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What will remain...? Some responses from autoethnography and young people's fiction

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ABSTRACT

I keep thinking lately that I am writing for the next generation, for those like my granddaughter who have come into the world during this time of the pandemic, with all its anxiety and insecurity. Vulnerability, I imagine, will be for her a normal part of life that no longer knows how to define its normality. Thinking about these issues, I will try to give some answers about the legacies we are leaving behind and how autoethnography and young people's fiction propose ways of looking for the confluence between the past, the present, and the future. Among *what will remain*, I hope to show the importance of the moments of connection that we achieve in anthropological encounters, as well as artistic creation, moments that allow us to feel that we share a human heritage that belongs equally to all of us because we exist in the world.

KEY WORDS

Legacies, vulnerability, autoethnography, fiction, Spain, Mexico, Cuba.

¿QUÉ QUEDARÁ...? ALGUNAS RESPUESTAS DESDE LA AUTOETNOGRAFÍA Y LA FICCIÓN PARA JÓVENES

RESUMEN

Últimamente no dejo de pensar que estoy escribiendo para la próxima generación, para aquellos como mi nieta, que han llegado al mundo durante este momento de la pandemia, con toda su ansiedad e inseguridad. Me imagino que para ella la vulnerabilidad será una parte normal de una vida de la que ya no se sabe cómo definir su normalidad. Pensando en estos temas, trataré de dar algunas respuestas sobre los legados que estamos dejando y cómo la autoetnografía y la ficción para jóvenes proponen maneras de buscar la confluencia entre el pasado, el presente y el futuro. Entre *lo que quedará*, espero mostrar la importancia de los momentos de conexión que logramos en los encuentros antropológicos y en la creación artística, momentos que nos permiten sentir que compartimos una herencia humana que nos pertenece igualmente a todos y todas por el hecho de existir en el mundo.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Legados, vulnerabilidad, autoetnografía, ficción, España, México, Cuba.

The theme of the Asociación de Antropólogos Iberoamericanos en Red Conference in 2022 is *creating legacies*. We were asked to reflect on how we can speak about creating legacies at a time of profound uncertainty and anxiety about the future. On every level — individual, communal, national, global, planetary — we are faced with extreme vulnerability. We have so much knowledge of our condition and yet we are so confused about how to resolve our dilemma.

The entire world has endured more than two years of an unending pandemic. The rise of new Covid variants still makes it difficult to fully embrace life. And the death of millions of people around the world has taken a toll on us all, whether or not we wish to recognize it. These plague years have been accompanied by a sense of apocalyptic dread about global warming. Catastrophic climate disasters have led to droughts, floods, fires, poverty, hunger, homes fallen to ruin, homes gone in the blink of an eye.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons and militarization around the world puts us all at risk. School shootings in the United States and violent hate crimes around the world fill us with anguish. The unjust profiling and incarceration of people of color and the deportation of refugees and undocumented immigrants have increased racial inequality and normalized the brutality of white hegemony.

Growing anti-gay and anti-trans discrimination, and the precarious position of women, as domestic violence increases and our rights over our bodies diminish, reflect a worrisome trend toward the kind of dystopian future imagined in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1986). The rise of authoritarian governments, political fractures around the world, the banning of books, and threats against freedom of expression further intensify the feelings of insecurity that have become all too common in twenty-first century society.

Our world feels broken, our planet fragile. Vulnerability has become an intensely relevant concept in our era, and heartbreak has become an all too familiar condition. How, then, are we to move forward? I hope that by sharing some stories from my experiences as an anthropologist and a creative writer, I can at least offer a few ideas for how to have a productive discussion about this crucial question.

Twenty-five years ago, I proposed the notion of the anthropologist as a “vulnerable observer.” I found it impossible to research the lives of other people in a distant and detached way, as I was expected to do. I felt affected emotionally and intellectually by what I witnessed when I traveled to Spain, Mexico, and Cuba, the places which became my field sites. I came to define my anthropological work as being about “loss, mourning, the

longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you having no idea how to do it...” (Behar, 1996: 3)

In the late 1990s, the word “vulnerability” wasn’t much in use. I remember colleagues looking at me funny when I spoke about being a “vulnerable observer,” as if I’d let slip a profanity. Now we hear the word daily. Not only is our world vulnerable, but we’ve all become vulnerable observers as we move about our lives concerned about the next catastrophe. The pandemic has shown how entangled we all are with one another; it is no longer possible to pretend to be a distant, detached observer, whether of other societies or our own societies.

While there is reason to feel gloomy about our world today, it must also be said that we live in a time of greater compassion and sensitivity than we’ve ever known before. Books that teach kindness and empathy are widespread. Anti-racist work is taking place. The #MeToo Movement has made some strides. Monuments to slavery and colonialism are being toppled around the world, reclaiming public spaces and remaking public memory. Artists are creating work of abundant magic and vision. More than ever, we know the survival of humanity depends on caring together for our one world, our one planet.

People are rising up, speaking up. Last summer, on July 11, 2021, in the midst of Covid, food shortages, and unrelenting heat and power outages, thousands in Cuba participated in a historic protest. Rather than chant *Patria o Muerte*, the revolutionary slogan, they chanted the words of the song, *Patria y Vida*. Life. Not death. Hundreds of young people are in jail for this act of rebellion, in an island that once celebrated rebellion as a means of social transformation. A new generation in Cuba seeks change and is no longer afraid to demand it.

It’s urgent that we envision the world that could be, a world that values life, justice, and wellbeing for all. Now as a grandmother, I wonder what the future holds for my granddaughter, born during this moment of the pandemic, a moment of reckoning with mortality, a moment when vulnerability is the norm. I can’t know what my journeys, my writing, will mean to her and others of the generation just emerging now. All I can do is pass on the stories that give me hope for humanity, stories that make me want to embrace the world with wonder and without fear.

* * *

I was young, only twenty-one, when my professor, Jim Fernandez, who is of Asturian ancestry, dropped me off in Santa María del Monte, a small village in the province of León. As he waved goodbye, he said,

“Okay, now go do fieldwork.” I had no idea how to start. I had only taken a year of anthropology courses, all very theoretical. But the people of Santa María would be the ones to teach me. They would mold me into an anthropologist, *their* anthropologist. In that village, where I had no roots but came to understand the meaning of roots, I’d spend two more summers, an entire year, and several other summers. It was where I named myself “a vulnerable observer,” during a painful summer in 1987, when I was a young mother and chose to be in Santa María researching death customs rather than with my dying grandfather in Miami Beach.

Long before pursuing anthropology, there was much that drew me to Spain. Growing up in a Cuban Jewish immigrant family in the United States, I had always spoken Spanish. It was my first language and a beloved language. On my mother’s side, the family was Ashkenazi, from Eastern Europe, and my grandparents spoke Spanish with a Yiddish accent. As a young girl, I had a vague understanding that my Turkish Sephardic abuelos, my paternal grandparents, had a different “accent” because they spoke another Spanish, an antiquated Spanish. I didn’t know it was a language in its own right, preserved and reinvented for centuries after leaving Spain, and that it was called Ladino. All I knew was that Spanish came to me not only from being born in Cuba but from the legacy of Spain. Through language, food, stories, and fits of inexplicable rage and sorrow I saw in my father and his family, it was relayed to me we had roots in Spain; the expulsion in 1492 had left emotional scars and a nostalgic longing for a lost home, expressed in heartbreakingly sad Sephardic love songs.

This was why, when I had the opportunity to travel on a semester abroad program as an undergraduate, I chose to go to Spain. It was the autumn of 1975. I was nineteen and I smoked Ducados and drank *jeréz* and spent my afternoons at the Prado Museum, transfixed by Goya’s black paintings. Though it was exciting to be on my own as a young woman for the first time, I never felt carefree. The *guardia civil* in their stiff green uniforms and intimidating *tricornio* hats were stationed all over Madrid. I tried never to look at them, and when I did, their gazes were so harsh they sent a chill up my spine. I witnessed the frightened silence that enveloped Madrid when Franco died. Afterwards, I returned to finish college. I read *Don Quixote* and made the reckless decision to direct a performance of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* rather than study for my exams, which I nearly failed. I wore silky white blouses, wavy skirts, tall boots, wide-brimmed felt hats and played Spanish classical guitar. I missed Spain.

Being asked to do fieldwork in Santa María del Monte seemed somehow destined. But I wasn’t prepared for how my heart would be touched

by the experience of being in a Spanish village that had lost most of its population and continued to try to maintain a way of life that seemed hopelessly antiquated, as I was told by the villagers themselves. Naively, I set foot in that Spain which Spaniards had grown ashamed of, the Spain which Sergio del Molino named *La España vacía* (Molino, 2016), and it became a place to rethink what anthropology meant and why it mattered.

In the era of the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists chose to live in small villages, in face-to-face communities, as they were called, where it was possible to get to know everyone. Working in cities, or transnationally, or with immigrants moving from place to place, wasn't yet conceivable to most anthropologists. The notion of the proper "field site" depended on rootedness in one space, where traditions and legacies were thought to be maintained intact. The "field site" stood in contrast to the metropolitan centers the anthropologists were from, which were viewed as in flux and bereft of the traditions they searched for in their research.

I fit into this mold of the cosmopolitan anthropologist searching for the ideal of rootedness somewhere else. I had grown up in New York in crowded apartments, I was an immigrant child, and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants. Imagine me, extremely young, pathetically earnest, asking to be adopted into a village of 120 people where everyone went to mass every Sunday. Everyone, that is, except for the village shepherd, Aurelio, who spent his days in the monte with the collective rebaño, and Jose, an anticlerical retired coal miner who had worked in Switzerland and come back and built a chalet with a swimming pool. But I, as a woman and a guest, was obligated to go to mass; it would have been disrespectful to not go. In Santa María everyone assumed I was Catholic because I was born in Cuba and spoke Spanish. I usually didn't correct them. I wanted their acceptance. And I needed their love.

At that moment, when I first encountered the people of Santa María, I had been disowned by my father. He had rejected my partner David for not being Jewish and demanded I stop seeing him. When I refused, he stopped talking to me and declared me dead. I went with David to Santa María without letting my parents know. That was why the bond with the people of Santa María was so important to me. A few years later, David converted to Judaism; we were married and the conflict with my father was resolved — but at the time of my first fieldwork I felt like an orphan.

David was a gringo who'd fled Texas. He had studied Russian, not Spanish. In Santa María, everyone thought Spanish was the most marvelous language and should be spoken by all people. They couldn't understand why David had been so linguistically deprived. They teased him relentlessly. Germiniano, who had a great sense of humor, would point to

his bald head every time he saw David and say “Calvo! Cal-vo!” so he’d learn the word. And David did learn Spanish quite well. And I learned to say the rosary in Spanish and to cross myself and kneel at the appropriate moments in the mass. These actions would have shocked my family, but I wanted to be as much like the people I was studying as possible, absurd as that seems now in retrospect.

And so it was that I spent hours, months, years, in their fields, in their church, in their homes, at their fiestas. I gave my full attention to the villagers who stayed in Santa María, almost all of whom were elders to me; they had children and grandchildren who had been part of the rural exodus and now lived in Madrid and Bilbao and other cities and came back in the summers to help with the harvest and to vacation. There was much I’d never be able to learn, such as how to gather hay and wheat, but I did help to pick potatoes, and it hurt my kidneys just like they said it would. I was pathetic at collecting the blood from the slaughtered pigs; they laughed at how queasy I became just holding the bucket. I admired their system of communal land tenure that had made it possible for people to survive hard times. I saw with my own eyes how well they came together as a community in situations of crisis; once, during a fire, they immediately formed a line to pass buckets of water forward and it was a beautiful and humane choreography. I transcribed the historical documents of the village and read them and discussed them with villagers who helped me interpret them. I documented their lives in interviews — not everyone happy with what was said about one another. I took thousands of pictures with my large format cameras. My pictures showed the villagers at work, using tools and cow carts and implements that a few decades later would be on display at the ethnographic museum in León. Those pictures became part of the museum’s collection, the village’s archive, and its website. I preserved and championed their legacy, as if it had been mine, returning as best I could the love they’d shown in welcoming me, a stranger, into their lives when I was orphaned from my family and culture.

The people of Santa María were endlessly amazed at how I had appeared out of nowhere, brought there by a professor, mysteriously, to ask them for their stories, to bear witness to their efforts to remain on the land at a moment when urbanization, the growth of commodity culture, and corporate globalization made it seem foolish and backward to continue to grow your own food in little villages where everyone knew each other. It would take years for the organic food movement to arise, and for there to develop awareness about protecting the beauty of local spaces and customs — back then, the villagers I met felt no pride; they were ashamed and humiliated to be working “like brutes” on the land. Now we realize

they had knowledge that is crucial to ecological wellbeing. I remember Balbino, in whose house we lived for two summers, offering us apples from his trees that had been stored in a cellar for the winter months. “They look ugly, but they taste good,” he told me, biting into one. But I was used to pretty red apples from the store. I couldn’t eat them and I insulted him terribly by refusing them.

Years later, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the people I knew in Santa María found me on the internet and wrote to me for information about their history. The book that came from the dissertation, *The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village* (Behar, 1986), translated as *La presencia del pasado en un pueblo español* (Behar, 2013a), for this younger generation became an important document about the traditions and way of life of their ancestors, whom I was blessed to know. Bruno Castro Benito, a young man from one of the neighboring villages, who studied anthropology, took it upon himself to translate my book into Spanish. He did it for his father, so his father could read it, as an act of love. This impressed upon me that at the core of ethnography is the gift — the gift of stories and legacies passed on, gathered by anthropologists out of love, not merely for the sake of social science, not knowing who will need them.

When I was last in Spain in 2018, I met Tonio while at a bar in León with Fran, who is passionate about the history of Santa María and has created a website for the village. Tonio grew up in Madrid and became a chef but decided to return to his roots in Santa María. He had just arrived with his wife and child. I immediately noticed his tattoos. On his right arm, he’d tattooed “the Chef,” but on his left arm I saw an image that looked familiar. It was his abuela, he said. As Tonio held up his left arm and showed me on his cell phone the image the tattoo was modeled on, I realized why it looked familiar: I had taken the photograph! His abuela was Amparo in her black widow’s dress, which she wore daily, sifting kernels of wheat with one of the handmade wooden sieves still used back then, that later found their way into the ethnographic museum.

I had taken the picture in 1984, when I used a square format Rollei. I always enlarged the pictures and gave them to the people I photographed. I never imagined one of these photographs would end up etched into the flesh of a grandson who’d grown up in the city, far from the rural life of an abuela I came to know through my fieldwork. Tonio was searching for his heritage, and my anthropology was a map to an abandoned ancestral home that had acquired new meaning for a new generation. Here it was, the sense of possibility, the confluence of past, present, and future, the interconnectedness that anthropology could make possible. In the

empty region of Spain, *en la España vacía*, where villages await their lost grandchildren, Tonio's journey and mine had flowed into each other and landed on the same shore.

I realized it was possible to create a legacy consciously, as I had done in my writing and photography about Santa María and in sharing my work with the people of the village and the ethnography museum, helping to build an archive that all could access. And I realized, through Tonio, that it was possible to create a legacy unconsciously, as a beautiful unexpected legacy. In visually documenting the life of Amparo, I had no idea one of my photographs would have an afterlife as a grandson's memory, to be made visible on his own flesh.

As Rebecca Solnit has said about being a writer, "The response to your words may come long after you're gone and never reach your ears — if anyone hears you in the first place" (Solnit, 2004: 64). It's true, what Solnit says; you don't know who will inherit your legacy, if anyone at all, but sometimes you can be lucky, as I was, to receive the response in my lifetime, when I got to see my anthropological gaze inscribed in Tonio's tattoo.

* * *

After the years in Spain, I went with David to do fieldwork in Mexquitic, a town in the region of San Luis Potosí in northern Mexico. I met people who wanted to go to *el otro lado* to work and couldn't get across because they were poor and undocumented. As a Cuban immigrant, I was granted an easy path to U.S. citizenship because Cubans were seen as political refugees escaping communism. With my passport, I crossed the border easily between the United States and Mexico. Border politics affected me deeply. It was painful to be in such an unequal situation, and at first I wasn't sure I'd be able to do fieldwork in Mexico. I turned to historical research, focusing on cases of women's witchcraft that were documented in Mexican Inquisition records. I had also become interested in feminist ethnography and was exploring the experimental and creative forms of writing produced by earlier generations of American women anthropologists.

While doing research in the historical archive of San Luis Potosí, I found a case from 1599 about a Guachichil witch. She was an elderly woman, part of the hunting and gathering indigenous Guachichil community, which at the time had been almost completely vanquished by Spanish conquerors, and she had tried to lead an uprising against the crown and the church. Enough people were convinced of her powers as a witch that

local rulers deemed her dangerous. She was tried and hung on the same day. I was inspired to write an essay about this woman's story — she was left unnamed in the record. The essay appeared in English in 1987 and in Spanish some years later (Behar, 1987 and 1995), but I didn't expect much of a readership. Now, more than twenty-five years later, it has caught the attention of a group of individuals in San Luis Potosí who claim Guachichil ancestry. This indigenous identity, thought to have been erased, has come alive again, and my essay is a key reference in the quest for a heritage. What once seemed like an esoteric anthropological project has found a younger generation who treat it as an anchoring work about their history. The essay is now being republished online by the Colegio de San Luis Potosí to make it more accessible.

I finally found my way back to fieldwork in Mexico when I learned of Esperanza, in the town of Mexquitic, who was considered a “bruja.” At first she intimidated me, but eventually I was drawn into a relationship with her and we became comadres. She was strong-willed, sharply aware of how gender, race, and class limited her possibilities in life. She asked questions that led me to a lot of self-interrogation of my privilege as a writer and an ethnographer. The book I wrote about her (Behar, 1993 and 2009) is both her life story and an examination of the politics of my being able to cross the Mexican border and bring her story to the United States for processing and consumption.

As I look back at her story now, in the context of the U.S. Supreme Court's abortion ruling, Esperanza was a woman aware that she was not in control of her fertility. She told me about giving birth to several babies who died from the rage — *el coraje* — they swallowed with her breast milk. The rage came from having suffered seeing her mother suffer from domestic violence. Then, like her mother, she too endured the pain of beatings from an abusive husband. But she found the courage to leave her husband and went to work as a street peddler to support the children who survived. Because she wasn't ashamed of her independence, and because her husband went blind after she left him, she was accused of being a “bruja.” In truth, she was just a woman who, before the feminist movement arose, refused to live a life she found intolerable.

Esperanza took pride in her own life story, what she called her *historias*. She understood in her heart — though there was no official confirmation of it anywhere in her social world — that her *historias* mattered. Alone and wretched, but she had her *historias*. She insisted her youngest son and daughter be present during the interview sessions. She wanted them to appreciate the importance that I — an educated woman from *el*

otro lado — gave her life story in wanting to turn it into a book. She was passing on her legacy to her children and to me at the same time.

Disparaged as a *bruja* in her community, Esperanza had been unafraid to speak up and protest the injustice of her condition. Her life was lived before the feminist movement asserted that women should have the same opportunities as men to develop their intellectual and creative gifts, without fear of discrimination, abuse, and oppression. I learned through my relationship with Esperanza that before feminism existed, there were brave women. She was one of these brave women. We recognize now that the struggles of women like Esperanza brought feminism into being. With the regressive turn in women's rights that we are witnessing in this current moment, I expect we will again be looking to brave women to speak up, knowing they will be accused of being *brujas* for demanding the right to their full humanity.

* * *

After the journeys to Spain and Mexico, I began to travel back and forth to Cuba. Many Cuban exiles, like my parents, refuse to return to visit the island, not wanting to engage with a country they fled. Going to Cuba against my parents' will, I felt that I was being ungrateful for the sacrifices they'd made to give me a better life in the U.S. I was “una niña vieja,” and the first visits were so intense that I cried inexplicably. I kept wishing my parents could accompany me. Instead, they feared for my safety. Every time I went to Cuba I worried I wouldn't be allowed out again. Yet I was determined to create a normal relationship with my native land and sought to build cultural bridges between Cubans and Cuban-Americans. I returned to the places where my family lived, where I lived, as if to reclaim those sites of memory and make them mine again.

Initially, I couldn't bring myself to do fieldwork in Cuba, so I wrote poems, then personal essays and stories. I formed friendships with writers and artists, including a close bond with the Cuban book artist Rolando Estévez who urged me to translate my poems from English to Spanish so they could be known on the island. We have collaborated on several projects and he has created beautiful handmade books that feature my writing. Going back to Cuba allowed me to release the creative soul that had been hiding within the anthropologist. Poems about returning to Cuba, about the sea, about love and loss and mortality, about the broken streets of Havana, were how I found my way back to the country where my childhood had been interrupted.

Eventually, I felt ready to do fieldwork and chose to study the Jewish community from my perspective as a diasporic anthropologist. After the revolution turned communist in 1961, the majority of the island's 15,000 Jews left for the United States. Their economic livelihood was threatened when private businesses were expropriated (most were merchants or peddlers) and they feared their Jewish identity would be at risk when religious schools were shut down and atheism imposed on the nation. Only around 1,500 Jews stayed, some because they believed in the revolution, some because they didn't want to leave Cuba.

At four and a half, I was part of the exodus of the Jews who fled Cuba. Looking at my family's old black-and-white photographs, I wondered what traces were left of the Jewish presence — the cemeteries, synagogues, and Torahs? Who was taking care of this legacy? What Jewish memories had survived the years of revolutionary atheism? What had become of the handful of Jews who stayed on the island? Who might I have been had my family chosen to stay rather than leave?

Searching for answers to these questions, I traveled all over the island meeting with Jews in cities and towns. Rather than writing an ethnography of a community, I created a chronicle of my encounters (Behar, 2007 and 2010). Some people I knew well; others I met only once and with a sense of urgency, knowing we wouldn't see each other again. Documents and keepsakes were the means by which people proved they were Jewish, allowing them to participate in the community and even, if they wished, to leave Cuba for Israel. They held up for my gaze the relics, photographs, souvenirs and documents they had saved — the photo of the last *quinceañera* celebrated at the Patronato Synagogue in 1959, the tallit, or prayer shawl, that had belonged to a beloved grandfather from Turkey, the Jewish marriage contract of grandparents that could be used as a "passport" to leave the island, the conversion documents that certified their Jewishness, and the postcard sent decades earlier to Cuba from a relative in a concentration camp.

I became aware of how material things play a key role in weaving together past, present, and future. I think of my mother: when we fled Cuba, my father deciding from one day to the next that he couldn't live in a communist regime, she had the presence of mind to pack in her suitcase two garments I am so grateful she salvaged — her honeymoon nightgown, made from the lace my grandparents sold in their store in Havana and sewn to fit her body; and my blue school uniform, which I wore for a few months, but forever reminds me I was once a little girl in Cuba.

Unlike the Jewish community that existed in my parents' time, where marrying someone of another faith was considered taboo, the majority

of Jews in Cuba today aren't genealogically Jewish. They are "Jews by choice," some of them descendants of Jews who married non-Jews and were exiled from the community in the pre-1959 period, some of them non-Jews who have married into the community and undergone religious conversion. They are a microcosm of Cuba, inclusive of people from a wide range of racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds. I feel a deep sense of gratitude both to the Jews who remained in Cuba and to those who have chosen to become part of the Jewish community. Though now fewer than a thousand, the responsibility of guarding over Jewish memory on the island is huge; without them, that memory would be lost. I recognize that my writing is an acknowledgment of my debt to their presence and the hope that the Jewish legacy won't disappear from the soil of Cuba.

* * *

After years of obsessive back-and-forth trips to Cuba, I returned again to Spain, where my journeys began. It was a new century and the Spain I'd known years before had been transformed. The communal life of pueblos like Santa María had ended; the elders I'd known had passed away, and the few survivors were living with their families in the cities. There were more immigrants in Spain and an awareness of Spaniards who were Afrodescendientes. Chinese restaurants had become part of the urban landscape. And, I noticed, an official and popular interest in Sephardic history and culture had arisen and there were now people in Spain proud to claim Jewish ancestry. The Red de Juderías de España had come into existence, creating a new consciousness about the towns and cities where Jews had lived over 500 years ago and making it possible to visit restored synagogues now turned into museums.

Of course I found my way to Béjar, where I was part of a quirky summit of Sephardic Jews with the last name Behar who gathered together (in 2004) to search for our roots in that town, so close to Salamanca. Though in the end we didn't arrive at a definitive conclusion about our origins, I, along with most of the participants, came to feel a spiritual connection to Béjar, and was glad to be present for the launch of their Jewish Museum. Like my fellow Behars, I felt a strange joy having a town in Spain welcome me back as if I still belonged (Behar, 2013a and 2020a). I hoped it was consolation enough for our ancestors who left Spain singing love songs they couldn't forget.

* * *

What in the end has been the purpose of all my travels? My brother asked me this question. He is a musician in Philadelphia and hates to travel. He prefers to stay home, to compose, play piano, live in the world of music, not be troubled by the discomfort and anxiety of going elsewhere. You go on far away journeys and what do you find? he teased. Just people, right? So why not focus on the people around you?

As I've grown older, I've come to understand my brother's perspective. I am learning about the pleasure of not going anywhere and taking journeys of the imagination. Of course in anthropology, we often take the journey and then return to a place we call home to write the story retrospectively — we also draw on the imagination to write our ethnographies. And fictional stories often require research — whether historical or ethnographic or both. But it is still quite a different experience to embroider upon the truth, to put thoughts inside the heads of characters, and words in their mouths, to invent people who never existed in real life (as far as you know), or invent people who did exist and make them nicer than they were or perhaps more interesting.

I found my way into fiction when I began writing *Lucky Broken Girl*, a story told by a ten-year-old immigrant girl named Ruthie (Behar, 2017 and 2022c). She has begun to adjust to her new life in New York after leaving Cuba with her family and then is severely injured in a car accident and must spend a year in bed in a body cast to recover. It was liberating and wildly exciting to be constrained only by my imagination in writing this novel, though it was based on a true story. Ruthie was me and wasn't me. I had to put myself not only in the head of the girl I was so many years ago; I also had to put myself in her body and feel again the terror of being confined to bed and being utterly helpless, unable to move, dependent on her mother and others to care for her, and her nakedness covered only by a bed sheet, while the future was filled with uncertainty.

I had first told the story in an essay, "The Girl in the Cast" (Behar, 1996: 104-135), where I addressed how this traumatic event affected me emotionally and years later brought on terrible panic attacks. I also reflected on how my notion of "the vulnerable observer" sprang from this experience. That thinking process was important, but it was only when I began creating a fictional world around the experience that I finally understood how great enchantment can be wielded by the pen. I had the power to invent things that had never happened and make them seem true. Words I wished had been said to me could be said at last and make my heart so happy. In the book, there's a moment where Ruthie has a smaller cast on the right leg but must still stay in bed. It's New Year's Day and snowing. The two hospital attendants who have been taking her to the

hospital for her doctor's visits make a surprise visit with a stretcher. They take her out to play in the snow with the other kids and make a snowman. Ruthie is overjoyed. She feels almost like a normal girl again. As I wrote, I felt the beauty of that moment. It seemed so real, I could feel the snowflakes. And when my mother read it, she said, "I remember when that happened." But I had to tell her, "Mami, that never happened. I made it up." I had wanted magic in this otherwise gloomy story and through fiction I had permission to create it.

It wasn't simply Ruthie's voice that needed to be represented but that of the entire community that surrounded her — family, neighbors, friends, the doctor, the nurses, the physical therapist. In that sense, I felt like I was again doing anthropology, understanding the "village" in which this young person's experience unfolded. I wanted to be sure that not only her Cuban Jewish background was shown, but that those around her also had complex identities. The characters are Mexican, Belgian, Puerto Rican, Irish, and Bengali, and their subjectivities as immigrants are presented in a nuanced way, showing how they converge in the neighborhood of Queens, New York. Ultimately, I wanted to show the vast diversity in which I grew up, aware of my Cuban Jewish identity while intersecting with many other people who were starting a new life while still seeking to hold on to the cultural legacies of the countries they'd left behind.

* * *

I went on to write a second novel, *Letters from Cuba*, sparked by my horror at the criminalization of immigrants on the U.S. border and how children were being separated from their families and placed in cages (Behar, 2020b and 2021). I wanted to speak out against the cruelty of the anti-immigrant stance and it occurred to me that my family was part of this story. My four Jewish grandparents were not able to enter the United States in the 1920s and 1930s because of a racist immigration policy that imposed quotas on Eastern and Southern European immigrants. Unwanted in the United States, they went to Cuba instead. That led to my parents being born in Cuba, and I too. After the 1959 revolution, we were welcomed with open arms into the United States, the same country that had closed the door to my family in an earlier era. I am a Latina writer because of the twists and turns of the racial politics surrounding immigration to the United States.

Of my four grandparents, my maternal grandmother Esther had a dramatic story that I had been entranced by since I was a child. Esther was the first of seven children to take a ship across the ocean to meet up

with her father, who was already in Cuba struggling to make a living. He had saved enough money to only bring one of his children to Cuba and wanted to choose his older son. But my grandmother, the eldest of all the children, begged him to let her be the first to go, promising that she'd help him bring the rest of the family to Cuba. She kept her promise and she saved her family, getting them out of Poland on the eve of the Holocaust. I was drawn to my grandmother's bravery, and took inspiration from her story to create a fictional tale focused on a Polish Jewish girl who becomes enamored of Cuba's diverse cultures and religions.

In addition to my interest in the history of the Jews in Cuba, I've examined the African roots of Cuban culture. The island has preserved an impressive amount of West African culture — religious, musical, dance — and it's been said that people come from Nigeria to witness rituals that their ancestors once performed. I chose to set the novel in Agramonte, a sugar-growing town in the province of Matanzas, because that's where my grandmother and her family lived when they were all reunited in Cuba. Agramonte is a historic hub of Afro-Cuban culture and I was lucky to go there several times and witness rituals performed with the sacred batá drums. The drums appear in the story and make Esther aware of another form of spirituality, different from Jewish traditions, but equally beautiful in preserving a legacy from a faraway past.

I chose to write the book as a series of letters that Esther writes to her sister Malka, who is waiting in Poland with the rest of the family until she can come to Cuba. The story takes place in 1938. I thought about what it was like in the pre-internet era when people took a ship across the ocean and ended up in a very different place. They communicated through letters, where they shared personal stories and practical information. I found several books with published letters by immigrants to the United States, but unfortunately there isn't an archive of letters penned by Jewish immigrants to Cuba. I had to invent the letters, using my imagination to fill in the gap. Where history is missing, we turn to the imagination to tell the stories that would otherwise be lost to future generations.

* * *

Most recently, I've written a book for younger children, a picture book, *Tía Fortuna's New Home*, and in Spanish, *El nuevo hogar de Tía Fortuna* (Behar, 2022a and 2022b). It was an interesting challenge to tell an entire story in less than 1,000 words. I felt I was writing a prose poem. Though a book for small children, ages 4 to 6, I knew that an adult would

be reading the book to a child and so the story had to appeal to both the child inside the adult and to the child who is being read the story.

It's very bittersweet, this story, which is not surprising, since it focuses on the Sephardic legacy, which is melancholy by definition. I imagined a little girl named Estrella accompanying her Tía Fortuna on the day she has to move from her pink casita on the beach and create a new home for herself in an assisted living residence. The pink casita is part of a building called the Seaway that is going to be demolished to construct a luxury hotel. Tía Fortuna has no choice but to move. In a way, like her ancestors five-hundred-years ago, she is being expelled.

Tía Fortuna has lost a home in Cuba and now she is losing a home in Miami Beach and she is well aware of the ancestors who lost their homes in Spain and Turkey. But not wanting to sadden her niece, she tells her the borekas she offers her — like empanadas, filled with potatoes and cheese — contain a special ingredient, *esperanza*, since their ancestors found hope wherever they went. Her language is filled with Ladino expressions like “*mazal bueno*” and the Arabic “*Mashallah*,” which Sephardic Jews use often, to say “*si Dios quiere*.”

Tía Fortuna still has the key to the home she lost in Cuba, and she pockets the key to the home she is losing in Miami Beach too. After settling in at the “*casa de los viejitos*,” she gives Estrella a special gift — the key to the pink casita. The legend goes that the Sephardim took the keys to their houses with them when they left Spain. Even young Estrella comes to understand the loss of home. The key, which can no longer open the door to a home that will be destroyed, will still spark memories in her heart, perhaps the only home that no one can take away from us.

* * *

We've taken lots of journeys in this lecture and hopefully I haven't tired you out!

As I think back to what drew me to anthropology, it was the idea of seeking voluntary periods of exile. To live between homes, between languages, between cosmologies, made sense to me having been an immigrant child. That I could pursue this state of in-betweenness as a profession seemed incredible. The promise wasn't that you would find home. The promise was you'd have unfettered consent to engage with the world in the manner that immigrants do — obsessively aware of impermanence and grateful for moments of connection.

Anthropology fulfilled that promise for me. I have been fortunate to engage with the world as an immigrant in many places, knowing my pre-

sence was ephemeral yet finding those moments of connection. I've sought to create legacies and preserve cultural memory through ethnographic research, life history research, archival research, and by writing fiction for children and young adults. I cannot say what will become of this knowledge. But on several occasions, it has warmed my heart to witness the beautifully unexpected intersections that have taken place, bonding me to a range of people who found value in my work that I didn't know was there.

It's dizzying to think of how we are amassing documentation about ourselves at a rate and at an amount unprecedented in human history, not to mention what surveillance cameras and other invasive data-collecting tools are gathering. We are leaving behind archives of the profound and the trivial. Will those archives prove to be a burden to those who come after us? What will happen to the vast number of Selfies being taken each day? To whom will they matter? How will decisions be made about what to keep and what to dispense with? Might everything end up being deleted at the flip of a switch?

I believe we create legacies not knowing what will last and what will vanish. Politics, of course, plays a significant role in which individuals and communities are remembered and honored. The struggle for legacy is the struggle for culture, knowledge, and truth. The voices and histories that are preserved have the backing of the forces of power and the social system built through it. Anthropologists and writers strive to push against the weight of those forces of power, giving voice to alternative stories that need to be heard.

With the world on fire, we can't know what legacies will disappear or prove too burdensome to hold on to, as new generations try to survive amid new complexities. But I think the work we do as anthropologists and writers, slowly building an understanding of a few human beings at a time, slowly learning in detail the dilemmas those human beings face in sustaining their own humanity, slowly seeking to understand the communities that shape them, is important work that will outlive us. It is my hope that even in these times of strife and intense political divisions, we will find a way to join together in our interconnectedness and heal our global society and our one and only planet. As vulnerable observers, let's build that trust so we can fill in the gaps in our histories and strive to imagine a more equitable and creative future, filled with the real and imaginative journeys of the immigrant who lives with a suitcase by her bed.

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