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## Roots and Routes to Utopia: Imagined Geographies in Isabel Allende's Fictional Universe

Isabel Allende's works have been translated into twenty-seven languages and have attained best-seller status in the United States, Australia, and numerous European and Latin American countries. As highly-regarded Argentine author Mempo Giardinelli has observed, Allende is the rare author who inspires both popular and critical acclaim: "Allende es el único caso que concita el interés del mercado y de la academia"<sup>1</sup> ("Siempre"). The Allende phenomenon began in 1982 with the publication of *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*), which Donald Shaw considers "without question the major literary event in Spanish America during the early eighties" (53). Various literary critics have pointed out that after the international explosion of Spanish-American fiction known as the Boom of the 1960s and 1970s, the region's literary scene lacked an obvious successor to Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Julio Cortázar, who are widely considered the four great Boom authors. Sonia Riquelme Rojas and Edna Aguirre Rehbein attest that Allende's publication of her first three tremendously successful novels in the 1980s, *Casa* (*House*), *De amor y de sombra* (*Of Love and Shadows*), and *Eva Luna*:

re-established the Latin American literary space which had remained in a vacuum for some time. . . . The diverse Latin American reality, which has provided Isabel Allende the material for her narrative work, is so deeply rooted in the author's wide range of personal experiences that it allows her to transmit first-hand the historical development of the continent. (3)

<sup>1</sup> "Allende's is the only case that awakens the interest of both the market and the academy." All translations are mine other than those of Allende's works themselves, which are taken from the authorized English translations identified in the bibliography.

The author's international success also marks a significant achievement in women's writing, as *Casa (House)*'s repeated translations and multi-million-volume sales marked the first time that a woman had dominated the Latin American literary scene since the success of Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, winner of the 1945 Nobel Prize. Within three years of its publication, Allende's first novel ranked number one on best-seller lists in Spain, Latin America, and the Netherlands. By 1985, more than one million copies had been sold in Germany alone, in addition to the 400,000 sold in France during that same period. The novel's English translation in 1985 precipitated a long series of conferences, invited lectures and visiting professorships by Allende in many of the United States' most prestigious universities, including Barnard College, the University of Virginia, and the University of California at Berkeley. By 1994, only twelve years after her first book-length publication, more than ten million copies of Allende's fiction had been sold in twenty-seven languages, due in part to the continuing success of her first novel (Rodden, *Conversations* xvi–xvii).

Allende's international renown continued to increase with the publication of *Hija de la fortuna (Daughter of Fortune)*. According to the Chilean newspaper *La Tercera*, "*La hija de la fortuna* fue el segundo libro más vendido en el mundo durante 1999 superado sólo por *El testamento* de John Grisham,"<sup>2</sup> based on a compilation of thirty-four countries' rankings of best sellers ("Isabel Allende, la escritora"). Oprah Winfrey's selection of the novel in February 2000 for her market-driving book club played a pivotal role in the author's elevation to the list of the most widely read authors in the United States. Allende described the reception of this novel in the United States as "excepcional," noting that, "En el momento en que anunció [Oprah] que iba a abordarlo, la novela pasó a ser la Número 1 en Amazon.com y al día siguiente tenía 500 mil entradas en mi sitio web"<sup>3</sup> ("Siempre"). Although the Oprah effect further fixed Allende for certain critics in, as Harold Bloom puts it, "the cosmos of supermarket fiction," the enormous attention paid to the novel played a pivotal role in the author's decision to conclude the story through a third work that would link it to her breakthrough fiction of the 1980s (3). As Allende has admitted in numerous interviews, readers' questions and fascination

<sup>2</sup> "*Daughter of Fortune* was the second most sold book in the world in 1999, exceeded only by *The Testament* by John Grisham."

<sup>3</sup> "As soon as Oprah announced that she was going to take it on, the novel became Number 1 on Amazon.com, and the next day I had 500,000 hits on my web site."

with *Hija (Daughter)* greatly influenced her subsequent work, *Retrato en sepia (Portrait in Sepia)*, a form of sequel that continued and clarified the stories begun in the preceding work. Regardless, the novel's sales intensified the constant polemic, particularly in Chile, regarding her works' literary merit.

Searching the Biblioteca Nacional de Santiago (National Library of Santiago)'s literary criticism archives unearths hundreds of articles centered on this debate, largely condemnations of Allende as anti-intellectual, contrasted with the author's own attempts to defend herself. The Chilean press provides numerous interviews in which the author defends herself against the repeated charge that her commercial and critical success are merely products of marketing campaigns or a famous last name, always with some version of the following: "[S]i alguien puede vender algo, cualquier cosa, porque se llama Allende durante veinte años, es una cosa ridícula"<sup>4</sup> ("Isabel Allende defendió"). The naming of Allende, the world's most recognized Chilean author, as a possible candidate for the Premio Nacional de Literatura (National Literature Award) in 2002 unleashed such a virulent backlash that to the present day the author refuses to allow the committee to nominate her for this award. As she described the situation in the aftermath of her nomination, Allende sees herself as "odiada por un grupo de escritores chilenos"<sup>5</sup> and is unwilling to subject herself again to a process that began "con mucho orgullo y alegría"<sup>6</sup> but left her in such a damaged state that "me iba a meter entre las patas de los caballos"<sup>7</sup> ("Isabel Allende dice sentirse detestada"; "Isabel Allende defendió"). Criticism of Allende tends to be intensely personal and appears to be linked to a number of factors, including the author's early fame as a "light" journalist during her young adulthood, her preference for literary structures and conventions, such as the romance, that tend to be stigmatized as "feminine," and, on the part of authors who condemn her, an alchemy of jealousy and machismo or misogyny. Beyond these factors, Allende's work is frequently chided as unsophisticated and accessible, by Latin American authors and critics who favor a more elitist narrative.<sup>8</sup> Within Chile, for example, best-selling female authors such as Allende and Marcela Serrano are targets of harsh criticism, in contrast

<sup>4</sup> "If someone can sell something, anything, for twenty years because she is named Allende, that's a ridiculous thing."

<sup>5</sup> "hated by a group of Chilean writers."

<sup>6</sup> "with great pride and joy."

<sup>7</sup> "I was ready to throw myself under the horses' hooves."

<sup>8</sup> Please see Philip Swanson's "Z/Z," referenced in the conclusions of this discussion,

to the critical praise typically shown for such authors as Diamela Eltit, whose hermetic fiction is accessible only to the nation's intellectual elite. The author is also the target of frequent criticism for her supposed appropriation of Gabriel García Márquez's magic realist techniques as a means of boosting her sales, although numerous critics, perhaps most notably and extensively Patricia Hart in *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende*, have effectively answered this attack.

Because Allende's works are highly referential and clearly autobiographical at times, a brief critical biography of the author and her writing seems necessary here.<sup>9</sup> Isabel Allende Llonca was born August 2, 1942, in Lima, Peru, to Tomás Allende and Francisca Llonca Barrios. Tomás, first cousin to later Chilean President Salvador Allende, was serving as the country's Ambassador to Peru at the time of Isabel's birth.<sup>10</sup> By the time the child was three years old, her mother had made the decision – almost unheard of, particularly in Catholic Latin America in those days – to separate from her husband and return with her three children to her parents' home in Santiago, Chile. Consequently, Isabel and her siblings lived much of their childhood in their grandparents' house, which served as the inspiration for the house of the spirits of her first novel. When the author's mother married again – to the diplomat Ramón Huidobro, frequently referred to in Allende's interviews and memoirs as “Tío Ramón” – the family lived for several years in Bolivia and Lebanon, where Isabel attended English-language private schools. Following the Suez Canal crisis, in 1958 the author returned to Chile to complete her schooling, and she followed what seemed to be a traditional personal trajectory: in 1962, at age twenty, she married Miguel Frías, whom she met as a student, and within four years she had given birth to both of her children, Paula and Nicolás. In 1964, she began her journalistic career by writing a popular column, “Los impertinentes” (“The Impertinent Ones”), for the women's magazine *Paula*. As referenced above, to some degree the Allende polemic is rooted in this period, as her writing for a magazine directed to bourgeois women marked her – for certain sectors of

regarding Allende's sweeping socio-cultural impact, in contrast to the more restricted sphere of influence of Latin America's postmodern authors.

<sup>9</sup> Expanded biography and photographs are available on the author's web page, [www.isabelallende.com](http://www.isabelallende.com).

<sup>10</sup> Because Isabel Allende is sometimes referred to as niece and sometimes as cousin of President Salvador Allende, it seems useful to point out that in Spanish the term tío (literally, uncle) is used both as the equivalent of the English word “uncle” and to refer to one's parents' cousins.

the Chilean public – as frivolous and superficial. The author herself has acknowledged the disconnect between her public image at that time as an autonomous career woman and the domestic stereotypes that she lived as a self-sacrificing wife and mother (Lagos 118). The two Allendes – the public feminist author and the private traditional housewife – collided in the aftermath of the 1973 coup d'état that resulted in the death of President Salvador Allende and plunged the nation into General Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship, a regime that would endure until 1990. During the violent time of transition, the author lived the activism and isolation depicted in the final chapters of her first novel, as she sheltered so-called subversives, smuggled them into embassies for asylum, and eventually was forced to flee Chile. Beginning with her immediate family's exile in Venezuela in 1975, Allende was forced for the first time in her marriage to depend fully on her husband as breadwinner, while she stayed home with the children (Lagos 117). As an exile, Allende found herself socially and economically marginalized for the first time in her life, having lost the position of privilege afforded to her as a member of affluent Chilean society (Lagos 118). This period marked both a symbolic and a geographic border crossing for the author: the violent destruction of President Allende's government propelled a woman who had previously practiced what is commonly termed "armchair activism," or *theoretical* support for the Marxist revolution, from a safe and comfortable social position into forced subversive action in the national and socio-political borderlands as a means of survival. As Allende admits in her earliest memoir, *Paula*, upon arriving in Venezuela she suffered a profound disorientation provoked by her newly peripheral social placement:

Los más odiados eran los del Coño Sur, como llaman a argentinos, uruguayos y chilenos, porque en su mayoría se trataba de refugiados políticos, intelectuales, técnicos y profesionales que competían con los mandos medios venezolanos. Aprendí pronto que al emigrar se pierden las muletas que han servido de sostén hasta entonces, hay que comenzar desde cero, porque el pasado se borra de un plumazo y a nadie le importa de dónde uno viene o qué ha hecho antes.<sup>11</sup> (266–67)

<sup>11</sup> "The most disliked immigrants were from the Southern Cone – Argentines, Uruguayans, and Chileans – because they were primarily political refugees, intellectuals, technicians, and professionals who competed with Venezuelans at the higher echelons. I learned very quickly that when you emigrate, you lose the crutches that have been your support; you must start from scratch, because the past is erased with a single stroke and no one cares where you're from or what you did before" (Paula 241–42). While Sayers

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