

The Revolutionary Doctor's Dilemma:
Medicine and Politics on Che Guevara's First
Road Trip

by

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I. Introduction

In October of 1951, Ernesto Guevara de la Serna and his friend Alberto Granado decided to travel from Argentina up toward North America. Two months later, as the year drew to a close, they left Córdoba and traveled to Buenos Aires, where Ernesto's family bade him farewell. Then, the two embarked on a trip that would later come to be internationally recognized, discussed, and disputed. From Buenos Aires, they traveled down the Atlantic coast of Argentina, across the *pampas*, through the Andes and Chile, then further north into Peru and Columbia. They ended their adventures in Caracas on July 26, 1952.

When they set off on their journey, twenty-three-year-old Ernesto has completed all but one year of his medical school training and twenty-nine-year-old Alberto was already a certified biochemist. Alberto originally proposed the idea for the trip with an aim to expand his medical and pharmaceutical horizons. Ernesto, bored with educational institutions and eager for a thrill, was more than willing to accompany him.

Nowadays, teenagers revere Ernesto or "Che," whose face covers the front of thousands of red T-shirts, as someone who stuck it to the man. Historians discuss his tactics and ethics as a military theorist. Writers explore his reasons for becoming a Marxist revolutionary. But who was the man behind this famous leader, this face on the T-shirt, this icon? Where can we find information about who Ernesto was as a person? One place in which we can find the true Ernesto is his personal narrative. What he wrote humanizes him. His own documentation of his experiences exposes

his conflicts and flaws, stripped of the public's projected images and preconceived notions.

Ernesto's account of the trip, *Diarios de motocicleta*, or *The Motorcycle Diaries*, helps define his character. He wrote it at a young age and did not tamper with the majority of its contents before publication. The narrative invites readers to consider his early identity as a sick patient, a struggling medical student, and a restless traveler.

In fact, much of Guevara's early life revolved around illness, medical practice, and politics. *The Motorcycle Diaries* allows for the exploration of the paradoxical intersection between three conflicting sides of twenty-three-year-old Ernesto: the patient, the physician-to-be, and the budding revolutionary.

In my essay, I aim to interpret how Ernesto's role as a doctor impacted his actions and attitude as a budding revolutionary. I will use Ernesto's book as the main source of evidence for my interpretations. I will further support my interpretations by using Alberto's account of the journey, published in 1978, as well as the film *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), to compare and contrast with Ernesto's account. These contrasts will highlight what Ernesto emphasizes or minimizes in his own account of his experiences.

The body of literature analyzing Guevara's *The Motorcycle Diaries* is not extensive, and is comprised almost entirely of reviews of Salles's film. Jorge Castañeda, author of the biography *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara*, is the only author who addresses the book analytically. He argues that upon completion of his trip with Alberto, "Che's politicization had grown in leaps and

bounds, but it fell far short of that of an aspiring revolutionary” (Castañeda 46). He further explains that throughout Ernesto’s account of the trip, his approach to politics “remained naïve and incomplete: indignation and common sense made up for serious deficiencies in analysis” (Castañeda 46). Castañeda revisits the temptation to romanticize Ernesto. Instead, he argues that, in 1952, Ernesto was an adventurous kid on a scenic trip, not yet a pugnacious revolutionary with defined political views.

The three most well known Guevara biographies aim to extract facts from Ernesto’s childhood that offer an explanation for his future role in politics and warfare. Jorge Castañeda, Jon Lee Anderson, and Paco Ignacio Taibo all emphasize the severity of Ernesto’s asthma during childhood, which often confined him to bed, restricted him to a special diet, and forced his family to move multiple times in search of air quality that would not aggravate their son’s illness. In regard to his medical endeavors, all three authors describe Ernesto as a student who treated patients with respect and caring, but received unremarkable grades in his courses at the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Buenos Aires.

The only article I found that considers Ernesto’s aspirations to become a physician is a one-page commentary on the movie *The Motorcycle Diaries*. The writer argues that on his trip, Ernesto “realizes that what people need is not his scientific knowledge as a doctor, but his desire to bring about social change” (Cohen). Although my findings are somewhat consistent with this statement, I believe that this point cannot be proven solely in the context of Salles’s film.

The biographies and articles that have already been written about Ernesto's young adulthood discuss his illness, his free spirit, his education as a medical student, and his predisposition to becoming a political and military figure. They are less focused on the significance of Ernesto's medical training and the impact it had on his development into a revolutionary. In my essay, I will explore how Ernesto reconciled his politically anti-authoritarian stance with his assumption of authority as a physician by analyzing the three available accounts of his journey.

Together, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Traveling With Che Guevara* and the movie *The Motorcycle Diaries* provide a comprehensive window into Ernesto's experience of being in the role of a physician while shaping his own aversion to authority figures, but there are reasons to be skeptical of these accounts. It is quite possible that Ernesto's daughter, Aleida Guevara March, Alberto, and Ernesto himself changed parts of their narratives before publication. Ernesto's book begins and ends with chapters that make him seem more politically conscious than he is in the majority of his story. Alberto's narrative and some parts of the Salles's movie are more geared toward making Che a palatable, relatable figure than toward illustrating him in a way that is consistent with his own account of the trip. Even the title of Ernesto's narrative has been changed from the realistic *Notas de Viaje (Notes on a Trip)* to the extravagant *Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey* regardless of the fact that it is not a diary, and La Poderosa broke down about two months into the seven-month-long trip. Ocean Press published Ernesto's narrative under the title *The Motorcycle Diaries* in 2003, most likely to help spread the word about Salles's film, which would premiere the following year (Ferrari 158).

Despite the general tendency to idealize Che, the two books and the movie provide insight into his perception of the world as a young adult who was struggling with different interests and passions. Using these sources, I will analyze how the physician in Ernesto interacted with the revolutionary in Che. I believe that Guevara's notes on his travels, together with the accounts offered by Granado and Salles, which highlight important areas that Guevara may have minimized, show that Ernesto was so conflicted about the possibility of establishing himself as an authority figure that he limited his documentation of his interactions with patients to descriptions of the social implications of his medical experiences and avoided using scientific language because it contributes to the doctor-patient hierarchy.

II. Guevara: *Notas de Viaje*

When his journey commenced, Ernesto's experience of the misuse of power was limited to what he had learned from textbooks, hearsay, and public demonstrations. As a child, what he heard and read about the Spanish Civil War and the oppressive Franco regime in Spain may have shaped Ernesto's development (Castañeda 14) and solidified his "naturally rebellious, decisive" attitude (Anderson 16). As a young boy, he opposed the Nazi regime and enrolled in a pro-Allies group called la Acción Argentina (Anderson 31). Later, as a teenager, he refused to march in protest with Alberto if not given a revolver (Anderson 33). Although he learned that people have the ability to misuse power, it was not until his travels with Alberto that he first had the opportunity to observe injustice and abuse of authority in the field. When he encountered injustice during his travels, he did not immediately become a full-fledged revolutionary, but he was still affected by what he saw. In his memoir, it is possible to see the Che that awakens in Ernesto as he experiences first-hand the way in which hierarchy can promote exploitation.

One can imagine that this aversion to authority might have conflicted with Ernesto's efforts to become a doctor. Patients often idealize healers because the scientific comprehension and experience they possess can make them seem all-knowing. Patients generally execute the orders and instructions of these god-like figures without question. Therefore, in a doctor-patient relationship, the physician often assumes the role of an authority figure.

How does Ernesto approach the disparity between his growing disdain for hierarchical structures and his pursuit of a medical degree? One way to understand

his avoidance of using scientific language in his diary is that he is attempting to avoid becoming the all-knowing, idealized, authoritative type of physician. Instead, he focuses on the social aspects of the medical profession.

I will begin this section by providing evidence for Ernesto's growing distaste for authority figures throughout his journey. I will then establish Ernesto's recognition that the idealization of doctors endows them with power that they have the potential to abuse. Finally, I will consider what Ernesto's language suggests about his attempts to reconcile being an authority figure with his anti-authoritarian stance.

Ernesto's encounters with exploitation on his trip help shape his contempt for authority figures. He sympathizes with the proletariat and shows disdain for the bosses who make them work in terrible conditions. For example, on their way to Chuquicamata, a copper mine in Chile, Ernesto and Alberto meet a Communist couple, a man, who works in the mountains at a sulfur mine, and his wife. The man tells him about the exploitation of the miners, how he is disturbed by the "enthusiasm with which the workers set to ruining their health in search of a few meager crumbs that barely provide their subsistence" (Guevara 78). Ernesto concludes that the cruel bosses push the miners to their limit in order to exploit their desperate circumstances. The bosses know that, at the end of the day, the workers must make money to put bread on the table.

Ernesto sees the plight of the miners through the eyes of a medical student. Therefore, he focuses particularly on how mining is a detriment to the health and

livelihood of the workers. He writes: “It was one of the coldest times in my life, but also one which made me feel a little more brotherly toward this strange, for me at least, human species” (Guevara 78). Ernesto seems to feel the pain of the miner and his wife as if he were in their position. He seems disturbed by the loss of so many “lives of the poor, unsung heroes...who die miserably in one of the thousand traps set by nature to defend its treasures, when all they want is to earn their daily bread” (Guevara 80). This intricate prose illustrates Ernesto’s compassion for those who must sacrifice their safety in order to earn enough money to survive. In this quotation, he uses corporal imagery and scientific framework to argue that the mining enterprise exploits the body of nature just as the mining bosses exploit the bodies of the miners.

Later on, Ernesto and Alberto are riding in the back of a truck with a group of indigenous people and a few cows. Ernesto notices that the horn of one cow is scraping the eye of the one next to it. Not wanting the cow suffer and go blind, he mentions it to the one of the indigenous men, suggesting that he space the animals further apart. The solemn man only replies: “ ‘Why, when all it’ll ever see is shit?’ ” (Guevara 125). Ernesto believes that the man “pour[s] the whole spirit of his race” into his answer (125). Ernesto recognizes the man’s identification with the suffering cattle. He implies that indigenous people are poor and, therefore, often exploited by wealthy business owners who put them to work in dark, dangerous, isolated places.

Toward the end of his diary, Ernesto continues to denounce those in charge. At the border between Colombia and Venezuela, a Venezuelan soldier approaches him “with the same spiteful insolence as his Colombian counterparts” (Guevara 158).

He notes that the soldier “checked our luggage and then seized the opportunity to submit us to his own personal interrogation, just to show we were talking to someone with ‘authority’ “ (Guevara 158). This overt jab at the officer emphasizes how Ernesto’s abhorrence of arbitrary, abusive authority has grown over the course of his journey.

Ernesto encounters evidence of the idealization of the doctor and, with it, the temptation to abuse power. As a medical student and a biochemist, carrying forms that verify their positions, Ernesto and Alberto receive special treatment on their trip. Once they leave Argentina and venture into Chile, the public regards them as celebrities. In one Chilean city, they impress several doctors with their knowledge about leprosy, and immediately find themselves held in high esteem. Before leaving, they say goodbye to the admirers they have acquired and pose for some Brazilian girls “who place [them] in their souvenir album for southern Chile” and other tourists who “note their address ceremoniously so they [can] send [them] copies of the photos” (Guevara 56). In this scenario, Ernesto and Alberto become a popular tourist attraction on account of their medical knowledge.

When a newspaper in Temuco called *El Austral* publishes a lavish description of the boys’ travels entitled “Two Argentine Leprosy Experts Tour Latin America By Motorcycle,” Ernesto and Alberto are beside themselves. Ernesto describes how the article establishes them as “experts, key figures in the field of leprology in the Americas, with vast experience” who “had consented to visit this picturesque, melancholy town” (59). The article also exaggerates their prowess a bit, claiming

that they had “treated 3,000 patients” on their journey and were “familiar with the most important leprosy centers of the continent” (Guevara 59). The article solidifies their status as idealized scientists, and they are treated as such for the remainder of their trip. As Ernesto puts it, “...we were now ‘The Experts,’ and we were treated accordingly” (59). A mechanic who reads the article, elated to be in the presence of such godlike men, fixes their bike free of charge. Later, when the boys are looking for a place to sleep, a railroad worker offers up a room in his house and treats them “like kings” (Guevara 60). When La Poderosa crashes, a car going in the opposite direction stops and the men inside help them fix the motorcycle because they are so ecstatic to meet the scientists from the paper. Ernesto notes: “We were like demigods to these simple people” (91). His experience as a medical student on his journey through Latin America heightens his awareness of society’s inclination to idealize healers.

Ernesto also comes to realize how the idealization of physicians endows them with authority. He encounters the misuse of physicians’ authority a few times during his travels. In a Chile, he mentions that “free, public hospitals are extremely rare” and points out posters that announce “Why do you complain about your treatment if you are not contributing to the maintenance of this hospital?” (Guevara 87). When he encounters a system in which healthcare is not readily available to the general public, Ernesto recognizes the power that physicians have over patients to withhold or permit access to care. Perhaps, as a future socialist, Ernesto disapproved of the promotion of private healthcare and the lack of public healthcare he observed in Chile.

At the hospital in Lima, Ernesto and Alberto choose to not wear the gloves and apparel that physicians normally wear in the presence of the lepers. The patients grow so attached to Ernesto and Alberto that their farewells are tearful and moving. Ernesto determines that their connection with the patients was not only a result of their refusal to wear the suggested overalls and gloves, but also a product of their drive to embrace the lepers, who were used to being rejected from society and isolated from the healthy. “We sat with them,” Ernesto writes, “we talked about all sorts of things...we played football with them...the risk to us is extremely low” (146). Ernesto knows that the prevention of skin-to-skin contact between lepers and physicians is unnecessary because the illness is not contagious. He concludes that the physicians wear gloves and uniforms to visually establish the doctor-patient hierarchy in the leprosarium. The physicians working in the leprosarium establish their authoritative roles both physically, by adhering to a strict uniform, and mentally, by declining to develop emotionally supportive relationships with their patients.

As a physician-to-be with distaste for authority figures, Ernesto appears to resolve his ambivalence about authority by focusing on the social aspects of medicine and avoiding scientific jargon in his descriptions. He writes about his medical experiences on his trip as if he is a health inspector, concerned with the social implications of the hospital conditions. He does not write about the specific ailments of the patients or the treatments he offers them. Instead, he discusses how society has exacerbated patients’ ailments by providing unsanitary conditions and rejecting them. He colors his descriptions of his medical experiences with opinions about resources,

hygiene, and isolation of the ill. Emphasizing his social concerns allows him to become a doctor of the people, who does not just help them feel better physically, but also seems to feel *with* them, especially in terms of emotional pain.

Often, Ernesto describes the conditions of the hospitals he visits rather than the conditions of the patients he treats. In a Chilean hospital, Ernesto does not describe any interactions with patients in favor of outlining the inadequacy of the facilities he observed. He writes about the lack of money, medicine, and surgical instruments, and describes the “filthy operating rooms with pitiful lighting,” the “dirty” bathrooms, and the “poor” hygiene (Guevara 87). He also mentions that it is a Chilean custom “not to throw used toilet paper in the toilet but on the floor or in the boxes provided” (Guevara 87). Like a government inspector or a social worker, Ernesto focuses on his disappointment with the material aspects of the facility.

In Huambo, he expounds again on the “appalling sanitary conditions” of a leper colony (Guevara 121). He also underscores the mental toll isolation takes on the lepers: “The thought of having to spend their whole lives between four adobe walls, surrounded by people speaking another language, with only four orderlies who make just short visits each day, causes nervous breakdowns” (Guevara 121). When he visits a relatively new hospital in the area he has a similar reaction. He writes that, although the colony houses 250 patients, it lacks a laboratory and surgical facilities and is “situated in an area infested by mosquitoes, representing pure torture for anyone who has to spend the whole day there” (Guevara 123).

When he does describe his interactions with patients, he focuses on the social implications of their conditions rather than the physiological components of their

illnesses. In Valparaíso, Ernesto meets an old woman suffering from severe asthma. Ernesto, who has gained a wealth of knowledge about treating asthma throughout his medical school training and his own personal experience with the illness, would perhaps be expected to analyze the patient's ailments and outline his scientific observations in his record of the encounter. Instead he focuses solely on how the hospital conditions and societal regulations have worsened the "pitiful state" of the woman (Guevara 70). He describes the "acrid smell of concentrated sweat and dirty feet" in her room and comments on the dust covering a couple of armchairs, noting that they are "the only luxury items in her house" (Guevara 70). He also remarks on the "powerlessness" he feels as a physician and states that he longs for "a change to prevent the injustice of a system in which only a month ago this poor woman was still earning her living as a waitress, wheezing and panting but facing life with dignity" (Guevara 70). Ernesto criticizes society for not providing an environment in which a sick old woman can recuperate. He goes into no scientific detail about her medical condition. Instead, he sympathizes with her by appreciating the harshness of her situation.

After exploring the leper colony in Huambo, he describes a few patients in the hospital, but strategically avoids mention of their specific medical conditions. Again, he chooses to focus on how discrimination and societal regulations have impacted the health and wellbeing of individuals. He writes about a man who needed a serious surgical operation, who asked the hospital if he could have the operation done in a proper facility "even if it was a morgue" (Guevara 123). The hospital declines and the man dies. Ernesto also makes note of a young girl reading *Cousin Basilio* who

describes her life as “calvary, a living hell” (Guevara 121). Ernesto centers his commentary on two patients who have suffered from societal injustice, but refrains from any mention of specific ailments or treatments.

When Ernesto travels to the leper colony in San Pablo, Peru, he describes some details of the illness, but the editors who would later publish his book were not able to read the scientific word he used. He mentions a “widespread nervous problem” throughout the colony and also points out that “there are very few blind people, perhaps leading to the conclusion that [indecipherable word] has something to do with it, seeing that most receive no treatment at all” (Guevara 147). The placement of the “indecipherable word,” which is noted thusly in the published text, shows that Ernesto most likely mentioned a scientific aspect of leprosy once in his account of the trip. His reference to this word subtly indicates his role as a medical student, but the fact that one of the few scientific words he uses is indecipherable suggests that Ernest may have felt uncomfortable using medical jargon.

The only interaction with patients that Ernesto describes in depth is the social one, outside the hospital. He illustrates scenes in which he embraces the sick back into society. At the leprosarium in Lima, Ernesto and Alberto refuse to wear gloves in the colony like the other doctors. They play football with the patients, talk with them, “treat them like normal human beings instead of animals, as they are used to” (Guevara 146). He says the patients leave “a very strong impression” on them (Guevara 146). He also depicts their tearful farewell in great detail, noting that the lepers gave them 100.5 soles and a thank you card for “the little bit of life” they had given the place (Guevara 137). The experience was touching for Ernesto as well: “If

there's anything that will make us seriously dedicate ourselves to leprosy, it will be the affection shown to us by all the sick we've met along the way" (138). Interacting with the patients outside of the hospital lets him see the lepers as people, not patients. In this quotation, Ernesto displaces the doctor-patient relationship from a hospital setting into a social setting, which allows him to write freely about his relationship with his patients without establishing himself as an authority figure.

Although Ernesto avoids discussion of patients and their ailments, the subject of the patient is consistently present in his diary outside of the hospital setting. He humanizes various inanimate objects, scenery, and concepts by describing them like patients. This tendency anticipates the revolutionary role he would play later in life. Ernesto viewed social problems through the lens of a medical student. As a physician-to-be and a budding revolutionary, he seemed to see society as suffering from illness.

In the Chilean mines, for instance, Ernesto diagnoses the truck carrying them over the treacherous terrain: "...on the horizon appeared the asthmatic outline of the little truck which took us halfway, to a town called Baquedano" (77). The truck is not assigned an adjective common to inanimate modes of transportation, like "rickety" or "rundown." Instead, Ernesto identifies the illness of the truck, as if it is a patient and he the physician. Perhaps he diagnoses the vehicle with asthma, his own illness, because it is a displacement of his desire to label himself as a patient. This imaginative representation of an inanimate object emphasizes Ernesto's tendency to think like a physician as well as a patient. His desire to attribute human ailments to

inanimate objects in daily life suggests that he views the world as susceptible to illness.

Once again, Ernesto uses language infused with medical metaphor when the boys leave Dr. Molinas Luco's office in Valparaíso. As they pass the front desk on the way out the door, the receptionist asks them irritably to take their dog with them. Ernesto and Alberto, surprised, look down at a forlorn puppy that has defecated on the lobby carpet and is busy chewing off a chair leg. The boys deny their connection to the "poor animal" and the receptionist roughly kicks the howling dog out of the building. Ernesto feels sorry for the puppy but remarks: "...it was always consoling to know that some living thing's well-being depended on our protection" (72). In this case, the puppy becomes the patient, who looks to Ernesto and Alberto, the physician and scientist, for protection of his "well-being." The puppy, in this case, is a patient suffering from lack of sympathy from society. In this situation, however, Ernesto demonstrates his attraction to the role of an authority figure by being so satisfied with his position as a protector.

Furthermore, Ernesto's daily life, outside of the hospital, takes on a scientific framework. At one of their stops on the trip, Ernesto and Alberto hear rumors that vicious pumas inhabit the area. Ernesto accidentally kills the dog of the family hosting them because, in the darkness, he thinks it is a puma. The next night, as he tries to fall asleep, he decides to remain silent and unmoving "for fear of being knifed, just in case mirages were contagious in those parts" (Guevara 53). He views his mistake, the mirage plaguing his conscience, scientifically, like an illness that can be passed pathogenically between hazy entities blurred by the darkness.

Ernesto also uses medical metaphors to describe his interaction with the Communist couple. The Communist man says to them: “ ‘Come, comrades, let’s eat together. I, too, am a tramp’ ” (Guevara 78). Ernesto decides that the man’s remark is indicative of his “underlying disdain for the parasitic nature he [sees] in [his and Alberto’s] aimless traveling” (Guevara 78). The poor man disapproves of privileged Argentineans exploring South America for fun, while helping themselves to others’ food and sleeping quarters. The bitter Communist morphs into a patient who is wary of coming down with the latest mooching virus because he already has so little in life. Here, an underprivileged man suffers from the exploitation that results from the gap between the wealthy and the poor. In Ernesto’s medical metaphor, the exploitation of the worker becomes the illness that ails the proletariat.

It is La Poderosa, the motorcycle, that serves as Guevara’s most frequently assessed patient. The reader follows the trajectory of the motorcycle’s life as if it were a friend in the hospital. From introduction to demise, La Poderosa is never in very good shape. She is constantly getting injured and it is up to Ernesto and Alberto, the physician and the scientist, to repair her. After one particularly bad fall off the motorcycle, “La Poderosa’s bodywork was damaged enough to force us to stop and, worst of all, we found we had what we most dreaded: a punctured back tire” (Guevara 42). Ernesto adds: “In order to mend it, we had to take off all the packs, undo the wire ‘securing’ the rack, then struggle with the wheel cover which defied our pathetic crowbar” (43). The future physician describes his mechanical endeavors like a surgeon would describe his medical endeavors. This depiction of fixing the parts of

the motorcycle is more detailed than his descriptions of fixing the living patients he encounters on his trip. Ernesto also reflects on “the prosaic figure of La Poderosa II, whose asthmatic wheezing aroused pity in our hosts” (Guevara, 68). Like the ancient truck that hauled the travelers to Baquedano through the Chilean mines, La Poderosa becomes a vehicle with a diagnosis.

When there is no hope left for La Poderosa, Ernesto illustrates sorrowfully how a truck carries “the corpse of La Poderosa II” with them to Santiago (65). Ernesto regards the motorcycle as a patient even after its death. He refers to it not as broken machinery, but as a “corpse.” The funeral of the deceased motorcycle is emotional, as if the boys are leaving behind a patient to whom they were very attached, a dear friend who did not make it despite the valiant efforts of her doctors: “...two tears ploughed symbolically down Alberto’s cheeks” (Guevara 67).

The medical student in the budding revolutionary views societal issues as though they are the disease of the world. Displacing medical jargon to an environment outside of the hospital setting contributes to his illustration of himself as a doctor of the people. When he is working in hospitals, Ernesto describes his medical experiences by outlining them in a social context. He dismantles the doctor-patient hierarchy by concentrating on the social implications of hospital conditions and patient interactions. He puts himself on the same level as his patients by emphasizing his outrage at the injustices in their lives and by embracing the rejected sick back into society.

III. Granado: *Con el Che por Sudamérica*

Con el Che por Sudamérica, or *Traveling with Che Guevara: The Making of a Revolutionary*, Alberto's account of the trip, provides a telling contrast to Ernesto's narrative. Some parts of Alberto's account project the common revolutionary "Che" image onto Ernesto, perhaps to make his young years more palatable to those who prefer to view him that way. Other parts, however, suggest that Ernesto had difficulty coming to terms with being an authority figure.

Alberto's version of the story provokes an important question: Why did two scientists who went on the same adventure, one medical student and one biochemist, embark on such different journeys after their journey together ended? Alberto, who started working in a clinical laboratory in Caracas shortly after their trip ended, stuck to his original plan. Ernesto, on the other hand, graduated from medical school and hastily embarked on another journey around Latin America, in which he traveled through Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, where he met a group of young Cuban revolutionaries, and eventually become a revolutionary himself. What accounts for such a discrepancy in the boys' decision-making? The diaries of Ernesto and Alberto suggest that, while the authority vested in scientists disturbed Ernesto, it did not have as strong an impact on Alberto. Although Alberto denounces the misuse of authoritative power, he does not seem to make a connection between wealthy employers who exploit their workers and the privileges attached to his own role as a scientist. While Ernesto portrays himself as primarily concerned with the social implications of his medical experiences, Alberto seems proud to use his scientific knowledge freely.

Alberto contributes to the idealization of the doctor that Ernesto so despises. This is apparent in Alberto's high moral expectations for a friend of his, a scientist who has become bourgeois in attitude and status during his adulthood. Alberto writes that it "drives [him] to despair" that a once "progressive" scientist has become "completely absorbed by the loathsome society around him" (Granado 9). He admonishes his friend for playing the system by "charting more for lab tests than they're worth" and "even seem[ing] to take some morbid pleasure in going against the dictates of his conscience" (Granado 10). A materialistic scientist who conforms to societal norms and leads a conventional lifestyle repulses Alberto because he believes scientists should be innovative, adventurous, and insightful.

Thus, Alberto tries to act like his own idealized version of a scientist. He throws himself into every opportunity and records his experiences in great detail. In the Chiquicamata copper mines, for example, he outlines a thought like an equation:

There are many who have been working here for more than ten years and don't know what goes on or what gets done in the next section down the line. Of course this is encouraged by the company, which can more easily exploit them this way, as well as keep them at a very low level culturally and politically. (Granado 61)

Alberto depicts his distaste for the authority figure's abuse of power by describing a cause-and-effect situation like an arithmetic problem: the exhausted workers' lack of curiosity added to the business owner's desire to establish his authority and keep the

workers in the dark equals an established hierarchy in which the rich continue to exploit the poor. In this passage, Alberto describes a social situation like a mathematical equation, which underscores his scientific way of writing.

Later on, he describes scenery as though he is looking through a microscope.

He writes:

By the time we crossed the last of the snowy hills the clouds formed by the snow's evaporation were already enormous. Their blue contrasted with the coppery red of the hills without snow on them, and these in turn were splashed with the green of the moss (Granado 78).

In contrast with Ernesto's corporal description of landscape, Alberto accepts that the landscape is inanimate in his descriptions and focuses on its chemical and chromatic intricacies instead of endowing it with human characteristics. He approaches the landscape realistically and takes meticulous notes to preserve his observations.

Alberto also uses scientific language to describe his medical experiences, including his encounters with both doctors and patients. In Cuzco, he describes his interaction with a famous leprologist named Dr. Hermosa. When Alberto is speaking to the secretary, he is embarrassed to explain that, despite his "patched gaucho trousers and my rather grubby leather jacket" he himself is the certified, acclaimed Dr. Granado (Granado 88). He is not surprised that Dr. Hermosa does not recognize him in his traveling garb, but "fortunately, there [is] a photograph on the wall taken during one of his study trips to Argentina" that jogs his memory because "it show[s]

mutual friends and leprosy specialists such as Olmos Castro, Argüello Pitt, Garzón and others” (Granado 89). While Ernesto excludes his perceptions of other physicians and his interactions with them, Alberto often goes into great detail on such subjects by mentioning appearance, attitude, and specific names of doctors.

He also includes specific names and descriptions of medications. As a biochemist, he seems intrigued by the pharmaceutical profession and excited about participating in it. In Huambo, he writes about his concern for patients who are not getting the drugs they need. Four children, all under the age of six, are living in the leprosarium in the same space as their parents who are “suffering from lepromatous leprosy” (Granado 107). Alberto worries that if the children do not receive a “BCG injection to increase their resistance” to leprosy, they will contract the disease themselves because of “the susceptibility they have inherited from their parents and living in continual direct contact with them” (Granado 107). He notes that the “BCG injection, . . . though meant to prevent tuberculosis, apparently has the capacity to create antibodies that protect the organism from Hansen’s bacillus as well” (Granado 107). Later, he points out that although he is concerned for some patients, “the picture is not entirely bleak” because “the medication is up-to-date, [and] the patients are given promanide and sulphetrone, which is currently the most effective drug against *Mycobacterium leprae*” (Granado 108). These scientific notes about existing ailments and proposed treatments are elaborate and informative. His notes are consistent with the research conducted in Europe from the mid-1940’s through the early 1950’s. Sulfur drugs, known as “sulphates” or “sulfones” were the most popular treatment for tuberculosis and for “military or meningeal infections with the

tubercle bacillus, like leprosy” at the time (Macmillan 1312-1315). The use of sulphates was relatively new and exciting for Alberto, who began his work as a biochemist during the discovery of the drug. In contrast to Ernesto’s account, Alberto proudly highlights his pharmaceutical knowledge and its utility in the medical field.

Alberto also incorporates detailed accounts of visits to hospitals and interactions with other physicians that are completely absent from Ernesto’s diary. In Abancay, on the way to Huambo, for example, he mentions a hospital in which he and Ernesto give “a lecture on leprosy and asthma” (Granado 101). Later, at a malaria hospital in La Merced, Alberto brings up another “brief talk on leprosy and on the anti-malaria drive being carried out in Tucumán, in Argentina” (Granado 117).

In Andahuaylas, he writes about meeting “the German doctor who runs the WHO chickenpox eradication campaign” (Granado 113). This note suggests that the boys may have met Dr. Maxime Kuczynski, one of the very few German doctors that worked in Peru treating leprosy. In the colonies, he had much the same attitude as Alberto and Ernesto and displayed a similar style of embracing the sick into society. According to one leper’s account of the leprosarium at San Pablo: “[Kuczynski] has no fear of us. He touches us ... He brings a microscope. He has the will and an interest in curing us. He says that many of us can return to the world of the healthy” (Lombardi 75).

Later on, while they are exploring a village in the Amazon, an elderly shopkeeper tells Ernesto and Alberto about the power of natural remedies. Alberto includes a thorough list of these in his memoir:

Mallow and lancetilla, for example, are used in infusions for insomnia; verbena for fever; ñuño picanilla is a vigorous purgative; the cisa rose is used for bronchitis; chuchuhuasa for asthma (we must get some for Fúser); cotahua latex is used in the forest to stanch wounds; the chirisango to knit fractures; and so on. (Granado 135)

The descriptions of these interactions, informative lectures, and thirst for information emphasize comfort and competence with medical knowledge, which is absent in Ernesto's version. Ernesto's account lacks these details because he emphasizes his and Alberto's social observations and social roles in the medical world rather than their credibility as scientists.

Alberto's memoir sheds light on Ernesto's difficulty with identifying himself as an asthmatic. At the time of their trip, Ernesto was both a physician-to-be and a patient. From his first attack at age two, Ernesto suffered from chronic asthma so severe that it would "afflict him for the rest of his life," and also "irrevocably change the course of his parents' lives" (Anderson 11). After trying numerous remedies and seeking help from many doctors, "the atmosphere in the home became sour" because Ernesto's father "blamed Celia, [Ernesto's mother], for imprudently provoking their son's affliction" (Anderson 11). It is of note that, just as his father understood Ernesto's illness in terms of family dynamics, Ernesto came to understand illness in terms of social dynamics.

The Guevaras moved to Córdoba province, and then again to Alta Gracia, in search of dry climates that would not aggravate their son's condition, but Ernesto's asthma attacks seemed to come and go "without any apparent pattern," which left the family "unstable, in the air, unable to do anything" (Anderson 12). The boy could not attend school until age nine because of his illness, so Celia, his mother, tutored him at home. His parents began keeping a record of Ernestito's daily activities, "documenting everything from the humidity and the type of clothing he wore to the foods he ate" (Anderson 17).

When Ernesto's attacks confined him to bed for days, he spent most of the time reading. Castañeda suggests that the origin of Ernesto's asthma may have been a response to a "primary, recurring anxiety, which caused him to suffocate" (Castañeda 18). In this theory, the anxiety is supposed to be a product of recurring ambivalence. Ernesto's "difficulty in facing and accepting conflicting emotions or desires – whether in his family, at school, in love, or, years later, in politics," supports this idea (Castañeda 18).

The debilitating asthma that confined him to bed for the majority of his childhood and would plague him for the rest of his life was ever present on his trip up the coast of South America. The consistent incidence of Ernesto's asthma attacks is apparent in Alberto's diary, but marginalized in Ernesto's account.

In his narrative, Ernesto includes documentation of two of his asthma attacks. In a small town in Argentina called Choele Choel, he had an attack in which he "was shaking uncontrollably like someone possessed" and his "head was like a drum hammering out strange rhythms" while he watched "bizarre colors [shift] shapelessly

across the walls” and “some desperate heaving produced a green vomit” (Guevara 40-41). Later, in Huambo, he experienced another attack that lasted all night because he had no vials of adrenalin left with which to stop it (Guevara 119-120). Nearing the end of the book, when Ernesto and Alberto are in San Pablo, Ernesto periodically mentions a few more struggles with his illness, devoting about half a sentence to each one (142-143).

Alberto, on the other hand, writes frequently and graphically about Ernesto’s asthma. According to his comrade’s account of the trip, Ernesto’s asthma was severe and consistently present. Alberto describes intense situations in which he and Ernesto could not travel forward because Ernesto was having trouble with his asthma or showing early signs of an attack (Granado 12, 33, 101, 108-109, 111, 112, 137). He writes of an instance, for example, in which Ernesto is having a severe asthma attack in the Peruvian rainforest and the Civil Guard post and police headquarters are deserted. Alberto goes off to find water to sterilize the syringe with which to inject Ernesto, but a distressed woman with very sick children steers him off his course. When he finally returns, Ernesto is gasping and “quite desperate” until Alberto gives him the adrenalin injection (Granado 112). This story is absent from Ernesto’s narrative.

Sometimes, Alberto approaches Ernesto’s illness with the same type of scientific writing he uses to describe the hospitals he visits. For instance, he portrays Ernesto’s attack in Huambo more vividly and more analytically than Ernesto does in his version of the story. Alberto writes:

At about four o'clock in the morning Ernesto woke me up in desperation, his asthma attack had intensified again. As we had no adrenalin we decided that I should give him an intravenous injection of calcium chloride in order to cause him stress, which would stimulate his own adrenal medulla to secrete adrenalin. (Granado 102)

Later, he adds:

Suddenly I was woken by moans. I lit a match, and the sight of Ernesto made me leap to my feet. He looked as if he were in the throes of an attack of tetanus. His whole body was arched off the ground, supported only by his neck and heels, and his mouth and face were contracted. These signs, known as opisthotonos and trismus are characteristic of tetanus. (Granado 102)

Alberto even suggests that Ernesto may have been “psychologically predisposed” to an asthma attack at that time because there were no “general clinic[s] or pharmac[ies] anywhere in town and [they] had only a single vial of adrenalin left” (Granado 101). This description, in which Ernesto plays the role of the patient and Alberto plays the physician, establishes the contrast between Alberto’s way and Ernesto’s way of writing about healing. Alberto’s narrative proves that Ernesto’s asthma was not infrequent and mild, as Ernesto portrays in his own telling of the story. He shows that, in fact, Ernesto’s asthma was serious and unrelenting.

The strong presence of Ernesto's asthma in Alberto's memoir and the marginalization of his illness in his own account suggest that Ernesto does not want to identify himself as a patient. This could also be due to Ernesto's awareness of patients' reliance on the authority of their doctors. By identifying as a patient, Ernesto would be admitting to his own desire for an authoritative, all-knowing physician figure to cure him. As his journey progresses, his asthma worsens. Thus, his need for an authority figure increases as his distaste for authority figures develops. He avoids discussion of his asthma because his identification as a patient would be inconsistent with his increasingly anti-authoritarian opinions.

IV. Salles: *The Motorcycle Diaries*

The Motorcycle Diaries (2004), directed by Walter Salles, has been criticized for romanticizing Ernesto. While some critics commend Salles for his production of an exquisite “road movie” that reveals the real Che and contributes to the internationalization of the film industry (Sadier), others have commented on how the movie is effective, regardless of its historical accuracy, because it encourages “imagination on the figure of a revolutionary, stimulating acceptance” (Bueno). There are also those who chastise the movie’s “Disneyesque caricature of Guevara” and argue that the plot is predictable, historically inaccurate, and “filled with Hollywood clichés” (Foster). The movie does seem to go beyond poetic license by overstating the level of political consciousness present in Ernesto’s own account of the trip. In the movie, the concept of injustice plagues him to an extent far more extreme than his book suggests. Still, it is clear that, like Ernesto himself, Salles struggled with the portrayal of an anti-authority physician-to-be.

Ernesto resolved this discrepancy mainly by limiting his descriptions of clinical interactions. Salles, in contrast, emphasizes Ernesto’s clinical interactions, specifically with patients, but alters them in order to establish Ernesto as an understanding, respectful, sincere physician who is on the same level as his patients. By portraying Ernesto as a medical student who does not contribute to the doctor-patient hierarchy, Salles is able to romanticize him in his role as both a revolutionary and physician.

Salles romanticizes Ernesto the revolutionary and exaggerates his inclination to embrace and support the oppressed, particularly the exploited proletariat. The

movie selects each episode mentioned in the boys' narratives that suggests such an inclination. For instance, Salles alters Ernesto's interaction with the Communist couple to emphasize his political consciousness. In the movie, the Communist couple looks miserable and dirty as they sit with the boys around a small fire. They explain that, when the landlord discovered their political views, he drove them off the little land they had, forcing them to leave their son with other family members and search for work on the road. They talk about how mine work is very dangerous, but how it is the only option that allows them to avoid the police. When asked if they too are looking for work, the boys admit, sheepishly, that they are traveling "just to travel" (Salles). The man and woman look at each other, eyebrows raised. "Bless you," says the woman finally. "Blessed be your travels" (Salles). This comment implies that the lifestyle of the exploited proletariat is so poor in comparison to the luxurious lifestyle of the Argentinean middle class that they are astounded to encounter people who travel for amusement rather than out of necessity.

In Ernesto's account, the comment is pronounced more curtly: "'Come, comrades,' " says the man, "'let's eat together because I, too, am a tramp' " (Guevara 78). Ernesto notes the man's "disdain for the parasitic nature he [sees] in [their] aimless traveling" (Guevara 78). This quotation makes the couple seem less like sad, lost victims of circumstance, as they are portrayed in the movie, and more like clever, savvy homeless people who avoid freeloaders, especially those who are privileged. While the book gives the couple attitude and character, the movie makes them quiet and subdued in order emphasize how society has victimized them and to preserve a sympathetic picture of Ernesto and Alberto.

Following this conversation, the voice-over of Ernesto in the movie says: “their faces were tragic and haunting....It was one of the coldest nights of my life, but also one that made me feel closer to this strange, for me anyway, human race” (Salles). In his narrative, Ernesto describes the “mysterious, tragic air” of the couple and recounts their sad story, but is clearly uninformed about the Communist ideology. He mentions how Communism stems from a “longing for something better,” but does not discuss any of the principles and beliefs behind the practice (Guevara 78). In the book, Ernesto’s ignorance about Communism, which was a political system that he would later represent and spread, implies that on his trip he was not as politically conscious or informed as Salles makes him out to be.

Meeting the Communist couple seems to ignite Ernesto’s awareness of oppression and passion for change, in both the book and the movie. But while the memory of such an extreme example of exploitation plagues Salles’s Ernesto for the remainder of the movie, real Ernesto does not mention the experience again. Salles invents a subsequent scene in which Ernesto picks a fight with the boss of the miners, after seeing them loaded onto the back of a truck. “Can’t you see these people are thirsty?” he says. “Why don’t you give them some water, damn it?” (Salles). As the dismissive employer drives away, Ernesto hurls a rock at the truck in frustration. Salles creates this scene, for which there is no evidence in either of the memoirs, to romanticize Ernesto’s response to his encounter with the Communist couple. He displays Ernesto’s distaste for exploitation in order to portray him as more passionate and palatable than how he appears in his book.

There are many other scenes included in the movie, but absent from the books, in which Ernesto embraces the oppressed. As they travel on, the boys encounter examples of the suffering that has resulted from the Spanish conquest of the Incas. In the movie, the voice-over of Ernesto notes: “The deeper we go into the Andes, the more indigenous people we encounter, who are homeless in their own land” (Salles). In Cuzco, they are escorted through the city by a young indigenous boy who tells them all about the history of Cuzco and introduces them to a group of indigenous women who give them coca leaves to smell and sample. Later, as Ernesto and Alberto are climbing a mountain, they meet a man who was kicked out of his home and fired from his job by his landlord. The man says he needs to make money to educate his five children and has lost his source of income. When Ernesto asks if he has organized with other workers to overthrow the authority figure, the man responds by saying the workers are unified in that they help each other work the land. Both of these scenes are entirely absent from the books. In the movie, Ernesto is considerably shaken by the pain and loss that has resulted from the Spanish conquest of Inca land. Salles visualizes how the injustice that arises from misuse of power plagues Ernesto by shooting a collection of snapshot-type scenes that display the oppressed people he meets on his trip. With these shots, Salles suggests that Ernesto is absorbed in the negative effects the conquistadors who have imposed their own rules and regulations onto a culture they do not understand.

In his book, Ernesto’s reaction to the indigenous communities of South America is quite different than the one presented in the movie. He does not often mention them, but when he does it amounts to this:

The somewhat animal-like concept the indigenous people have of modesty and hygiene means that irrespective of gender or age they do their business by the roadside, the women cleaning themselves with their skirts, the men not bothering at all, and then carry on as before. The underskirts of Indian women who have kids are literally warehouses of excrement, a consequence of the way they wipe the rascals every time one of them passes wind. (Guevara 117)

Ernesto's condescending remarks show that he was not nearly as concerned for the wellbeing of the indigenous communities as Salles suggests. Although he may have sought to embrace the oppressed, racist comments are consistently present in his travel log. Salles emphasizes Ernesto's compassion for outcasts and glosses over his apparent racism. Such glorification of Ernesto's daily interactions has earned the movie some scathing criticism.

Salles also romanticizes Ernesto as a medical student. In his narrative, Ernesto briefly mentions his refusal to wear gloves in a letter to his father about a leprosarium in Lima. Salles chooses to highlight the boy's rejection of the customary apparel and situates the scene in San Pablo instead of Lima. In the movie, a doctor gives the boys the gloves, saying, "I suggest you wear these gloves. Although leprosy is not contagious, the nuns insist that the staff wear them" (Salles). He tells them that if they do not wear the gloves they might make "mortal enemies," but

Ernesto resolutely declines. The nuns, who make the rules in the San Pablo leprosarium, refuse to feed the boys because they have rejected the appropriate attire, so the lepers steal food from the dining hall and bring it to them. This scene is not present in either diary, but Salles uses it to emphasize Ernesto's denunciation of the rules established by the nuns, as well as his efforts to put himself on the same level as his patients. Ernesto is idealized as both a budding revolutionary and a physician in this scene.

Salles's Ernesto is respectful of his patients. He does not rely on his idealized position to gain special privileges from the public. One night, when asking for a place to sleep, Alberto begins describing how he and Ernesto have cured some of the twentieth century's "most terrifying diseases" until the Argentinean owner of the house stops him, unmoved: "What the fuck do you bums want?" (Salles). Ernesto admits glumly that they are starving and need a place to sleep. Salles uses Ernesto's willingness to be frank with the man to suggest that he has a modest view of himself as a physician-to-be, despite his awareness that the profession is often idealized. In this scene, Ernesto rejects the authority invested in him by the medical profession and chooses to be sincere. He is rewarded for his honesty with food and lodging.

Later on, Ernesto and Alberto try to coerce a German man living in Argentina into giving them a place to sleep for the night. When they tell the man they are doctors, he asks the boys to take a look at a lump on his neck. Ernesto immediately tells him it is a tumor. The man, upset with the diagnosis, asks them to leave. Ernesto respects the man's orders and stands behind his decision while Alberto makes his exasperation apparent. "You made him shit his pants!" he shouts. "You can't

treat a patient like that!” (Salles). Ernesto resolutely disagrees. Rather than infantilize his patients, he chooses to view them as intelligent, dignified individuals who can take the truth.

Another way in which Salles pictures Ernesto as minimizing his medical authority is by emphasizing his identity as a patient when he is in the role of a physician. In San Pablo, Ernesto meets a young girl named Sylvia who has recently been diagnosed with leprosy. She is devastated about being isolated and ill. He sits down at the side of her bed, looking at her with concern. She looks back at him.

SYLVIA: What’s wrong?

ERNESTO: I was born with shitty lungs.

SYLVIA: Pity.

ERNESTO: It’s not so bad. Thanks to that I got out of military service. I didn’t have to clean anybody’s boots.

SYLVIA: Is that why you became a doctor? Because you’re sick?

ERNESTO: Maybe. The first word I heard was injection. I want to be useful, somehow.

SYLVIA: You’re wasting your time.

ERNESTO: Why?

SYLVIA: Life is pain.

ERNESTO: It’s pretty screwed up. You’ve got to fight for every breath, and tell death to go to hell.

(Salles)

In this scene, Ernesto is not only on the same level as the patient, he also understands her pain on a sincere, fundamental level. The authoritative aspect of his job disintegrates and he becomes a confidant of sorts. In his diary, Ernesto mentions a young upset patient, who describes her life as “a living hell,” but he offers no details about her illness or his interaction with the girl (Guevara 121).

Salles goes so far as to imply divinity in Ernesto. In one scene, he has Ernesto swim across the river dividing the healthy from the sick in order to celebrate his birthday with the lepers. He is wheezing and gasping for air as he swims and finally, amidst cheers from both the healthy and sick sides of the colony, reaches the opposite bank. This episode is possibly based off an incident in the book in which Ernesto dives into the river to get food. Ernesto’s swim across the river to the side of the sick, however, is absent from both Ernesto’s and Alberto’s narratives. The scene seems to be Salles’s way of turning Ernesto into a Jesus figure. He swims across the water to embrace lepers, the Bible’s original outcasts. This scene more than any other makes Ernesto a doctor of the people because it shows that he is willing to sacrifice his own health to level the doctor-patient hierarchy and bring happiness to his patients.

V. Conclusion

When people pass away, especially at a young age, their lives become intertwined with the imaginations of those they leave behind. In early October of 1967, at age 39, a group of Bolivian soldiers killed Ernesto, leaving the public with many unanswered questions about his choices and his personality (Castañeda 395). Today, some view Ernesto as a symbol of rebellion and compassion, as a result of his leadership in revolutionary guerilla warfare. Others think that, later in life, his actions as a left-wing extremist paralleled the approach Hitler took as a right-wing extremist in World War II. Regardless of opinion, judgments about Ernesto are hard to support because of the tendency to view his life through prisms of idealization or vilification.

In order to answer the unanswered questions, biographers have tried to dig up answers in childhood circumstances and interviews, while Hollywood has upheld his reputation by projecting a Che-Jesus figure to the masses. I think a study of Che's own words, his own language, contributes particular opportunities to examine his character.

Considering Ernesto's own description of his trip around Latin America has given me insight into his identity beyond what a third person narrative or film about his life offers. His language reveals his particular value conflicts and perspective. As a medical student, he described clinical experiences in social terms instead of scientific terminology. As a patient, he described problems in his daily life using medical framework, but avoided mentioning his own illness.

His account of the journey suggests that his decision to become a revolutionary, an anti-authoritarian authority, helped him integrate the roles of

physician and social observer without feeling that he was contributing to social inequalities. As a twenty-three-year-old medical student, he approached social problems in terms of his role as physician-to-be. He went on to become a revolutionary in order to cure what he saw as a societal illness.

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