THE NECESSARY FUNCTION AND AUTHORITY OF THE FEMININE NARRATIVE IN ISABEL ALLENDE’S *THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS, DAUGHTER OF FORTUNE, AND PORTRAIT IN SEPIA*

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Introduction

Isabel Allende’s “trilogy,” *The House of the Spirits, Daughter of Fortune, and Portrait in Sepia*, preserves the necessary function of providing a vehicle of authority for the feminine narrative which was previously lacking in literature of the Americas. Allende’s texts prolong the feminine perspective throughout, which demonstrates importance because the story is ultimately unable to be told from a more traditional, patriarchal perspective. While the stories told are not inherently gendered, it becomes evident that a masculine narrator cannot sustain an “accurate” telling of the tension between matriarchal presence and patriarchal control couched within a family narrative. Allende’s texts also link the importance of the continuation of family history, which, not incidentally, is ultimately translated through the various feminine narrators even though much of the histories are controlled and shaped by masculine prerogatives. Furthermore, the succession of female narrators all develop narratives that are non-linear and unbounded by space; the narrative fits the physical location of the narrator in so far as the men are associated with traditional spaces, four walls, but the females exist in a variety of spaces, none of which have such tangible boundaries. In this way, Allende’s texts validate the existence of *écriture féminine* in Latin American fiction. Gender is undoubtedly the most important signifier when reading these texts, which ultimately should be regarded as cornerstones in continuing discussions of gender barriers and the
feminine voice within literature, especially in connection with historical, social, and cultural norms.
Chapter One: From here toward a feminine narrative

Allende’s avant-garde ideology translated into her writing corresponds directly with Hélène Cixous’s groundbreaking text, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” where a fundamental understanding of *écriture feminine* was first introduced in Western thought. Allende’s semi-autobiographical writing directly relates to what Cixous describes as “everything about writing that can neither be subsumed into an idea nor made to correspond exactly to empirical reality” (Leitch 2036). Allende first garnered critical attention for *The House of the Spirits*, which elicited comparisons between her writing and that of Gabriel García Márquez due to her reliance on magical realism in her text. In *Isabel Allende*, Levine notes that “magical realism strongly suggests that life, and the representation of life in literature, is not composed of neatly defined categories. Rather, boundaries blur, dichotomies disappear, and new spaces are created for the coming together of such traditionally different spheres as the fictitious and the historical, the spoken and the written, and the male and the female” (20). While this certainly describes this text, especially because of the gender-space issues that are raised in it, my argument lies in the understanding that each text in the trilogy (not just the first) works in conjunction with Cixous’s “definition” for *écriture feminine*, which has not been directly established. If we limit the association of Allende’s writing with *écriture feminine* simply based on her use of magical realism, it is too limiting, and we would not be able to
discuss the majority of this trilogy, especially *Daughter of Fortune*. Instead, I contend that while magical realism is an ideal vehicle with which to showcase Allende’s ties to *écriture féminine*, it is not the only way to do so; rather, the way that Allende manipulates the narrative perspective is actually the primary connection between her texts and *écriture féminine*.

Allende’s texts exclusively privilege the association of females with magic and the supernatural. This is especially true given that Allende “creando la realidad con una nueva dimensión, construida por la lógica codificada en el texto mismo” (Rojas 206). Jenkins posits that this may be intentional on Allende’s part in that it can be seen as “a specific rhetorical strategy both to expose and counter the androcentric social and literary scripts that circumscribe ‘acceptable’ behavior” (61). Furthermore, she explains that “this use of the supernatural reproduces a reality that a formally realistic economy cannot contain” (69). Yet we cannot make the assumption that *The House of the Spirits* is Allende’s only text that fully corresponds with Cixous’s idea because it is the only one that truly embodies the essence of magical realism throughout. All three represent *écriture féminine* though neither *Daughter of Fortune* nor *Portrait in Sepia* utilizes anything more than fleeting allusions to magical realism. Rather than focusing on Allende’s contribution to the tradition of magical realism, Cox suggests that her work is pivotal in the post-Boom movement because she helped usher in the acceptance of female Latin American writers (14-15). Furthermore, Cox asserts that in her writing, “Allende departs from her literary predecessors to challenge a Latin culture that reveres maleness and circumscribes its women into narrow, non-threatening roles” (20). Because her pivotal texts are primarily associated with female emancipation, she sets herself apart
from the male Boom writers, especially Márquez. Allende’s use of magical realism helped establish what Jenkins refers to as a “counter current” in Latino/a literature that demanded women/the Other be given “individual authority and opportunities to articulate alternative experience” (70). Écriture allows for “everything that had been repressed, obscured, or unacknowledged in Western thought” to be “readable,” which is to say that Allende established a basis for which the feminine narrative could be heard (Leitch 2036-2037).

Allende’s texts repeatedly imply that men are nothing more than a mouthpiece for past traditions, showing how men cannot handle an emancipated discourse; instead, the silent female narrative controls. This is like how Boschetto describes Clara, who she describes as “simultáneamente ausencia y presencia…El poder de la palabra en la novela, pertenece irónicamente a las mujeres” (526-527). Feminine absence is omnipresent and all-knowing though masculine absence is not. Allende gives Esteban Trueba a voice; she allows his story to be told, though in doing so and through the bluster of his masculine wrath, what we realize is that his masculine presence is not so much a male voice but a not-female space filler. In Allende’s texts, it is the male rather than the female that suffers for what he lacks…a voice, an authority, a presence. The masculine narration is consistently lacking in all of the ways that the feminine narration is strongest. It simply cannot account for the feminine perspective, but the reverse is not also true because Alba’s narrative still relates to Trueba’s. However, Trueba demonstrates that he only has power behind the presence of the females closest to him, who male writers have traditionally marginalized as “veils, shadows, [and] enigmas” (Norton 2037). Consider the most veiled, shadowy, enigmatic of Trueba’s women—Tránsito Soto, the prostitute.
She seduces Esteban and controls him through carnal lust, and it is in her presence that Trueba ultimately succumbs to his most emasculated role, begging her to save Alba’s life (The House of the Spirits 419-421). André notes that Allende’s texts consistently explore feminine eroticism “as a powerhouse for the attainment of individual satisfaction,” which “counter the image of the traditional silenced body—as an object of desire—through differential perspectives framed within masculine and feminine point of view” (81). Tránsito Soto’s manipulation of Esteban Trueba demonstrates how Allende privileges the “veils, shadows, [and] enigmas” that have traditionally been silenced.

Yet Allende repeats this empowerment throughout the trilogy. Clara is the house of the shadows, and she is ephemeral, perpetually elusive to Esteban. Alba refuses to conform to her grandfather’s expectations, proving to be an enigma who shuns her name and family wealth in favor of social justice. But Eliza, the protagonist from Daughter of Fortune, embodies all three of these principals herself: she veils her femininity and dwells in the shadows as she blindly follows her lover’s reputation, thus becoming an enigma who chases a love that is not reciprocated. Furthermore, in Portrait in Sepia, Lyn’s power lies in her ability to veil her beauty, Aurora grows up in the shadows of two households, and Paulina’s enigmatic, intuitive business sense guides her husband’s dealings, resulting in vast, uncanny wealth for the del Valle family. While these female protagonists retain marginalized qualities, they still represent an ongoing association with écriture feminine because they are not subsumed by masculine-imposed “shadows.”

The feminine narrative achieves a more complete perspective because it is consistently a form of detachment, not unlike Alba when Clara’s spirit visited her while she was close to death in the concentration camp after being repeatedly raped and
tortured. Indeed, Allende illustrates the most elemental truth about the feminine narration at this point, stating that “the point was not to die” or give in to the patriarchal control by acquiescing or even asking for silence, but “to survive, which would be a miracle” (*The House of the Spirits* 414). Indeed, Alba’s purpose so wholly consumes her that her consciousness is elevated “beyond his [the figure of all base, non-human, patriarchal] power” (415). Eliza Sommers demonstrates a similar circumstance in *Daughter of Fortune* when she ultimately overcomes the binding control of her lover, which leads her to the climactic realization that “I am free” (*Daughter of Fortune* 447). In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous is implicit on such an issue as this, stating that “The future must no longer be determined by the past,” which perfectly corresponds with Eliza’s self-realization when she finally understands that she has the singular control of her own existence and therefore of her own voice (2039). This decisive moment comes after “Not one…but many dreams” that repeated the same message to her (*Daughter of Fortune* 433). Stating that “I haven’t wasted my time” in her quest to find her lost lover illuminates her epiphany that “I want to be myself” (*Daughter of Fortune* 433, 442).

Likewise, Aurora’s awakening is a direct result of dreams—“My nightmares are a blind journey through the shadowy caverns where my oldest recollections lie locked in the deep strata of consciousness,” which “gives me a lot of confidence” (*Portrait in Sepia* 279, 277). In these texts, dreams are a medium through which the female achieves a depth of understanding that is impossible without this outsider-insider perspective. Because Allende employs a dual-narrative approach, she subverts what Levine refers to as the “double-voiced discourse” of women’s writings—a discourse in which the ‘dominant’ voice is male and the ‘muted’ voice is female,” which emphasizes “Allende’s
desire to break down the gender dichotomy that often shapes artistic endeavors” (Isabel Allende 22). All that is omitted from spoken (present) language in Allende’s texts, the silent, still has “la importancia de un grito” (Boschetto 528). Boschetto implies that Esteban, representing “la sonoridad hueca que se asocia con el macho prepotente y reaccionario,” tries to control language through his bluster whereas she specifically states that Clara “no controla la palabra, sino que simplemente la anota” (528). If Alba did not continue her grandmother’s narrative, then the pomposity of Trueba’s narrative would ultimately dominate, subsume, and negatively re-interpret the feminine narrative.

Boschetto refers to Clara’s journals and Alba’s subsequent narrative as “el lenguaje…que ‘mata’ al narrador masculine” (529). The House of the Spirits reconstructs both feminine words and feminine silence, an act which Allende continues throughout Daughter of Fortune and Portrait in Sepia.
Chapter Two: Writing from the Twilight

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous states that “Woman must write her self...Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (2039). Allende’s life experience has directly translated itself most noticeably into the pages of *The House of the Spirits*. For example, the climatic events at the end of *The House of the Spirits* that ultimately lead to Alba’s rape and self-realization strongly mirror her great-uncle President Salvador Allende’s overthrow in 1973. And, embroiled in the charged political atmosphere, Alba also finds herself trailing behind the coffin of “the Poet” through the streets of the Capital, just as Allende joined the public procession following Pablo Neruda’s casket after his death immediately following the Chilean coup. Allende empowers the feminine narrative because she writes “her self;” she authorizes Alba’s perspective through her own experience.

Allende’s characters perfectly relate Cixous’s idea that “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (2043). Alba, the last voice able to continue the matriarchal legacy in *The House of the Spirits*, was essentially silenced in the concentration camp through the brutal tortures that she endured at the hands of her male captors until she was able to transcend her physical body through her grandmother’s spirit. Eliza was physically withheld from her lover in Chile, so she figuratively relinquished her femininity so that she could follow him to America. Aurora’s family
refused to acknowledge her photography, forcing her to abandon her connection with them in order to sustain that passion. In all of these circumstances, the female authorizes herself in order to transcend patriarchal censorship. Censoring a woman’s body forces her to be silenced in some capacity, unless the female subversively refuses to be marginalized. In other words, Allende affirms Cixous’s demand that “women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence…They shouldn’t be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem” (2044). In all of these circumstances, the female was pressured to “forget” and to conform. But, a lack of memory also equates to eternal forced silence.

In these texts, memory is to be understood as factual history, which means that if it is not recognized, then the history is likewise silenced. Clara in The House of the Spirits offers an interesting take on this perspective because, as we will discover, she does not inherently negate this mentality though she chooses silence not once but twice in the text. Alba refuses to be relegated to the edges of history, fighting back against the patriarchal regime. Eliza refuses to accept the prescribed silence and marginality that her Aunt Rose endures as a result of a similarly torrid and clandestine love affair. Aurora refuses to serve as a cover for her husband’s own affair, choosing the scandalous and unprecedented life of a woman who is married yet not living with her husband in early Twentieth Century Chile, a country that historically has developed social mores decades after other Western nations. These women’s stories all represent the unbounded spaces of écriture féminine. As Jenkins says, Allende “explores the tension between silence and voice, authentic experience and that constructed for a patriarchal ideology, folklore and
sanctioned history…the double bind of articulating female voice in cultures that ordain silence as the appropriate expression of female experience” (62-63). As we are beginning to see, Allende’s protagonists represent unprecedented territory and essentially helped to establish a new standard for a feminine narrative to be heard as its own independent entity rather than in conjunction with a dominant patriarchal presence.

Dulfano believes that the feminine identity represented by Allende’s protagonists is composed of a “Fragmented reality…typified by the symbol of a kaleidoscope” (4). She makes a connection between a kaleidoscope apparatus and the way that Allende manipulates the text in order to “conjure up a pattern of coherence for the reader…[which is] literally rotated as the eye=I=witness reveals to the reader a particular perspective” (Dulfano 4). She refers to the narrative structure of The House of the Spirits as a “polyphonic I…a collage, a pastiche of many individuals” (Dulfano 4). In the text’s original language, “ella,” a third person feminine pronoun dominates, enforcing the notion of Alba’s narrative as the joint narrative between Clara and Alba that is revealed in the last pages of the text, which Dulfano refers to as “a concept crucial for feminists who seek to recover the lost tradition of their foremothers” (5). In other words, it is vital that we remember that embedded within Alba’s perspective is the succession of matriarchal narratives that came before her. André supports this point, stating that each of Allende’s narratives “constructs a collective female identity from the perspective of an individual subject, thus suggesting that the heroine’s life transcends her own destiny and comes to represent the problems all women encounter in their quest for personhood” (85). The strength in the feminine narrative throughout these texts thus likewise derives from the cumulative effect of layered history. Thus, by the end of the trilogy, Aurora’s
narrative is not singular but a kaleidoscopic culmination of all of the other feminine histories that have come before her.

Dulfano also links Allende with Alba, asserting that “Allende is clearly intrigued by the same issues and becomes the mouthpiece for the lost generations before her, who either wrote utilizing a more personal, private medium, or could not write at all…the piecing together the silenced past” (5). We might question this with Allende’s work because neither Eliza nor Aurora are raised and therefore influenced by their actual mother. However, this holds true for the more figurative mother (maternal presence) as well as the literal mother. Indeed, both Eliza’s and Aurora’s journey of self awareness culminates in some understanding of their (and thus the female’s) place in “the silenced past.” André claims that Allende’s “motherless” protagonists follow the “‘matrophobia’ tradition in literature…in which orphanhood or the lack of a mother’s presence is depicted as potentially having a beneficial effect on the female protagonist, in that daughter escapes the anxiety of having to mirror the maternal figure or to differentiate her own image from that of her progenitor” (78). However, while this suggests that Eliza and Aurora (and in some ways similarly Alba) are free to supply their own voice and therefore their own narrative, we have to realize that Eliza’s and Aurora’s narratives are not narratives that inherently rejoice in freedom from domination but are intensely soul-searching *bildungsromans* that ultimately reach an awareness of feminine independence that chooses to love. These protagonists are not struggling against a dominant “mother narrative” but against the patriarchal limitations of their respective societies.
Chapter Three: Towards a feminine structure

Allende repeatedly utilizes alternate forms of expression in these texts: written, verbal, artistic, subversive. Clara, who wrote in her notebooks “in order to see things in their true dimension” (The House of the Spirits 432), is certainly an obvious example of this, but Allende first establishes the idea with Clara’s older sister, Rosa, who embroidered fantastical creatures on the pieces of her trousseau. Later, Blanca did the same in clay, creating crèches full of magical creatures. Yet Clara’s journals are the most essential to this text because they become the means by which Alba ultimately re-tells the story, which is “inscribed only in her imagination…a secret text of life and hope,” ensuring that the story is also told from a feminine perspective (Meyer 362). And, Allende subtly authorizes power to a traditionally feminine medium—diaries, journals, and letters—while concurrently deflating Trueba’s “discourse of power” (Isabel Allende 22-23). Rojas notes that “un distanciamiento que le permite crear la ilusión de objetividad,” and this is exactly why the feminine narrative works throughout the trilogy. First, Clara’s journals maintain authority because she objectively detailed the minutia of her life, especially with Esteban Trueba. Then, Alba’s voice has authority vicariously through the act of re-telling Clara’s journals, the “actual” narrative (Rojas 212). Next, Eliza’s story is related from a third-person omniscient perspective, which enables her story to also be told objectively. Finally, Allende again utilizes objective distance when
she has Aurora relate her own story through a journal. These books account for presence and absence as they ensure a continuation of authority, thus conquering one aspect of silence because the narrative is inevitably continued regardless of extenuating circumstances like death (Boschetto 526). Boschetto’s thought, that “El centro de la novela no reside en el personaje, sino más bien en el proceso de escribir su historia y, a través del recuerdo y la memoria, volver a hacerla presencia” also demonstrates how the patriarchal control never succeeds in censoring the feminine narrative (527). Ironically, the feminine narrative succeeds because it relies on the alternative, “feminine,” mediums, which are not questioned because they are not perceived to be subversive.
Chapter Four: On this side of Postmodernism

A written narrative does not have to be “traditional” and a narrative does not have to be written as Allende repeatedly proves. For example, when Clara’s Uncle Marcos passes on his fairytales to her, he not only ensures that the next generation will be included in the narrative, but he gives Clara another pivotal narrative perspective. Once Uncle Marcos tells the fairytales to Clara, the stories proceed to be passed down through the female members of the family, thus re-inscribing this narrative element firmly within the space of the feminine narrative. Like the journals, Clara passes the fairytales on to her children and subsequently Alba as well, which permeate the text so subtly that the fantastic and the realistic are completely intertwined…hence our understanding of Allende’s magical realism. She tells us the origin of the fantastic in the text itself, which ultimately forces us to accept magical elements as truths for we also know that the majority of the narrative (that which Alba tells) comes directly from Clara’s journals, which we accept as truthful, so we have no reason to disbelieve the fairytales. And since Alba relates these tales once more to the reader, it is as if we are chosen as the next generation to continue the story; she gathers us to her in the pages of the text just as she “sat with a child in each arm and told them magic stories from the enchanted trunks of…Great-Uncle Marcos” while imprisoned in the concentration camp (The House of the Spirits 427).
Allende continues the alternative form of narrative when she gives Aurora the gift of telling stories through her photography in *Portrait in Sepia*. This art form is as tangible and permanent as Clara’s journals, indeed much more so than the fairytales. Like the journals and fairytales, however, we must also remember that this is a form of expression that is often overlooked as valid or even valuable, yet Allende embraces all forms of narrative and uses Aurora’s photography to tell as much of a story as any of the more “traditional” narrative forms. In an interview with Cristen Reat, Allende notes that “I wanted photography to be was just a tool for remembering, which I think in my case is writing…So I needed Aurora to have a tool that would be like writing is for me” (283). Rivero refers to the repetition of photography/portraits throughout the trilogy as a narrative device that has “a certain metaphorical nomenclature that ties together the female narrators and main characters, who search for truth and origins and compete the saga” (96). Photography definitely transcends *Portrait in Sepia*, figuring significantly into each text in the trilogy. Rivero also draws a parallel between textual and visual correspondence, calling it a “double-sided blueprint for reconstructing past (or lost) memories…[it] is the only way to survive oblivion: by living on, visually and verbally, in the family histories, by existing in the genealogies of kin that will be told and recounted for generations to come” (96). Cox believes that Aurora’s photographs give her “the material to build her story, a tale that would otherwise be fashioned from little else than unreliable memories” (154). However, thinking of Aurora’s experience in this way negates the validity of Alba’s narrative in *The House of the Spirit*, certainly an idea with which no one would agree.
Allende uses photography as another means of understanding, which joins all alternative forms of storytelling as “reconstructive devices for memory and the search for origins” (Rivero 97). These storytelling/narrative devices most importantly link each of the three texts into one collective whole, weaving a veritable web of feminine narration that succeeds because these are what Rivero refers to as proleptic, meaning they create the illusion of narrative omniscience (98-99). The repetition of these alternative narrative forms instill a decided power and authority for the female Other in these texts. For example, Blanca’s fantastical crèches, Rosa’s magical embroidery, Alba’s political voice, Clara’s stories, and Rose’s salacious writing all demonstrate success even though they are not successful when measured by “normal,” masculine standards. Furthermore, as each woman succeeds in her narrative, she receives some degree of acceptance in a male-dominated community.

It is interesting that Allende chose to give Aurora, the last feminine narrative in this trilogy, photography as her alternative form of expression because the art of photography, especially as Aurora utilizes it as a means of telling a story, requires different exposures, and figuratively speaking, this is synonymous with passing stories down through a family’s generations. Each exposure/generation “sees” and “recreates” the same story in a slightly different way. Thus, it also provides for the possibility of future narratives. Meyers refers to Alba’s act of figuratively reading the “texts” of female experience” as an act of authoring “her own text,” which culminates in symbolically “en-gender[ing]’ her own selfhood” (362), yet the same holds true for Aurora (as well as Eliza) as they each essentially replicate the journey that Allende attributed to Alba in the original text.
Dulfano asserts that “each female character listens, absorbs and repeats bits and pieces of the life and actions her mother has handed down in assorted media…[because] women are not single, clearly defined entities” (5-6). This, of course, is a figurative mother, representative of generations of female predecessors. The understanding here, then, is that in order to achieve a voice/presence, a female must undergo a journey of self-awareness that is reliant on the matriarchal history. For that matter, we cannot forget the extreme importance of the matriarchal lineage, which is decidedly present in *The House of the Spirits* but also more subtly in *Portrait in Sepia* and *Daughter of Fortune*. Cixous writes that

a woman is never far from ‘mother’…There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink…There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other—in particular, the other woman…*In* her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other…It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her (2045).

We see this most clearly with the passing of the narrative from Clara to Alba since “Clara also brought the saving idea of writing in her [Alba’s] mind, without paper or pencil, to keep her thoughts occupied and to escape from the doghouse and live” (*The House of the Spirits* 414). Similarly, Eliza becomes an ephemeral spirit that guides Aurora throughout her life’s journeys, “who came from far away to light the dark corners of my past” (*Portrait in Sepia* 303). Eliza’s most definite matriarchal influence is her Aunt Rose, but
this proves to be a negative relationship as Rose, who has a stunted, constricted social presence imposed upon her because of her own blighted love affair, is utterly incapable of being a positive role model for Eliza. This causes Eliza to pursue her own lover as she, mirroring her aunt’s disastrous affair. In every case, we have an example of what Dulfano refers to as “the cycle between generations,” which “is brought to fruition and initiated once again…an infinite and never-ending continuity between women” (6).
Chapter Five: Decolonizing writing

In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende writes that "the reality of the present was a kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors where everything and anything could happen" (82); this idea of “un caleidoscopio” illustrates how a fragmented narrative reproduces simultaneity. Dulfano notes that such multiplicity evokes the idea of a palimpsest, which is fascinating considering the idea that historically, the masculine narrative has dominated, even at the sake of smudging or even erasing the feminine narrative in order to be heard over it (6). Esteban Trueba’s narrative mimics this act in *The House of the Spirits* as he repeatedly makes statements like “They say that…” and “It’s not true…as my granddaughter says” in order to erase the feminine point of view and favor his own authority (33, 53). The feminine narrative is vital because the patriarchal (traditional) narratives are imperfect, as is evidenced by Trueba’s words. When Trueba cannot remember or blatantly disagrees with Alba’s representation, he (as the representative for masculine narrative in the first text) devalues the female voice because he essentially deems it insignificant and therefore “unintentionally” intentionally forgets the feminine perspective, which effectively dismisses it. This is especially consequential give the historical gravity of how the feminine narrative has traditionally been marginalized to minor status, if recognized at all. Similarly, Jenkins believes that Allende’s writing “record[s] stories of female experience neither sufficiently nor authentically articulated
by histories constructed from patriarchal perspectives” (67). Repeatedly, we see how Allende’s writing establishes a precedent that the feminine narrative does not have to be reduced to an Other, especially given the effect that this is reproduced consistently throughout the trilogy.

Cox claims that by writing about women who are in positions that have been traditionally marginalized in their respective societies, Allende “has the opportunity to shift the historical perspective so that it focuses on the edges of the story, at the margin when women, immigrants, and supplanted natives can have their stories told” (26). In The House of the Spirits, Allende actually uses the masculine narrative, Esteban Trueba, to speak on behalf of one of these marginalized females, Tránsito Soto, albeit he does so unintentionally. This act thus suggests that the masculine narrative, while already proven to be largely ineffective, succeeds only as an alternative voice for the Other, such as a prostitute. And, because the masculine narrator is not cognizant of his function as such, it implies a definite amount of ignorance associated with his narrative. When Trueba is functioning as the voice for Tránsito Soto, his words are gentler, softer, more feminized. This further demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the masculine narrative in these texts because it cannot function as itself in order to be effective. The feminine narrative is vital because it is a privileged Other, one that is marginalized but also knowledgeable because it is forced to the edge; it can objectively relate circumstances in a way that the masculine narrative cannot. While the masculine narrative cannot account for a “complete” story, the feminine narrative consistently includes the male.
Chapter Six: Recovering the feminine authority

Cixous states that the female “physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body” (2044). This is especially evident in connection to these texts which consistently demonstrate women refusing to be marginalized by masculine proclivities. Cixous also notes that “when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence. Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences in aphonic revolts” (2049). Ultimately, the female in Allende’s texts perseveres, survives and continues her matriarchal lineage. Women are effectively penalized by men because the act of a man impregnating a female forces her to embrace a new life, which will inevitably be removed from her and not by her choice. A case in point is that Alba survives while pregnant with a presumed daughter. She notes the absurdity of trying to “avenge all those who should be avenged,” which reiterates the spirit of Allende’s fertile matriarchy; instead, Alba asserts that “my revenge would be just another part of the same inexorable rite. I have to break that terrible chain. I want to think that my is life and that my mission is not to prolong hatred…while I carry this child in my womb, the daughter of so many rapes…but above all, my own daughter” (The House of the Spirits 432). Women know how to live detachment; giving birth is neither losing nor increasing. It’s adding to life an other,” (Cixous 2054) Emphasizing the
patriarchal control of this act, Esteban Trueba did not see the faces of the women he 
raped on his estate (The House of the Spirits 63). Because of this impartial, patriarchal 
perspective, Esteban cannot conceive of his bastard offspring cannot as anything but 
lesser beings—Others—synonymous with the faceless women that he forced into 
submission. However, Meyer notes that The House of the Spirits is “a feminocentric 
novel that…represents through discourse two empowering and transforming female 
experiences associated with renewal: giving birth and being reborn…[It] focuses both on 
the physical experience of creating a text (within a text) and the psychological experience 
of creating a new self” (360). As an extension of the feminine narrative, the female 

bodies in Allende’s texts consistently achieve Cixous’s “violent incandescence,” 
physically transforming into beings of power and authority.

Cixous asserts that women have been taught “an antinarcissism…the infamous 
logic of antilove” and thus see themselves as the Other, agreeing with the predominant 
masculine myth (2042). Despite the history of “antinarcissism,” these texts combine to 
form a cohesive matrilineal narrative, a groundbreaking collection of écriture feminine in 
a canon where such a concept was non-existent. Allende generates a discourse 
whereupon the feminine narration does not have to succumb to being the Other, where 
there is no longer the sense of detachment and envy but of presence and strength in “her 
self.” Lagos demonstrates that similarly Allende’s writing creates “a world from the 

perspective of an insider who positions herself as an outsider, combined with a self-
assuredness that exposes women’s strength and an awareness of the disadvantages 

women face in Latin America” (112). Essentially, in Allende’s trilogy, men are the Other 
because women maintain control throughout and the masculine perspective is
marginalized instead, which according to Perricone demonstrates that Allende is learning control (81). As Cixous says, “She gives that there may be life, thought, transformation;” this is impossible to ignore in Allende’s texts—Alba, Eliza, Aurora all sacrifice themselves for the sake of understanding/self-actualization/realization (2056).

Repeatedly, the female represents an aspect of society that must be first acknowledged, then reckoned with, and ultimately changed. Dulfano states that “The polyphonic ‘I’ is an assimilation of voices that function by reflecting away from one particular voice, binding many, and introducing a voice representative of a plurality of Latin American women…a more universal tone, since the discourse may apply to many underprivileged or repressed groups” (7). The strength in the polyphonic feminine narrator is that the strength in numbers forces the Other to be acknowledged.

The multiplicity of the feminine narrative also suggests the dual perspective of both insider and outsider at times. For example, photography emphasizes this paradox repeatedly throughout the trilogy. Gough notices that Allende often uses “hidden or distant gazes” and that “The author’s frequent use of voyeurism through a lens reveals her sense of the importance of sight at a distance in her stories” (93-94). Eliza’s search for her lover symbolically ends when she has herself be photographed with her love letters, an act “to immortalize them…before she destroyed them;” then she “put the letters aside” and was photographed with her pearl necklace, a symbol of her return to femininity as well as a past association with the society from which she came and the adult life that she was beginning (Daughter of Fortune 443). As is the case with photography, the act of watching through a filter, a voyeuristic act, “is also limited by people’s imperfect abilities to interpret what they witness” (Gough 94). Such is exactly
the case with Blanca in *The House of the Spirits* and her husband’s deviant actions, which, not coincidentally, involve photography. It is not until she is literally forced to acknowledge her husband’s deviance through the filter of the darkroom images that she can completely interpret and understand the irreparable failure of her forced marriage. The camera repeatedly provides a voyeuristic lens that inevitably leads to understanding and self-realization.

The implication of voyeurism is a signal that Allende’s protagonists exist in a nebulous state as they avoid rigid (patriarchal) patterns and therefore structured narratives, which Levine claims mimics Allende’s own life work as she “both fulfilled and defied social expectations for women of her class, thus defining her ability to be inside and outside the system at the same time” (“Weaving Life into Fiction” 5). For example, Aurora should be a social insider because of her family connections, but she only comprehends her own existence by being an outsider, looking into society through the lens of her camera. And, as she is the “writer” of this narrative, she functions simultaneously as “spectator and actor [because her] writing recounts her past, whereas her photos prevent the present from disappearing” (*Isabel Allende* 158). Similarly, Eliza maintains a silent outsider narrative position because of her ability to pass as a male, which affords her the luxury of transcending social class and gaining understanding in a variety of ways. Allende corroborates this understanding of Eliza, implying that an important facet of her personality is her “discretion, her ability to make herself invisible. She is a silent person who observes and acts, but makes no noise…She lived in the middle of the Victorian era, when women were less than shadows in a patriarchal world” (Zapata 175). Because of the nebulous state that she maintains, the insider/outsider
position, Eliza ultimately achieves understanding and subsequently authority of her own life. This non-traditional technique again reinforces the connection that Allende’s writing has with écriture féminine.

Lagos also reiterates the notion of the un-conventional when she states that repeatedly within Allende’s texts, “we find women with a sense of agency able to circumvent the constraints of their conservative society by empowering themselves in a society not their own” (118). She is referring specifically to Aurora in Portrait in Sepia, but Paulina del Valle in Daughter of Fortune likewise succeeds outside of the “normal” society for a woman, in the middle of the 1849 gold rush. Paulina is simply another example of one of Allende’s female characters who chafes within the imposed constraints of a conservative society. In her circumstance, Paulina’s “agency” is her prodigious business acumen which brought her immense wealth that afforded her the luxury of breaking free from the outdated traditions of Chile. Whereas Paulina embraces independence and freedom to forge her own path, Aurora is something of the opposite, deeply desiring some sense of belonging. Raised within the constraints of Paulina del Valle’s wealth, Aurora is essentially forced to understand how to empower herself in a society where she “would be lost,” one which “would have no forgiveness” (Portrait in Sepia 69). The result of Aurora’s journey to find her “society” where she belongs resulted in her catastrophic marriage, and is yet another example of how the feminine perspective finds herself in a forced exile. Lagos calls this a “life experience where there is an increased awareness of the subject’s position, an experience conducive to…transformation” (124-125). Again, Allende repeats this form throughout her trilogy, emphasizing not only the limitations placed upon females but also the journey that
females must undergo in a traditional patriarchal society in order to discover their own self and therefore their own authority.

Not unlike the repetition that permeates Allende’s writing, *écriture feminine*, is oft described as cyclical. Furthermore, it can be detached and has the ability to empower women who are the Other in society. Jenkins sees the value of the cyclical experience in Allende’s writing as having “temporal” histories that directly contrast with the traditional linear, Western, patriarchal narratives (68). It is readily apparent that Allende’s writing commits to these same descriptions; not only does *Portrait in Sepia* create an ending, the final denouement even, to *The House of the Spirits* but also the characters within the three texts are unalterably interwoven despite functioning as separate stories. The narrative perspectives demand a detachment from the actual story lines as they are all narrated in hindsight and with an introspective objectivity necessary to fulfill the purpose of finding some measure of healing. Meyer agrees with this understanding, stating that “This sense of the 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” (361). Yet André also claims that Allende’s protagonists are empowering models, claiming that they signify “a new kind of feminine archetype whose identity is no longer measured by her capacity to love, marry or bear children, but by her determination to colonize her own space and her own body as places of resistance where the spiritual, the intellectual and the creative self may finally be nurtured” (87). Essentially, the collective feminine narrative succeeds because of its repetitious, cyclical nature, and, as a detached perspective, the female simply cannot continue as the Other. She authorizes her own power.
Chapter Seven: Understanding silence

As Cixous’s theory would suggest, there is some amount of authority in silence, especially if the silence is chosen rather than forced. Allende’s female protagonists “have learned that silence, in particular the withdrawal of words that another has demanded, can send a very formidable message” in “a culture that does not value them as whole persons” (Cox 47). When we “witness” the scene of Rosa’s autopsy, we understand how this scene enables Clara’s self-imposed silence as a reaction against masculine brutality. Gough makes an important point noting that when Allende revisits this scene later through Esteban Trueba’s perspective, his narration is dependent on other observers (perhaps Clara’s) when he says “They say I…” (The House of the Spirits 34). Gough remarks that this second narrative perspective about Rosa’s autopsy indicates “a deliberate move to correct Esteban’s egocentric male view. The decision seems to say, in fact, that although Esteban’s feelings are valid and worth noting, this story is not about him, but rather about her [Clara]” (98). What we also have, effectively, is the same scene interpreted in two very gendered ways—from Clara’s feminine position, her sister was raped and brutalized by these unknown men; from Esteban’s masculine perspective, the two unknown men acted as every man would towards a beautiful woman, which is to say that they revered Rosa and tenderly worshiped her beautiful form. This contrasting scene interpretation exemplifies what Gough refers to as “women’s victimization by men” (98).
Cortínez makes a valid point, noting that in what amounts to recounting family histories, multiple narrators save the possibility of a narrative lapse, “sino que también le permiten la posibilidad de rescatarlos del olvido,” which indicates that there is a larger purpose beyond a gendered tension (323). Cox notes that later when Clara refuses to speak to Esteban again, her revolt “symbolizes a move to reject the male violence that menaces these women” (21). Not only does her silence dictate their relationship thenceforth but also she commands the right to no longer clarify his memory, symbolically allowing his memory to lapse. If his masculine narrative cannot remember because she refuses to corroborate it, then it only emphasizes the flaws of that perspective.

In *The House of the Spirits*, the silence is both a matriarchal entity and a familial commodity that is passed down through the generations of females—Nívea to Clara to Blanca to Alba. In this text, a female’s silence is most noticeably self-inflicted, such as with Clara who reverts to silence twice in her life after she experiences circumstances of overt masculine passion, which she perceives as brutality. *The House of the Spirits* subverts patriarchal history by allowing women to choose silence rather than “muzzle” them with it. We should think of Clara’s silence as a “positive act implying a rejection of hypocrisy and violence and a commitment to non-traditional forms of communication” (Meyer 362). And, despite Esteban’s efforts to have power over Clara, he can never wholly succeed simply because he can never control her voice; rather, she demonstrates her own authority in the relationship by refusing to cede her voice to Esteban, which is essentially the most fundamental, integral element of her existence. Her voice is the one that writes the family’s stories, and instead, she bequeaths this possession to Alba. In so doing, she symbolically excludes Esteban from being a part of her family. Her voice is
the fundamental way that the family history is recorded and choosing to not acknowledge
Esteban effectively silences him in it. And, Clara’s self-imposed silence directly
contrasts with the bluster of Esteban’s masculine narrative, which demonstrates an
interesting paradox given the duality of this text—it includes both the voice of the
oppressor as well as the oppressed. Furthermore, Clara’s voice is the only voice that
speaks on behalf of the lower class as she works on behalf of the common laborers at
Tres Marías. Indeed, “Clara understood that there was a place for her at Tres
Marías…because her ability to see what was invisible immediately detected the workers’
resentment, fear, and distrust” (The House of the Spirits 105). She is a representative for
the silent even though she engages in silence herself.

The masculine and feminine narratives represent two very distinct functions
within Allende’s writing. For example, in The House of the Spirits, Esteban Trueba’s
masculine narrative is interspersed with the feminine narrative which we eventually come
to understand to be his granddaughter, Alba. She continues the “silent” tradition of her
grandmother in that her narrative is ambiguous until the very end of the story,
demonstrating that the narrative, while obviously feminine, succeeds despite its silent
ambiguity. Because we read Alba’s narrative as a neutral perspective, it affords a
measure of third-person omniscient authority that is wholly lacking in Esteban Trueba’s,
whose words represent a fraction of the text, constantly repeat the story that Alba has
already told and make no effort to hide the fact that they are his bias. Meyer makes an
important point here, reminding us that Trueba’s narrative interjections are “essential to
the novel’s theme of self-renewal and rebirth” because he gradually seeks some measure
of solace and uses his narrative as a means to “exorcise the sins of selfishness and pride
that drove him to violence,” but ultimately, Alba’s narrative voice is the one that explicates the silence of “women divided by class, race and economic situation, who, like herself, have been oppressed by patriarchal culture” (361, 364). And, there is some measure of strength represented in the feminine narrative in this text because it is the foundation upon which Trueba undergoes his transformation. This demonstrates an intrinsic authority in the feminine narrative that “her” text is the one that supports not only “his” struggles but also lends a voice on behalf of “them,” the Other.

The feminine narrative also demonstrates power in that it embraces some traditionally masculine social roles. Esteban Trueba’s voice is paradoxically silenced by his wife when she does not allow him the “natural” right to name his children. As Foreman states, “Despite Trueba’s temporary first-person narrative ‘control,’ Clara’s appropriation of his rights of patrilineage displays Allende’s irony, for Trueba delimits his expansive use of the droit du seigneur precisely on the basis of maintaining an economically ‘pure’ and patriarchal familial structure” (376). This is yet another example where the masculine narrative fails because the female subverts his voice. Foreman also notes that “Allende subverts the Adamic power of literal naming and so posits a new genesis, one in which woman challenges her always already fallenness and instead…is the site of a history which survives, and so nurtures the present” (370). Indeed, Trueba reacts furiously at having his “Adamic” right to name his own children, especially his sons, removed from him, saying “That was too much for me. I suppose I blew my stack…Her decision was inflexible” (The House of the Spirits 115). The female’s subversion, her “already fallenness,” helps to explain why Allende’s protagonists follow a name scheme demonstrating clear, bright, and clean auras (i.e.
Clara, Blanca, Alba, Aurora); she no longer responds to masculine dictates, representing a new innocence.
Chapter Eight: Subverting masculine power

Trueba repeatedly attempts to distance himself from the feminine state of “fallenness” even though his words are inherently impotent throughout the text, demonstrated by his need to beg the prostitute, Tránsito Soto, to save his granddaughter’s life. He is forced to plead with her, admitting that “I’ve been to every office, every ministry, seen all my old friends, and no one’s been able to do anything, they don’t want to see me anymore…I’m just a poor destroyed old man, have pity on me” (*The House of the Spirits* 420-421). When Trueba is forced to acknowledged his granddaughter’s “fall” from privileged status due to her revolutionary political maneuvering, he uses his narrative space to deny his role in her actions, insisting that “she never listened to me” (*The House of the Spirits* 419; in so doing, the masculine narrative “implies that the mother, Woman, Eve, is responsible for such ‘falls’” (Foreman 377). The only point where his narration can be taken as corresponding to Alba’s is when he recognizes his failing virility, which not inconsequentially, is also timed to coincide with his substantial drop in political power. Ironically, Treuba’s voice is only effective at the time when he is emasculated by old age, which coincides with his figurative self-realization. He can finally recognize his “true” place in the narrative once all of the masculine bluster has been stripped away—physically, socially, and psychologically. Unfortunately, when he finally admits that “I’m just a poor destroyed old man,” it is too late to validate his
perspective (*The House of the Spirits* 421). We get the sense that the masculine narrative is impossible to sustain, perhaps because “voicing” this sub-text allows Esteban “to understand the destructive nature of his rage” (Meyer 363). Throughout the text, Treuba uses force and brutality against the peasant women and then against Clara, and his actions foreshadow the wrongs of Pedro Tercero and his Socialist comrades who do the same to Alba in a reversal of power/class roles, cutting off three of her fingers in what Trueba only understands as “a macabre joke that brings back memories,” which once again recognizes his faulty ability to remember events as they happened (*The House of the Spirits* 421). His narrative simply mimics the overt force that is rendering it ineffective in the first place.

Yet Esteban Trueba is not the only example of an overtly dominant masculine presence in the trilogy, what Meyer refers to as “the androcentric vision of history, the perspective within Latin American (and Judeo-Christian) culture that has traditionally imposed its discourse of power and law of privilege” (361). Like Esteban Trueba, John Sommers’s narrative is both limited and controlled by a “silent” feminine narrative in *Daughter of Fortune*. The integral circumstances of Eliza Sommers’s birth is completely controlled by Rose Sommers, whose authority is silent because it is a negotiated agreement with her brother, John. However, in *Daughter of Fortune*, Allende also bends gender associations with silence as Tao Chi’én actually signifies more of a feminine narrative rather than masculine; though he chooses silence in the manner of invisibility as a survival measure, his choice to do so firmly ensures that he represents a feminine narrative rather than a masculine one. Having Tao Chi’én function in support of the feminine narrative only strengthens not only the polyphonic authority of that
perspective throughout the trilogy but also the connection between Allende’s writing and *écriture feminine*. 
Chapter Nine: Embracing responsibility for the story

“A little of that good mother’s milk…[writing] in white ink” is another aspect of the “silent” feminine narrative (Cixous 2045). Likewise, the gradations of “whiteness” in the protagonists’ names from *The House of the Spirits* reinforce this notion. Boschetti refers to *The House of the Spirits* as a “texto en blanco,” yet the entire trilogy figuratively corresponds with this description; her implication is that Allende’s first text is full of “white” imagery, symbolic of “la fertilidad y productividad futura…una futura maternidad, la promesa de fertilidad” (527). But her focus is solely on Clara “se nos presenta como espacio en blanco, como lenguaje ausente,” but it transcends more than just Clara. The “silent” narrative is the epitome of writing “in white ink” and transcends not only this singular text but also the entirety of the trilogy. Cox, however, believes that the protagonists’ nomenclature is “cleansing a history tainted by the selfish acts of Trueba men,” which includes Esteban Trueba’s illegitimate children and descendents, especially Esteban García, Alba’s brutal attacker (35). While Cox offers what could be a viable explanation, it is too singular, ignoring how Allende repeatedly draws on associations between white—realization—figurative daybreak with the names: Clara—illustrious, Alba—dawn, sunrise and Aurora—goddess of the dawn.

Alba’s narrative directly comes from the presence of her grandmother’s, Clara’s, spirit, which figuratively passes the authority and stories to Alba to narrate, but in *Portrait in Sepia*, Aurora’s stories are likewise narrated through filters. Aurora’s story is
focused in two ways—through her nightmares and through her camera lens. In an
interview with Reat, Allende acknowledged that “In photography you freeze a moment,
so I thought it would be a wonderful tool for her [Aurora] to see through the lens what
you don’t see otherwise” (283). Because of this ability, Aurora first discovered her
husband’s affair. Similarly, she constructs a more complete understanding of her early
childhood through the lens of her dreams. Her conception was the direct result of a
pseudo-rape involving photography. So when Aurora’s narrative positively relates non-
traditional, deviant, and ugly circumstances, it demonstrates that her narrative cleanses
the taint of her mother’s rape. Aurora’s “white ink” challenges the black, patriarchal
force of her father, who with “habitual insolence” made a bet to seduce her mother “in
three steps” though he found her “pathetic” (Portrait in Sepia 59-60). Aurora’s father’s
dismissive attitude towards her mother highlights the patriarchal inclination to devalue
the feminine presence, to demand its “silence.” Aurora’s photography highlights the
contrast of black and white, which, as the last feminine narrative of the trilogy, it might
imply that narratives are a constant juxtaposition of Other and lack. But, Aurora’s
closing remark is that “the tone for telling my life is closer to that of a portrait in sepia,”
which indicates that a narrative is actually the opposite of black and white (Portrait in
Sepia 304). Instead, a narrative emerges out of a culmination of shades smudged from
environmental, social, gendered, and familial histories; clearly, a “silent” feminine
narrative only allows the surface of the female’s “sepia” presence to be acknowledged.

Much like the voyeuristic experience of illustrating a narrative through
photography, there is something of a within/without perspective in representing silence in
these texts. For example, Alba wholeheartedly joins the Communist reform though she is
never accepted in this role because of her family’s wealth. Aurora maintains a dual perspective by using her camera to explore the story of the lower class laborer, but she does so without permission or acceptance from the people she is representing. This is largely because like Alba, her family’s wealth separates her from those with whom she often identifies, the outcasts of society. Eliza chooses to be a social outcast by posing as a male. In so doing, she becomes silent through her ability to become invisible, though she does not ask permission to represent this perspective and is never wholly accepted as one. In *Daughter of Fortune*, Rose also maintains a certain silent authority as she writes anonymous, wildly popular pornographic material. Choosing to not sign her name to her writing is synonymous with signing her writing with white ink. Yet again, she manages to be heard despite such silence/invisibility. Repeatedly, Allende demonstrates that the feminine narrative can succeed without employing overt, domineering masculine tactics. In each of these situations, there is something of a double vision, a paradox that is both assertive and silent.
Chapter Ten: Facing alterity

Silence is also an interesting element that Allende uses with Tres Marías, the Truebas’ country estate. The estate works perfectly as a setting that mirrors écriture
feminine because the “voice” that really does the “narrating” of that subculture’s story is beyond the grasp and therefore the control of the authoritative male, Esteban Trueba. Clara undoubtedly controls the production of the narrative in this place because of her position as leader of all domestic realms as well as her singular ability to understand the tenants (The House of the Spirits 105). In turn, the indigent workers rely on Clara not only to protect them but also to bridge the figurative language barrier between them and the patrón. Esteban only speaks politics, meaning he is much too consumed by his conservative elitism to ever comprehend the voice of the lowest class. This is another example where Esteban Trueba’s narrative lacks substance; he never privileges the fundamental, substantive “voice” of Tres Marías. Furthermore, this setting clearly delineates the “us-them” dichotomy between Esteban and every other member of his family, which is likewise very much a juxtaposition of spaces as well. He is the only member of his family who is a “nosotros,” singular except for the other wealthy patrones who control the local laws and mete out all punishments in the very traditional masculine role, whereas each of his family member’s individual actions link them firmly to the marginalized “otros” because of their contrasting political agendas. As a definite
member of the elitist upper class, the one who controls all wealth and land, and therefore
all power, Esteban Trueba “was unaware of the danger that threatened the fragile
equilibrium of their [the landowners’] position” (The House of the Spirits 67). Rojas
describes Trueba as a narrative that “resulta inadmissible y, por tanto, es severamente
castigada” (207). Because the text is a thinly veiled indictment against the politics that
Trueba is associated with, he simply cannot be a reliable narrative voice.

However, the women throughout Allende’s texts individually speak in some
capacity for the “otros,” though with varying degrees of success. Clara cooks, sews and
educates the peasants; Nivéa fights political battles on behalf of women and the poor;
Alba protests and acts subversively against her grandfather’s political regime. Yet one of
the most distinct examples of his immediate family members signifying an “otros”
position is Blanca, Esteban’s daughter who defied politics and class barriers in order to
foster her love for a tenant of Tres Marías, declaring that “When I grow up, I’m going to
marry you and we’re going to live here in Tres Marías,” to which Pedro Tercero replies
“with a shake of his head,” as if he “already knew his place in the world” (The House of
the Spirits 146). Rojas points out that despite everything, “Las mujeres de La Casa de los
espíritus consiguen aquello que los hombres logran nunca o a medias: vencer los
mecanismos del miedo y sobreonarse a la vergüenza” (210). The “otros” position at Tres
Marías, the most definite example of such a marked “us-them” delineation in any text of
the trilogy, should have no authority to write its own narrative. But, like any
marginalized narrative, the “otros” must use “white ink” in order to tell its story—another
“invisible” narrative because it is silenced by members of the “nosotros.”
The feminine narrative also speaks for, or gives a voice to, those who are forced into silence, the “otros” that are not allowed to be the “nosotros” because of a difference like gender. Truly, this feeling of a peripheral vision mimics the notion of voyeurism. Gough believes that “Allende is clearly playing here with the idea that truth can be discovered both up close and from afar—that there is an imperfect relationship between understanding and distance, or between vision and division” (102). However, Aurora specifies that “Memory is fiction,” which seemingly negates Gough’s belief that Allende is toying with truth as both near and far seeing as the purpose of memory is to revisit something that is no longer near to us (Portrait in Sepia 303). In The House of the Spirits alone, Allende gives multiple examples of women who all demonstrate against a forced Otherness in some capacity—Nívea, Clara, Blanca, Alba, and Tránsito Soto. Such is also the case with Eliza, Rose Somers and Paulina del Valle in Daughter of Fortune. And ultimately, we see this trope repeated yet again in Portrait in Sepia with Paulina del Valle, Aurora and Señorita Matilde Pineda, her tutor. Repeatedly, these women who in some manner choose to be an Other ultimately not only control their individual situation but also thrive in various settings.
Chapter Eleven: The space recovered

Tres Marías represents the most overt matriarchal control of any setting in Allende’s trilogy. Allende again utilizes an obvious nomenclature technique because “Tres Marías” definitely represents the three roles of women—virgin, mother, and matriarch. Clara best exemplifies all three of these distinctions though it might seem counterintuitive to characterize her as “virgin.” Given the way Clara reacquired control of her body by re-stating her nun-like vow of silence, her marital relationship was effectively dissolved, and she became virginal once more, especially to Esteban, who became “resigned…Tired of pursuing her up and down the house, begging her with his eyes and drilling holes in the bathroom wall” (The House of the Spirits 224). Even after re-assuming a virginal role, she still acts competently as both mother and matriarch. Yet there is also the virginal association with the land as “Not a girl passed from puberty to adulthood that [Esteban] did not subject to the woods, the riverbank, or the wrought-iron bed…Trueba continued polishing his reputation as a rake, sowing the entire region with his bastard offspring” (The House of the Spirits 63). The land literally became the setting for sexual encounters, completing the overt cycle of fertility of a modern May Day rite carried out by one man who cannot control his virility. Subsequently, the association of motherhood with the land is also pronounced since “No one had ever seen such astonishing fertility” after he “roll[ed] in the pasture” and repeatedly took the
peasant girls’ virginity (*The House of the Spirits* 66). Such fertility is a definite association between “land” and “matriarch” as only the silent fields of Tres Marías ever “knew the exact number of [Esteban’s] children (*The House of the Spirits* 66). Yet again, the silent narrative is the authentic voice, the only one that makes no effort to deny the truth, whereas Esteban’s opinion stands that “he was not interested” in acknowledging the truth, hence he denies his parentage of all the children who were born as a result of his peasant rapes (66). Thus, Esteban’s patriarchy is called into question here, which also weakens his narrative as it is patently obvious that he refuses to acknowledge the whole truth, or any truth for that matter that does not agree with his ideal view.

Allende also uses this physical setting to parallel characters’ functionality. For example, Tres Marías is in various stages of neglect while Esteban and his family are likewise in disrepair. When the family is at its most cohesive, functioning level, the estate is likewise at the peak of its own productivity. Likewise, Trueba’s eccentric mansion in the Capital falls into an extreme state of disrepair when the Trueba family breaks apart emotionally and physically. Specifically, “Clara’s death completely transformed life in the big house on the corner…Alba noticed the decline from the very first days. She saw it advancing slowly but inexorably” (*The House of the Spirits* 295). Not accidentally, this is when Tres Marías also deteriorates. The earthquake that ruins Tres Marías also marks the end of Esteban and Clara’s peaceful marriage because it forces an awareness that Blanca is blatantly defying social expectations by sleeping with Pedro Tercero, a Socialist tenant on the estate. Yet these associations do not occur in just the first book in the trilogy. We also see this connection when the setting shifts to California in *Daughter of Fortune*. The chaotic, untamed, tumultuous setting in this text
also exactly mirrors the chaos of Eliza’s barely controlled life and search for her estranged lover. And, the negotiable canvas that these frontiers present mimics the spatial non-conformity of *écriture feminine*.

Allende’s chameleon characters conform to spaces they exist in, not just landscape settings (Chile, California, Tres Marias) so absolutely that “spaces” also prove the relationship between Allende’s writing and *écriture feminine*. For example, Eliza perfectly conforms to the inherent expectations of both Chile and California while she is in either location, but the individual living spaces that she inhabits throughout the text indicate the progression of her inner turmoil, which is beyond the realm of the normal, especially for women of her social station. Once she leaves Chile and that set of social restrictions, she occupies a collection of piecemeal shelters, none of which limit her physical freedom like Chile did even though she is a woman in an extreme patriarchal setting. She is not emotionally tied to any location. It is not until she has come to terms not only with her lost lover but also with her burgeoning love for Tao Chi’en that she chooses a permanent shelter, a house. For much of *Daughter*, Eliza is associated with unbounded freedom, which is something of a paradox given the intense emotional boundaries to which she is bound. Allende contrasts her emotional restraints with the possibility of unbounded physical space. Eliza’s pivotal moment of realization depends on her ability to establish equilibrium between her emotional and physical limitations. Every space that she inhabits is a conscious choice—the hull of the ship as she escapes the rigidity of Chile; the rude shacks in the various immigrant villages in California; the bedroom in Tao Chi’en’s house. Eliza’s example validates Levine claims that space is unbounded because it derives from a conscious choice in every circumstance, and it
ultimately “provides women with the space to choose and experience pleasure” (“Weaving Life into Fiction” 17). If such were not the case, then Eliza would never have been able to achieve a true understanding of her self. And, in conjunction with écriture feminine, Eliza was only able to dictate her own narrative on her own terms rather than by established patriarchal norms.

However, we cannot forget that space is also significant figuratively. André believes that Allende’s “characters not only deconstruct the boundaries of the space-bound stagnant female subjects, but also, by rejecting the nostalgia of an ethics of place, instead propose an aesthetic of feminine anarchic displacement that challenges the passive and subdued traits associated with femininity” (76-77). The most significant example of this is certainly Eliza’s choice to disguise herself as a male upon her arrival in California. Furthermore, she masquerades as both a youth and a mute, thus giving herself two more natural defenses to aid in her invisibility. Disguised as a male, she effectively structures a figurative shelter around herself, one that renders herself invisible to anyone who would be searching for her as a female. In fact her modified gender identity is as much of a shelter to her as the rough shacks she “lived” in throughout her journey in search of her lover. In this circumstance, gender is a definite shelter that allows her to function as she wishes without garnering undue attention or limiting her freedom.

Gender is also another space that Eliza alternately inhabits; it is constructed, certainly, but also transportable, fluid, and sheltering. The irony here is that Eliza maintains the most power when the physical shelter she is in is the rudest, most inconspicuous, poorest kind because it is when her gender is the least likely to be questioned or acknowledged. And her fluid gender is certainly Eliza’s most powerful possession. Interestingly, while
posing as a male, Eliza always shares a bedroom space with at least one other person until she is ready to reclaim her femininity.

The bedroom is the one space throughout Allende’s texts that consistently remains a feminine domain. The only scene of gentle desire as evidence of pure love in any of these texts takes place in Tao Chi’en’s bedroom, but only after Eliza has slipped back into her feminine identity. This significant moment occurs in her own bedroom when she realizes that “The obligation to dress like a man was beginning to be a heavy burden” (Daughter of Fortune 434). Her bedroom is the first space she claims as a woman rather than as a man when living in California, relearning her own body and “confirming her desire to be a woman again” (Daughter of Fortune 440). André theorizes that “room” is synonymous with “maternal womb” in Allende’s texts, claiming that “Protagonists withdraw there to emerge reborn into new women with a clear sense of self and a definite life purpose,” as is the case with this example of Eliza’s gender re-birth (83). As Allende says,

We could say that Eliza’s adventure is allegory of the feminist movement: the woman leaves the prison of domesticity, and the corset, and sets forth to conquer a purely masculine world; in order to do that, she learns to use the weapons and tools of men; she must masculinize herself, but once she gains her freedom she returns to her female role—without the corset and with new power (Zapata 177-178).

Yet Allende consistently affords her females some measure of control: Clara joins Esteban in the “sailboat of the gentle blue silk sea, as she liked to call her bed” until her purpose with him has been fulfilled (The House of the Spirits 292); Eliza seeks out Tao
when she has decided to embrace her femininity again, “barefoot, in her nightgown” with an “eagerness to touch him [that] was stronger than the sophistries of reason” (*Portrait in Sepia* 45-46); Aurora encourages Iván Radovic as part of her transformation from believing herself “incapable of inspiring or desiring love” (*Portrait in Sepia* 287). Whenever there is a moment of harsh passion or carnal lust, it never occurs in the bedroom, as if that space is sacrosanct for one purpose only—making love rather than making lust. For example, Esteban rapes the peasant women “anywhere he could find a place in the fields…He did not bother to hide, because he was afraid of no one” (*The House of the Spirits* 63). Eliza and her lover Joaquín thrash about in “a back room where the family’s clothing was kept in huge armoires” (*Daughter of Fortune* 123). And Aurora finds her husband engaged in his own erotic, lustful fantasy in “one of the stables where the family’s personal mounts were kept,” which directly connects the animalism of Diego’s actions with the space he chose for the torrid pleasure (*Portrait in Sepia* 259). Repeatedly, the overt, raw sexuality that tends to exemplify masculine dominance in Allende’s writing is distinctly removed from feminine spaces.

The bedroom serves as a pivotal location, one that ultimately helps to define the inner conflict of the feminine narrative. Clara captains the “gentle blue silk sea” and subsequently can deny her husband access to it as part of her vow of silence against Esteban. Alba hides her subversive love affair in her bedroom amid the ruins of the decaying house. Eliza’s identity is synonymous with the identity of whatever itinerant bedroom she uses, which illustrates how she marginalizes herself. Paulina del Valle demonstrates her ability to manipulate men by how she controls her husband’s exposure to her bedroom even though she deeply yearns for physical love and acceptance.
Aurora’s married bedroom is frigid and sexless, just like her marriage. Clara, Eliza and Paulina all at some point dictate that their bedroom space is their singular possession, and to gain access to that space requires an invitation on the part of the owner—the female. Traditionally, the bedroom space has been dominated by the male, who ultimately chooses who joins him and when. But Esteban Trueba establishes this inversion in Allende’s texts because he beds the peasant girls in “the woods, the riverbank…anywhere he could find a place in the fields, usually at dusk” (*The House of the Spirits* 63). Instead, Allende subtly shifts the bedroom dominance to favor the “Other.” All of Allende’s females control the bedroom space, which really supports the strength of their narratives in defying conformity.

Allende makes such a distinction between masculine and feminine spaces that the texts are quite literally broken into gendered parts. Conflicts develop when gender expectations are defied. For example, the monumental and ongoing gender trouble upon which the majority of *Daughter* is based stems from Eliza forcing her femininity into a masculine territory, California. While immediate problems disappear when Eliza cross-dresses and literally adopts a masculine identity, the initial conflict is never resolved until Eliza reclaims her femininity. Upon the (re)acceptance of her “natural” gender, Eliza’s character is no longer in conflict with anyone associated with the masculine territory, California, because her role and thus expectations of her change. By ultimately accepting her femininity, she also accepts the fringe status of a woman in a man’s space. An exception to her marginalized status as a woman is that her role with Tao Chi’en does not change privately like it does publically because his character is feminized and thus resists masculine expectations. Eliza is able to manipulate her body’s physical gender because
the public perception of her has no reason to question her association with either masculine or feminine territory, which is very convenient; as long as there are two clear gender distinctions, then it is quite easy to profile and accept anyone given the physical association that they make.

A problematic twist on an individual’s association with masculine/feminine territory is when someone openly chooses the opposite territorial association without actually relinquishing their “natural” space. Such is the case with Pauline del Valle, specifically in *Daughter* but also continuing into *Portrait*. In fact, Paulina conquers several so-called masculine territories: California, business, and her own household. Paulina has the distinct advantage over Eliza, however, in that she has both wealth and an established family name. Nevertheless, Paulina’s accomplishments, while remarkable, are abnormal. Interestingly, body size plays a pivotal role in both Eliza’s and Paulina’s successes. Eliza is able to cross gender barriers because her petite, boyish frame allows her to not only be relatively invisible but also to hide easily in a masculine costume; Paulina, however, is enormous, which gives her the ability to both subtly and overtly intimidate in order to achieve her pursuits. Most importantly for Paulina, she overwhelms her husband, who she uses as a mouthpiece to conduct her business because socially she is likewise invisible. Aurora’s decision to leave her husband and to not divorce him demonstrates a blending of figurative spatial influences from both of her grandmothers—Eliza and Paulina. Her decision is overt, blatant and defiant of social expectations, but it is also a quiet choice, allowing her to survive in the shadows. Figuratively, Aurora also dons a masculine identity (like Eliza) in that she chooses a masculine space, though she does so openly (as Paulina would).
What we cannot overlook is the fact that these texts are also Allende’s space, especially given the blatant autobiographical elements in each, especially *The House of the Spirits*. While these texts promote the feminine narrative as authoritative, they also serve as a forum for her narrative to be acknowledged. Allende is part of the community of women who reclaim their own spaces. Foreman asserts that Allende “feminizes generic codes to employ magical realism as a bridge to a tradition recoverable in political history, a history she ultimately constitutes in her text as distinct from the magical…rather than being simply mimetic, [her texts] often create textual ruptures, spaces through which she both feminizes and politicizes the genre” of magical realism (371, 379). The only way that Allende can do such work is if she has the appropriate space to do so. *Écriture féminine* supports this liberation by providing women with the space that is free from patriarchal control, a space that they can assume as their own. Jenkins talks about how there must be an “evolving language of experience” as a means of continuing the narrative (67). Since women have not traditionally had their own space to pass their narrative down through generations as men have, the advent of *écriture féminine* has provided the opportunity for doing this.
Chapter Twelve: Establishing continuity

When Allende’s female characters have deviated from accepted patriarchal standards, they have been forced into a different space. Exile is a trope used repeatedly throughout this trilogy, and it never truly succeeds because inevitably the punishment strengthens the female rather than weakens her. It is a patriarchal directive intended to hide an imperfect feminine quality or action. It forces the feminine narrative to exist outside of structured, linear norms. Lagos notes that “women tell their lives from a perspective that shows a detachment from their particular societies” (120). Detachment is exemplified when Esteban Trueba exiles his daughter because she becomes pregnant out of wedlock with her Socialist lover, when Rose Sommers is exiled to Chile to keep her brother’s household in order to hide her scandalous affair, and when Aurora is exiled to the fringes of society when she chooses to leave her husband. Such continuity implies that in the eyes of this patriarchal society, the choices that a woman makes will ultimately lead to punishment—physical and/or emotional exile. This incongruence is certainly heightened given the detailed description of Esteban Trueba’s violent sexual exploits before his marriage, for which he was never punished in such a way. However, it becomes inherently obvious that Trueba’s actions punish those closest to him, thus leading him to finally understand the enormity of his losses when he is utterly emasculated, admitting that “I’m just a poor destroyed old man” (The House of the Spirits
421). The implication is, of course, that everyone is ultimately punished for their faults. Such blindness on the part of the masculine narrative further weakens its believability.

Each text in Allende’s trilogy ends with a similar tone—one of survival rather than defeat, repeating the “continuity of hope” throughout. Alba’s pregnancy reinforces her idea that “I have to break that terrible chain [of revenge]. I want to think that my task is life and that my mission is not to prolong hatred but simply to fill these pages while I wait…while I carry this child in my womb, the daughter of so many rapes…but above all, my own daughter” (The House of the Spirits 432). As Rojas points out, “Alba adopta la postura de un narrador homodiegético, para transmitir con más vigor sus experiencias de mujer torturada, pero también para anunciar que después de esta sombra pasajera vendrá finalmente un Nuevo alumbramiento, como el que anticipa de la criatura que espera” (211). Similarly, Eliza realizes her freedom from her past, simply stating “I am free” (Daughter of Fortune 447). And finally, Aurora achieves some understanding between her past and her present because she writes her story in order “to elucidate the ancient secrets of my childhood, to define my identity, to create my own legend. In the end, the only thing we have in abundance is the memory we have woven. Each of us chooses the tone for telling his or her own story” (Portrait in Sepia 304). In all of these parting thoughts, there is a “continuity of hope” that was born out of the wreckage of various forms of masculine power (Rivero 105). The structure of each text creates a cyclical pattern as well, for each begins with a birthing image and ends with a rebirth. In The House of the Spirits, “Barrabás came to us by sea…;” not surprisingly, this is also how this text ends (1). In Daughter of Fortune, “Everyone is born with some special talent” and ends with Eliza’s awareness that she is figuratively free of all constraints that
inhibited her in Chile (3). And, in Portrait in Sepia, “I came into the world one Tuesday in the autumn of 1880” and culminates with Aurora’s understanding that her life is not black and white but has the depth of sepia tones (3).

If we acknowledge that Allende’s trilogy demonstrates écriture féminine, then we can also make the connection that each narrative exemplifies the cyclical nature of écriture because each rebirth comes after an episode of literal or symbolic death. Clara’s narrative was nearly lost entirely when Alba almost died; Eliza’s identity was wholly sacrificed; Aurora nearly disappeared in the shadows of tangential existence. This cycle empowers women who are otherwise “Others” in society because it forces the individual to learn her own strength. Repeatedly, Allende’s female characters are isolated or marginalized, yet by undergoing a “rebirth,” they realize power via freedom or independence. Levine refers to this as “magical feminism” and discusses how the blurring between the so-called natural and the unnatural that is at the heart of magical realism can also be viewed as emblematic of the entire novel and related in particular to the realm of sexual politics and the association of men with discourses of power and of women with the private sphere. From the beginning of her novel [The House of the Spirits] Allende challenges this division of male and female into fixed spheres by giving primacy to the female voice in the narrative process (Isabel Allende 21).

“Magical feminism” is decidedly an apt and more appropriate description of Allende’s writing rather than the categorical label “magical realism.” Repeatedly, her writing reinforces basic tenets of écriture féminine in such a way that does not support patriarchal
understandings of realism because it consistently inverts social traditions, if for no other reason than it privileges the feminine narrative.

Traditionally, feminine narratives have been reduced to minor status. But, the New Woman movement ushered in a change in this perspective in Western literature. Allende’s narrators prove the effectiveness of acknowledging the feminine voice given that it dominates whereas the masculine voice is *there* but largely ineffective—the Other. André supports this notion, stating that there is “a new kind of feminine archetype” created within Allende’s text(s) (87). She ties Allende to an emerging group of Latin American women writers who have concentrated on the deconstruction of feminine stereotypes through the creation of disorderly heroines born to question the patriarchal conventions of their time…[who] embody radical extensions to the nineteenth-century New woman heroine…[and who] replace sexual passion with female solidarity, thereby expanding the vision of a culture of sisterhood between women uncompromised by color, class or age, but strictly based on affection and friendship as positive sources for feminine empowerment (André 77).

Relating these texts to the New Woman movement is actually significant because while this movement initially ran its course in the United States by the early 1920s, Chile’s society did not react similarly for several decades. *The House of the Spirits* and *Portrait in Sepia* both reflect this delayed reaction. While Allende describes *Daughter of Fortune* as “an allegory of the feminist movement,” Eliza’s quest for liberation predates such social advances in both Chile and the United States (Zapata 177). Regardless, this text
absolutely corresponds thematically with the scope of the entire trilogy, so we have to understand that such motives, ideas and actions are truly universal.
Conclusions

Allende’s marriage of a dominant feminine narrative and magical realism corresponds with Cixous’s idea of *écriture féminine*. Magical realism supports the feminine narrative because it is likewise untraditional and provides a space for imagination. It gives the Other a place to be and flourish rather than forcing the Other to the fringes or shadows of society. *Écriture* is detached, which seems to be a necessary function of any outlet that supports giving a voice to the invisible. If it were a traditional narrative outlet, then the Other would never be accepted in it, would never be invited to participate in its space. While writing a trilogy is not inherently a break from the “normal,” writing texts that boldly empower women despite being historically grounded while also utilizing magical realism is. Recognizing that Allende’s writing demonstrates fundamental ideas of *écriture féminine* strengthens the understanding that the texts maintain fluid boundaries rather than conformity to rigid patriarchal dictates.

The three novels work best as a trilogy rather than as singular works because of their continuity; they collectively strengthen the subversive qualities of the feminine discourse to force their acceptance beyond the limited scope of a patriarchal idea/understanding of magical realism. Allende makes note of this, stating that I think almost all of them [her female protagonists] are subversive…All of these characters have one thing in common: they do not accept what they are told; they
rebels. They search for ways to escape from patriarchy, religion, the tremendous weight of tradition and the family. Some rebel through politics, or by being feminists, or finally participating as guerrilleras. Others like Clara rebel by evading reality completely in search of other worlds. Others like Paulina do it by taking the bull by the horns and confronting tradition directly, but she has the advantage of being born wealthy (Zapata 189-190).

Because the trilogy creates a generational narrative continued through the feminine perspective, Allende ultimately achieves the effect of a narrative perspective that is fertile, engendering more hope in each successive generation that takes up this family history. It is both maternal and cyclical, rife with allusions to birth and rebirth that are only possible because Allende chose to emphasize the matriarchy within the family history. For this reason, the collection of stories simply cannot be sustained through a masculine perspective, which is also inherently faulty. Allende does not simply repeat an archetypal story but rather creates a foundation upon which successive generations of écriture feminine can stand; in so doing, she establishes the feminine narrative as having authority in the literature of the Americas, which was decidedly lacking previous to her trilogy.


