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Book Review Essays

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

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Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story. Ruth Behar. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993. xiv + 372 pp.

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 *quinceaños* (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 Sánchez* (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

represent a personal portrait of the investigator as well. This portrait would take the form of a shadow biography, a negative image for which the missing text could be found in the investigator's private thoughts, interview questions, field notes, dreams, and letters home. ["Finding the Common Denominator: A Phenomenological Critique of Life History Method" *Ethos* 7(1):85]

A source of this insight was anthropologist George Devereaux's psychoanalytically inspired book, *From Anxiety to Method in the Social Sciences* (Mouton, 1967). Reactions to Behar's last chapter take us, however, from method to anxiety. If anything, Behar's autobiographical material has been underanalyzed both by the author herself and by her critics. I agree with the criticism by Victor Perera (*Nation*, September 20, 1993) that there is something off about Behar's juxtaposition of her story with that of Esperanza, but there may be more to the matter:

Something rings false in Behar's comparing herself to her *comadre* as fellow literary wetbacks and victims of the patriarchy. It is disingenuous to compare the suffering Mexican village society inflicts on Esperanza for rebelling against its strictures with the ordeal of having to accept tenure at a prominent university. Esperanza's betrayal of her Mexican mores is not comparable to Behar's determination to be an "academic traitor." ("Comadre, if you are going to bite the hand that feeds you," Esperanza might well have advised, "you have to sink your teeth into it.")

There is a formal difference between the women's stories. When Esperanza asserts that she was filled with rage (*coraje*) when beaten by her husband and that her babies died because her rage poisoned the milk from her breast, we believe and suffer with her. Despite her exceptionally vivid writing, Behar's feelings are not so clearly evaluated, not so clearly defined. She uses a different life story genre, a model that is literary rather than conversational (see Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: Creation of Coherence*, Oxford, 1993). Without a live and willing listener, Behar seems more tentative than Esperanza; she tends to beg for a hearing and rely more on the missing reader to supply boundaries for her feelings, an emotional seal of approval.

The most credible comparison between the two women's life stories concerns their relationship to domineering men who oppress or repress them, the husband in Esperanza's case, the father in Behar's. Behar's description of conflicts with her father about getting an elite education are packed with a subtle violence that is convincing. Behar hopes to become a poet or essayist, or in any case a writer. When she returns home for a break in her senior year, her father complains about her highfalutin attitude. He accuses her of insincerity, ingratitude. One by one, he rips up her letters home, mocking their contents, tearing them into confetti "with the cool precision he used to shave his face or wipe his mouth after dinner"

(p. 327). As a reader, I am convinced that Behar is truly devastated.

Transnationalism, being "mixed" in many ways, sets up fascinating and frustrating tasks for a woman inclined to seek reasons in roots, identity in history. Behar's attempts to use her father's resources in order to leave him and his social class behind is another feature of her "mixed" identity. Behar's mother supports her daughter's escape from home ("to go to an Ivy League college") by helping to pay for fees and tuition with her job as a typist. When Behar tries to use her MacArthur fellowship to parlay an untenured offer into a tenured position at an idyllic university in California, her mother repeats what 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 encouraged Behar to include the chapter in the published work. In it she makes explicit her visceral associations to her collaboration with Esperanza, besides "locating" herself in the more conventional sense. Yet reviewers are uncomfortable. Some of this may be due to the postmodern sensibility with which Behar blurs ethnographic and autobiographical 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 concerning 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 immigrants and head of a household, *that* was a risk that Behar felt she could not take, and, later, could not reveal. Know-

ing this, however, makes it more possible to empathize with her anger.

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, draining 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, all the better. It's great reading—not something we have to deal with in the neighborhood. Behar's ambitiousness, the hungers of her soul, 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

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Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States. Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc. Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1994. 334 pp.

Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives. Thomas Hylland Eriksen. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994. 180 pp.

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]