

Ruth Behar On Exploring Identity

In her new book of essays, "The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart," **Ruth Behar** reflects on her work as an anthropologist while also exploring her identity as a Cuban Jew. Ms. Behar, a professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, spoke with the BALTIMORE JEWISH TIMES about both of these defining roles.

J.T. — Please explain the term "vulnerable observer."

Ms. Behar — A vulnerable observer is someone who's willing to be transformed by the experience of being an observer — someone who is moved by the process of observation and feels compelled by what he or she hears and sees. It's also a willingness to be present with both heart and mind fully engaged.

The official academic position advocates more distance and detachment in anthropological field work. Scholars like me are now mixing up a commitment to research with a strong personal sense of engagement.

Another facet to this is that the observer is not the only one vulnerable. The anthropologist makes others vulnerable by observing them. This mutual vulnerability is too often ignored.

How did your field work in Spain affect your Jewish identity?

Looking back on it, I realize that working in Spain was about trying to build a bridge to my family history. Spain had a real pull for me because of my Sephardic background. The little village that I was doing my field work in was extremely Catholic. I learned how to recite a rosary to fit in, how to follow a Mass in Spanish. As an anthropologist, I tried to become as close as I could to the people I was studying.

Did that mean that in some ways you were living the life of a *conversa*?

Very much so. At first I didn't emphasize my Jewishness for practical reasons. I needed access to baptismal and death certificates for my own work, so I suppose I did act like a *conversa* to get them. But then I found myself hiding postcards that I had bought at the synagogue in Toledo.

During the summer of 1987 your grandfather died in Miami Beach. You were in Spain studying the evolving death rituals in a small Spanish village. How did those two experiences bring out the latent Jew in you?

Until then, I had thought of my anthropology as a way to learn about my identity. But I realized that it had actually distanced me from my own identity. My grandfather's death and all of the Jewish death customs associated with it brought me back to Judaism. It made me view Jewish ritual in a much different, more emotional and connected way than I had before.



Studying other cultures helped Ruth Behar explore her own Judaism.

In the "Vulnerable Observer" you write about the similarities between the Cuban-American and Jewish-American communities. What sort of impact has exile from Cuba had on Cuban-American Jews?

Cuban Jews think of themselves as exiled from two homelands — Cuba and Israel. And they truly regret the loss of Cuba, which became for many a tropical Jerusalem, a refuge from the anti-Semitism they had experienced in Europe.

In the "Vulnerable Observer" you write that Cubans aren't yet ready to let go of their dreams of returning to Cuba one day. In many ways the Cuban-American community has learned a lot from its Jewish-American neighbors in Miami. They learned to think of themselves as a Diaspora people and to live successful lives with their hopes intact. □

— Staff Report

Our selection, prices, service leave the competition out in the cold.

AMANA ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE
Amana ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE

AMANA ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE
Amana ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE

AMANA ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE
Amana ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE

AMANA ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE
Amana ASKO ASEA CALORIC-CARRIER PACO
DYNASTY EMERSON FEDDERS FRIEDRICH
FRIEDRICH ERIGIDAIRE GAGGERBAU GENERAL
ELECTRIC INTERMOTOR JENN AIR BELVINDA
MAYTAG MAJORANA MAJORANA PANASONIC
PREFRIGERATOR SHARP SUNDAY SUB ZERO
TAYLOR MADE WHITE WESTINGHOUSE

Appliance

1708 Reisterstown Road • 484-1333 • Open daily 'til 5:30, Mon. and



World Cello Congress

Mstislav Rostropovich, President

July 1-8, 1997 - St. Petersburg, Russia

33 events - 74 guest artists and ensembles
St. Petersburg Philharmonic and Symphony Orchestra

Air and land packages available for music lovers and tourists (sightseeing included)

For brochure and other information contact:

Dr. Helene Breazeale

Towson State University, 7720 York Road

Baltimore, Maryland 21252, U.S.A.

WWW site: <http://www.towson.edu/~breazeal/cello>

Tel.:
Fax:
e-mail: br