

TRAVELING HEAVY

a memoir in between journeys



Ruth Behar

PRAISE FOR BOOKS BY RUTH BEHAR

An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba

Photographs by Humberto Mayol

“A fascinating and vital memoir about a rarely glimpsed cultural force in Cuba. . . . *An Island Called Home* digs deep to reveal new things about the collective soul of the Cubans.” —**Oscar Hijuelos**, author of *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*

“*An Island Called Home* is a kaddish, an offering, dedicated to the exiles and to the children of the exiles and for those wandering still, searching for their homes. May they ‘not be given up for lost.’”
—**Sandra Cisneros**, author of *Caramelo*

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“*An Island Called Home* is Ruth Behar at her best. Her caring for Cuba and its small and thought-provoking Jewish life is profound.”
—**Virginia Dominguez**, author of *People as Subject, People as Object: Selfhood and Peoplehood in Contemporary Israel*

“*An Island Called Home* weaves past and present with poetic strength. The searing images here made brilliant by words and photographs connect the personal with the communal.” —**Hasia Diner**, Paul and Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History, New York University

“This may be Behar’s most personal work. . . . She lovingly intertwines her own thoughts and feelings with the more analytical observations of her profession. The result: a narrative that tugs at the heart.”
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“Behar has convinced me that ethnographic empathy will produce an anthropology that has greater meaning than the distanced and detached academic anthropology of the past.” —Barbara Fisher, *The Boston Globe*

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“A finely crafted, readable cross-cultural encounter between *dos co-madres*: feminist anthropologist and informant, *cubanita de este lado* and *mexicana* across the border. . . . *Escribiendo cultura con corazón, compasión y pasión*, Behar moves the serpent to speak, and moves us to read and read again.”—**Gloria Anzaldúa**, author of *Borderlands/La Frontera*

“Ruth Behar, as editor of *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, leaps across conventional intellectual boundaries in an effort to show the complexity of nationhood, exile, and revolution in the Cuban experience of the last thirty years. An important book about the possibility and impossibility of building cultural and political bridges.”

—**Arcadio Díaz-Quñones**, Professor Emeritus, Princeton University

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Latin American Research Review

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"A demanding and intensely satisfying read."—**Beverly Sanchez**, *Hispanic Magazine*

"A landmark in contemporary anthropology. . . . An important effort in the direction of more thoughtful and inclusive ways of knowing."
—**Gelya Frank**, *American Anthropologist*



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Ruth Behar

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TO MY FAMILY

*and the strangers who have
treated me like family*

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Let no thought pass incognito, and keep
your notebook as strictly as the authorities
keep their register of aliens.

—WALTER BENJAMIN,
“One-Way Street,” *Reflections* (1928)

Roots of Havana.
Photo by Gabriel Frye-Behar, 2011.

part one

FAMILY



Immigrants just arrived in New York.
Left to right: Papi, Ruth, Mami, and Mori,
1962. Photographer unknown.

the key to the house

I love to travel.

But I'm also terrified of traveling.

As I embark on yet another trip, I carefully enact my various good luck rituals. I check to be sure that my Turkish evil eye bracelet is still around my wrist. If there's turbulence during the flight, I'll rub the turquoise glass beads to keep the plane from falling out of the sky. In a zippered pouch inside my purse, I place a handmade necklace I must have with me at all times to be protected from illness and sudden death. I received it at a Santería ceremony in Cuba, where the hypnotic beat of three batá drums summoned the ancient African deities back to earth. Carrying these talismans, one evocative of my Jewish heritage and the other of my Cuban heritage, I ready myself for travel.

Before I go out the door, I drop my car and office keys on a side table, since they won't be of any use while I'm away. But I say to myself, "Take the key to the house. Don't go anywhere without that key."

The legend is that Sephardic Jews took the keys to their houses when they were expelled from Spain over five hundred years ago. Centuries later, living in other lands, they still had those keys in their possession. Tucking my house key in my suitcase, I honor the sad love for Spain that my exiled ancestors clung to.

Of course I know perfectly well that my stay-at-home husband, David, will open the door on my return. (In fact, he always drops me

off and picks me up at the airport.) When we were young, David and I went everywhere together, but now that we're older I'm the one who travels. He stays behind in Michigan, *cuidando la casa*, as they like to say in Mexico, minding the house. Even with the assurance that David awaits me on my return, I fear that if I don't bring my key a catastrophe will happen that will prevent me from coming home.

I may rack up miles flying far and wide, but travel isn't something I can treat casually. My departures are always filled with a looming sense of finality. Minutes before take-off, Mami calls, wishing me well in such a choked voice it seems she's uttering a last goodbye. "Please call me when you land, Ruti, don't forget," she says. By the time we hang up, I'm trembling. Then I turn around and call my son, Gabriel, in New York and make him totally nervous. "Bye, honey. Love you, honey," I say, as if I won't ever see him again.

Then it's time to power off. There's nothing left to do but hold my breath as the flight attendant shuts the door of the plane. I'm immediately overcome by a sense of tender solidarity, bringing me to the edge of tears, as I glance at my fellow travelers: the businessman who helped me squeeze my bulging suitcase into the overhead bin, the tired mother clutching her crying baby, the tattooed young man clasp his headphones, waiting to be up in the air so he can listen to his music, the lovers holding hands like schoolchildren, all of us united in the belief that it's not our day to die.

Yes, I'm a pretty neurotic nomad.

What's funny is that in spite of traveling heavy with my doubts and worries, just give me the flimsiest pretext to get on a plane and go somewhere, and I'll rush to pack my suitcase. Not that packing is easy for me. Faced with the quandary of what to bring and what to leave, I suffer deciding what's got to stay behind. Is it too melodramatic to say that packing is a rehearsal for death, when you can't take anything with

you? Traveling, you can take only a couple of things, and this gets you used to letting go of the material world. It sweetens the coming of the inevitable departure. You abandon the weightiness of your existence so you can be light on your feet as you move about in a new place, meet new people.

I go to other places for the same reasons most everyone does: to seek out a change of scenery and feel a sense of enchantment, to learn about the lives of strangers, and to give myself a chance to be someone I can't be at home. We leave behind the creature comforts and familiarity of home in order to explore alternate worlds, alternate selves.

Travelers are those who go elsewhere because they want to, because they can afford to displace themselves. Immigrants are those who go elsewhere because they have to. If they don't displace themselves they'll suffer: their very existence is at risk. They pick up and leave, sometimes at a moment's notice. The journey is wrenching, often dangerous, a loss of the known world, a change of scenery that creates estrangement, an uneasy dwelling among strangers, having to become a different person against one's will.

I'm now a traveler, a professional traveler. Until I went to college, I had no idea there was a profession called cultural anthropology, in which it's *my job* to spend extended periods of time residing elsewhere, doing fieldwork to understand how people in other places find meaning in their lives. From the first moment, I was seduced by the prospect of being such a traveler. And so I set off on this odd career, and everywhere I went I found a semblance of home. The kindness of strangers was a great gift. I would not be who I am without it.

So now I'm a traveler, but I always remember I started out in life being an immigrant. We left Cuba when I was four and a half and my brother, Mori, was just a toddler. There's an old black-and-white picture of the two of us, with Mami and Papi, taken upon our arrival in

New York. We're wearing our best travel clothes and squinting into the sun and our future. We look bedraggled, shabby, a little shy, and grateful. Our posture is lopsided. We're unsure of ourselves.

Caro, the woman who was my nanny long ago in Cuba, says I was happily oblivious when we left the island. "You thought you were going on a holiday, you didn't realize you were leaving," she tells me. Perhaps a child is incapable of mourning the loss of a homeland. I've been accused sometimes (though *never* by fellow Cubans) of having left too young to assert my right to claim a bond to Cuba. What I know for sure is that I found it painfully difficult to adjust to life in the United States. To this day, no matter where I go, I carry the memory of the girl who felt utterly foreign, helpless, speechless, a misfit, the girl who wanted to dissolve into the cracks in the walls.

I don't recall the moment in my childhood when I was uprooted, taken from the place where I belonged. My subconscious gave me amnesia so I'd have to keep traveling to find the girl who lost her home and didn't cry because she didn't know what she was losing.

Call me an anthropologist who specializes in homesickness. Going to other places is how I make my living. I'm forever packing and unpacking a suitcase. I should know how to travel light. But I travel heavy. I carry too much.

Among anthropologists it's a mortal sin to write about oneself. We're taught to be scribes, to tell other people's stories. Here I've gone and written personally, too personally. But being an obedient student at heart, I've done so with trepidation. This is the memoir I snuck in, between journeys.

learning english with shotaro

I have spoken English for almost fifty years and still haven't forgotten that English isn't my first language. Even now I hesitate as I lay down this first sentence. Does it sound right in English? Is it stilted? Is it correct to say "I have" and "haven't" and "isn't" in the same sentence? I honestly don't—do not—know.

It's strange and possibly absurd that I should feel this way. I speak English perfectly well. I wrote my Ph.D. thesis in English. I think, dream, and live much of my life in the English language. "You're from Cuba?" people say, surprised. "But you don't have an accent." No, I don't have an accent. I don't say "shit" when I want to say "sheet," as my mother does, though as a teenager I tried hard to imitate a British accent because I considered it more refined than the English I heard around me as I was growing up in New York. I spoke to my parents only in Spanish, as I do even today, because Spanish is the language in which they're most comfortable.

Mami and Papi definitely have accents, thick Cuban accents, when they speak English, and I continue to correct their pronunciation and grammatical errors, as I did as a child. English was the public language, the language of power, competition, and progress—also the language of solitude, the language in which I was totally on my own, without my parents to help me. Now I speak an English that can't be recognized as being from anywhere specific. Years ago, my brother, Mori, put it



Birthday party in Queens, New York.
Left to right: Dinah, Cora, Ruth, Grace,
Shotaro, and, seated, cousins Linda and
Danny, 1963. Photographer unknown.

exactly right. What I have, he told me, is a “college accent.” It’s the English of a person who went to school, studied hard, and got good grades because she feared if she didn’t, she’d be sent back to the dumb class.

No one can tell by looking at me or hearing me speak that another language burns inside me, an invisible but unquenchable flame. No one can tell I came to the English language the way a woman in another era came to her husband in an arranged marriage, trying to make the best of a relationship someone else chose for her and hoping one day she’d fall in love. I’m still waiting. . . . I depend on English. I’m grateful I speak English. I wouldn’t be a professor, a scholar, a traveler, a writer if I didn’t know English. But I’m not in love with English.

My mother tongue is Spanish. This is the language I spoke as a little girl in Cuba. I’m told I spoke that little girl’s Spanish with a lot of spunk. They tell me I was a nonstop talker, *una cotorrita* (a little parrot). But after we arrived in the United States, I grew shy, silent, sullen. I have no memory of myself as a little girl speaking Spanish in Cuba. That’s likely why every time I’m in Cuba and encounter a little girl letting Spanish roll off her tongue so naturally, so effortlessly, I want to yell, “That was me!” That was me, once upon a time—before I became self-conscious about which *lengua*, which tongue, I was speaking.

When we left Cuba after the Revolution and went to Israel, I’m told I became fluent in Hebrew. I might have already known a few words because in Havana I attended kindergarten at the Centro Israelita, a bilingual Spanish-Yiddish day school founded by Jewish immigrants who settled in Cuba in the 1920s and 1930s. But Hebrew didn’t stick in our family. Leaving Israel for New York after a year, we never spoke it at home. Hebrew became the language of the liturgy, of our infrequent prayers, on the High Holy Days and Passover; it ceased to be a vernacular tongue for us. Spanish became our home language, and I spoke it with Abuelo and Abuela, my Ladino-speaking grandparents from

Turkey, and also with Baba and Zayde, my Yiddish-speaking grandparents from Poland and Russia.

Just before I turned six, I was dropped into a first-grade classroom at P.S. 117 in Queens. I was expected to survive without being able to utter a word of English. This was in 1962, before bilingual programs and English as a Second Language were introduced into the public school system. You learned English by osmosis, ear training, lip reading, like a baby, without any special instruction and not a drop of mercy. Or you failed to learn English and joined the dumb class, where you stayed forever.

In that first-grade classroom, I vividly recall the teacher, Mrs. Sarota, writing a math problem on the blackboard. Knowing the answer, I raised my hand. Mrs. Sarota smiled and nodded, lifted her eyebrows. She waited, chalk in hand. I opened my mouth. No words came out. I knew the answer, but didn't know how to say it in English. I sat there. "Ruth," the teacher said, "do you know the answer or not?" I wasn't accustomed to hearing my name spoken in English. It sounded harsh. Ugly. In my family, I'm called Ruti, and the two syllables are said slowly, languorously.

"Well, Ruth?" The teacher spoke my name like an insult. I tried sign language, writing the answer in the air with my fingers. Soon the other children were giggling and pointing at me, as though I were a monkey escaped from the zoo. Ashamed, I lowered my head and pretended to disappear. I retreated into silence for the rest of the school year.

By second grade I was in the dumb class and felt I deserved to be there. Although the school claimed not to make any distinctions, as kids we knew that, for each grade, there was a dumb class made up of children who'd flunked the previous year. To be in the dumb class in second grade was a sure sign you'd gotten off to a lousy start in life. Things had to be pretty bad for a kid to flunk first grade. The teacher, whose name I've forgotten, acted as if we were not merely dumb but

deaf as well; she repeated things and hovered over us, watching as we wrote in our notebooks, ready to pounce on our mistakes. Some of the kids in the class were slow learners, but a few were more impaired, like Grace, who had a large head and wore shoes several sizes too large and was so friendly you knew something had to be wrong with her. In those days, the dumb class was also where they put the foreign kids until they could prove to the world they were actually smart and had just needed to learn English—or until they revealed that deep down they really were dumb.

Shotaro, a boy from Japan, was also in the dumb class because he spoke a language that wasn't English. As the only two foreign kids, Shotaro and I became close friends. His bangs were crooked and he was a head shorter than I, so I felt protective of him. We looked at picture books together and read to each other and played tag and hopscotch during recess. Shotaro was the only boy from school I invited to my birthday party in second grade. (Mori and my cousin Danny were there too, but they didn't count.) He came outfitted like a little man, in a gray suit, white shirt, and maroon tie. I wore one of my old handmade Cuban dresses that barely fit me but which I still adored. Not long after, all the dresses from Cuba disappeared from my closet; my mother gave them to my cousin Linda. It pained me to see her wearing them.

One of the pictures I most recall from those years, which I've since lost, is the Polaroid of a cluster of girls around an M&M-studded cake, with Shotaro and me in the middle of the group, beaming from the sheer joy of standing next to each other (But I did find a picture in which I'm wearing a crown, Grace appears on my left, and Shotaro stands on the edge, sporting a party hat.) I think Shotaro and I learned to speak English only because of our urgent need to communicate with one another, though there existed an understanding between us, mysterious and deep, that went beyond words.

We both did well and got good at English. By the end of the school

year we were sprung from the dumb class and assigned to a regular third-grade class. But Shotaro and I didn't continue together in third grade. His family decided to return to Japan, whereas it had become clear to my family that there wasn't going to be any return to Cuba.

I was sad to see Shotaro go. He gave me a going-away present that I still store at my parents' house with other keepsakes from my childhood. It is a pair of miniature wooden male and female dolls, outfitted in matching kimonos and nested together in a silk brocade box. Maybe the dolls were intended to represent the two of us, a girl and a boy, who grew into the English language together, during a year spent in the dumb class. Neither of us spoke the other's language, so English was our common tongue—English and a faith that we weren't dumb, that what we were was dispossessed, dislocated.