



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Dancing in the dark: Immersion and self-reflexivity in Nancy Huston's Danse Noire*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/131976/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Holmes, D [orcid.org/0000-0001-9079-3582](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9079-3582) (2018) *Dancing in the dark: Immersion and self-reflexivity in Nancy Huston's Danse Noire*. *Nottingham French Studies*, 57 (3). pp. 298-310. ISSN 0029-4586

<https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2018.0226>

---

© University of Nottingham. This is an author produced version of a paper accepted for publication in *Nottingham French Studies* by Edinburgh University Press (<https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2018.0226>) Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

# DANCING IN THE DARK: IMMERSION AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN NANCY

## HUSTON'S *DANSE NOIRE*

DIANA HOLMES

Nancy Huston's 2013 novel *Danse noire*<sup>1</sup> opens with a family tree mapping the relationships between the protagonists of the novel's three interweaving stories, a visual aid to entering the fictional world reminiscent of the popular family saga. Turning the page, however, the reader comes upon a more enigmatic piece of paratext: the title page of the novel's first section introduces a Portuguese word unfamiliar to most readers, LADAINHA, followed by its definition: 'Litanie. Chant qui ouvre le *roda* de capoeira, avant le début du jeu'. An analogy is announced between the structure of this novel, and that of the Brazilian art of capoeira; the analogy is then sustained as each of the novel's ten sections is prefaced by a new capoeira term, its pertinence revealed as the narrative develops. As with most of Huston's novels, *Danse noire* combines an invitation to immersion in a richly peopled narrative world, or to what she has described as 'ce geste intrinsèquement moral qui est l'identification avec des êtres humains sous forme de personnages',<sup>2</sup> with a call to the reader to be attentive to the process of storytelling itself. Huston has the distinction among contemporary French-language novelists of combining page-turning narrative with a high degree of formal complexity and self-reflexivity. Her fictions create virtual worlds that are immersive or, to adopt the formulation of narrative theorist Marie-Laure Ryan, that 'transport the reader's virtual body onto the scene of events'.<sup>3</sup> At the same time they ask the reader to participate consciously in the aesthetic process of shaping the contingent world into meaningful form.

Though *Danse noire* tells a compelling story of individual lives enmeshed in the web of world history, it does so with a pyrotechnic display of self-reflexive devices that include not just capoeira as framing device and analogy, but also language-switching, dramatic shifts

in spatial and temporal setting, and the intra-diegetic presentation of the narrative as a film scenario. Some critics have found this formal complexity excessive and alienating. Elizabeth Beaujour, for example, finds the novel's accumulation of distancing techniques frankly 'annoying' and likely to 'strike readers as intellectually arbitrary'.<sup>4</sup> Genevieve Waite endorses Monique Verdussen's view that 'À force de voyager d'un personnage à l'autre, d'une époque, d'un lieu, d'une langue à l'autre, de musique en poésie, d'un film en train de se faire à un roman qui s'ébauche, on peine à suivre',<sup>5</sup> and herself finds the constant transitions between narrative trajectories, places, epochs, languages and artistic media 'disorienting'.<sup>6</sup> Other readers, including many of those who record their responses for the on-line book club Babelio, find themselves at once entranced by the novel's plot, characters, and setting, and admiringly aware of its technical verve: 'un roman d'une grande richesse, à la fois dense et bouleversant, dans lequel les cultures se mêlent et se mélangent'; 'un bouquin formidable, puissant, du drame, de l'émotion et des paysages'.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I want to ask how Huston's fusion of mimetic realism and formal experimentation is achieved in *Danse noire*, and with what degree of success. I then want to examine the implications of Huston's dual literary project for the experience and the importance of reading fiction.

It is primarily as a French writer that the bilingual Huston is known, but her commitment to the dramatization of historical and social issues through page-turning stories makes her an unusual figure on the French literary scene. The realist novel, with its emphasis on verisimilitude, thrilling plot and memorable, lifelike characters, has long been out of critical fashion in France, particularly since the influential *Nouveau Roman* movement of the mid-twentieth century cast a sceptical eye on the very notion of literary realism. Huston's fiction goes against the grain by maintaining faith in the mimetic, storytelling dimension of the novel, to which moreover she grants an ethical function: her 2008 essay *L'Espèce fabulatrice* affirms categorically that the novel 'plays an ethical role' by enabling its readers

to suspend disbelief in fictional characters and experience the world from perspectives other than their own.<sup>8</sup> The reading public, too, has maintained a preference for a broadly realist style of fiction, if sales figures and book groups (both ‘real’ and on-line) are to be believed. If Nancy Huston’s fiction is widely read, adopted by reading groups,<sup>9</sup> and awarded the prizes for which readers themselves vote (Goncourt des lycéens, 1996; Grand Prix des lectrices de *Elle*, 1998; Prix France-télévisions, 2006), this surely has much to do with the compelling nature of her plots and characterization, as well as the scope and pertinence of her themes. Huston’s novels echo the ambitions of nineteenth-century realism or the early twentieth-century *romans-fleuves* in their fusion of a panoramic approach to time and space with the portrayal of intimate experience. She has tackled the legacies of colonialism and the European settlement of Canada, the aftermath of the Holocaust and the Nazi policy of *Lebensborn*, interweaving these historical themes with depictions of love, both romantic and sexual, of maternity, sexual violence and the warmth and pain of family relationships. Temporally her plots range across the twentieth/twenty-first centuries and back as far as the seventeenth; spatially, if they return frequently to France and North America, they also extend to Germany, Italy, Israel and (in *Danse noire*) Ireland and Brazil. Personal stories are constantly interwoven with public history.

At the same time, her novels belong distinctly to a post-modern, post-*nouveau roman* age in the self-conscious attention they pay to the process of story making, or narrativization, for awareness of the constructed nature of plot is essential, in Huston’s view, to the ethical mission of fiction. Her essay *L’Espèce fabulatrice* insists that storytelling is fundamental to being human, that narrative is one of the organizing principles of consciousness, so that we all live immersed in stories, some of them – for example simplified us-and-them versions of national history – limiting and harmful. The ubiquity of distorting, over-simplified narratives, she argues, makes it vitally important to put into circulation stories that are not only morally

rich, but also able to bring attention to the process of narrative itself: ‘C’est parce que la réalité humaine est gorgée de fictions involontaires ou pauvres qu’il importe d’inventer des fictions volontaires et riches’ (*EF*, p. 186).

Thus *Instruments des ténèbres* uses the technique of a novelist narrator (Nadia), whose first-person diary alternates with the novel she is writing, so that the process of composition is integral to the story, and a double narrative thread draws the reader into two fictional worlds even as it demonstrates the interaction between autobiography and fictional invention.<sup>10</sup>

*L’Empreinte de l’ange* features an overtly omniscient narrator who addresses the reader (‘Oh! Soyez mon Dante et je serai votre Virgile’)<sup>11</sup> and rejoices, sometimes ironically, in fiction’s capacity to travel freely in time and space, to move from one consciousness to another, and to invent alternative endings. *Dolce agonia* treats narrative omniscience with nice irony by featuring the deity himself as a narrator who, unconstrained by temporality, announces the future of each character.<sup>12</sup> *Une adoration* is narrated by La Romancière who freely addresses the reader (‘Ceci est une histoire vraie, je vous le jure... alors faites attention, c’est important; vous êtes seul juge, comme toujours...’), and the characters: ‘Non, Latifa, pas encore. Votre récit appartient au futur de cette histoire’.<sup>13</sup> Yet in each case the self-reflexivity of the narratives, what in theatre or cinema would be the breaking of the fourth wall, fails to weaken the immersive power of the story: love stories (notably in *L’Empreinte de l’ange*), the loss of a child (*Dolce agonia*), the sensual experience of another body, the pain of exile (these last two in all of the novels) – these are all *felt*, vicariously and vividly, through irresistible identification with the fictional characters. The experience of reading Huston’s novels is well captured by Marie-Laure Ryan’s description of fiction reading as an ‘amphibian’ activity that alternates or even fuses immersion within the fictional world and ‘interactive’ awareness of its meta-fictional level.<sup>14</sup> However ‘lost in a book’ we become, we are always at some level conscious too of our real environment, and of the fact that the imaginary world is being

created for us by the words on the page. In Ryan's formulation the reader 'remain(s) fully conscious of contemplating a representation, even when this representation seems more real than life.'<sup>15</sup>

*Danse noire* is a triple-stranded story, its three main protagonists linked by blood across generations and across the twentieth century. Like many Huston novels, most notably *Lignes de faille*,<sup>16</sup> it is concerned with the transmission of elements of identity through generations, and with the relationship between collective and private histories: 'Nous avançons grotesquement, à cloche-cloche, écartelés: un pied dans nos petites histoires et l'autre dans l'Histoire du siècle' (*EA*, p. 196) in the words of the narrator of *L'Empreinte de l'ange*. Neil Kerrigan is an idealistic, poetry-writing law student in early twentieth-century Dublin, his friends and contemporaries including Joyce and Yeats, when a semi-reluctant involvement in the 1916 Easter Rising ends with his exile to French Canada, marriage to a solidly Catholic, conservative woman, and a life of nostalgia, regrets and the paternity of thirteen disappointingly un-poetic children, on his father-in-law's remote rural farm. Awinita is a Cree Indian girl supporting herself and her family through prostitution in 1950s Montreal: her pregnancy, after unprotected sex with one of Neil's feckless sons, leads to the birth of Milo, the third and principal hero of the novel. Milo, given up for adoption, passes through a number of variously cruel and kind foster homes before his grandfather, Neil, learns of his existence and takes him to live on the family farm. Grandfather and grandson form a warm attachment around Neil's books and a love of stories, together with a shared resistance to Catholicism and the small-minded local culture. Each section of the novel is sub-divided to pursue separately the narrative arcs of three very different lives, set at different points in the century, as they gradually interweave to form a connected narrative.

Huston constructs her characters through the standard realist techniques of physical description, voice and situation. Unlike cinema, where the fictional protagonist is literally

embodied by an actor, the novel only needs to sketch in certain key physical traits for the reader's imagination to take over and invent a mental image (sometimes visually hazy rather than fully realized) of the protagonist. To know that Neil is a tall, rangy, auburn-haired Irishman is sufficient to establish a sense of his presence; Awinita's coltish fragility survives beneath her provocative red dress and dyed blond hair ('sa dégainé de pute a quelque chose de touchant et d'enfantin', (*DN*, p. 31)); Milo is a dark, beautiful child and later man, 'brun, solide, robuste' (*DN*, p. 219). Neil's voice reaches us in part through his inner monologues, italicized in the text, self-aggrandizing and straining for a literary tone ('*Ah! griffonner un poème sur le goélands et les grues: voilà ce que je ferai, dès après mon somme matinal*', *DN*, p. 20), for the young Neil is plausibly vain and self-deluded, liking the glamorous idea of being a poet and a revolutionary more than he likes the work and commitment these require. Awinita's stoical courage and laconic humour are expressed primarily through her dry, elliptical speech ('Jesus!' exclaims a client when he realises she is heavily pregnant; 'Kinda doubt it', she replies, (*DN*, p. 64)); her inner world, blurred by exhaustion and drugs, is articulated less in words than in the form of visual images. Her son too is sparing with language, expressing thought and emotion primarily through image, gesture and bodily movement, his voice repeatedly silenced in childhood as he shifts between different foster families speaking variously English, German and French. Brought to life as body and voice, each character also invites sympathy as they confront painful situations. Neil pays a disproportionate price for his youthful vanity in the form of lifelong exile among people with whom he feels no affinity; Awinita is condemned to a life of sexual slavery and to the loss of her children by the poverty of native American peoples in 1950s Canada; Milo's early childhood, mostly starved of love and care, is graphically rendered and painful to read, and leaves him with a dark core of depression ('le Trou noir' (*DN*, p. 267)) that, for the most part, he sublimates in creative work, sex and capoeira.

Thus the novel operates that familiar power of fiction to make the reader care about non-existent people, in part through granting more intimate access to their thoughts and feelings than life normally allows. The experience of being ‘immersed’ in the imaginary world is heightened too by a sense of place, or the provision of a plausible textual geography that both produces what Barthes termed ‘l’effet de réel’<sup>17</sup> and can give form to the reader’s often inchoate emotions, providing an affective mapping or in Bachelard’s phrase a ‘topographie de notre être intime’.<sup>18</sup> *Danse noire*’s world encompasses Dublin and Rio de Janeiro, though it is Quebec, and above all Montreal, in which the three narrative strands converge. Dublin appears first as a misty grey city, cosy and affluent in the bourgeois quarters where Neil’s family lives, grimy and sordid in the poorer neighbourhoods, and tense with rebellion and the presence of armed British troops. After Neil’s enforced exile to Canada, Dublin becomes the site of his nostalgic longings, distant, absent and suffused with the vague romance of a lost homeland. Quebec by contrast signifies exile and from Neil’s perspective it is the cold of the winters and the barren ‘vastitude inhabitée’ (*DN*, p. 195) of its rural hinterland that characterizes the province. For Awinita and the young Milo, Quebec is perceived not as a place on the world’s map but simply as the world into which they are born, its meanings dependent on situation. Awinita’s Montreal is confined to the seedy cafe in which she waits for clients, and the grubby room upstairs where she undergoes sex with them: if the city opens out briefly when she visits the park on the Île St-Hélène with Declan (Neil’s son and Awinita’s lover), it soon closes in again. But when the teenage Milo runs away from school and attempts to find his mother the city is seen from the hills above, spread out before Milo’s dazzled eyes: Montreal becomes magical, a Shangri-La of maternal presence that will never be reached: ‘miroitante et scintillante dans la douceur rose-mauve de l’aube printanière [...], elle s’étale depuis la montagne en son coeur jusqu’aux longs bras du fleuve qui la tiennent en une étreinte serrée...’ (*DN*, p. 329). The sparkling city contrasts dramatically with

another space in Milo's emotional life, that of the dark cupboards into which he is repeatedly shut as punishment for some perceived childish misdemeanour. The cupboards are oppressively silent, terrifying places within what should be the protective maternal space of the house, and they produce in Milo a form of resistance that internalizes his prison and transforms it into an inner refuge: 'Il construit dans sa tête un placard plus sombre encore, y pénètre de son plein gré et verrouille la porte derrière lui.' (*DN*, p. 99) 'Peu à peu, Milo, ce placard intérieur deviendra ta carapace. Il te protégera toute ta vie.' (*DN*, p. 100) Specific, real-life locations anchor the fiction in extra-textual reality, whilst the protagonists' experience of place, imbued with affect, potentially evokes readers' own experiences of generic human emotions: nostalgia and exile, desolation, yearning for lost maternal love, terror and retreat into the self.

The vivid depiction of place, like characterization through appearance, verbal style and situation, is a standard technique of realist fiction. But *Danse noire* is also an elaborately structured novel that employs several devices to impede the reader's total immersion in the fictional world and – to use Ryan's 'amphibian' analogy – make us 'resurface'. First, Huston's characteristic use of language switching is here pushed to the extreme, at least in the original French version of the novel, to the point of (arguably) 'obstruct[ing] the monolingual and bilingual reader's understanding of the text'.<sup>19</sup> Though predominantly narrated in French, the French-Canadian dialect of *joual* is also rendered phonetically, and a considerable amount of dialogue is given in English, with footnotes providing a French translation, and additional minor use of German and Portuguese according to the logic of the plot. At a diegetic level, this gives some sense of the characters' own, sometimes disorienting, occupation of a multi-lingual world, but the jolt of (at least temporary) incomprehension certainly interrupts the fictional illusion by demanding attention to the linguistic surface of the text. However the techniques that I want to analyze here concern less the language(s) than the elaborate

narrative framing of *Danse noire*. They are firstly the conceit of presenting the story as a planned film scenario, secondly the use of capoeira as an intricate analogy both for the novel's narrative structure and for the values it affirms, and thirdly the *mise-en-abyme*, through the diegetic importance of storytelling, of the novel's own demonstration of the salutary pleasures of fiction.

*Danse noire* is narrated intra-diegetically as an imagined film scenario. The primary diegesis places the character Paul Schwarz, a film producer who is both Milo's professional partner and his lover, at Milo's deathbed: Milo, now a successful scriptwriter, is dying of AIDS-related illness. Paul addresses his (we gather) mostly unconscious lover as he verbally sketches out his plan for a film that will tell the story of Milo's life and origins: if the narrative voice returns regularly to the second-person 'tu' ('T'en fais pas, Milo, c'est moi qui me mettrai au clavier cette fois-ci' (*DN*, p. 13), it is the third person that predominates as Paul conjures up, in the present tense of cinema, the sequences of his film. If Paul's reflections on narrative choices (point of view, fast or slow editing, soundtrack) have a distancing effect, the scenario technique also produces a graphically visual and aural form of storytelling. When we first meet the young Neil returning home in the misty Dublin dawn, his version of his first, drunken sexual experience in a brothel is recounted in voice-over, in italics in the text, whilst, Paul proposes, the dissonance of this account with what really happened is revealed 'à travers une série de flashbacks rapides' (*DN*, p. 22), narrated in the third person. Neil's account of a cavalier subjection of the prostitute to his pleasure is followed by the unmediated narration of the reality: a sordid setting, his nervous fear and her disdainful expertise. In the elliptical style of film, simple juxtaposition replaces discursive connection between events.

Paul's scenario then is to include inner as well as outer worlds. If Neil's self-conscious literarity is rendered through voice-over, Milo's inner life from its pre-linguistic stage on is rendered through an alternation of 'caméra objective et subjective' (*DN*, p. 39), so that the

baby Milo, for example, is observed externally, ‘un bébé maigre et hurlant, crispé et agité’ (*DN*, p. 39), whilst the loveless efficiency of the public hospital to which he has been abandoned is rendered through the ‘voix de femmes, stridentes ou rauques’, he hears, and the ‘Air sec. Néant retentissant. Talons qui claquent au loin’ (*DN*, p. 40) that contrast cruelly with the ‘tiédeur liquide, doux bercements rythmés’ of the womb from which he has just emerged. The technique of the subjective camera, with its positioning of the spectator/reader inside the protagonist’s consciousness, is however used most consistently and explicitly for Awinita’s story. ‘Caméra subjective. [...] Nous sommes Awinita, nous sommes la femme; toujours dans ces séquences nous serons elle.’ (*DN*, p. 27) The desolation of submitting her body to the endless series of clients, many of them rough, contemptuous, racist, is seen always from Awinita’s perspective, and the use of animation, in Paul’s planned film, also gives access to the fantasised images into which she mentally escapes and which, under the influence of heroin, turn nightmarish. The decision to grant to the novel (and film)’s most humiliated, socially despised character the dignity of being always subject, never object, is an ethical one, underlined by the fictional film director’s explicit choice. The film soundtrack works as an effective narrative device: the track to Awinita’s life is that of ‘Une braguette qui descend. Un homme qui pisse dans la cuvette des W-C. [...] Bruits de porte, grincements rythmiques de sommier... Fermetures à glissière. Boucles de ceintures. Grogement d'un orgasme masculin’ (*DN*, p. 65), which rapidly become shorthand for the oppressive repetition of the brothel, interspersed nonetheless with brief reminders of Awinita’s origins, resistant sense of self, and legacy to the child she will be forced to abandon. An insistent rhythm runs through the novel (and the film) like a refrain: Ta, ta-da **Da**, Ta, ta-da **Da**. Expressive of the drums of capoeira, and of its roots in both African and First Nations American culture, this recurring rhythm pierces through the grim soundtrack of Awinita’s life, and echoes in Milo’s memory as a sensory trace of maternal presence.

The present tense, strongly visual imagery and sound effects of film thus translate into vivid written narrative, even as Paul's interspersed commentary on the choices to be made maintain awareness of the selective, creative process of narration. Self-reflexivity is normally defined as a distancing effect, as part of the panoply of modernist devices that undermine, and implicitly critique, realism's pull toward suspension of disbelief, but the technique of the film scenario here underlines the active role of the reader without seriously impeding a sense of immersion in the novel's fictional world. Moreover, this dimension of *Danse noire* accentuates the ethical function that Huston attributes to fiction. For Paul Schwarz, scrupulous attention to how to tell the story is an act of love: narrative choices give form to his intense empathy with the abandoned little boy, the renegade adolescent and the adult Milo, creative, sensual and shadowed by depression. Thus the narrative constructs for the reader a relationship of empathetic identification whilst explicitly characterizing this as a 'geste intrinsèquement moral' (*PD*, p. 267), a gesture of care and concern for the other.

The novel's ethical dimension is also central to *Danse noire*'s use of capoeira as an organizing principle, a thematic motif and a literal element of the story. Capoeira is a form of dance that is also a mode of unarmed combat. Like the novel, it connects history across continents and centuries: developed by people of African descent, transported to colonial Brazil as slaves, its precise history is still being researched, but it was certainly both a means of self-expression, of sustaining and transmitting a culture at once ancestral and self-created, and a type of combat based on feint and mobility. Its potential as a fighting technique was developed when slaves escaped and formed resistant communities, *quilombos*, which also welcomed native Brazilians in flight from colonial Portuguese troops, and even some Europeans fleeing the law or religious oppression. Capoeira has also become a very popular contemporary dance form, so that for many (a majority of?) readers, the word conjures up at

least loose images of white-clad figures performing powerfully graceful acrobatic moves to the rhythms of Latino music.

Each of the book's ten parts is given a title relating to capoeira, Portuguese words briefly glossed in French. Part IV, for example, is placed under the sign of *Malicia*, 'L'essence même de la capoeira, (...) permet au capoeiriste de voir les côtés les plus obscurs de l'être humain et de la société sans perdre sa joie de vivre' (*DN*, p. 97), and contains some of the novel's more painful scenes which, indeed, the protagonists survive with the will to live intact. In this section Milo as a small child undergoes repeated abandonment and cruelty; Neil experiences rejection by both family and friends and realises the inevitability of his exile from Ireland; Awinita suffers a painful labour and the scornful indifference of medical staff in the public hospital, as she gives birth to her first child, a daughter, and immediately sees her taken away for adoption. The rhythm of the drum that accompanies the capoeira dance (Ta, ta-da **Da**, ta, ta-da **Da**), as we have seen, weaves through Awinita's mental soundtrack and passes to Milo, forming his 'appel de cœur, appel de racines, le rythme de la voix de [s]a mere' (*DN*, p. 15). Within the plot, Milo encounters the practice of capoeira in his twenties: now a successful screen-writer, he travels to Brazil with a film crew, and immediately recognizes the rhythm and the art of capoeira as 'ce que tu cherchais depuis toujours' (*DN*, p. 286). Both the formal and the diegetic importance of capoeira are thus strongly foregrounded, and it would be hard to read the book without considering its significance.

Capoeira, in the novel at least, works not through cerebral reflection but rather through movement of and between bodies. It configures an attitude to life and a way of relating to others, or to the Other. First, the condition of its enactment is the *roda* or circle of participating onlookers that forms around the dancers/combatants – this is a collective, communicative activity in which watchers establish the rhythm, encourage and applaud, potentially take their turn and join in. The individual dancer's performance is inseparable

from the collective, just as personal stories are inseparable from History. Second, the model it enacts of relation to the other is not aggressive: the whole art lies in demonstrating the possibility of landing a kick or blow in order to renounce its realization and to refuse violence. It is an expression of controlled and powerful resistance, not of attack, and its beauty depends on the interplay between two graceful resisters, thus on appreciation of the other's strength and skill. 'Pas de gagnant ni de perdant à ce jeu, seulement le jeu lui-même, un jeu sans fin dans lequel on veut que son adversaire soit fort et malin, pas faible et bête' (*DN*, p. 286). So the dance embodies a generous and reciprocal model of self/other relations, but it also expresses the individual's need for self-protection rather than total openness and hence vulnerability. The novel demonstrates that the world is a place of cruelty and destruction as well as joy and creativity, and if capoeira's deployment of feint, deception, strength through self-control is so immediately recognisable to Milo, it is because he has learned painfully to protect the core of himself from hostile others. The dance pulses through him, carrying the heartbeat rhythm and ancestral memories that connect him to his mother, but also giving form to that self-protective fatalism that others interpret as passivity, but that is really 'ni inconscience, ni passivité, c'est capoeira. Absence de peur et de jalousie, ouverture d'esprit, curiosité, indifférence, tous tes traits découlent de l'attitude capoeira' (*DN*, pp. 15–16).

Capoeira is thus a form of corporeal knowledge, an embodied philosophy represented in the novel both discursively and through the diegesis. This emphasis on the body is part of Huston's sustained project as a writer to refute the cerebral bias of much Western philosophy and literature, and to insist that human beings are not free minds unfortunately trapped in the material 'en-soi' of a body, but profoundly material beings, shaped in part by genetic heredity, by biological sex,<sup>20</sup> and over time by the uses to which bodies are put. She can not be accused of simple biological determinism – as she wrote of the sex into which we are born,

‘on naît bel et bien fille ou garçon, et ensuite ... ça se travaille!’ (*ROH*, p. 295), but she lambasts the current of Western thought that finds the human condition demeaning and tragic because locked into a mortal body:<sup>21</sup> the emphasis on generational inheritance in some of her more recent novels (*Lignes de faille* as well as this one) translates into fictional form the insistence in her non-fictional writing on ‘dealing with what’s dealt’,<sup>22</sup> or recognizing that human freedom is shaped and boundaried by ‘the hand one is dealt at life’s outset’<sup>23</sup> of which physicality is a major part. Through capoeira, *Danse noire* represents a philosophy developed, lived and handed down not through words but through the body. Capoeira represents through movement both the necessity of self-protection, of wariness and resistance, and the expansive joy of opening out to the world and others through a controlled but exuberant gracefulness. It exemplifies that fusion of lucid awareness of human cruelty with undiminished joy in life that characterises Huston’s work.<sup>24</sup>

*Joie-de-vivre* is one of the emotions graphically embodied in capoeira, and vividly conveyed through the verbal depiction of capoeira in the text. Huston’s writing, here as elsewhere, celebrates the power of fiction to simulate sensory experience through language. If readers can not all take up the demanding physical art of capoeira, they can experience its urgent sensory power through the entrancement of fiction:

Levant le pied, tu frôles le visage de ton adversaire puis tournes, la beauté consiste à le manquer de très peu, s’il danse bien il sentira le coup venir et sera prêt à l’éviter, te déséquilibrer et te menacer à son tour avec grâce, la musique vous tire vers l’avant tandis que vous regardez, esquivez, balancez, pivotez et plongez, vous dandinant à chaque seconde, et quand vient la fin de votre tour, cédant la place... (*DN*, p. 285)

Immersion, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, is ‘the mode of reading of an embodied mind’,<sup>25</sup> in which virtual experience produces sensations and emotions extremely close to those of lived reality. This experience is not only provided by the novel, but also depicted within it. As in most of Huston’s fiction, the value attributed by the text itself to the creative, attentive act of narration finds echoes within the diegetic world, where stories are frequently a source of emotional warmth and offer a refuge from loneliness and pain. Milo’s only good foster home lends him a mother, Sara, who takes care of him, values him – and reads to him, providing him with a love of stories that will endure after her premature death. ‘Les mots imprimés le transportent au pays de la liberté, les histoires font vibrionner son esprit. L’important c’est de décoller de ce monde et de s’envoler loin, loin, loin...’ (*DN*, p. 102). Neil is the *failed* writer, longing to reach the poetic and storytelling heights of Yeats or Joyce but constantly frustrated by circumstance and by his own limited creativity. But reading provides him with some escape from the pain of exile, and it is Neil who fosters Milo’s love of books and finds in him a receptive listener to his stories of Ireland and his youth, so that this legacy is not entirely lost. It is entirely within the logic of the novel that Milo’s brutish, jealous cousins, also Neil’s grandsons, should celebrate Neil’s death by making a bonfire of the library he had left to Milo, in a futile if wounding effort to erase the bond they could neither understand nor share. The bonfire of the books also unavoidably evokes historical attempts – most notoriously, that of the Nazis – to destroy the creative, subversive power of the human imagination. The novel both performs and thematizes the power of literature to affirm human creativity and breach the boundaries of individual selfhood. Like the non-verbal art of capoeira (and in part through its depiction), literature is cast as a gesture of resistance and challenge to the opposing forces of close-mindedness, egoism and tyranny.

## **Conclusion**

As this analysis has shown, *Danse noire* is a formidably complex novel in which the pleasure and entrancement of the story are at some risk of subordination to the self-reflexive sophistication of the text. If fiction always demands of the reader an ‘amphibian’ adaptability, the danger here is of being pulled so repeatedly to the surface that re-immersion in the fictional ‘sea’ becomes impossible, and some critical responses to the novel register precisely this. My reading suggests rather the intricate interdependence in this novel of immersion and self-reflexivity. I have argued that here, as more widely in her fiction, Nancy Huston’s literary project is to carry the reader in imagination into other times and places, and especially into other subjectivities, whilst making us see and share in the process of shaping life into narrative. For some readers, including this one, this is not only an eminently worthwhile undertaking but also one in which she largely succeeds. The de-immersive effect of a multi-lingual text depends in part on the reader’s own degree of ease in switching between languages, but other techniques are less dependent on individual situation. The framing of the story as a film scenario lends the plot a present-tense immediacy, an elliptical tautness in the juxtaposition of scenes and the notation of soundtrack, and a manipulation of point of view that is powerfully immersive even as it draws attention to the ethical charge of empathizing with a subjectivity other than our own. Capoeira forms a multi-layered but profoundly apt analogy for the philosophy that enables Milo, arguably the novel’s hero, to survive the brutalities of his life, and that also informs the novel as a whole. To be reminded of the transcendent potential of imaginative fiction even as one experiences it is a form of ‘interactivity’ that can coexist happily with immersive reading.

*Danse noire* is an ambitious novel, in terms of both narrative technique and moral scope. Its immersive dimension eloquently affirms our human capacity to go beyond the confines of the self through empathy and imagination. Meanwhile, self-reflexivity, or the engagement of the reader in the process of shaping and patterning the real, affirms the

heartening possibility of composing from the heterogeneous muddle of contingent life what Ricoeur calls ‘concordance’,<sup>26</sup> and Frank Kermode ‘kairos’<sup>27</sup> a ‘transformation of mere successiveness’ into meaningful order, or in other words a humanizing of time. Huston’s fiction carries a charge of optimism even as it deals with the most painful experience. Even where her world is at its darkest, storytelling itself – like the dance of capoeira – provides a provisional sense of meaning, hope and beauty.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Huston, *Danse noire* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2013 [2014]).

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Huston, *Professeurs de désespoir* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2004 [2006]), p. 267, adapted.

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, ‘Nancy Huston’s *Danse noire*’, CUNY Academic Works (2014), p. 6, <[http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_pubs/46](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/46)> [accessed 25 August 2016].

<sup>5</sup> Monique Verdussen, ‘Les voix et les voies de Nancy Huston’, *La Libre.be*, 9 September 2013, para. 2, <<http://www.lalibre.be/culture/livres-bd/les-voix-et-les-voies-de-nancy-huston-522d886f35703d8e48d2ceef>> [accessed 25 August 2016].

<sup>6</sup> Waite, ‘Nancy Huston’s Polyglot Texts’, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Comments respectively by ‘Sando’ and ‘Le Bison’, <<http://www.babelio.com/livres/Huston-Danse-noire/497360>> [accessed 30 March 2017].

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Huston, *L’Espèce fabulatrice* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2008), p.183.

<sup>9</sup> Both Atlantic Books and Penguin Random House have responded to demand by publishing Reader’s guides (designed to support reading groups) for Huston novels; see <<http://prhcom.cloud.prh.com/books/84691/the-mark-of-the-angel-by-nancy-huston/readers-guide>; <http://atlantic-books.co.uk/content/notes-reading-groups>>

---

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Huston, *Instruments des ténèbres* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Huston, *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 1998), p.10.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Huston, *Dolce agonia* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Huston, *Une adoration* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2003), p. 11; p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, p. 351.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Huston, *Lignes de faille* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, 'L'Effet de réel', *Communications*, 11.1 (1968), pp. 84–9.

<[http://www.persee.fr/doc/comm\\_0588-8018\\_1968\\_num\\_11\\_1\\_1158](http://www.persee.fr/doc/comm_0588-8018_1968_num_11_1_1158)> [accessed 19 August 2016].

<sup>18</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958), p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Genevieve Waite, 'Nancy Huston's Polyglot Texts: Linguistic Limits and Transgressions', *L2 Journal*, 7:1 (2015), p. 9, <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85w679q0>> [accessed 8 August 2016].

<sup>20</sup> Huston's essay *Reflets dans un œil d'homme* (Arles: Actes Sud; Montreal: Leméac, 2012) was severely critiqued by many feminists, despite its author's feminist credentials, because of its insistence on sexual difference. Huston argues that to completely deny the reality of men and women's biological hence psychological differences, grounded in the reproductive instinct, is to indulge in a form of 'Promethean pride' that ignores humans' 'continuité avec le monde animal' (p. 77) and causes damage to both sexes.

<sup>21</sup> *Professeurs de désespoir* ironically summarizes this widespread (and predominantly male) horror of the body, evident for example in Schopenhauer, Beckett, Kundera, Houellebecq: 'A quoi est due cette hideur de la vie? La réponse est prévisible: elle vient de *l'existence*

---

*physique*. Ah! si seulement nous n'étions pas vivants, c'est-à-dire mortels et pourrissants!' (PD, p. 283).

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Huston, 'Dealing with what's dealt', *Salmagundi*, 106–7, (1995).

<sup>23</sup> 'Dealing with what's dealt', pp. 268–69.

<sup>24</sup> In her article 'Novels and Navels', Huston's quotation from feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* nicely expresses a philosophy that informs her own fiction, that of 'a matter-of-fact willingness to accept having given birth, to start and start over again, to welcome a future despite conditions of one's self, one's children, one's society and nature that may be reasons for despair.' (Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p.74; Nancy Huston, 'Novels and Navels', *Critical Inquiry*, 21:4, (1995), pp. 708–21 (p. 711)).

<sup>25</sup> Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, p. 355.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit I* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 47.