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## **‘Generation and Transmission: Transnational Ageing in Contemporary Women’s Writing in French’**

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This paper examines transnational ageing in Nancy Huston’s *Lignes de faille*.<sup>1</sup> With the increasing feminisation of transnational mobility since the latter half of the twentieth century, many women in the twenty-first-century are growing old in a place, and often a language, other than the ones in which they were born and raised. This phenomenon is compounded by sociologists’ claim that ‘[l]ater life is primarily an experience of women’ to describe women’s higher rates of longevity, as compared to men’s, and the fact that women outnumber men in ageing populations around the world.<sup>2</sup> The impact of this emerging facet of women’s experience on questions of how the cultural otherness associated with migration, and the subjective otherness associated with old age intersect with each other, and how they impact on configurations of femininity, demand critical attention.

The works of women writers whose own experience of migration, cultural and linguistic shift, and ‘ageing abroad’ offer a particular lens through which to examine the negotiation of femininity in late life and as a cultural Other. Whether reflecting directly on their own experience, or inflecting their fictional creations with insights drawn from their transcultural imaginary, transnational women writers offer particular insights into the different modes of ‘settling’ into the kinds of multidirectional belonging that are driven by the various ties that are formed along a woman’s trajectory; ties that are public and personal, and in particular familial, as women undeniably remain largely responsible in the twenty-first century for forging, cultivating and maintaining family relationships. I use the term ‘settling’ advisedly here, but also deliberately, to

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Huston, *Lignes de faille* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Sara Arber and Jay Ginn, *Gender and Later Life: A Sociological Analysis of Resources and Constraints* (London: Sage Publications, 1991), p. vii.

propose the notion of the long-term accommodation in displacement as a kind of ‘settlement’ in a multidirectional mode of belonging.<sup>3</sup> Nancy Huston is one such writer to invite readers to consider how questions of mobility, belonging and transcultural identity intersect with late-life femininity. Drawing on a literary, philosophical and sociological theoretical framework, this paper asks: what models of ageing femininity are offered in Huston’s *Lignes de faille*? how do narrative form and style allow the author and reader to think about female ageing? and how is late-life femininity here inflected by what Brian Worsfold calls ‘cross-cultural and intercultural ageing’, to refer to ‘the experience of people born and raised in one culture and living out late life in another’.<sup>4</sup>

*Lignes de faille* is not, of course, Huston’s only work to reflect on ageing, and the Franco-Canadian author who has been living in Paris since 1973 has demonstrated a consistent interest in this new frontier of feminist thought since long before it became the fashionable topic that it is today, as a number of key contemporary women writers in French – such as Annie Ernaux, Hélène Cixous and Camille Laurens<sup>5</sup> – have picked up, with increasing impetus since the turn of the twenty-first century, the mantle passed on to them via the seminal twentieth-century works of Colette, Beauvoir and Duras.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Huston’s ‘ageing credentials’ can be traced back to her first novel, *Les Variations Goldberg*, published in 1981.<sup>7</sup> In this highly constructed novel, female characters react against being reduced to their bodies as they age: ‘ça me paraît terriblement injuste d’avoir moins d’estime pour quelqu’un simplement parce que du temps lui est passé sur son corps’ (*Variations*, p. 69). The character of Hélène laments both the pressure to remain attractive in the eyes of men and the equivalence of youth with beauty, and resists the social imperative to seek to physically belie chronological age: ‘Il m’assure que moi je suis toujours aussi belle, que moi je ne fais que rajeunir de jour en jour. Mais justement, je voudrais ne pas avoir à rajeunir. Je voudrais pouvoir vieillir, tranquillement, en me sentant aimée’ (*Variations*, p. 69,

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<sup>3</sup> Here I borrow from but also build on Michael Rothburg’s notion of ‘multidirectional memory’ as developed in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Brian J. Worsfold, *Acculturating Age: Approaches to Cultural Gerontology* (Lleida: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Lleida, 2011), p. xxxi.

<sup>5</sup> See Annie Ernaux *Une femme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), and *Mémoire de fille* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016); Hélène Cixous, texts published since 1999 and notably *Benjamin à Montaigne: il ne faut pas le dire* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), *Ciguë: vieilles femmes en fleurs* (Paris: Galilée, 2008) and *Ève s’évade: la ruine et la vie* (Paris: Galilée, 2009); and Camille Laurens, *Amour, roman* (Paris: P.O.L., 2003) and *Celle que vous croyez* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See, notably, Colette, *La Fin de Chéri* (Paris: Flammarion, 1926), *Le Képi* (1943), *L’Etoile vesper* (1946), *Le Fanal bleu* (1949); Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), *Tout compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: The New Press, 1999), *La Cérémonie des adieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981); and Marguerite Duras, *L’Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Huston, *Les Variations Goldberg: romance* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

original italics). Olga, on the other hand, rejoices in the freedoms her old age and illness permit her:

Je lui ai dit combien j'étais contente. Tu te rends compte? Je suis complètement libre. Je dois plus rien à personne. Je suis plus obligée d'être jolie, je me regarde même plus dans la glace. Je suis plus obligée de jouer à l'épouse, à la maman, à la grand-maman, je suis plus qu'une moribonde [...] Je peux dire des obscénités. Je peux injurier tout le monde, ils le mettront sur le compte de ma maladie. (*Variations*, pp. 119-20)

There is less an attempt in the propos of either of these two female characters to subvert existing templates of women's ageing by reclaiming the aged female face as beautiful à la Duras, or by asserting the gratifying role of late-life motherhood or the pleasures of grandmotherhood as does Ernaux, but rather a far more radical project to rethink ageing femininity beyond existing models, underscored by Olga's grammatical disruption in the form of the reiterated omission of 'ne' in the negative adverbial phrase.

Published when Huston was twenty-eight years old, the ageing concerns present in *Les Variations Goldberg* place Huston in the narrow category of writers who have turned their attention to ageing at an age considered by many to precede the onset of ageing itself and that is, furthermore, commonly considered 'young' for a writer. The vast majority of recent French-language 'texts of female ageing', whether focusing on their own, their mother's, or on a fictional character's ageing (by, for example, Ernaux, Cixous, Laurens, Benoîte Groult, Régine Detambel, or Noëlle Châtelet)<sup>8</sup> were written as their authors themselves experienced middle and old age, thus coinciding with the observation made by a number of feminist scholars, such as Toni Calasanti, Kathleen Slevin and Neal King, amongst others, that female ageing has only begun to enter feminist enquiry and activism as second-wave feminists, themselves, have begun to age.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to works mentioned in footnotes 3 and 4, see Régine Detambel, *Le Long séjour* (Paris: Julliard, 1991), *La Verrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), *Syndrome de Diogène: éloge des vieilles* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008), and *Noces de Chêne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008); Benoîte Groult, *Histoire d'une évasion* (Paris: Grasset, 1998), *La Touche étoile* (Paris: Grasset, 2006), and *Mon évasion* (Paris: Grasset, 2008); Noëlle Châtelet, *La Femme coquelicot* (Paris: Stock, 1997) and *Au pays des vermeilles* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Toni M. Calasanti, Kathleen F. Slevin and Neal King, 'Ageism and Feminism: From "Et Cetera" to Center', *NWSA Journal*, 18.1 (2006), 13-30. See also Barbara MacDonald, 'Outside the Sisterhood: Ageism in Women's Studies', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 25.1/2 (1997), 47-52. Sara Arber and Jay Ginn cite historical reasons for this in *Gender and Later Life*.

From novels, such as *Les Variations Goldberg*, *Instruments des ténèbres*, *Prodige*, *Dolce agonie* and *Lignes de faille*,<sup>10</sup> Huston's treatment of female senescence also extends to essays and reflective writing, including 'Dealing with What's Dealt', *Passions d'Annie Leclerc*, sections of *Nord perdu*, and, to a certain extent, *Professeurs de désespoir*,<sup>11</sup> illustrating Sylvia Henneberg's notion that one of the important strategies of ageing studies that will enable an understanding of what it means to age in our and other cultures is to look at literary texts that deal with ageing in less obvious ways.<sup>12</sup> Literary texts that deal with ageing may – and often do – reflect explicitly on the experience of growing old, frequently by an author in later life, whether in fiction or creative non-fiction, in turn often earning themselves labels such as 'texts of ageing', 'novels of senescence', 'late-life memoirs', etcetera. English-language writing provides many fruitful examples of such works amongst the recent flux of publications focusing on women's late-life experience such as, for example, Diana Athill's *Somewhere Towards the End* and Lynne Segal's *Out of Time*, or indeed by younger novelists, such as first-time author Emma Healey, whose *Elizabeth is Missing* received widespread attention and acclaim from both readers and critics.<sup>13</sup> This explicit approach to ageing is shared by two of the rare French-language women writers to have focused on the increasingly widespread experience of ageing abroad: Silvia Baron Supervielle and Abla Farhoud.

The poet, translator and creative writer, Silvia Baron Supervielle, now in her eighties, reflects in autobiographical, reflective prose on her interstitial positioning as an Argentine-born writer who has been living in Paris since 1961, and is one of the rare exceptions amongst the many writers from Latin America having passed through or settled in France to have written and published only in French.<sup>14</sup> In *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, Abla Farhoud's narrative of her protagonist Dounia's experience of growing old in Quebec, where she has migrated from her native Lebanon, contains trace elements of autobiography although the differences between the

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Huston, *Instruments des ténèbres* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1996); *Prodige: polyphonie* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1999); *Dolce agonie* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Huston, 'Dealing With What's Dealt', *Salmagundi*, 106/107 (1995), 257-69; *Passions d'Annie Leclerc* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2007); *Nord perdu: suivi de Douze France* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1999); *Professeurs de désespoir* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia B. Henneberg, 'Of Creative Crones and Poetry: Developing Age Studies through Literature', *NWSA Journal*, 18.1 (2006), 106-25.

<sup>13</sup> Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End* (New York: Granta Books, 2009); Lynne Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* (London: Verso, 2014); Emma Healey, *Elizabeth Is Missing* (London: Penguin, 2014), winner of the Costa First Novel Award in the UK.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Silvia Baron Supervielle, *La Ligne et l'ombre* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); *Le Pays de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 2002); *L'Alphabet du feu: petites études sur la langue* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007); and *Journal d'une saison sans mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

character of Dounia and her author, Farhoud, far outweigh the resemblances.<sup>15</sup> In the texts of these two authors, it is either the protagonist's or the author's experience of growing old abroad that is the focus of reflection. Yet texts may also reflect on ageing in less explicit ways: in novels, for example, that foreground older protagonists, albeit without the process or experiences of ageing constituting the central concern of the plot. In other words, by building the plots of popular, literary, detective, or any other category of narrative around central characters in advanced age, such that ageing provides neither the primary thematic focus nor the generic distinction. *Lignes de faille* might be said to fall into this latter category: whilst not a 'novel of senescence', it is one which is profoundly concerned with the passage of time, with the passage of the individual through the stages of life, with intergenerational transmission – of memory and of genealogy – and whose central character is an older woman.

The generic distinctions that we might observe in texts in which ageing is present are as telling as the critical language in which we frame our analysis, and many of the debates concerning age and ageing hinge around the ways in which we use and define key terms such as 'old', 'older', 'age', 'ageing', 'elderly', etc. So far in my discussion, I have used 'ageing', 'late life', 'old age', 'old', 'older', 'young' and 'younger' in ways that may strike different interlocutors as alternatively appropriate, euphemistic, or confrontational, but I hope not unreflective. Indeed, the choice of terminology in the framing of the analysis of ageing has the potential to politicise or to euphemise the debate. We might take as a starting point an articulation of ageing as a life-long process that begins at birth, rather than an experience set in motion on the eve of a woman's fortieth birthday, as many popular tomes in the French commercial press (and indeed, elsewhere) might suggest.<sup>16</sup> Feminist scholars Calasanti, Slevin and King advocate an interrogative approach to euphemistic norms, stating: 'Feminists exclude old people in their [...] theoretical approaches when they do study the old. They often write or say "older" rather than "old", to avoid the negativity of the latter' but '[w]e don't ask why it seems denigrating to label someone old'.<sup>17</sup> They thus identify a persistent failure to confront, head-on, the internalisation of the negative stereotyping of ageing

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<sup>15</sup> Abla Farhoud, *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (Montreal: l'Héxagone, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> David Elia, *Comment rester jeune après 40 ans: Version femmes* (Paris: J'ai lu, 1960); Josette Rousselet-Blanc and Marianne Buhler, *40 ans pour longtemps: Le livre anti-tabous des femmes* (Paris: Plon, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Calasanti, Slevin and King, 'Ageism and Feminism: From "Et Cetera" to Center', p. 15.

that is also noted by the literary scholar Joy Charnley with respect to female ageing when she declares: ‘not for nothing is the term “old woman” as insulting as it ever was.’<sup>18</sup>

Sociologists Sara Arber and Jay Ginn prefer to adopt the term ‘elderly’ in their work to reflect the use of those whom they are studying, explaining that ‘[a]mong elderly people, use of the word “old” does not refer to any particular calendrical age, but to a state of decrepitude and feebleness’, thus also identifying an internalisation of the negative stereotype of old age on the part of elderly people, and a reticence to identity as ‘old’.<sup>19</sup> In order to more accurately articulate the experiences of late life, we might distinguish between different stages of later life, in keeping with the recommendations of Arber and Ginn, who make the distinction between the ‘young elderly’ (under seventy-five) and the ‘old elderly’ (over seventy-five), much as sociologist Julia Twigg does when she differentiates between the ‘Third Age’ to refer to the fifties-seventies range, and the ‘Fourth Age’ to refer to the seventies and over.<sup>20</sup> If late life now lasts as long, if not longer than childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, sociologists argue that we need to similarly distinguish its different phases. In order to counteract the negative stereotyping of old age and ageing, and the ‘Othering’ produced and internalised therein, we might place these differentiated phases of late life along a continuum with the full scale of the life process, from birth to death. Such a conceptualisation of the continuity of life’s stages might have a ‘queering’ function of our understanding of age and ageing in its disruption of the dichotomisation of ‘young’ and ‘old’ in the manner suggested by Barbara Frey Waxman when she proposes that ‘If feminist theory seeks the sources of the concept of gender and the dichotomisation of the sexes, the same may be applied to conceptualise youth and old age as an undemarcated continuum.’<sup>21</sup> Just as queer thinking has permitted a more nuanced understanding of gender beyond the binary, in the realm of ageing studies queer thinking might allow us to get to grips with the gradual shifts and developments of ageing, and the full range of identifications formed between individuals along that continuum.

The complex shifts and relations formed along the ageing continuum are in evidence in *Lignes de faille*, which might be said to queer ageing in more ways than one. In fact, it doesn’t, at

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<sup>18</sup> Joy Charnley, ‘Introduction: Representations of Age in European Literatures’, *Forum for Modern Languages Studies*, 47. 2 (2011), Special Issue on Representations of Age in European Literatures, ed. by Joy Charnley, 121-125 (p. 122).

<sup>19</sup> Arber and Ginn, *Gender and Later Life*, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Twigg, ‘The Body, Gender, and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology’, *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18 (2004), 59-73.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Frey Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* (New York: Greenwood, 1990), p. 8.

first, seem to be about ageing at all, but rather childhood, narrated as it is by its four six-year-old protagonists, such that the novel is divided into four equal parts, the first beginning in a contemporary setting (in the United States in the twenty-first century) and gradually delving back into the past to a mid-century, war-ravaged Europe. For Oliver Davis, whose 2006 study of the senescent subject in non-fictional twentieth-century French writing, there are two approaches to looking at ageing in fiction: the first, an 'author-focused late style' approach, he dismisses as belonging to a bygone era of literary criticism.<sup>22</sup> The second, a concentration on the way in which fictional characters are represented, he claims, would reduce literary portrayals to either 'positive' or 'negative' representations of the elderly. But if fictional writing allows writers and readers to explore subjective, imaginative and aspirational modes of ageing that extend beyond the realm of lived experience and provide contrasting, sometimes contradictory, accounts to those provided by empirical or experiential approaches,<sup>23</sup> we might also add to these a narratological approach, to ask: how does narrative form and style allow for writing and thinking about ageing? In addition to a narratological approach, a gendered approach furthermore allows us to consider not only how gender inflects the experience of old age but also how old age impacts on gender or, as Bethany Ladimer puts it, to question the notion that the gender of a subject is identical to itself throughout life.<sup>24</sup> Just as 'gender' is not a synonym for 'women', 'ageing' does not mean 'old' and *Lignes de faille*'s narrative division and privileging of the child's narrative voice thus highlights the relativity of ageing as well as what Eena Job calls 'the lifelong construction of old age'.<sup>25</sup>

Beginning in 2004 with the story of Sol, and working its way back in approximately twenty-year increments, to recount the story of Sol's father, Randall, and Sol's grandmother, Sadie, the narrative culminates (or rather begins) in 1944 with the story of Kristina, Sol's great-grandmother, a character who is present in all four sections of the novel in her different guises as the female ancestor and central figure of this family saga. The gradual revelation of her life story provides the main drive of the narrative intrigue: a survivor of the Nazi *Lebensborn* programme, she was removed from her Ukrainian family at an age too young to retain any memory of the event and adopted and raised by a German family. Recovered and taken into care by US forces following the

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<sup>22</sup> Oliver Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently: Stories of the Senescent Subject in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> As discussed by Jeanette King in *Discourses on Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), where she compares literary representations of older women with perceptions of older women within medical, psychological and social discourses of ageing.

<sup>24</sup> Bethany Ladimer, *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999), p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Eena Job, *Eighty Plus: Outgrowing the Myths of Old Age* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), p. 198.

war, Kristina is eventually placed with a third family in Canada, where she is raised and goes on to succeed in a career as an internationally renowned singer. As the central female ancestor, she is far from occupying the role of a benevolent yet conservative grandmother with outdated values, a mad great-aunt figure, or a shrewish spinster, or any of the other one-dimensional, stereotypical models readily available to fictional ageing women. Rather, the central ageing female character of *Lignes de faille* is constructed as a complex and intriguing individual, a character development that is reflected in the narrative structure, which eeks out her story little by little, with great narrative suspense, such that the revelations of her past and childhood in the novel's final section constitute its climax. The details of Kristina's life are partially revealed through the development of the novel's plot and the shifting narrative perspective of its various narrator-characters, and finally filled in when Kristina takes up the narration in the first person at the novel's conclusion.

The novel's narrative structure is thus key to the development of complex ageing femininity, as it underlines the relativity of ageing – as it moves through different subjective voices and thus external perspectives of the female ancestor – and the accumulative, multi-faceted nature of individual identity, as it moves progressively back in time. Kristina is initially presented as a very old woman in the eyes of her six-year-old great-grandson, Sol, despite the fact that she might be designated, in 2004, as 'young elderly' or in the Third Age, to adopt the sociological framing referred to above. From the perspective of her six-year-old grandson, Randall, and from a slightly narrower generational gap, she appears as a 'young-old' woman in 1982. To her daughter, Sadie, she appears as a young woman in 1962, and as a six-year-old child in the first person in 1944. To the reader, these underlying layers of the self are gradually peeled away and revealed, coming to constitute interlocking aspects of the same subject in an instance of the palimpsestic ageing self that is also present elsewhere in Huston's corpus, as for example, in *Nord perdu*, where the narrator recounts a conversation with a friend regarding the childhood self within, stating: 'On est tous nos âges à la fois.'<sup>26</sup>

The ageing self as multi-layered palimpsest is further reinforced in *Lignes de faille* by the many names which are used to refer to the central female protagonist: Kristina, Krystka, Krissy, Erra, and AGM (meaning 'arrière-grand-mère'). She is initially introduced in the novel as 'AGM' by the obnoxious, self-centred Sol, who is reminiscent of Sartre's Lucien from *L'Enfance d'un chef*, with lines such as: 'j'ai six ans et je suis un génie', (*Lignes*, p. 13), 'Je suis exceptionnel' *Lignes*, (p.

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<sup>26</sup> Nancy Huston, *Nord perdu: suivi de Douze France* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1999), p. 18.



14), and 'JE SUIS PUISSANT' (*Lignes*, p. 44). Sol depicts his great-grandmother as one-dimensional, and in purely external, physical terms: 'je suis mal à l'aise dans ses bras parce qu'elle ne me semble pas propre. Des odeurs âcres de sueur, de fumée et de vieillesse sortent de son corps.' (*Lignes*, p. 46) His vision of her highlights the relativity of ageing: 'AGM' is, after all, only in her mid-sixties, and for the reader, who is presumably an adult and does not have the same child's perspective as Sol, she is not the ancient crone that this description would appear to indicate. Like Sol's *great*-grandmother, his *grandmother*, Sadie, is also described as a monstrous body – obese, disabled, with much emphasis being made of her wig – and she is *also* an unwelcome distraction to his parents' undivided attention to him as the only child whose name, Sol, resonates with 'soleil', the centre of the universe, and who occupies the role of a kind of 'roi soleil' in the family. It is only through the accumulation of narrative perspectives that a fuller picture of Kristina, or Erra (as she is also most frequently referred to in the novel) is built, and that the complexity of her character is revealed; perspectives that, of course, come to include her own at the novel's conclusion.

Randall's account of Erra (as he refers to her) portrays a doting, attentive grandmother with whom he has an especially intimate and loving relationship, while Sadie's narrative reveals Krissy – not yet Erra in 1962 – as an absent, unreliable mother who has abandoned the young Sadie to the harsh discipline of her grandparents, thus revisiting the Hustonian theme *par excellence*: that of the mother-artist, or the artist-mother. Mothers and grandmothers thus come to the fore, and are portrayed in complex ways, neither idealised nor demonised, with individual characters simultaneously occupying these different roles, and in very different ways. For example, Erra is depicted as an unappreciated great-grandmother, a treasured grandmother, and a longed-for yet absent mother. Gill Rye might argue that what is missing here is the perspective of Erra *as* mother, *as* a grandmother, and *as* a great-grandmother: the only perspective we have of the older woman is that of her progeny.<sup>27</sup> When the narration is eventually taken up in the first person by the central character, it is not from the perspective of the ageing or older woman, but from that of the six-year-old self, in keeping with the novel's overarching narrative style. What it lacks in first-hand perspectives of mothering, grandmothing and ageing, the novel makes up for in empathy: *Lignes de faille* is arguably a virtuoso exercise in narrative empathy, as characters'

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<sup>27</sup> Gill Rye, *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

seemingly reprehensible traits and behaviours are explained, and thus attenuated, by a backwards shift in chronological and subjective perspective: literally, by telling their backstory.

In *Lignes de faille*, then, we see an example of the kind of narrative complexity discussed by Helen Small in her philosophical approach to the understanding of the impact of longevity on human experience.<sup>28</sup> For Small, such narrative complexity provides a response to literature's historical inability to deal with old age – and particularly women's old age – in complex ways. Small notes that the bibliography of old age has been more heavily weighted towards essays, letters and aphorisms, rather than novels, and this certainly rings true of the slim tradition of women's writing in French that has dealt with ageing up to and including the twentieth century, by writers such as Françoise de Graffigny and Marie Riccoboni in the eighteenth century, George Sand in the nineteenth, and even Beauvoir in the twentieth. Small suggests that the novel's historical inadequacy for dealing with complex configurations of old age is due to the appeal of the progress narrative, and its preference for presenting articulations of lives as whole, complete, and resolved stories. Old age, of course, presents problems for the progress narrative insofar as it provides the conclusive evidence that lives do not resemble stories, or obey narrative norms, thus raising the question of what innovative narrative techniques can be adopted to offer constructive approaches to ageing and old age? Small suggests that 'we can handle very complex narrative structures in our thinking about lives without forfeiting the sense that there *is* a recognizable and sufficiently unified self at their centre'.<sup>29</sup> Huston's adoption of multiple, accumulative narrative voices, provision of contrasting even contradictory perspectives, and a fragmented, reverse narrative chronology that wends its way back into the past to build a richer picture of the present, provides an example of some of these strategies.

Within the reverse chronology adopted in the novel, that is structured along genealogical lines from great-grandson, to grandson, to daughter, to the woman depicted as the female ancestor of this lineage (and the passing on of the narration, within this genealogy, from son to father, son to mother, and finally, daughter to mother), relationships between grandchildren and grandparents are privileged. In two cases, these are enriching, loving relationships (between Randall and Kristina/Erra; and between Kristina/Erra and her own grandparents) and in the other two cases the grandparents are resented or the relationships are experienced as hurtful or

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<sup>28</sup> Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Small, *The Long Life*, p. 117.

damaging. But in all four cases, the relationship with the grandparents is key, and plays a significant role in the child, and then adult's, life. *Lignes de faille*, then, can be said to foreground female filiation beyond the mother-daughter tie that has been so frequently the focus of contemporary women's writing. More long-term female filiation is significantly shown to be a frequent emphasis of women's writing of ageing by literary and feminists critics alike, such as Annette Keilhauer and Monique Membrado, and it is particularly through intergenerational *female* ties that the characters genealogically retrace their steps back into the past.<sup>30</sup> The origins of Kristina/Erra's own identity is, genealogically speaking, a dead end, as she is removed from her birth family and raised by an adoptive family during the war, thus severing her national, cultural and linguistic heritage, such that the only manifestation of the transmission of genealogy is genetic. This separation from her own genealogy is further exacerbated by her settlement in Canada and formation of her own family there, with whom she does not share the linguistic or cultural heritage of her past. The mole that Erra inherits from her unknown family background is a reassuring symbol to her throughout her life of her uniqueness and of an inherited family history that, although unknown to her, is nevertheless one that she is able to pass on to her own children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the absence of a common cultural family history. This shared physical trait symbolises an important point of contact between Erra/Kristina and Randall, and a symbol of the prized grandparent-grandchild relationship, yet this closeness is shown to be disrupted with her great-grandson Sol, whose parents have decided to have his mole removed, with disastrous consequences.

Huston's interest in genealogy and the transmission of family traits, memory, and symbolic inheritance is present in many of her other works, including the autobiographical essay, *Nord perdu*, where she notes, at age forty, the appearance of two wrinkles between her eyebrows, identical to those of her grandmother, causing Diana Holmes to comment on the significance of this passage in illustrating Huston's insistence on the power of the myth of the autonomy and self-invention of the individual in the nihilistic tradition in western European literature and culture. For Huston, such autonomy and self-sufficiency is belied by the physical evidence of her genetic inheritance which blends with her own personal development to continuously produce and create

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<sup>30</sup> Annette Keilhauer, *Veillir féminin et écriture autobiographique* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2007); Monique Membrado, 'Le genre et le vieillissement: un regard sur la littérature', *Recherches féministes*, 26.2 (2013), 5-24.

her identity in the present, and throughout the life course.<sup>31</sup> The refusal to acknowledge this inheritance – or at least the failure to ensure the transmission of a shared cultural family history – ends in disaster for Sol, when his surgery to have the mole removed goes horribly wrong. Sol is severed from his lineage in more ways than one, as the transmission of memory is also blocked with this, the youngest member of the family, who learns little of his complex, transnational family history, and significantly becomes the first monolingual member in a line of polyglots, having failed to inherit either of the languages – neither the German nor the Hebrew – that have formed his family’s cultural inheritance.

Huston’s construction of ‘transnational ageing’, then, is shown to find its roots in childhood and to take place over a lifetime, and exist in a dialectical relation with those around the ageing subject. At the core of this complex construction lie the dynamics of the transmission – or non-transmission – of memory and intercultural family history, tellingly revealed through a characteristically complex narrative structure. Further investigation will allow us to examine the role of the acquisition of new languages and the inhabitation of new cultural spaces in the reinvention of the self throughout the life course and especially into the Third Age, including new sexual and creative roles adopted in the post-menopausal, post-reproductive phase.

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<sup>31</sup> Diana Holmes, ‘Dealing with What is Dealt: Feminists and Ageing’, in *Women, Genre, and Circumstance: Essays in Memory of Elizabeth Fallaize*, ed. by Margaret Atack, Diana Holmes, Diana Knight and Judith Still (Oxford: Legenda, 2012), pp. 123-37.

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