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Max Apple, Cynthia Ozick, Gwendolyn Brooks

International Writers Czeslaw Milosz,  
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Atwood, Mario Vargas Llosa, Chinua Achebe,  
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## Borderline Case

VICTOR PERERA

TRANSLATED WOMAN: Crossing the  
Border With Esperanza's Story. By Ruth  
Behar. Beacon. 354 pp. \$25.

In the story of Esperanza, a street  
peddler from a Mexican town 500  
miles from the U.S. border, Ruth  
Behar has found a paradigm for a  
ground-breaking Latina feminist ethnog-  
raphy. Behar, an anthropologist at the  
University of Michigan, came to this story  
fresh from studying the confessions of  
colonial Mexican women to the Inquisi-  
tion tribunals. Esperanza Hernández (a  
pseudonym) proved far more lively and  
contentious than the women who spoke  
to Behar from dusty Inquisition archives.  
And she provided a mirror for Behar to  
examine her own ambivalence and con-  
tradictions as a self-described Jewish La-  
tina "literary wetback."

These accomplishments came at some  
cost. From their very first encounter,  
when Behar asked permission to photo-  
graph Esperanza carrying calla lilies to  
the graves of her children on the Day of  
the Dead, the terms of their relationship  
were dictated by Esperanza. "What is it  
for?" she demanded, obliging the anthro-  
pologist to examine her motives. At their  
next encounter, Esperanza asked Behar  
to be godmother to one of her children.  
The relationship of *comadrazgo*, or spiri-  
tual coparenthood, became the precon-  
dition for Esperanza's cooperation in  
confiding her story. These terms denied  
Behar the professional detachment of an  
Oscar Lewis or a Margaret Mead, a  
provision that accounts for most of the  
strengths as well as the vulnerabilities of  
this important study.

In rough outline, Esperanza's narrative  
fits the prototype of a Third World wom-  
an abused and exploited by a patriarchal  
legacy embodied in her father, her hus-  
band and in-laws and ultimately in her  
sons. Her marriage to Julio, an abusive  
womanizer and improvident street ven-  
dor, is a sixteen-year-long ordeal that  
Esperanza calls "my martyrdom." The  
*corajes*, or rages, provoked by his abuse

Victor Perera is author of *Rites: A Gua-  
temalan Boyhood*, and co-author (with  
Robert D. Bruce) of *Last Lords of*  
*Palenque: The Lacandon Mayas of the*  
*Mexican Rain Forest*. In *October, Cali-  
fornia will publish his Unfinished Con-  
quest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*.

and infidelities sour Esperanza's moth-  
er's milk (she believes) and cause her to  
lose six children to malnutrition.

But Esperanza refuses to give in to her  
fate. After years of suffering her hus-  
band's abuse she turns him in to the local  
judge, who sentences him to jail for adul-  
tery. "If before you had yours, now I have  
mine," Esperanza cries out in a rage when  
she catches Julio with his lover, and pun-  
nels them both with flailing fists. At that  
moment she loses respect for Julio and  
addresses him as *tú* instead of *usted*, the  
crowning insult from a lower-class Mex-  
ican wife to her former lord and master.

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*Behar's influences are  
diverse, from Walter  
Benjamin to Elena  
Poniatowska to Gloria  
Anzaldúa.*

---

Julio's vindictive mother retaliates by  
putting hexes on her rebellious daughter-  
in-law and her mother, but Esperanza  
combats them successfully with the aid  
of an androgynous spiritist, Chenchá.  
Once begun, Esperanza's defiance of  
Mexican rural mores exceeds all accept-  
able bounds: When Julio suddenly goes  
blind, townspeople assume Esperanza has  
cast a spell on him. Her actions are mo-  
tivated by a rudimentary retributive jus-  
tice that is part Catholic and part pagan:  
"You pay for everything in this life." The  
townspeople, who fear Esperanza's *coraje*,  
accuse her of witchcraft—although nearly  
all of them consult *brujas* to fend off  
curses and exact revenge against real or  
imagined enemies.

The institution of *comadrazgo* lies at  
the heart of *Translated Woman*. Two  
women of unequal station and wealth  
form a bond of mutual stewardship and  
respect; Behar's patronage, which in-  
cludes sending expensive gifts to Esper-  
anza and her children, is reciprocated by  
Esperanza's gift of her story. The implicit  
bond of trust between *comadres* adds a  
double-edged dimension to this study:  
On the one hand, it affords Behar an in-  
timate perspective on Esperanza's life; on

the other, it opens the book to accusations of privilege and conflict of interest that are potentially harmful to both women. Esperanza repeatedly alludes to the *envidia*, or malicious envy, that her privileged relationship with the gringa anthropologist provokes in her neighbors. Behar is keenly sensitive to this danger:

By being willing to reveal more of herself to me than any other woman in Mexquitic . . . it can be said that Esperanza has been a traitor, translating for me in ways that transgress the norms of Mexican rural society. . . . Who can say whether this book will do Esperanza any good?

The central metaphor of *Translated Woman*, taken from Esperanza's folklore, is that of a "talking serpent" that can come back to tell stories on its executioners if its tongue is not cut out. In remolding her story to academic requirements, Behar fears she may be "cutting out Esperanza's tongue":

When I am done cutting out her tongue, I will patch together a new tongue for her, an odd tongue that is neither English nor Spanish, but the language of a translated woman. Esperanza will talk in this book in a way she never talked before.

For Esperanza, her "confession" of suffering alchemized into a purifying rage has a redemptive purpose; she holds back from revealing aspects of her life that do not contribute to this redemption, such as her sexuality, although the evidence suggests her sexual relations with Julio were as joyless and abusive as the rest of their life together. Esperanza's *coraje*, and her search for redemption through suffering, touched a chord in Behar. And it is here that the loss of objective distance becomes most apparent. In her continuous questioning of her *comadre's* objectives, Esperanza uncovers a startling symmetry between subject and interlocutor, one that Behar explores in the closing autobiographical section of the book.

Esperanza's defiance of her mother-in-law, for example, is reflected in Behar's provocation of the academic institution that has granted her status and financial security. Esperanza's *coraje* awakens Behar's own outrage, just as Esperanza intended it should, *comadre to comadre*. When Behar asks her how she should title the product of their collaboration, Esperanza replies, "So, my comadre, you do with this book whatever makes you really angry."

Taking Esperanza at her word, Behar

bitterly decries the fact that she can transmute Esperanza's story across the border and advance her career in the process, while Esperanza can enter the United States only as an illegal alien. For Behar, this irony pollutes even the vocabulary of her profession:

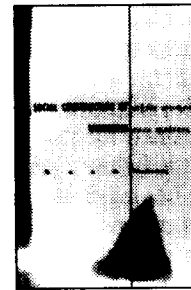
How could I call what I was doing "fieldwork" when I was not allowed to forget about the existence of real workers crossing a real border to work real fields? Fieldwork in Mexico, for me, could only be about the way race and class intersected with, and intercepted, cultural understanding.

Behar's rage is compounded by resentment of academic pressures that play on her feelings of insecurity, obliging her to choose tenure at Michigan rather than teach at a more laid-back institution where she can develop her skills as poet and essayist. "Will I lose my job for saying all this?" she asks at one point, after a scathing denunciation of academic politics. The question is rhetorical, as Behar's fractiousness is right in step with the current crisis of identity in the social sciences. Far from being fired, she will instead be promoted and further rewarded as a standard-bearer of feminist ethnography.

Behar's mentors and influences are diverse, ranging from the critic Walter Benjamin and Mexican journalist Elena Poniatowska to emerging feminist ethnographers who include Lila Abu-Lughod and Sally Cole; but Behar draws most support from Chicana and Latina writers who embrace Esperanza's rebelliousness and *brujerías*. It was Gloria Anzaldúa who encouraged Behar to append an autobiographical chapter that would "set things afire." Sandra Cisneros counseled her to give free rein to the witchy side of Esperanza, to enhance a sense of ethnic pride. Evidently, Behar has been claimed by these vanguard Chicana writers as one of their own. They have discovered the power of Esperanza's story, and will use it to carve out a political space in a patriarchal gringo society. "Chicano and Chicana writers have so radically shifted the terms of cultural analysis," Behar writes, "that it now seems impossible to imagine doing any kind of ethnography without the concept of the borderlands or the border crossings." (Behar herself is an impure Latina, as she admits from the outset—Cuban/Jewish and gringa/Chicana.)

In her moving autobiographical essay, "The Story of Ruth, the Anthropologist," Behar uncovers the seeds of her *coraje*—and her ambivalence toward U.S.

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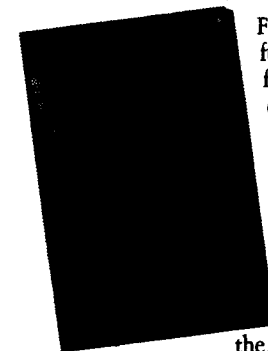
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patriarchal culture—in a desolate memory of uprootedness from the age of 5, after her parents decided to leave Cuba. This memory continues to fuel her sense of marginalization and her sisterhood with Chicana writers. It also underlies her oft-stated quandary: “How do you remain in the academy without becoming a sell-out, a Malinche to feminism?”

One could argue that the academy has proved to be the chief crucible for evolving a postmodern feminist ideology.

It is a tribute to Ruth Behar’s professionalism that neither her legitimate ambivalences nor the obligations of *comadrazgo* prevent her from presenting a fully dimensional portrait—warts and all—of Esperanza, the power of whose story matches any of those recorded by Oscar Lewis and more traditional anthropologists. Behar is all too aware that the theoretical underpinnings of feminist ethnography would not interest her *comadre*, who viewed her story more in terms of a melodramatic confession; what intrigues Esperanza is that Behar has succeeded in a male gringo world, that she has a gentle, caring husband who helps her to be a full-time mother and university professor. (Esperanza’s views of her *comadre*’s world—and of her Jewishness in particular—would make for an intriguing study that explores the concept of “translated woman” from a Third World perspective.)

The closing section of *Translated Woman* could stand as a set piece in a larger autobiographical work. For this reader, what is most interesting in it is the balancing of polarities between the university investigator and the poet/essayist, the “mestizo” Jew and the Cuban Chicana. But does this polemical self-portrait belong in a book about a Mexican peddler? Something rings false in Behar’s comparing herself to her *comadre* as fellow literary wetbacks and victims of the patriarchy. It is disingenuous to compare the suffering Mexican village society inflicts on Esperanza for rebelling against its strictures with the ordeal of having to accept tenure at a prominent university. Esperanza’s betrayal of her Mexican mores is not comparable to Behar’s determination to be an “academic traitor.” (“Comadre, if you are going to bite the hand that feeds you,” Esperanza might well have advised, “you have to sink your teeth into it.”)

The strengths and frailties of Esperanza’s story—and of this book—are so closely bound together they may prove impossible to separate. But if in fact the

two women’s marginalizations are mirror images, as Behar claims, that theme could best be explored in the larger text, within the *comadre* relationship. The final section may make for feisty and innovative

feminist anthropology, but it shifts the book’s gravitational center in a wrenching way that detracts from more than it contributes to an otherwise powerful and brilliant study. □

## Hecht to Pay

CHRIS CALHOUN

TRUST YOUR MOTHER BUT CUT THE CARDS. *By Sidney Zion. Barricade Books. 312 pp. \$15.95.*

A couple of months ago New York newspaper followers witnessed two occurrences that are starting to look routine. The *New York Post* was yet again sold and saved, and Sidney Zion was fired from another paper (this time the uptown broadsheet *New York Observer*).

Those who welcomed Rupert Murdoch back to the *Post* with open arms (the employees were waving white flags) spoke in high-minded tones of preserving a crucial editorial voice and maintaining independent views, and went on and on about how the rough and tumble tab caught an invaluable reflection of New York’s rowdy side. “It just wouldn’t be New York without the *Post*!” went the cry.

They could have been—should have been—saying the same for Sidney Zion. In his first collection of journalism, the legendary *Read All About It!*, Zion listed as his “alma mater” Ben Hecht, A.J. Liebling, Ring Lardner, Damon Runyon, Walter Winchell, William O. Douglas and Hugo Black, among others. What he has most in common with this crowd—not to mention H.L. Mencken, the relatively radical Heywood Broun and even the reactionary misanthrope Westbrook Pegler—is a brazen contempt for the official line. He’s a First Amendment junkie’s junkie who has fashioned a fetish of political incorrectness.

Zion, a former assistant U.S. attorney, is always at his best as Bill of Rights vigilante. In his rousing piece “William Kennedy Smith and Trial by Headlines,” he simultaneously nails the press for collective self-censorship while arguing that refusing to name the accuser in a rape trial is not only patronizing to women but profoundly un-American. “We have lost our way when we decide that the role of the press is to protect not the accused but

the accuser. . . . It is, I suppose, politically correct. The next time I hear that phrase I reach for my revolver. And if you care about the Bill of Rights, cover me.” Somewhere, Justice Douglas is smiling.

Zion is one of the last practitioners of the “Hello, Sweetheart, Get Me Rewrite!” school of journalism. That is, he unashamedly loves the whole game and wants his readers to be in on it. His column on how *New York Post* owner Dolly Schiff tried to economize and took the J.F.K. assassination story from the wires is an absolute howler.

Unlike *Read All About It!*, where he gave colorful background on how each piece made it into print, the little dramas behind the columns collected here are left out except for one nugget on how tightwad Marvin Shanken, publisher of *Cigar Aficionado*, stiffed him and he had to threaten to sue for a cheesy kill fee. The story is so funny, it’s better than the piece. The cocky, hard-boiled “Front Page” tone of the columns owes a debt to Ben Hecht, as does Zion’s fierce advocacy for Israel. With great pride and swagger he glorifies all the famous Jewish gangsters and declares baldly, “If you’re against Israel you have no character.”

It seems a bit easy to label Zion a “throwback,” but he has worked so hard at it I guess it’s his due. He chains cigars and good-naturedly describes himself as “perhaps the last Jewish drunk since Toots Shor.” Only he could write a column like “Reaching From a Check,” in which he lists the town’s great cheap-skates and tips his readers to the phenomenon of “hang back wives”—uptown women married to cheapies who “after their husbands pay the check . . . have to figure out ruses to hang back and throw a few extra bucks on the table so they can come back again without getting hair in the soup.”

In “Only for Mad Dogs and Joggers,” Zion and his wife are all dressed up and on their way to a cabaret at 10:30 when a young neighbor on the elevator “off to catch the video store before it closed” says, “What a great thing to go out at this hour!” It’s a touching lament on the slow death of New York nightlife—not that

*Chris Calhoun is a literary agent in New York City.*