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Le “vrai” moi: Nancy Huston’s concern for authenticity

Abstract

Nancy Huston, voluntarily exiled in France from her native Anglophone Canada, is constantly troubled by others’ perception of her displaced identity and her own presentation of her “real” identity. This article examines the way in which Huston situates herself within French culture and the French literary canon through the analysis of two of her non-fiction works, *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l’exil* (1986, in collaboration with Leïla Sebbar) and *Nord perdu* (1999). The analysis of the importance of childhood as key to Huston’s adult identity and the significance of the French language to her writing project and identity as a writer, is followed by the discussion of her right to claim belonging within the different aspects of her identity as French, Canadian, writer, and exile. The article concludes with a discussion of Huston’s notion of identity as constructed rather than inherent, the notion which lies at the root of her anxiety over the tension between imitation, and the authentic performance of identity.

Keywords

Nancy Huston, *Lettres parisiennes*, *Nord perdu*, francophone, identity, nomadism, authenticity.

Choisir à l’âge adulte, de son propre chef, de façon individuelle pour ne pas dire capricieuse, de quitter son pays et de conduire le reste de son existence dans une culture et une langue jusque-là étrangères, c’est accepter de s’installer à tout jamais dans *l’imitation, le faire-semblant, le théâtre*.

Nancy Huston, *Nord perdu*

The problematics of identity is a persistent concern in Nancy Huston's corpus, and one to which she has unceasingly returned over nearly three decades of fictional and non-fictional writing since the publication of her first book in 1980. Her novels, populated with exiled and displaced protagonists struggling to reconcile the different roles they play in their daily lives, enact the identarian concerns that Huston explicitly discusses in her non-fictional works. The clear link between the themes of Huston's non-fictional texts (which embrace various genres, including essays, a diary, published correspondence and reflective writing) and those of her novels derives from the autobiographical drive behind her writing.

Inspired by her own migration from North America to France, Canadian-born Huston explores the concerns associated with the experience of uprooting oneself from the birth country and constructing a new life in an adopted country and language. Arriving in Paris in 1973, after "une enfance instable, marquée par des déménagements fréquents",¹ Huston chose to settle in France, where she has now spent the greater part of her life and where she still lives today. Through her texts, she investigates the process of her insertion into the adopted culture, questioning the extent to which she is perceived as French by others, whether she herself feels French, how her cultural and linguistic identity is manifested in her writing, and how this impacts on her position within the French literary canon. Such questions lead to the constant revision throughout her corpus of the relations between the different aspects of her identity; as French, as Canadian, as a woman writer, and as an exile.² At the centre of this persistent re-evaluation of her subjectivity lies a deep-seated concern both for feeling authentically herself, and for being perceived by others as an authentic subject. In Huston's use of the notion, "authenticity" would seem to refer to an exact coincidence, firstly, between an absolute, pre-linguistic self and the self which is expressed through language and, secondly, the coincidence between that self which is expressed through language and the self that is perceived by others. Despite its frequent use, Huston does not explicitly problematise the term "authentic", and whilst the authentic self, for Huston, appears to be the self-consciously constructed identity

that she shapes through language and writing, she also appears to maintain the notion of a "*vrai*" *moi* which is obscured by language, as will be discussed. The paradox of the co-existence of an inherent and absolute "true self" and a consciously constructed "true self" arises repeatedly in Huston's reflection on the various constituents of her identity.

This paper will explore Huston's concern with presenting herself as an authentic subject in her writing and her anxiety about being perceived as authentic by her readers, as well as considering the tensions underlying Huston's assertion of a willed, constructed identity. The study will be carried out through the analysis of two of Huston's non-fictional texts, *Lettres parisiennes* (1986) and *Nord perdu* (1999), works whose oral and apparently spontaneous tone masks a highly conscious construction and presentation of the self. Huston's heightened awareness of the image she presents is at the heart of an anxiety which she frames in terms of authenticity, an anxiety about identity that embodies the problematics of simultaneously belonging to two different cultures and their respective linguistic communities. Huston's displacement from her linguistic and cultural origins and positioning between two cultures places her in a position of critical and emotional distance from which she scrutinises and monitors the different roles she plays. I will also trace a shift in the discursive configuration of Huston's displaced identity, from the uncertainty and questioning of *Lettres parisiennes*, written after ten years of exile in Paris, to the more assertive, anchored voice of *Nord perdu*, written after nearly three decades of life as a bilingual, bicultural subject. Finally, conclusions about the evolution of Huston's exilic identity will be informed by the concept of "nomadic consciousness" that Rosi Braidotti has explored in her research into the nomadic subject.³

Jointly published in 1986 by Nancy Huston and French-Algerian Leïla Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* is a collection of thirty letters exchanged between the two writers during a period spanning just under two years, from May 1983 to January 1985. At the time of writing, both are established writers living in Paris, and have known each other, and worked collaboratively on writing projects, for approximately ten years. They write to each other

explicitly on the topic of exile, in a dialogic quest to explore their exilic condition in a text that Huston has referred to retrospectively as “une prise de conscience de l’exil”.⁴ Mindful of the fact that the letters will be published at some point in the future, the two women turn to writing as a means of resolving the uncertainty and ambiguity characteristic of the exiled subject.⁵ The intention at the time of writing to make the letters public belies the apparent spontaneity of the epistolary exchange and suggests that the presentation of exiled identity in *Lettres parisiennes* is more contrived than it at first appears. The contrived/spontaneous binary underlying this text anticipates the tension between constructed, and primordial identities which underpins Huston’s concern for authenticity.

Nord perdu, published in 1999, is a non-fictional reflection on Huston’s position as a non-native Francophone Canadian woman writer settled in Paris for over 25 years. Divided into 14 chapters with titles such as “Orientation”, “Désorientation”, “Le masque...”, “...et la plume”, “Le faux bilinguisme” and “La détresse de l’étranger”, this work revisits and reconsiders the themes with which Huston was preoccupied in *Lettres parisiennes* in 1986. The title of this small volume, *Nord perdu*, prefigures the disorientation and uncertainty of the self that provide the drive behind Huston’s writing project. Derived from the expression “*perdre le nord*”, which Huston spends the first pages explaining and which holds a special significance for her, the title also communicates the location of identity within a zone of displacement and unfamiliarity. The expression “losing north”⁶ also contains a certain resonance for her as a Canadian, with Canada commonly referred to as “the Great North”, describing a loss of homeland which is closely linked to feelings of culpability and betrayal at having left, and therefore lost, her native Canada: “Mon pays c’était le Nord, le Grand Nord... Je l’ai trahi, et je l’ai perdu” (*NP*, p. 15). Following her adoption of a French identity, and her distantiating from the Canadian, she is dogged by the sense of not having, or of having lost, a legitimate claim to belonging in either.

As established in the introduction, Huston’s concern for authenticity encompasses both a preoccupation with *feeling*

authentically herself as well as *being perceived by others as authentic*. Huston repeatedly defines her identity in her texts in order to present herself as she would have others see her as well as to disrupt imposed identifications which she feels do not coincide with her identity and which have a disruptive effect on her construction of identity. Despite participating in a long tradition of foreign writers and artists settling in the cultural and literary hub that Paris represents, Huston resents being likened to the cliché of the American tourist in Paris. She feels this comparison to be the projection of an identity onto her by others, an imposition which signals the loss of control over the depiction and creation of her own identity. Her compulsion to constantly clarify the parameters of her identity in her writing appears to stem from a fear of misidentification, and in particular, of being mistaken for an American tourist: "j'aurais peur de ressembler à une 'Américaine à Paris'" (*LP*, p. 11). Her assertion, "je ne suis *pas* francophile" (*LP*, p. 12), seems somewhat incompatible with references she makes to arriving in Paris to fulfil the ambition to become a writer, and suggests that she does indeed have more in common with American aficionados of French culture than she would perhaps like to believe.

Whilst Huston clearly stakes out her claim to a French identity, ("[j]e suis française parce que je partage complètement l'existence des Français" (*NP*, p. 95)), she concomitantly qualifies that claim by referring, in both *Lettres parisiennes* and *Nord perdu*, to an "authentic" Frenchness, thus making the distinction between an *authentic* and an *acquired* Frenchness. Huston cautiously tempers her claim to a French identity, by differentiating between degrees of *francité*:

je n'ai aucune envie de me sentir, moi, française authentique, de faire semblant d'être née dans ce pays, de revendiquer comme mien son héritage. Je n'aspire pas, en d'autres termes, à être vraiment *naturalisée*. Ce qui m'importe et m'intéresse, c'est le culturel et non le naturel. (*LP*, p. 14)

In this telling statement Huston distinguishes carefully between the French identity to which she lays claim, and an "authentically"

French identity to which she declares she does not aspire. Here, Huston employs the term “authentic” to describe those born in France who are native speakers of French, and in doing so clearly implies a hierarchisation of Frenchness, defining an acquired French identity in opposition to a genuine (‘authentic’) French identity, thus relegating the former to the inauthentic. Aspiring to the notion of an “authentic” French identity would be for Huston, as she states quite clearly, “pretending”. Similarly maintaining that she does not lay claim to a French heritage, she prefers to limit her stake to the acquired (the cultural), rather than the historical. Her conscious use of language, a point which I explore below in greater depth, is here in evidence in her italicised use of the term *naturalisée*, underscoring the innate/acquired binary of the natural and the cultural, in order to reject any claims on the former. In the context of French identity, Huston employs a notion of “authenticity” which refers to that which is innate, which is not to be confused with the “authenticity” of her claim to an “acquired” French identity: if Huston posits the “fake” in opposition to “authenticity” in terms of personal identity, it is not so for national identity where the “acquired” contraposes the “authentic”.

Others’ perception of her right to a French identity also seems to respect the innate/acquired binary, which distinguishes between the “natural” and the “cultural”. If the French public has denied Huston the status of a French woman, constantly reminding her of her foreignness, it has conversely effusively embraced her identification as a French writer and granted her privileged access to the French literary canon. To illustrate the limitations on her assumption of a French identity, in *Lettres parisiennes* Huston recounts the anecdote of a visit to a shop in Paris, when she absent-mindedly hands over the incorrect sum of money for a purchase, prompting the French customer behind her to translate the amount required into English. After ten years in the French capital, she experiences such incidents as unsettling, and a reminder of the obstacles which prevent her from fully assuming a French identity. Huston’s sensitivity to French resistance to her adoption of Paris as “home” is demonstrated when she states “Parfois, l’on me demande si je ne souhaiterais

pas un jour 'rentrer chez moi', et quand je réponds que je n'ai plus d'autre chez moi que Paris, on est éberlué" (*LP*, p. 22).

If Huston demarcates a space for herself within French society and culture, she (once again refuting the charge of being a Francophile) claims not do so out of blind admiration or servility to France and French culture. She explains her presence in Paris as an arbitrary choice, largely due to the availability of French tuition at high school in Boston, which then lead to French studies at university. She extends the arbitrariness of adopting France as her new home, and consequently acquiring a French identity, to encompass the assimilation of national identities in general, stating with reference to being French in *Nord perdu*: "Mais j'ai sur les souchistes ce petit avantage: je sais que 'être français' est une identité parmi d'autres, la résultante de mille hasards géographiques et historiques" (*NP*, p. 95). The dual nature of Huston's relationship to France affords her both the insider's understanding of, and the outsider's critical distance from French culture, permitting her to adopt an irreverent tone with regard to the veneration of French language and culture. Her critical irony can also be viewed as a reaction to the limitations the French place in the way of her claiming a French identity for her own. The fact that she claims not to have aspirations to attain an "authentic" French identity may be seen as a pragmatic acceptance that she will never be permitted to access the class of French identity reserved for *les souchistes*.

One of the (I would argue two) principal distinguishing features that Huston presents as differentiating an "acquired" Frenchness from a "real" or "authentic" Frenchness, is having had a French childhood. On repeated occasions, Huston asserts that a French childhood is the key to an authentic French identity.⁷ If the formation of the self in childhood is fundamental to the adult identity (or in Huston's words, "notre 'vrai' moi est bien celui, rabougri et ridicule, de l'enfance" (*LP*, p. 60)), her Canadian childhood, then, becomes the primordial and eternal link to the Canadian part of her identity. This enduring tie to Canada is characterised as the indelible mark of childhood that sustains her Canadian identity and denies her access to becoming "authentically French". In *Nord perdu* she asks, "En quoi suis-je

encore l'enfant de mon pays?" and concludes, "*En tout*: pour la simple raison que j'y ai passé mon enfance" (*NP*, p. 16).

Her own immediate family (made up of her Bulgarian-born husband, her two French-born children, and herself) provides evidence of the differing permutations of French identity. She remarks with irony that even though she has spent longer in France than her children, it is they who are considered to be "more French", concluding, "Dans la famille, tout le monde est français mais, c'est comme l'égalité, il y en a qui sont plus français que d'autres" (*NP*, p. 16). If childhood is the key that grants access to what Huston refers to as an authentic French identity, this identification remains definitively barred to her. She does however acknowledge the limitations of the link between a French childhood and a recognised, "authentic" French identity when she criticises, in an aside, the difficulty with which some French citizens live their Frenchness depending on their skin tone and physical appearance: "(Même *avec* une enfance française, il y en a, et pas un petit nombre, qui ont du mal à se sentir français!)" (*NP*, p. 17). Once again illustrating her point with the example of her own family, she compares her children's relatively unproblematic assumption of their French identity, "grâce au taux relativement bas de mélanine dans leur pigmentation" (*NP*, p. 16), with that of the hypothetical offspring of Togolese and Cambodian parents, thereby reinforcing the hierarchisation of Frenchness, and the fact that in France, some are considered more French than others.

If, for Huston, the first distinguishing feature of an authentic French identity is having had a French childhood, the second is language. The key difference between these two determining features is the unique, random nature of birth and childhood, as opposed to the volitional character of the possibility of acquiring languages in addition to the mother tongue, a difference which echoes the innate/acquired binary that underpins the literary configuration of Huston's identity. Her extremely conscious use of language demonstrates the foreigner's awareness of the sonorities and associations of words in French, and she refers to her "écoute pathologique de cette langue, l'écoute d'une étrangère, attentive plus qu'un natif aux frottements et aux coïncidences sonores" (*NP*, pp. 44-45), and to her "extrême

sensibilité pour ne pas dire sensiblerie linguistique" (*NP*, p. 48). Having written her Master's dissertation under the supervision of Roland Barthes, she has recognised the possibility that her consciousness of language and its play of meanings reflects more than merely the heightened awareness of the foreigner, but is principally due to her education.⁸ Nonetheless, it is her status as a foreigner which above all defines the nature of her relationship to French: she preserves the liberty of her status as an outsider by defamiliarising language whilst demonstrating her proficiency and thus her right to claim membership within the French language and the French literary canon.

Huston's relation to French is usefully illuminated by Claire Kramersch's theory of the idealisation of the native speaker, and the privilege of the non-native speaker. Kramersch raises the problem of the classification of the native speaker, arguing that "it is not enough to have intuitions about grammaticality and linguistic acceptability and to communicate fluently and with full competence; one must also be recognized as a native speaker by the relevant speech community".⁹ Thus, according to Kramersch, it takes more than mere linguistic ability to be accepted as a native speaker into a certain linguistic community in that the non-native speaker must also rely on the willingness of the community to accept him/her therein. Kramersch also argues that the non-native speaker enjoys a certain freedom of expression as a result of their multilingualism that is not available to the monolingual speaker. Her assertion that "the pleasure of annexing a foreign language does not primarily consist in identifying with flesh-and-blood native-speaking individuals[, i]t derives rather from the unique personal experience of incarnating oneself in another"¹⁰ is one that resonates particularly strongly with Huston's very consciously constructed identity. Huston qualifies her bilingual identity in a manner similar to her French identity, once again making the distinction between the "authentic" and the "inauthentic", stating: "Il y a bilingues et bilingues. Les vrais et les faux" (*NP*, p. 53). The real bilinguals she qualifies as those who, for "legitimate" reasons ("pour des raisons géographiques, historiques, politiques, voire biographiques" (*NP*, p. 53)) have learned to master two languages from childhood. The "false bilinguals", a less clearly defined

designation which refers to those who have acquired a second language after adolescence, is the group in which she locates herself.

Underlying the assertion of her identity in the present is a fear of being discovered, of having her “real” self found out, and of being labelled a fake. She describes a recurring nightmare in which she loses her French language, where “[m]on ‘vrai moi’ transparait de plus en plus à travers le masque du ‘moi’ français” (*LP*, p. 194). If language is the means by which the exile can assert a claim of belonging on their adopted culture, it can also be that which betrays them, and reveals them as a foreigner and exile. This dream, recounted in *Lettres parisiennes*, prefigures the notion of adopted language as mask which is again described in *Nord perdu* when Huston relates the effect on her listeners when she speaks French: “On entraperçoit le *vrai vous* que recouvrait le masque” (*NP*, p. 33). The concurrent notions, in Huston’s discourse of identity, of a ‘*vrai moi*’ that is founded in childhood and misconstrued by language, and an authentic self that is self-consciously and linguistically constructed, present an apparent inconsistency that somewhat confounds her notion of the authenticity of her discursively-produced identity.

Writing in French, as opposed to speaking in French, can be seen as a gesture which reinforces the opacity of the mask. Huston admits a torturous sense of self-consciousness when speaking French and a preference for writing, where she can go back over her words, correct herself and revise, and where she feels her accent cannot be heard and give her away so easily. Rather than anchoring Huston firmly in two cultures, proficiency in two languages produces a sense of alienation from each, culminating in a

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. (*LP*, p. 77)

She describes conducting her daily existence in French as altering her relationship to her native English, and her acquisition of French as only a partial appropriation of the language. Huston may regard Paris as her new home yet she is never entirely at home in her acquired language. In *Lettres parisiennes* she describes French as an “artifice”, thus conveying the sense in which French is a kind of prosthesis – a tool which Huston uses but which she feels does not serve to express an identity that exactly coincides with her own. The “translation” of the Anglophone into the Francophone self posits language as a performative tool that contributes to the construction of Huston’s present identity. Her awareness of language has the effect, not only of reinforcing her status as an outsider to French, but also stages her use of French as performance and raises once again the preoccupation with authenticity.

In *Lettres parisiennes* Huston describes the performative function of the French language: “ma fixation sur la langue française a (entre autres) pour résultat que, la plupart du temps, j’ai l’impression de vivre entre guillemets” (*LP*, p. 168). The trope of living in inverted commas is one that she repeats frequently, with regard both to speaking French, and to living in France, and she refers to “le fait que j’aie l’impression non seulement de parler mais de *vivre* entre guillemets” (*LP*, pp. 169-170). Once again Huston’s awareness of the acquired nature of French culture and language for her positions French as a device through which she stages the very conscious presentation of her identity. She goes on to illustrate her awareness of conducting her life in inverted commas with several examples, amongst which, “je ne fais pas vraiment une pâte feuilletée, je ‘fais une pâte feuilletée’” (*LP*, p. 171). The extent of her performance is thus not limited to her use of French, but also to the adaptation to new (i.e., French) activities, and different ways of going about everyday life in her adopted culture.

French as “performance” slips into “imitation” for Huston as she describes living in another country, language and culture as “*l’imitation, le faire-semblant, le théâtre*” (*NP*, p. 30), and she refers to living in exile as “le théâtre de l’exil” (*NP*, p. 31). In *Nord perdu*, she explains the effort she makes to imitate the language of those

around her in order to be accepted, “J’essaie de vous faire plaisir, vous comprenez...j’essaie de parler *comme* vous afin de pouvoir parler *avec* vous, je fais de mon mieux” (NP, p. 35), and in doing so reveals her ideal reader to be French, and possibly monolingual. The interlocutor of *Nord perdu*, a work which has a strong resonance of orality, is most often a monolingual French reader but can also at times be Canadian, or collectively other exiles and expatriates living in France. The shifting interpellation of the reader demonstrates the merging of imitation and adaptation: as performance slips into imitation, so imitation slips into adaptation as the foreigner imitates the language and behaviour of the new society in order to adapt to that society. Huston problematises the distinction between imitation and adaptation stating both that “L’étranger, donc, imite” (NP, p. 33), and that “L’étranger, disions-nous, est *celui qui s’adapte*” (NP, p. 43).

Huston feels her own adaptability as a foreigner to be heightened by her gender, as she makes the claim that women are more adaptable than men: “Les femmes sont des comédiennes-nées. Elles ont l’habitude de s’adapter; cela fait partie de leur identité de femme” (NP, p. 33). She gives the example of the change of family name upon marriage as evidence of the symbolic identity shifts that women have been accustomed, and expected, to undergo. She attributes women’s flexible conception of their identity to their awareness of the relativity of the categories by which identity is commonly defined, suggesting that the lack of investment in the status quo is therefore that which makes women’s configurations of their identities more flexible and prone to transformation. Nevertheless, this privileged versatility which allows women, and in particular Huston, to perform different roles also risks obscuring the borders between the women’s public and private roles. Huston is particularly concerned with what she perceives as the constant threat of the overshadowing of her public role as a writer by the domestic role she plays in the setting of the home and family. In *Lettres parisiennes* she compares her husband’s (also a prominent writer) ease at moving between his public and private roles with her own fear of being engulfed by the female domestic stereotype:

il ne ressent pas la menace de perte d'identité s'il doit délaissier la plume pendant une semaine ou même un mois, alors que plane au-dessus de nos têtes le spectre de la Femme-domestique-et-ménagère, toujours prête à nous happer. (*LP*, p. 102)

Thus her role as a writer, intricately linked to her acquisition of French and her insertion into French culture, is an identity which must be constantly worked at and maintained in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the domestic role.

Huston's reflection on the association of the performative with the inauthentic, and the primordial with the genuine, suggests that it is the conscious performance of diverse roles which gives rise to the anxiety that she is merely enacting a willed identity, as opposed to living out a primordial and thus authentic identity. Huston often characterises the roles she performs with a kind of fakeness: "je suis une fausse Française, une fausse Canadienne, une fausse écrivaine, une fausse professeur d'anglais" (*LP*, p. 101). This professed lack of authenticity could well be ascribed to a perceived disparity in the many diverse aspects of her identity and the fragmentation of her life before and after exile, but it seems more accurately attributable to the very conscious construction of her present identity, and the voluntarily-made choice to assume the roles of exile and writer in an adopted homeland.

The presentation of the self that can be witnessed in Huston's writing is commensurate with the nomadic construction of identity that Rosi Braidotti describes in her figuration of a nomadic consciousness.¹¹ I wish to stress here the correspondence between the wilful nature of the nomadic subject's self-conscious construction of identity and Huston's conception of her own identity as a willed construct, as expressed in her statement "le moi, ça ne se trouve pas, ça se fabrique".¹² The nomadic style is defined by transitions and passages, and the nomad (as opposed to the exile or the migrant) stands not for the loss, or the nostalgia of home, but rather for the relinquishing of the desire for fixity:

This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity. The nomadic subject, however, is not altogether devoid of unity; his/her mode is one of definite, seasonal patterns of movement through rather fixed roots. It is a cohesion engendered by repetitions, cyclical moves, rhythmical displacement.¹³

The “theoretical figuration for contemporary subjectivity” that Braidotti advocates through the notion of nomadism posits a critical position towards hegemonic, socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. Katharine Harrington makes the important point that it is not only lifestyle that defines the nomadic subject, but also the mindset.¹⁴ Indeed for Braidotti, the mindset takes precedence over physical displacement, as “[i]t is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling”.¹⁵ The transitional nomadic subject, located between fixed positions and permanent configurations of identity, is particularly well-placed to disassociate him/herself from fixed patterns of thought. Braidotti’s configuration of nomadism is, then, a creative sort of identity construction that focuses on the stages of transit between points along a trajectory, more concerned with embodying the in-between than with settling for a static, given identity: “Nomadic shifts designate therefore a creative sort of becoming; a performative metaphor”.¹⁶

The nomadic position is therefore creative, performative and willed. It is a highly conscious positioning of one’s identity in an in-between space, in the case of Huston, between the birth and the adopted country, between languages, and between cultural and linguistic identities. Nomadic consciousness is an identity formed by mobility and transition, where the nomad creates identifications that situate and define their subjectivity without seeking out the limits of a singular, fixed national identity. Braidotti emphasises the active subjectivity of nomadism, in opposition to the passivity of the marginalised exile, and the nomad’s immunity to the illusions of permanence and fixity: “Nomadism, therefore, is not fluidity without borders but rather an acute awareness of the non-fixity of boundaries”.¹⁷ John

Durham Peters differentiates the nomadic from the exiled identity by making the distinction that “globally speaking, exile goes together with notions of primordial identity and nomadism with constructed identity”.¹⁸ He describes nomadic identity as a doctrine of social construction where the subject sees self, home and homeland as works that are collectively authored. Accordingly, the nomadic construction of identity liberates thinking from dogmatism and is, ultimately, the desire for the kind of radical liberty that Huston alludes to when she poses the question, “en m’installant dans une culture étrangère, qu’ai-je fait d’autre que de me choisir libre et autonome?” (*NP*, p. 68).

That nomadism dispenses with the determining function of the originary home leaves the way open for the construction of the self in the present which corresponds to Huston’s plea, “*j’ai besoin d’histoire*” (*LP*, p. 90), implying both “I need history” and “I need *a* history”. Her desire to reconstruct a story, and a history for herself, propels her autobiographical writing project and triggers the anxiety about the authenticity of the willed, discursively created identity which is at the root of the configuration of her nomadic identity. In stating “[j]e ne *subis* pas l’écart, je le *cherche*” (*LP*, p. 210), Huston defines her identity in terms of what she feels she is not – she does not feel authentically French, or Canadian, or a writer, or an exile – as each aspect of her identity infringes and encroaches upon the other, preventing her from discretely inhabiting each one. Huston instead defines herself within a fluid, in-between space; between countries, between languages, and between her public and private roles. Difference, she declares, “deviendra votre trait le plus saillant, *la qualité qui, entre toutes, vous définit et vous décrit*” (*NP*, p. 34). By seeking out “la mise en scène, la mise entre guillemets” (*LP*, p. 210), she works to disrupt the association between the conscious construction and performance of identity and a lack of authentic subjectivity. Huston’s concern for authenticity, a concern both with feeling authentically herself, as well as being perceived by others as authentic, is resolved through the nomadic staging of her identity as a work in progress rather than a fixed, stable entity.

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Notes

¹ Argand, 2001, p. 3.

² In his analysis of the fragmented identities of many of Huston's protagonists, David J. Bond posits the recurrent *dédoublément* of identity as a reflection of the fragmentation of Huston's own identity. His conclusion that she eventually defines subjectivity within such fragmentation is one that illuminates the present analysis of the question of authenticity in Huston's discursive representation of her identity (Bond, 2000, pp. 53-70).

³ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 1994.

⁴ Huston, 2004, p. 23.

⁵ The change to the sub-title in the 1999 *J'ai lu* edition of *Lettres parisiennes*, from *Autopsie de l'exil* of the original 1986 Barrault edition to *Histoires d'exil*, suggests the attainment of a certain level of resolution of the exilic condition in the shift from the investigative tone of "autopsy" to the more assured, narrative tone of "stories". It is the 1999 edition that I will be referring to throughout.

⁶ *Losing North* is the title of Huston's own 2002 English translation of *Nord perdu*.

⁷ Likewise, in *Nord perdu*, Huston also vouches for the significance of *une enfance d'ailleurs* to the formation of the exiled identity, a theme explored at length in her 1993 text. Her literary collaboration with Leïla Sebbar continued with the joint publication of *Une enfance d'ailleurs: 17 écrivains racontent* (1993), containing chapters on 17 Francophone writers living in France who were born elsewhere, such as Daniel Maximin, Eduardo Manet and Henri Lopès, amongst others. The willed nature of her exiled identity is another problematic aspect for Huston, in terms of the authenticity of her status as exile, and can be seen to be a key motivation behind the correspondence of *Lettres parisiennes*:

j'envie aussi les "vrais" exilés, ceux qui disent aimer passionnément leur pays d'origine, sans pouvoir pour des raisons politiques ou économiques y vivre; dans ces moments, mon exil à moi me semble superficiel, capricieux, individualiste..., mais il n'en est pas moins réel, et de plus en plus réel à mesure que le temps passe. (*LP*, p. 22)

In making the distinction between herself and "real" exiles, Huston acknowledges the unspoken hierarchy of exiles that, in practice, largely

corresponds to a hierarchy of suffering. Huston, a self-designated voluntary, or self-imposed exile, emphasises that her exile in Paris is not only the result of her choice, but that her particular position of exile extends certain privileges to her, not the least of which is her status as an established French writer. Not only does she not share the same suffering or persecution of those who have been forced to leave their country of origin for political or economic reasons (to whom she refers as “real” exiles), but equally she does not share the longing for home typical of those who have left their country against their will. Despite insisting on her status as an exile, the question of authenticity arises yet again, as she feels her own exile to be somewhat capricious and she does not maintain the dream of homecoming due to the fact that Paris has become her new home.

⁸ The titles of her earliest published essays, such as *Jouer au papa et à l'amant* (1979), point to a longstanding fascination with puns and word associations, as well as the linguistic sensibility that inspired her Master's dissertation on taboo words and profanities, published as *Dire et interdire: éléments de jurologie* (1980).

⁹ Kramersch, 1997, p. 363.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

¹¹ See in particular the Introduction to Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, pp. 1-39.

¹² Huston, *Désirs et réalités*, 1995, p. 184.

¹³ Braidotti, 1994, p. 22.

¹⁴ Harrington, 2006, pp. 117-125.

¹⁵ Braidotti, 1994, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ Peters, 1999, p. 31.