It is such a pleasure to have Ruth Behar with us on La Bloga today. Ruth is a Cuban-American anthropologist and writer. Her work focuses on various Cuban and Mexican cultures. She has spent many years investigating her own family’s Jewish Cuban history. Ruth was born in Havana, Cuba. Her family history is of Sephardic Turkish and Ashkenazi Polish and Russian ancestry. When she was four, she and her family emigrated to the United States. Her work as professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan has been nationally and internationally recognized. She was the first Latina to receive a MacArthur “genius” Fellowship (in 1988).

When I asked Ruth if she would answer a few questions for La Bloga regarding Obama’s announcement on Cuban relations, she was just about to leave for Cuba. Now that she is there, in Havana, she sends us her thoughts and impressions.

Amelia M.L. Montes: In a Washington Post article, dated December 18th, you describe your initial thoughts when you heard that President Obama and his administration was reestablishing ties with Cuba after 50 years. You note that he announced it on December 17th, the Feast day of San Lázaro, an important day in Cuba. Since the publication of that article, what other thoughts have you been having in this preliminary stage of establishing ties with Cuba?
Ruth Behar: Amelia, thank you so much for the opportunity to appear on La Bloga! When I received your questions, I was in Miami, on my way to Havana. I decided to wait to respond once I was inside the island.

Friends and acquaintances in Havana greet me, as always, with the most incredibly warm affection. They look me in the eye and tell me that I don’t seem to age. How good that feels! Then they hug me like they don’t want to let me go, ever. And I am reminded, yet again, why I keep coming back. Cuba remains the home of my heart.

I am writing these responses in an apartment facing the Malecón. There’s a very cool breeze, a humid breeze you feel in your bones. It’s winter in Havana, when the sky turns the very deepest blue you can imagine. Be careful walking along the Malecón this time of year! The ocean spills over the seawall, leaving a gooey algae residue on the pavement, making it as slippery as ice. Believe me, I know, I rushed out yesterday, so happy to be here, and hit the ground fast, dancing on my derriere.

“So what do you think about relations finally being restored between Cuba and the U.S.?” I ask everyone. Cubans here all agree it’s a good thing. New year’s celebrations, they tell me, were more festive than they’ve been in years. There is great hope for the future. But all say, as well, that it’s going to be a slow process. Both nations are imposing conditions on their rapprochement. They are going to have to meet somewhere in the middle. At least there’s conversation now. Words are flowing. “Hablando se entiende la gente.” Better a difficult encounter than the stone-hard silence of animosity and distrust.

I myself am optimistic about the good that can come of restored relations between Cuba and the U.S., two countries that have determined my own identity and fate. An easier flow of people, ideas, and goods back and forth across the ocean border will create opportunities for Cubans and Americans to engage in cultural exchanges, to dream together, to learn from one another.
Since writing my article for the Washington Post in the midst of the excitement of the December 17th announcement, I’ve come to feel it’s more urgent than ever that we listen to, and document, the personal stories of Cubans everywhere during this historic moment. These are stories about deep emotional bonds that transcend politics. Stories like the one I heard recently, about two sisters, separated after the Revolution who hadn’t seen each other in years. One was on her deathbed in Miami and the other was in Cuba trying to get a visa to go see her and say goodbye. An act of kindness by a Cuban government official, who intervened to speed along the process, made it possible for the sister in Cuba to arrive just in time to be with the sister in Miami on her last day on earth.

Twenty-four years ago I began envisioning bridges to and from Cuba. Now this is no longer a dream but a reality in the making. Cuba is filled with creative people. Poetry, the visual arts, music, theater, and dance are flourishing. Amazing initiatives emerge every day.

Last night a friend took me to the Fábrica de Arte Cubano (FAC), a former factory in Havana turned into a multi-use space, its labyrinth of tall-ceilinged rooms converted into a lively arena for art and photography exhibits, concerts, theatrical performances, and nooks for bars and cafés, with indoor and outdoor corners to hang out and chat. It was abuzz with people, young and old, ready to stay up until 4 AM. Such life, such energy, such joy! This is the Cuba I have hoped for. I pray I will have the good fortune to live long enough to be part of this bold new island as it spreads its wings.

But I must add that this morning, as I rush to finish writing my replies, the lights have gone out. I am hoping my laptop has enough battery power so I can keep writing. I am also hoping I’ll be able to connect to the Internet again. Until the electricity comes back on, I won’t know. Yesterday the connection was good, but I am not sure that will be the case today. This too is Cuba. The island can be a place of tremendous uncertainty, where you just don’t know why things suddenly decide to fall apart. But I won’t lose faith. As I wait, I am grateful for the sunshine.

Amelia M.L. Montes: Thank you for writing us from Cuba! I wonder—if you were an advisor to President Obama, what are some cautionary items you would put on a list to discuss with him regarding how to go about reestablishing these ties.

Ruth Behar: I think it’s important for President Obama and all Americans to understand the long history of Cuba’s relationship with the United States. Cubans have struggled for their independence since the end of the nineteenth century and don’t want to be a backyard colony again of the great power to the north. In moving forward to restore ties, the U.S. will have to be careful not to repeat the errors of the past and impose postcolonial systems of development and dependency. Cuba may be a small nation, but it has played
I hear many Americans saying, “I want to go to Cuba before it changes.” They mistakenly think Cuba is an isolated country. They view Cuba as an island preserved in amber that stood still after the U.S. imposed the embargo over fifty years ago. They fear the U.S. will ruin Cuba by bringing in the worst of capitalism. But things are much more complex and Cubans are super-savvy; they have found alternative ways of keeping up to date on everything that’s going on in the rest of the world, from news to soap operas to HipHop. The mix of socialist institutions and creative independent ventures have turned Cuba into a postmodern country like no other, with a people who are flexible, energetic, and reinvent themselves constantly.

Americans need to learn more about the reality of Cuba. I strongly believe that dialogue and people-to-people encounters are crucial building blocks for positive negotiations at the political level. President Obama should continue to encourage all kinds of grassroots ambassadorship and allow Cubans and Americans to engage with each other beyond the tourist sector by supporting educational programs, community forums, cultural exchanges, and artistic exhibitions. Controls will need to be placed on American business investments in the future, so the wellbeing of Cubans isn’t jeopardized, assuring that health care, educational equality, and women’s rights continue to be protected.

Amelia M.L. Montes: These are such important points in considering building relations with Cuba. Literature also can be helpful in this effort toward mutual understanding. Who are some Cuban authors that most U.S. Americans have never read because their books are not available here? Tell us about the writing world there and who we might be reading soon!

Ruth Behar: When I began to travel regularly to Cuba in the early 1990s, there was very little contemporary Cuban literature available in the United States. Only the classic works of writers such as José Martí, Alejo Carpentier, and José Lezama Lima had been translated into English.

My earliest project in Cuba was to bring together writing by Cubans on the island and in the diaspora. This became the anthology *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*. It was produced before the Internet. People in Cuba often gave me the only typed manuscript copy they had of their work, entrusting me with something so precious for the chance to be published in English in the United States.

It was at that time that I met the great poet Dulce María Loynaz, who is considered the Emily Dickinson of Cuba. Her meditative *Poemas sin nombre* took my breath away and inspired me to write poems again after giving up poetry for anthropology. Many of her poems have been translated into English, but if you can read them in
Spanish, her sad, wise voice will stay with you and haunt you.

Now there is a lot of writing from Cuba circulating in the U.S. The anthology *Cubana*, published by Beacon Press, for which I wrote the introduction, is a great place to start for a look at short stories by Cuban women. From there, you can go to the small independent publisher, Cubanabooks, which is based in the U.S. and specializes in literature by Cuban women. Cubanabooks offers a range of works from the island, including poetry by the marvelous Afro-Cuban poets Nancy Morejón and Georgina Herrera.

I happen to live with a translator, my husband, David Frye, who has translated many poems by Nancy Morejón; and also two novels, *Thine is the Kingdom* and *Distant Palaces*, by Abilio Estévez, a Cuban writer who I met in Cuba in the 1990s and now lives in Barcelona. David has recently translated, *A Planet for Rent*, a work of Cuban science fiction by Yoss, available from RestlessBooks. (Click here to read an interview with Yoss by Ricardo Acevedo.)
I have been able to collaborate on several publications with the spectacular book artist Rolando Estévez. He lives in the city of Matanzas, where he makes both one-of-a-kind handmade books and books in small editions. You can see some of these works on my website (click here for Ruth's website) as well as Estévez's website (click here for Rolando Estévez).
One of Cuba’s most popular fiction writers, Leonardo Padura Fuentes, well known for his gritty detective novels, and a recipient of the National Prize for Literature, has been gaining an international following. He recently moved into historical fiction. His novel, *The Man Who Loved Dogs*, about Trotsky, is now widely available in the original Spanish and in English. His latest novel, *Herejes* (*Heretics*), a braided narrative about the Jews in Cuba and a mysterious Rembrandt painting, will soon be published in English.

Blogging has become very popular in Cuba following upon the success of dissident writer Yoani Sánchez. A collection of her blogs can be found in her book, *Havana Real*. The blogs of many others, reporting on daily life in Cuba, can be found on the site www.desdecuba.com (click here)

A good general site for interviews with writers and artists and musicians is www.havana-cultura.com (a window on contemporary Cuban creativity). (click here for a quick look)
Amelia M.L. Montes: Thank you so much for sharing your insights, Ruth. Is there anything else you would like to say to our La Bloga readers?

Ruth Behar: As we look to the island for literature, let’s not forget about all the amazing Cuban-American writers that have kept alive the memory of Cuba and the wrenching story of the Cuban diaspora. The list is long, so I can’t mention everyone that I would like. Among my favorites are inaugural poet Richard Blanco, and Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz. I also love the wonderful conjuring of 1950s Havana in Rosa Lowinger’s Tropicana Nights. This was an era that the Revolution tried terribly hard to erase. Ironically, tourists now come to the island wanting to live out their own Tropicana fantasy. Cuba responds by selling that prerevolutionary fantasy while also selling Che Guevara T-shirts and the dream of the Revolution itself.

Links: (Click on each)
- Washington Post
- Huffington Post
- Jewish News
- Michigan Radio
- NPR’s Latino USA
What a wonderful interview! Thank you, Amelia and thank you, Ruth. I appreciate the insights, the links, and lovely artwork and photos. Viva Cuba y su gente who are "energetic, flexible, and reinventing themselves constantly."

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