The process of migration by definition involves encountering cultural change. When people leave their homelands and migrate to a new society they encounter new languages, foodways, customs, traditions, and social norms. For many, this presents a challenge: adapting to a foreign environment requires learning new social rules and practices and often new ways of behaving. For others, especially those who have some previous knowledge of their new adopted home, they may welcome such changes, especially if they offer new opportunities or freedoms that migrants did not enjoy in their home countries. Cultural adaptation and exchange, however, does not occur only in one direction. Immigrants contribute new ideas and practices to their adopted countries as well. They introduce new words into the dominant language, new foods, fashions, and forms of recreation. The process of migration produces complex dynamics with regard to one’s identity, sense of self, and sense of belonging.

Throughout the history of immigration to the United States, immigrants experienced varying degrees of adaptation and assimilation to their new environment. The first Spanish, English, French, and Dutch settlers who came to the newly claimed European colonies arrived to a foreign setting where they had to learn how to adapt in order to survive. They depended primarily on the knowledge of native peoples, who taught them how to harvest native foods, raise new crops, and acclimate to the natural environment. While these original settler-colonists borrowed Native American words, practices, and ideas, however, they also intentionally tried to recreate their European societies in the colonies rather than fully assimilate into the existing Native world. The French, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the English brought their legal systems, religious beliefs, economic practices, and world views and imposed them (sometimes forcefully) on indigenous peoples. In this respect, the early colonists were distinct from later immigrants who have been expected to adapt their ways of life to American society much more fully.

By the first decades of the 1800s, a young American nation began to take shape and a distinctive “American” identity and culture emerged. Subsequent immigrants entered a society where they retained some aspects of their heritage and practices but also were expected to adopt “American” ways. The Irish and the Germans, for example, brought with them their own traditions and lifeways that influenced American culture, diets, and economic activity and were incorporated into the developing nation – our St. Patrick’s Day celebrations and taste for hamburgers and frankfurters are just a few examples. Many immigrants retained their Irish or German identity by building their own churches, publishing newspapers in their native languages, and maintaining strong bridges with family and friends back home. By the second and third generation, however, the children of these immigrants no longer considered themselves “Irish” or “German”; instead, they saw themselves as “Irish Americans” or “German Americans” or simply “Americans.”

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the source of migration to the United States shifted from Northern and Western Europe to Southern and Eastern Europe. The new populations –
Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, Slavs and Greeks, among others — similarly brought their traditions and ways of life. Many also tried to retain their connection to the heritage and culture of their original country by attending synagogues, churches, or social clubs where services were offered in their native languages. They produced a vibrant foreign language press and often lived among or socialized with fellow countrymen and women, allowing them to celebrate holidays or traditional festivals that they had observed back home. As the United States industrialized and technological advances increased communication and accessibility, Americans embraced a mass consumer culture. Across the country, in urban, rural and suburban areas, Americans began to participate in the same types of leisure and recreational activities — theatrical performances, motion pictures, dime store novels, and radio programs. They began shopping not only in local stores offering local products, but also through mail order catalogs or in department stores that offered a larger variety of merchandise. And they began buying national brand products and shopping at chain stores. As this mass culture proliferated, immigrants and their children faced increasing pressure to assimilate and acculturate to a new American society.

To the children of immigrants, who saw their participation in consumer culture as a way to become “American,” the new mass culture was especially attractive. Young people clamored to see the latest movie shows, listen to popular music, and wear the latest fashions. This was particularly true during the 1920s, the “Flapper Age” or “Jazz Age.” The process of assimilating or acculturating into American society often produced generational tensions when immigrant parents, who often maintained more traditional and conservative views and ideas, hoped their children would retain their family’s original culture, religion, and heritage. Such conflicts between generations within immigrant families have persisted over the years and continue into the present.

While the children of immigrants have used mass culture as a way to assimilate more quickly into American society, immigrants have also influenced and changed what we define as “American culture.” Many musicians, writers, and theater performers at the turn of the century were recent immigrants who infused Yiddish, Italian, and Russian cultural elements into the art forms they produced. Immigrants also introduced new foods to the American diet — bagels, pierogis, spaghetti, egg rolls and latkes. Even as Americans gravitated to an emerging mainstream popular culture, immigrants continued to reshape what was seen as “American” in various ways.

In the second half of the twentieth century, growing numbers of people from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East began migrating to the United States. They encountered many of the same dilemmas and dynamics that earlier immigrants did. Some have tried hard to preserve their religious traditions, or encouraged their children to marry within their ethnic, national, or religious group. Still others hope to instill a sense of their ethnic or national identity in their U.S.-born children. Many quickly discover, however, that their children are more fluent in English and serve essential roles as translators between their families and mainstream American society. Second and third-generation children of immigrants rapidly adopt American gender norms, notions of appropriate family relations, and dating practices. They also marry outside of their parents’ cultural group at higher rates.
The question of identity continues to be a complex one for immigrants and their children. Individuals’ perspectives on assimilation and acculturation can vary depending on how loyal one is to his/her maternal or paternal heritage, how much exposure one has had to various cultural influences, and one’s aspirations and expectations in the United States. Regardless, the experience of living between two worlds for immigrants and their children continues to create challenges for individuals as much as it enriches the greater American society.

**Film: The New Americans, Episode 1, The Nigerians**

Produced by Steve James and Gita Saedi, directed by Steve James 2004
Chicago International Film and Television Festival, Gold Hugo, Best Television Production
Best Limited Series, Distinguished Documentary Achievement Award, International Documentary Association
Columbus International Film and Video Festival Award Winner

**Running time for excerpt: 34 minutes**

**Description:**
In this intimate series with “the richness and density of a Dickens novel” (*Los Angeles Times*), Steve James, co-producer of the acclaimed documentary feature, *Hoop Dreams*, turns his camera on the struggles of the Nwidor family to make their way as new immigrants in America.

The Nwidors are Nigerians who were forced to flee their home after the military executed their tribal leaders. We first meet them in a refugee camp in Benin. Israel, a former chemical engineer, his wife Ngozi and their two children have been living for years in a dripping tent in a refugee camp, waiting for resettlement. They share their hopes with the camera and humorously acknowledge their exaggerated expectations for their new life in America.

In their first weeks in a low-income housing complex in Chicago, they are grateful for a dry place to sleep and the interesting experience of their first McDonald’s hamburgers. But they find much of their new world confusing. Both parents struggle with low-paying jobs in the hotel industry, and are exhausted by their schedules, the lack of community support in America, and the expectations of family back in Nigeria that they will send money home regularly.

Access to medical treatment in the U.S. reveals unexpected health problems. Israel discovers he has dangerously high blood pressure, and Ngozi finds she is a tuberculosis carrier. Their attempts to adapt and succeed crumble at times into despair, but we also share with them small moments of hope. Ngozi is in danger of failing her nurse’s assistant certification class, her stepping stone to better her chances for a good job.

In a scene of quiet triumph, she learns she has passed her final exam. Israel, whose health has kept him from succeeding in one job, begins work at a new one, with
chances for greater mobility. While we rejoice in their success, it is by no means
certain that this family, as hard working and likeable as they are, will finally attain
their American dream.

Technical Notes:
DVD: Open Disc One. Go to Main Menu. Hit STORIES BY COUNTRY.
Hit NIGERIANS. Start at beginning of this strand, and play through the
end of the section that ends at 33 minutes, 45 seconds.

Suggested Readings

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Americanah

Richard Alba and Victor Nee, Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and
Contemporary Immigration

Carlos Bulosan, America Is in the Heart

NoViolet Bulawayo, We Need New Names

Teju Cole, Open City

Junot Diaz, Drown

Firoozeh Dumas, Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America

Reyna Grande, The Distance Between Us: A Memoir

Jean Kwok, Girl in Translation

Jumpa Lahiri, The Namesake

Chang-rae Lee, Native Speaker

Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine

George Sanchez, Becoming Mexican American

Esmeralda Santiago, Almost a Woman

Warren St. John, Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's
Quest to Make a Difference

Anzia Yezierska, The Bread Givers
Online Resources

American Composers. This article details the contribution of American immigrants to the development of music in the U.S.: https://www.americancomposers.org/cta_oja.htm

Billboard. This article details the large growth of Latin American music in the US and its impact on American culture: https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/magazine-feature/7341512/latin-music-impact-on-american-popular-culture

Cato Institute. This report argues that immigrants have historically enriched American culture: https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/immigrants-have-enriched-american-culture-enhanced-our-influence-world


Hoover Institute. This article examines the cultural impact of immigration throughout US history: https://www.hoover.org/research/making-and-remaking-america-immigration-united-states

Huffington Post. This article lists ten major immigrant popular artists today in the U.S.: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/06/immigration-in-pop-culture_n_3224868.html

Humanities. This article details the unique cultural contributions of Italian immigrants to the U.S.: https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2015/januaryfebruary/feature/what-sets-italian-americans-other-immigrants

Institute for Human Sciences. Charles Hirschmann’s article argues that historic arguments used against immigrants coming to the US have historical been demonstrated to be inaccurate: http://www.iwm.at/transit/transit-online/the-impact-of-immigration-on-american-society/

Learn Liberty. This article discusses the relationship between immigrants and American popular culture throughout U.S. history: https://www.learnliberty.org/blog/how-immigration-gave-rise-to-american-pop-culture/

Living History Farm. This article details the challenges schools and the educational system face in teaching immigrant children: https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe70s/life_16.html.

Museum of Modern Art. This digital exhibition looks at the works of American immigrant artists from the twentieth century: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3813#slideshow.

National Endowment for the Arts. This article discusses immigrant partition in the arts in America: https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2017/taking-note-immigrant-participation-arts.


PBS. This is a timeline of Latin American immigration to the US: http://www.pbs.org/latino-americans/en/timeline/.


Smithsonian. This article tells about the history of Indian immigrant culture in America, especially as it relates to cinema: https://festival.si.edu/blog/2014/beyond-bollywood-indian-american-experience/. This article looks at African immigrant music in America: https://folkways.si.edu/african-music-usa-immigrants/american/article/smithsonian.

USCitizenship.info. This article examines Italian-American immigrant culture: https://www.uscitizenship.info/italian-american-history-and-culture/.

Humanities Themes

Foodways and Culinary Traditions. Immigrants introduce many new foods to the American diet as evidence by the prevalence of so many “ethnic” items that have become mainstream staples—salsa, hummus, curry, and others. While some native-born Americans may find immigrants’ cultural differences threatening or unfamiliar, foods represent a basic necessity and form of cultural exchange that can break down barriers between people.

Religion. Immigrants have always brought new religious traditions to the United States that have not always been seen as compatible with existing, mainstream religions. Still, the United States has prided itself on being a nation that values religious freedom. Learning about other religious traditions—such as Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and others—can broaden our understanding of how people develop spiritual beliefs, values, and a sense of morality.

Assimilation and Acculturation. Assimilation and Acculturation generally refer to cultural transformation and adaptation of new members of a community into the local dominant practices and norms. Earlier historians assumed that immigrants followed a rather direct trajectory from their native culture to becoming “Americanized” and in the process, shed their ethnic or national
origin and cultural differences. Most contemporary scholars, however, emphasize how immigrants retain some elements of their culture, language, and social practices and in fact reshape what it means to be American.

**Writing One’s Personal Story.** It is no surprise that many immigrants and children of immigrants have written extensively about their changing identity and the challenges of assimilating and acculturating into American society. Writing of memoirs, poetry, prose, and other genres offer a way to express and reflect upon the personal transformations that immigrants and their children experience being in a new society.