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**An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba**  
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**Seeking the Heart of Jewish Cuba:  
A Review of Ruth Behar’s An Island Called Home**

Barbara Tuchman (1980) declared "books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill. [Books] are engines of change, windows on the world, lighthouses erected in the sea of time" (p. 12). In keeping with this sentiment, Ruth Behar’s An Island Called Home does its part to carry Jewish Cuban culture into the 21st century. This vibrant and moving book is so not simply because of Behar’s talent as a writer but also because of the voices of the people that speak throughout. At once subjective, historical and scientific, Behar’s art mixes her personal quest for her Judeo-Cuban heritage with her anthropological research of the island’s inhabitants. The result is a literary experience as rich as the history of the Cuban island through which she moves.

In the tradition of qualitative research, Behar’s introduction is the equivalent of a subjectivities statement. She begins with her recent past, telling us with a slight sense of shame that her trips to Cuba over the last two decades of the 20th century were done with "a vague desire" that culminated in her "concrete search for the Jews who make their homes in Cuba today" (3). To answer the questioning tilt of the head to the idea of Cuban Jews, Behar
presents a concise but detailed history of Jewish emigration to the island, and a perhaps too brief mention of the Jewish exodus by 1965. But, rather than expand on the conflict between communist revolutionaries and Jewish capitalists, Behar transitions neatly into personal history by focusing on her parents as part of the emigration wave to the USA. And in this family context she places the motivations for her journey.

Beginning with family photographs, she mixes nostalgia with anthropological interest, asking, "I wondered what had become of our lost Jewish home in Cuba. What traces were left of the Jewish presence, of the cemeteries, synagogues, and Torahs?" (14). With this in mind, she wistfully recounts her journeys to Cuba over the years, emphasizing her sense of alienation and insecurity among the Jewish Cubans. Most striking is her declaration of torment over having no memories of her brief childhood in Cuba. The passage moves the piece beyond simple nostalgia and into the level of personal quest. But, before Behar lingers too long in this subjective space, the anthropologist returns, and she finishes the introduction by bringing the history of the Cuban Jewish population up to the present. Yet, despite the choice to finish with the scientific voice, we realize that Cuba is Ruth Behar’s dusty jewel and her deep obsession.

With the first section of chapters, "Blessings for the Dead," Behar appropriately prefaces her study of the living Jews with a figurative Kaddish (a traditional Jewish prayer of mourning for the dead). The Hebrew dead are not to be forgotten but to be remembered as part of the Jewish family. And Behar’s search "for all the dead Jews in Cuba" (48) shows that they are as important as the living. What the search establishes as well is Behar's kinship with the culture she investigates, for she is Jewish, and "Jews are a people who will not let go of the dead" (41). But again, this inclusion of the dead is not macabre, a point that Behar emphasizes. In looking for a "ghost named Henry Levin," (39) a family legend deceased at twelve, Behar snaps a picture that deftly poses the Jewish dead in frames of hope rather than those that "announce what it means to vanish and be nothing" (43). The tragedies of young death should quell inspiration, but they instead inspire by spurring Behar’s inquisitive spirit and becoming quiet symbols of the hopes that can be fulfilled by the island's living Jews.

Returning to this theme in later chapters, Behar presents the sheltering tomb of a young Jewish woman called Simboulita not only as a tragic memory of a life cut short but also as a reminder of the "courage and fierce
determination" (177) of the culture that laid her to rest among the Gentiles; to be Jewish in Cuba is to die and live within a proud minority. And though the Hebrew graveyards are abandoned cities of ghosts, Behar finds herself strangely comforted among the stones that bear her family name and remind her of the continuing celebration of Jewish culture of which she is a part.

Having recited a proper Kaddish, Behar moves us from the cities of the dead into the living Havana. Not to move too quickly from the markers of Jewish presence, though, she begins with the city’s synagogues. Like the gravestones, the synagogues of Cuba stand with the same mix of life and death. When we are introduced to central Havana’s synagogue, Patronato, it is a cavern echoing the slightly attended recitations of scripture. In the end, it is renovated but subdivided and partially sold; both conditions are celebrations of Judeo–Cuban culture but also sobering reminders of its diminishing presence on the island. Moreover, while small renewal sparks on one side of Havana, vacant neglect resides on the other, as the oldest synagogue in Cuba, Chevet Ahim, stands abandoned, a cenotaph to the long departed worshipers under whose dreams it grew. But like the sea that surrounds the island, the ebb and flow of remembering and forgetting is the central tension within this work.

Moving beyond the synagogues as mere markers, Behar quickly fashions them as places where the Jewish Cubans gather to celebrate their lives. Behar emphasizes those caretakers such as Adela Dworin who gave up her pursuits in law in order to preserve "Jewish memory in Cuba" (62). People such as Adela and Jose Levy of the Centro Sefardi synagogue watch over the Jewish cultural centers, and thus Jewish culture in Cuba, hanging onto the past in hope of the future. Within these synagogues, the Jewish people thrive with love, diversity and hospitality. As a childhoodfriend of Behar’s own father remarks, "We’re still alive! So what’s the problem?" (72).

Focusing fully on the living now, Behar presents a string of vignettes on individual Jews. From the "privilege" of the kosher butcher shop, through the holocaust memories, to the happy Jewish family dedicated to the faith and culture, Behar is carried through the population by hospitality. Each of the families has memorabilia, and Behar’s use of photography to capture these items successfully conveys the melancholy with which the people present them to her. Old photos, shirts from death camps, menorahs, passports, blankets and victrolas, she collects these memories with an appropriate note of sadness.
One of Behar’s projects is to document how the Jews who have left Cuba for Israel and America have forgotten Cuba and moved into the past, into the memories of the family and friends left behind, into shoeboxes and closets, and into the collective cultural memory that those in Cuba hold in hope of the return of Judaism to the Island. But, to leave is to forget, and to stay behind is to remember and be forgotten. And so those left behind become like the cultural relics they hold. (Her third section of the book, "Traces" provides a compelling photo journey through the memorabilia.)

Yet, in the midst of this objectification, Behar reminds us, through portraits of Jewish Cubans, that these are people, with hearts full of hope and memories. For Alberto Behar Medrano the memories both "sustain and wound his soul" (92). Enrique Bender, whose eyes are like Behar’s grandfather’s, is a vibrant man who laughs, smiles and winks. The most powerful picture is of a woman whose name remains unknown to us as she takes charity with "a look of such anguish in her expression" that Behar is speechless (143). With these emotions, Behar shows us the complex humanity of the Cuban Jews. They are pained but hopeful, a sentiment Behar captures in a lyrical closing for the section: "When I see you again / There will be no pain or forgetting" (160).

The book’s fourth section, "In the Provinces" continues the themes found in Havana. Behar begins with a graveyard, honoring the dead, and moves to the synagogue, adding a multiple wedding scene to the celebration of life within. The people are the focal point, and the sense of abandonment and endurance is pervasive. With the repetition of the same sentiment found in Havana, Behar builds a sense of futility. Perhaps holding on to the culture is in vain, since Cuban Jews continue to emigrate. In one family that Behar visits, a young boy holds a parakeet for a picture. "We can’t let it go," his brother Danielito says, "or it will fly away" (192). Likewise, the Jews of Cuba have nurtured the identity Behar is reclaiming; however, most are old and many young are moving on. In this light, the picture that Behar gives of Jews lighting matches in place of Shabbat candles makes the heart ache in anticipation of the coming sundown.

Still, in kinship with the people she is documenting, Behar fights against fatalism with the picture of Hizzaday, a black Jewish-Cuban girl who "represents the possibility of a Cuban future—a future where Jewish memory is safe" (232). But the offering of hope seems like a small meal in barren land. The last section is a series of goodbyes, first those of Jewish Cubans.
who are leaving for Israel or America, and finally Behar’s own. She will return, she says, even if she knows "that the purpose of each return journey is to get better at saying goodbye" (255).

Among all these portraits, Behar’s tastefully weaves her doubts and joys. Ironically, a theme raised but left unexamined is one of Behar’s own, what she calls her Fidel–phobia. The disdain she holds for Castro and communism, left largely unaddressed, remains as an undertow within her book. Her pounding heart before Castro and subsequent swooning at the communist rally, the loss of property that led to her family’s departure, and the fear her mother ingrained in her of being brainwashed by radicals, create a dark subtext that remains elusive throughout the book. What does she want to say to Fidel? Would a non–communist Cuba stem the tide of Jewish emigration, bring expatriates home and revitalize the culture, fulfilling the hopes that she and the remnant hold? Or, does her fear of brainwashing suggest some reluctant agreement with certain Communist ideals? The latter certainly seems suggested by her frequent mention of the lack of anti–Semitic sentiment on the island. Finally, what exactly did families such as hers go through when the Communists took over? These tensions seem to be a large part of Behar’s impetus to find Cuba and are therefore worthy of exploration, but perhaps those questions are for the next book.

Those who wish to explore An Island Called Home will find a rich landscape. Though it was published as a memoir, the label is imprecise. An Island Called Home is less a biographical account of a lifelong experience than a personal take on a historical narrative. But, this does not mean that Behar’s work here is not literature. It is, in fact, literature that opens opportunity for inter–disciplinary and cross–genre study. An Island Called Home is a narrative rife with imagery, symbolism, metaphor and characters. For teachers of literature, language, and culture, this book will be a rewarding adventure. For history instructors, An Island Called Home is a great opportunity to push the canon and read about the little–studied Jewish–Cuban history within the larger narrative of worldwide Jewish culture. Moreover, Behar’s ability with character sketches will bring history to life and engage students and instructors.

Most importantly, within her own field of anthropology, Behar successfully pushes the boundaries of traditional, dry qualitative format without abandoning her dedication to scientific quality. If art imitates life, then Behar’s artful approach is most appropriate for the study of the living.
human struggle is one of unresolved tensions, and An Island Called Home is a work of realism that never lets up on this focus. From the vacillating tone of her introduction to the final chapters, Behar strikes a fine balance between qualitative, scientific research and personal/cultural narrative that will surely lead the field in an exciting, fulfilling and insightful direction.

References