

'Barrabás came to us by sea': Absence and Presence in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

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In between the beginning and the end of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, framed by the same sentence about Barrabás – '*Barrabás came to us by sea*'¹ – is a fascinating story spanning three generations, a book of Chilean/Latin American memories and re-imaginings. In Allende's own words, she writes to 'prevent the erosion of time, so that memories will not be blown away by the wind.'² According to her, she chose the novel form specifically because she is from Latin America. 'A novel is like a window, open to an infinite landscape.'³ The landscape of *The House of the Spirits* is not infinite but it is sometimes labyrinthine in the manner in which Allende roots contemporary events in historical contexts. Her preferred narrative style, magical realism, evidences the dialectics of absence and presence: that which is present is inexorably connected to that which is absent and that which is absent is paradoxically discernible in that which is present. This dialectics is also evident in the novel's presentation of Chile, its treatment of the 'invisibility' of blacks, the virtual erasure of Indians, and the disempowerment of women. In each of these instances, there is a significant interaction between presence and absence that is an important aspect of the novel's structure.

Allende's magical realism traces a path back to the origins, involving a conjunction of European and native narrative traditions (and other presences that are part of what Allende calls the Chilean quintessential image, 'the campesino'). Notably, Alejo Carpentier, inventor of the term '*lo real maravilloso americano*' (the marvelous American real) describes magical realism as a distinctive American form:

Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing, America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?⁴

The '*Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man*' references a force to which magical realism is beholden. Carpentier's *Faustian* adjective refers to Faust the magician, a character that E.M. Butler discusses in *The Fortunes of Faust*: 'Both

¹ Isabel Allende, *The House of the Spirits* [1985] trans. Magda Bogin (New York: Bantam Books, 1993) 1. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

² Isabel Allende, 'Writing as an Act of Hope,' *Paths of Resistance: The Art and Craft of the Political Novel*

ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) 45.

³ Allende, Writing 45.

⁴ Alejo Carpentier, 'On the Marvelous Real in America,' *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 88.

Marlowe and Goethe irrigated their Faust dramas with ceremonial magic.⁵ The ‘invisible’ blacks and Indians are present in Latin American literary aesthetics in the manner in which their originary (oral) narrative traditions, rooted in ritual and magic, intersected with (written) European narrative traditions to create contemporary Latin American magical or marvelous realism. Although the terms are different, Carpentier’s ‘marvelous realism’ is in some respects not different from Roh’s ‘magic realism.’ Carpentier speaks of the marvelous as arising ‘from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality.’⁶ Roh discusses magic realism in the sense of a ‘calm admiration of the magic of being’ and the representation of ‘*the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world.*’⁷ But while Roh relates magic realism to European Expressionism and beyond, Carpentier uses an American context that includes diverse cultural memories, in a comparable manner as the term ‘magical realism’ – the ‘domestication’ or naturalization of the extraordinary – is often used today. This variant of realism is the narrative mode of *The House of the Spirits*. It mirrors the flux of Latin American history and maps the contemporary Latin American identity. Thus, Allende says *The House of the Spirits* started as a farewell letter to her grandfather: ‘I wanted to tell him that he could go [die] in peace because all his memories were with me. I had all his anecdotes, all the characters of the family, and to prove it I began writing the story of Rose, the fiancée my grandfather had had, who is called Rose the Beautiful in the book.’⁸ But the narrative also extends beyond her grandfather’s verifiable memory into a world inspirited by the unknown and the unusual. Allende’s use of magical realism involves a reinvention of meaning through the conjunction of two forms of memory: the documentary (the known, present) and the mythical (the unknown, the absent).

Allende’s magical realism is also premised on the existence of ‘terrible contrasts’ and of ‘great violence’ in Latin America,⁹ the reconciliation of which sometimes creates seismic reverberations in *The House of the Spirits*. In Allende’s picture of Latin America,

[t]here is an apparent world and a real world – nice neighborhoods where blond children play on their bicycles and servants walk elegant dogs, and other neighborhoods, of slums and garbage, where dark children play naked with hungry mutts. There are offices of marble and steel where young executives discuss the stock market, and forgotten villages where people still live in the Middle Ages. There is a world of fiction created by the official discourse, and another world of blood and pain and love, where we have struggled for centuries.¹⁰

⁵ E.M. Butler, *The Fortunes of Faust* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 341.

⁶ Carpentier 86.

⁷ Franz Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism,’ *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 20, 24.

⁸ Allende, *Writing* 42.

⁹ Allende, *Writing* 46.

¹⁰ Isabel Allende, *My Invented Country: A Nostalgic Journey Through Chile* trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: HarperCollins, 2003) 47.

The 'dark children' playing in neighborhoods 'of slums and garbage' are nevertheless 'present' in the 'nice neighborhoods where blond children play' because of the complex coexistence – with its tension and difficulties – of the various racial and ethnic groups in the Americas since 1492.¹¹ Notably, Pancha Garcia, who is raped by the *patrón* Esteban Trueba in *The House of the Spirits*, is a fifteen-year-old girl with 'an Indian face' and 'dark skin' (56). In this intercultural setting, magical realism is a literary return to the origins and found its strongest and earliest expression in Latin America because of an indigenous (Indian) and African (black) character to narrative. As Mariko Walter and Eva Fridman have noted, the 'esoteric elements [in magical realism] belong to a worldview whose origins can be traced to the shamanic belief systems of the three foundational cultures of the Latin American continent: the Native American, the African, and the Iberian.'¹² Seen in this manner, Latin American magical realism points to the recovery of 'absence' or references the historical connection of cultures – including connections that are often elided or understated. In her comparison of *The House of The Spirits* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Deborah Cohn remarks that in both novels 'the use of spatial and temporal frames, which are microcosms of the experiences of an entire marginalized population, intersects with the novels' key projects of rewriting history to restore what has been omitted from the official record.'¹³

As a cultural response to political intersections that brought Indian civilization in contact with Spanish (and British and French) and with black civilizations, modern Latin American literature exemplifies the role of memory and identity in the reinvention of meaning. European colonialism and emigration resulted in the creation of a European diaspora in Latin America, as is evident in the genealogy of Allende and some other prominent writers. The transatlantic slave trade created an African diaspora in the region. One consequence of this cultural confluence in Latin America is a cultural mix that includes Indian, European, and African memories or narratives. This mix includes both pre-Columbian and post-slavery literary traditions. In his essay on 'Cultural Plurality,' George Robert Coulthard argues that 'there would be no Indian contributions without Spanish as an intermediary, and to a certain extent, this is true of African contributions in regard to French and English.'¹⁴ But this unqualified observation does not negate the fact that 'pre-Columbian creations in poetry, drama,

¹¹ Writing specifically about Africans in the Caribbean and Latin America, Shamil Cruz notes the presence of blacks in the Americas since 1492 – beginning with Pedro Alonso Niño, a navigator who sailed with Columbus on his very first voyage, and 'the black colonists who helped Nicolás de Ovando form the first Spanish settlement on Hispaniola in 1502.' After emancipation, he notes, '[i]n parts of Latin America where the black population was relatively small [such as Chile], cultural and genetic integration with the white or Native American majority over time blurred considerably the obvious ethnic distinctions.' Cruz is careful to add that '[c]enturies of contact among African, European, indigenous American, and Asian people have produced a socioethnic complexity in which status and racial designation depend on many factors.' (Shamil Cruz, 'African Americans in the Caribbean and Latin America.' *IPOAA (Indigenous People of Africa and Latin America) Magazine*. http://ipoaa.com/blacks_latin_america_etc.htm)

¹² Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman, *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, 2 vols (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2004) 414.

¹³ Deborah N. Cohn, *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction* (Nashville and London: Vanderbilt UP, 1999) 100.

¹⁴ George Robert Coulthard, 'Cultural Plurality.' *Latin America in Its Literature* eds. César Fernández Moreno, Julio Ortega, and Ivan A. Schulman, trans. Mary G. Berg (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980) 39.

and narrative have an historical and actual existence' and constitute 'the first chapters of the literary histories of Indo-America.'¹⁵ In *Manuel Zapata Olivella and the 'Darkening' of Latin American Literature*, Antonio Tillis discusses the Africanized literary trajectory in Olivella's writings in particular and Latin American literature in general. He concludes:

For years, literature has represented Latin American culture as a monolithic entity, a reflection of the North American concept of 'melting pot.' However, this amalgam has undergone a hyperbolic sense of cultural 'whitening' and ethnic suppression. Latin Americans have exaggerated and encouraged their 'Hispanic' selves in order to suppress indigenous and African traits. In doing so, a mental state of (re)construction has occurred whereby selective amnesia facilitates the disappearance of integral parts of themselves.¹⁶

Allende herself traces her family history to the end of the nineteenth century 'when a robust Basque sailor disembarked on the coast of Chile with his mother's reliquary strung around his neck and his head swimming with plans for greatness,'¹⁷ but she says of her generation (of Chileans with a Spanish ancestry): 'We Chileans feel our bond with the soil, like the campesinos we once were.'¹⁸ This bond with the soil is a connection to a specific geopolitical history and its network of memories.

The specific history in this case is that of Chile, a country that is simultaneously absent and present in *The House of the Spirits*. Allende describes Chile as 'that remote land that few people can locate on the map because it's as far as you can go without falling off the planet [...] Chile lies at the end of all roads, a lance to the south of the south of America, four thousand three hundred kilometers of hills, valleys, lakes, and sea.'¹⁹ This is the country invoked in the non-specified Latin American setting of *The House of the Spirits*. That setting is identifiable as Chile because of certain political and economic milestones in the country's history: the agrarian reforms of President Salvador Allende; the assassination of Victor Jara (the Pedro Tercero Garcia in the novel, approximately, who like Jara is a folk singer and who also has his fingers cut off); the topography of the *cordillera*; the 1933 earthquake; Pablo Neruda's death (including clear echoes of the meeting between Neruda and Allende, as recounted in Allende's memoir, *Paula*); the role of the *gringos* (the USA) in the overthrow of President Allende; even the cape and moustache of General Augusto Pinochet. María de la Cinta Ramblado-Minero correctly describes *The House of the Spirits* as 'located on the border between fiction and *testimonio*' in that it largely presents 'a testimony of the events in Chilean history from the beginning of the twentieth century to the coup d'état in 1973'.²⁰ Although

¹⁵ Abraham Arias-Larreta, *Pre-Columbian Masterpieces*. History of Indo-American Literature Book III. (Kansas City, Missouri: Editorial Indoamerica, 1967) ix.

¹⁶ Antonio D. Tillis, *Manuel Zapata Olivella and the 'Darkening' of Latin American Literature* (Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 2005) 130.

¹⁷ Isabel Allende. *Paula* trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996) 3.

¹⁸ Allende, *My Invented Country* 2.

¹⁹ Allende, *My Invented Country* 1.

²⁰ María de la Cinta Ramblado-Minero, *Isabel Allende's Writing of the Self: Trespassing the Boundaries of Fiction and Autobiography*. Hispanic Literature Vol. 77 (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003) 64.

the setting of the novel is identifiably Chile, however, its non-particularization is Allende's way of gesturing to the general via the specific, of using Chile as a parable of Latin American history. As she herself says, 'after so many years of exile I understand that my country is all of Latin America, that all of us who live in this continent are brothers and sisters. Our stories are similar; our earth is the same'²¹ Thus, Chile as a specific geopolitical reality is both present and absent in *The House of the Spirits*. Its presence reinforces Allende's bond with the soil and its historical markers; its absence enlarges the poetic or epistemological circumference of the narrative to include both historical and mythological strands, both Chilean and non-Chilean cognitive maps.

Allende's universalizing compass is therefore not based only on the principle of extension but that of the dialectics between absence and presence. This dialectics is also evident in the way in which blacks and Indians are inserted into the narrative, like haunting absences or lone survivors. Via the Hotel Columbus, Allende gestures towards that part of Latin American history that stretches across national boundaries, back to the catalytic arrival of Christopher Columbus. The hotel, run by a 'cooperative of prostitutes and homosexuals' (315), serves a number of purposes: as spectacle ('people traveled from the provinces to the capital just to see it and go back and tell their friends about it,' [314]), as the exotic ('the only whorehouse in the country with its own authentic negro,' [316]), and as the 'unreal' (its frescoes 'were poor copies of the ones at Pompeii,' [315], and it had previously been run aground by a 'madam' with a phony French accent before the era of the Japanese-sounding Tránsito Soto). Allende convokes in the Hotel Columbus a realm of action rather tangentially related to the plot of the novel. This aspect of the narrative fills out the picture of the European intersection with Latin America and the consequent construction of otherness, the invention of the exotic, and the phony rhetoric of 'civilization.' In *My Invented Country*, Allende makes the puzzling claim – considering the interior architecture of her novel – that 'African blood was never incorporated into Chilean stock, which would have given us rhythm and beauty' and that 'there weren't even enough Asians, as there were in Peru, to compensate for our solemnity and spice up our cuisine.'²² Contrary to Allende's claim, however, black slavery thrived in Chile and was only abolished in 1823; miscegenation – the 'incorporation' of African blood into Chilean stock – was not uncommon during this period and after, even though blacks (and Asians) continued to be discriminated against. Allende's claim may be attributed to the relatively low slave traffic to Chile. In *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, Philip Curtin estimates that there were about 4,000 (or less than 0.05 percent) persons of African descent in Chile.²³ Herbert S. Klein, citing diverse sources, in *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*, estimates the slave population in Chile in the late 18th century to be about 12,000 persons. By 1823 when Chile abolished slavery, this slave population had declined to 4,000 persons.²⁴ '[O]ur immigration policy has been openly racist,' Allende adds. 'For a long time we didn't

²¹ John Rodden, ed., *Conversations with Isabel Allende*, revised ed. (Austin: Univ. of Texas at Austin, 2004) 51-2.

²² Allende, *My Invented Country* 38.

²³ Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975) 91.

²⁴ Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 295, 252.

accept Asians, blacks, or anyone with a deep tan.²⁵ This non-acceptance registers in *The House of the Spirits* in the ‘exclusion of unrecognized “mestizo” children’ – an exclusion that María Roof argues ‘drives the [novel’s] narrative action.’²⁶

Allende’s own ‘immigration policy’ in *The House of the Spirits* locates the only ‘authentic’ black and Asian admitted in her fictive cosmos in the Hotel Columbus (or the Christopher Columbus, as the hotel is also known). But there are other visually marked bodies (such as Esteban García, Trueba’s illegitimate grandson) that speak of miscegenation – whether acknowledged or not – in Chile. When the Hotel Columbus directly connects with the action of the narrative, it is as ‘the paradise of lost souls and furtive lovers’ (417), an illusory line of escape wherein one of the main rooms or hubs is named The Thousand and One Nights (of Shahrazad). Naming and location are important. The naming of the hotel after Columbus is significant for the way that it invokes Columbus as a ‘living’ presence. The Columbus is virtually a character in the novel, a technique that imbues a non-living thing with approximately ‘living’ characteristics. The Columbus’s particular abilities include both the provision of succor and the revelation of the true nature of the military leaders. They (the military leaders) are presented as ‘a breed apart, brothers who spoke a different dialect from the civilians and with whom any attempt at dialogue would be a conversation with the deaf, because the slightest dissent was considered treason in their rigid honor code’ (389). But the true character of the top members of this ‘messianic’ military is signaled in Tránsito Soto’s account to Trueba that the police had raided the Hotel Columbus a couple of times after the coup ‘but ... each time they dragged the couples out of bed and lined them up at gunpoint in the main drawing room, they had found a general or two’ (417).²⁷

The reference to the Thousand and One Nights cusps the image of the Columbus as an occult zone in which magic is possible, perhaps even inevitable. Shahrazad’s particular magic is her ability to transform reality into fabulous narratives. As the sultan, Shahriyar, tells Dandan, the vizier, in Naguib Mahfouz’s extension of *The Thousand and One Nights* entitled *Arabian Nights and Days*: ‘Her stories are white magic [...] They open up worlds that invite reflection’²⁸ Shahrazad the storyteller has since become an elastic symbol for the generative magician able to transform absence into presence. Notably, it is through the Christopher Columbus, through Soto’s intercession, that Trueba possibly manages to rescue Alba, thus suggesting that despite its existence on the margins of contemporary Chilean history and as an illusory universe, the Christopher Columbus is nevertheless a potent channel. That meeting between Trueba and Soto begins, in fact, in the room named

²⁵ Allende, *My Invented Country* 38-9.

²⁶ María Roof, ‘Maryse Condé and Isabel Allende: Family Saga Novels.’ *World Literature Today* 70.2 (Spring 1996): 284.

²⁷ In *My Invented Country*, Allende paints a striking picture of a top military officer that evidently informs the general attitude to the military in *The House of the Spirits*: ‘This same admiral [José Toribio Merino] justified the government’s decision to put him in charge of the economy by saying that he had studied economy as a hobby in courses of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. And with the same candor he stated on the record his opinion that “War is the most beautiful profession there is. And what is war? The continuation of peace in which all the things peace does not allow are achieved, in order to lead man to the perfect dialectic, which is the extinction of the enemy”’ (*My Invented Country* 163).

²⁸ Naguib Mahfouz, *Arabian Nights and Days* [1982] trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1995) 2.

the Thousand and One Nights. Neither Mustafa nor Soto is presented as a magician in his/her own right, however. Banished from the public sphere, Soto and Mustafa exist at the margins of the narrative as the unlikely keepers of the legacy of Columbus. But the Columbus, with its historical resonance, is indeed the social center for some top politicians and military leaders. For Trueba, it is an important outlet in both social and political respects. In the manner of a trendy museum-keeper, Soto refigures the Columbus legacy to her own ends. She tells Trueba how she became rich via political correctness and the voiding (and substitution) of the core of Columbus's meaning:

She had an excellent relationship with the new government, just as she had had with the preceding ones. She told me that Christopher Columbus was a thriving business and that every year she renovated part of the décor, replacing the stranded hulls of Polynesian shipwrecks with severe monastic cloisters, and baroque garden swings with torture racks, depending on the latest fashion. Thanks to the gimmickry of the mirrors and lights, which could multiply space, transform the climate, create the illusion of infinity, and suspend time, she could bring all this into a residence of relatively normal size. (417-18)

Columbus had set out to shorten infinity; Soto profits by multiplying it via illusion. Soto is discernibly Asian, and her illusionism mirrors, in reverse, Columbus's illusion that he had found his way to Asia (India, specifically) when he landed in Hispaniola. Soto's presence also reinforces the novel's other reference to Asia (Indonesia in this case). On seeing a mural 'stained with red paint and [containing] a single word printed in enormous letters: Djakarta' (362), Alba asks: 'What does that mean, *compañero*?' But the addressee does not know. 'And none of them knew why the opposition had painted that Asiatic word on the walls; they had never heard about the piles of corpses in the streets of that distant city' (363). While the Asiatic character of Soto points more towards the profit and pleasure principle contextually pioneered by Columbus, 'that Asiatic word' compares the struggle in Chile to that in Indonesia, conjoining that which is present and that which is absent into a compound image of a cross-border liberation struggle.

Mustafa's presence and 'authenticity' (as determined by spectators) point more to a complex absence – the absence of a black man or black people *not* over-determined from without. His presence and existence at the margins of the narrative further highlight the invisibility of the native Indian in the political terrain of *The House of the Spirits*. The Indians appear mostly as domestic servants or as pointers to a dead (or absent) nation which its buried collective memory has boosted its commercial appeal, hence the excavations and smuggling of Indian artifacts by Jean de Satigny, Blanca's husband. These illegal excavations, described as raids on 'the historical heritage of the nation' (255), suggest that memory (archeological memory) elevates the Indian more than contemporary history – in which case a dead Indian is more valuable than a living one. While the excavations produce commercial treasures, the Indians involved in that clandestine operation are described as anonymous: 'Various teams of Indians who had slipped across the twisted passes of the border undetected were working for Jean de Satigny. They had no documents that proved they were human beings, and they were silent, stubborn, and inscrutable' (255). Yet Chile was originally Indian territory, before the arrival of Columbus. The Indian Nightmare (its destroyed or disfigured civilization) is thus reinvented as a Euro-

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American Dream, one ironically aided – in Allende’s account – by still-invisible Indians. But the persistence of Indian beliefs and customs is one of the ways in which the Indians are relatively humanized, one of the ways in which they triumph over negation by absence. Esteban Trueba reflects on health care in *Tres Marias*: ‘The fact is you couldn’t get a doctor in a godforsaken place like that. The peasants went to an Indian *curandera* who knew all about the power of herbs and suggestion, and in whom they had great confidence. More than the vet’ (53). And when Blanca gains entrance into her husband’s studio and sees the walls ‘covered with distressing erotic scenes that revealed her husband’s hidden character’ (261), she glimpses ‘the sinister power of the Indian’ (260): ‘She recognized the faces of the household servants. There was the entire Incan court, as naked as God had put them on this earth, or barely clad in theatrical costumes’ (260). The reference to the ‘entire Incan court,’ which signifies completeness and valence, is telling – particularly of the effect of the images on Blanca. This ‘sinister power’ contrasts the earlier image of an Indian ‘[setting] off at the slow trot typical of his race’ (259) and presents an enriched picture in which the Indian regains the quality of dynamism.

This dynamism is comparable to that which the female characters – regardless of their disempowerment or absence from the public sphere of national politics – possess. Clara is the core of this collective female energy. With her death, a new era begins in the Trueba household, one presented as a lessening of spiritual vitality, of the departure of the spirits, of the narrowing of the magic circle: ‘Alba knew that her grandmother was the soul of the big house on the corner. Everybody else learned it later, when Clara died and the house lost its flowers, its nomadic friends, and its playful spirits and entered into an era of decline’ (283). Clara’s passage marks the passage of the magical, or what Patricia Hart refers to as ‘*magical feminism*’:²⁹ the sort of spiritual energy capable of reinventing the ordinary, via a conjunction of historical and cosmic memory, as the extraordinary or the marvelous. However, the sort of distinction that *The House of the Spirits* makes between the marvelous and the real weakens the intervention of ‘magical feminism’ in the political life of the nation. Although female intervention in politics is suggested by Soto’s intercession on behalf of Trueba, for instance, this intercession is (to be) routed through Soto’s male patrons and there is no confirmation that her role is ultimately consequential. Blanca and Alba play secondary roles in the revolutionary struggles. Mora tells Alba, ‘Your Grandmother Clara is doing all she can to protect you in the Hereafter, but she sent me to tell you that your spiritual protectors are powerless when it comes to major cataclysms’ (365). In the internal architecture of Allende’s novel, Clara’s is that spiritual presence that holds the Trueba house of memory together in a time-space fusion but is nevertheless unable to re-frame the public arena of national politics. But it is that private sphere that points to alternative histories or memories capable of redirecting the political domain. From this perspective, that absence actually registers as a presence.

Clara the matriarch is a counter to Trueba the patriarch, and in the end it is her legacy (Alba’s text, urged on by Clara and guided by her notebooks) that survives or triumphs. Alba’s text is a significant construction of history that connects with what María Roof refers to as ‘the invasion of the public sphere by Latin American women

²⁹ Patricia Hart, *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende* (London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1989) 176.

[in the decade that began in 1973].³⁰ ‘Not only are the women actively engaged in what *One Hundred Years of Solitude* described as a masculine endeavor [the writing of the Buendía family epic by Melquíades instead of Ursula, and Aureliano’s discovery of the key to Melquíades’s manuscript],’ observes Pamela Moore, ‘but they are involved in it together [...] without the defining presence of Man.’³¹ In the same vein, Carrie Sheffield points out ‘Allende’s focus on what have traditionally been considered unimportant, ahistorical stories (namely stories of women), and her refusal to structure the novel along traditional historical lines.’³² Karen Cox describes this structural principle – the construction of the narrative around the lives of the female characters – as ‘a move that clearly separates [Allende] from other Latin American Boom writers.’³³ Cox’s point about the importance of Allende’s projection of women remains pertinent, but Allende seems better situated within the Post-Boom generation. Notably, José Donoso discusses the Boom largely as a 1960s phenomenon in his personal history of the era.³⁴ With reference to García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Allende’s ‘parodic intertextuality’³⁵ or her direct reflection of history in *The House of the Spirits* has also been interestingly discussed ‘as a commentary on the evasive nature of the narrative of the Boom.’³⁶ The Post-Boom also marked ‘the beginning of the end of “macho” literature’.³⁷

The character of Clara is in the main a reinvention of the significance of womanhood in the Latin American region. Clara and the other two main female characters in the novel, Blanca and Alba, extend the significance of womanhood in this region beyond any signification as a lack. They elevate it to an enhancement of the resources of the imagination within which a higher form of reconciliation is possible – something that the Latin American politics of military (and patriarchal) dictatorship is bereft of in its objectification of power. Clara’s magical sphere also signals a retrieval of an indigenous (narrative) tradition. The absent Indians and blacks are present in this sphere in the manner in which Indian and black narrative traditions are utilized as part of an animating principle. Alba’s process of writing, of which *The House of the Spirits* is the consequence, becomes a way of exorcising her personal – and her country’s public – demons. And it is to her grandmother’s non-chronological notebooks that she turns, augmented by her dying father’s recollections and documents. The structure of the novel is such that Trueba does get a chance to tell his

³⁰ María Roof, ‘W.E.B. Du Bois, Isabel Allende, and the Empowerment of Third World Women.’ *CLA Journal: A Quarterly Official Publication of the College Language Association*. 39.4 (1996) 410.

³¹ Pamela L. Moore, ‘Testing the Terms: “Woman” in *The House of the Spirits* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.’ *The Comparatist* 18 (1994-5) 96.

³² Carrie Sheffield, ‘Voices from the Abyss: Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* and the Reconstruction and Preservation of History and Memory in 1970s Chile and Beyond,’ *Proteus* 19.2 (2002) 34.

³³ Karen Castellucci Cox, *Isabel Allende: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003) 35.

³⁴ José Donoso, *The Boom in Spanish-American Literature: A Personal History* trans. Gregory Kolovakos (New York: Columbia UP in association with Center for Inter-American Relations, 1977) 105.

³⁵ Stephen Hart, ‘*The House of Spirits* by Isabel Allende,’ *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel* ed. Efraín Kristal (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2005) 271.

³⁶ Philip Swanson, ‘The Post-Boom Novel,’ *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel* ed. Efraín Kristal (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2005) 94.

³⁷ Andrew Graham-Yooll, ‘Light at the End of the Tunnel: The New Writers of Latin America,’ *Antioch Review* 52.4 (Fall 1994) 578.

own story, in snatches, but he is mostly narrated – by the third person narrator and by Alba, who recreates her world mainly through the magical lenses of her grandmother, Clara. As Doris Meyer has pointed out: ‘In Allende’s metatext, Esteban represents the androcentric vision of history’, but Allende’s (or Alba’s) self-conscious text is essentially ‘feminocentric’.³⁸ Alba’s narrative is linear in its sequence yet cyclic in its return to the origins (to the could-have-been marriage between Trueba and Rosa the Beautiful) and in its status as a narrative by the spirit of Clara linked together by Clara’s memoirs. Alba’s narrative is thus a fulfillment of the possibilities of her grandmother, a completion of her magic cycle:

My grandmother wrote in her notebooks that bore witness to life for fifty years. Smuggled out by certain friendly spirits, they miraculously escaped the infamous psyche in which so many other family papers perished. I have them here at my feet, bound with colored ribbons, divided according to events and not in chronological order, just as she arranged them before she left. Clara wrote them so they would help me now to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own. The first is an ordinary school copybook with twenty pages, written in a child’s delicate calligraphy. It begins like this: *Barrabás came to us by sea...* (432-433)

Her narrative lends chronology and (greater) coherence to Clara’s scribbling and engenders a long procession of spirits of the past, of which she is the inheritor. In *Isabel Allende*, Linda Levine aptly notes that the names Allende gives her female protagonists are ‘laden with symbolic meaning’ and highlight ‘her progressive view of history and women’s active role in shaping their personal and national histories. Nivea, Clara, Blanca, and Alba capture, most notably in the original Spanish, the idea of a ‘luminous dimension in ascending gradation’ culminating in a dawn (*alba* in Spanish).³⁹

In a sense, this dawn is the beginning or the re-presentation of a history that has always existed. The character of Barrabás is especially significant in this cyclical sweep. The dog, Barrabás, had been fondly adopted by Clara because it had belonged to her dear uncle, Marcos; it therefore became the link between her and Uncle Marcos, who had died on the sea journey back from one of his contextually off-the-map explorations of the unknown. Barrabás arrives and is received by Clara as her uncle’s unwritten last will and testament. Barrabás is more than just a dog in Clara’s view; it is the figural manifestation of the presence of her departed uncle. Thus, when Trueba asks her to give the dog to the gardener to get rid of, she threatens: ‘He’s mine, Papa. If you take him away, I’ll stop breathing and I promise you I’ll die’ (9). Clara becomes Barrabás’s ‘mother’ (19) – ahead of the conception of her first daughter, Blanca. The eccentric Uncle Marcos is presented as the character that helps Clara towards a greater expression of her psychic powers. His synthesis of knowledge or distillation of the legends of the past, with its universalizing compass, speaks to the

³⁸ Doris Meyer, “‘Parenting the Text’: Female Creativity and Dialogic Relationships in Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus*.” *Hispania* 73.2 (May 1990):

³⁹ Linda Gould Levine, *Isabel Allende*, Twayne’s World Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2002) 24.

dialectical nature of knowledge. The figure of Marcos is the passageway through which Clara experiences 'absent' worlds as the figural core of her present:

She [Clara] did not hesitate as she recalled Lope de Aguirre's search for El Dorado, or the unpronounceable names of the flora and fauna her extraordinary uncle had seen; she knew about the lamas who take salt tea with yak lard and she could give detailed descriptions of the opulent women of Tahiti, the rice fields of China, or the white prairies of the North, where the eternal ice kills animals and men who lose their way, turning them into stone in seconds. Marcos had various travel journals in which he recorded his excursions and impressions, as well as a collection of maps and books of stories and fairy tales that he kept in the trunks he stored in the junk room at the far end of the third courtyard. From there they were hauled out to inhabit the dreams of his descendants, until they were mistakenly burnt half a century later on an infamous pyre.(17)

Marcos represents Allende's attempt to map the unmapped or even the unmappable, to marvelously fictionalize the real. In Allende's own words: 'There are two characters [...] based on Marcos [her real-life uncle]. In real life he was indescribable'.⁴⁰ When Marcos's experiences subsequently 'inhabit the dreams of his descendants,' they are transfigured from their somatic mode (as experienced by Marcos) to affective psychic ripples.

Marcos is also the character fascinated with flight, even if for commercial reasons, and actually manages to fly 'a gigantic hot-air sausage' aided by 'a compass, a telescope, and several strange maps that he had traced himself based on various theories of Leonardo da Vinci and on the polar knowledge of the Incas' (13). He thus harvests the past in the service of the present-future. Marcos is the only character in the novel to 'resurrect' from the dead (although his burial had been based only on a supposition that he had not survived the flight). He is the only one to collaborate with Clara on a public divination activity, using a crystal ball, even though he relies more on Clara's clairvoyance than on the vision of his crystal ball. His 'reincarnation,' Nicolás (Clara and Trueba's 'other son...[who] went from one fantastic enterprise to another' [229]), is the only character in the novel to succeed in North America and transform the Latin American Nightmare of always being acted upon into a Latin American Dream of independent success. Marcos's 'reincarnation' (as Nicolás) transfigures his death from an absence of the corporeal self into a presence of the spirit. In North America, according to Blanca's account (or Nicolás's letters to Blanca), Nicolás 'established another academy for uniting himself with nothingness,' and he becomes 'so successful' that he acquires 'the wealth he had not been able to with his balloon and his sandwiches. He wound up lounging with his disciples in his very own rose-colored porcelain swimming pool and enjoying the full respect of the citizenry, having combined, without intending to, his quest for God with his luck in the world of business' (300).

Uncle Marcos is therefore both a catalyst and a litmus to Clara in particular and a catalyst and a litmus of an alternative realism in the novel's higher sphere –

⁴⁰ Celia Correás Zapata, *Isabel Allende: Life and Spirits* trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2002) 41.

both a vertical projection of the spirit and a horizontal extension of experience. And Barrabás, both in its living form and in its later existence as a signifier in Clara's notebooks is the connective thread that links Clara and Marcos (and Nicolás). Read together as aspects of the same signifying field (a unification of mainly two 'I's into a Clara-defined third 'I'), Clara stabilizes Uncle Marcos's effervescence while Uncle Marcos lends to Clara's hermeticism a widening of space that extends the reaches and the possibilities of the magic sphere in *The House of the Spirits*. After Clara reinvents Uncle Marcos, and Alba reinvents Clara, Barrabás is the thread of memory that links together the magical spaces of the novel and imbues them with a regenerative dynamism.

Barrabás is the figure both of absence and of presence, as even his manner of coming indicates. His coming by sea (the Pacific Ocean, most probably) puts him in a special league – with Marcos and Nicolás – as one of the few characters in the novel with a knowledge or experience of another (absent) world other than the locale of the narrative. And his coming – *by sea*, with the immensity inscribed into that image – points to a conjunction of worlds, of the known and unknown. Unsurprisingly, Allende frames the novel, both at the beginning and at the end, by the same sentence signposting that conjunction: '*Barrabás came to us by sea...*' (433).