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The House of the Japanese Spirits: Orientalism and Magical Realism in Isabel Allende's *El amante japonés*

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Abstract

Isabel Allende's novel *El amante japonés* (2015), uses magical realism and Orientalism to present an idealized and exoticized characterization of Japanese Americans. In light of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, this article analyzes how the novel presents Japanese Americans in a positive light, yet resorts to various stereotypes in its portrayal. Also, this article explains how Allende draws on the mystical beliefs of the Oomoto religion, a modern Shinto sect, to justify the supernatural traits of the protagonist's Japanese lover, Ichimei Fukuda. Additionally, magical realism and Orientalism in the novel attempt to offer a constructive alternative history of the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII. The novel characterizes Japanese Americans through an Orientalist lens that emphasizes their positive traits and diminishes their flaws. Allende's novel suggests that these characters are representative of Japanese culture and that Japanese Americans comprise a model minority in the U.S. Finally, in *El amante japonés*, Allende incorporates Orientalism and magical realism to interpret Japanese culture by emphasizing the perspective of the Western protagonist.

Key words

Isabel Allende, Chile, Orientalism/Orientalismo, magical realism/realismo mágico, *El amante japonés*/*The Japanese Lover*, religion/religión

A beautiful Japanese woman, dressed in navy floral silk, lies on verdant leaves. This female figure does not represent any prominent character in the novel, nor any significant moment in the story. She appears to evoke the Orient and a romanticized and unknowable version of Japanese culture. Such is the visual image on the first-edition book jacket of Isabel Allende's 2015 novel *El amante japonés*. Isabel Allende, Chile's most internationally recognized and best-selling fiction writer, presents a novel that is multicultural in scope and, similar to her other recent books, thematically ambitious and socially conscious. *El amante japonés* includes a kaleidoscope of social issues and international characters spanning a time period from pre-WWII to the early twentieth-first century. The novel focuses on members of the Fukuda family who follow the Oomoto religion, a

contemporary Shinto sect that re-popularized mysticism as a basic tenet in twentieth-century Japan. The main character in the family is Ichimei Fukuda, who becomes the best friend, then lover of Alma Belasco, the novel's protagonist. Ichimei survives imprisonment in the Japanese-American internment camps during WWII and later overcomes emotional trauma and institutional racism to become integrated into American society. Notably, Ichimei is revered for his supernatural self-control, humility, and serenity. Members of the Fukuda family are humble, yet honorable, and overcome obstacles to the awe of other characters. The Japanese Americans in the novel are characterized through an Orientalist lens that emphasizes their positive traits and diminishes their flaws. Allende's novel suggests that these characters are representative of Japanese culture and that Japanese Americans comprise a model minority in the U.S.¹

Isabel Allende is renowned for her epic family sagas involving female protagonists and magical realist elements, such as *La casa de los espíritus* (1982), *De amor y de sombra* (1984), *Eva Luna* (1987), *El plan infinito* (1991), *Hija de la fortuna* (1999), and *Retrato en sepia* (2000). Most studies of Allende's fiction focus on issues of feminism, politics, and magical realism.² While these themes are relevant to this story, Orientalism provides a productive lens with which to further the critical debate on this major author's work. This study begins to address the gap in critical attention regarding Orientalism as it pertains to Allende's recent novel. In *El amante japonés*, Allende uses magical realism as a technique to rewrite dominant historical discourse regarding the internment of Japanese Americans from 1942 to 1946. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, as well as scholars of Japanese culture and history Nancy Stalker and Richard King, I will describe how Allende's magical realist technique brings out Orientalist characterizations, resulting in idealized and exoticized representations of Japanese Americans. Finally, considering how very few studies of Allende's fiction touch on notions of Orientalism, this article discusses how magical realism and Orientalism in the novel attempt to offer a constructive alternative history of a traumatic chapter in Japanese-U.S. relations.

Magical Realism in Allende's Fiction

Patricia Hart distills various theories on magical realism down to five principal characteristics in Isabel Allende's fiction. She defines magical realism

as narration in which: 1. the real and magic are juxtaposed; 2. this juxtaposition is narrated matter-of-factly; 3. the apparently impossible event leads to a deeper truth that holds outside the novel; 4. conventional notions of time, place, matter, and

identity are challenged; and 5. the effect of reading the fiction may be to change the reader's prejudices about what reality is. (27)

Hart's theory qualifies the narrative elements of the text as well as how the text relates to the reader's experience. For Hart, magical realism expands the reader's sense of truth and reality in an instructive and enlightening way as assumptions about oneself and others are called into question. Hart's theory assumes that the implied author is able to speak on behalf of the fictional world to a readership in need of its "deeper truth."³ For Hart, the magic and reality at play in the text serve a greater purpose beyond the text itself, since they challenge dominant or conventional discourses.

The implied author and narrative voice of the text assume privileged positions in this novel. A Western, cosmopolitan, educated voice tells the story of Ichimei and his family. It is also the voice of a woman from within the patriarchal order. Patricia Hart coined the term "magical feminism" to refer to "magical realism employed in a femino-centric, or one that is especially insightful into the status or condition of women in the context described in the work" (29-30). Cristina Ruiz Serrano finds that, in the case of *La casa de los espíritus*, the patriarchal order is maintained, a fact that "implica la alteridad femenina y prolonga la subordinación de la mujer a la figura masculina" (883). Allende's female protagonists exert limited power and emphasize the experiences of women within patriarchy. This novel is unique in that it uses a female viewpoint and magical realism to portray Japanese Americans in an Orientalizing way. This approach suggests a privileged cultural position for the implied author, but an oppressive patriarchal environment for the female protagonist.

Nahem Yousaf uses postcolonial theory to frame Allende's magical realist technique in *La casa de los espíritus* as a "counter-version of events," conveyed through a "popular memory" that demonstrates "a culture's need for its own paradigms that will privilege a manner of telling that will construct and reconstruct a culture" (13). Like *La casa de los espíritus*, *El amante japonés* uses magical realism to offer a counter-narrative to official discourse, in this case regarding the Japanese internment camps in Western U.S. from 1942 until 1946.⁴ It also offers the Oomoto religion as a counter-cultural belief system that provided an alternative to the modern Japanese state-sanctioned Shinto religion that had separated itself from its more mystical and spiritualist foundations (Stalker 10-11). Following Yousaf's and Hart's theories of magical realism in Allende's novels, this article examines how this novel's female Orientalist perspective challenges official discourse and offers an alternative history of Japanese culture in the US.

Orientalism

Said describes Orientalism as the discourse of power exercised by the West over the East that presents Asians and Middle Easterners as “othered” by means of representation through Western epistemes (3-6). Allende, who has been called the “Latin Scheherazade” by critics and adopts the storytelling trope of *One Thousand and One Nights* in *Eva Luna* and *Cuentos de Eva Luna*, often filters Asian characters through Western perspectives (Feal 1).⁵ According to Said, Orientalism is the West's knowledge of the East (65). It depicts Near, Middle and Far Eastern cultures as inferior to European or American cultures by propagating negative stereotypes through cultural and literary texts, thereby attributing inequality to “immutable cultural essences” that are innate to Eastern peoples (65-67). Orientalist texts tend to exoticize, sensualize, and homogenize their subjects through a Western gaze that “others” the Orient through inescapable and constant cultural comparison. This novel never employs such negative representations, but instead emphasizes the exotic and precious nature of Japanese spiritualism, present in Shintoism and Buddhism. Like the Hispanic modernist poets Rubén Darío and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, the novel Orientalizes Japanese culture through *preciosismo* and exoticism.⁶ While Allende's novel rejects and intends to repair negative stereotypes, its idealization of Japanese culture evokes the exoticism of the Modernist era.

Richard Minear, in his critique of American and European Japanese studies, notes that “what we need is not a book-burning,” but an analysis of “the discourse which speaks through” Orientalists (514). Moreover, he emphasizes that Japan is the most unknown of the Orient: “Japan is the remotest segment of the ‘Far East’” and was “unknown to the West until Marco Polo’s time . . . ; another two hundred and fifty years would elapse before Japan saw its first Westerners” (514). He notes the lack of dependency the West has on Japan: “nor the abiding cultural ties which bound the West to the Orient exist between Japan and the West. Japan had no special historical interest. . . . Japan held no interest for philologists seeking the roots of Western languages. It held no special religious appeal and posed no special religious threat” (513). Since Japan was never colonize (despite the use of Western force in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), Western discourse on Japan never displayed the “naked authority over the Orient” that Said sees as an integral part of Orientalism (Said 3, in Minear 514). This philosophical and cultural distance can be seen in Allende’s idealization of Japanese culture in the novel. Ho-Fung Hung states that idealization has been a part of Orientalism since Europe began learning about the East (c. 1600-1900), resulting in a reductionist view of the East (254).

Orientalism's most important aspect, in terms of identity construction, is the fiction it creates regarding the aspirational identity of the Orientalist. As Westerners began to learn about the East, through

exploration, commerce, and colonialism, it began to create and define notions of East and West, promoting Western culture as more advanced and civilized, and Eastern peoples as backwards, anachronistic, and needful of the West's interventions (Hong 254). Ho-Fung Hong refers to Said's critique of Oriental studies as a scholarly field in the nineteenth century that "was based on an imperialist epistemology that constantly presumed the differences between Western and non-Western civilizations to be ontological and suggested the moral and intellectual superiority of the former" (254). While magical realism builds a narrative about a culture, Orientalism works in a parallel as it presents an aspirational morality that presumes the cultural and intellectual privilege of the implied author. Allende exemplifies this idea as she presents the Japanese-American characters in *El amante japonés*. However, before the novel develops this dynamic, it establishes the protagonist Alma as the Orientalist point of departure.

Orientalism and Cultural Appropriation

The reader's first encounter with Orientalism in the novel comes through cultural appropriation when, as an adult, Alma is a renowned artist who creates luxurious silk kimonos, tunics, and scarves: "sus colecciones estaban inspiradas en sus viajes por el mundo --animales del Serengueti, cerámica otomana, escritura etíope, jeroglíficos incas, bajorrelieves griegos" (35). The third-person narration breezily catalogues the "othered" cultures from which Alma derives her designs and calls her creations "diseños originales," known for their "exclusividad y excelencia" (34-35). Representative Eastern and Global South cultural artifacts serve as artistic inspiration for the artist in San Francisco to enhance her reputation as a designer of luxury apparel. Alma's character is that of a worldly artistic genius, who creates beautiful accessories for aesthetic purposes but never sells out to mass produce her designs. While it can be argued that the various cultures might benefit from increased exposure of their aesthetics and traditions to an international affluent audience, the novel avoids the question of what, if anything, the local artisans gain from Alma's appropriation of their original art and iconography. This detail in the novel is particularly relevant to Orientalism as a means of cultural appropriation.

European and Western artists and designers have a history of drawing inspiration from and imitation of Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Polynesian and indigenous designs.⁷ The phenomenon of cultural appropriation, or as cultural critic Peter Shand calls it, "the colonial catwalk," highlights the imperial nature of this dynamic and how easily it is inserted in Alma's characterization. This detail demonstrates the internalization of the Orientalist's gaze through cultural imperialism in Allende's

novel. As critic Diane Hoelever puts it, drawing on Meyda Yeğenoğlu, a principal figure in Orientalist theory, Orientalist discourse is varied and contradictory. That discord does not subvert Orientalism, rather it enriches Orientalist discourse (153). Hoelever claims that “Orientalism establishes its unity through its ubiquity” (153). Alma's eclectic tendencies characterize her as tastemaker who integrates exotic, multicultural aesthetics for an elite clientele. However, the narration fails to acknowledge that this sort of cultural appropriation is potentially offensive and exploitative. Just as Alma colonizes through her fashion, she later colonizes the character of Ichimei through her subjectivity. Such ubiquitous Orientalism establishes the manner of presentation of the primary Japanese-American characters whose story comprises a major portion of the novel.

The depiction of Japanese Americans in this novel is a variation on the theme of Asian Americans as part of the U.S. cultural fabric in Allende's fiction. Previous novels by Allende include an Orientalist view of Asian characters, particularly in *Hija de la fortuna* and *Retrato en sepia*. According to Isaac Rivera-Campos, the only scholar to date to offer an Orientalist critique of Allende's narrative, the Chilean and Chinese characters in *Hija de la fortuna* novel are described as less civilized, more savage and instinctual, whereas the North American and South American European *criollos* are described as more refined and decent (157). Additionally, Rivera-Campos's reading of *Hija de la fortuna* describes the scaffolding of subalternity developed by Allende, demonstrating the power of Western discourse about the East, with Western Europe and the United States at the top, Chileans and Mexican men below, then indigenous people and Asians, and black slaves along with Chilean and Asian women at the bottom (157-65). Susan Carvalho analyzes representations of Chinese culture in her study of space as a narrative tool in *Retrato en sepia*, yet leaves the door open to explore such dynamics in light of Orientalism.⁸ In the *Hija de la fortuna* and *Retrato en sepia* saga, the protagonist Eliza Sommers's lover and spiritual guide is the Chinese physician Tao Chi'en. The Alma/Ichimei parallel to these characters is striking. Some of Tao Chi'en's traits (moral superiority, humility, and magical capabilities) also coincide with Ichimei Fukuda's characterization. Just as Allende integrates Chinese characters into the complex U.S. multicultural fabric in previous novels, she uses a similar approach to her presentation of Japanese characters in *El amante japonés*.

Orientalism in an Intercultural Space

The image of the house emerges as a crucial narrative space as an international cast of characters, displaced from all over, converge at two primary residences in the San Francisco/Berkeley area: the Sea Cliff estate and later at Lark House, a retirement home. The protagonist, Alma Belasco, a Polish Jew, is sent as a young girl to live with wealthy relatives in San Francisco in 1939 at Sea Cliff,

their estate home. In her old age, Alma befriends Irina, a Moldovan immigrant, who becomes Alma's personal assistant at Lark House, where Alma resides in her last years. The story of Ichimei Fukuda and his family appears in both narrative settings, for Ichimei lived at Sea Cliff during Alma's youth, and his relationship with Alma becomes the primary enigma to be unraveled by Irina at Lark House. It is through these primary narrative spaces, Sea Cliff and Lark House, that the novel frames the story Ichimei Fukuda, the Japanese lover.

Mel Boland argues that when Allende uses the United States as a backdrop, cultural displacement can be considered more comprehensively, as everyone is displaced in one way or another (134). This novel's intercultural convergence of characters reveals religious and cultural differences tinged with Orientalism. In the novel, the Polish emigré offers the Western subjectivity with which to describe and Orientalize Ichimei and his family. As Alma was adopted into a wealthy family in San Francisco, Allende paints a rosy picture of U.S./Polish-Jewish identity and includes very little anti-Semitism affecting her or her family in the U.S. Although some narrative space is devoted to Alma's Jewish background and her escape from Nazi persecution, her Jewish religion is not emphasized as a component of her character. In contrast, the religious influences in Ichimei's life deeply affect his characterization. Allende uses mysticism, present in Buddhism and Oomoto Shintoism, as a mechanism to elevate Ichimei's moral stature. Mysticism, the sublimation of the self to allow for unmediated divine communion, is incorporated into magical realism to describe Ichimei and the Fukuda family.

Orientalism and Shinto-Oomoto Principles

The novel tells the story of the Fukuda family who immigrated to the U.S. early in the twentieth century and have maintained their religious customs and beliefs. Ichimei Fukuda exudes supreme spirituality and honor as he relates the story of the Fukuda family's katana sword to Alma, which was buried in the Sea Cliff garden under the custody of the family patriarch Isaac Belasco (Alma's adoptive father) for twenty years. Ichimei writes to Alma:

mi hijo Mike cumplió cuarenta años y decidí entregarle la katana de los Fukuda; a él le corresponde el deber de cuidarla... Fuimos todos los que quedábamos en nuestra familia, mi madre, mi hermana y yo. Nos acompañó Kemi Morita, el líder espiritual de Oomoto. El día de la ceremonia en el jardín, tú estabas de viaje con tu marido. (228-29)

This segment offers several insights into Allende's vision of the spirituality of the Fukuda family: the katana sword represents the family's honor and must be protected, it must be passed down from father to son in continuation of the patriarchy, and family and spiritual leaders are expected to witness the continuation of family honor in a formal manner. The history of the Samurai sword is reduced to a brief anecdote, with no indication of why it was passed down to Mike at that point in time. Allende highlights the notions of honor, ceremony, and formality, represented by the katana, as essential to the Fukuda family. However, the narration lacks nuance and limits the reader's understanding of the Oomoto practice, further enhancing the unknowable portrayal of Japanese culture.

Ichimei's characterization, specifically his supernatural talents, further resonate with Said's criticisms of Western perceptions of the Orient. When Ichimei returns as an adult to design a Japanese-style garden for Alma at Sea Cliff, the description presents him as austere and controlled: "Ichimei era un hombre tranquilo y de gestos medidos, observaba cuidadosamente, nunca parecía apresurado, hablaba poco y cuando lo hacía su voz era tan baja que Larry debía acercarse para escucharlo" (226). While not derogatory, the description resorts to Western stereotypes of Japanese reticence and reserve, presenting the character as unknowable and distant. In an interview with Leylha Ahuile, Allende further elaborates such stereotypes: "It was difficult for me to put myself in the place of the Japanese lover. Japanese culture is very different from our Latino culture. We are exuberant, loud, and affectionate. Japanese are more reserved, soft-spoken, and not necessarily affectionate" (3). These Orientalist generalizations are clearly evident in the novel through Ichimei's characterization. Moreover, the following description, told by Alma's grandson Seth, introduces Ichimei's magical realist qualities:

Mi papá me dijo algo muy curioso, Irina. Me aseguró que Ichimei tiene aura un halo invisible. Es un círculo de luz tras la cabeza, como los que tienen los santos en las pinturas religiosas. El de Ichimei es visible. Mi papá me dijo algo que no siempre se le podía ver, sólo a veces, dependiendo de la luz... Otra cosa: el hombre debe de ser una especie de faquir, porque controla el pulso y su temperatura, puede calentar una mano como si ardiera de fiebre y congelar la otra. Ichimei se lo demostró a mi papá varias veces. (226)

This segment exhibits the various Orientalist tendencies of the novel through magical realism. First, Seth matter-of-factly compares Ichimei's supernatural aura to European paintings of Catholic saints. Seth instinctually Catholicizes and interprets Ichimei's supernatural characteristic through a Western worldview with no further attempt to explain or explore it. Second, his ability to control his pulse and

body temperature is compared to that of a Muslim or Hindu faquir, a mystic capable of physical feats (sword swallowing, sitting on nails, and snake charming) who exists without money or possessions and depends solely on God. This comparison displays exoticism and otherness on the part of Seth toward Ichimei's fantastic and mystical attributes. Finally, Seth's matter-of-fact description highlights the reliance on orality in conveying magical realist events. Since neither Seth nor Irina witness Ichimei's powers, he is framed as unknowable and "othered." This detail also places the novel in the tradition of magical realism as a product of oral history.⁹

While Seth uses Orientalist stereotypes to describe Ichimei, the third-person omniscient narrator emphasizes aspects of Japanese culture through an Orientalizing U.S. point of view. The conversation between Seth, Alma's grandson, and her assistant Irina takes place in a Japanese sushi restaurant in Berkeley, California that is, according to Seth, the most "propitious" locale to talk about Alma's relationship with her Japanese lover (254). The description of the space typifies American stereotypes of Japanese culture: "El restaurante era un remanso de paz oriental, todo de manera clara, con compartimentos separados por tabiques de papel de arroz, iluminado con globos rojos, cuyo cálido resplandor invitaba la calma" (224). While this passage describes typical decor in a Western sushi restaurant, the narrative emphasizes the exotic aspects of Japanese culture. The description of Ichimei, his family, and their customs is encompassed in a Western frame. The conversation takes place in Berkeley between a Jewish-American and a Moldovan immigrant and ends when Seth, unwittingly, gets intoxicated on sake. Japanese characters are neither active nor nuanced in this segment, and their culture is reduced to U.S. stereotypes.

While the novel tends to employ stereotypical characterizations, Allende uses the Oomoto religion as a touchstone for magical realism in a subtle, yet potentially subversive way. According to Stalker, Oomoto's "fundamental belief system envisaged a spirit world with a permeable boundary that allowed interactions with the human world" (10). This opens the door for Allende's magical elements to appear as part of an alternative belief system, rooted in ancient Shinto traditions. Furthermore, Stalker explains that Oomoto and other contemporary new religions attracted followers due to spiritualism, although this was suppressed by the modernizing Japanese state (10). Oomoto cofounder Deguchi Onisabur (1871-1948) "was trained in mystical aspects of the Shinto tradition, such as exorcism, spiritual possession, and *kotodama*, the belief in the magical and prophetic power of Japanese words and syllables" (Stalker 2, 10). At a time when the elite wanted to separate spiritualism and magic from Japanese religions (partly to appear less superstitious to the West), Onisaburō propagated them through Oomoto (Stalker 10-11). Onisabur sought to reinvigorate the material and

mythological Shinto traditions that predate the more recent State Shinto (Stalker 7). By contextualizing Ichimei in the broader cultural movement of the Oomoto religion, Allende presents Ichimei's powers and beliefs as a transgressive characterization that defies Westernizing and modernizing forces. Patricia Hart's description of magical realism is also relevant here as Ichimei's characterization challenges mainstream beliefs and institutions. More specifically, Ichimei's religion endows him with otherworldly abilities that aid him in overcoming physical and emotional hardship as a prisoner of the U.S. government. While Ichimei is especially gifted in this sense, his family and fellow Japanese-American detainees also display admirable traits that function as a moral counterbalance to the injustice of this historical event. Magical realism offers a productive technique in this novel to challenge dominant narratives regarding the history of Japanese Americans in the twentieth century.

Humanizing Orientalism and Counter-Narrative

The description of life for the Fukuda family in the Japanese internment camps exemplifies the positive values of Japanese culture. In this chapter, "El peligro amarillo," the Japanese prisoners are portrayed as a model minority for their admirable moral comportment under abusive and humiliating conditions. The first six months of their imprisonment takes place in the Tanforan hippodrome in San Bruno, California. The camp has insufficient food and water as well as poor and unsanitary living conditions that expose the prisoners to hot summers and freezing winters. Despite harsh treatment, the prisoners quickly organize, electing representatives to negotiate with the camp authorities. Ichimei's mother Heideko is highlighted as the only female leader among the prisoners. The third-person omniscient narration signals the hardships faced in the camps and characterizes the Japanese as indomitable and industrious:

Habían . . . inaugurado una escuela sin lápices ni cuadernos, y programado deportes y otras actividades para mantener ocupados a los jóvenes, que se consumían de frustración y ocio. Se vivía en cola de día y de noche. . . . Había toque de queda, se pasaba lista de la gente dos veces al día y se prohibía el uso de la lengua japonesa, algo imposible para los *Isei*. Para impedir que intervinieran los guardias, los mismos detenidos se encargaban de mantener el orden y controlar a los revoltosos . . . (109)

Despite dehumanizing lines, roll calls, rations, and curfews, the Japanese organize schools and sports events though lacking in resources; they even monitor themselves to avoid negative interactions with the guards. Allende emphasizes the irrational harshness of life in the camps by mentioning the prohibition of the Japanese language, which punished first-generation Japanese immigrants, the *Isei*,

more so for their lack of English-speaking skills. The prisoners' resilience under these circumstances defines the Japanese Americans as a morally superior collective in contrast to the U.S. government that was responsible for their detainment.

The second camp where the Fukudas are incarcerated is in Topaz, Utah, where the circumstances are even more dire. The camp is composed of endless rows of improvised barracks, surrounded by barbed wire fences and control towers. The desert environment is described as devoid of all life, and the prisoners are plagued by constant high winds and brutal dust storms. However, the Japanese once again quickly implement their resourcefulness to create some semblance of normal life:

En pocas semanas había escuelas, guarderías infantiles, centros deportivos y un periódico. . . . Formaron una biblioteca con libros donados, crearon compañías de teatro y bandas de música. Ichimei convenció a su padre de que podían plantar vegetales en cajones, a pesar del clima despiadado y la tierra alcalina. Eso animó a Takao y pronto otros lo imitaron. (113)¹⁰

No narrative space is given to suffering or complaints. The Japanese, represented by the Fukuda family, are characterized by a hyperbolic moral superiority that allows them to maintain their dignity and culture in the concentration camps. Young Ichimei, who had already been established as a gifted gardener, now fantastically makes vegetables grow in the previously lifeless desert sand of Utah, thereby supplementing his family's poor rations with fresh produce. While this magical detail is related in a realistic, matter-of-fact way, the reference to the miracles of Jesus feeding the multitudes is apparent. Just as Jesus made loaves of bread and fish mysteriously multiply to feed the masses, Ichimei grows produce in the wooden drawers taken from the barracks, leading others to do the same. This implicit reference to the Christian gospel suggests the notion of a Japanese-American savior in the character of Ichimei. In this case, his talent and skill are revered, not in light of Japanese culture, but in relation to the Westernized story of Jesus.¹¹ Ichimei's miracle emphasizes the Western subjectivity of the implied author. It also offers an important counternarrative to the history of this period. Despite their poor conditions, these camps were places where miracles were possible, and the prisoners, in spite of their official status as potential security threats, were capable of extraordinary feats.

As Yousaf describes in his reading of *La casa de los espíritus*, Allende's magical realism offers a counter-narrative to the official silence regarding the Chilean dictatorship (1973-1989). In this novel, magical realism is used as a technique to rewrite the history of the Japanese internment camps in the U.S., which attempted to suppress what the government saw as a potentially subversive group after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent American entry into WWII. While the history of

this event has not been silenced, it has been minimized and officially justified in U.S. discourse. Allende's narrative brings life to this historical desert by attempting to humanize the victims. Thus, she leverages positive stereotypes of Japanese culture: organization and honor. Additionally, Ichimei, with his supernatural talents and perseverance, represents the Japanese as morally admirable under distress. While the novel is indeed a counter-history to this period and presents a positive image of Japanese Americans, it presents Ichimei as an aspirational, yet unrelatable archetype: a boy who never complains and makes food grow in the desert. The implied author attempts a positive representation of Japanese Americans through historical rewriting and magical realism, yet the Orientalist dynamic is unavoidable and reduces the heterogeneity of Japanese culture to Western stereotypes.

Deifying Orientalism and Magical Realism

After the Fukudas's imprisonment ends, Ichimei overcomes discrimination and institutional racism to build a successful landscaping company. He and his mother take a spiritual pilgrimage to Japan so that Ichimei may "buscar sus raíces" and recover from a painful break(?) in his relationship with Alma, who abruptly ends it and marries her cousin Nathaniel without explanation (269). Ichimei and his mother Heideko plan to visit and present offerings at one hundred temples and leave a bit of his father's ashes at each site in order to fulfill their duty to their ancestors. When they arrive, Heideko stays with her family, and Ichimei continues on the pilgrimage alone. Ichimei visits each site on his memorized itinerary, walking in solitude for four months. The following description of his pilgrimage highlights the Oomoto's values of humility and frugality taken to an extreme: "Caminaba durante el día hasta que lo vencía la fatiga, ayunaba hasta que alguien le ofrecía algo de comer, dormía donde cayera la noche. Nunca tuvo que pedir, nunca necesitó dinero. Iba con la mente en blanco . . ." (271). Ichimei's journey coincides with the Oomoto beliefs of purity of mind and complete reliance on God (Stalker 85). According to Stalker, the moral code adopted by the Oomoto religion emphasized "self-denial, frugality, diligence, and honesty" (85). By bolstering Ichimei's character with hyperbolic doses of Oomoto values, Allende further elevates the status of the Japanese lover to that of a spiritually devoted and morally pure being. However, his supposed superiority is problematic in the context of his love affair with Alma.

In the years following the trip to Japan, Alma and Ichimei rekindle their relationship, but never marry, mainly because the social taboo of the time surrounding interracial marriage. They maintain a love affair over decades through secret letters and clandestine meetings, despite having separate lives and families. Throughout the novel, Alma is criticized for her instability and contradictory nature,

while Ichimei is revered.¹² The novel presents a double-standard in regards to Alma's and Ichimei's moralities. Alma's husband, Nathaniel, maintained private homosexual relations that she condoned. Nonetheless, Alma goes to great lengths to hide her affair with Ichimei for fear of being discovered. Moreover, Ichimei's wife suffers on account of his infidelity, yet she submissively accepts his lack of loyalty to her. Meanwhile, the narrator lauds Ichimei for his unfailing devotion to the flighty and irresponsible Alma. The conventional double-standard in regards to love affairs--men are allowed to have them, but not women--develops the characters in divergent ways. It appears that the reader is supposed to turn a blind eye to Ichimei's infidelity in order to admire his spirituality and devotion to Alma, his true soulmate. In contrast, the imperfect female protagonist appears more humanized to the reader, partly due to the anxiety she experiences as a result of the affair. In this situation, the relationship between Ichimei and Alma provides an opportunity to emphasize Western female subjectivity; meanwhile, it casts an aura of impeccability around the otherworldly Japanese lover. As in other novels by Allende, *El amante japonés* keeps a complex and strong-willed woman locked in a patriarchal cage, but this time, magical realism combined with Orientalism complicates this power dynamic.¹³ Alma represents a partially liberated woman by novel's end. Nevertheless, the narrator's perspective shows her as emotionally dependent on the admirable, yet distant and exoticized, Ichimei.

Throughout the novel, the love affair is depicted through Ichimei's letters to Alma, which emphasize his mystical and exotic nature. His last letter displays a complete surrender to the values of purity and universal peace of the Oomoto religion. He writes:

Estoy disfrutando mi realidad de hombre maduro, por no decir viejo. Si me fuera a morir dentro de tres días, ¿qué pondría en esos días? ¡Nada! Me vaciaría de todo menos del amor. . . . O tal vez no hay pasado ni futuro y todo sucede simultáneamente en las infinitas dimensiones del universo. En ese caso estamos juntos constantemente, para siempre. Es fantástico ser vivo. Todavía tenemos diecisiete años, Alma mía. (346)

His serene acceptance of old age and inevitability reveals a character without fear, guilt, shame, or human need. Instead, he meditates on oneness and infinite communion with his greatest love, Alma. His character is aspirational and supposedly unflawed by normal human errors, which elevates him to a supernatural status for Alma and for the reader. The narration equates Ichimei with a supreme being, composed only of love. Moreover, Allende presents Ichimei mainly by his letters to Alma, always framing the Japanese lover within his relation to the Western protagonist. These two factors, reductionist idealization and Western subjectivity, characterize the novel's Orientalist viewpoint.

One of the final scenes in the novel further demonstrates the text's magical realist and Orientalist technique. Irina is at Alma's hospital bedside when she is at her weakest and, without warning, Ichimei appears:

Era la hora más oscura de la noche, la hora misteriosa del tiempo delgado, cuando el velo entre este mundo y el de los espíritus suele descomponerse, llegó por fin el visitante que Alma estaba esperando. Entró sin ruido, con zapatillas de goma, tan tenue, que Irina no habría despertado sin el gemido ronco de Alma al sentirlo tan cerca. ¡Ichi! Estaba junto a la cama, inclinado sobre ella, . . . era como lo había imaginado cuando estudiaba su retrato en el marco de plata, de mediana estatura y hombros fuertes, . . . el rostro noble y sereno. ¡Ichimei! (338)

Irina leaves the room and falls asleep in a chair in the hallway. When she awakes, Ichimei is gone, and Alma has died: "Ichimei se había ido y el aire de la habitación estaba lleno de su ausencia. Alma se había ido con él" (339). After Alma's funeral, Irina asks about Ichimei and mentions his last visit with Alma the night she died. Seth reveals that Ichimei died of a heart attack three years prior. He explains away her vision by adding: "Viste lo que deseabas ver, Irina" (346). Allende uses dramatic irony and detail to create an Orientalist aura around the uncontainable ghost of Ichimei. The Japanese lover becomes a Japanese spirit to escort Alma to the afterlife.

Conclusion

Allende's novel adopts an Orientalist viewpoint to tell the story of Alma and her Japanese lover. Magical realism, shown through Ichimei's supernatural abilities and mystic qualities, offer positive, yet problematic, stereotypes of Japanese Americans. The implied author presents an alternative history that is sympathetic to the Japanese, but displays various facets of Orientalism in doing so: exoticism, idealization, "othering," and cultural appropriation. Furthermore, she uses her archetypal female protagonist (traveler, exile, woman of the world, according to Carvalho) with a Western worldview to depict the Eastern lover (95).¹⁴ In this novel, as in *Hija de la fortuna* and *Retrato en sepia*, Allende displays Orientalism through her magical realist techniques.¹⁵ In *El amante japonés*, the narrator uses an Orientalist point of view to justify magical realism by means of the Oomoto religion. The novel describes Ichimei as capable of incredible feats and as a humble hero who overcomes unimaginable hardships with serenity and extraordinary skill. His final appearance to Irina upon Alma's death exoticizes his character by presenting him as more spirit than human. The novel filters Ichimei, his family, their history and culture through Western characters and a Western context, emphasizing

their unknowability. Additionally, Ichimei, a follower of the Oomoto religion, is compared to unrelated religions and religious figures through the Western gaze that attempts to explain, and even dismiss, his mystic abilities. As Said claims, Orientalism is more about the construction of the identity of the West than it is about the East (3-6). Likewise, *El amante japonés* is less about the lover than about whom he loved. This novel is Alma's story. It is not Ichimei's life and death around which the narrative is constructed, but hers. Ichimei is the magical realist object to the story's Western subject.

Notes

¹ Ellen Wu offers a comprehensive analysis of the concept of the model minority in the U.S. as it pertains to Asian Americans. The myth of the model minority perpetuates the belief that certain demographic groups are more successful, are more law-abiding, are better educated, and have more stable families than other demographic groups. This controversial notion homogenizes the experiences of members of various ethnic groups, races, and religions. The model minority stereotype has been used to justify the distribution of public and private resources to some groups while excluding other groups.

² Literary scholars who have analyzed Allende's novels regarding these issues include Linda Gould Levine, Harold Bloom, Donald Shaw, Rosemary Feal, Patricia Hart, Susan Carvalho, María Inés Lagos, Cristina Ruiz Serrano, Beth Jorgensen and Yvette E. Miller, among others. Jorgensen makes a detailed summary of the major critical analyses of Allende's fiction (in Feal 130). Among her recommendations for future critique is the recourse in Allende's novel to frequent stereotypes, particularly for lower-class characters. She mentions tired tropes of indigenous nanas and "black women with ample bosoms" (in *El plan infinito*), but does not mention the Orientalist treatment of Chinese characters in *Hija de la fortuna* and *Retrato en sepia* (in Feal 130).

³ According to Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, the implied author, in contrast with the narrator(s) who can vary throughout the text, is seen through the worldview or ideology as presented in the narrative as a whole (17). The implied author is demonstrated through the manner in which characters and situations are presented, tone or attitude, and values displayed in the text. The implied author's ideology, values, or worldview may coincide or contrast with those of the empirical author.

⁴ Nahem Yousaf critiques the representation of Latin American "realities" in Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*. Allende's project "can be understood as attempts to rescue Latin America from the clutches of dictatorial regimes, with such regimes' suppression of 'subversive' peoples and their state version of historical events" (11). Regarding U.S. political intervention in Latin America, Allende's novel points to "the neo-imperial hold that the United States has over Latin America" (Yousaf 11).

⁵ Stephen Gregory analyzes the Scheherazade/Eva Luna parallel as it relates to Isabel Allende's figure as a writer. While the Orientalist appropriation is clear, Gregory makes no reference to Orientalist theory (81-101).

⁶ Araceli Tinajero demonstrates how Orientalist discourse is manifested in these modernist poets and others in *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano* (1).

⁷ In recent years, Massai, Maori, Navajo, Oaxacan, and Guatemalan artisans have spoken out and filed lawsuits against U.S. and European fashion and apparel designers including Nike, Isabel Marant, Marc Jacobs, Chanel and many others for appropriating and capitalizing on their cultural property. This phenomenon of cultural appropriation for commercial gain is not limited to clothing, but extends to all forms of decorative art, including household items and furnishings. The notion of cultural appropriation is an emerging interdisciplinary issue crossing sociology, media, film, and culture studies, and economics. For analyses of cultural appropriation in merchandise and Western cultural production see Coombe, Shand, and Ziff.

⁸ Carvalho analyzes the use of space as a narrative tool in *Retrato en sepia*, which coincides with issues of Chinese heritage and cultural identity, though never incorporating the theory of Orientalism. Nonetheless, Carvalho detects various details that evidence Allende's Orientalist tendencies regarding the primary characters Eliza, Tao Chi'en, Lynn, and Aurora/Lai-Ming (64-82).

⁹ Magical realism often appears as part of a local or native belief system, as in Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* through voodoo and in the Yoruba and indigenous traditions present in the work of Gabriel García Márquez. According to Michael Valdez Moses, magical realism often draws on pre-modern or non-Western traditions to reveal a "lower strata of cultural traditions that predate the arrival and imposition of 'Western' modernity", and I see a direct parallel in terms of Orientalism for similar purposes (112).

¹⁰ In 2017 the U.S. Library of Congress released online a cache of over 4,600 newspapers published in the Japanese American internment camps in both Japanese and English. The papers present the difficult task of presenting news, maintaining moral, and complying with authorities (Maloney). Such publications further the notion of Japanese Americans as a model minority.

¹¹ The stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes is reported in all four gospels. One miracle, the feeding of the 5,000, appears in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9: 12-17, and John 6:1-14. A separate miracle, the feeding of the 4,000, appears only in Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-9.

¹² Neither character is criticized for having the affair, but the narrator criticizes Alma throughout the book. Ichimei's wife was devoted to him, and Alma's complicated but loving marriage was more of a brother/sister relationship. Her husband Nathaniel was also her first cousin and lived most of his adult life as a closeted homosexual and protected by Alma,

maintaining private relationships with men, including an important long-term relationship that was ultimately blessed by Alma.

¹³ For detailed analyses of magical realism and feminism in Allende's fiction, see Cristina Ruiz Serrano, Susan Carvalho, Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy Faris, and Patricia Hart, among others.

¹⁴ Carvalho describes this female archetype who reappears in various iterations throughout Allende's novels. This type of woman is partially liberated and negotiates power beyond many Western patriarchal norms. Examples in Allende's novels include: Eliza Sommers, Miss Rose Sommers, Paulina del Valle, Nivea del Valle, and Sor María Escapularia, all of *Hija de la fortuna* and/or *Retrato en sepia* (Carvalho 95).

¹⁵ As in *Hija de la fortuna* and *Retrato en sepia*, *El amante japonés* provides evidence of an Orientalist viewpoint in Allende's fiction. In all three novels, a Western protagonist displaced to the U.S. provides the subjectivity through which she depicts a magical realist Asian-American as a lover, soulmate, and moral compass.

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