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Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*:

Examining Magical Realism as It Bears Witness to Life

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*There are exiles who gnaw and others
that are like the consuming fire.
There is a heartache for the murdered country
that rises from below
from feet and from roots
and suddenly the man is suffocating.
he no longer knows corn tassels,
the guitar has been silenced,
there is no air for that mouth
he can't live without a land
and then he falls to his knees
not onto native soil, but unto death*

Pablo Neruda

"Exiles" from *Cantos Ceremoniales*

(qtd. in Allende, *My Invented Country* 165)

When Isabel Allende began writing her letter to her ninety-nine year old grandfather who was approaching death, it came out all in a flow as if she had been in a trance. Allende, who lived in Caracas, Venezuela, as a self-exile, had been having a long-distance relationship with her grandfather, who lived in Santiago, Chile, under the Pinochet regime. The letter was Allende's passionate and enduring testimony to him. Her purpose was to keep him living, in conformity

with his idea of immortality. The literary critic, Peter G. Earle, says Allende believed, “My *tata* (grandfather) theorized that death didn’t really exist. Oblivion, to him, is what existed, and if one remembered those who died, they would always live on, at least in spirit” (Allende, qtd. in Earle and Allende 543). The letter became longer and longer, resulting in a five hundred page novel. By then, her *tata* had passed on in spirit. So began *The House of the Spirits*. It was a memoir, in retrospect, a family saga, based on her family members with extraordinary embellishments, and a political *testimonio*, a societal portrait of a contemporary postcolonial history, blended together with magical realism. She wanted to bear witness to socio-economic class lines, women’s repression, and political violence – having been motivated by her traumatic experiences from the betrayal and resulting death of her uncle, President Salvador Allende, by right-wing conspirators and their U.S. counterparts and the brutal dictatorship that ensued.. Yet, in her novel, one gathers that the military coup and reign of horror that follows is somehow a broader range of the Patriarchy at its ultimate using what it knows best – violence – to terrorize and suppress those who it deems as dissenters and subversives from its power over society. Moreover, Allende’s novel shares the lives of four generations of the del Valle-Trueba women, all of whom are feminists, each fighting within the confines of their respective generations, oftentimes spinning the Patriarchy on its head. Although Allende’s novel incorporates other elements of magical realism, three elements in particular are salient throughout her novel, distinguishing it as central to feminism. First, hybrid cultures are discussed. Next, the subaltern are stratified and, especially, in this novel, women are subjugated. Finally, linear time and conventional space are subverted, and a more sacred space of the feminine is taken into account. In addition, polyvocal narration and the multidimensional characters that are inclusive of magical realist texts will be discussed. Magical realism as a literary device re-emerged in Latin America and, indeed, it was

Allende and her magical realist novel *La casa de los espíritus* or *The House of the Spirits* that opened the door for other Latin American women to have their stories published during the Post-*Boom* era of the Latin American Renaissance.

Magical realism's essential purpose is to contest any assumption of a single and unified world-view or reality brought on by Western realism. A dual spatiality is opened up, where at least two world-views collide, and entire groups of individuals become disenfranchised from the power structure. That suspension between these two conflicting world-views resembles the colonized suspension between two – or more – cultures, and serves to reflect the postcolonial experience quite well. With magical realism, the story's borders between the magic and the real are so finely blurred that the two grow organically from one another. Another way to view magical realism is what Alba discovers, when reading her grandmother's notebooks, that Clara's world is one "where the prosaic truth of material objects mingled with the tumultuous reality of dreams and the laws of physics and logic did not always apply" (Allende, *House* 432). Literary critic Suzanne Baker suggests that, "despite the presence of magical events, the story is always grounded in recognizable societal, historical, or political events." Furthermore, Baker teaches, "a narrator of magical realism accepts most or all of the realistic conventions of fiction, but introduces 'something else' into the text without question [and] it is just as imperative that the characters accept all realities of the text, accordingly." This leads to an enticing tension where the reader is often put into a position of asking at what point does the suspension of disbelief begin or end? According to the English and Comparative Literature professor, Wendy Faris, "Magical realism has become so important as a mode of expression worldwide, especially in postcolonial cultures, because it has provided the literary ground for significant cultural work; within its texts, marginal voices, submerged traditions, and emergent cultures have developed and

created masterpieces” (1). Consequently, readers are presented with cultures which differ from their own.

Magical realism and postcolonialism go hand in hand in the novel *La casa de los espíritus*. Postcolonialism elaborates a politics of the subaltern or marginalized people. Resulting from the European Enlightenment, which gave Europeans the illusion they were superior and, therefore, had a moral obligation to “civilize” other peoples and their lands, it was created from the political insights and experiences that were developed in the course of colonial resistance to Western rule and cultural dominance. In its broadest sense, postcolonialism seeks to allow its alternative knowledges – women’s equality, social justice, and socialism, to name a few – into the unequal power structures which dominate the globe. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, in order to produce a more equitable and just relation between the peoples of the world. Literary critic Stephen Slemon, in considering the basis for why magical realism contains central elements of postcolonial discourses, proposes “in the language of narration in a magical realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other” and “since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the ‘other,’ a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems” (Slemon, qtd. in Faris 103). When magical realism is used effectively in describing the effects of postcolonialism, as does *The House of the Spirits*, a decolonizing agent within the literature occurs. In effect, postcolonialism is the residue of centuries of territories, states or nations occupied by outside forces. What often happens as a result, is a hybridization of entire peoples who often become marginalized – the subaltern.

In her description of the U.S.-Mexican border, where the lifeblood of several worlds merge to form a third country – a border culture, the late Chicana author and professor of Chicano and Feminist Studies, Gloria Anzaldua, defines border cultures. She defines a borderland “as a dividing line,” “set up to distinguish *us* from *them*” ... “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,” which “is in a constant state of transition” (25). Anzaldua suggests:

the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed” in which “[some] consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians, or Blacks. (25)

Yet, this marginalization occurs worldwide where geography, or development by multinational corporations who have destroyed the local people’s economy, have rewritten history for colonized peoples, and, caught in the process of decolonization, find themselves relocating from their origins. What usually occurs with hybrid cultures is the dominant culture “invokes a perception that is contaminated and represents a voice and experience that is alien” (Benito, Manzanar, and Simal 110). When these re-located people become hybrid, their world-views change and often they are outcasts with most living in poverty, with few opportunities. Thus, “in the context of postcolonial writing, magical realism” raises questions about “the inherent problems created by the imposition of a bizarre and UN-real European world-view onto the local reality of the colonized” (Baker). The lack of harmony between the colonized and the colonizer is most apparent when Esteban Trueba arrives at Tres Marias and begins to partly renovate it himself along with the workers, who are forced into cheap labor with script and left

with only a veterinarian for a doctor. However, from Trueba's perspective, before his arrival, the peasants were like children who could not take care of themselves and, thus, this makes him a great *patron*.

The noted postcolonialist theorist, Gayatri Spivak, asks three important questions: "Can the subaltern speak?" If they can, does someone such as an academic speak for them and if they don't, who will listen? Finally, she asks, "can the subaltern vote?" (Spivak, qtd. in Morris 67). Trueba would not allow his peasants to vote, thinking they would vote for Communism. His attitude was, "Unfortunately, the only thing that works in these countries is the stick [for] this isn't Europe [and] what you need is here is a strong man" (Allende, *House* 64). He makes it known from the beginning that he views women, especially those from marginalized societies, as objects. The peasant females on his *hacienda* are there for him to rape at will. (Allende, *House* 36). Pancha, a virgin and granddaughter of wise Old Pedro Garcia, is one of his first victims. For a time he allows her to sleep with him at night in the master's bed. When he begins noticing her very pregnant belly, he brings in a new young peasant worker to sleep with him and moves Pancha back to her hut. Pancha, in turn, is filled with despair and anger. Eventually, Pancha confides in her grandson, named Esteban Garcia, after his grandfather, that Trueba owes a material debt to Garcia. Pancha instills in Esteban Garcia that Trueba is a very greedy man. A disturbing picture begins emerging at a young age as Esteban Garcia evolves into a tormented individual, with a severe emotional sickness. It is from this point on that Esteban Garcia seeks revenge on the whole family, focusing primarily on Alba, who Trueba considers as his legitimate grandchild.

On the other hand, with magical realist literature, readers are presented with stories of a hybrid nature in which multiculturalism is reflected both in the narrative structures and their

cultural environments, bridging the “ethnic gap” between both the colonized and the colonizer. In *The House of the Spirits*, at Esteban Trueba’s *hacienda*, Tres Marias, it is his peasant worker, the eldest Pedro Garcia with his vast reservoir of indigenous knowledge in identifying different field grasses and herbs for their healing properties and as antidotes to poisonous insects who is asked for advice by “the doctor from the nun’s hospital” (Allende, *House* 140). After pesticides fail to eradicate an ant plague, old Pedro Garcia is called in and, “By talking to [the ants]” he “tells them to go, that they’re a nuisance” and leads them to the highway, explaining, ““They understand”” (Allende, *House* 112). Hence, by dawn, no ant remains at Tres Marias. When a particularly destructive earthquake occurs, that leaves ten thousand people dead and Esteban Trueba buried underneath an avalanche of rubble and stones from his home, it is old Pedro Garcia that is trusted to set Trueba’s broken bones back into place such that when Trueba arrives at the hospital, the doctors are astounded that a blind man could so perfectly and, solely by touch, accomplish such a feat most of them would not have dared. Thus, in Allende’s novel, a more positive perspective of indigenous cultures takes place.

In *The House of the Spirits*, women, also members of the subaltern, are given a second-class status. The scholar of psychoanalysis Julia Kristeva, notes, “within European feminism there are three mental spaces that are at once corporeal and desirous” (qtd. in McAfee 93). The first, which she locates prior to 1968, “was the movement in which women sought all the same rights and prerogatives that men, in their same literal space, and believed that women deserved the same rights as men because they were ‘just like’ men” (McAfee 93).

Nivea, the del-Valle matriarch, works within the male linear line to advance her causes. When her husband, Severo, an atheist and a Mason, decides to run for a seat in the Liberal Party, he wishes to attend the most heavily attended Mass so he can be seen. Nivea supports his wish

since she believes that if he wins, she will be able to secure women's suffrage. They drag all eleven of their children to church with them, including the ten-year-old Clara, who especially does not wish to go. The priest they go to hear, Father Restrepo, "was a firm believer in the value of a good thrashing to vanquish the weaknesses of the soul" (Allende, *House* 2). The priest, carried away with zeal while standing upon his bully pulpit, turns his roving eyes and attention toward Nivea, pointing at her with his finger as he begins his spiel about the Pharisees who, "had tried to legalize bastards and civil marriage, thereby dismembering the family, the fatherland, private property, and the Church, and putting women on an equal footing with men" (Allende, *House* 3). Consequently, patriarchal religion plays a large role as female sexuality is defined, controlled, and even exiled for her "sins."

Ironically, it is Clara who calls the reactionary priest out, instead of Severa del Valle, who's just had his wife disgraced in public. During a lull in his sermon, an impatient Clara asks, "Psst! Father Restrepo! If that story about hell is a lie, we're all fucked, aren't we?" (Allende, *House* 7). Embarrassed, Clara's parents and their whole clan leave, with Severo grabbing Clara by the neck in anger and the priest yelling out behind them hysterically as they leave, "Possessed ... She's possessed by the devil!" (Allende, *House* 7). Unfortunately, the naive child is blamed for the incident, when it was she who has the courage to speak up.

While Clara is outside of Kristeva's classification of the second-wave feminists, she supports her daughter, Blanca, who clearly embraces ideas which fall into the range of the second-wave. Where the first generation "wished to minimize differences – those that were womanly – the second-wave "focused on it intently and valued everything they viewed as womanly" (McAfee 9). The second wave of feminists, which Kristeva locates close to the late 1960s, "conceptualizes a space linked not only to the linear nature of history and politics, but

one consisting of what she calls cyclical and monumental time” (qtd. in McAfee 93). The moment Treuba discovers his daughter’s non-compliance in stepping over the boundaries of his paternally protected domestic world, especially when it comes down to his sexual/political economy through her love and lovemaking with the peasant and communist singer, Pedro Garcia, he beats Blanca and then lashes out at Clara, accusing her of raising her daughter, “without morals, without religion, without principles, and without a sense of her own class” (Allende, *House* 220). Yet, despite Esteban’s raving antics, Clara refuses to allow Blanca or herself to play the roles of Esteban’s “fallen women.” In Blanca’s defense, Clara points out to Esteban that, “Pedro Tercero Garcia hasn’t done a thing you haven’t done yourself” (Allende, *House* 200). Clara reminds Esteban, “You also slept with women not of your own class. The only difference is that he did it for love. And so did Blanca” (Allende, *House* 200). With these statements, Clara exposes Esteban as not only a hypocrite, but a man who views not just his wife, but all females, including his own daughter, as objects in whose sexuality he seeks to control. He is unable to bear these statements and strikes her in the face, knocking her against a wall, which results in the loss of several of her teeth.

In spite of the fact that Blanca has a daughter, Alba, with Pedro Garcia, she neither tells Pedro Garcia that Alba is his daughter or, Alba, that Pedro Garcia is her father. In the meantime, she continues to repeatedly deny Pedro’s offers of marriage. Although not politically or socially active like Nivea, Clara, or Alba, where it comes to women’s rights, Blanca lives it.

In *La casa de los espíritus*, Clara and Alba, grandmother and granddaughter, both share views of the third-wave feminists. Of the third wave of feminists, Kristeva says:

These feminists will need to recognize that the psychosymbolic structure is based upon a metaphysics of identity, where one sex (or class or race or nation) is seen

as rival yet, instead of shunning this structure, these feminists need to internalize it, to see within themselves the ‘fundamental separation’ of the sociosymbolic contract and from that point on, the other is neither an evil being foreign nor a scapegoat from the outside, that is, of another sex, class, race, or nation. (qtd. in McAfee 101)

Within this mindset, binaries such as center/periphery, civilized/primitive, real/magic, and male/female are eliminated and hierarchies are dismantled. The third-wave of feminism is more aligned with what Kristeva “terms a semiotic or hidden and unconscious form of discourse that relates back to a connection to the maternal, the communal, and the spiritual, than with the symbolic kind of speech, which is allied with the father, patriarchal society, and rational thought” (Faris 171). Magical realist texts, as in *The House of the Spirits*, “tend to merge rather than separate different realms” in “implicitly emphasizing relationship more strongly than individuation, a mode often associated with a female sensibility” (Faris 178). Other identities and unique individuations are embraced into relationships.

Finally, a major element of magical realism that *The House of the Spirits* incorporates is a deviation from linear conventional space and time. An interesting thought that Clara writes in her notebook is that “we believe in the fiction of the past, present, and future, but it may also be true that everything happens simultaneously” and “the past and the future formed part of a single unit, and the reality of the present was a kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors where everything and anything could happen” (Allende, *House* 82). Consequently, instead of switching back and forth between linear time and cyclical time, Clara does neither, but believes that all things happen simultaneously.

The flashbacks and flash-forwards are accomplished through the use of Clara’s

notebooks. These are not written chronologically but by subject matter. Haverford College's Susan R. Frick makes an interesting point in challenging Kristeva's concepts of time by observing that, "Neither the linear nor the circular model proposed by Kristeva fully describes human time, but the spirals created by generations of women in *La casa de los espíritus* do suggest that both the author and her storytelling characters use writing to resolve internal conflict about the past by sharing stories in the present" (29). In similar fashion, "remembering through writing evolves as an empowering cultural response to trauma," (Frick, qtd. in Smith 89). Meanwhile some of these spirals don't repeat themselves, but progress forward in meaningful existences.

Space is *used* quite cleverly in *The House of the Spirits*. After Esteban and Clara get married, he has a mansion built for her with only his tastes in mind – those of an aristocrat's from Europe with the finest antiques and furniture imported from the West. Despite Esteban's specifically having the home built for Clara, he soon makes clear even in her home she and her space are controlled by him when he eventually decides to campaign for the office of Senator of the Republic. Since the majority of the time, Esteban is at *Tres Marias*, Clara is used to having space to herself and her friends at the 'big house on the corner.' Suddenly, Esteban wants this same space for the same length of time for purposes of his political party. As a result, "the house became filled with political propaganda and with the members of his party, who practically took it by storm, blending in with the hallway ghosts, [and] Clara's retinue [which] was gradually pushed into the back rooms of the house" (Allende, *House* 224). Indeed, by Trueba and his motley crew literally coming in and consuming more than their share of space, he announces to all parties present, and most of all, to Clara, that her desires and needs are trivial and, next to his, come second.

Their home that should have been equally shared between the two becomes a house divided as “an invisible border arose between the parts of the house occupied by Esteban and those occupied by his wife” (Allende, *House* 225). “Since the home represents the unification of its occupants – usually a new couple, “the ‘invisible’ spatial division within the house is a symbol, not only of the Trueba’s spliced relationship, but of the separation of the sexes” (Garcia-Johnson 188). This is the major binary of Allende’s novel – the male/female division – and the unequal status of power that one sex maintains over the other through religion, control of sexuality, denial of equal privileges, and violence. Trueba believes that:

While it is true that, early on, he wanted control not only over [Clara’s] body, but over undefined and luminous material that lay within her and escaped him even in those moments when she appeared to be dying of pleasure. Except the patriarch realized she did not belong to him and as long as she continued living in a world of apparitions she probably never would. (Allende, *House* 96).

Still, Trueba would adamantly try, if not to own Clara, control her. Yet, accordingly, as the author Ronnie-Richele Garcia-Johnson, “No structure could keep Clara isolated and protected from the outside world” (185). Through various spatial maneuvers, Clara employed methods to gain her freedom from her husband. Nor did she “have to physically and permanently leave the structure of her house, for she existed, spiritually, in another dimension, and, oftentimes, brought the outside world inside the space of the house to her” (Garcia-Johnson 185). When all else failed, she simply locked herself in her bedroom, out of Trueba’s reach. Since, he often goes to *Tres Marias* for lengthy periods, the home essentially becomes her domain. It becomes one big carnival of magic with artists, poets, and spiritualists. Naturally, as a result of Clara providing shelter and food for the poor, upon arriving home, “Trueba objects to the carnivalization of his

home” and “coldly ordered that his home was not a thoroughfare and that the celebration of the everyday be stopped” (Garcia-Johnson 187). Nevertheless, as soon as he leaves, Clara and her entourage resort back to their same routine, this time with added adjustments in which, “she redefined the limits of the structure Trueba had built” and “according to the new arrivals and requirements of the moment, new brick-layers would arrive, adding extra rooms, staircases, and spaces so that the ‘big house on the corner’ eventually came to resemble a labyrinth” (Garcia-Johnson 187). This is telling, for a labyrinth space represents non-linear structures and more of a maze, where “instead of allowing Trueba’s logical space to enclose her, Clara, instead, opens it up and recreates it to suit her” (Garcia-Johnson 187). When Clara begins manipulating the home’s space, it slowly begins to vanish until it no longer becomes “a reflection of himself, as he had wanted, but of Clara, the family, and his relationship to them” (Garcia-Johnson 189). She even converts the rear garden, at one time a perfect emulation of a French garden into a space that, when she’s finished, looks more like a jungle and where all forms of life proliferate. Where Marjorie Agosin affirms that “Clara is the ‘soul’ of the house on the corner,” Rene Campos and Gaston Bachelard discuss their ideas on conversions of space and conclude, “that the house ‘is Clara’ ... the space of the ‘unconsciousness, of the Imagination, of the mother’” (qtd. in Garcia-Johnson 189). It is for these reasons, that Clara is so full of life that even ghosts wish to be in her presence, which give the novel its title – *The House of the Spirits*. All in all Clara and the house become united and the ironic situation about this is it happens directly under the jealous, possessive, and watchful glare of Esteban Trueba.

The reader may be given the perspectives of more than one narrator in a magical realist text. Doris Meyer, writing of *La casa de los espíritus*, states, “[b]y structuring *The House of the Spirits* as a double-voiced discourse in which [Esteban] the grandfather represents the

internalized patriarchal culture, whereas [Alba] the granddaughter and the newly born feminist, Allende embodies this emergence of a polyvocal feminist text which expresses hope of an transformed community” (qtd. in Faris 172). Faris suggests that Meyers views the double-voiced discourse as a feminist strategy, associating it with the “parented” female text Elaine Slowalter defines (following M.M. Bakhtin) “that female discourse is double-voiced because it encodes both the ‘dominant’ mode and the ‘muted’ group [which] aligns it with the polyvocal nature of magical realism” (Faris 173). As the major narrator of Allende’s novel, Alba’s narration taps into the collective memory of the novel using the technique called “the objective/subjective position” through the all-inclusive use of stories and voices. In contrast, the novel’s other narrator, Esteban, using the technique of “the capitalistic appropriation/ownership,” mostly seeks to justify himself, to assert his will and opinions, to leave out important information, especially where it concerns women, to control, and to vent his rage. Alba wishes, only, to inform.

In magical realism, humanity is painted in much broader strokes and presented as multi-dimensional. One example is Trueba’s character. After the democratically elected socialists are overthrown through a military coup d’état, a coup which Trueba is one of the first to call for, and after all the Republican’s options of sabotage run moot, he uses his waning political power in helping Blanca and Pedro flee to Canada from the brutal agents of the right-wing dictatorship. Next, in the middle of the night, Esteban Garcia, who is one of the top commanders in the military regime, destroys Trueba’s home, burns his important documents, and, worst of all, imprisons Alba, where she is continuously raped and tortured. Trueba, seeing he has lost his standing as a politician with the military regime, finds he is powerless. While Alba is in seclusion or “the dog-house,” she almost gives up, determined to die. Clara’s spirit visits her and reminds her now is not the time to die. Her grandmother encourages Alba “to write a testimony

that might one day call attention to the terrible secret she was living through, so that the world would know about this horror that was taking place parallel to the peaceful coexistence of those who did not want to know” (Allende, *House* 414). Going by Clara’s advice [who] “brought the saving idea of writing in [Alba’s] mind, without paper or pencil,”(Allende, *House* 414), Alba finds she has many *companeras* (female companions) who form a community that nurtures each other and gives her many stories. Meanwhile, another woman, Transito Soto, who plays a small role in the novel yet has an extraordinary influence, enters the novel at an important time. Trueba has befriended Alba’s revolutionary boyfriend, Miguel, who knows Transito as an underground Marxist. Trueba has known her throughout the years, when Transito was a business-savvy prostitute who now runs an exclusive co-op as the Madam with powerful ties to the military police, whom she services. He pays her a visit and in the only part of the novel, truly humbles himself to another human being, begging her to have Alba released from prison.

When Alba arrives home from prison, Trueba, too, encourages her to write, so she can take her roots with her. During the time Alba is in prison and, especially, after her release, she has an epiphany. Ruminating about the day in which, one day, Esteban Garcia will stand before her in defeat, she fantasizes how she will seek to take her revenge out on him. In like manner, however she realizes she would just be adding to an unending tale of sorrow, blood, and love.” (Allende, *House* 431). It is with these thoughts that Alba is the human link in breaking the terrible chain of violence so that her country’s people can finally heal. Furthermore, she is able to bear witness to life through Clara and her *cuadernos de anotar la vida*, or notebooks of notation of life.

In essence, magical realism has become the new international revolutionary genre, where authors write back against authoritarian regimes. Allende’s novel broke the “glass ceiling” for

female authors in Latin America since, at the time, only male authors were writing acclaimed magical realist texts. This, in turn, sparked interest in the international world of both Chile and Latin America. Today, Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is a classic.

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