

Mediajourneys: Looking at People, Looking for People

RUTH BEHAR AND MARCY BRINK-DANAN

Ruth Behar's oeuvre consistently deals with the issue of looking as an anthropological concern. This interview explores the way anthropology in general, and Behar in particular, looks at and for people. The conversation explores topics of primary interest to this journal's readers, including the advantages and disadvantages of different representational strategies, the relationships of various media to anthropological subjects and to each other, and issues of pedagogy, authorship, and artistic choices. [looking, media, photography, representation, visibility]

Introduction

[...] if we can recognize the subtle like-a-sledgehammer effects of visual behavior on individuals and societies, we are moving closer to comprehending human behavior in general and to raising the level of concern about how humans interact. [Newton 1998:70]

Ruth Behar's oeuvre consistently deals with the issue of looking as an anthropological concern. Her latest work, what she calls a "photojourney," employs images that are products of different kinds of visual behavior, including "visual embraces"—"when subject and photographer embrace, or make an intimate, reciprocal interaction"—and "visual theater"—"images created by photographers and subjects in a kind of conscious or unconscious ritual or performance" (Newton 1998:65–66).

The following interview explores the way Behar looks at and for people in her work. It is an outgrowth of a public conversation held between Behar and Marcy Brink-Danan on April 6, 2009, at Brown University. The conversation treated a number of topics of interest to this journal's readers, including the advantages and disadvantages of different representational strategies, the relationships of various media to anthropological subjects and to each other, and issues of pedagogy, authorship, and artistic choices.

Marcy Brink-Danan: You called your recent book, *An Island Called Home* (2007), a "photojourney." Why?

Ruth Behar: I think photographs allow for an intense and immediate relationship with a people and a place, while texts, like ethnography, require more of a gradual buildup through storytelling to give the viewer/reader the same kind of impact. This book, unlike any of my previous books, grew out of the photographic work produced by Humberto Mayol in collaboration with me as ethnographer. We made the journey through Cuba together—several journeys at different times throughout a couple of years—and developed an archive of photographs. I kept notes about conversations and travels, and also recorded several interviews, but I also used the photographs as a kind of record of the people we had met and places we had been. When I sat down, finally, to write the book, I wrote in response to the photographs. I was very conscious that the text was going to run parallel to the images, and that shaped the kind of text I wrote, thinking of the photographs not as illustrations of my text, but rather as inspiration for my text, as a reason for writing. Photographs have always been an important part of my ethnography. They are included in my first book, *The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village* (1986) as well as in *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (1993), and are in a significant relationship to the text. But in those books I took my own photographs and kept the number modest. In *An Island Called Home*, I decided to work with a professional photojournalist, and see Jewish Cuba through his eyes; I also used many more photographs, over a hundred, putting

the photographs on a more equal footing with my text, something I'd never done before.

MBD: Something that I noticed, and liked, in your new book was that there were lots of photos of other photos. What did this device do for you?

RB: Humberto Mayol and I devised this strategy of asking people to display photos that were meaningful to them, that were part of their history and tied them to the Jewish past. When I visited with Jews in Cuba, they often showed me old photos of their families, of themselves, and initially we were photographing the photographs on their own, but we eventually decided it would be more interesting, as well as emotionally powerful, to have people show them to the camera, creating an interactive relationship between the photo being taken in the present and the photo being held on to from the past. We liked the photos that came out of this strategy and afterwards it became a conscious method for our project. These photographs allowed people to compose themselves for the camera, to hold the past in their hands, to be part of the flow of time itself.

MBD: You mention that a wing of the Patronato Synagogue in Havana now houses the government-run Bertolt Brecht Theater. When I think of Brecht, I think of his vision of theater that breaks frames, making the audience aware of the fact that it is watching a show. Brecht wanted to raise critical awareness about the very act of representation; that is, the sometimes taken-for-granted media which purports to tell a story. Photography is widely recognized for its "high modality," which means that it appears to represent in a denotative, transparent relationship. Do you see this as an advantage or disadvantage of photography?

RB: Photographs require contextualization, even if it's something as simple as noting where they were taken or the date when they were taken. In this sense they never exist independently of texts or written language, and their transparency is

always an illusion. I think the advantage of photography is that it can conjure so much meaning on so many levels, in the conscious mind and the unconscious—memory, longing, dreams, the immediate present, which instantly becomes the past as soon as the photograph is snapped. The disadvantage is that there are things that can't be shown visually. There are intimate truths, wounds and wishes of the heart, that require words, or so I believe, at least. A photographer would argue very differently, of course!

MBD: You have commented that Jews in Cuba are used to being the objects of a certain kind of gaze ("...even with many eyes gazing at them, the Jews of Cuba are still mysterious") (2007:33). Can you tell us more about this gaze and what role you see photography as playing in the renegotiation of the terms of the anthropological gaze?

RB: Jews in Cuba are one of the most gazed upon, photographed, and ethnographized modern groups. In the last 20 years, American Jews have taken a special interest in this small community of a thousand Jews and it has become common for humanitarian missions to travel to Cuba from the United States to bring charity, medical supplies, and educational materials to support religious and cultural Jewish revitalization on the island. Jews in Cuba are now quite accustomed to these visitors. To a large extent they depend financially on the missions and on Jewish organizations like the Joint Distribution Committee and B'nai Brith. But with so many visitors coming through, Jews in Cuba tend to hold up a certain kind of public face and keep their intimate selves carefully hidden. Outside visitors go to Cuba to witness "the miracle of Jewish survival" in the midst of a socialist system maintained 90 miles off the coast of the United States. And indeed that "miracle" can be seen in Cuba. I wanted to get at something different. I wanted to get at the intimate stories and histories of the Jews who remain in Cuba, or the Jews who have become so by conversion, by choice. This led me to visit

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people in their homes, to spend time with them outside of rituals and ceremonies, to want to learn about what they kept of the Jewish past, to see them when they were beyond public view. Of course I recognize that by photographing them and writing about their more private selves, I ultimately exposed them—but this was done in the service of trying to represent the individuals I came to know of this community with compassion, complexity, and credibility.

MBD: Maintaining anonymity of our subjects, through pseudonyms, composite characters, and other creative devices, was once the anthropological standard; your work seems to be increasingly engaging in the opposite process: it brings anonymous people to the public light. Did the photographic medium compel you to publish people's real names and true stories? What do you consider more revealing: photos or narratives? How do these tell different stories about people? Did you encounter any resistance from people to being photographed? Were there people that enjoyed "mugging" for the camera?

RB: It was impossible to use pseudonyms since we were taking pictures of living people. We let our subjects know that the pictures might potentially be displayed in exhibits and in the book. Everyone we photographed gave consent. Many people had been photographed numerous times by previous photographers, artists, journalists, and amateur picture-takers, so we were part of a long line of camera-wielding observers. The difference was that a fellow Cuban, Humberto Mayol, not a foreigner, was holding the camera, which was much less common, and a Cuban American who'd come to Cuba many times (namely me) was asking the questions. I think that as partial insiders we created trust among members of the community, which led to more relaxed picture-taking, more interactive picture-taking. We didn't encounter resistance. We did find that people often had their own ideas about how they wanted to be photographed and we respected those wishes. For example, we found that Solomon, "the schnorrer," enjoyed mugging for the camera. His picture is included in almost every report about the Jews of Cuba!

MBD: Tell me more about working collaboratively with Humberto Mayol, the Cuban photographer who took the images in your recent book. How was this partnership different than working with coauthors of articles and collections, producers, and filmmakers for the documentary film, *Adio Kerida* (2002), or

working independently, writing and taking your own photos as you did in *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*?

RB: We worked very well together overall. Humberto isn't Jewish and he was very intrigued by the Jewish community in Cuba and eager to learn about it. I felt that he was another pair of eyes looking at the community and trying to understand the unique conjuncture of Jewish and Cuban. We understood each other because he also thought like an anthropologist and was very respectful of the people he was photographing. He was patient and didn't take pictures before people were ready. He would sit and listen while I interviewed people and then find the appropriate moment to ask to photograph someone. I had some concerns about the ownership of the photographs—which are ultimately his, of course—because I had made it possible for him to know the community and to get inside. With *Adio Kerida*, even though I didn't film it, as the director I could claim the entire production as my intellectual and artistic work. It was different with Humberto's photographs. I might have "directed" him in a certain sense, even at times asking him to take certain pictures in a certain way, but at the end of the day, I had to accept the fact that he was free to do what he wished with his photographs. I think I worried unnecessarily. Fortunately, we've maintained an excellent working relationship and we both feel pleased with our collaboration.

MBD: Can you discuss your intriguing method of collecting Mayol's images and only then going back over them to create the "photojourney"? How did you decide to work this way? I imagine you encountering and reencountering the images as a historian might do upon finding an archive, but with the unusual experience of having been present during its compilation—indeed, having been an impetus for the collection of materials.

RB: Yes, the photographs we compiled were the archive, and they inspired my remembering as well as my writing. Just like old family photographs of Cuba had allowed me to imagine the Cuba I didn't remember, the photographs that Humberto and I gathered together allowed me to imagine the Cuba I did remember, the Cuba that is continually escaping me, the Cuba I always leave again.

MBD: During your lecture on this material at Brown University in 2009, you discussed how your Afro-Cuban childhood nanny has safeguarded old photos of you and your family throughout the half-century since your family left Cuba. Who should be

responsible curators of the past when communities “disappear” (relocate, migrate, are exterminated, assimilated, etc.)? To whom might we entrust these images and their interpretations? Anthropology once focused on salvaging the cultural heritage/knowledge of groups perceived to be nearing extinction. How is memory work different than salvage anthropology, especially as it concerns visual material?

RB: It was so moving to me when I discovered that my childhood nanny was literally “holding on” to Jewish memories in Cuba by safeguarding our old family photographs. She keeps these photographs in the same box where she keeps the photographs of her own family. I think she’s a very responsible curator of the past and I am grateful for her loving-kindness. I’m honestly not sure exactly how to generalize from this story to large issues of salvage anthropology and memory work. Perhaps the most intelligent thing I can say is that we must think about the way memory travels across borders and social groups, and we must be able to imagine attachments to memory beyond those of our own group. Jewish memory is not always held in Jewish hands, as the story of my nanny shows.

MBD: Do you see the camera as putting a kind of distance between anthropologists and our subjects?

RB: I felt that the camera *could* have put distance between me and my subjects when I worked on *An Island Called Home*, had it been used without a sense of rapport and intimacy. But in this project, I was participating in the construction of the photographs. I made suggestions about the kinds of pictures I wanted. Of course, Humberto also took a lot of pictures on his own. He had his own initiative, and did really amazing things. We were both trying to represent a community that’s Jewish and Cuban. Neither of us wanted to create a stereotypical portrait. As he went about taking photographs and reviewing them with me, this allowed me in a sense to say, “Okay, this is what they look like.” Photographs give you a tactile reality. You might have a certain image of what a Cuban should look like, of what a Jew should look like, but in Cuba these conceptions of “Cuban” and “Jew” merged in very unexpected ways, because there is so much intermarriage and mixing. If you see this girl from Guantánamo, who looks like a Cuban schoolgirl, who’s black Cuban, and then you find out that there’s this other layer of her story—that, well, she’s also Jewish, in fact, that

she’s since left Cuba for Israel with her grandparents—that changes your perception. You see the picture—and I don’t have to tell you she’s black, that’s obvious from the picture—and that allows me to write about her from another perspective, to discuss the imperceptible.

MBD: So you can play with visual and textual signifiers at the same time. . . .

RB: I can say, “She’s black, she’s a ‘pionera,’ part of the new generation of communist youth, look at her in her school uniform.” You’re going to have a whole set of associations with that picture. But, in fact, we try to challenge those associations, those stereotypes. In the picture we use in the book, she’s holding up another picture of a great-great-grandmother, a Sephardic grandmother who stayed behind in Turkey, to whom she bears an uncanny resemblance. So the image allows you to break with expectations of identity and categories of identity.

MBD: You write in the text of *An Island Called Home* about those who visit the Cuban Jewish community: you have all the American Jews visiting the island, such as workers from the Jewish Joint Federation, rabbis from Argentina, or tourists. They show up in the text all over the place. So, in terms of cultural and social contacts, the literal island’s not such an island. Even this island within the island of Jews is really not isolated anyway from most of the Jewish world. However, these other players are largely absent from the photos that are included in the book.

RB: Yes, in Humberto’s pictures they are largely missing. There were a couple of shots, and actually that was one of the requests that I frequently made to him, to please get some of these other observers, because I was constantly noticing their presence.

MBD: Was his [Humberto’s] inclination to keep them out of the frame?

RB: I think he was just more interested in the actual subjects, that is, the Jews of Cuba. So there are only a couple of pictures of outsiders included in the book. Overall, the pictures that he took with the outsiders weren’t such interesting pictures. But there’s a strong photograph of the Havanatur bus right at the entrance to the Jewish cemetery. That image references, I feel, all of the outsiders literally “docking” in these Jewish sites. Perhaps since there weren’t that many photos with visitors, I wrote about their presence more. This interplay made the project compelling; there were things that the

photographs did that freed me from the obligation to write; and there were things that the photographs didn't do that I then wrote about. The photographs and the text don't mimic each other exactly. There were gaps; Humberto filled certain gaps for me, and I filled certain gaps for him. And that's why it was a collaboration; it was a complementary project.

MBD: Let me ask you about a specific image that struck me: There is that incredible picture of the Hollywood director, Steven Spielberg, posing with this kid. In the book, the child is holding up a photograph of himself posing with Spielberg. Given Spielberg's status as a media representative and powerhouse, the image is quite charged and layered.

RB: It is. I'm sure Spielberg will make a film in Cuba as soon as it opens up (politically). I mean, I'm sure that he was there to think about the next film. But he was also genuinely interested because this community has become so celebrated. He wanted to connect with the community and see who was there. You know, it's really amazing when you think about how inaccessible Steven Spielberg normally is, that these couple of Cubans got to hang out with him. And several people in the book spent time with him: Ida Gudstadt, who's the person who has her father's concentration camp uniform, and he went to one of the Jewish cemeteries as well with her and several of the Jewish leaders in Havana. So he did the route that all the American Jews do, you know, who visit Cuba. We come back again to this topic of looking. I wasn't the only one looking at this community; there were various people looking in various kinds of ways—I was complicit in this gazing; it was my gaze along with all these other gazes. And then emotionally I went through different phases as I thought about this. Initially, I felt, "Oh my God, now they're taking Cuba away from me." After finally reclaiming Cuba after so many years away, now all these Americans were coming, with much more money, and much more power. I mean, how can I compete with Steven Spielberg? Forget it. What am I doing getting involved? I think for a long time I just felt very sad that I was losing Cuba all over again. And then over time I guess I started thinking, well, we're all in this together, and of course I'm American now, I live in the United States, but I still have a different kind of claim on Cuba, even though, most of the time, no matter how often I return, I am on this side of the border. I have to view us (myself and Spielberg and other American Jews) in a sense as coming at this reality in Cuba together. My unique role is that I'm a

messenger, delivering news, impressions, images, stories, between all these different communities.

MBD: One thing I always discuss with my students in linguistic anthropology classes is the difference between visual and written representations and our cultural codes for interpreting them. We always have a debate around a quote by French theorist Roland Barthes from his classic work, *Image-Music-Text*: "The text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image. [. . .] The image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image" (Barthes 1978:25). I had that in mind when I first noted that you didn't have photo captions in the book. I'm sure I'm not the first person to ask about the (lack of) captions. At first I found it slightly disorienting, because we're used to every picture having its textual interpretation. Upon reconsideration, I found the lack of captions to be an interesting choice. How did you decide to organize the book this way?

RB: There are captions at the end of the book; that was my choice. I really dislike captions, unless they are written as mini-stories. Otherwise, I find them very obtrusive. I just didn't think they were really necessary in my book, because the stories were paralleled with the photographs. The idea for my book was that it have the form of an album. I thought that the stories—the textual stories—sufficiently contextualized the photographs, so the reader wasn't going to need captions. What was I going to say in a caption? I could say: name, place, and date. Humberto didn't give the photographs captions, so it didn't seem right to me to impose captions on his pictures. That was one thing. I think in part I was respecting his view of himself as an artist; if he didn't offer captions, who was I to impose them on him or on his pictures? And I thought the photographs really were evocative by themselves. And then I thought, with my stories next to them, that they entered into a relationship with one another. I've always been very interested in the layout of books. For the Spanish version (2010), we decided to organize the book differently. Certain sections have the photographs interlaced with the text. But a lot of the photographs that I always felt should have been on their own are presented separately. So I'm not wedded to the specific layout of the English edition. I was excited about doing something different. The editors in Spain are from Cuba, although they are living in Barcelona. We talked about it, and they thought

that the material could be artistically framed in a different way. So rather than the more romantic layout and framing that we have in the English edition, the principles of “New Design” informed the Spanish edition. The cover is primarily black, white, and red and has a distinct, dramatic impact. I wanted to do the edition in this way in large part for Humberto, because this is the Spanish edition, this is the edition that’s going to circulate in Spain and Latin American countries and Cuba, and I wanted his photographs to resonate powerfully. The photographs will be very important to people looking at them in the Cuban and Latin American context. So I thought they should have a different kind of play in the text.

MBD: The mutability of your project lends it a provocative aspect. Have the photos appeared in fora outside of academia or the book format?

RB: Yes, an exhibit based on Humberto’s photographs, called “A Journey to Jewish Cuba,” went on display at the University of Miami in 2008 and at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 2009. The exhibition at the National Yiddish Book Center came about because the Center’s founder and president, Aaron Lansky, has taken an interest in the Jews of Cuba, and went to the island a number of years ago to bring back Yiddish books preserved there. The exhibition appeared in their new gallery space at the Center.

MBD: How did you handle the exhibition texts?

RB: I created special texts to go with the photographs. They’re short texts, placed on the wall next to the images. The exhibition does have a clear order of presentation. It takes you through different aspects of Jewish Cuban life and ends with the new Cuban Diaspora to Israel. It ends with an e-mail text from Danayda [the young girl posing with José Levy, the former leader of Havana’s Sephardic community, who now lives in Israel with her father]. So, curating is another kind of experiment with visual topologies.

MBD: Let’s consider, for a moment, the photos that didn’t make it into the book to think a bit about your relationship to the images chosen and why they fit the story you wanted to convey. Was this purely an aesthetic concern? If there had been infinite space would you have included them all? Have you considered an online display to accommodate more images? I guess what I’m asking is, given your seeming discomfort with forcing a given interpretation to the images (as, for example, you eschew

titles or captions), would you like to see an “uncurated” archive available to the public? Or, do you think that it is your job to shepherd the images into a story?

RB: I would say that the photographs I chose—or curated into the exhibition that is my book—are the ones that I felt best told the story I wanted to tell. I tried to balance the photographs to show a wide range of sensibilities—images range from people engaged in religious rituals to people who are revolutionaries and atheists, would never set foot in a synagogue and posed with pictures of independence leader José Martí or Che Guevara. I was especially drawn to the photos within photos that we spoke about earlier, and so I made a broad selection of those for the book, which another curator perhaps wouldn’t have found as compelling. So there were aesthetic concerns, for sure, but there were also intellectual concerns. Humberto asked me to make the final choices, but I did seek his opinion about which were his favorite photographs from an artistic standpoint. Almost all these pictures had already been selected by me, so I was glad that we were in agreement.

MBD: When I assign students your essays, they often comment enviously on your ability to tell a good story and how they hope to achieve your success as a writer. Given your experience with film and photography, do your courses in ethnography deal with other kinds of media? Should various media methods be a bigger part of the way we train our students? How do visual techniques fit into anthropological training?

RB: We’re not trained in anthropology to think like artists. This is why I teach a whole course on ethnographic writing, to encourage students to be creative. But I always have to deal with the fact that they feel they need permission to write more evocatively or to incorporate images into their work. They always ask themselves: “Well, can I really do this and get tenure? Will I do this and be able to get a job?” It always comes back to these practical realities. Every time I try to say to students, “You can do this more artistically; think not just about the content, but the form in which you’re telling this story,” some listen and go forth. Others become scared. They don’t really feel like they’re good enough “artists.” They feel safer staying within academic parameters, which are clearer and not so risky.

MBD: I have been intrigued lately by what has been called a “backlash” against expressive ethnography.

RB: Whose backlash?

MBD: I actually feel it very much. And no one's ever said it to me. But in writing my first book, I worried that it was too reflexive, and not because anyone ever mentioned this to me about my writing.

RB: There must be something that you're feeling in terms of what colleagues are doing, or the kind of work that you're seeing that's being encouraged, or the kind of work that's being published. I guess I don't feel it because I basically do what I do. I can't do any other work but the work I do. So if I'm going to suffer consequences, then I'll just have to live with them. I can't force myself to write in a way that's not me. I mean, to please whom? Someone commented on my work during a 2009 American Anthropological Association meeting panel about expressiveness, saying, "Oh, wow, you're not afraid to talk about feeling!" And I didn't know what to say, I was so surprised. What I later thought I should have replied, and it would have been a brave comeback, was the following: "You know what, I don't think I put enough feeling into it. I wish I'd put more."

MBD: Experimenting with different media sometimes pushes us past our comfort zone. As you have written, "It was during the making of the movie [*Adio Kerida*] that I realized I was more of a writer than a filmmaker because I kept wanting to add voiceovers rather than allow the visual images to tell the story" (2007:257). As academics, we are trained in particular disciplinary techniques (largely textual) that are familiar to us. However, the wide variety of media that you have used over the past decade provides a useful platform for asking larger theoretical questions about representational strategies and the various merits and challenges they offer for ethnographic documentation. What do you see as the merits and challenges of visual media over textual ones?

RB: In our era we really don't have to choose one medium to tell our stories. We can work with different media simultaneously, or gradually, over time, try several of them. What I loved about making *Adio Kerida* was that I could incorporate music into the story—Sephardic, Cuban, and American jazz, which made the music another character in the narrative. I'd never been able to do that before in my work and it was very exciting to me. I was also able to share my ethnographic journey to Cuba with a wider audience than might ever read my texts. People were very willing to sit for 80 minutes and watch my documentary. A film is like a short story; it has to be viewed (ideally) in a single sitting, which means you have to hold the viewer's interest. I found it fascinating to try to meet that challenge. On the other hand, I was frustrated there was so much more I wanted to say in the film that I couldn't say, either because it would have made it too didactic (and a film has to "show" rather than "tell" and also communicate its meaning subliminally) or because it would have taken too long to say it and made the film a marathon to watch. That was why, afterwards, I felt the need to write a book, and turned to the photojourney that became *An Island Called Home*, still working with visual media, but now given free reign to use words again, and to write vignettes that might allow a reader to take in a story or two, linger, pause, and come back again later for more. Writing allows for this different temporal experience—when you love a book you both want to devour it and never finish it, because the idea of being done reading it is so sad. I was anxious to come back to this unique temporal reality that writing allows after I completed *Adio Kerida*. Now in my most recent work, I am trying to write in the classical way, writing without using any additional media, using only words, words, words, to convey everything—sight, sound, senses—giving language my all once again.

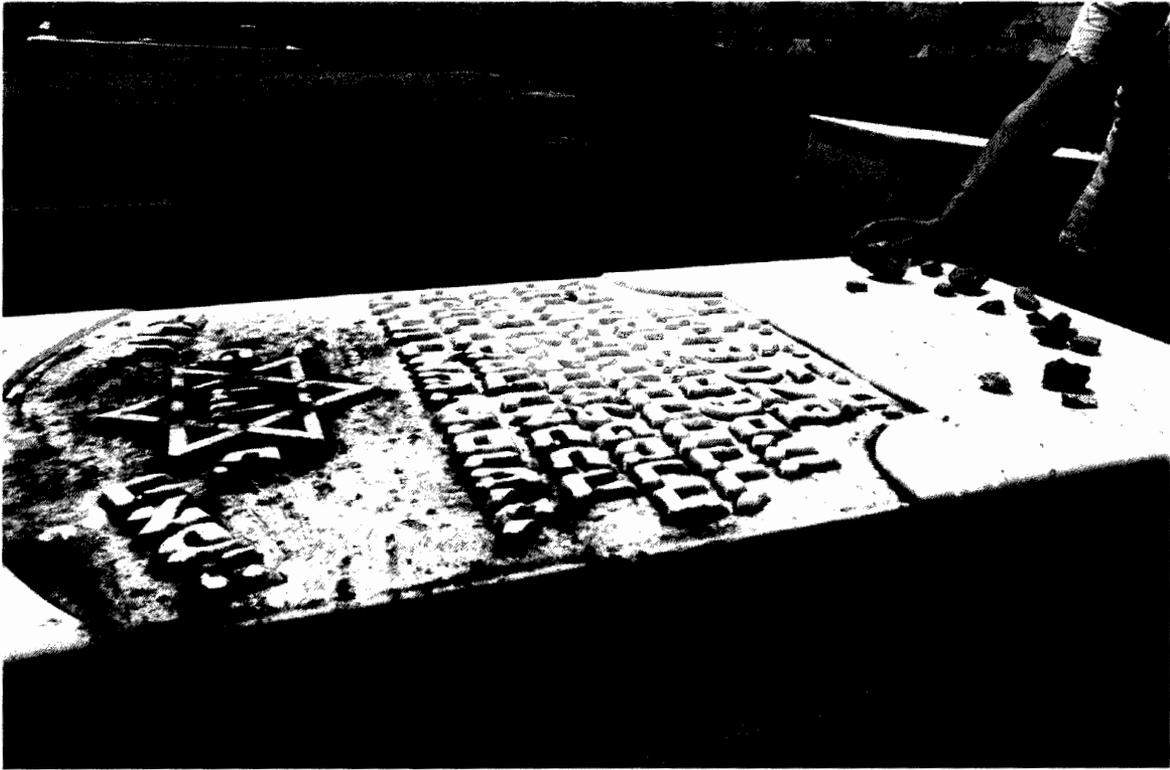


FIGURE 1. Jewish cemetery in Santiago de Cuba. Photo by Humberto Mayol.



FIGURE 2. Displaying Purim puppets, Santa Clara. Photo by Humberto Mayol.



FIGURE 3. Three generations of a Jewish Cuban family, Remedios. Photo by Humberto Mayol.



FIGURE 4. Roberto, an old friend of Ruth Behar's father, in Havana. Photo by Humberto Mayol.



FIGURE 5. A Jewish-American mission arriving at Adath Israel Synagogue in Old Havana. Photo by Humberto Mayol.



FIGURE 6. At prayer, Adath Israel Synagogue in Old Havana. Photo by Humberto Mayol.



FIGURE 7. Casa Jaime, a store owned by a Jewish merchant before the Revolution, Camaguey. Photo by Humberto Mayol.



FIGURE 8. Che Guevara in the synagogue. Photo by Humberto Mayol.

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