

## **Photographs and Personal Memory in Ana Menendez's Loving Che**

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### **Abstrak**

This paper points out the issues of personal history versus mainstream/official history, the changing meaning of photographs, the concept of truth/fact, and personal identity in Ana Menendez's novel *Loving Che*. The unnamed main character in this novel tries to construct her identity based on her mother's diary and letters as well as the photographs her mother sent to her. She and her mother, Teresa de La Landre, were separated due to a political dispute in Cuba. Teresa managed to get her father and baby out of Cuba and fled to Miami. When Teresa's father arrived in Miami, only then did he realize that Teresa did not go with them to Miami. She stayed in Cuba to wait for her lover, as he told his granddaughter. The main character wondered if she was Che Guevara's daughter, as implied in Teresa's letters and diary. By using Roland Barthes' Semiotic theory and feminist approach, this paper investigates how a photograph can be given different meanings when it is given a different context or background story. Furthermore, how the image of the revolutionist Che Guevara changes from the image based on the fact we read from mainstream history books into the melancholic and romantic image of the same man in the novel when it was given a more personal approach toward the man in the photograph.

Keywords: Identity, history, collage, meaning, memory, truth.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

How many of us have experienced that someone downloads our pictures that we upload in our social media, and then they use the pictures in different contexts either as their profile picture to scam people or to misuse them for various situations which are not the original situation the pictures were taken? In this digital era, people misuse pictures for many reasons. So, what I am trying to say is that a photograph can be put in different situations, and people will give it different meanings according to the context the photograph is in when they see it. The meaning is derived from the process of signification. The association between the photograph and the context attached to it is what Roland Barthes called the sign (Bouzida, 2014). The sign is the meaning given to the photograph (the signifier) and the context (the signified). The process of giving meaning to the photograph is the signification. This paper attempts to investigate and explain how the photographs of Che Guevara are put in the context of a woman's diary and are used to construct the identity of the main character in Ana Menendez's novel *Loving Che*. Menendez posits some intriguing points in her novel, namely, main character's identity disconnecting from the past, mainstream history vs personal one, and the concept of truth concerning the love affair between Che and Teresa, the main character's mother. (Muñoz, 2017), Menendez uses photos in the novels because they

are a democratic medium that allows her 'to create the plot of the story and sets up her intentions of show the cracks produced in the lost generation.'" (p. 115)

The main character is an unnamed immigrant's granddaughter, an exile, and seemingly lives between America and Cuba (Serra, 2011). Her being an immigrant gives her the kind of experience of being in space that cannot be easily identified, because she is neither being here, America, nor there, Cuba, being in the middle space of two cultural spaces that need to be named if it is to exist. This condition can be perceived early at the beginning of the novel when she reflects on her obsession with looking at old photographs of strangers: "I am a nervous flier, and this excavating into other people's memories never fail to soothe my fears on the eve of departure." P (.1) The nervousness, the fear she experiences on the eve of a departure at every end of her travels, on the one hand can be a signal of the anxiety of returning to an unfamiliar place and space, and on the other hand a desire to be connected to a place and space that is still in her imagination. The narrator realizes that the Cuban exiles are in an unfamiliar space of not knowing where they 'may set down their feet,' not knowing from which 'door' they enter the space.' In a way, the urgency for the connection with one's past-could be 'an antidote to a new and more terrible kind of madness, that is 'the trauma of separations. In the narrator's view, 'the backward looking of the exiles' only have the memory of their past, and since memory is always bound to places, then Cuba always becomes the centre of their story and narrative. It exists both in their memory and imagination, and at this point a narrative of the main character's Cuban past needs to be told in order to name the space where her identity can be rooted. Nevertheless, since the narrator does not have the memory of her mother and her place or origin, Cuba, her geographical space is defined as 'yonder' a new space - a middle region that was neither here nor there, a place that simply does not exist until it is given a name, to borrow the phrase from (Hustvedt, 2012) book, *Yonder*, on defining self and landscape. (p.7).

In the novel, photographs and other factual references taken from Che's biography are used in collages to add depth and meaning to the narration of the main character's identity as it combines historical fact and imaginative storytelling. The imaginative story surrounding the photographs of Che enables portrayals of the conflicts, idealism and betrayal experienced by the ordinary Cubans during the time around and after the revolution in a more thought-provoking form (Brotherton, 2012). Teresa's letters do not only narrate the fulfillment of her desire and her romantic relationship with the legendary Che but also the sorrow of losing and separating from Che, reflecting both the ideals and the failures of the revolution from her perspective. The narrative structure of the novel follows the main character's search of or inscription of Cuban history from a site of exile, which, according to (Helmick, 2016), 'is arranged dissonantly with multiple layers of contradictory documentary and metaliterary information referenced outside the narrative frame.'" (p.3). Menendez presents the story of Che Guevara as both a great man, a revolutionary hero and as an offender by using some frames for creating a historiography of the Cuban revolution.

At one point her relationship with Che is depicted as consummated, while at another point Teresa is also aware of Che's machismo, her marginalization, and objectification as a female subject (Rizzo, 2005). Teresa's relationship with Che replete with the atmosphere of the triumph of the revolution and the indeterminacy of its aftermath. Che meets Teresa for the first time at a party celebrating the triumph of the revolution, 'when all people were so happy' anticipating the future of ' beautiful Cuba' the seek of 'wealth, beauty, even learning' through the new political power. Yet in the

end the relationship also appears dubious, with the disappearance and the death of Che, thus questioning the meaning of the revolution and what it brings to the people of Cuba. The romantic relationship between Teresa frames the Cuban revolution as something romantic and ideal, but at the same time also questions these ideals as Teresa and Che relationship is also portrayed as problematic from Teresa's perspective as a woman.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Personal Memory and Identity**

In *Loving Che*, (Menéndez, 2004) uses photographs to strengthen the truth of Teresa's story in her letters to her daughter and to reconstruct her daughter's identity. Ironically, by placing the photographs there, the truth about Che as a historical figure becomes blurry, in the sense that the image of Che in the photographs are as accurate and alive as the image of Che in postcards or posters on city walls, for example. The photographs create both the historical and fictional characters of Che Guevara. Teresa's daughter reconstructs her identity by reading the letters and looking at the photographs. She suspects that she may be Che's daughter due to the affair between her mother and him. The daughter becomes obsessed with her mother and wants to meet her so much that she goes to Cuba. The search is difficult because the daughter does not know what Teresa looks like. Teresa's letters contain no photographs of herself, only ones of Che and a baby picture. The absence of Teresa's photographs signals her desire not to be found.

Moreover, to strengthen the daughter's sense of loss, the character is unnamed, which adds to the loss of the mother, her past life, and her identity. Living in Miami with her grandfather, the daughter never knew her past or her mother. Furthermore, her grandfather never mentions Teresa's name or anything about her. For the daughter, it seems like her grandfather wants to take her away from her past life in Cuba without knowing the reason. Teresa's letters to her daughter open the grandfather's wounds. After a while, the daughter realizes that her grandfather was very disappointed with Teresa because she broke her promise to come and join them in

Miami. Teresa encouraged her father to take her daughter and leave Cuba to build a brighter future in Miami. The grandfather can never understand how a mother like Teresa can live separately from her own baby. From her grandfather's attitude, it is obvious that he has certain expectations of how a mother is supposed to be, while Teresa has her own perspective of how a mother should act.

For Teresa, the physical bond between her and her daughter is less significant than the psychological one. She insists on staying in Cuba to wait for Che to return to her, while she sends her daughter away, who may be Che's daughter, to Miami to save her life from the chaotic political situation in Cuba. Teresa chooses to play the role of a lover rather than a mother. She creates her own image of what she wants to be. The physical separation between mother and daughter also symbolizes the daughter's exile from her motherland, Cuba. This geographical alienation contributes to the daughter's feeling of displacement and loss of identity. For the daughter, Teresa's role as a romantic mother represents Cuba, the exotic motherland. She wants to give meaning to her life through her love for the great man Che and his spirit for revolution. The image she creates in the memoir, with the illustration of Che's photographs suggest the meaning of the revolution in her life, as she makes meaning of her own past. As stated in the beginning of Teresa's story, she had already grown old with the revolution" and she needs to tell the story to her daughter to establish the mother-daughter bond along with

the exile and the motherland connection. The narrative of the success and failure of the revolution in Cuba interwoven in Teresa's memory is significant in the attempt to connect the daughter with Cuba's past, providing a national identity of the daughter. The mother's romantic relationship with Che, therefore in turn, also symbolizes the connection of the romantic revolution to the daughter, providing her with a sense of connection with Cuba.

Writing her letters in a romantic tone, Teresa creates not only her own image as a romantic mother but also Che's image as a romantic lover, an image that the readers are not familiar with when they see Che's public pictures. By using the love story mode, the novel raises the issue of a power struggle between the female voice as different versions of history, women as the subject of history or women writing history, and the male voice of mainstream history. Teresa's voice dominates the novel, although not in an assertive tone. Her voice is soft and romantic but powerful in the sense that the voice shows her character and personality. The narration demonstrates that she knows what she wants in her life, and she lives her life to the fullest, unaffected by what people think about her, including her father. Ironically, despite her strong agency in writing her female experience as a subject of history, she still enjoys being the object of the male gaze, in this case, Che's voyeuristic love. One of the scenes in the novel depicts how Che loves to look at Teresa stripping:

He has entered so quietly, and now he stands watching me, arms folded across his chest like wings. Take off the necklace, he says, not harshly but without smiling. I hesitate. Why? Because I ask you to. ...I do as I'm told. I unbuttoned the blouse. I look back at him, but he doesn't speak. I slip the blouse off my shoulders. The skirt, he says. ...I unzip it. ...He has not moved. He is watching. He nods. I shake my head no. He points to me. Do it. ...I stand bare-breasted and open to this foreigner, like some fetish of a woman, some stone carving from the mountains of his travels. But he does nothing, only looks. For a long time, he looks. And then he walks slowly to me. Without touching me, he bends and picks up my brassiere helps me with it (Menéndez, 2004 139-140).

Che's machismo marginalizes Teresa's dominant voice in the novel. Her doubt, when she is faced with his power over her, depicts her struggle in surrendering to her lover's fetishist attitude. What she wants seems to surrender to his voyeuristic love. As a result, the issue of subject vs. object in the novel is ambiguous. Her letters have a dominant female voice. Yet, she enjoys being the object of the male gaze.

I've gone shopping. Look. I'm wearing the green dress, the one with the full skirt and the big white flowers. My dark hair turns in the wind. A man whistles, of course; I am used to this. It is why I wear the dress and let my hair hang loose, though I pretend not to see the faces that turn to me. But really, I don't know any other kind of life. Assume that all women feel this. The attention has already borrowed its way into my sense of the world. I've known fear and disappointment, but still I cannot imagine indifference (Menéndez, 2004 90).

The scene reflects Teresa's desire to feel connected with the world around her. The men's attention confirms the connection between her and the people around her. Therefore, although she does not want her daughter and father to find her, she send the letters to her daughter to make a connection. She does not want to be forgotten, but she wants her own life as a lover to Che.

In her relationship with Che, Teresa plays a passive role. When Che has to go away, she is always the one who waits for him. This scene also depicts his machismo.

I'm not going to lie to you, sweet Teresa, he says. My vocation is to roam the highways and waterways of the world forever, always curious, investigating everything, sniffing into nooks and crannies, but always detached, not putting down roots anywhere, not staying long enough to discover what lies beneath (Menéndez, 2004 146).

This scene reflects the construction of Che's image as being masculine both in public and private, blurring the boundary between the historical figure and the fictional character. The portrayal of Che's personality in private challenges his image in the public eye because not many people know about his personal affairs.

From a feminist perspective, the relationship between Teresa and Che also reflects the relationship between the revolution and capitalism. It is interesting to note that *El Encanto*, the United States-modelled 'department store,' as a capitalism temple, is mentioned twelve times in the novel, suggesting the presence of materialism and capitalism, which are nevertheless also favourable to the revolutionaries. To Teresa, the department store once 'was a private comfort' she liked to visit:

I had been inside often and still remember the past pleasure of stepping off the tight street of the old city and into the wide interior of the store. The inside, at least in my memory, was very grand and clean, almost plastic in its perfection. I imagined it as a copy of the great department stores I had heard about in the United States. Jewellery, cameras. The most fashionable women in Havana bought their clothes there... the new government would issue a directive that the prices there would remain unchanged – almost an unconscious not to a capitalist past" (p. 40)

The two specific commodities in the store in Teresa's mind, jewellery and cameras, suggest women's desire to be beautiful and to be the object of gaze. Menendez's frequent depiction of Teresa's awareness of the dresses she wore– the flowered skirt on occasion of meeting with Che, the 'pin-stripped skirt' Che asked her to unzip in order to satisfy his voyeurism, all bought at *El Encanto*, highlights capitalist's exploitation of women's desires of beautiful things.

When the daughter begins to think of Teresa as her 'newly discovered part of [ herself] and starts searching for Cuban and Che history, she locates a photograph of the mannequin in *El Encanto* windows, prints it out on a special paper and frames it. It is through the context of this photograph that the imagination of her mother begins: 'Sometimes, I like to imagine Teresa standing there, just beyond the photograph's blind edge " (p. 82). The way the daughter imagines the figure of Teresa through the context of the photograph of the woman mannequins at the *El Encanto* window sets the frame for the issue of capitalism and exploitation of women in the novel. In her letter, passing *El Encanto* on a walk, Teresa mentions she 'almost weep at the sight of the plastic mannequins who have never known love.' It anticipates Teresa's realization of being the object of Che's gaze and the impossibility of forever 'possessing him,' as it turns out that the last time Teresa saw Che, he was dressed as someone else, that is, as a haughty businessman' who said good-bye to her.

The way Menendez problematizes Teresa and Che's relationship suggests an ambiguity of the meaning of revolutionary that defines Cuba, undermining it as a source of identity that the mother wishes the daughter to connect. Just as the mother romanticizes her connection with Che, the Cuban connection to the revolution as a Cuban defining identity is also romanticized. In reality, after the revolutionaries fulfil their desire to overthrow a political order, they and the people find themselves wandering among destruction and ruins, as depicted in the difficult life of Teresa after the revolution.

### **Memory, Fact, and Fiction**

Menéndez also raises the issue of fact vs. fiction through the attitude of Teresa's daughter, a journalist always looking for facts rather than fiction. Teresa's letters and her story about her love affair with Che challenge her daughter's trust in facts over second-hand information. She argues with her professor, who thinks that her mother's letters cannot be considered a reliable source of history. It is obvious that this professor represents mainstream history, which doubts that the personal writing of a woman can be the source of historical information. The daughter questions whether she should consider her mother's letters as facts that can lead her to find her past life or give up and move on with her life in Miami. She chooses the former. She goes to Cuba to find people who know her mother, hoping that she can meet Teresa in person.

The first time the daughter arrives in Cuba, she feels like she's stepping on foreign soil. She feels alienated from the place where she was born, her motherland. The longing for a mother and motherland is so consuming that she is not interested in having a romantic relationship like her mother did. Rohrleitner argues that the daughter feels regretful when she realizes she does not have a romantic life. According to Rohrleitner, her regret is shown when she watches a movie with a Cuban family. She thought that her life was not as romantic as it was in the movie. Rohrleitner observes that the daughter's search for her past is used as a replacement for the absence of romance in her life (Rohrleitner, 2007 174).

In contrast, I would argue that she thinks the movie makes romantic love look so perfect that it could not happen in real life. She criticizes the romance in the movies as fake, unrealistic, and misleading. She feels that the search for her past is the most important thing in her life because not until she knows her roots and her identity can she go on with her life. The daughter finds the romance in the movie unrealistic and anticipates the truth; she eventually finds out later about Teresa's romantic love with Che, which is only fictional since Teresa never meets Che.

Nevertheless, even though she finds that Teresa and Che's relationship is not real in the end, the earlier event of her second visit proves to be most significant in the daughter's sense of her new identity as a Cuban. The encounter with the boy, who takes her to his mother and the neighbourhood, provides the daughter with a real connection and a sense of belonging to the motherland. This event is in contrast with the encounter with the boy on her visit to her old neighbourhood where she lived with her Uncle in Miami. After receiving her mother's letters, she decided to pay a visit to her old neighbourhood. Though the houses in the neighbourhood look familiar, she feels only like a stranger and meets no people, only a small boy with a "frown on his brow" who approaches the house, gazes at her and leaves:

His black hair kept falling into his face as he walked, and now and then, he swept it away angrily with one hand. I watched him, barely able to move. As he approached the house, he slowed. He stopped at the side, walking in front of the house. He turned and looked at me. I sat very still. A minute passed, maybe two. Then he took his gaze away and started walking again, past the house, up the street, and I followed him with my eyes. When his tiny figure turned in the distance and vanished, I rolled up and drove away from the house. (p. 88)

The boy in her old neighbourhood gives her an uncanny feeling: he looks at her for minutes, yet there is no communication between them, not even an exchange of greetings.

In contrast to the American scene, the encounter with the Cuban boy depicts a vibrant communication between two strangers, giving her real feelings and experiences among the Cubans. No wonder she claims herself as a Cuban to this boy, who then initiates her into the Cuban community. She takes a walk to gather her courage before knocking on doors to find out about her mother, and a little boy falls in step with her:

"... and together we walked in silence.' Hello, finally I said in English. Hello, he answered back. Are you British? I thought for a moment. Cuban., I said. He stopped dead, feigning

great surprise, and I laughed at his hard little actor. For a long stretch, the little boy walked with me, pointing out houses and telling me fantastical stories about them: And that house there is where a famous dragon used to live. See where it's burned by his breath? That's where he stood every day to watch the people pass. The child was delightful, and I found myself after a while following him instead of him me." (P.97)

She follows the boy to the market, makes her pay for the stuff, meat, fruit, and vegetables, and follows him home to her mother, who cooks the food for their lunch. This idea of Cuba that enters her mind gained from the delightful and warm interaction with the boy's family, is more truthful and real than the ideas of Cuba narrated in the mother's letters because it involves real feelings. In fact, it is from the stories about the difficulty of living in Cuba, even in getting food, that she heard from the boy's mother during the 'delightful game' of shopping, cooking and eating that she experiences the real Cuba.

Therefore, on her second visit to Cuba, her attitude changes. The first time, she felt like she was in a foreign country. She romanticized Cuba and acted like a tourist; the second time, she stepped into Cuba and felt at home. She finally finds a woman who knows her mother, but the story that the woman tells is different from the story in Teresa's letters. The woman says that Teresa died as a poor woman. Furthermore, it is uncertain if Che is Teresa's lover, as she told her daughter in her letters. Jacinto, the Cuban photographer who used to work closely with Che, does not deny that Che likes many women, but he does not specifically know if Teresa is one of them. Based on the results of the interviews, the daughter is unsure if the Teresa that the Cuban woman talks about is the same as her mother. Instead of feeling frustrated about this uncertainty, she decides to believe Teresa's letters because those letters are the only truth she wants to believe in. With the photographs in the letters, the daughter can visualize her past and understand where she comes from.

In the novel, Menendez places the photographs in a context that leads the readers to interpret them in a certain way. She is trying to, not only show but tell the readers what the photographs mean, the meaning which is constructed from the context – which is naturalized by being placed in the context. Teresa's daughter uses the photographs to get the facts, but she also creates the meaning of Che's pictures (Menéndez, 2004 226-227) the same way as Teresa, as an artist, who sees different moods in a photograph when she is going to paint it for tourists. Teresa's painting depicts the mood that Teresa feels through the photograph:

I returned again and again to a photograph of a couple standing by a palm tree in front of an old hotel...and the way the woman held the man's arm, her fingers bent a little as if she were hanging on with fear. And the man's eyes had something—not a sadness exactly, but a kind of weariness that I couldn't understand and that therefore interested me....the more I looked at the photographs, the more they looked as if they were from an alien place, a place of the imagination (Menéndez, 2004 64).

In the quotation, Teresa interprets and constructs the meaning of the photograph of a tourist couple who are strangers to her. Similarly, when Teresa's daughter finds Che's photograph

in one of the stores, she interprets and constructs the meaning of it. The photographs become a commodity that can be interpreted and constructed.

At the end of the novel, whether Teresa's story is true or not does not really matter anymore because her daughter has decided where she belongs. Teresa's letters and photographs contribute to the process of reconstructing her daughter's identity and finding a sense of her cultural roots. Rohrleitner suggests that Loving Che represents the longings and desires of a generation that has experienced Cuba only second-hand, as a constant shadow of their parent's absence, nostalgic stories of the Cuban immigrant community in Miami and, in this particular case, their grandparents' silence (Rohrleitner, 2007 187). It does not matter whether Teresa is a reliable narrator or not because, as long as we depend on memory, we cannot describe the past exactly in the same way as when the events happened. Memory is sometimes deceiving. So, it does not matter whether Teresa's version of the truth or the Cuban woman's version of the truth is the real truth. They have their own versions of the truth, and we believe what we want to believe. Teresa's daughter wants to believe in the possibility of being Che's daughter, as she says at the end of the novel, "...a beautiful stranger who, in a different dream, might have been the father of my heart (Menéndez, 2004 228)."

The fact that Che's photographs are constructed differently through different contexts by the mother and the daughter gives emphasis on felt history and not on official history. (Sims, 2010) As Sims points out in 'Loving Che, "Menendez brings into conflict official history, which relies on attention to leaders, events and trends to felt history, which reveals the pressures of events and the psychological impacts of events on individuals". (p. 104) When the daughter is searching for an official historical account of her mother, through her ex-professor and other figures witnessing historical events involving Che, she does get an answer that would resolve her identity problem. Therefore, Menendez brings felt history into the narrative through Teresa's nostalgia in order to solve the daughter's identity problem. By using nostalgia, Menendez creates a dialogic space where Che Guevara can be given multiple meanings by the mother and the daughter. This enables an emotional, historical and temporal connection between them and solves the daughter's identity problem.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a novel about identity, Loving Che attempts to tell the story of finding and understanding Cuban American identity. It begins with the problem faced by the narrator, a young Cuban woman living in America who never knows her parents and her homeland where she was born. She has no sense of belonging, feeling as belonging to 'nowhere' as she feels at odds with both the American and the Cuban American. She is alienated from the culture and history of the place of origin since her mother left her to her uncle in America when she was a baby; finally, with the help of her mother's letters sent to her before she died, she can solve her identity problem. The letters from Teresa de la Landre, the mother, reveal a personal history of the mother's life during the tumultuous Cuban revolution and her romantic relationship with the revolutionary hero of Latin America, Che Guevara. Menendez uses photographs of actual persons, references to historical events and documents and nostalgia to give a sense of authenticity to the Cuban life portrayed in

Teresa's letters. Though in the end, the daughter finds out that Teresa's relationship with Che is not proven to be factual and could only be 'an elaborate fable of her own life and death,' it is the mother's narrative that plays the central role in the daughter's sense of identity as Cuban. At one point, her mother's narrative has established a sense of connection with the Cuban people, allowing her to experience the community and gain an authentic knowledge of Cuba that is crucial to her sense of identity. At another point, she accepts the fact that identity is something to be imagined rather than being grounded in formal historical fact or the physical. Following her mother's way of constructing her identity through her fictional relationship with Che, the daughter finally also her identity through her imagining of the possibility of being Che's daughter as she keeps an old photograph of Che she found in an antique shop.

Through the collage technique of juxtaposing visual and verbal mediums in the novel, Menéndez raises the issue of fact vs. fiction, which blurs the boundaries that conventionally define literary genres and suggests artistic innovations. According to Higgins, artist writers 'have used collage in order to create expressly political art, an art whose politics inheres in the strategies taken by its creators' (p.3). The use of photographs of real persons may claim a kind of historical authenticity, but then readers realize that historical authenticity represented through these photographs does not count for any factual truth about the identity of the main character, as it turns out that Teresa's memoir of her relationship with Che is also not factual. However, using memoir enables Menéndez to challenge the popular belief and perception of Che Guevara as a heroic figure in Cuba's aftermath of the revolution. It also suggests the idea that the interplay of inauthenticity and unreliability constitutes literary and artistic elements of identity narrative fiction rather than a form of fakery. By juxtaposing the factual and the fictional, Menéndez plays on unreliable voices and inauthenticity in telling about Cuba. The biographical element of *Loving Che* is not to be found in the historical narrative of facts and events but in the voice embodied through the real story in the novel.

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