

MOTHERING IN THE STEPMOTHER TONGUE: MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY AND LINGUISTIC PRACTICE IN NANCY HUSTON'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NON-FICTION

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Exile and troubled motherhood are two closely intertwined themes that dominate Nancy Huston's œuvre. Every collection of Huston's non-fiction writings contains at least one essay reflecting on the link between her mother's departure from the family home in childhood and her own exile, and her novels are equally preoccupied with such themes. The protagonist of the novel *La Virevolte*, a mother of two, is caught in an agonizingly painful conflict between family life and an international career as a dancer, and she finally opts for leaving the former for the sake of the latter.¹ The novel *L'Empreinte de l'ange* features the story of a female German character who relocates to France at the end of the 1950s, where she marries a French flautist and becomes a mother shortly after that. Her love affair with a Hungarian instrument maker of Jewish origin draws her into a double life that has fatal consequences for her son.²

Voluntary exile and the resulting hybrid, dual, exilic, nomadic, bilingual identity is the most widely studied problem in Huston's scholarship. Numerous studies theorize the identitarian position of the 'in-between' constructed in Huston's texts and posit the necessity of writing as the main condition in sustaining such an identity.³ Studies focusing on exile in relation to motherhood privilege Huston's perspective as a daughter and writer. Mihoko Martens-Okada argues that Huston uses fiction to symbolically reconstruct her mother's trajectory in order to come to

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1. Nancy Huston, *La Virevolte* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1994).
 2. Nancy Huston, *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1998).
 3. See for example Patrice J. Proulx, 'Writing Home: Explorations of Exile and Cultural Hybridity in the Correspondence of Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar', *L'Esprit créateur*, 40:4, (2000), 80–8; Kate Averis, 'The Formal Architecture of Identity in Nancy Huston's *L'Empreinte de l'ange*', *Francosphères*, 1:2 (2012), 171–84 (p. 177); Ann-Sofie Persson, 'L'Interstice, le dialogue et la migrance: pratiques épistolaires (auto)biographiques dans *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l'exil* de Nancy Huston et Leïla Sebbar', *Nouvelles études francophones*, 27:1 (2012), 51–65.

terms with it.⁴ In contrast, Marylea MacDonald focuses on Huston's subject position as a 'mère porteuse' and 'une mère parlante' to establish the use of fiction as an ethical writing position that protects the author and those she writes about.⁵ This article explores Huston's subject position as a mother and writer that emerges in her autobiographical non-fiction written during or reflecting upon the period of her life when her children were born and during their early childhood. It examines the link between Huston's linguistic maternal and literary practices as these are expressed in *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l'exil* and in five essays: 'A Tongue called Mother' "'La Rassurante Étrangeté" revisitée' and 'En français dans le texte', published in *Désirs et réalités: textes choisis 1978–1994*; 'Le Faux Bilinguisme' that appeared in *Nord perdu: suivi de Douze France*, and 'Déracinement du savoir, un parcours en six étapes', published in *Âmes et corps: textes choisis 1981–2003*.⁶ The article aims to understand how and why Huston comes to mother in her adoptive 'stepmother' tongue, French, and how it is significant in her translingual writing practice.⁷

My discussion is shaped by Julia Kristeva's theory of poetic language, in particular the notion of the semiotic *chora* that conceptualizes the link between maternal body and fictional creative practices. I begin by outlining the theoretical framework of my discussion and proceed to analyze Huston's relationship with her mother tongue, English. I then focus on Huston's association with French, her *langue marâtre*, before arguing that both languages and the tension between them function as a maternal space in which Huston's identity as a daughter, mother and writer are negotiated. I conclude by suggesting that Huston's embodied use of French with her children as described in the essays discussed here works towards

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4. Mihoko Martens-Okada, 'Le Roman familial de Nancy Huston. La relation problématique: la fille abandonnée et la mère coupable' in *Relations familiales dans les littératures française et francophone des XXe et XXIe siècles: II. La figure de la mère*, ed. by Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine Van Wesemael (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 107–16.
 5. Marylea MacDonald, 'L'Éthique de la déference: des récits de vie interstitiels dans *Journal de la création* de Nancy Huston', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 64 (2003), 7–16.
 6. Nancy Huston, *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l'exil* (Paris: Bernard Barrault, 1986), henceforth *LP*. I shall refer to five letters in particular: Lettre II, VI, XVIII, XX, XXVIII. Nancy Huston, *Désirs et réalités: textes choisis 1978–1994* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1995), henceforth *DR*; *Nord perdu: suivi de Douze France* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1999), henceforth *NP*; and *Âmes et corps: textes choisis 1981–2003* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2004), henceforth *AC*. 'Déracinement du savoir, un parcours en six étapes' will be referred to in the text as 'Déracinement'.
 7. The literary scholar Steven Kellman defines 'literary translingualism' as 'the phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one'. Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), p. 8. By this definition, Huston is a translingual writer. Since as an individual she can speak more than one language and speaks the language that is not her primary language to her children, I also refer to her here as a translingual mother.

the repair of the dramatic distancing between her mother tongue and her creative maternal energy.

Semiotic *chora* and poetic language

In her early work, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, the linguist, psychoanalyst and feminist philosopher, Julia Kristeva, theorizes the way in which meaning is created.⁸ She singles out two modalities in the signification process – the semiotic and the symbolic – and traces them down to the structure of the speaking subject. According to Kristeva, the semiotic is the non-verbal part of making meaning pertaining to rhythm and sound, whereas the symbolic is the realm of the logos and structural aspects of language. Kristeva's main concern is to articulate the semiotic which she links to the maternal influence within the developing subject and employs the Greek word *chora* to name what she describes as:

Une totalité non expressive constituée par ces pulsions et leurs *stases* en une motilité aussi mouvementée que réglementée. [...] Une articulation toute provisoire, essentiellement mobile, constituée de mouvements et de leurs *stases* éphémères. [...] Une *disposition* qui relève déjà de la représentation.⁹

The interactive energy flows within the *chora* are directly related to the mother's body and the coexistence of the mother and foetus during the gestation and immediately after. Therefore, the *chora* takes the shape and form of a uterus and represents an enduring psychophysical mother-child bond that starts *in utero* and develops during the first months of the baby's life. The *chora* is anchored in the earliest stages of language acquisition, consisting of pre-linguistic undertakings that define mother-baby interactions during the first weeks and months of the baby's life, such as breastfeeding, cooing, washing, touching, stroking, singing, and cuddling. According to Kristeva, the embodied intersubjective mother-child bond is disrupted when the child becomes a speaking subject, but its traces survive in language, especially in poetic language. It is through the production and consumption of poetic language that the semiotic bond between mother and child can be accessed later in life.

Alison Stone draws inspiration from Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* in her concept of maternal language.¹⁰ In her psychoanalytic theorization of maternal subjectivity, Stone's reading of the *chora* insists on the continuous connection between the subject and their mother throughout the subject's life, challenging the mainstream psychoanalytic principle that Kristeva abides by and which suggests

8. Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

9. Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 23, original emphasis.

10. Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

that the acquisition of language marks a rupture with the maternal. Stone argues that the subject's entrance into language and existence as a linguistic social being is shaped by the semiotic bond that serves as an affective model for all linguistic encounters throughout their lives.

Langue maternelle

Huston's creative project is consistently haunted by her mother's departure from the family home. Huston scholars in both literature and psycholinguistics agree that this traumatic episode is at the heart of her own exile and bilingualism.¹¹ For example, Celeste Kinginger argues that Huston's emergence as a writer in French as opposed to English 'is based on a carefully crafted rationale for rejection of the past'.¹² In the most explicit account of the mother's departure, entitled 'En français dans le texte', Huston relates how, whilst her parents were finalizing their divorce, their future German stepmother took the six-year-old Nancy and her sister to Germany for the summer holidays, during which she picked up German with phenomenal speed. Huston describes experiencing her swift acquisition of the foreign language as a symbolic transition from being an abandoned and, in her mind, unwanted daughter to becoming a newly acquired and desirable stepdaughter. Therefore, Huston's mother tongue, English, which comes to be associated with the trauma caused by her mother's departure, is disavowed and replaced by other languages (first German and then French) in an act of self-preservation, as demonstrated in the following passage:

Donc, en matière de la langue maternelle, quand j'avais six ans, elle a disparu. Ma mère. Avec sa langue dans sa bouche. *Mary-Louise*, elle s'appelait, s'appelle encore. Et aussi: *Mommy. Mom. Mother*. Elle a été immédiatement remplacée par une jeune émigrée allemande du nom de *Maria. Mutter. Mutti*. Il suffisait de changer de langue et les mots n'avaient plus le même sens. *Mutti* et *Mommy* désignaient deux personnes différentes. [...] Bientôt je n'étais plus moi-même non plus. [...] Je n'étais plus la fille que *Mommy* avait abandonnée, j'étais celle que *Mutti* venait d'acquérir. (*DR*, p. 232–3)

The correlation between the names of Huston's mother and stepmother and their complementary maternal roles makes the transition from English ('*Mommy. Mom. Mother*') to German ('*Mutter. Mutti*') seem almost natural and easy. The repetition of the words meaning 'mother' in different languages sounds like a lament that

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11. Aneta Pavlenko, *Emotions and Multilingualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Elizabeth M. Knutson, 'Writing In Between Worlds: Reflections on Language and Identity from Works by Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar', *Symposium*, 65:4 (2011), 253–70.
 12. Celeste Kinginger, 'Bilingualism and Emotion in the Autobiographical Works of Nancy Huston', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25:2/3 (2004), 159–78 (p. 168).

gradually transforms into an incantation of a distressed child trying to pacify herself. The repetition performs a soothing function, suggesting that as long as Huston's younger self portrayed in this extract can call somebody a mother, she can bear the pain. The stream of different words for 'mother' finally trickles down to two, *Mommy* and *Mutti*, symbolically replacing one mother with another who has to be spoken to in another language. Furthermore, the switch from one language to another entails a shift of identity for Huston: by speaking another language she can become another person with another destiny. Therefore, the mother's departure is depicted as a life-changing event that triggers the development of Huston's translingual, fractured and yet coherent identity in a foreign country and language when she settles in France.

In her correspondence with Leïla Sebbar published as *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l'exil*, a collection of thirty letters exchanged between the two writers from May 1983 to January 1985, in which they explore different aspects of their exilic condition, Huston asks whether her exile to France and to French might be a symbolic revenge for her mother's abandonment:

Je me suis exilée parce que [...] ma mère m'a « abandonnée » quand j'avais six ans; [...] Plus tard je me suis mise, moi, à abandonner les autres avec une régularité implacable [...] Mais cette fois-là, et sans le savoir [...] j'effectuais l'Abandon par excellence, un abandon si énorme qu'il allait me suffire pendant longtemps, peut-être le reste de ma vie: celui de mon pays et de ma langue maternels. Revanche symbolique contre la mère qui inaugura la série? (*LP*, p. 116)

Tracing Huston's exilic identity to her mother's departure, this passage proposes that Huston's identity is formed to only sustain relationships by metaphorically abandoning those she loves by putting them into the realm of another language. Thus for Huston, *la langue maternelle* signifies both a negative association with the past and her mother and the productive distancing mechanism that sustains her identity in the present. Figuring the abandonment of the mother tongue as a symbolic revenge for Huston's mother's departure from the family home in childhood implies a continuous and intense emotion towards the mother, but also condemning herself to unremitting separation from both the mother and the mother tongue.

Langue marâtre

It has been extensively and effectively argued that Huston's choice of French as the language of writing is motivated by its association with freedom from childhood trauma and access to personal independence and self-determination in the present.¹³ In Huston's own words, 'j'ai appris le français trop longtemps après ma langue

13. See, for example, Kate Averis, 'Le "vrai" moi: Nancy Huston's Concern for Authenticity', *Essays in French Language and Culture*, 45 (2008), 1–18.

maternelle; il ne sera jamais pour moi une deuxième mère, mais toujours une marâtre' (*LP*, p. 13), thus inviting a parallel comparison between the French language and Huston's actual *marâtre*, who has been shown to have taken over the maternal role thereby anesthetizing the pain of the missing mother. The *mâratre* metaphorically stands for the mother figure who is not subject to unconditional love and is devoid of the almighty maternal power of attraction and destruction. Huston claims that French for her is the language that is not 'de l'ordre de l'intime' (*AC*, p. 25) but rather of the social and performative order from which Huston demonstrates that she can so easily extract herself. Huston's German *marâtre* is described as having mothered and socialized her, thus fulfilling her practical needs as opposed to the birth mother who, minimally involved in Huston's day-to-day life, was capable of provoking immense emotion in her as demonstrated in the previous section. Thus, French in Huston's description is the language 'qui protège' (*LP*, p. 138), the foreign language that 'm'a maternée' mieux que ne l'avait jamais fait ma langue maternelle' (*DR*, p. 193), and that is also 'moins chargée d'affect et donc moins dangereuse' (*NP*, p. 64). The danger of the hurtful affect from which Huston seeks refuge in French is precisely the intimacy of her early childhood with her own mother that Kristeva calls the semiotic, which is of the order of the pre-symbolic and regulated by psychosomatic rather than intellectual drives. Thus, the emotional safety of French for Huston consists of the distance from the semiotic in language and therefore allows for the symbolic structure Huston requires for meaningful artistic self-expression.

Conversely, Huston also uses French to speak to her then-husband and the father of her two children, Tzvetan Todorov.¹⁴ The fact that he too is an exile and has also adopted French as the language of artistic and scholarly expression plays a significant role in their relationship. When Huston states that: 'nous n'avons jamais parlé que le français entre nous; c'est notre langue d'amour mais aussi notre langue d'écriture' (*LP*, p. 33), their translingual, complex and productive relation to French is suggested to serve as an extra dimension of their amorous, intellectual and family liaison. Huston's relationship with Todorov conducted in French somewhat attenuates her claim that French is not 'de l'ordre de l'intime' (*AC*, p. 25) and provides evidence to suggest that French must carry some emotional and semiotic weight for her.

Most importantly for the purposes of this article, French is also the language in which Huston mothers. At the time of writing *Lettres parisiennes*, Huston's firstborn daughter Léa was growing from a baby into a toddler and becoming a speaking subject. Her letters in this publication document Huston's early

14. At the time of writing the essays analysed here, Nancy Huston was married to the French-Bulgarian literary critic, philosopher and essayist, Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017), who fathered both her children. She refers to him as 'M.' in *Lettres parisiennes* and 'T.T.' in *Âmes et corps*, where she also calls him by his name and surname.

experiences as a translingual first-time mother offering some precious insights into her linguistic mothering practice. In the letter to Sebbar written on 19 April 1984, Huston shares an anecdote about how she tried to speak some English to her daughter which she describes as follows:

J'ai essayé de parler en anglais à Léa. [...] Ça me troublait drôlement [...]. C'est impossible. Quelque chose en moi se soulève, résiste et cale [...]. C'est comme si ma voix devenait réellement la voix de ma propre mère. [...] C'est trop fort. C'est une mine d'émotions si turbulentes que je refuse de la sonder. [...] Les livres, les enfants, je ne peux les faire que dans une langue non maternelle. (*LP*, pp. 138–9)

What Huston describes as an almost physical resistance to English in the context of mothering, and the conflation of her own voice with that of her mother, invokes maternal transmission and suggests Huston's need to keep the traumatic past at bay, to stay away from the negative maternal heritage and protect her children from it, cutting off the lines of negative maternal communication.¹⁵ Considering that mothering is a performative act susceptible to trans-generational repetition, Huston's reaction can also be interpreted as her determination to avoid replicating her own mother's practice, experienced as devastating by Huston. Thus, it seems that the affective distance Huston enjoys in French provides her with emotional safety from everything associated with her own mother, in both writing and mothering.

From French to bilingual

The affective distance permitted by language and writing is explored in her essay 'Déracinement', in which Huston traces her journey towards literary translingualism. Here Huston argues that her transition into English as a language of writing alongside French coincided with the transition from non-fictional theoretical texts to a fictional and more poetic mode of writing, thus highlighting two modalities that correspond, respectively, with the symbolic and the semiotic outlined by Kristeva in her theory of poetic language. At the beginning of the essay, Huston discusses the initial fascination with literature that she developed at secondary school where 'la directrice de l'école nous a lu à voix haute *toute la Divine comédie de Dante*' and where with 'le professeur de théâtre nous avons appris par cœur des soliloques de *Macbeth* et de *Hamlet*' (*AC*, p. 15). The way Huston describes her early pleasures of literature suggests that she engages with poetic language in a sensual, embodied, performative and interactive way. Huston claims to have learnt to enjoy literature not through reading – a solitary and cerebral activity – but through listening, reciting and performing. In Huston's description,

15. For a detailed discussion of the idea of maternal practice as trans-generational and transmissible, see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

her early contact with fiction as a secondary school student comes across as closely related to the music of the spoken word: the voice, the tone, the sound and the rhythm that is transmitted and experienced in an intersubjective space. Huston's own desire to become a writer is also said to stem from her wish to create textual worlds containing the emotional power to move her readers in the way she is herself moved by literature. Read through the matrix of Kristeva's theory of poetic language, Huston's ambition as a writer appears to be invested in the semiotic aspect of a fictional text, in other words, in the maternal dimension. However, as demonstrated previously, it is precisely the maternal in language that has to be repressed and broken away from in order to enable Huston to find a voice as a writer.

In 'Déracinement' Huston recalls the beginning of her writing career in France and in French as distanced from the poetic and the semiotic aspects of writing: 'Dans ce pays, personne ne rêvait d'être romancier. [...] Il ne s'agissait plus de rêver ni de faire rêver, il s'agissait de lire et de discourir' (*AC*, p. 17). Here she suggests that her initiation into writing through non-fiction is due to her engagement with the discursive, critical and theoretical paradigm reigning in Paris at the time, which, according to Kristeva's theory of poetic language, represents the symbolic. Huston's essay continues with the story of the genesis of her first novel and third publication, *Les Variations Goldberg*, written in French.¹⁶ She claims to have been unable to write 'un roman "réaliste", "à l'américaine"' (*AC*, p. 22) and therefore embarked on a writing project built on a strict formal structure, that is to say, also anchored in the symbolic. Nevertheless, Huston deems this novel to be an important step towards realizing her ambition of becoming a writer of fiction. At this point in the essay she also mentions her relationship with Todorov, describing his role in liberating her from the need to write theory thus providing further context for the use of emotionally coded French for Huston (*AC*, p. 23). In a striking sentence in the following section, she also makes the crucial observation that 'cela a coïncidé, d'une façon qui pourrait sembler paradoxale, avec un autre événement important dans ma vie: la maternité' (*AC*, p. 23). Huston's daughter Léa was born in 1982, just after the publication of the first novel in French and before the start of the correspondence with Sebbar. Huston's subsequent two novels were also written in French, however the third one, *Trois fois septembre*, features an interesting structural linguistic inversion, consisting of letters and diaries said to have been written in English but appearing in French in the text, as they are read out loud by the characters who in doing so, also translate them.¹⁷

Towards the end of 'Déracinement', Huston describes the mental and physical health crisis she suffered in 1986–7 followed by a subsequent pregnancy and the

16. Nancy Huston, *Les Variations Goldberg: romance* (Paris: Seuil, 1981)

17. Nancy Huston, *Trois fois septembre* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

birth of her son in 1988. The following year, she conceived of the first paragraph of her fourth novel and the first written in English, *Plainsong* ‘lors d’une insomnie suivant un réveil nocturne de mon bébé’ (*DR*, p. 202). With this novel Huston starts to write in English as well as French and her ‘vraie vie d’écrivain démarre à ce moment’ (*AC*, p. 28). In 1993 her novel *Plainsong* is published in English in Anglophone Canada and her French translation, *Cantique des plaines*, appears in France and in Quebec.¹⁸ At this moment the split between the symbolic and the semiotic in writing is temporarily transformed into the split between the two languages: ‘la division ne s’évanouit pas pour autant; elle ne fait que se déplacer: au lieu de passer entre théorie et fiction, elle passe désormais entre anglais et français’ (*AC*, p. 28). The essay concludes on a positive note: ‘J’assume mon statut de romancière impure, oui...’ (*AC*, p. 29), suggesting the closure and repair that are enabled by incorporating both languages in the production of poetic, literary prose. The fact that Huston continues to write and publish in both languages, often writing simultaneously in both languages before translating her bilingual novels into distinct English and French versions, implies a successful resolution of the traumatic split.

In her reading of Huston’s autobiographical non-fiction, Kinginger suggests that the embrace of English for writing purposes may be attributed to Huston’s coming of age and detachment from the ‘emotional residue of childhood’.¹⁹ Although Kinginger does not associate this transformation with Huston’s own motherhood or analyze it any further, she makes an important observation that this development is related to Huston’s ability to reach back to her own childhood and to be healed by that move. In the last section of the article, I would like to suggest that Huston’s becoming a translingual mother is a significant factor in her bilingualism as an author.

Language as maternal space

Aneta Pavlenko’s research demonstrates that in some cases adults can achieve as high levels of linguistic embodiment in a foreign language as in their mother tongue. The conditions for such a development are as follows: they acquire the second language in a natural as opposed to a classroom environment, enjoy a relatively high social status in the country where that language is spoken, and live emotionally intense experiences in that language.²⁰ According to this framework, Huston’s use of French qualifies as embodied on every count due to the fact that she learnt it in a natural environment in France (firstly, as a student at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and, later, as a published author), and can be said to

18. Nancy Huston, *Plainsong* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1993); Nancy Huston, *Cantique des plaines* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1993).

19. Kinginger, ‘Bilingualism and Emotion’, p. 173

20. Pavlenko, *Emotions and Multilingualism*, p.185–6.

enjoy high social status in this speaking environment. Her autobiographical non-fiction furthermore suggests that she has experienced a number of sexual and amorous encounters in French, including her relationship and marriage to Todorov, and the birth of her children (arguably one of the strongest emotional experiences there is).

In the same vein of linguistic embodiment, Kristeva argues that the link between linguistic practices, including creative linguistic practices, may be grounded in early pre-linguistic relationships between the subject and their mother. For her, the use of poetic language is fundamentally attached to the lasting effects of the subjects' primary maternal intimacy. However, she believes that the maternal linguistic capacity remains in the pre-symbolic and cannot be transported into the realm of social linguistic communication. In Stone's reading of the *chora*, the subject's semiotic engagement with language transcends the confines of the maternal body and functions as a space of social as well as emotional significance. Stone argues that since the semiotic dimension of language prolongs the maternal *chora*, the semiotic can only ever exist under and within the symbolic form. Furthermore, Stone claims that: 'Rather than repressing the maternal body, language can be the medium within which the maternal space continues to connect multiple individuals.'²¹ That is to say, a social linguistic relationship with any other individual later in life can resurrect the subject's early semiotic bond with their mother. The memory of that relationship can inspire and motivate other relationships, reminiscent of the original one and thus extend it.

In light of these theoretical considerations on linguistic embodiment, Huston's linguistic trajectory as documented in her creative non-fiction presents an interesting case of one embodied linguistic relationship reviving another one through the linguistic maternal space. In *Lettres parisiennes*, Huston describes an episode in which she takes her mother to a *hammam* during the mother's short visit to Paris:

'La mère' que j'ai rejetée avec mon pays et ma langue maternels est en fait un mirage. [...] Nous avons passé trois heures à nous masser et à nous savonner l'une l'autre, les corps (nus ensemble pour la première fois depuis vingt-cinq ans) abandonnés voluptueusement à la vapeur. Et j'ai vu que l'intensité sensuelle que j'ai recherchée en Europe, je l'ai héritée, tout bêtement, de ma propre mère. (*LP*, p. 193)

This scene recreates the original mother-daughter intimacy contained in images of the two bodies of a mother and child confined in a closed, dark, warm and comfortable space. The nudity, touching, washing, darkness, warmth and humidity testify to a strong and embodied connection between the two women and evoke the semiotic *chora*, characterized by psychophysical drives, amorphous movement and

21. Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity*, p. 80.

pre-linguistic togetherness. The episode occurs when Huston's daughter is still around the age of two and well before her second child is born. Huston's suggestion that she might have chosen France and French as her country and language of voluntary exile due to their sensuality, is indicative of the resurfacing of Huston's previously repressed semiotic bond with her own mother facilitated by the birth of her daughter and her increasingly embodied use of French not only in mothering but also in writing. If language is the medium through which the maternal body can connect numerous individuals, then it can be argued that the use of French with Huston's daughter reconnected her with her own mother's body, and vice versa. Although up to this point Huston had claimed that French was not 'de l'ordre de l'intime' (*AC*, p. 25) but the language of non-semiotic, cerebral, artistic self-expression, the above episode, along with the French-speaking relationship she held with her then-husband, suggest that French indeed became 'de l'ordre de l'intime', that is to say, as embodied, semiotic and maternal as her native language.

Huston's second and last child was born shortly before the publication of *Trois fois septembre*, her third novel written in French before switching to English in her fourth novel, *Plainsong*, arguably completing the cycle of linguistic embodiment in French. Thus, Huston's claim in 1984 that 'les livres, les enfants, je ne peux les faire que dans une langue non maternelle' (*LP*, p. 139) no longer holds in 1989. Since Huston's lost semiotic bond with her mother is figured in English, the return of the repressed maternal body and the semiotic also brings back her lost attachment to the mother tongue, English, as Huston reminisces:

Je laisse la langue anglaise – longtemps exclue, condamnée, obscène [...] renaître et revendiquer ses droits dans mon cerveau, j'entends de nouveau son chant, sa poésie, sa densité particulière, je lui donne le droit de passer du cerveau dans mon cœur et dans mes tripes, mon sexe, d'y circuler à nouveau, de les irriguer de nouveau. (*DR*, p. 194)

The involvement with English here is represented as an intensely physical and eroticized experience, figured through body parts that sensually reconnect with the semiotic aspects of English and that are all situated in the outskirts of meaning but participate in its production, namely, its auditory and rhythmic qualities. Huston's writing debut in the mother tongue signifies the regaining of the lost attachment to the maternal, and a full embrace of the semiotic capacity of representation. The issue of English as the language of writing apparently resolved, the question of the language of mothering remains.

Mothering in the stepmother tongue: concluding remarks

There is no indication in Huston's texts about her switching to English for mothering purposes and I am drawn to conclude that she does not make that step. This article posits several explanations as to why. Firstly, French is the language in which Huston speaks to her husband at the time of writing the essays here analysed.

It is the language of the children's socialization and education but also the language spoken in the family home. Secondly, keeping French as the language of mothering having integrated English into her writing life might be indicative of Huston's need to keep these emotional attachments in the safekeeping of the other language, which is not the language of the mother. Thirdly and most importantly, I have demonstrated that for Huston, French becomes at least as embodied and loaded with the maternal as English and is therefore as functional as her native language for the purposes of mothering.

The fact of French being the mother tongue of Huston's children effectively results in this language, in turn, metaphorically mothering the author herself, enabling her to become a powerful, nurturing mother. In line with Stone's interpretation of the semiotic *chora*, the French language together with its cultural context in which Huston lives, recreates the conditions of the *chora ex utero*. According to Stone, the *chora* serves as a safe and nurturing locus for the child to develop and grow, but since the baby's birth is also the beginning of the mother's new life as a mother, it equally provides room for the mother to grow into her new identity. The *chora*, therefore, allows for the common space of mutual growth and nurture as well as the individuality and alterity of both the mother and child.

In the essay *Nord perdu*, Huston explains that languages are not merely languages, that they are also world views informed by historical, cultural, literary, political and other backgrounds: 'les langues ne sont pas seulement des langues; ce sont aussi des *world views*, c'est-à-dire des façons de voir et de comprendre le monde' (*NP*, p. 51). People born into and educated in one language or another, like her children who were born into the French language and culture, ingest the mother tongue together with 'les berceuses, blagues, chuchotements, comptines, tables de multiplication, noms de départements, lectures de fond depuis les *Fables* de Fontaine jusqu'aux *Confessions* de Rousseau' (*NP*, p. 62). If, according to Stone, the semiotic can only exist under and within the symbolic form, the French context with its world view represents the symbolic form in which the semiotic that surrounds and ties Huston and her children together exists. Since Huston's children have a privileged access to French language and culture and are supported by it, they are in the position of nurturing their mother into an embodied speaker of French. In this way, the children semiotically connect with her for life and reunite her with her own maternal and creative substance. Therefore, although Huston's maternal linguistic practice originates in a traumatic early experience, her embodied linguistic relationship with her children in the language of the host country performs a restorative and healing function, enabling a translingual practice of mothering as well as writing.