Anthropologist Ruth Behar Talks with *HO*

The Essential Homeland of the Imagination

By Michelle Adam

Ruth Behar looked up at the two nightgowns hanging on the back of her door as she recounted the event that led her to her novel-in-progress, *Nightgowns from Cuba.*

The honeymoon nightgowns, she explained, once belonged to her mother, who left them and the furniture and the apartment with the family caretaker, Caridad Martínez, when they moved to Israel in 1961 and then on to New York City a year later.

Behar was then five. Caridad remained in the apartment until authorities kicked her out. She chose the nightgowns. Years later, after many visits between Behar and Caridad in Cuba, Caridad gifted the nightgowns back to Behar’s family.

Now about halfway into her novel, Behar says she isn’t clear why the nightgowns inspired her to begin her fiction writing, and that she has yet to weave them into the work.

But for the Jewish Cuban American anthropologist, that is part of the mystery of embarking into fiction. After much acclaim for her non-fiction and
anthropology—The New York Times named Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story Notable Book of the Year in 1993—Behar is now combining autobiography and anthropology with fiction to tell the story of her family's journey from Europe to Cuba to the United States as seen through the eyes of her caretaker, Caridad.

Behar has dedicated her career as an anthropologist to writing about her experience of border crossing. From the late 1980s until today, as professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, she has sought to understand the meaning of home through the multiple lives and stories of others. And she has been in a good position to do so. Her own story is that of a true diaspora that reaches back beyond Cuba to her Jewish roots in Eastern Europe (Poland) and the Mediterranean (Spain, Turkey).

Behar began her first writing journey in Spain, the home of her paternal ancestors. Her book, The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village: Santa María del Monte, published in 1988, related how a small village negotiated its relationship to the past in the wake of the social transformation of the late Franco years that removed people from the land.

"I was very aware that these people in Spain were very rooted. They knew what their land was. They had a feeling of being connected," said Behar. "I found it a contrast to my uprootedness."

Behar's "love for the culture that comes from Spain, which got replanted in Latin America," led her to her second book, Translated Woman. During her stay in rural Mexico in the early '80s, Behar established close ties with Mexican women, and became especially fascinated with the story of Esperanza. The book is an account of her friendship with this bold Mexican woman, who walks out of an abusive marriage and becomes a street ped-
Querida/Goodbye Dear Love: A Cuban Sephardic journey, a feature-length film about the search for identity and memory among Sephardic Jews living in Cuba, Miami, and New York. She expects to complete the film this summer.

Behar writes from a place without borders, yet seeks to discover what home is within this context. Asked what she considers home to be, as a woman, as a Jew, and as a Cuban, she provides a different answer for each.

"Isn't there a line in Virginia Wolff where she says 'as a woman, I have no country?'" says Behar. "In a sense, I am country-less." As a Jew, Behar describes herself as "a Jew of the diaspora." "I will always be this. My grandparents were part of the diaspora, and my parents were part of the diaspora." And as for Cuba, "I am connected to Cuba with strong emotional ties. I have nostalgia for that island," she said. "It's where I took my first step. That was my beginning. But I came here, and all my education was in English. I am also a creature of that displacement."

Although Behar has brought her love of philosophy, travel, and intellectual discourse to her career in academia as an anthropologist, writing is her most deeply seated passion.

"I always knew, from the time I was 12, that I loved writing," she said. "But I needed a framework, and anthropology has been the tree trunk from which all the other limbs have emerged."

Through anthropology, Behar has returned to the multiple homelands of her ancestors and of her memory. But, beyond the tangible sense of home, she has discovered something else as a writer.

"The essential homeland," she said, "is in the imagination and in the memory. And the only real homeland you can count on is that of imagination, of that shared imagination."

That shared imagination, whether fiction or non-fiction, whether as anthropologist or writer, has been that of her Jewish Latin roots, and of her role as a woman. "Bringing together the voices of women of different cultures is important to me—women who are very smart and gifted but do not have the pen," said Behar. "I want to give them the pen."

For now, pen to paper, she brings voice to the women of her own family—to her grandmother, her mother, herself, and Caridad—embarking on a journey into that deepest place of the imagination.

Asked if she might choose fiction over anthropology once Nightgowns from Cuba is completed, Behar responded, "If writing this novel brought me to a place where I write novels for the rest of my life, I would be delighted. It would be a wonderful ending to the story."

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