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Laura Alexander
High Point University

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Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Laura Alexander is Associate Professor of English at High Point University. She is the author of multiple articles, several poems, and two books, *Dangerous Women*, *Libertine Epicures*, and *the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730* (Ashgate 2011) and *Lucretian Thought in Late Stuart England: Debates about the Nature of the Soul* (Palgrave 2013). She wrote this article for her son Luke, who provides her with endless inspiration and loves *Dracula*. Currently, she is at work on a project that examines the aesthetics of melancholy in libertine literature.

**A Topography of Darkness:
Isabel Allende's "If You Touched My
Heart," the Gothic, and Disability**

Laura Alexander

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Isabel Allende's gothic short story, "If You Touched My Heart," published in her collection of short stories, *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1991), features a distressed heroine in Hortensia, imprisoned in the cellar of a forgotten, neglected, and old sugar mill belonging to the wealthy and influential Peralta family. Described as a pit in the earth, the cellar becomes Hortensia's dwelling place for forty-seven years. She is confined there by Amadeo Peralta, a corrupt town politician who preys on women. Though powerful for the majority of the story, Peralta is eventually imprisoned in a prison cell for his crime against Hortensia, a cognitively disabled character traumatized by her

confinement. The narrative looks at the category of natural and ‘unnatural’ states of being and ultimately ties Hortensia’s fate to the earth, as Allende collapses her disability with the setting. By the end of the narrative, Hortensia is a figure representing the dark pit that Amadeo visits, a symbol for the Gothic topography of doom. Her body inhabits a space recalling a literary trope, the womb and tomb. Like her more classic Gothic predecessor, Mary Shelley’s creature in *Frankenstein* (1839), Hortensia is abused and neglected until she is reduced to animal utterances, shuddering from other humans and living a death-in-life existence. This essay considers Allende’s short story as an adaptation of the genre of the ‘Female’ Gothic because of its focus on women’s entrapment; it argues that Allende reevaluates this genre in her examination of the categories of nature and disability. The text presents multiple entrapments of Hortensia, a figure with mental disabilities whose sexual encounters with Amadeo Peralta and imprisonment leave her outcast from her community even after her rescue.

Written alongside multiple narratives of female suffering in the entire collection, Allende’s short story is unique because it strongly conforms to the genre of the Female Gothic and focuses on the helplessness of a passive heroine. In the literary tradition of the Female Gothic, Hortensia resembles Charlotte Brontë’s famously imprisoned inmate of *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason Rochester, kept locked in a room in Thornfield Hall and watched over and guarded by a hired jailer, Grace Poole. The classic

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gothic heroine, Jane Eyre, arguably a doppelgänger for Bertha, describes Bertha as an animal moving about on all fours and sounding like a hyena, a non-human. Bertha attacks her husband, Mr. Rochester, finally blinding him and burning down the ancestral home that has become her prison for years. Critics have often compared the so-called “madwoman” figure to Bertha’s character to explore the origins of madness, subjection, imprisonment, and Otherness—all central concerns both to the genre of the Female Gothic and to “If You Touched My Heart.”

Allende’s Hortensia lacks agency, appearing even more passive than Bertha. She never attacks Amadeo Peralta as Bertha does Mr. Rochester. Even after her rescue, she seems unaware that she has been under duress in her captivity. Like other victims of kidnapping, Hortensia appears to suffer from a number of disorders related to her traumatic experiences with Amadeo Peralta and prolonged fears of survival during her captivity. The narrator describes symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome, a condition victims sometimes after they have been taken captive and isolated. Sufferers develop loyalty, feelings of love, and total belonging to their captor because they depend on that person for survival. When Hortensia is found after nearly fifty years of captivity, she repeats her misperception of Amadeo Peralta’s affection: “He loves me; he has always love me” (521). She remembers that he has fed her each day to keep her from starving. She brings him a saucepan after he is imprisoned, then

sings to him in prison even after the community frees her.

The figure of the female captive trapped in a domestic or other closed-off space is a common trope in gothic literature and particularly so in the genre of the Female Gothic. Hortensia's character owes a literary legacy to an earlier prototype of the abused, neglected madwoman found in nineteenth-century texts. Critics most often trace this figure in the Female Gothic in *Jane Eyre* and Brontë's Bertha Mason. Like Hortensia, Bertha also depends entirely on Mr. Rochester, who removes her from her home in the West Indies to England, when Bertha is kept upstairs. Rochester justifies his behavior by relating a story of the Mason family madness, but he is unreliable, often misrepresenting himself to Jane and other characters. Bertha only appears crazed around Rochester—a clear sign that he has abused her—and roams the estate when she understands that Rochester has a mistress and potential new wife, or Jane, in their home. Both literary characters—Hortensia and Bertha—are described in animalistic terms as creatures of the earth that have acquired animal-like movements. Both women have jailers keeping watch over them, but Allende extends the descriptions of Hortensia by attaching her body to the earth; she literally 'grows' into the earth. The narrator describes Hortensia's life in captivity with a female jailer and caretaker, who appears to 'prune' Hortensia, a name meaning 'garden,' like a plant:

She kept the key to the padlock, and regularly came to clean the cell and scrape

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away the lichens growing on Hortensia's body like pale delicate flowers almost invisible to the naked eye and redolent of tilled soil and neglected things. (522)

Hortensia becomes one with the landscape, and her abuse by Amadeo Peralta signifies his destruction of the land, both naturally and politically. In their introduction to *Ecogothic*, Andrew Smith and William Hughes locate the Gothic body within a topographical context, noting the way authors like Margaret Atwood, among others, tie the boy to dystopic ecological landscapes or wastes (8-9).¹

Allende does not show a clear activist message, as Atwood and others do, in her story, though both writers employ fictional form as biting social commentary. Allende also focuses attention on communal values and domestic issues of family life commonly found in the Female Gothic. Amadeo still operates as a 'classic' gothic villain, and Allende ties his mistreatment of Hortensia to his unnatural family. He was born into a villainous tribe, "in the midst of his father's gang." Further, "like all the men of his family, [he] grew up to be a ruffian" (519). He is raised to live by violence, lacking education, which his father considers "for

¹ See their definitions and discussion of Ecocritical literature and its intersections with the Female Gothic notably in *Frankenstein*. While many writers look to the Gothic to draw attention to activist causes, like climate change, all of the writers they discuss appropriate tropes associated with the Gothic to repurpose the aesthetic values of the form.

cissies” (519), and by age thirty-two “the habit of seducing girls and then abandoning them was deeply ingrained” (519). The narrator describes all his moves as dark, calculated, and manipulative and rooted in a corrupted family and father, for Amadeo Peralta “did not dare disobey his father” (519). The description suggests a deeply cursed patriarchal culture and strongly conforms to the gothic mode of inherited curses.

Amadeo Peralta’s abuse of Hortensia proves even more vicious than descriptions of his earlier treatment of women. He nearly starves her after forgetting about her entirely. Her deprivation and treatment is made all the more heinous by the description of Amadeo Peralta’s erstwhile fantasy with Hortensia. He thought of “making the girl a concubine from an oriental tale, clad in gauzy robes and surrounded with peacock feathers, brocade tented ceilings, stained-glass lamps, gilded furniture with spiral feet, and thick rugs he could walk barefoot” (521). The reality is far less sumptuous, as the dream turns to a gothic nightmare with near fatal consequences to Hortensia, whose yellow dress eventually rots, leaving her naked (521). When asked by reporters after the kidnapping and imprisonment of Hortensia is discovered forty-seven years later, “Why did you keep her locked up like a miserable beast?” Amadeo Peralta answers as any typically gothic villain would: “Because I felt like it” (520). He acts similarly in his community, without regard for the opinion or goodwill of the town. By the time Hortensia is discovered, Amadeo

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Peralta has collected numerous enemies and a community eager to punish him.

The tragedy of Hortensia's captivity is made more horrific by her position as gothic 'damsel-in-distress,' as Allende focuses not only on Hortensia's sexual trauma, which is tied closely to the earth, but also her mental disorder, likely autism spectrum disorder (ASD). First defined by Leo Kranner in 1943, ASD is a disorder marked by the inability to communicate with others in the social world or to access it without profound difficulty. Specifically, the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) defines this condition as "the impairment in communication" that is also "marked and sustained and affects both verbal and nonverbal skills" (70-5).² Sufferers from the disorder often appear childlike and trust others, unable to intuit manipulation or prurient intentions. Hortensia's difficulties with speech and articulation, as well as her impaired cognitive judgement, resembles symptoms of ASD. Amadeo Peralta cruelly considers Hortensia an "idiot girl" (521) that "He wanted to be rid of" (521) but could not: "she stuck in his consciousness like a persistent nightmare" (521). It is a nightmare he perpetuates through the years, and it drives his prurient desires and cruelties with Hortensia.

² See also chapter five of Simon Baron-Cohen's *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* for a discussion of the theory of mind and the autistic brain.

Owing to problems with cognition, Hortensia does not at first understand that Amadeo Peralta means to abandon her and so pursues him innocently just before he prepares to make an advantageous marriage to a wealthy landowner to “see whether they could cleanse the Peralta name of all its stains of mud and blood” (519). We might expect Amadeo Peralta to kill her, but he cannot abandon her entirely or murder her because the power he holds drives him sexually to visit her and keep her alive, if barely. It is her “mindblindness,” the cognitive inability to perceive the intentions of others, and her total dependence on him that appeal to his lust, the idea that he exerts the power of life and death over her. Described in the text both as a mentally disabled and a vulnerable “simple” girl, Hortensia falls prey to a sexual predator who literally entombs her in a pit of the earth, ensuring that she will not escape. Indeed, she does not have the mental capacities to figure a way out of her captivity, and she lacks any cognitive understanding, believing that Amadeo Peralta will marry and love her forever and that his imprisonment is a true home that will be complete with children. After their encounter, when Amadeo Peralta has already forgotten Hortensia, she “had searched until she found *him*; it was she who had planted herself before him and clung to his shirt with the terrifying submission of a slave” (521). Nature—an unyielding and uncaring force embodied in Amadeo Peralta--is her enemy in this text. He is an overpowering force, while she appears

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like a weed that “planted” itself by him, unable to be uprooted after the initial seduction.

The sound of the springs summons her predator, who overtakes her and then neglects her, nearly killing her after forgetting her for nine days once. Redolent of the “cloying odour of mango marmalade in the air” (519), Amadeo Peralta hears “a crystalline sound like water purling between stones; it was coming from a modest house with paint flaked by the sun and rain like most of the houses in that town” (519-20). The sounds draw his attention to the virtuous Hortensia, still child-like and linked to the Edenic natural environment that entrances him with its purity and seductive sensory experiences. She embodies the unknowing and thus entirely innocent Garden of Eden, a utopia that he spoils and poisons, making a rank dystopic space, a fallen world of lurid secrecy. Instead of being a secret paradise, they exist in a hidden nightmare.

Amadeo Peralta denies Hortensia children, her one desire and her role given biologically by ‘mother’ nature, instead replacing the natural infants she might have with false surrogates: “Children, no; but you shall have dolls” (522). Claire Kahane points out that the maternal space often appears as a tomb, a monstrous or hideous space in the female gothic that explores “the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront” (336). Maternity occupies a unique position in the genre of the Female Gothic, and Karen F. Stein has suggested that women’s

procreative power and their capacity to create—literally with the body—generates an overwhelming fear and disgust in men, who seek to control or end this uniquely feminine power; it is this disgust and need to take power again that Stein believes are at the center of the genre of the Female Gothic (124).

Amadeo Peralta wants to hide Hortensia but also to end the possibility of her loving another being or having the power to bring forth life; he forces her into a position of decay, rot, and death to disempower her and remove any natural life giving power she has. As Bill Phillips has argued, the earth and women have long had a close relationship in literature so that ‘mother’ nature can be subdued and controlled by men (49). Precedents for the imperial domination of women and the natural world appear in canonical works by John Milton and John Donne, among many others. Narratives in the Female Gothic tradition emphasize masculine power so that even the power of life, including procreation, and death, come under the control of the villain.

Allende’s story conforms to narratives of horror in the gothic tradition. Shelley’s *Frankenstein* set a precedent for the horrors implicit in the birthing motif. In first defining the genre of the Female Gothic and positioning it against gothic texts by male writers, Ellen Moers explains that the Female Gothic and particularly *Frankenstein* explore “the motif of revulsion, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences” (93). Hortensia herself is child-like in her innocence, but monstrous to Amadeo Peralta. Like

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the creature in Frankenstein, there is misunderstanding of Amadeo Peralta's cruelty and blind, even parental-like trust in him, even after her rescue. She is denied reproduction, the power of life, by him; he alone holds the power over life and death. Like Victor Frankenstein, arguably the real villain of Shelley's novel, Amadeo Peralta holds a god-like position in the text and will not give in to allow another like Hortensia to be made. He finds her attractive and monstrous. There can be no monstrous children connected with him.

Sexual desire—the most 'natural' of biological urges—diminishes until it dies in the pit, as Amadeo Peralta "sensed the dampness eating into his joints, and he began to feel the attraction of things outside the walls of that grotto. It was time to return to the world of the living and to pick up the reins of destiny" (522). The predator causing this decay, of course, is Amadeo Peralta himself, a premier member of the ruling classes and a politician whom priests and the community fear. His neglect of Hortensia signifies his abuse of his political power that extends to his abuse and neglect of the earth and landscape that is tied to Hortensia's body and mind in the story.

Amadeo Peralta experiences for Hortensia both revulsion and attraction, or what Julia Kristeva has defined as "abjection" in the *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*—the simultaneous feeling of erotic or sexual desire and repulsion, even nausea as a reaction to *Thanatos*, the death wish. Kristeva describes these conflicting responses to the figure of "the corpse," defining the linguistic meaning of

cadaver: “*cadere*, to fall” (3). Hortensia’s body is described in terms of death after her “fall” literally into the pit where Amadeo Peralta keeps her entombed; his response is one of abjection, both attraction and repulsion of the living corpse he has made of Hortensia:

In the cave they found a naked creature with flaccid skin hanging in pallid folds; this apparition had tangled grey hair that dragged the floor, and moaned in terror of the noise and light. It was Hortensia, glowing with a mother-of-pearl phosphorescence under the steady beams of the firefighters’ lanterns; she was nearly blind, her teeth had rotted away, and her legs were so weak she could barely stand. The only sign of her human origins was the ancient psaltery clasped to her breast. (525)

Allende is not alone, of course, in exploring abjection in the ‘damsel-in-distress’ motif in a story about an ecological nightmare of monstrous proportions. The architect of this monstrosity is Amadeo Peralta, and the story concentrates attention on his exploitation of a helpless mentally disabled victim given a life-in-death existence.

Hortensia’s characteristics of ASD are prominent in Allende’s narrative but not unfounded in gothic literature. Joyce Carol Oates and Margaret Atwood, among others, feature similarly disabled characters in gothic “goat girl” stories linking a distressed female figure to an unnatural environment or body. Like Allende, they refocus our attention less on the “freakish” nature of these

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figures' alterity but the "neurotypical" responses to Otherness by the villains or shocked outsiders, often focusing on the cruelty with which victims are treated by their misunderstanding communities.

We may trace these questions as far back as Mary Shelley, who creates a monstrous figure with the feminine attributes of Eve in *Frankenstein* in Victor Frankenstein's creature. The story consciously replays the fall of mankind and questions the nature of monstrosity and evil. So too with Allende's Hortensia, "entombed" (520) by Amadeo Peralta for her mental disability. She begins as a character associated with light, the sounds of spring, "the crystalline sound like water purling between stones," and religious virtue and devotion, as she is "cradling a blond wood psaltery on her knees" like an infant when he first sees her (519-20). He forces Hortensia to become a creature of darkness. As with Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Allende's story shows the real ecological nightmare is a man-made creation—the evil is in her captor's godlike power forcing her literally into the earth to be a creature. Amadeo Peralta, the most powerful figure in the story, misuses, abuses, and neglects the care of the earth, as of Hortensia, leading to trauma, violence, and disaster.

The title, *The Stories of Eva Luna*, conjures 'evening madness'—the name Eva implying the evening or night and moon and its linguistic roots—*lune* or lunacy. All of the stories deal with the captive positions of women, most often in society but often also by their families, lovers, or husbands. Her women are tied to the earth in powerful ways

that leave them distressed, even cursed, and doomed. As Iftekharuddin explains about female characters in the collection,

[t]he enigma of the female, the illusive sensuality of the feminine, the mystery of the eternal conflict between the genders, and the incomprehensibility that marks the persistent masculine desire to impose gender superiority, born primarily of assumed sexual superiority, to the extent of influencing socio-economic and political behavior detrimental to the female occupy the time and space within the narratives in *The Stories of Eva Luna*. (226)

Most striking in “If You Touched My Heart” is its insistence on the Otherness of Hortensia and the exploitation of her Alterity. Allende ties the deterioration of Hortensia, a being who lacks cognitive capacities for defense or realization, to the natural, fallen world, degraded by a masochistic captor in Amadeo Peralta, powerful in the pit and with the people until three boys hear “the notes of a monstrous song” (524). The song belongs to Hortensia, now entirely entrapped in the earth, a true garden entombed. The boys call attention to her plight and end her captivity, drawn to the gothic horror and superstitious folklore of the area around the pit, now considered haunted by the community. The sound of Hortensia’s melodic, eerie utterances are for them spellbinding as the children discover the corpse-like Hortensia: “Trembling, they almost retreated, but the lure of horror was stronger than their fear, and they huddled there, listening, as the

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last note drilled into their foreheads” (524). It was, for them, “the door to hell” (524).

What tempts Amadeo Peralta is that same melody, now made horrific by his treatment of her. His entombing of Hortensia and what it makes her—a living corpse—is the most insidious form of evil, a systemic horror that extends out to the community. They know about her and what Amadeo Peralta has done to her but fall back on superstition rather than acknowledge this evil. When the boys finally find her, nearly half a century after her imprisonment, they hold “lynch parties” (525) for Amadeo Peralta, finally granted permission to hate this powerful man—perhaps less for his treatment of Hortensia and more for his oppressiveness in the community. His enemies exploit the situation to tear this “former caudillo” down and see him in prison while “Authorities who for years had overlooked his abuses fell upon him with the full fury of the law” (525). Family and friends now reject Amadeo Peralta, harassed and harangued even by fellow prisoners, and he is made by the town into “a symbol of all that is abominable and abject” (525-6).

Now an abject figure, Amadeo Peralta receives the same punishment he had inflicted on Hortensia, and like her, he is now entombed in a prison cell and forced to listen both to voices on the street and to Hortensia, who sings everyday outside his cell with her psaltery, “wresting from it moans of agony impossible to bear” (526). Either from old age or the weight of so many abuses, Amadeo Peralta cannot feel guilt for long because he cannot

remember why he is there. He has physical symptoms of guilt, “pangs” and anxiety as he hears her mournfulness everyday, but he ends in forgetful darkness, literally and metaphorically as he “lost himself in his misfortune” (526). This is literally true—just as it was for Hortensia, who loses herself and only remembers that Amadeo Peralta fed her, if only above the level of starvation. She reverses the pattern by bringing him a saucepan each day to the prison.

While it seems that Amadeo Peralta deserves and receives the entire weight of punishment for his crimes against Hortensia in the text, Allende does not absolve the townspeople. They are, reluctantly, like the three boys who find Hortensia, “released from their paralysis” (524) when the discovery of Hortensia is made. They know about Amadeo Peralta: “Behind his back, people whispered about his victims, about how many he had ruined or caused to disappear” (524). This includes not only bribes and other financial corruptions, smuggling rumors, and “crooked dealings” (524) but also his keeping “a woman prisoner in a cellar” (524). So many people find out that “with time it became an open secret” (524). For years they do nothing, allowing these corruptions to go on.

After they have released Hortensia and given her a means of living among them, the community wants to forget her. She represents an uncomfortable truth about the community that cared little about her while she was imprisoned. No one wants to hear her sing—they give her money to silence her. All along, they know about Hortensia

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and do nothing to help her until an official discovery is made: “To assuage their guilt for having ignored Hortensia for so many years, everyone wanted to do something for her” (525). No part of the community is left behind in Allende’s critique. Content to ignore her in the pit for decades, many “welfare organizations” bring her back to life: “They collected money to provide her a pension, they gathered tons of clothing and medicine she did not need” and they “scrap[ed] the filth from her body, cutting her hair, and outfitting her from head to toe, so she looked like an ordinary old lady” (525). They rush, in other words, to ‘normalize’ her and make her one of the community, not an outsider made literally into a walking corpse that symbolizes their neglect and lack of care or concern. This too is like a prison for Hortensia, who “finally...grew accustomed to daylight and resigned to living with other human beings” (525). Though the nuns finally take her in, Hortensia is never one of them—she is always an outcast.

In describing the collection *The Stories of Eva Luna*, Iftekharuddin explains that “...Allende’s stories illuminate intellectually pathogenic gender disparities and parody patriarchal notions, and ultimately repudiate male hegemony” (226). While “If You Touched My Heart” accomplishes this repudiation, it cannot replace it with another system of inclusion. Instead, the story does not parody patriarchal notions so much as it reinforces them. Hortensia can never free herself of Amadeo Peralta, and the community never really cares about her

torment. It ignores her plight, then eases its conscience with charity it never would have given had so many not hated Amadeo Peralta for his abuses of others and oppressiveness in the town. Amadeo Peralta only experiences in prison what he does on the outside—episodic instances of guilt almost immediately swallowed by perhaps deliberate forgetfulness or self-denial. Like the community, Amadeo can only feel bad so long but really wants and does find forgetfulness of his crimes to Hortensia. The story thus presents a topography of doom—the town and its people are collapsed with the corrupt politician, while the innocent ‘garden,’ Hortensia, remains tied to the decayed landscape that she becomes, finally appearing like a street-side persistent weed that will not go away as she sings mournful songs to passersby. The relationship among the figures in the story never really changes, even after Amadeo Peralta goes to prison. Hortensia remains entrapped by his abusive power, and the community goes on—as if nothing ever happened. They seek to silence her songs that serve as uncomfortable reminders. The title “If You Touched My Heart” is an idea left unfinished, and that is the point of the narrative. The heart never is touched, not by Amadeo or the town, by Hortensia’s plight. Had it been, then Allende’s story have presented a better world capable of caring for its least fortunate.

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