
The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart, by **Ruth Behar**. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. 195 pp. \$22.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-8070-4630-2.

MARJORIE L. DEVAULT
Syracuse University

One striking feature of contemporary ethnography is its increasingly "personal" character. In a trend celebrated by some and decried by others, many researchers have abandoned distanced, impersonal modes of writing to produce texts with more passionately individual voices. One intellectual source for this new writing has been a strong critique of conventional objectivity, which suggests that distanced, impersonal modes of presentation are incomplete. No doubt there are broader social sources as well, signaled by the widespread popularity of memoir outside of academic circles. These developments raise the persistent questions of social scientific method—questions of representational adequacy—in new forms. If we accept the personal as a legitimate part of the research text, how might and should it appear?

Ruth Behar, an anthropologist, is a leading practitioner of experimentation with personal material. In *The Vulnerable Observer*, she presents a series of essays that explore the researcher's self as it shapes and is shaped by the research encounter. Locating these essays in the rich but uncertain field of new directions, she provides not an autobiography but something deeper and more valuable: a map of the emotions that have driven her thinking and writing. Behar recounts, for example, the pain of her first major fieldwork project, a study of customs surrounding death in a Spanish village—undertaken, reluctantly, during the summer when her grandfather lay dying in Miami. She writes about Marta, her friend transplanted from Mexico to Detroit—now a neighbor rather than informant, but still an inhabitant of a different world. And she writes about her nine-year-old self, injured in an auto accident, and the 35-year-old self who must come to terms with her long stint as "the girl in the cast." These seemingly disparate topics all offer ways of addressing the

core anthropological concerns of self and other, and the tensions of participating and observing. They offer and embroider substantive themes as well: the author's three cultures—Cuban, Jewish, and American; her profound sense of uprootedness and child's-eye attempts to make sense of her family's displacement; and the enduring pulls of childhood, the body, and a Cuban homeland. Most important, they illustrate how this scholar's work is best understood as an integral part of her contingent and highly individual life.

These core essays are beautifully crafted, thoughtful, evocative, and full of unexpected juxtapositions that bring ever deepening insights. They are bracketed by several shorter chapters that situate a "vulnerable anthropology" within the wider professional field. These more academically oriented chapters, though somewhat less compelling, are useful for explaining and commenting on the wider project. They also address, at least glancingly, some of the questions that skeptical readers are likely to ask: Writing personally, Behar assures us here, does not mean that "anything goes"; anthropologists can and must critique vulnerable writing, though perhaps in new ways.

As the text unfolds, the book's subtitle—"anthropology that breaks your heart"—gathers meanings that shift and accumulate. At first, I understood it to refer to a confessional anthropology, concerned with the emotional experiences of fieldwork. Gradually, I began to understand the phrase in terms of a deeper commitment to witnessing. Behar aims for a scholarship that engages directly and immediately with the massive transformations of a global "special period"; borrowing the Cuban shorthand, *el periodo especial*, for the time of desperate confusion and vulnerability that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Behar suggests that "new stories are rushing to be told in languages we've never used before, stories that tell truths we once hid, truths we didn't dare acknowledge, truths that shamed us" (p. 33). "Anthropology that breaks your heart," then, does so because it is scholarship that matters.

Some sociologists, deeply anxious about this kind of vulnerability in scholarly work, ask if the center can hold. But the movement this book arose from is one that doubts whether it should. For me, Behar's essays reveal, again, that "the center" is only an illusion of simplicity and normalcy. Behar invites readers to venture beyond this illusion and to risk the "irreversible voyage" (p. 2) of anthropology.