

## NOTE

1. In his *New York Review of Books* article on *Mr. Palomar*, novelist Brad Leithauser (1988) discusses at length Calvino's life-long interest in science. He describes Calvino as "rare among fiction writers in responding so strongly, with both wonder and skepticism, to scientific discovery," and even compares the individual chapters of *Mr. Palomar* to "a fine collection of popular scientific essays . . . not far from the work of Stephen Jay Gould or Loren Eiseley."

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## FOLKLORE AND THE SEARCH FOR HOME

*Ruth Behar*

I was wounded once in a classroom. Not physically, but in my soul. I'd been invited to be a guest professor for an intensive Chicana/Latina course that had been created at another midwestern university to meet the demand of students seeking knowledge about their heritage. The professor who invited me thought the students would enjoy learning about my work as a cultural anthropologist and would feel comfortable with me as a Latina, as one of their own.

It was late April, spring was on the way, but it was still very cold. To get around the campus, there was an underground labyrinth of corridors that took you from building to building. You didn't need to set foot outside. Perhaps due to the gloominess, they had tried to make the classroom a space that reminded them of home. Students sat on couches covered with Mexican wool blankets. The professor hosting me, who was the official teacher of the Chicana/Latina course, greeted the students and her teaching assistant, then she rushed out of the room. I found her behavior strange, but I tried to take it in stride.

I asked the students to introduce themselves. We went around the room, and I wrote down their names. They also told me their ethnic identity. Fifteen of the 17 students were Latinas. Three were Puerto Rican, but

most were Chicanas from Texas and California. One student was Chicana and Puerto Rican. Another was Navajo and African American. Two students described themselves as White women. The teaching assistant was Chicana.

I began speaking about my work on the life story of Esperanza Hernández, a Mexican woman who made her living as a street peddler (Behar, 1994). I told the students how my initial plan was to write about several women I knew in the small Mexican town where I had lived for three years, but ultimately Esperanza convinced me that she had the most interesting life story, and also the most wrenching, because she had been the victim of domestic violence before freeing herself from the grip of her husband's control over her life. I told them anthropology had a long and shameful association with colonialism, but that since the 1960s and 1970s, cultural anthropologists had become keenly aware of issues of power and were desperately afraid of exploiting the people with whom we worked. I discussed my doubts about bringing Esperanza's story across the border for consumption in an academic marketplace. Esperanza had often reminded me about my ability to travel back and forth across the border, while she, as a poor working-class woman, could only hope to get across as a "mojada," a wetback. I had been led to ponder how I, as a Cuban immigrant, had risen through the social hierarchy and become the woman who had the power to cross the border to bring back another woman's story. These reflections on my own privilege had become part of the book I'd written about Esperanza's life story, and this, I explained, was what made it a reflexive ethnography.

So far, so good, I thought. The students seemed to be listening attentively. But they were soon distracted, as was I, by a couple of the women who were fidgeting on the squishy couches. Time for interaction, I thought.

"Any questions or comments?"

I didn't realize I was opening a Pandora's box.

A Chicana student said, "Why did they bring *you* here? You're not Latina."

"Excuse me?" I said.

The student who was Navajo/African American said, "You're Jewish, not Latina. You've got Jewish blood. European blood."

"But I was born in Cuba," I protested. "Si quieres, hablamos en español."

The Chicana student who'd started the dialogue replied curtly, "I don't speak Spanish. Speaking Spanish doesn't mean you're a Latina. Spanish was what the conquerors spoke, and they slaughtered most of our people, the indigenous people."

Next came an indictment: "You're a privileged White woman. You used Esperanza to be able to write a book about her and make a lot of money."

The Puerto Rican student sitting next to her added, "If you really cared about Esperanza, you'd buy her a house in Mexico or bring her over here to live with you."

I explained that the book had done well by academic standards, but the earnings had been modest and I'd shared them with Esperanza. She'd gotten many things she needed—including a stove, a bathroom, and medication for her epileptic daughter.

"So what?" the Navajo/African American student said, looking at me with contempt. "You're Jewish. Aren't Jews pretty rich?"

"That's a stereotype!" I exclaimed. I tried to stay calm. "It's conceivable that many of you have Jewish ancestors," I said. "Jews lived in Spain until the expulsion in 1492. The majority converted to Catholicism to stay in their homeland. They were called 'conversos,' or 'new Christians' and were viewed as suspect because many continued to practice Judaism secretly. That's why the Inquisition was created—to punish 'judaizers.' Those who chose to remain Jewish were forced to leave Spain, and they fled to North Africa, Greece, and Turkey. 'Sepharad' means Spain in Hebrew. These Jews never stopped speaking Spanish, even though it was the language of the country that had expelled them."

I wanted the students to know that Jewish identity was more complex than they realized. I was Sephardic, of Turkish background, on my father's side, and Ashkenazi, of Polish and Russian background, on my mother's side, and these Jewish cultures and communities were as different as night and day. I wanted them to consider the idea that Sephardic Jews are Latinos without a country, expelled Latinos, an idea proposed in somewhat different terms at the turn of the 20th century by the Spanish writer Angel Pulido Fernández (1905), whose book, *Españoles sin patria (Spaniards Without a Country)*, was a plea for Spain to reopen its doors to the Sephardic Jews who had held onto the Spanish language and the memory of Spain through centuries of exile.

But then I heard someone say, "What's all this Spanish history got to do with us?"

I decided to try to change the subject. I hoped we could have a conversation about the texts by Chicana/Latina authors I'd brought in for discussion. "How about if we talk about *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros?" (see Cisneros, 1985). This coming-of-age novella, about a working-class Chicana who grows up in a Chicago barrio hoping to become a writer, is a canonical text in Chicana/Latina literature and read in high schools across the country. I knew it well, and its author had become a friend. I started to talk about the book, about its originality, and how it put into words what it meant to be a young Chicana.

"What do you know about being Chicana? I don't want to listen to you talk about *House on Mango Street*."

I looked up from my notes and met the gaze of the student who had questioned my right to be there from the first moment. She had long black hair gathered into a ponytail, and she was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans. She looked like the typical American student, except she knew that a generation ago she probably would have been bent over a field of grapes laden with chemicals that wrecked her lungs. I saw rage and sorrow in her eyes. She was infuriated that there wasn't a Latina professor who shared the same soul injuries that she and her people had suffered and could teach her what was precious about her own history. Instead, they'd brought me in, an imposter, a Jewish woman born in Cuba who spoke Spanish and was parading as a Latina and snatching limited resources I had no right to claim. At that moment, all I wished was to erase myself and be the woman this student wanted me to be.

"I don't want to listen to *her* either," said the student who was Navajo/African American.

The other students looked on, shocked, but also in awe. The teaching assistant barely hid a smile. I later learned she'd been adamantly against inviting me to the class.

It had never happened to me before in a classroom, but I started to cry. Soon the crying turned into weeping. Maybe I felt I was getting a little taste of what the expulsion from Spain felt like to my ancestors. I ran out of the room. In the hallway, I found the Jewish-American professor who specialized in Latin American literature, was fluent in Spanish, and had invited me.

"What happened?" she said.

I opened my mouth to explain but no words came. It turned out I didn't have to explain. She knew. The students, it turned out, had expelled her from the classroom, and she was waiting until they admitted her back. She'd hoped I'd somehow have better luck.

That evening in my hotel room, the phone rang. It was my cousin, Simon, telling me that his father, Salomón, had died of a heart attack in Atlanta. Salomón was a second cousin, but he was close in age to my mother, and they'd grown up together in Cuba, so I thought of him as an uncle. The funeral was the next day. I didn't think twice. I felt so despised by the students that a funeral seemed like a welcome relief. I took an early flight and went to Atlanta and then dutifully returned the next day to give my public lecture.

Salomón was buried in the soft green hills of Georgia. He spoke English with a singsong Cuban accent, but his three sons were bona fide Southerners. You could hear their Southern drawl when they recited the mourner's prayer, the Kaddish, in Hebrew. It would be their responsibility to say Kaddish for a year in their father's memory. *Y'he sh'lama rabba min sh'mayya ... May there be much peace from Heaven and good life....* I tried to forget the words of the Kaddish as soon as I heard them because my par-

ents are alive. It's a superstition my mother taught me, that you're not to know the Kaddish until you need to know it, until your parents die and you're cast into the world as an orphan.

I wept again at the funeral. Those tears, I felt certain, were Jewish tears.

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Lest my purpose in telling this story be misunderstood, my aim isn't to castigate the students. My visit, I later learned, caused them as much pain as it caused me, because I had shattered their assumption of Latina unity. They wanted to build community, and to do that they had to draw boundaries and create their own border patrol, a necessary first step in deciding who is and is not one of "us." This meant not only excluding me, but policing those within the circle to ensure their conformity. The three Puerto Rican students dared not say it out loud but told me privately after my lecture that they felt bad about what had happened because they did accept me as a Latina.

In that classroom, there had been two clashing ideas of Latina identity: a notion of identity based on blood and descent and the claim of an indigenous background (roots), and a notion of identity based on a Caribbean sensibility that no one from the islands can be purely indigenous because the legacy of slavery and crosscutting waves of migration means that everyone comes from somewhere else (routes) (Gilroy, 1993). It was the blood and descent argument that had prevailed, and from that perspective I was to be seen as a privileged White Cuban and a plundering anthropologist, but, most of all, as a Jew.

It hurt me deeply to be perceived as a thief of Latina identity because of my being Jewish. My being born in Cuba, my parents being born in Cuba, the way my parents were marked as "other" in the United States because of their accents, the struggle I'd waged to find a voice in the academy as a first-generation college graduate, none of that counted. The strange thing was that, although my Jewishness was supposed to be the core of my identity in a blood and descent fashion, I was in doubt about what it meant to be a Jew. Was Jewish identity truly a question of blood and descent? Or were Jews a people who feared intermarriage and mixture while engaging in it throughout their diasporic history?

The truth was that in my role as an anthropologist, I'd been an embarrassed Jew. Call me a coward, but I found it impossible to announce my Jewish identity openly in the villages and towns in Spain and Mexico where I spent many years of my life speaking my native Spanish and learning the craft of ethnography. Finding myself in places where I was warmly accepted and yet where being an observant Catholic was the only form of acceptable religious and social identity—where people used the term *un cristiano* to refer to a human being—I kept quiet about being a Jew. Winning trust

depended on sharing with my informants a common heritage from which the stain of Jewishness had been purged. Saying I was a Jew would have made me the ultimate outsider. In places where I was "almost home," I became an anachronistic *conversa*, a Jew-in-hiding. Living with a peasant family in Spain in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I kept stashed in my suitcase the evidence of my Jewish affiliation—I tucked away postcards from El Transito synagogue in Toledo, founded in 1357, which was turned into a Catholic church after the expulsion and now is a Jewish museum. At night, I closed the door to the bedroom and took down the crucifix over my bed. The next morning, I always hung it back up.

The discipline of anthropology contributed to my skittish Jewish behavior. Anthropology is a favorite discipline of Jewish Americans, but ironically the discipline is deeply ambivalent about turning its gaze toward the study of things Jewish. Virginia Domínguez (1993), a Cuban-American anthropologist who is one of the few non-Jewish scholars in anthropology to have worked on Jewish subjects, has suggested the term *the Jewish closet* to describe the odd silence. Since the founding of American cultural anthropology by Franz Boas, a German-Jewish immigrant who preferred to identify as a German rather than as a Jew, Jewish anthropologists have mainly seen themselves as secular people, true cosmopolitans, citizens of the world, working to increase tolerance and bring down racism without focusing on their Jewish identity as their subject matter.

As Jewish Americans became "White folks," gaining access to status and wealth and ceasing to be marked as "other" for their Jewishness (Brodin, 1998), an entire generation of Jewish anthropologists who followed Boas chose to use their newfound privilege to "give voice" to less privileged others, in contrast to Jewish writers who obsessively explored their own identities in literature and film—Isaac Bashevis Singer, Phillip Roth, and Woody Allen immediately come to mind. In anthropology, Jews left home and wrote about people unlike themselves—Boas (1897) wrote about the Kwakiutl, Ruth Landes (1947) about Brazil, Roy Rappaport (1968) about New Guinea, Oscar Lewis (1951) and Eric Wolf (1959) about Mexico, Sidney Mintz (1960) about Puerto Rico, Sherry Ortner (1978) about the Sherpas, Paul Rabinow (1975, 1977) about Morocco, Marjorie Shostak (1981) about the !Kung of the Kalahari Desert. These Jewish anthropologists longed to reach out to a larger world. Several were proud "red diaper babies," for whom studying Jewish topics didn't offer a path to confronting issues of inequality and social justice. Early on in my career, I realized I couldn't claim the "red diaper baby" model of Jewishness as a badge of honor. I bore the stigma of being the child of Jewish immigrants who chose exile rather than participate in communist revolutionary change in Cuba.

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Leaving home to go to an exotic land, a place with no ties to the anthropologist's life and heritage, is the classical scenario of anthropological displacement (the greatest prestige, when I was a graduate student, went to those who carried out their fieldwork in New Guinea). In the 1970s and 1980s, this paradigm was challenged by minority and diasporic anthropologists, who felt the urgency of returning to lost or abandoned or imagined or desired or denigrated or exiled homes, and found themselves being ambivalent insiders, rather than absolute outsiders, in the societies they examined. Once anthropologists could think about their work in terms of homecoming—however fraught such homecomings might be—rather than leaving home to go elsewhere, many of us started thinking of our purpose as being about what Virginia Dominguez (2000) calls a "politics of love and rescue."

One of the pioneering works of anthropological homecoming, *Number Our Days* by Barbara Myerhoff (1979), is an exception to the rule of Jewish anthropologists not working on Jewish topics. It was first published in 1979 and explored the lives of elderly Jews who belonged to a social center in Venice, California, next door to where Myerhoff taught at the University of Southern California. Her interlocutors had as many questions to ask of the anthropologist as she had of them. Upon her arrival, Myerhoff was asked, "Are you Jewish? Are you married? Is it true human beings began in Africa once upon a time?" These feisty, Yiddish-speaking ancestors were anxious to pass on their stories to her. They were "survivors" who had been spared the suffering of the Holocaust and lived to extreme old age, carrying a tremendous burden of guilt while still remaining engaged with the world through their passion for storytelling and ritual. These elders—living in the vicinity of Hollywood—thought they deserved an Academy Award for their stories; in fact, the movie version of *Number Our Days* (Littman and Myerhoff, 1977) actually won an Oscar.

Myerhoff had originally wanted to study Chicanos in California but was told by her potential subjects that she should study "her own people." That was how she came to find herself among Jewish elders in their 80s and 90s who welcomed her as a long-lost daughter but mourned her ignorance of Hebrew, Yiddish, and what it meant to be a Jew. How could she be so uneducated about her own history, her own identity? "Teach me," she begged the elders, who had one foot on death's doorstep. Her salvage anthropology turned out to be about salvaging the identity of the anthropologist.

Myerhoff was convinced that these elders could teach the rest of us how to grow old gracefully (she was funded by a gerontology institute at her university). As she buoyantly stated in the film, she hoped when she became a little old Jewish lady, she'd be just like them. Sadly, she never got to become old. The elders in Venice, who were dying literally as Myerhoff finished speaking to them, weren't the only ones nearing extinction. In 1983, a few years after completing her book and film, Myerhoff learned she had lung cancer. Two years later, at the age of 49, she was dead.

After learning she had cancer, Myerhoff wanted to believe in a miracle—only a miracle could save her life. Although she grew up as a secular Jew and lacked religious faith, she decided to make Hasidic Jews in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles the focus of her last fieldwork. They had the religious faith she lacked; they didn't doubt that miracles were possible. Her last fieldwork came to be enshrined in an unusual and haunting film called "In Her Own Time" (Littman, 1985). In the film's opening scene, an Orthodox Jewish doctor examines Myerhoff. Then the camera cuts to a close-up of an X-ray of Myerhoff's sick lungs. When have we ever seen the lungs of an anthropologist on display before the camera? We are invited inside, to the core of Myerhoff's being; we are invited to see through her, into her, to penetrate her body. From that image, the film unfolds, a film that is ultimately a documentary of a dying anthropologist turning to her research subjects to help her find her faith. It is they who are asked to rescue and save her.

At the recommendation of one of the Hasidim, she goes to purify herself at a mikveh, a ritual bath used by married Jewish women for cleansing after menstruation. Myerhoff undresses and, naked, immerses herself in the water. You can't get more vulnerable than that. Showing your lungs, your flesh, showing yourself trying to believe. But Myerhoff can't believe, can't stop being the anthropologist analyzing everything, even with death so near. The best she can do is come clean by revealing herself to the camera.

You can say she had nothing to lose. She could be as vulnerable as she pleased. She was dying, after all. She wouldn't have to care if her colleagues later snickered and called her work "self-indulgent." But the fact is, she did worry. As she noted, "I spent a great deal of time agonizing about what I was doing—was it anthropology or a personal quest? I never fully resolved the question" (Littman, 1985, 12). In the end, the agony outlasted her; she didn't survive to see the release of the film.

At the edge of death, Myerhoff tapped into an emotional openness and intensity of feeling that remains unique in the history of anthropology. It's better if we're not dying while we're doing our fieldwork, but all of us need to be conscious of the philosophical and even spiritual nature of our work as anthropologists and folklorists—our encounters with others is all about our shared mortality; what we are doing, constantly, is saving lives, our own, as well as those of the people who have chosen to become our subjects.

I believe that all forms of ethnographic investigation are cut through with a range of profound emotions, which we ignore at our own peril. Anthropologists, I have always thought, are the worst heart-breakers because we go to places and offer friendship and trust, but ultimately we say goodbye, we move on, to the next site, the next people, the next topic. Imagine how anthropology would be transformed if the goodbye weren't built into the very fabric of our work. Imagine if, instead, return were at the very core of what we do, the path of return. That would be a different discipline. Perhaps that discipline would no longer be anthropology. Or it

might become anthropology as some of us dream of it—as unbearably, messily, lovingly entangled in the desire for human connection.

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Although I tried to forget about being wounded in that classroom, I was haunted by what happened. I don't think it was accidental that afterward I turned my gaze as an anthropologist to those whom I thought of as my own people—Cuban Jews. In Cuba, I came out as a Jew. I embraced my Jewish identity in a Spanish-speaking country without shame or fear. I wrote poems and stories about my Cuban Jewish family (Behar, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2001, 2002, 2006). I wrote personal essays about my identity as a Cuban Jew (Behar, 1995, 1996, 1999). I made a documentary about Cuban Sephardic Jews (Behar, 2002). I wrote a book about Cuban Jews in Cuba (Behar, 2007). Now I'm at work on a book about Cuban Jewish exiles in Miami.

Can you imagine that—focusing so much of my energy on a community that at its peak in Cuba included 15,000 Jews and now on the island consists of 1,000 Jews, most of them converts to Judaism? I continually ask myself, "Is this okay, to work so intently on a tiny fragment of our vast humanity, on one little tribe?" Have I narrowed my horizons too much? Or has the focus on the particular, always anthropology and folklore's strong suit, expanded my understanding of our great big commonwealth?

The theme of return is at the center of my new book about the Jews of Cuba. I think of the book as a series of tangos that explore what felt like moments of epiphany in my encounters with Jews on the island, in whose presence I constantly felt, "There but for the grace of God go I."

The Jewish community that now exists in Cuba, which I got to know during years of back-and-forth visits, arose from the ashes of the old Jewish community that fell apart after the Revolution in 1959. Jews arrived in Cuba at the turn of the 20th century, escaping pogroms and destitution in Europe, and found a home in the tropical island, but they ultimately left in a mass exodus in the early 1960s due to the expropriation of their mom-and-pop businesses and other independent livelihoods they had pursued on the island, as well as their disaffection with Fidel Castro's turn to communism. Only a handful of Jews stayed, either because they were communists or didn't want to uproot themselves.

Going back to Cuba in the early 1990s, I was determined to create a normal relationship with my native land, even in the face of abnormal political relations with the United States. I arrived at a postutopian moment, when the Cuban government opened the doors of the island to tourism, remittances from Cuban Americans, and missions from the United States, to obtain hard currency in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of subsidies that buttressed the economy.

God was officially allowed back into the island by the Cuban Communist Party, which declared that Party members didn't have to be atheists but could have a religious affiliation. After the opening to religious freedom, Cubans revitalized all their faiths, from Catholicism and Protestantism to Santería and Judaism. While Ry Cooder was recording the music of the "Buena Vista Social Club" and American curators were awed by the Cuban art they found in the Havana Biennial, faith-promoting American visitors entered Cuba via the humanitarian religious category, exempted from the U.S. embargo, bringing educational information, bibles, and medical aid, food, and clothing to their coreligionists. Religious tourism, as rampant as sex tourism in Cuba, is the counterpoint to the desire to consume the body of the Other. It is a key element of the scramble to gaze upon, gather up, photograph, and collect everything Cuban before "it all changes"—in other words, before Castro goes (which may be on the verge of occurring even as I write).

Prominent among the gawkers are American Jews who travel to Cuba on religious missions seeking to commune with the Jews in Cuba. One of the core Jewish values is *tzedakah*, giving to those in need. In recent years, American Jews have chosen to lavish their *tzedakah* on the Jews in Cuba. Partly out of guilt for the embargo, partly out of a desire to guarantee that Jewish life survives on an island that occupies such an important fantasy role in the consciousness of the United States, American Jews have turned the Jewish community in Cuba into *the* exotic Jewish community that they wish to uplift, medicate, and create utopian folklore about.

As a child, I lived half a block from the Patronato, the Jewish community center built on a leafy street in the upscale Vedado neighborhood on the eve of the Cuban Revolution, when the Jewish community of 15,000 imagined they had found a permanent home. During the early years of my visits, the roof was in disrepair and pigeons flew in and out. Air conditioning was lacking. Sweat dripped down your forehead when you attended religious services. It was a Jewish ruin that only an anthropologist could find compelling.

At first I tried to ignore the American Jews who started appearing in those Jewish spaces in Cuba that for me were filled with sentimental meaning. I tried to pretend I had nothing to do with the *Americanos*. They embarrassed me. The American Jews traveled in groups, stayed in five-star hotels, were always freshly showered, spoke no Spanish, and glowed with pride about the aid they were bringing to the Jews of Cuba. But by the late 1990s, it was impossible to ignore them and the impact they'd had on the people I dared to think of as "my people." A program of Jewish education was put in place, and a young generation of Jews in Cuba learned enough Hebrew to run their own religious services. Visiting rabbis flew in to carry out circumcisions, conversions, and weddings to bring the Jews of Cuba into the fold of the international Jewish community.

On every visit, I saw the air-conditioned Havanatur bus pull up in front of the Patronato, unloading American Jews eager to commune with the Jews of Cuba. Sitting in the library with Adela Dworin, then the vice-president and now president of the Jewish community of Cuba, I watched her take a deep breath as she prepared to give her usual speech about how the Jews in Cuba are only a thousand, but they are dedicated to maintaining their heritage and customs. Adela, like all the Jews I met in Cuba, was aware of the exoticizing gaze her existence inspired. She felt she could talk about this with me, as a fellow Cuban Jew, even though I came and went with the same privileges as the American Jewish travelers.

Unlike the American Jewish travelers, I didn't bring aspirin, I didn't bring prayer books, I didn't bring shoes for the Jews in Cuba. I came empty-handed. I took more than I gave. I asked the Jews who still live on my island to tell me who they were so I might imagine who I might have been had I stayed, and I asked them to pose for our camera. What did I promise in return? Folklore. Folklore that hopefully wouldn't do them harm.

But whose folklore was I to lend credence to? The Jewish community in Cuba depends on American Jewish missions for its survival. But Jews in Cuba don't want to feel that they are simply carrying out Jewish traditions in order to receive handouts from American Jews. The story they like to tell about themselves is that they've experienced a Jewish rebirth and that this miracle of Jewish survival coexists with Cuban communism. In turn, the American Jewish community likes to praise itself for its bravery and boldness in assisting fellow Jews in Cuba despite the antagonism of the U.S. embargo. American Jews want to feel that they are heroic actors in the story of Jewish renewal in Cuba, that their philanthropic benevolence is the motor that keeps Judaism going on the island.

Ultimately, the Jewish community in Cuba is an "imagined community," created as much by the gaze and needs of outsiders as by the economic and political realities of a postrevolutionary Cuba. While acknowledging the performative space of Jewishness put in place by American Jewish assistance to Cuba—the rituals and public ceremonies enacted in synagogues—I also felt it was important to go beyond the visible realm and try to reveal a more intimate and even invisible history.

Working with Humberto Mayol, a photographer based in Havana, we enacted a project of memory activism, creating pictures of Cubans on the island holding fragments of the Jewish past for the camera. Encounters began with my asking people to show me the Jewish traces they had saved or rescued. Often I didn't have to ask. Documents and keepsakes were the means by which people proved they were Jewish, allowing them to participate in the community and even, if they wished, to leave Cuba for Israel. I was shown wedding pictures; a *tallit* (prayer shawl) brought from Turkey by a Sephardic grandfather; photographs of the last *quinceñera* celebrated at the Patronato synagogue in 1959, which are kept by a woman who is the only

one in the group who still lives on the island; the passport that once belonged to a mother and sister who came from Poland after the war and the prisoner's shirt worn by a father who survived Auschwitz; a letter in Yiddish written by family members who perished in the Holocaust; and a postcard sent to Cuba from a concentration camp with its Hitler stamps.

Only a dozen of the Jews I met in Cuba were Jewish on both their mother's and father's side. Unlike Jews in prerevolutionary Cuba, who rarely married outside of the tribe because it was so taboo, Jews in Cuba today are mixed, "impure." No one "looks Jewish," but what should a Jew look like?

We asked an Afro-Cuban Jewish girl in Guantánamo, dressed in the red school uniform of the young communist pioneers, to hold up for the camera a picture of her great, great-grandmother, a Sephardic Jew who stayed behind in Turkey. The photograph is a visual challenge to fixed notions of identity. At the same time, it reveals the striking resemblance between the girl and her Jewish ancestor, whose memory she literally holds in her hands.

Anthropology gave me my passport to go home. After 17 years of travels to Cuba in search of home, I'm not sure whether what I found is home after all. Sometimes I worry that maybe I just learned to lose my home more thoroughly. But then I think of the girl in Guantánamo, who shares a Sephardic history with me, and I tell myself that even if I never go back to Cuba, it is a consolation to know that she is there. Jews blend in with the people whom they live among. This is precisely what their neighbors have always found so unsettling about Jews. As long as she's there—this girl in Guantánamo whose Jewishness is a secret unless it has been revealed to you—there might still be a home for me.

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When I look back to the young women and her peers whom I barely got to know in that classroom 11 years ago, my heart goes out to them. They too were searching for home. I've never stopped wondering whether they found it in that classroom. I hope they did.

But looking back, I can't help feeling that these young women were almost desperate in their desire for purity and certainty in the construction of their identity. Maybe they were responding subliminally to the growing onslaught of hybridity. They were fiercely trying to hold onto and validate their identities through traditional means—circling the wagons, denying entry to outsiders. That strategy has the advantage of keeping your history (and your sense of pride and pain) undiluted. But is that the only way? Especially as we (as a society) move forward into a world where there will inevitably be more mixing, I think the need to hold onto an undiluted ethnic identity will have to give way to more inclusive and flexible definitions of identity.

A few years before my encounter with the students, in 1993, *Time Magazine* ran a cover story, "The New Face of America," with the subtitle, "How Immigrants Are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society." The woman on the cover, with her brown eyes, brown hair, and pale brown skin, was "created by a computer from a mix of several races" and was intended to show the mixed identity that would prevail in our new globalized nation and world.

Soon after, an eloquent defense of the need to affirm mixed identities appeared in Amin Maalouf's (2001) *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, which was originally published in French in 1996. Maalouf begins his book this way:

How many times, since I left Lebanon in 1976 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt "more French" or "more Lebanese"? And I always give the same answer: "Both!" I say that not in the interests of fairness or balance, but because any other answer would be a lie. What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages, and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity.

He goes on to analyze his multiple affiliations as well as those of others in today's world. His concern is to point out the danger of reducing identity to a single affiliation, which "encourages people to adopt an attitude that is partial, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently even changes them into killers or supporters of killers." The recognition of mixed identity, in contrast, helps to promote peace. As he notes, "A man with a Serbian mother and a Croatian father, and who manages to accept his dual affiliation, will never take part in any form of ethnic 'cleansing.' A man with a Hutu mother and a Tutsi father, if he can accept the two 'tributaries' that brought him into the world, will never be a party to butchery or genocide" (Maalouf, 2001, 1, 30, 35).

I think of the year 2008 as the year in which everyone in America had the opportunity to recognize and affirm their multiple affiliations. Barack Obama is a global symbol, an icon literally, of the bridging role that a person of mixed identity can play in a multicultural America and a globalized world. As we have all come to know, he is the son of a White American woman, an anthropologist, who met his Black Kenyan father when they were students at the University of Hawaii. His father left the family when Obama was 2 years old and returned to Africa, and Obama was raised by his White mother and White grandparents. Is Obama "Black enough" or "the new Black?" Such a question seems almost silly because what makes Obama such an unprecedented figure is that he resists the simple categories of iden-

tity politics. He chooses to claim both Black *and* White identities, viewing Whiteness and Blackness as cultural worlds that possess, in his words, their “own language and customs and structures of meaning” and convinced “that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere” (Obama, 1995, 82).

To acknowledge that identities and cultures are mixed, impure, and miscegenated in complex and ever-changing ways is truly revolutionary for our scholarship. It forces us to rethink everything we do as anthropologists, folklorists, and teachers. How are we to go beyond traditional research that unwittingly continues to draw borderlines around peoples and communities, which need to be seen, now more than ever, as entangled with one another? This is the question that will surely preoccupy the next generation of anthropologists and folklorists.

What I know now, is that I should have stayed in that classroom. I should have wept all my tears in the presence of those students and then tried again to teach them, to be with them. I gave up on them much too quickly, and that is what brings tears to my eyes now.

\* \* \*

For the first time in my career as a professor, I taught a course called “Cuban Jews: Identity, Diaspora and the Search for Home” at the University of Miami. I had three Cuban Jewish students in the group and a mix of people I couldn’t have foreseen—Latinos who weren’t Jewish, Jews who weren’t Latinos, a student from Boston, a student from Australia, and a student from Japan. Every week, when I saw the 18 students sitting around the classroom, I was in awe. I couldn’t believe they kept coming back to learn about my little tribe.

One day, at the end of class, my Japanese student, Mitsuko, shyly reached inside her book bag and pulled out three CDs.

“For you,” she said.

Mitsuko is a musicologist who studies Cuban Sephardic music. Part of the repertoire includes melancholy laments that refer to losses of various kinds—lost homes, lost dreams, lost loves. But there are also songs of a lighter spirit, concerning things like the preparation of eggplant for a favorite stew. They are sung in Ladino, the broken Spanish of Jews expelled from Spain 500 years ago. This is the Spanish my paternal grandparents spoke, and I still hear it in my dreams.

I popped Mitsuko’s CDs into the player in the car and listened to those Sephardic songs I hadn’t heard in a while. There were renditions I’d never known existed. I had a 45-minute drive back to my rental apartment, but I might as well have been floating on a magic carpet. The songs sounded more beautiful than ever. I wondered whether their beauty shone through because

they’d been given to me as a gift from Mitsuko. I thought about how she had no reason to care about Cuban Sephardic music, but she cared anyway. She’d given my culture back to me with humility, respect, and simplicity. My heritage felt luminous to me. I felt rescued. I felt loved.

The historian David Hollinger (1993) asks, “How wide the circle of the ‘we’?” I’d like to think the circle could be much wider than many of us dare to imagine. Thank you, Mitsuko, I thought. Thank you for widening the circle of “we.”

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## NARRATING OURSELVES

Marilyn M. Cooper

In a book titled *The Truth about Stories*, Thomas King (2005) says, "The truth about stories is that's all we are" (2). He is not alone in claiming that we understand ourselves through the stories we tell: Jerome Bruner, Antonio Damasio, Daniel Dennett, Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor, among others, have advanced theories of the self as narrated. In his book on stories, Richard Kearney (2002) says that it was Aristotle who postulated that storytelling "is what gives us a *shareable world*," and he argues that "narrative provides us with one of our most viable forms of *identity*—individual and communal" (3, 4).

In this chapter, I explain narrative as an approach to understanding the self as becoming rather than as essence or as endless flux. Becoming a self, like creating a history, is a narrative process that continually integrates past, present, and future but not teleologically: There is no final goal for nor a final form of the self. The self arises out of interpretations (both conscious and unconscious<sup>1</sup>) of interactions within the enmeshed systems of living and, as such, cannot be grounded in any permanent reality. Literally nothing about any entity (whether living or not) stays the same over time—not names, not material configurations, not memories, not psyches<sup>2</sup>—because entities are continually interacting with things (forces, chemicals, and inor-