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ISABEL ALLENDE'S  
*HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS* TRILOGY  
NARRATIVE GEOGRAPHIES

TAMESIS

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## INTRODUCTION: READING SPACE IN THE TRILOGY

A geographically-rooted reading of the novelistic trilogy formed by *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*), *Hija de la fortuna* (*Daughter of Fortune*), and *Retrato en sepia* (*Portrait in Sepia*) reveals that Isabel Allende's fiction subverts masculinist and authoritarian domination of political, ethnic, sexual, and even textual spaces, as it converts these sites into contact zones to be contested, renegotiated, usurped, or appropriated by marginalized groups. Read from a spatial perspective, Allende's re-writing of the center implies a revolutionary process, since, as Michel Foucault has noted, "the history of space [is] . . . the history of power" ("Eye" 149). Noted geographer and critic Edward Soja similarly affirms the value of textual readings anchored in cultural geographies, as he claims that "[A]ll social relations become real and concrete . . . only when they are spatially 'inscribed' – that is, concretely represented – in the social production of social space. . . . There is no unspatialized social reality" (*Thirdspace* 46).

Yi-Fu Tuan and other contemporary critics have persuasively confirmed "the prestige of the center" ("Space and Place" 38). Through her writings, Allende frequently repositions populations that have traditionally been marginalized, or simply rendered invisible, to the center of her plots and narrative flows, thereby imbuing them with prestige while displacing whites, males, and oligarchs to peripheral roles. The trilogy's construction of textual spaces insists upon the heterogeneity of both public and private sites as a systematic rejection of what Linda Gould Levine describes as the "colonialismo ideológico" – "ideological colonialism" – of the traditional borders governing gender and ethnicity ("Fronteras" 170). While Allende's works, particularly *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*), have inspired significant research and analysis, very little critical attention has been paid to the coherence of the three novels in question as a trilogy, and to date no monographic studies have concentrated on the trilogy from a strictly geographic perspective. The study attempts to address this void through an analysis of the sophisticated means by which

Allende anchors her works in the construction of physical contact zones among the various sectors of the center and the periphery through their political maneuverings, racial and ethnic hybridizations, regulation (or lack thereof) of access to corporeal space, and both written and photographed texts as a means of acquiring mobility and transcendence. It will attempt to demonstrate that her works reject the traditional “patriarchal paradigm” and replace it with various pluricentric or multivalent representations of identity as a fluid, hybrid, at times contradictory space (Lindsay, *Locating* 136). Chapter 1 attempts to situate the author’s life and works within a progressive socio-political, socio-ethnic, and socio-sexual framework in order to demonstrate the trilogy’s particular suitability for geographic readings and offer a framework for spatial approaches to fiction in general and Allende in particular.

Studies of what collectively may be termed the geography of identity provide the theoretical framework for this project. Chapter 2 attempts to provide a synthesis of critical theories vital to this approach to offer readers a fuller picture of the possibilities unleashed by a kinesthetic reading of literary texts. Briefly stated, this approach explores the shifting nature of individual identity as one attempts to navigate the various borders and contact zones that govern access to and interaction with one’s surroundings. The works of Susan Stanford Friedman and Gloria Anzaldúa are pivotal to this approach to Allende’s trilogy, the former as a pioneer of a feminism interwoven with “cultural geographies of encounter” in her key work *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, and the latter as the Chicana activist and author who contributed profoundly to the study of the point of encounter known as the borderlands. Michel Foucault also supplies a key theoretical base for this work, as his analyses of heterotopia and the interrelations between space and power have shaped much of literary and cultural criticism in recent decades. Other important influences on this approach include Henri Lefebvre, another founder of the discourse on space and power and key interpreter of Foucault’s works; Shirley Ardener, for her insights into access to and regulation of space; and the important work on corporeal space contributed by Elizabeth Grosz and Susan Bordo in recent years.

Chapter 3 proceeds from an overview of contemporary geographic and cultural studies approaches to race and ethnicity as social constructs, to an analysis of the role of these perceived markers of identity in the construction of both national and personal space. Given Allende’s increased consciousness of issues of class and race during her own decades as an expatriate, this chapter concentrates on *Hija de la fortuna* (*Daughter of*

*Fortune*) and *Retrato en sepia (Portrait in Sepia)*, which explore these issues with greater depth and sophistication than Allende's first novel. I begin with the novels' dismantling of the myth of "European" Chile and proceed to the navigation of ethnicity within the home by multi-racial protagonists such as Eliza Sommers and indigenous domestic workers who are afforded partial access to the private sphere of the elite. Finally, I consider the California frontier as a heterotopic space which affords a degree of agency and mobility to socio-ethnic minorities due to the region's undefined nature, yet also insists upon the strict maintenance of ethnic hierarchies and myths of racial purity within the private sector.

Chapter 4 delineates Allende's breakthrough novel, *La casa (House)*, as a feminist historiography that systematically exposes, contests, and dismantles borders governing both public and private access to centers of power. The home, as perhaps the most intimate of built spaces, frames out an ideological battleground between Latin America's Liberal and Conservative parties. Domestic spheres serve as both sustainers and challengers of class-based hierarchies of oligarchic power, and Allende's universe abounds with the penetration of subversives into supposedly impermeable zones. The appropriation of public space, particularly through the political propaganda and public protests of the early 1970s, is a central focus of the chapter, culminating in the tragic, covert space-within-a-space of Alba's military imprisonment.

Chapter 5 expands upon and concretizes the introduction to feminist corporeal geographies provided in Chapter 2 by focusing on socio-sexual stratifications within the trilogy. Sexuality – along a continuum ranging from the playful to the violent and exploitative – plays a central role in Allende's works, but critics have typically emphasized only those aspects which contribute to a portrayal of the author as excessively romantic and sentimental. However, a geographic reading, tied to a broader vision of the author's consistently progressive political views, reveals that her works reject the mechanisms of control that have permitted heterosexual males to regulate, define, and market the female body without consequences. My analysis emphasizes concealed sexualities, particularly within the spaces of rape and sexual slavery, and the author's means of constructing narrative sites that resist and subvert taboos. The chapter concludes with a study of the author's fondness for heterotopic and carnivalesque spaces, including her re-invention of the Latin American literary commonplace of the brothel as topos and rite of passage.

The metaphoric or symbolic space of text – both written and photographed – is a primary site within the trilogy for the subversion of

class- and gender-based borders. Chapter 6 explores the role of women's discourse, which has traditionally been marginalized or dismissed by patriarchal power structures, as a means of carving out a zone of space and authority for the female voice. Within the trilogy, writing and photography function as passports, either by allowing the female protagonist herself to achieve physical mobility or by allowing her message to transgress political and cultural borders. This chapter in many ways synthesizes the contexts explored earlier in the discussion as it demonstrates the role of text as a means of recovery or preservation of memory and the accompanying socio-ethnic, socio-political, and socio-sexual border crossings made possible by this documentation. It explores photographs as a means of blurring ethnicity, diaries and letters as testimonial literature, and taboo writing as an instrument of subversion and validation of female corporeality.

The study concludes with a brief synthesis of the often contradictory roles of Allende's narrative cosmos as both a site of protest against social injustice – firmly grounded in cruel realities of disenfranchised existence – and vision of an imagined community rooted in utopian social order. It explores the means by which the author's mass-market appeal uniquely positions her as an effective advocate for many of the same progressive purposes advocated by her elitist contemporaries.