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Notable Books of the Year 1993

This list has been selected from books reviewed since the Christmas Books issue of December 1992. The list suggests only high points in the main fields of reader interest, and it does not include titles chosen by the editors of the Book Review as the Best Books of 1993. Books are arranged alphabetically under subject headings.

TRANSLATED WOMAN: Crossing the Border With Esperanza's Story. By Ruth Behar. (Beacon, $25.) An experimental ethnographic biography in two parts — one about the short-fused, furious Mexican Indian woman who manages to use the author, an anthropologist, to take revenge on her disdainful neighbors; the other about the anthropologist's own rage and redemption.

Behar/TRANSLATED WOMAN
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The Academic and the Witch

The author learned more than she expected from her subject.

TRANSLATED WOMAN
Crossing the Border With Esperanza's Story.
By Ruth Behar.
Illustrated. 372 pp. Boston:
Beacon Press. $25.

By Nancy Scheper-Hughes

THIS experimental narrative begins and ends with the rage of two oddly juxtaposed and intersected women — one a short-tempered Mexican Indian woman named Esperanza Hernández, the other a high-spirited Cuban-American anthropologist from the University of Michigan named Ruth Behar. The book is full of revenge and, in the end, redemption.

On the surface, at least, "Translated Woman" is Esperanza's story, the oral history (as told to Ms. Behar) of a fruit and flower peddler who is a putative witch, a woman said to have cast a spell on her philandering husband. According to one story, she struck him blind and fairly chortled that she did it "so that you will never again see women!"

Ms. Behar first encountered her anthropological subject on the Day of the Dead in 1983 in the cemetery of a dusty little town some 500 miles south of the border. Amid the profusion of lavishly decorated tombstones, Esperanza appeared carrying a huge bouquet of calla lilies in her arms, looking to Ms. Behar like a perfect study for one of Diego Rivera's epic paintings. "Click!" went the anthropologist's camera, and "snap!" went Esperanza's sharp tongue: *Why*, she asked, did the photographer want to take *her* picture? The Diego Rivera image talked back and challenged the anthropologist's assumed permission to capture her subject.

Instead, it was Esperanza who would capture the anthropologist, who would use her as a vehicle for her own revenge against the many villagers who had slighted and abused her. She distracted and finally subverted Ms. Behar from her intended archival study of women's confession stories from the colonial Mexican Inquisition, by presenting herself as an irresistible living subject, full of rage, courage and spite, as a woman who demanded an audience, and preferably a Yanqui one. While local village women would only "laugh like hell" at the pretensions of an ignorant Indian with a story to tell, Esperanza said, the gringos across the border just might recognize the intrinsic value of a great story. So she offered her life as an object lesson in the female heroic, a decidedly underexamined genre.

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Night after night during field seasons in 1985, 1987, 1988 and 1989, Esperanza, disguised under the wraps of her black rebozo (it wouldn't do at all for curious neighbors to suspect this odd collaboration between the privileged gringa and the traitorous Indian), knocked quietly at Ms. Behar's door. Once inside, Esperanza would take her accustomed place at the kitchen table, where, ignoring the late hour and the anthropologist's husband nodding off in the corner, she would string her radiant stories together like the beads of a rosary.

Esperanza's stories are dialogical, and they are performed more than told. Much, then, is necessarily lost in translation. One can only imagine this expressive Indian woman taking the parts of each of her key characters (family members and in-laws, bosses, petty officials, clerks, priests and other authorities of church and state) who will prove themselves in turn to be loyal or despicable, grand or venal, stupid and brutal or (the very few) wise and noble. Her stories are full of wit, irony and vitality, and they all underscore her self-importance. One is mesmerized and wonders how the words might fall in their original and sonorous Spanish. (She speaks neither the Nahuatl of her grandparents nor the English of her interlocutor.)

Esperanza's narrative contains all the predictable tropes of her desperately poor, female, lower-class Mexican origins. She begins as the hungry, battered and exploited child, later becomes the abused lover and abandoned wife, then the rejected and pitied single mother and finally the crafty and manipulative street vendor who also happens to be a credulous practitioner of woman's magic.

But Esperanza emerges from her potential victimhood as a person in charge of her life and cognizant of the lessons and meanings to be gleaned from it. She moves gracefully across the stage of her own making — from the stories of early suffering and sexual humiliation, the birth and death of her infants, the struggles over property and land, the righteous anger and various forms of sweet revenge, to the stories of her eventual self-mastery. Esperanza knows that she has earned the right to a place of honor and respect through her suffering, and she flaunts her wounds like an impaled, though ecstatic, St. Sebastian.

Her virtues seem to be manly ones: stoicism in the face of bodily pain, heroism against evil and dishonor, pride in her independence and in her ability to provide for the material needs of others. Perhaps this is meant to prepare us for the final twist in Esperanza's life history: her paradoxical "redemption" when, as a mature and reflective older woman, she joins a new religious cult that initiates believers into the practice of violent trance and possession by the wild and macho spirit of Pancho Villa. In all, Esperanza's story is a stunning critique and reversal of the received image of the passive and humble Mexican Indian woman.

All of this makes for engrossing reading at the hands of a skillful interpreter who, until the very end of the book, chooses to remain in the shadows, wrapped in her own cloak of obscurity. Ms. Behar is the mother confessor, a willing and nonjudgmental ear to the many slights and sins that Esperanza chooses to reveal. She listens without comment or interruption and allows the storyteller to frame her life the way she chooses, making herself appropriately small against the largeness of her subject.

This obscurity is breached in the final chapter, however, when the anthropologist steps forward to tell her own story of rage and redemption, attempting to link her biography with that of her subject. Ms. Behar rails at the ignorance of her high school teachers and her parents, who underestimated the intellectual power and the ambitions of a young Cuban immigrant in New York City. Later, hiring and tenure practices at the University of Michigan are offered as another source of humiliation.

It is only through the "redemption" of her MacArthur fellowship that Ms. Behar can prove to herself (and to others) that she, like Esperanza, is a force with which to be reckoned. Beware the fury of a patronized woman! The two "translated," "border-crossing" women intersect, but the metaphor is contrived and the lesson is clear: the lives of anthropologists are rarely as rich and fascinating as those of their subjects.

Nonetheless, Ms. Behar has broken many taboos and inhibitions in writing an experimental ethnographic text that has for its subject a poor native Mexican woman who refuses to be a pitiful victim, or a saint, or a Madonna, or a whore, or a Joan of Arc. Esperanza the hopeful is instead a master of the tactics of getting by and making do, and having a few good belly laughs along the way, with her hands cupped over her mouth and her rebozo dropped carelessly around her shoulders. □

Nancy Scheper-Hughes is a visiting professor and chairwoman of the department of social anthropology at the University of Cape Town. Her most recent book is "Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil."