


Writing Mother: Maternal Abandonment in Nancy Huston's *La Virevolte*

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Abstract: In Nancy Huston's 1994 novel, *La Virevolte*, and her 1996 English translation, *Slow Emergencies*, her protagonist struggles to balance motherhood and her career to no avail, finally abandoning her family to devote herself to dance. Huston's profoundly moving analysis of the family dynamics before and after a mother's abandonment reveals a real desire to negotiate the complexities of motherhood. In this paper, the character's evolution is analyzed through the lens of de Beauvoir's theories on maternal instinct and mothering.

Keywords: Motherhood – Nancy Huston – abandonment – Simone de Beauvoir

With what price we pay the glory of motherhood.
- Isadora Duncan

ometimes life's defining moment can come early. Nancy Huston's came at age six, when her mother left home to start a new family, abandoning Huston and her two siblings in the care of their father. Given the enormity of such an event in a child's life, it is no wonder that Huston has devoted a lifetime trying to understand her mother's motivations and rationale. The theme of motherhood, and often maternal abandonment, is addressed in many of Huston's novels [i.e. *La Virevolte* (1994), *Prodige* (1999), *Lignes de faille* (2006), *Infrarouge* (2010)] and in her numerous essays [i.e. *Nord perdu* (1999), *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l'exil* (1986), *Âmes et Corps* (2004)]. Now, in her sixties and a mother of two, Huston lives in Paris where she publishes novels and essays in both English and French. In her 1994 novel, *La Virevolte*, she adopts the voice of a career dancer and choreographer who tries to settle down with her two children and professor husband, but is finally unable to endure her bourgeois life.

Huston's profoundly moving analysis of family dynamics before and after a mother's departure is not tainted with accusations or bitterness, but reveals a real desire to negotiate the complexities of human relations. Her narrative of loss and survival is

poignant in its treatment of childhood disillusionment and the enduring psychological consequences engendered by maternal estrangement. At the same time, both Huston in real life and the children in this novel benefit from the presence of at least one mother figure who raises and cares for them in the absence of their birth mother. In this paper, I will demonstrate how Huston uses this novel to come to terms with her own mother's betrayal, while refusing genetic predisposition for behavioral patterns and affirming the equal importance of nurture and nature through positive examples of non-biological mothering.

In literature and art, the mother figure is rarely represented with indifference given her immense psychological importance in human development. Every human being has a mother, for better or worse. Whether absent or present, biological or adoptive, a mother's role in the emotional evolution of her child is lifelong and deeply felt. The idealized or mythical archetype of the good mother, characterized as loving, tender, virtuous, devoted, and attentive stands in opposition to the exception: the unnatural female persona, lacking maternal instinct, characterized as manipulative, cruel, abusive, and selfish. These two poles of opposition represent extreme ends of the maternal spectrum, with most mothers possessing a nuanced combination of the above traits based on their level of "maternal instinct." However, many feminist scholars challenge the very concept of maternal instinct as a simple manmade construct designed to bind women to their offspring by glorifying maternal sacrifice and self-abnegation. In her seminal feminist work, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that maternal instinct is a social, not a physiological phenomenon:

Il n'existe pas d'"instinct" maternel. Le mot ne s'applique en aucun cas à l'espèce humaine. L'attitude de la mère est définie par l'ensemble de sa situation et par la manière dont elle l'assume. (I, 510)

Feminist author Yvonne Knibiehler, while disagreeing with de Beauvoir's view of maternity as an obstacle to transcendence, corroborates her view on the fictitiousness of maternal instinct:

La fonction maternelle chez les humains n'a rien de naturelle ; elle est toujours et partout une construction sociale, définie et organisée par des normes, selon les besoins d'une population donnée à une époque donnée de son histoire. (13)

If maternal instinct is nothing more than a fabricated concept to promote socially acceptable "choices," why do some new mothers feel a connection with their infant, while others feel nothing? This is a question that author Nancy Huston tries to resolve in much of her work, where ambivalence toward her own mother informs her portrayal of fictional mothers.

In literature and cinema, the figure of the bad mother is characterized as selfish, heartless, ambitious, frivolous, negligent, and even abusive. This tradition is strong in French literature, with classic authors such as Proust, filmmakers such as Truffaut, and contemporary writers such as controversial author and poet Michel Houellebecq, who blame their mothers for enduring emotional suffering. In his 1998 novel *Particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq creates a mother character who abandons her children to live in a commune in California. The effects of her selfish behavior are devastating and permanent. Some years later, in his autobiographical blog entry entitled “Mourir” [To die], Houellebecq recounts his own childhood suffering, when at 5-years-old his mother left him to be raised by his grandparents:

Lorsque j'étais bébé, ma mère ne m'a pas suffisamment bercé, caressé, cajolé ; elle n'a simplement pas été suffisamment tendre ; c'est tout, et ça explique le reste, [. . .] Aujourd'hui encore, lorsqu'une femme refuse de me toucher, de me caresser, j'en éprouve une souffrance atroce, intolérable [. . .] je crois aussi que c'est un mal inguérissable. J'ai essayé. Je le sais maintenant : jusqu'à ma mort je resterai un tout petit enfant abandonné, hurlant de peur et de froid, affamé de caresses.

Houellebecq's eight-page autobiographical blog entry constitutes his sole attempt at countering unauthorized biographies, preferring to the medium of fiction to create “psychologically twisted” maternal characters based on his own mother as a means of coming to terms with his dysfunctional childhood (Crumley). In the same vein, Nancy Huston creates mother characters to work out her childhood trauma, but weaves more complexity and compassion into her portrayals.

When Huston's novel opens, professional dancer Lin Lhormond has just given birth to a baby girl. Rather than experiencing the joy, exhaustion, and relief that most mothers feel immediately post-partum, Lin seems detached and strangely bewildered. Her quiet astonishment at suddenly becoming a mother stands in sharp contrast to the more instinctual “... clameur de cris et de roucoulements et de câlins (14)” surrounding her in the maternity ward. From the outset, it is clear that motherhood does not come naturally to Lin, who analyses each new physical sensation and emotion from an analytical perspective that belies her psychological distance and her inherent difference from the other new mothers in the hospital: “Angela est l'unique bébé au monde, et Lin, l'unique mère” (14). Even the love she feels for her infant falls under her careful scrutiny: “Non seulement elle est en vie, mais quelqu'un d'autre l'est également, là-bas au bout du couloir, et elle sent la vie de cet être tirer sur les fibres de son cœur” (15).

Motherhood, for Lin, is frighteningly consuming in both the figurative and the literal sense. The omniscient narrator describes the intensity of baby Angela's connection with her mother in animalistic terms that equate the demands of motherhood with a brutal loss of individuality: “Angela avale avec voracité le regard de

sa mère” (14). As the baby “imperiously” sucks at her mother’s breast, it seems as though she sucking the very life from her. Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir describes breastfeeding as an act of physical depletion: “L’allaitement est aussi une servitude épuisante [. . .] c’est au détriment de sa propre vigueur que la nourrice alimente le nouveau-né” (70).

Lin refuses to submit herself entirely to her new role, as evidenced by her emotional withdrawal even while performing the routine tasks of motherhood: bathing, nursing, dressing her daughter. Moreover, while the majority of mothers in the ward are totally occupied with caring for their newborn babies, Lin’s regular work-out sessions in the gym and her immediate focus on her healing body are indicative of a dedication to dance that supercedes normal professional concerns and sets the stage for a divided spirit that will eventually lead to an irrevocable conflict of interest. Ambitious and driven, Lin is unable to lose herself in the “passive” act of mothering, as de Beauvoir explains: “Engendrer, allaiter ne sont pas des activités, ce sont des fonctions naturelles ; aucun projet n’y est engagé ; c’est pourquoi la femme n’y trouve pas le motif d’une affirmation hautaine de son existence ; elle subit passivement son destin biologique” (I, 83).

Lin’s passive experience with motherhood contrasts with her mystical connection to dance, in which her personality is similarly subsumed, as she becomes transfigured by the movement that takes control of her body: “Au bout d’une heure de travail, en général, elle pénètre dans ce lieu où ce n’est plus elle qui produit la danse mais la danse qui la produit, la danse qui s’empare de ses pieds et de ses bras et de sa taille et la fait tourner, la retient et la relâche selon son gré” (20). In the same manner, Lin finds herself under her baby’s control, the roles bizarrely reversed as the daughter demands and the mother acquiesces. Moments after the birth, Lin looks down at the baby suckling at her breast, and sees “un être qui se comporte comme un vrai bébé vivant qui serait sa fille” (13). This sense of disconnection is even more evident in the English language translation, *Slow Emergencies*, where Huston, who translates her own novels, chooses to use the neologism “daughtering” to express the inverted power structure that opposes mother and daughter.

In *Lettres parisiennes*, Huston’s correspondence with French-Algerian author Leila Sebbar, she describes her own inability to practice her art following the birth of her daughter, indicating a real sense of compassion for her protagonist: “[. . .] la dépression *post-partum* a été d’autant plus profonde que je vivais complètement chez M. afin de pouvoir allaiter Léa, et chez M., il m’est impossible d’écrire. Perte d’identité, risible et prévisible [. . .] Au bout de trois mois je pleurais matin et soir sur mon sort tragique de femme interrompue” (151).

Perhaps the greatest sign of the troubles to come is that while Lin objectifies the baby by using referential terms like “il,” “ce corps,” les grands pieds rouges” (13-15), the art of dance is personified: “Il y a en Lin une nouvelle danse, qui meurt d’envie de naître” (28). Later, as both of her offspring grow and become less helpless, Lin

expresses feelings of guilt at having prioritized them over dance, her other creature-creation. Her protective and almost maternal feelings confer upon her art a human quality: “La danse déjà si fragile, si dépendante, qui meurt à chaque instant tout en naissant, la danse déjà l’enfant mortelle de mon corps mortel...” (64). Thus, portrayed as a sensitive being that requires as much attention and love as a newborn, choreography and performance soon reassert themselves as her predominant obsession, in direct competition with her two children, who seem to need less and less of her attention as they grow more independent: “Ils apprennent à parler, ils te font des câlins le soir, ils changent de taille d’habits, comme un serpent change de peau... Au fond, ils n’ont pas vraiment besoin de toi” (98). As time passes, the children and her maternal responsibilities become an unbearable burden, keeping her from practicing her craft, and her feelings of resentment and guilt at having forsaken her first love intensify.

Despite her middle-class lifestyle, Lin’s past is peppered with dysfunction and nonconformity. Her own mother, a runaway-turned-teen-bride, died of a brain hemorrhage at 21 years old, leaving three-year-old Lin in the care of her alcoholic father and, eventually, a sweet-natured but inelegant stepmother, Bess. Dance was an escape for Lin. Using the living room poker table as a ballet barre, and ignoring the pervasive stench of alcohol and cigarettes, her determination to perfect her art would take her miles away from the sordid world around her. “De longues heures de fouettés, allongés, développés, ronds de jambe et soubresauts, toute seule au milieu de la nuit. Les mâchoires obstinément serrées, Lin ne tenait aucun compte de la douleur...” (81).

In contrast to her dysfunctional childhood, Lin’s life as a new mother is enviable. Her handsome and sophisticated husband, Derek, adores her and satisfies her sexually by frequently making passionate love to her. Supportive and free of sexism, he is proud of her accomplishments and does his share of parenting while Lin works feverishly on a new dance in the studio they built together. The housekeeper, Theresa, takes care of chores, thus freeing Lin of petty domestic obligations. But in spite of her good fortune, there are clouds on the horizon. At a dinner party, Lin is strongly attracted to one of Derek’s colleagues, an alcoholic Irish poet “dont la spécialité consiste à distiller le malaise” (43), and who sees through Lin’s veneer of happiness: “Mais qu’est-ce que vous êtes en train de faire alors que vous avez ça dans le corps ? Comment pouvez-vous continuer à jouer l’épouse du professeur dans une petite ville universitaire ? Vous ne savez pas que votre don sera étouffé ici ? ” (49-50)

Lin’s violent attraction to Sean Farrell, which she shares with her best friend Rachel, is rooted in her primordial penchant for darkness, “... préférant le poison du danger à la complaisance mièvre de la bonne santé” (23) and in a tacit distaste for stability and normalcy. At the same time, she is repulsed by his cocksure clairvoyance, and angrily rejects his unwelcome advice. Lin’s inherent, but unspoken dissatisfaction with the ordinary life she has chosen for herself is implicit not only in her attraction-repulsion to Sean Farrell, but also in her parallel reaction to the contents of her kitchen garbage can: “...les souvenirs d’ordures, des rues sombres à Manhattan où des

silhouettes décharnées fourragent parmi les détritrus, le fracas strident à six heures du matin des poubelles métalliques renversées dans la gueule du camion, et les dents rotatives broyant tout” (40-41). Confronted by persistent sights, smells and sounds that remind her of her gritty past, she fleetingly realizes that something fundamental is missing in her new middle-class existence, but represses the knowledge, fearing the consequences.

More revealing still is that Lin’s hidden anguish manifests itself in her first new choreographed dance since becoming a mother, a highly symbolic piece that ominously narrates an epic struggle between mother and daughter, which ultimately denies the former her essential freedom and self-expression. The innocent image of a baby in swaddling cloth turns highly negative when the sheer material becomes a wedding veil imprisoning the dancer, “une jeune femme qui se débat, ligotée, emprisonnée par le voile, une momie bandée vivante pour le mariage” (28). The commentary on marriage is unambiguous, as is Lin’s ideal of maternity when the mother frees her daughter by sacrificing her own life, strangled by the bonds of her own earthly ties.

Like Sean Farrell, Lin’s best and only friend, Rachel, does not believe that Lin’s new life is authentic. Their profound connection, dating back to their angst-filled, motherless adolescence, allows Rachel to see clearly into her confidante’s soul. When she visits mother and child soon after Angela’s birth, her skepticism is evident, as symbolized by her gift of tiny black pajamas for Angela. Her sense of Lin’s duplicity is compounded by Lin’s desperate and hypocritical attempts to convince both of them that her new role is natural and satisfying by playing fifty rounds of peek-a-boo with her baby and ineffectively expounding on her unexpected bourgeois happiness. Rachel’s nonjudgmental expression belies the pretense Lin’s life has become: “Rachel était restée fidèle à leur philosophie partagée: réussir en tout, ne croire en rien. Lin l’avait trahie” (24). While Rachel tries to support Lin’s choice to lead a conventional life, she cannot reconcile the new Lin with the free spirit she had always known, so she uses humor to avoid a potentially hurtful exchange: “Allez, on peut toujours être amies, tu sais. Même si tu es heureuse” (26).

Lin’s awakening is ultimately prompted by a paradoxically banal event. As she is dancing in her attic studio, she hears the hum of the housekeeper’s vacuum, and follows it from room to room. Soon, in spite of herself, her mind begins to make connections that she had been trying to repress: “que la poussière retourne à la poussière / je t’aimerai jusqu’au tombeau” (63). Thoughts of dust lead to thoughts of death, and inescapably to the tragic death of Isadora Duncan’s two small children. In 1913, Patrick (6) and Béatrice (4), and their governess drowned when their car plunged into the Seine: “... un jour elle a embrassé ses deux enfants, ils sont parties, et dix minutes plus tard la voiture avec Patrick et Deirdre et leur gouvernante sur la banquette arrière a dégringolé, dégringolé le talus, dégringolé le talus jusque dans la Seine ... ” (63-64). In the face of this unbearable pain, Isadora’s only possible reaction is to forsake the material world, practicing and embracing the supremacy of the spirit as embodied by the ephemeral

nature of dance: “Non non non non, dit-elle, *la seule vie qui existe c’est là-haut où vole l’esprit, libéré de cet abominable cauchemar de la matière ...*” (64).

From this moment on, Lin is lost. Try as she might, she will never be able to shake herself free from the realization that her life is a sham. She fires the housekeeper so as never to hear her run the vacuum again and she throws herself back into mothering, but her patience is thin, her children want too much of her, and her heart is elsewhere: “Ce qui se passe en elle n’est pas dicible” (88). Isadora’s voice keeps calling to her, like a siren calling her sweetly to her fate. Slowly, but surely, Lin’s life becomes less tolerable, as her husband and children weigh more heavily on her, while the voices of all her muses (Duncan, Nijinski, Chariss, Wigman) join in unison to call her back to dance.

Lin’s greatest challenge is her inability to reconcile the demands of motherhood with those of her art. Unable to respond appropriately to her children’s emotional and intellectual exigencies, she feels drained and overwhelmed, with little energy left for creative expression. In *Lettres parisiennes: Histoires d’exil*, Leïla Sebbar French writer born in Algeria, who currently lives in Paris, describes the same conflict between creative expression and maternity as she finds herself suddenly obliged to interrupt writing a letter to her friend Nancy Huston: “... Mais le téléphone sonne, on sonne à la porte, les enfants entrent en turbulence et je bascule. J’aurais beau fermer la porte, m’enfermer, me coller à ma table, à ma chaise, leurs cris, leurs voix m’ancrent et m’enfoncent dans le quotidien domestique, dans une réalité qui me tient ici...” (17).

Nevertheless, while Sebbar acknowledges the classic female artist’s dilemma, she is obviously able to negotiate a balance between motherhood and writing given her prolific literary output, thus belying Huston’s statement in her essay “Novels and Navels” that “Mothers qua mothers must be “other-oriented”; they embody connectedness and attachment. Novelists qua novelists must be selfish; they demand for themselves disconnectedness and detachment” (711). Unlike Lin, Sebbar celebrates the day-to-day reality that keeps her grounded, and is able to produce great works of fiction and non-fiction despite the constraints on her time and emotions. Ultimately, even Rachel, Lin’s childhood soul mate, raised like her friend without a mother, and sharing her “ancien amour de la mort” (23), later finds herself in the position of assuming a proactive mother-like role despite her dysfunctional upbringing and her undying commitment to her own vocation: philosophy, teaching, and scholarly activities.

Perhaps what separates Lin and Rachel is the form of art that they practice. Modern interpretive dance is a multi-dimensional performance art that requires a perfect harmony of the mind and body, giving audiences fleeting moments of inner and outer awareness as they follow wordless abstract stories based on the human condition. While writers commit thoughts and stories to paper, bringing characters to life and defying mortality, dancers live in the moment, conscious that their energy, their synchronized movements, their story - their dance - withers as soon as it is performed. The conflict between concrete family obligations and the ethereal quality of dance is

made apparent when Lin's performance is spoiled on its opening night by a whiny phone call from her daughters: "Et maintenant il y a cette voix, telle une main / qui tirerait sur sa volumineuse jupe en velours / pour l'empêcher de gravir les quatre marches jusqu'au plateau" (87).

Lin's frustration is at breaking point as her daughters, portrayed as a single, disembodied voice, smother her emotionally and even encumber her physically. Unable to escape her human ties, she feels like a caged animal. In a 1984 interview, while conceding that some women may sincerely wish to have children, Simone de Beauvoir still compares motherhood to human bondage: "Même si une femme a envie d'avoir des enfants, elle doit bien réfléchir aux conditions dans lesquelles elle devra les élever parce que la maternité, actuellement, est un véritable esclavage" (77).

Huston's psychological portrait of Lin is generous in that we see her struggle valiantly with the obvious, refusing to acknowledge the depth of her frustration, even though it is painfully clear to all those who truly know her. When she finally decides to leave her family, after reaching the point of no-return, even her husband admits to himself the reality he had never previously wanted to consider: "Il s'étonne d'être si peu étonné et comprend qu'il le savait depuis longtemps, peut-être depuis toujours" (122). The words that mark the end of Lin's life as a wife and mother, "C'est terminé. Elle est prête" (115), recall the final words spoken by Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, and point to a Christian interpretation of her otherwise unfathomable actions. As Lin bids farewell to all that she holds dear in her earthly life, she, like Jesus Christ, is leaving to follow a higher calling.

In a 2001 interview, Huston evokes the impact her mother's absence had on her childhood and explains how she attempted to comprehend her mother's actions by exploring the emotional evolution of a woman who chooses, then opts out of motherhood.

Le lien que j'avais, petite, avec ma mère était un lien d'absence, exclusivement nourri d'imaginaire et d'évocations à travers ses lettres, ses mots. [...] C'est pour cela que je suis devenue écrivain, parce qu'il y avait dans ma vie quelque chose d'incompréhensible qui requérait un immense et perpétuel effort d'imagination pour tenter de le comprendre. Dans *La Virevolte*, je me suis efforcée de me mettre à la place d'une mère qui abandonne ses enfants. Écrire permet de tout voir en face... (Argand, *Lire*)

By putting herself in the skin of her tortured character, Lin Lhormond, a woman who leaves her family to pursue her artistic career, Huston no doubt reaps the therapeutic benefits of compassion and forgiveness. However, it is clear that Huston does not personally identify with a mother who abandons her children, given that she does not use first person narration and the perspective shifts as the novel progresses. In

fact, her own experience with maternity renders her birth mother's choice even more incomprehensible than when she was childless and less conscious of the profound nature of the mother-child bond:

Je n'ai commencé à mesurer la perte que lorsque je suis devenue mère. Comment a-t-elle pu couper le lien avec trois enfants : mon frère, ma sœur et moi ? C'est devenu de plus en plus opaque ; en tout cas, c'est une chose qui ne se répare pas. (Argand, *Lire*)

While adopting Lin's viewpoint is an emotionally demanding intellectual exercise for Huston, she stops short of equating Lin with her own mother. For example, unlike her mother, Lin does not leave her husband for another man (Argand, *Lire*), and instead devotes her entire life to realizing the pure art of dance: "Tu étais le seul mari, Derek. Je te l'ai toujours dit" (153). Huston makes it clear that the choice between family and art is not an easy one for Lin and haunts her for the rest of her life. Though she seeks refuge in intense rehearsals and continual performances around the world, she is unable to completely escape the reality of what she has sacrificed for the transitory moments of joy and awareness her choreography brings to people all over the world: "Dans le métro de Mexico, et dans les rues – partout sauf dans la danse –, Lin est vulnérable: elle peut être attaquée par des bébés. Dès qu'elle entend un bébé qui pleure, c'est l'épouvante" (126).

Huston's mother, in contrast, did not make so noble a choice, simply opting for a new family over the old: "Celle-là a jeté l'éponge ... et l'eau du bain, la baignoire, le bébé, trois bébés, le mari, le balai, le rouleau à pâtisserie, et puis son dévolu ... sur une vie plus palpitante à l'étranger. (*Âmes et Corps*, 37). Whereas Lin is fully conscious that the decision to leave her family will destroy her private life and have devastating consequences on those she leaves behind, Huston's mother seems to have made a selfish choice based solely on personal happiness and without a full grasp of the disaster she leaves in her wake. Throughout the years, she blithely sends letters to her children, recounting her adventures in faraway places, and on their rare familial visits, spoils them with gaudy gifts before taking off for her next exotic destination (*Âmes et Corps*, 38). Her appreciation for the arts differs from Lin's complete physical and emotional surrender to dance in that she sees art as a mere source of enjoyment: "Ma mère pour sa part, était portée sur les arts: c'était une bonne pianiste, une grande lectrice, amateur de théâtre, de ballet, d'opéra ..." (*Âmes et Corps*, 14).

After Lin's departure, the novel's perspective shifts from that of the deserter to the deserted as Derek assumes full parental responsibilities of their growing daughters, Angela and Marina. Aged seven and four when Lin leaves, the two girls develop a close bond born of shared distress, and support each other unconditionally as they each slowly elaborate very distinct coping mechanisms to deal with their loss. At age twelve, Angela announces to her father that she is abandoning dance and is henceforth

devoting her life to acting, which she sets out to do by single-mindedly overcoming all obstacles and using all the resources available to her, including (as a young woman) sleeping with a series of sugar daddies to pay the rent. For her part, Marina develops a secret obsessive-compulsive disorder combined with bouts of self-mutilation as a means of controlling the chaos in her shattered world. Later, she will find a more acceptable outlet for her pain in Holocaust studies, which she undertakes because "... je me dis toujours que par rapport à cela, ma souffrance à moi ce n'est rien" (173).

This leitmotif of the lonely woman, scarred by maternal neglect, who compensates for her loss by delving into the horrors of the Holocaust is recurrent in Huston's novels. As a young woman living in New York City, Huston was profoundly influenced by her close friendship with a Jewish woman of Russian descent, who introduced her to another culture, another religion and another history: "Oui, une juive russe née dans l'état de New York peut être la mère d'une protestante irlandaise née dans la province d'Alberta: conseillère et confidente, fiable et fantasque, membre et même pilier de ma famille..." (*Âmes et corps*, 39). Like Marina, Sadie, one of the narrators in Huston's 2006 novel *Lignes de faille*, finds an outlet for her mother's neglect in an obsession with Holocaust research, which ironically ends up monopolizing her attention and spoiling her relationship with her husband and child.

Although the girls undergo the same kind of emotional trauma that the author endured as a child, and thus have much in common with the young Nancy Huston, these children are by no means strictly autobiographical representations of the author's childhood. Huston would have great difficulty writing a mémoire since she is riddled with doubt as to the veracity of her own recollections and writes often about the unreliable nature of memory: "The truth is that our memories, like our tastes, ideas and political opinions, are shaped by our everyday lives. They change, shift, meld, mix, dissolve and disappear" (80 *Losing North*). In *La Virevolte*, Huston elucidates her theory on the instability of memory with a concrete example when Angela tells her sister she remembers their mother leaving for the hospital to give birth, and Marina responds, "Non. Elle t'a raconté ça plus tard, tu as seulement l'impression de t'en souvenir" (194). Consequently, while it is certain that Huston borrowed elements from her own life to create these complex characters, the percentage of conjecture and embroidery in their composition fictionalizes them and distances them from the author.

This patchwork pattern of autographical details woven throughout the novel is perpetuated in the male characters, who experience some of the trials endured by Huston's father after his wife's desertion. Huston's obvious sympathy for the character of Derek reflects her deep appreciation for her own father, a love she expresses in no uncertain terms to Leïla Sebbar in their collected correspondence: "Tu vois, j'ai été élevée par mon père, et je l'adore" (*Lettres parisiennes* 192). Derek, the rejected husband, is presented as the polar opposite of Lin's father despite the fact that both of them find themselves suddenly single, albeit for different reasons. Both men are heartbroken by their wife's sudden disappearance (caused by death or abandonment) and both remarry

quickly, but Derek is able to maintain a healthier environment for his children. Nowhere is this clearer than in the descriptions of parties hosted by the two men and their new partners: the gambling, smoking, yelling, drinking, and passing out in Lin's childhood home differ greatly from the gourmet food and gossipy banter of the dinner party hosted by Derek and Rachel: "Tous les amis restent jusqu'à deux heures du matin, à manger et à boire et à faire résonner les murs de leurs rires" (142).

Huston reinforces the chasm separating the social classes of the two most important men in Lin's life by using graphic body imagery to symbolize the material and the intellectual worlds. Both Lin's father and his wife Bess are weighed down by their ungainly bodies, fat from seeking refuge and solace in food and alcohol. Lin's father's corpulence, his trembling fingers, and his inability to communicate embody the essence of an empty, mediocre, and medicated life. His hands are symbolically stained by grease from years of manual work, even though he has been retired for some time. By contrast, Derek's hands are "les mains d'un professeur de philosophie" (18), delicate and deft, the hands of a writer. Rather than turning to food as consolation for his loss, Derek finds himself numb and impotent, losing all contact with his body, and only feeling it when his girls throw themselves into his arms: " - à ces moments-là, et seulement alors, il supporte son corps" (128). Lin's departure triggers insomnia, depression and a sudden revulsion for his physicality: "Le pire pour Derek, c'est le corps. Il est incapable de regarder sa propre chair" (128).

Like Huston's own father, Derek learns to raise his children as a single parent, giving them as normal a life as possible, but quickly remarries Lin's best friend, a woman who gradually becomes a positive influence in his children's life. Nevertheless, the role of the stepmother is fraught with pitfalls that require careful treading and endless patience as the recomposed family redefines itself. In *La Virevolte*, Marina resists the imposition of a new female figure in her life and tells Rachel, her mother's childhood friend-cum step-mother, she hates her, only recanting when Rachel proves that she does not intend to usurp her mother's place. Huston tells of her experience with the same kind of inner conflict when she describes her father's second wife as a gentle-natured German woman "s'installant avec grâce à la place de ma mère, à table, dans la cuisine, dans le lit du père, se faisant passer pour la mère, oh! douce, très douce imposture ! Gentille, preste et rieuse usurpation ! Mais tout de même : mensonges, ravages et destructions, tabous et interdits de tous les jours" (39 *Ames et Corps*).

Bess, Lin's stepmother, is a plain and kindly woman, who cannot have children due to a botched abortion. An eternal victim, Bess is fiercely loyal to Lin's volatile, alcoholic father, standing by her man in a stoic assumption of the traditional female role, and doing her best to take the place of Lin's late mother. Paradoxically, when Bess introduces the four year-old Lin to the world of performance art by taking her to a puppet show, she is unwittingly responsible for deepening the divide between them: "Cet après-midi pluvieux avait changé la vie de Lin. Le soulagement inouï: il y a donc un autre monde ! On n'est pas obligé de vivre tout le temps dans celui-ci" (38) !

As Lin's stepmother, Bess is also the female confidante whom Lin is obliged to consult during her passage to adolescence. Lin's horror at Bess' clumsy physical demonstration of inserting a tampon illustrates the personal and cultural divide that separates them. Later, when an adult Lin takes Angela to visit Bess and her father, it is clear that Bess represents exactly what Lin has struggled not to become. As Bess cooks and cleans, serving huge portions of macaroni and cheese on plastic plates, her father sits idly by, drinking, smoking, and making uncomfortable efforts at conversation with his stranger of a daughter. On her way home, "... Lin peste intérieurement contre la réalité" (35) as her childhood preference for the fleeting beauty of artistic creation is once again confirmed by the heavy materiality of her family.

Lin's rejection of Bess is a prelude to her abandonment of her own children given that her inability to function in the material world is deeply rooted in her childhood and is ultimately responsible for undermining her best efforts at creating and nurturing real-life relationships. Forever scarred by her mother's premature death, Lin pieces together details about her life and appearance in order to feel close to her. Embarrassed by her stepmother, Lin clings to a romanticized image of her biological mother, a tragic figure whose rapid passage through life is marked by all the worst and the best aspects of human existence. Poor, frumpy Bess is unable to compete with Lin's imagination, and finds herself shunned and rejected as a mother figure, the object of Lin's pity and shame: "non, ma vraie mère était blonde, espiègle et belle / un elfe, un farfadet / le miroitement de la lumière sur l'eau / tout ce qui étincelait, tout ce qui dansait était ma mère" (57). Even her mother's name, Marilyn, conjures up images of another, more famous, beautiful, blond enchantress whose short life was full of drama, beauty, and misfortune. Lin's predilection for art and fantasy will come full circle when she turns away once again from the chaos of family life and back toward the immaterial artistic medium that had given her childhood meaning and a sense of connectedness to the mother she had never known.

Simone de Beauvoir's study of biologically based family roles and notions of spousal or maternal servitude in *Le Deuxième Sexe* presents a rationalization of the protagonist's rejection of the bonds of marriage and motherhood:

Ordinairement, la maternité est un étrange compromis de narcissisme, d'altruisme, de rêve, de sincérité, de mauvaise foi, de dévouement, de cynisme. Le grand danger que nos mœurs font courir à l'enfant, c'est que la mère à qui on le confie pieds et poings liés est presque toujours une femme insatisfaite [. . .] (326-7)

However, de Beauvoir's analysis fails to account for the novel's plot twist in which another woman enjoys deep fulfillment as a proxy mother to Lin's abandoned children. While Lin shuns her stepmother, her daughter Marina eventually accepts her stepmother into her life. The bond between Marina and Rachel develops slowly despite

a bumpy beginning and Rachel's gentle assertion to Derek that she could not be a mother to his children, to which he responds: "J'espère que tu seras non pas une mère mais une Rachel pour mes enfants" (149). Gradually, Rachel's calm and steady presence, her love of learning, combined with their common bond of motherlessness, draw the two together. It is Rachel who teaches Marina of the Holocaust, thereby giving her a new passion and sense of purpose to replace the self-destructive behavior that had followed her mother's abandonment. And it is Rachel who spends time with the traumatized little girl, reading to her, taking walks with her, and mothering her as Lin had never been able.

Marina completely turns away from the stranger she is forced to visit once a year, while her sister Angela, a performer herself, is better equipped to accept their mother's decision. Marina's disgust at the artificial nature of her rapport with her mother lies in her inability to comprehend the world on a superficial level. Rather than simply accepting her mother's gifts and pretending everything is normal, she demands an intimate, honest relationship that her mother is incapable of giving. In her interview with Catherine Argand, Nancy Huston expresses the same distaste for the shallowness of her own mother-daughter relationship: "Je ne la vois plus depuis longtemps, nos relations étaient strictement civiles et cela ne m'intéressait pas d'avoir des relations civiles avec ma mère" (Argand, *Lire*). Angela, on the other hand, shows less anger at their mother's choice and is even capable of turning their family tragedy into a comedy routine: "Je l'ai fait pour eux, dit-elle. Tout le monde se plaint toujours des mères envahissantes [...] Je voulais que mes enfants soient forts, libres, indépendants [...] et regardez le résultat ! Johnny a eu son permis de conduire à quatre ans, Susie son doctorat à huit !" (182)

Lin's devotion to dance represents the fulfillment of Simone de Beauvoir's dreams of feminine empowerment: "Il est naturel que la femme essaie de s'échapper de ce monde où souvent elle se sent méconnue ou incomprise, ce qui est regrettable c'est qu'elle n'ose pas alors les audacieuses envolées d'un Gérard de Nerval, d'un Poe" (551). Yet, while Lin takes her art to new heights, her inability to compromise ultimately results in an unfulfilled personal life and permanent feelings of remorse. By contrast, both her best friend, Rachel, and her daughter, Angela, succeed where Lin fails by building a life in which career and family hold equal importance.

Just as her female characters' lives are shaped by their mother's desertion, so is Huston's. In *Nord perdu*, she equates her self-imposed linguistic and geographic exile, along with her abandonment of piano lessons, as a rejection of all things associated with her mother: "Ce que je fuyais en fuyant l'anglais et le piano me semble clair" (65). And as fiction imitates life, Angela's abrupt renunciation of dance is analogous to Huston's symbolic dismissal of piano. Both the fictional daughter and her creator forge new paths that distance themselves from their biological mothers. However, each using her own genre of artistic expression as therapy, they both learn strategies to deal with the psychological trauma of maternal abandonment.

Huston's abrupt narrative shift immediately following Lin's abandonment of maternal bonds symbolizes an upheaval in the novel's theoretical framework that had heretofore read like the embodiment of Simone de Beauvoir's condemnation of maternal enslavement in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Prior to her departure, Lin is a sympathetic character, suffering from post-partum depression and the physical and professional frustrations inherent in the condition of motherhood. Nancy Huston's own experience with post-partum depression renders her character's suffering authentic, and the author's personal experience with loss of subjectivity informs Lin's metaphysical distress. However, Lin's ultimate decision to forsake family and responsibilities transforms her from a protagonist to an object of pity and even derision. Clearly, Huston's deliberate switch to multiple narrative voices underlies the unforgivable devastation Lin leaves behind. As a result, the reader's sympathy is transferred from Lin to her victims, specifically her husband and children. Lin's failure to reconcile her artistic ambitions with her maternal duties, despite her husband's immense support and her children's imminent suffering stands in contrast to Rachel's ability to balance responsibility and career ambitions, and essentially replace her best friend as a surrogate mother despite her obvious lack of "maternal instinct." Thus, despite her initial empathy, Huston's attempt to rationalize and forgive a mother's departure falls flat as she lays bare the consequences of Lin's quest for self-fulfillment. In the end, she would no doubt agree with Simone de Beauvoir who, while taking a personal stand against a flawed conception of motherhood, still asserts the importance of a well-adjusted mother: "[. . .] c'est la femme qui a la vie personnelle la plus riche qui donnera le plus à l'enfant et qui lui demandera le moins, c'est celle qui acquiert dans l'effort, dans la lutte, la connaissance des vraies valeurs humaines qui sera la meilleure éducatrice" (II, 384).

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