Introducing the Tales

Since the main ideas for this book came from talking with people, I am aware that the best evidence I have for substantiating those ideas are the stories people tell me. My own experience has also been important, since I have lived and continue to live these transnational realities. But a lot of others live them in many different ways, sometimes more intensely than I myself. As time went by over the past ten years or so I went about identifying good stories, and good storytellers. Some of these tellers were, or have become, good friends, and others are friends, or acquaintances, of friends. For as people came to learn what I was interested in they would mention others they knew or heard of, and steer me toward them. I started to make lists of people I had to get back to, for clarifications or elaborations or more chapters in their life-stories. As my ideas took shape I knew I had to follow up, and to follow leads.

It's a far cry from a casual conversation to a formal interview, but there is a lot of gray area in between. On the one hand, as much as you would like to, you can never reproduce the casualness and spontaneity of a conversation. On the other hand you need a certain degree of formality if the goal is to develop evidence in support of an argument or line of analysis. Early on, as I got ready to start doing interviews a few years ago, I set my sights on that gray area, aiming for structured and thematically guided discussions that still retained an air of informality and affective interaction. A good laugh and trading notes about everyday experiences helps keep it light and encourages a probing of those nooks and crannies of life that often harbor the deeper, more revealing aspects of a social phenomenon. As is so often the case, the truth is in the details.

Many of the people knew that I am a writer and researcher, but few thought I would be interested in including their stories in my work. I would often let them know that I would be following up with them, so that my contact
with them and request for an interview wouldn’t seem as if it were coming from out of the blue. Though very few had ever been interviewed before, generally they knew what to expect when I sat down with them and my tape recorder. I knew I put them at ease by leaving the location totally up to them. I met many in their homes, others in nearby or convenient stores or public places, a few in my office or home. Wherever was best for them. I let them know that it would take less than an hour, maybe even a half hour, though of course in many cases we went on for as much as two hours or more. In quite a few instances, we left it that there was lots more to say and that the conversation would go on, maybe for life. The topic itself has become a bond between us.

At the occasion of actually meeting up with people I would notice a touch of nervousness, as though they were expected to perform or give a speech or account for themselves. My instinct was to put them at ease with my own cheerfulness, bring up points of connection from earlier conversations, things we did together or people we know in common. Then I inch my way toward the theme at hand, reminding them that since we are talking about their lives and the meaning of what they have lived through, they are the experts, the ones with the valuable information. Then, finally, before putting on the recorder, I would in most cases give them a copy of my guiding questions. Not in all cases, because there were some people who I knew would likely be too self-conscious to hide their words on a page. Those tended to be the ones with less formal education, though some of those same people actually seemed to place greater stock in the interview session when it had the appearance of being “official” or formal in some way. I would always assure them that the questions were a rough guide to what we would talk about, and that we would most likely be changing them up in other sequences than that listed, depending on the flow of the conversation. I always placed a premium on flow, on one thing leading to another, and the power of free association. That always seemed to make them feel more comfortable. More often than not I would go over the questions aloud with them in advance of actually turning on the recorder, the purpose being to give them a general sense of the scope and nature of the topics at hand, and a suggestion as to the sequence. I frequently adapted the questions somewhat in view of the specific interests and characteristics of each respondent. I of course had a version of the questions in English and one in Spanish, and conducted the interviews in whichever language the respondent felt most comfortable, which in many cases was a mix. Spanish, English, and a few other dialectal variants that I have picked up over the years. Thus, for the Spanish speakers, especially the Puerto Ricans, I give the impression of being both within and outside of their immediate cultural world, while in English I had little trouble coming across as a slightly off-beat but well-meaning and knowledgeable Nuyorican.

I would always mention, usually at the beginning when I asked them to identify themselves, that I planned to change the names of the respondents for publication, and otherwise remove some identifying facts and traces. I explained that, aside from wanting to protect them from any possible misunderstanding, invasion of privacy or embarrassment, I am less involved in their specific, unique, and “named” reality than in larger patterns and experiences that many people have lived through and can identify with. While most of them simply nodded in concurrence, there were also those who objected mildly, insisting they are proud of their stories and have nothing to hide. Another few seemed relieved and wanted me to promise to stick to my intentions, as they didn’t want others to know some of the things they would be saying or had already shared with me. In general, knowing that they would not be readily identifiable further reduced their anxieties, as did my explicit intention to share with them whatever I end up using from their testimony. I know that I have endeared myself further with each of them by systematically carrying through on that promise. Note that some of the respondents also figure in my analysis in the later chapters of the book, and I have therefore had to “blow their cover” by revealing their identity. I made a point to secure their approval in all such cases.

The interviews themselves were, as they tend to be, idiosyncratic; I am amazed that even though time has elapsed by now, I still recall each of them lucidly and in great specificity. Despite the guiding template, each roamed in its own directions and established its own tempo and tenor. Though I wanted them to feel that nothing was out of bounds, at the same time I often reminded them that I was not after their full life-stories but certain themes and kinds of experience. The thematic focus helped to limit the time involved and to render manageable testimony for purposes of transcription and citation. I found myself maintaining that delicate balance between freedom of flow and gentle prodding in the direction of the central subject of transnational lessons and challenges. In most cases I avoided words like transnational, diaspora, gender, race, even cultural or national or colonial, though the content of those terms was always palpably present in what they were saying. In listening back through them, and even during some of the sessions, I recognized a certain dramatic or narrative structure to each testimony, a building or cross-referencing that lent a kind of coherence to each ensemble of experience. I was pleased that so many of the respondents expressed warm appreciation at the end, once I had turned off the recorder. Some even volunteered, either on the spot or on a later occasion, that the
interview was important to them, and that as formative as those issues and
events were in their lives, they had never had occasion to talk about them,
or even to think about them in any depth.

I found myself with three mini-disks filled with these twenty-some oral
histories, all grippingly pertinent to my theme and strictly based on real-life
experience. The question was, what do I do with them? How do I most effec-
tively use them to ground my theoretical interventions, historical overviews,
and critical interpretations of instances of creative expression? I choose the
word "ground" carefully and in its most literal sense, because I see ethnographic
testimony as the necessary mooring or foothold of both theoretical and
interpretive work, the real-life, experiential correlate to the more conjectural
language of social philosophy and hermeneutics. There is a school of twentieth-
century philosophy called by the forbidding name of "hermeneutical
phenomenology," most directly identified with the interesting French thinker
Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005); I identify my relation to and use of the tales
included here, and my idea of "ethnographic grounding," with that line of
thinking.

In any case I saw three main possible ways of using the testimony I had
gathered. I could transcribe them and simply publish the interviews as is, or
at least cleaned up by editing out the um's and ah's. While such a use has
the advantage of remaining faithful to the ethnographic moment and to the
content and contours of the testimony in a literal sense, my own reading
experience has been that the result is often tedious at best, and can be
confusing and frustrating; I usually wind up resenting the interviewer, whose
presence seems like something of an intrusion and whose questions like a
violation, or at least interruption, of the life-story. Why that question or that
line of questioning? Why not let the person tell his or her story, in his or her
own terms?

Another option was of course the most common practice in social science
ethnography, which is to use the interviews to glean quotes for the substi-
tuation of the researcher's line of argument. Here at least there is a
built-in practice of interpretation, based on the selection of specific quotes
and their insertion into the scholarly text. The interviewing persona is in this
case not just an intrusion, or in positive terms a guide, but reaps the harvest
of the ethnographic database by demonstrating the direct value or relevance
of specific statements to the thesis of the larger study. The problem with this
usage is that it tends to discard the unity and coherence of the life-story in
favor of these proof-values; the value of the narrative is trumped by the need
to substantiate via citation.

After agonizing over it for some time, I found myself unhappy with either
of these options. So I hit upon a third, rather unusual one. I knew that I
wanted to preserve the entirety and cohesion of the life-story but not in that
literal, Q&A-bound way characteristic of the transcribed rendering of raw
interview data. I recognized that each of the interviews contained a story, or
comprised the telling of a tale, but one which might not be apparent in the
sequencing and structure of the interview itself. Further, I was interested
not in everything that was said but in certain key themes that relate that life
to the issues and arguments of the book. I liked the example of certain
ethnography-based books (I think of the books by Robert C. Smith and
George Gmelch referred to in my chapters 1 and 2), which contain vignettes
of certain of the interviewed personages; those were stories that held my
interest, were not intruded on by an interviewer, and not reduced to quotes
dislodged from their narrative context. However, they tended to be in the
third person, still mediated by that all-knowing scholar and told in other
words. In addition, they also were burdened with a lot of extraneous
information and sub-plots that only distract from the story itself and the
main reason that it is being told. Worst of all, they often miss the punch-
line or key, most instructive dramatic moment, the turning point. The fact
is that many of the stories, if not jokes, are in most cases a kind of parable
or allegorical exemplum of the theoretical or hermeneutical point I am trying
to bring home.

The "Tales of Learning and Turning" are interviews re-written for the sake
of narrative coherence and their inherent emblematic significance. All of the
words and sentences are intact, exactly as spoken on tape. Nothing has been
added or invented. What I have done is alter the sequence and immediate
narrative context in which they were uttered, and structure the story in a
range of ways to lend it greater dramatic impact and interest. I aimed to offer
tales that would be as interesting and rich to a reader as the conversations
themselves were to me, and whose tellers would take on as much human
presence and character as they have for me in real life. Many times I was able
to identify a key point, phrase or experiential moment that might draw the
reader in, or serve as an effective climax or turning-point in the story. This
"hook," as I might call it: thinking of devices of many popular songs, also
helps to cue the reader in to a specific aspect or angle of the social experience
under study. I refer to the shoes in Ester's story, or the military greens in
Tofio's, or the round-trip ticket in Nury's, or the admired dance step in
Marielena's. The whole story seems to be "turning" on that one detail, which
also serves to signal the main "learning" experience embodied in that life.

As said, I have shared each of the stories with their respective tellers, and
have gotten responses from most. I have received no substantive objections
or corrections, but a slew of very affirmative, appreciative comments. I am
not sure if they feel flattered by the way their lives had been synthesized, or
grateful that I have taken their experiences at face value and only altered them
by lending them a certain narrative poignancy. A few have commented that
they see themselves as the narrator and main character in a short story or
human interest reportage. Others have told me that they feel like I make
them into a "good person." I assure them that they are, and that their own stories prove it.

In any case, I thus offer up "authorized versions" of so many rich and interesting lives lived between and across transnational borderlines. I invite you to read and enjoy them, preferably for the sake of the book in the order presented. I explain that order, and whatever else I glean from the stories, in my follow-up interpretive commentary, "Reading the Tales." Remember that I see the "Tales" as the fulcrum of the book, both the experiential grounding of the theoretical and historical contextualization of part 1 and the stage-setting for the cultural interpretations of part 3.
Andrés “And Now for Another Rum and Coke . . .”
Beatriz “My Own Person”
Carmen “An Embarrassing Moment”
David “Some Minor Points”
Ester “Shoes for Dinner”
Francisco “A Little Sex Education”
Gabriela “Like it Is . . .”
Hernán “Full Circle”
Isabel “A Fine Line”
Johnny “We had Pizzazz”
Lenny “A Common Ground”
Maricela “Show Me That Step”
Nury “My Round Trip Ticket”
Olga “Look How They Send Her Back”
Pedro “Rude Boy, Fríqui, but Always Very Cuban”
Quique “They Didn’t Get It”
Rodolfo “They Can’t Believe Me!”
Samuel “Let’s Face It”
Toño “We All Had Our Verdes”
Uruala “Another Way of Being (Dominican)”
Victoria “Keeping Up With the Jones Act”
Wanda “If My Parents Let Me . . .”
Andrés,
"And Now for Another Rum and Coke . . ."
(Y ahora, otra Cubita . . .)

You see that big old tree over there, across the street, the tamarindo? That's the same tree I used to sit under when I was a little kid, right here in the same neighborhood where I was born and grew up. See the shoreline over there in the distance, and the little store down at the bottom of the hill? It's all exactly the same, after all these years. Where I am standing right now was always my favorite spot to wait for my friends, or just stand around, 'cause of the breeze, you feel it! Here, on this spot, there's always a breeze, you can count on it.

I'm 68 now, just retired after 49 of those years living over there, almost 50 years, imagine, in New York City. That's most of my life, since I was 17, in 1956, when I left. Sure, I've come back, lots of times, but just for short visits during my vacations. But all of my working life was over there. In Brooklyn, the Bronx, but mostly in Manhattan, that was home to me. I did all kinds of work, and did my stint in the service. Most of the time, though, I worked in bodegas and especially restaurants. You know that place La Taza de Oro, on 8th Avenue just above 14th Street? Yeah, the Puerto Rican place that's always crowded, where the taxi drivers stop to pick up their rice and beans and chuletas? It's famous. Well, I was the counter man there, for 24 years! Actually, the owners of the place, since the beginning (it's been there forever), are from right around here, right up the road; they're family of mine, just like about all of the people who worked there. We grew up together here, in Barrio Guaniquilla de Cabo Rojo, and then wound up working and spending all our time together up there.

So I guess you could say that I became a man, a grown-up, there in Nueva York. That's where I met my wife, had family, saved up my social security, learned how to get around, talk English (it's still not very good, though, 'cause most of the time I was talking Spanish, at work, at home, just about everywhere). Sure, we played baseball here, and would go to see the local town teams around here when I was little, but there I went to Yankee games, it was a big deal.

I'm a black man. I think I always considered myself black, though no, actually I didn't think about it when I was a kid, before I went to the States. I'm black because when I joined the army, they put down, "race: black." But to tell you the truth, it doesn't really mean that much to me, 'cause for me racism, or races, they don't exist. I just don't agree with people when they say that to be black is lower, or less. I know there is racism over there, that there is, but I never felt discriminated against. Sometimes I used to feel for the American blacks, the way they were treated, but I was usually with family and other boricuas, where I felt comfortable. Yeah, I got held up in the street a couple of times, and I would hear comments, but my thing was just not to pay it no mind, just ignore it and keep walking. My parents would say, "Hacer bien, y no mirar a quien," you know, stick to what you're doing, do it well, and don't judge people, regardless of what they look like or say.

So, then a couple of years ago, in 2005, I reached retirement age and came back home to stay. That was the idea all along, of course: there was not a single moment, ever, when I wasn't planning to come home. It's been my hope and dream since the first time I left, and all through the years. And here I am now, at the same spot where I grew up as a kid. You see that building over there, the two-story house with the balcony? We used to play in the street right in front of it, and upstairs, that was the dance place. "Tres Copas y un Amigo", it was famous all around here. On weekends it would be packed with people from the whole barrio and all around, who came to drink and socialize and dance to the music from the jukebox. It would blast all over the mountain, those old love songs, the twist-slashers by Felipe Rodriguez, they used to call him "La Voz," "The Voice." Every other song was by him or the trios, you know, Trio Los Panchos, Trio Végañez, and of course some fíbaro music, too, like Ramito and Chuito, they were real people. I'll never forget it, it was like a party every week, from Friday afternoon to Sunday night, when things finally quieted down as people got ready to go back to work early Monday morning. There were times they had to take Monday off, just to recover!

But things are different now. That place closed down a few years ago, and now all we have is this little cantina, and the evangelical church down the road. Nothing like the fun and excitement of times gone by, but things are better in a way, too. Before we didn't even have roads or anything. See this paved road, and the other little roads up here in the hills? They were just dirt paths back then, people used to walk them, miles up and down these steep hills, even to go to the store, or to school, or to visit neighbors. Now we have cars, and trucks, and bicycles, and even some streetlights. And people have refrigerators, and running water, and indoor bathrooms, and wear shoes instead of going around barefoot. I love it, it's modern, there's been so much progress to make life a little easier. I got used to all that in New York, so it's easier for me to come and live here now. I learned to appreciate it, and to expect it as part of my life, and even though I miss the good old times, I wouldn't want to live that way any more.

One thing I like better about the way things are here is the way women are. There, the women go off to work, and they're more independent. Here, they're housewives, they depend on the man to bring home the habichuelas. Till this day, that's what women do here. And I like it better that way, I think women should mainly be housewives, take care of the home and the children. I don't like when they get too independent, and don't pay attention to the family or respect their man.

So all in all it wasn't very hard for me to come back, in fact it's been pretty easy. Everyone knew me and accepted me, no problem. Sometimes I
challenge people, you know, the ones who never went up there and don’t
know about it, when they get narrow-minded and act stupid, like when they
sound too much like they’re against everyone American, or on the other
hand when they become so pro-American that they can’t appreciate their
own kind and country. That’s one thing I have no patience for, when people
deny who they are, and try to be Spanish, or American. We may be American
citizens, but that doesn’t mean that we’re Americans. I may be Puerto Rican,
through and through, but as I learned over there, I am also a black man, and
proud of it.

And a working man, ’cause here I don’t see that much racism, but there
is a lot of abuse and prejudice against the working man, the poor people. I
didn’t live it myself, directly anyway, ’cause as I said, all of my working life
was up there, except for when I helped in the fields as a little boy. Around
here, in my barrio, everyone is pretty poor, and always has been, and the
people with money, the ones who live over there (see those big houses over
that way, on that hillside?), they couldn’t care less about us. They live their
lives as if we don’t exist, except when they need us to clean their yards, or
fix the leaks in their roof. It’s like that in the States, too, of course, like the
rich neighborhoods in the city, like the Upper East Side just below El Barrio,
but not as sharp and deep as here. Or at least I don’t feel it as strongly. Up
there I got a sense that maybe it doesn’t have to be quite as separate and
exclusive as it is here, that maybe it doesn’t have to be that way.

Now I’m going have another Cubita (you know, Cuba Libre, rum and
coke), and sit down to play dominos with those guys over in the cantina.
I am happy with my life, and always tell the young ones to be sure to travel,
to get out of here for a while and see what it’s like over there, wherever, so
that when you come back you appreciate the place where you grew up.

Beatriz,
“*My own Person*”

The neighbors on both sides of us were there, and those two families across
the way, them too. In fact I’d say we came back to a community where around
eighty per cent, or more, spent years in the States, mostly in New York, and
returned, just like us. So I always felt accepted, never rejected, I was never a
“nuyorican” as they say nowadays. Everyone saved some money, and we all
lived comfortably, not rich, but a lot better than when we left. I love being
back, especially to live in my own house and not have to pay rent. In a way,
it’s like a dream come true, since all along, for all the years I was over there,
I always intended to come back. There wasn’t a day that I didn’t dream of
returning to my country.

And it was a long time. I left here back in 1952, when I was only twenty
years old. I was a lucky one in my hometown, because unlike most of my
friends I managed to go to high school. But the problem was, there was no
work. As a young girl I used to do embroidery, piece work at home, you
know, en la aguja, el bordado, like most poor women back in those times.
We used to travel all the way to Mayagüez to pick up the work, that was a
long way through the mountains back then. And the pay was miserable. So
I got married and we moved to San Juan, where things were even worse. My
husband went first, and then we followed, myself and my baby daughter, to
try our luck in New York. And that’s where I made my life. First I stayed
home to raise my three daughters, and then when the youngest turned nine
I took my first job, first in a garment factory, then in a department store,
and finally in a hospital, where I worked for over seventeen years.

For thirty-five years I made El Barrio my home, in the projects alongside
a lot of other poor Puerto Rican families in the same boat we were in, and
Black Americans, and some Italians and other Americans, a lot of them
immigrants, too. As time went by I learned to speak some English, never real
well but enough to get along and relate to my neighbors and fellow workers
on the job. There were a lot of different cultures there, which I liked. Our
children grew up speaking Spanish with us in the home, but outside, in the
playground and at school, it was all in English. After a while, when they were
teenagers, we would talk to them in Spanish and they would answer in
English, and talk English among themselves. It made it a little hard
sometimes, and it hurt sometimes to see them losing their language, but we
understood. In fact we even encouraged them to learn English well because
that would help them get ahead.

We felt different from our non-Puerto Rican neighbors, though we always
tried to get along and be friendly. I remember coming home with the kids
and we were all put off by the nasty smell of cabbage cooking, or mutton,
or whatever it was someone was making for dinner. Maybe they felt the same
about the way our food smelled, but we never said anything to each other.
The kids might have had their scuffles, but as families we always tried to get
along and respect each other. And we’d turn to each other when there was
trouble of some kind, or when we needed to borrow a cup of sugar or
something. There would always be respect for the parents and older children
when they went off to work early in the morning. We were all in the same
boat. But with all that, we were different, and sometimes we were afraid, and
I had to warn my kids who to play with and not to play with.

In Puerto Rico, back in the early years, Puerto Ricans weren’t seen as black.
I had no awareness about that before leaving for the States. But my
perceptions changed because of being there. A lot of our neighbors were Black
Americans, and once I could speak English a little we got along fine. I
remember sitting on the benches with them, the parents of the Black kids,
and feeling no fear at all and talking and laughing about a million things. I could see that even though I felt so different from them, out in the world beyond the projects we were looked at and treated pretty much the same way they were, as something less, as stupid and lacking in skills and education. That's how I learned the connection between poverty and racism, that the rich are usually white and the poor a lot of times are black, or dark. The same is true here in Puerto Rico, but if I hadn't lived there I may not have seen it so clearly. In fact, people here who never left often don't see things in those terms, even though it's obvious everywhere you look. But we almost never talk about that here, it's just not part of our conversation. All I know is that people who've lived and learned that over there arrive here more prepared to deal with that reality.

I've always been keenly aware of class differences, the rich and the poor, and that the poor are always under the thumb of the corporations, like slaves. It was in New York where I was in a union, and I took part in the affairs of the union. I learned from the strikes and the protests that that's the only way to get anywhere or anything. There, if I didn't have the union I would have had no one to fight for me. It helped me secure my rights, because I was paying my dues. Not that there are no unions and strikes here, there are. But here it's warfare, there things were more peaceful, and organized. I'm not involved in that any more here, because once I retired I was no longer in the labor force, so that it didn't interest me. The most important thing I learned, though, was that you can protest, and fight for what's yours, and appeal to the law. But here, in Puerto Rico, I have no faith at all in the system of justice, since everything is so politicized. So much depends on who you belong to, and who you know, and power and influence. Corruption is everywhere.

Even so, I still fight now and then. Like a few years ago, when the Pentecostal church up the block used to blast its services and music trying to attract converts and bothering the whole neighborhood with the deafening noise. So, I went around and talked with the neighbors, and we wrote up and signed a petition letter and took it to court. And we won, so that the church people had to show more respect and turn down the volume and close their door. I probably wouldn't have done all that if I hadn't seen how it's done in the unions and among the tenants in the projects in El Barrio.

And one thing I know for sure, if I hadn't spent those years living in New York I would be a different woman. I would have stayed in the olden days, and it's very different there. A woman is more independent there, you just feel freer and better when you can get out of the house and earn a living, and have an income of your own. The women who stayed here keep on being controlled by the man: he's the one in charge, who has an opinion and makes the decisions. I notice a lot of times that women who never left still don't take an active part in conversations when men are around, "no se mixuyen," they "don't get mixed up" in anything, they don't want to discuss or argue about things. Among ourselves, as women, of course, we do talk about those things, but the difference is there. So that was a very important lesson for me, and for all of the family. As soon as they were old enough all of my daughters got jobs and went out to work, mostly in fast food places, but they all have always worked, to this day. And I do think that things have changed here, in Puerto Rico, over the years. It's different than up there, but it has also progressed and is better that it used to be here.

So that, coming back, I felt so much better, I went right on being the way I was there. I'm the one who goes to buy what I want, and makes decisions about things on my own. I've stayed pretty much the same about a lot of other things, like my love for my country, my ideas about the United States, my distrust for the local politicians of all political stripes (though I am still against independence and in favor of statehood for Puerto Rico). And I even like a lot of the changes in my country since I was young, like the greater opportunity for work, the improved healthcare and transportation, everything's easier now, and better. And for me, thanks for a lot of that goes to the United States. In all those ways, and many others, I feel like I am the same person as ever, pretty consistent in my views and values. But as for being an independent woman, that's one thing I will never give up, and never go back to the old ways, never go back to my old self.

Carmen,
"An Embarrassing Moment"

I was embarrassed. Not so much anger, or blame, or shame in any deep way. Embarrassment is what I felt when they called me from the police station and told me that my daughter—my eldest—had been arrested for necking with her boyfriend in the town plaza. "Indecent behavior" they called it. She should have known better. I think in the Dominican Republic you don't go around kissing or necking or anything like that in public. "Aquí no se hace eso," "That's not done around here." And then again, how was she supposed to know? She might have been born here, in Monte Cristo, our hometown, but she grew up her whole life in Nueva York, in the Bronx, and there you can kiss and make out and do what you want and nobody says anything. They wouldn't arrest you for it, that's for sure. "Son las diferencias," things are different, you know.

That was just last year, and I had only been back to Monte Cristo for a little over a year. My husband and I returned home after almost thirty years in the States, five in Miami and then the rest, more than twenty years, in New York. I've been a "costurería" nearly all my life, before I left home in 1976, and my whole time in New York I worked in a garment factory. I also raised four children, two born here in the Dominican Republic, and two over there, in the States. It has been a difficult life, a lot of hard work and sacrifice.
My main joy has been my family. Though I must say that, even though I love them with my life, my children have sometimes been hard to understand and very different culturally. My youngest daughter doesn’t even understand Spanish, and all of them are leading lives very different than in my country. They’ve been successful—one even went to Harvard—so I’m proud, but it’s like worlds apart when it comes to anything but the deep affection we feel for each other.

As hard as it’s been, though, I don’t regret for a minute that we went to lead our lives there in New York, nor that my children have that as their home. My feeling is that anyone from my country who doesn’t leave and go there, dies blind. Really, I feel like I learned to see there, in the U.S. Not that I think it’s better than my country, no way. Through all the years, I have always loved my country, longed for it every day. I knew I would be coming back and even set up my life in anticipation of my return. But it is only now that I can truly appreciate my country, and understand it somehow in a way that I never could have otherwise. I mean it, when I think what I would be like if I didn’t live there, I feel like I’d be fast asleep, “dormida.” Maybe it’s just that I was fully an adult during those years, but it was in New York that I learned how important a sense of order is, how you can count on things, how you have certain rights and can defend them. I learned what it means to be independent as a woman, in fact my husband learned that there, too, because if he hadn’t I wouldn’t have stood for it. Not that I think that poor people have it good anywhere, but over there I could see a society with programs to help poor people out, unlike in my country, where it’s “a capa y espada,” fend for yourself, that’s it. I even learned more about the relation between my country and Haiti, you know, the thorn in the side of Dominican politics. I became familiar with that history, which is especially important if you live along the border, like in my hometown Monte Cristo. Maybe I could have learned about that at home, but in New York there was no way I wasn’t going to learn about it, nor with my daughters around.

Now, I love being home again, even though I’ve been going through a lot of adjustments getting used to things again. In some ways it’s like I never left, things are so familiar to me, and of course people are so warm and kind. Sometimes I detect a note of “desconfianza,” a kind of distrust from them, but I attribute that to the cultural differences that have of course developed over all that time. I can understand it, of course, they have to have a chance to figure out who we are by now, and who we’re like. The only thing about that it bothers me is when they assume we have lots of money, that we owe them gifts or something. I have to tell them, again and again, that we didn’t have it easy over there, and that we worked our arms and legs off for low wages to pay high rents, and pay for all the kids, too. But things like that get worked out with time, and what I like most about life here is the slow pace. Things move more slowly here, more easygoing, without all that hustle and bustle and stress of the big monster city. Life is driven there, like always in development and progress and being modern and all that, which I like too, but I really prefer this pace, and the sense of family and community I have in my hometown. I just want to take the good with the bad, adapt again to this way of doing things without losing or forgetting the principles and values I learned in my other home, the Bronx. I think it’s that with the much broader view I got living there I can now value and understand the close-up things more fully than ever.

Getting back to that night when I was embarrassed by what happened to my daughter, I myself agreed with the police officer who reprimanded them for acting that way, because I think there is such a thing as “indecent behavior” and agree with that and prefer my culture in that way. That’s why I was embarrassed. But I also agree with my daughter that arresting them for that was too extreme. He could have just scolded her and sent her home, or told her parents about it. That would have been enough. arresting them and making a criminal case out of it reminded me of that undemocratic, fascist thing that I hate about my culture. The thing that needs to change, to this day.

David,

“Some Minor Points”

When I go to Cuba, which I have been doing almost every year now since my first visit in 1978, I stay at the Hotel Nacional. I love that grand hotel, with all the charm of the olden days yet also the fresh stamp of the revolution. But two things have bothered me all along, since my first stay. One is that the hotel has no black people on the service staff. All you see are white and light-skinned porters, waiters, even the chambermaids, not to mention the receptionists and management. I once brought my concern up with some of the party militants and government officials I know: “Wasn’t that the idea of the revolution in the first place?” But my objection fell on deaf ears, which meant to me that they think it’s only natural somehow that wealthy and prestigious tourists and guests should not be attended to by black people.

My other beef is this. The Hotel Nacional is on the same block in Havana as the Department of Agriculture building, and when I go out for a walk I always pass by that stately edifice. But I notice to my displeasure that though the front yard of the building has the usual ornamental palm trees, the rest of the yard is barren and dry. The same is true of the front yards of the houses in the neighborhood I would walk through, and wherever I went. That’s the other thing that most disappointed me about my beloved home country, the lack of vegetation and concern for the natural environment. They could even plant vegetables or fruit there, to add some needed nutritional value to their