Wendi Manuel Scott

1. What questions can you ask of manifest records? (1:52)
The source is a manifest record of passengers arriving in New York City. And I came across them at the National Archives when doing research on West Indian immigrants to the United States during the early 20th century.

When a student or a researcher immediately comes to the document, it's quite clear that they can get direct information—the name of the immigrant, perhaps what their age is. Are they 40 years old? Are they a six-year-old? Are they married? Are they single? The basic information that's presented in the document.

But then the student or the researcher asks questions of the information. Are most of the people of the single? What does that mean about West Indian immigrants? Are most of them women? Are most of them men? What might that mean about the West Indian immigrants' experience in the United States? What port are they going to in the United States? It's New York. Why is it New York? Was New York a typical destination for West Indian immigrants? Why New York? Why not Miami? Who paid for the ticket? Did they pay for it by themselves? Did they have family support? What information does that tell us about the immigrant's experience, both in terms of leaving and in terms of coming into the United States?

One of the limitations of the manifest records is that without a rudimentary knowledge of Caribbean history, it makes it difficult for students to begin to understand the indirect value of the document. They could come to the document and point out what the document provides in terms of direct information. But the ability then to stand back from that and say, "What does this mean that the women were domestics?" They would have to understand the Caribbean background. So that the document of course does not provide that. It also does not provide the New York context, the Harlem context, of what happens to the women. So that then has to be provided on the other side. It only gives in many ways the direct information, but with a larger context it allows students to raise larger questions about the indirect value of the document.

2. What kinds of information do manifest records provide? (2:09)
They provide various information in terms of the general name of the immigrant. Also in terms of their age, their gender, their occupation in the West Indies, their race, complexion. Who paid for the voyage—the sending family? the receiving family? It allows an instructor to ask students to try to determine what direct information they're able to gather from the document. Then to go back through the document again and try to determine what indirect information the manifest records provide.

The race is noted and that's of particular interest because for many West Indians, they would say that they were West Indian. And yet you'll see immigration officials scribble over the top of West Indian, "African", just to show that they're [not only] West Indian, but they are [also] a person of African descent. And it's quite interesting. They may just have "West Indian", but then if you go and look at the complexion, it then might say "fair and blue eyes." Or sometimes it may say "dark" or it may say "black." So it raises questions about how West Indians saw

themselves, their identity in the West Indies within the context of West Indian history and within a cultural context. But at the same time, how that then plays out within the United States. So that offers an excellent opportunity for discussion with students about how racial identity is constructed in the United States and how it's constructed in the West Indies.

Immigrant official[s] they would ask them the questions and there were essentially 29 questions. The individual provided the information, so they'd go down the list between the name, the sex, race, age, the nearest relative in the Caribbean, the household that they were leaving, the nearest relative in New York that they planned on residing with.

When you're looking at the various manifest records, the questions are all the same. A standard form with the questions going across and then the information is filled out. Depending on the individual filling out the information, I'm sure that also played a part in whether or not they chose to mark out "African" where the individual had simply maybe said "West Indian." Some people are much more detailed where they won't just list, for instance, the address of the place that they were going to reside in the United States. They might list next to the address, "they're going to meet their husband," "they're going to stay with an aunt," "they're going to stay with a grandmother," "they're going to stay with a sister." That's particularly useful for scholars because then that gives you some idea of the role of family and community within the immigrant's experience.

3. What is the larger historical context? (3:55)

When you look at the manifest records, one will note that the occupations of most of the women are within the domestic industry. So the women will declare themselves to be domestic servants, to be laundresses, to be seamstresses. One, that says something about their occupations in the islands, but, two, it also says something about their occupational options in New York. What types of work could women do within New York? Most West Indian women, along with African American women, were domestic servants. What was the typical woman who might be on a ship headed toward New York? She would have been single. She would have been fairly young, between about 18 and 40. It allows students to draw conclusions about West Indian women arriving in New York City.

I think it's important to try through the documents to determine what was the immediate experience of these women prior to leaving Jamaica, prior to leaving Trinidad, prior to leaving Barbados. And I think by looking at the occupations, by looking at the age, students can try to answer some questions about the immediate historical background, the push factors in the migration experience. I think this is particularly important because frequently studies of immigration/migration may only focus on European migration. This gives students and teachers an opportunity to try to compare the West Indian immigration experience. But then also consider the experience of West Indian women in their own right. Looking at the push factors, but also looking at what happened to the women once they come to the United States. [It is] an excellent opportunity to deal with the issue of identity, ethnicity, and race within the United States and then place that within the larger context of world history, African diaspora, Caribbean diasporas.

In terms of the first large wave of West Indian immigration, usually between 1900 and about 1920 is when the largest numbers came to the United States. 1924 is really a cut off with the change in immigration laws.

West Indians have always been on the move. It's one of the themes within Caribbean history. From the very first when you have Europeans coming to the new world, to the Caribbean. From the enslaved Africans who came to the Caribbean. And then there's constant movement between the islands, within the islands, from rural areas to urban centers.

And this migration continues. In the British West Indian islands, after emancipation, after 1838 when they received their quote "full freedom," there was constant movement. And you see also individuals trying to realize that freedom. And one way that they tried to realize that freedom was by moving. They moved to urban centers in terms of women trying to find a job perhaps as a domestic. You see many men in the 1850s, they go to Panama to work on the Panama Railroad. Between 1904 and 1914, you again see Jamaican men and many other West Indian men going to work on the Panama Canal. In fact, the Panama Canal plays a really central role. It was [a] first step in this migration outside of Jamaica, outside of Barbados before many West Indian men and women decided to go the United States.

The money that Jamaican men earned working on the Panama Canal, they sent remittances home to Jamaica which afforded other family members, other community members, the ability to go to the United States. You also see Jamaican men going to Cuba to work on sugar plantations and some of those men might have decided then to go to the United States. You see women who might have been domestics or laundresses on the Panama deciding to go from Panama to the United States. There's this very long history of migration within the Caribbean, not only to the United States but throughout the Caribbean region.

What's quite unique about West Indians in the early 20th century in New York is that most do not choose to become U.S. citizens. They do not want to become U.S. citizens because for them there's a certain value, both politically, culturally, in having an English identity. They will go to the British counsel and say, "This happened to me. I've been discriminated against." So for them to seek U.S. citizenship was not going to be beneficial.

4. How do you read a manifest record? (1:34)

This particular manifest record is from the S.S. Atenas ship which sailed from Kingston, Jamaica, on January 11th, 1920, and arrived in New York on January 16th, 1920. And what's particularly interesting about this document are two women, Miss Edith McKinney and Miss Mary McKinney. Miss Edith McKinney was 25 years old and Miss Mary McKinney is 29 years old. Both of them were single and declared their occupations to be servants. Both of them also noted that they're West Indian. However, "African" was scribbled on top of their declaration of their race. On the portion of the record that asked, "Who were they going to join in the United States?" they both note that they're going to join employers. And this really brings up a fascinating aspect of West Indian women going to the United States.

Some of the women went because they had signed a contract with employers in the United States. And so their passage was paid by the employer, and that's noted here on the manifest

record. And they then had to work off the money for the ticket. But again it points to so many issues in terms of women being domestic servants in Jamaica, continuing that occupation as domestic servants in the United States. By looking at this document, you'll see that they note that they're black and they also note that they are literate, that they can both read and write English.

Most West Indians, easily as high as 99 percent of West Indians immigrants, were literate. They'd contracted themselves to work for American employers although they were literate women.

5. What other sources provide information on West Indian immigration? (3:11)
There are various sources that one could use. For example, you could look at the Universal Negro Improvement Association records. The chapter records within the United States provide a wealth of information. The *Negro World*, the main newspaper of the UNIA, also provides a valuable resource because frequently some of these island organizations would report the community activities. And so you might find some of these women, their names or their activities within these newspapers or within the UNIA records.

Trying to trace individual women into Harlem or through New York can be a very difficult task. One could try to look at organization records, but there's no guarantee that one's going to be able to necessarily find Edith, the woman on this particular ship. But I think that the value of these documents is not necessarily in tracing one individual woman, but rather being able to understand the larger migration process, the experience of West Indian women in New York City and who they were.

Frequently they would state that they were coming only for a short period of time, for six months, for one year, for two years. And in that case, they might bring letters. They might bring various commodities, food items. Some items were very difficult to find in New York and so their family members would bring food and maybe newspapers, word of other family members. But even beyond that, you find a large amount of exchange in terms of money, the remittances that were sent home from West Indian immigrants and then family members sending various goods home.

You can learn about the remittances by looking at Jamaica and other island census records. The postal records state that a certain amount of money, American dollars, came into Jamaica. Or a certain amount of money from the United States came into Trinidad. So you're able to trace that over a period of time. And the remittances make up another kind of fascinating feature of Caribbean history and almost a certain reliance on remittances within Caribbean culture.

And then through oral interviews, we can also begin to try to tease out some of this information where you find a woman who may just have a job as a domestic, but she is sending money. She may have left her children back home in Jamaica or Trinidad, and so it's very important that she send a significant portion of her earnings. So it becomes a matter of piecing various documents together and, again, the manifest records provide one part of that larger puzzle.

Some West Indians left family records, letters, that were written between family members in New York and family members in the islands in addition to various organization and association

records which point to the role of West Indian women in New York, their community activism. The records, again, led me all the way back to Jamaica, to try to piece together who these women were before they left Jamaica. The "push factors" in terms of why choose migration. And although I was not necessarily able to track one particular woman, I was able to begin to put together a picture of the process of migration. What went into the decision to migrate? Also, in terms of their occupations as domestic servants in Jamaica which allows for a certain amount of comparison between life as a domestic servant in Jamaica versus life as a domestic servant in Harlem.

6. How do you teach students to analyze these documents? (4:29)
I have used these documents in several courses. One, a course on Caribbean history, so when we get to the theme of migration and particularly migration to the United States. I've also used the documents in African diaspora. Caribbean migration is a central component of the African diaspora class. I allow students, usually in teams, to work through the documents. I try to help them navigate the documents giving them a set of questions in terms of what information does the document provide. Then I ask students to determine, based on the lectures that we've already had in class, based on the readings, what additional information does this document provide? How does it parallel with what you already know about West Indian immigrants? What new information does it provide? What questions do you now have about the West Indian experience? What information can the documents provide and what information can the documents not provide? Students have read a significant amount about migration in the Caribbean, about the experience of West Indians in Panama. Frequently we've already talked about Harlem as this mecca within the African diaspora. They are able to begin to ask some questions and try to gather the indirect information that the documents provide.

I ask the students to determine what type of document I've provided, where the ship is sailing from, where it's sailing to. As they look at the document to determine that they're sailing to New York, I ask them why are they sailing to New York? Why aren't they sailing to Baltimore? Why isn't this ship going to Richmond, Virginia? We usually have a certain discussion about the role of New York, its significance within Caribbean history, Caribbean migration within the African diaspora. Once we've determined where the ship is coming from and where the ship is going, students then usually begin to look at the names and the basic information in terms of sex and gender. For example, Virginia Carrington who is on a ship leaving Trinidad in 1918 on the 20th of August. Virginia Carrington was 45 years old, a widow. When students move over to who paid her passage, in the case of Virginia Carrington, she paid the passage for herself. However, if students look at another individual, for example, Ada Charles who's a 23-year-old woman who was single, we find that Ada's passage was paid for by her sister. And, in fact, she was going to meet her sister in New York.

Then I ask students what does that mean, that her sister paid for her passage? How might her sister have paid for her passage? And so we begin to talk about the role of remittances. Is it likely that her sister sent her money? How expensive was the passage? How would an individual who was just a domestic or laundress in Trinidad [have] been able to afford the passage? And the role then of family members and community in terms of saving money, sometimes selling a plot of land. Sometimes it's Panama money, money earned from a father or an uncle working on the Panama Canal that's all cobbled together to allow one family member to go to New York.

And then what might she have done once in New York? In the case of this young lady, she's 23 years old and she's a seamstress. Was she likely to go out and find a job as a seamstress? How might she have found a job as a seamstress? Would her sister have played a role in that process? We talk about the role then that family members and the community played in helping someone locate a position. If they worked in a garment factory, for example, they might say, "There's a position available." Or if they were a domestic servant, they may say, "I know a woman who's looking for a domestic."

We also talk about the fact that sometimes family members sent money to sisters or siblings in the islands because they needed someone to be a caretaker of the children. The ability to have a younger sister come to New York to assist in taking care of the children for a short period of time played an important role in the well being of the entire household. Students might not immediately pick up on the fact that the sister paid for the passage and that they were going to live with the sister. And then what might that mean on a larger scale. How might that have been significant to the experience of West Indian women in New York?

Generally they are quite fascinated with the record. Their immediate reaction is to gather the surface information from the manifest records. I help guide them through to ask the bigger questions about the experiences of the immigrants, to try to piece together what the documents, what the manifest records say about West Indian women in Trinidad. And what it might say also about their lives in New York City.