

Observer author knows of Cuba, diaspora

By ELINOR J. BRECHER
Herald Staff Writer

Several years ago, Ruth Behar, who teaches anthropology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, decided to offer a course on Cuban culture.

She often traveled to the country where she was born, which she'd left at 5, and became convinced by "all this going back and forth that I ought to do something with my anguish and ambivalence besides write poems."

Certainly, there was course content to select. But first, the perplexing matter of a course title.

In her collection of essays called *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Beacon Press, \$22), Behar, 39, details how she wrestled with the semantics of exile and displacement, history and politics, longing and grief, before finally settling on a course title, "Cuba and its Diaspora."

The first year she offered it, says Behar, who appears Sunday at the Miami Book Fair International, 15 seminar students signed up. Then she opened it up to 40, "and got 40," including 10 students from Miami, some of Cuban backgrounds, "and a large number who really want to understand Cuba and the exile community."

This is no easy task.

Pain and politics

When she looks at the complex and emotionally fraught politics of the Cuban diaspora, Behar says she sees "pain on both sides, for those uprooted and for those who had to say goodbye to the ones who left, people who lost all their neighborhood friends."

Behar counts herself among the

IF YOU GO

Ruth Behar will speak at 3:15 p.m. Sunday in Room 1101, Building 1, Miami-Dade Community College, 300 NE Second Ave., as part of the Miami Book Fair International.

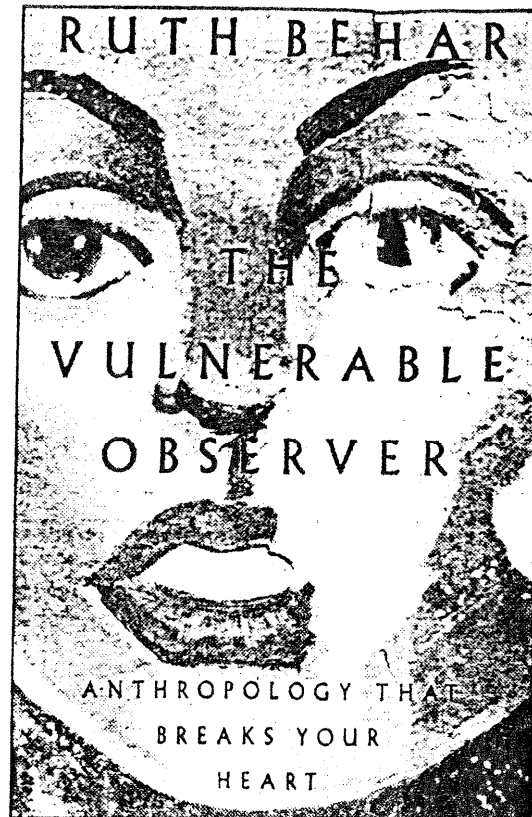
former. Her family left Cuba when she was 5 and settled in New York. Her grandparents eventually retired to Miami Beach.

Her family counted itself part of "El Grupo: all Cuban Jews, five couples and their children, who would get together and go to Cuban restaurants [in New York] . . . The fathers would come down [to Miami Beach] for a week and mothers would have a blast because the fathers weren't there."

As one who grew up in the diaspora of New York, the scene of a horrible car wreck that left her in a body cast for a year when she was 9 — Behar came to realize that return trips for all second-generation Cuban Americans "are always about recovering our abandoned childhoods. I return to Cuba in search of memories I never find."

And for several weeks after returning from Cuba, "I have a distinct fear, when I set foot in the street, that I will not be able to find my way back to the Wedgewood Blue Victorian house [in Ann Arbor]. I worry that a sudden oblivion will strike. The fear is so acute that I want to pin a piece of paper on my blouse with my address, just in case anybody finds me wandering around, lost."

These feelings, in part, have been caused by Behar's transition



ESSAYS: Ruth Behar tells how she wrestled with the semantics of exile and displacement in *The Vulnerable Observer*.

from detached observer to "vulnerable observer," someone who watches, yet becomes an emotional participant.

Behar writes that as an academic she came to see herself "playing the role of the second-rate *gringa*. I felt uneasy with the entitlement I had earned . . . of being able to speak unequivocally and uncritically for others. At the same time, I began to understand that I had been drawn to anthropology because I had grown up within three cultures — Jewish . . . Cuban and American."

Grandfather's death

It was the 1987 death of her beloved grandfather, Moishe Aaron, who had been living in Miami Beach, that sparked her transition.

At the time of his death, she was in Spain doing fieldwork, researching a paper on "the anthropology of death" while her grandfather lay dying.

"I hated myself for not having stayed in Miami Beach to help him die well, for having cowardly

and ambitiously given priority to work over feeling and love," she writes.

"Instead I went to Spain to hear the death stories of my Spanish friends because I had not wanted to face the fact that Zayde was dying."

Two years later, Behar was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant. Then she spent part of this year on a Rockefeller Research fellowship at Florida International University.

She was living in Miami Beach near her 88-year-old grandmother when the Brothers to the Rescue pilots were shot down earlier this year.

"It was amazing for me," she recalls. "I realized that if I'd been in Michigan, I wouldn't have been able to follow everything that happened. It was horrible that it happened, but it was a chance to see something so amazing take place before your eyes."

Specifically, "the creation of a death ritual," during the memorial service at the Orange Bowl, which she watched on television.