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"Mapping Ethnicity in Isabel Allende's *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia*"

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### **Mapping Ethnicity in Isabel Allende's *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia***

The trilogy formed by *The House of the Spirits* (1982), *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), and *Portrait in Sepia* (2000) presents a unified saga of six families, three continents, and 130 years of political and cultural history. The novels' progressive Weltanschauung addresses such politically-charged topics as immigration, exile, war, colonization, independence, Marxist revolution, and military dictatorship within the geographic and cultural frameworks of the Southern Cone and the California borderlands of the nineteenth-century gold rush. Throughout the texts, Isabel Allende's carefully constructed narrative framework systematically rejects the borders that have traditionally delimited class, race, and ethnicity; instead, she consistently deterritorializes the ostensibly white, dominant social class by shifting its sphere of action to peripheral textual spaces in order to create a narrative whose energy is derived from the agency and mobility of women, ethnic minorities, and the working-class. As Maria Claudia André notes,

[T]he narratives document the significant participation that minorities and women exercised on the socio-political development of newfound territories in North and South America. . . [and] they stress how the transgression of either racial, geographic, social and sexual boundaries became a frequent practice of the times, and most likely, the only legitimate practice to exercise mobility and agency. (76)

Linda Gould Levine also supports this interpretation of Allende's texts as a coherent, purposeful contestation of the "colonialismo ideológico" implicit in traditional constructs of gender and ethnicity, and by extension, in male-authored historiography which she describes as committing "memoricidio" through its intentional forgetting of non-privileged populations (170). In other words, Allende's matrilineal history re-centers Latin American society, displacing traditional power structures while privileging those who have traditionally been written out of history—homosexuals, indigenous populations, lower socio-economic classes, women, and racial/ethnic minorities.

A spatial reading, or geo-reading, of Allende demonstrates that her plots are sustained, indeed driven, by the contestation of socio-ethnic, socio-political, and socio-sexual boundaries. Within this destabilized universe, her female protagonists' identities are positionally constructed. As Susan Stanford Friedman demonstrates in *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, "the geographics of identity moves between boundaries of difference and borderlands of liminality" (18-19). Race, gender and sexuality are axes around which identity is constructed, and the foregrounding or minimizing of these traits is spatially anchored. Thus, identity is read in terms of the interstices of space and power, so that identity is multiple, contradictory, and relationally constructed. Particularly in the final two works of the trilogy, as the parameters of hegemonically-defined spaces shift, the ethnic self-identification of Allende's characters also shifts. Her protagonists skillfully manipulate societal constructs of race in order to gain mobility and access in various spatial arenas. Through the processes of border transgression and assertion of agency, *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia* deconstruct the myths of ethnic and racial purity as politically-based socio-cultural constructs that are deeply interwoven with the construction of national *identity* in the California frontier as well as in the criollo-dominated world of post-independence Chile.

*Daughter of Fortune*, which encompasses 1843-1853, opens in a self-defined British colonial sector of Valparaíso, Chile, and closes amidst the boundaries of Chinatown in the heterotopic space of San Francisco's gold rush. On the surface, the text adheres to many of the conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel: the plot centers on the tale of a foundling, Eliza Sommers, left at the door of a wealthy family and later revealed to be the daughter of the ship's captain who takes her in. Miss Rose, the captain's sister, devotes herself to grooming Eliza as a proper young British lady. Additionally, the text incorporates multiple picaresque elements, albeit motivated by a crisis pregnancy: the pregnant orphan is forced to disguise herself as a male and stow away on a ship in pursuit of her lover, who has fled to California hoping to make his fortune in the gold rush. Unconventionally, however, Allende utilizes these somewhat standard plot elements as tools for her skillful deconstruction of the myth of Chile as a "European", i.e., "white," nation and of the United States as the land of opportunity.

By filtering the novel's first references to Chile through the privileged positions of two white, British males, Allende highlights the subaltern status of a nation that has traditionally prided itself on its "European-ness." When Jacob Todd and his peers finally manage to locate this unknown space on a globe, the outdated cartography denies Chile the very status of nation. Rather, it is still delimited as "una colonia del Reino de España, perdida en la parte inferior del mundo, donde ninguno de esos alegres compinches sospechaba que había vida" (22). From Todd's perspective, distance from Europe equates to invisibility, and the Southern Cone is a dark, inferior zone incapable of sustaining life, in contrast to the superior status of Spain and England. Further usurping the myth of Chilean whiteness, the narration characterizes Chileans as "un pueblo mestizo," "un ignoto y bárbaro país" whose incongruent and disjointed national topography reflects the hybrid nature of its people (23). Allende uses the perspective of Captain John Sommers, another of the earliest immigrants to

South America, to further expose the falseness of the nation's socio-ethnic hierarchies. As he points out, in Chile even the upper classes are mestizo, but "la sangre indígena se esconde como la plaga;" furthermore, he reveals that the government encourages the re-imposition of colonialism by giving land to Europeans in an attempt to "mejorar la raza" (23). Thus, from the earliest pages of the text, Chile is defined as a space of hybridity and hypocrisy. The European gaze frames the newly independent nation as a "backward" subaltern region, too distanced from the centers of metropolitan power to be of any consequence in the so-called civilized world. Consequently, Allende represents the arrival of European imperialists to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Chile as a new colonization, one devoted to the strengthening of white hegemony.

The emerging socio-ethnic hierarchies of mid-nineteenth-century Chile are also evident in the domestic sector that attempts to "whiten" the infant Eliza. The Sommers family inhabits a closed British-Chilean society which functions as a simulacrum of stratified English society. Indeed, the colonizers choose to live in Cerro Alegre, a space so elevated that it nearly succeeds in rendering the indigenous and mestizo portions of Valparaíso invisible: "el aspecto de la ciudad daba un vuelco y desaparecían las casuchas y conventillos de más abajo" (31). The self-selected isolation of the British colonists—an attempt to maintain the "ilusión eterna de no estar allí, sino en Inglaterra" reaches the absurd: Jeremy Sommers orders all possible products by catalog to avoid being contaminated by contact with the locals, and he is habitually ill due to his insistence upon dressing himself according to the calendar of the Northern Hemisphere rather than the realities of the port city's climate (54). Eliza, unaware that she is actually the child of one of these British aristocrats, lives in perpetual deterritorialization within this closed space. Within the domain of the house, the British "lady" Miss Rose Sommers and the indigenous servant Mama Fresia battle for the right to define the child's ethnic identity. Similar to the Chilean oligarchy's own mythical European origins, and the consequent obscuring of the region's Araucana roots, Miss Rose creates a version of Eliza's depositing within the family that highlights the child's whiteness. Thus, she insists that Eliza's mother left her at the door of the British Import and Export Company so that she would be educated in the "sólidos principios de la fe protestante y el idioma inglés" (12). Instead of acknowledging her brother John's one-night stand with an indigenous woman at the port, Miss Rose prefers to perpetuate the myth of Anglo superiority as the obviously preferred culture for child-rearing. Behind Miss Rose's back, Mama Fresia foregrounds the child's indigenous roots and thus her bond with her nanny: "¿Inglesa tú? Niña, no te hagas ilusiones, tienes pelo de india, como yo . . . No te hagas ilusiones, no naciste para princesa y si hubieras tenido el pelo tan negro como lo tienes ahora, los patrones habrían tirado la caja en la basura" (12). It is important to note that these acknowledgements of Eliza's obvious non-white roots take place only within the domestic spaces dominated by the servant: the kitchen and the bedroom. Within the more public zones of the home, only the intertwined myths of whiteness and British superiority are acknowledged. When Eliza begins to question her own place in the family, and, by extension, in society, Miss Rose identifies the child's interest in Mama Fresia's mapuche language and culture as the cause of her dislocation. Whiteness is presumed to be the natural condition

for the child, so that her confusion or sense of marginalization must be the result of the intrusion of non-white, non-British elements in her life. Rather than allowing for the possibility that a multi-faceted identity might enrich and complete Eliza's understanding of herself, Miss Rose presumes that indigenous customs and languages have darkened the child's experiences and prevented the orphan from embracing her (privileged, British) place in the world. Consequently, within the public spheres of the house—those which fall under Miss Rose's control—Eliza is required to maintain the pretense of a proper young British lady.

The negotiation of Eliza's identity within the British neo-colony of Valparaíso is a process from which the protagonist herself is excluded. Her position within the house determines which half of her being is validated at any particular moment, but within Chile she is never allowed to integrate her two cultures of origin. When she does attempt to transgress the borders of accepted behavior for a British young lady by entering into a fantasy-driven romance with Joaquín, a working-class teenager employed by her uncle's shipping company, Eliza becomes pregnant. This moment of crisis, which would normally result either in her banishment from her adoptive family or in the stagnation of a loveless marriage, actually propels her into her first significant exertion of agency and mobility. When she abandons the conventions of social class and femininity to stow away as a male on a ship to California, Eliza journeys into a heterotopic space, the California frontier, whose hybrid and undefined nature will allow her to begin the process of integrating the contradictory elements of her ethnic identity. She is free to simultaneously achieve contradiction and synthesis within this nation-less, lawless zone that "juxtapose[es] in a single real place several spaces . . . that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 268).

Within the frontier, her mutable ethnic identities allow Eliza to successfully navigate life disguised as a male, as well as to assimilate into any ethnic context demanded by her shifting positionality. For the first time, her bi-cultural roots, and their accompanying unreadability by the broader Anglo culture, are allowed to perform a positive, enriching role; as Eliza learns to read the ethnicity of others, she manipulates their interpretation of her own identity by choosing to foreground or minimize various aspects of her origins at different times. Through this skillful navigation of the boundaries that delimit interpretations of race and ethnicity, Eliza gains access to the Hispanic, Asian, and white zones of the borderlands. As the narrator observes, "Podía entrar a los pueblos sin llamar la atención, mezclándose con los grupos de latinos, donde un muchacho con su aspecto pasaba desapercibido. Aprendió a imitar el acento peruano y al mexicano a la perfección, así que se confundía con uno de ellos cuando buscaba hospitalidad. También cambió su inglés británico por el americano . . . ." (293). Through a continuous, fluid process of self-construction rooted in relations of space and power, Eliza subordinates or highlights the linguistic, physical, and cultural attributes necessary for her to gain access to prohibited or exclusive spaces, and thus to thrive within a dangerous territory. Her cultural and racial *mestizaje* enriches, rather than restricts, her existence, but only after she has exited the hierarchical world of British Chile for a more fluid zone.

Eliza's marriage to Tao Chi'en, briefly presented in *Portrait in Sepia*, produces two children, Lynn and Lucky, who grow up within the inscribed ethnic space of Chinatown. This narrative, framed as a family saga reconstructed in 1910 by Eliza's adult granddaughter, Aurora, continues the matrilineal history of the Sommers and connects it with that of the del Valle family of *The House of the Spirits*. Of the three multi-racial female protagonists presented in the two final novels of the trilogy, only Eliza's daughter, Lynn Sommers/Lin Chi'en, is fully aware of her multi-ethnic origins. Her existence is rooted in the constant transgression of ethnic boundaries, depending on her location within San Francisco. Because she can pass as "white," outside Chinatown Lynn "circulaba plenamente libre, como cualquier muchacha blanca," dressed in a modern "American" style (64-65). Her unclassifiable beauty increases her access to mainstream American society; in fact, she is selected as the model for a statue which will be the new symbol of the Republic, to be placed in the center of San Francisco's "white" society, precisely because she supposedly embodies the melting pot concept. Her beauty offers the American male a certain level of Orientalist exoticism, yet she is also described as lacking any clearly identifiable "Oriental" features; as Allende makes clear in *Daughter of Fortune*, access to the American dream requires a knowledge of English and the absence of any clearly indigenous, Asian, or Hispanic traits. For this reason, Lynn is also praised for her "classic," read European, features; the neutrality or unreadability of her appearance makes her an attractive symbol for the nation and affords her a certain level of access to privileged society. In contrast, her brother Lucky's sphere of action is limited to the ethnic space of Chinatown because he is considered too Asian to "pass" as "American" within broader San Francisco society.

Despite her mobility within Anglo society, in Chinatown Lynn is restricted to a minimal sphere of action. She follows her parents' example within Chinatown, shedding her "American-ness" and dressing in "Chinese" garments, a tunic and silk pants. This deculturation is intended to foreground her Chinese origins and thereby afford her a form of invisibility made possible through uniformity. Allende's representation of this process reveals her comprehension of the multi-axial nature of race- and gender-based hierarchies. In Anglo-dominated socio-cultural contexts which are centered on ethnicity, Lynn is expected to camouflage the Asian and indigenous portions of her identity in order to avoid the ostracism and racism directed against those who do not appear to be white. Within the boundaries of Chinatown, however, the appearance of ethnic homogeneity minimizes the threat of race-based violence. As a result, within this inscribed ethnic zone, gender is foregrounded as the key factor in social stratifications, and being female forces Lynn to live "totalmente recluida" within the domestic space designated for women by the violent, patriarchal governing structures of her community (64). As Gillian Rose has noted, the rules of access and confinement that restrict women to the private sector leave her dis-placed or place-less; she may be subject to violence within her home or immediate community, but patriarchal norms prevent her from gaining the agency necessary to escape this dangerous zone (35).

Aurora, the daughter of Lynn and the white aristocrat Matías del Valle, lives the sharpest ethno-cultural disembodiment of the three women. Orphaned

by her mother and unacknowledged by her father, for the first five years of her life she is Lai-Ming, fully inscribed in the life and language of Chinatown under the care of her grandfather, Tao Chi'en. The narration firmly roots her "bajo el techo de mis abuelos maternos;" in fact, Aurora's life is a form of reverse migration, an inversion of the pattern of her female ancestors (13). Although Eliza and Lynn are either unaware of or forced to subordinate the marginalized elements of their origins within mainstream society, in Aurora's case the situation is reversed: during her early childhood, her European roots are rendered invisible while her minority origins are foregrounded. When she is five years old, Tao Chi'en's death forces her into a traumatic deculturation and dislocation: in a misguided effort at providing her granddaughter with a sense of place, Eliza condemns her to the same rootlessness that she herself had suffered by assigning the child to live with her paternal grandmother. Reflecting on her own sense of loss after the death of her husband, Eliza laments, "No pertenezco a ningún lugar. Sin Tao, carece de sentido vivir en Chinatown, tampoco calzo entre americanos y no tengo nada que hacer en Chile. Soy extranjera en todas partes, pero deseo que Lai-Ming tenga raíces, una familia y buena educación" (146). By choosing to send the child to live with Paulina del Valle, a complete stranger who views Asian-ness as a defect, Eliza re-inscribes the child in the same aristocratic society that had immobilized *her* for sixteen years. In other words, this effort at "giving" Aurora roots implies a violent pruning of half her identity, a more abrupt version of the displacement Eliza had experienced in the tug-of-war between Miss Rose and Mama Fresia. The only "Chinese" elements permitted under Paulina's roof are tokenized, trivialized adornments, the trendy "chinerías" with which she decorates (42). In a desperate attempt to re-inscribe herself in a familiar cultural and linguistic environment, Aurora flees Paulina's home and returns to Chinatown, an experience which prompts Paulina's decision to move with her grandchild to Chile, where her Asian identity will be rendered invisible.

Of the trilogy's three multi-ethnic female protagonists, Aurora is the least actualized and least capable of exerting agency. She describes herself in her diary as always trapped between uncertainties, as a blurry, undefined portrait in sepia. The portrait metaphor is an apt one, as Aurora's life is on one level a constant search for the missing pieces of herself that seem to have been cropped from the portraits she collects. The only tangible evidence of her Chinese roots lies in one photograph, taken during Chinese New Year, in which "una criatura muy pequeña, ataviada al estilo de las novias chinas . . . sostiene un abanico en la mano y podría estar riéndose, pero las facciones apenas se distinguen. . ." (109). The image of this tiny child is obscured by a huge dragon head and fireworks, a framing which implies a certain spatio-temporal disproportionality: the child's identity is dwarfed by the enormity of the cultural stereotypes that surround her, and she is dressed in clothing that threatens to devour her, blurring her features and nearly rendering her invisible. Thus, even in this picture which might facilitate the re-integration of her identity, Aurora as subject is barely defined. In fact, the image is described in third-person, thereby heightening the sense of distancing from the narration, and this passage is immediately followed by Aurora's first-person confession, "No recuerdo ese momento y no reconozco a la niña de ese único retrato" (109).

A second photo in her collection presents Aurora's mother, who died days after giving birth to her. Despite the multiple images of Lynn that Aurora has collected on postcards and calendars, she is unable to recognize her mother in the photo. Her only comments on the photo serve to distance her from the image it frames: "nada tengo de ella . . . Me parezco más a mi padre, tengo su tipo español . . . por desgracia saqué muy poco de la raza de mi extraordinario abuelo Tao Chi'en . . . no creería que llevo sangre china en las venas" (110). Juxtaposed, these two photos point to the protagonist's unrealized nature as a woman who is unable to recognize herself either in terms of her beloved Chinese ancestry or her blood ties to her mother. Rather, she defines herself exclusively in terms of the European father who barely acknowledged her and whose family displaced her from the Asian and indigenous elements of her identity. Aurora's search for roots and permanence takes place within Chile's white oligarchy, a society to which she can gain access only by perpetuating her own myth of whiteness. Having described herself and Eliza as "vagabundas," Aurora shares her grandmother's yearning for mobility as a means of self-identification and re-integration. Unfortunately, she lacks the socio-cultural fluidity which made Eliza's full assumption of agency possible. Aurora does manage to leave Paulina's home and relocate to a more marginalized position outside the city, but she never returns to her origins in Chinatown or understands the importance of mapuche cultures to her ethnic makeup. Consequently, she is a fragmented and contradictory subject. Aurora embodies whiteness and economic privilege, with all the rights of access and mobility that socio-cultural position implies in Chile, yet she remains paralyzed by the truncation of two-thirds of her identity.

As the increasing sense of identity fragmentation suffered by Eliza, Lynn, and Aurora demonstrates, racial and ethnic categories acquire their meaning and power, or lack thereof, through hierarchically-governed socio-cultural and socio-political processes. Constructs of ethnic space and their concomitant impact on identity formation in Allende's narrative universe support Mike Crang's argument that categories such as race and gender do not carry an implicit socio-cultural significance: "The meaning of even biological categories is given through social mechanisms—they do not have a natural or pre-ordained significance . . . Categories of identity are neither solely voluntary nor naturally given. Categorizing people is a political process" (60). The process of assigning value to or privileging certain axes of identity over others is strongly linked to questions of space and place, as the delineation of racial categories often takes shape in terms of national boundaries or through the demarcation of ethnic zones within the nation by hegemonic structures. Allende's trilogy reflects the rigidity of these boundaries and acknowledges their destructive impact on marginalized members of society; the novels both invite border transgression and highlight the difficulty of usurping traditional power dynamics. Thus, her protagonists shift between agency and immobility, with varying degrees of success, as they attempt to navigate their diverse ethnic inheritances.

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