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Heather Hewett

WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly, Volume 37, Numbers 3 & 4, Fall/Winter 2009, pp. 121-139 (Article)

Published by The Feminist Press  
DOI: 10.1353/wsqa.0.0188



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## MOTHERING ACROSS BORDERS: NARRATIVES OF IMMIGRANT MOTHERS IN THE UNITED STATES

HEATHER HEWETT

Over the past several decades, motherhood has gained a heightened visibility in U.S. popular culture. A combination of disparate phenomenon—the increased media coverage of celebrity moms, the development of targeted marketing strategies, the appearance of “mommy lit” and “mommy memoirs,” the prominence of mama bloggers in cyberspace, and the growing political advocacy of mother’s rights—has propelled increasing numbers of images of motherhood, as well as mothers’ voices, into the public sphere. Many of the books, magazines, essays, websites, and blogs penned by mothers have reflected the full complexity of mothers’ lives and experiences, thus challenging cultural narratives about what it means to be a “good” mother (Hewett 2006a, 2006b). Yet despite this outpouring, and despite evidence of a growing diversity among the mothers who are writing and speaking, few if any of these narratives reflect the experiences of immigrant mothers.

During the same period of time, quite a few negative images of immigrants have surfaced. These images have a longer history; as scholars such as Leo Chavez (2001, 2007) and Katrina Irving (2000) argue, racist images of, and mythologies about, immigrants have circulated throughout the twentieth century. The 1980s and 1990s have been marked by the flourishing of a “new nativism” movement that has publicly voiced multiple objections to immigration, particularly from Latin America (Perea 1997; Chavez 1997). This recent surge of anti-immigration sentiment has focused on immigrant women’s bodies, most of all those of Mexican immigrant women (Chavez 1997, 2007). The resulting narratives in the popular media portray immigrant women (particularly their reproductive rates) as posing “serious threats to the nation” (Chavez 2007, 87)—a nation that continues to be defined by Anglos, its “legitimate” citizens (88). Chavez (2007) further observes that anti-immigrant discourses and images do not simply remain in the popular realm but can have real political consequences. Indeed, since 9/11, increased

[*WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 37: 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2009)]  
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consciousness about national security has led to stepped-up deportations, increased workplace raids, increased border security, the construction of hundreds of miles of a border wall, the confinement of undocumented immigrants in detention centers, the separation of families, and incidents of human rights violations. Given this hostile climate, one can understand the obstacles preventing immigrant mothers from sharing their stories—as well as the need for them.

One exception to this silence lies in the ongoing research by a group of feminist social scientists studying gender and migration, who not only have begun to analyze and theorize the experiences of immigrant women but also have started to collect personal narratives from many of their subjects. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (2007) identified the increasing phenomenon of “transnational motherhood,” the practice of mothers living and working in different countries from those of their children, thus resulting in a “care deficit” in many third world/global South nations (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, 8). These scholars are examining the impact of transnational mothering on families as well as on mothers themselves, asking whether the practice of taking on new duties as breadwinners enables immigrant mothers to break free of oppressive ideologies of motherhood—or whether gendered ideologies remain rigid and unforgiving, demanding performances of “supermothering” across the borders of time and space (Parreñas 2005, 103).

As a feminist literary critic, I have found much of this research instructive and useful. Indeed, the insights provided by social science, on the one hand, and cultural productions such as literature and film, on the other, can prove quite illuminating when considered together. Literary studies reminds us that creative texts do not provide transparent windows onto the world, but rather individually crafted frames that require us to ask questions about issues of representation and interpretation—to think about *how* we see in addition to *what* we see. Furthermore, literature can help create reality and, as Rita Felski puts it, the “self as a cultural reality” (1989, 78). However, as Susan Stanford Friedman points out, *only* to focus on issues of representation and interpretation is to run the risk of erasing the woman’s life in the text; instead, we need to pay attention to the interplay between the process of making meaning and the meaning that is made out of women’s lives (2002). Thus a careful and conscientious use of social science research in literary studies can help us think about broader issues of gender and power. Likewise, some social scientists have suggested that incorporating an examination of

literature can benefit social science research. Avery Gordon argues that “literary fictions” can play an important role “for the simple reason that they enable other kinds of sociological information to emerge” (2008, 25). In the case of migration, Paul White observes that “creative literature contains some of the most effective explorations of identity issues” and the complex psychological shifts that take place as a result of crossing borders (1995, 2).

In this essay, I consider one film and one novel, both produced within the past fifteen years, that explore the experiences of transnational mothers in the United States. The film, *La Misma Luna* (2007), with the English title *Under the Same Moon*, was written and filmed by a Mexican-born writer (Ligia Villalobos) and director (Patricia Riggen) and distributed by Fox Searchlight/The Weinstein Brothers to both English- and Spanish-speaking audiences (although it was filmed entirely in Spanish, it has English subtitles). The novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1995), initially published by Soho Press, was written in English by Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat, primarily for an English-speaking audience.<sup>1</sup>

Although produced out of different cultural contexts and at different moments, both *La Misma Luna* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* suggest that cultural narratives of motherhood, in particular Catholic-inflected ideologies that lend themselves to the social control of female sexuality, remain a central issue for many transnational mothers—not only in their sending countries but also in the United States. At the same time, the comparison between the film and the novel reveals significant differences that may prove instructive for those who would use creative cultural productions in the interdisciplinary study of migration. The film, while powerful in its representation of the hardships facing an undocumented Mexican-born mother, offers relatively simplified portraits of its characters and, as a result, leaves dominant Euro-American and Latin American cultural scripts about what defines a “good” mother relatively untouched. By contrast, Danticat’s novel, written more than ten years earlier, presents a nuanced representation of the complexities of transnational motherhood in which the immigrant mother is neither all good nor all bad. Told from the perspective of the daughter (who later becomes a mother herself), the novel explores how Haitian cultural scripts and images of womanhood can prove both oppressive and empowering.

### **LA MISMA LUNA: THE TRANSNATIONAL MOTHER AS MARTYR**

*La Misma Luna* tells the story of a single mother, Rosario (Kate del Castillo), who works in Los Angeles as a domestic worker and sends remittances

back home to Mexico to her nine-year-old son, Carlitos (Adrián Alonso), in the care of his grandmother. (His father, we eventually learn, has separately migrated to the United States, so that caregiving remains squarely in the province of women.) When his grandmother dies, the spirited Carlitos takes the money he has been saving and sets out in search of his mother, encountering a range of slightly menacing, flawed, and helpful characters along the way. Picaresque in flavor, *La Misma Luna* offers an implicit critique of U.S. immigration policies by way of several scenes: an opening sequence depicting Rosario's harrowing border crossing, a scene in which the sound effects are provided by a Latino radio broadcast critiquing the unnamed governor's anti-immigrant policies, and an extended chase scene during an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid. The main conflict of the film stems from the physical separation of mother and son, and the plot is driven by their mutual desire to be reunited.

Rosario is a beautiful and appealing character primarily defined by her identity as a mother. She is always thinking of her son (and he of her), suggested by the film's parallel opening sequence in which mother and son wake up to alarm clocks, apparently only a few feet from each other; quickly, however, the audience realizes that they are separated by thousands of miles. Although emotionally connected, they live physically apart—they share only the experience of living under the same moon. Rosario's resulting preoccupation with her son extends into every area of her life. All her life decisions emanate from caring for her son and making his life better: she risks the dangers of crossing the border and working without papers in the United States so that she can send Carlitos money for food, clothes, and school; she calls him every week on the same day and time; she leaves LA to search for him as soon as she learns that he has left home. A devoted mother, she hides her own emotional suffering and pain from her son, though the film makes her suffering clear to audiences: she silently cries on the phone when she talks with him; she sadly tucks in a child while babysitting; and she refuses to go out with her roommate Alicia, who is in search of love and a good time.

Rosario's physical distance from her son forces her to perform long-distance emotional care work. Her demonstrations of "emotional intimacy" accord with what Joanna Dreby has found among transnational Mexican mothers (2006, 34). Like Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Dreby finds "gender expectations in parenting to be durable in the transnational context" (2006, 56).<sup>2</sup> In her study of Mexican parents in New Jersey, Dreby observes that "mothers' relationships with their children in Mexico are highly dependent

on demonstrating emotional intimacy from a distance, whereas fathers' relationships lie in their economic success as migrant workers. . . . These differences are tied to Mexican gender ideology in which women's maternal role is sacralized whereas the father's role is tied to financial provision" (34). In keeping with these gendered inflections of parenting, *La Misma Luna* includes a subplot involving Carlitos's father, a migrant in Tucson who has been out of touch with his family and does not accompany Carlitos to find his mother in LA, even after promising to do so. Although the film does not elaborate, the key to understanding his failure as a father may be tied to his inability (or refusal) to send remittances home to his son. As Dreby observes, "Fathers only communicate with children in Mexico as long as they are sending money home to them" (55). At stake is not just their identity as fathers but perhaps also that as men; as Marit Melhuus observes of Mexican gender categories, a "man's first responsibility is to maintain his family" economically, and the "inability to provide" is tantamount to failure of a man's masculinity (1996, 242).

Dreby's analysis further suggests that when Mexican mothers migrate, traditional understandings of gender, motherhood, and caregiving do not necessarily change. Likewise, in her work on transnational Filipino families, Parreñas has found that the care children received from relatives or other caregivers became obscured because it was not performed by their mothers. Parreñas argues that the resulting "gender paradox" harms "children's acceptance of the reconstitution of mothering and consequently hampers their acceptance of growing up in households split apart from their mothers" (2005, 92). *La Misma Luna* suggests that this may be the case for Carlitos. Although he is cared for by his maternal grandmother (a situation common within transnational Mexican and Latin American families [Schmalzbauer 2005; Dreby 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2007]), Rosario remains the always-desired figure. As Carlitos says to her on the telephone, she has been absent for too many years; the implicit suggestion is that her absence has begun to undermine her capacity to mother. Carlitos's victimization by his mother's absence sends a powerful message to the audience: no mother's sacrifice, no matter how great, can make up for her presence. While emotionally powerful, this message idealizes and naturalizes the biological mother as the only legitimate caregiver. Indeed, Rosario's entire success as a mother hinges upon her ability to fulfill her son's expectations.

Perhaps as a consequence, Rosario's devoted and self-sacrificial mothering extends further, exhibiting itself in the denial of her own sexuality. In

contrast to Alicia, who routinely dates, Rosario works and stays at home. She even rebuffs the romantic advances of the honorable and loyal Paco, a security guard at one of the houses she cleans. Although Rosario eventually agrees to marry Paco, who offers her the possibility of a green card, it is a pragmatic decision she subsequently realizes she cannot honor. (Rosario agrees to Paco's proposition only after she is unjustly fired and is unable to find more work.) Romance remains absent, not because Rosario does not feel physically attracted to Paco (in fact, their one slow dance suggests that she might be, if she let herself), but rather because Rosario has room only for Carlitos in her heart.

Rosario's denial of her own sexuality reinforces powerful scripts about what it means to be a "good" mother in both Euro-American and Latino cultures. In Euro-American culture, enduring images of the "good" mother (always defined against the "bad" mother) emphasize qualities of selflessness and self-denial.<sup>3</sup> An ideal with roots in the nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity," the "good" mother has more recently morphed into the practice of "intensive mothering" among middle- and upper-middle-class mothers (Hays 1996, 103). The ultimate good mother, of course, is the Virgin Mary—pure, devoted, nurturing, asexual—frequently posited as the opposite of Mary Magdalene, a prostitute. These two powerful mythic figures provide a simplified and binaristic view of female sexuality. In *La Misma Luna*, Rosario fits into the category of saintly mother; the contrast provided by her foil, Alicia (the "party girl"), emphasizes Rosario's saintliness and works to ensure that audiences will view Rosario as a good mother. After all, the film's success depends upon the audience's sympathetic identification with Rosario's struggle, and several potential pitfalls might ruin this affectual response. One is the possibility that the film might trigger any one of the anti-immigrant stereotypes circulating at the time of the film's release; another is that the film might trigger the stigma associated with maternal absence. As Diana Gustafson argues, "Few mothers are more stigmatized than those living apart from their children" (2005, 1). Indeed, given the narrowly defined prescriptions of ideal maternity presented by the figure of the at-home, solo mother—grounded in race and class privilege, and utterly unavailable to a single, working-class, Mexican-born, undocumented, and noncustodial mother—one can understand why the film carefully and repeatedly demonstrates that Rosario is, without question, a good mother.

Furthermore, idealized notions of the good mother circulate within many Latin American cultures. As Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila observe,

Women of color have always worked. Yet, many working women—including Latinas—hold the cultural prescription of solo mothering in the home as an ideal. This ideal is disseminated through cultural institutions of industrialization and urbanization, as well as from pre-industrial, rural peasant arrangements that allow for women to work while tending to their children. It is not only white, middle-class ideology but also strong Latina/o traditions, cultural practices, and ideals—Catholicism, and the Virgin Madonna figure—that cast employment as oppositional to mothering. Cultural symbols that model maternal femininity, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe, and negative femininity, such as La Llorona and La Malinche, serve to control Mexican and Chicana women’s conduct by prescribing idealized visions of motherhood. (2007, 391)

Drawing from Shirlene Soto’s research, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila describe the Virgin of Guadalupe as “the exemplary maternal model, *la mujer abnegada* (the self-effacing woman), who sacrifices all for her children and religious faith” (2007, 411n4). In a similar vein, Gloria Anzaldúa observes that “*la Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/*mexicano*” who, while a powerful “symbol of hope and faith,” has also been “used by the Church” to “make us docile and enduring” (1987, 30–31). Anzaldúa further argues that the Virgin of Guadalupe, along with “*La Llorona*” and “*La Malinche*,” has “encouraged the *virgen/puta* (whore) dichotomy” (31). The resulting idealization of motherhood, known among Latin American scholars as *marianismo*, is described by Evelyn Stevens as “the cult of feminine spiritual superiority” (1973, 91) that emphasizes women’s “semidivinity, moral superiority, and spiritual strength” (94). Central to this construction are the ideas that “spiritual strength engenders abnegation, that is, an infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice” (94) and a sexual ideal of “premarital chastity” and “postnuptial frigidity” (96). Melhuus further elaborates the connections between suffering and female sexuality, inscribed in the Virgin of Guadalupe as Virgin Mother: “It is through the particular suffering evoked by the Virgin that the basis for women’s chastity is generated. It is suffering, explicitly expressed in a form of self-sacrifice, which serves to transcend sexuality and becomes the mark of motherhood. Thus suffering becomes a virtue, and women are its victims” (1996, 247). Indeed, Rosario’s self-denial and silent suffering provide a transnational twist on the religious iconography of the *mater dolorosa*, the Virgin mother who weeps for her son (Stevens 1973, 96).

These resonances with iconic Euro-American and Latin American figures of motherhood explicitly identify Rosario as the suffering mother. It is also possible, of course, that *La Misma Luna* accurately represents the psychological reality of an undocumented Mexican migrant mother, whose emotional pain would likely be inflected by the ideals of *marianismo*. At the same time, the film does not provide any metanarrative reflections about the presence of these cultural scripts of motherhood. I sense that the film, sympathetic to the plight of undocumented immigrants and reluctant to stir controversy, refuses to explore more complex dimensions of Rosario's identity. Likewise, the film silences the anxiety of truly unsettling scenes (such as Rosario's border crossing) with easily identified and somewhat clichéd characters, light comedy, and a happy ending. The result, a one-dimensional presentation of Rosario, reinscribes gendered ideologies of the self-effacing and martyred mother. We are left with the near-perfect idealization of motherhood that young children seem to possess. The more sobering realities of the emotional turmoil that may surface after mother and child are reunited, not to mention their continuing vulnerability as undocumented immigrants, lie outside the frame of the happy ending (Menjívar and Abrego 2009). The film's previous critique of anti-immigrant policies is abandoned, so that the workings of the state become obscured by the emotional high of their reunion. Unfortunately, while the film achieves a great deal in telling the story of a transnational mother, it ultimately provides a feel-good fairy tale ending that shies away from more disturbing or complex realities.

### BREATH, EYES, MEMORY: REIMAGINING MOTHERHOOD

Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* considers the experience of women within the "long legacy" of women who have left the Caribbean in search of work and a better life (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2007, 388).<sup>4</sup> Danticat left Haiti in 1981 (her parents had migrated to the United States eight years earlier), the same year that Haiti caught national attention when a boatload of its citizens perished while trying to reach the United States in October. Subsequent U.S. media coverage of the country focused on violent images, such as the burning-tire "necklaces" that were thrown around Haitians while U.S. marines stood by, or images of people with AIDS, an epidemic that was just beginning to receive press attention (Wucker 1999, xi). All these images constructed a dominant media narrative about Haitians as diseased, starving, violent, and threatening. Danticat was exposed to this media narrative as a young girl who had recently arrived in Brooklyn. She

remembers that it was difficult if not impossible to “tell whether there are real living and breathing women in conflict-stricken places like Haiti,” yet she knew that such women “do exist” (1996, para. 8).

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells the story of these unseen Haitian women. A coming-of-age novel, it narrates the story of a young girl, Sophie Caco, who is left behind in Haiti as an infant when her mother Martine, migrates to New York City, where she attempts to “escape the trauma” of her rape by a tonton macoute, one of the members of Duvalier’s renegade forces in Haiti (Francis 2004, 80). Martine’s experience of transnational motherhood is difficult and emotionally painful. Like Rosario, she tries to maintain emotional intimacy: she frequently sends tapes home to Sophie and Sophie’s aunt and works two jobs (during the day in a nursing home, and at night in someone’s home) in order to make enough money to send for her daughter. During the nearly twelve years that she mothers long distance, she has only one picture of Sophie as an infant to help aid her memory. (It is thus not a surprise that when Sophie finally arrives in Brooklyn, she learns that Martine has displaced her maternal love onto a doll.) Unlike in the idealized reunion of Rosario and Carlitos, Martine and Sophie find themselves enmeshed in a fraught and conflictual relationship. Although primarily narrated from Sophie’s point of view, the novel incorporates the multiple voices of other women and sympathetically portrays their experiences. Sophie’s own struggle to find healing and self-acceptance ultimately leads her to return to Haiti to spend time with her aunt and grandmother. Through reclaiming powerful Haitian figures of motherhood and rewriting oppressive scripts of womanhood, Sophie escapes the cycle of trauma and finds the freedom never available to her own mother.

The novel begins on Mother’s Day, when twelve-year-old Sophie has made a Mother’s Day card for her aunt, Tante Atie. This gift immediately sparks Atie’s ambivalence about her own role as a surrogate mother, and she tells Sophie that the girl must save the card for her real (that is, biological) mother. When Sophie protests (“It is your card,” she says), Atie responds, “It is for a mother, your mother,” adding, “When it is Aunt’s Day, you can make me one” (Danticat 1995, 9). As the reader subsequently learns, Atie already knows that Martine has sent a plane ticket for her daughter, so that Sophie will be leaving—thus heightening Atie’s awareness that she is not Sophie’s mother. This leads her to remark, “Not this year,” upon receiving the card (8). This one sentence suggests that Atie has received Mother’s Day cards in the past. Based on this, and on her loving care of her niece, we can surmise

that up until this point, she has accepted the role of Sophie's mother. At the same time, the text suggests that both Atie and Sophie have been conscious that Atie is not a "real" mother. Sophie's remark that "maybe she wanted to be a real mother, have a real daughter to wear matching clothes with, hold hands and learn to read with" reveals the young girl's awareness that they are not biological mother and daughter, and thus not as good, or as authentic, as a "real" mother-daughter pair (7).

Atie's feelings of ambivalence reflect deep pain about her own situation: as an unmarried woman with no biological children of her own, she has embraced her role as Sophie's mother and loves the child (much later in the story, she says, "You were my child" [173]); but now she faces losing this child (a loss she must always have known she would someday face). With the loss of Sophie, she will return to care for her own mother, Grandmè Ifé, trading her identity as a surrogate mother for a role as another kind of caregiver: that of a dutiful daughter caring for an aging parent.

Atie's mothering can be understood within traditions of othermothering, or child fostering, which many scholars have documented throughout the African diaspora (Soto 1987; James 1993; Collins 2000). In her examination of West Indian child fostering, Isa María Soto argues that child fostering can be "considered an integral and vital part of [the] circular movement that works to maintain an historical and cultural continuity between the migrants and the communities that send them forth" (1987, 121). *Breath, Eyes, Memory* suggests that this continuity can be tangled, and child fostering emotionally complex. Atie's ambivalence about her role, and her ultimate rejection of the role of mother, betrays a complex internal struggle to define her identity as a single woman, an aunt, and an othermother. (One wonders, too, whether a good portion of her ambivalence may stem from a desire to protect her niece from any pain—to wean her, as it were, from their relationship, so that Sophie can readjust to being her mother's daughter.) In either case, as a result of her ambivalence, Atie accepts and unwittingly reinscribes scripts of biological motherhood.

Atie is not the only othermother in the text. Atie's mother and Sophie's grandmother, Grandmè Ifé, cares for Sophie through cooking and storytelling and, as Nancy Gerber argues, provides for Sophie a powerful figure of a female artist (2003, 77–8). But like Atie, Grandmè Ifé reserves a special place for the kind of caregiving a mother provides, telling Sophie that her mother should be her "first friend" (Danticat 1995, 24). These cultural scripts dictate what daughters, as well as mothers, should be and do. The resulting message

Sophie receives is confusing. She senses Atie's ambivalence and emotional distance; she is told she must leave the women she knows and loves to live with a mother she knows only from stories, recorded tapes, and a framed photograph by her aunt's pillow. Despite the fact that Atie and Ifé explain the separation as natural and inevitable, Sophie's own attempts to grapple with this impending change are characterized by fear: she has nightmares about her mother during which her mother chases her and tries to drag her into the frame of a photograph, at which point she dreams that her aunt tries to save her.

At the same time, Sophie possesses her own idealized notions of motherhood, images that stand in stark contrast to those of her biological mother. These ideas are informed by Haitian cultural myths, most of all the stories surrounding the Vodou figure Ezili ("Erzulie" in the novel). Consider, for example, the following passage:

As a child, the mother I had imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk, and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and lots and lots of French perfume. She never had to work for anything because the rainbow and the stars did her work for her. Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn. (59)

Ezili is a syncretic religious figure with roots in diverse West African religious traditions and correspondences with the Virgin Mary (Desmangles 1992, 143).<sup>5</sup> In Haitian Vodou, she has multiple manifestations. Karen McCarthy Brown identifies two of her primary manifestations as Ezili Freda and Ezili Dantò, and Danticat's description of "Erzulie" in this passage mirrors that of Ezili Freda, who is "beautiful, alluring, desirable" (Brown 1991, 246). As Terry Rey explains, Ezili Freda is frequently "characterized as a wealthy mulatto woman of radiant beauty, superfluous flamboyance, and extravagant taste" (1999, 201). This accords with Sophie's imagination of "Erzulie" as a powerful healer and an object of desire. With her almost excessive dresses, jewelry, and perfume, Erzulie signifies wealth and performs a femininity defined by power and sexuality, not submissiveness or weakness. She is a "lavish" deity who doesn't have to work, but can command the natural world to work for her.

As a figure of a powerful and sexual woman, Ezili Freda differs from the chaste and self-sacrificing Virgin Mother. As Brown explains, “Unlike the Mary of mainstream Catholicism, who offers an impossible ideal of perfectly submissive (and virginal) motherhood for emulation, the Ezili are much closer to the human drama” (1991, 221). Indeed, Ezili’s identification with the Virgin Mary leads Rey to name her the “Promiscuous Virgin” in his study of “Haitian Marianism” (1999, 199). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie understands this complexity not as contradictory, but as a kind of “doubling”: “Erzulie [is] our goddess of love who doubled for us as the Virgin Mother” (Danticat 1995, 113). However, the novel’s exploration of motherhood suggests that obtaining access to Erzulie’s power and escaping oppressive scripts of femininity are neither simple nor possible for everyone.

For Sophie the child, Erzulie provides a figure of powerful and sustaining motherhood—idealized and ever-present—during a time when her own mother has left her. For Sophie’s all-too-human mother, who struggles with self-hatred and her own failure to live up to ideals of womanhood, Erzulie sets an impossible standard. Indeed, Martine is plagued by guilt that she is not an “ideal mother” (189). She worries about the many ways in which she fails normative scripts of femininity (she’s not thin but “fat,” not light but “dark,” and has had a mastectomy) (189). As a poor, dark, Haitian immigrant, she cannot access the power or the sexuality modeled by the wealthy, light-skinned, and bejeweled Ezili Freda—despite Martine’s romance with Marc, a Haitian immigrant lawyer who helps her apply for a green card. Martine never marries her lover, in part because he hails from the Haitian elite; and once she learns she has become pregnant again, this time with Marc’s child, she is retraumatized by the memories of her girlhood rape. Her pregnancy reminds her of her rapist, and she has nightmares in which the unborn child speaks in his voice: “I hear him saying things to me. You *tintin, malpròp*. He calls me a filthy whore” (217). Unable to embrace her own sexuality without the internalized image of a whore, and unable to experience her pregnancy without reliving her violent memories, she commits suicide.

Interestingly, Martine never turns to another manifestation of Ezili suggested in other scenes in the novel: Ezili Dantò. According to Brown, Ezili Dantò is “above all else the mother, the one who bears children” (1991, 228); she is “hardworking,” “solitary,” “sometimes raging” (220), and unmarried (256). Furthermore, she “tells poor women’s stories, and, what is more, she does it from their perspective. Whatever her previous role . . . in contemporary urban Haiti she is a prism focusing light on the single mother and head

of household. Ezili Dantò functions these days to bring hidden lives and hidden truths to the surface” (255–56).

In a novel about the “hidden lives and hidden truths” of poor women, a novel dedicated to “the brave women of Haiti” (Danticat 1995), the characteristics of Ezili Dantò inform both the novel’s politics and its aesthetics. We can understand the number of stories in the novel—the stories told by individual female characters as well as the inclusion of folkloric myths and stories, also about women—within the context of a feminist storytelling ethos suggested by Ezili Dantò. For example, Sophie tells us the story of a suffering woman who bleeds constantly and turns to Erzulie for help. Erzulie turns the woman into a butterfly, a “transformation” that sets her free from the pain of her human condition (1995, 87). Erzulie’s compassion for the suffering woman (whose “bleeding,” N’Zengou-Tayo argues, symbolizes menstruation, and hence “the capacity of reproduction” [2000, 133]) provides some solace to Sophie, who similarly finds herself tormented by what it means to be a woman—in this case, being forced to undergo “testing” by her mother to ensure her virginity (N’Zengou-Tayo 2000, 133). As Francis points out, Sophie’s own attempt to set herself free of this practice (during which she ruptures her hymen) only represents a “short term victory” (2004, 84). Unable to love her body, Sophie manifests the same symptoms as those of her mother.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, she finds an alternative way forward, with the help of Erzulie—a figure who contains the power to set women free from the gendered ideologies and practices that confine them.

By contrast, Martine never escapes idealized scripts of womanhood. Instead, she participates in the invasive and violent practice of testing, which enables her to keep her daughter “pure and chaste” (Danticat 1994, 154). In so doing, she proves herself a “good mother,” defined by her willingness to patrol her daughter’s sexuality, hence ensuring purity upon marriage. As Francis points out, marriage in Haiti (as in many other places) often “determines or solidifies a woman’s class position” (2004, 82). Whether or not such a “virginity cult” exists in Haiti (Danticat 1995, 154), the “symbolic truth” lies in the novel’s exposure of Marianist ideals of women’s sexuality (N’Zengou-Tayo 2000, 128). As Carolle Charles explains, “In Haiti, the dominant sexual discourse classifies sexual and conjugal relations in polarized terms—with marriage at one extreme and prostitution and adultery at the other” (1995, 142). *Breath, Eyes, Memory* makes a powerful connection between testing and rape, suggesting that both of these should be recog-

nized as a violence against women that contributes to the social control of women's sexuality and behavior. As Martine tells her daughter, "The two greatest pains of my life are very much related. . . . The testing and the rape. I live both every day" (Danticat 1995, 170). Furthermore, migration does not end this patriarchal practice, and Martine's position in the New York Haitian diaspora does not provide her with an opportunity to free herself (or her daughter) from this abusive practice. Instead, the novel effectively demonstrates how Martine's reproduction of the ideology of virginity amounts to a cycle of "sexual violence" in which her daughter also becomes traumatized (Francis 2004, 83).

For Sophie, healing comes from escaping scripts of female sexuality in which rape and testing are used to control women. Erzulie helps her on this journey. The statue of Erzulie given to her by her grandmother subsequently plays a role in the ritual healing ceremony during which she forgives her mother for traumatizing her (Danticat 1995, 201–2). She does not blame her mother, because she understands that "my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too" (203). Subsequently, when Martine kills herself, Sophie reclaims Erzulie's power while dressing her mother for burial:

I picked out the most crimson of all my mother's clothes, a bright red, two-piece suit that she was too afraid to wear in the Pentecostal services.

It was too loud a color for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped *them*, and killed *them*. She was the only woman with that power. (227)

Sophie's defiant act draws upon Erzulie's power to contest social norms, particularly those regulating women's bodies and appearance—norms that function even in death. This power forever eluded Martine in life, who could never escape her own self-condemnation for failing to live up to the dictates of idealized womanhood. But Sophie has realized her own power to rewrite gendered narratives and "liberate" herself (157). As Gerber argues, "Sophie envisions Erzulie as a symbol of female subjectivity: to be Erzulie is to love one's self and one's body. By dressing Martine in red, Erzulie's color, at her mother's burial, Sophie claims Erzulie's power for women" (2003, 81).

In this passage, Sophie celebrates many of the characteristics recogniz-

able as belonging to Ezili Freda. Yet her reclamation of Erzulie simultaneously draws upon the powers of Ezili Dantò. As Francis argues, “In calling on Erzulie [Dantò], a symbol of bodily survival and resistance and the protector of women who are suffering from abuse, Sophie conjures these defiant characteristics for her own mother” (2004, 87). Sophie furthermore conjures these characteristics for herself, as she reimagines Erzulie as a mother figure empowered by her sexuality, her fierceness, and her compassion. In this combination of the characteristics of the two major Ezili manifestations in Erzulie, the novel reimagines the feminist potential of this powerful mother figure for pointing the way toward freedom. Sophie finally has the answer to her grandmother’s question: “‘*Ou libéré?*’ Are you free, my daughter?” (Danticat 1995, 234). She is finally able to author her own story as a Haitian American mother.

## CONCLUSION

Both *La Misma Luna* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* present stories of immigrant mothers not frequently heard in U.S. popular culture, but with strikingly different results. While *La Misma Luna* presents us with a likable main character, whose plight calls upon the audience’s sympathies, the cultural work of the film reinscribes her in dominant narratives of motherhood. Likewise, the female characters in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* elicit the sympathy of readers, in what Ifeona Fulani calls a “strategy” whereby “Danticat crosses cultural barriers to gain access to the imagination of the non-Haitian, non-Caribbean reader, and enter the American imagination” (2005, 77). Yet in its foregrounding of the presence of oppressive gendered narratives, and its reclamation of Erzulie as an alternative model of motherhood, Danticat’s novel considers the possibilities of feminist revision. As a result, Danticat’s novel “creates new myths for new spaces and new ways of living . . . for a new breed of Haitian-Americans” (N’Zengou-Tayo 2000, 137). For those interested in better understanding the experiences of transnational motherhood, comparing *La Misma Luna* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* within their differing cultural contexts highlights the ways in which cultural narratives—as they are transplanted, internalized, and reconfigured—play varied roles in the definition of self and the experience of mothering.

If these two cultural productions suggest how ideologies of motherhood travel and transform themselves in complex and nuanced ways, this essay furthermore suggests the pressing need for more stories about, and by, immigrant mothers. As Gretchen Hunt observes, “The story of immigration

and the policy debates now circling around the topic are strikingly gendered, and ignore the reality of mothers and their children. So too do the writings and public conversations on motherhood [that] often exclude the stories of immigrant mothers” (2008, para. 5). Only with more of their stories can we begin to examine the damage done by the many distorted narratives about mothers and immigrants, circulating among and between nations, cultures, and people; only then can we work toward a world in which all women can author their own narratives, for themselves and future generations.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank her colleagues who attended the presentation of a version of this essay given at the State University of New York, New Paltz as part of the Women’s Studies Colloquium series in spring 2009. She would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, whose generous suggestions were quite helpful for revisions.

HEATHER HEWETT is an assistant professor of English and women’s studies at the State University of New York at New Paltz, where she coordinates the women’s studies program and teaches courses in postcolonial and world literatures, women’s literature, and transnational feminism. Her work has appeared in a range of academic and feminist publications, including *MELUS*, *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, and the *Women’s Review of Books*, as well as the edited collections *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (Routledge, 2006); *Mothering in the Third Wave* (Demeter Press, 2008); and *Expressions of the Body: Representations in African Text and Image* (Peter Lang, 2009).

#### NOTES

1. Danticat sprinkles Haitian Creole (Kreyòl) throughout the text and, as Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo points out, the rhythm of the sentences suggests the “implicit presence of Creole underneath the English sentences” (2000, 136).

2. In her research among migrant Filipino families, Parreñas identified the phenomenon of “martyr moms,” in which transnational mothers felt compelled to perform a kind of supermothering (whether through phone calls, emails, gifts, or visits home) (2005, 103).

3. On the history and evolution of ideologies of “good” (and “bad”) mothering in a Euro-American context, see Kaplan 1992; Hays 1996; Thurer 1994; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1997; Smith 2003; and Douglas and Michaels 2004.

4. According to Mary Chamberlain, the long history of Caribbean out-migration

and its economic centrality for families has meant that “family strategies” and “family structures” have evolved to accommodate or even “encourage” migration (2006, 91). In the case of Haiti, Michel Laguerre argues that migration to the United States has created a new kind of citizen, a “diasporic citizen,” with allegiance to two nations, so that “Haiti” is redefined to include all those “inside the reterritorialized space of the dispersed nation” (1998, 8).

5. Syncretism is common in Creole religions throughout the Caribbean (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003, 7).

6. For a full exploration of Sophie’s trauma, her bulimia, and her doubling, see Chancy 1997 and Francis 2004.

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