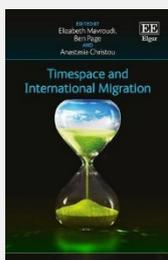


# On conjunctures in transnational lives: Linear time, relative mobility and individual experience

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**Abstract:** This chapter examines the spatio-temporal constitution of families from Cape Verde that are divided by migration. How does transnational family life unfold in time and space, and how does it matter to questions of power, agency and experience? The chapter starts from the premise that time and space are inseparable aspects of the transnational, but makes the case for addressing the two in contrasting ways. Time should be appreciated as a linear and measurable dimension, even as other perspectives dominate the temporal turn in migration research. Space, by contrast, should not be seen primarily as an abstract dimension, since the spatial aspect of migration and transnationalism is primarily about engagement with specific places. These arguments underpin a view of mobility as separations and unifications with people and places, rather than as movement across space. The chapter refers to this as 'relative mobility' and shows how it produces conjunctures at specific times in transnational lives. The analysis draws upon a study of childhood and motherhood in Cape Verdean families, and makes connections from the time-geography of Torsten Hägerstrand to contemporary research on transnationalism.

**Keywords:** transnational families, time geography, linear time, place, relative mobility, Cape Verde

## Introduction

A person's life can be transnational by virtue of frequent mobility. But, more often, the transnational is a joint product of the individual and the relational. People move in relation to places and other people, thereby weaving the webs of connectedness and separation that we think of as transnational families. The literature on transnational families is extensive, but conceptual links to time and space are not well developed.

In this chapter I take a step back to examine the spatiotemporal constitution of families that are divided by migration. How does transnational family life unfold in time and space, and how does it matter to questions of power, agency and experience? My empirical material draws upon a study of transnational childhood and motherhood in Cape Verdean families. I use this material to advance several conceptual and methodological arguments. First, I call

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for a reappraisal of attention to *measured* and *linear time*. The unfolding temporal turn in migration research takes us primarily in other directions, emphasizing the experiential, complex and non-linear aspects of time (Collins and Shubin, 2015; Griffiths, 2014). These are all valuable and potentially eye-opening entry points. But they should not preclude engaging systematically with time through its banal, measurable coordinates.

Second, I argue that, in the study of migration and transnationalism, the spatial side of ‘timespace’ should be reconsidered. Migration is first and foremost an engagement with *place*, rather than with space as such (Carling, 2015; King, 1995). A focus on space as an abstract dimension – whether on its own or as a constituent part of timespace – carries a risk of obscuring the place-bound spatialities of transnational lives. What we should examine is perhaps not ‘transnational space-time’, as Frändberg (2008) calls it, but rather ‘transnational placetime’.

Third, I suggest that people’s trajectories through time and places can be analysed with reference to *sociospatial conjunctures*. This proposed term borrows from ethnographic life course analyses as well as from time geography. It reflects an argument that mobility should not primarily be conceptualized as movement across space, but as separations and unifications with people and places.

The first part of the chapter briefly presents the context of Cape Verdean migration and kinship. Thereafter I present the conceptual building blocks ‘experiences’, ‘trajectories’ and ‘sociospatial conjunctures’. I then discuss the methodological and conceptual aspects of mapping trajectories, in order to bring out continuities and differences between traditional time geography and the approach that I advocate here. The second half of the chapter examines an individual Cape Verdean family history in detail and uses their case to discuss how conjunctures are shaped, experienced and managed.

## **Cape Verdean migration and kinship**

Cape Verde, a small island republic off West Africa, is an emigration nation *par excellence*. The vast majority of its people have relatives abroad, and the possibility of migration is a feature of everyday life (Carling and Åkesson, 2009). The transnational families described here are primarily shaped by migration to Europe that took place from the 1960s. Transnational motherhood has, in particular, resulted from women’s migration to Italy as domestic workers. In parallel with the female migration flow to Italy, there was a predominately male migration flow to the Netherlands, where Cape Verdeans found work as seafarers out of Rotterdam. These gender-segregated flows gave rise to transnational families that were not only split between Cape Verde and Europe, but also between several European countries.

Kinship networks are fundamental in shaping Cape Verdean migration flows and subsequent transnationalism. A key feature of the Cape Verdean kinship system is that conjugal relations are relatively unstable.<sup>1</sup> Relationships can be transitory and clearly come to an end, or they can last many years but be somewhat undefined and non-exclusive. The commonly used kinship term *pai-de-fidj* (literally, ‘father of child’) is open to such ambiguity. In the absence of strong conjugal ties, the mother–child dyad is the backbone of Cape Verdean kinship. A mother’s emigration without her children is therefore a significant experience for both parties, and is fundamentally different from the separation of fathers and children through migration. The nature of the father–child relation is highly context dependent, and relies upon material and social manifestations in addition to the biological fact of fatherhood.

The frequent fragility of father–child ties in Cape Verde means that paternal emigration is just one aspect of the more general phenomenon of absent fathers.

Child fostering is an important element in the flexible organization of Cape Verdean households, even in the absence of migration (Åkesson et al., 2012). There are many reasons why many Cape Verdean children spend part of their childhood away from their maternal household. Emigration by the mother is obviously a case in point, but it may also be motivated by the child's need for schooling in an urban centre. In addition, children may move to another household nearby if it is seen to give a better distribution of the costs and benefits of child-rearing.

### Experiences, trajectories and conjunctures

I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Cape Verde and among Cape Verdeans in the Netherlands and Italy for a total of about 20 months between 2000 and 2016 (cf. Carling, 2002, 2007). The part of my research that I draw upon here includes semi-structured interviews with people who had one or more of the following experiences: (1) being left behind in Cape Verde by a migrant mother;<sup>2</sup> (2) leaving a child behind in Cape Verde as a migrant mother; (3) fostering a child in Cape Verde for a migrant mother. It was analytically important to recruit on the basis of specific experiences rather than on a notion of 'categories' of informants. Several of the interviewees who had been left behind as children later migrated and left their own children behind, or fostered the children of other migrants. The various overlaps in experiences yielded particularly interesting data.

Past versus present experiences were a key distinction in the interviews. Some migrant mothers were currently caring for their minor children from afar, while others had already seen them grow up and become independent adults. Similarly, I interviewed children in Cape Verde whose mothers were currently abroad, as well as adults who had been left behind as children and related their experiences retrospectively. The current age of the interviewees who had been left behind by their mothers ranged from 10 to 38 years.

Focusing on children elucidates the more general point that transnational practices take place between individuals who stand in particular and changing relations to each other. Motherhood is a unique relation, but also one that is clearly transformed over time with the ageing of the child(ren). Children can also be central to transnational relationships between adults, such as between parents or between mother and foster mother. I structured the data collection around family migration histories, systematically recording the trajectories of all family members that seemed relevant in each case. By trajectory I mean the path that each person has taken in time and space through a series of migrations.<sup>3</sup>

When multiple trajectories are charted, we can appreciate *relative mobility* as a phenomenon that takes two forms. First, the mobility of individuals across space can be thought of as *mobility in relation to places*. Second, the divergence and convergence of individual trajectories constitutes *mobility in relation to other people*. In both cases mobility is not only about movement across space, but more importantly about separations from and/or (re)unification with significant persons and places. Mobility in relation to other people can be expanded to include the 'arrival' and 'departure' of important others through birth and death.

Instances of relative mobility can be crucial in a person's life, as is often the case within transnational families. I propose the term *sociospatial conjunctures* to describe critical moments of relative mobility. I draw upon Johnson-Hanks' notion of a 'vital conjuncture' (2002,

p.871), which she describes as a 'socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives'. Johnson-Hanks uses 'vital' as a reference to 'vital events' in demography, especially births, deaths and changes in civil status. But, by using 'conjunctures' rather than 'events', she points to the possibility of several contributing elements, a degree of duration and an openness to a variety of outcomes.

By introducing 'vital conjunctures' Johnson-Hanks sought to work 'between the individual and the social, free from the stultifying assumption of *étapes de vie*' (2002, p.866). In this analytical space, 'the social' refers to the normative and institutionalized more than to the relational. Indeed, Johnson-Hanks' primary interest was in conjunctures in which individual experiences could be related to 'structured expectations' and 'recurring systematicness' (p.872). These references to institutionalized patterns are essential for conjunctures that have to do with entry into motherhood or adulthood, which were Johnson-Hanks' foci. They are less pronounced for the multitude of conjunctures that make families transnational.

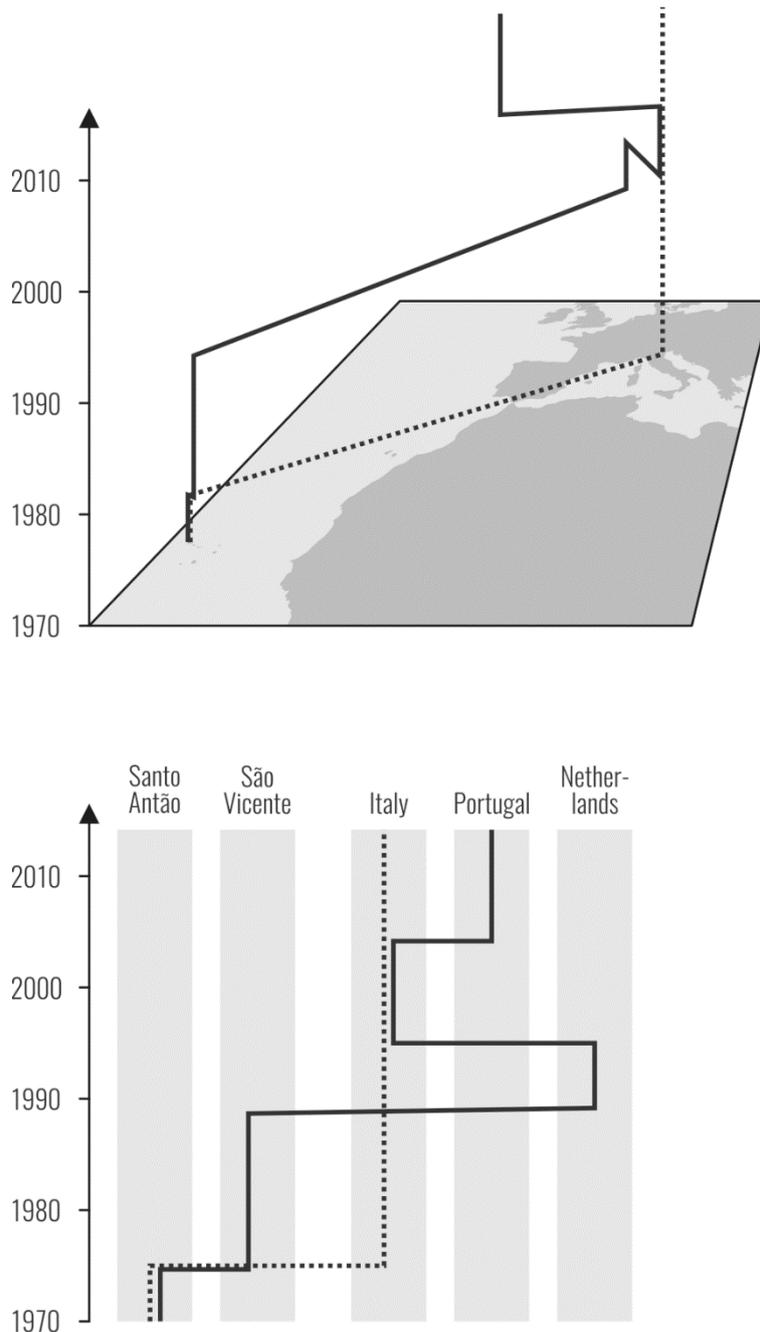
I am concerned with conjunctures that are 'socio-spatial' rather than 'vital', since they are defined by mobility in relation to places and people. The conjunctures I describe are vital in the sense that they are defining moment in people's lives. But, because they are constituted by mobility, they potentially exclude other critical moments – such as serious illness, completion of education, or the loss of a job – if there is no mobility involved in these events.

Socio-spatial conjunctures and vital conjunctures are thus partly overlapping concepts, and the difference between them is an entry point to understanding the significance of space in people's lives. Socio-spatial conjunctures inspire questions about the relative influence of the persons and places who were implicated; about the experience and effects of the conjunctures once they occurred; and about the relationships between conjunctures. Since each conjuncture typically creates a new constellation of proximity and distance, the time periods in between are characterized by different transnational relationships.

### **Mapping transnational trajectories**

My approach draws upon by the time-geography tradition that was pioneered by Torsten Hägerstrand (for example 1970, 1982) and that subsequently served both as a source of inspiration and a target of criticism for geographers. I follow Friberg (1993) in placing greater emphasis on the social and relational aspects of timespace; and, like Frändberg (2008) and Jarvis et al. (2011), I shift attention from the local timespaces of daily life to the transnational timespaces of the life course.

A specific tool has been central to my data collection and the analysis: *migration history charts* that represent the trajectories of the interviewees and their family members (see Carling 2012 for methodological details). Like Hägerstrand's well-known time-space diagram, the migration history chart traces human bodies through time and space, and measures linear time on the vertical axis. But in a migration history chart this vertical axis does not protrude upwards from space represented as a map; instead it intersects with a string of selected locations (Figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.1 Two migration trajectories displayed in a Hagerstrand-type time-space diagram (top) and a migration history chart (bottom)**

What is the effect of replacing the two-dimensional map of Hagerstrand’s diagrams with a series of locations? Conceptually, it breaks with the idea of time and space as equivalent and intersecting ‘dimensions’. Even conceptualizations that view the two as inseparable – as timespace, TimeSpace or space-time<sup>4</sup> – are founded on this parallelism. In the migration history chart, however, time remains linear, physical and measurable, even though it is differentiated and punctuated by moments of conjuncture. Meanwhile space is analytically partitioned into meaningful locations – that is, into *places* (cf. Agnew, 1987). These places may be countries, cities, neighbourhoods or even dwellings, identified and sequenced on the basis of empirical contexts and analytical perspectives. In other words, the change of visual display marks a shift from timespace to placetime.

Placetime retains the notion of inseparability between time on the one hand and space/place on the other, but acknowledges explicitly that lives are lived in *specific places* rather than across space. In the literature on migrant transnationalism it is a well-rehearsed point that attachments and identifications tend to be highly localized and parochial rather than de-territorialized and cosmopolitan (Boccagni, 2012; Van Hear, 1998).

The explicitly interpretive display of places – as opposed to space represented on a map – underlines the processual nature of telling a story about migration from a particular vantage point, in contrast to simply tracking the movement of human bodies through time and space (cf. Gren, 2001). The migration history chart is also sensitive to the scalability of place and the variable importance of distance. In the Cape Verdean ethnoscape that was the site of my research, the key geographical referents are the *islands* of Cape Verde and the *countries* of Europe. The migration history chart reflects this imaginary. In the classical time–space diagram, by contrast, the move from one Cape Verdean island to another is barely visible (cf. Figure 3.1). In the migration history chart it would also have been possible to zoom in on certain locations and differentiate between dwellings or households. The migration history chart's focus on places rather than on space resonates with the idea of *mobility in relation to people and places*. It highlights a vision of mobility that is focused on separations and unifications, as opposed to movement.

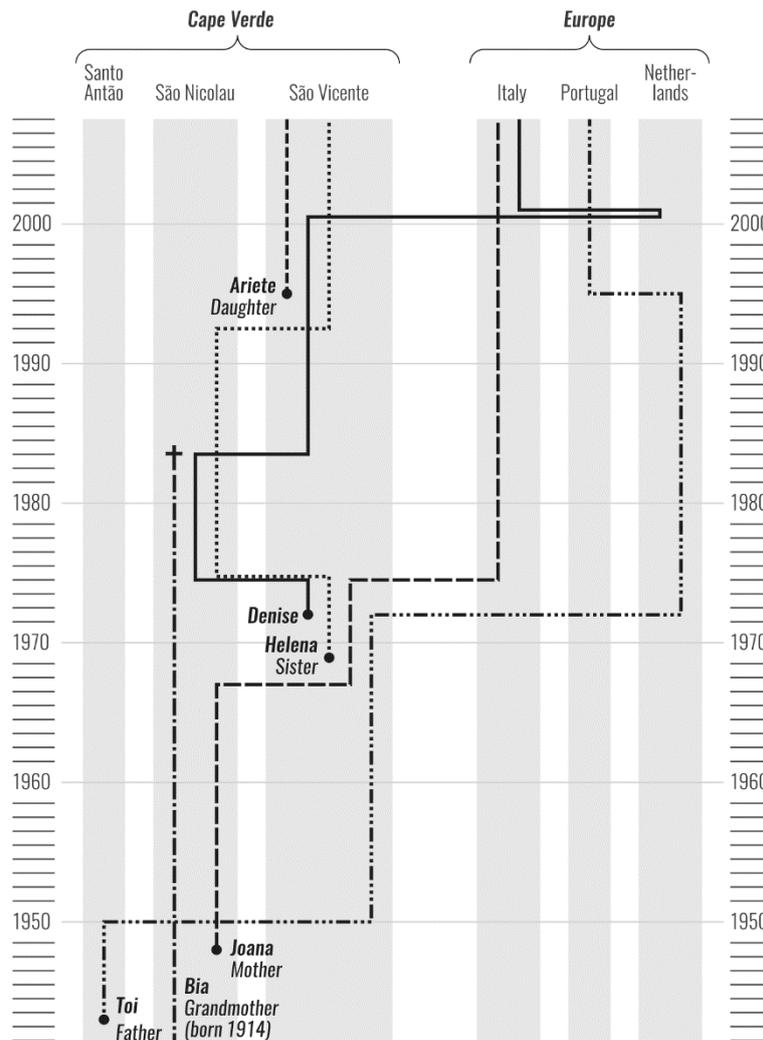
The vertical axis that measures time is apparently the same in Hägerstrand's time–space diagram and in the migration history chart. But they differ in a conceptually important way: the migration history chart reflects the open-endedness of past and future time. In the time–space diagram, by contrast, the map implies an artificial absolute beginning of time.

The conceptual differences between the two visual forms also have methodological implications. First, the two-dimensional form of the migration history chart makes it much easier to draw and read. Most geographers will have encountered Hägerstrand's diagram and probably appreciated that it illustrates some interesting points about time and space. But how many of us have found it a useful tool in empirical research? Even when the diagram is there, as in the top panel of Figure 3.1, deciphering the trajectories and the relationship between them is not straightforward.

Second, the simple form of the migration history charts allows them to be used as data collection tools (Carling, 2012). Informants differ as to how they interact with the visual display; but in my interviews I could always use the charts to record the key trajectories, and subsequently use the visual display to support the conversation.

### **Denise's family migration history**

I will use the experiences of one family to examine how transnational trajectories of mothers and daughters produce transitions in placetime. Figure 3.2 displays the trajectories of 35-year-old Denise and her closest family members in a family migration history chart.<sup>5</sup> In 1974, when Denise was two years old, her mother Joana migrated to Italy as a domestic worker. Denise and her older sister Helena were sent to live with their grandmother, Bia, on the neighbouring mountainous and sparsely populated island of São Nicolau. The girls' father had migrated to the Netherlands while Joana was pregnant with Denise. He worked at sea for many years, and played no significant part in his daughters' lives. After a failed marriage to a Dutch woman, he moved to Portugal upon retirement.



**Figure 3.2 Migration trajectories of Denise's family**

Denise and Helena lived with their grandmother on São Nicolau until she died, when Denise was 11 years old. When Joana (the girls' mother) first emigrated the obvious solution, as for so many migrant mothers, was to leave the children with her own mother, Bia. However, when Bia unexpectedly passed away, Joana had to find an alternative fostering arrangement. It was not possible to find somebody who would take both girls in: Denise was sent to São Vicente to stay with her maternal uncle's family and Helena remained in São Nicolau with other relatives. Joana considered the option of bringing the girls to Italy, but soon ruled it out. She was a live-in domestic worker, and would either have to place the girls in a children's home (*collegio*) or try to arrange independent housing and work as a daytime maid. Neither option would be feasible in economic terms.

Denise had a turbulent life in her late teens. She dropped out of school and had stints in various poorly paid jobs. When she was 20 her sister Helena moved to São Vicente in search of work and the sisters were reunited. A couple of years later Denise got pregnant by an occasional boyfriend who refused to acknowledge fatherhood.

Denise had made several failed attempts at getting a visa to go to Europe, but when her daughter, Ariete, was five years old, she finally succeeded. Like many others she obtained a visa for a family visit to the Netherlands, and later made her way to Italy. Denise's father had

left the Netherlands by this time, but her paternal uncle was there and sponsored the application. Somewhat hesitantly, Denise left her daughter with Helena. The sisters had been living together on the ground floor of the house that their mother was building (little by little) in São Vicente. Denise hesitated because Helena had several children of her own to care for. Still, Helena was the obvious choice. Helena was motivated to help her sister out now that a visa application had finally succeeded. It was also obvious that remittances from Denise would be a welcome contribution to her strained finances.

When Denise settled in Italy, she lived close to her mother for the first time since she was two years old. Joana had returned to Cape Verde on holiday more or less every second year, but they had never been particularly close. After six years in Europe, Denise has not yet been able to return to Cape Verde on holiday. Unstable employment and a slow-grinding Italian bureaucracy have made it difficult for her to obtain a residence permit. Without one, she cannot leave the country and return. Denise is frustrated by the lengthy separation from her daughter. She is particularly worried about the future, when Ariete will enter puberty and ‘all sorts of things can happen’, as she says.

### Identifying sociospatial conjunctures

The preceding empirical details are a lot to take in, but come together in the migration history chart (Figure 3.2). We can use the chart to identify three major conjunctures that punctuate Denise’s life. Table 3.1 lists them and highlights how each one is a ‘package’ of separations and (re)unifications with people and places. The first occurs when Denise is two years old and her mother leaves for Italy. The mother’s departure may be seen as the defining event of this conjuncture, but it was compounded by Denise’s change of environment and entry into her grandmother Bia’s household. She had only seen her grandmother once or twice before, but with time grew much closer to Bia than to her mother. Denise’s life from age two to 11 was typical of many children of emigrant women. Her grandmother provided the physical and emotional care that could have been expected from a mother, and her mother’s remittances and packages from Italy ensured a decent standard of living.

The second conjuncture occurred when Denise was 11 years old and Bia died. Again, it was a composite experience of loss and readjustment. First, she lost her grandmother, the adult she was most attached to. Second, she was separated from her sister Helena for the first time since birth. Third, she was separated from the social and physical environment she considered home. Fourth, she entered the relatively unfamiliar household of her uncle, his wife and their children. Fifth, she had to adjust to a new social and physical environment

**Table 3.1 Sociospatial conjunctures in Denise’s life**

Denise’s age	People		Places	
	Separation	(Re)unification	Separation	(Re)unification
28 years	Daughter (Ariete)	Mother (Joana)	São Vicente	Italy
11 years	Grandmother Sister (Helena)	Uncle Aunt Cousins	São Nicolau	São Vicente
2 years	Mother (Joana)	Grandmother (Bia)	São Vicente	São Nicolau

in urban São Vicente. This multi-faceted experience illustrates how growing up as a child in a transnational family can encompass conjunctures that do not involve the parents' mobility, but are nevertheless momentous.

During her teenage years, Denise made several moves between households in São Vicente. However, since she never re-attached to an adult in any way that resembled her relationship with her grandmother, it was a process of drifting rather than a series of critical breaks. The third major conjuncture in Denise's life came with her migration to Italy. Like the two previous ones, there were multiple parts to this experience. Leaving her home environment in São Vicente was the least challenging aspect of it. The separation from her daughter Ariete, however, was hard and did not grow easier with time. Entering Italian society and managing daily life was another trial. Finally, reunification with her mother was not what Denise had expected. Her mother's holidays in Cape Verde were exceptional spells of time which did not fully test their relationship. This conjuncture illustrates the more general point that in transnational placetime it is not only separation that is demanding, but also unification, adjustment and expectations of attachment.

It is illuminating to compare Denise's separation from her mother from that which her own daughter Ariete experienced. When Denise was left behind by her mother, it was a multi-dimensional experience of separation, relocation and encounter. But when Denise left for Europe as an adult, Ariete remained in the same physical environment, and maintained her close relations with Helena and her children. Such elements of stability have a major impact on the experience of conjunctures.

### **Managing transitions and relations**

When a Cape Verdean mother emigrates, it is generally her own, individual decision. It is also she who decides where her children will stay, within the limitations of available options. But when emigration is a scarce and coveted opportunity – as it is in Cape Verde – going abroad often takes precedence over other considerations once a chance appears. The imperative of migrating was lucidly expressed to me by Denise's sister, Helena. She had struggled to make ends meet with her mother's remittances for many years, and was keen to leave Cape Verde. After two failed attempts, she had meagre hopes of being given a visa, much less a work permit. Still, I asked her what she would do with her children if she were given a visa:

*Helena:* I'll leave them! Didn't my mum leave me? My mum left me when I was little, right? Didn't I grow up? Here I am, grown up, so I'll leave them too and go work. Here you don't find work. You see how many people are unemployed in this country, without work? If you get a chance to get out, go work, you don't go? Of course I'll go! You can't imagine how much I want to go.

*Jørgen:* So, do you have anyone to look after the kids?

*Helena:* No, not yet, because they still didn't sort out the [visa] papers for me. But when they're ready, somebody will appear. I'm not going to think that there won't be anybody! 'Cause if I think like that I won't get to go, right? So I'll have to think that somebody will appear, that a good person will appear to take them for me.

Many women who leave their children behind hope that they will be able to bring them to Europe at a later stage. But, as Denise experienced – first as a child and later as a mother – reunification abroad might be impossible because of immigration restrictions or financial

constraints. Another common obstacle is that the children's father fails to sign the necessary authorization.

The challenge of managing fostering from afar engages with both time and place on several scales. Time is typically referenced by a future reunification – whether in the form of the mother's return visit or the child's emigration. But this reference point is often elusive, postponed and uncertain. Separation is also defined by the accumulation of time spent apart; in particular it matters whether the child grows closer to other adults than to the biological mother. And the child's advancing age adds another layer of temporality, illustrated by Denise's fear about being absent when her daughter enters puberty.

A mother's choices about transnational fostering depend on relations with individuals, but these choices are also about place: the house, the neighbourhood and the island all matter. In urban Cape Verde there is a strong sense of spatialized danger, with some areas perceived to be worse for children than others. Moreover, socio-economic status is prominently expressed through housing. The quality of the house in which a child lives reflects the quality of the migrant mother as a provider, and can motivate relocation of the child from one household to another.

The delicate relationship between the biological mother and the foster mother can make children vulnerable. Social workers and teachers in Cape Verde explained that it was often difficult to work with foster families. When a child is severely challenged and some form of intervention is required, two possible scenarios are potentially harmful to the child. First, the foster family may ignore, actively downplay or deny the problems out of fear that the mother may say that the child was not properly cared for. Such an outcome would be stigmatizing for the fosterer and could entail a large loss of income when the child is removed from their care and remittances cease. If the challenges are recognized, the division of labour between the mother and the foster mother can make it hard to give children at risk the necessary attention. While the foster mother provides daily care, all major decisions about the child are typically left to the mother.

Children of migrant mothers are also vulnerable to their own expectations. Children who spend years on end awaiting their imminent departure run the risk of disengaging from their surroundings in Cape Verde. They may lose respect for their teachers or foster parents, and lose the motivation to study. A primary school teacher said of one such girl that 'when she finally got to join her mother after many years, she entered Europe as an illiterate teenager'.

## **Conclusion**

I opened this chapter with a plea for appreciation of linear time. Even if time has multiple layers of experiential and conceptual qualities, it is also measurable as a single dimension. When using this dimension to trace mobility in terms of years and dates, with several lives in play, it becomes clear that time, even in its taken-for-granted and commensurable form, is actually quite complex. A person's migration occurs at a specific moment in historical time, but it is also a specific moment in that person's biography – in biological time. This migration also takes place at a specific moment in the lives of the other people affected by the departure or arrival of the migrant. Moreover, a specific amount of time has elapsed since other significant migration events in the family at the point in time when this person's migration happens. In each instance time and people are related in slightly different ways. The family history chart serves as a tool for mapping such complexity-in-simplicity. The chart is not the end-

point of analysis, but rather a platform for pursuing questions about agency, vulnerability and experience. Most importantly, migration history charts help identify and contextualize sociospatial conjunctures in individual life courses.

I was originally seduced by the idea that transnational families are constituted in time and space – or rather, in timespace. But I have come to adopt divergent approaches to time and space: while time should be appreciated as a *dimension*, a dimensional view of space obscures its fragmented constitution as *places* that matter in people's lives. This recognition makes it possible to reconsider mobility as a set of separations and unifications with people and places, rather than simply as movement across space.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my Cape Verdean informants who shared their experiences and made this research possible. The analytical arguments have benefited from Ben Page's valuable comments.

## Notes

1. There is substantial variation between the nine islands of Cape Verde in terms of kinship. The research presented here is based on fieldwork on São Nicolau and São Vicente.
2. Some of the children 'left behind' were born abroad and sent back to Cape Verde as infants.
3. The term 'trajectory' has been used in different ways in migration research. Schapendonk and Steel (2014) use it to describe the drawn-out and unpredictable form of migration movements between well-defined origins and destinations. Others use it without any explicit spatial referent, as in migrants' 'livelihood trajectories'.
4. May and Thrift (2001, p.3) draw upon work that uses both 'time-space' and 'space-time,' and introduce their own version – TimeSpace – 'in a conscious attempt to move still further away from any separation of the two'.
5. All names are pseudonyms; fieldwork data has been substantially modified in order to preserve anonymity.

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