

Traveling Heavy: A Memoir between Journeys

Ruth Behar

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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 She reminisces about how she transcribed her great-grandfather's unpublished memoir in her grandmother Baba's kitchen while Baba patiently translated the Yiddish text into Spanish.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 (Summer 2013)

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