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# This is what America looks like

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## **This is What American Looks Like**

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This children's book narrative was authored by undergraduate students enrolled in Professor Eckelmann Berghel's HIST 3920: United States Race and Childhood course in 2018 Spring at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

## Opening Graphic

(Illustration --Mrs. Baker standing in front of blackboard telling students the project -- by Lauren)

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Eleanor sat at her desk one morning in Mrs. Baker's 3rd grade class. She loved school and eagerly awaited the bell that signaled the beginning of class. Her classmate Nicholas approached her with an angry look on his face. "Why don't you go back to your own country?" Nicholas yelled, looking smugly at Eleanor. Mrs. Baker shook her head at him. "Nicholas, that's not nice at all. You'd be surprised at how many of us have immigrant roots! Besides, not all people who look different are from other countries! I want everyone to go home and ask their parents about how their family history. Tomorrow you'll all give presentations about your heritage, and we'll all learn something!"

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The next morning, the bell rang, and all the students of Mrs. Baker's filed into the classroom and took their seats. "Good morning, everyone!" greeted Mrs. Baker. "Today we'll start by telling our stories about our families and how they came to America. Who wants to go first?"

"I do, Mrs. Baker!" cried Gabriel, eagerly jumping out of his chair.

"All right, Gabriel, go ahead," responded Mrs. Baker, smiling.

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(Illustration: Genevieve as a young child (black girl) in front of "Café Napoléon" with little suitcase)

"My mom told me that our family came to America 200 years ago!" started Gabriel. Counting on his fingers, he continued, "My great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, named Genevieve, came to New Orleans in Louisiana from the new country Haiti when she was just a baby in 1809. Even though they lived in America, they spoke French and so did everyone in their neighborhood. Like this, "Bonjour! Bonjour!"

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“Unlike a lot of other Black people in America then, who were slaves and had to work for white people, she got to learn to read and lived in their own house. Genevieve’s daddy, my great-great-great-great-...”

“We get the idea, Gabriel,” said Mrs. Baker, winking.

“Yeah well he was an upholsterer, which means he made fancy chairs and things like that. He worked really hard to make sure Genevieve could go to school and made sure they had a nice house and everything. Some other families in their neighborhood had slaves, and Genevieve couldn’t understand that even though they looked like her family, they had to work for families.”

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Illustration: exasperated/ concerned looking young woman (Genevieve) holding a newspaper looking at job listings — text visible on newspaper in French

“Classifieds: Job Listings.... Seeking a domestic ...”

“Les petits annonces: Postes à pourvoir.... Cherchant une domestique....”

“But Genevieve’s life still wasn’t so easy. When she got older, more white English-speaking Americans moved to New Orleans. Unlike the French-speaking whites, they thought that all Black people should be slaves, so they made really unfair laws about jobs and schools and things like that. They made it hard for Genevieve and later her husband to find good jobs, and they made it hard to live in good neighborhoods and to send their kids to good schools.

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“Even though Genevieve was never a slave, she still had to deal with racism. When she grew up, she decided to fight against slavery and racism with the abolitionists, the people who wanted to free the slaves. Because she could read and write, she helped to tell the slaves about ways to run away, what was happening in the abolitionist movement, and that people were talking about the possibility of a civil war.

“My 8-greats grandmother was a real hero, and I’m going to try to be like her when I grow up too.”

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“Great job, Danielle! Next up is Grace,” said Mrs. Baker. Grace walked up to the front of the class, standing proudly with her sticker-covered piece of paper.

“My Great Great Grandfather came here from China in the 1880’s through California. He came with his father because they both wanted to work and send money back to their family in

China. They were one of many Chinese families who moved to America to find jobs. They lived in a house with a few other Chinese immigrants, but it wasn't quite big enough for all of them to fit. My great great grandfather missed his family often, but found a bit of comfort in the familiar sights and sounds of Chinatown.

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He was only a kid, but he had to work very hard to support his family. He tried to work in the laundry business, but everyone told him to go home. He tried again by applying for jobs in people's homes, but no one wanted him there. His mother told him he could help out by embroidering intricate details on clothing that she was sewing for her job, and so he did. He worked hard at home to help his family out, staying up late into the night to finish his work.

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Illustration: A photo of Grace's great great grandfather pictured in traditional Chinese clothes (sans queue, although other family members are shown wearing it so kids can know what it looks like) with his family, smiling proudly in front of their small house. Resembling a graduation picture in the poses and smiles to represent his success in spite of never having gone to an unsegregated school.

He wanted to go to school, but he could only go to schools with other Chinese kids. He felt incredibly lonely and detached in a world where everyone wanted him to become "a proper American," but no one would help him do it! He wore different clothes, spoke a different language, and had to work harder than most kids did at his age. He eventually learned English and stopped wearing his round hat so he could fit in better. He cut the long braid of his *queue*, a hairstyle men were required to have in China, because he knew he probably wouldn't return home. He never did get to go to a university or even an unsegregated school, but I'm proud of him anyway.

I know my great great grandfather sacrificed a lot for me to be here, and I am thankful for that."

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The class clapped and Grace sat down. "Next up, what about you, Nicholas? What did you learn about your family history?" Mrs. Baker gestured for Nicholas to walk to the front of the class.

"My mom took me to the nursing home to see my great-grandfather, so I could hear my family history straight from him."

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(Illustration--Steamboat on the ocean, in the middle of nowhere)

In 1913, my great-grandfather and his family got on a big steamboat to come to America. They had to stay in the bottom of the boat with loads of other people going to America too because they didn't have enough money to ride in the rooms with beds. It took a whole week for the boat to go all the way across the ocean, and my great-grandfather said it looked like they were a mound of ants all piled on top of each other.

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My great-grandfather arrived at Ellis Island, which is an island beside New York City. He came from Austria-Hungary, which was a kingdom that doesn't even exist anymore. Every person who arrived at Ellis Island got inspected before they were let into America. If someone looked sick, looked like they had a bad back or something that would stop them from working, or the government workers didn't think they were smart enough, they were sent back to where they came from on another boat.

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His family came to America because they wanted a new life and had no opportunities in their old country. Their only options were to either accept being very poor for their entire lives in Austria-Hungary or come to America for a chance to not have to struggle to just have enough food. They lived in a little apartment in New York City in a building full of other immigrants that all spoke different languages.

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They worked very hard to be able to send my great-grandfather to school and to make it up to them, he tried to teach them everything he learned at school. Even though he wasn't allowed to go to the same school as American children, he learned English in school very quickly. His parents could never learn English well and had to rely on my great-grandfather to talk for them. Luckily his parents worked with other immigrants that spoke the same language as them.

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(Illustration--City Outline, Smog)

He had to quit going to school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade because his parents needed him to work because they had very little money and living in New York City was expensive. His parents got him a job at the factory they had been working at. He was the youngest worker there and the also

the one that spoke English the best. Because of this, all the workers relied on my great-grandfather to talk to the boss, who was born in America and only spoke English. The workers who couldn't speak English were treated a lot worse by the boss than the ones that could. I never realized how difficult it was to come to a new country and deal with people treating you badly just because you want to make a better life for yourself.

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“Thank you Nicholas! Now, Eleanor, let's hear your story,” Mrs. Baker said with a smile.

“Hola...mi nombre es Eleanor. I am from Guatemala. I brought a picture of my family and of my best friend, Esperanza. She's my dog. She has been my best friend since I was 4 years old.

Mi padre, my father, had to go back to mi abuelita, my grandmother in Guatemala. She is sick. That's what my mom told me and my brothers. She doesn't think he will come back to live with us. I didn't get to say goodbye to him because I was in school when he left that day. I cried a lot because I don't know why he would leave without giving me muchas hugs and kisses. I don't know when I'll see him again. My father loves me very much. I know he does.

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(Illustration--Half Page with Text--Truck traveling on a road, mountains, terrain--dark/ominous)

Papi is very far away. We did not have a car. I don't know anybody in Guatemala with a car! They cost a lot of money. We got to ride in a truck! My parents worked hard to get us all on that truck. It was their dream to come to los Estados Unidos, the United States. They talked about it every night during dinner. “One day we will all live in the United States, si Dios quieri, if God wills it”, Papi would say.

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And one day it happened! We packed only two little backpacks for all of us because Papi said we couldn't take very much. We left at night. It was dark and I was tired, but we had to go right then. Papi gave a man I didn't know a lot of money and we got into a truck with lots of people. I didn't know any of them. When we got to the truck, Papi said, “Eli, you must be very quiet”. For four days, I sat in my mom's lap, thirsty and hungry, papi whispering back and forth with other men. I was not sure when the ride would end, it seemed endless, and for a moment I began to worry we would not make it and what would happen to me and my family if the truck never stopped.

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It was scary. We weren't allowed to make any noise. Men fought a lot, the driver would stop only twice a day to let us use the bathroom. Every time the truck stopped, my parents would pray... "Dios, please, protect us," To make me calm, papi promised to get me a puppy when we got to our new home. That's why I have Esperanza!

I am glad to be here, except it was very hard at first. My father was never home because he worked long days. My mother worried whether we would get to eat or not...sometimes they would give my brothers and I food, but they would not eat. My parents knew that coming here would be good for us, but it was a long time before it was good. America has better jobs, better schools, doctors... everything!

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Papi helped build houses before he left to help my sick abuelita, and my mother washes clothes for people and cleans houses too. My parents work hard, but they do not make a lot of money. Sometimes I miss having eggs, black beans, and muchas frutas, lots of fruit for breakfast. Ah... the fruit in Guatemala is so sweet! Pero, Dios sabe...God knows. America is my home and I am here to stay.

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"Thank you all for telling such rich stories about your family's heritage today! Grab your book bags and coats, we can all walk out to the bus single file!"

As the class made their way to the bus line, Nicholas picked up his backpack and saw Eleanor's next to his. He picked it up and turned around to Eleanor right behind him.

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(Illustration--Eleanor and Nicholas together, School Bus in Background)

"Here is your backpack, Eleanor. I wanted to apologize for what I said yesterday. It was not nice and I understand now that what you and your family went through to come to America was not easy. I hope you can forgive me and know that I am glad you are here." Eleanor smiled. "I forgive you. We can play on the playground tomorrow, okay?" Nicholas smiled back and nodded. "Maybe you could bring Esperanza?"

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End Graphic

(Illustration--Esperanza the Dog)