

Enslaved and Still Not Welcomed

Brenda McGriff

*“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!”*

— “New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus



BEFORE YOU READ:

1. The above verse is from a poem inscribed in the base of the Statue of Liberty. Read the verse carefully several times. Look up words you don't know. What is the message of the verse and why is it connected to the Statue of Liberty?
2. Study the title. What tension or conflict do you think the essay will explore?

Brought Here by Force

This poem, inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, welcomes all immigrants to America. This statue is

the most recognizable symbol for freedom, peace, and prosperity in the world. All of us who are not indigenous could be classified as immigrants. But our Black ancestors are not conventional immigrants. Our ancestors were brought here by force, as slaves. Does this poem apply to them and to their descendants? No, not really!

Still Yearning to Breathe Free

Both Blacks and immigrants arrive here “tired and poor.” A good portion of Blacks and immigrants suffer poverty, and we are tired of it. Both groups



This *Puck* magazine cover from 1908 has the word “lawlessness” in the smoke, and “The Unwritten Law” is the title of the book in her hand (with the gun). The image makes a caricature of “Lady Liberty,” calling attention to “the widespread lynchings, disenfranchisement, segregation, and poverty that African Americans experienced after the Civil War.”

—<https://www.nps.gov>

What does caricature mean? Discuss this particular caricature. Is it effective in making a point? Why or why not?

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

qualify as the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Everyone deserves to be free from oppression. But this is where the message of the poem separates the immigrants from the Blacks. When the poem says, “Send me the homeless tempest-tost to me,” who does that refer to? Clearly, that welcome is meant for the immigrants who enter the country conventionally.

In my experience, Blacks, even though we have been here for generations, are not welcomed in most communities in the U.S. We have been segregated by laws and traditions. When I look at what has happened to me and my friends and family members, I notice that Blacks are not allowed to participate in the workforce in a positive way. Housing is hard to come by, and good education is not accessible to many Black people.

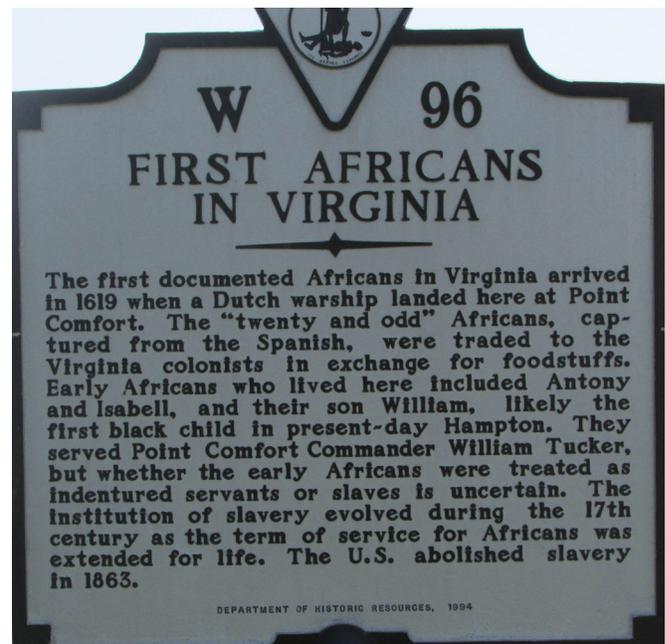
The Lamp Is Not Lifted for Us

The last line of the poem says, “I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” That lamp is lifted bright and high for many immigrants. There are programs to help them integrate into the country. While becoming citizens, immigrants are taught the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and other important laws of this country. They are also taught about different agencies that can help them with their personal needs to establish themselves. Food, shelter, and work are easier for immigrants to find in this country. It is my experience that a large portion of Blacks have no access to that information.

This doesn’t mean that some Blacks don’t achieve the “American Dream.” They do. They have money and education. It looks like the “golden door” is open to them. But in some ways, they are still stuck behind that “door.” If you are Black and prosperous, people think you are a criminal. They think that in order to acquire your good fortune, you have been dealing drugs and breaking laws.

When Will There Be Liberty for All of Us?

It seems to me that since the civil rights era, each time the plight of Black Americans is brought



This historical marker talks about the first enslaved Africans brought to the U.S. in 1619 and sold in exchange for food. Their story inspired The 1619 Project by Hannah-Jones, Nikole. Read further at this interactive website: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>

up, we are lost in a sea of other downtrodden people. So we are marginalized even further. Hopefully one day, the inscription on Lady Liberty will be relevant to immigrants, descendants of slaves, as well as indigenous people. This country can only be better if everyone can be treated as one.

AFTER YOU READ: What is the main idea of this essay? What arguments does the author use to make her case?

A native New Yorker, Brenda McGriff is a playwright and a freelance writer, who now resides in Manhattan. She was trained in her craft at HB Studio and Frank Silvera’s Writers Workshop. Her interests include writing, cooking, and being a concerned citizen of the world. She is currently in a Writing Workshop at East Village Access, a part of Community Access, in New York City.

