

Discovery

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Anthropologist finds own soul

U-M's Behar ruffles feathers with a style that's highly personal.

By Karl Leif Bates
The Detroit News

As an anthropologist, Ruth Behar studies and writes about other people.

But she also studies and writes about herself. And that has ruffled some feathers.

At 40, an age when many women in academics still find themselves bouncing from one visiting professorship to another, Ruth Behar is a tenured, full-time professor at the University of Michigan.

Sporting a black leather jacket and a full head of ringlets, this 1988 winner of a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" looks more like a college kid than a full professor. And she writes more like a novelist than a scientist.

Behar is trying, with the help of many other feminist and minority anthropologists, to blend science and art, measurement and feeling.

In the process of recording the world's invisible people and their vanishing ways of life, "we witness a lot of pain and grief and loss," Behar says. "It's in our notes" but not often in the finished works.

Behar tries to bring that pain forward, in part by bringing her own suffering and anger into the books she writes.

Her latest work, *The Vulnerable Observer*, (Beacon Press) is subtitled *Anthropology that breaks your heart*. It is a memoir not only of the cultures and people she has explored, but of herself experiencing those cultures. At times, it is highly personal.

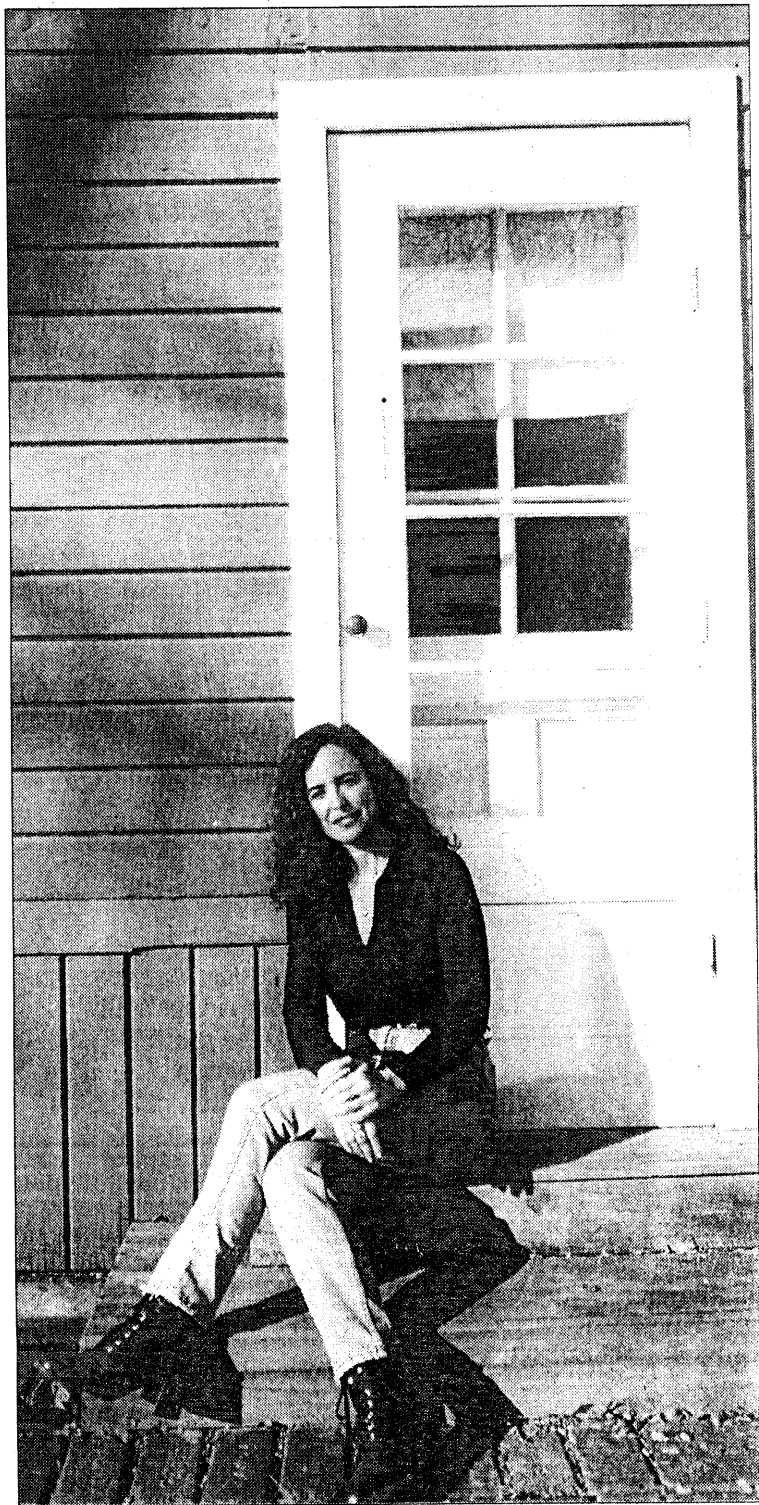
Most striking, the book includes an account of her terrifying encounter with panic attacks in 1991, just a few weeks before she was to leave for an extended study in Cuba.

"When I went back to aerobics a few days later, just lifting my arms brought on the feeling of dizziness and doom," she writes. "I felt I had to get out quick — as though an alarm were going off inside me."

For two weeks she was bedridden by paralyzing fear. The panic, she later realized, sprung from an ancient trauma, her nearly yearlong recovery from a badly broken leg suffered in a horrific car crash when she was only 9.

Guiding the reader through all this personal discovery is certainly not traditional anthropology.

As it was practiced a generation or two ago, anthropology tried to be objective and detached as it reported on people and their cultures. The anthropologist recorded the rituals and rules of another culture and laid out findings



Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

Ruth Behar, 40, a University of Michigan anthropology professor, has been criticized for her personal approach to anthropology. "Anthropology that doesn't break your heart isn't worth doing," she says.

in a supposedly neutral fashion.

But Behar and others who have taken over the field since the 1960s say such objectivity simply isn't humanly possible. The change was driven by

feminists, people of color and baby boomers, says Behar, who was born to Jewish parents in Cuba and grew up middle-class in New York.

To report fairly on the culture or feel-

ings of another, she believes the anthropologist should explain what she brings to the interpretation.

"We are not just observing others, but observing ourselves observing others," she explains.

But that can present a problem: "Is it going to be too self-indulgent?"

Yes, says Daphne Patai, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a strident critic of many feminist studies, including Behar's. "It isn't that I think there's no room for scholarly self-reflection," said Patai, who recently fled the women's studies program at Amherst. "It's the length it has gone to that is out of hand."

"I suppose people would have been interested in Einstein's thoughts about doing his work, but how much reflection is warranted in a relatively young scholar?" asks Patai, who has yet to see Behar's latest work. "Isn't there a sort of arrogance in assuming that this will be interesting? We see it coming up in dissertations now."

What Behar and other new-age anthropologists record isn't the tribal chief's account of what is going on in a town, as might have been done in the past.

She records culture through the eyes of one suffering woman: a Mexican bride who has a needless hysterectomy at 26 in America, a street peddler whose fellow villagers feel must be a witch, geriatric family farmers in Spain who will be the last of their kind.

She includes these gracefully written, often poignant details from her own life to show how and why she can relate to these people.

It's not necessarily a new idea that the anthropologist needs to be aware of her own perceptions of her subjects, says Gelya Frank, a friend and reviewer of Behar's who teaches at the University of Southern California. "But it has taken a very long time to get practiced."

Though this latest work might simply be read as a memoir of one interesting woman's work, Behar intends it as an addition to the library of anthropology.

"The whole book is really an effort to bring death, grief, mourning and loss into the practice of anthropology," Behar says.

A lot of the work being done now is what she calls "salvage anthropology," recording a way of life or a culture before it succumbs to larger economic forces and satellite television.

Feelings are more appropriate than detached "science" she feels. As she is fond of saying: "Anthropology that doesn't break your heart isn't worth doing."

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