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IN BRIDGES, AUTHOR FINDS UNDERSTANDING
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Once, from a friend in Havana, Ruth Behar -- Cuban-American author, anthropologist and dedicated bridge builder -- received a postcard with this most telling epigraph: Walls/ Turned on their sides/ Are bridges.

The anonymous lines capture Behar's life work. Bridges. They have taken her into villages in Spain and Mexico, where in the course of studying others, she has come to understand her own exile identity.

Today she sits with me at a South Beach cafe, days after having attended the Havana encounter between expatriates and government officials, the event that had been supposed to be a great big bridge.

What drew her to Havana was an anthropologist's curiosity. She believes in small D dialogues, the tiny exchanges that flow between the people, not the powers.

But there, she found few bridges in the official events. There were intriguing affirmations of identity from exiled Cubans. "But this seemed the wrong setting for these confessions of Cubanness," says the 37-year-old University of Michigan professor and author of a new book on the life of a poor woman from a Mexican village.

Behar seems far removed from the aftermath of the Havana encounter. As the local reaction clings to the most flagrant videotaped scenes, Behar was in a Lincoln Road bookstore, reading from her *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. While the buzz seems frozen upon the Miami lawyer who kissed Fidel, Behar moved on. She had skipped Castro's reception because it would have hurt her parents.

This is why, in this fragile time, I sought out the woman whose work earned her a MacArthur genius grant six years ago. What now, after dialogue has been all but declared dead in the water, its proponents left like corpses no one wants to claim?

"I'm tired of polarizations on this side. I'm tired of polarizations on that side," she says in a language that keeps her safely from political detours.

She believes you could look at Cuban dialogue two ways: A move by the state to control the diaspora. Or an exchange between family and friends. In Behar's case, that would mean Tere and Caro, the Cuban nannies who helped raise Behar and her cousins. People who didn't get invited to the Dialogue.

They live at the other side of bridges tethered by pain and loss, in a place where, as Behar quotes a Havana friend, people's arms are tired of waving goodbye. It was these human bridges that inspired Behar's writings.

She wrote this about a young cousin whose grave she visited in a Jewish cemetery in Havana:

"I reach for my camera/ But the shutter won't click/ Through ninety long miles/ Of burned bridges I've come/ And Henry Levin won't smile."

She has become an anthologist of young Cuban voices. She is compiling the work of Cubans here and on the island for a double issue of the Michigan Quarterly Review this summer. She hopes to etch a "meeting place."

She quotes one playwright she finds particularly inspiring. Abilio Estevez lives at the other end of the bridge. This from Marine Pearl, his play about nostalgia:

"We know that to live is to lose things, but perhaps we may be granted this wish: that we may never lose this island of our despair and our hope, the Island of all Cubans of every time and place."

Perhaps it is a prayer for those who want to move on.