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Behar, Ruth [with photographs by Humberto Mayol]. (2007). *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

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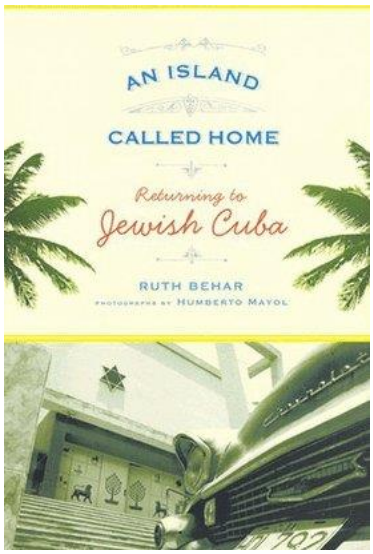
Feminism, post-structuralism, critical theory, arts-based inquiry and other postmodern approaches to educational research have long recognized the deeply relational and subjective nature of teaching and learning inquiry. While qualitative research methods that aspire to "objective science" have been theoretically challenged for over two decades, there are still too few examples of empirical work that illustrate what exemplary, alternative approaches to educational inquiry might be. Ruth Behar's latest book, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*, merges ethnography with creative nonfiction, memoir, photography, narrative, and poetry, creating a book that illuminates what is possible when empiricism is infused with the artful and auto-ethnographic. The text is infused with lessons for educational researchers about "Jews who were learning how to be Jews" (p. 15), and the nature of cultural identity as something inherited as well as acquired through educational study, community practice, and historical and political circumstance.



In signature Behar style, this latest book starts with the personal as entry to the larger social context of her study. "You're going to Cuba again? What did you lose in Cuba?/*Otra vez a Cuba? Qué se perdió en Cuba?"*, Behar quotes her Grandmother/*Baba* in Miami who's native tongue was Yiddish but who communicated in Spanish with her granddaughter. The Yiddish-lilted Spanish of an elder "*gusano"*, (a word Behar explains means both "duffle bag" and "worm," a term Castro used for all who left after the 1959 Cuban Revolution), introduces the genesis of this ethnographic memoir, a search for the Jewish Cuban home Behar's family had left behind. Behar's intimate prose is accompanied by her own family photographs as well as new photos taken by companion artist, Humberto Mayol. The book's accessible and lyrical language, family album photos of Behar's past as well as finely crafted portraits of Behar's study-participants all invite the reader to pack a bag for a journey that is recognizable to many educational ethnographers, one where the researcher "[runs] away from home in order to run toward home" (p. 3).

Behar says she took advantage of the metaphoric power of anthropology to be both a "passport" and a "shield" to study and learn about a cultural community that was at once familiar and foreign. The book's prose is full of poetic language such as this excerpt below:

> Even though I didn't want to turn my native land into a fieldsite, anthropology became my passport; anthropology became my magic carpet. Only as an anthropologist could I return to Cuba two and three times a year to do ongoing research. Anthropology also became my shield. Nobody could criticize me for breaking with the Cuban exile position which held that no Cuban should set foot again in Cuba until Fidel Castro was gone (p. 18).

Ruth Behar

Behar's book illuminates how autoethnography can be a gateway to research that is at once personally meaningful as well as universally revelatory for larger audiences. For example, the book's first chapter braids Behar's own family history of exile with a carefully selected history of Jews in Cuba more generally, beginning with the *conversos* of 1492, converts to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition. Through narrating the "intermarriage" struggles of her own parents who hailed from Sephardic-Jewish (mostly from Spain and Turkey) and Ashkenazic-Jewish (mostly from Poland) backgrounds, she paints a portrait of a largely divided Jewish Cuba in the early 20th century whose divisions are still apparent today among the few remaining Jews on the Island.

The book wrestles with who now defines themselves as Jewish in Cuba, how, and why in a context where most of what Behar describes as "pure Jews" (those born of both Jewish parents) had left the island by 1965. Cuban Jews today are mostly converts, the children or grandchildren of Jewish men in a culture where Jewish identity is passed on matrilineally. Moving through abandoned Jewish cemeteries, renewed synagogues, converted homes, Janucá/Hanukkah parties attended by Fidel Castro, and kosher butcher shops among other contexts where Cuban Jews are to be found, each chapter highlights individuals in Cuba living their version of a Jewish life. Descriptions of participants' language, attire, and perspectives are so clear and conversational, one feels as if one accompanied Behar into the living rooms and sanctuaries of participants' lives. Each chapter touches upon the contradictions between numbers of Cuban Jews drawn back to their faith

and the mass exodus of Cuban Jews to the United States, Israel and elsewhere. Upon learning from a participant that yet another Jew and his mother were leaving, Behar lyrically reflects:

He's one of the pillars of the community. But that's how it is in Cuba. From one day to the next, a pillar crumbles, disappears. And yet miraculously there are always Jews left in Cuba to keep the whole edifice from toppling (p. 90).

Behar critically situates her own work within the recent "avalanche of attention" Cuban Jews have received by "a never-ending stream of curious anthropologists, tourists, missionaries, and well-wishers" (p. 31). She points to the ironies experienced in the Cuban Jewish community where some members may only attend synagogue to receive special food products, free meals, t-shirts, shoes and other goods. The book raises questions about Jewish identity as a commodity in Cuba, where claims to Jewish ancestry and subsequent participation in Jewish spiritual life may be inspired by a free chicken dinner or a "crazy outpouring of emotion and charity" (p. 185) described in Chapter 27 when visiting American Jews pull off pearl earrings and take money from their pockets for one Jewish Cuban family. Many Jews in Cuba resurrect documents such as the *Ketubah* marriage certificate because it can translate into improved living circumstances in Cuba or an exit visa to Israel.

What draws Cuban Jews back to their faith on the island may ironically lead to the demise of the small community that's left as Jewish renewal leads to increased departure from the island. However, despite repeated reminders of how fragile this community's survival is, Behar's book is a testament to decades and centuries of Jewish survival. Using anaphora in Chapter 23 Behar poetically repeats "They are the keepers," listing the many symbols of Jewish identity that have withstood the test of time because those who've remained behind have cared for them, e.g. mezuzahs, Torahs, Kiddush cups, and menorahs. One paragraph which resembles a line of prose-poetry reads "They are the keepers of old family prayer books that have turned brown with age and smell like rain."

Behar distinguishes her approach to interviews and participant observation from other recent work as a series of "tangos—improvised conversations that led to surprising revelations and exchanges" (p. 34). Indeed, Behar's approach is unique—one that clearly identifies the researcher as part of, as well as distanced from, the research. Repeatedly, Behar reminds of us her own internal struggles regarding her economic status and freedoms to come and go relative to the Cuban Jews she interviews. She uses the Yiddish word "schnorrer" (one who thrives on the generosity of others) to describe herself and the field (p. 137). She takes the reader along with her as she accepts a meal from a poor Jewish family (Chapter 8) or when she leads a wealthy Jewish American tour group around Havana eating in the best restaurants and staying in fine hotels built for wealthy outsiders (Chapters 9 and 37).

Perhaps Behar protests her privilege too much, leading the reader to wonder about options the educational anthropologist has in the field to simultaneously document participants' lived experiences and improve participants' lives at the same time. Behar doesn't provide any answers to discomfort in the field, though she does provide humorous insight in the midst of a bare-chested male (pp. 122-3) or when she's offered an authentic poster of Fidel that she considers sneaking back home in her suitcase and selling it on eBay (p. 181).

This book models what is possible when disciplinary boundaries are blurred and a researcher creates a portrait that illuminates the community under study and the hyphenated space between researcher-researched. The use of personal and professional photography and scholarly and lyrical prose, create a study that simultaneously informs as it engages. This book would be useful for courses in the anthropology of education, spirituality and education, Latino and Jewish studies in

education and a host of other courses where students and professors wish to read an insightful and beautifully written ethnographic memoir about Jews and Jewish education in Cuba.

About the Reviewer

Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor, Associate Professor in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia, addresses bilingualism, second language acquisition, arts-based approaches to inquiry and multicultural education in her research. Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Educational Researcher*, *Language Arts*, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, and *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*; her poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere. She is co-editor of the book, *Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice* (Routledge). She is the poetry judge for Anthropology & Humanism's annual contest.

Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor