Review: Ruth Behar's Biography in the Shadow: A Review of Reviews

Reviewed Work(s):

*Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* by Ruth Behar
Gelya Frank


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-7294%28199506%2997%3A2%3C357%3ARBBITS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2


JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Ruth Behar’s Biography in the Shadow: A Review of Reviews

GELYA FRANK
University of Southern California


Reviews of Ruth Behar’s Translated Woman have been seen in some of the best literary places—the Women’s Review of Books, the New York Times Book Review, the Nation. They have also appeared in daily newspapers from Boston to Wichita, and a plethora of book-trade magazines. The wide attention is well deserved. Whether scholars or journalists, reviewers recognize the intellectual intensity and sheer literary skill with which anthropologist Ruth Behar has brought back the life story of Esperanza Hernandez (a pseudonym), a Mexican street peddler from Mexquitic, a town 500 miles south of the U.S. border.

Behar’s description of her first encounter with Esperanza, a woman reputed by the townsfolk to be a witch, carries emblematic meaning for their future relationship. In a cemetery on the Day of the Dead, the woman with the thick braids carrying an armful of calla lilies challenged the anthropologist with the camera who tried to take her photograph, demanding “Why?” Later, Esperanza appeared at the anthropologist’s door to invite her to become the godmother of the cake for her daughter’s quinceañeros (coming of age party), obliging her new comadre to contribute a considerable sum for the ceremony. In a calibration of exchange, Behar recorded Esperanza’s life story and taped it during intermittent seasons in the field from 1985 through 1989. The resulting portrait of a Mexican woman who talks and fights back is a landmark for contemporary anthropology.

The logical antecedent to Behar’s book is anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s Children of Sanchez (Random House, 1961), a work so popular that a feature film starring Anthony Quinn was based on it. Subtitled “autobiography of a Mexican family,” Lewis’s book set up, for professional and popular audiences alike, the conventional life history frame that Behar breaks by including her own voice and life. Nothing intrinsic to the life story of the feisty Mexican marketing woman Behar portrays, however, seems to have attracted as much attention or provoked as much controversy as the book’s final chapter, “The Biography in the Shadow.” There the Havana-born, New York-bred anthropologist of mixed Ashkenazic-Sephardic Jewish background (her maternal grandparents emigrated to Cuba from Poland, her paternal grandparents from Turkey) lets loose with some autobiographical reflections of her own.

Only about this aspect of the book are the reviews mixed. The reviewer for the Boston Globe (February 5, 1993) writes: “At times, the author’s confessions are embarrassing or distracting; her fantasies too grandiose, her feminism too shrill.” Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (New York Times Book Review, September 5, 1993) concurs, if more elegantly:

Ms. Behar is the mother confessor, a willing and nonjudgmental ear to the many slights and sins that Esperanza chooses to reveal. . . . This obscurity is breached in the final chapter, however, when the anthropologist steps forward to tell her own story of rage and redemption, attempting to link her biography with that of her subject. Ms. Behar rails at the ignorance of her high school teachers and her parents, who underestimated the intellectual power and the ambitions of a young Cuban immigrant in New York City. Later, hiring practices at the University of Michigan are offered as another source of humiliation. . . . It is only through the “redemption” of her MacArthur fellowship that Ms. Behar can prove to herself (and to others) that she, like Esperanza, is a force with which to be reckoned. Beware the fury of a patronized woman! The two “translated,” “border-crossing” women intersect, but the metaphor is contrived and the lesson is clear: the lives of anthropologists are rarely as rich and fascinating as those of their subjects.

If Esperanza is a suspected “witch” in Mexquitic, reviewers here are sanguine about it. They seem more enthused to put Behar to the stake for her indiscretions. If so, I feel the tickle of the flames, since I penned the immortal phrase “the biography in the shadow,” which Behar cites in an epigraph, in a 1979 article on life history method.

The life history may be thought of as a process that blends together the consciousness of the investigator and the subject, perhaps to the point where it is not possible to disentangle them. . . . If the investigator relies in a primary way on personal resources in understanding the subject of the life history as another person, then in some sense the life history may
Anxiety to Method in the Social Sciences (Mouton, 1967).

Perera (Nation, September 20,1993) that there is some-

material has been underanalyzed both by the author her-
Deveraux's psychoanalytically inspired book, From

by one, he rips up her letters home, mocking their con-

convincing. Behar hopes to become a poet or essayist, or in

stories. When Esperanza asserts that she was filled with

breast, we believe and suffer with her. Despite her excep-

rage (coraje) when beaten by her husband and that her

wounded her, since to do so would expose her frightful

didn't want an academic position as much as she yearned

for Behar is an old refrain: to be grateful and polite, not

ask for too much. Why? Is it the Latin part, playing down

the appearance of assertiveness a woman should adopt,

especially in public? Is it American, part of what it means
to grow up in a petit bourgeois/working class environment
in Queens in the 1960s? Is it centuries of Jewish wisdom,
the knowledge that Jews (like witches) have been burned,
that prompts Behar's mother to plead with her daughter
to be grateful, not too visibly successful, not demanding?
In her personal border-crossing into Esperanza's life,
what is Behar running to or from?

If in reading and writing biographies we engage in a
primary phenomenological process of self-comparison
with the other, Behar has taken the risk of revealing to
readers that mainly unconscious content. After reading
"The Biography in the Shadow" in draft form, I encour-
aged Behar to include the chapter in the published work.
In it she makes explicit her visceral associations to her
 collaboration with Esperanza, besides "locatingn herself
in the more conventional sense. Yet reviewers are uncom-
fortable. Some of this may be due to the postmodern
sensibility with which Behar blurs ethnographic and auto-
biographical genres, but certainly not all of it. Why hasn't
Behar made the case sufficiently, then, for her own rage?

My sense is that Behar's rage calls for more empathy
and understanding than readers feel. What Behar feels
may be something else she cannot name, or perhaps her
rage is caused by something she has not expressed. She
displaces the emotional focus from feelings about her
father too painful to describe fully to later events concern-
ing her hiring at the University of Michigan. In this way,
Behar may indeed be very much like Esperanza, unable to
admit her love and dependence upon people who
wounded her, since to do so would expose her frightful
vulnerability. The story Behar presents of her rage at
being made to feel "Other" at Michigan, for example, may
ring false because of something that is hidden: Behar
didn't want an academic position as much as she yearned
to quit and become a writer. As the daughter of immi-
grants and head of a household, that was a risk that Behar
felt she could not take, and, later, could not reveal. Know-
The most mordant critique of "The Biography in the Shadow" comes, interestingly, from dissenters under the feminist banner who decry Behar's self-absorption and, more generally, feminist ethnography's self-reflexive turn (Daphne Patai, "Sick and Tired of Scholars' Nouveau Solipsism," Chronicle of Higher Education, February 23, 1994). I believe that this New Objectivism is a mistake, telling us to turn off parts of our processes of understanding from which our vitality springs, dooming us to live politely in our heads, pretending to leave our guts behind. Yet Behar's representational strategies—the blurred genres, the feelings she reveals, and her self-reflections—do not mean either that the hard borders of objectification and exoticization of the Other are completely diminished for her readers.

"The Biography in the Shadow" makes readers squirm because Behar spits in a glass that many of us drink from, no less than her parents' cohort of Cuban Americans, drinking rum-and-coke Cuba Libres. We feel betrayed if upward mobility does not result in the happiness that money and professional success are supposed to bring. When Esperanza joins a cult dedicated to Pancho Villa, run by a despotic androgyne, her rage spill sour over the borders of the book jacket. No scholar, employed or not, wants to hear that Behar feels oppressed. Women who get MacArthur fellowships should shut up and enjoy them. The well-heeled are entitled to be discontented and neurotic, but only the truly oppressed are entitled to rage. I think Behar also believes this. This belief may partly explain why her biography in the shadow seems a bit weak. But it is no less courageous or interesting for that reason. It is also well to remember that this controversial chapter of 22 pages comes at the end of a 342-page major work.

Anthropologist Louise Lamphere (Women's Review of Books, May 1993) argues correctly, I think, that the unevenness of the work, its tensions and contradictions, are actually the book's strength. Ultimately Behar's "biography in the shadow" promotes a radical (and feminist) agenda of breaking down prescribed categories of women's experiences:

Just as Esperanza's life is shot full of contradictions, so is Behar's position as the anthropologist... The difficulties of articulating the connections between the American woman academic and Mexican female street peddler, the sense of contradictions in tension, and the lack of an easy resolution are perhaps, paradoxically, the most satisfying aspects of Behar's book. In the end she asks us to embrace dissonance, to get beyond the self/other division that has marked Western thinking. This, she suggests, is the ground of feminist anthropology, and "the best hope we have for liberating anthropology from the legacy of its links to colonizing domination."

Behar's book is an important effort in the direction of more thoughtful and inclusive ways of knowing. Let her biography in the shadow be among the first, not last, attempts to show us how to do it well.

Ethnography and Transnationalism

SETENEY SHAMI
Yarmouk University


Transnationalism, the global flows of people, goods, and ideas, has emerged as the dominant framework for contemporary ethnographic research and anthropological analysis. These two books, one an introductory text and the other an ethnography, attest to radical paradigmatic shifts in the discipline and the fashioning of new (anti)orthodoxies. The authors attempt to move beyond elegant manifestos that construct new representations of the world but remain "evocative rather than analytical" (Basch et al.:28). They carefully reexamine concepts of class, race, tribe, ethnic group, nation, and state in the light of contemporary and historical transitions in capitalism, migration, and "simultaneity on a global scale" (Eriksen:149). These explorations in theory and ethnography go a long way toward reformulating concepts and methodologies, but they also reveal some of the difficulties in translating a cognizance of new realities into new vocabularies and textual forms.

Basch et al. state the paradox facing this new anthropology:

First, we argued that to perceive and analyze transnationalism we need a global perspective on migration that moves beyond the bounded categories of ethnic group, nation and race and forces us to reconceptualize our concepts of society and culture... Yet we have also argued that transmigrants reinscribe their newly unbounded hyperspace into reconceptualized categories of deterritorialized nation-states and of race. [p. 268]