

CONSTRUCTING FICTION THROUGH HISTORY OR THE OTHER WAY AROUND? A READING OF *LOVING CHE* BY ANA MENENDEZ

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RESUMO: Habitando os entre-lugares, escritores cubano-americanos podem contribuir para o reconhecimento de experiências híbridas nas nações modernas. Seus textos podem ilustrar o entrelaçamento entre ficção e história e entre questões pessoais e políticas. Este artigo visa a analisar *Loving Che*, da escritora cubano-americana Ana Menendez, investigando o entrelaçamento entre história e ficção e entre o pessoal e o político. No romance, uma mulher nascida em Cuba e que foi levada para os Estados Unidos pelo avô com o consentimento da mãe quando era um bebê, busca por seu passado, sem sucesso. Um dia, a mulher, cujo nome não é mencionado, recebe um pacote de Teresa, que alega que ela é sua mãe e que a mulher é fruto de seu relacionamento com Ernesto “Che” Guevara. *Loving Che* oferece uma importante oportunidade de discutir como história e ficção podem estar conectadas e como questões políticas podem ser utilizadas para justificar decisões pessoais.

Palavras-chave: ficção, história, questões pessoais e políticas

1. Introduction

Exiles and nations, after all, are constructions intimately woven into memories, recollections, and dreams. As all human constructions, they can be bound and unbound and even reconfigured through an ongoing process of reflection, confrontation, and creation. (María de los Angeles Torres)

In the last decades, communities with Caribbean origins have been significantly present in the North-American society. At the end of the twentieth century, as Sonia Torres states in *Nosotros in USA: Literatura, Etnografía e Geografías de Resistência*, one may observe “the increasing ‘Latinization’, or, more specifically, ‘Hispanization’ of the USA.” (TORRES, 2001, p. 9. My translation.). This “Hispanization” has contributed to the transformation of the North-American canon, fostering the insertion of different cultures in the literary scenario of the United States.

Through the literary production by intellectuals with Caribbean origins, the North-American society may become aware of multiple hybrid experiences. Among the intellectual Caribbean communities that reside in the United States, Cubans play a relevant role in the accomplishment of new possibilities in literature, demonstrating a profound connection with the island. Inhabiting in-between positions, writers with Cuban origins illustrate in their work the intertwinement between history and fiction and between the personal and the political, offering their readers narratives that reflect the nostalgia for a world that is lost for them.

Living in a new society with a different language, hybrid subjects may feel compelled to learn the new language, while they struggle to maintain themselves

connected with their own roots. Language plays a relevant role in this relation, encompassing the way writers who dwell at the crossroads of cultures deal with this issue. In *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*, María Cristina García states:

The language in which one writes, dreams, and communicates is naturally a concern for Cuban American writers seeking to define their cultural and artistic identity. From the moment they arrived in the United States they have been pressured to learn one language and retain another. To maintain connections to both cultures, both societies, they had to be truly bilingual. Spanish provides a link to the past, but English represents the future and an opportunity for a reinvention of self. (...) Bilingualism represents adaptation. (GARCÍA, 1996, p. 187).

This bilingualism reflects itself in works by Cuban-American writers, allowing them to create their literary texts in the language of the host country and, in a certain way, to diffuse the culture and the history of the mother country. Through the production by Cuban-American writers resident in the United States, this new society may become aware of Cuban history, which is constantly present in their works. As Sonia Torres affirms, for Cubans from any immigration, the presence of the island is, inexorably, the thematic obsession. (TORRES, 2001, p. 137).

In addition to this, the fact that Cuban-American writers may illustrate the history and culture of Cuba in their works contributes to the insertion of the hybrid subject who emerges when negotiating with two different cultures. Despite their recognized relevance in the North-American politics and economy, people with Latin-American origins are constantly target of prejudice in the dominant culture, which is often Hispanophobic, as Sonia Torres argues. (TORRES, 2001, p. 9).

Torres adds that “the ethnic label ‘Hispanic’ serves as an anxiety rate for the Anglo-European homogenization, which is used to place their ‘others’ under the same ethnic label, without taking in account the national, cultural and racial differences of those peoples.” (TORRES, 2001, 10. My translation.). Being labeled displays the marginalization that people with Latin-American origins may suffer.

The insertion of the marginalized subject may be an important instrument for the acknowledgement and the insertion of multiple hybrid cultures in modern societies. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha claims that “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (...)” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 112). Bhabha also states that “Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects.” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 112). Hybridity, then, subverts the homogeneity imposed over dominated cultures and the acknowledgement of hybrid subjects may contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of modern societies.

As Stuart Hall states in “The Question of Cultural Identity”, “*Modern nations are all cultural hybrids.*” (HALL, 2005, p. 617. Italics in the original.). Identities and modern nations should not be considered as solidified entities. Perspectives may change according to time, place, or individual background, for instance. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Hall claims that “instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact (...), we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” (HALL, 1997, p. 110).

2. *Loving Che*: sewing together fiction and history

The quest for his/her own history and identity may lead the subject who dwells in the in-between positions to the history of his/her motherland, since, in many situations, the political and the personal intertwine in such a way that they may influence each other. This intertwining may be reflected in works by Cuban-American writers, portraying how history and fiction may be connected. As Isabel Alvarez Borland states in *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, “Understanding the relationship between fiction and the history that produces it can give us a new perspective on both the art of fiction and the portrayal of history in literature.” (BORLAND, 1998, p. 2).

This article aims at analyzing *Loving Che*, by Cuban-American writer Ana Menendez, investigating the intertwinement between history and fiction and between the personal and the political. In the novel, a young Cuban woman was taken to the United States by her maternal grandfather when she was still a baby due to her mother’s wishes. During the girl’s childhood and adolescence, her grandfather did not tell her much about her past and her mother. The woman lacked fragments of memories that would be necessary to connect her with her origins. Vijay Agnew states in the Introduction to *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home*:

Memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history). The past is always with us, and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call “our homes”. (AGNEW, 2008, p. 3).

Memories or their fragments are an important source to create one's connection with his/her own past. In Menendez's novel, the consequences of the void generated by the absence of one's memories are detailed constructed. Without parents, siblings, and even objects to link her with her own past, the woman felt incomplete and her need for fulfillment drove her to question her grandfather. Vijay Agnew adds that "Memories are constantly made and remade as people try to make sense of the past." (AGNEW, 2008, p. 8). The construction of memories, either individual or collective, is a continuum, not a static entity.

For the woman in *Loving Che*, making sense of her past is revealed to be extremely complex, since she does not have many elements to connect the dots of her own history. Her grandfather failed to provide her with enough information for her to understand her origins: "Of my own origins, I know little. (...) Of my parents, as of most things, he spoke little. I grew up with the understanding that my father had been in prison, and had died there, and that in her grief my mother had sent me away." (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 3).

When the woman reached puberty, though, her grandfather's silence was not enough for her anymore and the void caused by her mother's absence increased. However, not until she was in college, she confronted her grandfather about the lack of contact with her mother and about the inexistence of records of her past. Wishing to know her own past, in one afternoon at her grandfather's house, where she used to return to while at university, the young woman asked him about the fact of not having documents of her history:

I don't understand, I said slowly, how you could have gone these years without trying to get in touch with her [Teresa, the girl's mother]. I paused. If only for me.

My grandfather didn't move and I continued, rushing now to fill up the pauses: I don't understand how you have not one photograph, not one letter, not one document. For all I know I have been raised in a lie – what's to keep me from thinking you didn't kidnap me, or even that you're not really my grandfather? With this last, I knew I had pushed too hard, and fell silent. After a long while, my grandfather said, You want documents, photographs. This is truth to you? I didn't answer. (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 6).

The woman's grandfather doubted the veracity that records may really have and wondered whether the fact that the simple existence of a record or a photograph determined the credibility of an event. After some hours inside his house, her grandfather returned to the porch, where the woman had remained, with a worn piece of yellow paper and told her:

It had been her idea, he said after he had settled into his chair. I didn't want to take you away from her. But she insisted. She said she wanted you out of the country. My grandfather lit the small candle between us. He picked up the note again and when he sat back, his giant shadow materialized behind him. For years, I tried to contact her. Every May, on her birthday, I wrote her a letter. If I have no letters to show you now it's only because she never responded. Some years ago, my grandfather continued after a moment, I asked a friend who was traveling to Havana to take her a package. My grandfather turned to me. Some drawings you had made, and yes, a school photograph of you. But when he got there, he found the house filled with five different families. Teresa had vanished. (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 7).

Teresa had arranged the procedures so that her father and her daughter could leave Cuba. Within six months after their departure, she was supposed to join them in the United States, but this did not occur. When Teresa's father applied for a visa, the government took his house and he had to move in with his daughter. Some nights, he

could hear his granddaughter crying all night long without knowing if Teresa was holding the girl or not. The baby's endless cry could be seen a foreshadowing of her mother's early rejection towards her.

Only when they arrived in Miami after leaving Cuba, the woman's grandfather found a note that Teresa had pinned to her daughter's sweater. Her grandfather, then, handed her the small piece of paper which contained some verses of one of Pablo Neruda's poems, entitled "Letter on the Road" from the collection *The Captain's Verses*:

*Farewell, but you will be
with me, you will go within
a drop of blood circulating in my veins* (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 9. Italics in the original.).

Some months after this episode, the woman dropped out of college and started to travel. Years passed and, when the woman was in India, she heard that her grandfather had died. As the trip to return to Miami took three days, the woman missed her grandfather's burial. Her absence may have contributed to her feeling, during her first night at her grandfather's house after his death, that he would come back at any minute, since she had not been able to witness his burial with her own eyes.

Soon after her grandfather's burial, the woman made her first trip to Cuba in order to attempt meeting her mother: "When I landed and saw the capital by the red light of sunset, I knew I had returned to find my mother." (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 10). Motivated by the void created because of her mother's absence, the woman searched for her own history. The necessity of returning may be present in exiled subjects, even though it might occur for different personal reasons. Describing her particular

experience, María de los Angeles Torres states that “The need to return was powerful. It was the solution to the incoherence we all felt, to the tremendous sense of loss that haunted our memories.” (TORRES, 2003, p.36).

In *Loving Che*, the woman spent several days in Havana knocking on doors, asking innumerable people if they knew her mother while reciting them the verses by Pablo Neruda, her only physical connection to her mother, to her past. Attempting to find her mother, the woman made several trips to Cuba unsuccessfully, until the angst of failure and the sadness generated by the void made her to quit her search: “Havana, so lovely at first glance, was really a city of dashed hopes, and everywhere I walked I was reminded that all in life tends to decay and destruction.” (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 10).

Supporting herself by writing short articles about the places she visited, the woman travelled to various cities and countries. Her mother country, though, was not in her itinerary any more. The disillusion caused by her failure and her void prevented her from continuing her journey until a package arrived to her. One afternoon, when she returned from one of her trips, the woman found the package waiting for her. It had been postmarked in Spain without a return and sent first to her former residence in Miami, when she used to travel to Cuba constantly. Inside the package, there were photographs of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and letters by Teresa de la Landre addressed to the woman, claiming that Teresa had an affair with Guevara and that the woman was the fruit of this relationship.

The letters do not contain any dates and are not presented in chronological order. In those letters, Teresa described her relationship with the guerrilla leader, which had begun when she was married and continued even when Che got married. As her

husband travelled constantly and Teresa was always alone at her art studio, their encounters were possible without greater inconveniences. Teresa's narration of events portrays her personal perception of the alleged facts.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon states that "Facts are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events." (HUTCHEON, 2003, p. 54). Experiences, intentions and points of view, for instance, interfere in the narration of events, even of history. Depending on the narrator's background and agenda, history may be told and retold in different manners.

One illustration of this way of narrating may be observed in Menendez's novel. Throughout her words, Teresa seems to justify her rejection towards her daughter using her alleged affair with Guevara. Teresa subtly describes the photographs of Che that she sent to her daughter as though they were part of her history with him.

When presenting a photograph in which Che is with lying on a bed with a naked chest and looking to his left as if he were staring at someone, Teresa affirms: "He [Che] opens his eyes and watches me, propped on one elbow. I move to kiss him, part his lips with my tongue. He murmurs, moves his hand down my spine, down. He pulls me onto his body. I let myself sink onto him. He looks up at me; My love, he murmurs." (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 100).

It is interesting to notice that the photographs of Guevara illustrate Teresa's words as if corroborating her statements. Even though *Loving Che* is a work of fiction, as the author herself states in the notes, it contains records and images of facts. In the notes at the end of the novel, for example, it is also highlighted that many of the quotations by Guevara are from his own texts and from other works such as *Che Guevara: A*

Revolutionary Life by Jon Lee Anderson and *Ernesto Guevara También Conocido Como el Che* by Paco Ignacio Taibo II. (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 229). By appropriating elements from history, fiction may be produced as well as history may be a result of narration of events in a certain way.

A reading of the fact that the woman does not have a name in the novel may be an illustration of how personal issues may be overshadowed in a political context greater than the individual. In *Loving Che*, the woman's life is marked by events that interwove her history with Cuba's. Teresa's words describe her relationship with Che, trying to present justifications for having abandoned her own daughter by means of utilizing political issues in order to corroborate her decision of asking her father to take her baby to another country by himself. However, her decision had already been made even before her daughter was born: "I [Teresa] know that I will give birth to a girl and that I will send her away. I know that I will wait in vain for my lover to return, will wait even after he is dead." (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 144).

Accommodating events according to her own perspectives, Teresa presents her history, her youth in pre-revolutionary Cuba, her life as a painter, her marriage to the linguist Calixto, her relationship with Che, the abandonment of her child, all this without demonstrating any regrets for her choices and for the rejection of her daughter, since Teresa had opportunities of introducing herself to her daughter in Cuba. In her letters, Teresa describes the occasion in which she herself heard her daughter talking to her housekeeper in one of the woman's innumerable trips to Cuba. Her own daughter knocked on her door. Yet, Teresa did not answer; only her housekeeper did. On the following day, the young lady returned to Teresa's house. Teresa received her at the porch, without identifying herself. Besides, years later, preventing her daughter of

encountering her, Teresa sends the woman a package without the return's address, clearly trying to avoid any contact with her own child.

Previously, Teresa herself had experienced, in a certain way, the maternal rejection felt by the woman she claims to be her daughter: "My [Teresa's] mother let me roam the streets; she gave up on me long before I knew it." (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 21). When Teresa was a little girl, nuns from a school went to her house in order to tell her mother that Teresa had to study there. The agreement was made without taking Teresa's opinion into consideration, something which was traumatizing for the little girl.

This delicate situation was aggravated by the estrangement in their relationship: "My mother was alive, almost frivolous with my sisters. But when she and I were alone, we barely talked. Sometimes I would turn and see her contemplating me and she would nod." (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 28). While her mother was combing Teresa's hair after the nuns' visit, her mother's attitudes displayed their dysfunctional relationship:

You have to go to school now, she said.

I tried to shake my head, but she brought her hands back to my braids and held me tight.

You're hurting me, I cried.

She undid the braids quickly, pulling, her fingers stiff and cold on my scalp. She turned me around roughly.

You are a girl and you think the world is this small. But there is a lot you don't understand, little lady. Tomorrow morning and the day after and the day after, you are going to school. I don't care what you do after, I don't care what you do before. But the nuns will see you in class. I bit my lip to keep from crying and then I bit it to keep from speaking. My mother bent to kiss my forehead, then left the room. (MENENDEZ, 2003, 28-29).

The stiffness and coldness of Teresa's mother's fingers may be seen as a representation of the sentiments she had towards her own daughter. Interestingly, the void that Teresa felt in her relationship with her mother was, in a way, experienced by Teresa's daughter. However, her child was not even able to fill in the gaps of her own past due to the absence of evidences of her heritage.

One should point out that the woman had interrogated her grandfather about the lack of photographs or letters which she considers could disclose her past. However, even with the photographs and the letters sent by Teresa, the woman searches for other people's opinions so that she could have the alleged facts corroborated. Still in the United States, the woman contacts several people in order to attempt to obtain the truth about Teresa's words.

In order to find information about Teresa, Che and Calixto, the woman meets professionals who might confirm the content of the letters. Those people include Jacinto Alcazar, a photographer who had fought beside Fidel Castro and Che Guevara; Ileana, an art consultant and an aficionado of Cuban art; and Dr. Caraballo, the woman's (?) former professor. None of them provides the woman with evidences that Teresa's history is true. Dr. Caraballo even adds:

But I think I can understand that feeling of vastness at your back that you described in your letter. I can understand how in the absence of a past, one might be tempted to invent history. (...) In this sense, I cannot agree with your Teresa when she likens history to personal events. The world is much bigger than ourselves, though it is pleasant to think it might fit in the space of our fist. (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 173).

According to Dr. Caraballo's words, personal issues should not be connected to history. However, the intertwinement between the personal and the political seems inevitable. Besides, an individual's memories may depend on reports by other people. Hybrid subjects may count on other people's account in order to construct their own history. As Professor Leila Assumpção Harris claims in "Memórias Diaspóricas: Sonhando e Dançando em Cubano": "For many Cubans who have never put their feet on the island or who left there various decades ago the image of island is maintained through distant memories and contradictory accounts." (HARRIS, 2008, p. 52. My translation.).

When returning to Cuba in her attempt to find Teresa, the woman meets, among other people, Matilde, a person who affirms she had worked to her mother. Even though, according to Teresa de la Landre's letters, her maid's name was Beatrice and the name of the woman for whom Matilde worked was Teresa de la Cuerva, Matilde affirms that Teresa de la Landre and Teresa de la Cuerva are the same person. Matilde adds that Teresa de la Landre, now deceased, was the name she chose to call herself for her daughter's sake: "She didn't want you to come looking for her." (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 207).

Matilde shows the woman the studio where Teresa used to work, in which there are several paintings of Che. Among other details, Matilde tells the woman that Teresa was friends with a Spanish couple, who might have sent her the package from Spain. When talking about Teresa's husband, Matilde says that he was arrested after the Bay of Pigs and adds that he used both Carlos and Calixto as his names. (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 211).

Some months after leaving Cuba, the woman travels to Paris for business. While in the French city, at an antique shop, she sees a photograph of Che and declares: “And to come upon this photo now, so far from home. Surely I walked with ghosts.” (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 226). As she buys the photo, she tells the salesman: “For my mother.” (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 227). When at her hotel room, thinking of Che and looking at his picture, the woman considers that he was a beautiful stranger who, in a different dream, might have been the father of her heart. (MENENDEZ, 2003, p. 228).

3. Conclusion

Loving Che provides important material for the discussion of how history and fiction may be portrayed and how the political may be utilized in order to justify personal decisions. Professor Leila Harris affirms that the role of memory in the diasporic discourse reaches the connections and intertwinements between history and memory, the individual and the collective, the personal and the political. (HARRIS, 2008, p. 53). The construction of memory, either individual or collective, offers connections between them and presents itself in constant transformation. In “Broken English Memories”, Juan Flores states:

Historical memory is an active, creative force, not just a receptacle for the dead weight of times gone by. *Memory* has been associated, since its earliest usages, with the act of inscribing, engraving, or, in a sense that carries over into our electronic times, “recording” (*grabar*). (...) Remembering thus always involves selecting and shaping, constituting out of what was something that never was yet now assuredly is, in the imaginary of the present, and in the memory of the future. And the process of memory is open, without closure or conclusion: the struggle to

(re)establish continuities and to tell the “whole” story only uncovers new breaks and new exclusions. (FLORES, 1996, p. 381. *Italics in the original.*).

Works by Cuban-American writers offer readers a relevant opportunity of their having contact with the history of Cuba, since the history of that country is present in many of those literary productions, something which allows the reader to observe how history may be portrayed in fiction. Discussing the process of formation of the subjects in the postcolonial moment, Catherine Hall argues that “History and memory are central to that process. (...) It is a history which involves recognition and the re-working of memory. A history which shows how fantasized constructions of homogeneous nations are constructed (...)” (HALL, 1996, p. 76).

The process of the construction of the subject undoubtedly involves memory and history. The acknowledgement of the multiplicity of identities and the existence of hybrid subjects is a relevant step towards the recognition and the inscription of voices that have been silenced by dominant power. Literary works by Cuban-American writers provide a rich terrain for this insertion.

According to Isabel Alvarez Borland, “Seeing history from the perspective of fiction can be a valuable experience because it allows the reader a deeper knowledge and insight into that history.” (BORLAND, 1998, p. 4). *Loving Che* offers an important terrain for discussion over possible perspectives that involve the intertwining between history and fiction.

ABSTRACT: Inhabiting in-between positions, Cuban-American writers may contribute to the acknowledgement of hybrid experiences in modern nations. Their works may illustrate the intertwinement between fiction and history and between personal and

political issues. This article aims at analyzing *Loving Che* by Cuban-American writer Ana Menendez, investigating the intertwining between history and fiction and between the personal and the political. In the novel, a Cuban-born woman, who was taken to the United States by her grandfather with her mother's consent when a baby, searches for her past, unsuccessfully. One day, the woman, whose name is not mentioned, receives a package from Teresa, who claims that she is her mother and that the woman is the fruit of her relationship with Ernesto "Che" Guevara. *Loving Che* offers an important opportunity of discussing how history and fiction may be connected and how political issues may be utilized to justify personal decisions.

Keywords: fiction, history, personal and political issues

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