

Women's Gaze and Travel Literature in Isabel Allende's *Inés del alma mía*

Rocío Quispe-Agnoli
Michigan State University

Travel literature is one of the novelties of medieval Europe and can be traced in the Hispanic tradition since the fourteenth century. In the early 1300s *Los viajes de Marco Polo*, also known as *El libro del millón* and *El libro de las maravillas*, had a significant impact in the European imagination and stimulated interest of the lands far from Europe. *Embajada de Tamorlán* (1406) by Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo initiated Spanish travel literature (López Estrada 35). Almost one hundred years later, the "Letter to Luis de Santángel," written by Christopher Columbus in 1493 upon his return to Europe after his first voyage to the West Indies, opened travel narrative to the wonders of the New World and offered their first European written description. In these cases, the visual experience of the eyewitness supported the veracity of events, peoples and places that the traveler had seen. The tradition of writing events whose accuracy was supported by the accounts of an eyewitness is the platform used by Isabel Allende to write a fictional autobiography of Inés de Suárez, a sixteenth-century historical character who participated in the Spanish conquest of Chile. In *Inés del alma mía* (2006),¹ the protagonist Inés Suárez tells her story of knowing, domesticating, and conquering unknown territories for Spain at the same time that she engages her emotions with new lands and their inhabitants through the exercise of her gaze. In this essay I propose to look at this novel as an example of contemporary narrative that combines the mimicry of travel literature and woman's fictional autobiography. In travel literature, the traveler's journey beyond the limits of his/her own world introduces his/her personal experiences about other places and peoples while building representations of otherness. In this way, and through a process initiated by the traveler's gaze, the main character in this novel becomes a mediator between peoples, places and cultures. To understand this mediation, I explore the ways in which Inés's gaze is used to achieve two literary objectives. The first one is to mimic the genre of Hispanic travel literature and build knowledge about the New World; the second, the representation of self or the narrative of a woman's life through her own visual experiences. Both objectives constitute the basis for her fictional autobiography.

Travel literature, cultural mediation and visual agency

Travel writing can be read not only as the stories of unusual, unexpected and adventurous events in distant and unknown lands, but also as a pre-text to give voice to a mediator among cultures. For example, mediations by sixteenth-century women travelers in Spanish America offered a version of events recorded in official histories of the European conquest that, for the most part, remain unread. These texts reveal the exercise of women's textual agency that is usually overlooked in colonial Latin American studies. In these documents, "textual agency" refers to the capacity of a given individual to place him/herself in a position that allows him/her to speak with the intention to move his/her reader to action.² In this essay, I extend the concept of "textual agency" to that of "visual agency" to analyze the construction of Inés Suárez's gaze of the unknown in Allende's novel. This character's gaze includes the visual experience of the character's own self throughout time, and her realization of the potential differences between perception and referenced reality. Inés's

awareness of such differences indicates a journey of self-discovery that explains the novel's fictional process in the production of life- and travel-writing.

The relationship between individuals and the representation of their world is undoubtedly connected with their visual experiences. The network of such experiences may constitute a visual event³ that is perceived and transmitted in different ways according to the subject's personal and social experience as well as her or his interests and goals. In this way, the European experience of sixteenth-century South America and its configuration in various narratives and descriptions of the same period constitute a visual event. Visual events take place through the actions of agents of sight, or visual subjects that construct and visualize them, called visual subjects (Mirzoeff 10). The expression of visual events is especially prevalent in the literary expressions of early modern Europe and colonial Latin America literature since a small percentage of the population was able to read and write. Ways of knowing and learning by illiterate people of early modern Spain, like the historical Inés Suárez, was strongly supported by the consumption and circulation of visual images. Thus the main character of Allende's novel is constructed as a subject that participates in visual events, seeks information, consumes it, and transmits it by means of new representations that she creates and renders in the first person. In this process, Allende's character becomes a visual subject, an agent of sight who can see and is also seen by others (Mirzoeff 10). As a visual subject that sees, she decodes and encodes what she sees to communicate it to others, and she is also aware that she is the object of visual events during her journey. She sees and is seen by others. Among those subjects who see her, perhaps the most revealing of all of them is herself by means of a mirror.

In this essay, I look into the female character proposed by Allende's novel, whose gaze is displayed as tool for knowledge and as a platform to construct representations of the unknown. Gazing is a defining activity to process new information about the unknown in Inés's fictional autobiography. In Allende's novel there is a frequent use of verbs that indicate "seeing," "looking," "watching" (*mirar, ver, observar, reflejar, devolver los ojos, cruzar las miradas*). In order to deconstruct this female gaze, my study pays attention to the woman's visual experience in at least three possible scenarios: (1) her eyewitness experience of new lands and peoples; (2) her sensual gaze of individuals who become objects of attention and desire, and (3) her feminine way of looking at other women combined with her gaze about herself which also encompasses her necessity to write about her life.

The dynamic relationship that a given visual subject establishes with these possible scenarios for his/her visual experience has been addressed by gaze theory, which departs from the field of psychoanalysis. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Sigmund Freud introduced "schaulust" (pleasure in seeing) which manifests in human beings since childhood. This pleasure, according to Freud, could be sublimated as it happens with the visual consumption of art or may become a sexual-driven behavior that manifests, for example, in the male curiosity to look at the female body.⁴ The German term was later translated as "scopophilia" (love of looking) to indicate the sexual pleasure that results from looking at objects or subjects that are perceived as erotic (naked bodies, sexual postures and gestures). Jacques Lacan linked scopophilia with the apprehension of the other (183). Freud's "schaulust" or "scopophilia" became the basis to define voyeurism usually associated with male gaze in the cinematic experience. A voyeur in this context views an object that arouses desire for the other. In her analysis of visual pleasure and movies, Laura Mulvey departs from Freud's and Lacan's reflections on viewing and desiring the other and extends it to gender relations in cinematic narratives. In Mulvey's reasoning, the subject who views, the agent of sight in Mirzoeff's terms, is identified with a masculine gaze who views, and desires, a woman as an object and wants to possess and control her. The spectator, then, identifies with such masculine gaze in the screen and experiences the pleasure of looking at the female object: "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of

the male protagonists as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (307). Mulvey’s proposal implies that the agent of sight is male and active, while the female maintains a passive position as the object to be observed by the male gaze. While this gendering of the visual experience in cinematic narrative may apply to the cases studied by Mulvey, I contend that Inés’s gaze have characteristics of both, the male and female gaze, depending on the position from where she executes her act of seeing and what she does with it.

Sixteenth-century women travelers

Most scholarly approaches to early modern women travelers to the Americas tend to center in the historical information about their journeys: when the travel took place, which locations were visited, what means of transportation were used, and how many women did actually come to the New World and with what purposes. Consuelo Varela notes, for example, that European women started traveling to the Americas by the second voyage of Christopher Columbus (20). In the early 16th century only married women who were going to join their husbands in the New World were allowed to travel. Their mission was to contribute to the civilization of strange lands, to populate them with their progeny and to help their husbands keep their Christian ways as heads of their families. Married women were a focal point of western family values that were deemed crucial for the effective colonization of the Americas. In addition, during the first century of Spanish colonization, women had access to economic and social power that was traditionally reserved for men (Martin 17). In his book *Daughters of the Conquistadores*, Luis Martin studied the characteristics of the first Spanish women who arrived to South America. They were for the most part wives, sisters, or daughters of the Spanish conquistadors and were perceived as crucial agents of domestication in order to create and maintain a European-like society that would be orderly and civilized (9). Martin comments the activity of Spanish women who executed social, political and economic agency in difficult situations such as those who survived the civil wars among the Spanish conquistadors, and those who received *encomiendas* (labor grants) when they lost their husbands or fathers. In addition to these examples, female agency was publicly displayed in early colonial Spanish America in those women labeled as *mujeres varolines* (masculine or manly women) such as Catalina de Erauso, and the women pirates of the English Caribbean, Anne Bonny and Mary Read.⁵

Inés Suárez (Plasencia, Spain, ca. 1507- Santiago de Chile, 1580) was a Spanish woman traveler who crossed the Atlantic and participated actively in the conquest and colonization of Chile while accompanying her lover, Pedro de Valdivia. Her participation was recorded by Spanish chroniclers and Chilean historians who usually portrayed Suárez with the characteristics of a heroic conquistador hero, a mother and a matriarch (Barros Arana, Mariño de Lovera). According to historical records, Inés arrived to Spanish America in 1537 in search of her first husband, Juan de Málaga. Eventually she found out that Málaga had died and requested, as widow of a Spanish soldier and conquistador, land and the rights of owning a labor-grant, petition that was granted at that time and later fulfilled in Chile. In Cuzco, Inés met Pedro de Valdivia and became his lover. Francisco Pizarro granted Valdivia permission to have Inés traveling with him, as his maid, to the conquest of the southern territories considered at that time the end of the world or *Finis Terrae*. From this moment on, Inés Suárez became a defining agent of the conquest of Chile and the colonization of Mapuche lands. In his 1983 study, Luis Martin comments her feminine home-making habits: once Suárez’s role as a fierce soldier in battles with the Mapuche Indians was over, she would take special care in finding domestic animals that she brought herself to Santiago in order to ensure the survival of men (23). Thanks to her multiple skills—sewing, cooking, cleaning, healing the wounded, uncovering complots against Valdivia and her amazing gift to find water in the desert—and her

strong personality, Inés Suárez has been recorded in Spanish histories as the female conquistador of Chile *par excellence*. Like other prominent Spanish women of this period, she intervened to save the life of Valdivia several times and uncovered complots against him. Suárez's heroism reached its peak in a historical episode in which she fought, along Spanish soldiers, to defend the newly founded city of Santiago de Extremadura while it was besieged by Mapuche Indians in 1541. In 1545 Valdivia rewarded Inés with an *encomienda*. In 1549 the Spanish conquistador was forced by the Spanish officials to give up his personal relationship with Suárez as a condition to keep his position as Governor of Chile. Then, he arranged her marriage with captain Rodrigo de Quiroga with whom Inés led a quiet life and committed herself to public charity until her death in 1580.

Inés del alma mía comprises six chapters that follow historical events in chronological order from 1500 to 1553. These are the birth and death years of Pedro de Valdivia and not Suárez's who lived between 1507 and 1580.⁶ In spite of the dates associated with Valdivia's lifespan, the main character in each chapter is Inés who usually appears in the company of other women. The novel fictionalizes her story and makes her the author of her own life writing. It is important to note Allende's disclaimer about the historical sources that surround her main character and that have been consulted by the writer.⁷ None of these sources has been authored by Inés Suárez who appeared to be illiterate until a very advanced age. In fact, the novel offers a glimpse into the character's process of acquiring a basic literacy that allows her to write. Inés's story combines the daily discourse of her private life, usually associated with domestic spaces and endeavors, and the public and official history of the conquest of Chile. The novel conceives then a woman traveler who scrutinizes with her gaze individuals and geographical spaces that appear before her as agents of the unknown and become objects of desire. In this historical fiction, Inés's gaze tries to learn, tame, control and own the unknown and hostile places and people of the New World while she tries to obtain the attention of love of those men she falls in love with. At the same time, the protagonist reveals soon in the novel that she's the author of her own memory; she has learned to read and write and is producing her own life writing whose intended reader is her stepdaughter, Isabel de Quiroga.

Looking at new lands

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand Inés's gaze of the New World is in its contrast with the way she looks at the Old. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist expresses her dissatisfaction with the Spanish society that restricts her to the roles of wife, mother and homemaker. The social space of her native Spain is small and suffocating and she is seen as either the granddaughter of her *abuelo* whom she should care for, or the abandoned wife of Juan de Málaga. Inés describes herself as being trapped in a sort of social limbo and anticipates her freedom in the New World because it is a space conceived as untamed and dangerous:

Vivía rabiosa conmigo y con el mundo por haber nacido mujer y estar condenada a la prisión de las costumbres (...) Estaba atada al fantasma de Juan. No era realmente viuda, no podía volver a casarme, mi papel era esperar, sólo esperar. ¿No era preferible enfrentar los peligros del mar y de tierras bárbaras antes que envejecer y morir sin haber vivido? (Allende 29)

In contrast, the New World is introduced to Inés by the dreams of her first husband, Juan, who expects to become rich fast: “[Juan] se nutría de las historias fabulosas del Nuevo Mundo, donde los mayores tesoros y honores se hallaban al alcance de los valientes que estaban dispuestos a correr riesgos” (21). But the desired far lands are not exempt of dangers: “nunca me tocó ver de

cerca a ningún aventurero que volviese de las Indias enriquecido; regresaban, por el contrario, miserables, enfermos y locos” (27). In spite of its ambivalences, however, the New World is presented as a frontier space in which social expectations become flexible enough to allow freedom to most people, women included: “sospechaba que allá [el Nuevo Mundo] había algo aún más valioso: libertad. En las Indias cada uno era su propio amo, (...) ser otra persona, vivir otra vida” (27). Her anxiety for freedom is expressed repeatedly throughout the novel,⁸ and it will eventually extend to her descriptions of the land as well as her journey.

The unpredictable nature of the New World fits well with Inés's. Her gaze of the Atlantic Ocean during her crossing anticipates what she will see later and confirms her anticipated success in her search for freedom (58, 62). The ocean soon gives place to the Caribbean Sea that is consumed by Inés's gaze along her other senses: “Las aguas del mar Caribe eran azules y limpias como las piletas de los palacios de los moros. El aire tenía un olor intoxicante de flores, fruta, sudor” (67). On occasion, the accounts of others trigger her visual imagination of the strange nature full of wonders that she is about to see, as it happens when she cites the tales of Padre Gregorio in Cartagena: “Dijo que crecían flores carnívoras con olor a cadáver y otras delicadas y fragantes pero ponzoñosas; también nos habló de aves con fastuoso plumaje, y de pueblos de monos con rostro humano que espían a los intrusos desde el denso follaje” (65). Her eyewitness experience of new lands goes on in her journey through Panamá, Lima, Cuzco, and finally Chile. The detailed descriptions of each place oscillate between the dangers and admiration instilled by what Inés watches for the first time. The splendor of Cuzco (“Nunca he visto nada como la magnífica ciudad del Cuzco, (...) era una joya blanca y resplandeciente bajo un cielo color púrpura” 99) is compared with Rome, a common theme in early modern historiography, and it contrasts with the awe before Chile as she remembers from Diego de Almagro's account:

el espantoso viaje por las altas sierras, vigilados por los cóndores que volaban en lentos círculos sobre sus cabezas a la espera de nuevos caídos para limpiarles los huesos. El frío mató a más de dos mil indios auxiliares (...) Hasta los piojos desaparecían, y las pulgas caían de las ropas como semillitas. Nada crecía allí, ni un líquen, todo era roca, viento, hielo y soledad. (...) Durante el día el calor del desierto es como una hoguera y la luz es tan intensa que enloquece a los hombres y caballos por igual (...) La sed mató a muchos indios y envileció a españoles (90-91).

In the 16th century, expeditions to Chile were described as journeys to hell. The northern Chilean territory was perceived by Europeans as the most southern frontier, its desert and highlands were seen as a vast place of chaos and disorder, empty and dry desolation, intrinsically different from the abundance of the Caribbean islands, Mexico or Perú: “el desierto más árido del mundo” (129), “paisaje áspero, de inmensa crueldad” (151). Chile was the place of lack *par excellence*, feared by many conquistadors but survived and domesticated by women like Inés Suárez. As she soon figured out, another Chile awaited her. Fertile valleys and temperate climate could be found beyond the desert that became a threshold to a southern paradise (91). This threshold, states Inés, ended up being beneficial for her search of freedom:

He vivido más de cuarenta años en el Nuevo Mundo y todavía no me acostumbro al desorden, aunque yo misma me he beneficiado de él; si me hubiese quedado en mi pueblo natal, hoy sería una anciana pobre y ciega de tanto hacer encaje a la luz de un candil. Allá sería la costurera de la calle del Acueducto. Aquí soy doña Inés Suárez,

señora muy principal, viuda del excelentísimo gobernador don Rodrigo de Quiroga, conquistadora y fundadora del Reino de Chile. (14).

Furthermore, the New World reveals itself as the object of her sensual gaze that fosters her desire for multiple sensations and experiences: “En este Nuevo Mundo el aire es caliente, propicio a la sensualidad, todo es más intenso, el color, los aromas, los sabores; incluso las flores, con sus terrible fragancias, y las frutas, tibias y pegajosas, incitan a la lascivia” (96). Inés’s view of Chile slowly turns into admiration for a land whose wealth and advantages are not obvious at first sight. Once this land is seen in its many facets, the novel’s protagonist assumes proudly her civilizing roles as founder of cities and the spread of European and Christian values. Moreover, says Inés, it is the women who actually made possible the foundation of Spanish urban centers here, since the land is as passionate, energetic, and abundant as the Spanish women who came along Pedro de Valdivia’s expedition: “Esta tierra es fecunda y sus frutos debieran alcanzar para todos. Asumí con porfía el trabajo de fundar, que en el Nuevo Mundo corresponde a las mujeres” (194). In other words, the description and visual experiences of the New World and Chile serve as a frame for the character’s experiences and life writing. It is in this context where she manifests the different aspects of her identity and decides to write about it.

Gazes of love and desire

Among the multiple visual experiences of Inés Suárez in the New World, her gaze over men and women of different places and social standings takes place throughout the entire novel. Her visual descriptions of the new lands she encounters in her long journey to Chile include those of the native peoples of the Americas as well as the Spaniards who arrive with her. Her categorization of human groups is relatively simple, as it would have been in a sixteenth-century account written by a Spanish traveler: they may be collaborators or enemies. The Indians include the Andean royalty, the Quechua servants or *yanaconas*, who mainly act as collaborators of the Spaniards, and the fierce Mapuche as hostile enemies of Spain. The Andean royalty is incarnated in the overall reference to the Incas (52) and one specific female character who becomes one of Inés’s companions that I comment on in the next section. The Quechua servants or *yanaconas* are always mentioned as a collective group that recalls her first observations of Indians as poor and miserable human beings in the Caribbean coasts (63) although she also admires their strength and hardiness (97). In contrast, the Mapuche are valiant warriors with great honor, even if they mistreat their women (83). The Mapuche women are as strong and honorable as their male counterparts (207). Inés summarizes her gaze of the Mapuche when she wonders their origins and expresses her awe before their demeanor, a description that may fit her own in some episodes of her life. Similarly to Inés, the Mapuche are free, passionate, indomitable, hard working, ready for battle when necessary: “Son salvajes, no saben de arte ni escritura, no construyen ciudades ni templos, no tienen castas, clases ni sacerdotes, solo capitanes para la Guerra, sus toquis. Andan de un lado a otro, libres y desnudos, con sus muchas esposas e hijos, que pelean con ellos en las batallas” (144).

While the Mapuche seem to become an object of admiration in Inés’s gaze, she also finds herself exerting what Mulvey distinguishes as the male gaze of desire (307). The protagonist’s account slows down its flow when it comes to the description of her sensual contemplation of the men she desires. This happens in three instances: when she meets Juan de Málaga, Pedro de Valdivia and Rodrigo de Quiroga. In all three cases, Inés shares her first visual impressions of the men and how she chooses to allow them to see her in a subtle seductive exchange of gazes. One can also observe a transformation in the way Inés experiences the visual event of their first encounters. She sees Juan

for the first time during a religious procession⁹ and, in a flirtatious initiative and against her mother's control of her gaze, she removes her veil for him to see her: "Aquel día de Semana Santa, lejos de obedecer a mi madre, me eché hacia atrás la mantilla y sonreí al desconocido" (20). From that moment on, Inés and Juan become lovers and eventually, under her family pressure, they enter an unhappy marriage. Their apparent love has been founded on the very first impression of the young gaze in which physical appearances matter more than anything else. And as such, their relation does not last since it lacks a solid foundation. This mirrors the experience of Pedro de Valdivia with his wife, Marina, for whom he fell in love at first sight when he saw her one Sunday morning after mass: "Pedro vio a Marina Ortiz de Gaete en el único sitio donde podía encontrarla en público: a la salida de misa (...) la belleza y la virtud de la joven lo sedujeron al punto" (36). The beauty and virtue of Marina are external appearances: "rostro de ángel," "cabello rubio y luminoso," "piel translúcida," "aire de inocencia." Pedro and Marina also entered an unhappy marriage that would last until his death. A few years later, when Inés was in Cuzco in search of her estranged husband, she met Pedro in a poorly illuminated room of her house at night after he had prevented the sexual assault of one of her suitors. The following passage is a good example of their mutual visual seduction:

...procedí a estudiarlo de pies a cabeza en la luz amarilla de la lámpara. Me gustó lo que vi: ojos azules como el cielo de Extremadura, facciones viriles, rostro abierto aunque severo, fornido, buen porte de guerrero, manos endurecidas por la espada pero de dedos largos y elegantes. (...) ¿Y qué vio él? Una mujer delgada, de mediana estatura, con el cabello suelto y desordenado, ojos castaños, cejas gruesas, descalza, cubierta por un camisón de tela ordinaria. Mudos, nos miramos durante una eternidad sin poder apartar los ojos. (115)

Differently from these experiences, Inés's encounter with Rodrigo de Quiroga nine years before they married, is calm and even distant: "Era un hombre alto y muy guapo, de frente amplia, nariz aguileña y ojos castaños, grandes y líquidos, como los de un caballo. Tenía los párpados pesados y una mirada remota, un poco dormida, que le suavizaba el rostro" (148). Inés's impression of Quiroga contrasts with that of Eulalia, a Quechua young woman at the service of an Inca noble, who falls in love with him at first sight and gives birth to his only child, Isabel, later raised by Inés (224). Interestingly there are no detailed descriptions of Quiroga as a handsome and sensual man as it happens with Valdivia and Málaga. Instead, Inés remembers him at the beginning of her life writing, when he is about to die and asks his wife and daughter to dress him appropriately to receive the Holy Communion right before his departure. The description of the decaying, ill body of Rodrigo accompanies the aging body of the protagonist in the first chapter of the novel. Inés's focus on the elderly body brings us now to the third kind of woman's gaze that reveals a scrutiny of self. In this visual experience, the comparison with her impression of other women's appearances and gazes seems to be unavoidable.

Woman's gaze of women

I have commented above Inés's visual experience of the lands of the New World, its native people as well as those men who become her object of love and desire. In addition to them, Indian and Spanish women are among the characters that call her attention and play a role in her final self-representation. Among the women of Andean royalty, Inés writes in detail about Cecilia, an Inca princess converted to Christianity who married willingly a Spanish officer of Valdivia and accompanied him to the exploration of Chile. Allende's novel abounds with examples of Inés's

fascination with Cecilia, her physical beauty, her regal demeanor and her pragmatic serenity even in the worst moments of the Mapuche war against Santiago de Chile. Once again, as an object of her curious gaze, Inés offers her portrait in detail:

Era muy joven y bella, con facciones delicadas, casi infantiles, de corta estatura y delgada, pero resultaba imponente, porque poseía la altivez natural de quien ha nacido en cuna de oro y está acostumbrada a ser servida. Vestía a la moda del incanato, con sencillez y elegancia. Llevaba la cabeza descubierta y el cabello suelto, como un manto negro, liso y reluciente, que le cubría la espalda hasta la cintura. (134)

Cecilia and her Indian servants also act as spies for Valdivia and serve as cultural mediators, along Inés, between the Mapuche and the Spaniards. The protagonist's fascination with Cecilia extends to the women *yanacunas* of Cuzco whom she looks at with careful detail.¹⁰ Among them, a distinctive individual is Catalina, a woman from Cuzco who was given to Inés by Francisco Pizarro as her personal servant when her rights as widow of a conquistador were acknowledged. Similarly to Cecilia, Catalina is described by Inés in detail several times throughout her story.¹¹ Both women become their best friends, as no other Spanish woman in her life, and play important roles in the success of Suárez as founder of cities, defender of Santiago, homemaker, and later heroic mother of Chile. While Cecilia is beautiful, pragmatic, regal and proud of her status, Catalina shows Inés how to cook and prepare medicines from the native plants and animals of the Andes. The Quechua servant claims being able to speak with the dead and forecast the future, and announces that Inés should wait patiently for her fate to come to her. Both women protect Allende's main character while teaching her the Andean women's ways of knowing, a wisdom that is crucial for her success in Chile.

In contrast to the native women of the Andes, Inés shows distrust and suspicion of the Spanish women who come to Chile. There is a very quick reference to Valdivia's concubines (*mancebas*) that take the place in the novel after he is forced to end his relationship with her. Inés dedicates more time to Marina Ortiz de Gaete, wife of Valdivia left in Spain by her husband and later forced to come to the New World. From Pedro's first impression that made him fall in love with Marina at first sight, Inés rather makes emphasis on her lack of experience to be a married woman, her rejection of Valdivia, her abandonment, and finally, her ugly appearance after years of solitude. The novel includes fictional visual encounter between both women upon her arrival to Chile. At this point, Inés cannot avoid the temptation of comparing herself with her symbolic rival after twenty five years of Valdivia's death:

Marina tiene algunos años menos que yo, pero comparada con ella me siento un pimpollo; se ha convertido en una beata escrupulosa y fea (...) Las arrugas y melindres de Marina me producen cierta satisfacción, (...) Por lo menos no vive en la pobreza, tiene una viudez digna, aunque eso no compensa su mala suerte de esposa abandonada. (264)

While Inés seems to mock Marina's old and ugly appearance, she also remembers the ship that brought five Spanish women to Chile when she was still Valdivia's mistress. The comparison with "women of her own race" ("pude compararme con mujeres de mi raza" 261) made her realize of her physical changes to the point that she was closer to be a *mujer varonil* or an Indian-like woman who would not look desirable enough to Spanish men: "Decidí dejar las botas y las ropas de hombre,

eliminar las trenzas y hacerme un peinado más elegante, untarme la cara con crema que me regaló Pedro y, en fin, cultivar las gracias femeninas que hacía años había descartado” (261).

These examples showcase the changing self-representation of the novel’s main character in her narrative which culminates in her revelation as an aging woman before her own image in a mirror. Through the exercise of her reflective gaze, Inés is not able to recognize herself at first. In a similar fashion in which she scrutinized the unknown spaces and peoples of sixteenth-century South America, the main character of *Inés del alma mía* discovers her own image in a mirror. The image she sees is not what she expects to see but a different one, one that has changed over time. Her still youthful soul and heart are trapped in a seventy-year old body that she examines with her sensual gaze once again:

Al mirarme en el espejo de plata, primer regalo de Rodrigo cuando nos desposamos, no reconozco a esa abuela coronada de pelos blancos que me mira de vuelta ¿Quién es ésa que se burla de la verdadera Inés? La examino de cerca con la esperanza de encontrar en el fondo del espejo a la niña con trenzas y rodillas encostradas que una vez fui, a la joven que escapaba a los vergeles para hacer el amor a escondidas, a la mujer madura y apasionada que dormía abrazada a Rodrigo de Quiroga. Están allí agazapadas, estoy segura, pero no logro vislumbrarlas. (15)

Interestingly in this act of looking at her past to write her life as a child, a young and later a mature woman in love, Inés finds herself an old woman in the mirror. In her analysis of Rosario Ferré’s “Isolda en el espejo,” Victoria Ketz proposes the following reading of women who look at their images in a mirror: “Women, when observing themselves, use a reflective medium: surfaces such as glass, water or a mirror. The image projected onto this surface is active and changing since it incorporates movement. The female version is more realistic as it is able to capture more about the woman” (163). Is this happening with the fictional character of Allende’s novel? This image of herself is unknown and, at first, she is unable to recognize the old woman that she sees. The view of herself in the mirror makes Inés realize that her aching body and her passionate mind no longer seem to be synchronized. She then composes herself to resume her act of writing with the help of glasses that will assist her aging vision. However, she also seems to realize the distortions of her image in the mirror. I contend that the surface of the mirror echoes the surface of the paper on which Inés writes her life since her youth. The main character’s self-representations in her life writing are confronted with her image in the mirror as an old woman behind which the other Inéses can be found still alive. In this sense, Ketz’s proposal that the woman’s gaze of self “is more realistic as it is able to capture more about the woman” seems to be the case here too. In addition, the confrontation of the woman with her aging body brings her to reflections about the edges between life, death and memory. Inés starts seeing what she could not see before, as she states it: “Con la edad se adelgaza el velo que separa este mundo del otro, y empiezo a ver lo invisible” (267). Her interactions with Death, personified as a quiet woman who sits in her house and waits patiently for the moment to take her, become more frequent as she ages.

A traditional reading performed from a male-oriented gaze would contend that the female conquistador writes the history of the conquest of Chile in her memoir, but like all heroes of this history, she chooses not to see herself only as an aging woman. Due to the fact that the European heroes of the conquest remained strong and young in the historiography of colonial Spanish America, Inés Suárez did not want to be an exception to this traditional representation and would have also chosen to be remembered as the active and passionate young woman who defended Santiago from the Mapuche and founded Chile’s first European city. However, the way this character

is proposed in this novel offers a contrast with the former reading. In contrast with men's gaze that tend to see women as a static image that is idealized or rejected, the gaze of Inés Suárez in Allende's novel scrutinizes the changes in other women characters as well as in herself. The awareness of her visual agency is possible thanks to the writing of her life. Her autobiography collects the memory of her gaze placed upon her objects of desire. In this process, she realizes that she is looking at one stage of herself in a mirror while others hide but are not absent. The main character of *Inés del alma mía* may succeed in her life writing, in the domestication and control of the unknown at the end of the world (Chile), in the affections of those men she has longed for throughout her life, and in the historiography of the conquest of Chile. Her character also succeeds in her expression as a woman with multiple and dynamic possibilities of self-representation. By means of her main character's success over the unknown nature of places, lovers and loved ones, *Inés del alma mía* offers a fictional alternative to the male gaze that prevails in contemporary historical narratives of the past. Such male gaze represents the conquest of the Americas as an almost exclusive male enterprise, and relegates the history of women in early colonial times in the archives without making it to official history. Allende's novel, albeit its fictional nature, does offer an alternative representation of Chilean historiography as it would have been seen by women's eyes.

Notes

¹ Seix Barral published the first edition of *Inés del alma mía* in 2005. In 2006 Harper Collins published its first edition in United States. In this essay, I use the latter for all citations and bibliographical references.

² While "agency" is a key concept much utilized in postcolonial criticism and subaltern studies, I depart here from Margarita Zamora's use of "textual agency" to address indigenous voices that had remained unheard in Columbus's discourse of discovery (191).

³ Nicholas Mirzoeff defines visual event as "the effect of a network in which subjects operate and which in turn conditions their freedom of action" (9). Furthermore Mirzoeff places "visual event" as the constituent element of visual culture practice.

⁴ Freud states, "visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused (...) It is usual for most normal people to linger to some extent over the intermediate sexual aim of looking that has a sexual tinge to it" (156).

⁵ Catalina de Erauso wrote a chronicle of her travels throughout Spanish America that was published in Paris in 1829 as *Historia de la Monja Alférez, doña Catalina de Erauso, escrita por ella misma*. However, the fame of her adventures was included in plays such as *La monja alférez* by Pérez de Montalbán (Pérez Villanueva, 1443). From another end, pirate women like Anne Bonny and Mary Read dressed as men to cross the Atlantic and the Caribbean Sea in the 18th century. Bonny and Read were illiterate and we know their stories through the documents of their trials and popular tales (Paravisini-Gerbert 60).

⁶ The chapters are titled as follows: Uno: Europa, 1500-1537; Dos: América, 1537-1540; Tres: Viaje a Chile, 1540-1541; Cuatro: Santiago de la Nueva Extremadura, 1541-1543; Cinco: Los años trágicos, 1543-1549; y Seis: La Guerra de Chile, 1549-1553.

⁷ In "Apuntes bibliográficos", a section included at the end of the novel, Allende claims that she has consulted twenty sources that include historical works (from historical accounts to biographies), letters by Pedro de Valdivia, and literary works that range from Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* (1578) to historical novels like Munchik's *Butamalón* (1994) and Bello's *Ay, Mama Inés* (1993).

⁸ "...me propuse seguir a Juan en su aventura, costara lo que costara, no por amor (...), sino por el señuelo de ser libre. Allá, lejos de quienes me conocían, podría mandarme sola" (29).

⁹ "Habría sido imposible no verlo, era un palmo más alto que los demás y su cabeza asomaba por encima de la multitud. Tenía espaldas de guerrero, el cabello rizado y oscuro, la nariz romana y ojos de gato que devolvieron mi mirada con curiosidad" (19).

¹⁰ "...algunas indias quechuas con sus niños acompañaban a la interminable hilera de cargadores llevando vituallas para sus maridos. Las ropas de lana de colores brillantes les daban un aire alegre, pero en verdad tenían la expresión hosca y rencorosa de la gente sometida. Eran de corta estatura,

pómulos altos, ojos pequeños y alargados, y deintes negros por las hojas de coca que masticaban para darse ánimo. Los niños me parecieron encantadores, y algunas mujeres atrayentes, aunque nunca sonreían” (97).

¹¹ “Baja, cuadrada, de color avellana, con dos trenzas gruesas atadas a la espalda con lana de colores, ojos de carbón y olor a humo, esta Catalina podía estar en varias partes al mismo tiempo y desaparecer en un suspiro” (107).

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