INTRODUCTION:
CARIBEÑOS,
COUNTERSTREAMS
AND CULTURAL REMITTANCES

Marielena was 15 when her family moved back to Puerto Rico. It was 1965, and she found it hard getting used to her new surroundings after growing up in the South Bronx. With all the romantic illusions she held about her enchanted island homeland, she felt unwelcome and sadly disappointed. She and her sister were ridiculed by the other kids at school and in the neighborhood, for the way they looked and spoke and everything about them. "What am I?" they asked themselves. "Am I really Puerto Rican the way I always thought, if there are Puerto Ricans laughing at me and calling me gringa and treating me like a slut? Am I Americana after all, when up there I was always treated 'different,' and where I was even proud to be different? I was deeply confused, and felt lost." It was the most painful experience of her life, but she did struggle through it, and made adjustments while never losing her dignity and pride in herself.

"As time passed and we found our way around a little, they started to accept us, and give us a chance. In fact, after a while we even became popular. We still had our own unique style, that stood out, but they began to think it was cool, and admired it and imitated us. You know, the way we walked, jitterbuggin' and all, and our hair with the zig-zag cut and pony tails, and our music, rock and roll and Motown and Latin soul. And I was proud of all that, 'cause you know, I came to Puerto Rico at a rebellious age. They challenged us, but we challenged them back, too. I wasn't about to give up my diddly-bop for no one, I was proud of the blackness in me, even though I was blond with blue eyes. So, they started to like our style, they wanted to learn about it and act that way, too. Like me and the other Nuyorican kids in the school and in our neighborhood. 'Cause as time went by there were more and more of us. And there was salsa, and there was Pedro Pietri and..."
Nuyorican poetry that they started to hear about, partly from us. This is the stuff we brought with us.

And so, with time, Marielena went from being the butt of ridicule and insults to being a teacher, a mentor in cultural ways that the kids on the Island wanted to learn. "So I remember one time during free hour when I was in high school, we were listening to music and practicing dance steps. And I was doing some moves to something. I think it was the Wobble or one of those dance crazes of those years, or maybe it was some Joe Cuba record, some boogaloo, and I remember those same kids that used to bring us such grief coming over and saying, 'Oye, enseñame ese paso!' 'Hey, show me that step!' I'll never forget it, how the tables turned, '¡Enséñame ese paso!'"

Looking back, she realizes that her battle was worth it after all: "Because of my experience, and the same experience that a lot of other New York boricuas have lived through here, the new generation of people here are more tolerant. We have taught them, by example and from what we have said, to accept people as they are, to be less narrow-minded, and to know racism and prejudice when they see it, just as we learned it on the streets of Nueva York."

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The theme of this book first occurred to me during several visits in recent years to the Puerto Rican city of Mayagüez, where I had been invited along with a few other Puerto Rican writers from the States to offer readings and discussions of our work. Surprisingly large and animated crowds attended the events, and cheered us on as we read not only in Spanish, but in English and in that widely practiced switching of codes, Spanglish.

The audience seemed hungry for the voices and images of Puerto Rican communities in U.S. urban settings, and to relish that bi-cultural mixture of nostalgia for their ancestral island homeland and assertive pride in the fabled "mean streets" of the Bronx and other inner-city neighborhoods in the United States. They went wild when Tato Laviera read his poem "nuyorican," where he speaks directly and defiantly (and in Spanish) to his beloved Island, and especially the lines "Now I return, with a boricua heart, and you, / you scorn me, you look askance, you attack the way I speak, / while you're out there eating mcdonald's in american discotheques, / and I couldn't even dance salsa in san juan, which i / can dance in my neighborhoods full of your customs."

Or when Mariposa performed her signature poem, "Ode to a Diasporico," with its proverbial chorus, "No nací en Puerto Rico, / Puerto Rico nació en mi" ("I wasn't born in Puerto Rico, / Puerto Rico was born in me.") We felt like rock stars.

As I was to learn in the lively receptions that followed the readings, and in those joyous days spent in discussions on the Island, many of my new-found friends turned out to be the college-age children of return migrant
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As I was to learn in the lively receptions that followed the readings, and in those joyous days spent in discussions on the Island, many of my newfound friends turned out to be the college-age children of return migrant families. They all seemed to share some version or other of the same familiar story of rejection and disillusionment on their arrival "home," along with a strong affective identification with the big-city life they had left behind in the United States. They felt marginalized by the Puerto Rico they encountered, yet at the same time entitled to assert themselves and take full part in the life of the society. Their ambivalence and divided loyalties were reminiscent to me of what I knew of expatriate communities, or even more interestingly, of the similarly marginalized and similarly self-assertive Nuyorican diaspora in New York. The way that they hung out together and shared a sense of group belonging in an often unaccepting environment made them seem like a diaspora, or actually a kind of reverse or return diaspora within the homeland society itself. We joked, and made up the term "Re-asporican." To me it was a startling twist on the questions of Latino identity and everything I had been studying and writing about for decades.

I also observed their interaction with friends and family who had never left the Island, and with their uneasy and bewildered teachers, parents, and other authority figures. I noticed that the "Re-asporicans" frequently found themselves confronting and challenging stubborn assumptions about all kinds of hard-set cultural values: what it means to be Puerto Rican, what is an acceptable language of public discourse, how to relate to one's blackness and African heritage, the traditional roles and life-choices of women, and a range of other pressing social issues. I also observed the responses of their peers and others who were at home on the Island, and it became clear to me that, as in Marielen's story, along with the disdain and fear the returnees typically evoked there was also an admiration and even emulation of their ways and ideas. The "stayes," "los nativos" as they were sometimes called, thought the Re-asporicans were cool and liked their style and way of looking at things. There was not only interesting cultural contact going on here, but the seeds of change, some covert and reluctant, some vocal and quite public.

Here, I thought, in this fascinating, highly charged collision of distinct but intertwined experiences, lies an important key to the future of this country, and of many countries and regions of the world. Some major social changes must already be underway, and many more in store, because of this intense intersection of transnational desires. Such a dynamic and suggestive zone of cultural contact is surely worth a closer look and some creative analysis.

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In many parts of the world, return migrants and their children are bringing significant changes and challenges to home countries, and thereby altering the direction and impact of cultural and political flows that result from international migration and diasporic settlement. Whether it is Turkish or Spanish "guest workers" returning from long-term stays in Germany,
Japanese Brazilians moving “back” to Japan, Mexican immigrants in the United States taking active part in the civic life of their hometowns, or Dominicans shuttling between San Juan or New York and the Dominican Republic, returning emigrant nationals (“remigrants”) of many countries bring cultural ideas and values acquired in diaspora settings to bear on their native lands or that of their forebears, often with boldly innovative and unsettling effect. While these and related social phenomena have received growing scholarly and journalistic attention in terms of political economy and global migration, most studies continue to focus strictly on money remittances and transnational community formation by way of civic activity, entrepreneurship, and institutional development.

What most gripped my attention, however, was what I have come to call “cultural remittances,” that is, the ensemble of ideas, values, and expressive forms introduced into societies of origin by remigrants and their families as they return “home,” sometimes for the first time, for temporary visits or permanent resettlement, and as transmitted through the increasingly pervasive means of telecommunications. Thus, after years of studying, teaching, and writing about migration and the resultant cultural changes and continuities in receiving or host societies, I was now eager to explore a new and unknown side of the same phenomenon: the reverse flow or “countercurrent” resulting from massive circular and return migration and the ongoing remittance of cultural values and practices through friends, relatives, and the media.

The history of Puerto Rican migration, community formation, and returning home provides an especially rich field for studying modern-day processes of transnational identity formation, trans-locality, circular migration, and diasporic communities, and will therefore serve as the primary and paradigmatic case in point in this book. In the Puerto Rican case it is possible to examine such processes as they unfold through several generations of social history and play out in highly charged political and cultural contexts. For over thirty years a diasporic, “Nuyorican” identity location has been staked out, and circular migration has become a prevalent mode of movement. Puerto Ricans thus anticipating by a decade or more experiences undergone by millions of transnational migrants around the world. The re-entry of thousands of Puerto Rican families, many of them born and raised in U.S. cities, has had an enormous though largely uncharted impact on the Island society, such that assumptions about the meaning of national culture itself, and intersecting issues of territory, citizenship, language, gender, race, political representation, and social class, are of necessity addressed in new ways.

This often unwitting and unintended cultural challenge—which I encapsulate with the term “the diaspora strikes back”—has a particular edge because it is lodged not by “foreigners” imposing their ways in accord with reigning systems of international power, but by “one’s own,” as it were, fellow Puerto Ricans who continue to claim full-scale membership in the national
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The Puerto Rican case is of course idiosyncratic in some important ways, perhaps most of all because of the abiding colonial relationship under which its entire migratory movement and diaspora formation have transpired. The longevity, volume, and working-class composition of the migration and return migration are among the most salient consequences of this political and economic dependency, as is the intensity of its transnational and cross-cultural connections; perhaps most obviously, the U.S. citizenship status of all Puerto Ricans differentiates them from other Caribbean and Latino groups. Nevertheless, I would hold that rather than merely exceptional, and in some ways precisely because of its exceptional qualities, Puerto Ricans serve as an excellent focus by anchoring me in a paradigmatic and especially illuminating instance of transnational life and culture.

In thinking through my Mayagüez encounters and extending them with further study, I rapidly came across a wide array of congruent and contrastive experiences of co-ethnic "remigrants" and "cultural remittances" in other countries. Dominican and Mexican stories would appear to be closest to those of returning Puerto Ricans; while I do treat the Dominican experience here, the Mexican case, and the whole idea of Chicano culture haunting the traditional Mexican imaginary, while obviously of central concern for any consideration of U.S. Latino life, is so huge that it really requires a study in its own right. Other illuminating parallels can also be found among West Indians, African Americans returning to the south (as captured by Carol Stack in her book Call to Home (1996)), Filipinos and Koreans, Japanese Brazilians, and Turkish and southern European "guest workers." In reference to earlier stages in American immigration history, the largely overlooked drama of European return migration has also been addressed in more recent studies, as in Mark Wymann's Round-Trip to America (1993), and that of African Americans returning to Africa in James T. Campbell and David Levering Lewis's Middle Passages (2006).

But for the sake of focus, the Puerto Rican experience is the privileged example in this study, as is New York City the central diasporic location for
that and so many other transnational communities historically and in our times. Of course no such case can be taken in isolation, so that to assure the generalizing power of my analysis I identified the Dominican and the Cuban experiences as offering the most promising lines of contrast and comparison. The Hispanic Caribbean, the three Spanish-speaking Antillean islands with huge, vibrant Caribbean Latino enclaves in the United States, are as closely linked in their common cultural heritage and regional location as they are distinct in their political status and migratory and diaspora histories. I refer to this tri-national focus of my analysis as "Caribbean Latinos," or to use the Spanish word, "caribeños."

Combining as it does close family resemblances and sharp political divergences, the Caribbean Latino experience thus makes for an ideal testing ground for the study of transnational cultural flows and interactions. All three countries endured four centuries of Spanish colonial rule, which involved the virtual extermination of the indigenous Arawak populations and importation of millions of enslaved Africans. In differential ways, all demonstrate a troubled relation with that African heritage, and all have spent the past century under the direct and overarching sway of U.S. imperial power, which has included the formation of huge diasporas in North America. On the one hand, in addition to differing processes of national formation, their respective relations to their imposing northern neighbor exemplify the full gamut of modern-day political possibilities, from direct colony (Puerto Rico) to neo- or semi-colony (Dominican Republic) to tenuous breakaway from the imperial orbit via revolutionary socialism (Cuba). As a result, while the three diasporas bear many commonalities and intersections, making them almost seem like one pan-ethnic Caribbean Latino community in various historical periods, closer inspection shows them to make for very diverse historical realities. The same may be said for the processes of return migration and remittances, such that it is only by marking off those discrepancies that one can speak meaningfully, as I attempt to do, of a single "Caribbean Latino counterstream."

The longest-standing, most consistent and voluminous of the three migratory, diasporic, and return experiences is the Puerto Rican one, which is ample reason for allowing it a certain pride of place among the three instances. The Dominican case bears closest comparison with the Puerto Rican one over the past forty-some years, but that massive diasporic presence has been more recent and the cultural changes under study more abrupt, both differences attributable to the differing relations of colonial power at work. While the flow of cash remittances to the Dominican Republic has been far more abundant and that of challenging cultural transfers more abrupt and sharper, there has been far less migratory return, especially of a long-term or permanent kind.
The most anomalous of the three is of course the Cuban experience; demonstrating their compatibility within the analytical model I seek to develop will be the most obvious challenge to the validity of my argument. Historically, Cubans were the main protagonists of Spanish Caribbean exile in the nineteenth century, and shared close inter-diasporic connections with Puerto Ricans through the first half of the twentieth. But the 1959 revolution and its aftermath have meant the veering off of the Cuban community from the Puerto Rican and Dominican, and indeed an exceptional status within the larger "Latino" pan-ethnicity in recent generations. While the transfer of cash and other material goods has been ample and consequential and the ideological challenge posed by the exile community as extreme as can be, there has been virtually no return migration and resettlement in the homeland. Nevertheless, between many and meaningful temporary visits and incessant communication between diaspora and homeland locations, a cultural counterflow has definitely been evident all along and, as in the other two cases in point, has been a thorn in the side of the traditional homeland culture in terms of the reigning values, ideological perspectives and expressive means.

But the main reason for including Cuba and not, say, Mexico or Haiti or Panama, is not because of such direct commonalities, nor even its belonging to the Hispanic Caribbean family of national experiences. The idea is that if an analogous experience can be established in such a diametrically opposite situation, the line of analysis may then be applicable in a wider and more universal way. What I hope to show is that the "cultural remittances" entering and so consequentially affecting Cuba in our times stem not so much from a nationally defined and specified diaspora, but from broader Caribbean and Afro-Atlantic diasporic sources also influential in contemporary Puerto Rican and Dominican counterstreams. In other words, the process is indirect and oblique in the Cuban case, the diaspora and its cultural diffusion effectively disengaged from its explicitly national moorings and comprised of an already transnationalized mix of multiple cultural traditions.

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The Caribbean Latino diaspora and its varied relations with the home countries and region is thus the geo-cultural location for my study. I attempt to characterize this space and its historical trajectory in chapter 3, and then ground it with narrated life-experience and creative expressions in the remainder of the book. Before arriving there, though, it is important to address the key theoretical issues of diaspora and cultural "return" and set forth my own understanding of these complex concepts and social processes. What is a diaspora? What is a "transnational community" and what is new about modern-day transnationalism as compared with earlier instances of local and
global migrations and transformative cultural contacts? What can be said of cultural migrations between diasporas and homelands, and especially of the impact of return flows of people and their diaspora-forged cultural experiences and values?

I seek to address such and other related questions in chapters 1 and 2. In offering a critical review of previous scholarly and journalistic accounts, I was surprised to find myself bringing into dialogue two integrally tied but as yet relatively disconnected theoretical discourses: that is, I realized that the vast theoretical literature on diasporas and transnational communities rarely deals directly with the phenomenon of migratory return or the impact of remittances, and that the equally expansive studies of return migration and even remittances bore little if any explicit relation to the comparatively new found fields of diaspora and transnational studies. By implication I am proposing that the two discussions be brought into interaction with one another so as to arrive at a more coherent approach to contemporary transnational experience.

In addition to thus conjoining these two theoretical discussions, I also draw out my own points of emphasis so as to best set the stage for the evidence presented in the remainder of my study. My two main interventions have to do with the issues of power and of the cultural, both of which have in my view received inadequate attention in most theoretical reflections on diaspora and diasporic return. In thinking diaspora, we need to make clear which social sector of the home and host societies goes to comprise the given diaspora community, and what international power relations motivate and condition the diasporic formation. The phrase I take as the title of chapter 1, "thinking diaspora from below," signals my focus on working-class and economically based migratory movements and diasporas, and on colonially defined relations among home and host societies. The social and cultural worlds forged of such experience—which I refer to with the playful phrase "créolité in the hood"—is an expression of these structured relations of power, and therefore resist or at least go to qualify the idea of some generic diaspora reality. In different ways, all three creolized diasporas exemplify these coordinates of transnational power, and the cultural goods moving between homeland and diaspora locations need to be understood as—to take the title of one pertinent book—"streams of cultural capital."

I have also found that previous study of these relations has tended to focus inordinately on political and economic, or more broadly sociological, aspects, and to treat the cultural dimensions in minimal or marginal ways. While motivations for migratory movement as well as the relative placement of migrant communities clearly have economic and political sources, it is in its cultural manifestations that diaspora life and return can be understood in its human, experiential qualities, and differentiated at more specific, idiosyncratic levels. I also argue that when scholarly writers do take up cultural...
considerations, they generally conceive of "culture" in limited and often individualistic terms of social behavior and attitudes. Likewise, they take a narrow view of "politics" as civic consciousness and participation. Issues of ideology and collective challenges to traditional values and social identities usually get short shrift when they are not totally absent, while the humanistic sense of culture having to do with creative expressions and styles has no role in the analysis. The vast literature on the ubiquitous contemporary phenomenon of remittances provides ample examples of these shortcomings.

It is in terms of power and the cultural that I introduce the concept of "cultural remittances," perhaps the guiding idea of my book. In doing so, I hope to expand on the term "social remittances" as developed by anthropologist Peggy Levitt in her book *The Transnational Villagers* (2001). Scholars have long been saying that it is not just money and financial capital that are transferred in the multiple cross-border transactions of today's society, but also values, ideas, beliefs and a host of other features of social life. Levitt did the welcome service of injecting this insight into the used and abused concept of "remittance," and thereby provided a handy term for a whole range of transnational studies. However, I contend that her theoretical innovation fails to live up to its potential because of the methodological and philosophical limitations of her notion of the cultural. In order to recognize that the non-monetary aspects of today's "remittances" may bear even greater consequences than the "cash transfers" to which most of that discussion is limited, and indeed to understand the potential deeper significance of all "transfers" emanating from diasporas, our notion of culture needs to embrace collective, ideological, as well as artistic meanings of the term.

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With these theoretical and historical bearings in view, I then seek to ground my ideas by providing evidence in the form of personal life-stories and instances of expressive creativity. I think of the "Tales of Learning and Turning" that make up Part 2 as the heart of the book, the narrative fulcrum on which the more abstract and interpretive efforts turn. My commentaries included before and after the tales themselves ("Introducing the Tales" and "Reading the Tales") are intended to explain how they came into being, and what conclusions or insights I suggest might be gleaned from them as illustrations or illuminations of my main arguments and the social phenomenon under study. The tales are based on interviews I conducted in a range of sites over several years since around 2000, and especially in 2006 and 2007. I have changed the names, arranged them chronologically (and alphabetically for ease of reference), and reorganized each tale so as to enhance its dramatic appeal and draw attention to those experiences most germane to the present study. The result is a rich and engaging tapestry of Caribbean Latino lives.
as real people from different walks and stations of life navigate the joys and challenges—the intensive “learning and turning”—of transnational cultural reality. In this context it is also intended to serve as an archive or database of evidence for the controversial theoretical and interpretive perspectives set forth in the remainder of the book.

Indeed, in Part 3 I make frequent cross-reference to the stories so as to connect and associate my reflections on poetic, musical, and artistic innovations with this qualitative experiential data. Some of the writers and performers who illustrate the “Style Transfers” of that part are also storytellers of “learning and turning” experiences, and I am therefore obliged (with their permission, of course) to blow their cover, as it were, and reveal their biographical identities. In chapters 5 and 6 and in the Coda, “Bring the Salsa,” “Open Mic,” and “Visual Crossings,” respectively, Puerto Rican cultural history forms the point of departure and most fully substantiated case in point, in part because it is the longest-standing and in part because of my own greater familiarity with that experience. Clearly, I view the emergence and assertion of a “Nuyorican” field of group identity and creative expressivity in the later 1960s and early 1970s as the benchmark of the cultural ground-shift of central interest here. Nevertheless, it becomes evident that, despite the marked variations among them, Dominican and Cuban experiences may well bear even more radical implications for social and cultural change than the Puerto Rican case itself. In all three national instances, and in the pan-national regional framework, the Caribbean Latino cultural counterstream has the effect of decentering national, ethnic, and racial identities, and of redefining the sources and catalysts of cultural innovation.

Though salsa and Nuyorican poetry, both from the 1960s and early 1970s, are my primary examples of “remitted” culture forms, it is hip hop, since its diffusion as of around 1990, that serves as the main conduit of cultural styles forged in the diaspora that then exert such a challenging and even subversive influence in contemporary Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Cuba. That diffusion has of course been global in scope, and the presence of hip hop in the Caribbean is obviously part of a broader transnationalizing process. One difference, however, is that in the Caribbean Latino case the bearers of that traveling stylistic modality are themselves ethnic diasporans from those very nations, and many stem from the very social location and context in which hip hop originated; some of them, in fact, especially in the Puerto Rican case, were among the actual creators of hip hop from the beginning.

Furthermore, it is becoming ever clearer that hip hop is the stylistic current most closely identifiable with contemporary globalization. It is perhaps the aesthetic remittance par excellence because it emerged just when financial remittances became the most visible, tangible manifestation of transnational social relations in our times. Thus, in addition to being the uncontested lingua franca for youth cultures all over the world, it is also serving as the main

vehicle for the transnationalization of contemporary cultural forms, whether musical, linguistic, or otherwise. And that, I believe, is precisely what has been called to mind by the international recognition so far to the hip hop phenomenon.

I have been concerned in this essay to underscore the reflective and self-reflective nature of the cultural processes under discussion. That “co-construction” of cultural phenomena and their representations makes it both possible and necessary to recognize the intricate, complex, and at times contradictory ways in which cultural phenomena are co-created by the people who participate in them. It is part of the project, then, to examine and document the processes in which they are

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Indeed, in Part 3 I make frequent cross-reference to the stories so as to connect and associate my reflections on poetic, musical, and artistic interpretations with this qualitative experiential data. Some of the writers and thinkers who illustrate the “Style Transfers” of that part are also storytellers whose “learning and turning” experiences, and I am therefore obliged, with enthusiasm, of course, to blow their cover, as it were, and reveal their real identities. In Chapters 5 and 6 and in the Coda, “Bring the Style,” and “Visual Crossings,” respectively, Puerto Rican cultural consciousness as the point of departure and most fully substantiated case in point, and is the longest-standing and in part because of my own greater sense of precision. Clearly, I view the emergence and assertion of group identity and creative expression in the later essay as the benchmark of the cultural groundshift of central concern. It becomes evident that, despite the marked differences between Latin American and Cuban experiences may well bear even when the social and cultural change than the Puerto Rican instances, and in the pan-national regional history, the cultural “crosscurrent” has the effect of defining and redefining the sources

I have arranged the three parts of this book in a sequence that makes most sense to me. I have placed first a definition of terms, an extended theoretical reflection about diasporas and cultural return, along with a discussion of the cultural history of the Caribbean Latino transnational space and cultural “counterstream.” This more abstract and reflective exposition is then given personal and narrative substance, or experientially “grounded,” with representative life-stories with which any reader anywhere can identify. And then in the last part, building on that theoretical and ethnographic foundation, I interpret new cultural traditions and practices. Cultural remittances from below, as elaborated conceptually and as narrated in the oral histories of those who live them, take the form of stylistic transfers capable of exerting an innovative and catalytic influence on the course of national and regional histories. They illustrate in a cogent way how the cultural dimension of human experience can involve remarkable agency and power, and often embody profound lessons in democratic and cosmopolitan values and social practice.

Little did Mariela or my friends in Mayagüez know that their “Reasporic” stories would open up a whole new world to me. Thanks to them I have been able to develop an extensive network of helpful and generous people whose life-stories give me confidence in the tenability of my ideas, however controversial, and in whose very personal, unique experiences I recognized patterns and interfaces with those of countless others that I encountered directly, by word of mouth, or in my research. Of course there were many others whose views or life-experiences diverged from those patterns, or even contradicted them, people who fit neatly into the home society on their return, or whose presence or “remittances” go to reinforce the status quo there more than to challenge or unsettle it. But I believe that the lives I describe, while sadly understudied, are actually much more common today's transnational reality, where the working poor far outnumber the more privileged migrants, exiles, and returnees, both at home and abroad. It is to these remigrants, starting with the twenty-two who have shared their life-stories, that I dedicate my book.