

## Preface

### *Contradictions in International Migration*

I WAS BORN IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, the oldest child of a marriage between two distant cousins—one in the first immigrant generation, the other in the second (that is, born in the United States of immigrant parents). Both my parents call themselves West Indian, and all of my grandparents came from the same group of small islands that make up the Grenadines.

I found out I had an older brother (on my father's side) only when my brother moved in! My mother tells me that I was three years old at the time and he was nine. It turned out to be a great thing for me: he helped me get over my fear of thunderstorms, and when I got my first migraine headache (which made me think I was dying) around age eight, he comforted me by playing Scouts in the living room with blanket tents. I remember when he first showed up in our kitchen, straight off the boat, as they say. Although I was so young, I had so many unspoken thoughts and mixed emotions: "He doesn't even look like me." "So, you mean, I'm not the oldest?" "He has five other sisters on his mother's side? Does he like them better than me and my sister?" Kelly stayed with us until he was eighteen, and then he was gone. But he was not the first newcomer to stay for a short while, nor would he be the last. Before him came my father's cousin. And while my brother was still there, an aunt I had never known about showed up too. Still later, two cousins came, and went. And then aunts and uncles and more cousins came.

I should have been used to it by then, no? After all, I lived in a West Indian household. Well, no, I thought, it was unusual—after all, my aunts and uncles with whom I was close (on my mother's side) did not send for people, nor did

anyone else I knew besides my Dad. But every few years some new relatives would show up in our home, and stay for years.

I thought my family was unique in this respect—until, at the University of Wisconsin, I took my first qualitative methods course and conducted an interview to fulfill one of the assignments for the class. I interviewed a fellow graduate student who was born in Barbados. I asked about her family history and found out that her mother was very much like my father, always sending for people from back home, and was to that day still looking for new recruits. With her family also, none of the people who were sent for ever sent for anyone else. I realize that a population of two is ridiculously small, but it seemed somewhat exciting (at least to the committee at my dissertation proposal defense) that a pattern might be emerging. Because qualitative researchers start from where they are (Lofland and Lofland, 1995), I decided to study West Indian immigrants to learn how they run their networks.

Growing up in that household meant more than seeing the comings and goings of people. It also meant—because our family is so big—that there were many people living outside our home whom I had to think of as family members as well. I remember myself as a small child kissing the weathered faces of many old-timers from “back home.” Seeing them again as an adult, I could hardly recall their names or faces, but I knew I had to show them the utmost respect and be on my best behavior so as not to bring shame to my family. I still remember the names of the so-called sandhogs with whom my father worked in the water tunnels of New York City; many of them I’m sure my father knew from when he was a child in the Islands. I remember seeing them at weddings and christenings, and seeing too the countless “relatives” who were somehow connected to my father and mother by blood or shared experiences. The shadowy figures that hover in the background of my life *are* my family.

This notion of family is very different from the idea of family that pervades American society. Popular culture in the United States seems to promote the idea that the family is really only nuclear, consisting of mother, father, sister, and brother. Only these people count, and if one insists, one may throw into the definition the occasional divorced or single-parent family, or a gay or lesbian one. I remember that when I was presenting the preliminary findings from my fieldwork to my professors and colleagues, there was some controversy after I announced that one of the networks in this study included family members. Only after I spoke one-on-one with individual professors

did I realize that they thought I'd interviewed my nuclear family for the study. In fact, none of my immediate family members were part of the sample, and the "family" members who composed that one network were people I had not seen in twenty or more years, and many I'd never met before interviewing them. In fact, I'd gained access to their homes and their stories only because my father's name got me in the door. In a similar fashion I gained access to the other network: only my good friend and colleague's name (or her mother's name) got me in their doors. Many times I breathed easily only after I felt the respondent's own tension break when I spoke my contact's name. Sometimes I was told that if it had not been that Mister or Miss So-and-So had sent me, they would not have spoken with me at all. But then, once I'd arrived, and sometimes after the interview was over, I was offered tea, sorrel, or mauby (a drink made from boiling a kind of bark), or fed some island dish—the signal that I was welcome, and connected.

The stories of the comings and goings of new arrivals I heard while doing my fieldwork were familiar to me. In fact, I learned more about my own life than I'd known or understood before I started the research. This kind of pseudo-participant observation (where the investigator is an insider or participant in the social universe under observation) is a mixed bag. I could speak the same language they did—or so I thought—but I also felt more at risk of leading the interviewee, especially when I felt strong identification with the experiences of living in a household organized around helping others to come and go with relative ease, with little thought to the costs to the permanent household members. The process, the culture, the role to be played in these network interactions seemed all powerful as I heard these individuals recount their experiences; it often seemed that the people involved in the stories I was hearing were almost secondary.

It is for this reason that I feel the process of immigrant social networking can be modeled, as I try to show here. There actually is a process to network migration, and I argue that this process is common knowledge—accepted cultural practice, if you will—to network members, so much so that it is practically taboo to speak negatively about other network members. During the first part of the fieldwork, I thought I would never get anyone to tell me about the bad parts of sponsoring or being sponsored. But luckily I won the confidence of several people who were willing to tell more nuanced stories. I have reproduced all their perspectives here the best I can, while trying to maintain their privacy.

I must admit, however, that I feel some guilt about telling their stories. Even though I conceal the identities of the persons involved (changing the names and writing so you cannot tell who is in which family or network) it feels as if I'm airing the family's dirty laundry. But a family is the sum of both the good and the bad experiences its members share. So, this is the story of a network of people and how they arrived in the cities where they now reside, and how they helped and continue to help one another do the best they can. There's no shame in that. In fact, it makes me proud that they travailed, helped each other, and for the most part succeeded. In the end I hope I have managed to convey why these people's life stories have inspired me. Nearly all have come from desperately poor roots in the rural Third World, nearly all have achieved social and economic self-sufficiency, and most even have enough to share with others. They have succeeded on a global scale.

This book, then, is about social mobility in the broadest sense. Our normal way of thinking about social mobility is rife with stereotypes and tautological thinking. First, we think of social mobility as something that only "special" individuals achieve; moreover, we like to think that those who achieve it (that is, those who acquire secure, impressive jobs or pull down large incomes) are more deserving than others, mainly because we in the First World want to believe that the wealthy and well-off are reaping rewards merited only by their hard work. We imagine that we can tell who is a deserving soul—merely reaping what they have sown—because we want to think we can see someone's merit in their incomes and awards. The idea that modern society is a *meritocracy*—a society in which one is recognized for one's talents by being rewarded with returns like wealth, high incomes, awards, and other markers of recognition—is one we're loath to let go of. (Doing so will mean we have to make sense of meritocracy's opposite, *injustice*, and figure out how our modern world became an unfair place.)

The truth is, both in the society that resides within our respective national borders and in our global society, the achievement of individual social or economic mobility is a rare event. While we hope for it (how many play the lottery?) and believe deeply in its possibility, the rags-to-riches experience is rarely reality for most individuals. Thus, a book about the ways a formerly economically depressed group is also racially undervalued is necessarily a book about the contradictions of the society in which they live.

In international migration there's much that is contradictory. One contradiction is the way racism has shaped immigration law and the entry of those

we call people of color into the Western world. On the one hand, their low status has been meant to marginalize and, for some, even exclude them. Western immigration law has considered desirable those groups who wear the mantle of a particular kind of whiteness. Those groups whose members are not the right kind are neither desired nor welcomed. Yet they are not kept out wholesale—they are incorporated, but according to the valuation of their race and color. The contradiction lies in the manner of hierarchy that race is—a top rank requires a bottom rank beneath it. Racial incorporation requires a category of people to occupy the bottom rungs, both of the job ladder (Piore, 1979) and of the racial hierarchy (Bashi, 1998). That society desires these people, even if only to maintain a hierarchical bottom, is contradictory.

In the United States, where ethnicity tends to muddle society's racial dialogue, black immigrants face another contradiction. Those immigrants who convince the racially privileged that they are ethnically different from native-born blacks may be allowed to step up a rung from the bottom, the place normally reserved for the phenotypically black. This has happened with several ethnoracial groups over the immigration history of the United States. Increased status has given West Indians in the United States a relative global advantage over the Caribbean emigrants who have chosen to go to other Western nations, for these countries have no native-born black group comparable to African Americans upon whose backs they can stand. West Indian success, where it exists, is achieved precisely because of contradictions in the varying desirability of ethnoracial groups who confront one another within the confines of a racist and classist global capitalist system.

The prevailing question in social science research on immigration is, *What defines and enables social success?* As I was writing this book, a new body of research on the second generation was being explored; some of it had already been published, but much of it had not yet. While this new generation of research makes reference to social structures that are key to the outcomes of the immigrant generation and their offspring, it still seems to focus (as decades of immigration research have) on the idea that culture makes the difference between success and failure. The unasked question seems to be, *What is the cultural legacy that the first generation of immigrants gives to the second generation?*

Race and racism are only indirectly addressed in these analyses—as if they are either less than fully relevant or remain unnamed as people work to create better lives for themselves. (Writers seem to talk only about “contexts of

reception” and not about racism, not about the effects of living in a society where one is required to present oneself as black, Latino, Asian, or white—a self-identification that is the most useful predictor of what happens to striving immigrant and second-generation students and workers in the twenty-first-century United States.)

If there is a cultural legacy that immigrants leave for their American offspring, this culture is necessarily rooted in the social structure of the new destination that the immigrant generation must navigate. Rather than writing as if immigrants bring a culture with them, we might consider immigrants as people who are inserted into a functioning culture when they move. For example, in other work I have explained that upon arrival, immigrants are inserted into localized racial structures; they are labeled by a racial category according to the hierarchy of categories in the local system and are required to contend with the socioeconomic constraints consistent with that racial category (Bashi and McDaniel, 1997; Bashi, 1998). At birth, nonimmigrants are similarly categorized, but they are instead socialized into only one such racializing system. So, this book is necessarily but unintentionally also a dedicated look at the experience of the immigrant generation as a process of systematic struggle with new experiences in ethnoracial assignment and structural segregation. (In particular, this is a study of an immigrant group that is normally inserted into the bottommost position in Western racial hierarchies.) The ethnographic nature of the research demanded that race be addressed, for it was evident that racial adaptation is an undeniable part of the immigrant experience. How well the immigrant generation struggles far from home with new structural burdens (including the encumbrance of race) is the true cultural legacy they leave for their second- and third-generation descendants. (Let me be clear here, however, that this book explores the experiences of only the immigrant generation.)

At this juncture, I wish to explain this book’s title, which was chosen with deliberateness. This text presents an account of how the members of the immigrant generation have survived, with a specific reference intended to counterbalance both the new social Darwinist idea that it is the culturally superior group that survives and the Horatio Alger model that proposes that the morally right scrapper succeeds in pulling himself up from nothing because of his moral fortitude. Both of these ideas are still prevalent in scholarship about migration and ethnicity across the disciplines. I work to show that it is instead the immigrant’s structured connection to others like himself

or herself that helps the migrant and those in the entire migrant community to survive and thrive. While culture is not irrelevant, it comes into play as a by-product of the migrant network member's desire for community, and what drives success are the constraints on the members' networking behavior, constraints faced precisely because migrant groups confront limiting social structures as they assist one another. Because these migrants are joined together far beyond their moments of border crossing and job seeking, I chose the word *knitted* to indicate how deeply intertwined these migrants are as they live their lives in far-away destinations. The word *knitting* also gives primacy to some of the social skills associated with women; as I show, women's labor is central to the way these migrant networks operate.