

**Mothering at the Margins: Place, Memory and Migration in Contemporary
Circum-Caribbean Women's Writing**

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Abstract

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My dissertation investigates how contemporary circum-Caribbean women's literary fiction is shifting ideas of motherhood by narrating mothering in ways that complicate traditional notions of place and nation. I examine place, memory and migration across the novels of three circum-Caribbean women writers, including Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, Colombian-American Patricia Engel and Colombian Pilar Quintana. Although each writes from a specific linguistic and cultural context, they all imagine fragmented, transtemporal, deterritorialized and deeply subversive mothering that contrasts starkly with the "good mother," trope circulated in popular state and religious narratives. My textual analysis focuses on key literary moments in which subversive mothering unfolds within marginal and liminal spaces: in memories, across borders, at the edges of a forest, on transient coasts, in the womb and beyond death. Taken together, these authors articulate mothering as processes that occur not in or for nations but across them, unsettling and expanding our understandings of place and motherhood, and ultimately, opening up spaces in the literary imagination for grappling with histories of colonialism and displacement *while* offering the possibility of reconnection and healing.

Dedication

It seems silly to attribute a dissertation to a single person. While it is true that I wrote this manuscript, I never would have been able to finish it alone. I am indebted to my committee members: Gary Handwerk, Richard Watts, Jennifer Harford Vargas and Amanda Lock Swarr, whose energy, support and guidance sustained me throughout the process. I am endlessly grateful to my fellow graduate students, especially Amalie Goul Dueholm, Erin Gilbert and Anna Nguyen. As tough as those times were, I will miss our endless hours spent over coffee and baked goods trading drafts, talking through ideas and encouraging one another. We are, indeed, the winners of Eurovision. Last but not least, I want to thank my family.

To my New Year: thank you for making me take breaks to walk and play with you.

To my Andy: always and forever I love you.

Y Finalmente a mi mamá: Gracias por ser mi madre, mi confidente y consejera, mamá.
No sé qué hubiese hecho sin su apoyo.

Introduction

When acquaintances first ask me what my dissertation is about, I give them the short answer: it is about literary articulations of motherhood in contemporary Colombian and Haitian women's novels. Inevitably, the very next question I get asked is if I have children. I do not¹. Silence and confusion follow. Why, they ask me, am I so interested in motherhood if I, myself, am not a mother? I begin by reminding them that it is indeed possible to be interested in a research topic that one may not have direct experience with. I then ask them how they define motherhood (biological?). I counter that definition with the idea of *mothering*, the verb, designating acts of care that people of all genders can engage within kinship networks of all kinds, extended to human and nonhumans who may be related not biologically and / or socially and communally. I also bring up the idea that I may have a unique perspective on the topic *because* of the fact that I am not a mother in the sense that they are often thinking (biological) and there is value in the perspective of a childless woman as well. But ultimately, what I say is that it has to do with my mother and our relationship.

No one has shaped me more and no relationship has marked me more than the one I have with my mother. I marvel at its power, and I know that part of its depth has to do with my family's history of migration and the ways in which, for us, the deterritorialization of migration impacted and shaped us profoundly. Specifically, what I think gets lost in discussions of migration in the media and popular culture narratives, is the fact that migration is traumatic. In my mother's case, she left Colombia, her birthplace, as a young woman in her 20s to pursue educational opportunities in the U.S. that were not available to her in her home country because

¹ Not in the traditional sense anyway. I have no biological children. But I am a dog mom, and I participate in the care work and nurturing of younger family members as well as the children of my friends and neighbours.

of *la situación* in Colombia at the time. She recalls her experience of migrating as being extremely difficult.

Muy difícil. Muy difícil. Pero, mi madre me decía que era una oportunidad... Yo, ya había empezado una carrera en Colombia y la hice por un semestre en arquitectura. Pero la Universidad cerró... por la política o algo pasó. Entonces cerraron, entonces tuve la oportunidad de venir a los Estados Unidos. Con una beca para estudiar. Y mi madre me dijo: esa oportunidad viene solamente una vez... Entonces yo vine, pero fue muy difícil para mí dejar a mi mamá, especialmente a mi mamá. Y que yo me acuerde, yo lloraba. Todas las noches, lloraba, lloraba... fue difícil. No estoy mintiendo².

She struggled in the U.S., working and taking college classes, earning poor grades not because she was not smart but because she was learning English. Higher education institutions at the time did not understand or support the specific needs of multilingual learners. In short, it was traumatic for her because it is traumatic to leave one's entire world behind to start over in another one. Even so, even after becoming a single mother, she persevered and went on to earn a Master's in Bilingual Education and Curriculum Design, all while raising me and negotiating her identity as a proud Colombian migrant in the U.S., a country where the dominant narrative about Colombia is that Colombians are either beauty queens or involved in the drug and cocaine trade³.

It is not just migration that shaped my family and my relationship with my mother, though, it is also specifically our Colombianness, our *Colombianidad*. I was recently chatting over the phone with Latinx and U.S. - Colombian Studies scholar María Elena Cepeda. She called me because I had submitted an abstract for an edited volume she was co-editing, and she generously wanted to reach out to give me feedback and suggestions on my submission. Midway through our conversation, she digressed from the feedback to ask me about my particular

² Very hard. Very hard. But my mother said it was an opportunity. I had already begun a career in Colombia; I did it for a semester in architecture. But the university closed. Because of the political situation, or something happened. And so they closed. And I had the opportunity to come to the U.S. with a scholarship. And my mother told me: this opportunity only comes around once. So I came. But it was very hard, especially to leave my mother, especially my mother. From what I remember I used to cry. Every night, I cried and cried. It was hard. I won't lie.

³ For the record, not a single member of my Colombian family has ever been involved in drugs. Also, as much as I might wish it were the case, I am not a beauty queen.

research interests in circum-Caribbean motherhood. Connecting over our shared heritage as U.S.-born Colombians, the conversation shifted to Colombian mothering in particular, during which María Elena said something that stays with me. There was a pause in the conversation, and then she remarked: “Isn’t there something so…” she seemed to be searching for the right word. Not quite finding it, she settled on, “...*extra* - isn’t there something so *extra* about Colombian mothering?” It is so true.

Colombian mothering, especially within the context of the ruptures of migration, is so...*extra* - so powerful. In my mother’s case, the geographical rupture of having left her birth country Colombia in her 20s and then giving birth to me in the U.S. meant that she raised me in a country that was very different from the one she grew up in. It also meant that she raised me on her *nostalgia* for a Colombia she always longed to return to. That *nostalgia* became what María Elena Cepeda calls “deterritorialized memories.”⁴ These were the stories and anecdotes my mother always recounted to me about her life in Colombia, discussed in our own code-switching Spanglish - a dialect just the two of us speak. Of course, this *nostalgia* was not just words - it manifested itself in my house. My mother brought Colombia to our small apartment in the U.S. Growing up, my house was scented with sweet, buttery *arepa* corn cakes frying on the pan in the mornings or salted *patacones* frying in the evenings. There was always music: *Grupo Niche*, *Totó La Momposina*, and *Carlos Vives* among others. And, of course, my mom and I watched *telenovelas*, one of our favorites being the problematic but loveable *Cafe con Aroma de Mujer*. All of this creates identity-negotiating that is relational and transnational and that feels, at times,

⁴ In her monograph titled *Musical ImagiNation: U.S. - Colombian Identity and the Latin Music Boom*, Cepeda articulates her own upbringing as the U.S.- born daughter of Colombian migrants. She discusses her own identity-formation process this way: “My personal claims to *colombianidad*, or “Colombianness,” were rooted in both default and desire: language, music, food, wordless gestures learned from my parents, a sense of time and space molded by letters, phone calls, vacation visits, trinkets, and an endless list of “deterritorialized memories.”

both expansive (connecting to a sense of *Colombianidad* wherever I am) while, at the same time, alienating (not feeling Colombian *or* American enough).

What I have learned, though, is a sense of compassion for just how difficult it was for my mother dealing with her own identity-negotiation as both a migrant and a single mother. Patricia Engel summarizes it well when she says in an interview:

I've always been interested and very sympathetic to the struggle, as was the case with my own mother, to be from one country and have children raised in an entirely different one, completely different from the way she was raised, a different dominant language, different dominant culture, and in many ways to be totally powerless to that. (410)

That realization sparked an intellectual curiosity in me - an awareness of the ways in which mothering is performed, the pressures that shape mothering and how mothering is so quickly labeled as “good” or “bad” without much consideration for circumstances or contexts. I think of this when I think of how my mother raised me. As with so many migrant parents, there was always love but also strictness, at the heart of which was fear because she wanted to protect me in the U.S., a country not very familiar to her at first. Some of her mothering practices, including what is known as the *chancletazo*,⁵ might be considered “bad” mothering in today’s parenting-as-negotiation world, but that is such a limited, oversimplification of what her mothering was. Thinking through this “good” versus “bad” mothering dichotomy got me interested in examining and unpacking “bad” mothering practices and the contexts within which they happen. I am particularly animated by recuperating what is all too easily dismissed and deemed “bad” mothering in order to expose the overarching value systems, sociocultural constructions and remnants of colonial histories that have set up ideas of motherhood within this rigid binary of “good” or “bad.”

⁵ The *chancletazo* is a Latinx parenting disciplinary tool that has been used since time immemorial to keep children in line. It involves removing one’s sandal (*chancla*) and hitting your child with it until the child’s behavior improves. Sometimes all that is necessary is to remove the sandal and wave it around implying the threat and the child should stop misbehaving. Based on my own experiences, the *chancletazo* is very effective.

This dissertation recuperates “bad” mothering acts by examining literary representations of subversive or “bad” mothering across a mini canon of contemporary circum-Caribbean novels by Pilar Quintana (Colombian), Edwidge Danticat (Haitian-American) and Patricia Engel (Colombian-American). My analysis, which brings Colombian and Haitian women writers together in conversation (circum-Caribbean), uses mothering as a vector for tracing the nation and exploring how state-sponsored ideals of “good” mothering clash with lived experiences of mothering “on the ground.” Through literary depictions of subversive or “bad” mothering,” the authors of my study shift western-based understandings of mothering as an individual, biologically-based responsibility of total, uncomplicated nurturing to reveal the pivotal role that nations and national cultures play in creating the material conditions within which acts of mothering occur. When these authors depict “bad mothering,” they contextualize these acts within complicated histories of colonialism, neoliberalism and political violence. Additionally, each of my chapters explores the ways in which the authors of my study undermine binary ideas of “good” or “bad” mothering by highlighting liminal, in-between spaces as important sites of mothering where mothering can be reimagined in expansive ways.

While there may be a tendency to blame acts of “bad” mothering on individuals, I argue that the authors of my study highlight how the individuals mothering in these ways are making mothering choices within limited circumstances - that is, with the resources they have and the cultural baggage they have inherited *and* within a society impacted by violence. At the same time, this subversive “bad” mothering also can become a kind of resistance to colonially-created ideas of mothering because some of these acts - transnational motherhood, infanticide, violence - are acts of agency within systems, societies and nations that offer limited choices for those who mother.

Transnational Comparative Framework: The Case for bringing Colombian and Haitian Novels Together

This dissertation engages a transnational comparative literary framework examining novels written by three circum-Caribbean women authors of Colombian and Haitian descent. While there are scholars engaged in productive transnational and comparative analyses of motherhood in and beyond the Caribbean⁶, there is not much work that engages Colombia in these scholarly inquiries. When we include Colombia in analyses of the circum-Caribbean, we do several things. First of all, we acknowledge the unique position of Colombia as a Latin American country with coastlines on both the Pacific and the Atlantic, including major cities like Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta - all cities with significant Afro-Colombian populations located on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Positioned as it is, Colombia shares parallel (not identical, parallel) histories of colonialism and slavery with other Caribbean and Latin American countries. A regional focus allows for the study of comparative colonialisms to learn how slavery and other colonial projects operated across the region, what they set in motion and how that touches mothering today. In this way, the work of my dissertation contributes to scholarship that moves away from a limiting approach that privileges nations as units of study in favor of a regional analysis. The circum-Caribbean focus of this dissertation also broadens disciplinary scholarship such as Caribbean studies, which tends to exclude Colombia and Latinx studies, which has tended to feature Mexico as its prominent geographical locus.

The transnational, regional approach of my dissertation builds from the work of Caribbean scholars like Édouard Glissant and Antonio Benitez-Rojo. Glissant's 'poetics of

⁶ See, for example, Simone A. James Alexander's 2001 study *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, in which Alexander thinks through the complexities of Caribbean women from across the region writing about their layered relationships with motherlands, mother tongues and mothers, both biological and adopted. See, also, Abigail L. Palkos' 2016 monograph *Imagining Motherhood in Contemporary Irish and Caribbean Literature* in which Palko examines mothering in Caribbean and Irish novels in order to understand how women writers are pushing back against notions of the "good mother" in critically important ways.

relation' and Benitez-Rojo's ideas of the repeating island provide a theoretical framework for the kind of transnational, comparative analysis that is the basis of my study, because these approaches understand the Caribbean as a place of both heterogenous differences *and* relational ties. Glissant's ideas are useful in the sense that he develops a way of thinking about how memory, history and language exist in regions of colonial encounters like the circum-Caribbean. What he identifies are patterns of multiplicity, diffraction, open-endedness, diversion, erring, and repetition. In this way, for Glissant, a cross-cultural, transnational comparative analysis works as an exercise in examining both what is contextually specific (diversity) and repeating (unity) in areas such as the Caribbean, Latin America and the American South - areas that have experienced relational encounters with the other through slavery and colonialism.

Antonio Benitez-Rojo's idea of "the repeating island" is also useful in supporting circum-Caribbean comparisons in the way that he observes that the Caribbean region is a place of such heterogeneous mixture but also repeating traces that spill outward - a repetition of polyphonic rhythms, foods, dances, creole languages, ways of grappling with western cultures and more that are specific to the Caribbean as a region⁷. Glissant's poetics of relation and Benitez-Rojo's repeating island affirm a circum-Caribbean comparative methodology in the sense that the culturally specific settings and geographically diverse locations of these novels (coastal Colombia and Haiti) are connected through elements that repeat themselves across the Caribbean and Latin American tropical regions. Ultimately, a circum-Caribbean approach to thinking about mothering across Colombian and Haitian writing allows me to step outside of

⁷ One example of this as it relates to Colombia and Haiti might be robust maroon histories of resistance to slavery and colonialism. In Colombia, for example, San Basilio de Palenque near Cartagena on the Caribbean coast is a vibrant community of Afro-Colombians descended from enslaved ancestors who resisted and escaped enslavement and formed San Basilio de Palenque in 1619, making this the first free Black community in all of the Americas. Community members speak their own Creole dialect called Palenquero and they have largely preserved many African traditions passed down from their ancestors. Haiti also has a history of resistance and revolution, being the first independent Black nation to be established in the world following the revolution that ousted French colonists in 1804. Revolution and resistance reverberate across the circum-Caribbean region.

silos of “national” literatures, putting into practice my understanding of nations and borders as, in many ways, arbitrary and fictitious.

History shows us how entangled the region has been. Take Simon Bolívar, for example, the famed “Liberator” of Latin America. It would be difficult to travel to a city or small town in Colombia and not encounter a statue of him or at least a plaza or park named after him. In this way, he is, on the one hand, a famous symbol of national pride for Colombia, but his ambitions were transnational, as were his movements. Famous for helping to unite Latin American anti-colonial factions in the 19th century that would eventually end Spanish rule on the continent, much of Bolívar’s history is actually also intertwined with the Caribbean region. While he was born in Caracas, he spent significant parts of his life on Colombia’s Caribbean coast, eventually dying in Santa Marta in 1830. He even sailed to Haiti in 1815 where he was warmly received and supported by Alexandre Pétion in the newly created free republic in the south of the country. In exchange for military aid, Bolívar promised Pétion he would free enslaved Black populations in the pan Latin-American republic he had dreamed of creating. Never fully keeping his promise he, instead, made conciliatory efforts, such as persuading the congress of Cúcuta in Colombia to pass a law entitled the “Free Womb Law,” decreeing that while children of enslaved mothers were to be born free, only at the age of eighteen could they be emancipated from enslavers. Scholars such as Edgardo Pérez Morales and Ernesto Bassi both center their work on scholarship that explores the connections and entanglements between the Colombian and Haitian revolutions, contributing to a growing push to understand Colombia’s Caribbean coast as inextricably linked to the trade, exchange and movement of peoples and non-human elements across the region.

Since independence, both Colombia and Haiti have also experienced what many other places in much of the circum-Caribbean have experienced: tumultuous political upheaval. The 20th century saw instability such as *La Violencia* in Colombia, a civil war from 1948 – 1958, as well as armed conflict beginning again in the 60s between the government, drug cartels, leftist guerilla groups such as the FARC, and right wing paramilitary groups. When a historic peace agreement was signed between Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC in 2016, it was a monumental moment that promised to bring an end to the decades of kidnappings, bombings and violence that had plagued the country. But peace is proving difficult, fragile, and complicated. Reintegration and rehabilitation of former paramilitary fighters is difficult and the rural areas most impacted by the violence have not received the aid and assistance needed to recover and rebuild.

Haiti has also been its own series of violent events in the 20th century, from the “Parsley Massacre” in 1937 of Haitian migrants by Dominicans on the orders of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo,⁸ to the successive dictatorships of Francois Duvalier (also known as Papa Doc) from 1957-1971 and his successor ‘Baby Doc’ (Jean-Claude Duvalier) from 1971-1986. The violence has not all been directly related to political upheaval - natural disasters have also taken their toll on Haiti, for example, the devastating 2010 earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people. More recently, Haiti has been experiencing growing unrest with protests and the threat of authoritarian crackdowns, which culminated in the assassination of Haitian president Jovenel Moïse on July 7th, 2021 with news outlets reporting the possible involvement of a group of Colombian mercenaries in the killing.

⁸ Danticat’s novel *The Farming of the Bones*, published in 1998, recounts the story of the massacre through the eyes of a Haitian domestic worker named Amabelle.

Both Haiti and Colombia are nations within a region that has been shaped by the United States acting as a regional, neoliberal force interfering in the affairs of both countries in order to protect its own financial and political interests. Indeed, as Carol Boyce Davies notes⁹, the U.S., as a western imperialistic power, has operated under the idea that space must be developed and managed for the most efficient production of goods and commodities *and* that space must be conceived of as a “national” experience of bordered space made up of loyal citizens. Paradoxically, however, the U.S. has also acted as an aggressive force through military actions, the establishment of military bases, the operation of multinational corporations and even the dissemination of dominant U.S. pop culture objects (music, TV shows, movies) in ways that allow it to exert its influence well beyond its own borders. In other words, the U.S.’s impacts are also not just limited to their borders - they ripple outward across the Caribbean region.

These impacts have had catastrophic effects in both Haiti and Colombia. After Haitian President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam was assassinated in 1915, fearing that Haiti would fall under foreign interests hostile to the United States, President Woodrow Wilson sent a military force to restore order to the country. This military occupation lasted until 1934, during which time violence between Haitians and the occupying forces resulted in the deaths of thousands of Haitians. In Colombia, the U.S. has been involved in anti-drug policies and initiatives like Plan Colombia, which was conceived by former presidents Bill Clinton and Andrés Pastrana. Plan Colombia, which was enacted in 2000, increased U.S. economic assistance to Colombia to fight drug trafficking while also providing military assistance and training to Colombian military and paramilitary forces to fight leftist guerilla groups like the FARC. These efforts, however, led to tragic occurrences like U.S. support for the mass spraying of coca fields in Colombia with the

⁹ From her article, “Imperial Geographies and Caribbean Nationalism: At the Border Between ‘A Dying Colonialism’ and U.S. Hegemony.”

insecticide DDT - a known carcinogen that has been banned in the U.S since the 1970s. My mother recalls playing in fields that had been recently sprayed with DDT due to this policy. Human rights abuses, as reported by Amnesty International, were also bolstered, in part, by the funding that government forces and paramilitary militias received through Plan Colombia.

Ultimately, bringing the Colombian and Haitian authors of my study together means that I gather women writers from a region that has so frequently been vilified in the U.S. media with a penchant to see countries as independent, bordered spaces in isolation from one another, and for Colombia and Haiti specifically, to vilify them as “failed states.” My aim is to bring authors of the region together to examine their depictions of “bad” mothering practices and to show how dismissing Colombian and Haitian mothering as “failed motherhood” is connected to dismissing Colombia and Haiti as “failed states.” Reconsidering literary depictions of “bad” or “failed motherhood” from “failed state” regions allows us to raise critically important questions about how we might reimagine motherhood in ways that account for the impacts of colonial histories, political violence and migration on families and identities.

Engaging with these questions deepens our understanding of how mothering in the circum-Caribbean exists in what Christina Sharpe has called “the wake” of slavery, that is, mothering as continually haunted by the violence, separations and losses that slavery enacted and codified. But these questions also complicate our understanding of place and how people circulate through it. Place is, obviously, a very complicated idea and it is useful to provide here a definition of how I use the term in this dissertation. Just as I define and think about motherhood in terms of ‘mothering,’ or acts of care rather than a limited, biological understanding, I define place as locations that include not just physical, geographical spaces but also hidden (the womb), ephemeral (memory) and imagined (beyond death) spaces. In this way, my dissertation asks how

the authors I engage with challenge traditional notions of place intersecting with gender, race and mothering. How are mothers articulating their own definitions of place in order to enable a more expansive understanding of what motherhood is and to imagine more liberatory ways of being? In other words: what might happen if we refocus our attention from motherhood in the circum-Caribbean region as a fixed identity tied to traditional ideas of place and nation toward motherhood as a dynamic site of knowledge production inextricably entangled with identity *and* ever shaped by the colonial past? That is the work of my dissertation.

My project is grounded in the work of scholars in Black feminist studies, Migration studies, Caribbean studies and more. As stated above, something my work adds to the critical conversation is that I engage Colombian literary voices along with Caribbean ones, making my work Circum-Caribbean, which I define as the region that includes northern Latin American and Caribbean countries. While there are scholars engaged in productive transnational and comparative analyses of motherhood in and beyond the Caribbean, there is not much work that engages Colombia in these scholarly questions. This risks overlooking the experiences of Afro-Colombian women from coastal communities who are already marginalized in a country where it is common to believe that it is class, not race that is the biggest cause of social division. When we include Colombia in analyses of the circum-Caribbean, we also benefit from the opportunity to study comparative colonialisms to learn how slavery and other colonial projects operated across the region, what they set in motion and how that touches mothering today. For example, I would argue that without understanding the family separations that slavery systematically orchestrated in the region historically, it would be difficult to understand the full force of what it means when a Black family in Haiti is fragmented in the present day because a mother has to migrate to the U.S. to find work, getting a job doing domestic care work and

leaving her child back in Haiti in the process. The historical repetitions, the patterns, are vital to understanding what mothering means both in the past and today.

Finally, in the production of my scholarship I activate not just traditional, academic forms or methodologies like close literary analysis, but also alternative formats such as the scholarly podcast¹⁰ that engages storytelling as methodology. As a coda to my dissertation, I include a podcast companion piece that brings the overarching themes of my research on motherhood in the circum-Caribbean together with both the mothering in my own family and stories and anecdotes of mothering I collected as part of an audio project I undertook in Colombia in the spring of 2022. As Katherine McKittrick writes, “telling, sharing, listening to, and hearing stories are relational and interdisciplinary acts that are animated by all sorts of people, places, narrative devices, theoretical queries, plots” (6). In circum-Caribbean contexts, orality, storytelling, linguistic experience and music are, indeed, critical sites of relational and interdisciplinary knowledge production whose importance cannot be overstated and, in this way, the scholarly podcast format centers this methodology. I am happy to be able to include that multimodal aspect to my dissertation.

Chapters

Chapter one, titled “Violence, Nature and Motherhood in Pilar Quintana’s *La Perra*,” begins my examination of literary articulations of motherhood in contemporary circum-Caribbean women’s novels through an analysis of maternal violence in Colombian author Pilar Quintana’s spare, hard-hitting novel *La Perra*. Published in 2017, this novel tells the story of Damaris, a barren, Afro-Colombian woman and the maternal relationship she has with her adopted dog, Chirli. I specifically look at how Quintana confronts cultural notions of

¹⁰ I am deeply inspired by the work of Anna Williams, (with whom I am in contact) whose podcast dissertation titled *My Gothic Dissertation* was the first dissertation to be accepted as a scholarly podcast.

Marianismo that ideologically instruct Colombian mothers to be self-sacrificing, submissive and nurturing. I contend that Quintana challenges Marianismo notions of mothering by deconstructing idealized “good” mothering as always joyful and nurturing. Instead, she imagines motherhood, or the quest to live up to motherhood ideals, as crushing and as a kind of horror story. Not only this, she reveals that there is nothing sacred about motherhood, just as there is nothing sacred about nature: both the body and natural forces are governed by their own logics and both are just as capable of nurturing as they are of violence.

Chapter 2, titled “Bad Mothering and the Afterlives of Colonialism in Edwidge Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*,” looks at what I call “precarious mothering” in Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat’s 2013 novel *Claire of the Sea Light*. In this chapter, I argue that this novel offers a poignant counterpoint to media portrayals of Haiti as a failed state and Haitian mothering as inherently dangerous and irredeemably “bad.” I contend that while Danticat does not turn away from portraying the realities of Haitian mothering as precarious in a country that experiences instability at different levels (politically, environmentally, economically), she contextualizes this precarity. In particular, she exposes the colonial histories that have created the conditions for the present day precarity within which mothering occurs in Haiti. At the same time, she also focuses on resilient mothering practices in Haiti, such as community parenting, that have developed and expanded notions of mothering in important ways.

Finally, the third chapter of my dissertation, “Between States: Motherhood, Migration and Nation in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Patricia Engels’ *Infinite Country*,” looks at the issue of “transnational mothering.” Often, transnational mothering, or the act of leaving a child in the home country with family or friends so that the mother can travel to an

adopted country to work, is understood as negligent or “bad.” *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Infinite Country* reveals, however, that transnational mothering is more complex than that; often it is the result of a mother sacrificing physical closeness with her child in the short-term in order to build a future for them in the long-term. It also requires mothers to coordinate networks of care across vast distances. Through an in-depth comparative analysis of the two novels, I point out not only that transnational mothering is based in a deep sense of maternal care, but also that there is power in transnational mothering in that it undermines the traditional sense of place as a nation with impermeable borders.

Mothering: What Could Be More Interesting!

On a broader level, I hope that my focus on mothering in this dissertation and beyond can help quell the idea that only mothers of biological children should be interested in the topic of motherhood. Let me recount one more anecdote to explain why. I have a colleague and a good friend who is a single mother. She told me a story of a time when she was an instructor of a composition course at a community college. She created an assignment for this course asking students to reflect on the topic of mothering. A faculty member, a man it should be noted, took issue with this assignment claiming that this is a topic that not every student could relate to. This baffled her, and it baffles me. But it also says a lot about how devalued mothering and motherhood are not just in academic spaces but in the larger society as well.

Do we not all have direct experience with mothering and / or motherhood in some way or form when we understand it as caregiving? Do we not also all have a stake in better understanding mothering and motherhood, since no less than all of us has a mother? As my thesis advisor Gary Handwerk noted, even Jesus, who has no earthly father, had to have a flesh-and-blood mother. Do we not live in families, communities and societies where mothering

happens every day and where we must vote on policies that affect mothers, caregivers, families, and ultimately the very communities within which we live? Do we not want to live in a society where we speak more openly about reproductive issues in general, including mothering? Do we not need to continue to be educated on issues that impact mothers, mothering and families, from family leave policies to universal child care? For those of us who are educators working with undergraduates, aren't our students inevitably going to be (if they haven't already been) thinking about or dealing with reproductive issues and questions of mothering, parenting or caregiving in some way? Truly, how could one *not* be interested in teaching, learning about or otherwise engaging with ideas of motherhood or mothering in some capacity? Why would we let something like not being biological parents get in the way of connecting with a topic that so clearly touches all of us? What could be more interesting than mothering?

Chapter 1: Violence, Nature and Motherhood in Pilar Quintana's *La Perra*

Estoy presa en una cárcel, hecha con rejas de amor,
Sus paredes son de llanto.
Yo misma la construí en cada parto alumbrando,
Las paredes de esa cárcel en la que me estoy quemando.
Estoy presa en esa cárcel,
Dulce y terrible a la vez
En la cárcel de ser madre...¹¹

- From the poem titled "Agonía Lumbalú,"
by Afro-Colombian poet María Teresa Ramírez

Introduction

In Colombia, images of the Virgin Mary circulate widely. My mother, who was born and raised in Colombia, remembers, "...esas estatuas...cuando entras a la iglesia [*La Virgen María*]...se veía...triste, con problemas."¹² My mother might be talking about the way in which *La Virgen* is so often depicted in Colombia, with downcast eyes and outward-facing palms - a woman of humility and sorrow. It is difficult to overstate just how ingrained Marian iconography is in everyday life in Colombia - it is everywhere, from ornate Virgin Mary paintings (see fig. 1) and statues adorning churches to humble plastic figures situated in makeshift roadside altars (see fig. 2). As my mother puts it, being a majority Catholic country, Colombia "...está guiado por modelos... de la madre de Cristo."¹³ In the Catholic faith the Virgin Mary is venerated for her role as the Mother of Christ, and as such, because Catholic religious narratives are so pervasive in Colombia, *La Virgen* is celebrated as the embodiment of motherhood ideals that serve as a guide for what "good" Colombian mothers should be. In Colombia, "good" mothers must strive to be self-sacrificing, submissive, dedicated to their children and endlessly nurturing, as *La*

¹¹ I am a prisoner in a prison made with bars of love. / Its walls are made of sobs. / I made it myself with each illuminated birth, / the walls of this prison within which I am burning. / I am a prisoner in this prison, / sweet and terrible all at once / in this prison of being a mother.

¹² "...those statues...when you enter a church...she always looked...sad, troubled."

¹³ "...is guided by models of the mother of Christ."

Virgen was. But what happens when a mother cannot live up to those abstract ideals? What happens when her mothering, which is supposed to be nurturing, becomes violent, or fatal?

There is another figure that also circulates in the popular imagination in Colombia and across central and Latin America: *la Llorona* - the Weeping Woman (see fig. 3). Perhaps in some ways the ‘shadow self’ of *La Virgen María*, *la Llorona* is a folk figure of legend, a woman who, as the story goes, commits infanticide by drowning her children in a vengeful act carried out in order to punish her conquistador husband after finding him with another woman. Immediately regretful, she kills herself and thereafter becomes a phantom haunting the land and wailing for her dead children¹⁴. Her story brings to mind another “bad mother” of legend: Medea, perhaps most well-known to a broad audience through Euripedes’ play of the same name. As legend has it, Medea is a Colchian sorceress who comes to the Greek warrior Jason’s aid more than once while he was on a quest searching for the Golden Fleece. She eventually marries him after he succeeds in his quest, leaving her whole world behind (migration) to become Jason’s wife and bear him two sons. Their happy union, however, eventually dissolves into a hateful feud when Jason leaves Medea for another woman. In anger and despair, she plunges a dagger into the hearts of her two sons, committing an act of infanticide in order to punish Jason for his cruel betrayal.

La llorona and *Medea* are polemical figures that have been maligned by some as “bad” women but also as examples of “failed motherhood” because of the acts of murder that they commit. Indeed, not just in Colombia but in many regions across the world, mothers are imagined as figures who are supposed to safeguard, not slaughter their children. In this way,

¹⁴ This is how one common version of the story goes, but there are, of course, various iterations. In some she becomes not a ghost, but a kind of zombie figure, neither dead nor alive. In others she does not kill her children but is, instead, murdered by her husband.

there is a certain kind of horror in encountering these mothers of legend who commit acts of maternal violence. Yet for me, in a way that feels deeply problematic, even troubling, I must confess to a fascination with the mother figure who does the exact opposite of what she is supposed to do because in her transgressions, as horrific as her acts of violence are, there is also a complicated display of agency and power.

In a recent article examining motherhood archetypes in Latin American literature, Miller et. al. cite scholar Deborah Madsen, who argues that figures like *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in Mexican contexts are sometimes deployed to illustrate “good” notions of mothering (*la Virgen* who is devoted to her children) while figures like *la llorona* invoke “bad” mothering. Yet Madsen sees *la llorona* as actually complicating ideas of motherhood. They argue that,

For Madsen, *La llorona* encapsulates both the mother and the murderer, the creator and the destroyer: ‘the woman who is the giver of life is also the woman who condemns her children to death,’”(35).

La llorona and Medea are both women who step outside of the kinds of motherhood they are supposed to engender in order to be mother figures who enact contradictory elements - they are both maternal and murderous, thereby undermining binary motherhood ideals and imploring us to see motherhood and mothering as something much more complicated.

Mothers who murder exist not just in literature, *cuentos* and legends but in the “real” world as well. There are countless, tragic news stories of mothers killing their children and being sentenced for the crime. Sociologist Martha Smithey at Texas Tech University has devoted her career to studying these cases of infanticide¹⁵, and among the conclusions she has drawn is that, contrary to popular belief, “...my work, and that of others, makes me realize...everyone has a

¹⁵ For more on motherhood and infanticide see *Mothers Who Kill*, a volume published in 2021 and edited by Charlotte Beyer and Josephine Savarese.

recipe for ‘losing it’ and assaulting others.” Since anyone is capable of such violence, for Smithey, in order to understand this problem, it is pivotal to look beyond a focus on individual mother figures because, as she notes, “...the story is more than just bad or mentally ill mothers...the story is about how hard it is to be a good mother in a society where women are expected to raise their children in their spare time and with their spare change.” While Smithey is specifically referring to women in the present who commit maternal violence, her conclusion connects to legendary stories of *La llorona* and Medea’s violence because these legends are still regarded as “bad” mothers and their violence, along with the violence of present day mothers, is condemned as “bad.” The mother figure who commits violence is a woman found in almost every cultural context across time, and the struggle to be a “good” mother in whichever context can lead to devastating consequences for the mother, the child or both.

The novel that is the focus of this chapter also tells a story about mothering and murder, but instead of a mother killing her own biological child, the text subverts this trope with the tale of a barren woman who adopts a stray street dog and then commits an act of maternal violence. Contemporary Colombian author Pilar Quintana’s searing novel *La Perra*,¹⁶ published in 2018, tells the story of Damaris - an Afro-Colombian woman living in a remote village on Colombia’s Pacific coast within the geographical department known as El Chocó¹⁷. The novel recounts the unlikely maternal relationship between Damaris, a lonely woman who desperately wants to have a child, and the street puppy she adopts to fill the childless void. She names the dog Chirli, a name she would have given to her own child had she had one. Through the course of the novel, the protective, nurturing and motherly care Damaris shows for the dog slowly deteriorates as it is

¹⁶ This novel was shortlisted for the National Book Award 2020 and was the winner of the Alfaguara Novel Prize 2021.

¹⁷ Colombia is a republic divided into 32 departments and a capital district. El Chocó is a department in the western part of the country with a significant Afro-Colombian population. It is the only department with coastlines on both the Atlantic and the Pacific. It is also a remote geographical area with little infrastructure, rugged coastlines and dense jungle.

tested by the harsh realities of poverty, the hostility of nature and the violence of Catholic-based Colombian ideals of mothering. By the end of the narrative, in a climactic scene of total despair, driven by her inability to live up to the oppressive ideals of Colombian motherhood, Damaris commits a terrible act of violence.

The horror of this act raises the question: what kind of motherly figure would do such a thing, and why? The title of the novel raises more questions. *La Perra* translates into English as *the bitch*, which resonates similarly in English - it signifies a female dog as well as a “bad” or sexually promiscuous woman. But to whom does the title refer? Is it the animal itself - the small, female puppy that Damaris adopts on a whim one morning, tucking her delicately in the folds of her bra to keep her warm? Does the title activate the more derogatory meaning of the word, referring to the dog as “bad” when, for instance, she becomes pregnant and eats one of her own young before abandoning the rest of the litter? Is it Damaris? Is she the bitch because she perpetuates an act of violence? Is she a bitch because the act she commits is an act of “bad” mothering?

I am struck by the singularity of the title, too, the fact that the title refers to an individual, *the bitch* (whoever she may be). It makes me think of the tendency to scrutinize motherhood by focusing on mothering as an individual endeavor or burden rather than one for which the entire community or state is responsible for supporting. It is easy, for example, to think of Medea as “evil,” or as a “horrible mother,” or indeed, a bitch, because murdering her own children is a horrible act of violence. More difficult but no less important, however, would be to wonder about the choices available to her, how they might have been limited by the cultural pressures and economic realities of her situation as a woman living during a time when women (and their children) were considered to be the husband’s property and women were dismissed as weak and

conniving.¹⁸ In other words, what is less often considered is the larger cultural context within which maternal violence occurs. This is the focus of my analysis. I wonder about the cultural and material conditions that lead to these terrible acts of mother figures who commit violence.

Years ago, when I first read Toni Morrison's beautifully rendered novel *Beloved*, I began thinking about how nurturing and violence can accompany mothering, especially when mothering happens within the horrors of slavery. I find that in thinking about motherhood and violence, I return again and again to this novel, and recently, with renewed attention as I prepare to take a faculty position at the University of Cincinnati and move to the very city where the novel is set. Morrison's novel is about a formerly enslaved woman named Sethe who is haunted by the spirit of the child she killed in order to spare her from a life of slavery. As is well known, the idea for the novel came to Morrison from the real life story of Margaret Garner. Morrison states:

I started out wanting to write a story about the feeling of Self. Women feel themselves best through nurturing. The clipping about Margaret Garner stuck in my head. I had to deal with this nurturing instinct that expressed itself in murder (as cited in Clemons, 1987, p. 74)

The clipping Morrison refers to is a newspaper article reporting the story of Margaret Garner, a formerly enslaved woman who, in the 1850s, had escaped slavery in the south to seek freedom in Cincinnati with her four children. When enslavers caught up to them, she killed her children to keep them from being enslaved again. As Morrison explains, Garner's life story inspired her to explore the nurturing that is an element of mothering, but in the context of slavery during which

¹⁸ Classical Studies scholar Emma Griffiths has pointed out the ways in which Medea's character as she is described in Euripides' play is one that would not have fit easily into the gender expectations for women according to Athenian philosophy. In other words, Medea is a character who defies what a "good" woman is according to Athenian cultural expectations. Griffiths notes that Medea is extremely intelligent, quick-witted and able to commit murder - traits that would have been labeled masculine. Yet, she is also maternal, is a vengeful, scorned woman and expresses her deep love for her children - traits that would have been labeled feminine. Crucially, she is also seen as having magical powers—a witch as well as a bitch. It is an interesting point of connection between Medea and Damaris that, despite their wildly different cultural contexts, the murderous maternal figure is one that so effectively complicates gender expectations.

families were torn apart¹⁹ and enslaved women were prevented from nurturing their children because of the rampant mother-child separations and splitting apart of families that was part of everyday life during the time of slavery. What a horrible notion that in this context, infanticide would have been one of the deepest expressions of motherlove possible²⁰.

In her fascinating comparison of Morrison's *Beloved* and Euripides' *Medea*, scholar Shelley P. Haley finds a critical point of connection in these two texts in the way that both Sethe and Medea (besides being mothers who murder) are also otherised women²¹ living in patriarchal societies with racial hierarchies. In fact, citing descriptions of Medea's people (the Colchians) as "children of the Sun," (that is, descended from the God Helios), Haley remarks that this is an epithet that African peoples have used to describe themselves in literature. Furthermore, she cites Herodotus, who claimed that Colchians were of Egyptian descent with black skin. In this way, Medea may well have been a dark-skinned woman like Sethe, like Damaris - all otherised mother figures grappling with motherhood and violence. Haley notes that while Sethe's reason for infanticide stems from her instinct to protect her child from slavery by killing her, Medea's reason for infanticide, on the surface, is to protect her own pride at being reduced to a pitiful, abandoned woman. But Haley sees that what Medea's filicide really does is, "by using the rights of the patriarchy against him, Medea strikes a blow against the whole system," (199). In other words, she will hurt Jason and the whole patriarchal system the most by taking his property-owning, misogynistic heirs out, thereby destroying what perpetuates the system.

¹⁹ Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," has discussed the repercussions of these separations for Black communities and Black families for whom there is a recurring trend of a missing Black father figure and a Black mother figure for whom the trauma of slavery and colonization has forced her to become objectified flesh rather than a subject with a body.

²⁰ For a heartbreaking, breath-taking reading of the moment when Sethe kills her baby in *Beloved* to prevent her from being taken by enslavers, see Edwidge Danticat's *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, 104-105.

²¹ Haley writes, "Nearly every scholar who has done work on Euripides' *Medea* has described Medea as a "foreigner", a "stranger", a "barbarian" or in postmodern terminology, the "other" (181).

Damaris's violence, as I will examine below, is different. It is violence born out of frustration and despair, enacted from the colonially inspired desire to control the uncontrollable.

Quintana's novel, to be clear, is very different from Morrison's (and very different from Euripides' play *Medea*). *La Perra* takes place in the present day in a post-slave society, specifically a small village on the Pacific coast of Colombia. Yet, both novels engage some of the impossible extremes of mothering that are socio-culturally created. Moreover, the Colombian Pacific and Caribbean coasts were important sites of slave-trading in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, and they are places where, in the present day, many of the descendants of those formerly enslaved peoples still live, making up some of the most concentrated Afro-Colombian populations in the country. They are places where legacies of slavery linger, the damages of which live on, rippling forward in time.

In *Beloved*, as Haley notes, Sethe's resistance is that she refuses the position of enslaved woman who should not mother. Instead, Sethe's maternal love is deep, so deep it is almost all-consuming. Yet, as Haley and Carol Boyce Davies both underline, Sethe is also caught between her acts of resistance and her all-consuming and almost claustrophobic love for her child. Boyce elaborates:

A slave mother is not supposed to demonstrate deep love for her children. Sethe defies that. Yet her heroic response to enslavement paradoxically becomes the kind of mother-love which the society enforces for women. Sethe shuttles back and forth between enslavements, exchanging one for the other, unable to be freed from both at once. (54)

The way I read this, Sethe is made to bear the brunt of being the sole, total nurturer for her child with no acknowledgement that her mothering is held hostage by *both* the expectations of motherhood *and* the impossible choices in front of her as an enslaved woman and mother. Similarly, in *La Perra*, the fact that Damaris is Afro-descended - grappling with motherhood expectations as an Afro-Colombian woman - adds complicating layers to how she encounters

motherhood. Specifically, further on in this chapter I think about how her positionality as a Black Colombian woman thinking about motherhood carries colonial baggage.

To be clear, the maternal violence in *La Perra* and the killing of a child to shield her from slavery in *Beloved* are two very different acts of maternal violence. While the latter is unmistakably one of the most maternal acts of love possible, the former is not as clear cut. Damaris's violence seems to stem from desperation, and lack of ability to define her self-worth outside of motherhood. What links the two novels, indeed, all of these violent mothers I have mentioned (*la Llorona*, Medea, Sethe and Damaris), is that they all turn to violence as they grapple with mothering and the expectations of mothering in ways that clearly reveal that there is so much more to the story than just individual acts too easily dismissed as nothing more than "bad mothering." Their violence, which is admittedly horrific, is a decision made within the confines of societies that offer them very little agency or choice to begin with.

La Perra

In *La Perra*, there are two tragedies at the heart of the narrative that reveal how heavy the idealized expectations of motherhood fall on Damaris. The first is the death of Damaris's childhood friend Nicolasito when she was a little girl, a death that was blamed on her. The two children were playing on a bluff when a rogue wave swept him into the churning sea in front of a horrified Damaris who knew, as she scrambled back to the village to tell the adults, that even though it was not her fault she would be blamed for his death. The second tragedy in the narrative happens in Damaris's adulthood when she is unable to have a child. In an attempt to fill the loneliness and isolation of childlessness, on a whim, she adopts a squirming puppy. Thus begins a story of maternal love that turns into something more sinister and horrific - a claustrophobic and rageful relationship exacerbated by the unattainable expectations and cruel

realities of women and mothers in a culture that exalts, sanctifies and venerates saint-like forms of motherhood.

In this tightly-wound, tense narrative that culminates in a horrific act of maternal violence, Quintana's novel confronts cultural, religious and abstract notions of traditional motherhood shaped by two major ideas: 1) Marianismo ideals of motherhood inherited from Catholic notions of ideal mothers as self-sacrificing, submissive, nurturing (and light-skinned, a complexity I will get into in the paragraphs below), and 2) European colonial ideas of nature linked to women, with both seen as needing to be controlled. Moreover, I notice how Quintana's novel stands in contrast to the kinds of literary fiction Colombia is known for: the novels of Gabriel García Márquez, for example, and other works in the magical realism genre. Instead, Quintana's writing is pared down and austere. There are no ghosts. No one flies. There is, however, a creeping sense of dread that erupts into full-blown horrific scenes including bloated corpses, random deaths and claustrophobic jungles. For this reason, I see this novel as a horror story, creating an eerie, unsettling sequence of events where, at every turn, traditional ideas of women, mothers and nature as docile, fertile, healing and even sacred are subverted.²² In Colombia, Quintana reminds attentive readers, motherhood has been impacted by violence on many registers, and nature (to which motherhood has been connected) is not endlessly nurturing and always fecund, but sometimes barren, always powerful, indifferent at best and hostile at worst - horrific, even.

²² Interestingly, since the COVID-19 pandemic locked down many societies across the world in 2019 for one to two years, forcing parents to be in more constant contact with their children, several films have been released in which mothering is explored as horror. Take, for example, Ilana Glazer's 2021 "False Positive," a film in which the main character begins to suspect that there is something extremely sinister about the fertility doctor she is working with. A commentary on the medicalization of giving birth in the U.S. and the ways in which women slowly lose control of their pregnancy process, the film uses horror as a way to understand motherhood, which has many horrific elements to it. Growing another alien being in one's womb, giving birth, the risks associated with giving birth, the blood - all these lend themselves well to the horror genre. For more on motherhood and horror in recent popular films see film critic Amanda Hess's New York Times article, "When Motherhood is a Horror Show."

This chapter opens with an examination of theory that supports and deepens my analysis of Quintana's deconstruction of motherhood in the novel. In this first section, I first analyze Marian motherhood ideals in Colombia, which articulate "good" mothers in the Colombian cultural imagination as those who are self-sacrificing, benevolent, and who give undying devotion and unlimited nurturing to their children and families. I then underline that lived, 'on the ground' experiences of motherhood in Colombia are complex, with more and more women, especially in recent years, articulating more nuanced and ambivalent feelings toward motherhood and, in particular, being more vocal about exploring its troubling, dubious sides.

Ultimately, the work of this chapter is to draw attention to the very sharp schism that exists still between religious, state-sponsored notions of motherhood as sacred, self-sacrificing and nurturing with the realities of what it does to those who strive for that ideal in the context of histories of violence, economic instability, racism and gender-based inequality. Those ideals of motherhood get internalized and cause damage when the inhabited world does not match them because one can attach one's self-identity and self-worth to those ideals. Understanding those ideals, interrogating where they come from and which structures of power keep them in place, is vital for supporting more liberatory expressions of motherhood in Colombia and beyond.

Marianismo

In Latin America, it is difficult to talk about motherhood without also talking about gender stereotypes often referred to as "machismo" and "marianismo" ideals. These ideals dictate that men should be hyper-masculine, patriarchal heads of households, while women should embody the ideals of the Virgin Mary, namely those of self-sacrifice, benevolence and devotion to family and children. Erin E. O'Connor underlines this when she writes in *Mothers Making Latin America*, "Motherhood is at the core of this identity; indeed, the idea of

marianismo often suggests that a woman has no other identity than that of wife and mother,” (9). These ideas, which stem from colonial-era times of forced marriages and Catholic religious notions of the family, also are perpetuated in popular cultural texts such as telenovelas.²³

Compellingly, there are more and more contemporary Latin American artists, authors and scholars who have, in the last twenty years or so, been vocal about articulating counter-narratives to the motherhood-as-marianismo’ model. Their resistance is in the form of giving voice to the nuances, pressures and disappointments of motherhood more openly than in previous decades. This has been happening in the U.S., as well, as scholar Samira Kawash, in an article outlining the history of Motherhood studies in the U.S. since the 1970s²⁴, has noticed. Kawash underlines, in particular, that between the 2000s to 2010s, popular books on motherhood have exploded, specifically books authored by women narrating their own unique and complicated experiences of mothering. Kawash writes:

In the 2000s, mothers found their voice. And for the most part, they were pissed. In memoirs, blogs, anthologies, and zines, women wrote about their experiences, their joys, and their disappointments as mothers. Much of this is powerful stuff: women, lots of them, are making a lot of noise, talking and writing about mothering in ways that resist guilt for those supposedly nonmaternal feelings, that refuse to pathologize their own frustration and rage, and that seek broader contexts and communities in which to understand their experiences of motherhood, both the good and the bad.” (984-985)

Similarly, popular books on motherhood circulating in Latin America have also followed this trend. Recently, Spanish journalist and scholar Esther Vivas, for example, published *Mamá*

²³ For example, in “The Good and Bad Women of Telenovelas: How to Tell Them Apart Using a Simple Maternity Test,” scholar Julee Tate finds that, in her analysis of representations of motherhood across several popular Latin American telenovelas, “The good woman is above all maternal; that is, if she has children she is an exemplary mother who is willing to sacrifice all for the sake of her children. If she is childless, she dreams of one day becoming a mother and expresses the belief that her fulfillment as a woman is dependent upon having children. On the other hand, her antagonist, the bad woman, is not maternal; that is, if she has children, she is only interested in them insofar as they can play a role in advancing her own personal agenda, and if she is childless, she wants to stay that way. The bad woman does not view motherhood as an essential element of her identity as a woman. In fact, in most instances she views having children as an impediment to her own goals and self-actualization,” (97).

²⁴ “New Directions in Motherhood Studies,” and was published in *Signs* in June of 2011 Vol., pp.).

Desobediente: Una mirada feminista a la maternidad (2020) in which she argues that society continues to uphold expectations of motherhood that do not allow women to be the kinds of mothers that they actually want to be or, by necessity, have to be because of different social, economic and political contexts and personal identities. There is also a more vocal articulation of the fact that culturally, it is not well-received to express the parts of motherhood that are difficult or challenging. This is something Argentine feminist artist and children's book author Mariana Ruíz Johnson articulated in a conference session at the FILBO²⁵ entitled "Mamá es Tantas Cosas," (see fig. 4) in which she spoke candidly about her own experiences as a mother. In particular, she expressed a frustration with not seeing many children's books that spoke openly about experiences of motherhood in which mothers are their own fully formed people with lives of their own, independent from their children²⁶. This pushed her, she confided to the audience, to write her own children's books in which mothers leave their children behind (with *papá*, it should be noted) to travel, work and have their own lives outside of the one they share with their child.

But one of the most striking things she related to the audience about her experience with motherhood was how absolutely ambivalent she felt about it. In a captivating moment during the question and answer session, a young Colombian woman, perhaps in her early 20s, approached the microphone and posed this question to Johnson: "*Y qué pasa si vuelve mamá y descubre que a usted no le gusta...? ¿Usted ha pensado escribir un libro acerca de ese tema?*" And what if

²⁵ The FILBO is the Feria Internacional del Libro de Bogotá, a big literary festival that happens every year in Bogotá. I was fortunate enough to attend the FILBO 2022 in Bogotá where Pilar Quintana was an honored guest and gave a lecture on her archive of work. After the lecture, I was lucky enough to meet her and chat with her at a book signing. She is from Cali, the same city my mother is from.

²⁶ She also mentioned a frustration with the notion that women have to perform mothering perfectly. Mothers lose their cool sometimes and scream at their children, she noted. This is normal. But it never seems permissible to express that. One of the ways she wanted to resist that narrative of impossibly perfect mothering was through her work as a children's book author. She wrote one children's book, for example, featuring a mother who gets angry at her child in a moment of frustration. The idea, she underlined, is to normalize that mothers make mistakes and to do that in the medium of children's books.

you become a mother and realize you don't like it? Have you thought about writing a book related to that theme? The author paused thoughtfully and then said quite seriously, "*No, no lo he hecho todavía...pero si lo estoy pensando.*" No, no I haven't done it yet, but yes, I am thinking about it.

Pilar Quintana, who had her son later in life, in her Filbo lecture (see fig. 5) expressed motherhood as also characterized by unattainable expectations. The culture obligates women to be mothers, she underlined, because if you are not a mother you are not fully a woman. But then if you become a mother and complain about it, it is considered almost scandalous that you do not love being a mother all the time. This is something that Argentine scholar Ana María Fernández articulates in her scholarly work *La Mujer de la Ilusión: Pactos y Contratos Entre Hombres y Mujeres*, in particular in the third chapter, titled "Madres en más, mujeres en menos: los mitos sociales de la maternidad," in which she elaborates the concept of the "mujer-madre." She writes:

Actualmente, nuestra sociedad organiza el universo de significación en relación con la maternidad alrededor de la idea Mujer-Madre: la maternidad es la función de la mujer y a través ella la mujer alcanza su realización y adultez. Desde esta perspectiva, la maternidad da sentido a la feminidad; la madre es el paradigma de la mujer, un suma; la esencia de la mujer es ser madre. (161)

She outlines here that 'our' society (by this I read 'Latin American societies,') organize the cosmos of meaning around the idea of motherhood as the 'mujer-madre.' The 'mujer-madre' describes the idea that the entire purpose and function of a woman is to be a mother and, furthermore, motherhood is the only way for her to reach her full potential as an adult. This is the sentiment Quintana refers to when she describes one damaging ideal of motherhood as the obligation to become a mother in order to be fully a woman. Part of the impetus for writing *La Perra*, Quintana explained, was to talk about these damaging ideals of motherhood that have not gotten as much attention as they should. Indeed, one of the things that makes Quintana such a

captivating writer is that, as she told the audience, she writes about what is uncomfortable. She articulates what few are willing to do.²⁷

As stated earlier, many of these traditional motherhood ideals that Quintana and Johnson push against stem from Catholic Marian ideals of good mothers embodying characteristics of the Virgin Mary, such as benevolence, devotedness to children and family, and self-sacrifice. This makes me think of my grandmother Isaura, *mamita*²⁸ we call her. She raised ten children in Cali, Colombia - one of them was my mother Amparo Julia. I never got to meet *mamita*, but in my family she is known as a force, a matriarch with total devotion to her children, a woman who raised her children as best she could with little money amid a sometimes chaotic political situation going on outside the home. My mother remembers this about my grandmother:

[Ella era] muy dedicada a nosotros, con una expectativa de educación muy alta. Con una expectativa de moral muy alta. Estricta...Mi madre hacía líneas. She would go in line so we would be the first ones to get into the classrooms and classes that we wanted...So for her that was number one, get an education. And in the process she totally dedicated herself to us. She dedicated herself to our happiness, our wellbeing, and she sort of neglected herself...mucho sacrificio, mucho. Mucha preocupación de que estemos bien, que comamos bien. Sí, eso fue lo que pasó a ella. Murió un poco joven. Y yo creo que es cuando la familia se empezó a ir a lugares donde nos teníamos que ir. Una hermana se fue para Europa. Otras para los Estados Unidos. Y entonces parece que ella, como poco a poco, se empezó a quedar sola. Y eso le afectó mucho a ella. Que yo no nos tenía. Todas nosotras ahí. Entonces, poco a poco perdió su salud y...y murió²⁹.

That total sacrifice that *mamita* gave to her family put us where we, myself and all of my cousins, are today. That drive for education that she instilled in my mother, who has her M.A. in Education, lives on in me, in the PhD I am currently finishing and the role I am soon stepping

²⁷ See, for example, Quintana's difficult but poignant short story on sexual violence and family secrets.

²⁸ To clarify, the older cousins in my family, the ones who got to know her well call her *mamita* and the younger ones, myself included, who never got to meet her, we call her *abuelita*.

²⁹ [She was] very dedicated to us, and she had a high expectation that we would get an education. And a high expectation for morals. Strict. My mother used to wait in lines. She would go in line so we would be the first ones to get into the classrooms and classes that we wanted. So for her that was number one, get an education. And in the process she totally dedicated herself to us. She dedicated herself to our happiness, our wellbeing, and she sort of neglected herself... a lot of sacrifice. And a lot of concern that we would be ok, that we would eat well. That was what happened with her. She died a bit young. And I believe that when the family started to go where we had to go, one sister left for Europe, others for the U.S., she started to feel, little by little, she began to feel alone. And that affected her a lot. That she didn't have us anyone. All of us there. So, little by little her health faded. And she died.

into as a college professor. Although my grandfather Juan worked to provide for the family, it was *mamita* who kept the children fed, clothed and in school and who put everyone else first at great cost to her own health. That mother-as-martyr value is one of the Marianismo ideals I am fascinated by - the expectation put upon women to be a fountain of on-demand nurturing. On the other side of that must be exhaustion, and somewhere underneath all of that, frustration and even rage. Was *mamita* ever angry? I had never thought to ask my mother that. She was when the children misbehaved, I learned, always ready to dole out a *chancletazo*.

But another feature of Marianismo is that these images of the Virgin Mary that circulate, the ones that depict her with downcast eyes and a serene smile also link “good” mothering to whiteness. I want to be careful not to impose U.S.-based racial understandings onto the racial issues at play in this novel embedded in Colombian cultural contexts, because issues of race in Colombia are complicated. They play out differently than they do in the U.S. First of all, to the extent that racial hierarchies exist in Colombia (and they do) they are the legacy of Spanish colonial-based hierarchies that, during the colonial period, put race on a continuum with European-descended Spanish peoples being at the top of the hierarchy, followed by mixed Mestizos (of Spanish and Indigenous mixed race descent), then Indigenous peoples and finally Afro-descendant peoples. In the present day, Colombia is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, and often it is spoken of as a “country of countries,” meaning that it has distinct regions where specific ethnic peoples tend to be located. The central Antioquia region, for example, where Medellín is located, is often described as a place associated with whiteness or mestizo-ness, whereas the coastal regions of Colombia where Santa Marta, Barranquilla and El Chocó are located, are characterized as the Afro-Colombian regions of the country³⁰.

³⁰ I happened to be in Colombia during the presidential elections in the spring of 2022. At the time, the main candidates vying for votes were Gustavo Petro on the left, who ultimately ended up winning the election, and on the right Rodolfo Hernández, a candidate likened to Donald Trump in that he was a wealthy person considered a

Despite it being such a multicultural and multiracial country, there exists the idea in Colombia that racism is not a source of discrimination, but rather, it is class and class alone that creates tensions and divisiveness. This is, of course, untrue. Racism exists in Colombia as it does everywhere. One need only look to the presidential elections of 2022 for a recent example when then presidential candidate Gustavo Petro and vice presidential candidate Francia Márquez, who is Afro-Colombian, were elected to office. It was an historic election because Francia Márquez became the highest ranking Afro-Colombian political figure in the history of the country, but her ascendancy, unfortunately, also saw a backlash of racist remarks and attacks. Scholar Alejandro de la Fuente, an expert on racism in Latin America and the Director of the Afro-Latinx Research Institute at Harvard University, uses the term “*imaginarios nacionales*” or national imaginaries to help explain how racism works differently in many Latin American countries versus the U.S. He underlines that in many Latin American countries it is important to articulate a sense of belonging to a national identity. To be Colombian, for example, is an important identity among Colombians. The problem, according to de la Fuente, is that these national identities or this national imaginary can work to silence the realities of systemic racism and discrimination in Colombia. Why? Because it facilitates a sense that all Colombians of all ethnic backgrounds come together harmoniously to be *Colombianos*, and while this does happen, it also obscures the very real racism and discrimination that exist in Colombia and that marginalize many Afro-Colombians.

political outsider. Petro had generated a lot of excitement among Colombians, though. He is a former guerilla fighter-turned mayor of Bogotá whose running mate, Francia Márquez, has become the first Afro-Colombian woman to be the Vice President of the country. It was fascinating talking to taxi drivers, fruit sellers, students and people from all walks of life about the elections because in some ways, there was some polarization. In Medellín, for example, a more conservative area with a small Afro-Colombian population, Hernández was the favored candidate to win, whereas on the coasts in places like Cartagena where there were large Afro-Colombian populations, Petro was the candidate that people supported.

The fact that Damaris in *La Perra* is Afro-Colombian combined with her socio-economic status as a woman living hand to mouth is significant because it influences how she is impacted by motherhood ideals and helps explain her limited options when it comes to dealing with her futile attempts to become a mother. She does not have the options that wealthier women might have in Colombia's capital Bogotá, for example, to explore IVF or other ways to get pregnant. She is in a remote, rural coastland without means, and on top of this, she is living in a country where many of the Marian images of idealized motherhood that circulate are overwhelmingly images of a white or mestizo Virgin Mary (see fig. 6-7). In my time spent in Cartagena, for example (Cartagena has a large Afro-Colombian population), the Virgin Mary imagery I saw in churches, paintings and statues was overwhelmingly white or mestizo. There was only one image I saw of a Black Virgin Mary mother and child rendered in tile on the side of an old colonial building in the Old City (see fig. 8). I will come back to this point in my examination of Quintana's *La Perra*, because the novel confronts issues of maternal nurturing and "bad" mothering at the intersections of gender *and* race. The novel's protagonist, Damaris, is an Afro-Colombian woman³¹ for whom expectations of motherhood, care and nurturing are made even more fraught by histories of slavery in Colombia.

Mother Nature

Throughout the novel, the idea of 'nature' is invoked in multiple senses of the word. There is the physical sense of nature, the flora and fauna surrounding Damaris's village, including the churning, mud-colored Pacific waves, torrential downpours and thick, claustrophobic jungle canopies. One of the things that has been remarked about this novel is the way Quintana's descriptions of nature create an atmospheric narrative world so vivid the reader

³¹ While Quintana did live for 9 years on the Pacific coast in El Chocó where the novel is set, she herself is not of Afro-Colombian descent.

almost feels the oppressive humidity, sees the swarms of gnats gathering at dusk and smells the decaying, sulfurous dead animals rotting on the beach. The way that this setting comes to life, the horror that permeates the atmosphere, has a connection with magical realism. Magical realism is not just a genre that emphasizes extra-real and fantastical elements in ways that are seamlessly and unsurprisingly part of the novel's narrative world; it also has its own elements of horror that are based in real life events. It is difficult not to feel a connection between Quintana's portrayal of an eerie atmosphere where dead bodies wash up on the beach and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*. In *Cien Años*, there is, of course, the massacre in Macondo of banana plantation workers whose dead bodies are taken by train out to the sea to be dumped in the waves. As Annie Mendoza notes in *Rewriting the Nation: Novels by Women on Violence in Colombia*, one of the things that is not emphasized enough about magical realism in Colombian contexts is that it is often a genre of narratives that are based on oral history and oral narratives told about "real" historical (sometimes horrific) events that could not be so directly talked about because of the political situation, but needed to be remembered and passed on in oral histories as well as imagined and interpreted in "magical realism" novels. This is the case in *Cien Años*, a novel based on a very real, very horrific event: the 1928 massacre of banana plantation workers in Ciénaga, Colombia on strike against the U.S. - based United Fruit Company.

When Quintana focuses on nature in *La Perra*, nature is not beautiful. It is unsettling. It invokes a sense of quiet dread, emphasizing the ways in which the narrative is set up as a horror story about motherhood ideals. In this way, the claustrophobic and menacing atmospheric vibe of the dark jungles and deadly ocean around Damaris reinforce the sense that her inability to be a "good" mother and a "good" woman are oppressive ideals that surround her, weighing heavily on her. Consider, for example, the novel's descriptions of the beach near her hut. The novel opens

with Damaris's discovery of a bloated dog's carcass washed up on the shore, an opening scene that signals, early on, the idea of the novel participating in the horror genre. The descriptions that follow the discovery of the dog carcass make it clear that the beach is not the tourist-filled image of calm, azure waters and multicolored umbrellas that might be found in the Bocagrande peninsula of Cartagena, for example, a Colombian tourist destination on the Caribbean coast. Like her deconstruction of motherhood, Quintana signals that the beach on the Pacific coast in El Chocó defies our expectations and stereotypes.

Cuando la marea estaba baja, la playa se volvía inmensa, un descampado de arena negra que más parecía barro. Cuando estaba alta, el agua la tapaba toda y las olas traían palos, ramas, semillas, y hojas muertas de la selva y los revolvían con la basura de la gente," (11)

When the tide was low, the beach became immense, a vacant lot of black sand that looked more like mud. When it was high, the water covered everything and the waves brought sticks, branches, seeds, and dead leaves from the jungle and tossed them with human trash.

Similarly to Quintana's deconstruction of the violence of idealized and sacralized motherhood, the beach, with its trash-filled vacancy, is not here to fulfill our fantasy of nature as beautiful, accommodating, available or fecund.

Moreover, there is an unmistakable colonial resonance in Quintana's descriptions of nature and in how nature functions in the narrative. This colonial connection is made explicit through a memorable detail in the novel: after her white childhood friend Nicolasito is killed by a rogue wave when the two are playing by the bluff, his family decides to keep his room in their vacation home exactly as it was when he was alive. Years after his death, his room remains frozen in time, complete with his childhood bedroom curtains, which are decorated with images from *The Jungle Book*. Rudyard Kipling's 1894 *The Jungle Book* is, of course, a collection of stories about a 'man-cub' named Mowgli, a boy abandoned by humans and raised in the jungles of India by a pack of wolves. Not only does this reference to *The Jungle Book* invoke compelling

parallels to Damaris's own story of adopting a puppy and trying to raise it like her own human child, but it also foregrounds the entanglements between coloniality and nature that are part of what is alluded to in Quintana's descriptions of nature. Every time Quintana subverts notions of nature as docile, beautiful and consumable, every time her portrayals of nature tend toward descriptions of waves and jungles as impenetrable, vacant, opaque and violent, she is speaking back to colonial ideas of nature as controllable. Colonial ideas of nature as a force to be harnessed are rendered impotent in Damaris's world because no colonial force in the world could control an ocean that swallows Nicolasito (a white³² boy, no less) whole.

Marvin A. Lewis's 2019 work, *Literatura Afro-Colombiana En Sus Contextos Naturales: Imperialismo ecológico y cimarronaje cultural*, offers a compelling perspective that illuminates how Afro-Colombian authors themselves have historically written about nature. The work examines literary depictions of nature in the narratives of Afro-Colombian writers, especially those from El Chocó. In this monograph, he reveals that the Afro-Colombian poets and writers of his study write about nature differently than traditional canonical Latin American writers who depict their protagonists as outsiders to nature trying to battle or conquer it, but who end up ultimately ruined by it. In contrast, Lewis asserts that the Afro-Colombian writers he considers write about a relationship to nature that involves adapting to it, which Lewis suggests stems from maroon histories in which escaped former enslaved Afro-Colombians made enclaves and communities in the mountains, forests and other spaces and had to adapt in order to survive and thrive. Lewis writes:

Debido a la realidad inhóspita del ambiente físico, han forjado relaciones con el mundo natural que les han permitido sobrevivir y a veces durante siglos. Los autores considerados aquí no presentan perspectivas

³² I wish to reassert the fact that I use the word "white" cautiously because it does not have the same significance in Colombia as it might in the U.S. "White" in Colombia refers also to mestizo peoples or lighter-skinned peoples who are not Afro-descended or Indigenous peoples living in tribal communities. One of the reasons I do use the word "white" to describe Nicolasito, however, is that Quintana does in the text - and she stresses this point. He is "blanco," she writes.

ni extremadamente románticas ni abiertamente hostiles hacia los alrededores donde habitan los protagonistas. Al contrario, ellos mantienen un punto de vista equilibrado hacia un hábitat que no escogieron inicialmente, pero con el cual han formado una asociación tentativa. (15)

Due to the inhospitable reality of the environment, they [escaped formerly enslaved Afro-Colombians] forged relationships with the natural world that allowed them to survive sometimes for centuries. The authors I consider here do not present overly romantic perspectives or openly hostile ones toward the surroundings within which their protagonists live. Rather, they maintain a point of view that is neutral towards a habitat that they did not initially choose, but with which they have forged a tentative association.

The Afro-Colombian writers Lewis analyzes have forged connections to the natural world, an especially difficult and inhospitable natural world that includes dense jungle and angry coasts, and these associations have allowed them to survive in these places. The views they hold, Lewis contends, are not romantic but neutral perspectives regarding the environment. In contrast to the Afro-Colombian writers of Lewis's study, Quintana (who is not Afro-Colombian) writes Damaris's struggles with motherhood and with the natural environment not as a relationship of adaptation but as one of confrontation and struggle. Damaris is very much positioned as struggling *against* nature, both the environment and her own biological nature as a barren woman. But what Quintana shares with the Afro-Colombian writers Lewis references is that she also tends not to describe nature as overly romantic but rather as indifferent and vastly powerful.

Interspecies Mothering and Liminal Dogs

Related to nature, but in its own category, is the theme of animality in the novel, namely the important role that the street dog plays in the text. The novel is set in a village where street dogs roam and multiply, relying on scraps to survive. If ever these dogs are adopted into a family, they become a responsibility, and ultimately, one more mouth to feed in a situation where money is already tight and food scarce. As a result, oftentimes newborn pups are simply drowned at birth to spare them from a life of hunger and suffering.

In Colombia, street dogs are quite common (see fig. 9). To be sure, domesticated dogs are also frequently kept as pets who are very much considered members of the family, but the street dog is an undeniably common occurrence in Colombia. These street dogs can be seen curled up on sidewalks, sniffing around the plastic seats of outdoor restaurants for scraps or trotting along a busy street. Sometimes locals put out scrap food for them, sometimes the dogs scavenge, but either way they are, generally speaking, largely tolerated and roam in a way that is not as common in the suburbs and cities of countries such as the U.S. In the book *Underdogs: Pets, People and Poverty*, professor of Sociology at Tulane University Arnold Arluke and Andrew N. Rowan, the CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, examine the issue of expanding veterinary care to underserved populations in the U.S. and economically disadvantaged communities in Costa Rica. They suggest that in developing countries like Costa Rica (and I would argue that the situation is similar in Colombia) street dogs have a kind of liminal status.

To International animal welfare organizations, street animals in developing countries occupy an ambiguous rather dichotomous state, lying somewhere in between the extremes of being classified as either good or bad, as part of human families or not, or as tame or wild. These liminal animals or “border species” (Vermilya, 2012) confound the boundary lines between what is regarded as public and private and familiar or out of place. They are pets but not really, they might be owned by someone but not really. They exist between these cognitive cracks as neither fully domesticated nor entirely independent of humans - relatively free to roam but relying for their survival on occasional handouts from residents, tourists, street vendors, and business owners who might recognize them as neighborhood dogs - and as neither purely emotional nor purely instrumental in their perceived value to some local people (27).

Arluke and Rowan write, however, that these liminal animals are viewed as problematic in the dominant culture of many industrialized countries.

In the modern view, street animals’ liminality is a problem that needs correcting - they [the dogs] should belong to someone who owns them and is willing to take responsibility for providing them with veterinary care...such a view of liminality...is common in Western thinking...that sees, “stray,” “street,” or “roaming,” dogs in opposition to “pet” dogs. (27)

In places like Colombia, street dogs occupy a kind of liminal status where they move between categories. They are not fully pets, but they are occasionally cared for by the neighborhood; they are not fully independent and feral because they do interact with humans, but

they can survive when scraps do not come their way. Fascinatingly, as Arluke and Rowan note, this liminality of dogs according to the dominant culture of many “Western” countries is threatening, and triggers responses that call for dog-human relationships to be one of “responsibility” and, indeed, “ownership.” In *La Perra*, dogs occupy a similar status of being somewhere in between domesticated and wild, public and private, owned and free.

One theorist who becomes especially useful in clarifying ideas of motherhood, nature and ownership is Black feminist and Animal studies scholar Bénédicte Boisseron in *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question*. For the purposes of this analysis, I find Boisseron’s third chapter in this monograph, “The Commensal Dog in a Creole Context” especially insightful. In this chapter, Boisseron begins with the idea of the animal as imbued with a sense of other, of being foreign, nomadic and diasporic, especially outside of the developed world. Here it is important to note that Boisseron holds a perspective that, crucially, looks beyond the “West,” to regions including Latin America and the Caribbean where the nomadic street dog really is the norm and dogs as pets are less common than, say, in the U.S. Focusing on the figure of the dog in the Caribbean, Boisseron notes how this figure continues to haunt the collective consciousness by conjuring experiences of the horrors of slavery through the slave-hunting bloodhound, but also as a vehicle for thinking about creoleness. Du Bois, Boisseron notes, wrote about the double consciousness of being Black in the U.S. in the sense that a Black person must live with a kind of split consciousness because of the necessity of always having to look at oneself through the eyes of another. In this way, being American and being Black become two antagonistic endeavors. But Boisseron says that there is another kind of double consciousness: feeling both human and animal. The Caribbean street dog, Boisseron affirms, is a liminal animal that embodies the idea of creoleness precisely because, as Boisseron writes:

The dog's means of subsistence is not dependent on the work or the companionship it can provide to man. Likewise, the Creole dog, like the *callejero*, is not necessarily perceived as parasitic since, in Creole culture, there are no clear expectations of return for living alongside humans and being fed by them. (95).

The idea here, then, is of creoleness through the dog as a liminal animal, one that engages in a 'commensal' relationship with humans, that is, a relationship in which both organisms benefit without harming each other. For example, the dog might get fed a few scraps and the human might get some temporary companionship.

Where Boisseron is ultimately going is a critique of colonial-era ideas of humans as exceptional, and the notion that it is impossible for a Black diasporic subject to claim their humanity without also buying into the idea that humans are exceptional. For the Black diasporic subject, Boisseron notes, a more liberatory way of being involves rejecting the human-animal dichotomy and becoming 'species fluid,' which is already very much imbedded in Caribbean cultures with narratives of human-dog hybrids and the commensal relationship that exists between Caribbean peoples and liminal street dogs. Boisseron's work becomes important to my reading of Damaris's maternal relationship with her adopted street dog Chirli in the novel because of the way her maternal relationship slowly turns into one of possession and ownership, and as soon as it does, it becomes completely toxic. As Boisseron notes, "Imperialism begins with a hold on nature, on a territory, and ultimately on the animal," (102-103). I am interested in *how* this "hold on nature...and ultimately on the animal" also manifests itself in ideals of motherhood through Damaris's ever tightening grip on the dog she adopts. More specifically, I see that Damaris's attempts to control Chirli are, metaphorically, her way of trying to control nature, that is, her barrenness, the dog's animality and her own identity, which means nothing if it does not have the identity of motherhood attached to it.

Damaris's relationship with Chirli, the dog she adopts, is only one of many different kinds of human-dog relationships in the text. There is also Rogelio's more distanced and at times abusive relationship with his three dogs Danger, Mosco and Olivo. Damaris and Rogelio form the polar extremes of the types of human-dog relationships in the text, with Damaris being the most nurturing and affectionate and Rogelio being the most domineering and distanced from his dogs. With Damaris, there is no question that her dog is a stand-in for a child; she attends to the dog's every need and invites the dog to sleep in the house with her, treating it as a family member. Rogelio, on the other hand, maintains a clear boundary with the dogs: they sleep outside, they are severely disciplined and their one and only job is to protect the property.

Turning first to Rogelio, this is a relationship that is almost purely transactional. Rogelio provides the dogs with food and shelter in exchange for the protection that they offer patrolling the property where Rogelio and Damaris live. His relationship with the dogs is, at times, tyrannical and, one might say, very emblematic of a colonial, domineering and paternalistic kind of relationship in which he rules through fear and violence. Interestingly, the trajectory of the novel is one where Damaris will move slowly toward Rogelio's position. The text points out that Rogelio doles out not one single ounce of affection to the dogs. The most he can do is harbor secret admiration for them for their fierce aggression. But interestingly, he never leashes them, nor does he restrict their movement in the way Damaris does with Chirli. The dogs are free to roam as they please. But they seem to always return to Rogelio and to their situation with him despite his violence.

Somewhere in between Rogelio's domineering behavior toward his dogs and Damaris's affection toward hers is a neighbor named Josué and his relationship with his dogs. The text describes Josué in this way:

...a quien sí le habían gustado los perros. El los tenía para que ladraran, pero también les daba cariño y los entrenaba para que lo acompañaran a cazar;" (12).

...who had liked dogs. He had them so they would bark, but also he gave them affection and trained them to hunt with him. (12).

Josué actually likes dogs, the text affirms, and keeps them for protection but also gives them affection and trains them to hunt with him. The relationship seems to be mutually beneficial without being overly controlling, restrictive or domineering.

Damaris, on the other hand, has a different kind of relationship with her dog - a maternal one. Her first encounter with the puppy she adopts is at the very beginning of the novel. The opening scene is of the washed-up carcass of a dog on the beach. An older woman named Doña Elodia, who is present on the beach at that time, also sees the dead dog and she and Damaris have a conversation about how the dog might have been poisoned. The text goes on to explain:

Muchos perros del pueblo morían envenenados. Alguna gente decía que los mataban aposta, pero Damaris no podía creer que hubiera personas capaces de hacer algo así y pensaba que los perros se comían por error las carnadas con veneno que dejaban para las ratas o a las ratas que estando envenenadas eran fáciles de cazar;" (9)

Many dogs from the village died by poisoning. Some people said that they were killed on purpose, but Damaris didn't believe that there would be people capable of doing something like that and thought that the dogs ate the poisoned meat by accident that was left for the rats or the rats being poisoned were easy to hunt.

Quintana offers, here, the first of many glimmers of foreshadowing of the terrible events to come in which Damaris, who at this point cannot fathom the intentional poisoning of a dog, becomes a woman who, by the end of the novel, will be stunned by her own act of maternal violence.

It turns out that the dead dog washed up on the beach in the opening scene was Doña Elodia's that she had had for a long time, a black dog that always followed her wherever she went. It is never definitively explained why Doña Elodia's dog ended up dead on a beach; the two women only speculate that it was a poisoning, but nothing more is said on the matter. The black dog left behind a litter of puppies that Doña Elodia cares for who are seven days old, but the older woman tells Damaris that the puppies probably will not make it because they are young

and will need milk now that their mother is dead. But no one wants to take the puppies. Damaris, however, on a whim, decides to take one - a floppy-eared gray puppy. And thus begins their relationship.

Damaris busies herself with figuring out how to feed this puppy, whose mouth is too small to suck milk from the nipple of a baby bottle and who will not be able to get enough nutrients drinking milk drop by drop from an eyedropper, which Damaris had been using for a little while. Milk-soaked bread does the trick. As the narrative continues, Damaris goes to great lengths to lovingly care for the puppy in a decidedly maternal way, not just with milk-soaked bread but, for example, when she carries the puppy as one might a newborn:

...metida en el brasier, entre sus tetas blandas y generosas, para mantenerla caliente. Por las noches la dejaba en la caja de cartón que le había regalado don Jaime, con una botella de agua caliente y la camiseta que había usado ese día para que no extrañara su olor;" (16)

...tucked in her bra, between her soft and ample breasts, to keep her warm. In the nights she left her in the cardboard box that Jaime had given her, with a bottle of hot water and the shirt she had worn that day so that the dog wouldn't miss her smell. (16)

She is also constantly petting and caressing the puppy, so much so that her husband Rogelio remarks (in another glint of foreshadowing,) "*Vas a matar a ese animal de tanto tocarlo,*" (18) you are going to kill that animal by handling it too much.

Clearly, for Damaris, this relationship with her dog Chirli is a maternal one in which the dog is a stand-in for the child Damaris never had. And in this way, Damaris's treatment of the dog is as a pet and a member of the family rather than a liminal street dog, who is more independent and comes and goes as it pleases. Damaris gives the dog love and attention and in return she has expectations of the dog's behavior and attitude. But Rogelio's perspective on dogs diverges significantly from Damaris's. To begin with, the text states that, although he has three of them, Rogelio does not even like dogs, "*A él no le gustaban los perros, y si los criaba era solamente para que ladraran y cuidaran la propiedad,*" He didn't even like dogs, if he was

raising them it was only so they would bark and protect the property. For Rogelio, his relationship with dogs is not one whose purpose is to provide emotional companionship as it is with Damaris, rather, for Rogelio dogs are necessary for protecting one's property and for surviving in this remote area.

Danger, the oldest of Rogelio's dogs, was the product of some dogs that Josué, the neighbor, had had, and Rogelio actually harbors a sense of admiration for Danger because of his ferociousness, although Rogelio would never express that admiration outwardly. Instead, he regularly shouts at the dog and raises his hand to remind him of all the beatings he has gotten before. Mosco, the middle dog, was a mistreated puppy who came to Rogelio with an infected tail that Rogelio swiftly hacked off. When Damaris shoots Rogelio a look of absolute horror for amputating the dog's tail, he simply shrugs his shoulders and tells her he only did it to stop the infection from killing the dog, but Damaris believes that he had actually, sadistically, enjoyed the violent act. Finally, there is Olivo, a chocolate lab who is one of Danger's offspring with a neighbor dog. Olivo might be the youngest of the three dogs, but he is also the most ferocious and unpredictable. The text states, "...*Olivo era traicionero: mordía sin ladrar y por detrás,*" Olivo was a traitor: he would bite without barking and he would do it from behind. Given Rogelio's treatment of his three dogs, Damaris is understandably very nervous to bring her dog Chirli back to the home and when she does, Rogelio is standoffish and annoyed. "*Otro perro?*" Another dog, he asks? "*Ni creás que me voy a encargar de él,*" don't even think that I'm going to take care of him, Rogelio remarks, not knowing the puppy is a female.

There is an economic, material dimension to the human-dog interactions in the novel. One of the reasons Rogelio is annoyed with Damaris when she brings home the puppy when they already have three dogs in their care is that this is a family that lives day to day, trying to make

ends meet. Caring for a dog means feeding it, and Rogelio and Damaris already do not have a whole lot, at least in the beginning of the novel. The difficult truth about dogs in this region, the novel notes, is that there are not many resources available to help care for them.

No había veterinarios en la zona ni forma de esterilizar a los animales, y a la gente no le gustaba andar cuidando a las hembras en celo ni mucho menos encargarse de las crías. Muchas veces Damaris había visto desde el acantilado cómo tiraban a la caleta una canada entera de perros o gatos para que se la llevara la marea. (79)

There were not any veterinarians in the zone nor any way to sterilize the animals, and people did not like going around taking care of females in heat much less taking care of the young. Oftentimes Damaris had seen from the cliff how they threw into the cove a whole sack of dogs or cats so the tide would take them away.

What is interesting here is the suggestion of a societal double standard in the way that motherhood is often so sacralized, encouraged and venerated in Colombia in church and state-sponsored narratives, with less regard for the material consequences. In the novel, no one wants to adopt or take care of these animals, especially the females because when they have offspring, those are additional mouths to feed. It becomes a situation where people are euthanizing cats and dogs rather than having those animals starve to death. Similarly, the societal expectation to be a mother at times overlooks the lived reality of what that might mean in a way that is profoundly unfair for women. As a Colombian woman the town might talk about you behind your back if you are a woman without children and wonder why or what is wrong with you, as happens to Damaris, but on the other hand if you *do* have a child, you can also become an economic burden on the society or state when you and your child begin to need services and support.

It is ironic that Rogelio, someone who regularly hurts animals, does not lay a hand on Chirli while Damaris, the dog's adopted 'mother,' is the one who ends up perpetuating an act of maternal violence. The irony of this serves to further demonstrate just how oppressive motherhood ideals are. They are so oppressive that Damaris will make the journey from dog

mother to dog murderer. So how does this happen? How does Damaris's character arc shift from doting dog mother to devastated dog murderer? There is a progression of changes in Damaris's behavior toward the dog that are important to delve into. At the beginning of the novel, Damaris is incredibly hands-on with the dog, cleaning her, feeding her and comforting her when storms pass through. To Rogelio's annoyance, Damaris brings the puppy inside their house, which Rogelio thinks is a line that should not be crossed. But as the novel progresses and Damaris's circumstances change (she and Rogelio end up moving to a different living situation because Damaris becomes the caretaker and cleaner of the vacation home of Nicolasito's family), she realizes Rogelio was right. She should not allow Chirli to become accustomed to going indoors with her because the dog could destroy something valuable. From that point on she does not let Chirli inside, but neither does she banish the dog to the space outside and under the house designated for the other three dogs. Instead, Damaris makes a special space in a small enclosed kiosk on the property for Chirli where she will be protected from the rain and from Rogelio's other three dogs.

And then, there are a series of progressive episodes that occur, of misbehaviors of Chirli's that irritate and frustrate Damaris. One of them is when, after Damaris gives the dog a bath, Chirli destroys a couple of Damaris's bras, socks and underwear, which Damaris thinks is the dog acting out for being bathed, an activity the dog loathes. Another time Chirli is running around with the three other dogs when they all take off into the jungle. The other dogs return at some point, but Chirli stays away for thirty-three days. When Chirli finally returns, Damaris is not angry so much as worried sick and then beside herself with relief to see the dog again. The dog is emaciated, with cuts and covered in ticks, but she is otherwise alright. Damaris carefully washes Chirli, disinfects her paws, cleans her cuts, removes all of the ticks and gives her a

healthy serving of food, all of which are loving gestures that articulate the depth of her love for the animal. And yet, the next time she leaves the dog alone on the enclosed back patio of the house so that she can go and clean the vacation home that she is the caretaker of, when she returns Chirli is gone.

When the dog returns this time the overwhelming emotion that takes hold of Damaris when she sees Chirli is not fear for the dog's safety or concern for its well-being but rather anger. Damaris is furious that this time Chirli took off completely on her own without the instigation of the other three dogs. She is irate that Chirli made her worry so much and made her run around screaming the dog's name into the depths of the night trying to call her back home. And this time, we see Damaris, for the first time, dole out a punishment to Chirli - calling her, "*perra mala!*" (69), bad dog, and sending the dog to bed without feeding her dinner. The next day Chirli is docile and stays right by Damaris's side, leading Damaris to forgive the dog, but for the first time in the text, Damaris puts a makeshift leash on the dog. The leash distresses Chirli. The dog pulls against it, but when she does, Damaris tries to calm the dog and in a soft voice tells her,

...todo lo que esperaba de ella: que no se fuera nunca más, que volviera a ser una perra obediente, que recordara el hambre y los horrores de los treinta y tres días que estuvo perdida en el monte, que no fuera bruta y aprendiera de esa experiencia," (70)

...All that she [Damaris] expected of her [the dog]: that she never again leave, that she return to being an obedient dog, that she remember the hunger and horrors of those thirty-three days that she was lost in the mountains, that she not be stupid and learn from this experience.

The control Damaris tries to impose on the dog is clear: she expects a domesticated, obedient and dependent dog. This kind of domestication, control and, indeed, ownership is very much reminiscent of colonial ideas of control over nature and Western ideas of 'owning' domesticated and leashed dogs. Typically in the Caribbean region, as Boisseron notes, street dogs are 'liminal' animals with more liberatory ways of being and with adaptive characteristics. Boisseron describes human-dog relationships in the Caribbean in this way:

In a Creole context, the animal and human species share a commensal relationship where animals obtain food or other benefits from humans with no strings attached. The Creole human subject lets the Creole animal benefit from living within human communities without expecting to domesticate the animal and to get personal satisfaction from this domestication. Like the *callejero*, the Creole dog does not need to work for humans or be a companion to humans,” (106).

This is not the relationship Damaris has with Chirli, nor is it exactly the relationship Rogelio has with his three dogs. And this is, I argue, where motherhood for Damaris morphs into a claustrophobic relationship of ownership, one that moves away from the commensal relationship Boisseron describes in which neither humans nor animals own another but, rather, benefit from each other without the need for human exceptionalism, or human dominance or, in other words, without the need for Damaris to leash the dog who so clearly wants to roam. Not even a leash, however, can keep Chirli from escaping and roaming for a third time, and this time, when she comes back, the dog is pregnant.

This, for Damaris, is a devastating blow. To see her dog disobedient and careless, in her eyes, and then pregnant on top of it all, is very hard for Damaris to swallow. She cannot even look at the dog. When Chirli gives birth, Damaris does nothing to assist the dog in the birth; it is as if Damaris does not care. But perhaps the underlying feeling here for Damaris is a bitter enviousness toward her dog that can be a mother so easily when she (Damaris) cannot. Perhaps that is what is going on when, after Chirli gives birth, Damaris comes in to see the squirming newborn pups, picking them up one-by-one, nuzzling them against her chest and smelling their brand new milk smell. There is a jealousy in this act, but also a deep sadness - this is a maternal ritual that she will only ever be able to do second-hand, with the puppies of her dog, never with a child of her own.

But the final straw, it seems, is that Damaris feels that Chirli turns out to be,

“...una pésima madre. La segunda noche se comió a uno de los cachorros y los días que siguieron dejaba abandonados a los tres que le quedaron para asolearse en el andén de la piscina o echarse en el lavadero, donde siempre estaba fresco, o debajo de algunas de las casas con otros perros, en cualquier lado con tal de no estar cerca de ellos,” (77)

...a terrible mother. The second night she ate one of her puppies and in the days following she abandoned the three remaining ones to sunbathe on the platform of the pool or to throw herself in the laundry room, where it was always cool, or under some of the houses with the other dogs, or whatever other place away from them.

It seems very difficult for Damaris to understand why Chirli would behave in this way toward her puppies. Showing this little interest in being a mother or in the puppies, for Damaris, makes Chirli a bad mother in a way that projects socially constructed human ideas of what motherhood is onto the dog. What Damaris does not consider is the idea that there is no “natural” state of mothering, that even when Chirli has a litter of puppies and becomes a mother, there is no flip that switches turning her into a nurturing caretaker. Chirli’s own nature, it seems, is to exhibit a kind of indifference to the puppies because, as the novel describes over and over again, nature is not always nurturing, but uncontrollable and indifferent.

One by one, Damaris tries to rehome the remaining puppies, which is difficult because few want to take on the responsibility of feeding an extra mouth, much less the risk of taking in a female dog who might come home with its own set of mouths to feed. She finally succeeds in giving the puppies away, including a female puppy whom she promises to a woman named Ximena. But before Ximena comes back to pick the puppy up, another woman comes inquiring about the puppy and Damaris ends up giving the puppy to that woman because she is afraid Ximena will not show up to pick up the puppy. When Ximena shows up and the puppy has already been given away, she asks about Chirli and whether she might be able to adopt Chirli from Damaris. After some thinking, Damaris agrees because, as she tells Ximena, “...usted la quiere mas que yo,” (88) you love her more than I do.

The trouble is that Ximena does not keep a close eye on Chirli and the dog escapes and wanders back to Damaris’s place. There is a kind of frustration, aching sadness and anger that is building in Damaris at this point. It devastates her to give Chirli to Ximena, but it also eats at her

to keep Chirli knowing the dog will surely just escape and likely come home pregnant again. She feels betrayed by the dog, somehow. She clearly wanted a dog who might be a stand-in for the daughter she never had, but instead she got an animal governed by its own nature, its own species-centric patterns and interactions. When Chirli escapes from Ximena's house and shows up at Damaris's place, Damaris is fed up. She throws water on the dog and yells for it to go back to Ximena. The dog obliges, but it is only a matter of time before she returns again to Damaris's place. At this point, dangerously close to some emotional breaking point, Damaris takes the dog and drags her back to Ximena's house and sternly tells Ximena, "*La perra es su responsabilidad...Amárrela, enciérrela, mantenga la puerta cerrada. Haga lo que tenga que hacer, pero no la deje escapar,*" (94) the dog is your responsibility, tie her up, enclose her, keep the door locked. Do what you have to do, but don't let her escape. Again, there is the colonial call to domesticate and own the dog - to keep her in place.

Time passes. One day, Damaris has an urge to go to the house, the one she is a caretaker for, the vacation home that belongs to Nicolasito's family. Once there, she feels the need to deep clean it, and she does. It is worth pausing here to articulate how Damaris came to be the caretaker of this house. It used to a job that belonged to Josué, one of the only characters in the novel with a relationship to his dogs that is perhaps the most 'commensal' in the way Boisseron describes, that is to say, he gives his dogs care and affection without exacting a sense of domination and control over them. In a theme that picks up on the random violence interspersed throughout the novel, one day, Damaris and the other villagers hear a gunshot and when they go to investigate they are led to the body of Josué by turkey buzzards picking at his corpse. His death, like many others in the novel (Damaris's mother and the dog carcass on the beach to name two examples), is never explained. With no one to take care of the vacation home, Damaris calls

Nicolasito's father, Luis Alfredo, to tell him that Josué has died. It is a difficult phone call for Damaris to make because she has not spoken to Nicolasito's family since the little boy died, many years ago when she was just a child. When she calls, Luis Alfredo (Nicolasito's father) asks her,

Ya tenés treinta y tres años, no? Se hizo otro silencio terrible y luego Damaris habló como disculpándose: - Si, señor," (38).

You are thirty-three years old, no? There was another terrible silence and then Damaris said in an almost apologetic manner, "Yes sir."

Notice how the number thirty-three shows up again here. It is, in fact, a number that recurs in the novel. It is the age of Damaris as she is calling Luis Alfredo to inform him that Josué has passed away. Thirty-three is the number of days Chirli goes missing when she leaves Damaris for the first time. It is also the number of days that Nicolasito's corpse is missing in the ocean before it is found after the accident with the rogue wave. Thirty-three is a significant number, especially as it relates to Catholicism, as I will explore further on in this chapter. For now, what is notable is that during this conversation between Damaris and Luis Alfredo, Damaris volunteers to caretake for the house in place of Josué and this is how she comes to be in that role.

Part of the reason for agreeing to do this is undoubtedly a terrible sense of guilt she is never quite able to shake over what happened to Nicolasito, a guilt that was fomented by the way her uncle punished her and put the entirety of the blame and responsibility for Nicolasito's death squarely on her seven-year old shoulders. And this guilt returns to her at the end of the novel when she feels the urge, after reminiscing on memories of Nicolasito, to deep clean the house. It is a sense of trying to scrub away her guilt and shame or work off some sort of debt to the family that can never be repaid.

This guilt becomes more and more palpable for Damaris as she is in the house. She has just finished cleaning and thinking about Nicolasito - happy memories at first but the memories

that lead right up to the bluff, the crashing wave and the absence of the little boy who had been her friend. “*Damaris volvió a sentir el peso de la culpa como si no hubiera pasado el tiempo,*” (99) Damaris felt again the weight of her guilt as if no time had passed, the text states. It is unsurprising then, that with this guilt heavy in her heart, the next day when she finds that Chirli has returned and destroyed Nicolasito’s curtains, the ones in his bedroom that his family had left up after his death, Damaris’s emotional levee breaks. Of note is the fact that these curtains are themed with images from *The Jungle Book*, the classic story of a boy raised by friendly jungle animals. This is, of course, in stark contrast to the bleak reality of the novel in which the jungle is not friendly and the animals are independent and indifferent. Unlike in the curtain images from *The Jungle Book*, nature for Damaris is not something that is accessible, knowable, available and controllable. Everything that has happened in *La Perra* up until this point evokes a sense of total helplessness related to nature. Damaris has no control over anything, let alone any sense of nature. She has no control over her body’s ability to become pregnant, she has no control over her dog’s actions and she has no control over the wave that sweeps Nicolasito away.

After Chirli destroys the curtains, Damaris sees that the dog is pregnant again. This is when she snaps. In fury and despair and blind rage she ties a noose in a rope, throws it around the dog’s neck and pulls and pulls and pulls. The events afterward are a kind of daze for her. She is shocked. Stunned. She sees the dog’s still carcass in front of her. It is wet with urine. The novel ends with Ximena coming up the pathway to Damaris’s house to ask where her dog Chirli is, the one that Damaris has just killed. The final paragraphs of the novel show Damaris numb, lost in a haze of dark thoughts, knowing acutely that she has done something horrible, and that this time there is no amount of cleaning or caretaking that can atone for her actions. She thinks,

finally, (and these are the last words of the novel) that the only thing left for her to do is to walk away, far past,

“...los lugares que había recorrido con Rogelio y los que no habían llegado a conocer, para perderse como la perra y el niño de las cortinas de Nicolasito, allá donde la selva era más terrible” (108)

the places that she had journeyed with Rogelio and those they had not yet discovered, in order to get lost like the dog and the boy of Nicolasito's curtains, out there where the jungle was more terrible.

Motherhood and Violence

The maternal violence of this act that concludes the novel is hard-hitting and horrifying. Yet, the theme of motherhood and violence is ever present in the narrative, building and ratcheting up, culminating in the novel's fatal conclusion. Violence and motherhood, in fact, are entangled themes that reverberate not just in this novel but through the Colombian artistic expressions of many different contemporary Colombian women artists' works. Contemporary Colombian filmmaker Mariana Saffon, for example, in her award winning recent short film “Entre Tu Y Milagros,” expresses a similar connection between motherhood and violence. The film is a coming-of-age story of a teenager named Milagros trying to find her way and reconnect to a mother who is more and more immersed in her own world. In one particularly impactful scene, Milagros stumbles across a dead body washed up in a river, something she thinks about as she negotiates her complicated relationship with her mother. About this, Saffon stated, “...all the films in Colombia are intrinsically traversed by violence because it is what we know.³³” Saffon is, undoubtedly, referring to the decades of internal conflict that Colombia has suffered with widespread violence between government, military, paramilitary forces and narco groups.

One of the most apparent enactments of motherhood and violence in the novel is the many instances of mother - child separations. One of the most important and foundational

³³ From the article, “Exploring Privilege in a Colombian Coming-of-Age Film,” by Andre DenHoed in *The New Yorker*, September 8th, 2021
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/screening-room/exploring-privilege-in-a-colombian-coming-of-age-film>

relationships we can have is with a mother figure, and this is one of the first relationships of Damaris's that is severed. In the text we learn that:

...el hombre que preño a su mamá, un soldado que había prestado el servicio militar en la zona, la abandonó cuando estaba embarazada y ella, para poder sostener a su hija, tuvo que irse a trabajar a una casa de familia en Buenaventura. Mandaba plata cada vez que podía y venía a pasar las Navidades, la Semana Santa y algún fin de semana largo (29).

...the man who impregnated her mother, a soldier that had been conscripted to military service in the area, abandoned her when she was pregnant and, in order to provide for her daughter, she had to go work in the house of a family in Buenaventura. She sent home money as often as she could and came home to spend Christmas, the Holy Week and some long weekends.

In this way, Damaris has a mother but also does not have her, not all the time anyway, because the material realities of having a child as a single mother in el Chocó means that her mother has to leave her with her Tía Gilma and Tío Eliecer in order to work in nearby Buenaventura. Adding to the subtle undertones of violence in the narrative is the fact that Damaris's own father was a soldier stationed in the area who quickly abandoned the family. The absent father figure, a military man, is a reminder of the undercurrent of violence that undergirds the narrative and a notable example of how, right from the beginning, Damaris's relationship with her own mother is fractured.

And then, the novel tells us that, just shy of her 15th birthday, which signals a very important event in a Colombian girl's life called the Quinceañera,³⁴ Damaris's mother is suddenly and quite randomly killed by a stray bullet.

...a los pocos meses, en las celebraciones de diciembre, una bala perdida hirió en el pecho a la mamá de Damaris. En el puesto de salud del pueblo no pudieron hacer nada por ella y la llevaron de urgencia en un bote a Buenaventura, pero para cuando llegaron al hospital ella ya había muerto. Damaris, que estaba a punto de cumplir quince años, canceló su fiesta. Le había estado planeando con su mamá y ahora solo quería que la dejaran llorar tranquila en el cuarto que compartía con Luzmila. (35)

³⁴ The Quinceañera is a tradition across the Americas consisting of a party thrown for a girl on her 15th birthday to mark her transition from girlhood to adulthood. In Colombia this is typically a formal event with the young girl dressed up in a ballgown, jewelry and a crown. See French photographer Delphine Blast's award-winning photo series "Quinceañera in Bogotá" for poignant portraits of Colombian girls celebrating their Quinceañera.

...a few months later, during the festivities of December, a stray bullet wounded Damaris's mother in the chest. At the village health clinic they were not able to do anything for her and they took her urgently by boat to Buenaventura, but when they arrived at the hospital she had already died. Damaris, who was about to turn fifteen, canceled her party. She had been planning it with her mother and now she only wanted everyone to let her cry in peace in her room that she shared with Luzmila.

It is a devastating blow for Damaris to permanently lose her mother, but the way in which she loses her (a random act of violence that gets no further explanation) and the timing of it (just before Damaris's Quinceañera, which is supposed to signal her transition from girlhood to womanhood) - all of this sets the tone for what motherhood is in this context. Motherhood is wrapped up in violence and loss, and a kind of violence that is so pervasive that, for example, when Damaris's mother is shot for an unknown reason, no one bothers to find out what happened - the violence is almost taken for granted. Motherhood in this context is about fractured mother-daughter relationships and having to grapple with what it means to be a woman and to ponder motherhood for oneself all on one's own, without the pivotal guidance of one's own mother.

After Damaris's mother is killed, Damaris goes to live with her Tía Gilma and Tío Eliecer and is, essentially, raised by them. Her aunt is kind enough to her, but her uncle is more strict and traditional, at one point administering a cruel series of beatings to Damaris to punish her for Nicolasito's death. Although Damaris has a cousin, Luzmila, whom she describes as having been like a sister to her when they were growing up, theirs is a strained relationship as adults, which is fueled, in part, by Damaris's jealousy at her cousin's ability to have children and a family.

Nature is Barren

Despite, or perhaps because of her damaged relationship with her own mother, Damaris longs to be a mother. This is the central axis around which the plot turns. The text indicates that at the young age of 18, Damaris meets Rogelio, described as, "...un negro grande y musculoso,

con cara de estar enojado todo el tiempo,” (15), a big, muscular Black man with a face that looked angry all of the time. Rogelio is a character that is surprising in his complexities. He is a big, strong fisherman with a temper who likes to beat his dogs, at times, and to argue with Damaris. But he is also a husband who, when Damaris is devastated at not being able to have a child, sympathizes and grieves with her, vowing to do everything he can to increase their chances of conception, including going to a *curandera*, or a healer for help. When they first get together at 18, Damaris and Rogelio both eagerly want to have children but, as the text indicates, “*Damaris no había podido tener hijos,*” (19) Damaris could not have children. After two years, people begin to whisper, “*Para cuando los bebés? Qui/hubo que se están demorando?*” (19). When are the babies coming? Why is it taking so long? And Damaris’s desperation grows.

As time passes and still no children arrive, Damaris decides to try gathering herbs from the mountains, la María y la Espiritu Santo, that are supposedly good for making herbal potions that increase fertility. In one particular moment in the text, not knowing what she’s been getting up to and wondering if she’s getting involved in “*brujería,*” witchcraft, Rogelio follows her to a site where she’s been gathering herbs and, when he asks her what is going on she explains. But instead of getting upset with her, we see an empathetic side to Rogelio. “*Yo soy tu marido...vos no estás sola en esto,*” (20) I am your husband...you are not alone in this, he tells her. And they pick herbs together.

For two more years they talk excitedly about having children, but the children just do not come. Damaris goes to another extreme measure to try to get pregnant: she sees a local *curandera*, a half Black, half Indigenous local healer woman with a man’s name: Santos. Santos gives Damaris potions to drink, and when that does not work, she claims that the problem is Rogelio and she gives him potions to consume as well. Nothing works. Increasingly exasperated,

Damaris goes to a *jaibaná*, a different spiritual healer who claims to be able to help Damaris in exchange for a large sum of money that is almost a full year's pay for her. After the sum is paid, the *jaibaná* prepares a ritual for Damaris that will be a kind of spiritual event, an operation without opening any part of Damaris up. The ceremony takes place at night in a hut outside of town in the middle of a dry hill where ferns grow abundantly. The *jaibaná* offers Damaris a dark, bitter liquid to drink and then tells her to lie on the floor. Damaris does so and promptly sees a cloud of gnats descend on her and then, some time later, she thinks she hears an owl getting closer and closer. But then...nothing. She wakes up. The days pass. Still nothing. Damaris never becomes pregnant. Again, Quintana is not here to romanticize nature or spiritual cures of any kind. The special remedies prepared by both the *curandera* and the *jaibaná* simply do not work. Nature is nature and nature will do what it will do.

Crucial to an understanding of motherhood in the novel is understanding why Damaris longs to have a child and what the consequences of that longing are. There are several moments in the novel, first of all, that hint at motherhood as being an expectation of womanhood that Damaris is so fervently trying to live up to. After everything she has been through and still not being able to conceive, Damaris feels, “...*derrotada e inutile, una verguenza como mujer, una piltrafa de la naturaleza*,” (24), defeated and useless, shame as a woman, a freak of nature. Notice how Damaris's inability to have a child means that her very womanhood is in question - she is a “freak” of nature.

Scholar Richard Angelo Leonardo-Loayza, in an article analyzing motherhood in *La Perra* titled, “Maternidades Proscritas, Mandatos Sociales y Violencia en la Novela *La Perra*, de Pilar Quintana,” notices this as well in an analysis of a moment in the novel when Rogelio announces he will no longer see the *curandera* because he is frustrated that the remedies do not

seem to be working. Damaris takes Rogelio's intent to stop seeing Santos as a personal affront, "*Damaris lo tomó como un ataque en contra de ella y le dejó,*" Damaris took it as a personal attack against her and left him there. Leonardo-Loayza writes:

Para ella es una afrenta personal, ya que el hecho de no tener hijos pone en duda su femineidad. En otras palabras, no poder tener hijos la define como menos mujer que aquellas que sí pueden procrear. La maternidad es una condición que reafirma la femineidad de las mujeres, que las completa. No alcanzar dicho estado sugiere un defecto en su autoestima. (157)

For her it is a personal affront, as the fact of not being able to have children puts her femininity in question. In other words, not being able to have children defines her as less of a woman than those that can procreate. Motherhood is a condition that reaffirms the femininity of women, that completes them. Not being able to reach that state suggests a flaw in her self-esteem.

Leonardo-Loayza suggests that Damaris takes Rogelio's gesture personally because giving up their attempts to get pregnant means that Damaris has to face her fear of not being able to be a woman to the fullest extent possible (the *mujer-madre* ideal I referred to earlier. To go further, though, what is ironic is that Damaris's very nature, that is, what is natural for her *is to be barren*. Try as she might, that seems to be her "natural state," but being barren seems to disqualify her from being a woman or at least a good woman because, again, in Colombia, "good" women are mothers.

In another part of the text, when Damaris is almost 40, the text explains of Damaris, "*Ahora estaba a punto de cumplir cuarenta, la edad en que las mujeres se secan, como le había oído decir una vez a su tío Eliecer,*" (25), now she was about to turn forty, the age when women dry up, as she had overheard her uncle Eliecer say one time. Again, there is this idea of a woman's usefulness and fulfillment in giving birth and being a mother on one hand, and a woman's body after the reproductive years as useless and worthless. Leonardo-Loayza also astutely notices a tendency for Damaris to see her barren, childless body not just as 'dried up' and useless but as masculine and ugly. At one point, Damaris looks at her hands and sees the grotesque, ugly hands of a man:

Se estuvo mirando las manos durante un rato. Las tenía inmensas, con los dedos anchos, las palmas curtidas y reseca y las líneas tan marcadas como grietas en la tierra. Eran manos de hombre, las manos de un obrero de construcción o un pescador capaz de jalar pescados gigantes. (58-59).

She stayed watching her hands for a bit. They were enormous, with wide fingers, hardened and dried palms with lines etched like cracks in the Earth. They were the hands of a man, the hands of a construction labourer or a fisherman capable of pulling giant fish.

In Leonardo-Loayza's reading of this description they affirm, "*En el fondo, esta representación que hace sobre sí misma es la ratificación de que no puede ser una madre, porque su cuerpo no es femenino, no está preparado para merecer la maternidad,*" (158) Ultimately, this description that she gives of herself is the confirmation that she is not able to be a mother because her body is not feminine, it is not prepared to be worthy of motherhood. However, I would also draw attention to the power in these descriptive terms - her hands are hardened and described as those of a man, yes, but they are also strong and capable like a labourer or fisherman. In other words, I agree with Leonardo-Loayza's reading that her barren body gets characterized as masculine but also as strong - there is power, too, in her childlessness, even if she cannot see or appreciate this power. In fact, the passage brings another author to mind, a major social justice thinker of the 19th century. Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman," speech delivered in 1851 in Ohio also asked a group of people to look at a woman who had been excluded from that category and to see her as one despite being Black. "Look at me! Look at my arm," she implored, "I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?" Interestingly, whereas Sojourner Truth was expanding existing, narrow ideas of what a woman was and pointing out the hypocrisy of believing that someone like her was somehow not a woman, Damaris seems to be struggling with that narrow definition of woman because the strength of her body seems surprising to her, foreign and alien.

Nature is Hostile

Nature is throughout the text a hostile entity, and nowhere is this better articulated than the event when Damaris's childhood friend Nicolasito is yanked into the water by a rogue wave where his body is lost for more than thirty days before it is found bloated and rotting.

Importantly, Nicolalisto is, in many ways, Damaris's opposite. He is a white boy whose wealthy city parents buy a property in the area in order to construct a modern, expensive vacation home. Damaris befriends Nicolasito when they are children, and thus begins the friendship of a curious pairing of opposites - a white city boy and a Black village girl who happen to share the same birthday, "*una fecha horrible para un cumpleaños: el primero de enero,*" (30) a horrible day for a birthday: the first of January. Although the text does not elaborate explicitly on why this date is so unfortunate, the first of January is an auspicious day as it marks the beginning of the year. To have a birthday on a day that perpetually marks the renewal of a cyclical period of time is strange in that birthdays mark the passage of time and signify aging while the first of January becomes a resetting of the clock. The first of January is also a Catholic feast day of the Virgin Mary in celebration of her status as the mother of Jesus Christ. Despite being born on a day that commemorates and venerates the maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as an adult, Damaris remains barren and unable to conceive.

As children, one day Damaris and Nicolasito are playing on the rocks when Nicolasito, wanting to feel the spray of the ocean on his face, decides to walk close to a treacherous spot where the waves threaten the bluff. The ever present danger emanating from the rough waves and deep jungle is something that Damaris intuitively knows, even as a child. She tries to warn him, "*...le explicó que era peligroso, le dijo que en ese lugar las penas eran resbalosas y el mar traicionero,*" (30). She explained to him that it was dangerous, she told him that the rocks were

slippery in this place, and the ocean treacherous, but he does not listen, “...*se paró sobre las penas y la ola que reventó en ese momento, una ola violenta se lo llevó,*” (30) Nicolasito stopped on the rocks and in that moment, a violent wave took him away. That terrible moment marks Damaris - this image of Nicolasito remains forever etched in her mind as: “*un niño blanco y alto frente al mar, a continuación el chorro blanco de la ola y luego nada, las peñas vacías sobre un mar verde que a lo lejos parecía tranquilo,*” (30-31) a tall, white boy standing face to the sea, followed by the white crest of the wave, and then nothing - empty rocks above a green sea, which looked calm in the distance. Alone, frightened, she walks back to tell the adults what happened, feeling the weight of the dense jungle pressing down on her. The text narrates her lonely walk this way, “*Damaris tuvo que devolverse sola por una selva que le pareció más cerrada y oscura que nunca,*” Damaris had to return alone through a forest that seemed more closed and dark than ever.

That nature is depicted as violent in the novel is without question. But the violence is interpersonal as well. We have seen that with the random acts of violence that appear in the novel: the bizarre death of the dog washed up on the beach at the novel’s opening, the stray bullet that kills Damaris’s mother, the mysterious death of Josué. Violence is also a part of Damaris’s childhood. When little Damaris finally makes it home after Nicolasito is carried off to his death by a rogue wave, she tells her tía Gilma what happened. But it is when her tío Eliécer finds out that Damaris knows she will be punished, and that his death will be blamed on her. What is worth noting here, too, is the irony of the fact that even though Damaris *told* Nicolasito not to stand on the bluffs so close to the water, she *told* him to be careful, he did it anyway. His recklessness is never mentioned, rather, Damaris is the one made to feel responsible for his decision. When she gets home, Tía Gilma’s advice to Damaris is to relax her muscles so that the

whippings will hurt less. Every evening, after coming home from a full day of searching in vain for Nicolasito's body, her uncle Eliécer returns to their small cabin and whips Damaris across her thighs until, "...*parecían la espalda de Cristo,*" (32) they looked like Christ's back.

The strong religious undertone in this scene overtly connects Damaris's wounds to those of Christ. The message here is one that is shaped by gender stereotypes, racial discrimination and class issues that culminate in the fact that Damaris, a poor Afro-Colombian coastal girl should have taken care of Nicolasito, the rich, white city boy whose family employs locals as caretakers of their vacation house. Gender and racial stereotypes play into this role carved out for her as she is expected to be Nicolasito's caretaker, something that is even reinforced in Nicolasito's name, the "ito" being a diminutive form in Spanish to signify physical smallness but also endearment and intimacy. For example, between a mother and a child, the child would have the diminutive added to their name so that Nicolas becomes Nicolasito. Thus, the maternal expectations put upon Damaris to nurture and to be a caretaker haunt her even at this young age when she is expected to have taken care of Nicolasito. Her uncle's beatings reinforce this idea that she should have protected Nicolasito, and her suffering equates her with maternal suffering that is such an important part of Catholic maternal figures such as la Virgen María.

Damaris is beaten by her Tío Eliécer with a switch from a Guyaba tree every day that he and others in the village are unable to locate and bring back Nicolasito's lifeless body. The text tells us that the first day he is missing she gets hit once, the second day twice, the third day three times and on that way until his body is finally found on the day that her uncle should have hit her thirty-four times. It takes thirty-three days to find Nicolasito's body, which renders Nicolasito almost as a Christ-like figure to the role Damaris is made to play, which is a maternal, Marian, mother-as-sufferer figure. Christ was crucified as an adult at thirty-three, or so the Bible tells us,

and his lifeless body, after three days' time, disappeared from the tomb it was enclosed in. Similarly, but with some significant reversals in their stories, Nicolasito's death happens as a child and is associated with the number thirty-three, and his body that had disappeared is returned by the ocean in all of its horrifying decay. The description of the corpse is the following

Estaba despellejado por la acción del salitre y el sol, comido por los peces en algunas partes hasta el hueso y, según dijo la gente que estuvo cerca, hediondo,” (32)

It was peeling from the effect of the salt and the sun, eaten by fish in some parts down to the bone and, according to people who were close by, reeking.

Again Quintana seems to take the idea of sacralized and inherited images descended from colonial and Catholic ideas of motherhood and nature and show, firstly, how damaging they are (it seems especially cruel to blame a young Damaris for Nicolasito's death and foist that care-giving and responsibility on her at such a young age), and secondly, how out-of-place they are in a world where nature is not nurturing or life-giving but wildly indifferent. The text notes that, upon seeing her son's putrid, rotting corpse, Nicolasito's mother Elvira³⁵ cradles him in her arms, *“levantándole un poco del suelo para abrazarlo y llenarlo de besos como si todavía fuera hermoso,”* (33) lifting him a little from the ground in order to embrace him and cover him in kisses as if he were still beautiful. Motherhood, for Elvira, is not about redemption, or life or nurturing, although she *is* the perfect Marian image of suffering in this description in her desire to nurture him even in his death. However, the message is clear in the attentive description of Nicolasito's returned and destroyed body: motherhood is also about death and, in the lived experiences of mothering on ground in this context on the Pacific coast of Colombia. Far below any kind of fairy-tale like Catholic heaven, in this small village a dead child does not rise or live on, but rather, he dies because motherhood can also be a horror.

Nature is Uncontrollable

³⁵ Interestingly, the name derives from the Latin for “white,” which may be another reference to the family's (including Nicolasito's) whiteness versus Damaris's Blackness.

Ultimately, this scene with Nicolasito reveals that nature is not just hostile but strange, monstrous and uncontrollable. Take, for example, the following passage when Damaris sets out to look for her missing dog in the jungle. She treks under thick jungle canopy and reflects on the contrast of light and dark:

No veía sino lo que alcanzaba a apuntar con la linterna, partes de cosas, de una hoja inmensa, del tallo de un árbol alfombrado en musgo, del ala de una inmensa polilla con muchos ojos que, sorprendida por la luz, salió volando y aleteo asustada en torno a su cabeza...(51)

All she saw was what the reach of the lantern indicated, parts of things, of an enormous leaf, of the trunk of a tree carpeted in moss, of the enormous wing of a moth with many eyes, surprised by the light, it flew and flapped its wings flying and circling over her head...

The play with dark and light, with what is seen and unseen creates varying sensations of both wonder and foreboding. Compellingly, Damaris is moving in the darkness of the jungle guided only by a lantern that illuminates strange pieces of the scenery around her and what she sees are parts of nature that are almost freakish: an enormous leaf, an enormous moth wing with eyes staring back at her. Damaris seems to be almost intruding on this strange nature scene, with her incomplete view of what is around her. And the moth, startled by the light and dancing over her head produces a feeling of anxiety. Whereas butterflies delight (Haitian-American author Edwidge Dantica, frequently deploys butterflies in her writing as symbols of delight and beauty and representations of migration), moths are nocturnal creatures of darkness that startle.

Throughout the novel, the jungle is a dangerous, foreboding place and nature is a violent, antagonistic force. In her FILBO talk, Pilar Quintana was asked about her compelling use of nature in the novel in a way that renders it almost as an additional character in the text. Quintana answered this question by telling the audience that she had spent nine years living in a very remote corner of the Pacific Coast in El Chocó herself, and nature there had made a big impression on her. It was variable, moody, constantly changing and it dictated what did or did not happen that day in the village. When the monsoon rains unleash themselves on the coast,

there is little to nothing that can be done. As she was writing the novel, she told us, the idea came to her to write a ‘woman versus nature’ kind of story, and in the novel it very much feels like Damaris is up against nature in many different senses - in cultural ideas of a woman’s ‘nature’ as bearing biological children, ideas of nature related to wanting to domesticate and mother a dog that is very much a liminal street dog and ideas of nature as powerful, destructive and indifferent to human influence.

Conclusion

One of the things that makes this novel so searing is the way it untangles intersecting and socially constructed expectations, stereotypes and ideals of motherhood in Colombia to reveal how damaging, crushing and, ultimately, violent they can be. In my reading of the novel, Quintana articulates that the expectations of “good” women is that they are mothers, and “good” mothers, in turn, are expected to be totally responsible for another human being without any sense of understanding of the economic and material realities and circumstances of motherhood in a place where random, uncontrollable violence is both part of the natural world *and* embedded in day-to-day life. These expectations of motherhood are thrust upon Damaris at a young age when, at seven years old, she is already made to feel a sense of maternal responsibility for Nicolasito, and the expectations follow her into her 40s when it becomes clear that she is barren and will never have children of her own, despite the fact that she longs to.

As she grapples with motherhood pressures and ideals, little by little, Damaris comes to understand that there is nothing natural or sacred about motherhood because motherhood, like nature, is constructed by forces she has no control over. Try as she might, she cannot become pregnant and no natural cures, herbs or consultations with witch doctors can make her pregnant. Try as she might, she cannot control nature - not the wave that sweeps Nicolasito away to his

death, nor the dog that she tries so hard to mother. The ocean is empty, wild and trash-filled. The jungle is claustrophobic, dark and immense. The body either conceives or is barren and there is very little one can do to control or alter this. The novel shows us the crushing, impossible responsibility of expecting women to be in control of this, or to be the bearers of an uncomplicated sense of nurturing. The idea that women and nature nurture unconditionally is a colonial one, and the result is a kind of claustrophobic violence done to women, one from which it is difficult to escape and the wounds of which fester deep within the psyche.

While it may not be immediately obvious that Quintana is using horror as a genre to explore these oppressive motherhood ideals, I see evidence for the novel as a horror story everywhere: in the text's random violence, the foreboding natural atmosphere and the rotting corpses, both human and animal, strewn across the pages. Of course, there is also horror in the violence that Damaris perpetrates against Chirli, her dog. Unlike some kinds of horror, there are no obvious monsters in *La Perra* - no zombies or werewolves, So, who is the monster, or as the title of the novel puts it, who is the bitch, the one who commits a monstrous act? While it may be easy to point the finger at Damaris, what Quintana reveals is not so much the horror of an individual act of maternal violence, but ultimately, the dystopian horror of a society, a state and cultural institutions, particularly Catholic Marianismo ideals, that make motherhood ideals so abstract, sacralized and unattainable that they become violent - they become about total responsibility and claustrophobic control.

Devastatingly, the real horror of the novel may be the fact that the only way Damaris *does* exert some form of agency in this narrative world is through the brutal killing of her dog. The agency is in the sense that amid all this nurturing that she is supposed to do, the boy she was supposed to have saved, the child she was supposed to have born, the one thing she *could* make

happen was to exert control over the dog's life. This is a deeply unsettling notion that I, as a reader, sat with at the text's conclusion. It is horrific to think of this act of maternal violence as both an act of agency and one of violence, and perhaps there is a third layer to this. Could the act not also have been a maternal act of mercy - love, even? As many know, euthanizing a dog is often an expression of love and care. The novel signals this when it indicates that in Damaris's village, dogs and cats are drowned to spare them from a life of hunger and neglect. The power in this novel is that it leans into the notion that the burdens of motherhood ideals make for complicated expressions of mothering, and when they are violent, what may be monstrous is not so much the mother figure, but the society that made her.

It is fitting to close with a poignant moment in the text that summarizes the ways in which the ideals of motherhood do violence. Close to 40 years old and childless, Damaris is with Luzmila, her cousin. The same girls who used to thumb through beauty magazines together as little girls are now middle aged and doing home beauty remedies. Luzmila is applying a hair straightener to Damaris's curls, which is noteworthy given that the women, as little girls, used to look through magazine pictures of Miss Colombia 1977 Shirley Saenz- a light-skinned Colombian beauty queen from Bogotá, and idolize her beauty. As middle aged women, while applying hair straightener to Damaris's hair, Luzmila marvels at Damaris's shiny, supple skin, telling Damaris, "*...en cambio mírame a mí...*" on the other hand, look at me, she says, implying that her skin is the opposite of Damaris's. But then she quickly offers this as an explanation: "*...claro, como no tuviste hijos,*" (25) of course, it is because you never had kids, she tells Damaris. This anecdote summarizes so much: that motherhood is a sacrifice, that it contributes to bodily degeneration, that it is a trade off between children and beauty and that it signifies maturity and reaching the apex of womanhood (*mujer-madre*) in a way that not becoming a

mother would not. It also underscores that the damage of these ideals of motherhood is real because, although she never says anything back to Luzmila, the text tells us that Damaris, “...le dolió hasta el hueso darse cuenta de que ella, y seguramente todo el mundo, daban su caso por perdido, y lo estaba, ella lo sabía, pero le costaba aceptarlo,” (25-26). For Damaris, the text narrates, it hurt to the bone finally realizing along with everyone else that she was a lost cause (in terms of having a child), and she was, but accepting that would cost her dearly, she realized. And it does.



Fig. 1

Source: de Narváez, Alonso, photograph taken in 2001.

This image is of Our Lady of the Chiquinquirá, a Marian figure who is the Patroness of Colombia. This is a tapestry; the image was painted on cotton by Spanish painter Alonso de Narváez in 1560. This image is open source under a Creative Commons license.



Fig. 2

Source: Rubinsky, Leah April 14th, 2022.

This image is of a roadside altar constructed for *La Virgen* that I saw while traveling in the countryside outside of Cali, Colombia in the spring of 2022.

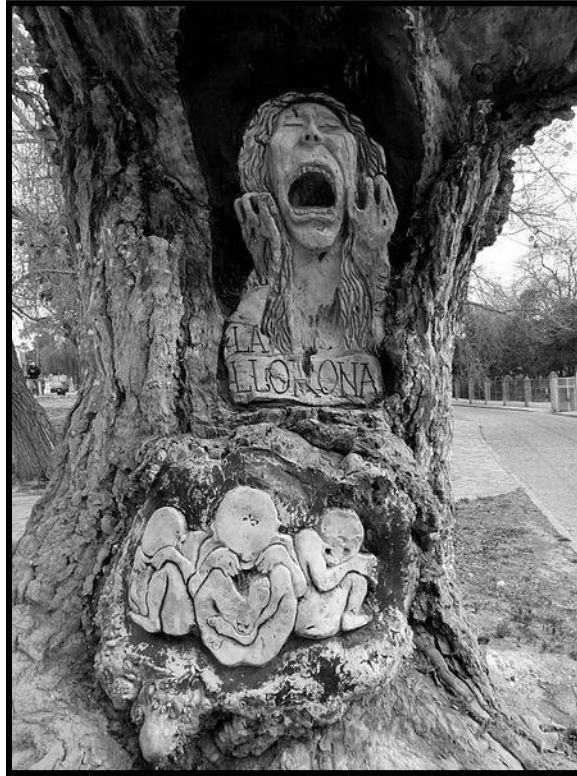


Fig. 3

Source: Salazar, Gabriel Perez. *Carved tree in Arteaga, Coahuila, with La Llorona (Weeping Lady) image*. 14 January, 2017. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_Llorona_arbol_tallado.jpg This image is open source under a Creative Commons license.



Fig. 4

Source: Rubinsky, Leah April 24th, 2022

This is Mariana Ruiz Johnson giving a lecture at the FILBO entitled “Mamá es Tantas Cosas,” or mother is so many things. She is an Argentine children’s book author, illustrator and mother whose books for children explore nontraditional kinds of mothers, mother-child relationships and children’s stories such as children’s books that depict mothers as their own fully formed people with lives independent of their children and mothers who are not perfect and lose their cool in front of their kids.



Fig. 5

Source: Rubinsky, Leah April 24th, 2022

This is Pilar Quintana giving a public talk at the FILBO in Bogotá, Colombia at a session convened to honor her literary career thus far.



Fig. 6

Source: Rubinsky, Leah May 7th, 2022.

This photograph, which I took while in Cartagena, Colombia, depicts a statue of the Virgin Mary and child. The statue sits behind the gates of an entrance to a local school. Cartagena, a port city originally founded as a Spanish colonial outpost in the 16th century, has one of the highest Afro-Colombian populations in the country, and yet it is common to see images of the Virgin Mary such as this, with light skin.



Fig. 7

Source: Rubinsky, Leah Viernes Santo / Good Friday April 15th, 2022

I took this photo in Cartagena during La Semana Santa, or Holy Week and specifically on Viernes Santo or Good Friday. The photo captures the traditional procession that happens annually on this day in which a group of women carry a figure of the Virgin Mary toward the church for Mass where they will meet another procession of community members rolling a large, life-sized figure of Christ in a crown of thorns dragging a cross on the way to his crucifixion. Again, it is noteworthy here the Virgin Mary is depicted as a light-skinned woman.



Fig. 8

Source: Rubinsky, Leah April 29th, 2022

Here is a rare example of a depiction of the Black Virgin Mary in Cartagena, one of the only ones I stumbled across during my time there. This image in tile on the side of an old, colonial building in the ciudad antigua, or old city of Cartagena.



Fig. 9

Source: Rubinsky, Leah April 28th, 2022

On this particular evening in Cartagena, Colombia there was a downpour of late afternoon and early evening rain. When the Santuario de San Pedro Claver (a 16th century Catholic Church) opened its doors for evening mass, this street dog wandered inside seeking shelter from the storm. Mass continued as normal.

Chapter 2: “Bad Mothering” and the Afterlives of Colonialism in Edwidge

Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*

Introduction: Haiti, Dangerous for Mothers, Babies

In an article for ABC News published January 17th, 2010, journalists Dan Childs and Joanna Schaffhausen report on a story about a Haitian woman giving birth in the terrible aftermath of the magnitude seven earthquake that struck Haiti just five days prior. Oddly, the Haitian mother’s experiences are not the focus of the story - her name is not even mentioned in the reporting. Rather, the article centers on ABC News Senior Health and Medical Editor Dr. Richard Besser’s experiences and how harrowing it was for *him* to deliver her baby. The article begins with the tense moment when Dr. Besser, who was presumably in Haiti as part of relief efforts, “...found himself faced with a woman in labor.” The situation was dire, the article makes clear. The baby was in a transverse position (back or shoulders toward the cervix instead of its head) and there was a suspicion that the pregnant woman might be suffering from an infection, making this a high risk delivery. Heightening the suspense, the article notes that at 11:26 AM Dr. Besser tried to get in touch with some OBGYN colleagues in the US to consult with over this “problematic” case. Dr. Besser was so nervous during this that, as he recalls, “my fingers were kind of trembling on the BlackBerry.”

Despite a difficult C-section procedure, the article ends with Dr. Besser’s successful (read: heroic) efforts to deliver the baby, a little girl who, the doctor states, would almost certainly have died (along with her mother) had the baby been born at home (that is, without his interventions, supplies and medicines). Woven into this article detailing the delivery in the chaos of post-quake Haiti are statistics about maternal morbidity under the subheading “Haiti

Dangerous for Mothers, Babies.” Readers learn that in Haiti 57 out of every 1,000 children die before their first birthday whereas in the U.S. that number is only seven out of every 1,000 children. They further learn that according to a 2005 UNICEF report, the maternal mortality rate in Haiti was 670 deaths per 100,000, “...a rate that puts it closer to Sub-Saharan Africa than neighbors in the Americas.”

This news article speaks volumes about the ways in which Haiti is understood, reported about and represented in U.S. news media. What is glaringly obvious is that stereotypes that circulate in the U.S. news continue to paint Haiti as a perpetually impoverished, backwards nation³⁶ with interchangeable poor people in desperate need of ‘saving.’ To this last point about savior narratives in the news, Edwidge Danticat, too, noticed that the foreign news coverage of the earthquake tended to focus on stories of rescues.

Perhaps because the images of the helplessly trapped were so hard to take, a lot of the television news coverage quickly shifted to foreign-led professional rescues. The rescues provided a dramatic arc for viewers, a resolution that wasn’t death. Among the stories that might have been too devastating to watch are some that my family members told me of hundreds of people who individually or in small groups kept vigil near a pile of rubble and spoke to their trapped loved ones as they slipped away, dying so close yet beyond their reach (48)

In this way, the news coverage hyper-focused on ‘savior’ narratives in which foreign aid workers rescued trapped Haitians. This narrative centers the West at the risk of obscuring the experiences of Haitians themselves: what they were witnessing and what they were living (and dying) through. Hillary Brown finds, in her insightful analysis of U.S. media coverage of the earthquake, that in particular, four themes emerged across the news articles she examined: 1) the West as ‘benevolent’ in terms of humanitarian aid efforts 2) a narrow focus on violence that included looting 3) assigning blame for the death toll of the earthquake on Haiti’s poor

³⁶ Let us not forget that in 2016, Haiti made the short list of President Trump’s “shithole” countries along with El Salvador and all of the nations that make up the continent of Africa. According to sources cited in an NBC news article reporting on the comments, it was a conversation about Haiti and Haitian immigration, specifically, that spurred these remarks, with President Trump stating, “Why do we need more Haitians? Take them out.”

infrastructure 4) an overemphasis on Haiti's condition of poverty relative to neighboring countries in the Americas. In short, the picture the U.S. media paints of Haiti is a country imploding on itself³⁷. As Gina Athena Ulysse writes in her work *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives*, on top of the trauma of surviving the earthquake and mourning those who did not, Haitians and Haitian-Americans also had to endure painful, one-sided, offensive stereotypes of their country in the news. As she puts it, "cue the 'Haiti is the poorest nation in the world,'" commentary³⁸.

These stereotypes swirl in the ABC news article I opened this chapter with, from the Dr. Bessar-as-savior figure to the statistics announcing how dangerous it is to be a mother (or a child) in Haiti. The racial undertones and sense of U.S. and /or white superiority could not be more apparent. But on another level, there is also a sense of the inadequacy of the statistics to meaningfully describe the situation in Haiti because readers are left with numbers, rather than stories. Susan Smallwood, for example, has argued that statistics are wildly insufficient when it comes to describing the full picture and to honoring the complicated situations that result in death. For Smallwood, it is vital to turn to "another window that helps us understand the limitations of quantitative analysis." What is most mind blowing, however, is how quickly the pregnant Haitian woman who is the true center of the story, who just survived a horrific earthquake and traumatic birth, whose name I wish I could type here, how quickly she is erased

³⁷ Interestingly, in an essay on American news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, Edwidge Danticat points out the hypocrisy of U.S. journalists who were baffled at chaotic scenes of poverty, poor infrastructure and fatalities in the aftermath of the hurricane. She cites Soledad O'Brien, an American journalist, who remarked about the footage from Katrina, "...if you turned the sound down on your television, if you didn't know where you were, you might think it was Haiti or maybe one of those African countries..." (109). Danticat's insightful response to this was to, "wonder why the so-called developed world needs so desperately to distance itself from us, especially at times when an unimaginable disaster shows exactly how much alike we are," (110).

³⁸ She expands in a later section of the book that even on the one year anniversary of the earthquake, Haiti was still being reduced to stereotypes in the news media. She writes, "As reporting of the one-year anniversary of the earthquake that devastated our birth country continues to fill the airwaves, many of us, at home and abroad, cringe as television screens and newspapers are satiated with standard-formula media representations of Haiti. Others, like myself and die hard Haitiphiles, have been preparing for the bombardment of "the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere" taglines that accompany every segment." (59)

and her story co-opted to become a tale of heroism centered on the white, western doctor.

Consuming stories about Haiti from the American news media means engaging with a portrayal of Haiti as little more than a failed state, a nation of chaotic, political instability and pervasive poverty battered by one natural disaster after the other. It also means learning more about the Dr. Bessars of the world. I am more interested, though, in the Haitian mother's story. What is her name? Where did she come from? How is she coping? What has become of her? From where does she get her resilience? What is mothering like for her? What does she think of American journalists and aid workers in the country? What was her experience giving birth in the aftermath of the quake? What is her day-to-day life like? What are her hopes for the future? In the wake of the earthquake, there was a narrative published that actually attended to questions like these. In other words, it did what so much of the reporting on Haiti failed to do: it humanized the lives of Haitians, contextualizing their struggles while also celebrating moments of great, creative resilience and beauty. I am referring not to a piece of journalism, but rather to fiction: Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's luminous novel *Claire of the Sea Light* published in 2013, just three years after the earthquake hit.

Edwidge Danticat, like most Haitian and Haitian-Americans, was personally impacted by the 2010 earthquake. As is common when a tragedy strikes, she remembers exactly where she was when she first heard the news. She writes:

I was in a supermarket in Miami's Little Haiti neighborhood with my two daughters on the afternoon of January 12th, 2010, when my cell phone started ringing. 'There's been an earthquake in Haiti,' a family member told me. 'They're saying it's 7.0 and catastrophic. (45)

In a panic her thoughts quickly turned to her family members still in Haiti, many of whom lived in Léogâne, the epicenter of the quake³⁹. In the months and years following the earthquake, she

³⁹ She later learned that some of her family did die in the quake - one of them was a cousin named Maxo who she writes about in chapter 12 of *Create Dangerously*.

would continue to write about the profound and lasting effects of the disaster, at times from a personal perspective and at other times venturing to humbly be one voice (of many) speaking for Haitians collectively. She explains her reason for continuing to write about the tragedy in this way:

...I hoped, [to add] one more voice to a chorus of bereavement and...to explain what so many of us were feeling, which was a deep and paralyzing sense of loss. Maybe that was my purpose then, as an immigrant and a writer - to be an echo chamber, gathering and then replaying voices from both the distant and the local devastation," (158-159).

Danticat *is* an echo chamber for Haitian voices not only in her nonfiction writing, but also across her short stories and novels, which offer a window into the complexity of Haitian life both in Haiti and the diaspora. Her storytelling centers Haitian voices and experiences, offering counternarratives to tired, flat stereotypes served up in the news. One of those stereotypes (with roots in colonial and slave histories) targets acts of mothering in Haiti that are misinterpreted, misread or too easily dismissed as “bad” mothering. For example, Gina Athena Ulysse tells the story of watching news coverage in the aftermath of the earthquake and witnessing a particular exchange between a British journalist and CNN anchor Anderson Cooper. The British journalist reports an encounter he had had with a Haitian mother who had lost a child in the earthquake. The woman was in the process of getting on a bus to leave Port-au-Prince. When the British journalist asked what she had done with the recovered body of her dead child, her response was “*jete*,” which Ulysse translates as “to throw out.” Ulysse notices the British journalist’s horror at the Haitian mother’s having “thrown out” her child’s dead body. He cannot understand this act and misreads (or judges) it as an act of “bad” mothering⁴⁰. But, as Ulysse underlines, what is missing is attention to context - to the words

⁴⁰ Ulysse also cites the British journalist’s exasperation at the survivors’ lack of emotion. “Why don’t you people cry?” he says about Haitian survivors in his exchange with Anderson Cooper (11). Interestingly, in her own writing on the earthquake, Danticat also notices the lack of outward expressions of anguish on the part of survivors, but her response is more compassionate. “Everyone sounded eerily calm on the phone. No one was screaming. No one was

(the adverbs, Ulysse specifies) before and after this mother said the word ‘jete,’ to an understanding of how trauma works, to engagement with and compassion for the unique ways in which this woman may be suffering, to what survival and resilience might mean to her and to the fact that his positionality may make it difficult for him to understand the full picture of what is going on.

Claire of the Sea Light, a novel Danticat dedicates to her own mother and her two daughters, is a narrative that is all about Haitian mothering. It confronts Haitian mothering in all of its nuances, but unlike most news stories, Danticat’s novel gives context for the mothering that happens in Haiti. She explores mothering acts and practices that could easily be dismissed by some of her North American and / or non-Haitian readers (among whom her works circulate widely) as “bad mothering,” except for the fact that Danticat gives context for these practices, inviting readers to understand where they come from and challenging notions of “good” versus “bad” mothering. Specifically, she reveals how mothering and parenting in Haiti are very much haunted by the “afterlives of colonialism⁴¹,” as Shashi Tharoor has termed it. This chapter examines how the afterlives of colonialism, or the lingering effects of colonialism that leak into the present, frame literary depictions of “bad” mothering in Edwidge Danticat’s understudied 2013 novel *Claire of the Sea Light*.

The central theme of the novel engages the question of child abandonment (what could too easily be dismissed as “bad mothering,”) and other parent - child separations that occur in

crying. No one said, “Why me? or “We’re cursed”. Even as the aftershocks kept coming, they’d say, “The ground is shaking again,” as though this had become a normal occurrence...” (155-156). Danticat clearly understands that what is going on is a myriad of different and very normal human responses to trauma: shock, courage, disbelief, mourning, resilience, sadness, and so much more that manifests itself in a variety of different ways, crying being only one of them.

⁴¹ Shashi Tharoor writes, “...those who follow world affairs would not be entirely wise to consign the issue of colonialism to the proverbial dustbin of history. The last decades of the twentieth century suggest that, curiously enough, it remains a relevant factor in understanding the problems and the dangers of the world in which we now live.” Source??

Ville-Rose, the Haitian seaside village within which the narrative is set. While the novel explores parental relationships of all kinds, one of the most important is the tender relationship between Claire, a young, motherless girl and her father, Nozias. Throughout the text, Nozias wrestles with a gut-wrenching decision: whether or not to send Claire away to be a “restavèk⁴²” - a child who lives with another family as a domestic worker in exchange for room and board. It is a profoundly devastating notion for Nozias to ponder because he worries that Claire Jr. will think he is abandoning her. Ultimately, though, he decides to go through with it and give Claire away to be a restavèk because his greatest fear is not being able to provide for his daughter in the way that she would be provided for if she lived with a wealthy family, even if it also meant she had to be a domestic house worker.

It is not just Nozias, though, making difficult parenting decisions in the novel - several of the text’s major characters are either confronting an impossibly difficult choice regarding their child or reeling from a profound tragedy that has torn either them from their child or a child from their parent. In other words, Edwidge Danticat builds a narrative world that reveals the precarity of mothering in Haiti. I use this word ‘precarity’ because it seems to me the most descriptive way to articulate the struggles Danticat writes about without falling into the trap of confining Haiti to a prison of dead-end, totalizing stereotypes. Precarity does not assign blame or activate meaningless buzz phrases like “poorest nation in the world.” Precarity means uncertainty⁴³, and in using this word I am trying to articulate that Danticat writes about mothering practices occurring within conditions that have created uncertainty. There is a precarity to life in Haiti - something evidenced by the way Haitians, in Danticat’s narrative world, think about life and death. Throughout the novel, life and death are presented as two

⁴²Many children were orphaned as a result of the 2010 earthquake, leading to an increase in restavèk arrangements as there was a need to accommodate and find homes for children who did not have anywhere else to go.

⁴³ Importantly, precarity also does not foreclose the idea of resilience, ingenuity and thriving.

sides of the same coin, where one is never far from the other. Ville Rose is the kind of village where, for example, a family could be celebrating the birth of a child and mourning the death of a parent all on the same day.

What emerges from the novel is a sense that life in Ville Rose is uncertain and precarious in more ways than one. Some of the precarity is related to economic realities. Through the course of the novel, readers come to understand that the child abandonment and other parent-child separations that occur are the result of the material realities of living in a village of great economic inequality: many must live hand-to-mouth, while a few have enough wealth to be insulated from the daily struggle to survive. Some of the precarity is related to political instability and a sense of lawlessness. The novel does not shy away from depicting gang violence - groups of young, restless men hustling, vying for power, discharging firearms in hit and runs and taking bullets to their bodies. Some of the precarity has to do with environmental degradation. Nozias laments early on in the novel, for example, that there are fewer and fewer fish in the sea these days, making it extremely difficult to depend on fishing to make a living and make ends meet.

What I am drawn to, in the novel, is how Danticat depicts mothering as acts occurring in precarity and how this precarity, at various levels, can be traced back to colonial histories that created the present-day conditions within which mothering occurs. Colonialism, and the project of slavery, in particular, are institutions that profoundly shattered and re-shaped ideas of mothering and the family - and the aftereffects ripple forward in time, haunting present-day mothering and parenting. But I also am tuned in to how contemporary neoliberal values, especially the glorification of mothering as a highly individualistic endeavor, also exert pressure on the kinds of mothering and parenting that happen in the novel.

In the sections that follow, I use the idea of precarity as a throughline to understand the kinds of mothering and parenting at play in the text, and I deepen this understanding through engagement with scholarship in Black Motherhood studies, the Environmental Humanities, Caribbean Studies and Black Feminist Geography. I begin with an overview of the different parent-child dynamics in the novel that are the focus of my analysis. I then engage in an examination of how mothering and parenting are intertwined with death in ways that draw direct links to the time of colonialism and its after-effects. I move on to focus on the ‘restavèk’ storyline in the novel as a specific example of how the afterlife of colonialism lives on in complicated ways in the novel. In the second half of the chapter, I analyze literary moments of mothering in the novel that are entangled with multi-species beings and multi-temporal timelines in ways that create a sense of liminality, an in-between space that Danticat extends to include the womb, the sea, dreams and memories (and the liminal space of the literary imagination).

Ultimately, I argue that what Danticat offers in *Claire of the Sea Light* is a nuanced portrayal of the realities of mothering in precarity in Haiti signaling what should never be forgotten: that contemporary mothering in Haiti is still haunted by colonial histories. At the same time, Danticat’s novel is also about how resilient mothering is in Haiti. Some of this resilience Danticat locates in spaces of liminality, in-between places like dreams, memories and the sea. These are sites beyond colonial plantation logics where mothering can be reimagined as a community endeavor, and as enduring relationships across time with an expansive understanding of what both community and time mean. The multi-temporal, liminal nature of the spaces in *Claire of the Sea Light* where mothering occurs make it so that notions of mothering are expanded and reimagined to include matrilineal ancestors across time, and a

more community-based sense of mothering with less of an emphasis on ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ mothering, but rather, on the idea that the carework of mothering is as much haunted by the afterlife of slavery of colonialism as it is nourished by maternal acts of the community (the human and more than human community).

Claire of the Sea Light

Claire of the Sea Light tells the story of the intertwined lives of a set of characters, rich and poor, living in a small Haitian seaside village called Ville Rose. The narrative, itself, takes place within a 24-hour time frame - it opens with a freak tragedy in the early morning hours - a rogue wave like “a giant blue-green tongue” (3) surges toward shore, toppling a fishing boat and dragging a fisherman to his death. The novel ends at dusk, in the evening hours, when villagers find a man’s body, almost drowned, washed back to shore. What sets the entire novel in motion, after the initial tidal wave of the opening pages, is the disappearance of seven-year-old Claire Limyè Lanmè Faustin (I will call her Claire Jr). Claire Jr. is the daughter of Nozias, a destitute widower who seeks to send his daughter away to live with the wealthy town fabric-maker Gaëlle as a *restavèk*, or a domestic servant. Although it breaks his heart to send her away, Nozias knows he cannot provide financially for his daughter. Moreover, he questions his ability to mother his daughter in the way she might need, in the way, he supposes, only a woman could. Wrestling with the guilt of being a ‘bad’ parent for giving Claire away, he ultimately makes the painful decision to do so. Understanding that her father is sending her to live with someone else, Claire Jr. decides to run away and for the majority of the novel, away is where she is.

Woven into this story of Claire Jr. and Nozias are the stories of other characters living in the community. Chapter by chapter, each character recounts, in first person narratives, their own experiences with a series of interconnected tragedies. Readers learn not just about the life of

young Claire, how her father met her mother and how her mother died, but other stories, too. We learn about Gaëlle, the town's wealthy fabric-maker and her unlikely friendship with Claire Jr.'s mother Claire, a poor woman working in a funeral home. We come to understand Gaëlle's fuller story - from the birth of her beloved child Rose to the child's heart-breaking death in an automobile accident. We learn about the Ardins, a wealthy family that includes Max Ardin Senior, who runs the village school *École Ardin*. We also learn about his son, Max Jr., his life of privilege studying in Miami and the secret he harbors - his homosexuality and his repressed love for his best friend Bernard. We meet women like Louise George, who hosts the local radio program *Di Mwen* (Tell Me) and who has a strange medical condition that involves coughing up blood for no medically-verified reason. Finally we learn about peoples' lives cut too short - young Bernard, Max Jr.'s best friend and secret love interest killed amid gang violence, Gaëlle's husband Laurent shot down outside the radio station that he worked for, Rose killed in an automobile accident and, of course, Claire, who died giving birth to her beloved Claire Jr.

Fractured Family Relationships

Danticat's novels, as in the works of many Caribbean writers,⁴⁴ dive deeply into the theme of fractured families and the trope of the absent, estranged or dead mother figure. In the following paragraphs, I outline the different parenting pairs and larger family networks that appear in the novel to better convey how absent mothers (and fathers) and fractured family relationships figure into the narrative and shape the way Danticat portrays mothering⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ For examples of Caribbean women's fiction and the trope of the absent, distanced, estranged or deceased mother figure see Dominican author Jean Rhys's 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* whose protagonist the Dominican-born Creole girl named Antoinette has a turbulent relationship with her mother, who eventually dies. Guadeloupean author Simone Schwarz Bart's 1972 book *Pluie et Vent Sur Telumée Miracle* offers another example, with Telumée being sent away by her mother to live with her grandmother, Queen Without a Name, the woman who ultimately raises her. Famed Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid, to give yet another example, circles back, again and again, to themes of motherhood and the estranged or absent mother.

⁴⁵ I would like to emphasize the importance of examining all of the parenting relationships in the novel when thinking about mothering because they all reveal pertinent elements of the carework of mothering.

Specifically, what is apparent in these family separations is a recurring notion of feeling like a “bad” parent and having failed one’s child in some way.

In Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*, there are two significant father - son pairings that offer compelling insight into different perspectives on parenting in the novel. The first pairing is Max Ardin senior and his son Max Ardin junior. The senior Ardin is a wealthy, divorced and connected Haitian- a member of the upper echelons of society in Ville Rose who send their children off to American and European institutions for education. Max senior’s relationship with his son is one of expectations that weigh heavily on the son. Max senior’s expectations, however, are not without flexibility or paternal love because although he fervently hopes that his son will, one day, follow in his footsteps and take over the local school, the École Ardin, when Max Jr. announces that his ambitions are to become a DJ instead, Max senior is supportive.

As the novel progresses, we learn two secrets about Max Jr. that his father eventually learns as well: the first is that he (Max Jr.) raped a domestic worker named Flore, fathering a child named Pamaxine from whom he is estranged. The second secret is that Max Jr. has been suppressing his love for another man, Bernard, a friend of his youth who was killed amid gang violence. Navigating his homoerotic desire in a homophobic context proves extremely damaging for him and those around him. It is one of the reasons, the text reveals, for his attack on Flore and for his attempted suicide at the end of the novel by drunkenly wading into the ocean. Although Max Senior supports his son’s nontraditional professional endeavors, he cannot be a source of support for his son in the way his son needs, that is, to provide the emotional support for his son to be who he is.

The second notable father-son relationship in the novel is Max Jr. and his estranged son Pamaxine. After Max Jr. assaults Flore, we learn that Flore leaves her employment at the Ardin

household to return to the rougher part of town called Cité Pendue, where her mother lives. After moving in with her mother, Flore gives birth and subsequently opens a beauty school where she does relatively well for herself and her son, whom she names Pamaxine Voltaire. Notably, it is her resilience and the care that she and her mother (the child's grandmother) provide for the child that *provides* for the child - materially, economically and emotionally. The novel gives a particular anecdote about the naming of the child that is useful to examine here. The text notes:

Because Max Junior had not legally recognized the boy, the child had been given Flore's family name, Voltaire. But with "Pa," a Creole prefix meaning both "his" and "not his," the child's first name could either mean "Maxime's" or "Not Maxime's." Only the mother could know for sure," (98)

This highlights the linguistic possibilities, in Haitian Creole in particular, for Flore to use language to put the father-son relationship between Max Jr. and Pamaxine in tension. Despite Max Jr.'s biological connection to Pamaxine, Flore has the power to name her son in a way that makes the father-son connection ambiguous.

In addition to his sexuality, one of the things that Max Jr. struggles with is a deep sense of remorse for the way he hurt Flore, the long-lasting impact of this violence on Flore and, most critically, on his relationship with his son. At one point in the novel, at the request of Max senior, Flore brings the child to the Ardin household to meet his father Max. Jr. for the first time. It is an awkward, painful encounter full of longing on the part of the child and the father to know one another, and yet not knowing how to bridge the divide. Max Jr. is very much struck by the conflicting notions of what fatherhood means for him. When his son approaches him and looks at him, he is struck by the fact that this boy looks just like him, and in that moment what hits him is that he *does* have a desire to be a father, to be Pamaxine's father.

At one point, Max Jr. kneels in front of the boy, "Both he and his son were in a mild trance now, their eyes locked on each other's, which he became aware of only when Flore snapped her fingers and whistled, motioning for the boy to talk to her," (99). Presiding over this

encounter is Flore's very understandable anger and distrust at bringing her son to meet his father. When Flore finally leads the boy away and out of the room, the new maid of the house comes into the room with a note from Pamaxine to his father. On the paper, "...was the word "papa" in small slanted letters along with a sketch of a man with a blank O for a face," (101). This encounter underscores a painful realization for Max Jr., not only that his son thinks of his father as a blank spot in his life, but also that this disruption, this disconnection between father and son is traumatic. He feels a deep sense of sorrow and guilt at having hurt his son's mother, abandoning his son and, ultimately, for his bad parenting.

As Max Jr. contends with what it means to be biologically but not emotionally connected to this child and his new-found yearning for fatherhood, he remembers the story that a girl he is casually dating, Jessamine, tells him about her parents. She tells him about her own parents and the story her mother told her about her father abandoning them. Max. Jr remembers Jessamine declaring, "The worst possible case of unrequited love...was feeling abandoned by a parent," (99). And this is exactly what he fears he has done to his son: abandoned him. It is difficult not to see, in this abandonment, echoes of the damage of slavery reverberating through this father-son separation and the fact that Pamaxine's imagined father is a simple stick figure with a blank O for a face. It calls back to Hortense Spillers's articulations in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," of the missing Black father in Black families where the father is estranged from the child and family, a separation that has its roots in the way slavery routinely disassembled families.

The mother-daughter pairs in the novel also are relationships of ruptures and reconnections that stem from colonial histories. Gaëlle is an affluent fabric vendor in the town of Ville Rose who has experienced much loss in her life. When she and her husband find out they are expecting a child, they also learn that the child would likely suffer a health issue and not

survive past infancy. In a strange turn of fate, however, Gaëlle gives birth to a perfect child, a girl she names Rose. The first tragedy that strikes is the sudden and violent death of her husband on the very day that Gaëlle goes into labour to deliver her daughter. He is shot to death by local gang activity outside of the radio station that he works for. In this way Rose is born, without ever having met her father, yet another instance of the missing Black father that Hortense Spillers writes about.

Gaëlle's relationship with Rose is one of fierce, almost claustrophobic motherlove, for instance, she nurses Rose until the child is three years old, for much longer than most people nurse children. Gaëlle is acutely aware of the precarity of life in Ville Rose, and her protective instincts toward her daughter make it seem as though she knows some tragedy is coming around the corner that will tear her daughter from her life as it did her husband - and it does. While coming home from school one day in a moto taxi there is an accident and Rose, as the novel describes, is flung out of the car and through the air, her body flapping like an angel with wings. This is how Rose dies and how Gaëlle loses everything that matters to her. The pain is deep and overwhelming, and in a moment of bitter regret in the novel, Gaëlle reflects on her daughter's death and wishes, "...she'd never let her daughter, not even for one minute, out of her sight," (147). In this way, Gaëlle's anxiety about being a "bad parent" is a tension between being too protective of her daughter but also, ultimately, not vigilant enough with her.

Perhaps the mother-daughter relationship most central to the novel is the one between Claire Jr., the daughter of Nozias the fisherman, and her mother, also named Claire, who died in childbirth. While this death means that Claire Jr. is separated from her mother at the point of birth, there is still a whisper of a relationship present between Claire Jr. and her mother. What becomes clear early in the novel is that even though Claire, the mother, is already dead from the

very start of the novel, she is very much present throughout the text, in the form of lush, vivid memories. Nozias, her husband, for example, recalls the evening when he had taken them out on his sloop and she had insisted on going for an evening swim in the sea. She had looked like a brown Goddess, Nozias recalls, with her full belly and long hair swimming in the calm sea among the silvery fish and shimmering, bioluminescent algae. Gaëlle remembers the tentative, humble way in which Claire used to sew little baby clothes and gift them to Gaëlle during her pregnancy. Claire Jr. only has a single, real memory of her mother, and it is of her mother, laboring in childbirth and coaxing the infant to ‘vin’i’ or come - come into this world.

Finally, a major parental relationship in the novel besides the one between Claire Jr. and her mother is the bond Claire Jr. shares with her father. Nozias is a humble, hard-working fisherman who, as the text reveals, originally did not want to have children because of the economic burden they would impose on his already very meager income; in other words, they would be mouths to feed. In order to avoid the problem of children, he signed up to be part of a mass sterilization program, and was in the middle of his vasectomy when he was startled by the sudden pain of the procedure and the gravity of what it meant. Without realizing what he was doing, he ran out of the hospital room mid-procedure thinking that the damage had been done, that he would not be able to have children, something that is proven wrong when his wife Claire becomes pregnant with Claire Jr. As a father, Nozias is overwhelmed, tentative, humble and loving. When his wife Claire dies in childbirth, he suddenly becomes a single father with a newborn infant. Desperately trying to find someone to nurse baby Claire, he goes to Gaëlle who is still breastfeeding her child Rose at that point. Gaëlle agrees to nurse baby Claire, then stresses the importance of sending baby Claire to be raised, for her first few years of life, by her mother’s

people in the mountains, and this he does. Eventually, after some years, he sends for her and she comes back to live with him in Ville Rose by the sea.

It seems as if he is always trying to figure out his relationship with Claire, and underlying this negotiation of fatherhood is his doubt about his ability to parent a daughter when she has lost her mother. But he shows tenderness. For example, every year on her birthday he has a new dress sewn for Claire (although it is the exact same dress as the year before, just a bit bigger). He also takes her to visit her mother's grave on the anniversary of her death (also Claire Jr.'s birthday) so that she might remember and reconnect with her mother. And, of course, there is the decision that Nozias is weighing throughout the novel, the one that spurs Claire Jr. to run away and sets into motion the search for her throughout Ville Rose. Fearful of being unable to provide for Claire on his subsistence fishing income, Nozias considers giving Claire to Gaëlle to raise in a situation commonly known as *restavèk* (*rester avec*, or stay with).

Death and Precarity in Ville Rose

This novel is unquestionably about mothering, but something readers will notice is that the book is also all about death. This was one of the first questions I had of the text that drew me to it. For a narrative so centered on mothering, why was there so much death? On one level, this direct engagement with death pulls no punches: without sensationalizing it or falling into stereotypes, it is not inaccurate to notice that death is pervasive in Haiti. As Danticat writes in an essay from *Create Dangerously*, she experienced a profound sense of confusion when her aunts and grandmothers would tell her as a child that in Haiti people never really die. She later understands that what they were communicating to her was how resilient Haitians are, but at the time, as a little girl, she was flabbergasted because:

...in Haiti people were always dying. They died in disasters both natural and man-made. They died from political violence. They died of infections that would have been easily treated elsewhere. They even died of chagrin, of broken hearts," (176)

Danticat articulates that death is very much part of daily life in Haiti - both the kinds of deaths that spring from heartache (those that might happen anywhere) but also unnecessary deaths (those caused by infection and other illnesses that might easily be treatable elsewhere). In a country that struggles economically and politically as Haiti does, life is precarious - it is uncertain in Haiti, and it is uncertain in Ville Rose (where the novel is set). In Ville Rose characters are also always dying: Claire (childbirth), Bernard (gang violence), Rose (moto accident), the fisherman at the beginning of the novel (rogue wave) and, almost, Max Jr. (attempted suicide.) Death in *Claire of the Sea Light* also is undoubtedly linked to the fact that the book was published just a couple of years after the earthquake in 2010. It was a horrific natural disaster; Danticat herself lost family members in the quake, and she published essays detailing her visits to Haiti in the aftermath during recovery efforts. That the novel, itself, also engages with natural disasters and death of all kinds is not surprising.

Knowing that Danticat is in constant communication across her works and literary career with Black diasporic writers from all parts of the globe⁴⁶, particularly the Americas, when thinking about her examination of death in this novel, I am reminded of something James Baldwin wrote. In his “Letter from a Region in My Mind” published in 1962, he also articulated his thoughts on death:

...life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life...but White Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them.

⁴⁶ In both of her nonfiction volumes of collected essays *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* and *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* Danticat writes profusely about Black diasporic writers, artists and creatives from Toni Morrison and Ta-Nehisi Coates to Basquiat and Alice Walker (among many others) who have inspired her and with whom she regularly engages.

What strikes me about this passage is Baldwin's astute observation that white Americans have a different relationship to death than Black Americans. Earlier in the letter, he writes that white Americans regard the history of slavery as shameful, and as such, white America tends to overlook, ignore and erase any kind of meaningful grappling with race. White Americans, he notices, have this luxury, this privilege, because race is not an immediate issue of life or death in the way that it is for Black Americans. And so, white Americans have the privilege of simply not believing in death.

In her fiction, Danticat writes about the precarity of life in Haiti where there is not the luxury of ignoring or not believing in death, as Danticat reveals, not even across social spheres as rich and poor are each impacted by the precarity of life in Haiti, although the wealthy classes are, admittedly, more insulated from it. To quote Danticat, people are always dying in Haiti. Through her body of work Danticat not only humanizes this struggle, giving voice to those who live in this precarity, but she also illustrates where this precarity comes from: colonial histories and legacies of slavery, those histories that many white Americans are still all too willing to overlook, dismiss, not teach in classrooms or simply not engage.

For Nozias, the precarity within which he is living and mothering is an economic precarity; he does not have the means to support his daughter and so he seriously contemplates giving her away. In fact, Nozias's economic reality is the economic reality of many villagers in Ville Rose. The novel describes the town in this way:

Ville Rose was home to about eleven thousand people, five percent of them wealthy or comfortable. The rest were poor, some dirt-poor. Many were out of work, but some were farmers or fishermen (some both) or seasonal sugar cane workers," (5).

The poverty that plagues Ville Rose, however, does not arise from nowhere - it is, rather, a precarious reality built from colonial histories. Haiti's economic woes as a country and its history

of debt to foreign powers undoubtedly began when, following the slave revolt that resulted in independence in 1804, Haiti was forced to negotiate with France in order to be recognized as an independent state. The indemnity of 150 million francs Haiti agreed to pay to France in order to be recognized as a state - a sum so exorbitantly large that Haiti was forced to take out loans in order to make the required payments, resulted in an endless cycle of borrowing money to make the payments and falling further into debt. Such a cycle, coupled with the ways in which neoliberal economic policies of the 20th century like the Washington Consensus,⁴⁷ ensured that Haiti would never develop economically. The result is a cycle of poverty creating political instability coupled with environmental degradation, which creates precarity in everyday life. Nozias's precarity as a fisherman whose livelihood depends on his daily catch *and* the realization that this may not be enough to make ends meet and that he might have to give Claire Jr. up to a *restavèk* situation and leave Ville Rose to 'chèche la vie,' (make a living) - this situation is not Nozias living in a failed state of perpetual poverty in an ahistorical vacuum, this is Nozias living in the afterlife of colonialism.

For Max. Jr., the abandonment of his son comes from his act of violence toward Flore, a terrible act stemming from his inability to accept his own sexuality in a homophobic society⁴⁸. Max. Jr. learns that finding a way back to his son means confronting his own violence and his identity. Tragically, his attempted suicide at the end of the novel (his is the body that washes back to shore in the novel's final pages) indicates that he is unable to do either of these things. Here, too, is a character living in the afterlife of colonialism. Scholar Erin Durban has spent the

⁴⁷ The Washington Consensus opened up developing countries to the private interests of the Global north to set up companies and operations in places like Haiti that would extract resources and sell finished products at profits back to Haiti.

⁴⁸ Haiti is a country where the majority of the population is not generally accepting of LGBTQ+ populations. Homophobia is rampant and issues like same-sex marriage are generally not supported. For example, in 2017 the Haitian Senate passed a bill banning gay marriage and codifying punishments for those engaging in or abetting gay marriage. According to the bill, anyone participating in or assisting with a gay marriage could be fined up to \$8,000 and receive up to three years in prison.

last several decades researching LGBTQ+ issues in Haiti, and part of what her work touches on is that some of the places where the homophobic vitriol is the most acute is in Evangelical and / or conservative Catholic spaces. Evangelical Christianity and Catholicism, of course, were religions brought to Haiti as part of the colonial project, the latter through Spanish and French colonialism and the former through missionaries. Max Jr.'s struggles, the violence he experiences living in a homophobic society and the violence he commits, this situation is also Max. Jr. living in the afterlife of colonialism

In *Claire of the Sea Light*, the novel, itself, draws these connections between colonial histories shaping present realities. I will give two examples here. The first relates to an area of Ville Rose, a mountainside referred to as “Mòn Inital,” where, during the time of enslavement, enslaved Africans were killed. The place is still haunted, as Madame Louise George articulates in the novel.

The bones of our ancestors, Madame Louise had said in her croaky voice, still litter the grounds of Mòn Inital, and their ghosts still haunt its trees. (216)

To the present day, that area is haunted by its history and is a place that the inhabitants of Ville Rose will not set foot in. Another example is in the naming of Rose, Gaëlle's daughter. Rose was the name of a maternal ancestor of Gaëlle's named Sò Rose, a free woman whose mother was enslaved.

Sò Rose, a direct ancestor of Gaëlle's, was the free colored woman, the wealthy affranchie, who'd founded the town after Pauline Bonaparte had left. Sò Rose herself had been named by her slave mother and a French father after Sainte Rose de Lima, the patroness of the southern region (55).

In naming her daughter Rose, Gaëlle makes a direct connection between maternal ancestors of the colonial past and her daughter in the present.

The Afterlives of Colonialism that Frame Mothering in *Claire of the Sea Light*

[As I have attempted to outline, the effects of colonialism live on in Ville Rose, in the precarious situations within which mothering occurs and in the direct connections to place sites (Mòn Inital) and maternal ancestors (Rose) articulated in the text. I also wish to point out how] the projects of slavery and neoliberalism each also have shaped mothering and how mothering happens in the novel. Slavery had a lasting, devastating impact on families and mothering. As Alys Weinbaum has written, slavery was the first time in history when the womb became a commodified space, one that was owned by enslavers for the express purpose of increasing the slave labor workforce. Mothering became a strictly biological process so that enslavers could accumulate property and increase the slave labor work force. Enslaved women were not allowed to mother their own children, at the same time, they were forced to mother the children of enslavers. Along with this dehumanizing treatment of enslaved women came European stereotypes. Barbara Bush⁴⁹ underlines that European enslavers' views on African enslaved women included the idea that they gave birth easily, without much pain, that they were sexually available and that enslaved Black mothers were neglectful of their children (or, that they were "bad mothers.") These views live on in the afterlife of slavery as stereotypes that persist - stereotypes of Black women as well-suited to domestic labor⁵⁰, as not experiencing pain in the same way that white women do, and Black women as "bad" mothers.

The more recent impacts of neoliberalism have also shaped mothering, particularly the notion of "intensive" mothering that has coalesced in the U.S. This idea of mothering celebrates

⁴⁹ From "African Caribbean Slave Mothers and Children: Traumas of Dislocation and Enslavement Across the Atlantic World," in the *Caribbean Quarterly*.

⁵⁰ Charmaine Crawford writes about this in her article, "African-Caribbean women, diaspora and transnationality," when she finds that Afro-Caribbean immigrant women in the 60's, 70's and 80's living in the diaspora were too easily "funneled" into what Dionne Brand has called "dirty work," or domestic labor including care and cleaning work, and other domestic labor.

individuality and the idea that the mother figure must be the child's entire world, constantly providing for, nurturing and caring for the child. As Danticat's literature circulates widely in the English-speaking world, particularly in the U.S. (where she currently lives), much of her readership will be familiar with if not immersed in this neoliberal understanding of what "good" mothering is - that it is an individual endeavor. In that way, it might be easy for readers inundated in those ideas of "good" mothering to see Nozias's abandonment of Claire Jr., his giving her away to Gaëlle in a *restavèk* situation as "bad" mothering. Even Nozias, early in the novel, has a particular idea of what "good" and "bad" mothering are that seems to be part of the aftereffects of colonialism and slavery, and neoliberal ideas. When he first loses his wife Claire and is left with an infant to care for, he is not only completely overwhelmed but also doubtful of his ability to mother his child in the way that she might need.

...he was a man. What did he know about raising a little girl? ... He would always need caretakers he couldn't afford, neighbors from whom he'd have to beg favors, and women he could either pay or sleep with so they would mother his child." (16)

Nozias clearly has a very specific picture of the "good" mothering Claire Jr. needs - she must be mothered by a woman and the mothering must be an individual task, it must not be something shared by the community. This, in combination with the fact that he does not bring home enough money to guarantee that there will always be food on the table, ultimately is what leads him to make the decision to give Claire Jr. away as a *restavèk*.

The *restavèk* situation is not new, it has existed in Haiti since independence in 1804. It is estimated that there are currently around 300,000 children living in this informal arrangement, working as domestic servants for wealthier families or family members with the expectation that they will be provided with room and board. It is a practice that is generally viewed in Haiti negatively and has been likened to modern slavery. There is, also, an entire string of mostly

foreign but also some local aid organizations in Haiti whose mission it is to assist restavèk children and to work to end the restavèk practice altogether. While it is true that some restavèk children are in situations that are transactional and in homes where they are mistreated and vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, Danticat both humanizes and complicates how readers might understand the restavèk practice because it is more complex than simply a system of ‘modern slavery.’ This is exemplified by a simple exchange between Nozias and Gaëlle when she asks him, “Why would you want your child to be my servant, a restavèk?” He responds, “I know she would never be that with you,” (8)

What becomes clear is that the restavèk arrangement Nozias and Gaëlle are creating is less of a transactional exchange that would put Claire Jr. in domestic servitude or danger (*and* that could be quickly dismissed as “bad” mothering). Rather, what Nozias and Gaëlle are putting together is a restavèk situation that is more like community parenting, or “othermothering” in the sense that Patricia Hill-Collins outlines when she describes othermothering as a common practice in Black communities when children are cared for by a number of caregivers, not just the biological parent. This idea of community parenting is established in the novel through moments in which readers understand how close Gaëlle actually is with Nozias and Claire Jr. Gaëlle nursed Claire Jr. as a baby, something that is recognized when Claire Jr. and Rose (Gaëlle’s biological daughter) are referred to as “milk sisters,” (23). Gaëlle was also very close with Claire Jr.’s mother despite their wildly different social stations. Claire Jr. herself realizes, toward the end of the novel, that although she lost her mother and will never be able to get her back, she has, essentially, been raised by the community.

She had no idea what it was to have a mother rather than a string of motherly acts performed by different hands: the aunt in the mountains - who’d had her the first three years of her life, the neighbors, including Madame Josephine, who’d motion for her to come out of the sea when she’d been in there too long,” (217)

The motherly acts extend beyond what is mentioned in the quote: there is also Max Ardin Senior who agreed to accept Claire Jr. into the École Ardin on a scholarship so that she might get an education, there is her father whose love for Claire Jr. is endless, and of course Gaëlle who will step in as her surrogate mother in the restavèk arrangement. In agreeing to take in Claire Jr., Gaëlle, the woman still grieving the death of her own daughter, is not so much gaining a domestic servant as another daughter. With this idea comes one of the central themes of the novel: that despite all of the death, dislocation and precarious mothering in the afterlife of colonialism, there is life, there is resilience, there is the community that comes together to parent children when the worst happens, when they lose their mothers. bell hooks argues that this kind of community parenting (something Black communities created) is “revolutionary,” because of the ways in which it relieves the burden on the mother as being the sole provider for the child.

She writes:

Childcare is a responsibility that can be shared with other child rearers, with people who do not live with children. This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only child rearers. Many people raised in black communities experienced this type of community-based child care. Black women who had to leave the home and work to help provide for families could not afford to send children to day care centers and such centers did not always exist. They relied on people in their communities to help. Even in families where the mother stayed home, she could also rely on people in the community to help...this kind of shared responsibility for child care can happen in small community settings where people know and trust one another. It cannot happen in those settings if parents regard children as their “property,” their “possession.” (144)

The community parenting that Nozias and Gaëlle are engaging in is possible precisely because Claire Jr. is not being treated as a possession or property as is commonly said of children in restavèk situations. The restavèk arrangement here is more complex than a simple, transactional exchange. It is more revolutionary than that.

Multi-Species Entangled Mothering

[I have discussed parent-child relationships in the novel, tracing how they are affected by long histories of colonialism that have helped to create the present-day precarity within which parenting happens. I have also underlined Danticat's depictions of parenting resilience in the face of this precarity when the community steps in to parent. But] thus far, I have addressed only human relationships and the community of humans in Ville Rose. There are other kinds of mothering that happen, too - relationships that exist not just between human kin, but that extend toward the larger ecological community, one which is also living in precarity. Curiously, there are many memorable moments in the novel in which mothering happens either in natural spaces such as a forest or in the sea, or mothering that is closely connected to nonhuman entities including pigeons and frogs. These human-nonhuman relationships are demarcated by expressions of care that extend from the human to the nonhuman world and that reveal the intimate ways in which this community of Ville Rose is connected, that is, not just through human neighbors, friends and family, but with the whole ecological community including non-human members and, of course, non-human elements like the land and the sea.

Danticat is not primarily known for writing about environmental or nature themes, and yet, there are many moments in this novel that reveal intimate connections to landscapes, seascapes and the nonhuman world. Poignantly, Danticat opens the novel with an epigraph: an excerpt from Jean Toomer's "Tell Me," an intimate poem about the deep, rich beauty of a landscape at dusk, a beauty that is likened to an unknown someone, perhaps a beloved someone to whom the poem is addressed. The poem begins, "tell me, dear beauty of the dusk..." and goes on to ask, "do prayers, like kernels from the husk / come from your lips?" There is an intimacy

expressed toward the land, and a sense that both the person and the land are “beauties of the dusk,” celebrating and honoring their shared hue, their darkness.

Toomer himself was a person of mixed race. Born in the U.S. in 1894 to mixed Black and white ancestry, he famously resisted racial classification, wanting to be known not as Black or mixed but as “American.” When he eventually moved to the south for a job, he immersed himself in rural Black community life and culture in a way he never had before, an experience that was deeply moving. Although he had been able to pass as white in the past, after his experiences in the South, he began to identify more strongly with his Black heritage. His most famous work, *Cane*, published in 1923, is based on his observations of life in the Black communities he moved within in the South - particularly the profound connections between Black folks and the land, which he writes about through stories of Black women and their interactions with land. Citing Jean Toomer at the very beginning of the narrative signals right away that Danticat is thinking diasporically and putting this novel about parent-child separations in conversation with a diasporic Black writer who was fascinated and energized by Black communities, their everyday stories and lives lived together. But also, Danticat alludes to the idea that Black communities are also made in close connection with the land - that Black diasporic communities, in spite of painful histories of forced migration, dislocation and deterritorialization, are in relationship, too, with the land.

In *Claire of the Sea Light*, humans also are in relationship with the land. One telling example from *Claire of the Seelight* is when Claire shows up to the funeral of Gaëlle’s husband, Laurent. The relationship thus far between the two women, Claire and Gaëlle, is a tentative one because they are from different social classes: Claire lives in poverty with Nozias and Gaëlle is a wealthy shop owner with her own privileged life. Yet, reaching across social class divisions,

Claire makes an enduring connection with Gaëlle by giving her handmade gifts during Gaëlle's pregnancy. Claire is even present at the funeral for Gaëlle's husband Laurent after he is shot and killed. Gaëlle sees Claire leaning against a weeping willow tree at the funeral -she is wearing a humble, shabby blue dress. The fact that she is even there at all is hugely meaningful to Gaëlle, and when Gaëlle looks again at the young woman she sees Claire's body melded together with the weeping willow.

Claire's body seemed indistinguishable from the small part of the willow's trunk that was not covered by its drooping branches. Claire's head was topped by the willow's golden crown. Claire Narcis had seemed that morning to be a dazzling mirage, a veil between the dirt being piled on her husband's coffin and the wailing baby waiting at home. (163)

[It is difficult to read this passage and not think of Toomer's epigraph where] both this passage and Toomer's poem meld bodies and land together. In Toomer's poem, "prayers, like kernels...come from your lips." In the above passage Claire is "indistinguishable" from the willow's trunk with glorious branches for a crown. She is connected to this tree - she *is* the tree.

There are many ways to read this image. I see this as underscoring Claire's goodness and the extension of care she offers to Gaëlle in this painful time. While the weeping willow signals grief and mourning, Claire's brilliance, her "dazzling" image is almost a beacon of hope, a flash of beauty in what is otherwise a terribly dark time. The fact that she is characterized as a "mirage" or a "veil" between the horrible finality of soil on a coffin (death) and the squirming infant Rose at home (life) also makes her seem like some sort of revenant or in-between figure of liminality herself. What I love about the description of Claire as a mirage is that it invokes the idea that this is an optical illusion (a naturally occurring phenomenon), but juxtaposed with what Gaëlle is seeing - a magical image of Claire as a tree. The real and marvelous collide here in a way that happens again and again in the novel, something I will come back to in a discussion of genre later in the chapter.

Invoking Toomer's poem at the beginning of *Claire of the Sea Light* sets the stage for a novel within which bonds between humans, particularly women, land and seascapes, will be important, as it is in the above example with Claire and the weeping willow. As Caribbean scholars have noted, Black relationships with land in the Caribbean can be fraught due to the trauma of slavery and deterritorialization from ancestral homelands. Landscapes and seascapes in the Caribbean are thus haunted by colonial histories, as Feminist Black Geography scholar Katherine McKittrick asserts:

Our present landscape is both haunted and developed by old and new hierarchies of humanness. If past human categorization was spatialized, in ships and on plantations, in homes, communities, nations, islands, and regions, it also evidences the ways in which some of the impressions of transatlantic slavery leak into the future, in essence recycling the displacement of difference" (xvii).

As McKittrick underscores, colonialism and slavery made it so that inequality was *spatialized* - Black dehumanization occurred on plantations, for example, and so these spaces, which still exist as physical spaces in the Caribbean (fields with crumbling sugar cane mills that tourists visit, for example) and as ideas and systems (plantation economies, as Environmental Humanities scholar Anna Tsing has noted, which are the basis for modern agricultural practices) - they haunt the present and they become historical repetitions reverberating forward in time.

So, how is it possible to create relationships with place, with land and sea when they are haunted, in their various ways, by colonialism's aftereffects? What is the way forward to be in relationship with a place when it has been the site of such historical violence and, additionally, when colonial histories and contemporary neoliberal realities have also left damaged environments of precarity in their wake? In *Claire of the Sea Light*, environmental precarity is ever present in the narrative. Early on in the novel, the narrative mentions dwindling fish stock.

It was no longer like in the old days, when he [Nozias] and his friends would put a net in the water for an hour or so, then pull it out full of big, mature fish. Now they had to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out of the sea that were so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back. But now you had to do with what you got; even if you knew deep in your gut that it was wrong, for

example, to keep baby conch shells or lobsters full of eggs, you had no choice but to do it. You could no longer afford to fish in season, to let the sea replenish itself. You had to go out nearly every day, even on Fridays, and even as the seabed was disappearing, and the sea grass that used to nourish the fish was buried under silt and trash (9).

The environment has changed since Nozias was younger; the fish stocks and the seabed have all but disappeared. The ecological community is in distress, in precarity and although “you knew deep in your gut that it was wrong,” the fishing had to continue, even if it meant keeping what should have been thrown back to the sea. What is the way forward in the wake of such environmental precarity?

Danticat’s novels, including *Claire of the Sea Light*, engage questions like this, telling stories about human relationships not just with each other but also with land, sea and nonhuman species. In the novel, there are various human-animal relationships that are important. Let’s begin with pigeons. These birds are mentioned in chapter 8 titled ‘Ghosts,’ which tells the story of Bernard, Max. Jr’s friend and secret love interest. Bernard lives in the more crime-ridden part of town called Cité Pendue where his parents run a restaurant. The text states that Bernard’s parents, like many others in the village, originally moved to Cité Pendue temporarily from the surrounding countryside so that their son could attend and finish grade school. However, as the countryside and surrounding mountains were deforested, leading to dry, nutrient-poor soil, the area became unlivable, forcing families to stay in Cité Pendue. In other words, environmental precarity led to the family’s decision to stay in the city. It is in the city that Bernard’s parents opened a restaurant and ran a pigeon breeding operation where they sold the birds as pets and food.

The language in the text describing the pigeon business already entangles humans and birds in curious ways. The text notes that Cité Pendue was a temporary “perch” (64) for villagers while their children finished school and that Bernard’s parents “raised” (64) not only their son

but birds. The pigeons also are referenced in a ritual that involved young men, sometimes accompanied by their fathers, buying a squab (a young pigeon) in order to slit its throat and mix its blood with condensed milk and Malta (a carbonated beverage), making a virility drink. Of the headless, dying pigeon fathers would laugh and say, “I pity that girl,” referencing both the pigeon’s dying body but also conflating it with a woman’s body in a sexual way. Although they loathed it and longed for the days when people would buy pigeons to give to their children as pets, Bernard’s parents sold many of their pigeons for this ritual.

Pigeons are, first of all, a unique species of bird in that they are the oldest domesticated bird in the world, and in the Caribbean, a species that was brought over during colonization. They serve humans in a variety of ways, as indicated in the novel: as companions (pets) and sustenance (food). They are exceptionally close to humans, and with Bernard, they sustain his family and allow them to build a small amount of wealth with which they purchase the restaurant that becomes their more stable livelihood. In characterizing the birds and humans similarly (both “perching” in *Cité Pendue*, for example) Danticat gestures to the idea that the community she so lovingly writes about in the novel, the cast of characters from Claire to Bernard, are joined by nonhuman community members, too, who shape and impact each other’s lives. The maternal care that is extended to the pigeons by Bernard’s family, that is, the appreciation and respect they have for the birds and the way they “raise” them as they raise their own son, is evident. On the other hand, when the pigeons are killed senselessly for their blood in a cruel ritual, that violence is directly linked to sexist attitudes and misogynistic actions.

There is another non-human species in the novel that has a palpable presence: frogs. While they appear in several sections of the novel, they make their first and most lengthy appearance early in the narrative, in chapter two, which is aptly named: “The Frogs.” This

chapter delves into the story of Gaëlle Cadet Lavaud's strange and wonderful pregnancy with her child Rose. During this time, there was a period of unusual heat in Ville Rose, a heat of such intensity that the frogs that lived in the surrounding gulch near her house were exploding. The text makes it clear that what is going on with the frogs is unusual because, while it is normal for the frogs to live and die in cycles, the number of frog carcasses piling up is alarming. These frogs are on Gaëlle's mind, so much so that she begins a curious ritual of getting out of bed each morning after her husband has gone to work and walking barefoot in the grasses by the brook outside of her house with her chamber pot in hand to collect frog carcasses. On one particular day, she collects three distinct frog cadavers, a green-horned frog, a brown dwarf jungle frog and a tiny koki frog, "...whose melodious staccato song was believed to lull babies to sleep," (43).

Throughout this ritual, the frogs are connected to Gaëlle's pregnancy, from the koki frog's lullaby song mentioned above to the way the text describes Gaëlle as, "...rubbing her belly," (43) while she picks up frog carcasses and drops them into the chamber pot that she, "cradled...against her stomach," (43). Unlike the pigeon ritual, this carcass-collecting ritual has a tenderness to it; it is an act of respect and maternal care. There is maternal care in the way she collects these dead frogs and buries them carefully under an almond tree. The dead frogs, the text states, remind her of her childhood when she would bury dead lizards and trap butterflies and fireflies in jars. The text narrates:

Though she vowed that each morning's brief hunt would be her last, she couldn't stop, so much had she convinced herself that the frogs needed her and she them (43).

There is also a connection here to Claire's own job in the funeral home as one who dresses the dead for burial. Both Gaëlle and Claire, both of whom become mothers, also have contact with and respect for death.

This relationship between Gaëlle and the frogs is a fascinating one for many reasons. Frogs, first of all, are a symbol of fertility across many cultures⁵¹. That the frogs are also so connected to Gaëlle's pregnancy is important. During the days when she is in pain, or cannot eat or sleep properly as a result of the pregnancy's effects on her body, she wanders outside and seeks companionship among these dead frogs who "need her." There is also an undeniable ecological undercurrent at play with the frogs that becomes apparent upon closer examination. When I read this passage and see Gaëlle in my imagination barefoot, walking through fields of frog carcasses, her swollen belly leading the way, I cannot help but think about life and death (twin themes across the novel) and precarity, and a creeping sense of dread that what might be killing these frogs has an environmental cause that might also threaten other members of the ecological community. Frogs, for example the three distinct frog species Gaëlle collects, are part of Haiti's great biodiversity when it comes to amphibians. Haiti is, in fact, home to 49 native species of amphibians, 15 of which are found nowhere else in the world. The fact, then, that there is a heat wave causing the frogs to die off in droves in Ville Rose is profoundly distressing, especially as frogs are often known as 'indicator species,' or species which are the first to be impacted by environmental damage, thereby acting as a kind of canary in the coal mine for impending environmental problems.

As I see Gaëlle in my mind's eye, awkwardly bending over to carefully lift a tiny frog carcass from the soil, I also cannot help but think of Anna Tsing. In particular, I think about Tsing's descriptions of what it means to walk through a damaged landscape and be immersed in a world of another scale. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing writes:

⁵¹ For example, according to a description of a frog pendant housed in the Taíno Museum, Haiti's first museum dedicated to educating the public about pan-Caribbean Taíno Indigenous cultural objects and artifacts found in Haiti, frogs were a symbol of fertility for the Taíno peoples.

To walk attentively through a forest, even a damaged one, is to be caught by the abundance of life: ancient and new; underfoot and reaching into the light. But how does one tell the life of the forest? We might begin by looking for drama and adventure beyond the activities of humans. Yet we are not used to reading stories without human heroes... We forget that collaborative survival requires cross-species coordinations. To enlarge what is possible we need other kinds of stories, including adventures of landscapes. (pp?)

Tsing writes here about the importance of noticing, of walking “attentively” in nature, especially in a damaged landscape. Similarly, Gaëlle’s attraction to the frogs and her sense of care and connection to them all begin with noticing and walking attentively. As the text states:

The frogs had been dying for a few weeks, but Gaëlle hadn’t noticed at first. They’d been dying so quietly that for each one that had expired, another had taken its place along the gulch near her house, each one looking exactly the same and fooling her, among others, into thinking that a normal cycle was occurring, that young was replacing old, and life replacing death, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. (41)

As with Tsing, Danticat reminds us that becoming attentive to what life abounds even in a damaged landscape means first to observe and change one’s perspective. Doing this allows Gaëlle to tune into the plight of the frogs and the recognition that what is happening, their die-off, is not part of a normal cycle. Additionally, when Gaëlle becomes attentive to the frogs, there is a sensory awareness that follows. When she first goes out in search of the frog carcasses, the text describes the textures and temperatures of the surrounding environment. The sun was hot, “blazing” in the sky, the pebbles under foot felt “icy,” Gaëlle walked on them cautiously, tenderly, “...as she would a bed of dirt or grass,” (42). Then she finds her first frogs.

She noticed a green-horned frog that looked like a leaf with horns. Its legs were like a chicken’s and it seemed to be almost frowning. Soon after, she found a brown dwarf jungle frog, which had the more ordinary look of a frog, except for what seemed like a long middle finger on its hind legs. (42)

Noticing these frogs, their details, their various colors, naming them even, is to connect with them and care about them. In this way Gaëlle becomes aware of and feels responsible for these nonhuman community members who are pivotal species in Haiti, and who are threatened.

Some villagers in Ville Rose, however, like the octogenarian Suzanne Boncy, do not take it upon themselves to connect with the frogs, but rather, they see the frog die-off as a bad omen. As Boncy says to a group of neighbors and villagers one day, “these frogs dying earlier this year

weren't a good sign, either," (53). For the town mechanic Elie, however, the frog die-off is not necessarily all bad because some of the frogs are poisonous. In fact, he knows of at least one crazy woman who ate a frog. He tells the story this way:

Knew a crazy woman once. Would catch small frogs by the river, throw them in her mouth. Smaller and more colorful they are, more poison frogs have in them. Women died from this, everyone said so. Better for the children and for crazy people the frogs are not around. (53)

If the first part of this story with the woman catching frogs sounds familiar, it is because it is reminiscent of Gaëlle's morning ritual collecting dead frogs who have baked to death in the heat wave. The story, however, becomes Gaëlle's story in a more direct way when later in the chapter, while going for a walk near her house, she comes across a small, dead, bright red koki frog. Without thinking she stuffs it in her mouth. As she is trying to swallow this little frog's slick carcass she thinks about the more physical parts of pregnancy that have to do with bodily fluids and disgusting smells. She also thinks about the child in her womb. A doctor had told her that according to a sonogram, her unborn child had what appeared to be a cyst growing in its chest and along its spine. The child would die at birth, the doctor had warned. As Gaëlle is thinking of this she is also trying to quell the growing wave of nausea she feels at having just eaten the dead frog.

The very air that floated around her disgusted her. And sometimes, even though she had decided to keep it, the child growing inside her repulsed her too. (59)

Gaëlle is articulating a very embodied experience of pregnancy that includes a mix of sensory experiences and emotions, primarily the sensation of disgust at her changed body and the alien child growing inside of her. Surprisingly, she does not end up vomiting; she keeps the frog carcass down, swallowing it, "...until she could almost feel it land, somewhere deep inside of her," (59). Now, in her belly, she has the frog carcass together with her unborn child.

Two types of animals were now inside of her, in peril: her daughter, Rose, and now this frog. Let them fight it out and see who will win. (59)

I notice how the text portrays both Rose and the dead frog as being in “peril,” or precarity. The whole story of the frogs, in fact, is one of precarity. They are in peril; they are dying. Rose is also in peril. But there is something about consuming the frog, which interestingly could have put Gaëlle’s own life in peril (koki frogs are poisonous!) that leads to Gaëlle’s conclusion that there is nothing further she can do. Let what will happen happen. Strangely enough, it is Rose that wins out. After the frog-eating episode, Gaëlle’s stomach settles. She even has a bit of an appetite. The next evening, her baby daughter Rose is born and to the great surprise of readers anticipating the worst, the child is “...plump and gorgeous, a swirl of tiny curls covering her perfectly round head,” (61-62). On that same clear, starry night, as Gaëlle is weeping tears of joy at the miracle of her daughter’s healthy birth, her husband is shot to death while leaving his job at the radio station. The text states, “...people began to declare that his shooting was related to a new, urgent plague in Ville Rose, one that was even deadlier than the frogs: gangs,” (62).

Returning to a question at the beginning of this section (what is the way forward in the wake of such environmental precarity?), I wonder if the plague of frogs offers some insightful perspectives. One of the ways forward might be, first, to confront the precarity, to walk “attentively” as Anna Tsing writes, among the dead frog carcasses, to pick them up and really see and relate to them. Yet another might be to see that community is the way through precarity. As with mothering and the power of the community to mother Claire Jr. in the absence of her own mother, the way to confront precarity is together, in community with an expanded sense of who makes up that community, in this case the human and more-than-human world.

This is demonstrated in the novel when the theme of frogs returns in the form of a poem that Madame Louise reads to school children at the Ardin School. The poem is titled, “Le Soleil

et les Grenouilles,” which is an old tale by the French fabulist Jean de La Fontaine. The part of the tale that is excerpted in the novel is when the frogs protest the tyranny of the sun who has come to rule them too harshly. “What will we do if the Sun has children? / We can barely survive one Sun,” the poem asks. This tale connects to many ideas in the novel: the heat wave, for example, that is killing the frogs, but also it connects to ideas of colonialism with a tyrannical sun and the frogs recognizing that they will not survive the sun’s dominating rule, a reference to monarchical rule, unless they come together to challenge it. What is interesting about Danticat’s inclusion of this French Fabliaux story in the novel is the layers of meaning at play. There is the French colonial presence in this French tale recited in French to the school children; the colonial reach is present in schools, still educating children in Haiti. Yet, there is also the meaning of the tale that, in *this* context, in Ville Rose, what resonates is also the idea of community, that is, the frogs coming together as a community to confront a monarchical (but also it could be read as colonial) tyrannical problem. The way through precarity is in community.

Gaëlle’s connection with the frogs makes her stop and notice elements of the nonhuman world in a mindful way that recognizes the ecological community that she is part of. But this sense of connection also opens up a liminal space within which curious things are possible. In those moments of entanglement with the frogs, when she is in an auspicious, liminal “edge” space outside of her house in the fields away from the village and other humans, she is able to marvel at the vibrant diversity of the frogs. She develops a sense of maternal care for them, and she even consumes one of them, making her connection to the frogs complete. This brings to mind a conversation between Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing about the notion of the “Plantationocene” in which Haraway remarks that, “...the capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation.” In this way, perhaps it is a maternal kind of care, of

motherlove extended to the non-human world that can reforge connections to place, even as those connections might be fraught in regions like the circum-Caribbean. In the consumption of the dead frog, Danticat pulls together this idea of life accompanying death once again as the dead frog mingles, in Gaëlle's belly / womb, with the growing fetus. Then, when a reader assumes that Gaëlle might become extremely ill after eating the frog, strangely, Gaëlle does not. In fact, she gives birth to a healthy baby girl. This theme recurs throughout the novel: life and death, maternity, liminality and healing.

What makes liminal spaces, and particularly, passage through a liminal space, produce a physical and / or psychological sense of healing? In the circum-Caribbean context I think about the protective aspect of liminality, a transition space outside of established norms, in relation to maroon histories. When plantation economies, for example, established sites (plantations) that hierarchized human beings and non-human elements to create places of extreme violence, escaped enslaved people formed maroon communities outside of those sites, in peripheral / liminal mountainous and coastal spaces, often in nature. I am aware that ideas of nature and land are fraught and complicated in the circum-Caribbean and that Caribbean writers in the 20th century have grappled with the notion of place because plantation economies were so violent and, as Édouard Glissant has noted, they perpetuated continual ruptures of people from places. Not only that, but as Elizabeth DeLoughrey writes, the idea of what nature is also became fraught as imported cash crops like sugarcane and coffee became a part of the circum-Caribbean landscape as non-native plants shaping the local ecology. Some Caribbean writers,⁵² DeLoughrey notes, in their efforts to reconnect to a sense of place, turned to a veneration of folk traditions

⁵² One example would be Haitian author Jacques Roumain's *Les Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, a novel of the "peasant novel" genre in which protagonist Manuel returns to his native village in Haiti after working on a sugar plantation in Cuba. Upon his return to Haiti, he finds a village suffering from the effects of drought and a kind of apathy among the people. Over the course of the novel, he motivates the village to come together and find water through ideas of solidarity and the notion that going back to the land, reconnecting with it and cultivating it are so important. The idea here is a celebration of peasants, rural folks and bringing them back to a sense of relationship with the land.

descended from maroon communities living in those liminal spaces outside of plantation sites.

She writes:

A large body of Caribbean literature has sought to re-establish a sense of place outside of the plantocracy by recuperating African and Indigenous traditions maintained in Creole (or folk) epistemologies, in rural or in maritime communities, in the spaces of maroonage, and in the places where slaves and their descendants maintained their provision grounds," (267).

Sylvia Wynter's plot-plantation dichotomy is another opening to understand the importance of the idea of liminal spaces in a circum-Caribbean context. The plot, she explains, was a small piece of land given to enslaved Africans to grow their own food so that enslavers would not have to feed them, thereby maximizing profits. This plot, however, became a site of resistance as enslaved Africans, tapping into their traditional beliefs, practices and connections with land, created their own folk cultures from their relationship to these plots. Wynter anticipates and attends to the dangers of romanticizing the plot or a "return to the land" idea as she makes clear that, "...there is no question of going back to a society, a folk pattern whose structure has already been undermined by the pervasive market economy," (100). Rather, Wynter writes, "...we accept folk culture as a point outside the system where the traditional values can give us a focus of criticism against the impossible reality in which we are enmeshed," (100). These points outside of the system along with the spaces maroon communities created are, as scholar Crystal Eddins notes, important sites of resistance and freedom.

Indeed, marronnage was not just an act of flight, but created a liminal space between freedom and slavery where revolutionary potential could be nurtured, and the fullness of humanity expressed.

Katherine McKittrick's reading of the "garett" space within which formerly enslaved woman

Harriet Jacobs / Linda Brent⁵³ hid for years is another example of the power of liminal spaces. As

⁵³ Harriet Jacobs was an escaped formerly enslaved woman who fled north, became free and published her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Jacobs was born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina sometime between 1813 and 1815, and as a young woman was under constant harassment and threat by the enslaver known as James Norcom (she names him Dr. Flint in her autobiography) to whom she had been sold. When he threatened to sell her children into slavery, in a desperate attempt to protect them, she hid herself in her grandmother's garett, a crawl space so small she could not fully stand in it. The garret was in

McKittrick writes, this confined space became a “loophole of retreat,” a liminal place where Jacobs / Brent was both confined but, in a way, also free and shielded from some of the violence of slavery, including Norcom’s harassment.

The fact that Gaëlle wanders in the fields outside of her house, in edge / liminal spaces in order to recuperate a sense of connection to the land, to the frogs and the more-than-human ecological community and to perhaps, find a kind of “loophole of retreat” - this is not an accident. On the other side of things, it is also not accidental that the site where Martine is raped in Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a sugar cane field - a site of violence. Put simply, there is power in liminality and healing in liminal spaces - Gaëlle finds that when she takes the time to walk among the frogs, caring for them, letting them nourish her and carry her through a healthy pregnancy.

The Maternal Sea

In *Claire of the Sea Light*, another entanglement with the more-than-human world involves the sea. In fact, the sea takes on a life of its own in the novel, becoming its own kind of character in a way that makes me think of Édouard Glissant’s articulations of landscape as not the externalizing of an interior state of mind, but rather landscape as a character itself. In *Claire of the Sea Light*, one example of the sea as its own character is when Max Jr., in a contemplative moment, thinks this about the sea:

People like to say of the sea *lanme pa kenbe kras*, the sea does not hide dirt. It does not keep secrets. The sea was both hostile and docile, the ultimate trickster. It was as large as it was small, as long as you could claim a portion of it for yourself. You could scatter both ashes and flowers in it. You could take as much as you wanted from it. But it too could take back” (199).

There is an acknowledgement, in these lines, of the sea as a trickster character but also as its own force, as an entity of life and death, creation and destruction. Describing the sea in this way

such close proximity to Norcom’s house that while she hid there for a full seven years she was able to watch Norcom through the window of the garret without being seen herself.

emphasizes not just the agency of the ocean, but it also stands in stark contrast to the Euro-American colonial obsession with classifying, categorizing and controlling nature. This is something Caribbean literary scholar and poet Derek Walcott thinks about in his essay “Terra Incognita” in which he writes about the ways in which Caribbean landscapes, islands and oceans, themselves, resist the colonizer’s attempts to name, know and fix in place ideas of what the Caribbean is. Walcott writes:

What’s with naming islands if they are going to be “discovered” and renamed? These islands are hard to know. Names are arbitrary. They are there to distinguish one island from the next, which is difficult because the islands repeat. No name, then - otherwise they will all resemble one another. An unknown island, not important. So where to approach it? A deserted beach that already has a fisherman’s bathhouse and fish-cleaning shed? Above it, telephone poles and the litter of vacation people. That’s good enough, for the beach has that thick and sultry anonymity of all the beaches in the archipelago. And very few beaches’ names are known, far more remembered. No, turn and see where you have come from instead, so you’ll know where you are. You look at the ocean behind you and accept that you are nowhere.” (51).

Compellingly, for Walcott the islands, the sea - they have an ‘anonymity,’ and an opacity to them. The islands repeat, there is no point in naming them, and in order to know where you are you must look at where you came from. All of this disorients colonial logics of place, what McKittrick calls “traditional geographies,” that would seek to name, claim and map out the Caribbean on a spatio-temporal plane that moves only forward on a linear timescale, conveniently de-emphasizing, even refusing, a real reckoning with colonial histories.

In Danticat’s novel there is great respect for the ocean - for its ‘trickster’ nature and its ability to bear both ‘flowers’ and ‘ashes.’ For Claire Jr. the sea is a special place because it was a special place for her mother. Claire Jr. muses:

Her father often took her to the cemetery to visit her mother, but if it had been up to her, if she had had a say, they would have been visiting her mother at sea, because her mother would have been buried at sea. It was clear that her mother had liked the sea. (218)

Claire Jr. also likes the sea, but she has a fear of it, too - that it might one day take her father to his death while he is out at sea fishing. But if the sea disappeared completely, she would miss it.

...she would miss its ever-changing sounds: how it sometimes sounded like one long breath. And sometimes like a cry. She would miss thunderclaps and how the lightning that came with them momentarily

brightened the farthest-out reaches of the sea. She would also miss the sea's colors: the turquoise in the distance and its light-blue ripples up close, the white foam at the peaks of the waves. She would miss the surge of high tide and the retreat of low tide, the milky or rosy clouds of dawn and the orange mists of sunsets. She would miss driftwood, sea glass, seashells, especially the baby ears and buttercups. She would miss throwing stones into the sea and seeing how far they would go. She would even miss the slimy seaweed that the sea spewed out, more during the warmer months of the year. She would also miss smelling the sea, which sometimes reminded her of wet hair. (220)

This is such a profoundly astute observation of the ocean in all of its rich moods

Danticat equates the ocean with mothering in important ways in the novel. We learn in *Claire*, for example, that Claire's very name (Claire Limye Lanme) means 'of the sea light,'⁵⁴ and we know that she gets this name when her mother, fully pregnant with her, decides to skinny dip in the sea one calm night. In a touching moment in the narrative, Nozias (Claire's father) remembers himself sitting in the gently rocking sloop, watching his wife swimming among bioluminescent algae and silvery schools of fish, absolutely mesmerized by her beauty. At this moment she tells Nozias what the name of their child should be: Nozias Limya Lanme if it is a boy or Claire Limya Lanme if it is a girl. So luminous is she that when Nozias sees her swimming in the sea he sees the image of Lasirèn (see fig. 1).⁵⁵

And in that moment she was his Lasirèn, his long-haired, long-bodied brown goddess of the sea. With an angelic face like a bronzed Lady of Charity, Lasirèn was, it was believed, the last thing most fishermen saw before they died at sea, her arms the first thing they slipped into, even before their bodies hit the water. Like most fishermen he knew, Nozias, in his boat, next to his trap, net, hook, line, and tin can full of bait, kept a burlap sack in which he had a mirror, a comb, and conch shell, an amulet to attract Lasirèn's protection. (34)

Deborah O'Neil and Terry Rey, who examine a fervent following of the Catholic Saint Philomena in a seaside Haitian community in their article, "The Saint and Siren: Liberation Hagiography in a Haitian Village," articulate some of the strategic ways in which Haitian communities have fused Catholic and Voodoo traditions together to serve their spiritual needs,

⁵⁴ "Limye" means light and "lanme" means sea in Haitian Creole

⁵⁵ Lasirèn is a Haitian Voodoo Goddess and one of the manifestations of Mami Wata, or an African Water Goddess sometimes known as 'Mother Water.' She appears across the African diaspora and is often depicted as being half fish or whale and half woman with the ability to both heal and to entice fishermen and others at sea away to the bottom of the ocean. She is also a complicated figure, often depicted with a mirror to symbolize not just her beauty but her vanity as well.

something that has been termed “folk Catholicism.” Although they write specifically about Saint Philomena’s influence on a small community in Haiti, she is a spiritual figure who is connected to Lasirèn, as the authors indicate when they write:

St Philomena shares with St Anne an affiliation with maternity and an ancient mother goddess figure, manifest in Voudou in the cohort of Ezili spirits that includes Lasyrenn. Exili, Voudou's most popular female Iwa, whose multiple incarnations represent love and beauty, sensuality and fertility, motherhood and strength, is most strongly associated with the sea, in her incarnation as Lasyrenn, where in the most marked inscription of Mami Wata spirituality, devotion to a mermaid spirit that is widespread in West Africa and throughout the African diaspora, is manifest in Haitian Voudou," (179-180)

Significantly, Nozias sees his wife Claire in the sea fully pregnant as an incarnation of Lasirèn *and* “...a bronzed Lady of Charity,” - both the Voudou mermaid Goddess of the sea and a version of the Catholic Virgin Mary. Another instance of this occurs when Nozias takes his daughter Claire Jr. to visit her mother’s grave when the girl is just 5 years old. Claire and her father are walking toward the cemetery.

They passed a Voudou temple whose outside walls were covered with images of Catholic saints doubling as Iwas, and Nozias pointed out, just as he had many times before, the glowing face of a pale Mater Dolorosa with a sword aimed at her heart. “The goddess of love,” he said, “Ezili Freda. Your mother liked her.” (11)

The folk Catholicism at play here depicts a convergence of Voudou and Catholic religious iconography converging as Catholic saints “doubling” as Iwas. The goddess of love, Ezili, who is described as a kind of Catholic saint or Virgin Mary (a “pale Mater Dolorosa) is then linked to Claire Jr.’s mother. There is a blending of worlds happening here, and Claire, Nozias’s wife, is depicted as profoundly connected not just to the sea, but to multiple maternal saint and folk figures, again sidestepping colonial tendencies to subscribe to singular narratives.

The ocean, itself, signifies motherhood in that we float in our mother’s amniotic fluid, also a saline body of water, until we are born. In this way the ocean is a kind of womb, and both could be considered liminal spaces, spaces that exist in the in-between. At one point in the novel Claire, who is always wondering about her mother, the woman who died giving birth to her, is floating in the sea, her ears half submerged in the salt water, and she is, “...listening to both the

world above and beneath the water, she yearned for the warm salty water to be her mother's body, the waves her mother's heartbeat, the sunlight the tunnel that guided her out the day her mother died..." (215). Claire equates the sea water with her mother's body and, in this way, equates motherhood with the great ambivalence of the ocean, one that is creative and destructive (something Claire knows well because she was born on the day her mother died) and one that resists attempts to fully know it. Claire, try as she might, will never *know* her mother. But what she *does* do is find moments of meaningful contemplation about her mother that unfold in liminal spaces like the ocean. Here she is, floating in the sea, part of both the water and the air, in her own in-between space, and here she has a moment to long for her mother, to miss her and attempt to connect with her, a Lasirèn maternal figure, in the waves. This connection is articulated even more clearly toward the end of the novel when Claire, who has run away from her father because she does not want to be sent away as a restavèk, is at a crossroads and must decide whether to return to her father or to keep running. She is at the top of a hill overlooking her village, again, in a kind of liminal, in-between space between the sea and sky. She can see neighbors, friends and community members far below moving around like ants. Suddenly she feels a sensation:

A warm burst of air brushed past her, rising, it seemed, at that very moment, from the sea. It reminded her of a sensation she sometimes had, of feeling another presence around her: of noticing only one branch of a tree stir while the rest remained still, of hearing the thump of invisible feet landing on the ground, of seeing an extra shadow circling while she was playing wonn. She would sometimes feel the gentle strokes of fingers traveling up and down her back, then lingering ever so lightly at the nape of her neck. She couldn't always pin down the moment these things would start, then stop, so she would call them *rev je kle*, waking dreams" (236).

This maternal presence, which lovingly strokes the back of Claire's neck, in this instance, rises as a cloud of air from the sea, from the most maternal element, from her mother, Lasirèn.

Multi-temporal Engagements

Liminal moments of healing and connection are not just created through multi-species engagements, they are also created through the inclusion, in the narrative, of multi-temporal time frames. The first thing to notice about multi-temporal engagements is that, although the entirety of the novel takes place within the span of 24 hours, the narrative does not move in a linear fashion. It begins with Claire Jr. turning seven years old on the same day that a rogue wave hits the village. It is this day that she decides to run away from home because she senses that, after years of mulling it over and stalling, today her father Nozias will send her to live with Madame Gaëlle. The narrative follows this main storyline that involves Nozias, Gaëlle and other villagers looking for Claire Jr., but along the way it deviates into side stories, flashbacks, memories and backstories. The first section of the novel, for example, begins with Claire Jr. turning seven years old, but then the narrative goes backward in time describing events that happened on her sixth, fifth, fourth and third birthdays. Then the novel moves, as if moving from thought to thought, from when Claire Jr. was three to when she was born. The novel describes her traumatic entry into the world when Nozias became a father and widower in the same moment and Claire Jr. lost her mother forever. As the novel develops, the narrative moves back and forth between different stories occurring in the past and present, weaving them together. There is the story of Bernard and his parents and how he ended up killed by gang members, the story of Gaëlle's pregnancy ten years ago with Rose, the story of Rose's death, the story of Max. Jr's return to Haiti after being abroad and having to face his own violent actions and the son he abandoned, and the story of Louise and her radio show "Di Mwen," (tell me). Additionally, there are myths and folklore, those timeless stories shared to teach some morality, that also get thrown into the mix.

There are also memories and hypothetical imaginings that are conjured along the way, adding to a narrative that refuses a strictly linear timeline in favor of an explosion of multi-temporal stories. One of the most heartfelt scenes in the novel is Nozias's memory of his wife when he takes her out fishing on his sloop and she decides to slip off her clothes and go for a night swim in the most beautiful, calm, bioluminescent sea. This memory is all the more precious because, as the text makes clear, it is all Nozias has left of her - there is not even a picture of her floating around anywhere because it would have cost money to have a photograph taken at that time, and money is something Nozias never has. There is only a headstone that serves as a marker for where she is buried.

For many circum-Caribbean writers, the question of memory can be central to a text, and yet memory is a funny, elusive thing. Memory can be haunting, unreliable, and frustrating. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Édouard Glissant explains the importance of generating and spurring a collective memory among the people of Martinique who have been so very cut off from their past through the erasures that slavery enacted, including dispossessing enslaved peoples of their homelands, families, tribes, languages, and even own names. Memory is, thus, wrapped up in trauma, at least in Martinique and other areas of the circum-Caribbean region. As Danticat herself writes in *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*:

There are many ways that our mind protects us from present and past horrors. One way is by allowing us to forget. Forgetting is a constant fear in any writer's life. For the immigrant writer, far from home, memory becomes an even deeper abyss. (65)

In this way, remembering is traumatic, not just because of deeply painful histories of slavery and colonialism, but because remembering is often simply not possible. Where memory should be, instead, deeply painful erasures, blank spots, silences. Glissant advocates for the need for Martinicians to revive or invent and nourish a collective memory through writers, using

imagination, to galvanize this collective memory and, ultimately, to tell the people who they are. Yet, as Danticat points out in the above quote, forgetting is also equally fraught.

Remembering is an ambivalent action across Danticat's novels. As Danticat writes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for Martine Caco, a woman who was raped in Haiti and who moves to New York to outrun those memories, they stay with her and they are, ultimately, what kill her. The memory of the trauma leads her to stab her own stomach and unborn child multiple times. Memory is also something that is difficult to outrun because, although events may have happened in the past, memories are things we carry with us and that impact us in the present, as Sophie Caco expresses in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* when she notes, "I come from a place where breath, eyes and memory are one, a place from which you carry the past like the hair on your head," (pp). In this way Sophie is describing Haiti, her birthplace, as a place in which memory is pivotal because it is not forgotten, rather, it is part of you wherever you go.

In *Claire of the Sea Light*, memory is also painful. Gaëlle's memory of her dead daughter Rose, her dead husband Laurent, these are painful memories. Memory, however, is also a liminal space of connection. Memory can be the vehicle through which it is possible to access moments of connection between mothers and children or family members when one of them has passed away or is otherwise separated from the other. This is the case with Nozias and his memory of his wife skinny dipping in the sea. It is also the case with Gaëlle, whose daughter Rose was killed in a moto accident. She also thinks about her memories of Rose - of her unusual birth, for example, and how she was born absolutely perfect. She wonders what her daughter might have been like at all of the ages that Claire reaches in the text, which is not so much an exercise of memory as it is of imagination. In some ways memory and imagination are related to one another

as they both involve creating liminal realities and spaces that do not currently exist, but within which it is possible to think about and reconnect with a loved one.

there are certain sites in the novel that are steeped in memories and history, for example a dilapidated French colonial castle that a pregnant Gaëlle and Laurent drive past as they take a joy ride to escape the heat of the day, and Ville Rose's lighthouse named Anthère Lighthouse. the castle is a set of ruins in the oldest part of town that had been built in the years when Haiti was still a French colony. Originally, the castle was a gift for Napoleon's sister Pauline.

The castle, one of the town's most remarkable relics, had been left unfinished in 1802, when Pauline Bonaparte's husband died from yellow fever and she sailed with his body back to France. Some of its stone walls remained, although no one had seen fit to make any type of official monument out of them. Tubers were planted where Pauline's drawing rooms and boudoir should have stood. Cows and goats grazed around them. Children played afternoon soccer games in what would have been the zoological park meant to house Pauline's large menagerie of wild native plants," (47)

The site of the castle, a colonial relic of the past, is ever present in this landscape and serves as a reminder of the colonial past but, as the text notes, it is a faded ruin within which children are playing and animals are grazing. A few pages later in the novel, after driving past this site, Gaëlle tells Laurent that she knows what their baby will be named: Rose, for Sò Rose, an ancestor of Gaëlle's. Laurent worries that the name Rose is too common, but Gaëlle assures him that it is a good name: the baby would be named after an ancestor, a city and a saint. Maternal connections stretch across generations and across time. This is something that LaKisha Michelle Simmins notes in her research looking at themes of Black maternal loss in slave narratives. She articulates what she calls a "Black sense of time" and a "Black notion of maternal embodiment that foregrounds Black women carrying the past within the body. Black maternal stories collapse generations through a never-forgetting perspective and through deep connections between grandmothers, mothers and daughters," (318). Simmins writes:

I define Black feminist relationality as always in conversation with the dead and with the past. Black women understand pregnancy and infant loss within a wider relational model that collapses notions of time, space, and generation.

This connection is present here with Gaëlle, her daughter Rose and their maternal ancestor Sò Rose. In this way, part of the triumphant resilience of mothering in Haiti is that the parent-child connections that are fragmented, the mothers who are estranged or dead, the children who might be killed - despite the dislocations and death, these relationships endure in the liminal spaces of memory. Against all odds, in spite of the separations that seem (and are?) most visible and permanent (death), the connections, the memories, the love is still there. The past we carry with us, like the hair on our head.

Conclusion, or how there are many Haitis

It is true that Edwidge Danticat is not a journalist. She is so much more than that. Her fiction provides the “window” Susan Smallwood is talking about - when statistics and numbers are not enough to fully explain death, we need something else, a different way to better understand tragedy in ways that fill in what statistics cannot fully articulate. Danticat’s novel *Claire of the Sea Light*, published just three years after the massive 2010 earthquake in Haiti, takes readers into the complicated, intricate and intertwined lives of villagers living in a humble fishing village in Haiti battered by its own natural disaster - a freak wave that kills a fisherman in the very first paragraph of the book. What I have thus far not emphasized, however, is that Ville Rose, the fishing village, is as imaginary as Macondo was in *Cien Años de Soledad*. These are both made up villages that manage to offer a glimpse into life in their respective cultural contexts that is *more real* (more in-depth, more humanized, more nuanced) than most news stories of both Colombia and Haiti.

I have attempted to outline how Danticat explores acts of mothering in *Claire of the Sea Light* with particular attention paid to how these acts continue to be haunted by the afterlife of colonialism as they unfold in present-day precarity. That precarity, I suggested, is apparent in the way that death permeates the narrative. But the novel is not just about death. It is also about life. Life also permeates the narrative and with it, resilience and hope. I also gestured to how Danticat emphasizes moments of connection between humans, land, sea and more-than-human creatures emphasizing the idea that the community is made up of human and more-than-human members alike. Finally, I thought about multi-temporal time frames in the narrative and how they create liminal moments of observation, reflection and connection across space and time allowing for healing and reconnection.

Ultimately, though, I wish to conclude with an idea that I think is also a powerful part of Danticat's novel. I offered the idea of Danticat's novel as a counter narrative to flat, tired stereotypes of Haiti and mothering practices in Haiti that are misread as "bad" mothering. I want to draw attention here to how Danticat's novel also resists the idea that there could be one totalizing story that might definitively describe what mothering is and how life is lived in Haiti. *Claire of the Sea Light* is but one novel, but the way it is written speaks to the idea that it is vital to understand that it is multiple voices, perspectives and stories that help us get closer to understanding the complexity of Haiti. The novel explores life in Ville Rose through the first-person perspective of multiple characters, meaning that there are multiple narrators telling their stories. Not only this, but Danticat's writing style emphasizes the idea that there are multiple ways to understand an event.

Take the opening paragraph of the novel, which describes the natural disaster that takes the life of a fisherman.

The morning Claire Limyè Lanmè Faustin turned seven, a freak wave, measuring between ten and twelve feet high, was seen in the ocean outside of Ville Rose. Claire's father, Nozias, a fisherman, was one of many who saw it in the distance as he walked toward his sloop. He first heard a low rumbling, like that of distant thunder, then saw a wall of water rise from the depths of the ocean, a giant blue-green tongue, trying, it seemed, to lick a pink sky. Just as quickly as it had swelled, the wave cracked. Its barrel collapsed, pummeling a cutter called *Fifine*, sinking it and Caleb, the sole fisherman on board. (3)

This paragraph gives a sense of Danticat's writing style, which dances between journalistic, observational description and lyrical, what some might term marvelous realism. Consider the freak wave. Danticat gives us a concrete estimate of the size of the wave (measuring between ten and twelve feet) as well as the indisputable facts of its effects: the destruction of a boat and the drowning of a man. This style of writing is almost journalistic - it is reporting a natural disaster. This is in line with Danticat's thoughts in *Create Dangerously* on her role as writer. For her, being a writer means being a witness, and witnessing is about conveying what one sees, the observable facts. But in the above passage from *Claire of the Sea Light* do we not also get a bit of fancy and magic as well? Perhaps we get it with Claire, whose surname conjures legendary German knowledge-seeker Faust and his magical dealings with the devil. Perhaps we get it with the image of the wave as a "giant blue-green tongue" rolling upward to lick a pink sky. Readers who have read both *Create Dangerously* and Danticat's other non-fiction work *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* will know how influenced she is by Gabriel García Márquez, famed Colombian magical realism writer.⁵⁶

Magical realism, a term first coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 was initially used to describe a new form of European artistic expression that emphasized the magical, fantastical and bizarre nature of the objects and events of our quotidian lives. Between the 1920s and the 1950s and through the so-called "Boom" literary period in Latin America, magical realism took hold in the works of acclaimed Latin American authors - not just Márquez but

⁵⁶ See, for example, her close reading of the opening paragraph of *Cien Años de Soledad* in *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* (67-69).

others, for example Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. Magical realism, as a literary technique, invites extra-real and fantastical elements such as flying humans and talking ghosts into what would otherwise be realistic settings and stories. Without hesitation the characters in the narratives accept these strange, magical events as being normal, everyday parts of life. In Caribbean contexts, which include both Haiti and coastal Colombia, marvelous realism, a strand of magical realism elaborated by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier in his novel *El Reino de Este Mundo* extends magical realism with a focus on Latin America, the Caribbean and the mixing of Indigenous, African and European cultures unique to the region in ways that make everyday occurrences of life seem marvelous to the outsider because of what this cultural mixing generates. In *Create Dangerously* Danticat explains marvelous realism, or the ‘real marvelous’ as she calls it in this way.

The real marvelous, which we have come to know as magic realism, lives and thrives in past and present Haiti, just as Haiti’s revolution does. The real marvelous is in the extraordinary and mundane, the beautiful and the repulsive, the spoken and the unspoken. It is in the enslaved African princes who believed they could fly and knew the paths of the clouds and the language of the forests but could no longer recognize themselves in the so-called New World. It is in the elaborate *vèvès*, or cornmeal drawings, sketched in the soil at Vodou ceremonies to draw attention from the gods. It is in the thunderous response from gods such as Ogoun, the god of war, who speak in the hearts of men and women who, in spite of their slim odds, accept nothing less than total freedom. (103)

In the opening lines of *Claire of the Sea Light* there is a noticeable mix of the observational and the fanciful. María Alonso argues in her 2012 article “Marvellous Realism and Female Representation from the Caribbean Diaspora,” that while Danticat does employ elements of the fantastical in her fiction she also provides rational, empirical explanation for the events. In doing so, Alonso argues that Danticat creates a tension between the folkloric elements and rational explanations of her text, which she negotiates as a diasporic writer somewhat separated from the culture she is trying to write about. In this way, Alonso concludes that Danticat is

neither a magical realist nor marvelous realist writer, but rather, Alonso writes, "...it seems that a third literary mode is created, where the opposition between what is real and what is fantasy is counteracted in one way or another by offering an explanation for the supernatural" (62). This certainly seems to be the case in the introductory paragraph of *Claire of the Sea Light*, which combines empirical observations of the rogue wave with magical musings of its sky-licking tongue.

What I would add, however, is that while Danticat provides explanations for the supernatural events, she does not favor any one explanation. Rather, there are multiple explanations and interpretations of events that she lets co-exist. For example, related to the frog die-off, there is never one definitive reason that explains why this event is happening. Aside from rising temperatures, Madame Boncy points out that in the town's weekly newspaper there is a story about the unusual frog situation giving a scientific explanation as to why the frogs are dying.

The article in the paper had been written by a herpetologist who had come all the way from Paris to uncover the reasons for the frogs' dying. According to Madame Boncy, the herpetologist had stated that, given his studies of the condition of the frog carcasses and the dirt and water samples he'd taken of their environment, and given the climate and blistering temperatures in Ville Rose that summer, the frogs had probably died from a fungal disease caused by the hotter-than-usual weather. (54)

This is a possible explanation given for the frog deaths, but there is never really any consensus or finality as to whether this is the true reason for what is going on. There are other such examples in the text of situations that are not fully explained by science, as if a scientific explanation would only be a partial explanation as to what is going on. Other examples include the rogue wave at the beginning of the novel, which is never really explained. Max Jr. reminisces, however, on his mother's explanation for the rogue waves that occasionally hit Ville Rose. "Lasirèn, she said, made her presence known by swilling a wave several feet, whenever she craved human company," (198). Another would be Gaëlle's pregnancy, which a medical doctor

had said would result in a deformed or even dead fetus, something that does not at all come to pass. There is also the example of Max Jr. who sees something so strange one night he is not even sure that he really saw it.

...he was sitting alone on the gallery of the old Anthère lighthouse when he thought he saw a supernova exploding above the sea. It was so dazzling that he could make out the even edges and emission line, even after closing his eyes. That's when he also thought he saw the night sea swirl into a massive funnel, as if a mid-ocean whirlpool had come near the shore. Then the same waters quietly retreated - a tsunami in reverse - the waves turning into liquid mountains. He stood up, pressing his ribs into the lighthouse railing until he saw what he believed was part of the seafloor, a mountain-size ridge with reefs and sandbanks stripped bare for miles. Then just as quickly, the waves buckled and the water collapsed, hastily covering the ocean floor, as if nothing had taken place. He had wondered then whether he was in shock, or overtired, or hallucinating. But now he believed that he had neither dreamed nor imagined all of this, that it had actually happened. (198)

Max Jr. witnesses a series of strange, natural phenomena occurring one after the other (a supernova, an ocean funnel and some kind of reverse tsunami) all at once. These are all recognizable phenomena but to happen in succession as they do in the narrative is on the edge of believable. The text also creates ambivalence as to whether or not these phenomena occurred. On the one hand Max Jr. "thought" he saw what "he believed" to be these phenomena. On the one hand he wondered whether he was in "shock" or "overtired" but on the other hand, "he now believed that he had neither dreamed nor imagined all of this, that it had actually happened."

In one way, the lack of one definitive explanation makes room for multiple perspectives, interpretations and ways of understanding events. This is important because it signals that there are multiple ways to understand events *and* it honors the mythical, folkloric and marvelous realism storytelling elements that are central to Danticat's artistic expression. Just as there is no one totalizing story of what Max Jr. actually did or did not see that night, there is also no totalizing story of what "good" or "bad" mothering is in Haiti let alone what life is like in Haiti. It is so richly complex.

In *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives*, Gina Athena Ulysse writes that there is not just one Haiti, there are many.

There was the one that, due to migration, was being re-created in the diaspora, and the one in the public sphere that continually clashed with the one in my memory. Or perhaps there were three Haitis. (xviii)

Edwidge Danticat writes, in *Create Dangerously*, that there are at least two different Haitis: the one before the 2010 earthquake and the one after. This, along with Danticat's celebration of multiple perspectives and community voices allows for an understanding of Haiti and Haitian mothering as multifaceted and complex versus singular and reductive. It allows for readers to see the fuller picture of mothering in Haiti and how colonial histories do still plague mothering.

It also gives readers a view of other Haitis that they might not know exist - a Haiti where, for example, while it might be a dangerous place to be a mother or a child it might also be a place where community and community parenting become a protective factor against some of life's precarity, a Haiti where there is also life, resilience and hope. Maybe this is hope generated from Black liminal geographies carved within, around and through traditionally-oriented spaces that have done so much violence (loopholes of freedom, plots and other edge spaces within, around and in spite of plantations, segregated spaces, disaster zones, etc.). In spite of everything (statistics, media representation, economic realities, national debt, predatory foreign aid organizations, turbulent political events, colonial histories, apathetic countries from the Global North, etc.) maybe there is also an afterlife of maroon histories, the unending and unbreakable resilience of creating and cultivating sites of enduring liberation and joy, and revolutionary mothering.

Chapter 3: Between States: Motherhood, Migration and Nation in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Patricia Engel’s *Infinite Country*

I had been asking the [border patrol] officers where [my child] HM was and no one would tell me anything. I asked many officers, and they would say, “Why would you bring her here? Why would you put her in danger? You are bad mothers.

- “The Secret History of the U.S. government’s family separation policy,”
The Atlantic

We need to take away children.

- Attorney General Jeff Sessions

Introduction:

On May 7th, 2018, under the direction of then Attorney General Jeff Sessions, the U.S. Department of Justice implemented what was termed a “zero tolerance” policy regarding undocumented people crossing the border. Undocumented people apprehended while crossing the border were to be criminally prosecuted. As Sessions plainly put it in a speech delivered to announce the policy:

Today we are here to send a message to the world: we are not going to let this country be overwhelmed. People are not going to caravan or otherwise stampede our border...I have put in place a “zero tolerance” policy for illegal entry on our southwest border. If you cross this border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you. It’s that simple. If you smuggle illegal aliens across our border, then we will prosecute you. If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law...This is a great nation—the greatest in the history of the world. It is no surprise that people want to come here. But they must do so properly. They must follow our laws—or not come here at all.

(Department of Justice, May 7th, 2018)

The dehumanizing way in which Sessions describes migrant people (as an otherized, looming threat, an invading “stampede” coming to take resources and jobs) is unsurprising. This is the kind of anti-immigration rhetoric that has resonated with a subsection of the American population, particularly leading up to the election of Donald Trump and throughout his presidency. What is noteworthy is the oversimplified language and bizarrely punitive tone of the

speech. Note how these remarks are directed at “you.” If “you” cross this border unlawfully, then “we” will prosecute you. There is an “us” versus “them” dichotomy being set up.

Furthermore, this language is threatening. The tactic is fear.

There is also Sessions’ claim that “it’s that simple.” There is a border. It is immutable. “You” cross it without papers and “you” will be prosecuted. Depending on how and with whom “you” cross the border, there will be consequences. There are no qualifiers here to speak of. Migrant people, according to Sessions, are all the same - they cross the border because...well, he does not articulate why. To be fair, later in this speech he does concede that many migrants come from “difficult situations,” but he does not elaborate on what those might be nor does he indicate that these “difficult situations,” should bear any weight on how migrants are received or treated in the U.S. Finally, he concludes with the fairy tale of U.S. exceptionalism: the idea that the U.S. is the greatest nation that ever was, implying that this is why migrants flock to the U.S. in droves - because it is some kind of promised land.

That this kind of rhetoric about immigration should be so completely devoid of nuance, complexity, perspective, and evidence-based research is frustrating, especially since this speech introduced a policy that had devastating material consequences for migrant families, notably the separation of children from their parents at the border. With regard to parent-child separations, under Sessions’ mandate the Justice Department facilitated the separation of at least 3,913 migrant children from their parents between July 1st, 2017 and January 20th, 2021⁵⁷. It seems obvious that a child forcibly taken from their parents would suffer psychological harm; recent studies have confirmed this. But what is becoming more clear is just how much harm: the

⁵⁷ This is according to a report by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security released June 8th, 2021 detailing the findings of the Family Reunification Task Force. Most alarmingly, the report found that of the 3,913 children separated from their parents during the Trump-era, at the time of the report there were, “...still 2,127 children for whom the Task Force does not have a confirmed record of reunification.”

research is unequivocally finding that not only has there been psychological damage done⁵⁸ to children and parents, but this damage is extensive and long-lasting.

Perplexingly, co-existing with this chaotic, punitive, state-sponsored child separation policy are beliefs that migrant mothers who take their children with them on the journey toward and across the U.S. border are “bad” mothers. As one woman featured in an article in *The Atlantic* told journalists when she was interviewed about her migration experience, after imploring Border Patrol agents to tell her where her child had been taken, the Agents’ response was to label her a “bad mother” for bringing her child across the border. On the other hand, when “transnational mothers,” or migrant mothers who leave their children in the home country to work in an adopted country, undertake the journey across the border *without* their children, they are *also* viewed as “bad” mothers. Linda Matthei, in her research on Garifuna⁵⁹ women’s experiences as transnational mothers, finds that the perception of transnational mothers is often negative. She writes:

Often the mere act of leaving children behind is described (either explicitly or implicitly) as damaging, neglectful, or even abusive; and the inference is invited that the mothers are detached or disengaged in some way (72).

In other words, a migrant mother is a bad mother when she takes her child across the border and a bad mother when she does not.

Reading Migration Literature is a way to attend to the fuller story of mothering and migration because official, state-sponsored narratives about immigration (Sessions’ ‘zero tolerance’ policy remarks, for example) can be painfully reductive, oversimplified and, at times,

⁵⁸ Physicians for Human Rights, for example, published a paper titled, “The Psychological Effects of Forced Family Separation on Asylum-Seeking Children and Parents at the US-Mexico Border: A Qualitative Analysis of Medico-Legal Documents.” In the paper the authors detail the findings of a study they conducted in which it was found that children and parents separated from one another at the border suffer from long-term symptoms of PTSD, major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, among other psychological issues.

⁵⁹ The Garifuna are a community descended from the mixing of Afro-descendants and Indigenous populations in Belize.

blatantly untrue. Reading stories about migration by authors who are migrants or who come from migrant families allows readers to inhabit the complexity of what it means to move across borders, most importantly what it *feels like* physically, emotionally and spiritually to migrate. I think it is crucial for readers to understand the particular *experiences* of migration because it is in these nuanced details that readers connect to the humanity of migration.

In this chapter I put Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Colombian-American Patricia Engel's *Infinite Country* (2021) in conversation with one another, paying particular attention to the theme of "transnational mothering" across both narratives. I argue that these Migration novels and their articulations of transnational mothering, read in the Post-Trump era of heightened anti-immigration sentiment, offer counternarratives to state-sponsored narratives of migrant mothers as "bad" *and* puncture the imagined fairy tale of the U.S. as a bounded, coherent nation that is "the greatest nation in the history of the world," as Jeff Sessions put it. Examining these particular novels written almost thirty years apart and from different cultural contexts (*Breath* in the Haitian-American context and *Infinite* in the Colombian-American one) allows me to trace comparative transnational mothering, and how it resonates both similarly and differently across cultural contexts between the mid 1990s and the 2020s, in the shadow of the Trump years.

I begin my investigation by thinking about how the nation and motherhood relate to one another as loaded and complicated interrelating concepts. I then think about "transnational motherhood," how it is theorized and how the two novels of this chapter engage this theme. I move on to focus on the novels themselves, offering a brief synopsis of each one. In the second half of the chapter, I move into literary analysis of how the transnational motherhood in each novel, with respect to their different cultural contexts, interrupts and challenges ideas of what

“good mothering” is, of what “home” is and, finally, of the nuances and ambivalences of the migration experience itself.

Motherhood and the Nation

In general terms, motherhood and the nation are, first and foremost, interrelated concepts etymologically - the very word nation derives from the Latin for ‘birth.’ A European social construct, the idea of the nation was born in Europe as feudal communities coalesced into centralized states under a consolidated power system and, as Benedict Anderson has articulated, under the imaginative impression that the citizens of a nation share certain characteristics from language to beliefs and values.

In the circum-Caribbean, the idea of the ‘nation’ has had complicated meanings and associations, especially when entangled with the idea of motherhood. It has been used by colonial powers to articulate the relationship between colonizer and colonized, with colonizer nations referring to themselves as ‘mother countries’ and colonies as dependent and child-like. As colonies in the Caribbean gained independence, ideas of nation also were correlated with sexist narratives that celebrated the ‘fathers of the nation’ and national heroes as men who fought for the liberation of their country (for example, Toussaint L’Ouverture of Haiti) while overlooking and erasing women’s contributions to liberation movements. Also relevant to this discussion is the idea that emerged during independence and anticolonial movements in the Caribbean, perhaps most specifically the Nègritude movement, looking to a romanticized or idealized Africa as a ‘mother’ figure.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ For more on motherhood and ideas of ‘Mother Africa’ see Giselle Anatol’s dissertation entitled “Mother countries, motherlands and mother love in 20th century Caribbean women’s literature,” in which she analyzes how traces of slavery reverberate in Caribbean women’s writing on mother / daughter themes. Specifically, she looks at notions of biological and adoptive mothers in Jamaica Kincaid’s fiction, romanticized ideas of Africa as a motherland and the theme of exile as it intersects with motherhood tropes.

But how, exactly, is motherhood, as a concept, thought of and used in nation-making? In Latin American contexts, Colombian Studies and Media Studies scholar María Elena Cepeda underlines that traditionally women's bodies have been linked to the 'body' of the nation. She writes:

Conventional images of women and the nation have often revolved around the representation of women as the traditional, backwards "body" of the nation, as suggested by terms such as *madre patria*, or "mother country." These depictions stand in stark contrast to those of men, who are frequently represented as the forward-moving agents of national progress...as bell hooks reminds us, sexuality has long served as a source of the gendered metaphors of colonization. Furthermore, sexuality does not merely provide the colonizing metaphor, it also contributes to the colonization process (and the process of national construction) itself. (12)

In this way, "nations," as a construct, have been imagined as women who are mothers serving as the metaphorical body of the nation, that is, providing future generations of citizens, while men advance the nation intellectually. I would point out here that for this idealized version of a "nation" to work, it is imperative that 1) women have children, and 2) women and their children stay within the boundaries of that given nation. Once women start migrating and people start developing different relationships and connections across borders to homelands and imagined homelands that transcend the idea of the nation, then the idea of a nation as a space with fixed borders is undermined.

Joane Nagel points out in her 2010 article "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," that central to the organization and formation of many nations and nation-states in Europe, the North Atlantic and elsewhere, including the Caribbean, has been the deployment of traditional, conservative notions of women as mothers of the nation producing future citizens, an idea often bolstered by restrictive views of women's sexuality and the regulating of women's reproductive rights. Interestingly, Nagel (who focuses mostly on the ways in which patriarchal understandings of traditional gender roles have shaped the creation of nations and nation-states) concludes that, because of the ways in which motherhood is used in

nation-making, resulting in the restriction of women's rights in that process, women may experience the idea of 'nation' very differently than men.

According to a Southern African Tswana proverb, 'a woman has no tribe' (Young 1993, p. 26). I wonder whether it might not also be true that a woman has no nation, or that for many women the nation does not 'feel' the same as it does to many men. We are not expected to defend our country, run our country, or represent our country. Of course, many women do these things, but our presence in the masculine institutions of state - the government and the military - seems unwelcome unless we occupy the familiar supporting roles: secretary, lover, wife. We are more adrift from the nation, less likely to be called to 'important' and recognized public duty, and our contributions more likely to be seen as 'private', as linked only to 'women's issues', and as such, less valued and acknowledged. (261)

If nations are ideas organized around patriarchal, sexist and racist understandings that see women as sexually pure, as mothers of the nation whose purpose is to ensure that the state endures through the generations without any recognition of women's many vital contributions that exist within and outside of the private sphere, then women may well 'feel' (as Nagel puts it) less connected to the nation. As this chapter progresses, I take Nagel's invitation to pay attention to how it *feels* to be in relationship with a nation and I extend it to think about how the novels I analyze in this chapter articulate *feelings* and *experiences* related to border-crossing, and to being in relationship with a nation as someone navigating nuanced experiences of citizenship, immigration status and belonging.

Such notions of *feeling* the nation remind me of Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid's 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*, which features protagonist Xuela Claudette Richardson, a young girl whose Carib mother died giving birth to her, and who must navigate her adolescence and adulthood in a Dominica still under colonial rule. At one point in the novel Xuela, who has never felt like she wholly belongs in Dominica or elsewhere, rejects the notion of belonging to a nation. She asserts, "I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe the people who do so," (226). Xuela, indeed experiences 'nation' in a particular way based on her intersecting identities, and this is Nagel's point. Women may experience 'nation' differently, especially in the ways in which they are

encouraged to participate (or not) in the formation of the nation, in how they are represented and reflected (or not) in the nation, in how they are recognized (or not) for their contributions to the nation and how their fundamental human rights are protected (or not) by the nation.

In Xuela's case, however, and in the circum-Caribbean more generally, the question of 'experiencing' the nation is not just one of gender, but of race and how the intersections of gender, race and space come together along with notions of motherhood to affect how different people experience a concept like the nation differently. Black Feminist Geography scholars have long been thinking about how race, gender and space intersect. As Camilla Hawthorne has outlined, disciplines like Geography have failed to fully grapple with how race, gender and space have shaped one another. She reminds us that Black geographies, in particular, have been historically devalued within Western intellectual traditions that mark Blackness as being antithetical to 'modernity' and Blackness as always being 'out of place.' Social relations, she emphasizes, are grounded in spatialized relations.

Along this same vein, Katherine McKittrick, in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, further elaborates on how place and space are not simply fixed, cartographic, bordered containers (what McKittrick calls 'traditional' or 'transparent' geographies) within which our lives unfold. Centering Black geographies, which are diasporic, rhizomatic, fragmented, embodied and situated within and across particular sites and particular times, McKittrick argues that these ways of knowing open up new possibilities for understanding place not as rooted in colonial ideas of linearity, progress or stasis (or the nation) but, rather, as rooted in movement, in memory, the body and other sites both visible and invisible. The very concept of the nation is one that was conceived in Europe and based on European colonial ideas that privilege white, patriarchal, racist and sexist notions and perspectives of place, she reminds

us. The nation, McKittrick suggests, is an example of ‘traditional’ geography in which a place is thought of as static, bounded and linear. And this is, as she puts it, a ‘terribly seductive’ idea. She writes:

Geography’s discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space “just is,” and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which “just is” not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are” (xi).

The terrible power of this idea of place and nation as static and immutable is that it induces a kind of amnesia. If a state or a nation is an unchangeable, tangible chunk of empty space that has always been and always will be, with defined borders and Anderson’s imagined community that brings people together (even though, as Nagel and McKittrick highlight, people of different intersecting identities experience nation differently), then it is tempting to accept the nation as it is without questioning the colonial violence that created it and the continued violence it imposes through enforcing its borders.

Part of why I am so drawn to Migration Literature and authors like Edwidge Danticat and Patricia Engel is that they confront ideas of mothering and the nation in their fiction. Their work poses questions such as: how have human histories and relationships shaped and been shaped by borders? What does it mean that nations invoke this idea of borders, which are boundaries that are both arbitrary and restrictive and how have these boundaries impacted mothers and families? How do women and, in particular, migrant women, Latinx women and Black women experience ‘nation’? I am also aware, however, that in thinking about race, space and nation with respect to mothering in Danticat’s (Haitian migration) and Engel’s (Colombian migration) novels, I am bumping up against a gap in the literature that falls somewhere between Black feminist scholarship that theorizes notions of racism, space and the body and Latinx Studies that theorizes notions of migration and border-crossing. As I delve into what migration and motherhood means

in both of these novels, my aim is to be carefully attentive to how characters in the novel *feel* and *experience* the nation, migration and motherhood in order to get a better understanding of insightful similarities, but also productive differences between Haitian and Colombian migration in the 1990s to the 2020s.

What makes the circum-Caribbean a particularly productive region to think about nation and motherhood is that ideas of 'nation' have long been challenged in the Caribbean in terms of what nation might mean and how those meanings may or may not apply to the unique situation of the Caribbean. Although the Caribbean is, in the post-colonial era, largely organized into independent nations (with the exceptions of territories and overseas departments like the British Virgin Islands, Guadeloupe and Martinique, among others) there are important Caribbean theorists and thinkers, notably Édouard Glissant, who have insisted on the Caribbean as a region of heterogeneous repetitions, bringing the region together in important ways that transcend national borders and boundaries. Again and again, the idea of the nation seems to be undermined and questioned in Caribbean contexts in terms of its inability to express the full complexity of the relationship between space, land, history and geography, something that Jill Toliver Richardson suggests in her study on the use of displacement in Caribbean-American narratives⁶¹. In the study Richardson finds that, "writers are searching for alternate models to nation that are not formulated with the same characteristics as Anderson's conceptualization of national identity" (17).

The idea of the nation and nation-formation has also been a particularly complex process in both Colombia and Haiti. Both countries began as Indigenous lands inhabited by Carib and Taino peoples in the case of Haiti and Indigenous peoples whose ancestors include the Carib

⁶¹ From Richardson's work *Narratives of Displacement: Evolution of the Caribbean-American Transnational Narrative*. (2008)

(known as the Kalina), the Quimbaya and the Chibchas in the case of Colombia. Haiti would be the point of first contact with European colonialism with Columbus's flagship vessel, the Santa María, wrecking on the reefs near Cap Haitien off the coast of Hispaniola on December 25th, 1492. From there, the plague of European colonization would spread. It devastated the Indigenous populations of the Circum-Caribbean and brought an influx of African peoples to coastal Colombia and Haiti through the Slave Trade that would last until 1804 in Haiti with Haitian Independence from France and 1851 in Colombia, more than forty years after Colombia gained independence from Spain in 1819. Colombian independence from Spain was followed by several iterations of a united, centralized nation-state. The first was Gran Colombia established in 1819 until 1831, a territory that included not just present-day Colombia but also present-day Venezuela and Ecuador. When the republic disbanded in 1830 due to the secession of Venezuela and Ecuador, the republic reorganized itself into what it called Nueva Granada, which included present-day Colombia and Panama. Between 1886 and 1900, a series of reforms centralized the Colombian federal government, allowing the country to finally become La Republica de Colombia. When, in 1903, Panama seceded, Colombia took on the shape that we recognize today.

Despite having been a former colony, Haiti's trajectory has been different from Colombia's in terms of its path to becoming a nation. It famously was the first nation of formerly enslaved people to successfully mount a rebellion against a colonizer and form its own independent Black Republic in 1804. It has also, however, suffered from division and conflict, specifically with its neighbor on the island of Hispaniola, what would eventually become the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic, under Spanish and French control at various points, was part of a unified Hispaniola Republic from 1822-1844 until it broke off and declared

independence. The relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic has been a tenuous one, culminating in violence (the Parsley Massacre, for example), infighting and racism.

I bring this up in order to remind us that nations are not static, immutable space-containers etched in stone, but rather contested, changing organisms whose borders have been drawn, challenged and re-drawn. Moreover, as Caribbean studies scholar Carol Boyce Davies underlines, the Caribbean region, from its geography to its histories of migration (both forced migration and voluntary) has always been a place evading the neat and tidy boundaries of fixed, bounded 'nations.' Take her use of the term Caribbean 'twilight zones,' for example, from her work *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones*. In this work, Davies critically examines questions of space, place, movement and migration in the Caribbean, beginning with the inherent fact that the Caribbean has, as a geographic region, almost always been a space in flux, a space of movement, an area constantly made and remade by many forces. "...Island space," she writes, "...indeed human land space is always unstable, fragile, always in the process of creation, subject to the motion of elements, violent storms, and natural movements of the earth" (34).

Aside from the Caribbean as a region made and remade by the natural environment, the Caribbean, she continues, has long been a place of changing and morphing spaces related to its diaspora. The diaspora, she reasons, is another such example of how the Caribbean extends and transcends itself across national borders to exist in what she terms 'twilight zones,' or "...spaces of transformation from one condition to another, one location to another, one reality to another, and the sometimes newly created emotional, physical, and conceptual space that then becomes another identified location." Little Haiti in Miami, for example, where Edwidge Danticat currently lives (interestingly, Patricia Engel also currently lives in Miami) would be a 'twilight

zone,' or a diasporic space where Haitians are gathering in a community speaking Haitian Creole, making Haitian food, selling Haitian wares and connecting in ways that supersede the nation.

Transnational Motherhood

Undermining the idea of national borders as fixed and immutable are transnational mothers. Transnational motherhood is a practice that many Circum-Caribbean and Latinx women have engaged in for decades. As Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila affirm in their study on the experiences of Latina transnational mothers, these mamas are mobilizing networks of care across borders. While these arrangements call for them to be physically separated from their children for long periods of time, this sacrifice enables mothers to find better paying jobs to secure their children's future. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila write:

Latina transnational mothers are improvising new mothering arrangements that are borne out of women's financial struggles, played out in a new global arena, to provide the best future for themselves and their children. Like many other women of color and employed mothers, transnational mothers rely on an expanded and sometimes fluid number of family members and paid caregivers. Their caring circuits, however, span stretches of geography and time that are much wider than typical joint custody or "other mother" arrangements that are more closely bound, both spatially and temporally (567).

In this way, transnational motherhood is about "improvising," and adapting, finding a way through a stifled home economy, or a troubled and unstable political situation at home to make ends meet for one's children. It should be underlined that transnational mothering requires an unimaginable amount of courage, self-sacrifice and dedication because, as many transnational mothers indicate, it is excruciatingly painful to leave a child behind⁶².

⁶² In Linda Matthei's study of Garifuna transnational mothers, for example, her research found that, "... these women struggled with the decision to leave children behind. All but one specifically mention how difficult it was" (72-73).

Not only this, but as Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila affirm, in leaving their children with other caregivers, often transnational mothers are challenging some of the deeply-seated cultural norms they, themselves, were raised with.

Being a transnational mother means more than being the mother to children raised in another country. It means forsaking deeply felt beliefs that biological mothers should raise their own children, and replacing that belief with new definitions of motherhood,” (557)

transnational mothers, at times, struggle with their decision to leave a child or children behind with a grandmother or a family friend in the home country because their inherent belief might be that the child should be raised by the biological mother. In her ethnographic study of transnational mothers of Mexican and Guatemalan descent in the upstate New York region, Melanie Nicholson found that some of her informants articulated anxiety about leaving their children with other caregivers in the home country. Nicholson wondered, however, whether this anxiety might also have something to do with the fact that dominant culture ideas of motherhood (white, middle class motherhood values) indicate that “good” mothers are always in close proximity to their children, in a one-on-one intensive parenting relationship.

When they express anxiety over the separation from their children, to what extent might their feelings be a response to a normative understanding of motherhood? Conversely, might these women, by the very act of seeking employment across national borders, be demonstrating a new kind of agency as *providers* with respect to mothering? (17)

In this way, Nicholson postulates that the transnational mothers of her study might have been responding to a fear that the mothering they were involved in was “bad” because it presented differently than white, middle class understandings of “good” mothers. In fact, as Gabrielle Oliveira writes in her chapter on transnational motherhood, one of the patterns that emerges from the literature on transnational motherhood is that transnational mothers, as painful as it is to leave their children behind, often think of their decision to become a transnational mother as “good” mothering, allowing them to build a future for their children.

One thing that transnational motherhood *does* facilitate, is a different, deterritorialized and fragmented understanding of home. This is something that Caribbean studies scholar Charmaine Crawford has written about. In her article, “African-Caribbean women, diaspora and transnationality,” Crawford underlines the idea that the diaspora, for many people, is about creating homes in different locations regardless of borders and origins. Crawford contends that, “For some immigrants, their transnationality disrupts meta-narratives of nation, nationhood and citizenship. ‘Here’ and ‘there’ are contested for those who maintain ties and connection to more than one place (real or imagined) at the same time.” Transnational motherhood facilitates these connections across borders in ways that undermine the idea of a unified nation with rigid borders. As Gabrielle Oliveira writes, “Transnational families...are more fluid; they do not belong to only one nation or place,” (404).

Transnational motherhood is the theme that I trace through the two novels I analyze in this chapter. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the protagonist Sophie Caco is a child of a transnational mother, Martine, who leaves Sophie behind in Haiti in the care of her Tante Atie while she goes to New York to work. In *Infinite Country*, Elena, who is an undocumented Colombian migrant living in the U.S., sends her baby Talia, who was born in the U.S., back to Colombia to be with her father and grandmother. Elena is undocumented working in the U.S. with three children, including Talia the newborn. She realizes quickly that it is impossible for her to continue working and care for her newborn infant at the same time, but it is imperative that she keep working because she provides an income not just for her children who are with her in the U.S. but also for her mother and husband back in Colombia. For this reason, she sends Talia back to Colombia to be raised by Mauro, her husband and Perla, her mother. Of her separation with her

daughter she understands that, “the price of being able to work to provide for the rest of the family was their estrangement,” (92).

There is something important about the kind of maternal care that happens through transnational mothering. It is different from “othermothering,” or the kind of community parenting Patricia Hill-Collins articulates, which involves people from the community (neighbours, aunts, grandparents etc.) who step in as caregivers when the mother figure is not able to. With othermothering, however, there is general proximity, while with transnational mothering, there is distance. Far from “bad mothering,” however, these acts of transnational mothering may be reimagining mothering from a day-to-day intensive form of care to arrangements and networks of care mobilized across distances and extending into the future as transnational mothers work to build a viable future for their child. As Melanie Nicholson reveals, in leaving their children in the home country to work abroad, many mothers she interviewed reasoned that, as difficult as this sacrifice was, it would be for the long-term economic benefits of the child. Additionally, many transnational mothers made arrangements to stay involved in their children’s lives even from far away through long-distance calls, video chats, care packages and more. Care packages and other forms of remittances that transnational mothers send to their children and their children’s caretakers are also an extremely important source of income and support for families in the home countries. RinaCohen GuidaMan, in their study of Jamaican transnational mothers in Canada, found that, “while the scars of migration in kinship networks persists, the remittances from migrants continue to provide a major source of foreign exchange accounting for nearly 15% of the gross domestic product [of Jamaica,]” (139). Maarit Forde, in their study of Caribbean migrant networks of childcare, also concludes that remittances are an integral part of the transnational parent-child relationship. They argue:

Remittances directed to children are a constituent part of transnational parenthood...the flow of material gifts from northern metropolises to the Caribbean reproduces and solidifies relatedness between parents and children across geographical distances and state borders...instead of condemning gifts like these as attempts to substitute for the absence of a migrated family member with mere material things, Giselle [interviewee] and many others consider nurturing from a distance an acceptable and valuable expression of relatedness. (89)

In this way, transnational mothering is an active, creative and adaptive process. As Gabrielle Oliveira writes, “To be a transnational mother is to reassemble the meanings of motherhood while recognizing the physical distance and rupture that borders bring to people’s lives,” (402). Transnational mothers are doing this by creating a kind of motherhood that is the family breadwinner and that creates a sense of care and love for their child through remittances and across distances.

Finally, many of the transnational mothers in the literature I surveyed felt that they were enacting “good” mothering by leaving their child in the home country because they saw the U.S. as an unsafe place. Nicholson interviewed transnational mothers who expressed a concern that child-rearing practices and family dynamics in the U.S. might be unhealthy. They saw U.S. families as fragmented and disconnected emotionally and worried about the U.S. as a violent place to raise children. Leaving their children with grandparents and family members in the home country felt like a better, safer choice. In both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Infinite Country*, many of these anxieties and complexities arise as mothers in both narratives leave a child or send a child to their home country while they work abroad. I argue that these acts of transnational motherhood are difficult choices made, yes, but also creative reimaginings of motherhood that expand what “good” mothering can mean and that even resist normative, totalizing notions of the nation.

Breath, Eyes, Memory

Breath, Eyes, Memory centers closely around the immediate family of the Caco women: young Sophie, her mother Martine, her grandmother Ifè and her beloved Tante Atie. The novel

begins with Sophie, at twelve years old, living in Haiti with her Aunt because her mother had migrated to New York to escape painful memories of trauma in Haiti, leaving Sophie in the care of Tante Atie. In the opening pages of the book, young Sophie learns that her mother is sending for her, and so she must pack up and leave Haiti and join her mother in the U.S.

The novel follows the coming-of-age experiences of Sophie as she migrates to the U.S. and tries to rebuild her connection with her mother Martine, although theirs is a complicated relationship. Sophie is, quite literally, a daughter of trauma. She is the result of Martine's rape at the hands of a member of the Macoutes, a Haitian paramilitary group created by the Haitian dictator known as 'Papa Doc' in 1959. The vicious, visceral memories of the rape live on in Martine's body and memory, which is what prompted her in the first place to leave Sophie as a baby in the care of her sister and flee Haiti for a different life in Brooklyn, New York. The second major trauma shaping Sophie's relationship with her mother is the cultural ritual of 'testing,' which consists of mothers ensuring that their daughters' hymens are intact to protect their sexual purity. This invasive and violating act is so traumatic to Sophie that she tears her own hymen just so that the 'testing' will stop, however even after this, the trauma continues to haunt her body and sour her relationship with her mother.

Infinite Country

This novel begins with Talia, a 15-year-old girl serving a six-month sentence in a girls' reformatory in a remote location in the Colombian mountains as a result of an act of violence she committed against a man who maliciously killed a cat for no reason. Later in the novel, we learn that Talia was actually born in the U.S. when her parents were both working there as undocumented migrants. Talia's father Mauro, convinced that there might be a better future in the U.S. for him, his wife Elena and their child Karina, takes his family to the U.S. on temporary

visas that they then overstay. Throughout the novel, readers follow the family as they struggle to find work, navigate the treachery of their undocumented status, and are subjected to the every-day violence of racism as well as other forms of violence including sexual violence.

When her father Mauro is sent to a detention center and then deported back to Colombia, however, Talia's mother, having just given birth to Talia, makes the painful decision to send Talia to Colombia to be in the care of Mauro and Talia's grandmother Perla because she knows she would not be able to work and take care of an infant at the same time. So, Talia grows up in Colombia with her father and grandmother while Elena works in the U.S. raising Talia's siblings until Talia, at age fifteen, gets into trouble and is sent to a reformatory. Her father Mauro, however, has a plan. He has an airplane ticket for her to go to the U.S. and be reunited with her mother and siblings, she just has to escape the reformatory and make her way to Bogotá, to her father's apartment, so she can claim that ticket and get on the plane. The novel follows Talia's journey to Bogotá and her reunion with her father, who takes her to the airport and sees her onto a plane headed to New Jersey to finally be reunited with her mother and siblings.

Transnational Motherhood: Long-Distance and Long-Term Mothering

The transnational motherhood that happens in both novels follows a similar formula, although with some notable differences. In both novels, there is a mother figure who is separated from her child. In *Breath*, there is Martine who leaves her daughter Sophie in the care of Tante Atie, Martine's sister, so that she can go to work as a *restavèk* and then, eventually, go to the U.S. on a visa to work. Martine's reason for becoming a transnational mother, however, is different from Elena's in *Infinite Country*. Martine is dealing with trauma. She is so overwhelmed by the PTSD of her rape that she cannot function, cannot even stay in the country where the rape occurred. She needs to escape, to outrun the effects of the trauma by going to the U.S. The

narrative makes it clear that she loves her daughter Sophie. When they are finally reunited in New York, Martine wraps Sophie in her arms and whispers to her, “Sophie, I will never let you go again,” (46). At the same time, the narrative also makes clear that transnational mothering is not such an outlandish notion, not just because Martine is dealing with trauma, but also because of the precarity of life in Haiti - there is political instability, violence and economic hardship. As Tante Atie tells Sophie when they are en route to the airport in Port-au-Prince so that Sophie can take a plane to the U.S. to join her mother, “In this country [Haiti], there are many good reasons for mothers to abandon their children.” (19) Although she uses the word “abandon,” she is justifying Martine’s decision to leave Sophie in Haiti while she works in the U.S. As if to emphasize this point, as she says this line, there is a student protest occurring right near the airport, right outside of the window of the taxi Sophie and Atie are in. Violence begins to erupt as the Macoutes brutally crack down on the protestors. These are the kinds of “difficult situations” Jeff Sessions referred to but could not quite articulate or elaborate on. These are the kinds of situations that spur some people to migrate.

In *Infinite County* the circumstances are slightly different. Elena is living in the precarious situation of being an undocumented single mother in the U.S. with three children to look after in between work shifts. Like Martine, Elena also survives a sexual assault, but this violence occurs in the adopted country, in the U.S. with her attacker being a white American man, her employer. After the assault, she manages to ask him why he did it. His curt response is, “I don’t know. I’m not usually attracted to mothers,” (102). This denigration of mothers is wrapped up in an illustration of just how vulnerable it is to be an undocumented person in the U.S. who is the victim of this kind of horrendous crime. Elena’s friend Toya tells her that there is nothing she can do about the assault.

Nothing. You can't report him. The police won't believe you. They could ask for your papers and arrest you because you don't have any. They'll send you back to your country and split up the kids because Nando was born here and Karina wasn't. Go back to work and get your money. Start wearing a wedding ring. Don't be alone with him. And if he tries again, remember it will soon be over," (102).

It is a desperate, terrible situation for Elena - to be the caregiver and mother in a mixed-status family, to be undocumented herself but to also be the sole breadwinner while navigating PTSD from unimaginable violence. She continues working at the restaurant through, "zombie days of obstinate nausea," and she says nothing about what happened to her even when she becomes aware that it has happened to someone else. "They never commiserated," the text states, "they kept each other strong so they could keep mothering and survive," (110).

When Elena makes the decision to send Talia back to Colombia to be with her father and grandmother, it is gut wrenching. Holding the baby in her arms, she whispers how much she loves her and that, "...they would say goodbye for now but the heavens would bring them back together soon," (92). The decision is painful, even as it is made with Talia's best interests at heart.

She [Elena] doubted her decision every day since, telling herself she should never have sent her baby away, even if Perla and Mauro both agreed it was the wisest thing. The price of being able to work to provide for the rest of the family was their estrangement. (92).

This echoes the responses of some transnational mothers in the ethnographic literature I have cited - the idea that the decision to be a transnational mother, to be separated from the child while the mother works in a host country, is both painful *and* an expression of maternal, long-term care. Far from being a neglectful mother, Elena is doing the most maternal thing she can do: she is acknowledging that, in the present circumstances, what is best for Talia is to go back to Colombia so that she, Elena, can continue to work and provide the living her entire family depends upon. Similarly, in *Breath*, Martine acknowledges that she cannot be the best caretaker for Sophie as someone struggling with the residual effects of trauma, and so she "abandons"

Sophie, or put another way, leaves her in the care of her loving Tante Atie in order to leave Haiti and try to survive the trauma that haunts her.

What is more, both Elena and Martine, despite being physically distanced from their children, coordinate care from abroad and make substantial efforts to maintain contact with their children to be present in their children's lives as much as possible. In this way, they have not abandoned their children - that is not what transnational mothering means to them. However, they have, each novel articulates, complicated mothering in ambivalent ways. In *Breath*, Tante Atie being Sophie's caretaker is complicated, as is indicated in the very first line of the novel when the text states that Sophie made a Mother's Day card for her Tante Atie rather than her biological mother Martine. There is no question that Atie loves Sophie - the motherlove is strong as evidenced, for example, when Atie embraces Sophie, "...so hard that the lemon-scented perfume, which she dabbed across her chest each morning, began to tickle [Sophie's] nose," (6). There is a sadness, too, however, because Atie knows that she is the temporary care-taker for Sophie and someday her mother Martine will send for her and they will have to be separated. At one point, Sophie wonders if Atie perhaps, "...wanted to be a real mother, have a real daughter to wear matching clothes with, hold hands and learn to read with..." (7). When Sophie presents the Mother's Day card to Atie, the older woman gently says, "Sophie, it is not mine. It is your mother's. We must send it to your mother," (7). In this way, transnational mothering opens up tricky questions about who a "real" mother is: is it the one who gives birth, is it the one who provides care? Perhaps it is both to various degrees at different times, because both love the child and provide care in different ways.

In *Infinite Country*, transnational mothering disrupts some of the expectations of mothering in unexpected ways. One example is the fact that, because she is undocumented and

cannot move freely and easily back and forth between the U.S. and Colombia, Elena is essentially permanently separated from her own mother Perla (Talia's grandmother) who lives in Colombia. Elena must watch the years pass by, wondering how her mother is really doing, knowing that she is not fulfilling the important responsibility of caring for her mother as she ages. It is agonizing for Elena. However, in a strange twist of fate, one result of sending Talia back to Colombia is that Talia ends up becoming her grandmother's (Elena's mother's) caretaker.

Elena felt guilty for sending Talia to be looked after by Perla. Then Talia became her grandmother's caretaker. Mauro said Talia acquired Perla's best traits, tending to her gently, washing her so she wouldn't be subject to the indignity of being bathed by Mauro. Talia dressed her. Combed her hair. Fed her, making sure Perla chewed and swallowed each bite so she wouldn't choke (123).

It is a way in which the ruptures created by transnational mothering open up space for the creative rearranging of the care network. Elena sends Talia to Colombia to be looked after by her grandmother Perla, but then it becomes a situation where Talia is providing care for Perla.

In both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Infinite Country*, what is evident is that, despite the distance created by transnational mothering, there are strong ties between mother and child. In *Breath*, Grandma Ifè reminds Sophie of the importance of the mother-daughter connection. She says, "You must never forget this... Your mother is your first friend," (23). Sophie has a difficult relationship with her mother not just because of their estrangement when Martine leaves for New York, but also because Martine carries on a tradition of "testing," - invasively inspecting and ensuring that Sophie's hymen is intact. This ritual is enormously damaging for Sophie; it causes her to have bulimia and sexual intimacy issues as she grows older. And yet, Sophie does not hate her mother because there exists between them a profound, unbreakable mother-daughter bond, a blood connection that persists. This is expressed in Sophie's wish to reconnect with her mother without the memories of their shared conflict and pain - to meet again as mother and daughter but as if for the first time. The matrilineal connections are important, extending across

generations as Grandma Ifè notes when she meets her granddaughter Brigitte (Sophie's daughter) for the first time.

'Do you see my granddaughter?' she asked, tracing her thumb across Brigitte's chin. 'The tree has not split one mite. Isn't it a miracle that we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking into this face?' (103).

In *Infinite Country*, in a similar way, the text expresses how Elena cherishes her children and in them, in their faces, she can see the ancestors of the past and the clouds and forests of Colombia.

But her love for her own children is different, marrowed beyond bloodlines, picked from their terrain, dusted off their mountains. In their dark eyes and amber skin she sees her cloud-cast city; her ancestors, her mother, everything her family has ever been and ever will be (122).

Elena is thinking about her work as a nanny for a white family and the little boy in her care. She does love him, she thinks, but not the way she loves her own children. Her love for her children runs deep, it is in the bones and blood (the marrow) and through that love she is connected to her kin (past and future) and to her beloved home country Colombia. This is similar to something that happens in *Breath* when Sophie introduces her daughter Brigitte to Granmè Ifè for the first time. The older woman has tears in her eyes as she beholds her granddaughter, and she says, "The tree has not split one mite. Isn't it a miracle that we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking into this face?" (103). There is connection across generations - family ties that extend across time.

Shifting Perspectives on Home Country

One of the consequences of transnational mothering in the novels is that characters are constantly trying to understand what and where "home" is and, in a related way, they grapple with conflicting notions of what their home country is. In *Breath*, there is a sense that Sophie, a woman who has left her home country at the age of twelve, is trying to understand just what

Haiti means to her. On one hand, her birth country is a place of specific beliefs and understandings, ones that venerate the mother-daughter relationship.

I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to.” (239)

Sophie is articulating Haiti as a place where the past and future meld together, and where mothers are never far from their children, even after death. Yet, there is some question as to whether Haiti feels like “home” for Sophie, something that is revealed when she is speaking with her husband and telling him about her recent trip back to Haiti.

“You called it home.” he said. “Haiti.” “What else would I call it?” “You have never called it that since we’ve been together. Home has always been your mother’s house, that you could never go back to,” (198).

He is pointing out that sense of disorientation borne from Sophie’s migration from Haiti to the U.S. Her sense of home shifts - at first it was her mother’s house in Brooklyn where she lived after she migrated to join her mother in the U.S. When the two have a falling out after Martine “tests” her daughter and finds that Sophie’s hymen is, in fact, not intact, Sophie’s sense of home shifts again. It is no longer her mother’s house, a place she cannot return to, but it is Haiti.

When Sophie’s mother dies, at the wake Sophie finally understands, in a more direct way, the depth of her connection to Haiti realized through her relationship with her mother.

... I realized that it was neither my mother nor my Tante Atie who had given all the mother-and-daughter motifs to all the stories they told me and all the songs they sang. It was something that was essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land,” (235)

This is one of the only direct points in the novel where Sophie is claiming her Haitianness, her sense of belonging tied to the idea of Haiti, of being a “daughter” of this land, which makes Haiti a kind of mother country figure for her.

In *Infinite Country*, Talia also understands home as being about not necessarily a single country or Colombia as a singular, constructed idea, but rather, home is about people. For Talia a

house means a place where you feel comfortable, but most especially for her, home means family. “Home,” the novel emphasizes, “to Talia, was a space occupied by her grandmother Perla,” (11) Throughout the novel, there are multiple ways of understanding Colombia. There is the idea of Colombia as it is seen through the eyes of the rest of the world, especially the U.S. dominant culture: Colombia the failed state.

..a nation of amnesiacs where narcotraficantes become senators and senators become narcotraficantes, killers become presidents and presidents become killers,” (11)

And there is also Colombia as it is experienced differently by different generations of Talia’s family.

The Bogotá of Elena’s and Mauro’s childhoods was another city from the one Talia knew... In Bogotá, a girl of Talia’s age could almost forget the terror, pretend it was happening in some other country across the continent, that the faces of the disappeared had nothing in common with her schoolmates’ families, and the hardened expressions of children kidnapped or orphaned into fighting the nameless tentacled war could not have just as easily been hers. (15)

There is also Colombia, the country of great natural beauty and biodiversity, which Mauro’s acquaintance Tiberio refers to as the “real” Colombia.

The real Colombia, he insisted, was a thing of majesty beyond their valleys and cordilleras. There were jungles, snowcapped sierras, and black- and-white sand beaches on different ends of the country; rivers that nourished the Amazon, the life force of the Americas; cloud forests and antiplanos; the tabletop mountains of Chiribiquete, and La Guajira, where honeyed desert kissed the Caribbean Sea,” (17)

Then there is the Colombia that Elena grieves, the one she yearns for when she is living undocumented in the U.S. At one particular point in the novel, Elena wonders whether life would not be more secure economically for her if she and Mauro returned home to Colombia from the U.S. But her mother Perla reminds her about the violence still occurring in Colombia at the time, like a massacre in the town of Bojayá in which hundreds of townspeople were murdered. All the way from the U.S., Elena’s reaction to this news is sadness and a sense of patriotism for Colombia.

It happened far away from the capital, all the way on the Pacific coast, but it was still *our country*, *our*

dead, Elena thought. Tragic, almost, that she never felt more patriotic than when grieving her country's victims," (40)

Interestingly, this dynamic of multiple understandings of what Colombia is and what it means is reflected in the different generations of my own family. My mother, born and raised in Cali, Colombia, is the second youngest of ten children. Her eldest siblings are ten to twenty years older than her. In my conversations with my older aunts (the ones who are still living), they tend to express a more negative view of Colombia, due to having lived through some of the most violent periods during which Cali was embroiled in conflict. My mother, however, who missed some of that violence, has had a different experience of Colombia. Her memories of Colombia are of a childhood and adolescence spent going to the market to retrieve produce for my *abuelita*, gathering around the radio to listen to radio stories and Sunday family picnics by the river listening to the call of the koki frogs. My own relationship to Colombia is different still, as it has been built on my visits to Colombia in the time after the signed peace accords of 2016 when tourism has exploded. I mention this to highlight, again, the importance of attention to *how* we experience the nation, how we *feel* it and how that might reveal something important about how we negotiate our identities and how our identities are shaped by our positionalities.

In both novels, transnational mothering and migration open up multiple perspectives for understanding the home nation. In other words, there are multiple and sometimes conflicting ways to think about what Haiti is in *Breath* and what Colombia is in *Infinite*. Migration also allows for multiple understandings, though, of what the United States is. One of the resounding points in *Infinite Country* is that the migration that Talia and her family undertake expose them all to a United States that is not the "greatest nation in the history of the world," (which might come to the shock of Jeff Sessions). In fact, what Talia and her family find is that, contrary to the tired narrative of Colombia as the nation that is nothing but a failed state of conflict and violence,

while the U.S. is an idyllic paradise, the violence that Talia and her family experience is in the U.S.

What was it about this country that kept everyone hostage to its fantasy? The previous month, on its own soil, an American man went to his job at a plant and gunned down fourteen co-workers, and last spring alone there were four different school shootings. A nation at war with itself, yet people still spoke of it as some kind of paradise.” (90)

Talia and her family are complicating the narrative of what the U.S. is through their experiences and observations. What they are seeing is that the U.S. is a violent place. Another character, Aguja, a young man who gives Talia a ride on his motorcycle as she is trekking across Colombia to get to Bogotá, states something similar. He cannot believe Talia would leave Colombia for the U.S.

Over there people walk into schools and buildings with weapons and kill everyone. They're not even guerilla or paramilitary. Just regular people. What are you going to do when you're out shopping and some gringo points a machine gun at your forehead?” (70).

He continues, telling her the U.S. is not just a violent place, but a lonely place.

When you get to the United States, nobody will understand you. I don't mean just the language. It's a country of strangers. It will be another kind of sentence. But one that as an immigrant you won't be able to escape,” (139).

There will be social isolation, he warns, because unlike Colombia, the U.S. is a place where people are wary of one another, and where, once she is there, she will not be able to easily escape. Talia's response is, “I want to be with my mother,” (139). Aguja tells her, “Colombia is your mother, too” (139). All of this reveals how migration is an incredibly complicated, nuanced experience, one that is about painful deterritorialization and dislocations, but also, because of these ruptures, it allows migrants to see through fantasies of the U.S. that conservative Americans, in particular, cling to. It exposes the hypocrisy of a conservative view of the U.S. as a flawless country, a beacon of light because another reality of the U.S. is that it is a country of violence.

In two Places at Once - Feeling Migration in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

The ways in which transnational mothering and migration complicate reductive narratives about the nation have to do with the fact that migrating mothers not only permeate boundaries, but they raise children in bi- or multicultural ways, bi- or multilingually with a transnational mindset where identities can be forged, shaped and reshaped. In this section, I want to look specifically at the unique ways in which transnational motherhood connects to an ephemeral and shifting sense of identity and place, and to do this, I begin with thinking about how each novel articulates the *feeling* and *experience* of migration. In *Breath*, there is an ever-present sense that place is never stable but always shifting. Sophie, for example, articulates this when she states, “I grew up believing that people could be in two places at once.” In this way, she continues, “...meeting for the first time again is not such a hard concept” (212).

This underlines a belief system that Sophie holds that is different from traditional ideas of time and place, because Sophie believes that one can be in multiple places at once *and* that it might be possible to connect for the first time again with someone. This is a belief system that contradicts traditional notions of geography that are underscored by linearity, progress, and space divided neatly into the idea of the nation. Instead, Sophie’s understanding of place and time is of blurred, ephemeral, flexible, multiple, fragmented and rhizomatic possibilities. One can be in two places at once, and this is a belief affirmed by Sophie’s experiences as a migrant person, born in Haiti and living in New York, whose mind and body are split, residing somewhere in between those spaces.

Across both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Claire of the Sea Light*, Danticat offers the idea of “doubling” as a vehicle for better understanding how it *feels* to be Haitian in the *dyaspora*. This concept draws attention to the variations of what place is and what it means across the novels,

and especially how time and space, in her conceptualization, do not adhere to colonially-produced understandings described as ‘linear,’ or ‘bounded,’ or ‘progressive.’ Instead, Danticat’s deployment of doubling reveals hidden, embodied, real and imagined spaces within which time flows in different directions and the present is often haunted by the past. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for instance, the doubling that occurs in the text is a motif running throughout the novel. The most obvious example of this is the ‘doubling’ that Sophie feels as a response to the trauma of the ‘testing’ ritual.

I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known...There were many stories about our ancestors having doubled. It was said that most of our presidents had actually been split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives. After my marriage, whenever Joseph and I were together, I doubled.
(155)

What Sophie describes is, in essence, a kind of dissociative behavior as a response to trauma so that instead of being located in her body, the site of the pain, she is somewhere else. Her doubling allows her to leave the site of suffering and ultimately survive it. Interestingly, she likens this to the kind of dissociative behavior that a dictator president or a person involved in violence might do so that by day he is able to perpetuate that violence but by night he can still be a loving family man. In this way, for Sophie in the narrative, there is the idea of doubling as a trauma response. Sophie mentions the doubling again in an intimate moment with her husband in which he is removing her clothes.

He reached over and pulled my body towards his. I closed my eyes and thought of the Marasas⁶³, the doubling. I was lying there on that bed and my clothes were being peeled off my body, but really I was somewhere else” (202).

⁶³ The Marasas, in Haitian Voudou ideology, are a set of somewhat mysterious twins from the spirit world. Although they are twins, they are sometimes depicted as a set of three, and although they are ancient spirits, they sometimes take on the form of children. They are also both male and female - both at once. In other words, they illustrate a Haitian worldview that is able to reconcile two seemingly contradictory notions, or to sidestep binaries and live in liminal states in between clearly defined binary notions.

Some of the doubling that we see across the novel also is mirrored by folk tales that Danticat infuses into the text. For instance, when Sophie is walking with Tante Atie to buy black beans and rice they end up near the cane fields where she hears singing. The men in the fields are singing about, "...a woman who flew without her skin at night, and when she came back home, she found her skin peppered and could not put it back on," (150). This woman without her skin is a soucouyant⁶⁴ -part of the rich ecology of Caribbean mythology. A soucouyant is an old, decrepit woman by day and a *flying*, skinless fireball by night who travels around looking for a victim whose blood she can drain. In one version of the story, her husband rubs the oil from hot peppers into the skin she has shed for one of her nightly flying adventures in the night sky, and when she returns to don her skin, the pepper oil burns her to death. The soucouyant is absolutely a figure of doubling and also one who moves across liminal spaces. Much like Martine Caco, she leads two lives: she is a terrestrial-bound crone by day carrying around the weight of her years on her skin, but by night she is a *flying* vampire-witch liberated of her flesh.

The doubling that is such a prominent motif in the novel also is enacted through geography. It is clear in the novel that Sophie's mother's life in Brooklyn is her present life, and the one back in Haiti is from the past, a time and a place she does not want to return to. When Sophie, who is part of her mother's past, comes to live in Brooklyn she meets her mother's new boyfriend Marc and is acquainted with her mother's new life in New York. Sophie remarks, "My

⁶⁴ In the Caribbean, the soucouyant has been called by different names including succubus, baton volant and soucriant among others. As Caribbean Studies scholar Giselle Anatol outlines in her 2015 work, *The Things that Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora*, the soucouyant is a remarkable character for several reasons. First of all, like the African flying figure (the myth of the enslaved person who escapes their chains and flies home to Africa, a motif picked up in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*) the soucouyant is mobile. She goes between worlds and across boundaries in ways that make her a highly transgressive female figure. Anatol observes that traditional tellings of soucouyant stories render her evil, wicked, and a 'bad' woman. Anatol writes, "Unlike the 'good' woman who marries, is faithful, bears and nurtures children, and anchors the domestic space, the soucouyant of conventional renderings is a woman who occupies a space completely outside of the phallic order" (23). In this way, the soucouyant is a 'bad woman' because she is not a mother, she has no children or husband and she has a kind of mobility that makes her powerful. Furthermore, she is a blood-drinker, which is an act that has many implications including sexual connotations, notions of mixing racial bloodlines and ideas of extracting resources that link back to colonial endeavors.

mother now had two lives: Marc belonged to her present life, I was a living memory from the past” (53). Again this splitting in half, or doubling surfaces. Her mother has two lives and Sophie is, in a beautifully oxymoronic turn of phrase, a living memory come to haunt her mother.

What is particular to Danticat’s writing and her perspective is that the migration Danticat references, and the effect of being in two places at once, may also be related to immigration policies in the U.S. in the 1980s that greatly shaped her own family’s life. In the preceding two decades, when Danticat’s parents would have first left her in Haiti to migrate to the U.S., there was a more open stance on immigration, with priority placed on reuniting families. The 1980s, when Danticat migrated to the U.S. as a twelve year old to join her parents in New York, saw the passing of the Refugee Act to provide assistance to those migrating to the U.S. in order to escape harrowing situations in their home countries. Not only this, but movement back and forth between the U.S. and Haiti was not as restricted, and people regularly traveled back and forth as time and money allowed.

This is not the case in recent years, particularly around the time when Colombian-American author Patricia Engels’ published *Infinite Country* in 2021, in the wake of the Trump Presidency. Notably, when President Trump took office in 2016 he enacted anti-immigration policies that included putting a stop to DACA and a halt on visas issued to citizens of countries with predominantly Muslim populations and, of course, policies like the “Zero Tolerance” policy that permitted the Justice Department to split families at the border. The way that Engel writes about migration is, thus, different from Danticat because she writes about a Colombian family migrating to the U.S. during a time of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and ever tightening borders. As such, the experiences of migration for the characters in *Infinite Country* are not so much about doubling and being in two places at once because there is no easy

back and forth across the borders. Rather, migration for the Colombian family she writes about is about crossing the border and disappearing into another life, while being haunted by the sacrifices of what is left behind.

Passing through “El Hueco,” Feeling Migration in Patricia Engels’ *Infinite Country*

In the case of *Infinite Country*, when Elena and Mauro first leave Colombia on visas to go to the U.S. and contemplate overstaying their visas, the text describes their thinking this way:

During the years Elena and Mauro contemplated staying in the country and the threat of being caught and sent back, they thought only of their lives lived here or lived there, not a fractured in-between. It never occurred to them their family could be split as if by an ax,” (88).

For Elena and Mauro, their lives are very much either in Colombia or in the U.S. perhaps due to the fact that their ability to cross the border is restricted by their visa and their status. Whereas Sophie and Martine Caco in *Breath* are dealing with U.S. borders of the 1980s during a time when they were more open than the time period that *Infinite Country* is set (the late 1990s and early 2000s). Being able to cross the borders with more ease facilitates more of a feeling of being in two places at once, of being able to double. In *Infinite Country*, the references to September 11th make it clear that Elena and Mauro are in the U.S. much closer to the time period of the 2000s and the decades after when, year by year, the borders would become more and more difficult to cross for migrants. In this way, when immigration status is precarious and uncertain and the borders are tightening, there is more of a feeling of being either here or there, rather than in both places at once as it might be for Sophie Caco.

The migration in *Infinite Country* also is described more as passing through what scholar Jennifer Harford Vargas terms *el hueco*, a kind of passage that is like a death of one’s national identity and an active creation of a new one. When Talia, for example, finally makes it to Bogotá

and her father takes her to the airport to take the flight she's been dreaming of to go to the U.S. and be reunited with her mother and siblings, it is an extremely emotional experience because she is leaving her father Mauro behind and also leaving her country Colombia. The novel describes this sadness as she turns away from her father in the airport to go through the gateway, *un hueco*, (a kind of hole) to board her plane. The novel notes that, "In the other country, an uncharted future awaited. But it could only be so if she let her future in this country die," (140). Contrary to Danticat's descriptions of *feeling* migration as doubling with two concurrent lives, Vargas describes migration for many Colombian migrants to the U.S. as an experience of moving through a passage that involves a death of one's national identity.

What I find so useful in Vargas's articulation of *el hueco* is that it offers a specifically Colombian way of understanding migration. Much of the scholarship in Latinx Studies that theorizes migration and border-crossing does so centering Mexico as the locus of study and Mexican-American and Chicanx identity-formation experiences in particular. This scholarship, however, does not allow for an understanding of how Colombian migrants, specifically undocumented Colombian migrants, *feel* and *experience* migration, because this experience is different. Vargas's theorizing of *el hueco* reveals that, unlike Mexican-Americans, Chicanx and Mexican identify-formation as Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes in *Borderlands*, the experience of crossing the border without papers as a Colombian is *not* one of forming a new "alien" element or identity as Anzaldúa writes. Instead, there is the feeling of death, of dying legally, giving up one's social and national identity while negotiating a more transnational one.

Additionally, I find that Vargas's notion of migration as passing through *el hueco*, or a hole or passage, also is an image that allows for a connection to motherhood as there is the implication of migration as a birth, passing through a birth canal, even as it *feels* like a death of

one's legal status. A metaphor like *el hueco* that invites links to notions of motherhood is useful because of how much migration impacts mother-daughter and mother-child relationships. So many migrants are mothers whose very reason for migrating is providing a future for their child. So many children of migrants (of which I am one) know that our relationship with our mothers have been impacted by migration. As Engel explained in an interview:

For me what's interesting is that in terms of immigration there is a rupture from one generation to the other, and I've always been interested and very sympathetic to the struggle, as was the case with my own mother, to be from one country and have children who are raised in an entirely different one, completely different from the way she was raised, a different dominant language, different dominant culture, and in many ways to be totally powerless to that (409-410).

This notion of *el hueco* that invites connections to mothering opens up more possibilities for thinking about how Colombian migrants *feel* migration, and especially as it relates to mothering and motherhood.

Migration as passing through *el hueco* is very different from Danticat's articulations of migration in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. When Sophie goes to live with her mother Martine in New York, for instance, and becomes acquainted with her mother's life there, she remarks: "My mother now had two lives: Marc belonged to her present life, I was a living memory from the past," (53). Martine is described as a single person with two concurrent, intermingled lives. In other words, there is no death here, there is no sense of Martine or Sophie's Haitian identity dying in order to accept a future in the U.S. Migration for the Caco women means, because the borders are more permeable, that they are able to travel back and forth across borders and live two concurrent lives. It does not mean, however, that migration is not fraught for the Caco women. Martine, for example, experiences what Simone Alexander calls "national unbelonging"

as someone who travels to the U.S. on a visa to escape her traumatic experiences in Haiti, but then neither fits in the U.S. nor wants to return to Haiti. Alexander writes:

Martine continually experiences national unbelonging. The integration deficit she experiences in the host country is rivaled by her lack of desire to return to her home country. She's not simply denying both nation states, though. She's given a non-status as an immigrant, she is invisible in a sense.

Alexander juxtaposes Martine's migration experiences with her boyfriend Marc.

Martine's liminal status, or rather her homelessness, is punctuated vis-a-vis Marc, whose notion of home encompasses multiple sites of belonging, is 'fixed'; in addition, his travels are documented as safe and legitimate. Martine's 'integration' into American society follows a different trajectory from that of Marc. Her legitimacy results directly from the pardon of the U.S. nation-state and indirectly from its representative, her lawyer Marc.

Marc moves seamlessly between Haiti and the U.S. He *feels* comfortable in both places. This is not the case with Martine, whose mental state deteriorates in the U.S., where she ultimately takes her life.

In both novels, migration happens via airplane (for all characters except Mauro). But in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* there is this sense of being able to go back and forth from New York to Haiti and a sense of living in the diaspora, because even in New York Sophie goes to a Haitian school. When she meets Marc, her mother's boyfriend, the three of them go to a Haitian restaurant in New York, a place that is very much described as being made by and for Haitians in the diaspora. It is, in essence, a "twilight zone" in the way Carol Boyce Davies describes. It is a Haitian community that happens to be physically located in New York, and truly, it is as though Sophie, Martine and Marc are in Haiti when they are eating there. It is this idea of being in two places at once - doubling, both in New York and in Haiti. But with *Infinite Country* there is a sense that this move, this border crossing is much more permanent. The fact that Talia and her family are a mixed status family in the U.S. makes their situation extremely tenuous; they could be found out and deported or they could stay in the U.S., but without the authorization to travel

back to Colombia as they might want to. In other words, when you go to the U.S. you stay there and leaving your country, Colombia, is like dying.

Conclusion

Transnational mothering is often denigrated or looked down upon because transnational mothers, in essence, break the one characteristic that is shared across many cultures of what “good” mothering is, and that is that “good” mothers should be *with* their children providing care. Transnational mothers, however, coordinate care for their children from across vast distances. For this reason, transnational mothers are so often dismissed as “bad” mothers, while political leaders like Jeff Sessions and government policies like the “zero tolerance policy” are not always so directly charged as facilitating being “bad” parenting actors and instituting child-harming practices. I am interested in this discrepancy, in how a migrant mother gets labeled a “bad” mother, while representatives of the U.S. government implementing child-harming policies largely do not carry the stigma of “bad” parenting. Furthermore, I wonder if part of the ire that migrant and transnational mothers provoke (or part of why they are scrutinized as ‘bad’ mothers) is that they are in transit⁶⁵, they actively permeate borders, they unsettle illusions of a coherent, unified and (especially in the wake of the Trump years) a white nation.

I have tried to argue in this chapter that the transnational mothering that happens in both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Infinite Country* reveals it to be a complicated endeavor - and one that is not without the deepest sense of love for the child left behind or sent away. I have investigated the effects of this transnational motherhood - how it has shaped the characters living the ruptures of migration and how the *feeling* of migration is different in Danticat’s *Breath* versus Engel’s *Infinite Country*. In Danticat’s narrative world, there is the feeling of being in two places at once,

⁶⁵ Know your place! Stay in place! - Katherine McKittrick quote here.

of doubling, as if being here *and* there. In a recent interview, Danticat elaborated on this idea of migration.

I often think of something I've heard people say about this experience of the disorientation of displacement, especially, you know, older Haitian people in my family, you know they'll say, [speaking Haitian creole] like 'its only my body that's here' and that there's so much in that like when you're in a place but your spirit is elsewhere or wants to be elsewhere and I think that's the sometimes undertold story of immigration: how much people sacrifice of themselves.

This is an experience of migration that, as Danticat points out, seems particular to older generations of her Haitian family, presumably those with documented status in the U.S., who experience a kind of doubling of being both here (physically) but also there (emotionally/spiritually). Her description of migration reminds me of a sculpture series called "Les Voyageurs," or "The Travelers." The series depicts life-sized human figures in bronze. The figures appear to trudge forward, carrying bags and rolling suitcases, but there is something curious about them: they are missing large chunks of their torsos. The sculptures were created by a Moroccan-born French artist named Bruno Catalano. They were originally displayed outdoors in Marseille, a large port city in the south of France *and* a city of migrants. For Catalano, himself a migrant, the sculptures illustrate the sense of loss, of aching, that literal hole in the chest that an immigrant can feel being so far from home. But the sculptures also remind me of Danticat's *feeling* of migration as one's body being in the adopted country but one's spirit or heart still at home.

Engel's depictions of migration are different. For the Colombian migrants of her novel, some of them with and some without U.S. citizenship, migration is passing through a threshold, *un hueco* as Jennifer Harford Vargas notes, a point that marks a painful separation and death from the home country because of the ways in which U.S. immigration makes it difficult to move freely across borders. For me, living in a country (the U.S.) that, during the Trump presidency,

has moved more and more in the direction of being led by increasingly conservative, nativist, white national, anti-immigration political leaders in positions of power, means that it is more important than ever to center the voices of migrants - to listen to them. Engaging meaningfully with Migration Literature is one way to do that. In this chapter, guided by the notion that there is knowledge and truth in women's affect and emotion⁶⁶ (even as that has been dismissed as secondary and inferior to reason and intellect in the Western tradition). I have tried to lean into the ways in which the characters of both *Breath* and *Infinite* feel their experiences of migration. Understanding these feelings reveals complex truths about what it is like to migrate: it is like dissociating, it is like dying, it is like doubling, it is like walking around in a body missing its heart. Understanding these complexities, I hope, leads to more of a sense of empathy on the part of those who are not migrants - an empathy I hope is carried to the ballot box as they vote in leaders in the U.S. who will make decisions about immigration policies that might mean the difference between life and death for those who migrate.

I will conclude with the idea that, while migration (as Danticat and Engel have shown) can *feel* disorienting, painful, like a kind of doubling or a kind of death, there is also something powerful about it. In one way, it counters the notion of ridiculous, blind patriotism that leads to ideas of, among other things, U.S. exceptionalism. As Engel writes:

Sometimes being displaced and dislocated can free you in a lot of ways, and I think that's ultimately what I'm most interested in, is how emigration and dislocation and exile in a way create some emotional confinement, but at the same time free you of things that can be quite confining, like patriotism and loyalty to a specific country, or culture or community (408).

Without romanticizing it, without giving in to the oversimplified idea that to be in transit is to be free, I contend that to cross borders, especially with all of the barriers in place of being without means or documents, is a powerful act of resistance against all of the violence that borders stand

⁶⁶ Here, I am thinking about Tanana Athabascan Feminist Indigenous scholar Dian Million's notion of 'felt theory,' or the idea that it is critical to pay attention to Indigenous women's affective writing in fiction because Indigenous women "feel" their histories, as she put it.

for. As Jennifer Harford Vargas points out, migrants so often undertake the journey of crossing the border because their opportunities and movement may be limited elsewhere. At the same time, migrants crossing the border are actively in transit, palpating its fissures, exploiting its ‘loopholes,’ and revealing the border to be a series of politically and socially constructed arrangements and structures. There is power in that.

In crossing borders as transnational mothers and family members, many of the characters in both *Breath* and *Infinite Country* are resisting those borders - they are refusing to let those arbitrary arrangements stop their movement toward a life of better economic opportunities or escape from past traumas. In one of the most moving passages of *Infinite Country*, Talia sees borders for what they are: damaging, but also imaginary.

I’ve had borders drawn around me all my life, but I refuse to live as a bordered person. I hate the term *undocumented*. It implies people like my mother and me don’t exist without a paper trail... Don’t tell me I’m undocumented when my name is tattooed on my father’s arm. This assigned status wants you to think of the U.S. government as another kind of parent. The one who rejects you for its preferred child,” (127).

For Talia, now a bicultural, binational child of multiple nations, her assertion to reject borders is powerful. She even rejects the term ‘undocumented’ because of the silliness of it; it implies that there is no record of her existence. But there is a record, it is just that this record is not part of the official state narrative, her existence is written in her mother’s love and tattooed on her father’s arm rather than documented in some electronic file deep within the labyrinth of government bureaucracy.

For these characters, migration and resisting borders also allows them to see through fantasies of the U.S. as a nation paved in gold, as a lost paradise or, to use Jeff Sessions’ phrase, “the greatest country in the history of the world.” In fact, what they see, indeed, what they *experience*, is the U.S. as a violent country, one that is not so different from the places they left behind, as Talia notices when she muses that, “...every nation in the Americas had a hidden

history of internal violence. It just wore different masks, carried different weapons, and justified itself with different stories...” (170). One particular form of violence they are subjected to is racial slurs - in *Breath* Sophie recalls hating the school she was sent to while living in New York because, “Outside the school, we were ‘the Frenchies,’ cringing in our mock-Catholic-school uniforms as the students from the public school across the street called us ‘boat people’ and ‘stinking Haitians,’” (64). In *Infinite Country*, the racism spans generations. Mauro and Elena are subjected to racism, “In South Carolina [where] they became used to stares, absorbing hisses from locals of *go back to where you came from* while Mauro and Elena pretended not to understand,” (39). Their children, including Talia, when they are living in the U.S. also experience this racism, as the novel indicates that, “Hearing cocaine jokes⁶⁷ and mechanical hallway insults of *Go back to your country* was nothing new for me and Nando, but there was a new brazenness to it, like a gloved hand reaching for our throats, reminding us we were not welcome,” (129).

Despite the racism and all of the compounding hardships that migrants experience, there is also a sense in both novels that there is something about migration that enables the active creation and claiming of one’s own sense of identity built from the experience of moving, of being in transit and of acknowledging that there is loss, but also there is something new. Articulating these experiences makes space for a sense of identity that is more deterritorialized, that is not connected to one nation, but to several or none at all. This is the great liberation of being in transit, of movement, and perhaps it is why across both novels, the one consistent

⁶⁷ This particular form of racism in the novel resonated very deeply with me, as I have lost count of the number of times I have been confronted with naive at best and ignorant at worst jokes about either cocaine, drugs or Pablo Escobar in response to sharing that I am of Colombian heritage. Of course, as scholars Lina Rincón, Johanna Londoño, Jennifer Harford Vargas and María Elena Cepeda have pointed out in their Special Issue in *Latin Studies* on U.S. Colombianidades, this is because Colombia is so often represented in popular U.S. media as a country of either hypersexualized femininity (beauty queens, for example) or hyper masculinized *narco-traficante* narratives of conflict and war (the terrible Netflix show *Narcos*, for example).

metaphor that appears over and over again is of being in flight. In *Breath*, there are constant references to butterflies, for example, a metaphor for migration. There are also repeated mentions of birds - Caco, for example, the surname of Sophie and her family, comes from the word for the fiery red bird that represents the constant departures and returns that the Caco women undertake throughout the novel. In *Infinite Country*, birds are, also, everywhere. At one point in the novel, for example, Mauro takes his daughter Talia to a lake. The text states, “*From the lake we came and to the lake we will return*, Mauro repeated... though Talia’s eyes were on the birds circling above. *We’re all migrants here on earth.*”

In this way, transnational motherhood and migration is, I believe, an audacious response to limiting systems and choices (economic and political pressures and violence in a home country as well as those in the adopted country). Ultimately, I wish to underline that migration is a courageous choice to leave everything behind, including one’s child, in the case of transnational motherhood. While I do not want to romanticize migration, I do want to challenge notions of transnational mothers as “bad.” Being a migrant and / or a transnational mother might mean consigning oneself to an ambiguous experience of being invisible in the adopted country, or being in a liminal and in between state, or experiencing precarious citizenship, or a feeling of displacement, disorientation or death. But on the other hand, movement and transnational movement is powerful and listening to migrant voices reveals a lot about how borders function, how identity-formation can be fraught, and how nations perpetuate myths that migrants may be able to see through more clearly than the citizens of that very nation. At the end of the *Infinite Country*, when she is finally reunited with her family in the U.S., Talia has a poignant realization as she considers her family’s long, fraught journey from Colombia to the U.S.

I wondered about the matrix of separation and dislocation, our years bound to the phantom pain of a lost homeland, because now that we are together again that particular hurt and sensation that something is

missing has faded. And maybe there is no nation or citizenry; they're just territories mapped in place of family, in place of love, the infinite country," (191).

It is a suggestion that what she has learned as a migrant moving between, across and through borders, is how they (borders) work to stand in for and obscure what home *really* is: the enduring, unending, borderless love of family - an "infinite country."

Conclusion

Across my dissertation, I have been engaged in recuperating the "bad" mothering in the novels of my study to show how these acts may actually be complicating dominant culture ideas of "good" mothering - and how this "bad" mothering might be extending care or enacting power in surprising ways. Concurrently, I have been trying to understand the margins, the liminal spaces within which the authors of my study situate mothering in their works and what that does. In chapter one, I was interested in maternal violence in Pilar Quintana's *La Perra* - or the subverted infanticide story in which instead of killing her child, the protagonist Damaris kills her adopted dog Chirli (a stand-in for the child she always wanted but never could have). In particular, I wanted to show that the "bad" mothering in the novel (Damaris's violence), along with being horrific, might also have actually been if not a maternal act of care then at least an act of agency and resistance within a dystopian society in which crushing caregiving ideals along with the '*mujer-madre*' ideal had been thrust upon Damaris relentlessly from a very young age. It was also important to point out that this narrative of mothering unfolds in a very remote, marginalized area of Colombia and it involves a liminal animal: a street dog. Putting her protagonist Damaris in this very marginalized location (the remote Pacific coasts of Colombia) and in close connection with a liminal street dog (somewhere between domesticated and feral) allows Quintana to show even more clearly how rigid, essentialist, sacralized understandings of

motherhood and womanhood (good women are mothers and good mothers are self-sacrificing) fall apart in a world where lived realities are not so black-and-white.

Chapter two allowed me to move from the Colombian context to the Haitian one in order to think through “bad” mothering as abandonment that happens again and again throughout the text. My hope was to underline the ways in which this abandonment and other “bad” mothering practices were examples of mothering in precarity unfolding in a Haiti shaped by colonial histories. Despite the precarity of mothering in Haiti, I wanted to also underline the resilience of mothering practices in Haiti that Danticat focuses on, for example the “community parenting,” that happens in the ‘restavèk’ storyline in the book. Ultimately, I also endeavored to focus on moments of liminality in the novel when acts of mothering occurred in in-between spaces like the forests near Gaëlle’s house where she encountered and mothered dying frogs or Claire Jr.’s quiet moments of connection with her mother’s memory when she went swimming in the sea. I hoped to argue that those moments of connection were facilitated by spaces of marginality and liminality that, like maroon spaces, offer a kind of ‘loophole of freedom’ or site of connection and healing.

Finally, chapter three gave me the opportunity to look at two Migrant Literature authors (Danticat and Engel) and engage in a comparative analysis of “transnational motherhood,” in the novels *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Infinite Country*. Given that these two novels were written almost thirty years apart, I was interested in exploring how each novel deployed different understandings of what migration *feels* like according to the time period and the cultural context (Haitian versus Colombian) within which the migration they were writing about occurs. Ultimately, I aimed to show not just how transnational mothering is a maternal sacrifice for the child’s future in the two novels, but also that there is a specific power in transnational mothering

that threatens the fantasy of the nation as bounded and bordered but also the U.S. as an idealized country. Moreover, the transnational state of being of many migrants (where home is both here *and* there, for example) is akin, at times, to living in liminality, an in-betweenness that can be as disorienting and painful (the feeling of unbelonging, for example) as it can be powerful (knowing that the idea of being documented is silly and borders are arbitrary).

As I conclude this dissertation, I think about how I opened it - detailing my family's migration experiences, especially my *extra* relationship with my Colombian mother, which was the impetus for getting curious about and thinking through issues of "good" and "bad" mothering. As I conclude, I think not about what started me on the path of being interested in mothering, but what happened along the way as I was researching and writing about it. Midway through the writing of my dissertation, President Donald Trump was elected in 2016 in the U.S. Then, toward the end of his presidency, the COVID-19 global pandemic shut the world down. During that difficult time, my spouse and I dealt with a situation many people go through but rarely talk about: his mother became very ill and we became involved in her day-to-day care. I was researching, teaching and writing my dissertation *while* involved in some of the most intensive caregiving I have ever had to do. In particular, I learned just how undervalued caregiving is in the U.S. as I fell into a situation where I was trying desperately to manage my teaching and writing responsibilities while privately participating in my mother-in-law's care. I did the best I could. When my spouse and I finally realized that we were exhausted and could not physically provide the 24 hour care she needed while also holding down our full time jobs, I felt devastated and guilty. When we were going through our budget to figure out what kind of 24 hour care we could afford to hire to help her, I felt particularly guilty that we could not afford the very best care. I felt like a "bad" caregiver. But, in a way that paralleled what I was learning

about “bad” mothering from the authors of my study, I also realized that I was doing the best I could, that caregiving is hard, and that doing it in a neoliberal society that privileges caregiving as a privatized, individual burden rather than a community effort - that is exhausting. I also realized that caregiving happens as it happens, within difficult circumstances and contexts. Ultimately, the best that we can do given our circumstances can still be engaging in caregiving that is genuine, selfless and one of the most powerful expressions of love, not just at the beginning of life but also at the end.

Thinking about migration and motherhood across the novels I focus on (works by contemporary Colombian and Haitian women writers) took on a different layer of meaning for me not just post-COVID, but in the wake of the Trump Presidency, too - especially the heightened anti-immigration and white nationalism sentiment he fomented. Specifically, I have been increasingly cognizant of the rise of a dominant culture ideology of “good” motherhood in the U.S. that has gone hand-in-hand with a rise in white nationalism and anti-immigration rhetoric. An example of this conservative, traditional, white motherhood ideal in action is the commentary that surrounded President Trump’s conservative pick for the U.S. Supreme Court: Judge Amy Coney Barrett.

Watching her Senate Confirmation Hearings, it was hard to miss the amount of praise she received from mostly Republican (but also some Democratic) senators not about her career accomplishments (there was that, too), but mostly about her role as a mother of seven children. As Melissa Block reported for NPR news, “One after another Republicans on the Judiciary Committee have highlighted Judge Barrett’s maternity,” with, for example, Senator Mike Braun describing her as, “...a legal titan who drives a minivan.” Interestingly, just a few decades ago many conservative politicians would have admonished the idea of working moms, people like

Vice President Mike Pence, for example, who wrote in a 1997 letter to the Indianapolis Star that moms who send their kids to daycare risk stunting the emotional growth of their children because, in his estimation, children need to be raised and cared for exclusively by their mother. He has since publicly stated that his views on this have changed, and along with him many conservative politicians seem to have embraced the ‘super mom’ trope - (white⁶⁸) mothers who work. Clearly, the conservative senators could not get enough of the fact that she had a successful legal career while simultaneously being a mother⁶⁹.

The commentary crystallized for me how white, middle-class motherhood values have been deployed in the Post-Trump era by conservative politicians in ways that really resonated with a section of the American public. Amy Coney Barrett’s status as a mother was particularly enticing to many of the conservative senators heaping praise upon her because it played into their fantasy of a “good mother” privately taking care of domestic responsibilities, including child-rearing, while also working full time, without mentioning things like universal child care or paid maternity leave. Also left unmentioned was all of the labor that made it possible for Barrett to be a working mom. There was very little mention, for example, of babysitters, nannies, tutors, gardeners, family members, housekeepers, and others providing care and support so that she could balance her home and work lives. As New York Times reporter Emily Bazelon puts it:

Supermoms can’t operate without a superstructure of support, which makes their status as out of reach for

⁶⁸ I say “white” because, as bell hooks has noted, Black women have always moved across private and public spheres, working and child-rearing at the same time.

⁶⁹ As it turns out, Judge Brett Kavanaugh (a current Supreme Court Justice) is *also* a parent, but during his Senate Confirmation Hearing there was a noticeable absence of praise related to his ability to parent and have a legal career at the same time. To be fair, it might have been related to the fact that Barrett has a large family (seven children). It could also have been related to the fact that much of Kavanaugh’s hearing was spent answering questions about an alleged sexual assault, so perhaps there was not time to praise his work-life balance as a working parent. It is, nevertheless, striking to note how Barrett was championed by a majority of conservative politicians as an ideal working mother, a “supermom” while other Supreme Court nominees like Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, who also is a mother, was not. In the case of Jackson, her status as a mother may not have drawn as much attention because, again, Black women have always been working mothers.

low-income or single mothers as the housewife role once was. Even attainable versions of working parenthood require constant attention to domestic arrangements, frequently rearranged as kids grow up or elderly relatives falter. Caregivers make the lives of two-earner couples and single mothers possible, and they don't always themselves earn a living wage.

The other factor that went unmentioned was Barrett's positionality as a white woman from an affluent background with access to an elite education, which all contributed to her ability to get the kind of high-paying job with which one could afford to hire help in the home.

What should be underlined is that the conservative embracing of the 'super mom,' a kind of motherhood that could be considered more 'progressive' or 'modern' because it celebrates (white) working mothers, is actually more limiting precisely because it still relegates care work as a mother's responsibility to figure out privately and it invisibilizes the "superstructure of support" that makes it possible to be a working mom in the first place. There have been very real, very violent material consequences to the rise of this conservative, white motherhood coupled with white nationalism - from immigration policies resulting in families separated at the border to the striking down of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark decision that, up until Amy Coney Barret and other conservative justices voted to strike it down⁷⁰, had guaranteed the right to abortion.

Considering the rise of white, middle class mothering values and the ways they get weaponized by conservative political actors to promote certain narratives about migration and mothering, I find it more critical than ever to turn to circum-Caribbean writing and Migration novels to explore more liberatory expressions of mothering along with humanized and nuanced

⁷⁰ It is interesting to note that in Colombia, a majority Catholic country, a ruling in February of 2022 in Colombia's constitutional court made abortion legal until the 24th week of pregnancy. Meanwhile, in June of that same year, the Supreme Court of the United States voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, taking away a pregnant person's right to an abortion in the U.S. Again, I think about "good" versus "bad" mothering. I think about why a Colombian migrant woman, for example, might be labeled a "bad" mother for migrating across the border with her child, while the U.S. judiciary would take away a human right that pregnant people exercise in order to make the best decisions possible for themselves and their families, and this might be labeled by some as the state exercising "good" mothering or parenting practices.

stories of migration. When we read widely about the experiences of Afro-Caribbean, Latinx and Migrant mothers, we begin to understand the complexities of mothering and caregiving within and across borders. We might, as is the case for me, see our own family histories reflected in those stories in ways we had not before. We might, also, find that the way circum-Caribbean women writers embrace marginality and liminality with respect to notions of mothering is a welcome challenge to binary, reductivist understandings of motherhood in the dominant culture in the U.S. as well as stereotypes that proliferate in U.S. media about mothering in places like Colombia and Haiti. A final thought: perhaps one way forward is to give “bad” and “subversive” mothers and mothering the credit that is due, for the deep motherlove of “bad” mothers may not be any less meaningful, compassionate or, indeed, *extra* just because the dominant culture cannot understand, see or value it the way those of us who *experienced* it can.

Cuéntame Mamá:
A Podcast on Mothering, Migration and my Dissertation

In the summer of 2022 I was lucky enough to receive a Fellowship from the Simpson Center at the University of Washington to work on a Digital Humanities (DH) project related to my dissertation. The project I developed was a podcast that explores the academic work of the third chapter of my dissertation, putting it into conversation with my own family's story of migration. The following is a transcript of the podcast. The podcast itself can be accessed here along with the dissertation itself as they both have been filed together. The podcast may also be accessed at the following site:

<https://www.buzzsprout.com/2228034>.

(Julia) Hi Leah, this is mama here.

(Leah) This is my mother.

(Julia) I'm calling from a museum called *el museo del mar*.

(Leah) She's calling me because I was having a tough time in graduate school. It was the pandemic.

(Journalist) ...Fast breaking developments in the Corona virus emergency...

(Leah) It was the Trump presidency.

(Donald Trump) ...anyone who illegally crosses the border will be detained until they are removed out of our country...

(Leah) It was a bunch of other personal crises...all converging together. And it was also the time I was supposed to be making major progress on my dissertation. But I was struggling.

(Julia) So I'm just thinking about you...

(Leah) So, the audio's not great but my mom is just calling to check on me...

(Julia) I just wanted to talk to you because you sound overwhelmed but I know you got this, I know that. So just breathe it out. Just breathe it out. *Respira, respira*. And I love you so much. *Ok. Adios mi corazoncito*. Talk soon, bye.

(Leah) *Respira*, my mother tells me, *respira*: breathe, just breathe. *Bienvenidos a todos*, welcome, my name is Leah and this is "Cuentamé Mamá" (Tell me, Mama) a podcast that tells the story of my dissertation...

(Leah) I can always delete that if I have to...

(Julia) You have to...(laughter) otherwise they don't give you the PhD.

(Leah) ...and how it led me to explore mothering and my own Colombian roots through contemporary literature from Colombia and the Caribbean region. In this episode, I explore themes of mothering and migration by reflecting on my mother's migration experience and stories about migration by two of my favorite Caribbean authors - Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat and Colombian-American Patricia Engel.

Here we go, part 1:

Part I: Mothering, Migration and All that is Left Behind...

(Leah) As anyone who has ever migrated knows, migration can be traumatic. Colombian-American author Patricia Engel puts it this way.

(Patricia Engel) We have this idea in the United States presented by the media and different sources of information that immigration is like walking through a door, the door closes and that's it. That's it. You're here. You've arrived and the old country is sort of lost behind you somewhere. In fact, it's quite different. There's a lot of complicated feelings around it. And the fact is most people in this world would choose not to leave the home that they love, the family they love, the

community that knows them and loves them in order to start over in a place where they know nobody where they have no resources where they don't speak the language and a place that is, more often than not, not very welcoming. Nobody would really choose that if they didn't have to. So I've always tried to write into that space of discovering what motivates different people to make those very hard decisions and embrace the whole picture that is, of course, the desire for something better but also the love and appreciation and respect for what came before⁷¹.

(Leah): Migration is complicated. It's not as simple as being either here or there. And sometimes, as Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat has noted, negotiating who you are as a migrant person means dealing with this feeling of physically being in one place, but having left your heart behind in your home country.

(Danticat) I often think of something I've heard people say about this experience of the disorientation of displacement, especially, you know, older Haitian people in my family, you know they'll say, {speaking Haitian creole} like 'its only my body that's here' and that there's so much in that like when you're in a place but your spirit is elsewhere or wants to be elsewhere and I think that's the sometimes undertold story of immigration: how much people sacrifice of themselves⁷².

(Leah) When I think of this, I think about my mom, and I wonder what she left behind in Colombia, what she sacrificed in order to migrate. I asked my mom about this, about what it felt like to make the decision to leave Colombia.

(Julia) *Muy difícil. Muy difícil. Pero. Mi madre me decía que era una oportunidad. Porque era una oportunidad. Yo, yo ya había empezado una carrera en Colombia y la hice por un semestre en arquitectura. Pero la Universidad cerró. Por la política o algo pasó. Entonces cerraron, entonces tuve la oportunidad de venir a los Estados Unidos. Con una beca para estudiar. Y mi madre me dijo que la oportunidad viene solamente una vez. Entonces yo vine, pero fue muy difícil para mí dejar a mi mamá,*

⁷¹ From an interview with Patricia Engel on South Florida PBS's "Between the Covers" program <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5yxd5HXWlc>

⁷² From an interview with Edwidge Danticat <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHD0ik9JReM>

especialmente a mi mamá. Y que yo me acuerde, yo lloraba. Todas las noches, lloraba, lloraba. Pero fue difícil. No estoy mintiendo.

(Leah) Very hard. Very hard. But my mother told me that it was an opportunity. It was an opportunity. I had already started a career in Colombia and I did it for a semester. It was in architecture. But the university closed. Because of the political situation. So then I had the opportunity to come to the U.S. With a scholarship to study. And my mother told me this opportunity only comes once in a lifetime. So I went but it was very hard for me to leave my mother, especially my mother. From what I remember, I cried. Every night I cried. But with time. I got through it. But it was hard. I can't lie.

(Leah) Although my mother raised me in the U.S. her "mothering" was always Colombian. We spoke Spanish, she made *patacones*, which are fried plantains, and we listened to *Carlos Vives*. And so even though I was born in the U.S. I grew up with my mother's *nostalgia* for her home country and what life was like there.

She would tell me about Sundays, for example, when all the family would have a picnic down by the river...

(Julia) *Nos íbamos cada domingo a un paseo de río donde, y eso era la felicidad del año porque nos íbamos al río y cocinábamos y nos pasábamos todo el día al pie del río bañándonos hablando. Y eso a mi me encantaba.*

(Leah) On Sundays we used to go down to the river, and that was the joy of the year for us because we would go down to the river, and cook and spend the whole day on the river bank swimming, chatting.

(Leah) ...she remembers the jasmine scent of flowers

(Julia) *Hay un árbol que da un olor. La flor. Da un olor muy especial como jazmín.*

(Leah) and the sound of the frogs at night singing...when we were in Cali we also heard the sound of these frogs that were very nostalgic for my mother.

(Julia) ...otra cosa es que hay una ranita... Que tenemos, que se llama. Pero es parecida al Coquí, pero es una ranita que hace un sonido especial. Así como koki koki...

(Field tape) [Frogs in Cali]

(Leah) These memories that my mother describes, they feel so bittersweet. It feels like there is a loss, a feeling of loss for the beloved home country. But when we listen to the news or politicians talking about migration, I don't think we hear enough about how complicated migration is or about how migration feels from the point of view of migrants.

That's where literature comes in. After the break, part II - Transnational Mothering - Read about it.

Part II: Transnational Mothering - Read about it!

(Leah) To better understand mothering and migration, I examined two novels in the third chapter of my dissertation: Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's debut novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Patricia Engel's *Infinite Country*.

Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a story about Sophie, a young Haitian girl who is left in the care of her aunt in Haiti while her mother, Martine, goes to work in New York. Eventually, mother and daughter are reunited in the U.S. But it's a difficult journey emotionally - there is trauma and there are complicated feelings for Sophie around leaving her Aunt who has felt like a mother to her and, of course, leaving Haiti behind.

Infinite Country, by Patricia Engel, is also about a mother who leaves her daughter behind. The story is about a Colombian girl named Thalia and her quest to reunite with her mother Elena in the U.S. where Elena has been living as an undocumented person. The book deals with the hope and heartbreak of a mixed status family in the U.S., how motherlove is expressed across borders, and the conflicting and complicated feelings of what it means to leave one's beloved home country behind.

The way I draw these novels together is that I notice how both stories are about something called transnational motherhood.

Guilford College Sociology professor María Madu who defines transnational motherhood as:

(Prof. María Madu) Transnational motherhood is a phenomenon that refers or that describes the situation of immigrant women who have to travel outside of the country, who have to cross borders in order to get a job that allows them to sustain their families and have to live or are required, because of their immigration status or for different reasons, to leave their children behind, that is to leave their children in their country of origin⁷³.

(Leah) In both of the novels I analyze, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Infinite Country*, there is this storyline of transnational motherhood, of a mother who goes to work abroad, leaving her child behind in the home country in the care of friends or family. Transnational motherhood is controversial. In most societies, mothers are supposed to be with their children, not send their children away. Researcher Linda Matthei, for example, has found that, "Often the mere act of leaving children behind is described (either explicitly or implicitly) as damaging, neglectful, or even abusive; and the inference is invited that the mothers are detached or disengaged in some way."

But the truth is more complicated than that.

This is something that one transnational mother who was interviewed for an LA Times video journalism piece confirmed.

(Guiselle) *Porque el problema es que como una madre, uno quiere lo mejor para los hijos. Si lo mejor para los hijos es que se vengán y vengán a buscar un futuro, y no importa que estén separados de uno*⁷⁴.

⁷³ From Savannah Henry's "The Trauma of Transnational Motherhood,"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEFXyHiTe_s

⁷⁴ From LA Times "Dos Madres: With Courage and Patience: Two Migrant Mothers Share their Stories,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApPmyAO8STU>

(Leah) Mothers, she is saying, want the best for their children. If the best means coming here in search of a future for one's child, it doesn't matter that they are separated from one another.

Transnational motherhood, however, is not easy. That separation is painful. One of the most gut-wrenching moments of Patricia Engel's novel *Infinite Country* occurs when Elena makes the decision to send her child Talia away, back to Colombia.

"She doubted her decision every day since, telling herself she never should have sent her baby away, even if Perla and Mauro both agreed it was the wisest thing. The price of being able to work to provide for the rest of the family was their estrangement. " (92)

(Leah) But amidst the pain is also resilience, because as researcher Gabrielle Oliveira notes, borders do not stop families from trying to be families. They do not stop mothers from trying to mother.

(Gabrielle Oliveira) One thing that is interesting to think about how families organize across borders is to think that family function never ends. So, our ideas of what parenting or mothering or care, all of these ideas of what they mean, they won't stop because families are not physically together. And, I guess there is an assumption that when people are separated across borders they're going to stop doing that, that there is an abandonment, that there is a rupture, that you can't fix that. But the reality is that they are still a family but they're trying to come up with ways to deal with that⁷⁵.

(Leah) That, for me, is part of the power, the resilience of transnational mothering. In my reading of these two novels, I don't see these portrayals of transnational mothers as "bad." I don't see them abandoning their children. I see them as making a sacrifice from the deepest place of maternal love. They are sacrificing physical, every-day closeness with their beloved

⁷⁵ Interview from Boston College Library program "Motherhood Across Borders: Immigrants and their Children in Mexico and New York," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_TUUA-aHAw

child for the chance to provide their child with long-term financial, physical and emotional wellbeing and security.

That, for me, is part of the power, the resilience of mothering, of migrant mothering, of transnational mothering.

Part III: Mothering Beyond Borders

(Leah) I've been talking about transnational mothering, and here I want to shift gears to the second part of my argument about the two novels I analyze.

In the novels, transnational motherhood is not only a story of deep mother love, but it also reveals things. It reveals how weird borders are. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for example, we learn that Haiti exists far beyond the physical bounds of the island nation. Haiti goes with Sophie and her mother in New York, it exists in their stories, in their mother-daughter love.

And when characters from both novels move across borders, we see that borders are not these set-in-stone, always concrete divides. They are both real (as in border patrol agents, visas and in some cases physical obstacles or barricades) but they are also...made up. As scholar Jennifer Harford Vargas puts it, borders are a mix of social and political arrangements that migrants resiliently learn to negotiate and travel across.

(Leah) I want to stress that being a migrant who is undocumented, though, that experience of being considered a "non person" and of not being able to access basic safety and security as any citizen would be able to do, that is very real. That is very horrific. And that is a very traumatizing consequence of borders. At the same time, what I think writers like Patricia Engel are pointing to is that migrants who move across borders in both ways that are documented and undocumented, they see what others are sometimes not able to. And that is that borders are also fiction. And that can be a powerful insight. Because if borders are stupid and made up, you're not beholden anymore to them. Your identity, your love, your connection to your family, your sense of belonging can be imagined in the way that you want. It doesn't have to be

measured in terms of borders and bordered nations. There's a freedom in that.

(Julia) I mean look at the animals.

(Leah) That's my mom once again.

(Julia) They travel the planet. You ask a whale, "Where are you from?" She's not going to tell you she's from Antarctica because she's not from Antarctica although she spends some time in Antarctica giving birth. But then they take the krill for the calves and they take them all over the planet. And that's home.

(Leah) Maybe borders are the problem.

(Julia) Maybe borders are the problem.

(Leah) I want to leave you with one of the last things Talia says in the novel *Infinite Country* that really speaks to this idea. Here's what she says.

"I've had borders drawn around me all my life, but I refuse to live as a bordered person. I hate the term undocumented. It implies people like my mother and me don't exist without a paper trail... Sometimes I feel bad for having ever longed for those papers, like who I am isn't enough... Maybe that I don't have the documentation they want is good. It means they don't own me."

Thank you so much for listening.

Un saludo a todos..

Leah

Note: All music performed and recorded by me, Leah Rubinsky. Both songs I sing and perform are covers. The first is Lhasa's bittersweet song "La Frontera," about border-crossing. The late Lhasa is, of course, the French-Canadian / Mexican singer and songwriter who sang beautifully across the musical genres and international borders of her Mexican and French - Canadian heritage. The second song is "Tierra de Luz," by Mercedes Sosa and Lila Downs, a song about endless longing for that 'country of light' that is one's homeland.

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