

Anthropologist Ruth Behar Talks with *HO*

The Essential Homeland of the Imagination

BY
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Ruth Behar looked up at the two nightgowns hanging on the back of her door as she recounted the event that led her to her novel-in-progress, *Nightgowns from Cuba*.

The honeymoon nightgowns, she explained, once belonged to her mother, who left them and the furniture and the apartment with the family caretaker, Caridad Martínez, when they moved to Israel in 1961 and then on to New York City a year later.

Behar was then five. Caridad remained in the

apartment until authorities kicked her out. She had only enough time to take a few belongings,

and chose the nightgowns. Years later, after many visits between Behar and Caridad in Cuba, Caridad gifted the nightgowns back to Behar's family.

Now about halfway into her novel, Behar says she isn't clear why the nightgowns inspired her to begin her fiction writing, and that she has yet to weave them into the work. But for the Jewish Cuban American anthropologist,

that is part of the mystery of embarking into fiction. After much acclaim for her non-fiction and

anthropology— *The New York Times* named *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* Notable Book of the Year in 1993—Behar is now combining autobiography and anthropology with fiction to tell the story of her family's journey from Europe to Cuba to the United States as seen through the eyes of her caretaker, Caridad.

Behar has dedicated her career as an anthropologist to writing about her experience of border crossing. From the late 1980s until today, as professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, she has sought to understand the meaning of home through the multiple lives and stories of others. And she has been in a good position to do so. Her own story is that of a true diaspora that reaches back beyond Cuba to her Jewish roots in Eastern Europe (Poland) and the Mediterranean (Spain, Turkey).

Behar began her first writing journey in Spain, the home of her paternal ancestors. Her book, *The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village: Santa María del Monte*, published in 1988, related how a small village negotiated its relationship to the past in the wake of the social transformation of the late Franco years that removed people from the land.

"I was very aware that these people in Spain were very rooted. They knew what their land was. They had a feeling of being connected," said Behar. "I found it a contrast to my uprootedness."

Behar's "love for the culture that comes from Spain, which got replanted in Latin America," led her to her second book, *Translated Woman*. During her stay in rural Mexico in the early '80s, Behar established close ties with Mexican women, and became especially fascinated with the story of Esperanza. The book is an account of her friendship with this bold Mexican woman, who walks out of an abusive marriage and becomes a street ped-

dlar, raising her child on her own.

The book was a turning point for Behar. It not only won acclaim from the *Times* and was adapted for and brought to the stage—it was an important personal project. "Esperanza returned me to the love of storytelling—to the love of women," she said. "Esperanza was a vital force for me in those years. I learned a lot about feminism through her. I learned that you can leave behind situations that are unfulfilling. She was radical in seeking what she wanted and not being afraid. I learned to think more of the freedom we want as women but fear."

Asked why she thought *Translated Woman* became such a huge success, Behar pointed to her unique approach.

"There aren't many books that look closely at the life of Mexican women, and specifically of a woman who talked openly about abuse and violence, and showed

both rage and redemption," said Behar. "And it may have been one of the first books to answer why we bring stories back over the border—that dealt with the politics of bringing stories across the border for consumption." Rather than bearing witness only to Esperanza's story, Behar wrote too about her own life, of being "a more privileged Cuban American woman" who had her struggles coming into academia. "I offended a lot of people," she said, by bringing academia into the picture. "I put all the issues on the table in ways not done before. I think of myself as someone who mixes so many cultures and points of view that others don't, as someone who wants to build bridges across all kinds of differences." To this day, Behar receives calls thanking her for writing the book. "It has been amazing how this story has affected people."

In 1996, Behar published *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology*

That Breaks Your Heart, a controversial and widely discussed collection of six personal essays that places the emotion of loss, mourning, and the search for home at the center of anthropology and all acts of witnessing. She has also edited various books, such as *Bridge to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, an anthology that paved the way for more interchanges and became a highly praised forum for the voices and visions of Cubans on the island and in the diaspora. With feminist scholar Deborah Gordon, she co-edited *Women Writing Culture*, an anthology of creative and critical writings that has become a required book in discussions of the history of anthropology. Her personal essays and poems, some of which have been published in Spanish, have ranged the gamut of her diverse heritage as well, relating her life as a Jewish Cuban woman. She has even stepped into the film world as director and producer of *Adios*



Caridad Martínez with Ruth Behar and granddaughter Amanda at El Valle Yumuri, Cuba



Caridad Martínez with Ruth Behar and granddaughter Amanda at El Valle Yumurí, Cuba

Querida/Goodbye Dear Love: A Cuban Sephardic Journey, a feature-length film about the search for identity and memory among Sephardic Jews living in Cuba,

Miami, and New York. She expects to complete the film this summer.

Behar writes from a place without borders, yet seeks to discover what home is within this context.

Asked what she considers home to be, as a woman, as a Jew, and as a Cuban, she provides a different answer for each.

"Isn't there a line in Virginia Wolff where she says 'as a woman, I have no country?'" says Behar. "In a sense, I am country-less." As a Jew, Behar describes herself as "a Jew of the diaspora." "I will always be this. My grandparents were part of the diaspora, and my parents were part of the diaspora." And as for Cuba, "I am connected to Cuba with strong emotional ties. I have nostalgia for that island," she said. "It's where I took my first step. That was my beginning. But I came here, and all my education was in English. I am also a creature of that displacement."

Although Behar has brought her love of philosophy, travel, and intellectual discourse to her career in academia as an anthropologist, writing is her most deeply seated passion.

"I always knew, from the time I

was 12, that I loved writing," she said. "But I needed a framework, and anthropology has been the tree trunk from which all the other limbs have emerged."

Through anthropology, Behar has returned to the multiple homelands of her ancestors and of her memory. But, beyond the tangible sense of home, she has discovered something else as a writer.

"The essential homeland," she said, "is in the imagination and in the memory. And the only real homeland you can count on is that of imagination, of that shared imagination."

That shared imagination, whether fiction or non-fiction, whether as anthropologist or writer, has been that of her Jewish Latin roots, and of her role as a woman. "Bringing together the voices of women of different cultures is important to me—women who are very smart and gifted but do not have the pen," said Behar. "I want to give them the pen."

For now, pen to paper, she brings voice to the women of her own family—to her grandmother, her mother, herself, and Caridad—embarking on a journey into that deepest place of the imagination.

Asked if she might choose fiction over anthropology once *Nightgowns from Cuba* is completed, Behar responded, "If writing this novel brought me to a place where I write novels for the rest of my life, I would be delighted. It would be a wonderful ending to the story."

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