A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

COMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE
Race and Immigration

To what extent does race and ethnicity play a role in immigration?

One lesson

Objectives
- Students will understand the racial and ethnic conflicts in immigration
- Students will use primary sources for understanding

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
The United States has a history of treating people of different colors, races and ethnicity differently. The Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of immigrants who could enter the United States from what were then considered undesirable areas such as Southern and Eastern Europe. Even before, in 1882, the Chinese were excluded from immigrating and by 1917, the United States had banned the immigration of most other Asians as well. The Immigration Act of 1965 was an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War. It eliminated the quotas and severe restrictions on Asian immigration, and mainly based entry into the United States on family reunification and, to a lesser extent, job skills. In large part owing to the 1965 law, there was a huge increase in immigration from Asia, the Caribbean (including Jamaica) and Latin America.

Jamaicans have arrived in the United States in significant numbers since the early 20th century, seeking economic opportunities in its growing economy. (The first large wave of Jamaican immigrants arrived in the first decades of the 20th century, while the second and larger wave came after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965.) In coming to the United States, Jamaicans moved to a society with different conceptions of race than they were used to in their home country.

A color line exists within the African-American community as well. This makes the question of immigration and race even more complicated.

ACTIVITIES
I. Opening activity — Analyze the Jamaican beauty pageant
   A. Show students Document C: Winners of Jamaican Beauty Contest, based on ten skin colors, 1955, and the interviews with Fern Khan, Documents D and E.

   B. Use the photo to answer the following questions:
      1. What do the names of each woman refer to?
      2. What do the different categories tell us about these women?
      3. Is using race in a Jamaican pageant “racist”? Why or why not?
      4. How are perceptions of race different in the United States and Jamaica?
         What do you think accounts for these differences?
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II. Read and synthesize – Relate story of Fern Khan to immigration and racism
   Read excerpt of oral history.
   1. What was Fern's experience in America?
   2. What conclusion can you draw about differences in views of race in Jamaica and the
      United States from this oral history and the Jamaican beauty pageant?

DOCUMENTS
A: (Can be used as background for teacher or as a handout for students.)
   Excerpt from “Race and Color: Jamaican Migrants in London and New York City” by
B: Background on Fern Khan
C: Winners of Jamaican Beauty Contest, based on ten skin colors, 1955
D: Interview with Fern Khan by Tara Jean Hickman, Educational Associate of LaGuardia and
   Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College/CUNY, January 15, 2008
E: Interview with Fern Khan by Professor Richard K. Lieberman, Director of the LaGuardia
   and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College/CUNY.
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BEING BLACK IN LONDON AND NEW YORK: THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Whether Jamaicans settled in London or New York, they experienced a painful change: being black was more of a stigma than it had been in Jamaica. As members of a racial minority group, they were subject to prejudice and discrimination of a sort they had not encountered back home. This does not mean, of course, that black skin was not a stigma in Jamaica. Black skin has long been devalued on the Island, and this stems from Jamaica’s history as a plantation colony based on African slavery. Whites, in the days of slavery, were masters, and throughout the colonial period, rulers. Indeed, a white bias has permeated the entire society since the 18th century. To most lower-class Jamaicans — who not only comprise the majority of the population but who are, by and large, black — being black is another symbol, along with their poverty, of their low social position.

Blackness in Jamaica, however, is not in itself — and has not been for the past few decades — a barrier to upward mobility or to social acceptance “at the top”. For one thing, blacks are a majority on the Island. According to the 1960 census, some 91 out of every 100 Jamaicans were, in Rex Nettleford’s (1972:27) words, touched by the tarbrush: 76 percent were classified as pure African and fewer than one percent as pure white or European. For another, culture, occupation, and wealth can override skin color in importance so that one can, in a sense, “change” color in Jamaica. Education, manners, wealth, and associates — not just fair skin or such European features as straight hair, thin lips, and a narrow nose — are crucial. “In Jamaica”, one Brooklyn migrant said, “we didn’t have color prejudice, we have class prejudice”. Black or colored Jamaicans who become doctors or lawyers, for example, or high-level civil servants, who acquire the cultural characteristics associated with white Europeans, and who maintain a “respectable” standard of living are often thought of “as if” they were white.

Black and colored Jamaicans in influential and important jobs are hardly “token representatives” of their race. Colored Jamaicans, in fact, have long predominated in middle-class occupations on the Island, a legacy from the days of slavery when free people of color (the product of unions between white men and slave women) had economic and other privileges denied to slaves. While after emancipation in 1838 whites virtually monopolized the highest positions on the Island and blacks, the lowest positions, colored Jamaicans were preferred for prestigious and well-paid occupations, partly because of prejudice and partly because they had prior access to education (Smith, 1970). The days of white rule are gone, of course, and middle-class Jamaicans are less likely to be light-skinned. Since the end of World War II, and especially since independence in 1962, black as well as colored Jamaicans have dominated public affairs, and it is they who fill prestigious and professional positions in the Island. This is obviously quite different from the situation in Britain and the United States.
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“I wasn’t aware of my color till I got here, honestly”, said one New York man. In nearly identical words, a London man told me he never knew he was black until he came to England. Both men, of course, knew they had black skin when they lived in Jamaica. But at home they had been in good jobs (one was a medium-sized farmer, the other a policeman) and they were respected in their communities. In England and the United States they are, as blacks, members of a definite minority. Education, income, and culture do not, as in Jamaica, partially “erase” one’s blackness. Nor are whites sensitive to shade differences, as people are in Jamaica. Whatever their achievements or their shade, Jamaicans, as blacks, are victims of racial discrimination in housing, employment, and education, and of hostility from sections of the white population. Thus, the two men cited above, like so many other Jamaicans in New York and London, became for the first time acutely and painfully aware that black skin was a significant status marker.

Although being black is more of a stigma in London and New York, the meaning and effects of blackness are not the same among Jamaicans in the two cities. This is related to the enormous contrasts in the structure of race relations in London and New York.

The crucial difference in the racial contexts of the two societies is that in New York, unlike in London, there is a large, residentially segregated native black population. New York Jamaicans, submerged in the wider black community, move in a more “black” social world than their London counterparts. At the same time, however, Jamaicans in New York differentiate themselves from indigenous blacks. The net result is that their position as black Jamaicans is less painful and their contacts with whites more limited than in London. It is also easier for them to participate in many activities.
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Background on Fern Khan

Fern Khan (formerly Fern June Spence) is a Jamaican immigrant who came to the United States in the 1950s to attend college. She initially went to Roosevelt University in Chicago, Ill., in 1957. She transferred a year later to New York University where she earned her B.A. in 1962 and her Masters of Social Work in 1964. Khan became an educator and is currently the Dean of Continuing Education at the Bank Street College of Education.

Khan attended universities in the United States because of the competition to attend the lone university in Jamaica. She was lured to the United States by the opportunities it afforded and she had family in New York, which eased her transition. Because Khan arrived in the United States before the implementation of the Immigration Act of 1965, she could only come to the U.S. as a student because of the small immigration quota allotted to Jamaica. After the law took effect in 1968, it became much easier for her to become a permanent resident of the United States and eventually become a citizen.

Fern Khan's (Formerly Fern June Spence) Jamaican Passport
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Winners of Jamaican Beauty Contest, based on ten skin colors, 1955

A spectrum of Jamaican beauty displayed before a cannon of Fort Charles, Port Royal. "Too white" was the heading of this contest, run in 1955 as part of the Jamaica 500 celebrations.
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Interview with Fern Khan by Tara Jean Hickman, Educational Associate of the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College/CUNY, January 15, 2008

This conversation examined the culture of Jamaican racial identity as compared with that of the United States. Of particular interest, the interviewee described how the contestants in Jamaican beauty pageants identified their skin complexion by comparing it to different colors of wood.

Hickman: First I asked Khan to describe the difference between racial identity in Jamaica and the U.S.:

Khan: There is a completely different cultural context. In Jamaica the majority of the population is Black, and so Jamaicans did not think of themselves as a minority group as exists in the U.S. This is a different environment for the understanding of race and identity. I came here as a young immigrant and brought my Jamaican values and perspectives on identity. Here, I gained an expanded knowledge about race and racism.

Hickman: Can you describe the first time you felt like a minority in the U.S.?

Khan: When I first moved here, I was an undergraduate student at Roosevelt University in Chicago. The majority of students in all my classes were white. I would always look around and take note how many students of color were in a class. While some classes had one or two students of color, there were times when I was the only one.

Hickman: Did this make you uncomfortable?

Khan: Not really, because this was my first experience in America and I was observing and learning a lot in general. In those days in the U.S. (the late ’50s and to ’60s), you were either Negro or colored, not persons of color as is used today, but in Jamaica neither term was generally used to describe individuals so this was new for me. However, I lived then with a Jamaican family so I went home daily to a familiar culture which helped in my becoming acculturated. In addition, there was a large enough Jamaican population in Chicago, and I met many new friends, several of whom were studying at a range of nearby universities. I embraced meeting new people including my professors and that was the great part about being here; it was not a negative experience.

Hickman: In looking at this photo of beauty pageant contestants in Jamaica, what can you tell me about the beauty pageant? Have you ever been to one?

Khan: No, I have never been, but this was a big event in Jamaica sponsored by the Star Newspaper (more like the [New York] Daily News here) which grouped female contestants into “Ten Types” linked to the variety of wood found in Jamaica, from Ebony (black) to Satinwood (fair complexion). Women then competed within their self-identified skin color categories and were featured in the newspaper regularly until the winners were chosen.
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Hickman: So the public voted on which girl they wanted represented in each category to compete in the pageant?

Khan: I do not recall whether the public voted or not. I think that the Star had its judges who decided on the winner in each category. But the Jamaicans had a wonderful time deciding among ourselves who the winners would be! It was great fun!

Hickman: Are/were beauty pageants a big deal in Jamaica? What do the contestants win?

Khan: Well, anything that happens in a small town is an event much like smaller communities in the U.S. The winners probably received money, trips abroad, other gifts and visibility. Today, there is just one Ms. Jamaica who then competes to become Ms. Caribbean and then Ms. World.

Hickman: Did any of your friends enter the contest?

Khan: No. However, one student enrolled in my high school during our senior year and she had been a contestant in a beauty contest. As students we were so curious about her and why she would have entered since this was not the usual thing to do in high school. But there was also veiled admiration for her simultaneously. This was a big deal because she was so young, about 16. Usually these contestants are about 18 years or so.

Hickman: Since the beauty pageants were so focused on skin tone, do you feel people are treated differently according to how dark they were?

Khan: They were treated according to their social status and not necessarily their skin color. However, color and class were closely connected during my youth in Jamaica and the lighter one’s complexion, the more promising were the employment opportunities. Still, class, education, professional status were all important variables in how you were perceived, not just skin color. So the very dark-skinned individual with an advanced education, a good job, was a business person etc. would be well respected and socially accepted. There was no formal color barrier in Jamaica and a significant portion of the population was often identified as being “half-Indian, half-Chinese, half-Syrian or half-Lebanese.” It was understood that the other half was usually of African descent but I have never heard anyone being identified as “half-African or half-black.” Also, it was rare to describe a visibly light-skinned Jamaican as being white. He or she was “fair skinned,” while in the U.S. that individual would be called white.

I have two lenses through which I look when faced with complex situations, my Jamaican lenses and my American lenses. For example, if someone appeared to be dismissive towards me, my Jamaican lenses might, in a split second, construe the behavior as related to “bad manners” because having “good manners” is highly valued in Jamaica. My American lenses may wonder if there might be a racial element involved in this behavior.

Hickman: So people in Jamaica do not show prejudice towards dark-skinned people?
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Khan: Not so much. I think they first use education and class as factors. Education, your profession and social class weigh more than your skin tone. It’s not because of dark skin. You get treated according to how far you have come: high school or college graduate, being a civil servant, and so on. However, I think it’s much easier to move up to the next class level in the U.S. than in Jamaica.

Hickman: Thanks, Ms. Khan; is there anything else you would like to add?

Khan: Well, my sons are also mixed, as are many of my family members. I remember watching my children, and realizing how racial identity could be a challenge for them since they did not have the same “buffers” experienced by my husband and me. We both came from countries [Pakistan and Jamaica] where we were part of a majority group. As they matured, I am sure that they too struggled with how to identify because America and the social forces require that they choose a group with which to identify. When we were completing college applications, we discussed which of the boxes to check for “Race.” I ended up checking “Other” and writing in each parent’s racial group. If we checked only African-American, my husband felt that this denied his role as a parent in his children’s lives.
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Interview with Fern Khan by Professor Richard K. Lieberman, Director of the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College/CUNY, February 2, 2007.

Lieberman: Now, Fern, when you got to New York during these first, say in the first four years of college, what did you face in terms of discrimination in New York? What are some of the moments you could talk about that you remember, that shocked you or hurt you?

Khan: Well, you know, it’s funny. When I came here, I didn’t know. I really didn’t expect anything in terms of discrimination. Because coming from a country where we’re the majority, you don’t think about being a minority anywhere. I came from Jamaica where the majority of the people are black, although in those days you didn’t call yourself black. In Jamaica, nobody would call themselves black in the ’50s, no. Neither would you call yourself Negro. You called yourself Jamaican. And that was the mentality of Jamaicans. And so, you know, I didn’t expect to be discriminated against. I came here for a purpose, and it was to study, to get a degree, to get a job and then to return home. Those were the goals I set for myself.

So I recall there was a, the first discussion I had with someone who was, he was a white gentleman in Chicago. And I don’t remember where we were, and he said, well, Jamaicans are different. And I never forget that because he was telling me about the situation in America, and I was trying to understand it, and he was saying, well, you’re different because you’re West Indian. And at that time I really didn’t understand it. I took it sort of like a compliment, and it wasn’t until years later that I began to see, when I see how African-Americans were treated here. No, that’s not a compliment at all because before I talk, you don’t know what I am, and so you will judge me the way you judge Africans-Americans. So for all, for all purposes I could be African-American. But it took me a long time to reach that stage where I really began to understand what was happening in terms of the African-American status in America, and to begin to empathize and to not feel separate because I’m Jamaican. And I think that’s a lesson we all, people coming from the West Indies, especially my generation, had to learn because they really did not grasp the experiences of African-Americans in the U.S. You know anything that makes you apart from something that’s not in vogue, that’s what people tend to follow. So you have to be careful not to fall into that trap.

And anyway, so I really wasn’t that conscious about race when I came here at first. And then at NYU, I was so protected because I had a, I had a critical mass of West Indian people nearby. I belonged to all these groups, whatever I needed. I had international groups, I had international friends, I had Jamaican friends, and I had the West Indian club. You know, so....

Lieberman: You lived in a protected world.

Khan: So I lived in a very protective world and didn’t quite get it.

Lieberman: Even a college environment, you had intellectual students from all over the world.

Khan: Yes.
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Lieberman: So when do you first hit it? When do you first hit?

Khan: The real first time was when I graduated and went to Hartford from graduate school.

Lieberman: The first time you hit any racism and any discrimination once you came out of that protected bubble.

Khan: That’s right. That’s right.

Lieberman: So you lived in this protected world, and were you aware at the time you were in a protected world?

Khan: I don’t know because, you know, I thought this was how it was. Right? But on the other hand, we had some Jamaican students at NYU at that time who were politically very astute and very active, and they were very aware. I still remember the student. She was brilliant, and she was engaged to a Haitian, and she was aware. What was her name? Barbara. Barbara. And I remember we used to study sometimes together, and she used to talk. But it was scary because she used to talk about how whites and blacks didn’t work together, and about the colonialism in Africa. That was her big thing what had happened in Africa, and how the colonialists had gone in and just divided up Africa in chunks, and this belonged to the English, and this belonged to the French, and this belonged to the Dutch, and I remember her talking about all of that history. And, you know, I never participated. I would listen, and I’d say, “but why are you so angry?” You know, it’s sort of like this is not your problem.

Again, I’m 22. I was not involved in that sort of worldwide view politically. To me it was important to get to know people, and you build relations with people from different parts of the world, and you ask people about where they came from, who their families were and so on. So it was a more personal level, rather than a worldwide level and political. But we had many West Indians who were older and very sophisticated and very, very much engaged in what was happening worldwide, and I would just listen to them, but I didn’t really participate and I didn’t quite understand all the things that they were talking about. Though I understood it intellectually, but I really didn’t feel it.

And after I graduated from School of Social Work, I went to live in Hartford, and I had a commitment to work with this agency, a social agency, for two years because they gave me a scholarship for two years, and I had to work to pay it back, sort of. And the first apartment I went to look at was in Hartford, but it was in a section that was predominantly white, but working class white, not even middle class, working class white along one of the main boulevards. And they had advertised the apartment, and I went to look at the apartment and thought it looked fine. It was one bedroom, and I said okay I’m interested in the apartment, and then they said they would be in touch.

Lieberman: What year?

Khan: This was in 1964. Yeah, ’64 to ’66. Right. So it’s ’64. And when I went to Hartford first I stayed in the Y for a few days, and then I moved in with a family who lived in the north end
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which was where all the black families lived. This was a very nice family, and they liked me a lot, but I wanted to get my own place. So when I got, I got a call from the landlord saying they were sorry, they had rented it already. I said okay. But I was telling Mr. Hilgar, the Executive Director of my agency, Rothe Hilgar, a very nice man. And I had known him before because he interviewed me for the scholarship. And I told him, and he said, Fern, tell me what happened. And I just told him what I thought. And he said that’s discrimination. They’re discriminating against you. Here Mr. Hilgar is white, you know, telling me this. I said, no, I don’t think so. Maybe they had individuals before me. He said, no, we’re going to call my friend, and he was friendly with the Commissioner of Human Rights at the time.

Now Hartford was an interesting city at that time. So again this is in the early ’60s. Hartford was embroiled in all kinds of racial disputes, but at the same time people were trying to make it work. Many of the white families, the middle class white families lived in West Hartford and then in the surrounding communities. Nearly all the black families lived in the north end of Hartford.

So Mr. Hilgar called his friend the commissioner of human rights. He came, he interviewed me. I told him what happened. He said, well, we’re going to take on this case, and I said okay. So but in the meantime I’m looking for other places. And there was a new development that just opened up, brand new buildings in the north end, near where I lived with this family. And I went to look at it and liked it a lot, and nobody had ever lived there before. And I took this apartment. I told them I would take it, but in the meantime apparently the Commissioner called the management company of the first apartment building, and told them that he was going to sue them. They called and offered me the apartment.

By then I really didn’t want to live there. So I said, ‘no, thank you’. But do you know, their lawyer called me. The lawyer for the management and he set up an interview for me. He said, you know, we were really protecting you because “a nice young lady like you shouldn’t be living in that area.” So, you know, I took it for whatever. If he meant it, fine. If he didn’t mean it, fine. It didn’t really matter. They offered me the apartment, but I declined it. I had found one that was much nicer.

So that was my first concrete, palpable experience with what may have been discrimination.
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DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY’S NEW YORK TIMES

1. From recent issues of The New York Times, locate a letter to the editor or an Op-Ed article on the subject of discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Then read the interview with Fern Khan included in the packet of materials for this lesson, especially the passage in which she also explains her reactions to the first time she “hit” discrimination. How might she have reacted to the article you selected? What pertinent information about her education and past experiences might have affected her reactions? Summarize your observations and share with the class.

2. Collect articles from The New York Times discussing race or ethnicity related to political aspirations, celebrity entertainment, local news, or human interest stories. Television programs, movies and political speeches often play upon stereotypes or ethnic jokes. A search of the Web will provide information on ethnic references and reactions. One example can be found at:

   Consider how an immigrant would react to these; could the immigrant define the positives or negatives of American culture by means of this information?

3. The Immigration Act of 1965 was an outgrowth of the civil rights movement and the Cold War. It eliminated quotas and emphasized instead family reunification. Many immigrants seek housing in communities where fellow immigrants reside and maintain their native customs and traditions. Go to the Web sites for Chinatown or Little Italy, New York City, or another ethnic locale. Review articles or advertisements from The New York Times related to entertainment, walking tours, or educational sites that celebrate the diversity and traditions of myriad cultures in a major metropolitan city.

   Search “This Week in the Community,” a list of events for the week prepared by the Community Affairs department of The Times (appearing in Monday’s New York section), and make a chart of those events that reinforce cultural heritage and diversity.