

## Praise for *Others Will Enter the Gates*

“*Others Will Enter the Gates* is a timely and necessary collection and to say that it is thought-provoking and versatile is an understatement. I urge everyone who cares about and loves the exiled and immigrant voices that constantly provide the new blood that keeps contemporary American Poetry lively and exciting to read and share this book, and to the teachers I say please don’t miss out on this great opportunity to use this wonderful collection in your courses.”

—Virgil Suárez

“Each time I open this book, each time I follow one of these fine poets through another gate in this country of a thousand gates, I feel like an immigrant again, realigned with my own Huguenot ancestors fleeing the religious tyrannies of France three centuries ago. To read these essays is to have your faith in the poetic future of this land restored, over and over again.”

—David Shumate

“*Others Will Enter the Gates* is a multilayered exploration by writers of different generations and backgrounds that passionately offers an urgent and daring insight into America’s ever-expanding literature on the immigrant experience.”

—Dike Okoro

“The great irony and most fabulous beauty of this very real and readable collection of essays are testament to why poetry has lasted for tens of thousands of years. No matter one’s circumstance, it’s outlived everything—every economic theory, every political ideology. Poetry exists because it is the language for which we have no language. What do we do when we can’t explain profound and genuine grief? What do we do when we can’t articulate profound and genuine joy? These poets, like all poets, make poems.”

—Ralph Angel

# **Others Will Enter the Gates**

Immigrant Poets on Poetry, Influences,  
and Writing in America

Edited by Abayomi Animashaun

Introduction by Kazim Ali



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# Preface

No anthology on writing, conceived for the purpose of print, whether of prose or poetry, can be exhaustive. This is because not *all* writers can be featured due, among other concerns, to the realities of scope and space *and* of merit and purse. Instead, the idea behind this project was to be panoramic, to bring as many immigrant poets into an anthology, whose main aim is to answer the question: How do émigré poets in the United States make sense of their immigrant experiences? To frame the discourse, the following areas of focus were suggested in the original call for submissions: a) *Influences* b) *What it means to be a poet in America* c) *How work fits within the American poetic tradition* and d) *How work fits within the poetic tradition of the (poet's) home country*.

The immigrant experience, however, is not neat and tidy. Thus, instead of squarely fitting in, most of the pieces in this anthology challenge and blur those categories in the call for submissions. In some cases, poets simply used one of the four categories as launching pads into more pressing concerns; in others, poets addressed two or more categories; and so on. Whatever fancies one held about straightforward categorizations were quickly dispelled. Also, each contributor's unique perspective on the experience of the émigré

poet in America is a reminder, however commonplace the idea, that when it comes to immigrant poets in America, or immigrants for that matter, there is no monolith.

Still, to allow for ease of navigation, the pieces in this anthology have been separated into five categories: *Self-Definition*, *Language*, *Influences*, *The Émigré Poet in America*, and *A Third Space*. These categories feel more suited to the pieces submitted for the collection. They feel less imposed. But, they are by no means absolute; because, which émigré poet in America has not wrestled with self-definition? Which has not, in some form, grappled with the dilemma of language or explored how influences from the home and new countries (terms here used loosely) speak to each other and affect her/him? Not to mention that the metaphor of *the third space* is one that many immigrants, poets and non-poets alike, find useful in conceptualizing their variegated experiences.

Also, readers will notice, and quickly too, that many of the pieces could easily have been placed in other, equally viable, categories. Just as the categories are not absolute, the arrangement and placement of the essays are not either. That said, it is no secret that the title of this collection of essays, *Others Will Enter the Gates*, is taken from the second section of Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", a stanza that carries a ring of the prophetic. However, despite the poem's auguries, one cannot ignore present day realities—the fact that even as this preface is being written undocumented immigrants are being detained, that others are denied entry into the United States, and that many *do not* enter the gates.

An immense gratitude to all who have supported this project at the beginning and at various points, especially Folabo Ajayi, Fred Marchant, Kim Stafford, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Also, thanks to the contributors for their engaging pieces. Thanks to Kazim Ali for

his patience and his introduction. Thanks too to the hardworking people at Black Lawrence Press and to Diane Goettel for believing in this project from the outset. Above all, thanks to Angela Leroux-Lindsey, a person of intelligence, vision, and kindness; wit, principle, and rigor, who was as much an equal partner as she was a co-editor in the long journey of bringing this collection to fruition. Without her, this anthology would not be possible.

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# Introduction

When a body crosses its first border—from inside another body and out into the world—it is *documented*, by a name, a gender, given a nationality (usually), its paternity notated. When we attain consciousness, how much is defined and shaped by this documentation? And who are we beyond that, intrinsically, in our flesh and breath and bones? Anything? The answer to the question matters because what then happens when we *change*—when we cross other borders, into other countries, languages, names and origins?

To move across a national border into another cultural context, to eat food from a different place, to put clothes on or take them off—these things *matter* because the body is an experiential location not a fixed phenomenon. Age and death teach us that much, and quickly, if their other lessons are harder to absorb. *Others Will Enter the Gates* collects a range of voices of immigrant poets to muse on these and other questions. In its prologue Danielle Legros Georges makes an argument against a monocultural or linear understanding of immigration—it is not a singular transition but a moment in process throughout one's life. She contextualizes this in American poetry by looking at such quintessentially “American” poets as Phillis Wheatley and Emma Lazarus, two earlier “immigrant” poets,

though the circumstances by which they came to American shores was radically different. She writes that American poetry “defies the monoculture America never truly was.”

Many of the poets whose essays are collected in this powerful anthology testify to the fact that crossing borders can be a “lethal” proposition—one can, as when crossing the mythological river Lethe, forget one’s language, even one’s self. In the opening section, the poets try to frame or problematize the notion of identity to begin with. How is it constructed by language? What limitations or possibilities are inherent in these arrangements? These are some of the questions tackled by the essays in Section 1, “Self-Definition.”

Poets often confront and engage this hybridity and multiplicity in various ways. Megan Fernandes, as an African Goan, gravitated toward those poets who worked against neat categorization, poets such as Jorie Graham, Medbh McGuckian and Eleni Sikelianos. She ties her interest in these poets and forms not only to her own cultural background but to a deeper historical context: “I was curious about the hybridity of languages, the way in which Portugal, as one of Europe’s oldest borders, allowed for a complex political and literary identity to make its way into imagery, tone and poetic forms.” This complexity of identity manifests not only in the content of a poet’s work but often in her approach to form. Sun Yung Shin, who came to the United States as an adoptee, writes in an innovative piece of her legal status as a family of one; with no forebear to mark her she has complete freedom for self-invention. She has the papers to prove it.

Zubair Ahmed, interestingly, claims that he found himself as a poet “when [he] stopped thinking in Bengali and switched to thinking in English.” The new language, with its unfamiliarity and unmoored from detritus of the past, appeared to help the poet

find ways to say things *newly*. It's precisely his in-between state that annealed poetic diction and expression into his mouth of new language.

In contrast, Anis Shivani critiques too easy a reliance on that trope. "One is always a citizen of one or another world," he contends. And in fact goes on to suggest, "Why let go of a convenient pain, which is actually a position of privilege? ... The immigrant poet is allowed to skate history, or rather, choose to withhold it if necessary, because her pain of emigration is supposed to make us cut her some slack." Shivani goes on to interrogate and critique the notion of an "immigrant identity" and to also critique the "benefits" of embracing such an identity.

Maria Victoria Grageda-Smith agrees, at least insofar as it comes to the notion of who is included or excluded from consideration in current discourse on poetry. Regarding Richard Blanco, who recited poetry at Barack Obama's second inauguration, she writes, "There is nothing distinctly Latino or 'immigrant' in Blanco's poem apart from the persona of the poet himself." Smith goes on to consider what the nature of the canon is in American poetry and how poets working in hybrid contexts of culture or language may or may not fit into it.

Rigoberto González, on the other hand, born in Bakersfield, California, resists definition as either an "American" writer or as a "Mexican-American" writer. Instead he chooses to identify as Chicano, "a term that situates [him] politically and geographically within the borders of the United States." Gonzalez points out that to identify as an American would "erase" important forces that have shaped him as a "citizen and artist." He goes on to interrogate the vexed relationship that he has to questions of translation and code-switching, two notions quite embraced by other writers in this anthology.

Kwame Dawes talks about his own multiple backgrounds in Ghana, Jamaica and his current embracing of the identity “African-American” which he had resisted for many years. He does say, “it was a political decision, not an emotional one.” Dawes continues to investigate what implication this pluracination has upon his life, in both practical and philosophical valences, as a writer.

Dawes is unsatisfied, in the end, with the limits his *documents*—birth certificate, passport, citizenship papers—place on his true identity: he is unable to be considered as a Jamaican writer, which is the one identity that resonates most truly to him. For every definition, there is a pigeonholing that occurs, preventing the writer—*any* writer—from openness in expression and reception of that expression. Perhaps Shivani is right? And in considering Gonzalez’ immigrant experience one remembers that old slogan “I didn’t cross the border, the border crossed me.”

Of course, immigrant poets may face a kind of pigeon-holing by readers and critics in both their use of language and chosen content, as Michael Dumanis points out in his essay, and his point makes me wonder how indeed “Michael Dumanis” might have been read or critically encountered had he chosen to publish under his original name: Mikhail Edouardovich Dumanis. He acknowledges though that while his own writing and approach to language is situated in an American literary context it does indeed draw from the Russian poetry he found on his parents bookshelves, “wildly declarative and loud in its rhythms, attentive to its surfaces, dramatic in its content, ambitious in its tackling of heady subjects . . . breathlessly full-throttle, full of sonic energy and internal rhyme.”

In the anthology’s second section, “Language,” poets worry more about the specific implication of the “translation” process on the

body and language of the poet. Fady Joudah wonders in his lyrical essay about what is born in such transference, or borne across into the new language. To him, time, money and politics play as much a relationship in the creation and recreation process of the individual human body as the actual distance in miles, the differences in food, clothing and weather. Later on in this book, Pauline Kaldas talks about that process like this: “I circle the immigrant experience—no longer a journey from one location to another but one that wraps around itself overlapping lives and histories.”

The body of the immigrant poet thus becomes a transformative and *translating* agent of language and culture, those constructions of identity. Andrei Guruianu picks up Shivani’s resistances to the strictures this role may place on the aesthetic development of a poet when he declares, “I sometimes feel as if I’m playing my own character, the embodiment of an ‘I’ whom everyone watches from a distance but who is nothing more than a flimsy façade.”

Of course Guruianu and Shivani are right in a way: there is nothing essentialist about the position of the immigrant other than his arrival. Even in one’s own country one can be alienated in both language and culture from the mainstream dominant group. And in this book too, we talk about “gates”—whether one is the keeper of them or the one who enters through with proper permission and documents or whether one is a gatecrasher, as it were. So the key concept is the “crossing” of that gate, the *translation* of one’s own self.

The process is not just an alchemy in the poem, it is transformative for the poet. Cristián Flores García discusses this in her essay. Rather than the new language changing her poetry, she claims that “Poetry gave me English.” It’s *in* poetry that she finds a new home. As Darwish once wrote, decrying the exile of the Palestinian people,

“My homeland is not a suitcase.” Later, after more than two decades of living in various cities around the world, he revised his line wistfully, “My homeland is a suitcase.”

Piotr Gwiazda shares his own concern with the idea of translation. He quotes Celan as saying, “In a foreign tongue the poet lies.” Yet both Celan and Gwiazda write in foreign tongues. Gwiazda goes on to cite Yoko Tawada, a Japanese-born writer who writes in German and relies on what she calls “exophony,” “a merging of two linguistic strata that can produce unique variations of syntax, diction, rhythm, accent, and so on.” These possibilities in the new language brought from the old seems to be one of the greatest gifts of the transitional position.

Vasyl Makhno points out the large numbers of writers who come to America to live but still write and publish in their own native languages and countries and that their literary lives unfold against those far contexts: “The next time I’m asked what it means to be a Ukrainian poet in America, I want to answer right away with a question: and what does it mean to be a Ukrainian poet in Ukraine?”

In the third section, “Influences,” several poets consider their sometimes difficult and oppositional relationships to the canons of their old nations and their new one. Gerardo Pacheco Matus wonders what happens to the poet who draws fully from the Anglo-American tradition when a more hybrid context is what is expected from teachers, critics, readers? Matus feels sometimes criticized for fully embracing the Western canon and must himself reconceptualize his relationship to new Latino writing.

Like Zubair Ahmed, some poets view the complicated political context of exile-in-language to be a position of power. Jose Rodriguez recounts a moment working with school children when he realized that his greatest influence in poetry was a name he didn’t even

think to share when talking about poetry. Two other poets, Abayo Animashaun and Ilya Kaminsky explore fully the influences of their poetic forebears, from their original home and their new one.

It might be easy to think of the immigrant as *displaced* or *unhomed*, but of course we know that one of the very real things that happens is either assimilation or acclimatization to the new country. In the opening essay of section four, “The Émigré Poet in America,” Matthew Shenoda muses on the ways the literature of the new country affects or changes what has been left behind. For Shabnam Piryaee, an exile from Iran, at the beginning poetry itself accompanied her. So embedded in daily life in Iran, the poetry she was so devoted to only heightened her sense of loneliness in America, where it occupies such a peripheral place. Marilène Phipps-Kettlewell can offer Piryaee only cold comfort: “To be a poet is to charm. To be a poet is to console. To be a poet is to silence.”

Barbara Jane Reyes has a different view of the artifact of experience, the documents that Sun Yung Shin uses to place herself: “My history, and my family history have always had documents and artifacts: posed and candid photographs, home movies, report cards, detention slips we forged with my parents’ signatures, diplomas and degrees, marriage certificates, evidence of immunization, naturalization papers, Philippine and American passports, Facebook posts, and Instagram accounts.” She goes on to discuss how the poetry of mythology and oral tradition works against the solidification of identity that these documents—hard copy and electronic—otherwise engender.

In a break from the somewhat more theoretical conversations in the other essays, Ocean Vuong recounts his move to New York City as a young man with \$564 in his pocket and little else. Like many of the other essayists he breaks off his narrative digressions several

times by saying “We’ll save that for another essay.” It is as if the plurality of each experience is always already too much for a single try.

In the closing section, “A Third Space,” the essays try to formulate what new possibilities their border-crossing has wrought. Lisa Birman came from an English-speaking country and so she does not share the same language conflict shared by many of the other poets, though perhaps because of this she still feels—and admits she will perhaps *always* feel—in an in-between state: “I never meant to leave Australia on a permanent basis. I am still unconvinced that I have.”

On the other hand, Sholeh Wolpé, like Anis Shivani, is wary of looking backward: “Shadows have a way of following their makers and questions can be more dangerous than facts.” Still, Wolpé—who like many others in the anthology, is actually *unable* to return “home”—confesses in heartbreaking and contradictory parentheticals, “This is (not) my country . . . They call me an immigrant writer when I am a native of this land.” America *has* to be her home because she has no other.

Poetry may then come from that place of defamiliarization—of language and culture—and as such as strangely more easily accessible to those who have crossed such borders into strange lands. Ewa Crusciel extends Ahmed’s notion when she suggests that “we can have a new beginning in a new language.” Her essay goes on to explore the third language—the one that the poet herself creates in between the mother tongue and the new language.

Of course, sometimes the linguistic differences are not so much political as very, very personal: Vandana Khanna talks of the language barrier between she and her grandmother: “My grandmother spoke no English and my Hindi often stumbled from my lips, clumsy and uncertain . . .” It’s Khanna who understands then, “I can belong to more than one place . . . I don’t have to choose.”

Jee Leong Koh considers this problem of belonging in his lyrical essay while Majid Naficy explains, “My body lived in LA but my soul was still rummaging through the ruins of a lost revolution in Iran.” In his poems he finds the Pacific and the Caspian merging in ways that confuse and disturb him. And not only has his subjects blurred, but the *reader* he brought with him from Iran has also changed: “He does not want to live in the past.”

Pauline Kaldas is, like me, part of what she called the “one-and-a-half immigrant generation,” children who arrive with their parents, having spent the earlier part of their lives elsewhere and arriving in the new country in older childhood. She writes at a different angle than Reyes, also part of this generation, on the so-called American Dream—that for many in this generation, the pressures are extreme—familial expectations to adhere to the older traditions vie with growth and identity with the new culture.

Since several of the previous essays have examined how the “immigrant” writer is *received* by the larger readership, it is interesting that David McLoughlin doesn’t even identify with being an “immigrant” because, as he points out, “In Ireland, the verb has been outward-bound for hundreds of years.” He challenges Pacheco Matus by admitting, “I want it both ways: I want to be free of the constraining aspects of my tradition, but free also to use (or abuse) it in ways that suit me.”

In the end I can only come back to my own body, born in England to immigrant parents there, taken back to India and then on to Canada when Trudeau opened the borders, and then following jobs to the United States. As an adult my restless body continues its wandering, not as a tourist, but to live and work—all over the United States from the Hudson Valley to Washington, DC, to San Francisco and the Southwest as well as across the world—to France, Spain,

Palestine, India, Uruguay, Israel—it is in that wandering that I find myself, in that loneliness of perception does my writing then reveal.

Nerval once said that you ought to travel so much that even your home becomes strange to you, but I have no hope other than the opposite—that is to say: once you cross borders often enough you find really that *every* place must be somehow home. The poets collected here testify, both in these statements and in their own work, that such a home is possible.

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