

Letting It Get to You

Cuban-born anthropologist Ruth Behar lives and works in a diaspora within a diaspora

JUDITH BOLTON-FASMAN

The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart, by Ruth Behar. Beacon Press; 195 pp.; \$22.

IN THE SIX ESSAYS THAT COMPRISE "The Vulnerable Observer," Ruth Behar, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan, attests to the ways that "anthropology has always been vexed by the question of vulnerability." She is at the vanguard of practitioners of her field who are increasingly answering that question

"vulnerable reader." Behar was born in Havana and lived on a kibbutz outside of Tel Aviv for a year before coming to the United States in 1962 at the age of 5. She is a Cuban-Jew — both Ashkenazi and Sephardi — and now a Cuban-American. Like Behar I too am both Ashkenazi and Sephardi. My mother is a Cuban-Jew whose father hailed from Turkey and landed in Cuba because of America's restrictive quotas in the 1920s. The quotas turned out to be a bonus — Spanish was an easy leap to make for Ladino speakers.

Behar and I belong to the second generation of Cuban-Americans who obsess

neither a saint nor a sinner. The anthropologist listened to her subject pour out her life story across a kitchen table, the material she collected gradually taking on the shape of a memoir. During the whole process Behar traversed the border between self and other; in the end, the two women became friends. As Esperanza's story unfolded, the concept of border, both physical and mental, became irrelevant. Consequently, Behar sits squarely on the hyphens of Cuban-American and Cuban-Jew — linked identities she explores in her new book. From these perches she has a clear view of both sides of the border.

about family history and about returning to forbidden territory. Born in America, I am certain that going to Cuba will feel like déjà vu — a return trip to a place I've never been. For Behar, who does not remember Cuba as a child, but has returned there several times as an academic, those visits constitute a shadow life. "I live in a Diaspora within a Diaspora," Behar says. She asserts that returning to Cuba has enabled her to recover her various identities — Jewish, Cuban, even American. And they have generated the kind of anthropology that

BEHAR: With her, the borders become irrelevant

emanates from Behar herself — an anthropology that initially broke her heart, and then healed it, leaving it stronger.

In the book "Translated Woman," Behar tapped the emotional currents running through anthropology and transformed that energy into a personal ethnography. Her subject was a poor Mexican woman, the pseudonymous Esperanza, who was

MEMORY COURSES DEEPLY through these essays too. In 1987, Behar's beloved grandfather was dying in Miami Beach. The essay "Death and Memory: From Santa Maria del Monte to Miami Beach" turns into an extended Kaddish for him. Santa Maria was the site of fieldwork that would later become the basis of Behar's doctoral thesis. That summer modernity was beginning to impinge upon the death rituals practiced in the small Spanish village. People were dying alone in distant hospitals rather than in the midst of the community. As a result the population itself was abandoning its collective history.

For Behar the trip to Spain was not so much an escape as it was the classic ritual displacement of the anthropologist. To distance herself from her grief, she "subjected [my grandfather] to my anthropological gaze" while drawing closer to the people in Santa Maria. However, in the end, Behar recognized that the gap between the two experiences was closing:

"My preoccupation with the death of memory in Santa Maria provoked a resurgence of memory, for me, about my own Jewish heritage and how I had become alienated from it. In the course of these movements and shifts of perspective, the boundary between social realms that are purely personal and those that are part of ethnographic fieldwork became blurred."

Forgetting and remembering figure prominently in a harrowing account of a car accident that left 9-year-old Ruth in a



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by illuminating their work with personal reflections. For Behar that translates into blending anthropology with autobiography, emphasizing the commonalities rather than the differences she has with her subjects. Although this is a radical departure from the academy, she recently said in an interview that she views it as the inevitable outcome of her determination to "mix up a commitment to research with a strong personal sense of engagement."

I should say up front that I am Behar's

body cast for over a year. Her memories of that year and its consequences in adulthood are beautifully and painfully rendered in "The Girl in the Cast." Behar recalls how she dutifully repressed her fears of continuing life outside of her bedroom. Nonetheless, those fears manifested themselves in her learning how to walk again and simply leaving the house.

"The body is a homeland," she writes, "a place where knowledge, memory and pain [are] stored by the child." The physical immobility she experienced as a child resurfaced 25 years later in an aerobics class. The class had given her newfound confidence in her legs. One day, while following difficult routines in the front row of the class, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and experienced a sudden and debilitating panic attack. The confining cast that had defined her childhood was relived as crippling agoraphobia. It is a deceptively simple association — yet a devastating and poetic connection to childhood trauma.

There are similarly perilous links for Cuban-Jews living — as Behar does — in a diaspora within a diaspora. Behar writes that Cubans "just aren't ready yet

to let Cuba go. To let Cuba go is to let go of Cuba's dreams — huge immense gigantic dreams, in which we have wanted, desperately to take part." Cuban exiles learned quickly from their Jewish-American neighbors in Miami to think of themselves as a diaspora people. This meant outwardly living the American dream without abandoning their hopes for Cuba. It does not, however, relieve Cuban-Jews of the

the Diaspora." The scholar in her observes that "the engagement with the Jewish Diaspora is present in everyday Cuban life and sensibility." But the vulnerable observer eventually resurfaces. On Calle Ocho in Miami, returning to Cuba is also a messianic fantasy. Nobody will go anywhere until Castro is gone. Behar muses that these people "must sleep more blissfully than those of us who can't keep from

'To look back, I tell you, is to look into the eye of power, to feel the salt burn'

burden of having two homelands in emotional storage. They pursue dreams in both places. At my childhood Seders my grandfather always said, "Next Year in Havana. The year after that in Jerusalem." The messiah's arrival for him was dictated by this dichotomy. His irreverence was forgivable.

Behar initially approaches the subject as an academic. In planning a course that she wants to teach on the Cuban exile in America she settles on the title "Cuba and

looking back. To look back, I tell you, is to look into the eye of power, to feel the salt burn. Some of us just don't learn."

That insistent looking back is what makes Ruth Behar's vision of anthropology so compelling. Memories do not vanish; they recede and leave traces. The anthropologist who makes herself vulnerable to these indications makes the world a more intelligible and hopeful place. □
Judith Bolton-Fasman is book editor for the Baltimore Jewish Times.

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