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Naming the Spirits: Feminist Nomenclature and Mythic Characterization in the First Three Novels of Isabel Allende

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Abstract

"What's in a name?" Juliet asks Romeo in their iconic balcony scene in Shakespeare's famous romantic tragedy. Does it really matter? Is it really true that the flower "which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet?" The answer of course is no, since a name by itself determines a person's identity and attributes, and oftentimes even his or her destiny, though sometimes in ironic or pastiche-like manner.

This paper is a semiotic-cum-socialist feminist analysis of Allende's first three novels, namely The House of the Spirits, Of Love and Shadows and Eva Luna. The close reading undertaken by this researcher reveals that the nomenclature in the three long narratives functions as a rhetorical strategy to provide nominal signs to discerning readers regarding the scope of her egalitarian and humanitarian concerns. There are at least four levels of naming in the aforementioned Latin American tales that point out to female (and eventual male) liberation from the

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binary opposites that bind them together but paradoxically at the same time keep them apart: the title of the novel as the first semantic sign the reader encounters, storytelling itself as a form of naming, the subversion of the surname as a patriarchal tool of domination, and the use of first names to create feminist characters with mythic proportions as bearers of light, life and love.

Furthermore, this paper argues for the necessity to reassess and rename the members of South America's literary canon in the light of Allende's fictional achievements as a novelist who asserts that "It's not a question of changing male chauvinism for militant feminism, but of giving both women and men a chance to become better people and to share the heavy burden of this planet."

Keyterms: militant feminism, male chauvinism, patriarchy, mythic, pastiche, semiosis and binary opposition

The man called his wife Eve,
because she became the mother of all the living.
- *Genesis* 3:20

My name is Eva, which means "life,"
according to a book of names my mother consulted.
- *Eva Luna* Chapter 1, Page 1

The act of naming in most cosmogony myths is a privilege given to the male of the species, be it human or divine, since the primordial creatures of these foundational narratives are traditionally depicted as masculine beings. In *The Holy Bible*, as well as in the sacred scriptures of Judaism and Islam, the two other patriarchal religions based on The Book, the privilege of nomenclature has always been assumed to be given by God to the so-called stronger sex. *Genesis*, the first book of the Old Testament, recounts how the Jewish god Jehovah, the omniscient male deity, bestowed to Adam, the first man, the divine right to name all of creation, including woman.

But why is taxonomy per se a tremendous source of patriarchal power? And why must women seize control of this political act? Feminist social scientist Barbara Du Bois gives as the answer to the first question when she claims that, "The power of naming defines the quality and value of that which is named and denies reality to that which is not named — often women's lives and experiences in (their) own terms."[1]

This erasure of female *herstory* through silence from the master narrative of male history is a discursive practice that has ensured the continuing proliferation of gender inequality in all levels of reality, including the fictional world of the written word.

Furthermore, when women are represented by men in the arts and in mass media, they end up as stereotypes or caricatures, their diverse subjectivities and the specificities of their social formations utterly neglected. This reduction of womankind to a set of predictable images and abstractions embodies the patriarchy's tendency to essentialize and trivialize women's lives and experiences.

Radical feminist Mary Daly, on the other hand, "argues that women have had the power of naming stolen from (them) and she describes ways in which women can reclaim this power through linguistic invention."[2] It is the foremost task, therefore, of women writers to reinscribe creatively on the blank page the manifold images of women who have disappeared or have been disfigured through textual exclusion or misrepresentation.

Isabel Allende has risen to the challenge by writing in a genre that is known as the woman's novel,

> which is perhaps the most novelistic of novels. If the essence of the novel is to produce a discourse that is both public and private, the woman's novel represents this intersection in exemplary form... It is adamantly not against interpretation and demands to be understood in terms of its content... Yet the richness of its language, the subtlety of its arguments, and its undeniable intelligence and self-consciousness defy the classification of popular culture.[3]

In Allende's fictional world, the act of naming seems to be of utmost importance, since stylistically speaking, the word *name* and its variants appear all throughout her first three novels as a leitmotif. This recurring trope alerts the sensitive reader to the fact that the nomenclature in her three lengthy narratives is not an arbitrary act of signification but a systematic process of feminist mythmaking which can be interpreted semiotically.

Allende's brand of Latin American feminism belongs to the socialist feminist strain, which "believes that women are second-class citizens in patriarchal capitalism which depends for its survival on the exploitation of working people, and on the special exploitation of women.

Socialist feminism argues that (there is the) need to transform not only the ownership of the means of production, but also social experience because the *roots* of women's oppression lie in the total economic system of capitalism."[4] Socialist feminists, therefore, treat both economic oppression and sexist oppression on equal footing, unlike radical feminists who consider material deprivation as secondary to patriarchal tyranny, or Marxist feminists who consider patriarchal tyranny secondary to material deprivation. In Allende's first three novels, the women's movement is inevitably and inextricably intertwined within the larger social movement for the economic empowerment of the masses.

Naming the Masters

The literary canon of any region is assumed to be the authoritative list of the best authors, majority of whom needless to say are male, and their most significant works. A quick look at the table of contents of even the most comprehensive literary anthology or literature textbook reveals the disparity between male and female writers in terms of textual inclusion. This uneven distribution of both creative and critical space is a product of patriarchal ideology which has relegated women's writings to the literary margins.

The editors of *Filipina 1*, an anthology of Philippine poetry, drama and fiction by women in mass media, aver:

> Most anthologies anywhere in the world are actually male collections. It has time and again been pointed out that the inclusion in anthologies of women writers is merely a patronizing or token gesture. Above all, for women to be accepted in both journalism and literature, they must think and write like men.[5]

In "Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman," Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn question the validity of the standards that determine the formation of the literary canon:

> literary history has canonized, designated as 'great', certain texts which are claimed to embody 'universal human truths'; but such truths only appear so because of

> their congruence with the dominant ideology. The criteria that have created the literary canon have, like the traditional conception of history, excluded the accomplishments not only of women but of people of races, ethnic backgrounds and classes different from the politically dominant one, which is western and hite.[6]

One of the criteria often used to legitimize the canon of any literary tradition is the binary opposition of the *universal* versus the *personal*. Literary works that deal with the heroic enterprise of war and its related male exploits are considered as *major*, while those that deal with domestic affairs and other female pursuits are considered as *minor*.

Because of this dichotomy, women writers are forced to either equal or surpass in terms of theme and technique the narrative skills of the masters, or completely subvert the prevailing notions of literariness by writing *differently*. Either way, they have to prove themselves worthy by either comparison or contrast to their male counterparts. Ongoing academic debates concerning the composition of the literary canon, therefore, are futile if the categories that ascertain major from minor wordsmiths are not modified, since these criteria are warped and biased against women.

The literary canon of Latin America has been dominated for the longest time by an exclusive club of male writers. Except for Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), the Chilean poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945, the list of notable names is a virtual catalogue of literary patriarchs: Miguel Angel Asturias (Guatemala), Pablo Neruda (Chile), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Octavio Paz (Mexico),[7] Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), Julio Cortázar (Argentina), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), César Vallejo (Peru), Ruben Darío (Nicaragua), José Martí (Cuba), Manuel Puig (Argentina), et al.

The supremacy of these authors in mainstream Latin American literature reflects this most isolated southern continent's macho culture, since writing like everything else that is deemed important has been claimed by the patriarchy as its sole property. In her preface to *Pleasure in the Word*, an anthology of erotic writing by Latin American women, Marjorie Agosín declares:

> Historically, written language has been the domain of men, the narrators of heroic deeds... Women, especially Latin American women, were placed by their cultures in a

> tradition of modesty and silence. For them to speak out in public, to make language their own, and to write required acts of daring and transgression, as well as the desire to invent themselves through creative imagination.[8]

It is therefore imperative for the female writers of Latin America to "break out of the snare of silence." For according to the French feminist Hélène Cixous, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal."[9] For if they fail to reinstate themselves in language, to weave their own narrative webs, "a kind of death would result. A death in terms of having to be content with their identity being written by someone else, having their voices silenced, and having their place in history erased."[10]

But for women writers of the Third World, this had been an undertaking easier said than done. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-95), the feminist Mexican nun who is considered as the first noteworthy writer of Latin America, was the earliest victim of patriarchal ideology. A poet-playwright writing in both the lyrical and satirical modes, Sor Juana was admonished by her superiors (lead by the chauvinist Bishop of Puebla, who wrote under the pseudonym Sor Filotea de la Cruz) "to give up her studies 'as unbefitting a nun and a woman.'"[11] She resisted the establishment for more than twenty years, but in the twilight of her brief life "the pressure of the church and lay society became too great, and Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz sold her library of 4,000 books... and dedicated herself to prayer and charitable works."

Other women writers of Latin America had suffered the same sad fate, for like "Shakespeare's sister"[12] they were censured into silence by their macho society, since writing was regarded as a subversive activity:

> Those who dared publish their writing had to contend with dire consequences ranging from societal disapproval, ex-communication, and forced exile, to complete obliteration, as was the case with Mercedes Cabello de Carbonara (1845-1909) who wrote and published romances... After publishing her most famous novel, *Blanca Sol* (1888), Cabello de Carbonara, said to be suffering from severe

> melancholy, was committed to an asylum outside of Lima, Peru."[13]

Partly due to the advances made by feminists of all stripes the world over, two Latinas have broken into the exclusive brotherhood of Latin American writers with the publication of their immensely popular first novels. The Chilean Isabel Allende (born 1942) and the Mexican Laura Esquivel (born 1950) have made waves in the global literary scene with the publication of *La casa de los espíritus* (1982, *The House of the Spirits*) and *Como agua para chocolate* (1989, *Like Water for Chocolate*), respectively.

But the commercial triumph of their works inevitably encourages comparison with the masterpieces of their male predecessors, who have achieved worldwide acclaim since the beginning of the "boom," which James Higgins describes as the time "when Spanish-American fiction won increasing recognition outside Latin America itself and achieved unprecedented commercial success."[14]

Allende, in particular, has often been compared to García Márquez, for both write in the magic realist tradition, the "Latin-American literary phenomenon characterized by the incorporation of fantastic or mythical elements matter-of-factly into otherwise realistic fiction."[15] For indeed, the novels of Allende and García Márquez, in particular *La casa de los espíritus* and *Cien años de soledad*, share a number of narrative techniques and stylistic peculiarities: the non-linear depiction of time and the constant repetition of events and dialogues, the multiplicity of archetypal characters and voices, the blurring of the line that divides the private from the public worlds, and the lyrical depiction of oppression and violence, among others.

And being a descendant of García Márquez rather than his precursor, Allende has been placed at a disadvantage. A number of critics, most of them male, have disregarded her contribution to Latin American literature, reducing her status to a mere copycat, a mediocre female García Márquez, and her novels as insubstantial female derivatives of his master narratives. The fraternity of literary critics, including the usually insightful Harold Bloom,[16] has declared that Allende is just another *minor* writer.

But this paper will prove otherwise. Following the line of argument of previous literary critics who view her fictional output as consummate examples of "feminist realism" or "magical feminism,"[17] this paper is a semiotic-cum-socialist feminist analysis of Allende's first

three novels, namely *La casa de los espíritus*, *De amor y de sombra* (1984, *Of Love and Shadows*) and *Eva Luna* (1987). The close semiotic reading undertaken by this researcher has revealed that the nomenclature or the system of naming in the three long narratives functions as a rhetorical strategy by providing nominal signs to discerning readers regarding the scope of her egalitarian and humanitarian concerns from a uniquely socialist feminist perspective.

There are at least four levels of naming in the aforementioned Latin American tales that point out to female (and eventual male) liberation from the binary opposites that bind them together but paradoxically at the same time keeps them apart: the title of the novel as the first semantic sign the reader encounters, storytelling itself as a form of naming, the subversion of the surname as a patriarchal tool of domination, and the use of first names to create feminist characters with mythic proportions as bearers of light, life and love.

Furthermore, this paper argues for the necessity to reassess and rename the elite members of South America's literary canon in the light of Isabel Allende's fictional achievements as a novelist who asserts again and again in her writing that:

> It's not a question of changing male chauvinism for militant feminism, but of giving both women and men a chance to become better people and to share the heavy burden of this planet. I believe that this is the true political literature of our time.[18]

Naming the Novel

The title of any literary work — be it a poem, a short story, an essay, a play or a novel — is the first semantic sign the reader encounters. The success of a novel is partly dependent on the appeal of its title, since this primary assignation brands the fictional product as *sui generis* and thus worthy of attention. A captivating title, therefore, has the capacity to seduce reluctant readers to peruse the text by creating inside their minds partial interest, if not outright intrigue.

But at what particular time do writers invent the titles of their masterpieces? Some writers, like Sinclair Lewis, formulate the title long before they begin scribbling the first word of the actual storyline. For others, like Ernest Hemingway, the title comes after the narrative is

already completed. The rest construct the title while in the process of working on the literary text.

Nevertheless, whether the title is created before, during or after the actual writing act itself, the fact remains that it is the first semantic sign the reader will see. Therefore, even if it is the last linguistic product of the author's confabulation, due to its primary position in the final manuscript, it becomes the first act of naming for the reader.

Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* is both a family saga and a novel of the nation. It chronicles three generations of the Trueba-del Valle clan, their trials and tribulations as well as their triumphs, while simultaneously annotating the historical changes and political upheavals of an unnamed Latin American country that closely resembles Chile. Most critics have focused on the marvelous realist elements of the novel or on its socio-political relevance. But Susan Bassnett asserts that *La casa de los espíritus* "is essentially the story of women's emergence in contemporary Latin American society."[19]

The title of the novel seems to support her claim, for the house has always been considered a traditional female domain. Popularly known as *la gran casa de la esquina*, the mansion built by Esteban is the focal area of the narrative. It is the arena where the Trueba-del Valle women wage their quotidian battles against the oppressive traditions, customs and cultural practices of a typical South American family. Moreover, it is their proverbial home base, the central station of their socio-political activities, the private space from which they constantly emerge when the need arises for them to confront the evils and injustices inherent in a Third World nation.

Esteban's mansion is originally constructed as "the reflection of himself, his family, and the prestige he planned to give the surname that his father had stained."[20] It is meant to be a palatial abode with formal gardens and marble statuary, an impressive façade of neo-classical columns and well-lit windows, a grand staircase and spacious halls. But through Clara's initiative and the dictates of the spirits, the dignified manor is transformed — with the addition of countless rooms to accommodate overstaying guests, and the dismantling of walls to exhume corpses and buried treasures — into an elaborate labyrinth. The structural metamorphosis, therefore, of *la gran casa de la esquina* into *la casa de los espíritus* can be read as a symbol of female subversion and feminine strength. For despite the impossibility of its altered architecture, *la gran casa de la esquina* remains a place of power, since the most prominent people of the country have discussed matters of

public importance, some of them national in scope, inside the private sphere of its enchanted rooms.

On the other hand, *De amor y de sombra* chronicles the growing social awareness of Irene Beltrán, a young upper middle-class female journalist, to the real conditions of her beleaguered nation, as well as the shift of her romantic feelings from Captain Gustavo Morante to Francisco Leal. Her transformation from a carefree lady of the privileged class to a concerned citizen is brought about by the semi-accidental discovery of a mass grave of the *desaparacidos*. Victims of the dictatorial regime of another unnamed Latin American country that also closely resembles Chile, these "disappeared ones" obliterated into oblivion by the military have been condemned to the shadows of official history. But universal love — that is, love for one's fellow man and woman — with its redeeming graces rescues them from the chasm of darkness by exposing to the light of day the truth of their untimely collective extermination.

It may appear at first that there is nothing particularly feminist about the title of the aforementioned novel; after all, love and shadows are generic words that can be associated with almost anything and everything under the sun. In the original Spanish, *amor* is a masculine noun that can denote love, affection, tenderness or even fancy; while on the other hand *sombra*, a feminine word, can mean shadow, shade, spirit or ghost. But aside from the obvious inversion of the male/female binary opposite of love/light versus lust/darkness, a closer examination of both the title and the text reveals that the shadow of military tyranny (Mars as god of war, the lower male principle) can only be countervailed by compassionate love (Venus Urania, the higher female principle).

Moreover, the three parts of the novel are subtitled "Another Spring," "Shadows" and "Sweet Land," which seems to suggest that light, life and love will still prevail in the future, despite the disruption of martial darkness and the eventual but not permanent exile of the main characters at the end of the narrative. The last scene of *De amor y de sombra* shows Irene and Francisco looking at their motherland illuminated by "the golden light of dawn" and closes with this dialogue:

> "Will we be back?" whispered Irene.
> "We will return," Francisco replied
> And in the years that followed, those words would point the way to their destinies: we will return, we will return...[21]

This hopeful, sun-drenched ending signifies that their expatriation is not final, for a military dictatorship that thrives in fear and darkness, with its simulacrum of law and order maintained at the expense of its citizenry, will eventually self-destruct since a genuine and long-lasting peace can only be achieved when light, life and love are allowed to flourish among the populace.

In contrast, *Eva Luna* is clearly a woman's narrative. Named after its female protagonist who is also the narrator, it is on one level a picaresque tale of a lowborn woman's triumphant rise to a better life through the power of her words, and on another level it is a metafictional narrative about the nature of storytelling itself. The two words that comprise the title, Eva (which means "life") and Luna (Spanish for Moon), unify "two important symbols of feminine identity, that of women as givers of life, and that of the moon, as a symbol of the matriarchal power that women once enjoyed in South American cultures."[22]

The appropriation of the patriarchal act of naming is apparent at the outset of the novel, for the first-person narrator identifies and inscribes herself in the very heart of the narrative: "My name is Eva, which means 'life,' according to a book of names my mother consulted."[23] Since the title character shares the same name as the biblical mother of all humankind, this subversion is doubly significant as feminist mythmaking, for *Eva Luna* can also be considered as a cosmogony myth of the emergence in Latin America of a new breed of strong women who refuse to conform to the norms of a sexually and politically oppressive society, deeply immersed as they are in the socialist feminist movement.

Storytelling as a Form of Naming

To tell a story is to nominate characters whether real or imagined into existence by emplotting their lives in a narrative framework. Conjurers of the highest degree, storytellers who narrate the most harrowing tales are actually naming the unnamable, breaking the shroud of silence that intends to condemn these narratives about dreadful events into collective amnesia and forgetfulness. Writers in particular who document sexual and political abuses valorize and textualize for posterity, whether in the realm of fiction or reality, these significant life-stories and micro-histories, which are otherwise undervalued by the dominant patriarchal capitalist ideology.

Storytelling also functions as a transmitter of memory, since the passing on of both family anecdotes and national allegories from one

generation to the next insures that these stories are not consigned to oblivion. Nonetheless, oral histories when they remain unwritten can still disappear in the ever-flowing river of time, the main reason why it is important to inscribe them in literary form, so that their complete erasure becomes the remotest of possibilities.

In his essay on Gabriel García Márquez, William Rowe points out the different functions of written and spoken language in relation to memory:

> Popular, oral memory changes according to the circumstances of the recall; it is continually re-actualized rather than fixed once and for all; and it takes the form of a voice heard rather than written words. Once memory becomes codified in a written form it is different: in the first place it is not open to modification.[24]

Claude Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, stresses the correlation between writing and knowledge in the development of mankind. In "A Writing Lesson," one of his seminal essays in structural anthropology, he observes that "The possession of writing vastly increases man's ability to preserve knowledge. It can be thought of as an artificial memory, the development of which ought to lead to a clearer awareness of the past, and hence to a greater ability to organize both the present and the future."[25]

Allende asserts again and again through the agency of her lead female characters the primacy of the written word over the spoken word, for the female protagonists of *La casa de los espíritus*, *De amor y de sombra* and *Eva Luna* are not only storytellers but scribes as well. They are all *cuentistas*,[26] not only in the traditional "oral" sense of the word, but also in the more modern "printed" meaning of the term: Clara is a diarist who writes in her notebooks that bear witness to life, which the adult Alba arranges according to events and not in chronology as her grandmother had intended, and with supplementary materials from Esteban and herself, as well as other domestic documents like Blanca's letters, to shape the many narratives that end up as the family saga *La casa de los espíritus*; Irene Beltrán of *De amor y de sombra* is a journalist of a women's magazine; and Eva Luna is a writer of television dramas as well as the "author-narrator" of the novel that bears her name.

The female protagonists in *La casa de los espíritus* recognizes the significance of storytelling both as a form of naming and as a

transmitter of memory, as well as the value of writing as a more dependable storehouse of both family narratives and national chronicles. Alba learns early in life the importance of transcribing stories which have been orally transmitted. She realizes as a child the fallibility of memory, as well as the power of the written word to preserve the past. This is because her mother, the ever forgetful Blanca, constantly changes the plot of her bedtime stories with each retelling. Since she is incapable of recounting the same narrative twice, there are always major revisions in her protean parables, some of them subversive in nature. For instance, the fairy tales from the "magic books" of her Great-Uncle Marcos acquire a feminist twist:

> This was how Alba learned about a prince who slept a hundred years, damsels who fought dragons single-handed, and a wolf lost in a forest who was disemboweled by a little girl for no reason whatsoever. (303-304)

Alba affirms both in the beginning and in the end of *La casa de los espíritus* the need to rescue the past from the clutches of oblivion in order to confront the present and redeem the future. Clara's notebooks, written in a span of fifty years, are the reliable repositories of memory that Alba uses among other manuscripts to salvage the history of the family, as well as that of her nation, from the morass of forgetfulness.

As a print journalist, Irene Beltrán knows the pertinence of annotating the oral narratives of marginalized people whose voices are prone to be silenced by the official discourse of the-powers-that-be. She refuses to completely forget the story of Evangelina Ranquileo's military abduction, despite dire warnings from the political police, and in the course of her investigation regarding the "miraculous" girl's whereabouts she uncovers with the help of her colleague in the magazine, the photographer Francisco Leal, the mass grave of the *desaparacidos*.

When the discovery of the abandoned mineshafts-cum-burial grounds becomes common knowledge thereby causing public outrage, Irene nearly loses her life after being gunned down on her way home from work, a desperate attempt by the armed militia to silence her forever. But she survives the attack, and while healing from her multiple wounds gains more conviction regarding the rightfulness of her decision to tell the truth, solidifying her political belief that she and her companions in the socialist movement are fighting the good cause.

Eva Luna, the self-conscious eponymous narrator of Allende's third novel, is aware of the many functions of storytelling, as well as the cogency of words to persuade people to help change the world. In the last pages of the opening chapter, she describes vividly the magical capacity of her imagination to manipulate the scale and composition of the universe:

> Space expanded and contracted according to my will: the cubby beneath the stairs contained an entire planetary system, but the sky seen through the attic skylight was nothing more than a pale circle of glass. One word from me and *abracadabra!* reality was transformed! (25)

In the beginning Eva uses her excellent storytelling skills to gain little favors: to be allowed to stay in bed with Elvira, the household cook of the bald *patrona*, from whom she "learned to barter words for goods (70)." She continues this proclivity in the colonial mansion of the Cabinet Minister where she tells "ghost stories to the other servants in exchange for sweets (111)."

Later, in Riad Halabí's domicile, where she acquires the ability to write under the tutelage of the schoolteacher Inés, Eva becomes ecstatic with her newfangled gift:

> Writing was the best thing that had happened to me in all my life; I was euphoric... Being able to write allowed me to remember without rhyme, and I could make my stories more complex, with multiple characters and adventures. (152)

After being immersed in the Arabic classic *A Thousand and One Nights*, Eva discovers her aptitude to revise the tales by transferring "characters from one story to another, to change the anecdotes, to add and remove details — a game of infinite possibilities. (153)" Her identification with Scheherazade indicates that storytelling for her is a means of survival, for indeed Eva becomes a professional raconteur as a writer of television dramas. The first one, titled *Bolero* "in a fit of sentimentality (296)," is a fictionalized account of her encounters with the eccentric people she has met thus far, as well as "other atrocities that would not bear logical analysis and that defied all laws of the commercial television romance (297)."

This last detail enhances the metafictional dimension of *Eva Luna*, since aside from being a picaresque tale the novel is also about the art of writing. Many other self-referential elements are scattered all over the narrative, but the most important one is to be found in the epilogue where the narrator herself problematizes the very veracity of the recounted events:

> Later, for a judicious period of time, we loved each other more modestly until that love wore thin and nothing was left but shreds.
> Or maybe that isn't how it happened. Perhaps we had the good fortune to stumble into an exceptional love, a love I did not have to invent, only clothe in all its glory so it could endure in memory... (307)

Surnames and the Patriarchy

Paternity is "the concept of fatherhood and descent by the male line on which patriarchy depends."[27] Unlike maternity which has a physical basis, paternity is not rooted in an experiential affiliation with the real world but a symbolic relationship anchored in causality. Since paternal claim is never bereft of doubt and suspicion, the patriarchy has institutionalized marriage as a means to control female reproduction, for the male of the species "have to create social substitutes for their own lack of a biological continuity."

In patriarchal societies, naming (or inversely, not naming) an offspring after the father is a hierarchical system of inclusion and exclusion. The legitimacy of a son or a daughter is determined by his or her surname. It also follows that the legitimate children (*hijos legítimos*) acquire all the rights of recognition and inheritance which their half-siblings (*hijos naturales*) do not share. The *hijos naturales*, therefore, are condemned to suffer marginalized lives, thriving on the peripheries of the privileged existence of the *hijos legítimos*.

In Latin American countries, where women are traditionally dichotomized into rigid categories of virgin and whore based on economic status, naming also becomes an agent of social stratification. Esteban Trueba, the typical patriarch in the beginning of *La casa de los espíritus*, subscribes to the idea that there are only two types of women: those who belong to his own social class (beautiful ladies with large dowries who are highly eligible for marriage), and those who do not (peasant women and prostitutes who are useful only as sex objects).

For him the first group of women, represented in the novel by the del Valle sisters, namely Rosa and Clara, should be treated with utmost decency and decorum. Because of their family background and their astonishing beauty, they are worth the sacrifice any decent man is willing to offer, the reason why Esteban dedicates his early manhood to earning a fortune doing backbreaking work in a goldmine to secure the future for himself and his beloved Rosa. After her untimely death and out of loneliness, he engages in sexual acts with other kinds of women, but reserves the marital bonds for a more appropriate lady:

> when he was ready to have children he would find a woman of his own class, with the blessings of the Church, because the only ones who really counted were the ones who bore their father's surname; the others might just as well not have been born. (66)

But Esteban Trueba's desire to have "a son who would bear his name and pass his family name on down the generations (100)" remains unfilled throughout the novel, since his firstborn turns out be a daughter (Blanca), and Clara refuses to bestow Esteban's first name on at least one of the twin boys (Jaime and Nicolás), arguing "that repeating the same name just caused confusion in her notebooks that bore witness to life. (115)" His frustration is further enhanced when Jaime and Nicolás come of age, since none of the two resembles him either in looks or temperament. Because of his contact with the poor people of the Miserecordia District as a medical intern and his lifelong friendship with the socialist Pedro Tercero García, Jaime rejects his father's rightwing politics and wishes his last name to be changed, causing Esteban to exclaim in anger, "I married so I would have legitimate sons to bear my name, not bastards with their mother's! (228)" Nicolas outrageous behavior at home and in public also evokes Esteban's legendary fury, since it tarnishes the prestige of his illustrious surname and his lofty position as a Senator of the Nation.

On the other hand, women who belong to the masses, like the peasant Pancha García and to a certain extent the prostitute Tránsito Soto, could be subjected to all sorts of physical ravishment without dire consequences to the perpetrator of the sexual act. But the feminist in Allende subverts this patriarchal notion of unaccountability, for she makes Esteban Trueba suffer towards the end of the novel, albeit mostly vicariously, the evil outcome of his past misconduct. For Esteban García, the grandson of the woman he had ruthlessly raped during his

bachelorhood in Tres Marías, winds up torturing and sexually abusing his granddaughter Alba, the apple of his eye. Esteban García's hatred of the Truebas is of course engendered by the *patrón's* refusal to recognize him even as a bastard progeny.

In contrast to *La casa de los espíritus*, most of the female characters in *Eva Luna* are known only by their first names. Except for the title character, whose surname is not her father's but a moniker invented by her mother, the majority of the female characters have no family names. The absence of surnames signifies that the identities and lives of these women are not dependent on what patriarchal capitalist society considers as the most important men of their lives: fathers, husbands or even sons.

Zulema Halabí, the only female character who is highly reliant on her husband for material comforts as befits a traditional Arab wife, languishes in bed all day and ends up killing herself after being left by her lover Kamal, her husband's nephew. It seems that part of the novel's message revolves around the importance of self-sufficiency as a fundamental factor of women's liberation.

On the other hand, Rolf Carlé, the romantic and sensitive male protagonist of *Eva Luna*, suffers in his formative years because of his surname. The son of a male chauvinist pig who humiliates his corpulent wife by forcing her to perform lurid acts while wearing "stiletto-heeled red patent-leather boots (85)," he grows up detesting his father, the tyrannical schoolmaster Lukas Carlé. Years later when Lukas gets murdered by his students, Rolf experiences a mixture of emotions, "torn between gratitude for having been liberated from his tormentor, humiliation at bearing the hated man's name, and shame for not having either the spirit or the strength to avenge his father. (83)" Like Jaime and Nicolás Trueba in *La casa de los espíritus*, Rolf Carlé's paternal name is not a source of family pride and honor but of personal anguish and embarrassment.

The surnames of the two main characters of *De amor y de sombra* are Beltrán (maudlin or foolishly sentimental) and Leal (loyal). These last names, aside from indicating their middle-class origins, appear to be indexical signs of their political engagement: Irene's initial romantic notion of an idyllic nation, a result of her bourgeois upbringing; and Francisco's ever steadfast commitment to the socialist movement.

But since the two are bound to tie the knot as their growing love for each other seems to indicate at the end of the novel, then Irene's mawkish surname is destined to be replaced by Francisco's more faithful

last name. Although on the surface this may look like collusion on the part of Irene to the patriarchal institution of marriage, on a deeper level this projected union with Francisco is a reconciliation of the female and male principles on equal terms, since the latter lacks the aggression of the typical Latin American man.

Naming the Spirits

"What's in a name?" Juliet Capulet asks Romeo Montague in their iconic balcony scene in Shakespeare's most famous romantic tragedy. Does it really matter? Is it really true that the flower "which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet?"[28] The answer of course to this pertinent question is no, since a name by itself determines a person's identity and attributes, and oftentimes even his or her destiny, though sometimes in an ironic or pastiche-like manner.

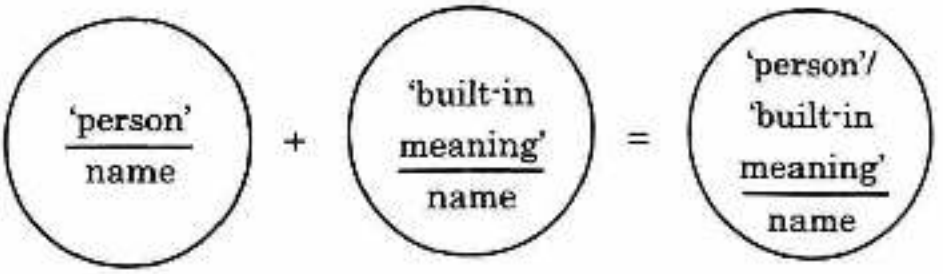
The fourth act of naming in Allende's novels, the one directly linked to mythic characterization, is the systematic "baptism" of the characters themselves. For more than the surname, the collective appellation that a number of related people share, the first or Christian name singles out an individual from other people, while at the same time associating him or her with a particular trait.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that in any given language the majority of proper names have specific meanings. It is also noteworthy that the appellations most often bestowed by parents to their children are those which refer to the most desirable physical attributes and psychical characteristics a person can possess.

Clifford Geertz in his discourse on personal naming upholds the following ideas:

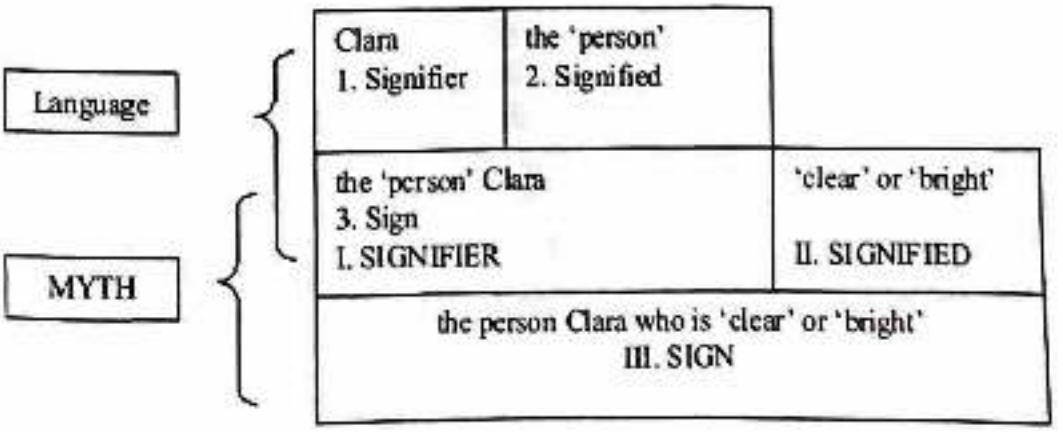
> The everyday world in which the members of any community move, their taken-for-granted field of social action, is populated not by anybodies, faceless men without qualities, but by somebodies, concrete classes of determinate persons positively characterized and appropriately labeled. And the symbol systems which define these classes are not given in the nature of things — they are historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually applied.[29]

Personal naming, therefore, is a system of signification by which individuals distinguish and differentiate themselves from one another. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, the general science "that studies the life of signs within a society,"[30] a name can be represented this way:



Note that there is only one signifier (for example, the letters that form the name Clara) but two signified concepts (the person Clara and the built-in meaning of the name, which in this case is "clear" or "bright"). The conflation of the person named as such with the built-in meaning of the name creates a character with a distinctive mythic trait.

A more appropriate paradigm is provided by Roland Barthes in one of his essays on the semiotic process of myth-making. According to his theory, a myth is made up of "two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other:"[31]



In the linguistic system, a sign or language-object is composed of a signifier (language/name) and a signified (object/person) belonging to different categories. But in the mythic system, the first sign (name/person) becomes a mere signifier of another signified concept (built-in meaning of the name) that produces a second sign, this time inscribed in secondary or metalanguage. In Allende's first three novels, personal naming is a systematic, deliberate process resulting in the nomenclature of feminist characters with mythic configuration.

In *La casa de los espíritus*, the del Valle ladies, representing four generations of middle-class Latin American women, have names that pertain to the qualities of light: Nivea (variation of Nieva/Nieve, which means snowy or extreme whiteness), Clara (clear or bright), Blanca (white), and Alba (dawn), "the last in a chain of luminous words (262)." They are constantly depicted as incandescent beings, aligning them like Eva Luna to the powerful matriarchal symbol of the moon. It is also implicit in their names that they are the bearers of light, life and love in a society constantly threatened by the darkness of political and sexual oppression, for luminosity is an optical phenomenon that can only occur at night.

Another interesting characteristic that these women share with the moon is their ability to adapt and act according to the call of each situation. Like the lunar disc, they undergo different phases as subjects-in-process,

> 'Process' in the sense of process but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because (their) identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled.[32]

The same type of negotiated subjectivity is embodied by the title character of *Eva Luna*, who becomes symbolically at different phases in her life a daughter, a sister and a mother. But the radiance of these women is often mistaken by patriarchal capitalism as a manifestation of lunacy, a reduction of metaphorical female strength (*luna*) to literal female madness (*alunada*). Esteban, for instance, fails to recognize until much later that both silence and hysteria are modes of resistance deployed by the women in his family to combat his tyrannical reign. Hysteria, in particular, "is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse."[33]

In contrast, despite being distantly related to the del Valles, the Trueba women do not share this luminescent quality, since both Doña Ester (star) and her daughter Férula (ferule) have been completely subjugated by the mechanisms of patriarchal society: the former by romantic love and the latter by religious fervor. Doña Ester's genteel poverty has been brought about by her falling "hopelessly in love with (a) good-for-nothing immigrant, a first-generation settler who within a few short years had squandered first her dowry and then her inheritance (45)." So despite the fact that her maiden name belongs "to the noblest and most highborn surname of the viceroyalty of Peru (45)," the shimmer of her first name emanates from the light of a dead star, which has a physical parallelism in her crippling arthritis.

Férula, whose name means, rule, yoke or authority, is characterized by her moral rigidity. Being five years older than Esteban, she uses her power to weave "him into her invisible net of guilt and unrepayable debts (42)." Férula becomes an instrument with which boys are punished, the other meaning of her name, when she reprimands her already adult brother for spending "Mama's medicine money on (his) private little whims (43)," hard-earned cash which comes from Esteban's own paycheck. To a certain extent, Férula is the female counterpart of Esteban, but her little emotional tyrannies can only go so far since she is only a woman.

The enigmatic Mora sisters, although unrelated to the del Valles, possess the same kind of inner and outer illumination. They are described as "three translucent ladies" with "eyes like sea mist" and "bathed in a strong scent of wild violets (124)," flower which are magically associated in the Wicca tradition with tranquility, love, luck, protection and healing, characteristics that they exhibit in their intermittent presence in the narrative. They are further identified as Clara's "astral sisters (125)," which indicates that for social feminists like Allende sisterhood is not determined by blood ties alone, but through spiritual links as well. Their sorority, therefore, "is based on a clear awareness that all women, irrespective of class, race, or nation have a common problem,"[34] which is none other than the patriarchy itself.

On the other hand, the male members of the Trueba clan are named ironically or paradoxically. Esteban (crown), the robust progenitor in the early episodes of the novel is reduced in the latter chapters of the book to the status of a powerless old man, who is incapable of emancipating his beloved granddaughter Alba from the evil hands of his own bastard grandson with whom he shares the same first name. In short, when push comes to shove, Senator Trueba is nothing more than

a mere figurehead, an impotent metonym of patriarchal power, for the real strength resides not with him but with the women in his family. The other Esteban (García) personifies the despotism of an embittered illegitimate descendant who has been denied due recognition by his forefather for the longest time.

Another key female character in *La casa de los espíritus* is the ambitious whore Tránsito (transition, also an inn for travelers) Soto, whose connections in high places turn out to be crucial in the release of Alba from prison. As her name suggests, she is also a subject-in-process like the del Valle women, changing her identity from small-town whore to big-city prostitute to brothel madam to fantasy motel owner. Although her character as a feminist role model is at best problematic, Tránsito's progressive rise to power, similar to that of the generically-named pimp La Señora in *Eva Luna*, proves to be a mode of resistance to reckon with. It seems that part of Allende's feminist project is to recuperate the often denigrated figure of the prostitute as a possible site for subverting the patriarchy, which has traditionally perceived her as a sexual subaltern without a voice and volition of her own.

On the other hand, the peasant woman Pancha (diminutive form of Francisca, which is the feminine version of Francisco, meaning peace) García, a passive victim of patriarchal violence who "made no attempt to defend herself (57)," is incapable of transcending her economic and sexual oppression, because she lacks the desire and determination to acquire a better life, unlike Tránsito Soto. Her limited imagination and internalized lower-class resentment fuels her grandson's Esteban García's craving for vengeance through her poisonous stories that encourage clannish rupture rather than familial interconnectedness.

In *De amor y de sombra*, the first name of the main female character is Irene (peace), and indeed in the opening episodes of the novel she is depicted as a serene young woman with a sunny disposition, untroubled by the socio-political and economic situation of her country. She is initially engaged to be married to Captain Gustavo (staff of the gods) Morante, but ends up falling in love with her co-worker, the psychology professor turned photographer Francisco (freedom) Leal. These names read within the framework of a national allegory indicate that peace (Irene) cannot be maintained by patriarchal force (Gustavo), but can only be achieved through freedom (Franciso).

The title character of *Eva Luna* does not personify her name as a giver of life in the traditional sense of the phrase, for she does not bear children per se; in fact, she begins to menstruate only in the closing

chapters of the novel, which she attributes to the continuing presence of Zulema's ghost, but is most likely caused by the police brutality she has experienced first hand in Agua Santa. Her motherhood then is more metaphorical rather than literal, since she gives birth not to babies but to various types of narratives, from oral stories to television serials and eventually to the very novel that the reader is reading.

It is also important to note that maternity in *Eva Luna*, like the soul sisterhood in *La casa de los espíritus*, need not be biologically determined, for maternal nourishment and protection can be provided by any woman who has a loving heart. Throughout her life, Eva has been cared for successively by mother figures, beginning with her biological mother Consuelo (consolation), her unnamed *madrina* (godmother or protectress), Elvira (trustworthy) whom she considers her *abuela* or grandmother, the pimp La Señora, and even the transsexual Mimí (original name Melesio). Motherhood in *Eva Luna*, as well as to a certain extent in *La casa de los espíritus* and *De amor y de sombra* (note the rearing of the switched Evangelinas by the Ranquileo and Flores families respectively), is an experiential act rather than an institutionalized fact, an embodiment of Adrienne Rich's concept of the importance of demolishing the established symbolic order as prescribed by the patriarchy for a more empirical model of motherhood:

> The experience of motherhood is the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children and it is the institution of motherhood which keeps that potential under male control. Once the institution is dismantled, Rich argues, motherhood would be a transforming experience for woman. All feminists agree with Rich that if the nature and status of women's ties to socially prescribed reproductive roles could change, then that freedom might be more revolutionary than any social revolution.[35]

Renaming the Canon

Although the significance of the literary canon has been the subject of numerous heated debates, its potency as an ideological state apparatus[36] deployed by the patriarchy to propagate itself is undeniable. It is therefore imperative to rename the canon, which is composed mostly

of male authors as proven earlier in this paper, by including some literary mistresses who have exhibited technical virtuosity and thematic *difference* in their writing.

By way of a conclusion, here is a reiteration of the major reasons why Allende should be included in the pantheon of Latin American writers. Although she herself acknowledges the influence of García Márquez and the other literary patriarchs of South America, her novels are not necessarily derivatives of their master narratives, for read in the light of semiotics and socialist feminism, *La casa de los espíritus*, *De amor y de sombra* and *Eva Luna* are more like deconstructive texts about the initial oppression but eventual empowerment of Latin American women. In a recent reevaluation by Philip Swanson of her literary corpus, he even declares that *La casa de los espíritus* "is really a critical reworking"[37] of *Cien años de soledad*.

As pointed out earlier in this essay, the nomenclature of Allende's novels is a result, not of an arbitrary act of signification, but of a systematic process of feminist mythmaking. A careful analysis of her first three novels has revealed at least four levels of naming: the title of the novel as the primary semantic sign the reader encounters, storytelling itself as a form of naming, a critique of the patriarchy's use and oftentimes abuse of surnames, and female characters whose distinctive first names have mythical dimensions. Furthermore, she has invented quite a number of technical and thematic innovations in her work, especially in the areas of *ecriture féminine*,[38] female subjectivity and feminist ideology, which make her *oeuvre* significant and thus canonical.

In contrast to the dismissive appraisal of the patriarchal critic Harold Bloom and his kind who are uncomfortable with Allende's commercial success, Swanson's more sensitive reassessment of her writing is rather refreshing, and this reader cannot help but agree when he further claims that

> she embodies both, on the one hand a relationship to and reorientation of the novel of the Boom, and, on the other, the trend towards readability, structural clarity, socio-political commentary and relative optimism.[3939] Swanson, Philip, op. cit., p. 98.

For indeed in this crepuscular, postmodern world inundated with a negative literature full of patriarchal figures who embody doubt, despair and hate, Isabel Allende's novels shimmer like lifeboats ferrying

luminous feminist characters who bear the life-affirming message that faith, hope and love will prevail sooner or later on the face of this earth.

Endnotes

[1] Du Bois, Barbara, from "Passionate scholarship: notes on values, knowing and method in feminist social science" (1983) as cited in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory (Second Edition)*, M. Humm (ed.), Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 185.

[2] Daly, Mary, from *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973) as cited in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory (Second Edition)*, M. Humm (ed.), Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 185.

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[4] Reed, E. from *Problems of Women's Liberation* (1970) as cited in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory (Second Edition)*, M. Humm (ed.), Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 185.

[5] Garcia, Mila Astorga, Marra PL Lanot and Lilia Quindoza Santiago, from the Preface of *Filipina 1: Poetry, Drama and Fiction by WOMEN (Women Writers in Media Now)*, Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1984, p. iv.

[6] Greene, Gayle and Coppelia Kahn, "Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman" in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1991, p. 22.

[7] Asturias, Neruda, García Márquez and Paz also won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1967, 1971, 1982 and 1990, respectively.

[8] Agosín, Marjorie, from the Preface of *Pleasure in the Word: Erotic Writing by Latin American Women*, M. Fernandez Olmos and L. Paravisini-Gebert (eds.), New York, Penguin Books USA Inc., 1994, p.15.

[9] Cixous, Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (Second Edition)*, M. Eagleton (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996, p.320.

[10] Poey, Delia, from the Introduction to *Out of the Mirrored Garden: New Fiction by Latin American Women*, New York: Doubleday, 1996, p. XIV.

[11] Manguel, Alberto, from the Introduction to *Other Fires: Stories from the Women of Latin America*, London: Pan Books Ltd., 1986, p. 4. Subsequent quotation is taken from the same essay.

[12] In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that if William Shakespeare had a sister she would not have survived, for "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty."

[13] Poey, Delia, op. cit., p. XV.

[14] Higgins, James, "Spanish America's New Narrative" in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, E.J. Smyth (ed.), London: B.T. Batsford, 1991, p. 90.

[15] *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*, Springfield, Merriam Webster Inc., 1995, p. 713.

[16] See the Introduction of *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Isabel Allende*, H. Bloom (ed.),Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 171-182.

[17] See Caroline Bennett's "The Other and the Other-Worldly: The Function of Magic in Isabel Allende's*La casa de los espíritus*" in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Isabel Allende*, H. Bloom (ed.),Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 1-3.

[18] Allende, Isabel, "Writing As an Act of Hope," *Paths of Resistance : The Art and Craft of the Political Novel*,Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989, p. 54.

[19] Bassnett, Susan, "Coming Out of the Labyrinth: Women Writers in Contemporary Latin America" in*On Modern Latin American Fiction* , J. King (ed.), New York: The Noonday Press, 1987, p. 252.

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[22] http://www.sdsmt.edu/courses/is/hum375/evaluna.htm DOWNLOADED 1/10/99 12:19 PM

[23] Allende, Isabel, *Eva Luna*, New York: Bantam Books, 1989, p. 1. All subsequent citations are taken from this edition and are indicated by their page numbers in the main body of the paper.

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[25] Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Tristes Tropiques*, New York: Pocket Books, 1977, p. 336.

[26] Read Susan de Carvalho's "Escrituras y Escritoras: The Artist-Protagonist of Isabel Allende" in in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Isabel Allende*, H. Bloom (ed.), Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 75-82, for a more thorough explication on Allende's female characters as storytellers.

[27] Humm, Maggie (ed.), *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory (Second Edition)*, Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 200. Subsequent citation is taken from the same entry on "Paternity."

[28] Shakespeare, William, Romeo and Juliet in The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Bath: Parragon Books, 2000, p. 720.

[29] Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, pp. 363-364.

[30] Read Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1966, for a more thorough discussion on the nature of the linguistic sign.

[31] Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, p. 115.

[32] Kristeva, Julia, "A Question of Subjectivity: An Interview" (1986) in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (Second Edition)*, M. Eagleton (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 351.

[33] Mitchell, Juliet, "Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis" (1984) in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (Second Edition)*, M. Eagleton (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 155.

[34] Humm, Maggie (ed.), *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory (Second Edition)*, Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 268.

[35] Rich, Adrienne, from *Of Woman Born* (1976) as cited in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory (Second Edition)*, M. Humm (ed.), Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 180.

[36] Read Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State pparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy (Notes towards an Investigation)*, New York : Monthly Review Press, 1971.

[37] Swanson, Philip, *Latin American Fiction: A Short Introduction*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 98.

[38] The term for women's writing in French feminist theory. It describes how women's writing is a specific discourse closer to the body, to emotions and to the unnameable, all of which are repressed by the social contract. This definition is taken from *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory (Second Edition)*, M. Humm (ed.), Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 75.