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Departure from Magical Realism: Female Agency in Latin American Post-Boom Literature

By

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Honors Thesis

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Introduction: Departure from Magical Realism

This thesis explores depictions of female agency in post-colonial Latin American literature. I highlight three primary texts: Gabriel García Márquez's (1927-2014) 1967 *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a canonical magical realist novel; Isabel Allende's (1942-present) 1982 *The House of Spirits*, her debut novel and a multi-generational story similar to Márquez's, and Isabel Allende's 2022 *Violeta*, a historical novel offering an autodiegetic narrative of a woman's 100 years of life in an unnamed South American country, to analyze how female characters evolve in response to changing sociopolitical landscapes and literary movements in Latin America. My central focus is Allende's most recent novel. *Violeta* serves as a reconstruction of female empowerment that celebrates South American women's overlooked virtues amidst a conservative and patriarchal society. While these virtues are somewhat present within *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, female voices in Marquez's novel are overpowered by central patriarchal figures in the story, such as the family patriarch and founder of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía, who limits the decision-making capabilities of his wife, Úrsula Iguarán and assumes leadership. Similarly, in *The House of Spirits*, the association between women and spirituality, which Allende borrows from Marquez, exacerbates the novel's misreading of Latin American women as exotic and shallow agents. This misreading also poses obstacles to the autonomy and empowerment of the female characters in the novel. Conversely, Allende's latest work redefines the traditional portrayal of South American women within multi-generational chronicles by offering complementarity between individual agency, evidenced by epistolary and spatiotemporal experiments, and collective agency, via a reciprocal relationship between *Criollo* and Indigenous women that the novel insists on.

Allende's *Violeta* provides more depth and agency for its female characters, partially because it departs from the mysticism that characterizes the magical realism genre from which *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The House of Spirits* emerged. The magical realism genre emerged among five prominent Latin American Boom literary movement authors during the 1960s and 1970s, including Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortazar, and Jorge Luis Borges. As scholar Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado notes in his essay "Teaching the Latin American Boom as World Literature," the Boom was characterized by innovative modernist literary forms introduced by these authors, who opened new circuits of commodity circulation in the transnational literary markets (Sánchez Prado 123). Despite the growing popularity of Latin American literature, allowing these emerging writers to gain recognition amidst a European-dominated market, their increasing popularity casts a shadow on other Latin American authors worthy of recognition and acclaim. This issue mainly affects Latin American female authors like María Luisa Bombal (who inspired Juan Rulfo to write *Pedro Páramo*), Clarice Lispector, Rosario Castellanos, and Silvina Ocampo, among others (García 2021). While exploring the works of these Boom female writers is not within the scope of my project, it is essential to point out how women's writing in Latin America has changed over time. The 1980s and 1990s allowed female writers to gain more recognition for their work while breaking into the "boy's club" encompassing Latin American literature. Literary scholar Román de la Campa notes this shift in his essay "The Boom and the Americas: A Story with No End," in arguing that the 1990s marked a "broader inclusion of border and United States Latino issues, a framework imbued by different national, racial, linguistic, and gender ideologies" (De la Campa 192). Moreover, De la Campa makes mention of Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel, known for her novel *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) as notable Latin American Boom female writers. Among

these writers, I'd like to highlight Isabel Allende, who has often received criticism for trying to replicate Márquez's novel with a feminist twist.

While magical realism initially emerged to challenge colonial power and representation, Western readers misinterpreted the original message of early Latin American Boom novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Thus, it began to influence inaccurate and exoticized misconceptions about South America. Towards the 1980s, Western critics and readers decontextualized magical realism from its original epistemic disobedience and reduced it to the cultural essentialization of the region (Lopez-Calvo 102). The harmful stereotypes and expectations placed on novels by Latin American authors are still pervasive, primarily within circles of English-speaking publishers of novels by Latin American authors. In these circles, emerging writers are deterred from getting their books published if they do not fall under the category of magical realism.

For instance, best-selling author of *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* (2022), Silvia Moreno-García, argues in a guest essay to *The New York Times* that the Latin American novel's magical realist roots have been putting authors like her at a disadvantage in trying to break stereotypes while also proving the worth of their written works. She says that the magical realism genre has become a loose term that binds Latin American authors to outdated generic expectations: "It ties our work to the literature of our grandparents, obliterating time and space and geographical differences to create one single, lumpy category" (Moreno-García 2022). Moreno-García's words echo the sentiments of contemporary Latin American authors, such as Mariana Enriquez (award-winning author of *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed*), Fernanda Melchor (Anna Seghers Prize winner for her novel *Hurricane Season*), Samanta Schweblin (award-winning author of *Fever Dream*), and many more as they face magical realism's legacy

in the anglophone publishing industry (Feeny 2024). As Moreno-García argues, these female writers have had to divert readers' attention from tired stereotypes by experimenting with realism and supernatural genres in inventive ways. This experiment resulted in being longlisted for a quarter of the books nominated for 2024's International Booker Prize for translated fiction, in what critics call the "second Latin American Boom" (Feeny 2024). The attractiveness of the genre to European and North American readers primarily lies in its ability to fulfill their stereotypical fantasies of a primitive and irrational society cemented on superstition, natural disasters, dire poverty, senseless violence, and chaotic revolution (Lopez-Calvo 102). Such misreading of Latin American magical realism novels, aside from reinforcing fantastical stereotypes about the social and cultural spheres of the South American region, has also strengthened detrimental depictions of underrepresented communities, especially depictions of Indigenous people in the region. Even some prominent authors of the Boom literary movement, such as Cortazar, Fuentes, and Vargas Llosa, were often mistakenly classified as magical realist writers when they wrote novels that aligned more closely with realism (Lopez-Calvo 103). These misguided labels and restricting expectations even gave way for a manifesto condemning the legacy of magical realism. The *McOndo* manifesto, written by Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet in the late 1990s, blatantly refuses "to accommodate a portrayal of Latin America as a place of exotic fantasies anchored by various formulas of magical emplotment featuring rural settings, family genealogies, and allegories of underdevelopment" (De la Campa 190). The willful neglect of the political corruption and social issues that magical realism novels seek to draw attention to, which Western criticism is guilty of, casts a shadow on emerging Latin American authors who strive to challenge similar socio-political landscapes while bypassing the magical realism that Western readers expect.

In light of such a weighty legacy of magical realism, these emerging writers sought ways to differentiate themselves from the worldwide success of their predecessors. With her debut novel *The House of Spirits*, Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel, with her novel *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), defined the beginning of the Post-Boom movement in the 1980s. The most distinguishing factor of their novels involved the interplay between magical realist elements and women's empowerment and solidarity (Lopez-Calvo 115). In the same way that Latin American magical realism emerged to challenge the widespread influence of European currents upon postcolonial cultural life in the region, *The House of Spirits* surfaced as a work of subversion of the patriarchal lens that the genre utilized in the beginnings of the Boom period. As noted earlier, these two writers' newfound success came at the expense of critics making comparisons to García Márquez and condemning Allende and Esquivel for "trivialising magical realist narrative techniques or writing formulaic and contrived works" (Lopez-Calvo 115). From 1982 onwards, Allende's novels have acquired a larger readership, driven by the development of her writing style.

The magical realist and multigenerational narrative of *The House of Spirits* gave way to other genres in her contemporary novels, exploring themes such as historical fiction, memoirs, and a resurgence of the *criollista* novel, while expanding her emphasis on the South American region to the United States. For example, the plot of *Violeta* regularly takes the novel's central characters from urban and rural locales in South America to Europe and North America, their lives unfolding on a cosmopolitan scale. The perspective of contemporary writers such as Moreno-García provides a chance to reflect on how the resurgence of classical narrative techniques and writing styles, such as the resurgence of the epistolary novel deployed in *Violeta*, that American and European modernists employed could be favorable to free Latin American

writers from the legacy of Márquez: “Categories should not act as straitjackets, and yet the magic realism label has sometimes strangled rather than liberated Latin American literature” (Moreno-García 2022). Allende’s decision to depart from the magical realism genre begs the question of whether a narrative rooted in more classic realism can convey the message of subversion from Western misconceptions of South American sociopolitical issues.

Inheritor to a literary genre that does more harm than good for Latin American authors, Allende moves away in *Violeta* from *The House of Spirits*, a work of magical realism that depicts women as magical beings easily swayed by their families and their expectations without crafting a unique path for themselves. Instead, she offers a contemporary novel celebrating a woman’s first-person account of her life. Allende’s paradigm shift in portraying female voices becomes evident in how epistolary notions augment the representation of female agency within the narrative.

Epistolarity and Isabel Allende’s *Violeta*

Allende’s *Violeta*, set in an unnamed South American country, follows the story of Violeta, a woman who retells her life through a series of events compiled within her letters sent to her grandson, Camilo, over several years. She is the sixth and youngest daughter of Arsenio and María Gracia Del Valle, after five older brothers. Throughout her early childhood and adult years, Violeta exhibits virtues of an entrepreneurial spirit, a strong character, and independence, which develop significantly under the tutelage of the Rivases at Santa Clara, where she and her family migrate to when she is a young girl.

Violeta’s narrative of her own life thus becomes the primary source of her agency as an act of defiance against a patriarchal sociopolitical environment. This act of subversion is also

done by the author, Allende herself, disrupting the novel's narrative structure. *Violeta* begins with a short letter from Violeta to her grandson Camilo. This letter dates to September 2020, midway through the COVID-19 pandemic, when Violeta is around 100 years old. From then on, she recounts her life story while acknowledging the reader's identity as Camilo by directly addressing him in several instances. Even though the narrative could seemingly be confused as a compilation of letters sent by Violeta to Camilo throughout her life since his birth, Violeta reveals at the beginning of the novel that she never intended for the story of her life to be told through letters:

You have received many of my letters, where I've detailed much of my existence (minus the sins), but you must make good on your promise to burn them when I die, because they are overly sentimental and often cruel. This recounting of my life is meant to replace that excessive correspondence. (Allende 5)

To diminish the significance of these letters as historical accounts of her life, Violeta insists on their destruction. Despite this, Allende highlights Violeta's direct involvement in establishing a writer-to-reader connection by reframing her voice within the epistle to that of an autodiegetic narrator outside the epistle. Violeta's exact words in her correspondence to Camilo become irrelevant despite their sentimental power. Instead, Violeta rewrites this "excessive correspondence" into a condensed narrative divided by critical periods of her life.

In the way that Violeta deconstructs her entire life laid bare in a series of letters to craft later another continuous narrative that accentuates her life's journey, Allende also dismantles the traditional epistolary conventions, such as the existence of letters, to distort the relationship between text and context. In *Epistolarity and World Literature*, Rachel Bower defines such a relationship as an "I-you" grammar: "Relationship sits at the heart of epistolary exchange: the

letter always demands connection in order to create meaning and calls for a response from a specifically defined addressee” (Bower 9). Starting from this clear delineation of the role of the writer and the reader in epistolary novels, what could we make out of Allende’s *Violeta*, a story that emerges from the extraction and re-composition of letters existing beyond the confines of the text? The novel makes clear from the start that the writer or “I” is Violeta, while the addressee or “you” is Camilo. However, the absence of Camilo’s responses to these letters (or even the condensed rewritten version) complicates this relationship’s structure. Moreover, the frequent insertion of contextual information within the narrative, such as historical facts and explanations of family ties, often makes it seem that Violeta may be addressing a wider audience rather than only Camilo. Even though the addressee is universalized to encompass Camilo and a wider audience, the argument that the “I-you” relationship exists still holds. This scenario proves epistolary conventions can distort the I-you grammar (Bower 9). Consequently, the motivations behind Allende’s choice to set up an “I-you” grammar at the beginning of the novel, only to make the “you” ambiguous as the story progresses, become clear amidst the sociopolitical issues that the novel seeks to address, in addition to the need for providing more agency to the writer.

The assumption that even the structural confines of the epistolary novel can be challenged and reformed without changing its essence highlights Allende’s development as a writer from her acclaimed debut, *The House of Spirits*, published in 1982, to *Violeta* in 2022. *The House of Spirits* begins with the first words recorded in the notebooks of Clara Del Valle, the novel’s matriarch. It thus offers the reader a realistic account of the primary text (a diary) used to tell the fantastical tale of the Del Valle family:

Barrabás came to us by sea, the child Clara wrote in her delicate calligraphy. She was already in the habit of writing down important matters, and afterward, when she was

mute, she also recorded trivialities, never suspecting that fifty years later I would use her notebooks to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own. (Allende 1)

Throughout the novel, the existence of Clara's notebooks seeps in and out of her granddaughter Alba's narrative chronicle of her family. Even though diaries are not epistolary texts, the assumption is that Clara (as a clairvoyant) ultimately expected Alba to read her written accounts and condense them. Therefore, Clara's notebooks almost resemble epistolary texts since they highlight a secure "I-you" grammar with an implicit addressee: Alba. Clara tells her the story of the Del Valle-Trueba family through the notebooks she has written over the years, which remain hidden from the reader throughout the novel. In contrast, Clara's husband Esteban Trueba's writings acquire prominence in crucial instances in the novel, allowing the reader to access his inner consciousness. Finally, Alba acquires the responsibility to rearrange and rewrite the family's history, during which her individuality gets lost amidst the depth of the experiences her ancestors carry.

Violeta's sole act of rearranging and rewriting her story is evidence of her agency; meanwhile, *The House of Spirits* complicates a writer's agency within the novel by offering varying "I-you" relationships between recipient and writer. Everything there is to know about Clara throughout the novel comes from the notebooks she left behind after her death, which bear witness to life. Here, the "I-you" relationship remains ambiguous as Clara did not directly write down her life story for an audience in mind, nor did she reference a specific receiver within these written accounts. Still, in appearing to Alba as a ghost to impart her with the responsibility of compiling her notebooks, Clara reveals that these notebooks will have to be read by Alba after all: "I showed her my hand and shook my head, but she put the pencil in my left hand, told me to write with it. I began slowly. I tried to organize the story I had started in the doghouse" (Allende

473). Here, the outside noise of her ancestors influences Alba. In retrospect, even though she solely writes the story, it lacks much of her personal experiences. She becomes a consequence of her grandmother's legacy and unable to carve a distinct path for herself. In her task, Alba makes herself the witness to the lives of the women before her and struggles with the convoluted nature of the many memories and experiences of women bound by bloodline: "the doghouse filled with all the characters of her story, who rushed in, shoved each other out of the way to wrap her in their anecdotes, their vices, and their virtues, trampled on her intention to compose a documentary, and threw her testimony to the floor, pressing, insisting, and egging her on" (Allende 460). From the novel's beginning, it becomes clear that Alba neglects the trivialities inside of Clara's narrative as Violeta neglects hers, except that Alba is not the writer of her own story. As it occurs in *Violeta*, the addressee loses their ability to voice a response to the stories they digest in their epistolary form. The difference is that in *Violeta*, the purpose of a voiceless addressee is to universalize it; in *The House of Spirits*, the addressee is strictly individualized. The dangers of the Del Valle-Trueba's story in *The House of Spirits* lie in the gaps in the many stories Alba has gathered.

While Allende's *The House of Spirits* mentions epistolary forms exchanged between the characters, almost the entirety of the novel lacks the direct address to a receiver of letters that *Violeta* insists upon. Still, it is important to emphasize that *The House of Spirits* initially began as a letter to her grandfather (as famously noted by Isabel Allende in an interview), which later transformed into a work of magical realism. Similarly, Ignacio López-Calvo hints at García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as the product of his finding literary inspiration in epistolary forms brought by Spanish conquistadors and explorers in the Americas, which include chronicles, memories, *relaciones* (reports of individual colonizing feats), and diaries

(López-Calvo 111). While Marquez and Allende utilize epistolary texts in their earlier writing, only Allende makes her main characters writers. Notably, the return to an immersive epistolary form shows how Allende could have noticed a message missing within the gaps of inconclusive epistolary conventions within her earliest novel. Rachel Bower helps explain the motivations behind authors returning to epistolary conventions by stating that “a ‘return’ to any past style requires us to look closely at technique and form as well as the contexts in which literary works are produced, sold, and read” (Bower 2). In exploring epistolary conventions for her most recent work, Allende exemplifies a paradigm shift many authors in Latin America faced to gain the recognition they deserve beyond the pipeline of the widely acclaimed magical realism genre. Allende deviates from the third-person narrative of the central character’s life that makes up for most of *The House of Spirits* and instead moves toward providing a first-person narrative encompassing the critical elements of the narrator’s life, which makes her story worth telling.

Latin American Women, Space, and Time

Depictions of individual female agency in *Violeta* become evident through the flexibility granted to the autodiegetic narrator over time and geographical constraints. Violeta, as a writer and storyteller, only bestows partial geographical frameworks throughout her story, as she leads Camilo and the reader through different cities, rural towns, and countries such as Argentina, the United States, and Denmark without providing the name of the country in which she was born and in which most of the story develops. Similarly, Violeta provides time frameworks to follow the trajectory of events, such as the headings for the four sections of the novel (“Exile, 1920-1940”; “Passion, 1940-1960”; “Absence, 1960-1983”; “Rebirth, 1983-2020”), critical historical events, and mentions of years; however, she deliberately ignores specific dates and

other characters' ages; all in the likeness of retroactive memory which she is partaking in. In exerting ambiguous spatiotemporal constraints, not only does Violeta emulate the natural product of writing 100 years' worth of history retroactively, but she also provides the protagonist with the individual agency to exert more power over her personal account of her story.

Allende borrows ambiguous spatiotemporal elements from the magical realism genre, arguably to achieve the same unrestricted narrative structure that prominent magical realism novels offer. Ato Quayson, literary critic and Professor of English at Stanford University, in his essay "Space, Time and Magical Realism," defines the spatiotemporal elements of magical realism as incorporating both iconicity and indexicality. Iconicity refers to the symbolic significance of ordinary spatiotemporal categories, while indexicality alludes to the common association with everyday expectations of space and time in the quotidian world (Quayson 97). Magical realism provides an ideal background for the interplay between these two elements, facilitated by the blurred lines between reality and fiction within the narrative. For Quayson, these two modes intertwine with an emphasis on iconicity within the magical realist novel, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The House of Spirits*, to tie Latin American realist culture with a fantastical criticism of its turbulent political sphere. However, *Violeta* offers a less conspicuous interaction of these two modes to highlight indexicality as a key element to the storyline, in contrast to the magical realist novel's key element of iconicity. Regarding magical realism, Quayson attributes the purpose of the interaction between iconicity and indexicality to a method by which magical realism offers templates for introducing varying ontologies within the genre (Quayson 81). In reintroducing these elements into *Violeta*, Allende acknowledges the significance of iconicity and indexical elements to highlight the shared lived experience of

socio-political instability in South America; however, she complicates the role these play within magical realism by emphasizing indexicality without completely negating iconicity.

In *Violeta*, Allende navigates through time and space in a way that challenges the traditional structures of Márquez's work and her own debut magical realist novel. For instance, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the city founded by the family's patriarch José Arcadio Buendía receives the name of Macondo. The country the Buendías inhabit remains undefined throughout the novel, even when other nations (such as the United States) are referenced. Furthermore, *The House of Spirits*, in the same likeness, references names of towns (such as Tres Mariás, the land that Esteban Trueba acquires and later tends to for most of his life) and foreign countries (such as France, where Clara's daughter, Blanca's first husband Jean De Satigny comes from) without ever mentioning the name of the country in which the entire story progresses. Unlike the vivid depiction of Macondo, which serves as an anchor for the development of the century-long story of the Buendías, the setting of *Violeta* remains elusive, with its geographical identity intentionally omitted by its own narrator. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the naming of the city of Macondo carries a substantial symbolic meaning, seeping into its indexical nature, given the city was founded at a time during which not many cities held a name of their own:

At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point. (Márquez 1)

Macondo's founding emulates the common creation story by relying on iconicity as the leading narrative mode, departing from its indexical nature. The chronicles of the Buendía family begin from a landscape of nothingness, highlighting the insignificance of prior events if they were to

have taken place. The novel sheds light on the novelty of Macondo as the only possible and obvious choice of where the story should unfold, diverting from the expectation of a wider frame of reference, such as the country's name, which would help the reader trace the origins of the place. In moving deeper into the iconicity of geographical references, Márquez provides the narrative distance from the influences of his personal life growing up in Aracataca, Colombia. Still, in delving into the motifs and items that Márquez draws from his motherland, readers can associate the description of the fictional town Macondo as a village in a deserted jungle with a fruit company by the same name in Aracataca, Colombia (Naimi 2020). As such, Márquez's deliberate choice to leave the country where the story takes place undefined becomes paradoxical, as based on his references to geographical descriptions and historical events, readers can still identify and assume the story develops in Colombia.

In contrast, in Allende's *Violeta*, the unnamed country where the story takes place exists within predetermined geographical boundaries. The Del Valle family inhabits a space that has already been claimed. They do not assert their powers as rulers of the land like the Buendías did of Macondo, but rather as cohabitants. This case is similar to *The House of Spirits* since most of the story is set in the capital of an unknown South American country and Tres Marías, Esteban's land. However, the similarities end when it comes to indexical elements to reference geographical boundaries. In *The House of Spirits*, geographical descriptions and historical events operate in the same manner as those in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, offering a paradoxical encounter that leads the reader to assume the story is based in Chile when Allende purposefully omitted the mention of her country of origin from the narrative. In *Violeta*, the undefined country becomes an element of iconicity within the novel, welcoming the reader to consider socio-political turmoil as a collective experience for many South American countries impacted

by authoritarian regimes and human rights abuses. Additionally, the references to key historical events, such as the 1920s Spanish Flu in South America and the women's rights movement, determine the indexical value of these frameworks to draw connections between the fictional country and Allende's country of origin, Chile. Despite welcoming assumptions from readers about the country in which the story develops (perhaps Chile), the incorporation of other nations into the storyline, most importantly Argentina (a close neighbor to Chile), decentralizes the focus of the novel in understanding the sociopolitical context of the South American region through the mysterious "unknown country" trope:

While our country teetered on the brink of tragedy, I spent three years traveling often between Miami, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles. The information about our country that circulated in the United States was biased, parroting the right-wing propaganda and depicting us as just another Cuba. I returned home often from work, each time seeing the chaos and violence escalate as Juan Martín slipped further and further away from me.
(Allende 188)

In this passage, the structured idea of a nation with complex international relations becomes evident but still lacks the purveyor of identity: a name. Allende, in leaving the country to be unknown, alludes to the importance of unimportance of restricting identity and cultural context to one specific place; however, she still exhibits national values and a sense of belonging in denouncing misconceptions from the West, such as the biased view of left-wing governments in South America from the United States. Despite Allende's public profile as a Chilean writer—with her association to Salvador Allende Gossens, Chile's 28th president, and Allende's uncle—she deviates the attention from her country of origin to foster a larger conversation about how the Western world misinterprets political issues in South America. These indexical elements acquire

an iconic value in transmitting sympathy for the political turmoil in other South American countries. For instance, in the previous passage, Violeta criticizes news outlets in the U.S. for “depicting us as just another Cuba.” This occurs in the novel's third section, “Absence,” from 1960 to 1983. It just so happens that during this period, Marxist ideas and democratic socialist politicians took over countries such as Brazil, Nicaragua, and Chile; simultaneously, the U.S. was dealing with its own altercations with Cuba in trying to mitigate the rise of socialism. Under the assumption that Violeta is expressing her discontent with the U.S.’s biases against South American politics to her grandson Camilo—who is universalized in the narrative to reach a wider audience, as I noted earlier—it becomes evident that she seeks to address the importance of tying world history to her personal account of historical events to the receiver of the letters. Without her voyage between her country and the U.S., she would not have found a way to draw comparisons between media literacy and political landscapes in both places.

Furthermore, while Marquez’s work provides a meticulously structured chronology attached to the feats of the firstborn Buendia sons, Allende’s novel unfolds with a fluidity that transcends linear time, as the aged Violeta narrates her life’s saga in retrospect when she faces her death in the present moment, September 2020. In a counterintuitive manner, linear time frames in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* exhibit iconic values, as such linearity is determined by the son who inherits his father’s traits; meanwhile, nonlinear time in *Violeta* exhibits indexical significance as it is the product of the process of recollection of memories and central historical events. In moving towards indexical elements to trace the timeline of Violeta’s story in her narrative, the autodiegetic narrator exerts individual agency in how she restructures time as useful markers to guide the addressee rather than as an element dependent on a patriarchal line of succession.

For instance, the first sentence of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* offers a glimpse into two different timelines intersecting, which are dictated by the leader (or first-born son) of each generation: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (Marquez 1). In the present, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, the family’s courageous soldier who led the Liberal army to civil war against the conservatives, faces the firing squad after losing the war. His imminent fate evokes a childhood memory of when his father, Jose Arcadio Buendia, who was also the patriarch of the Buendias, took him to see ice for the first time. The fantastical events that shape the fates of the Buendía family emerge from this core memory. Throughout the novel, the purpose of different timelines intertwining in an interplay between memories, prophecies, and the present moment ultimately leads to a book detailing every minute aspect of their lives, written by Melquiades, the village’s gypsy. The novel’s linearity of events follows the leadership of the most prominent of the Buendía sons. It moves according to the mysterious book by Melquiades, enforcing the cyclical nature of the family’s mistakes being repeated repeatedly.

On the other hand, Allende’s *Violeta* provides a compilation of vividly detailed memories, sections of sociocultural clarifications, and brief autobiographical considerations. These indexical time elements highlight an ever-changing political climate's disruptive and realistic nature. Still, these do not work to restrict the purpose of the Del Valle generations for the sake of an ultimate truth. In the last couple of lines of the novel, no higher truth is revealed to Violeta, except for the acknowledgment that she is at the end of her tale in the present moment: “After a century, time is now slipping through my fingers. Where did those hundred years go?” (Allende 319). This passage, instead of letting the story reach a conclusion, reveals that this passage of time is only observable to Violeta but not to people like Camilo, who is still in the

prime of his life. In addressing the continuity of life, even beyond Violeta's own story, Allende reinforces the idea that under time constraints of over a century, Violeta has prevailed and still manages to draw her last breath to finish recounting her life story.

In terms of structuring the series of events that occur throughout both stories, while Márquez's novel orients the reader by utilizing archetypal characters within the narrative as the main subject of the period in question, Allende's novel guides the reader with a clear structure consisting of four parts: "Exile" (1920-1940), "Passion" (1940-1960), "Absence" (1960-1983), and "Rebirth" (1983-2020). Moreover, at the start of each chapter, Allende orients the reader back into the series of events by concisely describing a character's age, time, and circumstances. Concerning Márquez's novel, he can accomplish this orienting mechanism because of the repetition of characters' names. When naming a new child of the family after someone else, not only does the name get inherited, but so does the personality and behavior of the original owner. As such, initiating chapters with the introduction of a name that has not appeared before or has not been revisited in a while comes with the expectation that something extraordinary will happen. For instance, one of the last chapters of the novel successfully foreshadows the death of Úrsula, the longest-living matriarch, and the unfortunate events that ensued in the following beginning lines of the chapter: "Úrsula had to make a great effort to fulfill her promise to die when it cleared" (Márquez 333). As if following the hierarchy of the family tree, the events that follow shortly after consisting of Amaranta Úrsula and Aureliano Segundo awaiting the death of their matriarch up until her eventual death. Particularly, Úrsula's death becomes a time marker for the eventual extinction of the Buendías and Macondo because not even her predecessor Amaranta Úrsula can live up to the standards that Úrsula's presence exuded in life:

With Úrsula's death the house again fell into a neglect from which it could not be rescued even by a will as resolute and vigorous as that of Amaranta Úrsula, who many years later, being a happy, modern woman without prejudices, with her feet on the ground, opened doors and windows in order to drive away the ruin, restored the garden, exterminated the red ants who were already walking across the porch in broad daylight... (Márquez 345)

In comparison with Márquez approach to characters as time markers for the Buendías' fate, the time markers within each section of *Violeta* are chosen intentionally by the author of the same name and oftentimes involve her leading the reader through her recollection of events and how much contextual information she is willing to give at a specific time. For instance, the beginning lines of chapter 13 detail the events before the great earthquake that Violeta and her children Nieves and Juan Martín lived through while staying at the Rivas's farm in Santa Clara: "The 1960 earthquake caught me off guard. I was with my children at Santa Clara—the Rivas farm was still my refuge, my favorite place for summer vacation and relaxation, far from Julián, who never joined us on those trips" (Allende 151). Here, in a distinct light compared to the vague chronological timeline that Márquez provides in his novel, Allende first offers a specific date to jumpstart from, 1960, then fills in the spatiotemporal blanks left since her last update. After Juan Martín's birthday, when he wished for his mother to leave the abusive Julián, the Del Valle family returned to Santa Clara for the summer holidays. It is during this trip that the tragedy of the earthquake ensues. However, amidst this tragedy, Violeta still gives herself time to provide an update on other active participants of her early life and childhood: "Of the old inhabitants the only ones left were Aunt Pilar, Torito, and Facunda. The Rivases had died a few years prior and we missed them terribly" (Allende 151). Departing from this overview of Violeta's loved ones, she gets engulfed in the need to provide contextual information about the people of Santa Clara that

she does not return to the point of departure: the earthquake of 1960, up until mentioning her daughter's character brings her back to the way her courage was proven by her heroic action during the earthquake: "Her mettle was proven the day of the earthquake, the strongest that had ever been registered" (Allende 154). As such, this passage becomes an example of how *Violeta's* narrative is cohesive with the natural ways in which writers reflect their recollection of events and memories in storytelling by drawing connections between people, places, and time without intentionally making meaning out of the transition of events in the way that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* does. Violeta's individual agency lies in that spatiotemporal boundaries are subject to her own will and recollection of memories over the years. Within this seemingly disorganized narrative of her life, Violeta also carries in her memories the intertwining stories of other women who impacted her upbringing and search for independence.

In her latest novel, Allende departs from the mysticism attributed to women in Marquez's novel; instead, she draws female characters further into the mundane chronotype of the narrative. In doing so, Allende particularly highlights Violeta's individual agency as both the creator of spatiotemporal constraints in her story and as the facilitator of its outcomes on readers. Even though Allende does acquire some spatiotemporal aspects of magical realism, mainly in neglecting the names of central places in the storyline, she also drops them in certain elements and contexts where the symbolic or iconic value is unnecessary.

Indigenous and *Criollo* Women

Violeta's autodiegetic narrator, aside from exerting her individual agency through epistolary experiments and spatiotemporal control in the narrative of her life, also explores notions of collective female agency through her connection to women of different cultural

backgrounds. *Violeta* depicts a value for Indigeneity and its intersection with *Criollo* culture, evidenced by the mentor-pupil relationship that the Indigenous and *Criollo* women exhibit throughout the novel. Overall, the *Criollo* women (including Violeta) in the story portray the common values and goals of the *Criollismo* literary movement in the early 1900s, focusing on feminism. Violeta, as the chronicler of her own life, represents a sense of nostalgia for the land and a slower agrarian pace of life; similarly, she reframes the history of her land and her people in her own words.

Criollismo is the “nationalistic preoccupation in the arts and especially the literature of Latin America with native scenes and types” (Britannica 1999). The term is derived from the Spanish word *criollo*, which describes people of Spanish or European descent who were born in Latin America. In *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, Carlos J. Alonso, a Columbia University professor from the Department of Latin American and Iberian Cultures, describes the chronology and origins of this literary movement in Latin America in the chapter: “The *Criollista* Novel.” Alonso describes the need for a literary shift away from the European currents of nineteenth-century Modernism and towards an emphasis on Indigenous literary expression, given that Indigenous culture, although not intrinsically tied to the *criollo* population (primarily white), still became part of a big aspect of postcolonial life as a result of displacement after South American regions stopped being viceroyalties of Spain. Despite *Criollismo*’s chronological limits dating from the 1910s to the 1945s, Alonso characterizes this literary movement’s origins as diachronic, unable to be pinpointed to a concrete point in time (Alonso 196). Furthermore, other scholars such as María Cristina Pons in her essay “The Boom and the New Historical Novel: Continuities and Ruptures,” points out that Latin American Boom literature departs from the “literary traditions, stereotypes and regionalism of the *novelas de la*

tierra and of *criollismo*” (Pons 212). Because of Allende’s pattern of disrupting narrative innovations of the Boom, while reintroducing old literary traditions like the epistolary novel, a return to *criollismo* emphasizes her literary trajectory. Given the chronological perpetuity of this literary movement, it is safe to assume that Allende incorporates the values and characteristics of this literary movement in her latest novel, *Violeta*. Such an aspect is even emphasized in one hundred years of the narrator’s life in South America.

Allende’s historical novels (*House of Spirits* and *Violeta*, among others) focus on the lives of Latin American people who comprise the wealthier social class and are widely known as *criollo*. Despite the lens of Allende’s widely acclaimed historical novels being focused on this subgroup of the population, *Violeta* provides more representation of Indigenous women. In the novel, the Indigenous female characters acquire the role of mentors for the *Criollo* female characters to learn to live more modestly but independently. Overall, the interplay between women of two different cultural backgrounds moves away from imposing a social hierarchy seemingly noticeable in Allende’s oldest novels, such as *House of Spirits*. In that sense, *Violeta* reflects a recent attempt by some Latin American countries to advocate for the human rights of Indigenous communities to counter the detrimental effects of discrimination in the 1980s and 1990s.

In *House of Spirits*, the depictions of Indigenous women are limited. However, one of the few instances in the novel in which they participate in the narrative alludes to the strong social inequalities characteristic of the period in which the novel was written. After the death of Pedro Tercero, Blanca’s lover of a modest background whom Esteban despised, Blanca is pressured by her father to marry the wealthy European Count Jean de Satigny. For financial gain, Jean is willing to raise Blanca’s soon-to-be child despite him being aware that the baby is not his. After

some time in their marriage, Blanca becomes perplexed by the odd behavior of the Indigenous servants around the house. The few interactions between Blanca and the servants highlight the different social hierarchies that each fall into: “When Jean went out, she called the high-heeled Indian and for the first time gave him an order. ‘Go to the city and buy me some candied papaya,’ she told him brusquely” (Allende 287). This encounter depicts Blanca’s lack of concern for the livelihood of the Indigenous people with whom she shares the house while raising concerns about how the novel could reinforce harmful stereotypes about the coexistence of Indigenous and criollo people in post-colonial Latin America. The situation worsens after Blanca breaks into the darkroom, which her husband Jean explicitly told her never to go into. In this room, Blanca encounters the atrocities of her husband’s activities:

She recognized the faces of the household servants. There was the entire Incan court, as naked as God had put them on this earth, or barely clad in theatrical costumes. She saw the fathomless abyss between the thighs of the cook, the stuffed llama riding atop the lame servant girl, and the silent servant who waited on her at the table. (Allende 289)

Jean’s act of photographing his servants for erotic purposes, in which he’s the only one benefitting from it, serves as an analogy of how Western audiences exoticize Indigenous people and their culture for the sake of their own entertainment, with complete disregard for their integrity. The fact that Jean forces his servant to dress up as the “Incan court” only emphasizes the stereotype of the “uncivilized Indian” in a disturbing way. Furthermore, the passage could be interpreted as a dehumanizing depiction of an underrepresented group throughout the novel. The defenseless Indigenous servants solely become the bizarre pastime of a rich man. Not only that, but it also becomes merely the catalyst for Blanca’s decision to leave her husband and return to her mother, Clara, without turning back to wonder if the mistreatment of her servants would be

resolved in any way. Overall, the passage treats the Indigenous people as a means to an end without providing them with much agency within the narrative, and it provides an example of what Alonso would describe as harmful depictions of Indigeneity through a European-centrist view.

In comparison, by allowing perspectives of women of different cultural backgrounds to intersect with Violeta's main narrative, *Violeta* provides an avenue for other women to become protagonists of their own by acting as mentors for Violeta's upbringing. Violeta's sheltered upbringing in the socialite society of the capital prevented her from knowing much about the Indigenous cultures in her own country. Moreover, her family shares a feeling of anxiety around Indigenous people from the start; still, Violeta holds an optimistic view of their new status of "exiles" living in the Indigenous territory of Nahuel. Violeta acknowledges her ignorance about Indigenous culture in Latin America, fueled by Western stereotypes she had grown up hearing about: "imagining the fierce Apaches in the only movie I'd ever seen, a confusing silent film about the American Wild West" (Allende 60). Her optimistic outlook on her family's new circumstances allows her to draw connections between her and the women of the Rivas family, even when their different cultural backgrounds show some apparent distinctions. For instance, Violeta outlines the contrast between her family's and the Rivas' clothing and behavior: "with our white hands and thin coats that were useless against a good rain shower, and our different way of speaking" (Allende 63). One of the main factors distinguishing the Del Valle from the Rivas is the marks of labor left on the latter. The only person who has ever had to do hard labor is Torito, an orphan who enters the family's life when Violeta's mother hires him as a handyman to help with household tasks. Violeta believes that he belongs more than she and her family. With Violeta's oldest brother mostly absent from business affairs in the city, the Del Valle women

learn to adapt to their new circumstances by taking care of household duties that require physical labor under the tutelage of the Rivases. Violeta's mother, once a matriarch of the family concerned for the upbringing of her children and care for her husband, is stripped of her sense of authority in the household: "My aunts, who had barely known how to make a cup of tea, learned to use it, but my mother never even tried" (Allende 64). Her inability to adjust to this new pace of life and a mysterious chronic illness paves the way for a new maternal figure to take her place: the tenacious Lucinda Rivas, Abel's wife and Teresa's mother, who even protects Violeta from the chief's marriage proposal. In *The House of Spirits*, Clara is a motherly figure who, despite her indifference and lack of involvement, still gets to uphold the title of matriarch. Meanwhile, Violeta's mother, who exhibits similar traits, completely loses her status in place of Lucinda, who has the knowledge and skills to keep this new family afloat.

The Rivases, fueled by their commitment to education and community, foster an environment in which the Del Valle women learn how to put their best skills into practice when they are mostly cast into the background under Violeta's father's leadership. At the same time, Violeta reaches a period of personal growth constrained by the judgments and demands of higher society in the capital. In Nahuel, Violeta finds a new sense of purpose and opportunity by incorporating the tasks of Indigenous women in the area into her daily routine: "At Santa Clara I was always busy, the days flew by, I had a thousand chores to do and I loved them all" (Allende 64). Violeta's aunts, Pia and Pilar, experience similar growth under the teachings of the Rivases and the people of Nahuel, which is portrayed as an environment of companionship and reciprocity between women of different social classes and cultural backgrounds. All in all, the communal aspect of womanhood is applied across cultures within the same country: "She would share her notes with Aunt Pia, who was expanding her repertoire of herbal remedies but who

used the healing energy of her hands in place of a magic drum” (Allende 72). This passage introduces two different kinds of healers who share the same profession and search for knowledge. Lucinda translates Yaima’s Indigenous knowledge for Aunt Pia to learn about. Aunt Pilar also finds value in the Indigenous knowledge imparted to her throughout her stay: “Aunt Pilar had transformed during her time in the country, polishing her knowledge of mechanics, swapping her skirts for pants and boots, and she competed with me for Uncle Bruno’s attention” (Allende 72). In finding a way to benefit the family from her labor, Aunt Pia gains more independence and, by switching her garments, defies stereotypical gender roles for women at the time.

Further into Violeta’s late adulthood, this sense of belonging and reciprocity imparted to Violeta by the community of Indigenous women in Nahuel continues to permeate her relationship with her homeland amidst the sociopolitical issues threatening her family's survival. The racial and behavioral differences that Violeta initially pointed out when she first moved into Nahuel come full circle many years later when she returns to retrieve the bodies (Torito’s among them) unlawfully hidden in a cave:

More than twenty women and even a few kids clinging to their mothers’ skirts. The majority of them knew each other, were relatives or friends, almost all of them with the indigenous features so common in those parts. Hard work, poverty, and tragedy had marked them with a patina of sadness. (Allende 252)

The difference in this scene is that Violeta realizes how little these differences matter, given the decades spent learning about the land and the women's history. This knowledge cannot be erased no matter how far Violeta seems to move away throughout her life: “I was embarrassed by my American blue jeans, suede boots, and Gucci purse, taller and whiter than everyone else, but

none of those women seemed bothered by my wealthy bourgeois appearance; they accepted me as one of them” (Allende 253). These superficial differences eventually get overshadowed by the emotional power that Violeta’s reaction to finding Torito’s cross exudes in the passage. Most importantly, Violeta returns to this memory sometime later, after the death of Roy Cooper—a private detective who helps save Violeta’s daughter Blanca and becomes Violeta’s lover shortly after—and upon her return to Nahuel. She communicates with the women at the cave and makes them active participants in her life by acknowledging their names within her story: “First it was the women I’d met the day we went to identify the remains from the cave. Digna, Rosario, Gladys, María, Malva, Dionisia, and several others, especially Sonia, the mother of the four Navarro brothers” (Allende 270). Violeta seeks companionship in these women, tormented by a tragedy that haunts them all while also by the thirst for justice that prompts them to advocate for the Nahuel community. Even though Violeta would consider Nahuel her hometown, and she still harbors the Indigenous knowledge imparted by the Rivases, her mentors while she was growing up, she still utilizes her meetings with the women Nahuel as a learning experience:

I was integrated into the group little by little, careful to avoid offending anyone. I resigned myself to being different from them without attempting to hide it, because it would’ve been futile. I learned to listen without trying to solve their problems or give advice. (Allende 270)

The significance of Violeta’s growing relationship with Nahuel’s Indigenous women lies in the fact that she internalizes this knowledge and utilizes it to advocate for the injustices committed against marginalized communities while also imparting it to others. Consequently, the novel depicts a mentor-pupil relationship between Indigenous and *Criollo* women, which serves as a vessel for collective agency.

Conclusion

Isabel Allende's *Violeta* is not just another novel in a writer's already long publication list but a significant milestone in the evolving landscape of Latin American literature. It is a testament to the exploration of individual and collective female agency after the Latin American Boom era. Allende's use of subversive narrative techniques, such as epistolary experiments, ambiguous spatiotemporal elements, and a feminist resurgence of *Criollismo*, challenges conventional genre norms and redefines the role of Latin American women in modern literature. This exploration illuminates the complexities of female empowerment within the context of conservative and patriarchal societies in the region, offering a refreshing departure from the mysticism of magical realism, which has long dominated the anglophone publishing world of Latin American literature.

Through an analysis of Allende's *The House of Spirits* and *Violeta* alongside canonical texts like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I have uncovered the interplay between individual and collective agency within Allende's latest work. This analysis challenges misreadings and stereotypes perpetuated by Western interpretations of Latin American culture and scrutinizes the legacy of magical realism, once a revolutionary tool of resistance against colonial power, for its role in reinforcing exoticized misconceptions and constraining the diversity of narrative voices within the region. As emerging Latin American authors seek to carve out their own literary identities in the wake of this legacy, the post-boom movement has also witnessed a resurgence of classical narrative techniques, evidenced by Allende's return to the epistolary novel and *criollista* novel. Her departure from magical realism

signals a broader shift towards more realistic narratives, which augment the authenticity of South American sociopolitical issues and cultural background.

In the broader context of Post-Boom Latin American literature, Allende's journey from the shadows of Márquez's legacy to a reconstructed narrative landscape of her own reflects a recent movement by contemporary Latin American authors toward literary liberation. As these authors continue to challenge the boundaries imposed by misleading genre labels and seek to dismantle outdated stereotypes, the potential for a more inclusive and authentic representation of female Latin American voices makes a turning point for the better.

The representations of female agencies in South American literature are not just new literary narratives but a means to give justice to the diverse cultural backgrounds of women in the region. They serve as a bridge for Western audiences, transforming their conception of Latin American culture from a distant 'they/them' to an inclusive 'us.' These narratives encompass the inherent value of women in individual and collective life amidst a tumultuous sociopolitical environment, thereby highlighting the importance of their representation.

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