

Between Textuality and Orality: An Interview with Ruth Behar

Caren Schnur Neile

Ruth Behar is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, where she is also affiliated with programs in Women's Studies, Latina/o Studies, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and Jewish Studies. Born in Havana, Cuba, she came to the United States with her parents as a young child after a brief stopover in Israel. She is co-editor, with Deborah Gordon, of *Women Writing Culture*, a classic text about women anthropologists and the art of ethnography. She has received a MacArthur Fellowship, as well as Guggenheim and Fulbright awards. In 1999, *Latina Magazine* named her one of 50 Latinas who made history in the twentieth century.

Behar's books include *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* and *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*, which was named a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times*. Her newest book, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*, blends memoir and photography to tell the story of her encounter with Jews living in Cuba today. In addition, her essays, poetry, and fiction appear in magazines and collections including *The Female Body: Figures, Styles, Speculations*; *Her Face in the Mirror: Jewish Women on Mothers and Daughters*; *King David's Harp: Autobiographical Essays by Jewish Latin American Writers*; and *How I Learned English*. Her story "La Cortada" was selected by Joyce Carol Oates for inclusion in the anthology *Telling Stories: An Anthology for Writers*. She also wrote, directed, and produced the film *Adio Kerida/Goodbye Dear Love: A Cuban Sephardic Journey*.

I reached Dr. Behar by telephone in May 2009.

Caren Neile: Dr. Behar, much of your work, both in the arts and in anthropology, centers on your autobiography as a Cuban-Jewish immigrant to the United States. Will you say a little about your background?

Ruth Behar: Both my parents, Rebecca and Alberto, were born in Cuba. My mother's parents came to Cuba from Russia and Poland and spoke Yiddish [High German language of Jewish origin, with Hebrew orthography] while my father's family was from Turkey and spoke Ladino [derivation of medieval Castilian Spanish preserved by descendants of Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, originally employing Hebrew orthography]. When my parents, a *polaca* and a *turco*, an Ashkenazi Jew and a Sephardic Jew, were married in 1956, it was considered a "mixed marriage" in Cuba. I grew up very aware that I represented a merging of two distinct Jewish civilizations. Spanish was the language I heard growing up at home, but what was interesting to me was that my grandparents had these other languages. My parents spoke Cuban Spanish, but my father's parents spoke Ladino, and my mother's parents spoke Yiddish. It was Spanish that brought us all together.

CN: As an adult, you returned to Cuba several times in the early 1990s. Could you talk about your experiences there with regard to language?

RB: It was so exciting to be there, especially after working so long as an anthropologist in Mexico and Spain. I remember my first few visits, how the things I would react to made my friends crack up. I would hear a quintessentially Cuban word, like if you punch somebody in the face, you say *piñazo* (*pinjaso*), or *guagua* (*wa wa*) for a bus. Throw out the garbage is *botar la basura*. These words were so familiar to me, but I had lost them, not only because of living in the United States, but also because I had been doing research in Spain and Mexico for 13 years. Being back in Cuba, suddenly I thought, oh my God, all the Cuban rhythms! It was really great recovering that spoken language, and it led to recovering the written language. For example, it was then that I discovered the great Cuban poet Dulce Mara Loynaz.

CN: What is it in spoken Spanish that is most exciting to you?

RB: Terms of endearment in Spanish are the arrows that pierce my heart. While in Miami this past semester, I hung out with my Aunt Fanny on Saturday afternoons. This is my father's younger sister. She has the sweetest voice in Spanish I've ever heard, a 1950s Cuban woman's voice, I don't think anybody talks like that anymore on the island, but I've heard that cadence in the speech of a lot of women of her generation. There are certain things she'll say, such as *te quiero mucho* (*I love you so much*), or *mi cielo* (*my sky*). Those words in Spanish send me soaring.

CN: So you are truly living in what the Latina feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa called the "borderlands," aren't you, existing in the liminal spaces between two cultures?

RB: I have seen that the code-switching that Gloria Anzaldúa did in her book *Borderlands*, we can do in our lives. She did it in an in-your-face way, saying, "I'm not going to translate everything for you [referring to 'gringos'],"

in just the same way that I've had to understand your reality without any translation." That's one of the things I love about Latino cities such as Miami, San Antonio, and New York. You can live that code-switching experience every single day, the kind of experience that Gloria produced textually in *Borderlands*.

What I loved about Miami, where I recently worked, was this comfort in going back and forth between English and Spanish. Being in Miami I felt that at any time I could start speaking in English and move without interruption or any special introduction into Spanish. For example, I was in the airport, and this woman working there at the ticket counter was very slow because she was taking the trouble to place baggage on the treadmill for a fellow agent who was pregnant. I thought, that's nice of her, and I'm not going to worry about rushing to my gate. She was so distracted, she hadn't given me my receipt for my two checked bags. She had been speaking perfect English; but I could tell she was Latina. She couldn't tell that I was, but when I spoke to her in Spanish, she happily handed the stubs to me, and said, with pride, "*Asi que tu tambien hablas español.*" ["So you also speak Spanish."]

Another story: I dance salsa, and while in Miami, I took some salsa classes. The teacher was a guy in his mid-twenties. At first he didn't realize I spoke Spanish, but once he did, either of us at any moment could go back and forth in either language. And my father loves it when we go to Jewish delis in Manhattan and the waiters are all Mexican. About ten days ago, we went into a deli, and my father got such a kick out of placing an order for matzo ball soup in Spanish with a Mexican waiter.

CN: You wrote, in the foreword to *Autobiographical Writing Across the Disciplines*, "we have a primitive faith in the power of a story well-told." Could you talk about the role of story and storytelling in your life?

RB: If you read my book *The Vulnerable Observer*, I have an essay in there called "The Girl in the Cast." When I was nine we were in a car accident driving through Brooklyn, and I broke my right femur. I was in a body cast for a year. We had only been in the United States four years. I was taken to Brookdale General Hospital, where I had an orthopedist surgeon who, this was in 1966, specialized in sports medicine. He was concerned that my legs would grow at different rates if I was put in a walking cast. So I was placed in a body cast and couldn't move. I had a pole between my legs so my mother could turn me and I could sleep on my stomach. I had to be in bed for close to a year. It was awful, embarrassing. Our entire Cuban Jewish immigrant family would come visit on weekends, and when I had to use the bedpan, I had to announce it to everyone, so my mother would come and help me, while my brother and my cousins giggled and left the room.

They sent a tutor to come and see me every day, so I kept up with school. I had nothing else to do but read. I had been a pretty active kid, but when I finally went back to school, I needed glasses, because I had been reading everything at very close range for a year.

I had a lot of difficulty learning to walk again. We lived on the sixth floor, and the hardest thing was to go down stairs with crutches. I had a tough nurse who forced me to walk, starting on crutches, then one crutch, then using both legs, but with a bad limp. That's when I started keeping a journal. And I kept reading lots of books.

I was definitely out of synch with my family and community. I was a smart, bookwormish girl, but my family was all in business, peddling and selling and trying to make enough money to make ends meet. No one understood my passion for literature, poetry, and philosophy.

I loved fiction. I read D.H. Lawrence in high school without fully understanding his work. I also loved Nancy Drew and was drawn to the whole idea of girls and women as problem solvers, mystery solvers. At the same time, I loved Spanish literature. I had a great high school Spanish teacher who was Cuban.

I was unhappy growing up. I had all these dreams and ambitions of going to college and being an educated woman, but I didn't have a role model. My mother had only gone to high school. She had started secretarial school in Cuba, but she quit because my father declared he wouldn't marry a woman who "worked in the street." None of the women in our Cuban-Jewish circle seemed to read books.

For me, books were an escape. I remember that library slogan "Be all you can be: Read." I wasn't very sociable; I was shy. After I recovered from the broken leg, my parents asked me why I wasn't going to parties. My father would get mad at me, because to read, you need a certain amount of quiet. But my father liked Latin music, noise, and TV. He'd say, "You're turning the house into a funeral parlor." When you're a young woman, you start to think and you blame yourself. I wondered, "Do I bring sadness into people's lives?" At the time my brother was playing really, really loud rock music. I would go to the bottom of the stairwell in our apartment and read my book.

From an early age I had to find a way to tell my story. Now it's a common thing to be Jewish and Latina in Miami and New York and elsewhere, but at the time it was an unusual identity. I often found myself in situations where I had to tell my story. I constantly needed to recreate a narrative of myself and my family. As the oldest, I was the child who interpreted between my family and the outside world. So memoir as a genre was a part of my family life.

Maybe for that reason, I was also the person most interested in the family history, asking my grandmother what it was like to leave Poland, and settle in Cuba. I found out my grandfather only ate bananas and bread in Cuba when he first arrived because he was so concerned about keeping kosher.

So in my life, there were different forces that influenced me: the Cuban Jewish immigrant family background, then the car accident that sent me to bed for a year, then as I grew older the need I had to keep telling my story because people couldn't believe that a person could be both Cuban and Jewish as well as American.

CN: Today, you are perhaps best known for your innovative work with ethnography as art. What is the connection in your mind between ethnography and oral narrative?

RB: Well, here I am a cultural anthropologist doing work in Cuba and now Miami, and I've found a way to come back to the community as a writer, as someone telling stories. Through my storytelling I can be a part of my community and feel connected to people that I didn't know how to relate to when I was a young woman struggling to define myself as a writer and scholar.

What's interesting about ethnography is that there are two aspects to it: first, ethnography as a practice, which is all about orality, because you talk to people firsthand and hang out with them. You're engaged in action and observation, as well as speaking.

But ethnography is also a form of travel writing, and what's interesting about travel writing is that while you're engaging in all this talk and observation, you're also aware that you're engaged in the practice of ethnography, you're aware that this experience is going to have to be transmogrified into some sort of written narrative. The experience is always larger than anything you can write about. I guess that's true about life in general. There is much more than I can ever fully represent, a sense of excess. There is much more than I have seen and heard and known than I will ever be able to do anything with. There will always be stuff that I'll have to edit out of my final narrative. There's a lot of pleasure in the process of listening to people's stories, being with them, sharing their experiences. Much of the time it's all nothing more than experience, it doesn't necessarily become written text.

You're always aware of this need to be intensely present when you're doing ethnography and that creates anxiety. There's a certain pressure I feel. I enjoy the moment of it, the practice of being there, listening, but I'm always thinking, Can I turn this into a story?

When engaged in ethnography, you're shaping a story at the same time that you're experiencing it. You're not taking totally raw experience and shaping it, because people are often giving you narratives, but you're shaping further, adding your own interpretation and analysis. You're layering the gift of someone else's narrative with your sense of what that narrative is telling you. It's a very interesting circular process. You're hearing a narrative while thinking of your own metanarrative.

So as I've said, there's anxiety. That sense that I've enjoyed this, but what can I say about it?

I've recorded a lot of conversations. Sometimes I bring a notepad or portable computer, and I'll write things up as they're told to me. If we're in a living room and I can just easily be writing notes, I do that. In some situations it doesn't feel right to tape record or write notes, so I'll write notes afterward. Sometimes I don't write anything during the moment of the encounter, and then writing becomes a process similar to memoir. Sometimes I wrote tons of field notes, but when I'm ready to write my ethnography, my field notes don't interest me. I think, what were the gaps? What are the things that didn't seem important to me to write down at the time, but which in retrospect suddenly seem hugely interesting?

Sometimes I'm a *bricoleur* [anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's term for one who recombines preexisting elements in new ways]. I often take photographs. Sometimes nothing gets recorded, but in that after-process, that hindsight process, which is so much of what ethnography is about, I think, wow, I remember so and so did this, but I didn't write it down then. And I'll weave together a story around that incident that I failed to give importance to when it took place.

I'm interested in silences between textuality and orality, in those things you didn't think were important. You start taking things for granted when you see them every day. But when you first arrive in a place, it's a shock. Sometimes I have to get out of the place I know and return later in order to re-shock myself.

I find that the most intense writing comes from shock, distress and sorrow, when we are pulled out of our comfort zones, our routine, and made aware of difference. That is one of the lessons that cultural anthropology teaches us.

You learn in ethnography to make the ordinary seem strange, and the strange seem ordinary. Storytellers do that, too. When things that seem strange become ordinary, you stop noticing and recording them. But after the fact something about that strikes you again. And then you want to tell that story.

CN: You mentioned taking photos. Could you discuss the intersection of word-based and image-based storytelling in your work?

RB: I have always been interested in images. I studied photography in graduate school, and I still love picture books. But lately I've been so interested in photographs that sometimes the photographs become my diary entries. They become the silent journal. Through a photograph, I can recall a meeting, an encounter, a casual conversation that I hadn't thought was important enough at the time to write about.

In one very short vignette in my book *An Island Called Home*, I write about being in the town of Santa Clara. I ran into a man I knew in the Jewish community; he was on his bicycle. I was with Humberto Mayol, the Cuban photographer I was working with, and he was photographing a

store that was empty of any goods for sale. We asked the man if we could photograph him in front of the store, and he said that was fine. Then he said goodbye and went on his way on his bicycle. I did not write anything down about this incident. But afterward when I looked at the photograph, I knew I wanted to use it in my book, and I thought, what's the story? I hadn't written any notes. There was nothing for sale in the store, and the man had an empty basket on his bicycle. I thought, oh my God, nothing for sale, nothing in the bicycle, and he rode off down this quiet street. There was this simple story, but I hadn't articulated it. Only afterward did I realize there was a story.

In Cuba, I often felt a kind of speechlessness, a sense of awe about going back. Images surrounded me and brought me back to visceral feelings, not-quite-memories, what I had experienced as a small child and not been able to articulate. Seeing the Malecon [a broad promenade along the coast in Havana], for example, or walking in Victor Hugo Park, where I was taken as a child to play in the afternoons. It had this gazebo, which is still there. Or reencountering my nanny, and sort of remembering her, remembering the sense of comfort when I was around her. These were very sensual, visceral kind of memories.

Perhaps my interest in using images in my ethnographic work stems from a desire to not have to deal with languages, not be in conflict with languages, not worrying whether I'm speaking in Spanish or English. That may be why I'm drawn to documentary film as well as photography.

CN: Levi-Strauss and Anzaldua would be proud. You negotiate and bring together all of these dualities: written and oral, Ashkenazi and Sephardic, Latino and American, word-based and image-based ways of thinking. Thank you for a fascinating interview.

RB: Thank you.

Caren Schnur Neile is a founding co-editor of *Storytelling, Self, Society*. She directs the South Florida Storytelling Project in the School of Communication & Multimedia Studies at Florida Atlantic University.

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