



Map 1. Ernesto Guevara's first journey as recounted in *The Motorcycle Diaries*.



Map 2. Ernesto Guevara's second journey as recounted in *Back on the Road*.

- 15 A notable exception is Juan Ignacio Siles del Valle's *La guerrilla del Che y la narrativa boliviana* (1996) quoted in Richard Harris, "Reflections on Che Guevara's Legacy," *Latin American Perspectives* 25:4 (1998), 19–32.
- 16 See James Petras, "Latin America: Thirty Years after Che," *Monthly Review* 49:5 (1997), 8–21; Gordon H. McCormick, "Che Guevara: The Legacy of a Revolutionary Man," *World Policy Journal* 14:4 (1997–98), 63–79.
- 17 Alberto Granado, *Traveling with Che Guevara: The Making of a Revolutionary*, trans. Lucía Álvarez de Toledo (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004); Ernesto Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo el Che* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1984); Hilda Gadea, *Ernesto: A Memoir of Che Guevara*, trans. Carmen Molina and Walter I. Bradbury (London: W. H. Allen, 1973); Carlos "Calica" Ferrer, *De Ernesto al Che: El segundo viaje de Guevara por Latinoamérica* (Buenos Aires: Marea Editorial, 2005); Ricardo Rojo, *My Friend Che*, trans. Julian Casart (New York: Grove, 1968).
- 18 See, for example, Ingrid E. Fey and Karen Racine, eds., *Strange Pilgrimages: Exile, Travel, and National Identity in Latin America, 1800–1900* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2000); and Jürgen Buchenau, ed. and trans., *Mexico Otherwise: Modern Mexico in the Eyes of Foreign Observers* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).
- 19 Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 21 James S. Duncan and Derek Gregory, eds., *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London, Routledge, 1999), 3.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 23 Ernesto Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America*, trans. Alexandra Keeble (London: Harper Perennial, 1995), 32; emphasis added.

Eduardo Elena

Point of Departure

Travel and Nationalism in

Ernesto Guevara's Argentina

The story of Che Guevara is one of a series of personal transformations—from asthmatic youth to medical student, and then to wanderer, guerrillero, revolutionary leader, and, finally, martyr. The fundamental role played by travel throughout these changes is widely acknowledged.¹ In fact, the one constant in Guevara's short life was its unsettled nature: he never remained long in one place during his youth, and he moved from country to country as an adult, embarking on one voyage or mission after another. In the standard account of his life story, it is the 1951–52 journey across South America that marked Guevara's political awakening as he was pulled away from his familiar life in Argentina and exposed to a continent of brutal extremes. This trip—recounted in Guevara's private journal and published after his death (and more recently in English as *The Motorcycle Diaries*)—has thus attracted great attention from biographers, commentators, and filmmakers. For all the insights provided by these works, however, they usually consider this voyage in isolation, as an assertion of willful independence. Such an interpretation hardly seems surprising, given that Guevara's self-presentation encourages this view, and it would later feed into the cult of heroism of El Che. But one is left with a distorted picture of an individual moving freely through a static landscape, as if he were the only historical actor in motion during this time and place. As a consequence, we fail to see Guevara's position within the broader social field of his homeland Argentina and the rest of Latin America, a region whose population was increasingly on the move in the post-Second World War era.

This essay aims to situate Guevara the traveler in the historical context of 1950s Argentina. In particular, it examines his early journeys from the vantage of two major contemporary trends: mid-twentieth-century mass migration and tourism; and the nationalist politics of the Peronist era (1943–55). This approach is premised on the assumption that to understand this particular traveler, one must examine his point of departure—in other words, the possibilities open to him at this moment and the conditions that he reacted against. Guevara came of age in a time marked by the regular movement of people across Argentina, from rural residents relocating to urban areas to short-term leisure travel. His decision to traverse vast expanses of his home country and Latin America can be seen in sharper relief by investigating these social displacements and cultural trends that accompanied them. This essay considers these historical subjects primarily through Guevara's earliest travel writings. During the journeys of his youth in Argentina, Guevara formulated his travel method—as reflected in his choice of itinerary, modes of transportation, and contact with the physical landscape and its inhabitants. *Method* is perhaps too rigorous a term to describe these wanderings, but it serves the useful purpose of grouping together his habits and preferences as a traveler, all of which reveal much about postwar Argentina and Guevara's place within it.

This type of historical analysis runs the danger of being reductive, that is, of explaining individual thought and action as the automatic outcome of structural pressures, political forces, and abstract social categories. To be sure, a measure of "sociologizing" may be welcome in this case, if only to counteract the inevitable mythologizing of El Che. But as we shall see, one of the distinguishing features of Guevara's early travels was, in fact, their anticonformist character. His ambitious trek across South America, on a minimal budget and just shy of earning his medical degree, clearly bucked convention. At the most obvious level, he pursued a self-conscious goal to evade acceptable practices of tourism. Although Guevara's rebellion was not yet aimed at fomenting revolution, his travels offered a gesture of rejection against prevailing class norms, cultural expectations, and the political trends of the 1950s. In contesting certain features of this milieu, however, Guevara continued to cling to others, and his travel writings reflect earlier paradigms of exploration and affinities with contemporary nationalist perspectives.

In keeping with the objectives of this volume, the essay also departs from a purely biographical analysis by reconsidering the history of postwar Argentina from the vantage of Guevara's travel accounts. The pages that follow will consider which central historical developments in his homeland Guevara saw (and which ones he did not see). Principal among these was the eruption of Peronism as the nation's largest political force. Discussions of Guevara's youth have tended to revolve around his somewhat perplexing distance from the partisan convulsions of Peronist rule. Nevertheless, a closer look at Guevara's travel writings reveals the inroads made by Peronist politics into everyday life across the national territory. Juan and Eva Perón's government accelerated ongoing social trends, such as urbanization, rural migration, and popular tourism (partly through state-sponsored programs). Despite his best efforts the young Guevara found it impossible to extricate himself fully from Peronism, even after he left behind his country's borders.

The essay begins by considering Guevara's place in the history of migration and travel in mid-twentieth-century Argentina. It then probes Peronist-era trends that shaped the parameter of his travels (such as the nationalist fascination with rural spaces). It concludes with a brief discussion of Guevara's return to Argentina as El Che, the embodiment of revolutionary action. There are a number of obstacles to examining Guevara and his travels in this manner. One relies by necessity on a critical reading of Guevara's own writings, yet they reflect the priorities of a youth seeking adventure in foreign lands, rather than meditations on his homeland. While Guevara and his companion Alberto Granado devoted more than a month to crisscrossing southern Argentina, the journals that comprise *The Motorcycle Diaries* are devoted primarily to their experiences elsewhere. In addition, these travel writings have a complicated provenance, which makes it difficult to address the scope of subsequent revisions and editing.² With an awareness of these interpretive dilemmas, the current essay draws on the *Diaries* and a range of other materials: additional Guevara writings, Peronist-era political and cultural sources, and secondary biographical works. What emerges from this analysis is a better appreciation for the historical significance of Guevara's choices as a traveler, including how his earliest journeys within Argentina blazed the trail for encounters elsewhere in Latin America.

On the Road in Argentina

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the 1951–52 journey recounted in *The Motorcycle Diaries* did not constitute Guevara's first travel experience, nor even his first trip abroad. As his biographers have shown, Guevara traveled extensively in his teenage years and early twenties, covering thousands of kilometers across Argentina by hitchhiking, bicycling, and other means. Along the way he crossed paths with other Argentines circulating throughout their country in ever larger numbers. Such is the emphasis on Guevara's exceptionality, however, that few observers have stopped to consider his relationship to these travelers or to the phenomenon of postwar migration more generally. In fact, Guevara took pains to distinguish himself from his contemporaries and embraced a different paradigm of travel, shaped by readings of explorer accounts, conversations with political refugees, and youthful adventures on a shoestring budget. It is therefore hard to imagine Guevara in the shadow of mass migration, to see him surrounded by crowds at a train station or lingering with vacationers at a popular resort. Yet his writings reveal glimpses of encounters not only with rural migrants seeking work but also with other urban Argentines who had taken to the road in search of leisure. Guevara's reactions to these chance meetings suggest much about his own social position and effort to define an alternative approach to travel.

Migration was a way of life for Guevara and his family. Both of his parents came from privileged backgrounds and boasted distinguished family names, but they were the downwardly mobile black sheep of the fold. Financial pressures contributed to an unsettled upbringing for the family's children, albeit one still characterized by middle-class comforts and connections to wealthy relatives. As the ~~successor of the old~~ financial pressures contributed to an unsettled upbringing for the family's children, albeit one still characterized by middle-class comforts and connections to wealthy relatives. As the household provider, Ernesto Guevara Lynch went from one failed business venture to the next, and the family moved frequently within Argentina. Born in the city of Rosario, the future Che grew up on a yerba mate plantation in Misiones, in the provincial hill town of Alta Gracia, and in the metropolises of Córdoba and Buenos Aires—in addition to living through shorter stays elsewhere in Argentina and through countless visits to relatives and friends. Guevara's vagabond tendencies later in life can be traced further back as well. On both sides of the family tree ancestors had journeyed far and wide

across Argentina, Chile, and even the United States. Ernesto's favorite grandmother would entertain him for hours with stories of her father's experiences as an exile from the regime of the nineteenth-century Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas and of his time living in California during the 1840s gold rush. A string of visitors in the 1930s and 1940s brought more tales of adventure in foreign lands. In particular, the Guevara family hosted ex-combatants from the Spanish Civil War whose stories of the Republic's brave struggles against right-wing nationalists captivated the young Ernesto.³

Equally important, the written word proved integral to Guevara's formation as a traveler. The family library was stocked with scores of travel chronicles and related books.⁴ Confined to the indoors for long periods of time due to asthma and other illnesses, Guevara became a devoted reader and spent hours poring over books by Jules Verne, adventure fiction, and more esoteric works on scientific expeditions and missions. (By his teenage years he had also familiarized himself with Karl Marx and other leftist authors, but his readings were extremely eclectic and his interests dispersed.) For the remainder of his life Guevara would keep journals of his voyages as a traveling routine, often revising them on his return. He rarely traveled without bringing books along. In a remarkable essay on Guevara the reader, Ricardo Piglia describes a photograph illustrating the centrality of the written word for Guevara later in life: close to his final days, while seeking to spark a guerrilla war in Bolivia and pursued by counterinsurgency forces, Guevara was pictured sitting in a tree reading a book. Even with the enemy closing in, suffering from exhaustion and wounds, he continued to carry books and diaries in a folder strapped to his body. Most incredibly, reading and writing were among Guevara's last recorded acts. After his capture and only hours prior to his execution, he was visited by a teacher, who offered him some food as he lay dying in the classroom of a rural school; Guevara asked her to correct a misspelling of a sentence on the blackboard: "I know how to read."⁵

The most famous of Guevara's writings—*The Motorcycle Diaries*, as well as the accounts of his Congo and Bolivian campaigns—can be added to the canon of Argentine travel writing, a tradition that includes essential works such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo* and Lucio V. Mansilla's *A Visit to the Ranquel Indians*. At times Guevara's accounts suggest a conscious awareness of this literary

tradition and precocious attempts to situate himself within it. The opening salvo of the *Diaries* declares, "The person who wrote these notes passed away the moment his feet touched Argentine soil again. The person who reorganizes and polishes them, me, is no longer, at least I am not the person I once was. All this wandering around 'Our America with a capital A' has changed me more than I thought"—an allusion perhaps to another celebrated writer-traveler-revolutionary, the Cuban nationalist José Martí and his classic work, *Our America*.⁶ In any event, this passage captures the complex function of travel for Guevara, for whom the physical experience of the voyage remained inseparable from reading and writing about travel, each sphere of activity continually informing the others.

Like that of his celebrated literary precursors, Guevara's approach to travel was shaped by his relatively privileged social position. Gender factors into the equation here not only in the desire for sexual adventure evidenced clearly in *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Guevara and Granado appear concerned as much with unlocking the mysteries of the continent as adding to their conquests with foreign women). More important, the text highlights the supreme confidence that guided Guevara's travels, the freedom with which he transgressed both social norms and spatial boundaries, an ease facilitated by his position as a male in 1950s Argentine society. Guevara's recklessness and romanticism as a traveler follow in the tradition of nineteenth-century male voyagers of a similar class and educational background. Within Argentine letters Guevara's travels have more in common in tone with those of a figure like Mansilla (who journeyed across much of Europe and Asia in his youth, before being sent on his famed expedition into Argentina's Indian territories) than, say, those of Juana Manuela Gorriti (who ranged widely across South America in the nineteenth century but is best known being sent on his famed expedition into Argentina's Indian territories) than, say, those of Juana Manuela Gorriti (who ranged widely across South America in the nineteenth century but is best known for her keen observations of postindependence society).⁷ Guevara's journals appear to echo, whether intentionally or not, Mansilla's combination of puffed-up arrogance and self-deprecating humor in the face of adversity.

Exposed to a range of travel experiences (physical and literary) during his upbringing, Guevara further established his preferences as a wanderer during his excursions across Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s. While in school he often hitchhiked hundreds of miles from Córdoba and Buenos Aires to visit friends and family. In his

early twenties he took a part-time job as a medic on ships that sailed as far as northern Brazil and Jamaica (though little is known about these trips).⁸ But Guevara's most ambitious experience before his Latin American journey with Granado was a solo trek on a motorized bicycle across Argentina in 1950. Descriptions of this trip survive in a short travel diary uncovered after Guevara's death. His father discovered these notes in a box of old notebooks in the family's Buenos Aires apartment. Although the paper was damaged and the young Ernesto's handwriting is difficult to decipher, Guevara Lynch transcribed the original document and published excerpts of it in his memoir, *Mi hijo El Che*.⁹ As with *The Motorcycle Diaries*, there are unanswered questions as to how accurately this account reflects the original (in this case, at least, there appear to have been fewer possibilities for editing from Cuban authorities). Nevertheless, this earliest surviving travel diary can serve as a crucial source for understanding the characteristics of Guevara the traveler.

For those familiar with the *Diaries* the account of 1950 possesses basic similarities. Much of the travelogue recounts the difficulties encountered by the twenty-two-year-old: the mechanical troubles with his bike, the perils of traversing a huge geographic expanse, and his endurance of the natural elements. The text offers vignettes of the landscape, anecdotes about the characters Guevara meets, and descriptions of medical centers along the way (including the leprosarium where Granado worked).¹⁰ In six weeks Guevara covered four thousand kilometers, passing through twelve provinces but spending the majority of his time in the northwestern region of Salta, Tucumán, and Santiago del Estero. What comes through in this text, as in his subsequent travel writings, is Guevara's desire to find far-flung corners of the countryside and to spend time among the "ordinary," impoverished residents. Through forays into remote areas, Guevara expected the revelation of hidden aspects of social reality.

It is thus noteworthy that Guevara did not fully "see" a major social trend (or at least comment on it in his writings) reshaping these provincial areas. The 1950s were a time of internal migration on a massive scale, and rural populations headed by the millions to the cities; their main destination was Buenos Aires and its suburbs, the hub for industrial, commercial, and government employment. Migration was nothing new in Argentina; the countryside's inhabi-

tants covered vast distances seeking ranching and harvest labor in the nineteenth century, and large-scale European immigration at the turn of the century transformed social structures. But the pace of internal migration built steadily to reach new highs in the postwar era. According to official estimates the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires received annually about 8,000 migrants from the provinces in the mid-1930s; by the early 1940s this number had grown to 70,000, and by 1947 to more than 117,000 provincial migrants a year.¹¹ This trend continued well into the 1950s and 1960s, and technically speaking the Guevara family's relocation to Buenos Aires city from Córdoba made them part of this exodus.

In his decision to investigate the heartland of Argentina, Guevara went against the predominant demographic trend. Given his fondness for travel, it surprises that he had very little to say about migration in his writings. In part, Guevara's travel method may explain this lacuna. He preferred to avoid large cities and devoted little time in his journals to describing metropolitan spaces or their inhabitants. In searching for ever more distant areas, Guevara was guided by a desire for contact with rural folk, those Argentines living close to the land and far from the harried urban world familiar to him. That these people were headed in increasing numbers from the countryside and towns to the big cities went against Guevara's very purpose of seeking their places of origin.

In one episode in his journal of 1950 Guevara discusses an encounter with a working-class migrant, and it offers insight into his sense of himself as a traveler. Having stopped to inflate one of his bike tires, Guevara was approached by a man, described as a *linyera* (vagabond or wanderer). The man was on his way from the cotton harvest in El Chaco, heading most likely to the grape harvest in San Juan. According to the journal, the *linyera* could simply not understand why Guevara was covering thousands of kilometers in his expedition through the provinces. Grabbing his head, the man supposedly exclaimed with an exasperated tone, "Mama mía, you are spending all that effort uselessly?"¹² On the surface the anecdote reveals Guevara's modest attempt at humor, although his portrait of the migrant borders on the paternalistic. The *linyera* made for a familiar social stereotype, a stock-and-trade character of comedic theatre and popular stories, and Guevara's account presents this man in similarly one-dimensional terms. The episode points to the

crucial difference between Guevara and the majority of those on the road in the Peronist era: his class background and relative privilege allowed him the leisure to travel "uselessly," at least from the *linyera*'s perspective.

Guevara defended the value of traveling in a free manner, liberated from the responsibilities of work and the routines of everyday life, but at the same time he rejected the paradigm of tourism. He saw himself as something more, as someone dedicated to the serious business of investigating the inner workings of society. Guevara was not the only young man of his generation to seek new forms of discovery through travel; other middle-class Argentines probed the expanses of their country, using vacations from their studies to roam off the beaten path.¹³ Nor can one overlook that elsewhere in the Americas young bohemians were also taking to the road. In the course of his trips across the region, Guevara came into contact with these individuals, as well as with those forced abroad by political exile, some of whom would influence his trajectory as a leftist revolutionary.

Yet even in his earliest accounts Guevara had already staked his claim as a different kind of traveler, one that followed an alternate path, literally and metaphorically, from the average tourist of the Peronist era. His initial voyages occurred during a time of mass tourism, evidence of which emerges from his diaries. More than ever before, Argentines during the 1940s and 1950s left their jobs and homes to go on vacation, heading toward the coast and to the mountains of the interior. The country already boasted distinguished seaside resorts like Mar del Plata, and Ernesto's boyhood home of Alta Gracia in Córdoba was renowned as a destination for invalids and vacationers. But postwar economic and political conditions fueled the transformation of tourism into a regular activity for the middle class and for fortunate sectors of the working class. As one measure of the surge in tourism during the postwar years, the number of vacationers in the premier resort of Mar del Plata jumped from 380,000 in 1940 to 1.4 million by 1955. The Peronist administration was both directly and indirectly responsible for accentuating tourism. The regime's economic program of the mid-1940s, centered on boosting the domestic economy by increasing aggregate demand, helped redistribute income to wage earners. The political prerogatives of forging an alliance with organized labor and consolidating

popular support served as the impetus behind social reforms that widened leisure opportunities. New labor legislation shortened the workweek and extended for the first time benefits such as vacations to much of the industrial working class and to state employees. Additional national holidays added to the free time of popular-sector Argentines, many of whom now enjoyed for the first time ever uninterrupted weekends and ten to fifteen days of paid vacation a year. The private tourism industry sought to capitalize on these changes: hotel developers, railroad companies, and organizations such as the Automobile Club of Argentina all took steps to attract and cater to the tourist market.

Moreover, Peronist authorities adopted measures to organize leisure time, inspired by a mixture of populist politics and managerial concern for the productivity and health of the labor force. National and provincial governments opened resorts, expanded the network of rural parks across the country, and offered subsidized train fares to tourists. The Eva Perón Foundation built hotels and vacation complexes (*colonias de vacaciones*) designed to minister to the needs of poor and working-class children. Most famously, the largest pro-Peronist labor unions constructed facilities for their growing memberships, in some cases expanding on limited leisure programs of the past. The union-operated hotels that dotted hill towns and seaside resorts—including in former elite playgrounds like Mar del Plata—lent evidence to organized labor's growing power, as well as to what historian Juan Carlos Torre and others have dubbed the "democratization of well-being" in the Peronist era.¹⁴

We have only fleeting signs of what Guevara thought of the new opportunities for mass tourism in Argentina. While many Peronist-era tourists headed for the beaches, public and private leisure facilities were located in the interior provinces traversed by Guevara during his youthful travels. It would have been difficult for him not to have crossed paths with other tourists. In his diary of his trip through the interior in 1950, Guevara took pains to distinguish his approach to travel from that of the common tourist. When asked by a hospital staff member in Salta what he had seen on a recent side trip—and presumably critiqued for having missed all the major sites—Guevara reflected on his travel philosophy. He argued, "At least I do not feed myself with the same forms as the tourists, and it seems strange to me to see on the tour guides [*mapas de propaganda*] for

Jujuy, for example: the altar of the patria, the cathedral where the patria was blessed . . . the miraculous virgin of the Rio Blanco; the house in which Lavalle was killed." These grand patriotic and religious sites were precisely the types of destinations advertised by the Peronist state and the Eva Perón Foundation in their travel pamphlets (complete with titles like *Tourism for the People*). One of the ideological goals of official tourism programs was to inculcate Peronist nationalism and Catholic religiosity in the hearts of working people by exposing them to symbolically important places.¹⁵ Guevara rejected this version of travel: "That's not how one sees a pueblo, a way and interpretation of life, that's just a luxurious facade [*lujosa cubierta*]." Instead he enumerated the sorts of things he searched for in his travels: the "soul" of the people reflected in the sick, prisoners in jail, and ordinary pedestrians.¹⁶ In short, Guevara described tourists as superficial and concerned only with what guidebooks told them to see, and his grittier mode of voyaging offered him a means to probe beyond the mapped destinations—which, it bears remembering, had just become more accessible to working people. His rejection of tourist banality in this sense also constituted a negative reaction to the popularization of leisure travel.

Ironically, however, Guevara's most famous journey began with stops in numerous tourist destinations in Argentina—a sign perhaps of the difficulties a middle-class youth encountered in attempting to break out of social routines. During the initial stages of his motorcycle trip in 1952, he and Granado visited the houses of relatives and friends along the beach resorts of the southern coast of Buenos Aires Province: Villa Gesell, Miramar, and Necochea (near where the vacation home of Guevara's then girlfriend was located). They arrived during the first weeks of January in the Southern Hemisphere summer, the very peak of the tourist season. On their way west across the Andes, the travelers passed through Argentina's mountain resort towns and found shelter in the region's national parks (a focal point of the Peronist government's tourism programs). Other travelers were close at hand. In fact, Granado mentions in his memoirs the pair's astonishment at meeting near the resort of Bariloche a sixty-year-old couple from New Jersey, who were traversing the continent in their station wagon.¹⁷ At this stage of the journey, it is unclear which pair represented the greater alternative to mainstream tourism: the pair of middle-class Argen-

tines, fresh from their stay in resort towns, or the married couple from Jersey?

Guevara's attempts to distance himself from Peronist-era tourism intensified after he left behind his country's borders, and financial necessity and his own preferences forced him to rough it during his travels.¹⁸ There seems to be more at stake here than just a longing to avoid being confused with Latin America's leisure travelers or a hint of youthful snobbism. Most tourists' class background would have annoyingly reminded Guevara of his own social status; and certainly the presence of mass tourism would have intruded on his project of uncovering an untrammelled América.¹⁹ Guevara thus cultivated a self-conscious approach not as a tourist but as an explorer. This characteristic would later resurface in the mythic status of El Che. In commenting on his son's journals, Guevara Lynch claimed that travel was no mere "hobby" for Che. His father went so far as to compare him to the Spanish conquistadores, with the major difference that Che's voyages of discovery led to Latin American liberation rather than subjugation.²⁰ With slightly less hyperbole, he claimed that his son approached travel as a "social investigator," as a scientist who sought to understand and document humanity and, if possible, to alleviate suffering. There is something to this metaphor, as Guevara's itinerary was shaped by his medical interests and attention to matters of public health. He punctuated his voyage of 1951–52 with stops at hospitals, clinics, and leprosariums that were hardly standard sites for tourists but held special interest to a young man concerned with the socially marginal and the sick. There is little doubt that the risk-taking Guevara went farther than his peers to seek out people from different social worlds.

It is this side of Guevara's personality that *The Motorcycle Diaries* best captures. By omitting references to previous travel experiences, to seek out people from different social worlds.

It is this side of Guevara's personality that *The Motorcycle Diaries* best captures. By omitting references to previous travel experiences, the text presents an image of the young Guevara as wide-eyed and inexperienced, which only accentuates the drama of his discoveries on the road. This trajectory has informed subsequent representations of his voyages, including the film version of the *Diaries* directed by Walter Salles in 2004. This thoughtful adaptation begins with a portrait of Guevara as an unseasoned youth at home in Buenos Aires city, which sets up his ventures into the rural heart of the Latin American continent. Early scenes focus on Argentina's urbanity (with scenes of Granado and Guevara saying their goodbyes in Bue-

nos Aires) and the nation's famed wealth (exemplified by the visit to the imposing vacation estate of Guevara's girlfriend, Chichina Ferreyra). These passages of the film underscore Guevara's connections to a privileged social milieu, but also his personal disdain for its pretensions (conveyed through the actor Gael García Bernal's formidable frown). The depiction of a comfortable life in Argentina establishes a foil to the poverty encountered during his journey: for example, the Ferreyra mansion, seemingly isolated in its opulence from the rest of society, offers a contrasting visual parallel to the remote San Pablo leper colony in Amazonian Peru near the movie's end. This narrative arc proves effective within the structure of the film and further contributes to the consolidation of Guevara as Latin America's emblematic traveler.

In the process, however, *The Motorcycle Diaries* (in both its written and film versions) achieves an effect at a cost: namely, obscuring for the audience key features of the historical setting of migration in which Guevara's voyages took place. The social landscape of the 1950s has been partially erased. Missing are the migrants moving between rural areas or relocating permanently to cities like Buenos Aires, further swelling the neighborhoods and suburbs of the post-war Argentine metropolis. Absent as well are the clusters of tourists on their way to resorts and other sites, among them working-class families participating for the first time in Peronist programs. These practices represented a point of departure for Guevara's "rebellious" approach, which constituted a partial rejection of prevailing cultural norms and expectations related to travel in Argentina. That Guevara's journals contain passing references to wandering laborers, patriotic tourists, and his own visits to resorts illustrates the veiled presence of this wider social milieu. It also helps explain exactly what he was attempting to leave behind in his decision to journey outside his country's borders and pursue an unknown Latin America.

Peronism, Nationalism, and Discovery

If migration constituted a major social trend in the Argentine 1950s, it was politically and culturally an era dominated by new forms of nationalism. At the forefront was the Peronist movement, whose leaders deployed the power of the state and of partisan organiza-

tions to project their vision of a New Argentina—a country “politically sovereign, economically independent, and socially just,” as the propaganda slogan went. The grandeur of the Argentine nation and of its *pueblo* (people) was extolled through the media, federal government institutions, and other means available to officials. Peronist initiatives built on nationalist trends gathering force since the early twentieth century and encompassing artistic circles and political sectors across the ideological spectrum. What, then, was Guevara’s place within this society shaped by multiple nationalist currents? On the whole he attempted to distance himself from Peronist nationalism. We can view Guevara’s decision to embark on a voyage outside Argentina as an attempt to break free from a nationalist political milieu, or at the very least, as the expression of a desire to immerse himself in a different reality. Yet in spite of his mistrust of official patriotism, Guevara’s orientation toward travel bore the marks of broader nationalist cultural influences, above all in his constant attraction to remote, “authentic” rural spaces and their inhabitants. Although the motorcycle voyage of 1951–52 opened up a wider world, Guevara’s writings reveal the ultimate difficulties of leaving behind Peronism and the nationalist trends of his youth.

Biographers have drawn attention to the young Guevara’s seeming indifference toward Peronism—what one author has dubbed his “a-Peronism.”²¹ Guevara lived through a time of ardent partisan conflict, but he managed somehow to remain aloof. According to the recollections of friends and family, he raised the subject of Peronism only occasionally in conversation, and it appears rarely in letters or personal notebooks from his teenage years and early twenties. On the surface, this attitude seems improbable: how could the young man who would become the most famed revolutionary in Latin America have such little interest in the central political pieties. On the surface, this attitude seems improbable: how could the young man who would become the most famed revolutionary in Latin America have such little interest in the central political phenomenon of twentieth-century Argentina? A closer look, however, suggests that Guevara’s silence derived, at least in part, from being caught up in the contradictions of Peronism, a mass movement that at once embraced elements of state authoritarianism and of working-class empowerment. Guevara responded to this dilemma by drawing back from political life, a reaction less uncommon than one might first assume in an era of mounting polarization.

On the one hand, Guevara shared the anti-Peronist sentiments of his family and circle of friends. If the base of the Peronist movement

lay among the working class, then the core of anti-Peronism could be found among upper- and middle-class sectors—with exceptions, of course, as class never mapped perfectly onto political loyalties. Like the majority of their social peers, the members of the Guevara family viewed Perón as a demagogue who manipulated the populace with false promises of social justice, motivated only by a thirst for personal power. The Guevaras’ involvement in leftist political causes and intellectual circles only strengthened this resolve. Guevara Lynch voted typically for Argentina’s reformist Socialist Party, whose leaders staunchly opposed Peronist rule and many of whom were eventually forced into exile. Negative views of Peronism also derived from the entire family’s support of the republican cause in the Spanish Civil War and from members’ participation in anti-fascist organizations such as *Acción Argentina*.²² These efforts no doubt inclined them to consider Peronism in a similar light; after all, Spain’s Francisco Franco and Perón were both military men whose coalitions included conservative Catholics and the extreme Right. The point here is not that Peronism constituted a form of fascism, but merely that there was a logic behind the Guevaras’ and others’ understanding of Argentine politics along these lines.²³

On the other hand, Guevara remained an ambivalent anti-Peronist compared to his family and friends. Granado took part in student protests against the revolution of 1943, from which Perón began his rapid rise to prominence. Decades later, in his own travel memoirs, Granado would continue to describe the politics of this period as “our own local Nazism . . . dressed up as nationalism.”²⁴ Guevara felt scant enthusiasm for the formal political opposition. He had long disdained Argentina’s traditional centrist party, the Radicals, and he viewed most leftist groups as ineffectual and mistaken in allying themselves with conservatives in defying Perón. This outlook may explain why he never participated in political organizations, even during his days at the University of Buenos Aires, a locus of student protest, where he studied medicine from 1947 to 1953. While Guevara considered Juan and Eva Perón little more than opportunists, he acknowledged the significance of Peronism for the working class. His biographer Jon Anderson recounts an anecdote in which Guevara advised his family’s maids to vote for Perón, arguing that they would benefit from the government’s policies (an example that illustrates both Guevara’s social advantages and his tendency to view politics in

class terms).²⁵ In this regard Guevara's attitude mirrored those of a minority on the Argentine Left, who felt unsure how to respond to this working-class movement. While most continued to view Peronism as a form of homegrown fascism, a few leftists explored the possibility of a rapprochement with this popular political force. Much as this problem perplexed Guevara in the early 1950s, the issue of whether socialism and Peronism were compatible would dominate the attention of progressives for decades after Perón's overthrow.²⁶

For those like Guevara, opposition to Peronism was further complicated by the question of anti-imperialism. The Peronist regime had taken up the cause of asserting national sovereignty by railing against the interference of foreign powers. Its leaders adopted inward-oriented economic policies and limited nationalizations (most notably, the purchase of the British-owned railroads in 1947). Anti-imperialism was perhaps Guevara's strongest political interest during this period, and he often butted heads with his father over the influence of the United States in the hemisphere. The young Guevara may have been an anti-imperialist, but he was no narrow nationalist; this is a crucial distinction for understanding his later vision as a revolutionary, one based on international guerrilla struggle. He was aware of the dark side of nationalist politics in Perón's Argentina, especially the state's censorship of the media and its harassment of dissenters. As a young man Guevara preferred reading about nationalists from other countries over those closer to home, and one of his favorite books was, supposedly, Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*.²⁷ The cosmopolitan, educated, and ostensibly left-leaning Nehru appeared far more palatable to an individual of Guevara's intellectual tastes than his own country's ruler. As with the class characteristics of Peronism, the government's embrace of anti-imperialism did not suffice to convert Guevara into a supporter—that would have been too great a leap for someone from his background. But the pull between these opposing impulses helps to explain why he would stay on the political sidelines during this turbulent age.

Yet the task of isolating oneself from Peronism was none too easy in Argentina in the 1950s. Passages from *The Motorcycle Diaries* capture the ubiquity, even inescapability, of Peronism. Indeed, the very idea for Guevara's odyssey across Latin America was intertwined

with a central Peronist ritual, for plans for the motorcycle trip were hatched on 17 October. Commemorating a worker-led protest against Perón's imprisonment in 1945, this date constituted the highpoint of the Peronist calendar, becoming by the 1950s a national holiday and an occasion for an outpouring of partisan enthusiasm.²⁸ Every year the government encouraged its supporters to make a pilgrimage to Buenos Aires, where they would gather in the Plaza de Mayo for a joyous rally. This particular 17 October had special significance, as Perón was up for reelection only a few weeks later in November 1951, and state and party authorities thus redoubled their efforts to stage a public celebration of devotion. Guevara, however, opted for another itinerary. As befitted his anti-Peronist leanings, he made use of the holiday to exit the capital and visit friends in Córdoba. (One wonders how many thousands of Perón supporters he must have crossed along the road heading in the opposite direction.) It seems hardly coincidental that on the most Peronist day of the year, Guevara and Granado began planning their trip across the continent—in essence, their flight from Perón's New Argentina.

Months later, while traveling through the country's southern reaches, Guevara found himself frequently reminded of Peronism. During a stop in Mar del Plata in January 1952, the duo met with a medical doctor, who Guevara noted had "joined the [Peronist] party, with all its consequent privileges." This reference points to the increasingly partisan nature of the state bureaucracy by the early 1950s. Like many professionals who worked in hospitals and other public institutions, this doctor was presumably under pressure to display loyalty to the regime as a condition of securing or maintaining employment—an often overlooked impact of Peronist rule on middle-class life. Certainly this issue would have been on the minds of two young men at the beginning of their medical careers; in Guevara's case, the Peronization of public institutions was no small matter, given that he was still eligible for mandatory military service. In the next town, however, the pair lunched with one of Granado's anti-Peronist friends, a doctor with ties to the Radical Party. But Guevara refused to identify with either doctor, noting that we "were as remote from one as the other. Support for the Radicals was never a tenable position for me and was also losing its significance for Alberto, who had been quite close at one time to some of the leaders

he respected."²⁹ Crossing the Andes, near San Martín de los Andes, the pair stayed at the ranch of some acquaintances, one of whom Guevara described comically as a "Peronist, always drunk, the best of the three."³⁰ In this regard Guevara's texts complement the findings of recent historical studies. By the early 1950s the Peronization of society had come into full swing, and public institutions such as the educational and health systems were deployed to overt partisan ends.³¹ Guevara's travel writings illustrate the penetration of Peronism on a national scale and into various aspects of quotidian life.

As Guevara would discover with some surprise, Peronism did not end at Argentina's borders. When traveling through the rural highland zones of Peru, the two travelers found themselves questioned by local residents on more than one occasion about life in Argentina. Near the town of Tarata, Guevara and Granado sought refuge among the popular inhabitants of two roadside huts, who are described simply as "cholos." The Peruvians peppered the duo with questions, and Guevara wrote the following description of the encounter: "We were like demigods to these simple people: Alberto brandished his doctor's certificate for them, and moreover, we had come from that wonderful country Argentina, where Perón lived with his wife Evita, where the poor have as much as the rich and the Indian isn't exploited or treated as severely as he is in this country."³² A few days later the pair had a similar exchange with rural Peruvians: "At one of the many stops we made along the road, an Indian timidly approached us with his son who spoke good Spanish, and began to ask us all about the wonderful 'land of Perón.'" Once again, the duo offered embellished accounts of life in Peronist Argentina, condescendingly assuming this was what the "Indians" wanted to hear, mainly to secure some food and shelter from them. In this case the older man even asked the travelers to send him a copy of the Argentine constitution "with its declaration of the rights of the elderly."³³

Guevara's description of these encounters is fascinating on many levels. Putting aside for the moment the issue of his ethnic stereotyping, these episodes shed light on a topic that has escaped much scholarly attention, namely, the impact of Peronism on other Latin American countries during the 1950s. Observers have commented on certain aspects, such as the humanitarian aid of the Eva Perón Foundation or the efforts of pro-Peronist unions to form ties with counterparts elsewhere in the region. Yet we can obtain some fresh

insight from finding residents of rural Peru so interested in Argentina's domestic politics and possessing a detailed awareness of Peronist state policy. These passages in Guevara's travel writings encourage us to reconsider the resonance of Peronism among popular sectors in other countries.³⁴ The mechanisms through which information circulated remain a mystery, although they probably included multiple channels: Peronist propaganda disseminated abroad; reports in radio, newspapers, and film, both domestically produced and imported; word of mouth carried through migratory networks, partly through postwar immigrants from Peru and elsewhere to Argentina; and, of course, conversations with passing Argentine tourists and travelers. In *The Motorcycle Diaries* these encounters with Peronism abroad rupture temporarily the illusion of an undiscovered Latin America, the guiding idea that originally drove the two travelers onward.

That Guevara decided to embark on a long journey outside his country—precisely during a time when state authorities exalted the greatness of Argentina and encouraged the population to travel domestically as good patriots—constituted a tacit rejection of Peronist nationalism. Yet Guevara did not entertain an entirely negative relationship to the nationalism of the Peronist era. In fact, nationalist cultural elements are present in Guevara's writings and shaped his very approach to travel. Guevara was driven by an impulse of discovery to journey off the beaten path and test his physical limits. Most important, his travels represented a means to witness and uncover a hidden social reality located far from urban population centers. In viewing rural dwellers as repositories of folk authenticity and examples of collective exploitation, he resorted to racial and class stereotypes strikingly similar to those of contemporary nationalist writers. Indeed, Peronist authorities adopted similar tropes of national discovery in their propaganda and tourism policies. One must, however, be careful not to insist on a direct line of causality between Peronist initiatives and Guevara's outlook, for both were shaped by nationalist trends in mid-twentieth-century Argentina. Rather than pinpointing an exact set of influences, it makes more sense to situate Guevara the traveler within these broader cultural currents.

Although nationalism was tainted through its association with the xenophobic Right in the Argentina of Guevara's youth, a handful of progressive models may also have served as sources of inspira-

tion.³⁵ During the 1930s and 1940s a growing number of Argentine leftists expanded their focus outside their traditional urban base. One such example is Alfredo Palacios's book of 1944, *Pueblos desamparados*, which analyzed the problems facing residents of Argentina's northwestern provinces. A longtime Socialist Party politician and member of congress representing Buenos Aires city, Palacios combined a social exposé of poverty with his own reflections on travel through the region. He recounted stories of rural families in arid La Rioja (a province visited by Guevara in 1950) who suffered extreme poverty due to drought and malnourishment. With indignation the author explained his shock at discovering how his compatriots lived: "My pride as an Argentine suffered a rude blow, confronted with the misery of this good pueblo, sad and resigned, whom we shamefully forget."³⁶ In response he advocated greater involvement of the national government in improving the education, health, and economic opportunities of this "forgotten" people. Palacios devoted much of his book to concrete legislative suggestions, thus limiting its readership. (It might, however, have been available in the Guevara household: Guevara Lynch supported Palacios and was known to collect books on such subjects.³⁷) In any event, Guevara would set forth into the same regions traveled by Palacios during his motorbike journey, in search of his own experience of national discovery in the provincial interior. He would encounter the same devastating signs of deprivation along the roadsides of Argentina's backcountry.

The Peronist regime reworked the themes of earlier nationalist writers and political actors during the 1940s and 1950s, amplifying the discourse of discovery to an unprecedented level. Although Perón had his most reliable support base among the working-class populations of major cities and suburbs, his government also highlighting the discourse of discovery to an unprecedented level. Although Perón had his most reliable support base among the working-class populations of major cities and suburbs, his government also highlighted rural themes in outlining its vision of national progress. Propagandists applied the nationalist's favored contrast between the "visible" and "invisible" country, including the Argentina of urban abundance and its forgotten hinterland.³⁸ Newsreels and short films produced under the regime's auspices presented audiences with poignant views of rural poverty, allowing them to witness the living conditions of their fellow citizens in other regions, separated from them by thousands of miles. Pro-regime pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines—all of which allowed audiences to

travel virtually to what for many was an unfamiliar side of their country—used similar strategies. "This is how working people lived in the incredibly rich Argentine Republic," proclaimed one newsreel of 1948 that showed images of poverty-stricken rural and urban communities. The rural poor in the northwestern provinces dwelled in "dark caves, almost ashamed to be alive" and "without water and without bread, a life of perpetual punishment." Footage showed dark-skinned men in tattered clothing gathering cane during the sugar harvest. The newsreel then cut to images of their children playing amid garbage in the open sewers running alongside shacks. To correct past injustices and usher in a modern age, Perón's government was "raising for the pueblo a house of equality, fraternity, and harmony."³⁹ Depictions of the discovery of social problems by Peronist propagandists contrasted the dire conditions of the very recent past with the dawn of another era in the New Argentina. This temporal frame sent the message that exploitation of the type suffered by workers in the northwest would soon be a thing of the past.⁴⁰ In a time of increasing state control of the mass media and propaganda on an unprecedented scale, nationalist representations of a hidden rural reality would have been impossible for members of Guevara's generation to avoid.⁴¹

Popular culture and the arts echoed similar themes. The Peronist regime counted on the support of nationalist intellectuals, many of whom embraced the notion that the true identity of the country resided in rural folk culture and a criollo heritage, by which they meant Hispanic traditions, originating in the colonial past.⁴² At the same time the era saw a growing interest in folk music and dance—including among middle-class people who in other respects remained anti-Peronist. Domestic filmmakers also paid increasing attention from the 1930s onward to nationalist concerns and representations of rural life for mainly urban moviegoers. Social realist filmmaking mirrored propagandistic treatments of exploitation in the interior. For instance, the films *Los isleros* (dir. Lucas Demare, 1951) and *Las aguas bajan turbias* (dir. Hugo del Carril, 1952) dealt with the lives of working people in the northeastern regions. These films also offered a virtual voyage for audiences into little-traveled areas. *Las aguas bajan turbias*, in particular, probed the brutal world of laborers on yerba mate plantations near the Paraguayan border. Hugo del Carril's film (based on the novel *El río oscuro* by Alfredo

Varela) depicted a region far removed from most Argentines. It illustrated the misery of the largely indigenous workforce in the Alto Paraná, the violence meted out by bosses, and the entrapments of debt peonage. Del Carril carefully avoided upsetting Peronist authorities, and his film began with a voice-over noting that the social reality described in the film occurred "some years ago, only a few years ago," and not in the supposedly glorious present of the New Argentina.

We have no hard evidence of Guevara's reactions to Peronist propaganda or commercial entertainments. Given that the Guevara family once owned a yerba mate plantation, Ernesto might have been interested in del Carril's film, but he had already embarked on his trip when it was released in theatres. One can assume that he would have viewed with great skepticism suggestions that poverty was a thing of the past in Perón's Argentina. After all, he had seen social inequalities firsthand during his youth in small-town Córdoba, in his work in hospitals, and on early voyages around his country.

Yet one can identify a sensibility in Guevara's travel writings similar to the nationalist cultural expressions of the era. The *Motorcycle Diaries* echoes the language employed by Argentine nationalists in describing rural inhabitants. As seen in his encounters in Peru, Guevara often resorted to stock depictions of indigenous populations, replete with stereotypes about the innate, timeless characteristics of Indian psychology—even as he railed against the abuse of Indians as workers and against the racism they suffered. This was not simply a case of the arrogance of a foreigner abroad, as Guevara employed similar language in describing rural populations of indigenous ancestry in Argentina as well. While journeying across the southern Andean region of Argentina, Guevara and Granado crossed paths similar language in describing rural populations of indigenous ancestry in Argentina as well. While journeying across the southern Andean region of Argentina, Guevara and Granado crossed paths with a group of male farm laborers who made fun of the duo's preference for drinking their infusions of mate with sugar—"mate for girls," as they dubbed it. (Here is an example of Guevara's use of a confident self-deprecation that often accompanies his stereotyping; it reads almost like an updated passage from Mansilla.) Yet the conversation did not progress much further: "In general, they didn't try to communicate with us, as is typical of the subjugated Araucanian race who maintain a deep suspicion of the white man who in the past brought them so much misfortune and now con-

tinues to exploit them. They answered our questions about the land and their work by shrugging their shoulders and saying 'don't know' or 'maybe,' quickly ending the conversation."⁴³ In this case, Guevara's stereotype of the silent Indian is not entirely a negative one, even if its overt class analysis overlooks other reasons why these laboring men would have been reticent to answer the interrogation of curious outsiders. This passage's emphasis on Indian exploitation and racism mirrored the social realism of films such as *Las aguas bajan turbias*, popular fiction, and Peronist propaganda. Guevara would fall back repeatedly on these types of representations for understanding rural populations and indigenous people outside his own country.

The nationalist tendency to see rural areas and populations as repositories of cultural authenticity appears to have rubbed off on Guevara. Had he been born a generation earlier, the future Che might have selected a different itinerary for his tour of 1950 and later voyages. One can imagine him crossing the Atlantic like his social peers to visit Paris or London. (There are hints of this alternative itinerary in the Salles film version of *The Motorcycle Diaries* during the dinner scene at the lavish vacation home of Guevara's girlfriend: the travelers cross paths with a wealthy young Argentine, a law student who had just returned from studying in Cambridge.) To be precise, Guevara did not abandon completely earlier travel traditions of his social milieu; he envisioned Latin America as a first leg of a journey that would take him to North America, Europe, and India. Yet he and his companion set out on a voyage in tune with the nationalist sensibilities of their time, shaped in turn by their own cosmopolitan interests and outsized ambitions. They would seek to explore the enormity of the American continent, in particular the remnants of ancient indigenous civilizations and the supposedly untrammelled expanses of its countryside. In their fascination for rural spaces Guevara and his companion did not ignore Latin America's cities. In fact, the itinerary of their trip in 1952 suggests that they spent much time in cities such as Santiago, Lima, Bogotá, and Caracas. But Guevara had comparatively less to say about these areas in the diaries, and his observations about urban spaces and populations pale in comparison to his accounts of the countryside. The longest stop of the trip in 1951–52, eighteen days, took place in Lima, more time than the pair stayed at the leper colony of San Pablo in the Amazon

region—even though the *Diaries* devotes seemingly greater attention to the later destination.

In traveling outside Argentina Guevara went against the grain of his times, leaving behind a country immersed in the politics of Peronism, whose contradictions he was unable to fully transcend. What was an anti-imperialist, progressive medical student to make of a regime that combined vast social programs and nationalizations with authoritarian controls of public expression, that staged mass rallies of partisan devotion in Buenos Aires but also enabled members of the working class to become tourists? In the course of his travels Guevara sought out the Latin American countryside where social injustice was seemingly in starker relief. Here, too, he would stumble across reminders of Peronist Argentina and signs of the interconnectedness among the countries of the region. Nevertheless, he continued to look farther afield, spending long periods of time in Bolivia and Guatemala, which as Jorge Castañeda has noted, were not coincidentally two of the continent's most rural and unequal societies, and among those with the largest concentrations of indigenous populations.⁴⁴ Driven by the impulse of discovery, Guevara's sensibility as a traveler would lead him back to those corners of Latin America that most contrasted with the politics and places of his youth.

Ernesto's Departure, Che's Return

At the end of his trip in 1952, Guevara returned to his family's home in Buenos Aires. He would not remain there long. Having completed his medical school examinations and obtained his title as doctor, he set forth on another continent-wide journey in July 1953, one that would eventually take him as far north as Mexico and would culminate in his decision to join Fidel Castro's band of insurgents. Guevara went back to Argentina once in 1961 for a momentary visit (the occasion for his secret meeting with President Arturo Frondizi). As part of his transformation into El Che, his travels as a representative of Cuba's government carried him elsewhere in the world—Europe, Africa, and India, the destinations that he had dreamed of reaching as a boy. Yet the idea of a return to Argentina remained on Guevara's mind: this time not as a young wanderer but as the head of an international revolutionary movement. It was in Bolivia, the

geographical heart of South America, that Guevara arrived in 1966 to start a guerrilla war, with the ultimate objective of spreading revolution to surrounding nations. He would meet his demise less than a year later, hunted down and executed a few hundred miles from the border with Argentina.

Prior to his death, however, Guevara had in a sense already returned to Argentina as an emblem of the Cuban Revolution and its socialist New Man. By the mid-1960s Guevara's impact on his homeland's politics had become profound. His example inspired a new generation of activists on the Left, who rejected the gradualist approach of their predecessors like Palacios in favor of immediate, radical change. Guevara had great appeal among young people who shared his middle-class background and university training, not to mention others drawn to his anti-imperialism and vision of social justice. Within the numerous factions on the Left, a minority applied the Cuban model of guerrilla struggle to their own society. Guevara backed these efforts, indirectly at first through the publication in 1960 of his work *La guerra de guerrillas* (part memoir of the Sierra Maestra campaign, part primer for would-be revolutionaries). He also supported early experiments to start an Argentine guerrilla movement. The first such effort—a campaign led by Jorge Ricardo Masetti to create a guerrilla *foco* of Argentines and a few Cuban advisors on the Bolivian border—was soon discovered by intelligence forces and crushed. This failure dismayed Guevara, but it did not dissuade him from his own Bolivian misadventure two years later. Nor would it stop subsequent guerrilla movements like the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (Revolutionary People's Army) from pursuing similar tactics in the 1960s and 1970s.

More unexpectedly, the impact of Guevara's involvement in the Cuban Revolution was felt in Peronist circles as well. In a twist of from pursuing similar tactics in the 1960s and 1970s.

More unexpectedly, the impact of Guevara's involvement in the Cuban Revolution was felt in Peronist circles as well. In a twist of Argentine history, the former anti-Peronist critic became a hero to many of its partisans. Guevara himself reacted with disappointment to Perón's overthrow in 1955. As he wrote to his mother, in the midst of his second long trek across the continent: "I confess to you quite frankly that Perón's fall has greatly embittered me, not on his account but because of what it means for the Americas. For however much you hate the idea, and however much it has been forced to give way in the recent period, Argentina was the champion of all of us who think that the enemy is in the north."⁴⁵ This statement down-

played that by then Perón had moderated his economic nationalism and had even courted foreign investment from the United States. Guevara, however, retained his suspicions about Perón, especially as the former ruler continued to exert an influence over Argentine politics from exile in the 1950s and 1960s.

Some Peronist supporters had fewer doubts, and they looked for ways to combine the characteristics of Perón's popular nationalism with Cuban socialism. The drive to revolutionize Peronism can be best seen in the career of John William Cooke, an Argentine-born member of Congress in the 1940s, who would become a well-known figure in the Peronist resistance against military rule in the mid-1950s. Inspired by the Cuban Revolution, he later relocated to the island to take a place by Guevara's side. Cooke's correspondence with Perón records his efforts to imagine a Guevarist variation on Peronism, as well as his futile attempt to convince the former Argentine president to join him in Castro's Cuba. Despite his dalliance with figures like Cooke, Perón was unwilling to abandon his supporters on the ideological center and right or to forfeit his personal authority. Nevertheless, Cooke was among the first Peronists to advocate guerrilla tactics and a radical swing leftward.⁴⁶ In his wake, insurgents such as the *montoneros* would reach a similar conclusion and take up arms under the flag of Peronism and of revolution. Here, too, guerrilla warfare would fall short of its objectives, as Argentina descended further into a cycle of bloodletting and state terror during the 1970s.

Guevara's homecoming to Argentina, as the epitome of the committed *guerrillero*, represented the ultimate, if unexpected, return to his original point of departure. Of course one must resist the temptation of a neat closure to this biographical circle, to see El Che as the product of the traveler in 1950s Argentina. Yet signs of the traveler's method could be seen in the theory and practice of the revolutionary. The *guerrillero* was in a sense a type of traveler, and Guevara's variation on guerrilla warfare centered on the idea of constant, unfettered movement through remote areas.⁴⁷ It rested as well on the ability of the guerrilla vanguard to live in poverty among rural populations, thus displaying their willful physical sacrifice and solidarity. As a strategy, guerrilla warfare represented the polar opposite of the style of nationalist politics associated with Peronism, even if the two approaches often shared common ground ideologi-

cally around anti-imperialism. From this vantage Perón and Guevara can be thought of as personifying two dominant modes of postwar Argentine politics. The former was flexible enough to accommodate himself to changing historical conditions and actors of diverse convictions. Perón's politics relied on deal making and alliances, on public displays of support and other mass rituals. By contrast, Guevara's politics focused on a more restricted group of believers devoted entirely to their cause, purposefully isolated from the rest of society (hence the oft-mentioned comparison between the *foco* and a religious sect). In Guevara's eyes the guerrilla should always be in motion and his politics a conspiracy against the status quo rather than an accommodation to it.

Despite the erosion of faith in guerrilla warfare and declining enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution over the past decades, Guevara's influence in Argentine culture shows few signs of waning. As in other parts of the globe, the commercialization of his beret-clad and bearded image advances steadily. His visage graces more than a few T-shirts on the streets of Buenos Aires, but Guevara's image can still be found performing other roles—including serving as a symbol of defiance, albeit one malleable enough to grace the banners of protestors, rock fans, and soccer supporters of every club. Few commentators, however, have probed past these surface manifestations to consider more substantively Guevara's contemporary cultural relevance. To hazard but one passing observation, it seems that Guevara has come to personify a paradigm of socially aware Pan-Americanism. He serves as a reminder to some Argentines of their nation's ties to a larger continent—"Our America with a capital 'A,'" as Guevara put it in his paraphrase of Martí in *The Motorcycle Diaries*. In a time of undeniable pressure in Argentina to embrace the globalized orthodoxy of the United States and Western Europe, Guevara's impulse of looking toward the interior of a vast, immiserated continent remains a potent one.

The recent spike in popularity of *The Motorcycle Diaries* (in book and film versions) will likely further this legacy among a new generation. But that Guevara has come to represent a guide for those seeking to better understand the lives of fellow Americans is not without its ironies. For Guevara's trajectory ran counter to the conventional wisdom about travel: the more he journeyed, the less he

apparently saw and the more his outlook on the world became reduced. From the late 1950s onward Guevara's voyages reflected the increasing rigidity of his view of political action, coupled with a deepening inability to perceive the full complexity of social conditions, especially in rural areas that seemed so deceptively straightforward in their extremes of exploitation. Certainly, the narrowing of Guevara's worldview contributed to his final failure in Bolivia, as the guerrilla-traveler attempted to lead a revolution among a largely indigenous population about whom he knew almost nothing. Unlike the average tourist's ignorance, this blindness did not result from inexperience; rather, it was the outcome of years spent floating from one place to the next.

We are accustomed to thinking about the voyage recounted in *The Motorcycle Diaries* as a personal epiphany, an awakening to the reality of a continent. But what if in addition to this familiar story, the journey of 1951–52 also represented the beginning of another, less obvious process that accompanied Guevara on his travels: the settling of certain convictions as unmovable truths, the gradual extinguishing of curiosity? This side of Guevara's personality stands as a source of attraction for those who seek an unshakable model of perfection, that is, a hero. But from the vantage of a less idealistic (not to say cynical) time, there is something in this extreme fixity of mind that is difficult to truly comprehend, let alone emulate, at the level of personal conduct. With the passing of years, the older Guevara stands ever more distant and cold, a "harsh angel" (to borrow Alma Guillermoprieto's apt description), just as the younger self depicted in *The Motorcycle Diaries* becomes seemingly more human.⁴⁸ Beyond his established place in history as a protagonist of Latin American revolution, it is this contradiction—the disconnect between the inflexible discipline of El Che and the vagabond sensibility of the young Ernesto—that makes Guevara's life an enduring enigma for the future.

Notes

1 The novelist and literary critic Ricardo Piglia has called attention to the metamorphoses of Guevara's life. Ricardo Piglia, "Ernesto Guevara: Rastros de lectura," *El último lector* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2005), 103–38. The present essay is indebted to Piglia's insights, as well

as to the numerous biographical accounts of Guevara's life, including Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove, 1997); Jorge G. Castañeda, *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara*, trans. Marina Castañeda (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997); Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Guevara, Also Known as Che*, trans. Martin Michael Roberts (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

2 Rather than offering its own translations from earlier published editions (such as *Notas de viaje*), this essay will, for the sake of simplicity, employ the recent English-language edition of Guevara's travel journals. Ernesto Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Keeble (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2004).

3 Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 14–42. Castañeda, *Compañero*, 3–24.

4 Ernesto Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo El Che* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1984), 99–119.

5 The phrase was "Yo sé leer," and Guevara noted the missing accent. The recollections of this school teacher, Julia Cortéz, have been challenged by others present in Guevara's final hours, including the military officers who killed him. Piglia, "Ernesto Guevara," 106–8, 136–37. Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 738.

6 Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, 32. According to Alberto Granado's later recollections of the journey in 1952—based on journals written during the trip, but first published in Cuba in 1978 (after the appearance of Guevara's account) and only recently translated into English—Guevara was familiar enough with Martí to quote lines of his poetry during one of their evening conversations in Chile. Alberto Granado, *Traveling with Che Guevara: The Making of a Revolutionary*, trans. Lucía Álvarez de Toledo (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004), 73.

7 For English-language versions, see Lucio V. Mansilla, *A Visit to the Ranquel Indians*, trans. Eva Gilles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Juana Manuela Gorriti, *Dreams and Realities: Selected Fiction of Juana Manuela Gorriti*, ed. Francine Masiello, trans. Sergio Waisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). On travel literature, see Beatriz Colombo, *Viaje intelectual: Migraciones y desplazamientos en América Latina, 1880–1915* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2004).

8 Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo El Che*, 180; Luis Altamira, *La infancia del Che* (Barcelona: Taller de Mario Muchnik, 2003), 60.

9 Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo El Che*, 257–59.

10 Ibid., 257–72.

11 Juan Carlos Torre and Eliza Pastoriza, "La democratización del bienestar," *Nueva historia Argentina: Los años peronistas (1943–1955)*, vol. 8, ed. Torre (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2002), 262.

12 Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo El Che*, 266.

13 To take but one example, Félix Luna (one of Argentina's most widely read historians) recalls how during the early 1950s he and his friends would use vacation time to set off for the provinces, taking long journeys on horseback, hitchhiking, and engaging in other adventures. Félix Luna, *Perón y su tiempo*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1984), 285–86.

14 Torre and Pastoriza, "La democratización del bienestar," 301; Eugenia Scarzanella, "El ocio peronista: Vacaciones y 'turismo popular' en la Argentina (1943–1955)," *Entrepasados, Revista de Historia* 7:14 (1998), 65–86; and Elisa Pastoriza and Juan Carlos Torre, "Mar del Plata, un sueño de los argentinos," *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina*, vol. 3, ed. Fernando Devoto and Marta Madero (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1999), 49–78.

15 Dirección General de Relaciones Culturales y Difusión, *Turismo para el pueblo* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1950), 1–48.

16 Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo El Che*, 270.

17 Granado, *Traveling with Che Guevara*, 30.

18 For instance, Guevara lambasted U.S. visitors to Machu Picchu, who he felt were too ignorant to appreciate the ruins and their connections between the Inca and present-day indigenous people. This aversion to tacky U.S. tourists may also explain why he so detested Miami during his brief sojourn there. Ernesto Guevara, *Back on the Road: A Journey to Latin America*, trans. Patrick Camiller (New York: Grove, 2001), 131.

19 *Ibid.*, 131.

20 Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo El Che*, 273, 275.

21 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 30–6; see also Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 14–70, and Taibo, *Guevara, Also Known as Che*, 1–19.

22 Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 21–5; Castañeda, *Compañero*, 14–5.

23 The literature analyzing the similarities and differences between Peronism and fascism is vast. Works include Gino Germani, *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1978); Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, and National Populism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1978); Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: NLB, 1977); and Marcela García Sebastián, ed. *Fascismo y antifascismo, peronismo y antiperonismo: Conflictos políticos e ideológicos en la Argentina entre 1930 y 1955* (Madrid: Editorial Iberoamericana, 2006).

24 Granado, *Traveling with Che Guevara*, xviii.

25 One wonders if Guevara would have encouraged his family's maids to participate in official tourism programs as well. Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 54.

26 For analysis of Peronism's impact on the Left, see Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesentas: La formación de la nueva izquierda intelectual en la*

Argentina, 1956–1966 (Buenos Aires: Puntosur Editores, 1991); Carlos Altamirano, *Peronismo y cultura de izquierda* (Buenos Aires: Temas Grupo Editorial, 2001); and Fernando Martínez Heredia et al., *Che, el argentino* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones De Mano en Mano, 1997).

27 Anderson, *Che Guevara*, 51.

28 Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, 32–33.

29 *Ibid.*, 38.

30 *Ibid.*, 50–51. For works on Peronism's impact in the provinces, see Darío Macor and César Tcach, *La invención del peronismo en el interior del país* (Santa Fe, Argentina: University Nacional del Litoral, 2003); and James P. Brennan and Ofelia Pianetto, eds., *Region and Nation: Politics, Economy, and Society in Twentieth-Century Argentina* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

31 Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina*, trans. Keith Zahniser (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2002); Marcela Gené, *Un mundo feliz: Imágenes de los trabajadores en el primer peronismo, 1946–1955* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de San Andrés, 2005); and Alberto Ciria, *Política y cultura popular: La Argentina peronista, 1946–1955* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1983).

32 Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, 91.

33 *Ibid.*, 95–96.

34 According to Carlos "Calica" Ferrer, who traveled with Guevara in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador during his second trip across Latin America: "Ernesto and I, of antiperonist stock, were impressed by the admiration that Perón elicited outside Argentina. He was seen as a champion of anti-imperialism, who had beaten that son of a bitch Braden, the famous ambassador who had supported the anti-peronist opposition and had been a member of the most imperialist yanqui companies, such as the United Fruit. In the rest of Latin America, resentment towards the gringos was much stronger than in Argentina: 'Perón has real balls, just look at how he confronted the Americans,' we would be told." *De Ernesto al Che: El segundo viaje de Guevara por Latinoamérica* (Buenos Aires: Marea Gringos, 2005), 142.

35 The term *nacionalista* carried an implicit right-wing connotation in Argentina during the 1930s. Cristián Buchrucker, *Nacionalismo y peronismo: La Argentina en la crisis ideológica mundial (1927–1955)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1987); and Richard J. Walter, "The Right and the Peronists, 1943–1955," *The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present*, ed. Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald Dolkart (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1993), 99–118.

36 Alfredo Palacios, *Pueblos desamparados: Solución de los problemas del noroeste argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guillermo Kraft, 1944), 80, 60.

37 Guevara Lynch, *Mi hijo El Che*, 104.

38 Carlos Altamirano sees this emphasis on the "two Argentinas" as part of an intellectual tradition that reaches at least as far back as the 1930s to works such as Eduardo Mallea's *Historia de una pasión argentina* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1937). Altamirano, *Peronismo y cultura de izquierda*, 27.

39 Urban areas were not neglected; the film lamented that the "social embarrassment" of filthy tenements existed just blocks away from the presidential palace in Buenos Aires. Archivo General de la Nación (Buenos Aires), Departamento de Cine, Audio y Video, *Justicia social*, film, 16mm, seven minutes, 1948.

40 On the politics of the "construction of the new," see Maria Helena Rolim Capelato, *Multidões em cena: Propaganda política no varguismo e no peronismo* (Campinas, Brazil: Papirus, 1998), 114; and Ciria, *Política y cultura popular*, 261–63.

41 With national literacy rates at nearly 90 percent, print media was widely accessible. Information about radio and film audiences is scant, but with more than half of all households owning a radio and a two-thirds increase in cinema attendance during Perón's first term, millions of Argentines came into contact with these forms of propaganda. Torre and Pastoriza, "La democratización del bienestar," 296–97.

42 Oscar Chamosa, "Archetypes of Nationhood: Folk Culture, the Sugar Industry, and the Birth of Cultural Nationalism in Argentina, 1895–1945" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2003).

43 Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, 43.

44 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 71.

45 Guevara, *Back on the Road*, 92–93.

46 Richard Gillespie, John William Cooke: *El peronismo alternativo* (Buenos Aires: Cántaro Editores, 1989); and Richard Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón: Argentina's Montoneros* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

47 Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *La guerra de guerrillas* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1989). Piglia, "Ernesto Guevara," 123–26.

48 Alma Guillermoprieto, "The Harsh Angel," *Looking for History: Dispatches from Central America* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 72–86.

48 Alma Guillermoprieto, "The Harsh Angel," *Looking for History: Dispatches from Central America* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 72–86.

Patience A. Schell

Beauty and Bounty in Che's Chile

When in 1951 Ernesto "Che" Guevara began his now legendary journey through South America, Chile beckoned; it was foreign while familiar, exotic but manageable, and it had a reputation for welcoming strangers. Chile, with its diverse landscapes, folkloric *huasos* (cowboys), and German settlers was both neighbor and sibling culture. In his *Motorcycle Diaries*, Guevara filled passages with descriptions of Chileans' easy hospitality and the attractiveness of the women, also noting the bountiful landscape. But Guevara was not alone in remarking on generosity, Chilean women, and the country's natural bounty. In isolation, his observations tell us something about the young Che but less about Chile in the 1950s. Yet Guevara's reflections mirror those of other travelers of the period, alongside them offering a wider view of Chile in the mid-twentieth century. Complimentary travel narratives discussed here, written by French, U.S., German, and English authors, also focus on the nation's beauty and bounty. Authors include a Maryknoll nun who had been a prisoner of war in the Philippines, a latter-day German romantic, and a staid British couple obsessed with their car. Like Guevara, each of these authors visited Chile on a wider tour of South America. Also like this volume's subject, these other observers romantic, and a staid British couple obsessed with their car. Like Guevara, each of these authors visited Chile on a wider tour of South America. Also like this volume's subject, these other observers reproduced a Chilean national discourse in which women's accomplishments and racialized constructions of their beauty represented Chile's progressiveness and in which its bountiful landscape constituted the nation's essence. Juxtaposed with additional foreign and Chilean sources, including a woman's magazine and the classic Chile *o una loca geografía*, as well as secondary sources, the travelogues show how these twin discourses of bounty and beauty defined Chile. Yet as this essay also addresses, foreign observers and Chileans alike