foner 15.
[12] Jefferson.
[13] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Declaration of Sentiments,* July 1848, Library of Congress, [Library of Congress].

not desire progressive measures which would secure women's rights. Therefore, by writing about equality for all, Jefferson contradicted himself through his language.

Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman, born on March 31, 1819, grew up in Brooklyn and started working at the age of twelve. He held many jobs throughout his life, such as a printer, journalist, editor, and schoolteacher. Whitman spent much of his time reading and experimenting with poetry during the mid-nineteenth century whilst living in New York.[14] In 1855, he self-published his first collection of poetry; *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman republished the collection in 1856, and again in 1860. In the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1860), Whitman included a poem titled "I Hear America Singing" in the chapter "Chants Democratic." The poem was a direct reflection of the urbanization and industrialization occurring at the time surrounding its creation. Through the transformative Market Revolution, "the growth of the American economy reshaped American life in the decades before the Civil War."[15] With the advancement of technology and the increased rate of transportation, mass production became more efficient in America. With this spike in efficiency, several Americans shifted their careers from agricultural to specialized trades and moved into cities for work. Whitman acknowledged this workforce shift in his poem, highlighting various jobs such as "mechanics" and "wood-cutters." He mentioned farmers as one of the "varied carols" heard as well, referring to them as "ploughboys."[16] Whitman, a self-made American, celebrated his background through "I Hear America Singing." He saw the beauty of the democratic principle of individualization, and claimed "The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen."[17] To Whitman, the true greatness of America had no meaning unless the American citizens mirrored that same spirit of greatness. "I Hear America Singing" was his way of praising the spirit of individuality in America.

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[14] Binns, Henry Bryan. n.d. A Life of Walt Whitman. Project Gutenberg. 28-47 [LIBRARY].
[15] James Ambuske et al., "The Market Revolution," Michael Hattem, ed., in *The American Yawp*, eds. Joseph Locke and Ben Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), [American Yawp].
[16] Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing," 1860, FYS: American History Through Poetry, [WEB].
[17] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Facsimile Edition of the 1855 Text,* (Thomas Bird Mosher, 1919), [UPenn].

Composed of eleven lines, Whitman wrote "I Hear America Singing" as a free verse poem. Between the second and seventh lines, nine different trades are listed. Each is a very specific masculine trade. In the eighth line, however, Whitman wrote women into the narrative. Their jobs contrast with the men's. While the patriarchs of society were completing strenuous and physically demanding jobs, the careers of women were those such as "the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing."[18] Although also incredibly important to American society, the jobs of women as Whitman described them were far more docile and domestic. All the careers listed in the poem were working-class jobs, and Whitman purposefully omitted commentary on the wealthy. However, there is a shift in the tone of the poem in the last two lines. Whitman wrote "the day what belongs to the day- at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly, singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs."[19]This sudden change contrasted the workday to the nightlife of the young workers. The singing that the narrator originally heard at the beginning of the poem consisted of the voices of the workers fulfilling their crafts. At night, the song heard is one sung in unison rather than individually. The working men went out drinking together, sharing a strong fraternal bond. Their drunken shouting and slurring, or possibly literal singing, is the song of the night. Through this connection, and through individualized jobs, freedom in America shifted.

Whitman based much of his prose on his pride for American democracy. "Political democracy," Whitman wrote, "with all its threatening evils, supplies a training-school for making first-class men. It is life's gymnasium... A brave delight, fit for freedom's athletes."[20] "I Hear America Singing," one of Whitman's praises of democracy, boasted how it allowed Americans to be individuals as well as united. However, it also served as a message to other American poets, and pushed them to follow Whitman's lead in the celebration of the common man. His targeted audience may have been regular Americans, but it is more likely that he aimed to reach the social elitist poets. In the mid-nineteenth century, most American

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[18] Whitman.
[19] Whitman.
[20] Walt Whitman and Ed Folsom, *Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile*, (University of Iowa Press, 2010), 29, [EBSCO].

poets based their work on past European models and principles. The common poet modeled his work after sonnets of the Shakespearian era, whereas Whitman wrote in a uniquely distinct free verse. Patrick Redding claims Whitman's diction is purposefully plain. “Whitman‘s commitment to democratic poetics sometimes takes the form of defending the plain style,” writes Redding. “The plain style embodies the principles of equality and transparency that are emphatically linked to the ideals of modern democracy.”[21] In “I Hear America Singing,” Whitman described the singing heard from American workers as “delicious” and “melodious.”[22] Through this positive description, Whitman showed his fellow poets that American poetry should reflect the beauty of distinctly American things, such as the specialized work force.

Emma Lazarus

Born on July 22, 1849, to a prominent Jewish family in New York City, Emma Lazarus received a private education through various tutors and studied numerous languages through her private academics.[23] Lazarus published several books of poetry, as well as one novel, over the course of her life. Despite her family’s deep religious roots, Lazarus did not have much of a connection with the Jewish community for most of her life. When Lazarus was 16, a French political intellectual named Édouard de Laboulaye created the idea for the Statue of Liberty in 1865 as a gift to America celebrating its centennial anniversary of independence and emancipation. Construction on the Statue began in 1876, and completed in the early 1880s. Around that same time, Lazarus became greatly concerned with the state of immigrants in America because of a series of violent anti-Semetic attacks that drove thousands of Jewish Russians to New York. This led to Lazarus’s heavy involvement in activism for Jewish immigrants and her frequent penmanship of poems promoting Zionism. However, Lazarus did this at a time of fierce

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[21] Patrick Redding, “Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912-1931,.” *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010), 669–90, [JSTOR].
[22] Whitman.
[23] Bette Roth Young, *Emma Lazarus in Her World : Life and Letters*, First edition, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 6-11, [LIBRARY].

American nationalism, where "nativists opposed mass immigration for various reasons," such as the idea that immigrants were "unfit for American democracy" and a fear that "the arrival of even more immigrants would result in fewer jobs and lower wages."[24] These common views led to the creation of anti-immigrant laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which set a precedent in the restriction of immigration based on nationality.[25] Laws such as this were what Lazarus strove to combat in her description of the Statue of Liberty in "The New Colossus."

Lazarus wrote "The New Colossus" in 1883 for an auction raising money for a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. Lazarus originally felt skeptical of the cause of the auction and viewed it as "an ostentatious testament to the acquisitive power of the American monied aristocracy of the Gilded Age…" as put by Michael P. Kramer.[26] Kramer's description of the exhibition highlights how Lazarus cast aside her personal reluctance to promote that all Americans should openly accept migrants. That is why the poem focused on welcoming immigrants to America.

"The New Colossus," written as a Petrarchan sonnet, had fourteen lines in an iambic pentameter. The octave followed a rhyme scheme of ABBA. Within the octave, Lazarus alluded to well-known New York City landmarks to establish the setting of the poem. The "sea-washed, sunset gates" referred to the meeting of the East and Hudson Rivers in New York Harbor, where the Statue rests. The "air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame" referenced, again, the New York Harbor, which separated the cities of Brooklyn and Manhattan and housed the entrance into America for many immigrants.[27] The sestet had a rhyme scheme of CDCDCD. These lines were spoken by the Statue herself. With "silent lips," she addressed the lands from which the immigrants were fleeing and commanded them to "keep your storied pomp" and instead give her "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses."[27] The phrase "storied pomp"

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[24] *The American Yawp*, "American Empire,", [American Yawp].
[25] "An Act to Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to Chinese." 47th Congress, 1st Session, May 6, 1882, [National Archives].
[26] Michael P. Kramer, "The *Raison d'être* of 'The New Colossus," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 2024): 355–77, 361, [EBSCO].
[27] Emma Lazarus, The New Colossus, 1883, FYS: American History Through Poetry [WEB].

meant grandeur or extravagance. The "huddled masses" were the large groups of immigrants fleeing their home countries and coming to the United States. The Statue welcomed these immigrants, regardless of their poor condition, into the waters of the United States by illuminating their path with her "lamp beside the golden door."[28] The "golden door" that Lazarus described referred to a literal entrance point into the United States, as the New York Harbor was a major immigration reception point. However, it also symbolized the opportunities for an improved life that America presented to immigrants. This concept highlighted the overall theme of the poem, which established the United States as a welcoming land of refuge for persecuted migrants.[29]

Due to increased nationalistic sentiment, Lazarus set out to write a poem that would offer her "vision of America as a haven for people fleeing ungodly historical circumstances…"[30]The Statue of Liberty already represented American democracy, but Lazarus viewed the Statue as a symbol of hope and opportunity for all, especially immigrants. The poem's title alluded to the Colossus of Rhodes, which Edward Hirsch attributes as a monument to "Old World male military power."[31] Hirsch claims that Lazarus saw an opportunity to use the feminine figure of American democracy to oppose the patriarchal Colossus of Rhodes which glorified violence. Max Cavitch further analyzes this concept and claims that "Lazarus's epithet for the Statue, 'Mother of Exiles,' [is] first identified as maternal…"[32] In "The New Colossus", Lazarus examined the significance of the maternal figure, which she claimed produced a comforting image that welcomed immigrants into the United States. This greatly contrasted with the brutal and harsh Colossus of Rhodes.[33] The Statue of Liberty sparked new ideals of hope and sanctuary, unlike the Colossus of Rhodes which portrayed the "brazen giant" who conquered territory. [34] Additionally, the two statues compared in the poem were described with contrasting images. Where the

[28] Lazarus.
[29] Edward Hirsch, The Heart of American Poetry (New York: Library of America, 2022), 73, [PRINT].
[30] Hirsch, 72.
[31] Hirsch, 74.
[32] Max Cavitch, "Emma Lazarus and the Golem of Liberty," *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (2006): 1–28, 3, [JSTOR].
[33] Hirsch, 74.
[34] Lazarus.

imagery of the Colossus honored an ancient sun god, the Statue of Liberty's imagery revolved the dawning of a new era. Kramer notes that this new era was one where America not only replaced the Old World but improved its flaws and established itself as a haven for immigrants.[35] This new age in America created the possibility of a country that welcomed all peoples onto its shores and set aside any previous prejudices.

Jefferson, Whitman, and Lazarus on Race

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson intended to include every American in his outline of natural rights guaranteed by the government. In an early draft, one of the grievances Jefferson listed "blamed the British for the transatlantic slave trade," and claimed that the empire discouraged "attempts [made] by the colonists to promote abolition."[36] Had it been included in the final draft, this language would have completely changed the document's legacy by eliminating any question of inclusivity. However, southern delegates challenged this idea, leading to the grievance's consequent removal from the document. The language Jefferson ultimately used for the Declaration didn't explicitly include slaves and therefore failed to incorporate the entire African American audience in his equality-based definition of freedom. It is also likely that Jefferson removed the passage addressing slavery because of his own discomfort in including slaves in his view of an equitable society. His racism was displayed through his critique of African American poet Phillis Wheatley as Jefferson rejected the capabilities of black poets in general, writing "...among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry."[37] That view, combined with his ownership of over 600 slaves in his lifetime, proved Jefferson contradicted himself in his guarantee of basic human rights to all American people, as he simultaneously held hundreds of people in bondage and stripped them of their own liberties whilst he wrote the Declaration. Although Jefferson did originally intend to address slavery in his document as a grievance, it ultimately wouldn't have been sufficient in securing equality. That grievance placed the blame for the

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[35]Michael P. Kramer, "The *Raison d'être* of 'The New Colossus,'" *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 2024): 355–77, 361, [EBSCO].
[36] *The American Yawp*, "The American Revolution," , [American Yawp].
[37] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787, quoted in Hirsch, 17.

horrors of slavery in the colonies on the British Empire but did not actually strive to include African Americans as an equal part of American politics. Had Jefferson explicitly written race into the Declaration, he could have prevented centuries of confusion regarding the systemic racism in the United States, and would have truly established freedom for all Americans.

Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" differed from Jefferson's Declaration of Independence because Whitman included women in his description of careers. However, Whitman did not state the race of the working characters in his poem. It is possible Whitman excluded the racial aspect of identity on purpose as a way of promoting equality. However, Edward Hirsch questions Whitman's motives; "but does this praise poem of the industrious variety, the robust working-class melody, also incorporate Black people, who after slavery continued to suffer from segregation and exclusion?"[38] "I Hear America Singing" was written at the height of the sectional crisis in the United States, just shortly before the dawn of the Civil War. If Whitman had been promoting true freedom of democracy, he would have unequivocally included a description of black workers as well as white workers. Hirsch claims that "Whitman's song about America singing inspires and even necessitates" a response from African American poet Langston Hughes through his own poem "I, Too."[39] Hughes claimed that he, "the darker brother," had a voice in the collective song of American freedom.[40] In the very first line, "I, too, sing America" Hughes acknowledged that although Whitman omitted a black voice from "I Hear America Singing," the black population also benefited from the freedoms of democracy. Although at that moment, Hughes was sent "to eat in the kitchen," he vowed that "Tomorrow, I'll be at the table."[41] Hirsch states that "the house is America, and everyone should be welcomed in as equals," meaning that through this poem, Hughes corrected Whitman's definition of freedom which failed to be equitable and inclusive of the black audience.[42]

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[38] Hirsch, xxii.
[39] Hirsch, xxiv.
[40] Langston Hughes, "I, Too," 1926, FYS: American History Through Poetry, [WEB].
[41] Hughes.
[42] Hirsch, xxiv.

Like both Jefferson and Whitman, Emma Lazarus did not include race in "The New Colossus." While this choice led to the inclusion of foreign immigrants, the "golden door" cast a shadow over the acceptance of African Americans. A 1903 *New York Times* article, written twenty years after the poem's publication, praised Lazarus for depicting "the Liberty Statue as a symbol for a land where the down-trodden and despised have found a chance to develop their own careers."[43] Reminiscent of Whitman's praise of democracy, the "down-trodden" individuals discussed in the article referred to immigrants. However, this message of welcome extended only to the "wretched refuse" of foreign lands, contrasting sharply with the domestic internal struggles of African Americans already on American soil.[44] While Lazarus influenced many Americans to redefine their understanding of freedom to extend to the incoming aliens, millions of black people were facing extreme racism at the hands of Jim Crow laws in the south. In fact, certain Jim Crow laws were deemed constitutional in the landmark Supreme Court Case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The ruling declared segregation legal so long as "equal but separate accommodations [were made] for the white and colored races."[45] This ruling wasn't overturned until 1954 with the Supreme Court Case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Although Lazarus's poem extended freedom abroad, it exposed the lack of freedom African Americans had at home. Even as millions of immigrants were welcomed onto American shores, black citizens faced oppression within the United States.

These literary works were crucial to defining what freedom meant to Americans, yet failed to include African Americans in their interpretations of liberty and obstructed their path to receiving the full benefits of American democratic society. As African Americans progressed through history, they faced oppression and violence. Yet in the true spirit of American resilience, the fight against systemic racism in the search for true freedom carried on. Despite these poems' exclusion, there still exists the possibility that America will one day realize its purpose of truly being "the land of the free."[46]

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[43] "In Memory of Emma Lazarus: Tablet on Liberty Island to the Poetess Who Sang of the New Colossus," *The New York Times,* May 6, 1903 [The New York Times].
[44] Lazarus.
[45] *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) [National Archives].
[46] Frances Scott Key, "The Star-Spangled Banner," 1814, The American Museum of National History, [Smithsonian].