

SANS PATRIE FIXE: HOW DOES NANCY HUSTON'S INTRICATE CULTURAL  
AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND EFFECT/AFFECT IDENTITY, VOICE AND  
PERSPECTIVE IN HER NOVELS?

by

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband, Sébastien, my two wonderful children, Eva and Samantha, and to my supportive parents – both in the United States and in France.

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## ABSTRACT

*SANS PATRIE FIXE*: HOW DOES NANCY HUSTON'S INTRICATE CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND EFFECT/AFFECT IDENTITY, VOICE AND PERSPECTIVE IN HER NOVELS?

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This thesis describes the works of Nancy Huston, an Anglophone-Canadian who began her writing career in Paris, and, more importantly, in French, an adopted language. The importance of this author's cultural and linguistic background serves as the backdrop to the analysis of various themes from her work, such as marginality, creation and death. Feminism, motherhood, and religion are also strong components in Nancy Huston's work and this thesis examines the interweaving of these themes. Several of this author's fiction novels, including *Cantique des plaines*, *La Virevolte*, *Instruments des ténèbres*, and *L'Empreinte de l'ange*, as well as some of her non-fiction work (including *Journal de la création* and *Nord perdu*, but also a number of her short essays) are presented as supporting documentation in this biographical critique of the thesis question.

## INTRODUCTION: Who is Nancy Huston?

As I began my research on Nancy Huston, I found myself trying to fit her, and her writing, into a category. Is she a French author or a Canadian author? Or, is she a French-Canadian author? Is her writing feminist or simply feminine? What about her translation: is she translating her initial work or producing original pieces in her translations? Questions like these could fill pages. I realized, though, that perhaps Nancy Huston doesn't fit into any singular category, and, like the complex characters in her fiction, she represents marginality. Nancy Huston's work sits just outside the neat, cookie-cutter categories of earlier eras because of her marginality. She does not belong to one cultural group, not even one linguistic group, nor does she relate to one gender-based role. Therefore, let us examine, through the lens of biographical criticism, who is Nancy Huston and how her intricate cultural and linguistic background effect/affect identity, voice, and perspective in her novels.

Born in Calgary in 1953, Nancy Huston grew up in English-speaking Alberta with Anglophone parents. At the age of six, her mother abandoned her family, an event that greatly contributed to Nancy Huston's strained relationship with her mother tongue, English. Her father remarried a young German woman and very soon after their marriage, Nancy Huston was sent to Germany to spend the summer with her new step-mother: "Je me suis plongée dans la langue allemande et ça m'a fait un bien



extraordinaire. J'ai senti qu'il avait une possibilité de sauvetage grâce à 'l'étrangéité' de la nouvelle identité qui m'était proposée" (Ploquin 6). This was Nancy Huston's first experience not only with the rejection of her mother tongue, English, but also with the creation of a new identity for herself by way of adopting and immersing herself into a new language.

Nancy Huston also had the experience of changing cultures as an adolescent when her family moved to the Northeast of the United States, where she attended high school in New Hampshire and then Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. As per an interview in *Le Français dans le monde*, it was the work of an extraordinary teacher who inspired her pursuit of the French language: "C'était une Alsacienne, une femme tout à fait remarquable. Elle nous enseignait le français à travers la lecture de Sartre, Cocteau, les chansons de Vian, Brel, Piaf..." (Ploquin 6). In 1973 Nancy Huston went to Paris for an academic year abroad; she ended up staying in France [and has lived there ever since] and continued her studies at the graduate level, writing her master's thesis under the famous literary theorist, Roland Barthes. According to Alison Rice, however, Nancy Huston moved abroad to France "to resist the assimilating influence of American culture" (Rice 108). Although one of Nancy Huston's "pet peeves" was to be mistaken for a wide-eyed, American tourist in Paris, the literary world in which she took part (as a spectator at that point) and the social movement for women (which she joined) would have offered much stronger reasons for her to stay in France and forge herself a new identity (yet again), in order to put her painful past behind her. As stated by Nancy Huston, "Le plaisir de cette époque venait aussi d'une sorte de mimétisme, de cette

capacité de faire ‘comme si’ j’étais française, d’oublier mes origines et tout ce qu’elles avaient de douloureux” (Ploquin 6).

In the above quotation, Nancy Huston evokes the idea of pretending, or playing at being French. This sentiment carries forth long after her initial formative years in Paris as a student when she finds herself not bilingual, but “mi-langue,” between two languages:

C’était le seul aspect pénible du séjour, cette sensation de flottement entre l’anglais et le français, sans véritable ancrage dans l’un ou l’autre — de sorte que, au bout de dix années de vie à l’étranger, loin d’être devenue “parfaitement bilingue,” je me sens doublement mi-lingue, ce qui n’est pas très loin d’analphabète.... (Huston, *Lettres parisiennes: L’autopsie de l’exil* 74).

It is the sense of abandonment that stems from her mother’s departure that reaches as far as a rejection (initially) of the English language and to the adoption of the French language in her exile. This then leads to a state where language is an important aspect of her exile, perhaps even more so than geographical distance (Rice 112). Nancy Huston abandoned people and places in search of the ultimate exile, “[...] celui de mon pays et de ma langue maternelle,” as she wrote in *Lettres parisiennes: L’autopsie de l’exil* (110). Furthermore, she continues in stating that: “Je ne *subis* pas l’écart, je le *cherche*. Constamment. Je cherche la mise en scène, la mise entre guillemets [...],” referring to her exile as playing a part, a theatrical reference, and, in particular, directly linked to [her] writing, as per the reference to living in quotation marks (Huston, *Lettres*

*parisiennes* 195). She gains great strength and creativity from her exile: “J’ai senti récemment avec une force nouvelle à quel point le fait de vivre dans la langue française m’est *vital*, à quel point cet artifice m’est indispensable pour fonctionner au jour le jour” (Huston, *Lettres parisiennes* 130).

In so far as Nancy Huston found novelty and creativity from the use of the French language, she allowed herself to break free from the confines of her emotionally charged mother tongue, beginning her writing career with essays and articles, then moving on to novels, written in French. Without the limitations a writer can feel when respecting a particular form or style, in the way that one would be hyper-aware (of grammar, connotations, regional influence, idiosyncrasies) in one’s native language, Nancy Huston felt an emotional freedom in her writing (Huston, “The Mask and the Pen” 64):

I could “hear” the language more intensely than my own; nothing went without saying, no turns of phrase were taken for granted; also, all emotions were distinctly attenuated. Apparently my super-ego didn’t speak French at the time, because I never experienced writer’s block working in that language. (Huston, *Victorian Writer* 13)

Shall she be considered then as a French-Canadian writer, since she is Canadian-born, but publishes in French? She herself claims to be neither Canadian, nor French, nor French-Canadian (Sing, “Ecrire l’absence” 749). The Albertan countryside does not feel like home to her since she left it years ago (even though she has now made amends with her mother tongue and writes in both French *and* English). The French have not claimed Nancy Huston among the likes of their native literary stars, although they have adopted

her, nicknaming her as “notre Canadienne,” for example (Huston, “The Mask and the Pen” 58). Nancy Huston feels like she is not rightfully French either, not having spent her childhood in France: “[je] n’a[i] jamais intégré à [m]a chair de petite fille (comme l’ont fait tous les Français, y compris mes propres enfants) les berceuses, blagues, chuchotements, comptines, tables de multiplication, noms de départements, lectures de fond depuis les *Fables* de La Fontaine jusqu’aux *Confessions* de Rousseau” (Huston, *Nord perdu* 62-63). Lastly, she is from English-speaking Canada, with no relation to French-Canada, especially, Montréal, other than having a brother who now lives there. I would say, then, that although both Francophone and Anglophone, Nancy Huston is most widely known as a Francophone *écrivaine*.

In addition to the above, I will add that Nancy Huston is not *Québécoise*. The reasons for this seemingly unnecessary specification are myriad. Firstly, she is an anomaly, as is Gail Scott, who writes in English but lives in Montréal, or Lola Lemire Tostevin, who is Franco-Ontarian, but writes in English and is therefore marginalized by the “lettres franco-ontariennes” (Leclerc 334). Namely, though, in searching for literary criticism on her writing, it becomes increasingly clear that her work rests just beyond pre-conceived classifications, and as such, it is possible to find aspects of several different categories within her body of work. Ben Shek separates *québécoise* and French-Canadian literatures in his anthology, *French Canadian and Québécois novels* [sic], and in his preface, he also separates the Francophones living outside Québec from the French-Canadian heading, stating, “‘French-Canadian’ here does not, unfortunately, include francophone authors who live(d) outside Québec. They should be treated in a separate

study because of the unique socio-cultural context in which they write” (Shek vii). It may be true that the best way to treat the review of francophone authors from outside of Québec (or in the case of Nancy Huston, a francophone from English-speaking Canada) is in a separate study, but the reality is such that the few francophone authors from outside of Québec are simply too few. These authors who find themselves at the proverbial crossroads can use the plurality of their identity to their advantage and sit alongside the Québécois(e) when it suits them, or to turn to their native or adopted compatriots in the same manner. Additionally, *Québécoise* is a term that initially reflected the strong nationalistic mentality of the women of Québec. Deep-rooted in memory and heritage, with its religious influence, there is a particularity to early, traditional literature from Québec. After the Quiet Revolution of 1970, and the failed attempt at Québec autonomy in 1980, France Théoret began to use the term to refer to a more plural, heterogeneous subjectivity, open to change (turning away from a nationalistic thematic), lending itself even more to the feminist movement (Green 104). The feminist movement in Québec was very much influenced by American feminism, given both the proximity of the two countries and the “extensive media coverage [...] of political issues and events—including the growing women’s movement” (Gould 32-33). In the 1970s France Théoret, Nicole Brossard, and other feminists in Québec began describing themselves as *écrivaines*, abandoning the masculine gender to describe their calling. As first interpreted by Mary Jean Green, this term refers specifically to feminist writers from Québec, because of the specific nature of their plight within the confines of a strictly Catholic, closed (almost xenophobic) population and surrounded by the

influence of outsiders (the dominant English-speaking Canadian population, as well as the nearby Americans). While the first *écrivaines* were certainly true *Québécoises*, Karen Gould argues that the term evolved to become more universal and to include francophone writers who adhere to a feminist aesthetic (Gould 291, *xvi*). Thus, because of Nancy Huston's status as a Francophone, and her feminist writing style and political and social stance, it is arguable that she can indeed be considered an *écrivaine*.

The feminist style of writing, now attributed to an *écrivaine*, was originally called *écriture féminine* or *écriture au féminin* by Hélène Cixous, and consists of writing from the perspective and experience of a woman or her body, with language familiar to a woman, putting herself into the text, and in the same way, making her own place in History (Gould 35). Karen Gould, in *Writing in the Feminine: Feminism and Experimental Writing in Québec*, goes on to say: "To give voice to the female body's story in this way is not to abandon the domain of the intellect and succumb to the patriarchal dichotomy of Man-Culture/Woman-Nature as American feminists have sometimes charged, but to supplement and extend the very meaning of knowledge" (48-49). The feminine aesthetic, according to Nicole Brossard, as quoted by Karen Gould in *Writing in the Feminine*: "[...] is to conceive of a link between mental space, body, and reality [...]" (50). Writing in the feminine uses voice, or absence thereof, as the "material manifestation of [...] thought, emotion and desire" (216). Feminist writing is about the reality of woman, but at the same time, it is not bound by the traditionally masculine genre of Realism. There is an acceptance of the use of autobiography in feminine writing, creating a sort of auto-fiction which is especially present in Nancy

Huston's work. It has also been observed that "[...] the notion of writing to other women as a form of acknowledgement, encouragement, and political identification is clearly at the core of the literary experiment of writing in the feminine" (Gould 42).

Correspondence, in addition to writing in the form of a personal journal or diary, all present in Nancy Huston's corpus of writing, are also examples of various forms of *écriture au féminin*.

Nancy Huston's participation in the women's movement in France was a springboard into writing. In her social and political search for identity, she found a community with the feminists with whom she collaborated on the journal *Sorcières*, or later at *Histoires d'elles*, where she found support and appreciation, as well as encouragement to write (Ploquin 7). It is there, in Paris, among the feminists of the time, that Nancy Huston began to define *her* feminism. Given that she was not a militant feminist in Québec, or in Canada, but rather a student in the Northeastern United States when the second wave of the woman's movement began to gain momentum, she cannot be considered among the likes of Nicole Brossard and Michèle Lalonde; she simply does not have the same historical or geographical perspective. Huston's perspective is not less important, however, and as a woman and a mother and an artist, her voice as an *écrivaine* still rings true. Many of her choices in life place her outside the social/professional/artistic norms, and it is because of this self marginalization that her work is so well accepted not only as feminine, but also as feminist.

The feminine nature of Nancy Huston's work is most readily noted by the autobiographical nature of her novels and by her writing style. The arts in one form or

another are ever-present in her personal life as well as in her fiction writing, again drawing on that intimate, first-hand appreciation of how art plays upon affect. She herself is an accomplished musician; she plays both the piano and the harpsichord. Even here, Nancy Huston can equate her music to her bilingualism as she writes in *Nord perdu*:

De manière fortuite, il se trouve que l'apprentissage de la langue française a coïncidé dans ma vie avec la découverte du clavecin (1971). Et que, deux ans plus tard (1973), l'abandon de ma langue maternelle a été accompagné d'un abandon analogique du piano. Ce paradigme secret, aberrant peut-être, me forme et me déforme depuis un quart de siècle. *L'anglais et le piano*: instruments maternels, émotifs, romantiques, manipulatifs, sentimentaux, grossiers, où les nuances sont soulignées, exagérées, imposées, exprimées de façon flagrante et incontournable. *Le français et le clavecin*: instruments neutres, intellectuels, liés au contrôle, à la retenue, à la maîtrise délicate, une forme d'expression plus subtile, plus monocorde, discrète et raffinée. (64-65)

It is no coincidence that in her first novel, *Les Variations Goldberg*, the main character, Liliane Kulainn, is an accomplished musician and the whole narrative takes place during her harpsichord concert! Nor is it a coincidence that the piece that Liliane performs by Johann Sebastian Bach, the Goldberg Variations (an aria with its 30 variations that was originally published in 1742) is baroque, offering insight into the theme of discord and



counterpoint so present in Nancy Huston's later work, especially in *Instruments des ténèbres* (1996).

As a mother, Nancy Huston explores the relationship of artistic creation as a mirror to procreation. Writing a novel, creating choreography, performing a piece of music, and other types of artistic conceptions are all compared to birthing a child in her work. In *Journal de la création* Nancy Huston writes: "Le manuscrit de mon roman [...] je l'ai déposé chez l'éditeur ce matin. Acceptera-t-il ou non de me servir de sage-femme ?" (283). The name of her published journal, *Journal de la création*, speaks for itself; it was written during her second pregnancy (physical act of procreation) and contains a collection of reflections on writing, literature, and on famous couples of literature (artistic creation).

The act of creation is central to Nancy Huston's work and writing style and this is one reason why she is adamant about the fact that she does not simply translate her writing, but that she actually re-creates it in a different language, be it a translation from French to English or vice versa (Huston, *Victorian Writer* 13). Translation necessitates both comprehension and interpretation, and an encounter with the unknown, or foreign (Wilhelm 215). Translations are most often considered to be inferior, associated with the feminine, in comparison to their originals because the authority of the writer inherent in the original text is identified with a masculine quality of "auctor" (Wilhelm 205). By translating her own work, both translation and original are identified as "auctor," thus bringing them both into the authoritative status associated with an original creation (Wilhelm 218):

[...] ce sont des hommes qui, de tout temps, ont su s'arroger l'*autorité* de la création, osant se mettre à la place de Dieu, "*auteur* de toutes choses."  
Créatrice, *la* créature par excellence ? Les femmes, même lorsqu'elles désirent ardemment devenir des auteurs, sont moins convaincues de leur droit et de leur capacité à le faire. Pour la bonne raison que, dans toutes les histoires qui racontent la création, elles se trouvent non pas du côté de l'*auctor* (auteur, autorité), mais du côté de la *mater* (mère/matière).  
(Huston, *Journal de la création* 29)

Her work between the two languages actually became so intense that from the creation of *Instruments des ténèbres* (published in 1996), all of her fiction is composed in both languages simultaneously (Huston, *Victorian Writer* 13).

Nancy Huston's coming to terms with English and French, her maternal and adopted languages respectively, opened up new possibilities in her writing. She is able to play one against the other, the affect that English carries forth for her and the reasoning and careful calculation that using French requires of her. This is not only important to her translations. In fact, it is secondary compared to the importance that this bilingualism takes on in defining Huston's identity and her treatment of identity in her work. Ionna Chatzidimitriou claims that the use of a foreign language does not create a new space but instead gives way to an absence in between the presence of the native and foreign languages. This absence of space provides perspective and allows bilingual authors to look back (at culture, society, history, themselves) from the outside as the "other." In self-translation Nancy Huston recreates her work through this negative space, free from

the confines of one culture, and in doing so re-centers her narrative (Chatzidimitriou 24). The act of looking back at one's work from the outside provides the perspective of *altérité*, which is the concept of recognizing the presence of the other in one's own difference(s), as well as the witness of everyone's individuality beyond normalized stereotypes.

Having established what epitomizes Nancy Huston's identity, that is to say, a multi-cultural woman, mother, artist, and *écrivaine*, one may ask what the scope of this thesis is. It is to explore Nancy Huston's work through her intricate cultural and linguistic lens, as it is expressed and reflected in her most dominant themes. Her thematic feminist triangle is re-christened with woman (self), mother (creator), and death (or the end of one existence) as the pivotal anchors, and under these broad headings are included the themes of culture and family; creation/procreation and the arts; and the spiritual and physical cycles of life. The use of multiplicity, fragmentation, and spiral narratives gives depth and dimension to her highly emotional themes and brings her characters to life. I will show how her writing style and themes effect, as well as affect, identity, voice, and perspective in her novels. *Cantique des plaines* (1993), *Instruments des ténèbres* (1997), *La Virevolte* (1994), and *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (1998) will serve as my key literary references, although I will mention several other works of both fiction and non-fiction by Nancy Huston.

## CHAPTER ONE: *Cantique des plaines*: A Very Literal Search for Identity

The problem of identity is central in Nancy Huston's work, and exile, in any of its forms -- forced or chosen, political, social or religious, local, international or metaphorical -- can be a defining characteristic of one's identity. Aside from the obvious physical exile to France, which incorporated a linguistic exile (leaving her native English for French), Nancy Huston also found exile in the written word. As she writes in *Nord perdu*:

Notre liberté d'aller ailleurs et d'être autrui dans notre tête est proprement hallucinante. Le roman, qu'on lise ou qu'on écrive, nous rappelle cette liberté... et son importance extrême. Il s'agit de *la* liberté: celle de ne pas se contenter d'une identité (religieuse, nationale, sexuelle, politique) conférée à la naissance. (105)

In this sense, exile can be a source of creativity just as creativity, or the act of creating, can be, in itself, an exile. Although the theme of exile is popular among both contemporary men and women authors, there is a distinct take on this experience by female writers wherein exile can be both positive and life-affirming as well as "acutely painful" (Holmes, "No Common Places" 33). In Nancy Huston's case, exile means "pleasure and pain, gain and loss" (Holmes, "No Common Places" 41): "Exile represents the opportunity for self-invention, the creative stance of the artist always a little on the

outside for whom no place is commonplace” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 41). This notion of being on the outside is important in a discussion of identity.

An exiled individual has the distinct advantage of seeing things from both sides of her exile. This instance of no longer belonging to the original and not quite belonging to the new leaves the exiled individual in a state of marginality, with the possibility of seeing herself through the eyes of the other. David Bond summarizes this idea in his article, “Nancy Huston: Identité et dédoublement dans le texte”:

L’individu qui s’expatrie se crée un autre moi, un double qu’il tient à distance et qu’il observe de loin. Il se voit par les yeux de ceux qui appartiennent à son nouveau pays et à sa nouvelle culture, devenant à la fois ceux qui voient et ce qui est vu. En choisissant de vivre en France, Huston découvrit plusieurs choses sur elle-même, comme si elle découvrait une autre personne. [...] Elle voit maintenant cette identité culturelle de l’extérieur, par les yeux de ceux qui l’entourent. (66)

In order to set the framework for understanding how sameness and marginality work to contribute to identity, and what it means to be the “outsider” or the “other,” terms that Kenneth Meadwell and David Bond use respectively, it is necessary to examine the notions of *mêmeté* and *ipséité*:

La perspective philosophique de l’herméneutique pratiquée par Paul Ricœur met en relief l’identité personnelle comme le lieu privilégié de la confrontation entre les deux usages majeurs du concept d’identité:

l'identité comme *mêmeté* (du latin *idem*) et l'identité comme *ipséité* (du latin *ipse*). (Meadwell 279)

Put plainly, *mêmeté* refers to the recognition of the same thing, over and over, proven by its permanence over time, whereas *ipséité* is the break from this sameness. *Ipséité* can be recognized only if *mêmeté* can be defined as a point of reference. We need the presence of the 'other' to witness our existence: "Nous dépendons tous de l'autre pour notre identité, et notre existence même est une fonction de l'autre. Si l'autre n'est pas là, n'est pas conscient de notre existence, nous n'existons pas" (Bond 62). Therefore, the act of writing within the state of exile sharpens one's capacity to be able to look beyond the immediate and to create the distance necessary to see oneself in one's own text. This is paramount in the identity of an *écrivaine*, as Nancy Huston states herself: "le roman, c'est ce qui célèbre cette reconnaissance des autres en soi, et de soi dans les autres" (*Nord perdu* 107). If the act of writing allows the author to recognize the "other," then writing in another language facilitates this multiplicity even more.

"JE est un autre, on le savait, mais la différence de langue favorise cette multiplication" (Klein-Lataud, "Les Voix parallèles" 219). When we add the language variable into the equation of identity, there is yet another "other" that appears, because "l'emploi du français la sépare d'elle-même," as states David Bond of Nancy Huston (67). We see this same multiplication of self when Nancy Huston, living in exile in France and writing exclusively in French, returns to writing in English, because she is experiencing her native language as would an outsider.

Doublement déracinée, par le pays et par la langue, d'un même mouvement, elle retrouve les deux [...]. Ces retrouvailles avec l'anglais ont constitué une expérience "exaltante" pour la romancière parce que, dit-elle "entre temps l'anglais était presque devenu langue étrangère pour moi, et c'était analogue à ce qui s'était passé il y a 20 ans quand j'avais commencé à écrire en français, langue étrangère." (Klein-Lataud, "Les Voix parallèles" 217)

It is with the creation of *Plainsong* in 1993 that Nancy Huston delves into the world of writing in her native-tongue, English. There are different accounts as to what sparked her interest in this return to English. In an interview in 1994 for a Montréal-based newspaper, *Le Devoir*, Nancy Huston is quoted as saying, "[...] pourquoi ne suis-je pas attachée à mes racines? J'ai recommencé à écouter de la musique country et j'ai soudain senti de petits frissons" (Rioux 1). Later, in an Australian review, *Victorian Writer*, in 2007, Nancy Huston wrote:

Then, partly because of a "mortality scare" due to a neurological illness, partly because of motherhood, and partly because I had gained sufficient distance from my childhood by living so long in a foreign country, I decided that if I went on writing only in French my novels would only be brilliant at best, never profound; I felt that I needed to recover my mother-tongue and all the emotions that went with it. (13)

Regardless of her reasoning, Nancy Huston had returned to using English in her creative process. In this first attempt at self-translation, she found that this allowed her to improve her work (Wilhelm 209). As we recall,

Confondant langue maternelle et étrangère, la pratique de l’auto-traduction de Nancy Huston met nécessairement en jeu les problèmes de l’identité et de l’altérité. Cette écriture entre le français et l’anglais interroge également les relations entre production et reproduction qui instaurent comme nous l’avons vu, des rapports de pouvoir liés au genre. (Wilhelm 219)

Therefore, both novels, *Plainsong* and *Cantique des plaines* (original and original self-translation respectively), both published in 1993, can be considered as original pieces, masters in their own rights, and held to the status of *l’auctor* (author/authority).

According to Christine Klein-Lataud, “L’auto-traduction ou la création parallèle peuvent alors apparaître comme une façon de transcender le clivage, de réconcilier les deux moitiés de l’être intérieurement déchiré en faisant cohabiter harmonieusement les deux langues” (“Les Voix parallèles” 228).

I cannot neglect to mention the importance that this novel, and the scandal surrounding it, has played in Nancy Huston’s notoriety. As winner of the *Prix du Gouverneur Général du Canada* (1993), *Cantique des plaines* became the first of her novels to elicit an emotional response from French-Canadian readers, in a positive and negative manner. The scandal that ensued in the French-speaking community in Canada after Huston received this prestigious award was due to the fact that the novel, *Cantique*



*des plaines*, was a self-translation of her novel, *Plainsong*, which was written in English. Régine Robin defended Nancy Huston and took the position that translating [one's own work] is an act of creation in itself (Potvin, "Inventer l'histoire" 9).

The two texts themselves contain very few actual differences. Stylistically, they both have a similar syntax with notably long sentences, "méandreuses, s'étirant parfois à l'infini, comme les Prairies qu'ils évoquent, comme l'histoire des peuples et des individus" (Klein-Lataud, "Les Voix parallèles" 224). The songs sprinkled throughout the text were either translated literally or rewritten to allow for the rhythm of the syllables or alliteration to portray the desired effect. Clearly, the Anglophone reader has an advantage when considering the full literary weight of these songs, though, since some are entirely unfamiliar to the "average" Francophone. Additionally, the epigraph is different in the two versions, to provide a recognizable inscription to the particular lingual and social audience: a quote from Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Good Country People," in the English language publication, and a quote (in English, perhaps as a nod to her reclaimed native tongue) from John Lennon and Paul McCartney, universal superstars, in the French language publication.

The only notable difference in content between the English and the French publications, actually due to an oversight as opposed to a calculated variation, is that regarding a passage from the English publication "où l'anniversaire de la Confédération canadienne est l'occasion d'un commentaire politique et d'une comparaison entre les autochtones canadiens et les Algériens, qui ont conquis leur indépendance et expulsé les Français de leur pays [...]" (Klein-Lataud, "Les Voix parallèles" 223):

In the midst of all this excitement you sent Ruthie a dry little note pointing out that only recently the French had gotten kicked out of Algeria on their asses after having settled there a hundred years before, taken over the country and its government, claimed it as their own and built it in their image, and wondering if it might not be dangerous for Canadians to indulge in premature rejoicing about their victory over the natives of this land. (Huston, *Plainsong* 198)

Nancy Huston clarified this error of omission in the French publication of *Cantique des plaines* in a letter she sent to Pamela Sing dated October 24, 2000 (Sing, “Ecrire l’absence” 748). Another difference between the two novels is in the register and tone. The register in the English novel is standard, whereas the French version contains hints of slang and a more familiar tone (Wilhelm 209). This particularity in the change of register between the English and French versions of her novels will tend to remain constant in future works. As Nancy Huston explains:

The French I use in writing has all the advantages and drawbacks of an acquired idiom. Whether I deploy slangy or sophisticated vocabulary, simple or convoluted syntax, it is something I have “learned” and used as convincingly as I can. My earliest texts in French, which date back to the mid-1970s, are rife with puns. This was partly a sign of the times (Jacques Lacan and Hélène Cixous were then making “plays on the signifier” very fashionable), but it also betrayed my pathological awareness of the

language itself. Foreigners are far more conscious of phonetical rubbings and rhyming than native speakers. (“The Mask and the Pen” 63)

*Cantique des plaines* holds a special place in the corpus of Nancy Huston’s works, and in her own search for identity, since writing this novel took her back to her native, English-speaking Canada: “She made the bonds of heredity central to the text’s narrative structure” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 39-40). She positions her characters between the aspects of identity that are given (that we inherit and that we cannot change) and those that are chosen (Holmes, “No Common Places” 41). In this novel, the reader will encounter concepts of “l’identité individuelle, de l’identité-mêmeté collective et de l’ipséité du soi” (Meadwell 287). In addition, one can see the relationship between History and the history of an individual: “[...] la question identitaire est perçue à travers une relecture de l’histoire ainsi que des cultures du centre (église, école, Blanc, homme, Canada, même) et de la périphérie (immigrant, autochtone, femme, enfant, Alberta, différent) [...]” (Potvin, “Inventer l’histoire” 10).

The novel does not unfold in a linear fashion, instead Nancy Huston takes the reader through the presentation of several generations in a spiral narration, a common trait in feminine writing that presents a narrative’s prevailing theme from different perspectives in the narrative, emphasizing references and using repetition. In *Cantique des plaines* the *intra-diégétique* narrator, Paula, is a young woman retracing and recreating the story of her grandfather, Paddon. The struggle to define Paddon’s identity while doing the same for herself is central to this novel. Through the telling of Paddon’s story, the reader will encounter Jake and John Sterling who came to Canada from Ireland

during the Gold Rush. John Sterling, Paddon's father, is a hard man of the earth, who is disappointed with Paddon's lack of masculinity. Paddon's sister, Elizabeth, however, has a very strong character that is evident in her extreme religious devotion. Karen, Paddon's wife, represents order, fidelity (both religious and romantic) and the family unit. Miranda, Paddon's mistress, is an Indian painter who represents the conflict of the Canadian identity on a national and cultural level.

It is during the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century that Alberta experienced the birth of its territorial identity (Thibeault 161). The reader is immediately aware of the complexity of this provincial identity in the list of proper names used in Canada found in *Cantique des plaines* (16), showing the variety of English, French and Native People's terms for places in Alberta. In order to accommodate the various actors in the history of Alberta, Nancy Huston will make use of multiple voices, a trait of *écriture féminine*, and *discours de la marge*, especially when speaking as the character of Miranda: "C'est à travers le merveilleux personnage de Miranda, une Amérindienne [...], que l'écrivaine réinvente le discours historique de l'Ouest précanadien" (Potvin, "Inventer l'histoire" 13). The story of exile for the native people in Canada, and as represented by Miranda, is particular as they find themselves in exile without even leaving their native lands. They are forced onto reservations by the invading Europeans, and in exile on their now restricted territory (Holmes, "No Common Places" 36). Even the narrator, Paula, in search of her identity, has exiled herself to Montréal, far from her native Alberta where her narration of her grandfather's life takes place: "[...] l'écart qui sépare l'espace de l'énonciation et celui de l'énoncé: le sujet

écrivain, le “je” de Paula, la narratrice et le porte-parole de l’auteure, vit prétendument à Montréal, et son objet, le “tu” du grand-père maternel, Padden, en Alberta” (Sing, “Stratégies de spatialisation” 66).

The whole point of Paula’s piecing together her grandfather’s story is to fulfill a promise that she made to him when she was only nine years old:

[...] oubliant que je n’avais que neuf ans, te rappelant seulement que je t’aimais avec ferveur, [...] tu évoquais devant moi ta thèse abandonnée puis ton presque-livre puis ton peut-être-livre et finalement ton jamais-livre – et moi, le cœur devenu tambour battant avec l’indignation d’une enfant qui aime, j’ai juré de t’aider. [...] j’ai promis de faire l’impossible pour reprendre le flambeau que tu avais allumé, achever les travaux que tu avais esquissés, faire en sorte que ton *De temps à autre* (comme tu l’appelais maintenant) ne soit pas du temps perdu. (Huston, *Cantique des plaines* 242)

There are in fact three texts at play in *Cantique des plaines*: “le discours historique, le texte inachevé de Paddon, [et] le conte de Paula” (Potvin, “Inventer l’histoire” 10): “La pluralité des voix se communique ainsi à travers une seule, celle qui entame le processus par lequel la vie de Paddon se réécrit” (Meadwell 293). The irony is that Paddon’s unfinished manuscript, which Paula receives by mail from her grandmother after Paddon’s death, is sent to her in an envelope marked, “*Livre de P*,” a polysemous title as it could refer to either Paddon or Paula.

The use of multiple voices is characteristic of feminine writing. Additionally, this novel represents a reflective literature, which is also common in feminine texts. Paula is constantly interrupting her story-telling to question her writing techniques and her own personal problems, as if to remind the reader that she is telling the story of Paddon, and not writing her own story, as in this passage where Paula writes about a story that Paddon never told her mother because his father never told him: “Il ne t’a jamais raconté cette histoire Paddon donc tu ne l’as pas racontée à Ruthie et elle ne me l’a pas racontée à moi, mais je suis à peu près certaine qu’elle a eu lieu [...]” (Huston, *Cantique des plaines* 24). It is as if Paula is giving herself permission to invent Paddon’s story, or to justify the liberties that she takes, while keeping her distance from the story itself. “Les narratrices qui réfléchissent sur ce qu’elles écrivent et sur les problèmes de l’écriture sont typiques d’une littérature réflexive qui se présente comme objet littéraire et qui maintient une distance entre l’écrivain et le texte (et, bien sûr, entre le lecteur et le texte)” (Bond 66). This distance that Paula creates allows her to look back at Paddon as someone from the outside. Here, Paula is the *ipse*, as a woman, as a lesbian, as a *métisse* and as a *Montréalaise*, and Paddon is the representation of *mêmeté*, as the white male of colonized Western Canada.

In order to be herself, Paula goes to Montréal, leaving behind her family to find herself at first as the *ipse* to the French-speaking community in Montréal, while seeking *mêmeté*. “It is no coincidence that “Nancy Huston places the narrator of her novel in Montréal, [...where Paula] finds the narrative space she needs [...]" to look beyond what she knows and to reinvent her grandfather, while she forges her own identity (Thibeault

xix). Just as Paddon is a double for Paula, who writes his life story, Paula can be seen as a double for Nancy Huston. She repeatedly refers to herself as being thousands of miles away from Alberta. Nancy Huston is not a native of Montréal, though, and there are references to aspects of life in Montréal that only an outsider would make. From her chapter in the book *Visions/Divisions*, Pamela Sing offers the following examples of this outsider's view of Montréal:

[...] il s'avère que plus Montréal est écrite, c'est-à-dire plus elle s'intègre la diégèse, plus il ressort qu'une non-Montréalaise parle d'elle. De là, "les voix françaises" [à la page 230] que la narratrice dit entendre en se promenant dans son quartier, ou, dans le passage réservé jusqu'ici à la version en anglais du roman, "the sophisticated French subway" que Paula prend [...]. (67)

Montréal remains, however "the city of the famous two solitudes" as Norman Cheadle puts it in his introduction to *Canadian Cultural Exchange/Echanges Culturels au Canada*, referring to Hugh MacLennan's famous novel *Two Solitudes* (published in 1945) which examines the French-English tensions in Montréal; Montréal is representative of the coming together (and the keeping away) of English and French in Canada, and it is the metropolis of French-speaking Canada. As such, it is perfectly fitting that Nancy Huston's narrator, Paula, finds herself in exile in Montréal.

Paula refers to having to sew the pieces and parts of Paddon's life story together into "un patchwork" that will serve as his death shroud (Huston, *Cantique des plaines* 243). She renames her story "l'Horloge [sic] de mon grand-père," but it will never be

finished. Paula needs to move on from her family's history and forge her own identity.

She recounts a scene where Paddon is watching his father brand his cattle:

[...] Que tu le veuilles ou non tu m'appartiens et tu t'appelleras Sterling et tout ce qui sortira de toi s'appellera Sterling et c'est comme ça, un point c'est tout, et du reste il avait raison parce que sa fille Elizabeth dont il perturbait alors le sommeil fœtal ne devait jamais se marier, et sa petite-fille ma mère Ruthie non plus, et moi Paula son arrière-petite-fille non plus, de sorte que toutes nous sommes condamnées à porter le nom de Sterling jusqu'à la fin de nos jours. (Huston, *Cantique des plaines* 87)

Paula knows that she will bear the name Sterling and thus carry with her the past that she did not choose, but this is not the only element of what makes up her identity. She doesn't exist without Paddon, but now, the opposite is also true: Paddon doesn't exist without Paula: “[...] oh Paddon je ne peux pas exister sans toi, ne m'enlève pas ces mots, je ne cherche pas à te faire du mal.... Nous avons besoin l'un de l'autre, Paddon” (Huston, *Cantique des plaines* 230). She has become the *ipse* to his *idem*: “Morceau par morceau, elle cherche à tisser une nouvelle identité qui tienne compte du désir d'appartenance, mais surtout d'exil de l'étranger, opérant de la sorte une espèce de neutralisation, de hors-lieu permanent” (Potvin, “Inventer l'histoire” 16). The creative space that one finds in exile permits one to look both forward and backward through time and space, “towards the exhilarating possibilities of a new place but also towards the unchosen reality of origins [...]” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 39).



It is the character of Miranda who represents the marginality and *l'altérité* of a collective identity in *Cantique des plaines*. Miranda, which is Latin for admiration, completes what Nancy Huston feels she is missing in her own identity – a well established and distinct collective identity. It is through Miranda that the reader will discover the “other” Alberta (Sing, “Ecrire l’absence” 743). Miranda is then the *ipse* to the *mêmeté* of the white history of colonization. Her stories about her tribe are then “l’énonciation par *l’ipse* de sa propre altérité” (Hepher 145): “La fonction discursive de Miranda permet que se raconte une autre histoire, celle de l’autre précisément” (Potvin, “Inventer l’histoire” 15).

Miranda is, according to Robin Hepher, “[...] une représentation assez romantique de la culture autochtone, qui se rapproche même du mythe du *bon sauvage*. En fait, même la noblesse y est: l’ancêtre de Miranda est un grand chef [...]” (Hepher 145). Her story is that of misappropriation, rape, and denial of basic, civil truths, and she is destined to repeat her people’s fate through her love affair with Paddon, because although he hears her stories and understands the plight of her people, he still belongs to the dominant culture:

En osant enseigner au Blanc la vérité historique d’après la perspective *autre* de l’Amérindien, Miranda – conscience et voix du colonisé et de l’ipséité du soi marginalisée – pénètre et transforme l’enclos qui entoure et protège l’espace de l’identité-mêmeté de la culture des Blancs, celle de Paddon Sterling. (Meadwell 290)

The argument between Miranda and Paddon over the discovery of the North Pole is a fitting example as to how Paddon is not able to fully recognize Miranda's (the Native people's) position in History:

“Alors, qui c’est qui l’a découvert ?” “Robert Peary,” répondis-tu avec méfiance, flairant le piège. “Tu veux dire qu’il était seul ?” “Bien sûr que non.” “Il était avec qui?” Tu soupiras encore – “[...] -- Avec son aide de camp noir Matthew Henson, et quatre guides esquimaux.” “Quatre quoi ?” “Quatre guides esquimaux.” “Si c’étaient des guides, c’est qu’ils y étaient déjà allés?” Demanda Miranda sur un ton triomphal et tu poussas un grognement d’indignation. [...] “Tu ne connais même pas les noms de ces Esquimaux,” déclara-t-elle. “Peut-être qu’ils se baladaient autour du pôle depuis des années ! Et sous prétexte qu’un Blanc déclare que c’est un pôle, c’est lui qui devient célèbre !” “Mais Miranda [...] il y a tout de même une différence. Malgré tout, errer à travers un territoire et en faire la carte, ce n’est pas la même chose.” (Huston, *Cantique des plaines* 122-23)

Miranda challenges the official version of History, but even her lover, Paddon, who wants to understand her, is conflicted: “L’identité métisse porte en elle une vérité que l’institution marginalise et oublie au profit d’un mythe ou d’une histoire territoriale adaptée à la bonne conscience du colonisateur” (Thibeault 166). It is in the sanctity of her bed that Miranda attempts, once again, to help Paddon understand. She tells the story of her grandmother:

Cela se passait le plus souvent le dernier jour de leur scolarité, c'était presque une tradition, un passage obligé de leur initiation à la civilisation, les prêtres avaient fait de leur mieux [...] mais leur instruction n'était pas parachevée tant qu'un intendant de la Compagnie de la baie d'Hudson n'avait pas déchiré leur hymen et déposé dans leur ventre sauvage sa graine civilisée, c'était pour ainsi dire inévitable et les parents de la fille n'avaient plus qu'à prier pour que la graine ne germe pas; malheureusement celle qui était dans le ventre de la grand-mère de Miranda avait germé. (Huston, *Cantique des plaines* 194-95)

In reality, the utopia that the colonizers boast of in creating a new race is actually a blatant violation of basic human rights: "Par l'histoire tragique de la grand-mère, Miranda dévoile l'aspect pervers du métissage canadien et ébranle l'image utopique d'un métissage censé être à la base d'une nouvelle nation en rupture avec la vieille Europe [...]" (Thibeault 166-67). Despite how much he loves her, Paddon cannot stand up for her story, and he is forced to reconcile himself with how history is told by his people. History wins against "her"-story: "Trouver un double à l'extérieur de soi n'empêche pas nécessairement les problèmes d'identité [...] la survie de l'un des doubles dépend presque toujours de la disparition de l'autre" (Bond 61). And just as the institutional history of the white majority lives on, the character of Miranda falls ill; she loses her physical capacity to paint as her limbs become paralyzed and then her memory fades, taking with it Paddon's *ispe* to his *idem*: "Nous sommes tous doubles: individus libres et

victimes de toutes sortes de forces qui nous menacent, sujets parlants transformés en objets par le discours des autres” (Bond 69).

One of Nancy Huston’s strengths is her ability to “envisage[r] les événements de l’Histoire du point de vue complexe et contradictoire du vécu, et en même temps de révéler l’imbrication étroite de la vie individuelle dans l’histoire collective” (Holmes, “Ecrire est un verbe transitif” 88). The English-speaking community in Canada, however, had a particularly hard time with Nancy Huston’s belated criticism of white repression of the Natives, and a white person “speaking for a Native would have been poorly viewed at the height of Anglophone Canada’s ‘appropriation of voice’ controversy” (Davey 5). The appropriation of voice controversy of the late 1980s and early 1990s revolved around the practice by authors (and other artists, including singers and painters) of representing people and themes with the kind of familiarity that only comes from being a part of that other culture. Many white critics read the novel as a white apology, along with the intended guilt-trip, “instead of as a cultural appropriation” (Davey 4). Regardless of the Anglophone reaction, this novel remains according to French reviews, one of Nancy Huston’s most celebrated examinations of identity, exile and marginalization: “Bien que Huston définisse l’histoire de sa vie adulte comme une quête d’intensité et non pas d’identité, elle n’en interroge pas moins dans son *Cantique des plaines*, incontournable retour aux sources, la construction d’identités individuelles et collectives à travers le temps” (Potvin, “Inventer l’histoire” 9-10).

Several of Nancy Huston’s other novels also explore the theme of exile; for example, *L’Empreinte de l’ange* (1988) and *Une Adoration* (2003) speak to exile because

of war or colonization; *La Virevolte* (1994) explores exile as a form of escape from traditional gender roles; in *Prodige* (1999) exile is in the form of madness (Holmes, “No Common Places” 33). Exile provides the ability to look back at oneself from the outside and to define one’s *ipséité* based on the *mêmeté* of the surrounding culture, and therefore define one’s identity. Having a solid understanding of the importance that the study of identity has to Nancy Huston in her choice of themes, or as one point on her feminist triangle -- woman or the self – let us now look at how she uses voice in her fiction to develop the second point – mother and creator. As a woman, as a bilingual, as a writer and creator, as a contributor to the feminist movement, and as a mother, she has an emotional arsenal with which to make her characters speak.

## CHAPTER TWO: Creation and Procreation in *La Virevolte* and *Instruments des ténèbres*

The vehicles by which Nancy Huston expresses her art and the personal stake that she puts in each of her creations contribute to the emotional depth of her characters, allowing for the narration of particularly female experiences that have been considered taboo in the past (Sardin 307). By this, I am referring specifically to abortion, but also abandonment and infanticide. The reference to Nancy Huston's writing as art is made purposely here for this discussion of creation and procreation, as the artistic process has been compared to the gestation and birthing process. The relationship between creation and procreation, although prevalent in most of her work, is addressed quite distinctly in her non-fiction publication *Journal de la création* (1990) as well as in several of her fictional novels such as *La Virevolte* (1994) and *Instruments des ténèbres* (1996).

The traditional mind/body dichotomy whereby “woman is primarily associated with the corporeal, man with the spiritual” is put into question in Nancy Huston's works (Proulx, “Giving Voice to the Body” 290). The *écrivaine* exists “[...] dans un univers, où le discours masculin domine. [...] C'est l'homme qui crée les mythes qui gouvernent notre vie, [...] il (se) raconte des histoires” (Huston, *Journal de la création* 23). Feminist writing requires the ability to “think from the outside” and to create another world (Gould 39). This “other world” is created in feminist fiction writing and can be represented by a form of exile and the necessity to be able to look at oneself from the outside, as the

“other.” In Nancy Huston’s case, both her geographic and linguistic exiles allow her to (re)create herself and to be reborn, releasing herself from her past, and allowing her to see herself from the point of view of the “other”:

Que proclamé-je en choisissant pour l’écriture une terre et une langue étrangères – sinon que je suis [...] “ma propre cause et ma propre fin,” capable de me remettre au monde à travers l’art, donnant naissance à moi-même, me débarrassant de tous les déterminismes hérités de mes géniteurs. (Huston, *Journal de la création* 163-64)

As Christine Klein-Lataud states, it is seeing oneself from afar, as another, that will allow for creation: “Ainsi, c’est la distance, la non-coïncidence avec soi-même, qui permet la création” (“Les Voix parallèles” 215). Nancy Huston is able to reveal herself, to be herself without being overcome, in the presence of her double: “[...] elle a réussi à dévoiler la présence du double, à se tenir à distance de celui-ci, et, enfin, à coïncider avec elle-même” (Bond 69-70). She revels in “la joie absolue de dire ‘je’ à la place de quelqu’un d’autre” (Huston, *Lettres parisiennes* 212).

Does this duplication present the danger of one losing herself, then?

“L’écrivaine surtout, selon [Nancy] Huston, a tendance à s’identifier à ses écrits et à ses personnages au point de se perdre dans le texte” (Bond 65). According to Nancy Huston, women find it difficult to “maintenir leur travail à l’extérieur d’elles, à la bonne distance” (Huston, *Journal de la création* 32). As David Bond explains: “Si la femme qui se dédouble pouvait être les deux doubles qui se voient et se parlent en égaux, elle pourrait se stabiliser. Si l’écrivain(e) pouvait se voir dans son texte, être en même temps celui ou

celle qui nomme et celui ou celle qui est nommé(e), alors il y aurait équilibre et identité” (Bond 63). This is where Nancy Huston has an advantage, because “la différence de langue favorise cette multiplication” (Klein-Lataud, “Les Voix parallèles” 219). She has dealt with the Janus complex in that she sometimes feels as though she is wearing a mask or that she is play-acting in French, but “écrire dans une langue étrangère, pour elle, a une fonction libératrice” allowing her to separate from her maternal language, which she associates with as *mater*, for the capacity to create in French as the *auctor* (Wilhelm 216):

Le langage joue un rôle privilégié dans la création de l’identité, surtout dans le texte littéraire. L’écrivain crée le personnage littéraire à partir de ses mots, et le personnage littéraire dépend pour son existence de la parole de l’écrivain. Le personnage est la possession de son auteur. La création littéraire est ainsi à l’image de la Création [...]. (Bond 62)

In *Journal de la création*, Huston wonders why some women can’t dissociate themselves from their art in order to “valoriser et respecter l’intégrité de leur corps écrivain,” because in doing so they would overcome and become the authority, the *auctor*, of their own *mater*, their material (299). The difficulty is that some women tend to relate artistic creation with the image of maternity and thus remain in the realm of *mater* (Wilhelm 216). This is not the case of Nancy Huston who fully embraces the possibility of a woman to be both the *auctor* and the *mater*.

There is a strong tradition in women’s writing of “the tension in female identity between a need to separate from the mother and a need not to repudiate but to sustain maternal identification” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 41). For Nancy Huston it is



very clear that her reasons for her exiles (especially her linguistic exile) are directly related to her mother's departure from the family when she was a child. Feminist writing, which is grounded in psychoanalysis, has theorized,

[...] through the work of Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin, that: daughters, like sons, must differentiate themselves from the mother if they are to achieve a sense of selfhood, but at the same time the girl's development as a woman demands that she retain some degree of identification with the mother, that she acknowledge the presence of the mother in herself. (Holmes, "No Common Places" 38)

Diana Holmes goes on to state that "[...] the place of origin is identified as a maternal space [...] and to leave it carries the risk of losing a part of oneself ("No Common Places" 39). Therefore, one's self-determination is shaped both by one's individual choices, but also by one's heredity and one's surrounding community. Nancy Huston finds the acceptance of her heredity in her return to English. In turn, she is also able to embrace her maternal origins as part of her identity. In a passage from *Lettres parisiennes*, which Nancy Huston co-authored with Leïla Sebbar, Nancy Huston recounts a visit to the Mosque in Paris with her mother where she saw that "l'intensité sensuelle que j'ai recherchée en Europe, je l'ai héritée, tout bêtement, de ma propre mère" (180). Some of what Nancy Huston sought in her exile in Europe, notably sensuality, she found that she inherited from her mother, the very person from whom she was fleeing.

Nancy Huston uses her exile "as a source of creativity, and [to provide] a vantage point" from which to see herself as another (Holmes, "No Common Places" 34). She has

the advantage that her bilingualism offers, too, in that, “la langue étrangère est doublement libératrice, puisqu’elle libère à la fois de la langue maternelle et du passé avec lequel celle-ci fait bloc” (Klein-Lataud, “Les Voix parallèles” 215). Nancy Huston explains that French “n’occupe pas dans son cerveau la même place que la ‘maternelle’” (Wilhelm 213). Jane Elizabeth Wilhelm, in describing the *écrivaine*, adds that “[...] lorsqu’elle s’exprime dans une langue acquise, le matériau de la création, la langue, la voix, ont des qualités de tendresse et de sollicitude que l’on peut associer à une mère apaisée et apaisante, fût-elle de substitution” (213). Perhaps this is because the *écrivaine* is experiencing the birth of her creation: “Every novel is a foundling. Every novel must be inculcated by its author in the short time allotted it to live, with the totality of human experience – joy and suffering, hope and despair, good and evil” (Huston, “Novels and Navels” 718). It is clear from this metaphor that Nancy Huston relates creating a novel with birthing and raising a child, as she writes in *Journal de la création*:

[...] si l’artiste et son œuvre sont comme la mère et son enfant [...] dans la maternité, il y a échange, passage, symbiose, transfert d’énergies vitales – tu m’aimes je t’aime je m’aime t’aimant par toi aimée par moi tu t’aimes – et aussi sûrement que l’œuvre fait l’artiste, le bébé fait la mère [...], tant qu’il est vrai qu’avec chaque œuvre [et] chaque enfant [...] on est une artiste une mère [...] différente. (288)

She is not the first woman to speak of her artistic creation in these terms. Virginia Woolf was perhaps the first to do so when she spoke of her novel, *Années* (originally published as *The Years* in 1937). Nancy Huston quotes Virginia Woolf in *Lettres parisiennes*: “Je

me demande si quelqu'un a jamais souffert autant d'un livre que moi de celui-ci. [...] C'est comme un accouchement interminable" and again, as Virginia Woolf speaks of another one of her novels, *Trois Guinéas*, originally published in English as *Three Guineas* in 1938, "Ceci est l'accouchement le plus facile de ma vie entière" (139). For Virginia Woolf, the creation and publication of any novel can be different from the one before or after it; similarly, pregnancies and deliveries can present themselves very differently from one child to the next, even for the same mother.

The publication of *Journal de la création* affirms Nancy Huston's opinion that "woman is capable of creating *while* procreating" because it was written during her second pregnancy (Proulx, "Giving Voice to the Body" 290)! She insists that procreation can actually inspire art and is quoted by Patrice Proulx as stating, "L'éditeur dit que mon roman est viable; il accepte de le mettre au monde, tout en me félicitant 'en premier lieu pour l'autre... œuvre en gestation'" ("Giving Voice to the Body" 289). In her case, as in the case of several other women writers whom Nancy Huston cites in *Journal de la création*, such as Myriam Bat-Yosef and Emma Santos, the act of procreating and the act of creating are "non seulement compatibles mais inséparables, indispensables l'une et l'autre, l'une à l'autre, dans une vie de femme" (300).

Nancy Huston defies the myth of baby versus book, even though, traditionally procreation and creation "semblent vouées à s'opposer et à se nuire" (Lorre 75). Perhaps this is because "Parents wonder how much they can give, whereas artists wonder how much they can take (Huston, "Novels and Navels" 709). Or is the old myth based on the idea that the mother represents all that is safe? [The fact is, though, that we know this is

not true in all cases.] In this comparison of the mother as safe and of the creation of art as an adventure, Nancy Huston says that “If you want to have an adventure, which necessarily entails risking your neck, you must at all costs get away from your mother – who, invariably, predictably, boringly, wants to *save* your neck (Huston, “Novels and Navels” 708). She goes on to describe how mothers are expected to be protective and to pass on the value of right and wrong to their children, whereas a writer, within the bounds of her fiction, may have to be vicious, or evil, or violent or insane, none of which are characteristics that one would qualify as motherly (Huston, “Novels and Navels” 711): “Novelists [...] must be prepared to kill their characters” (Huston, “Novels and Navels” 712). In *Journal de la création*, Nancy Huston recalls a friend of hers who could not overcome the baby versus book complex. This un-named author came to speak to Nancy Huston’s writing class after having spent several years dedicating herself to motherhood:

[...] elle a dit que si elle s’était consacrée entièrement à la maternité pendant sept ans avant de commencer à écrire, c’est que, pour elle, ces deux activités étaient foncièrement incompatibles. Une mère doit incarner, face à son enfant, la responsabilité, la solidité, le sens des réalités. Un écrivain est un peu enfant lui-même : casse-cou, capricieux, rêveur, aventurier.... Il doit pouvoir perdre les pédales; une mère n’en a pas le droit. (251)

The ability to look at oneself and at one’s work from the outside is essential to the *écrivaine* so that she can, if she wishes, overcome the baby versus book myth.

Pregnancy can also become a sort of duality, given that the expectant mother can feel inhabited by another being, but just as the birth of a child can bring fulfillment, the duality that the child represents can also become a threat to the identity of the mother (Bond 60). Similarly, in writing, the novelist must be able to solve this dilemma:

[...] le dilemme du sujet parlant, qui n'existe que s'il parle et que d'autres l'écourent, fournit la possibilité d'une solution au problème de l'identité. Si l'individu qui parle pouvait s'entendre parler, se voir, et s'éprouver de l'extérieur, être à la fois celui ou celle qui parle et celui ou celle qui écoute, il ou elle pourrait se suffire, exister pleinement, avoir une identité stable. (Bond 63)

Not only does Nancy Huston seem to create doubles of herself in her fiction, but she also has characters in her novels who create their own other characters through the act of crafted metafiction (Bond 62). This is the case for Nadia in *Instruments des ténèbres*. In both *La Virevolte* and *Instruments des ténèbres*, the theme of creation versus procreation is central, and in each of them the main characters are able to see themselves from the point of view of the other, in such that “[c]hacune [...] accept[e] d’être son propre Témoin. D’abord, elles découvrent la maternité puis la rejettent” (Gaboury-Diallo 57).

Of course, there is “un revers de la médaille” to the identity issue in literature that is important to consider, which is “celui ou celle qui écrit, nomme, et crée, dépend pour son existence de la personne qui écoute ou lit” (Bond 62). Nancy Huston’s work “in complex gender issues surrounding both the fictional renderings and the nonfictional realities of women as mothers and artists” is not meant to be shared by women only

(Proulx, “Giving Voice to the Body” 294). As Nancy Huston writes in *Journal de la création*,

Le conflit entre l’art et la vie, la création et la procréation, l’esprit et le corps, [...] me concernait, *moi*, comme il concerne aussi quiconque, homme ou femme, souhaite faire de l’art de nos jours sans faire trop de mal – ni aux autres ni à soi. Il concerne en fait toute la question du lien entre l’éthique et l’esthétique. (18)

It is up to the men and women who read her literature to deny the Sartrean concept of “l’auto-engendrement” that denies, in true existentialist fashion, “l’hérédité, la reproduction, tout ce qui ressemblait de près ou de loin à un lien imposé, prédéterminé [...]” (Huston, *Nord perdu* 66). A mother is expected to love and protect her children, but it may not be unimaginable that a mother, in some situations, would want to abandon or bring harm to her child:

As readers our duty is to go beyond our own limitations and expectations to grasp what is archaically common in these experiences, to acknowledge what is sometimes seen as unacceptable in motherhood and mothering, what is usually deemed unthinkable and thereby untellable, because it violently denies our comforting representation of the good mother.  
(Sardin 309-10)

Nancy Huston “argues that this disdain for the mundane and the biological carries a strong charge of mother-hatred and misogyny [...]” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 39). After all, even if we are not a mother ourselves, we all have a mother, so we are all

implicated in the theme of motherhood. The women in *La Virevolte* and *Instruments des ténèbres* are also daughters who “leave behind mothers in order to distance themselves from a model that is domestic, subservient, self-effacing” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 38). Their mothers were also “torn between home, the site of maternal love, and the freedom of exile” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 38). Both Lin, from *La Virevolte*, and Nadia (or Nada, as she will also call herself), from *Instruments des ténèbres* will provide strikingly different embodiments of the maternal, and even more so, of the non-maternal voice in relation to creation and procreation (Proulx, “Giving Voice to the Body” 302).

In *La Virevolte* Nancy Huston tells the story of Lin Lhomond, a female dancer and choreographer, who enters motherhood full of expectations and excitement but who soon realizes that she cannot reconcile both facets of her life. It is the narration of Lin’s decision to choose her art, the art of dance, over the very “art” that she created from her physical being, her two daughters. The novel is composed of two parts, “La Soliste” and “La Compagnie,” showing the reader that Lin’s story is focused around dance. Even the title suggests movement and at the same time a sort of instability or dizzying indecision. The narration is presented in short passages, and in short, untitled chapters, creating a sort of movement to the text, sometimes fluid and smooth, other times longer and more voluptuous, similar to the motions associated with dance.

From the point of view of the mind/body dichotomy, it is especially interesting that Nancy Huston’s main character, Lin, is a dancer, putting her “well placed to speak to the issues of women’s literal and figurative embodiment of art” (Proulx, “Giving Voice to

the Body” 296). Using dance as the art form of choice, it may appear that Lin is associated with only the body, but dance is Lin’s means of communication, giving voice to a voiceless body (Proulx, “Giving Voice to the Body” 297). Additionally, Lin is able to be both subject and object in her dance; as a dancer being choreographed she is the object, but she becomes the subject when she is the choreographer, because she gives voice to her dancers (Huet 24). Lin’s dancing is a sacred art for her because she is able to express emotions through dance that she is not able to acknowledge otherwise. She uses her art form as a safe haven for memories and realities that she is not able to face.

*La Virevolte* opens with the delivery of Lin’s first child, Angela, who, as her name suggests, was an angelic child. The description of this child after birth is described in gentle, awe-struck phrases as Lin discovers this little being who came out of her: “Ce corps est sorti d’elle” (11). Lin even describes her pregnancy as orgasmic: “Avec Angela la grossesse avait été comme neuf mois d’orgasme: une stimulation perpétuelle [...]” (67). The role of [Angela’s] mother and professional dancer come together very naturally for Lin: “Lin takes a real physical and spiritual pleasure in her pregnancy and in her first years with Angela – a time during which her positions as mother and dancer seem to coincide” (Proulx, “Giving Voice to the Body” 296). She is deeply in love with her husband, Derek, and fully lives the role of the mother infatuated with her child.

It is not long before Lin goes back to dancing, and soon after: “Il y a en Lin une nouvelle danse, qui meurt d’envie de naître” (30). The symbolism in the choreography of this dance is vivid and beautiful, and it is the first glimpse that the reader gets of the intensity of Lin’s art as she tells the story of a mother and daughter:



Susie sa jeune danseuse noire pourrait jouer la fille. Elle sera endormie dans un coin de la scène, enroulée dans des mètres et des mètres de tulle d'un blanc très pur. Un bébé emmaillotté... puis elle se lèvera et se balancera, tournoyant lentement sur elle-même pour dérouler le tulle qui deviendra son voile de mariée. [...] Avital qui joue la mère se précipitera à ses côtés, pressera le corps de sa fille contre le sien et se balancera avec elle tout en l'enlaçant. [...] Mais peu à peu la fille se détache, s'arrache à la mère et se met à danser pour elle-même, libre et souveraine, laissant Avital toute seule tandis que le voile s'enroule autour de son corps à elle, la serrant de plus en plus étroitement... son linceul. Elle s'affaisse sur le sol et meurt. (30-31)

The role of mother and dancer align, and Lin is happy. Later on Lin and Derek decide to have another baby: "Ce deuxième bébé pèse plus, bouge plus, lui fait plus mal que le premier. [...] Avec Angela, elle a pu danser jusqu'à sept mois [...] mais cette fois-ci elle est entravée dès le quatrième" (68). Lin does not experience the same feelings of sensuality and vivacity during her second pregnancy. Instead, she sees her body as only an object (only *mater*): "Danser cela: le corps comme matière à déplacer, comme substance stupide et obstinée" (70).

The birth of Marina, their second child, is painful, and her infancy is difficult: "Marina pleure et pleure. Elle hurle à faire trépider tout son corps. Aucun regard, aucun sourire, aucune caresse de Lin n'y peut rien. C'est Lin qui la fait pleurer [...]" (72). Lin doesn't know how to appease Marina, and she begins to have nightmares: "Pour Lin, il

s'agit presque d'un glissement [...] dans le fantastique imaginaire du conte des [sic] fées. La rupture est symbolisée par les mises en abîme répétées de ses rêves [...]” (Gaboury-Diallo 55). She dreams of harm coming to her daughters, or even of their death. But it is after her best friend Rachel's encounter with death, or rather her attempted suicide, that Lin's calling becomes clear to her.

Rachel is Lin's double. They both grew up without their mothers and “puisque personne n'exerçait sur elles d'autorité, elles-mêmes étaient devenues l'autorité incarnée” (25-26). Rachel becomes Lin's opposite, though, when Lin embraces motherhood: “Rachel n'est plus le reflet de Lin, elle est devenue Autre, son contraire. Cette découverte chez Lin correspond à sa réification: elle n'est plus Sujet maternel mais objet pour Rachel, la maternité n'étant qu'un masque” (Gaboury-Diallo 51). Sensing that she has lost herself in motherhood and is no longer the *auctor* of her actions, Lin has to shed the mask of motherhood to regain herself as subject: “Oui, c'est pour cela que je suis au monde et rien – non – rien ne peut égaler cette jouissance de faire bouger les corps dans l'espace [...]” (143). So Lin accepts to lead a new dance company in Mexico and leaves her family behind. She escapes the day-to-day reality of motherhood to seek the essence of her being, her art that gives meaning – dance:

Elle a pensé que l'œuvre d'art ne s'accomplit qu'au prix de ce sacrifice affectif, et que si la procréation et la maternité impliquent le don, l'art implique une liberté la plus grande possible, donc l'égoïsme. Lin n'envisage pas de compromis et pour elle la division entre création et procréation se traduit forcément par une rupture. (Lorre 90)

Lin's departure is not discussed explicitly in the novel. It happens in the ellipse between the first and second parts of the novel, in the space of the unsaid (Lorre 82). Lin does not speak of her departure, but she is haunted by the sounds of children calling their mothers in parks, subways and streets across the globe: "Soudain, derrière elle – le mot anglais se découpant nettement sur le charabia français alentour – Mommy! C'est Angela – la voix d'Angela – Lin virevolte. Son corps réagit avant son cerveau [...]" (161). She is forced to repeat to herself that she made the right decision to leave because "Le vide laissé par l'absence des enfants est en grande partie comblé par le travail artistique: Lin ne cesse de créer [...]" (Lorre 85). Nancy Huston is careful not to pass any judgment on her character and "while maternity is valorized, it is not made sacred" (Proulx, "Giving Voice to the Body" 299). The reader gets to know Lin in the first half of the novel, and for some her decision to leave may be "unacceptable, painful to read," but it can also be "forgivable in the way that Angela [...] can later forgive" (Holmes "No Common Places" 38).

Lin was separated from her mother, Marilyn, by death at an early age, and now the vicious circle would indicate that she then leaves her daughters: "Et, par un curieux mais significatif renversement des rôles, Rachel, qui dans la Bible représente la matriarche pleurant ses enfants, remplace Lin au foyer: elle épouse son mari et élève ses filles" (Gaboury-Diallo 53). Angela, who is able to forgive her mother, aspires to become an actress and has a child of her own (the father is not present). The reader experiences Angela's forgiveness through her acceptance of Lin's departure and her matter-of-fact way of speaking about it: "Je crois que le plus dur c'était ses affaires.

J'avais toujours aimé ses affaires [...]. D'un seul coup, toutes ces *choses* avaient disparu. Hop! [P]arties! C'est de ça que je me souviens le plus" (224). Even in a conversation with Marina, Angela seemed to know that Lin would put dance first:

[...] je me souviens que je montais parfois dans sa salle de danse pour la regarder travailler avec ses danseurs. Elle était assise par terre, les yeux rivés sur eux, elle hochait légèrement la tête au rythme de la musique... Quand je la voyais comme ça de profil, si belle et si absorbée, je me rendais compte que pour elle je n'étais tout simplement pas là. La maison aurait pu prendre feu, elle n'aurait pas détourné le regard de ces corps: elle les *faisait* danser [...] c'étaient ses yeux qui imprimaient tous leurs mouvements.... (218)

Angela even goes as far as to improvise a scenario for one of her comedy routines about mothers abandoning their children: "Je l'ai fait pour eux [...]. Tout le monde se plaint toujours des mères envahissantes, des mères manipulatrices, des mères étouffantes: moi, vous comprenez, je ne voulais pas être accusée de ces crimes-là. Je voulais que mes enfants soient forts, libres, indépendants. Voilà pourquoi je les ai quittés [...]" (221).

Marina does not forgive Lin, but she relates particularly well to Rachel, and warmly welcomes Rachel as her new mother. Marina dedicates her life to the study of the Holocaust, perhaps because of Rachel's Judaism (Lorre 84). She is infatuated with suffering and relates the plight of the Jews in World War II with the type of desperate sadness that she has always felt in her life: "Eh bien, je me dis toujours que par rapport à [la Shoah], ma souffrance à moi ce n'est rien" (211). As Marina witnesses the birth of

Angela's son, the graphic and bloody expulsion of the baby violently awakens her unresolved feelings towards Lin: "[...]—la danseuse qui a redécouvert le sol – eh bien mange-le, maman, vas-y, tu l'aimes tellement ce putain de sol, bouffe-le, mâche le parquet, t'es toute desséchée, maman, plus rien que de la chair de poule et des os de coq, une âme étoilée, remplie de sable et de limon et de fumée [...]" (239). Lin is aware of Marina's inability to forgive her, and in a double dream at the end of the novel (The same dream is experienced by both Marina and Lin.), Marina puts a pillow over Lin's face and suffocates her, all the while repeating, "I love you" (251-52).

Lin's renaissance is not entirely without guilt after abandoning her family, but she is able to live her art fully, even as her body deteriorates, because her mind remains sharp: "La famille de Lin est la danse, ses danseurs sont ses enfants, sa postérité est assurée: elle restera dans la légende. [...] Lin Lhomond ne devient pas folle [...] laissant derrière elle une œuvre accomplie" (Lorre 89). In the last scene of the novel, Lin is in New York City in her hotel, overlooking the street-scene below her: "Tout cela est à moi" (with no final punctuation in the published novel, and the novel ends as if it was an aperture) (253):

L'emplacement de Lin et la scène traduisent son sentiment de s'être élevée au-dessus du commun des mortels, parce qu'elle a transformé la réalité et la vie en beauté et en art [...] et l'absence du point final à cette phrase de closure [sic] laisse un vide que ne viennent pas combler les filles de Lin, comme le voudrait la logique du cycle naturel. (Lorre 88-89)

To continue with the discussion of (pro)creation and motherhood, I shall next examine the very intricate styling and narration that Nancy Huston uses in *Instruments des ténèbres*. The commentary on creation versus procreation is very straightforward in this novel, as is the reconciliation of the “sacré[e] et du profane, [de] ce roman fait l’éloge du multiple” (Arroyas 89). In addition, this is the first novel that Huston writes in both English and French simultaneously, contributing to its complexity. Consequently, there is another sort of symbiosis in the figurative translation between the two narratives:

It is argued that there is mutual “translation” between the two narratives which comprise the novel, such that aspects of each narrative infiltrate and influence the other. [...] “translation” is thus taken in a metaphorical sense in order to elucidate relationships between two stories and two sets of characters. Here “translation” signifies transfer, transformation, the double, and a hybrid result. (Brownlie 338)

Huston emphasizes the complexity of the novel by changing the narrative voice and by toggling between two distinctly different narratives. The first, “Le Carnet *Scordatura*,” is a sort of study of the writing process and the second, “Sonate de la Résurrection,” is the fictional novel that the main character, Nadia, from the first narrative is writing and which mirrors the struggle that she faces in coming to terms with her own identity, emotions, and art. The structure of *Instruments des ténèbres* can be related to “the type of postmodern novel called ‘historiographic metafiction,’ [a term coined] by Linda Hutcheon,” because the story of Barbe in Nadia’s “Sonate de la Résurrection” is based on historical events (Sardin 304).

This novel addresses the sensitive issues of abortion and infanticide and can in this respect be seen as a militant book: “[I]n this perspective, [Nancy Huston’s] depiction of dark mothers, which goes against the comforting myth of the good mother, reads as a political and humanistic project. [...] Huston’s respective aesthetics define a new kind of ethics involving the reader and centering on the notion of witness [...]” (Sardin 301). The role of the reader is key in this type of “literature of testimony” because the narrative has to be acknowledged as holding some sort of truth and evidence of the stories of women in history (Sardin 306). In this case, Nancy Huston resorts “to distancing techniques, playing with the readers’ emotions and expectations, trying to discard all remains of pathos and melodrama, especially by involving the genre of the historical narrative either as the starting point or as a background for the fictions” (Sardin 302). Nadia’s role is to testify by writing about her trials as a woman, and in turn, Barbe’s story will be incarnated by the voice of Nadia.

Nadia transcends her position as *mater* and, in renaming herself, takes on the position of *auctor*. Within the first few paragraphs of the novel, the reader is introduced to Nada: “Je me suis moi-même nommée, ou plutôt renommée. Mes parents m’avaient appelée Nadia et quand il m’est devenu clair que *I*, le je, n’existait pas, je l’ai éliminé. Dorénavant mon nom [...] mon seul nom restant, c’est: Nada. Le néant” (12). Nada is a successful, but cynical writer of “dark, clever novels” who confides her lack of faith in redemption to her *daimôn*, or male muse, “who calls her to order whenever emotion intrudes” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 37). Nada denies the need for love; instead, she seeks out another self: “Seul un autre ‘je,’ se tenant à une distance respectueuse et

observatrice du premier, aurait la bienveillance et l'empathie nécessaires pour jouer le rôle du Témoin..." (141). In an attempt to uncover her "painful, long-repressed memories," Nada creates the character of Barbe, whose story she tells in "Sonate de la Résurrection": "Comme le *daimôn*, Barbe est un double de Nada, mais elle appartient au passé et [c'est l'] *alter ego* de la narratrice [...]" (Gaboury-Diallo 54).

Both Nada and Barbe will reject motherhood. For Nada, "[...] elle sait que sa créativité passe par la stérilité" (Paillot 130). Instead, "Nada's fictional characters will indeed replace the children whom she can no longer engender" (Proulx, "Giving Voice to the Body" 301). She rendered herself sterile (through the countless abortions over the years) – both physically and emotionally. Her tainted view of motherhood comes from her childhood, however, when she witnessed her mother's frequent miscarriages, and, as the eldest, had to help her mother hide the carnage: "Je ne sais écrire là-dessus" (32). It isn't until "her defenses are completely shattered and the repressed is unleashed, thanks to her research on the plight of women in seventeenth-century France [...]" that she is able to write about her mother's (and her) experiences (Sardin 308). Her mother, Elisa, a musician, is forced to relinquish her art in order to succumb to the patriarchal tradition of motherhood: "[Le père de Nada] avait épousé l'oiseau pour étouffer son chant" (119). Nada will not let history repeat itself and would rather terminate any chance of motherhood, first metaphorically in her dreams ("Rêve abominable" 192) and then physically, by abortion after abortion. Her mother, Elisa, makes the arrangements for the first of Nada's abortions: "A la clinique elle continua de s'occuper de tout, d'un air calme et pour ainsi dire professionnel" (285).



Nada creates Barbe in her likeness, hard and autonomous, with an ambiguously masculine name (Gaboury-Diallo 54). However, Barbe's mother dies in childbirth, leaving behind her twins, Barbe and Barnabé. Nada's mother did not die in childbirth; instead, Nada's twin brother died: "In order to reclaim her own twin brother, who died at birth, and to exorcise the guilt she feels in having survived him, the protagonist envisions a twin brother who will ultimately play a role in Barbe's salvation" (Proulx, "Giving Voice to the Body" 301): "C'est justement le rôle dont j'ai rêvé toute ma vie pour Nathan, ou *Nothin'*, mon jumeau mort – "garçon moi," comme dit Barbe" (141). In fact, it is Nada's dead twin brother who will become her "other" and ultimately allow her the power to reclaim not only the "I" of her name, but also the right to her hidden emotions.

Nada's story is entitled, "Sonate de la Résurrection" after a musical piece that was written around the year 1675 for the Virgin Mary (Arroyas 94). The music of the piece is typically Baroque and parallel to the *scordatura* of Nada's "Carnet *Scordatura*": "[...] ces compositions retentissent d'une discordance particulièrement grinçante lorsque évoquées dans le contexte d'un roman où sont exposées, en termes si palpables, les souffrances et injustices de la condition maternelle" (Arroyas 94). The term *scordatura* means discordance, as Nada's mother's friend, Stella, explains to her, and "La *scordatura* la plus inouïe, la plus inhumaine de l'histoire du violon, me dit Stella, c'est celle qu'a utilisée Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber dans sa *Sonate de la Résurrection*" (29). In other words, Nancy Huston uses a sonata that represents not only the idealized maternal figure of the Virgin Mary, but also the misogynistic doctrines of the Catholic Church, in her

“enterprise féministe” (Arroyas 99). Even though Nada’s character, Barbe, is not immortal, she will experience a manner of resurrection at the end of her story.

Barbe, rejected by family after family, was raped and eventually convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to death (Proulx, “Giving Voice to the Body” 300). She, like Nada who creates her, was like an instrument that is out of tune, or “une âme en désharmonie [...]” (Arroyas 90.). But unlike Nada who is able to abort unwanted pregnancy after pregnancy, Barbe is unsuccessful in her attempt to end the pregnancy that results from her rape. She carries the child to term only to give birth and then bury him [alive]: “Tu vas faire dodo maintenant et, dès que tu te réveilles, on ira rendre visite à ton oncle. C’est d’accord, mon Barnabé à moi?” (277-78). Even in the rejection of her offspring, she wishes him to be with her angelic twin brother, the good friar with the voice of an angel, and the part of her that she loves.

Just as Nada’s confrontation with her lost twin brings her peace, so will Barbe’s encounter with her twin Barnabé. When she is reunited with him, “[...] c’est comme si elle se retrouvait” (Bond 61):

[...] quand Barbe parle à son frère, elle semble parler à son reflet. Son frère, pour sa part, a des visions de sa mère morte qui sont une sorte de projection de ses propres désirs et élans mystiques. Quand il parle avec cette vision, c’est comme s’il se parlait. Naturellement, quand il retrouve Barbe, cet autre moi beaucoup plus réel et présent, il n’a plus besoin de la vision de sa mère, qui cesse de lui rendre visite. (Bond 63)

In a surprising twist, Nada saves Barbe from her condemnation for having committed infanticide by sending her twin brother, Barnabé, to take her place (to die in her place, which saves her). In doing so, Nada takes control of her story and puts her faith into humanity and into “man,” showing that Barnabé would sacrifice his life for his sister (Gaboury-Diallo 55): “The coherently cynical moral vision represented by the daemon cannot survive either this admission of the humanity of even bad people, or the return of Nada’s repressed emotions” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 37). Nada reclaims herself and her “I” to become once again, Nadia. The art of feminist writing, like that of Nancy Huston’s *oeuvre*, requires taking ownership of one’s “childhood, [one’s] roots and [one’s] physical, imaginary and ancestral memories,” because cutting oneself off from these ties will deprive “everything that contributes to art” (Huston, “Good Faith, Bad Conscience” 228). Since Nadia is able to reclaim her identity, she will be able to release herself from the bond with her *daimôn*.

“Le *daimôn*, ce double objectif, permet à Nadia de se projeter dans l’histoire qu’elle écrit. En parlant de l’Autre, c’est comme si elle s’exorcisait car cette altérité est ressentie à la fois par Nadia et par [Barbe] [...]” (Gaboury-Diallo 54). Frédérique Arroyas even suggests that Nadia’s discussions with her *daimôn* will help her “accoucher” the “Sonate de la Résurrection” (89). In facing her past and her emotions, Nadia is able to find the power to dismiss her *daimôn* and to come to terms with her feelings of guilt and loss. She will even offer an apology to her unborn child, Tom Pouce, a name she gave the unborn fetus because she imagined him to be so small (not

having had a chance to develop): “Point n’est besoin d’exister pour compter. Tu as énormément compté dans ma vie, mon ange” (Huston, *Instruments des ténèbres* 291).

Once again, as in the case for *La Virevolte*, Nancy Huston’s narrator gives no explicit form of moral sermon, and just as Barbe escapes her trial, judgment is not the point (Sardin 307). Nadia’s “commitment to the integrity of her narrative, and hence to its moral complexity, leads her to reject the Daemon’s nihilism as simplistic and inadequate [...]” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 37). Neither Nadia nor her character, Barbe, falls into the category of “mother” by their own choice (even though they both live on the extreme limit of this role), and they live their *altérité* differently: “[...] Huston’s first-person narrators share the feminist belief that they must play their part in the writing of ‘Herstory,’ the silenced History of women, both private and public, while denouncing their past and present subjection” (Sardin 307). As Nancy Huston writes in *Journal de la création*, “[...] la figure maternelle dans toute son ambigüité [est] à la fois vie et mort, nature et culture, chair et poésie” (217-18). The difficulty is to accept when a woman “n’assume pas son devoir de mère tel que le conçoit la morale traditionnelle, et, à l’inverse [...] de célébrer ouvertement son courage” when she chooses what she wants her life to be (Wilhelm 87).

From fragmentation to duality we have seen how these literary tools are used to enhance the voice of Nancy Huston’s characters and narrators in her novels. We have examined the effect/affect of the maternal, and the role that the [double] identity plays in Nancy Huston’s work, and the impact that creation and procreation have on voice in her *oeuvre*. This brings me to the final piece of Nancy Huston’s feminist triangle: death-- but

also rebirth and the idea of an identity no longer in flux. It is the point of acceptance (or refusal) of doctrines, memories, and oneself.

### CHAPTER THREE: Perspective and the Universal Theme of Death

Perspective is so closely related to identity and voice that it is hard to write about one without the others, and part of what makes Nancy Huston's novels so interesting is the way in which she plays with perspective. Her treatment of identity and voice, with the use of different narrative techniques and writing styles, lends naturally to the study of how she uses perspective as a literary tool. In this chapter I will examine how Nancy Huston uses perspective to reveal themes related to the third point of her feminist triangle: death.

For Huston, death is not only treated in the classic sense as an end or finality. Death can also represent a transformation from one state to another. It can be the sign of one's identity ceasing to be in flux and therefore be the portal to rebirth. It can be the end of one "self" that makes way for another to be revealed through introspection or through retrospection when judgment is placed on one character by others. Death can also be manifested as the voice of a higher being who speaks either to the characters, to the narrator, or to the reader on a spiritual level. Death, as a theme, is more about the circle of life than it is about dying, and therefore, it can manifest itself in a change of state such as childhood to adulthood, or falling in love.

In her non-fiction writing, the most obvious use of perspective to reveal the theme of death is in *Dolce Agonia* where her narrator is an all-knowing, spiritual being, or God,

who explains to the reader how each of the characters will die. This is a very literal take on the theme, but the main storyline follows the paths of several characters who “speak” to the reader in the first person, divulging information about the other characters (sometimes passing judgment), and who are each facing his or her own mortality. Sean, the host of the dinner party that is the setting for this novel, is facing his mortality in a very immediate sense as he has been diagnosed with a fatal illness. The theme of death in this novel is presented as an inevitable road by which we all pass.

Nancy Huston is much more complex in her use of the theme of death in *L'Empreinte de l'ange*. Although this novel is full of the violence and atrocities of war, this is only the backdrop to one examination of the theme of death – the death, and in this case the rebirth, of one’s spirit. The main character, Saffie, suffers traumatic experiences in childhood which cause her to harden and shut out the world; that is, until she finds love in a *coup-de-foudre* with András: “Love in Nancy Huston’s world, provides an extraordinary space from which a core of self, damaged or distorted or traumatized by experience, can be reclaimed [...]” (Holmes, “No Common Places” 41). Saffie will be able to be reborn, to feel again, so that she can live the love affair that she has with András.

Saffie, a young German woman, shuts down entirely after her traumatic departure from Berlin immediately following World War II. This novel begins in 1957, in Paris, France. Saffie abandons her home country and native language, hides behind robotic action, showing no emotion or attachment whatsoever, and seeks a way to reinvent herself so that she can forget her past. In a way, she dies, letting a ghost of an identity

take over to protect her from facing the emotions that haunted her: “[...] c’est comme si elle était invisible, un fantôme. Pourtant, elle est bien réelle [...]” (27). She responds to an advertisement for a housekeeper at the home of a brilliant flutist, Raphaël. The first time they meet, Raphaël notices Saffie’s lack of presence: “Cette femme est là, et en même temps elle est absente [...]” (16). This does not keep him from falling in love with Saffie, whom he finds to be mysterious. Much later, when Raphaël and Saffie have been married and she has given birth to their son, Emil, Raphaël begs his wife, “*Saffie, je t’en supplie, existe!*” (133). Saffie refuses to open up to Raphaël, despite his attempts at getting close to her: “Although Raphael hopes to heal his wife’s hidden psychic wounds by the power of his love, it becomes apparent that Saffie remains submerged in her memories and will not share her past with her husband” (Branach-Kallas 190). In fact, not only will Saffie not share her past, but she technically doesn’t share his present (and the reader will come to find out that she will not share his future, either). She is completely dissociated from her husband while living another existence as the mistress of András, a Jewish-Hungarian immigrant, and instrument maker.

The one thing that Saffie and Raphaël share is the French language, but “[t]he French Saffie speaks with Raphaël serves to support and maintain a ‘false self’ and act as a defense” (Day 101). Saffie believes that her marriage to Raphaël can be considered a false marriage, because her vows were pronounced in French, “[...] et parler une langue étrangère c’est toujours, un peu, faire du théâtre” (230). The purpose of the union, from Saffie’s perspective, was to be able to construct a new identity, a French identity, and in so doing, escape her German past, including the atrocities committed by her father under



the Nazi regime and the sexual assault she endured by Russian soldiers who invaded her town in the events following the war:

Dorénavant, Saffie s'appelle: Mme. Lepage. [...] elle obtient son nouveau document dans la semaine. On lui restitue l'ancien avec un coin découpé; dès son retour à la maison, elle le déchire et le fourre à la poubelle. Le nom de son père, le nom de famille qu'elle a porté durant les vingt premières années de son existence, est oblitéré à jamais. (65)

Using French distances her from her mother-tongue, German, and therefore, from her past. She needs the comfort of a friend and the space to come back to life, and she will find both in Andrés' workshop (Day 102).

The workshop is full of dust, instruments, books, used objects, old newspapers, and there is a radio playing. Saffie's eyes dart from one thing to the next, taking in the emotion that Andrés has stirred in her. It is love at first sight:

Saffie a vingt et un ans et, dans les deux minutes qui viennent de s'écouler, elle s'est métamorphosée. Elle se sent investie d'un pouvoir sacré: le pouvoir d'aimer cet homme et de se faire aimer de lui. A se trouver ainsi parmi son fatras intime, elle a l'impression d'avoir franchi non sa porte mais sa peau. (145)

She is brought back to life in Andrés' workshop "et l'accord entre eux, alors, est scellé en ciment" (152): "Once Saffie's appetite for life is reawakened, she 'shamelessly' indulges it, betraying her husband with equanimity [...]" (Day 95). Little by little, and with the help of their physical closeness, Saffie opens up to Andrés and vice versa, revealing to

each other the secrets and struggles of the past. The couple slowly recognizes the enemy in the other – a German woman from a Nazi family who was raped by Soviet soldiers and a Jewish man, whose family died in the Holocaust, fighting for the communist ideal -- as the truth of their pasts is revealed, but as Anna Branach-Kallas explains:

[...] the central couple recognize [sic] in the other the image of the brother-victim, the absolute friend-lover, the absolute enemy. Still, at the same time, they realize that it is their own past that threatens the relationship, that it is the self that puts the love at stake and therefore it is the self that is the absolute enemy, the most dangerous foe of all. (193)

There are two particular episodes where the lovers are put to the test in facing their pasts. The first occurs when Saffie realizes that András supports the war in Algeria and adheres to communist politics. When she becomes hysterical, András slaps her hard across the face, and in the heat of Saffie's anger and András' physical violence, the two become bitterly aware of why they love each other so deeply: "En fait – ils ne se le disent pas mais tous deux le savent – ils ont enfin touché là à l'essence de leur amour, à son noyau secret et sacré. En l'autre, c'est l'ennemi qu'ils aiment" (227). The second episode takes place after Saffie explains to her lover the full truth about her father's part in the war and his experiments for the Nazis. András is impotent the next time they are together, but the time after that the passion in their lovemaking is full of erotic violence. András slaps Saffie over and over again, and as he lashes out at her, she quietly takes the blows; he then puts his hands around her neck: "[...] martyrisant en elle son père sourd et apoplectique, le peuple allemand sourd et apoplectique, les SS et les Croix fléchées, [...]"

et surtout, surtout, sa propre lâcheté et sa propre impuissance, il n'étrangle Saffie en éjaculant en elle son âme à l'agonie" (271). Loraine Day attributes this violence to the need for catharsis and for mutual recognition: "[...] While their shame is undoubtedly purged by the violence, what seems more important is that their love is strong enough to survive hatred and aggression" (102-03). Their love resides on the borderline, capable of oscillating into hate as they each discover the "Other" in themselves and in each other, but becoming stronger with each trial that they face.

Saffie compares her relief in having shared her dark past with psychoanalysis, which relies on conversation to help patients work through repressed trauma verbally: "Saffie se sent délestée du poids de son enfance comme par dix ans de psychanalyse" (274). Nancy Huston writes in *Lettres parisiennes* that: "Je suis convaincue que je n'ai pas pu aller jusqu'au bout de la psychanalyse que j'ai entreprise in 1978 pour la simple raison qu'elle se déroulait en français, la langue qui me protège, la langue dans laquelle mes névroses sont plus ou moins tenues en bride [...]" (130) French is the language in which Saffie is willing to open up, and as authentic as her confessions are to Andrés, so is her rebirth: "Through the partnership, she rediscovers spontaneity and vitality, embarks on the confrontation with her demons and learns to become more aware of suffering outside herself" (Day 102). Saffie begins to see the world and feel its presence: "Le monde autour commence à pénétrer en elle [...]" (274).

Saffie has faced her share of cold, cruel deaths. Some of her memories come back to her through music. For example, her mother would sing to her during the war to comfort her during air raids, or she recalls the lullabies that she would sing to the animals

that her father had put down. Music is certainly a focal point in Nancy Huston's work, and this is evident in *L'Empreinte de l'ange* from her epigraphs for the novel – they both make reference to the importance of music and its power to ease suffering. The first is by Göran Tunström, a Swedish author who established his strong literary notoriety in the 1970s: “Comment comparer les souffrances? La souffrance de chacun est la plus grande. Mais qu'est-ce qui nous permet de continuer? C'est le son, qui va et qui vient comme l'eau parmi les pierres,” and the second by Austrian-born poet and author, Ingeborg Bachmann (written between 1953 and 1973), “Allez, ne pleure pas, comme dit la musique.”

According to David A. Powell, we can even classify the characters through the music that each represents: Raphaël is a classical flutist, and classical music would symbolize social inequality; Andrés would correspond to jazz, with its dynamic freedom of melody, and to the upset of social inequality; and Saffie is like folk music, which sees the world as innocent and can be both a personal and a public declaration (referring to her relation to music as a child when her mother sang to her, or when she sang to the dead animals, or when she finally sings to her son, Emil) (62). Loraine Day articulates that Raphaël, because of his profession, should then be the most sympathetic of the three main characters:

Raphaël, in connection with his musical vocation is arguably the least sympathetically drawn of Huston's three major players. No doubt this allows Huston to draw attention to the inadequacy of art in the face of suffering, even as she signals the necessity of transmitting what we know

of human fallibility and the endless return of historical catastrophe. (105-06)

I would argue that András is the most sympathetic of the three, and that it is he who brings Saffie “back to life” and in so doing, proves the power of the arts, and specifically music in this case. Not only does he always have music playing in his workshop, a musical instrument repair shop, but he is the one who encourages Saffie to sing to Emil and to have that special connection through song. Music is also associated with memory: “[...] pour Huston, la musique et l’expérience de la musique produisent des événements affectifs. [...] Ainsi la musique transcende-t-elle le temps. [...] La séparation que ressentent les personnages de Huston entre leur passé et leur présent se détruit à travers et à l’aide des expériences musicales” (Powell 62).

Music, as a type of art, therefore, is a witness to the passage of time and of our own mortality. It can be used to trick death in the sense that the artist will live through her art beyond her mortal years. In the same way that a memory brought to life in the form of music or dance or a novel is inscribed for all those who carry it, as Loraine Day suggests: “[...] art relays the function of dreams, in so far as it permits the integration of difficult material that might otherwise be split off and denied [...]” (Day 106). However, in the case of particularly difficult questions of morality, one may question the effect of art:

[...] with a double-meaning characteristic of narcissistic narrative, at the same time, [Nancy Huston’s] metafictional novel seems to praise this kind of art which allow us to momentarily forget about our individual suffering

by placing it in a more universal context, and which provides us with helpful hints guiding us through the labyrinthine web of moral issues.

(Branach-Kallas 196)

The epitome of the moral dilemma presents itself in chapter XVII of *L'Empreinte de l'ange*, when the reader is put face to face with the juxtaposition of the feelings of passion, life and liberty between Saffie and András in the height of their love affair, and the feelings of betrayal, dread and sadness of Raphaël (Day 103). Raphaël is on a train to Bordeaux with his son Emil, whom he wants to question not only about Emil's relationship with András, but also about Saffie's (Emil's mother), relationship with András (now that Raphaël realizes that Emil has grown up calling both he and András "father"). Even the structure of the chapter jumps from one paragraph to the next, back and forth from joy to despair, from love to hate, from life in all its splendor to death in its misery. As Saffie walks home from András' workshop after their first declaration of love to each other she "se dirige vers la Seine en s'émerveillant de se trouver ainsi seule et forte dans la plus belle ville du monde" (319). Saffie is elated and alive whereas Raphaël is hot with anger, screaming at Emil, whom he is dangling outside of the speeding train: "Le souffle coupé par la peur et par la violence du vent, Emil ne peut répondre. Il bat des jambes dans le vide, essayant de reprendre pied. La seconde d'après, il n'est plus là" (317). When Saffie learns of the death of her son she simply disappears... out of Raphaël's life, out of András' life and out of the narrative completely, just like Emil. The narrator uses Saffie's disappearance (and Emil's death) to remind readers of our own mortality: "Comme tous, nous allons disparaître à la fin" (321).

In this representation of the theme of death, the reader first witnesses Saffie's coming back to life with the adoption of the French language, very much resembling Nancy Huston's own struggle to find her "voice." Saffie's creation of a new identity to allow this rebirth, again, mirrors Huston's own struggle to find her identity. Saffie relies on the power of art, and specifically the strong emotional ties that can be created by music and song, to face her past (for Nancy Huston, it is the art of writing that serves this same purpose). Death may be inevitable in a physical sense, but can be cheated metaphorically through memory and creation.

Therefore, death is not only a morose and finite theme, but it also represents a transformative process in Huston's *oeuvre*; it is a process by which to be reborn (by the coming of age or by falling in love), by which one can reinvent herself, and by which one can examine, judge, accept or refuse history, as well. The sudden disappearance of Saffie at the end of the novel is also testament to the study of the theme of death. The reader does not know what happens to her or where she goes, which creates a sensation of mystery, much like the mystery surrounding Death itself.

## Conclusion

To answer my initial question, the effect of Nancy Huston's cultural and linguistic background on her novels is that her characters are poised to ask the questions that Nancy Huston knows to be essential. That is to say that to get to the core of identity one has to be able to distance herself and to see herself from the outside. The affect that Nancy Huston's background has on her work is that her characters are able to put a voice to their newfound perspective, which is typically an emotional realization. Her background allows her to become whomever she wants, and to create in her own image if she sees fit, but it also reminds her that she is who she is because of the people and events that she experienced and that came before her, and she treats her writing in the same way:

[...] l'identité oscille entre la similitude et la différence, entre ce qui fait de nous une individualité singulière et qui dans le même temps nous rend semblables aux autres. La psychologie montre bien que l'identité se construit dans un double mouvement d'assimilation et de différenciation, d'identification aux autres et de distinction par rapport à eux. (Marc 29)

Nancy Huston steps outside of her tangible and material reality, whether it is in English or in French, to take an introspective look back at her life experiences, thus seeing them through the eyes of an outsider. Her bilingualism is precisely what allows



her to detach herself enough to distance herself from her writing. The duality that she evokes in her fiction is not figurative. The “death” of the English language, Huston’s mother tongue, stems from the departure of her mother. Its rebirth came after Huston became a mother herself and as she started to take a look back at her heritage through the act of writing and translating, this time in the negative space created between her two languages. One can even accomplish the act of translation within the same language using the interplay among multiple identities leading to multiple realities, in which case the study of perspective and the “death” of one language for the “birth” of another is taken to a whole new level, therefore taking the theme of death as part of the circle of life into a vicious circle resembling a spiraling, *mise en abîme* scenario!

Nancy Huston’s identity “—multiple and always in flux—is mirrored by her writings, on the borderline between novel, poetry, autobiography, and literary theory. Her work thereby often eludes definition and defies categorization” (Rice 119). She epitomizes marginality and recognizes that “la contrainte, autant que la liberté est partie intégrante de notre identité humaine” (Huston, *Journal de la création* 73). As Diana Holmes explains, Nancy Huston’s work is witness to the presence of the “other”:

Or les romans de Nancy Huston [...] insistent sur le signifié de chaque signifiant, sur la transitivité du discours et en particulier du discours romanesque. Ce sont des textes de plaisir, au sens où le récit invite le lecteur aux plaisirs du suspens, de l’identification, de l’engagement affectif, et à travers ces plaisirs-là, à la “reconnaissance des autres en soi,

et de soi dans les autres,” comme à la tentative de faire signifier le monde.

("Ecrire est un Verbe Transitif 91)

The work of Nancy Huston recognizes all the elements around her that make her who she is. Her existence is not singular or void of interaction with other people, other beliefs, and other cultures. She defines herself through the recognition of her *ipse* and in relation to the *mêmeté* around her. Her study of identity carries with it the emotional charge of her own journey which she uses to give life to her characters. The same can be said for her presentation of voice, with her use of various styles of narration to convey an undertone of social commentary, sometimes whispered, sometimes screamed, but ever present nonetheless. Nancy Huston's use of perspective allows for the emotional surrender of her characters... and of her readers.

In the discussion of perspective in Nancy Huston's work, it is interesting to note that I could have examined each of these novels from any angle of her thematic feminist triangle: woman (self), mother (creator), and death (or the end of one existence). *Cantique des plaines* was the reference for my study of identity and marginality, but I could have also offered analysis on the mother figure by focusing on the elements of mother culture and sister culture (the native people and the European settlers in Canada), or on the dichotomy of creation/procreation by taking a closer look at Paula's writing and Miranda's art. A study of Paddon's heritage or the fate of the Native people could have been the basis for a discussion on death. *La Virevolte* and *Instruments des ténèbres* were the backdrops for my discussion of the mother and of creation, but they each could have been examples of a study of identity: Lin, who discovered herself as a dancer (and not as

a mother), and Nadia, who even changed her name to Nada, or “nothing.” Both of these novels could also have served as the texts for the study of death (or the end of one existence) in that Lin left her legacy in her dance and choreography, choosing to immortalize herself with her art, and Nadia used the memory of her dead twin and her dead fetus to defeat her *daimôn*. Lastly, instead of writing about Saffie to illustrate the theme of death in *L’Empreinte de l’ange* I could have represented Saffie as a woman seeking to create herself anew by leaving her homeland and hiding away all memories from her past to examine the concept of identify, or her relationship with Emil and her own mother (and even her feelings about pregnancy) to explore the concept of mother and creation/procreation. Nancy Huston’s pivotal thematic anchors and elements of this triad are present throughout her work and beyond the few novels introduced in this study.

Similarly, there are autobiographical elements of Nancy Huston’s life present in her fiction. This is perhaps most obvious in *Cantique des plaines* in her own *retour aux sources*, but it is not the only example. She is a social activist and feminist, and the reader can get a glimpse of this in Andrés’ activism in *L’Empreinte de l’ange*, or in the plight of the native people in *Cantique des plaines*, as well as in other publications, such as *Histoire d’Omayya* (1985), *Trois fois septembre* (1989), and *Lignes de faille* (2007). In her community of characters, we come across dancers, writers and poets, painters, photographers, musicians, actors and comics, and the list goes on. Nancy Huston is a musician herself, and in *La Virevolte* (dance), *Instruments des ténèbres* (writing, music, song), and *L’Empreinte de l’ange* (music, song), not to mention *Les Variations Goldberg* (1981), *Prodige: polyphonie* (1999), or *Infrarouge* (2010), her integration of the arts is

not only present, but also integral to her themes. Her fascination with Judaism (and religion or spirituality as a whole) also appears across her work, from Marina's study of the Holocaust in *La Virevolte*, to Nadia's battle with her *daimôn* in *Instruments des ténèbres*, and then in *Dolce Agonia* (2001), *Lignes de faille* (2006) and *Ultraviolet* (2011). In her use of autobiographical material in her art, her writing, Nancy Huston minimizes her marginality and opens endless possibilities for inventing new characters through which she can speak.

I think that Jacques Poulin, the French-Canadian writer, put it best in his novel of self-discovery, *Volkswagon Blues* (1984), when he wrote, "Vous dites que vous êtes 'quelque chose entre les deux' ... Eh bien, je ne suis pas du tout de votre avis. Je trouve que vous êtes quelque chose de neuf, quelque chose qui commence" (qtd. in Simon: 149). Although these words were not meant for Nancy Huston, they are exactly how I would describe her!

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## BIOGRAPHY

Being a "military brat" and having to move fairly often gave Erin N. Mateu a taste for travel. She traveled extensively around the United States and France, and has also toured England and the Mediterranean region (including Cyprus and Egypt).

She is currently the Associate General Manager at the Center for Global Education, the study abroad office at George Mason University. Having returned to the U.S after several years living and working in Paris, France, she enjoys helping students achieve their global goals. She considers herself to be a true study abroad advocate who believes that study abroad can shape one's life.

Her study abroad experience began in high school with a semester in Bordeaux, France. Double majoring in International Business Management and French, she completed her undergraduate work at Central College in Iowa in 1999. In college, she participated in a year-long study abroad program at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, and then in a semester internship in London, England. She also attended the Institut Catholique de Paris for work on a Maîtrise de l'état in French Comparative Literature, before coming to George Mason University to complete her MA in Foreign Languages, concentration French, in 2014.

Her work experience includes more than ten years in the field of study abroad, as well as work for the Paris Chamber of Commerce. Her teaching experience ranges from university tutorials at Central College, to adult education with the WISE association in Paris, to volunteer elementary school language programming in Charenton-le-Pont, France.

She has two daughters, both of whom were born in Paris and raised with French as their first language. You may notice her strong admiration for the Paris Fire Brigade, stemming from the many years that her husband spent in active duty, protecting the people of Paris as a fireman. (She met her husband during her study abroad in Paris!)