Isabel Allende’s Representations of Women and the Oppressed on the Page and in Public

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Although women have been recognized only recently as creators of canonical literary works, writing is one of the fields of creative work in which they have long excelled, bringing to readers the insights from their experiences as women. In the wake of the modern feminist movement, those with the authority to define the literary canon have expanded it to include a significant number of women. The resulting, if still somewhat contested, inclusion of women as canonical writers has meant an enlarged stage for living women writers who choose to have a public persona in addition to their roles as authors of literary products. Isabel Allende, one of the new canonical writers, speaks to readers and diverse publics of public and private life both through her works and through interviews with critics, allowing readers to become more fully acquainted with both her imagined worlds and the lived experience of the writer and those with whom she has been connected. Appreciating Allende's life and work means recognizing the labors of a popular female Chilean writer and meeting through her Latin Americans of diverse classes and experiences, but especially those who are women, oppressed, and poor, as well those who struggle for justice.

Allende's interests are, in one sense, universal themes of political conflict, militarism and economic inequality, sexual politics, and love, optimism, and active construction of a better world. Allende reports that, "I have two obsessions, two recurrent phantoms: love and violence, light and darkness ... present in my life like two antagonistic forces (Rodden 7). At the same time, she is aware she represents the specific Chilean and Latin American cultures from which she comes. Allende self-defines as a Chilean and Latin American storyteller. As she related to García Pinto, Allende feels "like a troubadour ... That's how I think of myself. That's how I feel. I want to go from village to village, from person to person, from town to town telling about my country, telling about my continent, getting across the truth--that accumulated suffering and that marvelous expression of life that is Latin America." (93). She believes, moreover, as she related to Alvin Sanoff, that "storytelling is a way of preserving the memory of the past. . . the real stories of people and countries." Although her role is to "invent tales," Allende insists that "they do not come from my soul or womb. They are the voices of others whom I talk for" (103).]

In telling her stories, Allende sees her place among other women and her work as representing her own family of women: "I come from a family of storytellers, an oral tradition ... As women, we were kept silent in public, but we had a private voice ... I write about the lives of my people. It is the voice not of the winners, but of the little people, us, my mother, my grandmother, not my grandfather who wrote history with big capital letters" (Gazarian Gautier 130). Allende, in her storytelling, focuses on issues important to her as a Chilean, Latin American, and woman: "There's so much misery and violence, inequality, injustice, five hundred years of exploitation and colonization. It's very difficult for anyone to ignore that. And writers are not exceptions ... maybe they have more responsibility ... because they have a certain platform from which they can speak for others who are kept in silence" (Rodden 225). Living in the United States, Allende makes a comment that reflects on her current situation: "I feel that I have a mission. I belong to the lowest of the low in the social classes in this country. I am Latina and I am a woman. But I have a platform to speak in English about my culture" (Rodden 30).

Allende ambitiously pursues her writing as a representation of her culture, a persuasive agent for change, and an invitation to elicit reader response. Her purpose is to invite others to work together to understand and improve the world, specifically to defeat oligarchy, militarism, and limitations on women and to open up the world to just societies. She writes, as she tells Gazarian Gautier, "to make the world more understandable, and bearable, so that people may be

moved by the things that matter to me, to firmly establish the need for a collective endeavor to build a world where there is room for love, solidarity, laughter, the pleasure of the senses, the growth of the spirit, and imagination" (130). Allende is engaged in a great purpose: "Storytelling and writing ... allow me ... to fulfill all my dreams on the page. I like to do it from the perspective as a woman who challenges the patriarchal order, mocks authority, the law, repressive morals, and the thousand ways they have devised to trap our bodies and our souls" (Gazarian Gautier 133). She is clear in her purpose: "I want to tell a secret story, that of the silent voices who cannot speak. I want to change the world" (Gazarian Gautier 132).

The experience of exile for many years, approximately fifteen years in Venezuela and since residence in the United States, changed Allende's conception of home from Chile to Latin America. The phenomenon has been widespread in Latin America to her mind. The 1970s were the years of dictatorships, "forcing masses of people to emigrate, to leave their own country and live in other countries in the continent" (Alegría 202). As a result, there has been an exchange of cultures in Latin America and of shared perspectives. She concludes, in an interview with Fernando Alegría, that "this has marked our generation. That is why it is difficult to think of myself as a Chilean writer. I feel I am ... one of the many voices in Latin America today" (202).

In representing her culture, Allende now interprets her own work, even work of the past, as written to represent people throughout Latin American. For example, she views Of Love and Shadows, a story of the disappeared, as a story about El Salvador, Argentina, and Guatemala as well as Chile. "My country is all of Latin America," Allende maintains, "all of us who live in this continent are brothers and sisters. Our stories are similar; our earth is the same" (Agosín 42).

In La casa de los espíritus, Allende tells the stories of her family. "I put everything that I remembered about my family," she remarks, "and then, afterwards, about other families, and about my country, about things that had been very important in my life" (Jones and Prillaman 63). She recalls that "the years of my childhood are a treasure that I keep with me and that I recovered intact in order to put them into the pages of The House of the Spirits" (Agosín, 1999 41). The wild uncle with his room stacked with books, the trunk in the basement, the decapitated head, Aunt Rose the first fiancé, the unknown and unmentioned father, the magical grandmother, the loving, tyrannical, and patriarchal grandfather, all the people were real in her family. The public figures, her father's cousin Chilean President Salvador Allende, Pablo Neruda, "the Poet", the red carnations Allende carried at Neruda's funeral, and the singer Victor Jara, lived their lives and pursued their "destinies" in Chile and in Allende's writing. Material that Allende originally thought would serve as testimony against the dictatorship took on novelistic form: "The last chapters in the book, those that talk about prison, torture, the dictatorship, are recordings and interviews of survivors ... that I made clandestinely before leaving my country" (Moody 50).

Allende describes what magical realism is in her work: "Because magic, in my case, stands for emotions. The spirits in the house are not really ghosts, the spirits are the passions, the obsessions, the dreams of the family, and of the country ... that's what the spirits stand for in The House of the Spirits" (157). The spirits are the people she knows, loves, and remembers: "I don't believe in ghosts. But I do believe in memory. When I say somebody's spirit helps me, I mean that when I need poetic inspiration, I think of my grandmother and the crazy character she was. When I need something to be from the heart, I think of Paula, who had such generosity. When I need courage, my grandfather, this stubborn Basque, carries me through" (Rodden 26).

Magic is, to Allende, the people who have influenced us, our memories of them, and our reflections on human impulses.

Allende draws strength, as a person and an artist, from the "people who see evil and want something better, who struggle toward this end, and who very often prevail. With them, humanity takes one step forward, a little step ... It may have taken us five hundred years, but we now have democracies all over the continent. They are fragile and conditional, but they are democracies all the same" (Berlin Snell 246).

Preoccupying Allende's thoughts about the past are the themes of political justice and military violence and women's lives and feminism. Allende opens up to readers of Chile, Latin America, and other nations alike the political life and experience of Chile in one of the contemporary world's tragic moments. Allende also opens up to the reader her soul, her experience as a woman and writer, and the experience of women of her culture. She does so to "record memories" and "to take the reader by the neck", for her own benefit to recover her home, her homeland, and her place in the world and to take part with others in a reconstruction of the world.

In the film Isabel Allende: The Woman's Voice in Latin-American Literature, Allende relates that, after she left Chile in 1975, she "lived for eight years in silence, in a way paralyzed by this anger" (Isabel Allende). The loss of the Popular Unity government was a blow to Chilean democracy and the hopes of Chileans and Latin Americans for social justice in Chile and Latin America. During the three years of Salvador Allende's presidency, Chile accomplished within the constitutional framework land reform, nationalization of the copper mines of the north, and improved wages, "things that were very important to our economy and for our dignity as a country," Allende comments. "It was a fascinating process and a beautiful dream. Before that, Chile had been a democracy, but without social justice. How can you have a social democracy if there is such great inequality that a few people have all the opportunities and all the wealth while the great majority does not?" (Gazarian Gautier 126). Under Salvador Allende's government, there was open expression politically, a free press, and a renaissance of the fine and popular arts. Allende worked as a columnist for the magazine *Paula*, the first Chilean publication "that dared to speak about divorce, abortion, virginity, sex, drugs, corruption within the government." Allende comments that, *Paula* "delved into politics, reported on radical movements around the world, and . . . touched on all that which had been untouchable up to then in Chile" (Piña 177). Popular Unity led to "a great awakening for large masses of people . . . There was political voice and economic revival for the lower classes ... if they had allowed Allende to go through with his project . . . then possibly the idea of a socialist revolution in freedom would have spread throughout Latin America and the Third World like wildfire" (Moody 59). Allende, like many other Chileans, keenly felt the loss of the "original experiment" and fled Chile in fear of being detained following resistance work after the 1973 military overthrow.

Allende does not flinch in describing what she saw, a journalist by occupation and an activist, during the overthrow and its aftermath. In an interview with Michael Moody (1999), Allende comments on the fact that most people of her social class supported the coup but that she sympathized with working people and the poor. Her description of the repression is graphic and helps explain her paralysis in the first years of her exile in Venezuela: "I felt a visceral terror in Chile .... Every day I crossed that line that separates the upper-class neighborhood from the lower-class ones. The contrast was so great that I ... became ill from the pain and the shame. The underclass received the impact from the "politics of shock" imposed by the new economists

from the Chicago School. The rich became richer . . . The helicopters hovered like prehistoric flies . . . the police and the army raided . . . Stray bullets killed children in their sleep. Every day they took away countless detained . . . I saw bodies floating in the Mapocho River. I saw walls strained with blood. I saw the detained . . . shoved into the military vehicles ... a great feeling of fear took over and something gave in inside of me . . . I couldn't remain in Chile. I couldn't sleep at night because I heard the screams" (Moody 55-58).

Allende was able to recover and thus was not defeated by the experience, psychologically or politically. In her writing and in her life, Allende remains hopeful, trusting in others: "Kindness is discrete and tender . . . The solutions lie within the men and women who live in this world. For every torturer, there are a thousand ready to risk their lives in order to save another . . . the lack of hope is the worst trap. I believe that I can change the world and I try to do that every moment of my life" (Moody 58).

Over the course of her life, Allende has been alert to issues of sexual inequalities. She grew up in "a very patriarchal society, in a very macho family. With very strong males and very victimized subdued females, although they were strong characters" (Dolz-Blackburn, et al 153). When she was a girl, she felt anger towards "my grandfather, my stepfather, and all the men in the family, who had all the advantages while my mother was the victim" (Piña 175). Allende's mother, while never prepared to support herself, nevertheless had to work to take care of her three children after her husband abandoned his family. She had "to please everyone and everyone told her what to do" (175). Allende remembers that she felt distinctly at a disadvantage compared to her brothers. All her life, she relates, "I don't remember any instance when I didn't perfectly understand that having been born a woman was a curse" (175). She notes that she "even wanted to become a nun so no one would know that I couldn't catch a husband ... My anger towards male authority and all types of authority continued even after my marriage. And it endures even today" (175). In the private Quaker school for girls she attended, "everything was oriented to keeping you as ignorant, virginal, and chaste as possible" (173). Allende's schooling did not prepare her in any sense for employment, including even a writing knowledge of the Spanish language. Years later, two journalists taught her to write in Spanish "because I hardly knew it" (173).

After receiving her high school diploma, Allende could have entered the university, but she did not: "I was educated to be a housewife and not a professional. I had no inclination towards a career or towards university studies because no one ever expected it. I finished high school very early, at sixteen, but I never imagined that I could study beyond that ... Uncle Ramón told me that if I wasn't going to study, I should work at least for a year, to find out what I wanted. That is what I did ... I have been working since I was seventeen" (173).

Working, Allende was pulled by the conflict between wanting to be the "exemplary wife with the starched place setting for lunch" and "a terrible desire to accomplish something" (174). She feels that "I have been a feminist all my life, even though back then I could not articulate it. I didn't have the words to express it. What I felt was a rebellious anger towards everything, against machismo, against the fact that my husband had advantages and rights that I simply did not have. I refused to use his last name, due more to anger than an idea" (174). During Allende's separation from her first husband, she learned a bitter lesson in independence: "I learned the most important lesson in my life: feminism and freedom cannot exist if one cannot support oneself. Any freedom begins with economic freedom" (184).

Upon arriving in Venezuela in 1975, although safe from military authoritarianism in Chile, Allende hoped to return home. It took her three years to realize that exile was going to

last: "In 1978, when total anguish had overwhelmed me, I decided to unpack my bags ... and try to fit outside my country" (Piña 183). It was through writing that she both managed to survive and recovered herself: "I didn't know that I was writing. What got me through it all was the desire to rescue the memory of my family, my lost world" (Piña 184). The memories of home define who she is to herself: "I think I don't have roots anymore. My roots are in my writing, my memories. That's why memory is so important. Who are you but what you remember?" (Isabel Allende). Allende continues to draw on her memories and sees her life and art as intimately connected. In a speech at the University of Arkansas in 2004, she commented: "In my life, there is total consistency between my life and what I write. . . . I always write about those things that are important to me . . .since I was a child and they have never changed . . . It is always the same message, the same voice, it's the same stories." (Isabel Allende 2004)

Allende was able to move from making a modest living as a journalist to a career as a successful writer. After numerous unsuccessful efforts at contacting publishers in Venezuela with the manuscript for her first book, she heard of an agent in Spain. That agent "was a woman and because she was a woman she was interested ... nobody wanted it ... then something very interesting took place ... She was selling a manuscript of a very well-known Spanish author to a very important publishing house. She said, 'Okay, I'll sell you the manuscript but you have to take this woman.' ... she forced them to" (Invernizzi and Pope 119). Thus, in Allende's view, women's identification with one another led to her first breakthrough and her ability to make a distinctive contribution to world literature as a woman writer. Allende perceives that women writers in Latin America, based on their upbringing, offer a distinctive perspective on their cultures. "There is a different point of view," Allende remarks: "In our culture, men are more goal oriented and women more into the process ... We deal with a journey, with relationships, better than men" (Isabel Allende). It may be that women readers find more reflection of self in women's writing; they compose the majority of Allende's readers (Rodden 11).

Although she emphasizes the importance of process and relationships, Allende does so with an awareness of the history of sexism and a hope for fundamental change. She believes that "feminism is a fight that men and women must wage for a more educated world, one in which the basic inequality between the sexes will be eliminated. We have to change the patriarchal, hierarchical, authoritarian, repressive societies that have been marked by the religions and the laws that we have had to live with for thousands of years" (Gazarian Gautier 138).

La casa de los espíritus depicts the prevalence and uncontrolled force of male violence. The social and political violence of both Estebans, the oligarch and the military officer, represents the violence of upper class men toward women, the poor, and those working for social justice. Viewed through the novel's lens, rape of women, women's economic dependence on men, and restrictions imposed on women in the public sphere of politics are effective means of control and possession. The poor suffer similar violent restraint on their freedoms through physical violence, threats, eviction, electoral fraud, economic dependence, and political marginality. The theme of violent control by men, especially men in power, is developed throughout the work and culminates in the murderous golpe de estado of September 11, 1973, precipitating nearly two decades of military authoritarianism in Chile.

Esteban Trueba 's violence toward women is not limited to poor women. Rich women are also defenseless and trapped by the ownership and possession of men. When Rosa dies and Esteban spends the night of her burial at her grave, he tells Rosa that, if he had known that she was going to die, he would have constructed "un palacio alhajado con tesoros del fondo del mar: corales, perlas, nácar, donde la habría mantenido secuestrada y donde sólo yo tuviera acceso"

(47). Not only does he want to kidnap her and have exclusive access to her, he also wants to penetrate her innermost being: " ... encima de la confusión y la ira, el sentimiento más fuerte ... fue el deseo frustrado, porque jamás podría ... penetrar sus secretos" (47). Esteban also seeks to possess everything in Clara as well. His love for her physically and emotionally is equally jealous and confining; he wants Clara to think only of him and have no life apart from him.

Men's violent repression of women in the novel takes a variety of sexual, social, political, and economic forms. It expresses itself in asserting through violent emotional shouting episodes prohibitions on women's interactions with society. When Clara, for example, following her mother Nívea's heritage, educates peasant women on their rights as women within marriage and as workers and their equality to men, Esteban "montó en cólera" and "gritaba como un enajenado, paseándose por la sala a grandes trancos y dando puñetazos a los muebles" (118). Esteban informed Clara that "se iba a encontrar con un macho bien plantado" who "le prohibía terminantemente las reuniones" because "él no era ningún pelele a quien su mujer pudiera poner en ridículo" (118). The ultimate family example is when Esteban strikes Clara, knocking out her teeth, which results in Clara's final, enduring withdrawal from Esteban into silence. Esteban committed that final, irrevocable act of violence toward his wife in response to her defense of Blanca's sexual freedom and the rights and dignity of Pedro Tercero, a peasant.

Men's domain is maintained by control and direction of women's public lives. Men deliberately maintain women's dependence even in marriage at the time of the selection of a mate and for the duration of the union. Doña Estér accepts with passivity and resignation the loss of control of her wealth, her husband's failures, and the squandering of her wealth. When Clara carries on her mother's work at Las Tres Marías, speaking to the peasant women of their economic rights, Esteban reacts violently and prohibits the reunions. When Clara's political interaction with the world is circumscribed, she retreats into clairvoyance and magic. Clara becomes withdrawn at many junctures of her life and sometimes retreats into silence. While Esteban offers Jaime the money to set up a private clinic and gives Nicolás the money to live outside the country, he maintains Blanca confined to the house and ill in a state of poverty.

Physically, the women are often confined to the house. Even Nívea, the most autonomous of the women in publicly taking civic action, until her husband's hopes for public office are abandoned, waits to become very active politically for women's suffrage until her husband becomes an office holder. Clara, while surrounded by her family's affection and encouragement, is raised alone in the house in a world of her own creation. In adulthood, Clara finds herself confined to "la gran casa de la esquina" in the city until there is an outbreak of typhus and she insists on becoming active. While Severo is very close to Nívea and supports her efforts, Esteban opposes Clara's social action work, both in the city and in the country. Férula is the most severely trapped mentally and physically. She is unable to go out of the house, from habit of confinement, except to humiliate herself religiously, with the logical consequence of fear of the world: "llevaba demasiado tiempo encerrada en su casa. Tenía miedo de todo" (106). Blanca, until she frees Pedro Tercero, is also trapped in the house. She in Chile does not want to leave her social class to marry Pedro Tercero and she does not expect that she can become part of his social life. In Santiago, Blanca and Pedro Tercero cannot occupy the same social milieu. He cannot join hers and she is stronger seeing him only occasionally than joining his. When they leave Chile, they become equals again, reminiscent of their childhood, and develop a free, joint relationship in a new land. Until then, Blanca nests in the family house, suffering from illnesses and hoarding food. Alba, although not in a confused, peculiar relationship, also has no other locus of control than her family home. She does not become truly part of university life or any

site of employment, although she sometimes helps her Uncle Jaime in the clinic. She returns to the home of her childhood when released from detainment.

With all the limitations on their actions politically, socially, and economically, through denial of employment, salary, education, and family rights, and an open, public sphere of influence, the women in La casa de los espíritus nevertheless exert a tremendous influence on their own lives and on the lives of others. With the exception of doña Estér, each determinedly rejects their confinement and fights for a measure of autonomy. In the process, they build, develop, nurture, and share a women's sphere, physically, emotionally, socially, and politically. The women's sphere is devoted to women's solidarity and friendship. Women's relationships with humankind, women and men, children and adults, are characterized by affection, intimacy, kindness, compassion, and equality among people, both in terms of social class and feminism.

Allende takes pride in the fact that "the characters in my books defy the first rule in a patriarchal society. The first thing that women have to do is to stay in their house and be quiet in your home. They defy the rule of silence and they write" (Dolz-Blackburn, et al. 155). What did Clara and Alba do in La casa de los espíritus? Alba, after surviving the torture and returning home, sets out to "register the memory, the collective memory to write. And this book is the product of her writing, of her defying the rule" (155). It is the power of voice, something of profound importance to Allende. Likewise, the title character in Eva Luna is “a victim because she lives in a patriarchal society, she's orphaned, she's poor, and she's a woman. But she defies that, and she writes, and she becomes independent and free" (156). Speaking through her characters (Rodden 27), Allende addresses with writing the silence, invisibility, and deference forced on women.

La casa de los espíritus is a work of literature that focuses on the realization of women's voice bearing witness to the story of a family and a nation. Celebrating the public participation of women in the national debate on the country's political history and self-definition is the powerful culmination of the story. Allende's contribution to the national debate within Chile on Chile's history and destiny first juxtaposes the contradictions of opposing forces in society, specifically the patriarchal, androcentric dominant force and the new, feminist, counter-hegemonic, feminocentric. She then leads Alba and Esteban to achieve unification of these opposites through common suffering and love, as they join together to write, achieving harmony.

La casa de los espíritus also is a work of literature that expresses what Allende characterizes as women's predominant Chilean cultural tradition of kindness, compassion, non-violence, and social equality. Ana Díaz, for example, the student activist, befriends Alba in prison, caring for her kindly and intelligently, telling Alba what to do to heal from the effects of the torture, reminding her that she is not the only one injured or violated, encouraging her to write in order to analyze and expel the pain from her system, and inviting her to join the women in their singing, a form of active, non-violent resistance. Through singing, the women prisoners use their voices non-violently to resist the guards' attempts to isolate and silence them, maintain their psychological strength through physical action, and communicate with their male counterparts to tell them they are still alive and united. While overridden often by men's predominant tradition of a crushing jealousy, control, vengeance, and exclusive power, women's tradition simultaneously offers a strong, vital contrast and cultural alternative.

Allende offers to readers a view into women's lives over four generations. The novel reveals the limitations put on women's action, physical space, participation, and independence in society, constrictions that fall on both poor and wealthy women. Peasant women, for example, subject to violence and rape, are also workers without pay. They are held in bondage by the

customs of the hacienda. Tránsito Soto, a poor peasant woman, ultimately finds independence and respect as the manager and member owner of a brothel cooperative. Many prostitutes are not as fortunate, but Tránsito represents an ambitious, strong, vibrant woman who with luck uses every opportunity the changing times afford to achieve independence, if not find equality. Wealthy women may be more comfortable physically, but their drive, imaginations, and ambitions are discouraged and, when they develop in spite of this discouragement, are repressed. Doña Estér, Esteban's mother, has both a dowry and an inheritance, neither of which she owns or controls. Her husband, whom she marries for love, squanders both and leaves doña Estér and her two children in a precarious financial situation. Her daughter Férula does not inherit the family estate and is dependent throughout her life on her brother's beneficence, in spite of the fact that she worked to provide Esteban with food, clothes, and a home as he studied as a child. Nívea and Clara do not have employment and thus have no source of financial independence; although both are daughters of wealth, they are subject to the mercy of their husbands. Blanca, although from a more recent generation of women, does not perform paid work for most of the novel, has little existence outside of the house, except in clandestine reunions with Pedro Tercero, and is expected to run the house. She learns to craft clay figurines that, although they sell well, do not give her freedom financially until she reaches Canada. She endures, in fact, in spite of her family's wealth and position, awful poverty and has trouble buying clothes for herself and Alba and food for the family. She asks for nothing in order to maintain the little freedom of movement and discretion that she exercises following her mother's death as she lives within her father's house. Alba, although contemporary, also is unemployed.

Although Alba is the only one to be educated as a child and to attend the university, like the other women in her family before her she is undereducated. Alba's education as a child is one of the few things Esteban and Blanca agree on. Blanca informs Alba that she wants her daughter to gain independence, but Alba does not take her school studies seriously as a child, pursues university classes as a young woman with little direction, ambition, or purpose, swept up in love and social movements, and does not complete an education. Miquel, her lover, on the other hand, although from a poor family and also swept up in love and social movements, completes his university education and continues on to earn a law degree. Amanda, a peripheral character but poignant, works to take care of her younger brother Miquel. Miquel becomes strong and independent and Amanda unfortunate and defeated, although principled and strong in her commitment to her brother. Jaime, Blanca's brother, studies medicine and becomes a physician. The young men pursue their interests and careers, although Nicolás' are unconventional.

Despite their relative economic powerlessness, the women, over the course of La casa de los espíritus, exercise an influential role, becoming transformed, in the conclusion, into the validated, dominant cultural influence. One source of the women's strength is the mother-daughter bond within the family. Nívea starts the chain when she is loving, caring, and attentive to her two daughters, Rosa, her oldest daughter, and Clara, her youngest. She does not push either to follow prescribed female skills and, when their social life is circumscribed, she gives them her company and they are loved and happy. Rosa is suspect socially because of her strange appearance resembling the sea and Clara is rejected because of a priest's accusation. Nívea shares with her daughters family stories, love of nature, and love of each other's companionship. She is blessed with an understanding husband who respects her and parents with her. Nívea, who, "a pesar de los lavados con vinagre y las esponjas con hiel, había dado a luz quince hijos" (13), treats her youngest, Clara, "como si fuera la única, estableciendo un vínculo tan fuerte, que

se prolongó en las generaciones posteriores como una tradición familiar" (93). When Clara is silent, Nívea responds with patience and intelligence, speaking to her with the expectation that "de tanto meterle ideas en la cabeza, tarde o temprano haría una pregunta y recuperaría el habla" (91). At Clara's interest in spiritualism, Nívea realizes that "mientras más limitaciones y sustos tenía que soportar su hija menor, más lunática se ponía" (89). Nívea responds with kindness and acceptance, "tratando de amarla sin condiciones y aceptarla tal cual era" (89). Nívea and Severo adore Clara and do not override her will. When Clara adopts Barrabás, for example, upon his arrival, the dog becomes part of the family.

Clara continues the sharing and bequeathing of warmth, loving Blanca from the moment she expected her. She passes on what becomes, in effect, the family name: whiteness, purity, clarity. Nívea means a snow white color, Clara, clarity, and Blanca white. Blanca will name her daughter Alba, the dawn, the morning light. Each senses that she will give birth to a daughter and each is a devoted, encouraging mother to her daughter. Clara holds Blanca, nurses her, and talks to her. Clara has with Blanca "una estupenda relación basada en los mismos principios de la que ella había tenido con Nívea, se contaban cuentos, leían los libros mágicos de los baúles encantados, consultaban los retratos de familia, se pasaban anécdotas ... salían a mirar la cordillera y a contar nubes, se comunicaban en un idioma inventado" (139). Blanca is bright and happy. Clara does not parent her sons in the same way, leaving their upbringing to the servants and a private school. They, unlike the girls for whom the future is determined, must find their ways in the world. In the home, love between mother and daughter is constant and rich.

The female bond of friendship emerges strong and rich, analogous to the mother-daughter bond. Women express friendship for each other beyond the family throughout the story. Clara befriends Férula immediately, understanding perfectly her situation and offering love and security. She tells her, "No te preocupes. Vas a vivir con nosotros y las dos seremos como hermanas" (107). The two "se quedaron llorando y hablando hasta las ocho de la noche y esa tarde en el Hotel Francés sellaron un pacto de amistad que duró muchos años" (107). Férula loves Clara with a passion. Her great personality, like Esteban's, is jealous and overpowering. Unlike Esteban, however, she cannot unleash it on the world and must confine her attempts at self-expression and ambition to the house. Férula is a particularly well-developed character and the tragic results of her repression are keenly felt: "Era uno de esos seres nacidos para la grandeza de un solo amor, para el odio exagerado, para la venganza apocalíptica y para el heroísmo más sublime, pero no pudo realizar su destino ... se fue consumiendo" (121).

When Esteban evicts her, he hurts Clara, who is left lonely and disoriented, as even her writing suffers. During the plague, Clara is busy helping the sick. When spring comes, Férula's absence hurts: "La ausencia de Férula se sintió como un cataclismo en la casa ... Clara ... aumentó su tendencia a evadir la realidad y perderse en el ensueño" (147). When Férula dies, Clara goes immediately to prepare her for burial and tells Férula in a moving passage how much she has missed her. Clara also enjoys an enduring friendship with las tres hermanas Mora that sustains her most in those periods when she cannot act upon the greater society. Clara communicates her solidarity with other women so unequivocally that Esteban, in a jealous fit, realizes he cannot make her jealous by raping peasant girls, as Clara would be scandalized by the mistreatment of the girl and "en ningún caso por su infidelidad" (141). Meyer addresses this point when she maintains that the "sense of community of female experience across the boundaries of time and space conveys a message of female empowerment that subverts historical stereotypes of submissive women and mocks androcentric individualism" (1990, 361). La Nana, although a servant, is devoted to her female charges. She uses her own imagination, attention,

and talent to care for them. In prison, Alba's school compañera Ana Díaz befriends her, cares for her physically and psychologically, and preserves her spirit and life.

Women's family and friendship relationships give them strength. Attached to each other, they forge their ways in the world trying to make things better for their families, friends, and society, at least the poor, to whom the powerful give little thought. In the process, they break with tradition in important social customs. Nívea tells Clara that she quickly and resolutely cut down the tree that had been the scene of the boys' initiation rites. No more would the family's sons risk their lives climbing it to complete a symbolic ascent into maturity. She relates how the mother of a blind child killed by climbing and falling was taken off in a straightjacket because she became angry with the men. The tree speaks symbolically for the downed tree of men's lineage as Nívea begins with her own children the development and traditions of her new tree. Nívea's tree will bequeath life to a female tradition of courtesy, respect, care, and sanity: "Her tree will sprout from other roots and proliferate for other purposes since it is founded in artistic creation, nurturing compassion, equality and kindness" (Dulfano 83). Clara as well takes an independent path. She declares her decision to name her sons Jaime and Nicolás, names which Esteban despises as not his own or those of anyone in either family. Clara, who says it is confusing to record the events of members of the family if the names are alike, in effect brings Estaban's line to an end and, with it, symbolically, the violence it represents. As a result of conflict with their father, neither Jaime nor Nicolás continues the Trueba name.

All of the del Valle women participate, albeit not as equals, but as activists, in their society for social change. Nívea works for the legal rights of women and their children, including the right to vote. She tries to start unions and politicize the workers. Clara takes food, clothing, and anything else in the house that might be needed to the sick and poor. At Las Tres Marías, she pursues her mission, teaching the children in the school, doctoring them, and proposing to the peasant women that they have the same rights as men. Clara gains strength and purpose from her voluntary self-appointed employment to help the poor. When she first reaches Las Tres Marías, Clara finds her place: "Desde el primer día ... sintió que por fin había encontrado su misión en este mundo ... su capacidad para ver lo invisible detectó inmediatamente el recelo, el miedo y el rencor de los trabajadores ... Abandonó de la noche a la mañana su languidez, dejó de encontrarlo todo muy bonito y pareció curada" (117). Clara rose early and divided her time between the sewing workshop, the school, and health improvements. Blanca works with her mother in the same way and, in a critical period, surreptitiously harbors in her family home Pedro Tercero when his name appears on the list of those who must turn themselves in. Alba tries to participate in Miquel's university strike, although to little effect, and after the military overthrow she rescues members of the left who seek asylum.

The del Valle women are not allowed to act upon the national stage on behalf of their political views, as can Esteban Trueba and his fellow oligarchs, although they (unlike Esteban) come from wealthy, powerful families. Neither may they take the leadership role of Pedro Tercero, first as the much-loved political, folk singer and then as the Unidad Popular government public servant. Nor can they take Jaime's role of physician in a clinic in a poor neighborhood or Miquel's leadership role in the university student strike and then in the underground. They do charity work because they are allowed to be active in that arena, although they fully understand the ironies implicit in charity work and the need for justice. They, however, do not follow Esteban's lead politically, taking to the streets banging pans to support the right, as did many women of the upper classes, or staying neutral or silent in their house. They take instead to the

city and the country with verve to help within the confines of their sphere, fighting, in the process, for social equality.

The del Valle women are distinctly artistic in a quiet, traditionally women's way that, with Clara and Alba, leads to retaking society. Rosa has the ambition to embroider the world's largest tablecloth. She has a vivid imagination and designs strange and wondrous beasts. Blanca carries on in her aunt's tradition in using clay and creates monstrous figurines that become popular as folk art. She, herself, disparages her work, because she becomes familiar in the north with the superb indigenous art, but, in exile in Canada, her work earns her a living. Not unlike the experience of other workers, her hands suffer from the work. Alba carries on Rosa's and Blanca's tradition of artwork as she uses paints her grandmother Clara gave her as a Christmas present to cover her bedroom walls with colorful depictions of animals, people, and events important in the chronicle of her childhood and youth.

Writing in the family starts out in the traditional private, female form of notebooks, diaries, and letters. These sources, essentially the woman's diary form and distinct from such primarily male authority sources as archeology and legal rhetoric, will serve as the authority source for the women's narratives (Dulfano). Clara writes to recover the effaced existence of women's lives, attitudes, viewpoints, and vision. She writes to comment on life, to develop her individual woman's take on events, and, when she is allowed few other vents for her thinking and initiative, to save her sanity. Clara's writing is a response to her imposed silence, but it conveys her women's reality of values and connections. While silence is in part an illness, it also heals her as she gives expression to her identify and reality through her writing. While she writes private discourse, Clara's writing will reach the public stage with Alba's utilization of her notebooks and letters to write in her turn a novel. Alba, as Meyer suggests, will supplant the androcentric perspective of history, power, and vertical hierarchy with the feminist community of hospitality and sympathy, the lateral relationship, and pursuit of an ethically transformed community.

Alba tells the story of the women in the family by using Clara's notebooks and adding to them her own stories. Who is speaking in Alba's story sometimes becomes a collective. Blanca also tells stories to her daughter, but Blanca quickly forgets them. Because Alba likes to hear them repeatedly and Blanca cannot remember them, Alba adopts the habit of writing down her mother's stories. Alba will add the stories of the women in prison. Dulfano points out that "the story of the del Valle family incorporates the struggles and tales of all the women in jail and fighting for freedom. The battle entails more than a physical and spiritual struggle: in order to have a history, one must write. The women must write their own lives, actions and thoughts in order to ground and transmit a history of their own" (86).

Women speak through Clara and Alba to tell the family's story from their women's perspective. In a transformation of destiny, Clara and Alba contribute publicly to the national debate. Through their writing, which passes from the accepted, female form of the private diary to the form of a novel, a testimony, a witnessing, Clara and Alba define Chilean history. They find their voices and they have a say. They comment and their thoughts must be addressed and incorporated into the national discourse. Their interpretation becomes important as they interpret the nation's history and contribute to its self-evaluation. Women reach the public stage, no longer confined to the privacy and silence of their homes. They thus participate in definition, description, interpretation and promotion of self first as women and then as Chilean citizens. They interpret and evaluate the actions of men. They open new, women's thoughts to the societal debate of who and what Chile should be and they bear testimony to women's lives and

society's history and events. They rebel against oppression by speaking up publicly. They write to escape, inhabiting safe space in private to express themselves, to preserve memory and interpret history, to organize the chaos of experience, to heal from the consequences of repression by men, "desahogarse", to self-transform, and ultimately to transform society by bearing testimony to and condemning injustice.

When Alba is on the brink of defeat and death in isolation, Clara comes to her and teaches her to write in her mind in order to live and to bear testimony. As Dulfano points out, "the dismantling of the patriarchal culture is brought about in the novel through the manipulation of language- writing. The recent advocacy on the part of feminist critics for women to write their own lives, determine their own history and express themselves indicates that this issue is not peripheral. In fact it is crucial, because, as Cheris Kramarae says: 'those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality'" (84). As a result of writing, and specifically of writing the stories of her compañeras from prison, the story of the woman who sheltered Alba when she was dumped in the landfill, those of all of the "mujeres estoicas y prácticas de nuestro país", of "otras que conocí en los comedores populares, en el hospital de mi tío Jaime, en la Morgue, donde iban a buscar a sus muertos", Alba finds confidence, power, and hope: "Entonces supe que el coronel García y otros como él tienen sus días contados, porque no han podido destruir el espíritu de esas mujeres" (450).

Clara, in spite of tremendous odds and Esteban's violence, maintains some semblance of sanity and creates her own world. It is not the world of her choosing, but it is one to which she can resort. In it, she welcomes her daughter and granddaughter, her friends, and the artistic fringe of society. Blanca may be viewed as a stubborn, self-sustaining woman who, although wanting a healthy relationship, does not abandon the person she loves. Alba, the baby of the family, unites the family in her love and respect for her mother, her grandmother, and her grandfather, who is devoted to her. Her grandmother dead, her mother in exile, her grandfather dying in her arms, Alba writes the family history to recover her life and theirs', to get well while she recovers from torture, and to await the birth of her daughter, to whom she will convey life, a family, history, tradition, and a future.

Allende advocates a women's cosmovision of kindness, equality, unity, consideration and compassion, and the interests of the collective. She portrays novelistically a sharp contrast between the androcentric worldview Esteban Trueba expresses in his creation of the hacienda social dynamic and the feminocentric approach of Clara Trueba to the same estate. Clara, as Nívea before her, rejecting barbaric male customs, represents a distinct alternative in social vision. She encourages Blanca's friendship with Pedro Tercero when they are children and later is not disturbed by their love or Blanca's pregnancy. Clara respects the peasants, teaches their children to give them the basics of an education, doctors them, and makes friends among them, most notably with Pedro Segundo. In every respect, Blanca emulates Clara's example, helping in the school and workshop and nurturing a lifelong friendship and love affair with Pedro Tercero. Clara and Blanca express and offer an alternative to the crushing contempt and suppression of Esteban; it personifies respect, civility, recognition for rights, and the desire for a shared, collective social justice.

Like Nívea, Clara, Blanca, and Alba, Tránsito Soto believes in the possibilities of a world without patrones or pimps. In conversations recounting hope and ambition for a life of freedom and autonomy, Tránsito relates to Esteban her plans for and accomplishments at establishing a worker cooperative at the brothel. She succeeds first in contracting for work herself without the intercession of a pimp and subsequently achieves in concert with her prostitute associates

independence from an owner and business success as a result. Tránsito imagines, seeks, and brings to pass equality among workers: "Nos va muy bien, es un buen negocio y nadie aquí se siente explotado. Todos somos socios" (331). In the business of the brothel, Tránsito plays the role Pedro Tercero plays in the hacienda of proposing and postulating changes in power relationships in the workplace.

Allende symbolically represents the dichotomy between women like Clara and men like Esteban as the dichotomy between the political left and right in Chile. Esteban represents the political right and Clara the left and social progress. One represents the force of the individual and the other the shared equality and welfare of the collective. Tránsito's prostitute collective, the development of women's freedom and equality, and the agrarian collective in Las Tres Marías, the fruition of peasants' freedom and equality, during the open, changing, hopeful, democratic ferment of the period of el Presidente, symbolize the democratic, socially just equality of the people who live and work together. The madame and the patrón represent the authoritarian dominance of the individual owner.

Allende expresses her vision of the world through Clara and her women-centered sphere. Women speak for justice for workers, peasants, prostitutes, and women. Clara, for example, confronts Esteban for his beating of Blanca, granting to Blanca the sexual freedom that Esteban claims for himself alone, and his rejection of Pedro Tercero. Symbolically noteworthy in this regard is the fact that, of Esteban's three children, only Blanca uses his name or passes it on. "Yo me llamo Alba Trueba," Alba says, "Acuérdate de mi nombre" (301). Alba will have an important voice in the future of the country. She begins a long trajectory to find her influential voice when she denies her grandfather a champagne toast to the death of the president (391).

In her interviews, Allende seeks like her protagonist Alba to bear witness to the dangers of militarism and, in the process, change the world to personify her women characters' way of being: "If I can plant a seed in the mind of the reader, I've achieved something ... I can make a change" (Isabel Allende). Allende relates, for example, that "I have had a painful life ... my whole world was destroyed. The evil force is always there. The nightmares are always about torture, about abuse, power with impunity, the extreme power that you're not accountable for" (Isabel Allende). As a result, she, as, she would suggest, do the rest of us, must "deal with" the military presence and extreme power: "I love all of my characters except one. There is one character I can never love. The torturer. Esteban García. It's always there. The dictator, the torturer. I have to deal with him all the time. . . We have to eliminate militarism" (Isabel Allende).

Allende spoke for her beloved country, the only place in the world where her mother is from, one where she is at home. In her voice, the reader hears the voices of Chileans. The reader hears women's matriarchal voices calling for a new national self-definition and the antithetical voices of males perpetuating systems of oppression, the patrón and torturer included, in a "polyphonous I" (Meyer, 66). She wrote -- "the most emphatic form of deconstruction of the patriarchal system - writing" (Meyer 84) -- to preserve memory from oblivion and to create sense of chaos in order to understand the Chilean conflict, to countenance change, to expiate, even, the sins of her enemies. Allende postulates that "sometimes books have triggered events" (Isabel Allende) and hopes that hers will. Anger at being an expatriate and "anger at being a woman in a world very unjust for women" (Isabel Allende) may prove a catharsis when it moves one to triumph: "I think it's a good, positive energy, if you can use that anger to act, to change things" (Isabel Allende).

Allende seeks to elicit a response from her readers: "I want to take my reader by the hand and say: 'Look. This is happening. Let's try and find the meaning; let's see if there's a particle of truth in all this'" (Crystall et al 286). In an interview with Rodden, Allende explains that, "I want to communicate in a very direct way. I want to tell readers about my country. I want to tell them about torture chambers, about politics, about people who starve to death" (228). In teaching students at the University of California at Berkeley, Allende gives them a chilling warning, believing that there is general applicability to Chile's recent catastrophe: "'Beware! This dimension of violence is here. It can be triggered by a little excuse, by something very small, and the fascists will take over'" (Dolz-Blackburn,et al. 54). She reflects on her own experience: "The people who are self-righteous, who have the weapons, and who think that they have the truth, they need a very little excuse to take hold. And it has happened in the most civilized countries in the world" (154). Although Allende elsewhere expresses hope, she remains wary of the power of those she has opposed.

As a Latin American intellectual, a highly regarded and recognized author, Allende is invited to comment on current affairs and to recommend solutions. She envisions a future without revenge for Chile and other Latin American countries that have suffered extensive violence, from Guatemala to Argentina. In speaking to Juan Andrés Piña, she remarks that she has found that "the people who had been affected the most and lost the most were the ones who felt the least need for vengeance. They wanted to know the truth and wanted justice to be established, but they did not want to torture the torturer or murder the assassin. I learned a tremendous lesson on love" (191). At once wary of frighteningly real danger yet confident of a peaceful process of reconciliation, Allende remarks in a conversation with Marilyn Berlin Snell that, "it is not out of revenge that we will rebuild our country but out of love and forgiveness. Though the memory must be kept alive" (245). Politically, Allende speaks with one voice in her fiction and interviews, portraying her worldview and perspective on human relations in the dual public sphere of literature and public figure.

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