
The Social Construction of Improvement: Continuity and Change in Caribbean Migrants' Life Stories

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Abstract: Migrants' social mobility in migration destinations is often measured in terms of "objective" socio-economic indicators. These, however, generally say little about migrants' own hopes and aspirations. This analysis of Caribbean migrants' life stories argues that "improvement" offers a flexible notion of achievement that, as construed by migrants, may be understood according to a range of cultural rationales, thus enabling them to see themselves as worthy social actors. An ethnographic analysis of migrants' social construction of improvement therefore opens up a framework of analysis focusing on individuals' understanding of migration as a means of societal mobility and social recognition.

Keywords: mobility, life story, social construction of improvement, personhood, Caribbean

Résumé : On mesure souvent la mobilité sociale des émigrants au sein de la destination de leur migration en termes d'indicateurs socio-économiques « objectifs ». Ces indicateurs toutefois, nous disent peu de choses sur les propres espoirs et aspirations des migrants. Dans cette analyse d'histoires de vie de migrants antillais, on défend l'argument que des « améliorations » constituent une notion flexible de réussite qui, telle qu'interprétée par les migrants, peut être comprise selon divers raisonnements culturels, ce qui leur permet de se percevoir comme des acteurs sociaux respectables. Une analyse ethnographique de la construction sociale de « l'amélioration » chez les migrants ouvre alors un cadre d'analyse s'intéressant particulièrement à la compréhension individuelle de la migration en tant que moyen de mobilité sociétale et de reconnaissance sociale.

Mots-clés : mobilité, histoire de vie, construction sociale de l'amélioration, identité individuelle, Antillais

Much American migration research has focused on ascertaining the extent to which immigrants succeed at experiencing upward social and economic mobility in the receiving society as measured by "objective" national indicators such as occupation, income, housing and education. This research appears to be based on the implicit assumption that a primary goal for migrants is to settle in the U.S., pursue American goals of social mobility and become part of middle-class American society. This assumption may derive from the fact that immigration has played a central role in the development of the modern United States. American migration studies therefore have been concerned with investigating how foreign immigrants are transformed into good American citizens, and there has been less interest in exploring migrants' own ideas of migration and their relations with family and friends left behind. Indeed, Nancy Foner noted that in early migration research, "ties to the home society were often interpreted as 'evidence for, or against, Americanization' and, in many accounts, were seen as impeding the assimilation process" (2000:183).¹ This assimilation process has been conceptualized in terms of a model positing that immigrants become American through an intergenerational process of increasing adaptation to life in American society that is more or less complete with the third generation of immigrants, an important proof of their assimilation being that they have become solid members of the American mainstream society and have established their own middle class nuclear families (Gratton et al. 2007:204). The model thus operates with a basically optimistic perception of immigrants—they will become successful middle class citizens if only they work hard enough and adopt an American way of life. Thus, in their critical review of this research tradition, the sociologists Kasnitz, Mollenkopf and Waters (2004:4) note that American migration researchers "often wrote as if assimilation, acculturation, and upward mobility were virtually the same."

During the 1960s, when large numbers of non-white immigrants began to arrive from developing countries, this equation of assimilation with upward social and economic mobility began to be questioned by scholars who contended that assimilation “had historically been for ‘whites only’” (Kasinitz et al. 2004:4).² Instead of becoming part of American middle-class society, non-white immigrants tended to become incorporated into a socially and economically marginal subculture characterized by poverty and sub-standard living and working conditions. As Kasinitz et al. have noted: “if assimilation means joining the street culture of the urban ghetto, ‘becoming American’ can be every immigrant parent’s worst nightmare” (2004:7). This nightmare is particularly acute for the migrants who have middle- or upper-class backgrounds in their country of origin and who have little in common with people in the urban ghetto except for sharing the plight of being categorized as part of a marginalized urban minority. For these immigrants, it has been suggested, retaining immigrant status in the receiving country therefore may be more attractive than becoming a low status ethnic American (Waters 1999). Some scholars have gone even further, arguing that migrants may try to escape economic constraints in the sending society as well as the receiving country by developing transnational family networks that enable them to take advantage of the best opportunities in the global arena. In their 1994 book, *Nations Unbound*, Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc wrote that “transnational family relations allow the immigrants to resist their subjugation in host and home societies,” because such relations enable “the migrants to move between host and home societies emotionally, culturally, and materially when conditions in either become intolerable” (1994:92). They add, however, that such moves may have a high personal cost in the form of prolonged separation from close family members and do not offer “long-term solutions to the structural inequality” confronting migrants (1994:83, 92, 170).

The studies outlined above represent two widely different understandings of continuity and change in migration processes. The early optimistic research tended to view migration as entailing a complete change in migrants’ lives, as individuals left their problems behind in their place of origin in order to become citizens in a new country where they would assimilate culturally, enjoy social and economic mobility and end up as middle class citizens living in nuclear families. The later, more critical studies have pointed to the significance of continuity in the form of ongoing relations with family in the country of origin that can help migrants resist discrimination and downward social and economic mobility in the receiving coun-

try. They further criticize the tendency of the early migration researchers to regard the receiving society as the “natural” framework of analysis and call for studies that can move beyond the “methodological nationalism” prevalent in research on international migration, for example by examining migrants’ wider transnational field of relations (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2003).

During the past 30 years, I have carried out interviews with people in Caribbean families that had become dispersed in Britain, the United States, Canada as well as various destinations in the Caribbean (Olwig 2007). As individuals told me about their early life in their place of origin, their departure for a foreign place, and their subsequent life in a new society, it became apparent that they were not primarily concerned with talking about their attempts to become good middle class citizens in a new country and the various changes in their lives that this might have involved. Rather they were accounting for, and making sense of, the lives they had lived and the accomplishments to which they could lay claim. They did so by describing their movements through life (geographical as well as social, economic or cultural), in such a way that they generated a sense of coherence and purpose reflective of their sense of self.³ In my analysis of these life stories I have found that migrants often refer to the notion of “improvement,” or “betterment,” when accounting for the lives they have lived. The notion of improvement proffers a general rationale for leaving one place for another at the same time as it enables the migrant to determine the specifics of the desired improvement. The social construction of improvement, that takes place in migrants’ narratives, therefore provides a flexible space of interpretation that enables migrants to (re)assess their lives and achievements in the light of the different conditions of life in which they find themselves. At a basic level, however, it allows migrants to claim a sense of social worth, as recognized in a community of people relevant to the migrants. Thus, migrants may assess their migration experiences according to a range of cultural rationales that enable them to gain social recognition and sustain visions of themselves as successful social actors. These notions of improvement therefore cannot be measured through predefined indicators of societal status in the receiving society.

This article⁴ argues that by examining the varying ways in which migrants describe and understand their lives in terms of various pursuits of improvement, it is possible to generate a new framework of analysis that can help move migration research beyond methodological nationalism, as well as its counterpoint, methodological

transnationalism. This conceptual framework, however, requires that migration scholars' traditional topic of investigation—population movements between different places, usually countries, and the processes of integration that they set in motion—be redefined to focus on migrants' life trajectories through time and space and the ways in which migrants give meaning and purpose to their lives in light of varying circumstances of existence. I suggest that life story interviews offer valuable data on such migration processes, because they generate not just rich ethnographic data on migrants' experiences in different times and places, but important insights into how individuals, through their self-narratives, understand and assess these experiences.

In this paper, I will analyze three life stories related to me by members of an immigrant family from the Caribbean that I have called the Smith family. Though the family I shall here describe and analyze is formally a nuclear family that fulfils several of the criteria of social mobility as defined by "objective" American standards, I will argue that individual family members' descriptions and interpretations of their life trajectories, social relations and personal achievements differ markedly from dominant assumptions of middle-class family life grounded in mainstream American society. I shall argue that family members told their life story in relation to different frames of reference involving varying value sets and social norms that gave meaning and purpose to their particular lives. In this way, they could see themselves as respectable persons, whether or not their life trajectories conformed to established notions of success in the receiving society (cf. Chamberlain 1995:267). These life stories therefore point to the importance of questioning the social norms underlying migration research and of exploring the migrants' own notions of "betterment" and personhood as they stake out a life for themselves in a new society.

The Smith Family

The Smith family originates in a village of small farmers and fishermen on the West Indian island of Nevis.⁵ Nevis was colonized in 1628 by the British, who established large-scale sugar plantations on the 36mi² island using African slave labour. When slavery was abolished in 1834, those freed engaged in a range of economic activities as labourers on the sugar estates, share croppers cultivating cotton, and peasants growing "ground food" on tiny plots of land. The plantation economy underwent a long period of decline beginning with the mid-19th century, and when it finally collapsed during the middle of the 20th century, Nevisians were left to rely on their impoverished subsistence economy. Throughout this period, migration for

wage employment in more economically developed areas played a major role, as it did throughout most of the Caribbean (Richardson 1983; Thomas-Hope 1978, 1992, 1998). When Nevis attained independence in 1983 as part of the twin-island state of St. Kitts-Nevis, most of the population was living and working abroad.

The Smith family's emigration was part of the migration that took place after the Second World War. Beginning with the 1960s, nine out of the ten siblings moved to Britain, the American and the British Virgin Islands, the Dutch Antilles and neighbouring St. Kitts. I have interviewed members of the Smith family about their migration experiences over a 20-year period, beginning in the 1970s. It is therefore possible to explore the ways in which members of this family view their lives as migrants at different points in time and what kinds of ambitions and achievements they see as guiding their lives. I shall here focus on my interviews with Helena and their two oldest children, Cynthia and Emmanuel, who migrated to the American Virgin Islands during the 1960s. This American territory was then a popular migration destination because it offered migrants temporary work permits and employment at relatively high wages in order to attract the labour needed in the rapidly growing tourist industry. Helena migrated as an adult married woman whereas Cynthia and Emmanuel migrated as children. While they all are technically first generation migrants, the children spent a good part of their childhood in the migration destination and these family members therefore can be seen to represent two different generations in the process of adapting to life in the American Virgin Islands.

The Late 1970s

I first met Helena in 1974, when I did my doctoral research on the development of African-Caribbean culture in the American Virgin Islands. Helena was then working in a small restaurant known for its excellent West Indian food. While a local Virgin Islander owned the restaurant, it was apparent that the cooking, as well as most of the other work in the restaurant, was done by Helena, one of the many immigrants from the Eastern Caribbean who had sought work here. When I returned three years later to study immigration in the Virgin Islands, I interviewed Helena in her home. She was living with her husband and four children in a small wooden house, rented from a Virgin Islander and located in the backyard of the landlord's house. As the whole family sat in the tiny living room, Helena explained that on Nevis they had worked the land, planting cotton, pumpkin and other ground vegetables and raising animals. This was hard work, and when the rains failed, it was very difficult

to make a living. When it became possible to travel to the Virgin Islands on a labour certification scheme, they therefore decided to go—to make money and “better” their life. Kevin left first, Helena followed after two years, and the children, who were left behind with Helena’s mother, came five years later when a place had been secured for them in the local schools.

During my interview with the family in the late 1970s, it was apparent that things had not quite worked out the way they had hoped. A major problem, Helena stated, was their temporary visas. After more than 15 years, they still needed labour certification from an employer to stay in the Virgin Islands. They were therefore forced to work at minimum wages for local employers who thought that they ought to be grateful for such employment, since wages were much lower in Nevis. They did not mind the work but felt that they would earn much more money if they were allowed to have a business of their own. Instead of cooking for somebody else, Helena might run her own restaurant; instead of just pumping gas for other people, Kevin might have his own gas station. Another problem emphasized by Helena was that she missed living close to her family as she was accustomed to on Nevis. She said that she did not like to visit “strangers” because if you told them anything, they would gossip with others about it. For this reason, the only place she went, apart from work, was the local Baptist Church. Most of the time when she was not working, however, she stayed at home with her children as her only company. But the sort of home “that suited their pocket” in the Virgin Islands was not as nice as the home they had on Nevis. On Nevis, she explained, she would have a bigger and better house to live in, and it would be her own. She would have more freedom and more land around to use as she liked. Helena summed it all up by saying, “I only work in the Virgin Islands, I don’t live here.”

Despite this hardship, Helena felt that their move to the Virgin Islands had allowed them to improve their life in several respects. She was pleased that they were able to send boxes with food and clothing as well as money to their family in Nevis. Furthermore, they had succeeded in making some improvements on their house in Nevis, and the family enjoyed staying in this house every two to three years when they could afford to travel to Nevis during their paid two-week vacations. Another important improvement in the family’s life, Helena added, was that they had managed to give their children an education. Their oldest daughter, Cynthia, was attending the College of the Virgin Islands (at an exorbitant price, because as temporary residents they had to pay out-of-state tuition) and their son, Emmanuel, was doing very well at

school and heading for college. Helena showed me with great pride his report card with only As and Bs.

When I went back to St. John for a follow-up study two years later, the situation of the family had not changed much, and Helena asserted again: “Nevis is home to me. The Virgin Islands is largely a place to work, not to live.” This was no empty statement because the family was building a new modern house on Nevis to replace the older, modest home that they had left behind when they emigrated. The conviction that Nevis was the true home of the family had been passed on to the children. Thus, when I interviewed the son, Emmanuel, who was then 18 and finishing high school, he emphasized that he would like to study medicine, so that he might return to Nevis to practice medicine, or, as he said, “go back there and help someone.” He felt that Nevis was his home even though he had left the island at seven years of age.

The Mid-1990s

When I interviewed members of the Smith family in the Virgin Islands almost 20 years later, in 1996, their situation appeared to have changed dramatically. They had just finished building a large two-story concrete house located in an up-scale area of primarily well-to-do residents from the continental U.S. Helena was beaming with pride, as she showed me the huge house with many different rooms, wooden panelling and a built-in fountain with fish. She explained that acquiring this house was a great achievement: “It has been a struggle to finish the home. We must make sacrifice. We have not been glamour and fun time people.” The struggle involved a great deal of hard work, Helena continuing her job as a cook in the restaurant and Kevin purchasing his own taxi as soon as the family obtained resident visas in the early 1980s. It also meant making gradual investments in property—first in the little wooden house they had been renting, then in a plot of land in an attractive neighbourhood, and, finally, in the new home they built on the land.

Helena and Kevin’s two youngest children had married and established their own homes, when I visited the family in 1996, but Cynthia and Emmanuel were still living at home. When I interviewed Cynthia, she told me that she had dropped out of college after three years of study and had been working in various stores. She liked shopping and purchased all the daily necessities for the home, including food, and had bought “the curtains and everything else” for the new house. She also did a lot of shopping for relatives in Nevis whom she visited every year. Emmanuel had graduated from the local college and was working as a science teacher at an elementary school. He had spent a great deal of time helping to build the new

house and was active in the local Baptist church. He had dropped his plans to become a medical doctor, but still hoped that he might further his education in the U.S. and would like to work in research.

The Cultural Construction of Mobility and Personhood

From a very general perspective it is possible to analyze the Smith family's migration to the Virgin Islands in terms of, on the one hand, local processes of adaptation (and change) to life in the migration destination of the American Virgin Islands and, on the other, continued ties to the place of origin, Nevis. Furthermore, the interplay between local and transnational relations can be correlated with the family's access to social and economic mobility in the migration destination. During the early years, when the family's ambitions for improvement were severely constrained by their insecure legal status in the Virgin Islands, Nevis seemed to remain a primary frame of reference. During the 1980s, when the family obtained green cards and more opportunities opened up in the migration destination, their frame of reference appeared to orient increasingly toward the Virgin Islands until, finally, they were able to build a substantial home that was a firm basis for the local nuclear family.

This analysis in terms of a model of an overall process of linear assimilation taking place as individuals enjoy socio-economic mobility in the society of the migration destination does not match the way in which the individuals presented themselves as individual persons and members of the family. From individual migrants' perspective, migration will always be an uncertain business. Thus, while they may decide to migrate in order to achieve certain desired changes, the actual outcome of migration will always be unknown. Referring to the work of Johnson-Hanks, it may be useful to view migration as a "vital life event" (2002:865) that takes place at a "vital conjuncture" in individuals' lives. This means that the decision to migrate is taken within the context of "a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation" where "seemingly established futures are called into question." Vital conjunctures are therefore "rarely coherent, clear in direction, or fixed in outcome," but rather "negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence" (Johnson-Hanks 2002:871, 878). The notions of improvement that narrators point to in their life stories as important motivating factors behind their migratory moves are thus not stable, but undergo constant revision and reassessment, as individuals take stock of their lives at various points in time and reconsider the ambitions and

goals that have guided their life as migrants. This suggests that migration attains significance not just because of the opportunities it offers for individuals to enjoy social and economic mobility in the receiving country, but also because of the broader spectrum of varying contexts it provides individuals for asserting and sustaining their visions of themselves as persons in society.

A central theme in my interviews with Helena was the importance of acquiring a home of one's own. Indeed, it seemed Helena and Kevin's lives had revolved around fulfilling this ambition, and that this had been realized with the building of the dream house in the American Virgin Islands. The home had become the centre of family life. Helena was no longer employed but stayed at home most of the time, surrounded by children and grandchildren who lived nearby or visited on a daily basis if they did not live in the home. She kept busy helping care for the grandchildren and tending the little vegetable garden at the house that she said she had made "in memory of" her parents who had died a few years before on Nevis. Helena had not been back to Nevis since their death, and she had no immediate plans to go. She had not even attended her brother's wedding, held in Nevis a few months prior to our encounter, even though virtually all her siblings had participated in the family celebration, travelling from as far away as England (Olwig 2002, 2007).

It is tempting to conclude that with the construction of the house, and the establishment of an environment of close family relations in the Virgin Islands, Helena's ties to Nevis had more or less lost their import. This conclusion ignores the fact that Helena's achievements in the Virgin Islands attained significance primarily within a Nevisian context of relations (cf. Chamberlain 1995:267).⁶ This is particularly apparent with regard to the house, regarded by Helena as the family's major achievement. When I interviewed Helena in the 1970s, she emphasized that a major problem of being a temporary, poorly paid immigrant in the Virgin Islands revolved around having to live in a small, rented house in somebody else's backyard. This was, she explained, because ownership of a house was a primary mode of asserting oneself as a person of respect in the Nevisian community. "In my country," she explained, "a woman isn't a woman, and a man isn't a man, unless they own their own house." For Helena and Kevin, building a substantial house was of particular importance because of Kevin's particular family circumstances, as Helena explained:

Kevin is an *outside* child [i.e. born out of wedlock], and his mother is blind. His father paid less attention to him. A way was made for him to go out and seek a job

and better his condition. To be a man you must do for yourself. Coming to the Virgin Islands was a way of bettering the style of living. If you have no roof over your head, you are a nobody. But if you own a house, you are on your own. It makes you a man or a woman.⁷

Having a nice home in the Virgin Islands not only gave family members more space and comfort, it enabled them to constitute themselves as persons. Thus, if Helena had settled in the Virgin Islands, her understanding of herself as a person remained very much tied to a Nevisian framework of thinking.⁸

I also suggest that Helena's prolonged absence from Nevis should not be interpreted as due to any disinterest in Nevis or her family there, but rather reflected the continued importance of her Nevisian relations. Thus when I asked her why she did not attend her brother's wedding, she explained that she was afraid that she might get involved in a dispute among her siblings concerning the inheritance of property left by the parents.⁹ She also added that with her retirement from work she did not have the money to purchase the sort of gifts that would be expected of her: "I do not work now, and I don't feel good to have nothing to give them when I go there. I like to give a couple of dollars, or to carry a shirt or something. I don't have a lot, but I share whatever I have." Helena's absence from Nevis therefore should not be read as an abandonment of Nevis and the family there, but as a way of dealing with powerful emotional issues rooted both in her continued strong attachment to her childhood home on Nevis and in her desire to see herself as a generous member of the family who had been doing well abroad. Indeed, Helena's shifting focus from Nevis to the Virgin Islands can be described as being a result of her wish to maintain amicable family relations and a position of respect as a successful migrant in the Nevisian community.

The interviews with Emmanuel and Cynthia in 1996 also showed unexpected continuities in the face of apparent changes in their way of life. Both were in their 30s when I interviewed them in the mid 1990s, yet they were still living in their parents' home. When I asked Cynthia whether she had thought of getting her own place, she replied, that she could not afford it, and added that as long as she stayed in her parents' house, she would be able to "save money for other things." Cynthia's appraisal of her economic situation was probably realistic, given the relatively low wages she earned as a shop assistant. This might lead to the conclusion that she had become "a nobody" in the sense that she did not have her own home. However, if one takes into consideration the great contribution Cynthia made to the family home, it is possible

to make a different interpretation of her continued stay in this home. As noted, Cynthia did all the shopping for the family and purchased most of the items to decorate the newly built house. It therefore could be argued that the home in the Virgin Islands was Cynthia's, as well as her parents' achievement, and that she therefore had already proved her worthiness as a woman. It was obvious, however, that Cynthia did not constitute herself as a person primarily through the home, but rather through her shopping. Thus, she not only made purchases for herself and the immediate family in the home, but also for family members in Nevis who needed anything from abroad. She had become so well known as a good shopper that her uncle, who was working in the Virgin Islands, had commissioned her to make all the purchases for the wedding celebrations held the previous summer when he married a young woman from the family's village of origin on Nevis:

I bought the bride's dress—I got a catalogue, checked some dresses that I thought were possibilities and sent the catalogue to her. She picked one of the dresses that I had marked as a "check plus," and then I ordered the dress for her. I also bought shoes for the bride, and stockings and gloves for the members of the wedding party. I gave my opinion on the colour scheme, and I even chose the invitation and sent it to Nevis for her approval and then I ordered it. [My uncle] gave me money for all this. I chose the mint green for the women's outfits and the peach for the girls. The material they got locally, and they had a seamstress sew it for them. I enjoyed doing this. Anything with decorating I enjoy. I enjoy shopping on the whole.

Cynthia clearly relished both the shopping as such and the recognition she received from the family as a person with good taste and a flair for modern fashions. She developed this image further by presenting herself as a well-dressed person and by bringing generous gifts when she visited Nevis:

If I go to Nevis, I take gifts along. I buy for everybody, all my cousins, aunts. It is very expensive; still I do it. I budget \$1000 to take with me; I send food on the boat going to Nevis worth about \$400; I bring clothing for my own use worth about \$1000; and then I buy gifts for them worth \$1000-2000. I have to save between \$4000-5000 to go there. I try to save as much as I can.¹⁰

Despite the enormous expense involved in going to Nevis, Cynthia managed to spend every summer holiday in Nevis. This meant that as soon as the Christmas season was over, she began to save up for the trip. When I asked her why she used so much on gifts she simply said,

Because it is my family. If I could give them something once a year it makes me feel good. I don't know why. I don't want to see them look worse than anybody else.

When she emphasized that she did not want her family to “look worse than anybody else” Cynthia was referring to the understanding, prevalent on Nevis until the 1990s,¹¹ that the material welfare of families on Nevis depended on the receipt of remittances from family members abroad. Thus, if a family with relatives abroad was poverty stricken, this reflected badly on the migrants. On the other hand, if a family was able to display some material wealth, this would signify that relatives abroad were successful and loyal to the family left behind (Olwig 1993, 2007).¹² By showering her family on Nevis with gifts, wearing new clothes and spending considerable amounts of money on Nevis, Cynthia thus asserted her status as a successful migrant within the context of Nevisian society.

Cynthia was the only one in her immediate family to go to Nevis every summer. She emphasized that, for her, Nevis was still home. “I had no interest in going to St. John,” she stated and added, “I still refer to Nevis as home, though I have lived here longer.” This does not mean that she was unhappy about being in the Virgin Islands. On the contrary, she liked living in close proximity to her parents and siblings, going out with friends and shopping in the malls. It rather means that Nevis played a central role in her understanding of herself as a person, because she was born and raised there surrounded by relatives who still were important to her. Furthermore, this family provided a social context where she was able to assert herself as a generous person who could do something for others—something that made her “feel good.”

Like Cynthia, Emmanuel had contributed a great deal to the family home, among other things by helping to finance and build the new house in the Virgin Islands. He saw this as part of his duty to be there for the family, when he was needed. Unlike Cynthia, however, he devoted little attention to the family in Nevis, largely because with the death of his grandmother, who had cared for him before his parents in the Virgin Islands were able to send for him, he felt that he had lost his most important tie to Nevis. He noted that he must show respect to Nevis—“that is where my mom saw fit to bring me forth”—but that he preferred the Virgin Islands where he had lived most of his life. He was not happy about his life in the Virgin Islands, however, and felt it had been marred by Virgin Islanders' resentment of his educational ambitions. He described how local people had attempted to prevent him from being chosen as valedictorian for his class, when he graduated from the local junior high school and how he

was denied a scholarship for college, even though he graduated fifth out of a high school class of 200. When others protested at this unfairness, he was, at the last minute, given a miserly sum of \$250—hardly enough to pay for books. He therefore was forced to study at the local university: “I wanted to go to the States to study, but I couldn't. So I was denied citizens' privileges—even going to college because I had to pay the high fee. All that played a role.”

Emmanuel eventually managed to obtain his B.A. at the local university, studying part time so that he might work his way through college. When he got a job at the local school, however, he received no respect from the Virgin Islands parents who complained when he disciplined the students, making comments such as, “who is he to think that he can do that?” Emmanuel's greatest ambition was to go to the U.S. in order to continue his education: “I wanted to get my M.A. in science. I haven't completed it, but it is still part of my desire. I went to New York to study to obtain my M.A. But financially I was not able to, so I went back to St. John.” Whereas he expressed an interest in studying medicine and returning to Nevis to help the people there when I interviewed him in the late 1970s, this was no longer a goal: “If I was going into medicine it would have been research. If I do something, I like to do it myself and work alone in the lab, though I would not mind working with colleagues.”

Emmanuel's educational ambitions would seem to have taken him far from his roots in the little Nevisian village of small farmers and fishermen, but this was not how he saw it. He traced his interest in education back to his early childhood when he grew up with his older siblings and aunts in his grandmother's home. He recalled with fondness his eagerness to go to school as he watched the older children leave for school in the morning, the joy experienced when it was his turn to leave too, and the privileged position he had in his grandmother's home as the youngest child who could concentrate on school and did not have to do much work around the home. Furthering his education, therefore, was a way of cultivating his Nevisian roots.

Emmanuel also described his strong involvement in the local Baptist Church in terms of his Nevisian background. He spent most of his free time in this church and had developed a position of respect and leadership in the church as president of the Young People's Group, as a Sunday School teacher, and as a member of the Day School Board. He noted, “God is the most important person in my life,” and saw his life as being centred primarily on “pleasing God.” This devotion to God, he felt, stemmed from the strong tradition for attending church that he experienced

as a child on Nevis, especially through his grandmother. He therefore did not see himself as a new and different person, but rather as someone who had maintained the value of religiosity as emphasized in his early childhood in his grandmother's home on Nevis.

Mobility and Family Relations

The Smith family's migration to the American Virgin Islands can plausibly be viewed as an example of the sort of social and economic mobility that can ideally be enjoyed by settling in another country. In this view, poor migrants arrive with nothing but the clothes on their back and a strong desire for a better life and a willingness to work hard. The father leaves first, then the mother and finally the children join him and they settle as a family in the migration destination. Through a determined effort they improve their economic situation, manage to offer their children a college education and, finally, acquire a nice family home of their own in a good neighbourhood, thus establishing themselves as good middle class members of society. The question arises, however, what did this mobility mean to those involved and what kind of family life did it entail?

My analysis suggests that there is no easy correlation between social and economic mobility in society, as measured through objective parameters, and assimilation—nor is it possible to measure the quest for improvement by objective parameters. The Smith family's building of a grand home thus did not really reflect great social and economic mobility in the migration destination. Rather, it was a demonstration of migrant success as understood within the Nevisian community, largely made possible through hard work, a modest life style and great family loyalty. Emmanuel did experience social mobility through his educational achievements in the Virgin Islands, but this won him little respect in the local Virgin Islands community and instead made him feel humiliated. This may have contributed to his eagerness to assert himself as a person of moral integrity and religious leadership within a Baptist congregation that was dominated by people of immigrant background. Cynthia enjoyed limited social mobility in the Virgin Islands, but she constituted herself as a successful migrant through generous gift-giving in relation to the family on Nevis. The life stories therefore suggest that migration attains significance not just because of the new opportunities it offers for individuals to enjoy social and economic mobility in the receiving country, but also because of the broader spectrum of social and economic contexts it provides individuals for asserting and sustaining their understanding of themselves as persons in society.

These life stories also raise questions about the nature of the family relations among this small group of immigrants. The interviewed family members would probably be listed as living in a nuclear family in the quantitative studies examining indicators of social and economic mobility among migrants. Indeed, family members could be described as belonging to a standard nuclear family in the sense that the family consisted of father, mother, one daughter and one son. What could be more middle class? It is apparent, however, that this nuclear residential unit was closely interwoven with other family units. The two other daughters, who were living in their own homes with husbands and children, visited on a daily basis. I was told that Helena's youngest daughter often slept in Helena's home because her work place was closer to Helena's than to her own home, and she was staying there when I visited because her husband was away on a trip. Furthermore, her son spent every day with Helena who had given up work so that she could care for this child. Helena explained her engagement in this childcare by saying merely, "it is my grandchild." She added that the family and home were the most important to her:

I have lived on St. John for over 30 years and I don't go out to people's places. People may invite me, but I still have to go home to cook and care for the family, so why go? I live here and I don't know of many places. I stay where I belong.

The close-knit character of relations between Helena and her children and grandchildren became apparent in the interview with Emmanuel, when he referred to this group of people as "the nucleus" of the family. When I asked what this "nucleus" meant to him, he said:

Whatever is there to be done, I will do in whatever area I am able to. I am there for my parents and sisters. I try my best to help them. It is not the same with my aunts and uncles.

KFO: Could you give an example of the kind of help you give?

I worked in construction [of the house] and have helped in that area. I help financially if I can. When they were in school I helped within the areas that I could. Or I just sit and talk with them. I even do babysitting, though I don't like it. I am hesitant, but if there is no other way I will do it.

When he talked about the "nucleus of the family," it was clear that he was not operating with an idea of a nuclear family in the sense of a residential family unit expected to manage on its own. For him, the individual residential family units where his parents, sisters, nephews and nieces

were located were submerged in a network of relations extending help of various kinds, and it was this closely interwoven network that he saw as constituting the nucleus.

Cynthia also emphasized the close relations that she had to her sisters whom she saw every day, but she did not regard the immediate family as the most important nucleus of relatives. When I asked what family meant to her, she replied:

To me it is like a group that is set together to be like one. My mother, father, brother, sisters, aunts, uncle and cousins. I think of all that when I think about family.

KFO: What does it mean to be like one?

If one needs a favour that person can come to you. We share.

Cynthia's more inclusive notion of family must, of course, be related to her frequent visits to Nevis and her image as a knowledgeable and generous shopper for the wider family. This is in contrast to Emmanuel's image of himself as a dutiful son and brother who offered whatever assistance was needed to his parents and sisters whether or not he enjoyed it. Because of its embeddedness in a tight web of social and economic exchanges of great importance to members, the nuclear family of Helena, Kevin, Cynthia and Emmanuel therefore deviated at a practical social level from the Western ideal of the nuclear family as a self-contained, independent socio-economic unit.

Another way in which this family differed from Western notions of the family concerns age structure. Nuclear families in Western society are primarily families of procreation and therefore associated with couples and their young children. A nuclear family where the children are in their 30s would be fairly unusual, because young people would be expected to move out of their parents' home into a place of their own where they could establish a more independent life and form relationships that could lead to marriage and the formation of a new nuclear family. From this Western point of view, the nuclear family of Helena, Kevin, Cynthia and Emmanuel should not exist at all because Cynthia and Emmanuel ought to have left their parents' home and acquired places of their own. When I asked Cynthia whether she had considered getting her own place, she replied, as noted, that she could not really afford to do so and preferred to spend her money on other things than expensive rent. This seems like a straightforward, rational economic answer. There is also a cultural rationale behind this answer, however, because in an African-Caribbean context, it is very common for single persons to stay with their parents regardless of their age. Indeed, within the traditional order of things in

African-Caribbean societies young people are not expected to leave their parents' home before they marry.

An important precondition of marriage in the Caribbean has been the acquisition of a house of one's own. Since it is often difficult for the economically disadvantaged segments of society to obtain the economic means to build or buy a house, it has been common for young couples to start a family—in the sense of forming sexual relationships that result in the birth of children—while they are still living at home. The partners usually continue to stay with their respective parents, and their children usually live with the mother in the maternal grandmother's home. Many relationships dissolve, but some become permanent and the couple will then, when they have obtained the resources to acquire a house, marry and establish a family together in their own home. In this Caribbean order of things, the establishment of a nuclear family therefore is a sign of social maturity and a certain level of prosperity. The nuclear family based on marriage and living in a separate home, in other words, is a family form associated with high social status and prestige (see for example, Douglass 1992; Rubenstein 1980; Smith 1956, 1973, 1996).

The social significance of the nuclear family is well exemplified by the Smith family. Thus, Helena and Kevin had their first three children before they were married while they were still living in their parents' homes. Helena and Kevin married after the third child and moved into a house that Helena had inherited from her grandparents. Helena and Kevin did not really have an economic basis for sustaining a family of their own, nor did Kevin have the funds to make improvements on the modest house or to build a house of his own. He therefore decided to migrate to the American Virgin Islands where he was joined by the rest of the nuclear family. As soon as he had earned the necessary funds, he built his own house. Since he had uncertain immigrant status in the American Virgin Islands and limited funds, he constructed the house on Nevis, on the land that Helena had inherited with her grandparents' house. About 15 years later he finished building a substantial house in the American Virgin Islands where the family had settled by then more permanently. This house-building was particularly important for Kevin, Helena explained, because he was an "outside" child, meaning that he was not just born out of wedlock, but that his parents never married. He therefore felt extra pressure to assert his status as a responsible father and successful migrant.

The close connection between nuclear family, a proper home, marriage and social recognition suggests that the nuclear family, in African-Caribbean thinking and social practice, is not so much a practical family arrangement as

an ideal that the socially ambitious aspire to realize later in life. This notion of the nuclear family seemed to be changing as the second generation of immigrants grew up in a society with better income possibilities where it was socially acceptable to live as a family in rented accommodations, and where such accommodations were available. Indeed, neither of Helena's two married daughters owned their own home. Still, it is interesting that neither Cynthia nor Emmanuel had any plans to marry, nor to move out of their parents' home, both of them being satisfied with regarding the family's new house in the American Virgin Islands as theirs as well as their parents' achievement. By identifying this home as theirs, they had fulfilled their obligations as good members of society and they were then free to pursue their varying interests, whether in shopping and decorating or in religious activities. This analysis shows that behind the nuclear family form that is registered in various population censuses or social surveys, there may be many different social practices, cultural ideals and personal life stories. These three life stories thus point to the importance of questioning American middle class social norms and cultural assumptions that tend to underlie research on family relations in an immigrant context.

Conclusion

This analysis leads to the conclusion that migration entails complex processes of continuity and change, as migrants both reassert and revise ways of constituting themselves as persons within new fields of opportunity and restraint. Thus, the maintenance of transnational ties may not necessarily be a question of disappointment with not attaining "objective" goals of improvement in the receiving society. Rather, it may be an expression of the migrants' desire to achieve personhood within the framework of their lived experiences from their early years in their place of origin to later lives in the migration destination. From this point of view, change and continuity in relation to migration, and the mobility for "improvement" that it may entail, should be investigated in relation to the shifting contexts of life where individuals may construct their personhood, as well as in relation to social and economic achievements within national and regional frameworks of living.

At a wider level of analysis, this study suggests that the notion of improvement constitutes a central concern in migrants' narratives that should be subject to further investigation. Improvement thus refers to the general motive of leaving for better social and economic opportunities in another place, at the same time as it provides a flexible space of interpretation allowing migrants to find meaning and purpose in their lives in light of the varying

circumstances of life they have encountered in the migration destination. The analysis of the social construction of improvement that takes place in migrants' narratives therefore offers a methodological and conceptual approach that is valuable because it goes beyond methodological nationalism by focusing on the experiences and perceptions of the people who move rather than the success or failure of national agendas of integrating new citizens.

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Notes

- 1 In the words of the historian Walter Nugent: "To leave again implied that the migrant came only for money; was too crass to appreciate America as a noble experiment in democracy; and spurned American good will and helping hands" (Foner 2000:183; see also Gmelch 1980). Return migration therefore was regarded as a breach of loyalty toward the United States and it was, for many years, deemed a topic unworthy of study.
- 2 The American civil rights movement also created a public awareness of the continued poor social and economic conditions of Black Americans, one of the oldest "immigrant" groups in the country.
- 3 For discussions of the anatomy of life stories, see Bruner 1987; Langness and Frank 1981; Linde 1993; Ochs and Capps 1996; and Peacock and Holland 1993.
- 4 This article has benefitted from constructive comments from colleagues and the two anonymous reviewers at *Anthropologica*. This is gratefully acknowledged. I would also like to thank the "Smith family" for their generous help and friendship over many years. The data upon which this article is based were generated as part of a larger research project funded by The Danish Council for Development Research.
- 5 I have described the social and economic development of Nevis in greater detail in Olwig 1993 and 2007.
- 6 For a further elaboration of this, see Olwig 2005 and 2007.
- 7 Some of the quotes from these life stories have been presented in other publications (Olwig 2005, 2007).
- 8 A similar association of adulthood and house ownership could be found in traditional Virgin Islands culture, however, it has changed as the Virgin Islands have become "Americanized" and subjected to a highly inflated tourist economy that has made ownership of land and a house beyond the economic means of many people. See, for example, Olwig 1994.
- 9 For a further discussion of this dispute, see Olwig 2002.
- 10 She is referring to U.S. dollars.
- 11 This was especially the case before the 1990s when there were very few wage employment opportunities on Nevis and the local population depended, to a large extent, on subsistence farming. The situation changed in 1991 when the large International Four Seasons Resort opened on Nevis.
- 12 See also Philpott's (1968) early analysis of the role of remittances in family relations.

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