TRAVELING HEAVY

a memoir in between journeys

Ruth Behar

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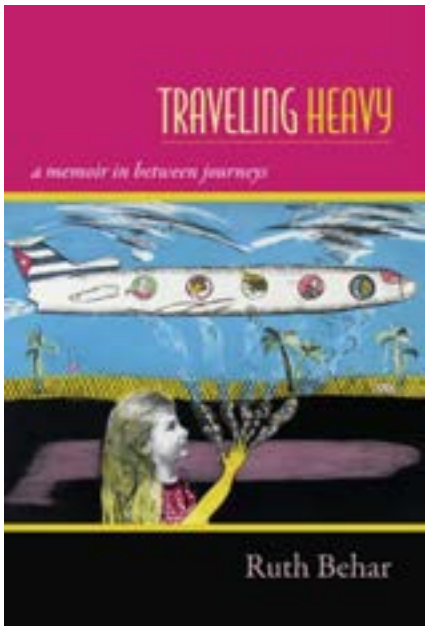
A Memoir in between Journeys

Ruth Behar

"Ruth Behar takes us deep into geographies she has charted, transcending anthropological reportage and finding the poetry that is there not only in the places she has mapped but also in history. She has written an observant and surprisingly compassionate book, full of warmth. I enjoyed reading every page; it is full of wisdom and devastating sincerity."**—Nilo Cruz**, author of *Anna in the Tropics*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama



Traveling Heavy is a deeply moving, unconventional memoir by the master storyteller and cultural anthropologist Ruth Behar. Through evocative stories, she portrays her life as an immigrant child and later, as an adult woman who loves to travel but is terrified of boarding a plane. With an open heart, she writes about her Yiddish-Sephardic-Cuban-American family, as well as the strangers who show her kindness as she makes her way through the world. Compassionate, curious, and unafraid to reveal her failings, Behar embraces the unexpected insights and adventures of travel, whether those be learning that she longed to become a mother after being accused of giving the evil eye to a baby in rural Mexico, or going on a zany pilgrimage to the Behar World Summit in the Spanish town of Béjar.

Behar calls herself an anthropologist who specializes in homesickness. Repeatedly returning to her homeland of Cuba, unwilling to utter her last goodbye, she is obsessed by the question of why we leave home to find home. For those of us who travel heavy with our own baggage, Behar is an indispensable guide, full of grace and hope, in the perpetual search for connection that defines our humanity.

Ruth Behar was born in Havana, Cuba. She and her family moved to New York City when she was five. In the years since, she has become an internationally acclaimed writer and the Victor Haim Perera Collegiate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. She is the author of many books, including *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*; *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*; and *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. In addition to her work as an anthropologist, Behar is a poet, a fiction writer, and a documentary filmmaker. She wrote, directed, and produced *Adio Kerida* (Goodbye Dear Love), a film that has been shown at film festivals around the world. Behar has been honored with many prizes, including a MacArthur "Genius" Award.

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A Cuban-born academic re-creates a moving emotional journey from Cuba to America.

A cultural anthropologist whose first love was writing poetry and fiction, Behar (Anthropology/Univ. of Michigan; *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*, 2007, etc.) is a stylish writer. Her probings about her complicated Jewish Cuban ancestry and family's immigration to America mine compelling, relevant issues about identity and belonging. Her love of travel first took root at age 5 with her emigration from Havana with her mother, father and small brother in 1962. The family settled in the Ashkenazi section of Forest Hills, Queens, making ends meet selling "fabric, envelopes and shoes." The young author was thrown, sink or swim, into first-grade, though she knew no English. Bookish and assertive, Behar wanted to pursue her education despite the injunctions imposed by her authoritarian father, and she eventually became a cultural anthropologist, able to use her Spanish for field work among farmers in Spain and Mexico. Her essays meander among these decisive events of her life, circling always back to the place where she began and longed to return: Cuba. She was able to return to her homeland in various capacities over the years, especially as a visiting academic. In "The Freedom to Travel Anywhere in the World," Behar delineates the glaring discrepancy between her own privileged comings and goings from Michigan, with suitcases laden with plentiful American products, and the dire shortages of and restrictions on her friends and family in Cuba. Yet always, touchingly, she is accorded by her compatriots "political innocence, [and] welcomed with tenderness."

A heartfelt witness to the changing political and emotional landscape of the Cuban-American experience.

Booklist ONLINE

Adult Books - Nonfiction - Social Sciences

Traveling Heavy: A Memoir between Journeys.

Behar, Ruth (author).

Apr. 2013. 200p. Duke, hardcover, $23.95 (9780822354673). 305.892.
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“You leave home to find home.” University of Michigan anthropology professor Behar says she specializes in “homesickness” as she relates her own Jewish family immigration story to the universal search for roots. She was born in Cuba in the 1960s to an Ashkenazi mother and a Sephardic father; after the revolution, the family went to Israel; then, after a year, they left for New York. Her father resists her extended education and never speaks to her after she marries a non-Jew. The history behind her personal journey will grab readers as she travels back to Cuba, to Israel, to Poland, and also back to Spain, where Jews were driven out in 1492 and where now communication on the Internet brings descendants together in a reunion in the city of Bejar. All those intrigued by their ancestral story will be moved by the personal quest and also by how—with the help of computers as well as the kindness of strangers—the lost can find their way home.— *Hazel Rochman*

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TRAVEL & GEOGRAPHY

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TRAVEL

MacArthur “Genius” Grant winner Behar (anthropology, Univ. of Michigan; An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba) uses her academic training as a cultural anthropologist to give readers snapshots from her lifelong quest to understand herself, her family of origin, and th world around her through travel. In a series of evocative vignettes taking their topic from pictures in her family’s photography album, she untangles her heritage as a child of Sephardic-Ashkenazi-Cuban parents who was born in Cuba and raised in New York City from the age of four. As an anthropologist, her studies of rural life in northern Spain and Mexico sharpen her ability to explain her own trajectory. Her autobiographical musings ask old questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? Where am I at home? Readers will be impressed by her honest, direct discussion of difficult topics, though her family and relatives often found her explorations perplexing. **VERDICT** A moving story of finding oneself through a lifetime of travel, this will be a terrific addition to memoir and Judaica collections.—Olga Wise, Austin, TX

KIRKUS

AN OLD LITTLE GIRL

by Joshunda Sanders on April 24, 2013 | Posted in Nonfiction

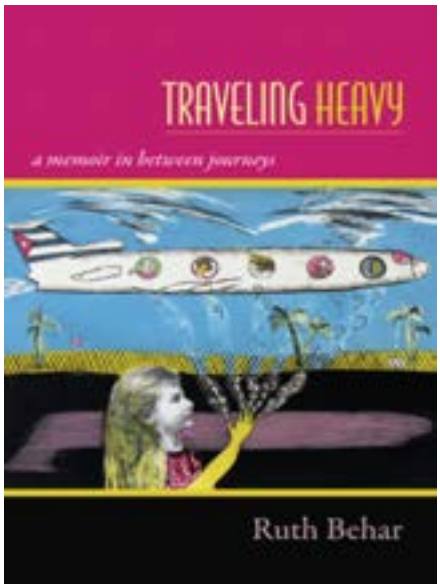
Try traveling light, or cheaply for that matter, in a post Sept. 11 era. None of us can bring everything we need, or think we do, on any trip. But in cultural anthropologist, poet and writer Ruth Behar's latest memoir, *Traveling Heavy: A Memoir In Between Journeys,* she notes the irony of even attempting to bring it all.

A self-described well-heeled orphan who grew up to be a professional traveler, Behar yearns and searches for home in *Traveling Heavy* while also tracing her Cuban/Jewish identity. Though it is a topic her other books and creative writing has tackled, the title is more about the emotional things we all carry with us than the tangible (though those are included).

The photographs and details of her memories in the book, as a little girl leaving Cuba and later as an adult who returns, remind us that while we may not physically bring things with us on each journey, we still carry much more than baggage and things. "We travel heavy with our memories, our histories," she says. "In that sense, we all travel heavy with the things that make us who we are. We travel with all our traumas and maybe we relive them when we're elsewhere with strangers. The emotional baggage may be heavier than all the things we carry with us."

Behar is an anthropology professor at the University of Michigan and, among other things she has been awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant. Her work takes her around the world and she estimates that she travels an estimated 50,000 miles annually. Anthropology has allowed her a passport to all the places she's ever wanted to go.

"Traveling can bring out the best in us," she says from her home in Michigan after one of her frequent trips back to Cuba, where she longs to own a home but has not yet purchased property. "We can take in strangers, in the best of all worlds," she says. "Travel can be a rich and deep experience and it can be a wonderful way for human beings to come together. "



It is also a way to drill down into one's soul for answers. She describes herself in a charmingly deprecating way as a "neurotic nomad" who loves traveling but is also deeply afraid of it – logistically but also in terms of wandering without finding her place in the world. "However much I long for the island I once called home," she writes, "I'm not beholden to any one place. I'm not stuck anywhere. But I'm also never sure whether I belong anywhere."

Belonging is another theme of her memoir, second only to the theme of movement, immigration and emigration. She is both Latina and Sephardic Jew, and the history of that is stitched in tales of her discovery of her own family tree. She finds relatives and kindred spirits at the World Summit of Behars in 2004, a gathering of 75 people for four days who share her last name, so they could discuss what it meant to them, what it will mean to the generations after them.

"We were all there, presumably, to find our origins, even though it was a crazy thing to think in 3 or 4 days that we would get to the bottom of our identity," she says. "There was a sense of, 'Let's just go with this; having a story is better than not having a story.' Is identity a real palpable thing because people are from a place, or is it finally a story and if we can convince ourselves that our stories are true, it doesn't matter if it is or it isn't in a scientific way?"

At last, the nomad felt that she had found her tribe. "It was fascinating to be there with these strangers who were in fact part of the tribe," she says. "We discussed What is a 'we'? What is a community, how do we decide that we belong to a place? How do you validate an identity, how do you really know who you are and where you're from? You have people searching for roots all the time. Sometimes what we want is a myth or a story of belonging, and just the myth or story might be enough."

Her story is one that, while singular, carries universal resonance at a time when immigration is often in the news and America continues to wrestle with a growing Latino population. Not only is her story of trying to let go of physical and emotional baggage a significant one, but the sense of reclamation of identity, of returning home or even figuring out home is particularly timely.

"The book is circular in the sense that I'm an old little girl," she says. "When I left Cuba in the 60s, I was a little girl, so when I return, I always feel like an old little girl. The more I go back, the more I'm this old little girl trying to be a grown woman."

Joshunda Sanders is a writer based in Austin, Texas. She blogs about books at Big Book Lover.

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Books

BOOK REVIEW

'Traveling Heavy' by Ruth Behar

By Judy Bolton-Fasman | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 07, 2013

So much of Ruth Behar's life story resonates with me. My mother is Cuban, and to paraphrase Winston Churchill, I may be half Cuban and half American, but there are so many times I feel completely Cuban. When I finally went to Cuba last fall, it was like returning to a place to which I had never been. I am the Cubana that Ruth Behar describes in her fascinating new memoir, "Traveling Heavy: A Memoir in Between Journeys," one that is part of an "intensely diasporic people."

Behar was born in Cuba in 1957 and left the island as a small child. By any measure she is an American success story. With a PhD from Princeton University, Behar is a self-described anthropologist who "specializes in homesickness." She's also a MacArthur grantee and a chaired professor at the University of Michigan who has been recognized for her groundbreaking work in Spain and Mexico. Like me, she's the offspring of the union of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish families.

Behar introduces the reader to her dual ancestry with talismans of Jewish and Cuban heritages and old family photographs. She writes, "In Cuba, the union of my mother, the daughter of polacos, and my father, the son of turcos, was viewed as practically an intermarriage." That displacement within her own people forges a unique empathy for the communities that she studies and their stories that she records.

As a young graduate student Behar was assigned to a village in Central Spain, a country that is one of the "many abandoned places" in her history. Like my mother, Behar's father traces his lineage back to medieval Spain. Yet on that early trip she hid her Judaism.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

"An instinct of fear and self-preservation had led me to decide not to reveal to the village people that I was Jewish. . . . I figured they'd be more deeply shocked to discover I was a descendant of the expelled Jews of Spain."

Three decades later, Behar returns to Spain as a proud Jew for the worldwide reunion of the Behar clan in Béjar, home to a notable Jewish community before 1492. In what she describes as the first world summit of Behars, she meets people with her surname who came from North America to Australia and she finally lays claim to her Sephardic roots. In Spain she and her fellow Behars "travel light, letting ourselves be blown back to our scattered destinations."

Ruth Behar

Author: Duke University

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But in Poland, another homeland, she travels heavy. Her beloved grandmother, Baba, entrusts her with a thick memorial book from Goworowo, a town near Krakow. The book details a community annihilated by the Nazis, and includes her great-grandfather's unpublished memoir. Knowing that her granddaughter the anthropologist is also a chronicler of family lore, Baba entrusts the book to Behar, and she takes it with her on her misty, gray tour of Poland as both a guide and talisman.

But Cuba is where Behar travels light with happy memories. Compared to the heaviness of Poland, Cuba is a place that she says, "resonates with joyous images of cigars, mojitos, salsa dancing and pristine beaches. . . . Cuba is seen as a multicultural Caribbean island where Jews were never persecuted."

Although the majority of Jews left Cuba in the years after Castro took power, there remained a remnant community, which over the past decades has been revived due to the largesse of the American Jewish community. Behar looks at the revitalization of Cuban Jewish life as an anthropologist, but her personal journey back to the island she left as a little girl is the heart of this "memoir I snuck in, between journeys."

Judy Bolton-Fasman is a columnist for the Jewish Advocate and can be reached at www.thejudychronicles.com.

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ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Traveling Heavy: A Memoir between Journeys

Ruth Behar
Duke University Press
978-0-8223-5467-3
(Apr 1, 2013)

Intimate, vulnerable memoir chronicles Cuban-American cultural anthropologist's coming-of-age as she travels the world in search of "home."

"However much I long for the island I once called home, I'm not beholden to any one place. … But I'm also never sure whether I belong anywhere," writes Ruth Behar in her biographical novel, *Traveling Heavy: A Memoir in Between Journeys*. As a Cuban immigrant coming of age in New York City, Behar struggles to understand her place in the world. With a Polish-Jewish mother and a Turkish-Jewish father, she finds herself straddling two distinct ethnoreligious cultures. Her memoir chronicles how she evolves from an immigrant girl at odds with the world into an intellectual woman grappling with what it means to belong.

The narrative forms a road map of Behar's frenetic travels around the world. A cultural anthropologist by trade, she is most comfortable as a "scribe" who writes other people's stories instead of her own. She contextualizes her journeys "in between" other people's, and bluntly states that she has written "too personally"—though her vulnerability is precisely what wins over her readers.

The book begins with a series of childhood memories. She reminisces about how she transcribed her great-grandfather's unpublished memoir in her grandmother Baba's kitchen while Baba patiently translated the Yiddish text into Spanish. When Behar eventually inherits the original, she clings to it instead of giving it to one of her relatives, despite being unable to read Yiddish. It comforts her to know that another family member found solace in penning his personal story.

Behar describes her observations as a burgeoning anthropologist doing fieldwork in Santa Maria del Monte, a tiny village in Spain. She immerses herself in Spanish culture, which initially feels familiar but ultimately does not provide her with the home for which she so longs.

Halfway through the narrative, Behar encounters a group of women in Mexico who believe that "to be a woman, you had to be a mother." Although she resists this attitude at first

as a PhD student in the throws of conceiving “a work of intellectual concentration, her doctoral thesis,” she quickly discovers her desire to become a mother. Shortly thereafter, she discovers she is pregnant with her son, Gabriel.

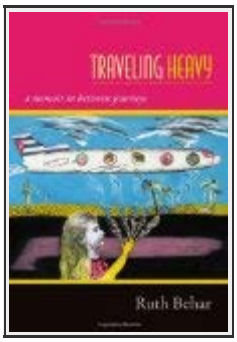
In the final chapter, Behar acknowledges what she has known all along: what she is looking for cannot be found in any one place. *Traveling Heavy* is a collection of pieces that weave together a story well worth reading for years to come.

Jacquelyn Lazo

MAY 2013

JANE SHMIDT
NONFICTION

TRAVELING HEAVY BY RUTH BEHAR



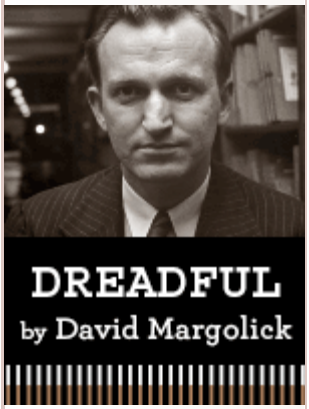
In a diary entry on January 8, 1914, Franz Kafka wrote, "What do I have in common with the Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself [...]" Of the material published by Kafka, a memoir is yet to be discovered. However, if Kafka had ever written a memoir, it would certainly have featured his persistent alienation. As a Czech in Austro-Hungary, a German-speaker in a country of Czechs, a Jew among Christians, an atheist among Jews, detached from his pragmatic family, Kafka was a perpetual misfit. His enduring status as a minority might have generated a memoir about longing for an unfragmented experience of wholeness, for a homeland.

In her memoir, *Traveling Heavy*, Ruth Behar displays her Kafkaesque dislocation. She descends from a long line of travelers by necessity, exiled from their homelands for reasons both political and social. Her Jewish great-grandparents settled in Cuba when Hitler was being named Führer. A month after the invasion of the Bay of Pigs, the young Behar was taken from Cuba, and in 1962, a few months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, Behar's family landed in New York City -- her borrowed homeland. Settling in New York as a little girl, Behar is ubiquitously alienated, marginalized. She is a Spanish speaker among English speakers, a Cuban among Americans, a Jew among Christians, and as a daughter of an Ashkenazi mother and a Sephardi father, she is continually torn between the customs of the two. She too is a perpetual misfit.

The memoir opens with her preparations to travel back to Cuba. Quickly we learn that she despises packing, longs to avoid flying, and fears that she will be unable to return to the house in Michigan she has built with her husband and son. And yet, our "neurotic nomad" often subjects herself to the pain of packing her suitcase, to the struggle of "letting go of the material world" for the sake of visiting the country from which her family escaped when she was too young to remember.

Several years earlier, Behar is invited to attend a most unusual gathering: a World Summit for people with the last names Behar, Bejar, Vejar, Bejarano, and Becherano. The summit is to take place in Bejar, Spain, because the Behars "were Sephardic Jews scattered around the globe," considered to be descendants of exiles from "Sepharad (or Sefarad), the Hebrew word for Spain." What do the Behars, Bejars, and Vejars have in common aside from a Jewish ancestry, meeting in a city that bears their name? Their most distinguishing common denominator is that despite residing in various parts of the world for several generations, they sense that they are a people without a country, lacking a material, visible tie to the past.

The Jewish search for home in Spain can best be compared with Aristophanes's

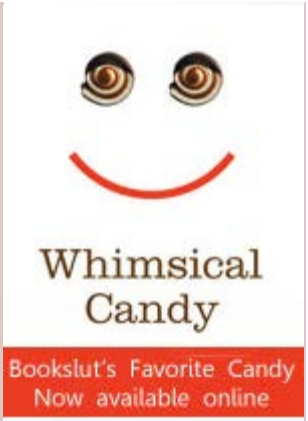


depiction of the lovers' plight in Plato's *Symposium*: The Jews lived in Spain and prospered, but in their prosperity they became proud and neglected to worship the king and queen. As punishment, the king and queen expelled the Jews from their land, dividing them in half and forcing them to leave a part of themselves behind. And so, the Jews are fated to be perpetually gnawed by the sense that they are incomplete and long to reconnect with that missing half, only to be found in the land from which they were exiled. The Behars are plagued by nostalgia for an inherited memory, mourning the loss of home and their amputated half, which their ancestors must have abandoned in the rush of gathering their material possessions. The Behar summit grows into the Jewish search for a homeland, for the moment when all the languages of the Jewish diaspora might ultimately converge into one.

Sadly, the genealogist invited to investigate the ancestral origins of the Behars casts grave doubt on their Bejarian origins. Not only is the city taken away as a potential lost homeland, but also Spain, along with their identity as Sephardim, is dismissed, for the genealogist discovers that the Behars are more than likely to be descendants of Ashkenazi Jews who, having migrated to Turkey in the nineteenth century, assumed Sephardic customs. Thus, the Beharian quest for home ends without a resolution, without closure. And it is particularly at this impasse that the Behar summit episode speaks to every immigrant's sensibility of what exile means. The idea of returning home is an "illusory quest" for Eden, which belongs not in memory, but in the imagination, and the search for lost identity is an eternal Platonic longing for wholeness. One can never really return there -- "there is no there there," to borrow a phrase from Gertude Stein. For the Behars, the imaginary lost homeland is dismissed by empirical evidence, but what they are unwilling or unable to surrender is the hope of its recovery, along with their final redemption. The perennially homeless are fated to continue their search despite evidence that history has erased all traces of home.

While Behar investigates all potential lost homelands, Cuba is the true object of her lovesick obsession. She has dedicated her body of work to the Cubans living on the island, as well as those of the diaspora. Her last book, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* -- part memoir, part ethnography -- is dedicated to the search for Jews in her place of birth. The Cuba Behar visits is not the country of her childhood, not the country of memory, which exile has erased. She describes the island before the revolution as a "safe haven," an "enchanted world" for the Jews -- an Eden, if you will. This is the Cuba which Behar's family is forced to abandon, and she is nostalgic for that mirage. And yet her ethnographic account features a trend among the Jews who have remained on the island to immigrate, choosing to forfeit the paradise she hopes to recover. Although these Jews have not been uprooted during their lifetime, their diaspora is ingrained, inherited from their ancestors who, once exiled, have been doomed to eternally seek a place of wholeness where they are "one people."

"¿Que se te perdió en Cuba?" What did you lose in Cuba? Her grandmother asks her each time she travels, reminding Behar that the abandoned country



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bears no relationship to the ever-elusive homeland. Yet, in efforts to grasp her situation, Behar returns to Cuba every winter and "forever re-enacts [her] departure," reproducing the experience of loss and fear. By this repeated practice of leaving Cuba she might recollect some part of what suffering the loss of her home has meant, and through that awareness the past event may be stripped of its indomitable anguish. She travels to master the memory of exile, and in so doing, attempts to recuperate the lost self.

On a stylistic level, Behar's prose imitates her preoccupation with the melancholy past, the sense of loss that is never forgotten. While she describes the Jews who remain in Cuba, she does not neglect to identify the island with the phrase "that my family had abandoned." She also wishes us to remember that this is a community of Jews "that might have been mine had we stayed." The tendency is to conclude the sentence with a subordinate clause that modifies the subject to remind us of its significance to Behar's past. The most significant element of the sentence is veiled within this subordinate clause, as a "by the way," or "in case you forget." Such sentences are retrospective, returning to the time diaspora splits her identity or the Inquisition or the Holocaust scatters the Jews all over the world: "how had Danayda's beautiful and talented older sister fared in a country *I associated mainly with the Holocaust?*" (italics mine).

In the final chapter of her memoir, Behar offers us "a Cuban goodbye," which is prolonged by renewed discourse. She is unable to conclude her memoir, as she has not discovered what has been lost in Cuba. The implication of her deferred ending is clear: there is no revelation to be had. Experiences just pass and no grand truth is to be gleamed from them. Despite the dissatisfaction, such an ending is arguably more plausible. As she admits in *An Island Called Home,* "the only true home" is the one for which the exiled must continue to search "inconsolably."

Much like her compulsion to travel, Behar's object of obsession is writing about her ever-fruitless search for a land that no longer exists. She wishes to write about her experience with Cuba because it allows her to fashion herself as a character in Cuba, to fashion a life there. When Franz Kafka wrote, "All I am is literature, and I am not able or willing to be anything else," he was attesting to the writer's ability to construct his identity and to generate a homeland on the page. In writing, the distance between the world and the self collapses, and the latter becomes a medium through which the former can be understood; the world becomes a function of the self. Thus, writing becomes the solution to the search for identity. Like Kafka, Behar takes part in self-creation. Through the act of composing a memoir about her search, she writes the lost homeland and the lost self into existence.

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