

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Vilna Francine Bashi, *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, 344 pp. \$US 21.95 paper (978-0-8047-4090-6), \$US 60.00 hardcover (978-0-8047-4089-0)

In a world increasingly aware of transnational ties, the network, drawing on connections based on certain obligations and expectations of reciprocity and trust, gets invoked as an explanatory — and exemplary — model for how we manage our relationships across and in place. Yet the invocation of the network can often substitute for careful excavation. In *Survival of the Knitted*, Vilna Bashi paints a careful and process-oriented picture of the role of networks, and how they are activated and work to facilitate mobility (understood in geographic and social terms). Drawing on a multisite research project that involved interviews with black women and men across the Caribbean, New York, and London, she finds that immigrant social networks serve to create opportunities that would otherwise not exist for new migrants. Immigrant social networks are an innovative and transnational response to constraint. The methodological decision to begin not with the migrant but rather with those who have enabled relocation offers new insights that challenge existing notions in the literature on dyadic networks. Shifting the focus from how a potential migrant activates connections in order to move, Bashi argues instead that those who have already migrated and built up a sufficient network in the diaspora create opportunities and seek out potential migrants to fill them. Starting with the facilitator evokes the image of a wheel, in which a hub (the helper) is attached to several spokes (newcomers) whom she or he helps to successfully negotiate the migration process, employment, housing, and a host of other services, in a process that is ongoing and repeated.

This text is exemplary for highlighting processes of racialization as central to a story about how networks operate and their *raison d'être*, making it a most welcome departure from studies of migration that background such questions and rely on an ahistorical and general reliance on “culture” as an explanatory tool for the success or failure of various migrant groups. Bashi chooses instead to emphasize the systemic processes through which the partial incorporation of black Caribbeans into North America and Europe can be apprehended, which give rise to and are in

turn affected by the meaning-making practices of migrants. Her analysis is rich and nuanced in its account of historic immigration policies across the UK, Canada, and the US (reading them at times in relation to each other and not just as three separate instances). Careful attention to detail (like racialized stratification in housing and labour markets, and differential modes of incorporation as blacks across the diasporic research sites) also enables a comparative account of Caribbean migrant networks in the US and UK, highlighting how global processes of racialization materialize in specific places, and reinforcing the book's argument against a simplistic cultural explanation. The hub and spoke model operates because and in spite of these structural constraints to facilitate the settlement and mobility of Caribbean migrants within networks that differ by place.

The text also convincingly challenges the assumptions of both assimilationist and ethnic enclave literatures, most obviously perhaps in its elaboration of the transnational ties through which strategies for belonging and success in the migrant destinations are continually forged. Moreover, the complex networks Bashi so richly describes neither fade away over time (they continue to be replenished in the sites of destination and to offer an important source of status and identity among Caribbeans in diaspora), nor exist in isolation from the "wider" society (as the chapters on housing, education and especially the labour market so clearly illustrate).

Bashi's interest in opening up the "black box" of the network offers us fascinating insights into how it works. At the same time, the explicit focus on what works raises questions about the possible downside of networks and the social capital that accrues from them. For instance, gender is identified on several occasions as a relevant factor for prospective migrants, particularly in relation to the labour market, but this lead is not systematically pursued, particularly as it relates to the hubs. We are told that both women and men become hubs, but are given little sense of whether and how gender might affect how they operate, who they recruit (do women recruit across gender to the same degree as men, one wonders), the resources at their disposal, or the kinds of networks in which they are inserted and which they can activate on behalf of potential spokes. Where are women recruited? Are the expectations placed on them (particularly if they are co-resident) different from what is required of their male counterparts? There are other lines of differentiation as well: the text concentrates its attention on black Caribbeans, but in countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, does recruitment cross racialized lines to include others such as Indian Caribbeans?

One also wonders about the possibility of overlapping networks of various kinds: do hubs compete against, or work or liaise with each other?

Finally, most of the transnational networks through which potential migrants are identified turn out to be an agglomeration of strategies that are for the most part binational in nature, which is understandable given a hub's own connections and the value she or he acquires in circles at both ends of the spectrum. Given Bashi's finding that Caribbeans are involved in various regionally based organizations in the US and the UK (they discover themselves as Caribbean or West Indian overseas, so to speak), why does this apparent or partial breakdown of national affiliations not seem to translate into widening where a hub recruits from? Does this tell us something about the webs of obligation in which hubs are enmeshed "back home," and the limits to their control, to which Bashi also clearly alludes?

There is much more work to be done on unpacking the various dimensions of these immigrant social networks. Bashi has given us an excellent start, in an engaging book that challenges much of the received wisdom in the migration literature. She also suggests further areas for research, in particular the ways in which the second-generation black communities negotiate the lived realities of racism, and the extent to which the networks continue to be relevant only for the first generation. As a region whose defining metaphor is movement, and whose modern history was founded on the transplantation of peoples from around the world, the Caribbean is an excellent site to open up these questions. But as Bashi argues in her concluding chapter, this is not just a Caribbean or "cultural" phenomenon: preliminary findings from other migrant experiences suggest a potentially rich field for comparative analyses.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

ALISSA TROTZ

Alissa Trotz is Associate Professor of Women and Gender Studies and Director of Caribbean Studies at the University of Toronto. She is the author of "Re-thinking Caribbean transnational connections: Conceptual itineraries," *Global Networks*, January 2006, 6 (1):41–60, and has recently co-edited (with Aaron Kamugisha) a special issue of *Race and Class* (Vol. 49:2, 2007) on Caribbean Trajectories, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British Slave Trade. da.trotz@utoronto.ca