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Confessions of an anthropologist

By MARION FISCHER
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In 'Traveling Heavy,' Prof. Ruth Behar examines the meaning of life.

The Princeton-trained Victor Haim Pereira collegiate professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan is a Sephardi- Ashkenazi Cuban-American multi-breed, whose life's work appears to be to leave home, to study the homes of others, to define home, to understand home and to come home.

Acclaimed as his "muse" by Prof. Jesús Jambriña of Viterbo University in Wisconsin, whose own incursions into medieval Sephardi history were inspired by his meeting her when she returned to Havana to film her *Adio Kerida* ("Goodbye my Dear Love") documentary on the Sephardim of Cuba, Ruth Behar is also author of multiple works of anthropology and a poet.

The very title of this, Behar's latest book, *Traveling Heavy*, is the product of a poetic mind, and the work itself can be regarded as prose poetry. Behar weaves together scenes whose below- the-surface meaning is often more poignant than the words she uses. In the self-styled "memoir in between journeys" the author ostensibly takes a break from her academic achievements and her travels in order to size herself up. She seems to be asking why she finds herself where she is, why she feels as she does and possibly even what she can do to improve who she has become. Yet she can never really break from her work because she and it are one, it is her very life force.

She is a keyboard whiz, conjuring up scenery and characters whose originality and individual traditions transport the reader from a village in Spain to another in Mexico at the turn of a page. The book is filled with affectionate self-mockery, with shockingly honest, yet seemingly casual confessions, with the curiosity of youth and often with conformism born of too close identification with the subjects of her anthropological studies.

"I never expected to have to lie about being Jewish," she writes on page 120, but felt she had to cover up part of her identity in her "early years encountering Spain," when she found herself in a Spanish village that offered her a taste of the homely feel of her native, beloved and estranged Cuba.

Throughout the book's 16 short stories, Behar does not hide that she suffers from certain neuroses, she does not try to disguise herself from her readers, but rather draws us in by sharing personal private moments, thoughts and attitudes, as if daring us to be any less sincere than she is. She admits that she has searched for a home; and that Mexico, Spain and Cuba – three countries that speak her mother tongue – are the places she turned to, on the surface for academic study, but beneath that veneer, for comfort while on her life's journey.

Behar carries her house keys with her whenever she travels. This may not be such an anomaly, but she notes it at the start of the book, together with other rituals, part-superstition, part obsessive-compulsive disorder. Keys and key chains are later to be symbolic too, of home and exile. Her travels periodically culminate in the return to her husband, David – an intrinsic part of her identity since age 19 – and her son Gabriel, who is in a sense, her alter ego, as well as being very much his own person and a young man she is proud of and whom she credits with having grounded her.

“Once a story is told it can never be lost,” writes Behar referring to anecdotes of her beloved Cuba, whose figurative arms she was ripped from as a five-year-old child.

It is Cuba’s love she hankers after, and cherishes during her visits, even when it is dished out in the casual comments of a stranger, calling her “corazón” (“heart”) or “mi vida” (“my life”) because that is the way they speak there.

Behar’s stories are divided into three sections: “Family,” “The Kindness of Strangers” and “Cuban Goodbyes.” The first two trace her decision to become an anthropologist, the opposition to her writing she encounters from many members of her extended family, and, most fascinatingly, her experiences living Spartanly in both Spanish and Mexican villages, with David, her companion and lover, later her husband. The last part of the book includes vignettes on “Unexpected happiness in Poland” and “The first world summit of Behar’s,” an eclectic group’s return to an ancestral village in Spain.

The writer is possessed of a great deal of feminine self-awareness, and in the same measure is weighed down at times by her awareness of aging, and of how she may be judged or perceived from the outside – possibly one of the drawbacks of being such an avid observer.

Behar returned to Cuba in 1979, just before she was to spend the next 12 years traveling and taking notes in Spain and Mexico, “living as an anthropologist in those adopted homelands,” she tells us.

In 1991, as the political situation eased slightly, she returned to visit the island as the mother of a four-year-old whom she had, with a heavy heart, to leave behind in the US while her disapproving parents “warned me that I might be trapped in Cuba and never see my child again.”

Throughout the ’90s Behar became addicted to returning to Cuba for weeklong stints that allowed her not only to relive scenes from her own childhood, but also those from the lives of local intellectuals she admired – as well as of the Jewish community that “might have been” hers had her family stayed on.

This “professional Cuban,” who built “a career out of my search for my roots” has, since 2010, returned to her beloved homeland with groups of undergraduates from the University of Michigan, and created that university’s semester- abroad-in-Cuba program.

As a native Cuban, although a longtime US resident, she must present her Latino passport when leaving the country, a touch-and-go moment that again and again provides her with a morbid thrill, worrying her each time, but not outweighing her need to repeat the experience. As if by chance we discover, in the course of the story about the mulatto girl who is emigrating to Israel, that when Behar’s family left they were called “worms” and strip-searched at the airport to make sure they were not hiding jewelery.

Behar has not recovered from her “interrupted childhood” in Havana, and it is this tragedy that makes her who she is, that shapes the ghosts she pursues, that has guided her steps as a subjective anthropologist; and that is able to offer the reader a smörgåsbord of literary delights.

Among a long list of scholarly publications, Behar is also author of *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*; *the Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*; and *Bridges to Cuba*.