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I Am American

A series of monologues representing the diverse immigrant populations that built our country and made it prosper. Ideal for virtual presentation. . . .

by Jennifer E. Tibbets

Characters

MAX LITTLEFOOT

JANE BRADFORD

TY SMITH

BETHANY MCLAUGHLIN

GRETCHEN SCHRIVER

MICHAEL LU

SHANA BLOOMSTEIN

VINCENT LOPINTO

JUANITA RAMIREZ

THREE SILHOUETTES

TIME: *Present.*

SETTING: *Bare stage.*

AT RISE: *MAX LITTLEFOOT stands center. Behind him, THREE SILHOUETTES stand reaching upward toward the sky. As MAX LITTLEFOOT begins his speech, SILHOUETTES enact Amerindian dance to off-stage drumbeat.*

MAX LITTLEFOOT: I am American. My ancestors were here long, long before white Europeans “discovered” America. My people lived freely across North America before our land was stolen from us and we were forced to live in the barren land the Americans didn’t want—what they called reservations. It is strange for me to hear the story of Columbus discovering America, when my people had lived here since man first walked the earth. My ancestors could read the earth. They saw a scuff in the dirt and would find deer to hunt. They smelled the thawing riverbanks and knew salmon were on their way upstream to spawn. They touched the rough bark of a pine and it would become a strong wigwam.

My ancestors were here before America was; now we live on forgotten reservations. There is still anger about how my people were treated. This is where I come from, though. . . it’s what I know, whatever it’s called. Tree roots don’t know the difference. Neither do I. I am American. (*Drumbeat stops. MAX exits right. JANE BRADFORD enters and walks down left. SILHOUETTES line up one behind the other up left and*

sway as though cramped together on a ship, slowly making their way across the back of the stage. They quietly whistle wind sounds as they move.)

JANE BRADFORD: I am American. My great-to-the-7th-power-grandfather sailed in 1634 into Massachusetts Bay during the Great Migration. In England he worked on land that he would never own because he was not “noble.” If he went to New England, and promised five years of service, then he would go from being a husbandman to a yeoman and own land. He chose New England, and when he arrived, he worked for one of the Puritan leaders. He took his whole family. They even brought the family cow, which cost more to bring than it did the family. They had to bring everything, though, because early on there were no grocery stores, or hardware stores, or anything.

A lot of people did not survive the journey over. (*Whistling stops. 1ST SILHOUETTE falls over.*) Or they did not survive the winter. (*2ND SILHOUETTE falls over. 3RD SILHOUETTE remains standing alone, facing the audience.*) It was a difficult life.

Before my great-to-the-7th-power-grandfather left, he and his family had to sign a loyalty oath to England. But his children’s and grandchildren’s hearts—and my heart—are loyal to America. (*JANE exits left. TY SMITH enters right and walks down right. SILHOUETTES rise. 1ST SILHOUETTE pantomimes swinging an ax. 2ND SILHOUETTE pantomimes hoeing a field. 3RD SILHOUETTE pantomimes scrubbing a floor. All three quietly hum “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”*)

TY SMITH: I am American. My ancestors probably were Yoruba, from the West African coast. Sometime during the 1750s they were sold into slavery. I say “probably” because no records were kept of my people; slave traders pre-

ferred to consider them livestock. They survived the Middle Passage, the trip from Africa, chained below deck. They were brought to Virginia and sold—mothers to one owner, children to another, torn apart.

My ancestors weren’t allowed to go to school. They just worked sun-up to sundown, growing the cotton that went north to textile mills, then traded back to Europe. Many people got rich. Just not my people, who did all the work.

Life was so hard, my ancestors invented the Blues to ease the pain. (*SILHOUETTES stop their pantomime and come together, holding hands, now humming or singing a verse from a Blues song.*) They sang together in church, played washboards and spoons when they couldn’t buy instruments, and kept believing life would get better. It took over one hundred years for my ancestors to be free, and another century and more to overcome laws and customs that held them back. Still today, in many areas, the struggle continues. I do not understand why. (*Pause*) I am American, though. My family’s blood is in this very soil. (*TY crosses exits left, crossing paths with BETHANY MCLAUGHLIN, who enters and crosses to center. SILHOUETTES release hands and pantomime arriving in America, looking around scared, with imaginary pole sacks on their backs.*)

BETHANY MCLAUGHLIN: I am American. My people left Ireland in 1847 because of the Potato Famine. They sold their grain to pay rents to English landlords and grew potatoes for themselves to eat. Potatoes fried, potatoes mashed, potatoes baked. You get the idea. Anyway, potato blight hit and the potatoes shriveled to black dust in the dirt, stinking up the fields. My ancestors didn’t want to starve like their neighbors, so they came to America. They arrived with only the clothes on

their backs. (*SILHOUETTES drop to their knees and very slowly rise up to stand tall when BETHANY begins to talk.*) They arrived in Boston. . .New York. . .Chicago. One of the brothers went North to the timber mills. The other worked to build roads and lay streetcar tracks, dirty work no one wanted, but my ancestors took what they could get. After the Civil War my great-great-great-grandfather and his brother both became policemen. (*SILHOUETTES walk as though they are on patrol.*) Their wives were housekeepers. (*1ST SILHOUETTE pantomimes dusting shelves at the rear of the stage.*) More brothers and cousins kept coming over, and America became home to them all. It has been ever since. (*BETHANY exits right. GRETCHEN SCHRIVER enters left and walks down left. SILHOUETTES congregate up right and throughout the speech slowly spread out across the back of the stage, legs and arms spread wide to represent the prairie.*)

GRETCHEN SCHRIVER: I am American. In 1885 my family left the newly united Germany. It was the Industrial Revolution and machines were replacing people. My family was no longer needed. America was still wide open, though. They entered through Galveston, Texas, and eventually made their way up the Mississippi River to Milwaukee. They farmed. They took all that land, that prairie grass waving mile after mile, and started turning it into the infamous bread basket. They built churches and music halls, and, well, they really settled into America. (*GRETCHEN exits left. MICHAEL LU enters left and comes center. SILHOUETTES begin pantomiming hammering spikes on railroad tracks.*)

MICHAEL LU: I am American. My ancestor, Chang Lu, first arrived in California in 1863 with visions of gold

mines. He came to San Francisco Bay and was instead recruited to work for the Central Pacific Railroad. He worked there—for one dollar a day—all of the five years it took to build those tracks. He lost three fingers to dynamite, he lost two friends to heat-stroke in the desert, and he certainly lost his visions of gold. He was there, though, when the eastern line met West in Utah. America was united.

After that Chang farmed in the Bay Area and lived in Chinatown. (*SILHOUETTES now embrace each other up center. They then turn around and link arms, forming a circle, outward facing.*) He sent for his wife just in time before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 went into effect, which prevented any more Chinese people coming to America. In fact, the government didn't allow any more people from China until 1943, when we were allies in World War II.

My grandfather still lives in Chinatown. Still speaks Chinese. He owns a grocery store. My parents and I live in the city. We are all Americans. (*MICHAEL exits right, crossing paths with SHANA BLOOMSTEIN, who crosses to the down left corner as she speaks. SILHOUETTES unlink arms and begin a slow-motion dance, rotating in a circle, then reversing direction, clapping their hands above their heads, stomping their feet.*)

SHANA BLOOMSTEIN: I am American. Before my family even came, there were others that had settled here, loving the idea of a country that allowed all religions, a country that would give “bigotry no sanction,” in the words of George Washington in 1790 at the Newport Hebrew Congregation. My family arrived in 1903, fleeing mob attacks against the Jews in Eastern Russia. They were poor, and spoke only Yiddish when they moved into New York's Lower East Side. They went to

work in some of the clothing factories owned by their predecessors. They were made fun of for speaking Yiddish, but were helped all the same and learned American ways. The factory where my great-great-grandfather worked was one of the first to have a labor union. (*SILHOUETTES stop their dance.*) My great-great-uncle opened one of the first movie theaters, called a Nickelodeon, in an abandoned building downtown. (*3RD SILHOUETTE pantomimes a tragic death.*) Many people do not take the time to learn about other people's religion, which over the centuries has led to discrimination and persecution. My people have worked hard to provide for their families and their communities. I am proud to call this country my home. I am American. (*SHANA exits left. VINCENT LOPINTO enters right. SILHOUETTES congregate and pantomime an animated conversation.*)

VINCENT LOPINTO: I am American. In 1910 my great-great grandfather came to America from Naples, Italy. He entered through New York City's Ellis Island. The only English he spoke was "America!" He moved into a one-room apartment on New York's Upper East Side, and after a few years married an Italian girl also living in America. They moved to Brooklyn, and my great-great-grandfather got a job in construction with others that had come from Naples before him. I think he was scared to death, to be perfectly honest. Back in Italy, though, he would work his whole life for nothing. America promised to be different. A country where dreams could come true. (*VINCENT exits right. JUANITA RAMIREZ enters left and goes center. SILHOUETTES begin a synchronized pantomime of harvesting fruit from an imaginary tree.*)

JUANITA RAMIREZ: I am American.

Half my family is from New Mexico. They stayed after the Mexican War ended in 1848. They were promised citizenship, but they didn't get it until New Mexico officially became a state in 1912. My other half is from Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, just across the border from El Paso, Texas. In 1942, because of the war, the government let temporary workers in, called *braceros*, and every year after that my grandfather would travel up the coast following the crops, from strawberries in the valley, to apples and black cherries in Oregon. He worked 12-hour days and made minimum wage. One year my grandfather just stayed in Oregon. He did not return to Mexico, and instead met my grandmother, opened a business and became a backbone of the community. We are American. (*JUANITA remains center. SILHOUETTES slowly raise their arms above their heads, as at beginning. In the following, the cast no longer represents specific persons, but others that have made America their home. Each successive actor should begin speaking just before the previous actor has finished, so the speeches layer on top of one another.*)

MAX LITTLEFOOT (*Entering right and coming to stand at JUANITA's right*): I am American. My parents traveled from India to go to medical school.

JANE BRADFORD (*Entering left to stand at JUANITA's left*): I am American. My grandmother married a soldier who had been stationed in Japan.

TY SMITH (*Entering right to stand beside MAX*): I am American. My mother asked for political asylum from Cuba.

BETHANY MCLAUGHLIN (*Entering left to stand beside JANE*): I am American. My parents adopted me from Russia.

GRETCHEN SCHRIVER (*Entering right to stand beside TY*): I am American. My grandfather moved here from the Czech Republic to work in the coal mines.

MICHAEL LU (*Entering left to stand beside BETHANY*): I am American. We left Korea when I was three years old.

SHANA BLOOMSTEIN (*Entering right to stand beside GRETCHEN*): I am American. My father worked in Saudi Arabia and was transferred here sixteen years ago.

VINCENT LOPINTO (*Entering left to*

stand beside MICHAEL): I am American. My parents were sick of being beaten down by the sugar cane plantations in Puerto Rico and came here.

JUANITA RAMIREZ: I am American. We were brought here to escape starvation in Somalia. I am also a Muslim, and yearn to be treated with the respect every person deserves. (*SILHOUETTES join hands above their heads.*)

ALL (*In unison*): We are American.

THE END

PRODUCTION NOTES I Am American

CHARACTERS: 4 male; 5 female; 3 male and female silhouettes.

PLAYING TIME: 20 minutes.

COSTUMES: Regular, modern-day clothes. Silhouettes wear all black.

PROPERTIES: A drum.

SETTING: A bare stage.

LIGHTING and SOUND: The backdrop is brightly lit to highlight the silhouettes' movements in front of it.

Note: If desired, the play may be performed without the actors representing Silhouettes, since the speeches can stand alone.