TEACHERS TALK

WRITING, TEACHING, AND FILMING MATERIAL LIVES
A Conversation between Ruth Behar and Circe Sturm

Ruth Behar is a poet, writer, filmmaker and one of the leading figures in contemporary cultural anthropology. Born in Havana, Cuba to Jewish parents, she left the island with her family shortly after the revolution, when she was only five-years old. They moved to Queens, New York where Ruth was raised in a Spanish-speaking home. The language of her childhood has remained central to her work as an anthropologist, and her fieldwork has been based primarily in the Spanish-speaking world, including Spain, Mexico and Cuba.¹ Her life experiences as a Jewish, Cuban-American woman have played an important role in shaping her work and writing. Her latest book, An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba (2007), addresses in greater detail some of the same themes that emerge in her earlier documentary film, Adio Kerida/Goodbye Dear Love: A Cuban Sephardic Journey. In both, Behar chronicles her personal journey back to Cuba and the Jewish communities she finds there. Behar has taught at the University of Michigan for many years, where she is a Professor of Anthropology. Over the course of her career, she has received several prestigious fellowships and awards, and in 1988, she became the first Latina to be awarded the MacArthur Foundation’s “genius” fellowship.

Circe Sturm is a cultural anthropologist who grew up in Texas in a multiethnic household. Because of her own family dynamics, she has spent most of her career trying to understand how individuals and societies construct and use categories of sameness and difference, self and other. Most of her research has been based on work with indigenous people in the Americas, primarily in the US and Guatemala. Her book, Blood Politics: Race, Culture and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (2002) is an often self-reflexive account, incorporating third-person vignettes to address sensitive issues of racial and cultural difference in Indian country. She has just co-produced her first ethnographic film, Texas Tavola: A Taste of Sicily in the Lone Star State, a portrait of her mother’s kinsfolk in Texas that focuses on Sicilian American women. Sturm teaches at the University of Oklahoma, where she is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Native American Studies.

Ruth Behar and Circe Sturm had never met nor spoken to one another before this interview, and yet the two of them were surprised to find that they shared a remarkable degree of connection. Both are cultural anthropologists who celebrate the humanistic side of the discipline and are known for their self-reflexive writing. Both have worked at some point with indigenous
people in Latin America, and both have ventured into ethnographic work and documentary filmmaking in their own "home" communities. Perhaps most significantly, both believe that there is a fundamental artistry inherent in understanding and representing human experience. Ruth Behar makes a space for that artistry not only in her well-known ethnographic writing but also in her poetry, fiction, and film. Sturm does so in her non-fiction writing, ethnographic film, and mixed-media art installations.

In the following conversation, the two women discuss the place of material culture in ethnographic research and writing, the classroom, and their personal lives. Both women point to earlier theoretical paradigms within anthropology that limited their ability to perceive and write about the significance of material culture in the world around them. Behar talks about how she came to have a greater critical awareness of material culture once she started doing ethnographic fieldwork in communities outside the United States. As a result, material culture has become more and more central to her work. The same is true for Sturm, who also argues for a greater engagement with material culture. Both are concerned with how they might encourage students to become more cognizant of their own personal and social relationships with material culture. By exploring in the classroom what they have experienced as anthropologists, Behar and Sturm hope to empower students to think and write about material culture with greater creativity and insight.

CS Within anthropology, we've always recognized that culture has both material and symbolic properties, and that the best work within the discipline needs to deal with that connection. Yet, we still have a slight bias towards seeing culture as something largely in the mind or material culture as something that only matters in terms of what we think about it, rather than how it makes us think. How has your own work forced you to confront and maybe even rethink the materiality of social life and culture?

RB Well, that's a big one, and answering it involves me giving you a mini-history of the fieldwork I've done over the years, and then I'll go into teaching and writing. Starting out as a very young woman in my twenties, I worked in a small village in Northern Spain, and it was really impossible not to be aware of material culture, because these people were literally living off the land. I would help them in their farming activities, and they would say, "This is really going to hurt your kidneys, your riñones," and after bending down all day, I would think, "Wow, it really does hurt your kidneys." So, I developed an increased awareness of the land and of people being dependent on the land. When I finally wrote up these stories in my dissertation, I wasn't really effective at conveying the materiality of it all. I talked a lot about communal properties and inheritance, but I don't know if I really got across the material palpability I felt and witnessed. At the time, I was reading John Berger's Pig Earth, which is a beautiful book, but I wasn't brave enough
at that point to try to write like he did. He really does capture the physicality of rural, farm life. There is this incredible material presence to that kind of life, and I think your question is an interesting one, because I was taught to see kinship systems, systems of inheritance, or a history of land use, but I really didn’t know how to evoke the material culture that was so impressive to my senses when I was there.

CS In addition to seeing these material differences, it sounds like it was your bodily experience of them, more than anything else, that was critical to your growing awareness of material life.

RB Yes, completely, and not really knowing how to evoke it on the page later when I sat down to write a dissertation or to revise that into a book. For example, nowadays, I’ll introduce my students to a book like James Agee and Walker Evans’ Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, where Agee has whole sections that are really evocative of material things—the red dirt, the dusty land, the crusty shoes with soil on them, the smell of corn. When I first started writing, I didn’t really have the language and perhaps the courage to really know how to put all of that on the page.

Subsequently, I went on to work in Mexico, and there I think I did a little better job of recognizing materiality and knowing how to make that part of my writing. My husband and I used to drive from Michigan down to San Luis Potosí in Mexico, where we were doing our work in a small town, and it would take about a week. We would make stops, of course, but that physical experience of crossing the US-Mexico border had a huge impact on me. Then, being in this small town in Mexico where there were many people who were crossing over in the other direction as undocumented workers, who felt real humiliation and resentment about the way they were being treated, that experience would bring up all the issues for me that I talk about in Translated Woman. I often heard, “Well, how come you can cross over so easily, and we have all these difficulties crossing to your side?” So, the border was very much a real, physical and material presence for me. I was also very influenced at the time by the writing of Chicanas like Gloria Anzaldúa who talks about the border as an open wound, la herida abierta, and, so I was very aware of the border as this wound.  

2 For more on Gloria Anzaldúa’s path-breaking work on the border as a space of limits and transformation, see Anzaldúa (1987).
When I wrote *Translated Woman*, I had a real sense that this story that she was feeding my tape recorder was a real material object, and that it was going to cross the border with me, because it was on all these tapes. The tapes were real objects in my suitcase, and I was crossing the border with them. Later, I had to transcribe them to create the book. So, I had a vivid sense of the materiality of Esperanza not being able to cross the border herself but that her story could cross. Then, as I created the book, I was aware that this story was going to become a book, and it was going to become a commodity that was going to have a life of its own by becoming a physical and material object in the world. I was extremely conscious of that and concerned about all the possible repercussions of having this story become a book that would then move freely across all kinds of borders without my being able to control the way it would be read and understood.

More recently now, I have been working in Cuba, where I was born. The experience has been quite intense of going back to a place that my family left behind, a place where I’m not supposed to return and to which my family would prefer I didn’t return. Truly going back and connecting with this place, where the earth is very red and there are particular smells, ocean smells, is very sensual—even in the little things, like what happens to my hair in Cuba, where the humidity makes it curlier. I have a very palpable sense of the island as a material place, surrounded by the ocean and palm trees. And then, maybe as a result, in Cuba I’ve developed a growing interest in the visual arts and bring back a lot of art from Cuba, including paintings, drawings, and even tapestries.
I suppose I’m telling you about the way material culture is important to me, personally, and I’m not really speaking to the discipline of anthropology, but I think the discipline has had difficulty teaching us how to incorporate this material world into our writing, how to enliven our writing so that it is filled with this materiality that’s all around us. We are mainly taught to perceive other worlds. We tend to focus on either the visual or the oral, because we’re either talking to people or observing people, but there’s also this whole range of material presence that, in a sense, we still lack a language to describe.

CS You talk about your frustration with not being taught to see and think about materiality in nuanced ways, and yet it’s the experience of fieldwork that created a greater critical consciousness within you. However, we can’t easily reproduce that experience for our students in the classroom. How do you teach students to begin to think critically about material culture and not take it for granted?

RB One of the ways I try to teach the importance of material culture is to bring a lot of things to class. For example, I’m teaching a class now, called “Cuba and Its Diaspora.” We focus on Cuba since 1959, the year of the revolution, and we look at the Diaspora that was created as a result of this political moment. One-tenth of the population lives outside of Cuba, largely in the United States. When we left Cuba, even though my father is very anti-Castro or has become so, when he left Cuba, he left with a copy of History Will Absolve Me, which is the text Fidel Castro wrote in his own defense. Between 1953 and 1955, Castro was trying to bring down the Batista regime, and he and other revolutionaries were caught. Many were killed or executed, but he was jailed along with others and then was finally given amnesty. However, in order to gain his release, he went before a court. Because Castro was trained as a lawyer, he knew how to defend himself. He said he would provide his own defense, and wrote this short book. He had this faith that what he was doing was right and that history would prevail, that he was a person chosen to liberate Cuba from US domination. So, I decided to bring to class a copy of History Will Absolve Me, because to me it’s very meaningful that my father left Cuba with it. I showed it to the students in order to say, “Here’s what Fidel Castro used to defend himself, and he’s still in power after leading this revolution.”

I just taught class on Tuesday, and I brought in the book so that students could see the original text from the 1950s. At the same time, when I started going back to Cuba in the 1990s, I found that History Will Absolve Me was widely available for sale, even though there was very little you could buy in Cuba in the early 1990s. They were just beginning to switch over to a partially capitalist system and had been living under Communism for several years. So, one of the few things that could be purchased to bring back as a souvenir from Cuba was a copy of History Will Absolve Me in a miniature format. This was a
tiny little book, like Mao Tse Tung's, "Little Red Book." It's barely readable, but the idea is that the book is a pocket edition that you are supposed to have with you at all times, like a talisman. I brought those two books into class and showed them to the students and talked about them. I think those objects helped to bring my point home. I was trying to explain to them what history with a capital 'H' might mean, why Cuba carried out a revolution, and why Cubans thought the revolution was necessary.

One time, I brought in some nightgowns from Cuba. These are nightgowns that were my mother's honeymoon nightgowns, made from the lace that her parents sold in their store in Cuba. Although the nightgowns stayed behind in Cuba after we left, the woman who was my nanny saved those nightgowns that belonged to my mother. She saved them for forty years, so that when I started going back to Cuba, she still had them. She didn't give them to me right away, but instead took several years to say to me, "I have these nightgowns and have been saving them for your mother. I don't think she's coming back, so I'm going to give them to you." Then she pulled out these honeymoon nightgowns that had belonged to my mother. It was a very powerful moment. After she finally gave them to me, I brought them back to the US, and several times, when I've talked about my relationship with this woman who was my nanny when I was a child, and who is an Afro-Cuban woman who is still alive in Cuba, I've brought the nightgowns with me just to convey the impact of this material object—something that carries so much meaning, memory, and even eroticism.

CS I agree that there is something about actually holding a material object that allows students to read these objects in new ways. Is there anything else that you do in the classroom that you find to be particularly useful in terms of material culture pedagogy?

RB The other thing I do in the Cuba class is we have a whole week in which we discuss Santería, an Afro-Cuban religion.³ We build a Santería altar in class as part of our learning about the religion. I have everybody bring something in that's significant to him or her. It can be a picture of a dead ancestor, or an object that's meaningful to them, such as a rock or a seashell from the natural world. It could be something that represents a person they want to honor, even a favorite writer. Any number of things would make sense for an altar. So, with fifty students, we create this big altar in the spirit of Santería. People bring flowers, all kinds of things, and I want them to understand that it's not a religious thing. I'm not trying to convert anyone. I want my students to understand what happens when fifty people work together to build an altar, the kind of spiritual energy that gets created with everybody putting an object that is spiritually meaningful to them in that space on the table, how that then acquires a kind

³ For more information on Santería, see Brown (2003).
of transcendent power—to see all of that effort and collective meaning come together in a room. On that day, we transform the room. A couple of times, I’ve even been able to bring in a drummer that can drum some of the Santería beats.

CS Very interesting. The ethnographic film that I’m finishing up right now is about a very similar process. We’re calling it, *Texas Tavola: A Taste of Sicily in the Lone Star State*, and it’s about the creation of a *Tavola di San Giuseppe* or St. Joseph’s altar among Sicilian Texans.4 The film shows how weeks of cooking and preparation transform a family home into an enormous altar filled with decorative breads and cookies, religious icons, and flowers. The event usually attracts about eight hundred Sicilian Texans. So I am deeply familiar with the altar experience, and understand how building an altar not only creates a sense of communalism, but also transforms everyday objects and spaces into something sacred. It sounds like you’re really able to convey that emotional and physical experience to your students. It’s a great exercise.

RB Yes, I’ve done that every year, because I recognized that it was very effective, that students were going to feel it in their bodies and their senses, to be in that room, that transformed room, as you said.

CS I also try to create opportunities for those kinds of bodily experiences of material culture to happen for my students. For instance, I’ll have them bring in a snack so we can all eat together, and we will spend a fair amount of time just looking at what counts as a snack, how it is packaged, and what it says about our society—such as the nature of surplus and having food on the run. Or I will organize a fieldtrip, so that if I am teaching a class on American Indian culture, for instance, I will have them attend a powwow and write about the experience. Then, they will begin to notice the way in which difference is inscribed in the body or how an everyday space is transformed. They will also talk about what they heard and saw, and they will begin to think about the social life of things and the way they express their own social lives through things. But going back to your earlier example, I wonder how your Mom responded to those nightgowns?

RB She was very moved. It was just so powerful to see those nightgowns again. And, interestingly enough, until I brought those nightgowns back from Cuba, I didn’t know that she had saved one of her own. She had one that was meant to be for the first night of the honeymoon. The other two were meant for the other two nights of the honeymoon. In those days, or perhaps because my parents were lower middle class, the honeymoon was three days long; and so she had a nightgown for each day. They went to Varadero, a beach resort about an hour and a half from Havana. I was really surprised to learn that my mother had this other nightgown that I had never seen. She had

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been saving it, and finally she pulled that one out and showed it to me. Now, I have all three nightgowns. Actually, I have a novel that’s been on the back burner for a long time in my life, called The Nightgowns From Cuba and it tells this whole story of the nightgowns. A few years ago, I wrote quite a lot of it, about two hundred pages, and now I’m coming back to it again. I think it’s a very moving story. Women’s garments are such powerful symbols. In these last few years, there have been many new books coming out about women and their clothes, because women’s garments carry so much sentimental and erotic meaning.

CS Absolutely. In fact, I often find that clothing is a wonderful starting place for getting students to talk about the expressiveness of material culture—the variety of options for men and women and what our clothing choices says about who we are as people. Since we are already talking about what we wear on our bodies that leads to another question. In your documentary film, Adio Kerida, there’s a scene during which you visit a Sephardic Jewish shop in Miami, and you’re looking at all of these good luck charms that are there to protect against the evil eye. At the time, you’re wearing an armful of these same bracelets.... Are you wearing them right now?

RB I don’t wear as many lately, but I do still wear three.

CS Okay, so in the film, you mention how you always wear these. It’s like literally wearing your culture on your sleeve, and I was hoping you could talk a little bit about the meaning of those bracelets for you, how wearing them connects you to other Sephardic Jews with Cuban origins or other Sephardic Jews, period? How does that little piece of material culture work to create meaning in the context of Jewish Diaspora and Cuban displacement?

RB I love that moment in the film, because it is so fun and spontaneous. Well, these good luck charms, these ojitos—which look like little eyes—well, there are many things that I think are interesting about them. First, this object represents the convergence of ideas about good luck, protection against the evil eye and Islamic beliefs, all at once. I was very drawn to them, because the Habifs who sell these ojitos in Miami are both Turkish. They immigrated to Cuba in the 1930s and stayed until the early 1960s. They get the ojitos directly from a factory that they have in Turkey, and there is absolutely no conflict for them in embracing what is primarily an Islamic belief in the evil eye.

A lot of cultures have this belief in the evil eye. I’m sure Sicilians do, and Latin Americans and Jews. But for me, it’s especially meaningful because what makes Sephardic Jews distinct is that they are Jews who lived among Muslims for centuries, rather than among Christians, as Ashkenazi Jews did. Ashkenazi Jews, who lived in Northern and Eastern Europe among Christians, speak Yiddish,
while the Jews that were in Turkey spoke Ladino and lived among Muslims, and did so quite peacefully for centuries. In fact, when the Jews were expelled from Catholic Spain, the Sultan of what was then the Ottoman Empire welcomed the Jews that were fleeing Spain. In 1492, in the era of expulsion, they could either convert to Catholic-ism and stay, or if they wanted to remain Jewish, they had to leave and go elsewhere. One of the places where Jews could remain Jewish in the late fifteenth century was the Ottoman Empire. For centuries, really until the twentieth century, they lived in peace with Islamic culture, which is obviously such a contrast to the modern-day conflicts between Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, and so on. So to me, this ojito harkens back to a time when there was this wonderful kind of understanding and cooperation. Maybe that’s overstating the case, to say it was a time of great cooperation and understanding, but at least it was a time of mutual tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

What is also interesting is that the Habífs, whom you see in the movie, have never been back to Cuba since they left in the early 1960s. Like a lot of Cuban emigrants who are in the United States, they view themselves as political exiles, and they don’t want to show any kind of support for Castro. For them, going back to Cuba is a way of showing support, and so they have refused to go. But what was interesting about the Habífs, Alberto and Elza, is that they decided to give me hundreds of these little evil eye charms. They said, “Take them to Cuba and give them to people as a gift.” And so, I gave one to every Jew that I met, and lots of people who weren’t Jewish, who saw my bracelets and fell in love with them. Everyone in Cuba seemed to like the idea of having something for good luck, and so I was giving away the ojitos all over Cuba, thanks to the generosity of the Habífs. I thought it was so beautiful that while they might not agree with the political system, they still understood that the people of Cuba were human beings who would like a good luck charm. For me, the ojitos became a powerful symbol of the way I had become a bridge between worlds—someone who travels between Cuba and the United States bringing stories and material objects back and forth.
CS The story of the *ojitos* is interesting because it's an example of the material object working as a gift and creating social connections. Recently, Daniel Miller, who studies material cultural as his specialty, wrote an article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. He describes how anthropological theory has been stuck within a paradigm where the gift is conceived of as a social good and the commodity a social evil. The gift is good because it is centered on extending and maintaining social relationships, whereas the commodity is assumed to have alienating effects that threaten and destabilize social relationships. He argues that this dichotomy has kept many anthropologists, and other scholars for that matter, from fully exploring how patterns of production and consumption in the modern world also create different and yet significant communities of exchange. I'm wondering, first of all, whether you think we've gotten beyond this dichotomy, or if we are still mired within it?

RB I think we have gotten beyond it, though I think there still is a kind of aura around societies that maintain gift exchanges. Actually, within every society, even the most consumer-oriented like our own, both systems operate simultaneously. Part of the error that anthropologists made at an earlier point in the history of our discipline was to look at these things from an evolutionary perspective and to suggest that we evolved from the gift to capitalism and consumerism. However, if you look at our society, the two systems coexist. I think one of the ways in which we are looking at things differently today is that we really can't help but study consumerism in whatever society we're working in, because the onslaught of consumerism is so intense. What's strange now is that the boundaries between the two seem much more unclear than they were before.

CS I also think there is still a tendency to look at consumption as something that is corrupting, as something that always has the taint of the negative about it. When I brought up the example of the *ojitos* at the shop in Miami, I was thinking about the way in which consumption is also creative, and in this case productive of social identities and relationships. Consumption is this social force. It's not just about the pleasure of buying and owning something, but also about how doing it connects you to other people like yourself. Can you talk about some ways in which you see that happening?

RB Cuba is a wonderful case in point. It's one of the reasons that people are so attracted to Cuba and want to go there—because it's a society that challenges capitalism and consumerism. There are no ads for products to purchase. There are no billboards except those that advertise the revolution. Here is an example, in fact, of what you were talking about as the model that you and Daniel Miller are critiquing, this model of consumerism as bad so that people were bet-
ter off living in a society centered on the gift. That is certainly what the communist system tried to enforce, but what they discovered was that people do want consumer goods, and these consumer goods are productive of values, and not always negative ones. So, now they've had to find ways to make consumer culture possible in Cuba, while also maintaining some of these more altruistic notions of volunteer labor, giving to others, and doing things where there isn't any kind of material gain.

Anthropologists who are working in Cuba are trying to understand that border between gift culture and consumer culture. I'm thinking of people who've done research on sex tourism, for example. Both the receivers and the givers of sex in these situations felt very torn. Those who were giving sex away, the Cubans, whether it was for money, goods, travel, or other kinds of material rewards, were feeling very guilty, because they felt that sex should be something free, without a price tag on it. At the same time, they would rationalize their choices by saying, "Unfortunately, I have to fill my stomach. Unfortunately, I need to put something in my refrigerator, and so I have to do this." Then, the Canadians and others who were on the receiving end were constantly perturbed as to whether these were truly their lovers, because they thought of them[elves] as lovers rather than as clients, and would say, "You know, I think he really loves me, but sometimes I'm not sure." So, they wanted to overlook the consumer relationship they were creating, and wanted to see them in terms of the notion of the gift in order to participate in...[these relationships] with a clean conscience.

Another answer comes to mind when I think about patterns of consumption in the United States among Latinos. I think of things like the role that that Cuban restaurant, Rincón Criollo, in Queens, New York, played in our lives. We've been going to that restaurant for about twenty-five years or more, since it first opened. And when we go, we are of course consuming Cuban food, but it also becomes a way of maintaining culture, because it's a Cuban space that's being maintained through this restaurant. We all know how important food is to maintaining culture. It's probably one of the most important and intense forms of materiality for every culture.

CS Your story makes me think about the year I lived in Sicily with my husband and young daughter. This was in 2006, and one of the things that really struck me about consumption patterns in Sicily is how different they are from those in the US. You do see a few of the large, North American style supermarkets, but most of the time you're going around and buying your bread from the bakery, your cheese from the cheese shop, and your saliscia from the butcher, and your fruit from the corner fruit-vendor. You go to each place, and at times it is frustrating because it takes all day to get your shopping done, but there is also this social relationship built around that type of consumption. There's a
similar sort of moral obligation at work, just like there is a moral obligation of reciprocity with gift exchanges. I was really struck by the fact that certain vendors knew my name and expected to see me, and that if I went to a particular fruit peddler on a regular basis and then decided to buy from someone down the street, this felt like a betrayal. There's this real sense of social life in that kind of consumption, and I think that the same thing is going on in your Cuban restaurant, that it's not just enacting your cultural identities and creating that space, but a relationship of expectation that you will come and make this place live as a Cuban space simply by being there.

RB Well, that's beautifully said and exactly right. It's those social relationships that we lose in our society, say, in the United States, where we want efficiency, speed and anonymity. As you said, it can take all day in Sicily to get your shopping done, because social relationships take time. What we most want to conserve in an efficient society like ours is time, and so we're not willing to put time into those social relationships. We might put time into other kinds of relationships, but not those relationships of consumption, at least not on a regular basis. Most of the time, we'd rather go to increasingly big grocery stores. Even some place like Whole Foods, when it first began in Austin, Texas was initially a very face-to-face kind of place. Now, look at what it has become. In essence, it's really not that different from any huge supermarket. Yes, it's all organic, but now going there entails the same kind of anonymous shopping where you can run in, pick up what you need, and get out. I think we don't want to invest time in consumption, because we'd rather just be able to move efficiently and quickly. Sometimes, though, when we travel, particularly as anthropologists, and we spend time in other places, we're reminded of other kinds of beauty, and the social relationships that can accompany consuming products. Yes, it takes time, but we get something out of it. We build ties with people.

I don't know if Sicily is the same, but in Cuba if you don't have those social relationships, you can't survive in that society. Now, we don't have that problem here, those of us in the middle classes and above, because there isn't scarcity. You don't lack for much of anything, but when you live in a society where there is scarcity, it's very important to have a really extensive social network. For example, through the rationing system in Cuba you might get a box of cigarettes, and perhaps you don't smoke but your neighbor does. He'd rather get your cigarettes, and because he doesn't like milk, he'll give you his ration of milk. Then, you've bartered for something. In some societies, the social relationships ... allow you to survive. In societies like ours, where the social relationships of that sort aren't needed, we don't form them. However, we still need other kinds of social relationships to get the things we want, whether it's upward mobility or something else. Social relationships are always key.
CS I wanted to shift gears a bit and ask you about the relationship between materiality and methodology. One of the things that I've recently been experiencing as I make this foray into ethnographic filmmaking is how the experience changes because there's a camera or a boom mike physically present that seems almost to stand between the filmmaker and the subject. I'm wondering how, in your experience with documentary filmmaking, having a camera "mattered?" How does the material presence of that camera somehow shape the nature of the experience and the final product?

RB Oh, it's a completely different process, and I can say so with some assurance because I've tried working in different ways—sometimes with the same people, sometimes filming with the camera, sometimes photographing with a still camera, sometimes taking notes by hand, sometimes taping, and sometimes not recording anything. Each of those different ways of interacting changes what you're getting from people and how we each experience that interaction. In my experience working with a film or video camera, people often bring forth their best and sometimes their deepest self. Something about knowing that it's not ephemeral, that the camera is going to guarantee some kind of shot at immortality, creates two responses in people. Sometimes people really dig deep and say something that's important to them. Other times, if they're afraid of the camera, then they perform for the camera and you get something very wooden. I have had both happen. When I worked on my film, one of the ways I tried to avoid this second reaction was that I tended to get to know people very well before filming them. After this trust had been built up and the camera was there, people seemed to be less self-conscious, because they already had a relationship with me. I was often in the frame, as well, with people talking or asking questions, so that also helped make people less self-conscious. However, I do think that the camera brings out something special in people. I think they collect themselves and their thoughts in a different kind of way. The other thing is that when people know they're being filmed, there is no pretense anymore that you are just their friend or buddy. I mean, you are filming them. You are out to create a product with this camera that's in front of them, and so the presence of the camera reinforces the fact that this is ethnography, and we're working on it together.

CS The method is a little more transparent, a little more honest.

RB It's a little bit more honest, yes, because when you're not filming, people don't know what it is that you're gathering from the experience of being with them that you might potentially use in your ethnography. I found in making my film that people were aware that they were creating a historical record. There was a sense of urgency and importance to what they were doing. It mattered. They were doing this for the record. Even though they may think they're doing
it for the record when you're writing down field notes, these can be scribbles on a piece of paper and maybe you can't even read them afterwards, but when you're filming, the camera is there. It's a real thing. It's going to last. A film, if it is not lost, is going to last. It has a tangibility and realness about it. After all, we live in a media saturated world. We're surrounded by visual images all the time, and I think we're more aware of the materiality of these things, the fact that when you're filming people, they know that this is real. They know that these images might circulate in the future, and I think it makes people, again, try to reach deep and say something more profound about themselves.

CS I also think the presence of the camera helps to make tangible the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject of the film. For instance, Michelangelo Antonioni's 1975 film, The Passenger, has a scene that really captures this tension. Actually, in my upper-division classes, I almost always have students read a transcript from this scene, because it encourages them to see some of the power dynamics inherent in ethnographic representation. In the scene, the documentary filmmaker, played by Jack Nicholson, is filming a Native rebel leader and asking him questions. There's nothing surprising about this at all. It's par for the course, but when the rebel leader refuses to answer and then takes the camera out of the filmmaker's hands and turns it back on him and says, "Okay, now you can ask the questions," we as viewers are pressed to think about this relationship. So, it seems to me that there's something about having this object pointed at you that makes patently obvious that there is a relationship here that is going to entail representation and a particular kind of analytic gaze. It is a relationship that is fairly typical for most anthropology, but it's one that doesn't become obvious until that camera is there between you. Do you see what I'm saying?

RB I do. I agree, but I think that at least in the way that I try to do anthropology, I try to make it be about the mutual gaze. So, at least in my film, I made a real point of being inside the frame of the camera as well, and the camera was pointing at me as often as it was at other people. I wanted to make it inter-subjective. I didn't want to say, "Okay, you're the subjects and I'm going to stand back here and ask you questions." It wasn't like that at all. I was on camera asking the questions, and people could ask me questions back. So, I'm really more interested in these mutual gazes, where I'm looking at them, but they're also looking at me, and, it goes back and forth a lot. So, yes, I think in part the camera returns us to that subject-object relationship, but it doesn't have to. It depends on the kind of documentary you're making.

CS Right. That's such an important point about the real variability that exists in the kinds of relationships and styles that go into ethnograph-
ic work, whether it be in standard fieldwork, filmmaking, or even photography for that matter. I always try to remind students of that variability, and how these relationships affect their own reading and writing. I know we’ve just talked about filmmaking, but I’m wondering if you had any similar experiences with material culture when collaborating with a photographer for your new book, *An Island Called Home?*

**RB** As a matter of fact, I really did work with the notion of material culture very consciously and in a way that I never have before in my writing. Working with Humberto Mayol, a photographer who’s based in Havana, we traveled all over Cuba looking for Jews who live on the island today, learning their stories. He took the photographs first, before I wrote the stories that go with the pictures, and together we negotiated the taking of these pictures of people, where and how, and what kind of picture we were taking and why. In order to talk about Jewish identity in Cuba, I asked people to show me material objects that they had saved from the past. Sometimes I didn’t even have to ask them. They knew I was going to interview them about Jewish identity, and they would pull out old passports that belonged to a mother, a father, or a grandparent, a passport from Poland or Turkey. That’s where the two major immigrations were from in the 1920s and 1930s, and so they would pull out these old passports. They would pull out old photos and old documents, like a wedding contract, a *Ketubah,* as it’s called in Hebrew. Two little boys also showed me conversion documents, because most of the Jews in Cuba today are converts, and so they showed me
their conversion documents, and we took a picture of these two brothers holding up their conversion documents.

In the photographs, we have a lot of this kind of material object within material object going on, meaning that these are photographs within photographs, pictures of people holding up objects in photographs, such as passports, documents, images, and so on. So, there's a way in which the history of Jews in Cuba is present in the material culture and in these objects that people have saved. I wanted to document that, and I also wanted to look at Jewish traces on the landscape, in the synagogues, cemeteries, tombstones, and old mezuzahs. Somebody even had a kippah, a skull cap from a 1959 wedding, which was the year the revolution began. So, it really felt that I was building up this lost Jewish Cuba through all of these material objects that the people who now remain in Cuba were guarding. There's this whole material Jewish past that would have vanished if the people who are there today hadn't been guarding over these things. I felt that these people were memory-keepers who were holding on to all of these material traces of the Jewish past for the rest of us. So, that became a big theme in my project, in the way I wrote the stories and in the way Humberto took the photographs. The book has one hundred and forty photographs. It's visually a very rich book. That's one of the reasons I was so excited about talking about this theme of material culture in anthropology, because in this new project I've addressed the issue of the materiality of memory in a very direct way.

CS What strikes me about what you've just said is that you go from beginning your career as an anthropologist with the feeling that you have this material experience of fieldwork but don't quite have the language to represent and translate that experience for your readers. Then, for a variety of reasons, you get better at finding that language and paying attention to those themes as you go. Finally, in this most recent work you're really focusing on material culture as a central issue. So, you seem to be on a trajectory where you're moving ever closer to material culture studies as a central problematic, but I wonder if you believe that there is something about this project in particular that demanded you look at material culture?

RB That's an excellent question. I'm glad you asked it, because I think there was a sense at first that I was trying to recover a vanished world. I'm part of this exodus of Cuban Jews who left after the revolution in the early 1960s, and though I was just a child and didn't choose to leave, I was certainly influenced by everything I heard about Cuba growing up in
the United States. I came to feel that there was this Jewish Cuba that had vanished. Anthropologists classically try to salvage lost cultures. I felt this urgency not so much to salvage as to document a way of life that had almost vanished. In this case, Jewish Cuba didn’t vanish, and I actually wasn’t salvaging a lost culture. What I was looking at was documenting a culture that had been revitalized by the people that had stayed on the island, by the people who had inter-married, the ones who had married outside of the Jewish tribe and brought non-Jewish Cubans into the fold through conversion. So in the end, I wasn’t salvaging anything, but rather trying to document the traces of the past that Jews in Cuba were keeping, as if it mattered, as if this past mattered, even though they had been left behind by the majority of the Jewish community, who’d left for a better life in the United States.

The experience was more than a little bit poetic for me, this idea that one group of people plants the roses, but then another group of people comes later to gather the roses. I think it’s a Cuban saying, and I can’t remember the exact words in Spanish, but it’s something like, “No sabes para quien siembras,” meaning you don’t know for whom you’re planting the flowers. Somebody else may come along later to enjoy those flowers, so you still put them in the ground. Working on An Island Called Home evoked those feelings. I think that’s why the materiality of it was so strong for me. There was so much Jewish memory left behind in Cuba by these Cuban Jews who had been part of an earlier community. They had left because their lives were threatened economically, and they didn’t want to be part of a communist system. What was left of the cemeteries and synagogues lay in ruins for many years, because they weren’t being used. The Jews who remained had integrated themselves into the revolution, and they didn’t really care that much about their Jewish identity as such because they were more involved in the nationalist project of building a new independent Cuba. Then, in the 1990s, after the collapse of Russian communism, there was a major revitalization of religion in Cuba, and people started to come back and started caring about those religious traces that had been left behind. So, it was a very material process of reclaiming Jewish traces, because if something weren’t done to restore and renovate those material traces on the landscape and those material objects that remained, they would be lost. They would vanish. They would cease to have meaning. And to me, it became incredibly important to document that process of material reconnection with a Jewish world that had been abandoned during the hey-day of the revolution.

The point you made is so good, that I started in my career with this desire to capture materiality and couldn’t do it. What’s different about my new book is not only that I’m using photographs to capture a sense of materiality but also that my writing has changed. I think I’ve improved as a writer because I became more aware that what I needed to do was tell stories and not to explain things so much. My first project in Spain was a dissertation project and you’re
supposed to explain things in a dissertation. In this project, now that I am older and maybe freer, I thought, "I don't need to explain. I need to witness." Sometimes I was a witness to very complex situations where I didn't know how to act, but I was there watching, being present. So, I think my writing has changed and developed, and maybe now I've finally found a space for a form of expression that didn't seem possible when I started out twenty-five years ago.

CS You talk about your recent book as a documentary project, and in *The Vulnerable Observer* and earlier in our interview you mention the documentary impulse and the work of James Agee and Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. One of the questions that keeps being raised for me with making my own film is the difference between ethnographic and documentary film. My husband is also the co-producer of my film and is someone who not only does documentary studies but also creates documentaries, and I keep asking him about the difference between the two genres and if there really is one. I'm wondering if in some way that you and I, and any anthropologists for that matter, do not experience a certain demand and expectation that the "ethnographic" is about explanation, and yet at the same time, we have this desire to document and, as you've put it, to witness. It's akin to the idea that a good writer doesn't have to explain things but instead can evoke and describe them in such a way that we as readers can make sense of them for ourselves. I'm wondering what you think about these differences.

RB I think that's an interesting distinction. I guess I would call myself more of a documentary filmmaker than an ethnographic filmmaker, but only in the sense that the ethnographic filmmaker has to explain, rather than witness. If that is the case, then I would say that I am more of a personal, documentary filmmaker. I think ethnographic filmmaking could be so much better than it is, and I think we can learn from documentary filmmakers. Unfortunately, ethnographic films tend to be boring. To make documentaries more watchable, I think you really have to make them stories—whether it's a story of a journey or of learning something you didn't know and showing the process behind that learning. There has to be a strong story component. I think that's also true for good ethnography, and we're not taught sufficiently how to do that in anthropology departments. It's what Mary Louise Pratt said about ethnographers: it's a shame we're such interesting people, doing such interesting things, but writing such boring books. Maybe that's true with our ethnographic filmmaking, too, in that they're often shockingly boring. I think part of the reason they are is that our discipline has a real fear of anything that's artsy. I think the discipline of anthropology was created at a moment when we were supposed to be rough and hardy and go out safari-like to capture cultures that were on the verge of disappearing, and to live among people that live very rudimentary lives compared to our comfort level back in the
metropol. So, there is this assumption that grew up out of that way of doing anthropology that didn’t allow us to become too artsy and too literary in our writing, because that was going to take attention away from the subject of our research—the exotic others.

CS It also draws attention to the fact that the ethnographic product is fabricated, that it’s a creative process, right? And, so we can’t let people know that, because it might threaten our credibility and the perception that the discipline is something that gets at a real truth.

RB Yes, and that also threatens the perception that anthropology is a social science rather than a humanistic pursuit. If it’s a social science, the language has to be crisp. It has to be dry. I described it as having to be like Ivory soap, pure and unadulterated. Get in there and get clean. Leave no scent, right? That’s how we’ve been taught to think about writing and to think about the artistry that goes into doing anthropology. I think there’s a real distrust of people who do their anthropology artistically, because it poses a threat to that self-image which anthropology has of itself as a social scientific discipline. I think there’s also a sense that it’s too egotistical to get involved in the artistry of ethnographic filmmaking and writing, because, again, you’re focusing attention on yourself as the ethnographer as opposed to the “Just give us the facts, ma’am,” sort of attitude. So, it really goes back to the very interesting history of our discipline, and it goes back to the complications of our contemporary status. We don’t want to lose our status in the academy as a social science, because our whole world would topple, in particular our whole system of being able to get National Science Foundation grants, and other kinds of grants that support our work. If we all said we were doing memoirs, well then, why aren’t we simply in creative writing? Why are we this separate discipline? There are many different complex issues, and I certainly don’t want the discipline to topple either, but at the same time I feel the importance of making my work more accessible to a wider audience, and of communicating anthropological ideas to all kinds of people across all kinds of borders. I think part of the way you do that is by working more as an artist and telling compelling stories.

CS Also, good anthropology is about communicating to your readers that there is this fundamental inter-subjective quality to the experience of doing ethnography, and that that in and of itself has value. Don’t deny it but celebrate it. This is something I work hard to convey to students, that we all need to look at the kinds of knowledge that come out of that inter-subjective experience as something valuable in and of themselves.

RB Absolutely.
WORKS CITED


Contributors

RUTH BEHAR’s books include The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village; Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story; The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart, and An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba. She co-edited Women Writing Culture and is the editor of Bridges to Cuba. Behar wrote, directed, and produced Adio Kerida/Goodbye Dear Love: A Cuban Sephardic Journey, an 82-minute video documentary distributed by Women Make Movies. Her latest co-edited anthology, The Portable Island: Cubans at Home in the World, is forthcoming. Behar is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. Further information about her work is available on her web site: www.ruth behar.com.

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