An Intermediary Genre: Clothing Social Facts with Memorial Candor in Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer*

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Abstract

As an anthropologist and a writer of fiction, Ruth Behar proposes a new genre which claims to have mixed ethnography and memoir. This study aims to look at how Behar, in *The Vulnerable Observer*, locates her memories within the academic bulwark of objectivity through calling for a method of vulnerability. Her success in going beyond the limits of both modes of writing with her use of vulnerability in observation is based on three essential factors: The first is a candid familiarity with the anthropologist's past, in which her field of study and focal points are uncoincidentally embedded, i.e. the subtext of a specific ethnographic work. The second is a coalescence of "self" and "the other" sharply divided by what Wallerstein called "world systems", which results in a meticulous exposition of the frailest parts of one's memory even unbeknownst to oneself. The third is the insertion of the dissolved meta-language of the academy and the detached scientific approach into an intermediary genre, which makes social sciences available for a wider range of interested readers.

Keywords:

Arabulucu Bir Tür: Ruth Behar'ın *Kırılgan Gözlemci*'sinde Sosyal Gerçekleri Hıfzî İçtenlikle Kuşatmak

Özet

Bir antropolog ve kurgu yazarı olarak Ruth Behar, etnografi ve hatıratı cem ettiği iddiasında olan yeni bir tür öne sürmüştür. Bu çalışma, Behar'ın *Kırılgan Gözlemci*'de 'kırılganlık usulü' çağrısında bulunarak hatıralarını akademik nesnellik istihkâmı içerisinde nasıl konumlandırdığını görmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Onun, gözlemde kırılganlığı kullanarak iki yazı biçiminin de hududunun ötesine geçme başarısı üç temel etmene dayanır: İlki, antropoloğun, çalışma alanının ve odak noktalarının rastlantısal olmayan bir biçimde iç içe geçtiği geçmişine samimi bir aşinalıktır; bir başka deyişle, hususi bir etnografik çalışmanın alt metnidir. İkincisi, kişinin kendinin dahi bîhaber olduğu, hafızasının en kırılgan yönlerinin, titizlikle sergilenmesiyle sonuçlanan, Wallerstein'ın

"dünya sistemleri" olarak adlandırdığı şey tarafından keskince ayrılan "kendi" ve "öteki"nin bir araya gelişidir. Üçüncüsü ise sosyal bilimleri daha geniş bir ilgili okuyucu kitlesi için erişilir kılan, çözülmüş akademi üst dilinin ve mesafeli bilimsel yaklaşımının arabulucu bir türe eklenişidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

antropoloji, kırılganlık, hafıza, nesnellik, öznellik

Until the 1970's, scientific inquiry showed a determination to segregate itself from unscientific approaches. The foundation of this radical understanding resided in the assumption that science was the ultimate way for reaching reliable knowledge. Although this scientificist bias continues within the domain of the physical sciences, the post-structuralist and post-modernist outlooks have shaken its validity in social sciences to a large extent. The Cuban-American anthropologist Ruth Behar has adopted an eclectic method using both objective and subjective lines of data, and her work *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996) became one of the prominent examples of reflexive ethnography at the time of its publication. Having experienced various identities (Sephardic Jewish, Cuban-American, immigrant, novelist, poet, anthropologist, and filmmaker), Behar explores how they have influenced her academic work and ethnographic perceptions by challenging previous methods of cultural anthropology. The book consists of six essays in which she tells the story of her broken leg, the death of her grandfather (for whom she uses the Yiddish term Zayde), and her visits to Spain and Cuba.

The term ethnography, based on the Greek words "ethnos" (people) and "graphia" (description), indicates a 'null subject' who commits the act of writing since any particular text cannot generate *per se* (it needs to be written by someone). How contradictory would it be, then, to simply disregard the writer of a script deriving its weaknesses and strengths from its own creator despite its claim to be fact-oriented? As fictional narratives, ethnographies are written by human persons whose biases, traumas, and diverse distorted perceptions may have serious impact on their writing. Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1989) is a revealing example of the failed claim to realism and objectivity in the clearest sense. Although it seems paradoxical, disregarding the subjectivity of any author cannot lead us to reality. As Nagel suggests, "One limit encountered by the pursuit of objectivity appears when it turns back on the self and tries to encompass subjectivity in its conception of the real" (6). Reality, in this sense, is

a harmonious whole in which objectivity and subjectivity combined help towards its completeness.

Memoir gives us a hint about self-oriented perceptions. As a genre pertaining to the personal, it conveys facts as experienced by one person at a specific time. Its main distinction from autobiography is that it aims to explore and deliberate the mental processes behind the life events of a person. Therefore their narration is also colored with personal candor revealing the true reasons behind certain patterns of outward and inward dynamics, i.e. reactions, choices, views, biases, emotions, expectations of a person rooted in the memory. The inner structure of memoir as a genre deems it pertinent to an ethnography that is vulnerable, and the reflexive turn in anthropology doubtless paved the way for the merging of the two.

This article examines how Behar, in *The Vulnerable Observer,* locates her memories within the academic bulwark of objectivity through calling for a method of vulnerability and how this literary alloy draws upon and surpasses the merits of both modes of writing. The first part of the study examines the reasons behind the need for such divergence from radical scientificism, addressing William James's doubts about the dangers of scientific monopoly and Thomas Kuhn's necessary shifts in scientific paradigm. The second part deals with Behar's use of memory as a tool for giving depth and volume to classical ethnography. Behar's work has been selected among other reflexive writings for being a harbinger of a new genre that was recently being formed and given shape in the academic arena, with a justifiable *raison d'être*. Behar's close relation to and active participation in the fictional world as the creator of a number of novels and poems, making her more knowledgeable in the literary field than her fellow anthropologists, add to the desire of discussing her writing. Her work has proved that there is likely to be more to ethnography than mere professional education and academic detachedness in the fieldwork.

Scientificism and the Shift in Scientific Paradigms

Trying to create a new genre mixed with personal details, Behar embarks on a mission in which she feels the need to give a new turn to the problem of objectivity, one of the backbones of scientific inquiry. Scientificism is radically different from belief in the validity of science in that it sees science as the sole way to reach true knowledge. When adopted in the form of an ideology, science becomes a new religion in which nothing unscientific and non-scientific can

find an eligible place for itself. William James, in *The Will to Believe*, points to the drawbacks of "Scientific Truth": "Although in its essence science only stands for a method and for no fixed belief, yet as habitually taken, both by its votaries and outsiders, it is identified with a certain fixed belief,—the belief that the hidden order of nature is mechanical exclusively, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining even such things as human life" (James 698). Not only is this misconception a theoretical mistake but also one of the biggest impediments to grasping life with all its realities. "They have simply chosen from among the entire set of propensities at their command those that were certain to construct, out of the materials given, the leanest, lowest, aridest result,— and they have sacrificed all the rest" (James 555). James regards science as one particular method that has its own rules, yet without ostracizing alternative ways of knowledge.

Kuhn's idea of "scientific paradigm" presents this problem from a new angle. According to his definition, a paradigm "…stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (Kuhn 175). Shattering the prevalent set of rules, scientific revolutions have emerged as new solutions to unfolding crises. However, the term "revolution" should not be taken in the sense of a worldwide transformation necessarily. The change in question may be limited to a specific constellation consisting of 25-30 members or one particular school and its advocates. However, it is a *sine qua non* for the way we modify our definition of science. Kuhn's groundbreaking ideas have shown us the importance of preserving adversary vantage points and their contributive force to scientific knowledge: "Paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research-engagement differently" (Kuhn 111). This perceptual transformation has been the key to the transition from Aristotelian physics respectively to Newtonian, Einsteinian and finally to Quantum physics. Therefore, "paradigm shift" seems a most necessary step towards an assiduously widening apprehension of reality.

As a form of witnessing carried out by a human subject, anthropology has always questioned the possibility of objectivity of the ethnographic work. As Behar notes, "Throughout most of the twentieth century, in scholarly fields ranging from literary criticism to anthropology to law, the reigning paradigms have traditionally called for distance, objectivity, and abstraction. The worst sin was to be 'too personal' " (12-13). She explores the conflict standing at the heart of Malinowski's controversial conception of the ethnographer proper: "Our methodology, defined by the oxymoron 'participant observer,' is split at the root: act as a participant, but don't forget to

keep your eyes open" (5). Although this argument seems to present the question of emotional involvement, i.e vulnerability, it covertly indicates the political agenda behind the emergence of anthropology: "Out of that legacy, born of the European colonial impulse to know others in order to lambast them, better manage them, or exalt them, anthropologists have made a vast intellectual cornucopia" (Behar 4). The 19th century disciplinary divisions depended on the assumed fact that the "exotic peoples" colonized by the West "required dedicated specialists to study them. Since these people were 'primitive' and had no documents, they had to be studied *in situ*, and since they were primitive and had not yet learned to differentiate their spheres of human activity, they had to be studied ethnographically, that is, by describing the linked set of their presumably unchanging patterns" (Wallerstein 96). What Wallerstein called world-systems was a capitalist system that sought to get to know the "other" only for the benefit of the world powers. Hence, the repeated call for detachment from the observed object was not entailed purely by fear of epistemic fallibility. On the contrary, it was more of an indication of an inconspicuous concern which was not scientific but considerably political in its own right.

The realization of this political and non-scientific aspect brought out the problem of representation and authorship, which demanded a shift in paradigm altogether. Becoming evident as an oxymoron especially with the deconstructivist investigations, Malinowski's "participant observer" (whose infeasibility is Behar's starting point) accelerated the dissolution of a series of claims through successive interrogation. The emergence of the first question "What does the ethnographer do?" invited further ones: "who speaks? who writes? when and where? with or to whom? under what institutional and historical circumstances?" (Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths" 13). The crisis of representation shook the realist authorial claim that declared equivalence between the representation and its object. It underscored the possibility of distortion in the conversion of experience into textual form as a consequence of "writing culture". "It was primarily through the reception of Foucault's analysis of discourse that the crisis of representation came to be reflected in the reflexive turn and defined as a problem of the dependence of cultural descriptions on power" (Bachmann-Medick 107).

The inevitable dichotomy, the dwelling gaze of the European author on "the other", as Said suggested, was invigorated by a desire to construct and sustain a self-image faithfully produced counter to this "other". It also had further implications. It found in itself the justification to decode and define the cultural patterns which diverted from those of its own.

Hence, it obtained an alleged legitimacy to speak for the "other" acting as its mouthpiece. In Johannes Fabian's terms, "denial of coevalness" was its benchmark (31).

There is a point in anthropology where the reflexive turn is led by profound insights of literary studies. The monologic and monophonic authority on which Malinowski's realist approach heavily depended was now nullified by Bakhtinian concepts. The experiential and interpretive processes of cultural anthropology were relegated to a subsidiary position and primarily replaced by dialogic and polyphonic modes of writing (Clifford, "On Orientalism" 4). Hence, the ethnographer's alleged omniscience is irrevocably shattered. Behar writes *The Vulnerable Observer* as a solution to this paradigmatic crisis. While dethroning Malinowski's authoritative interpreter and animating a novel type of narrator whose personal perspective, in accordance with the scientific countenance of fieldwork, had been rejected and condemned until then, Behar exposes the most hidden fragilities(even unbeknownst to oneself) of the researcher at work. A quite similar enterprise, suggests Behar, had been embarked on by Kay Redfield Jamison, a renowned professor of psychiatry of the time:

> Clinicians have been, for obvious reasons of licensing and hospital privileges, reluctant to make their psychiatric problems known to others… I have no idea what the long-term effects of discussing such issues so openly will be on my personal and professional life but, whatever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continually silent. I am tired of hiding, tired of misspent and knotted energies. (as qtd in Behar 10)

The genuine concern that protrudes from these lines does not go unnoticed. A psychiatrist, we perhaps falsely assume, has no right to bear any of the mental illnesses that he professionally defines and feels so proud to treat. Within the range of this false assumption, even the slightest mental abnormality, or at least any outright exposure of it is denied to him.

A part of contemporary academics demand that we present our reasons to study a particular subject matter under a professional sounding objective which is totally cleared of personal dispositions. However, just as in the case of Jamison and Behar, researchers /academics might have irrefutably personal motivations behind investing so much energy in one (not just any!) specific field. Odd as it sounds, overlooking or rejecting the validity of such propulsive ground, in fact, harms the whole character of a scientific study. Speaking to this essential component, Behar shows that the way to increase the quality of a public work is certainly not keeping one's personal investment hidden. Establishing clear connections between the researcher and her/his

subject matter "does not require a full-length autobiography, but it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and more particularly, the topic being studied" (Behar 13). The reflexive attitude in question provides us with a candid familiarity with the anthropologist's past, *quod est* her memory which works as a concomitant to her ethnographic perceptions. That is how we get to learn the subtext of any kind of text, its grip on its writer.

If we overlook the personal details of Behar's initiation to anthropology -even before her specific field- our understanding of her work is prone to be deficient and erroneous. "I began to understand that I had been drawn to anthropology because I had grown up within three cultures – Jewish (both Ashkenazi and Sephardic), Cuban, and American – and I needed to better connect my own profound sense of displacement with the professional rituals of displacement that are at the heart of anthropology" (21). In addition to this, University of Michigan's granting of tenure depends on the same reasons. Although the university officials revoke the Latina identity based on her Cuban heritage on the grounds of her Jewish roots, Michigan's chance to "boost their statistics on affirmative action hirings" brings her the position from which she wrote Esperanza's story in *Translated Woman*. "This experience called into question my ability to depict Esperanza's mixed identity, on the one hand of Indian descent, on the other cut off from much of her Indian heritage by centuries of colonialism. Was my portrait of her as reductionist, shifting, even hurtful as the university's characterization of me?" (15).

This book is also an attempt by Behar the anthropologist to help Behar the Cuban-American immigrant remember and recognize some aspects of her identity that have sunk into oblivion. All ethnographic work included in the book, in fact, connects Behar most of the time either to her own or her family's past. In the same vein, the majority of the autobiographical details enrich our understanding of Behar's methodology of research. On top of that, all narratives, be it ethnographic or autobiographical, converge in upon the same human faculty: memory.

'Remember Your Vulnerability'

The relation between ethnography and memory is more than significant. If the first part of the work consists of "being in the field" and accordingly observing certain situations and events while listening to what informants have to say about their culture, the second part necessarily requires the ethnographer to recall and process that mass of experience he had in a previous time

and revive it at the very moment of writing. This cannot but suggest, without exception, that the quality of such research rests on the dependability of retrieval. How does the ethnographic work dispel the doubts that were cast on it by the shortcomings of recalling?

Experimental memory research began in the 19th century with Hermann Ebbinghaus and continued with Frederic Bartlett's rebuttal of the former's findings. In his seminal work, *Remembering* (1932), Bartlett explored what can be called the fallacious nature of memory in whose essence laid an imposition of meaning. One of his most well-known experiments of "serial reproduction" showcased how each human subject tends to reconstruct -rather than reproduce- a famous North American folktale he has heard only minutes ago in an idiosyncratic way. After meticulous perusal of the differences in narration, Bartlett reached certain conclusions:

> 1. The stories tended to become shorter when they were remembered. 2. The stories also became more coherent: i.e. people seemed to make sense of unfamiliar material by linking this material to their pre-existing ideas, general knowledge and cultural expectations. 3. The changes people made when remembering a story tended to be associated with the reactions and emotions they experienced when they first heard it. (as qtd in Foster 12)

Drawing on Hebb's analogy originally used to hallmark perception, Neisser identified the rememberer with the paleontologist in terms of his memorial functioning. The paleontologist's process of reconstructing a dinosaur "out of a few stored bone chips" based on his professional knowledge and preconceived idea of a dinosaur is likened to the act of remembering (285). Although this web of past experiences in which we go back and forth is the foremost guarantee of our sense of identity, the verisimilitude of our remembrances is subjected to investigation.

Behar's vulnerable observer seems to have reconciled with this reconstructive operation of memory and to have succeeded in going beyond its pitfalls. Since the work derives its strength *ab inito* from the existence of a vulnerable inner world whose pushing force can be traced back to our private memories and redeems them from the scrutiny of full-fledged scientific objectivity, the interference of the personal with the social results in creation of a hybrid outlook free from sharp edges. If Malinowski can describe his observations of faraway cultures as in any way real - considering his untamed honesty in his notorious diary- Behar's sincere perception of Hispanic culture even doubles that sense of reality.

     In light of these preliminary concerns and questions, how does Behar maintain her vulnerabilities as Ruth the-Cuban-immigrant within ethnographic contours without vitiating her portrayal of Hispanic culture? Showing meaningful divergence from Geertz's and Devereux's understanding of the term in respect to purpose, her method keeps the interiorizing of fieldwork and the outpouring of private memories in accurate proportion, so that what is written vulnerably does not evolve into useless sentimentalism. "Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake…. It has to persuade us of the wisdom of not leaving the writing pad blank" (Behar 14). Disclosure of one's emotions almost always entails an outpouring of reminiscences that are related to that specific emotion. Memories (whether we are conscious of them or not) are most of the time the reasons why we react in certain ways. They are the alphabet of each person's emotional life.

     The second chapter, "Death and Memory", is comprised of two stories of death that develop and complete each other. It is the story of Behar's struggle to go to Spain to conduct fieldwork on the theme of death in order to run away from that of her own grandfather (Zayde): "This essay…. is a lament about death, loss and grief, inscribing my mourning, a double mourning, as an anthropologist and granddaughter" (81). Therefore, this chapter can be considered the most emotionally laden part in the entire book as it deals with the most solemn issue in human life.

     On the other hand, Behar's intermediary genre that intertwines ethnography and memoir not only brings a relatively distant culture's *modus vivendi* closer but also bridges the gap between that particular culture and our own by thrusting us into it. This bilateral action has emotional results by which the reader finds himself wrapped up in an empathetical state evoked by life accounts not exactly unfamiliar to that of his own. In that sense, the 19th-century anthropologist who dedicated himself, in Wallerstein's words, to investigate and define "the other", is replaced by an upgraded version of an observer who has to do more than just observing one thing at a time. One of the reasons why the reflexive turn has not still been accepted at large by the contemporary academy is this meaningful attempt to melt away the walls between the writer, reader and the objects of writing. Hence, Behar's method, while enhancing the richness of both experiences and touching on the reader's vulnerability, prompts him to take notice of his

own inner world. In this sense, Behar's work, betraying the vulnerabilities of its writer, invites its receiver to show the same sagacity to do the same for which we can call it performative. Reciprocal performativity, on the other hand, provides us with an interactive experience:

> In responding to my response to Esperanza, readers always also tell me something of their own life stories and their own struggles. Since I have put myself in the ethnographic picture, readers feel they have come to know me. They have poured their own feelings into their construction of me and in that way come to identify with me, or at least their fictional image of who I am. These responses have taught me that when readers take the voyage through anthropology's tunnel it is themselves they must be able to see in the observer who is serving as their guide. (Behar 16)

Behar's observations and commentary on the elderly peasants of Santa Maria very much reflects her inner turbulence caused by Zayde's approaching death. There is a constant switch from the stories of the observed to that of the observer. "Anthropology is constantly about displacements; that summer I displaced my fears about my grandfather's death onto my interlocutors in Santa Maria, asking them the questions that I couldn't ask my own family in order to work through the anticipation of my own grief" (43). The type of interview during which Behar engages with the local inhabitants is strained through self-awareness that can only stem from sharing a similar experience. "I have the same dilemma with Maribel as I have with Rufi. I should identify with them as someone closer to their generation, but instead I want to take the side of the older people. I feel a real loss in the refusal of Rufi and Maribel to accept the knowledge their mothers want to hand down to them. Their ethnographic distance is an exaggerated mirror to mine; I want more attachment from them" (65). The death of each elderly peasant quickens and guarantees the evanescence of Santa Maria community for their youngers have given up the duty of remembering.

Emotions have been a subject of unending debates in science due to their personal, hence subjective content. However, contemporary philosophers of emotion such as Robert Solomon emphasize that "reason and emotions are in cahoots rather than antagonists" since "emotions have their own rationality, their own reasons, their own *intelligence*" (x). An intense emotional response given in the face of a particular situation is the portent of a content that usually remained unspoken. In "Mood and Memory", Gordon Bower investigates how emotions function in the process of recalling past events. His mood-state-dependent memory suggests that "an

emotion serves as a memory unit that can enter into associations with coincident events. Activation of this emotion unit aids retrieval of events associated with it; it also primes emotional themata for use in free association, fantasies, and perceptual categorization" (129).

The last chapter of the book, "Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart", gives us parts from Behar's speech at the meeting of the American Ethnological Society. Expressing her gratitude for the Chicano critique of anthropology, she suggests that it "wryly brought home the brutal role of subjectivity in cultural interpretation by pointing to the unreality and, even worse, the humorlessness of accounts written by Anglo anthropologists, who failed to understand when the natives were joking and when they were speaking seriously, and so produced parodies of the societies they intended to describe" (Behar 162). This point well illustrates one incapability of dissociated interpretations in which the anthropologist insulates himself so much from his objects of study that he cannot distinguish, let alone understand, the topography of emotions behind what he has observed. Emotions which draw their force from memory, in this context, play a hermeneutical role. They become handmaids to apprehension at work making connections and aiding the analysis of what is seemingly distant and discursive. Thus, memories charged with emotional content, give the anthropologist, a context or a base that can sufficiently offer him grounds for understanding certain situations. A vulnerable writer avails his emotions and his own emotional content in retrieving the experience of his fieldwork and forming a meaningful account of ethnography like Ronaldo who "only came to fully understand the meaning of the rage in grief, which characterizes Ilongot headhunting in the Philippines, after the sudden tragic death of his wife, the anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, while they were in the field" (167).

In the fourth chapter, "The Girl in the Cast", Behar refers to the term "ghost limb" in relation to the story of her own leg which stayed in a cast for about a year after a car accident and kept her bedridden. When this term is taken, not purely at a physiological but also at a metaphorical level, we discover that it is closely linked with her memories which are neither complete nor so vague as not to be noticed.

> Working in Spain for me was partly about a search for something vaguer than roots, for the roots had been pulled out of the ground long ago. It was about a desire for memory, a 'community of memory' in which I might locate my own life story. At home I had sought out such communities of memory by urging my grandparents when I was growing up to tell me

stories about their past, and in Santa Maria, by seeking out the stories of elderly people and viewing the changes from their vantage point (79).

Behar was five when her family left Cuba, leaving her devoid of any vivid and clear memories. Yearning for the vaguest bit of reminiscence, she has no option other than having recourse to the Cuban Caro who took care of her and her brother until they departed for America. "I was less interested in the stories of the younger generation of villagers who had left the village for the city, just as I took little interest in hearing the stories my parents or their generation had to tell of their lives in Cuba… I was convinced at the time that only the grandparent generation could link me, two generations later, to a past that would otherwise be cast away in the wreck of oblivion" (79).

The radical discontinuity with traditions that has been brought by capitalism has rendered memories even more valuable. Behar borrows the French historian Pierre Nora's term "duty memory" in order to explicate the air that pervades the chapters on her journey to Spain and Cuba. Her personal duty to her past is as distinctive as her professional duty to history. Even though the temporariness of time does not sadden the elder generation -since they see these changes as the best thing that happened to the benefit of their children- Behar grieves the loss of traditions and customs, similar versions of which make up the Cuban part of her identity. Abandoning burials for modern niches epitomizes this irreversible reality of change. The niche "seems to be a monument to the replacement of earth by cement and all that represents, of the village replaced by the city, the rural by the urban, bread by money, fertility by capitalism" (68).

The third advantage of vulnerable writing is that it overreaches the academic milieu and touches ordinary people who are more interested in practical knowledge than abstract theories and their reflections. Their detachment from academia, however, does not relegate them into a second category in the communication of knowledge. In *Writing for Social Scientists*, Howard Becker classifies four academic personae that establish different relationships between the writer and the reader. The common denominator for the first three (persona of fancy language, classic anthropological persona, authoritative persona) is the fact that the author situates himself or herself at a higher position than the reader, whereas what Becker calls "plain folk persona" is not afraid to appeal to laypeople and has no problems with reiterating "similarities" between himself or herself and the addressee (34-37). This type of writer depends, not on the information that the reader is deprived of but very much on the least common denominator; i.e. the desire to understand. Only in this way, social sciences can be social, in terms of their scope. A social

science confined between the walls of institutions is nothing but a self-imposed abstraction from reality.

This genre helps Behar the-cultural-anthropologist ask Behar the-Cuban-immigrant to raise the question of diaspora through her academic research: "I know that I came to my sense of Cuban-American identity through my reading of Chicana/Chicano imaginings of home and homelands. Experiencing in my own flesh the visceral reality of the U.S.-Mexico border…made me think about the kinds of walls, and possible bridges that existed between Cubans of the island and the diaspora" (149). Behar's study of Esperanza's story, which was at the center of her *Translated Woman*, gives birth to a reflexive attitude towards her own situation within the U.S. as a second-generation Cuban-American. The close connection to and familiarity with other Latino diasporas and their reflexive force on her self -identity lead her away from the classical anthropological method of scientificism towards an agglutinative method that does not prioritize the scientific over the non-scientific. It recognizes the interconnectedness among the universal, the particular, and the singular without attaching itself to any of these categories of knowledge.

Conclusion

Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer* intertwines social sciences and humanities and contributes to a new scientific paradigm that dissolves the meta-language of the academy and its detached scientific approach, making anthropology available for a wider range of non-scholarly readers. Benefitting from a literary genre woven with personal memories and their emotional underpinnings, the book conveys the vulnerability of its writer and objects of its study to the reader, which altogether results in a vulnerable and more effective response. It also reduces the distance between the observer and the observed, representatives of self and the other, by joining their experiences together.

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