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# Nancy Huston's Polyglot Texts: Linguistic Limits and Transgressions

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Throughout her career, Nancy Huston has both accepted and transgressed the limits of bilingualism. *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998), *The Mark of the Angel* (2000), *Danse noire* (2013), and *Black Dance* (2014) are five texts that demonstrate Huston's diverse use of polyglot writing. While *Limbes / Limbo* is characterized by its use of bilingual writing and self-translation, *L'empreinte de l'ange* and *The Mark of the Angel* possess monolingual narratives accompanied by five different languages. By contrast, whereas *Danse noire* presents self-translations and multilingual dialogues within three alternating narratives, *Black Dance* demonstrates a less intense use of multilingualism. What, then, can be said about Huston's use of multiple languages? And what are the stakes of this unique, multilingual style? In view of these five texts, this study will examine the benefits and disadvantages of Huston's polyglot writing. Moreover, it will expose the linguistic limits for the "readerly" experience of Huston's work. When used minimally or as a form of bilingual self-translation, Huston's presentation of foreign languages enhances her narratives. When used excessively, or as a way to dominate the text, however, this multilingualism impedes the reader's comprehension of the narrative. In navigating these inter-lingual limits and transgressions, this study will uncover some of the linguistic problems and solutions inherent in Huston's work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *Les variations Goldberg* in 1981, Nancy Huston has established her reputation as an important contemporary literary figure in France. Writing in French and English and self-translating her work into both languages, Huston has published many short stories, novels, plays, and essays that have won a variety of literary awards both within and outside of France, including the Prix du Gouverneur Général, the Prix Louis-Hémon, the Prix Canada-Suisse, the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens, and the Prix Femina.

Throughout her career, Huston has both accepted and transgressed the limits of bilingualism. Indeed, *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998), *The Mark of the Angel* (2000), *Danse noire* (2013), and *Black Dance* (2014) are five texts that exemplify Huston's varied use of multilingual writing. While *Limbes / Limbo* presents a hybrid form of bilingual writing and self-translation (Danby, 2004, p. 84), *L'empreinte de l'ange* and Huston's English translation, *The Mark of the Angel*, offer monolingual narratives interspersed with five different languages. By contrast, while *Danse noire* presents three parallel, alternating narratives with intra-textual self-translations and multilingual dialogues, *Black Dance*, Huston's recent self-translation of *Danse noire*, returns to a more moderate level of multilingualism.

What, therefore, can be said about Huston's use of multiple languages? And what are the stakes of her unusual, polyglot style? This examination of Huston's five texts will discuss the benefits and disadvantages of her polyglot writing. More specifically, it will expose the multilingual threshold for the "readerly" experience of Huston's fiction. When used moderately or within the context of bilingual self-translation, Huston's use of foreign languages enriches her narratives. When used too frequently, or as a means to dominate and stylize the text, however, this multilingualism becomes detrimental to the reader's understanding of the narrative. In navigating these inter-lingual limits and transgressions, this study will illuminate some of the linguistic problems and solutions inherent in Huston's work.

### LINGUISTIC SOLUTIONS AND "READERLY" ACCESSIBILITY IN *LIMBES / LIMBO*

What is the nature of Huston's multilingual writing? In *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), Huston provides the reader with an engaging work of self-translation that is divided into two parallel English and French narratives. While the English version of the text appears in italics on the left-hand side of the page, the French version appears in standard typeface on the right-hand side of the page, allowing the monolingual and bilingual reader to navigate successfully through the text. Samuel Beckett himself would have agreed that "form *is* content, content *is* form" (Beckett, 1929, p. 10) in *Limbes / Limbo* since Huston strikes an exceptional balance between content and form while providing interesting translations which, for the bilingual reader, enhance and re-inform both versions of the text. In fact, according to Nicola Danby, *Limbes / Limbo* is a mode of "simultaneous bilingual writing" that "teeters on the edge between bilingual writing and self-translation" (2004, p. 84).

Designed to honor Beckett's "practice and life lived in limbo, or in the space between the two languages" (Danby, 2004, p. 84), *Limbes/Limbo* (1998) also reflects Huston's personal struggle with language and identity. While the cultural and linguistic "limbo" inherent within this work presents an isolated sense of division and "space between" Huston's mastery of French and English, it also seems, at times, to create a new kind of reconciliation between her use of both languages (Danby, 2004, p. 85). Actually, *Limbes / Limbo's* somewhat "imperfect" translations are, for the bilingual reader, artfully crafted recreations of the text. As Jane Elisabeth Wilhelm observes, *Limbes / Limbo* is a "...fête des mots ou de la langue en l'honneur du sens et de la (re)création qu'est l'auto-traduction" ["...celebration of words or language in honor of the meaning and (re)creation that is represented by self-translation"] (Wilhelm, 2006, p. 13).

From a structural and linguistic perspective, *Limbes / Limbo* (1998) is an ideal text for the bilingual reader. A work of self-translation *par excellence*, *Limbes / Limbo* avoids presenting rigid translations that defer to a sense of "strict literalism" (Steiner, 1998, p. 266). Rather, this work offers the bilingual reader numerous playful and inventive instances of linguistic recreation in which the English and French narratives appear as different, revised versions of each other (Wilhelm, 2006, p. 12). As Julio-César Santoyo notes, "...self-translations do, at times, end up modifying their original. If the act of translating is a creative one, there is little doubt that self-translation is its most creative expression...." (2013, p. 30). With its abundant use of bilingual idioms, puns, and analogies and its frequent recourse to restatement and

interpretive parallel (Steiner, 1998, p. 266), *Limbes / Limbo* is a highly creative work of self-translation.

As a linguistically informative work of invention and recreation, *Limbes / Limbo* (1998) also exposes many problems and solutions within the act of self-translation itself. Perhaps one of the best examples can be found in the first two pages of the text: “*Get it in Ing-lish. Shoved. Wedged. Lodged in the language like a bullet in the brain. Undelodgeable. Untranslatable,*” writes Huston (p. 6). A very different and imprecise translation is then presented on the opposite page: “*¡ Caramba ! Encore raté !*” [“Rats! Failed again!”]. Here, in the French version of the text, Huston addresses the difficulties of translation and the writer’s deep frustration with self-translation. While expressing this sentiment of exasperation, Huston presents a translation that radically differs from its corresponding English text. The English translation of the French portion of the text reads as “Rats! Failed again!,” an interjection that suggests the ultimate failure of the writer/translator to provide an adequate translation of his or her work. Whereas the English version of this excerpt uses eighteen words to describe the actions and emotions associated with the act of translation, the French version only uses three words (one in Spanish, and two in French) to express the ultimate failure of this act. In terms of the “readerly” experience of the text, the monolingual and bilingual reader are both able to comprehend these first two pages with relative ease. Nevertheless, while the monolingual reader perceives the inherent meaning of these individual passages as they relate to the difficulties of translation, it is really the bilingual reader who is fully able to appreciate the comparative, metaphorical, and figurative techniques used in both translations.

Similar to this first dramatically transfigured translation, Huston takes many other linguistic liberties throughout *Limbes / Limbo* (1998) that may be overlooked by the monolingual reader. Often, Huston prefers to navigate between specific cultural references, rather than to provide exacting literal translations. On page eight, for instance, Huston writes, “Close the way Miss Muffet is close to the spider,” for which she provides a different cultural reference in her French translation: “Proche... comme le Petit Chaperon rouge est proche du loup.” [“Close... just as Little Red Riding Hood is close to the wolf”] (p. 9). Even though “le Petit Chaperon rouge” (Little Red Riding Hood) is an imprecise translation of “Miss Muffet,” both quotes refer to traditional childhood fairy tales with female protagonists who are threatened by their respective enemies. While the monolingual reader appreciates Huston’s clever use of analogy here, he or she cannot as easily reflect upon the discrepancies between these two translations.

Regarding the use of cultural idioms, towards the beginning of the text, Huston presents a series of distinct quotes and colloquial expressions. For example, the English quotes from Shakespeare and the American film/musical *Bye Bye Birdie* (“Out, out, brief candle!” and “Bye-bye birdie!” on page 12) are translated into French as “Salut les mecs!” [“Goodbye guys!”] on page 13. These two English phrases are thus combined and translated into one single French expression. According to George Steiner’s description of seventeenth century translation theory (which Steiner deems as being “widely useful” and appropriate to modern theories of translation), this transmutation is exemplary of a typical “third class” of translation: “The third class is that of imitation, recreation, variation, interpretive parallel. It covers a large, diffuse area, extending from transpositions of the original into a more accessible idiom all the way to the freest, perhaps only allusive or parodistic echoes” (Steiner, 1998, p. 266). In this case, Huston uses her own sense of interpretive recreation to offer a translation that falls somewhere between Steiner’s image of an “accessible idiom” and an

“allusive” echo. Yet perhaps these bilingual idioms can be most closely associated with Walter Benjamin’s philosophic vision of translation: “Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity” (1986, p. 325). Within this context, Huston’s translations appear to be a product of continual transformation and revision rather than of adherence to exacting notions of identity and similarity.

At times, Huston’s translations extend beyond the realm of cultural and phonetic transfigurations. In fact, she often inserts words that remain untranslated in her French and English narratives. On page 17 of *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), for instance, Huston provides three French words, “Crac. Oblitérer. Oublier,” [“Crack. Obliterate. Forget,”] as a translation for the four English words that are presented on page 16: “Thump. Whump. Obliterate. Oblivion.” Here, “Obliterate” and “Oblivion” are the only words that are accurately translated from English into French, and the words “Crac” (crack), “Thump,” and “Whump,” are left untranslated. Likewise, on page 18, Huston translates the words “Stopped. Stilled. Stunned. Stone” as “Stoppé. Sonné. Stupéfié. Ligoté. Etranglé” [“Stopped. Knocked out. Stupefied. Tied up. Strangled.”] (p. 19). In this section, “Stopped” and “Stunned” are the only two words that are translated into French. Moreover, Huston provides five French words as a translation for the four words that are presented in her English text. The words “Stoppé. Sonné. Stupéfié. Ligoté. Etranglé” then appear as an extension, and not as a precise, literal translation of the corresponding English narrative.

Occasionally, these linguistic transgressions cause very dramatic changes to the text. For example, on page 25, Huston adds five new onomatopoeias to her French narrative (“Boum badaboum badaboum boum boum”), which she fails to present in her English narrative. In these instances, the monolingual English and French reader experience two very different readings of the same text. In fact, these particular self-translations offer two distinct versions of the narrative that are again rendered more accessible to the bilingual reader. According to Julio-César Santoyo, such “authorial” liberty is quite common in the work of self-translators. Santoyo writes, “[Authorial liberty]... puts its stamp on the translated text, making it a second original, creating a very particular play of mirrors... and, most importantly, establishing a dynamic relationship between the original and its specular image” (Santoyo, 2013, p. 29). Here, however, Huston’s game of mirrors has refracted her words away from their original point of origin. The language is bent, deformed, and rendered visible only to the observant bilingual reader.

Yet *Limbes / Limbo* (1998) does not always reflect Huston’s creative, “authorial” liberties taken as a self-translator. At times, her text expresses the limits of language through silence and instances of the “untranslatable.” In an autobiographical essay entitled “The Mask and the Pen,” from *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, Huston confesses, “The problem, of course, is that languages are not only languages. They are also worldviews—and therefore, to a great extent, untranslatable... And in a way, if you have more than one worldview, in a sense you really *have* none” (2009, p. 66). In light of this statement, it seems that *Limbes / Limbo*’s (1998) opposing translations are also reflective of Huston’s opposing worldviews. These bicultural worldviews (of France and North America, respectively), in turn, would then explain certain untranslatable moments within her text. On this imperfect nature of translation, George Steiner notes, “The ideal [translation], never accomplished, is one of total counterpart or re-petition... No such perfect ‘double’ exists.

But the ideal makes explicit the demand for equity in the hermeneutic process.” (Steiner, 1998, p. 318).

In fact, *Limbes / Limbo* (1998) does not present a perfect linguistic “double” of itself. Rather, Huston provides what appear to be enriching and enlightening extensions of both versions of the text. As Raymond Federman observes, the act of self-translation not only “enlightens,” “reassures,” and “reasserts” the knowledge presented in the original source text, but it also can occasionally correct the errors of the original text (1996, para. #16). For Federman, as for Huston, self-translation “...is no longer an approximation of the original, nor a duplication, nor a substitute, but truly a continuation of the work—of the working of the text” (1996, para. #16).

How is humor translated in *Limbes / Limbo* (1998)? In order to preserve an appropriate level of humor in both languages, Huston often presents the reader with a variety of bilingual puns and double entendres. For instance, while joking about the “fascistic” nature of language, Huston writes, “...it forces you to specify... What tense. The present is very tense” (1998, p. 34). On the opposite page, Huston provides a slightly altered translation that offers a different sense of humor in French: “...elle oblige à dire... Quel temps. (*Sale !*) Le présent, si vite passé” [“...it forces you to say... What tense. (*Bad weather!*) The present is so quickly passed.”] Here, although the word “temps” possesses an ambiguous meaning in French (“temps” can be translated into English as “tense,” “weather,” or “time”), the English pun about the present being “very tense” is dramatically contrasted to its alternate French pun, “The present is so quickly passed.” While the bilingual reader is able to admire the clever linguistic nuances of double entendre in both English and French, the monolingual reader is only able to appreciate Huston’s unilingual use of wordplay.

Because Huston frequently inserts bilingual *jeux de mots*, foreign words, and cross-cultural references into both translations, the monolingual reader occasionally encounters difficulties understanding the cultural, linguistic, and intellectual complexities of the text. On page 24, for example, Huston presents a pun (translated in both the English and French versions of the text) that is specifically adapted to the bilingual reader: “If you keep on laughing we’ll rip out your spleen. Where exactly is the spleen, anyhow? I smell a rat.” On the opposite page, she then uses bilingual word play to re-inform her French text: “Si vous riez, c’est la rate que l’on arrachera. Où elle est d’ailleurs, la rate ? Il y a un os.” [“If you keep on laughing, we’ll rip out your spleen. By the way, where is the rat? There’s a bone.”] Here, the words “rat” and “rate” (which means both “spleen” and “rat” in French) are presented as phonetic equivalents in English and French, and the words “rate,” “rat,” and “spleen,” are used as clever and informative puns that are translated phonetically and/or literally in both bilingual versions of the text. Unable to recognize the bilingual and intra-textual link between the words “spleen,” “rate,” and “rat,” the monolingual reader cannot easily appreciate Huston’s bilingual sense of humor.

Despite *Limbes / Limbo’s* (1998) linguistic discrepancies and varying levels of accessibility to the monolingual and bilingual reader (the title’s subscript indicates that the text is an “Édition bilingue” [“Bilingual Edition”]), both the English and French translations of the text appear as two equally creative and engaging narratives. Indeed, Huston is able to use her strong familiarity with both languages to create clever translations that reflect instances of inter-lingual and intra-lingual (a.k.a. rewording) translation (Jakobson, 2003, p. 79). As Huston herself once observed, “Bilingualism is an endless source of intellectual stimulation,”

(2009, p. 64) and *Limbes / Limbo* certainly epitomizes this heightened sense of intellectual awareness.

## MULTILINGUAL HARMONY IN *THE MARK OF THE ANGEL* AND *L'EMPREINTE DE L'ANGE*

In comparison to *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), *The Mark of the Angel* (2000) exemplifies Huston's more common approach to multilingualism; to a central monolingual narrative, Huston adds parsimonious instances of foreign words and phrases, which include German, Hungarian, Latin, Italian, and French. Likewise, in *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998), the original French version of the text, Huston presents sporadic instances of German, Italian, English, Hungarian, and Latin to a monolingual, French narrative. Similar to *Limbes / Limbo*'s bilingual translations, both *The Mark of the Angel* (2000) and *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998) appear as two slightly revised versions of the same text. In addition to altering or omitting certain words and passages from *L'empreinte de l'ange*,<sup>1</sup> for example, Huston occasionally incorporates new French words and expressions into the narrative of *The Mark of the Angel*.<sup>2</sup> Besides references to French songs, names, and street locations, Huston uses the French language sparingly in *The Mark of the Angel* to describe art –“the blueing bronze haut-relief of Leda being triumphantly raped by the god of gods who's metamorphosed into a swan” (pp. 16-17), to create cultural authenticity and awareness, and to preserve certain untranslatable French homophones such as “mairie” [“town hall”] and “marié” [“married”] (p. 47). With such a sparse use of multilingualism, the monolingual and bilingual reader are able to follow the narrative thread of the text with relative ease.

Since Saffie (the main female protagonist of both novels) is German, Huston also incorporates various German words, expressions, and excerpts into both *The Mark of the Angel* (2000) and *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998). In fact, when referring to songs, childhood memories, and the events of World War II, Huston uses German words and expressions to construct a more genuine sense of time, place, and identity. Describing one of Saffie's memories of Germany during the war, Huston writes, “The wind kept tearing the sheets out of their hands before they could pin them to the clothesline, and they'd run to pick them up on the lawn... then hang them up again, all the while singing together in harmony, *Kommt ein Vogel geflogen* [*A Bird Comes A-flying*]...” (2000, p. 83). In this narration, which corresponds to page 74 of *L'empreinte de l'ange*, Saffie recalls a childhood memory related to the events of World War II, the image of her mother, and the melodic qualities of the German language. In this particular example, the German language is used to express the words to a familiar old song from Saffie's childhood. Once again, because of the relative scarcity of multilingual writing within this section, the monolingual and bilingual reader of both novels experience a strong level of comfort with the text.

The calming effect of language and song (as a contrast to the brutal and traumatic reality of war) reappears on page 90 of *The Mark of the Angel* (2000), when Saffie recalls an image of her mother singing another German song to her two-month-old son Peter:

<sup>1</sup> Compare p. 73, 97, and 162 of *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998) to p. 82, 113, and 199 of *The Mark of the Angel* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 11, 16, 28, 30, 37, 42, 47, 61, and 179 of Nancy Huston, *The Mark of the Angel* (London: Vintage, 2000).

...*Köpfchen in das Wasser, Schwänzchen in die Höh...* [*Little Heads in the Water, Little Tails in the Air...*] no, the humming vibration you feel in *Mutti's* flesh comes from her song, not from the bombers, but then there's no denying it any longer, what they hear behind the song is indeed the familiar drone—and then—here it comes—a long whistle and the night sky explodes into fireworks... (2000, p. 90)

In this excerpt, which corresponds to p. 79 of *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998), Saffie's dream-like memory is vividly associated with the sights and sounds of war. The safe, calming sound of the mother singing to her son is suddenly transformed into a humming drone-like vibration that culminates in a violent explosion in the night sky.

Indeed, the German language is frequently associated with the sights and sounds of World War II, and these images often manifest themselves in Saffie's dreams. Unable to sleep following Raphael's departure, Saffie experiences a series of nightmares, one of which centers around an injured enemy fighter pilot. In this dream, the injured fighter pilot bears a striking resemblance to the devil: "...Saffie realizes—it's *der Teufel*, the devil... *Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann?* Who's afraid of the big black man? He's dressed in the devil's khaki uniform but it's all filthy and torn and bloodstained, he's the one who tried to murder them in the middle of the night..." (2000, p. 100). In this passage, which can be found on page 87 of *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998), the German language is once again used to reinforce the haunting, nightmarish images of Saffie's childhood in Germany. To the monolingual and bilingual reader's convenience, Huston offers a translation (in both versions of the novel) directly after the inclusion of these German words and phrases.

In addition to German, Huston also incorporates a selection of Italian and Latin words into the narratives of *The Mark of the Angel* (2000) and *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998). Like her use of language in other novels, Huston employs the Italian and Latin languages to illustrate various concepts and idiomatic expressions related to music, mathematics, religion, and the general events of the narrative. For example, on page 27 of *The Mark of the Angel* and page 30 of *L'empreinte de l'ange*, Huston uses the Italian expression "tutti quanti" ["all the rest"] to signify the demanding objectives of Saffie's superiors. On page 86 of *The Mark of the Angel*, the Latin expression "ad nauseam" (which is translated as "à satiété" ["to satiety"]) on page 76 of *L'empreinte de l'ange* is used to emphasize the excessive number of French screenings of the Nuremberg trials and camp liberations. On page 199 of *The Mark of the Angel*, the Latin phrase "ad infinitum"<sup>3</sup> ["endlessly"] is used in a mathematical sense to demonstrate the seemingly endless and complex connections between other people's lives. Finally, on page 218 of *The Mark of the Angel* and page 176 of *L'empreinte de l'ange*, the Latin expression *sine qua non* [something that is absolutely indispensable or essential] is used to illustrate the absolute necessity of Emil's presence in maintaining Saffie's illicit love affair with Andrés. Since these words are presented sparsely throughout the body of both texts, they remain well within the multilingual threshold for the monolingual and bilingual's "readerly" experience of Huston's fiction.

Hungarian is the fifth and final language that appears in *The Mark of the Angel* (2000) and *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998). This language, however, emerges less frequently throughout these novels. In fact, "Apu" ["papa"], "Edesapa" ["father"], and "Apuka" ["daddy"] are the only three Hungarian words that appear in these texts, and Saffie and her son Emil use these

<sup>3</sup> This Latin expression is presented in French as "à l'infini" on p. 162 of *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998).



endearing words to refer to Saffie's Hungarian lover, András. Unlike the German language, which is generally used to recall past trauma and memory, Hungarian is used for more personal and affective purposes. For instance, on page 230 of *The Mark of the Angel*, Huston writes, "Emil, who had leaped to embrace [András] when they arrived—'Apuka! Edesapa!'—was unceremoniously set back down on the ground and sent out to the courtyard."<sup>4</sup> Here, in an enthusiastic display of love and affection, Saffie's son Emil calls out to András and addresses him with the affectionate, familiar Hungarian words "Apuka" ["daddy"] and "Edesapa" ["father"].

Though *The Mark of the Angel* (2000) and *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998) differ in content and structure from *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), these two texts present an equally accessible level of multilingualism for the monolingual and bilingual reader. This polyglot writing, in turn, alternates between what Meir Sternberg (1981) has defined as the three different "procedures" of translational mimesis: vehicular matching (which "...substitutes the literalness and thoroughness of reproduction for the stylization and selectivity of mimesis, quoting each speech in its original wording...") (p. 224), selective reproduction ("intermittent quotation of the original heterolingual discourse as uttered by the speaker(s)") (p. 225), and occasionally, homogenizing convention (in which the "unilingualism" of the representational medium is contrasted by the "poly- or heterolingualism of the represented object") (p. 232).

Whereas *Limbes / Limbo* (1998) provides a single, unified text written as a bilingual self-translation, *The Mark of the Angel* (2000) and *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998) use five different languages sparsely throughout an essentially monolingual text. In these latter two texts, Huston inserts instances of German, Italian, Latin, and Hungarian into monolingual narratives. Instead of overpowering the text, these additional languages provide the reader with a sense of cultural, historical, musical, and linguistic authenticity. In addition, as these languages occur infrequently, they remain well within the reader's ability to comprehend and appreciate the narrative. As a result, the multilingualism of the novel does not obstruct the overall "readerly" experience of the text.

## MULTILINGUAL DISCORD IN *DANSE NOIRE* AND *BLACK DANCE*

In contrast to *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998), and *The Mark of the Angel* (2000), *Danse noire* (2013), Huston's most recent French novel, presents a very different use of multilingualism. Written primarily in French with dialogues that alternate between French, English, and/or French-Canadian Jouis, this novel appears as an intricate and somewhat disorienting exercise in fiction. In addition to these three languages, this novel also contains various words and phrases taken from Portuguese, Italian, German, and Latin. Of these additional languages, Portuguese has the strongest presence throughout the text. In fact, *Danse noire* and Huston's corresponding self-translation, *Black Dance* (2014), both contain chapters with titles written in Portuguese that relate to a different term from the capoeira, a traditional Brazilian martial art. In addition, the rhythm and music of the capoeira appear frequently throughout these two novels (notably via the familiar, repetitive sound of the atabaque, "Ta, ta-da Da, ta, ta-da Da, ta, ta-da Da") along with other Portuguese words, such as "roda," "madingueiro," "ginga," and "toque."

<sup>4</sup> This excerpt corresponds to p. 185 of *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998).

Although *Danse noire* (2013) and *Black Dance* (2014) demonstrate somewhat different usages of multilingual writing, they both display equally elaborate narrative structures. In fact, these two novels each possess ten chapters that are subdivided into three different, alternating narratives: that of Milo Noirlac (a French Canadian writer and drug addict), Milo's grandfather, Neil Kerrigan (an Irish-Canadian immigrant), and Milo's mother, Awinita Johnson (a First Nation Canadian prostitute). Though the three stories of Milo Noirlac, Neil Kerrigan, and Awinita Johnson run parallel to each other, their narratives occur in three different locations (Ireland, Canada, and the United States), and during three different periods of time (1952-2010, 1910-1939, and 1951-1952, respectively). Within these three narratives, the stories of Milo, Neil, and Awinita alternate between moments of narrative prose, monolingual or bilingual dialogues, and stage directions written like a screenplay for a film. Presented as a kind of hybrid product of a novel and a film, the stylistic and cinematic effects of these texts (voice-overs, cuts, sub-titles listed as footnotes, etc.) often complicate both the monolingual and bilingual reader's sense of time and place.

Compared to *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), *L'empreinte de l'ange* (1998), and *The Mark of the Angel* (2000), *Danse noire's* (2013) linguistic complexities frequently obstruct the monolingual and bilingual reader's understanding of the text. For instance, in the novel's first dialogue between Milo Noirlac and his lover Paul Schwarz (who also functions as the narrator of the text), the reader is struck by a variety of opposing narrative techniques. Not only does this scene occur at a future point in time (presented here as a kind of cinematic flash-forward), but it is also written in a foreign language (English). In this dialogue, Milo and Paul discuss the consequences of adopting a young Brazilian boy named Eugénio: "Jesus Christ. So what'll you do if he is [there]? Adopt him, take him back to Montreal?" Paul asks Milo, to which Milo replies, "No, just... find him a foster home, if I can" (2013, p. 18). Here, the unusual cinematic techniques and descriptions that precede and follow the dialogue make it difficult for the monolingual and bilingual reader to decipher the context, setting, and orientation of the plot. Like a film, the dialogue is introduced by Paul Schwarz's direction to cut, followed by a visual description of Paul and Milo climbing the hill of Saens Penha in Brazil. The conversation between Paul and Milo is then translated into French and presented as a footnote on the bottom of page 18.

In Huston's corresponding English self-translation, *Black Dance* (2014), however, this sequence of the text is more accessible to the monolingual and bilingual reader. Instead of appearing in a foreign language, this dialogue is presented in English with slight stylistic modifications from the original French text. For instance, instead of re-inserting the phrase, "No, just... find him a foster home, if I can" from *Danse noire* (2013), Huston rewrites Milo's quote as, "Find him a home" (2014, p. 7). Similar to *Limbes / Limbo's* (1998) creative use of self-translation, Huston once again presents the reader with a different, revised version of her original text. Additionally, by maintaining a single, unified language within this opening section of the narrative, Huston greatly facilitates the monolingual reader's linguistic understanding of the text.

In *Danse noire* (2013), this first English dialogue is followed by a close-up of a Brazilian street facing a green church and Paul's closing narrative commentary: "Qu'en dis-tu, Astuto? Ok, je sais que t'es jamais satisfait de nos premiers jets, mais quand même... Ça te plaît, l'idée de commencer avec le jour où tu as trouvé Eugénio?..." ["What do you say, Astuto? Ok, I know that you're never satisfied with our first shots but... Do you like the idea of starting with the day you found Eugénio?..."] (2013, p. 19). In this final voice-

over/narration, Paul addresses Milo in the second person and asks him if he approves of his initial, opening scene. Here, the monolingual and bilingual reader are reminded that although the dialogue between Paul and Milo occurs at a future point in the novel, the present time of narration revolves around Paul Schwarz's omniscient, narrative voice. Ultimately, these temporal and stylistic intricacies are complicated further by linguistic ones in *Danse noire*; although Paul's narrative voice is in French, he speaks to Milo in English. Finally, there is no direct indication (besides external interviews and commentaries on the novel)<sup>5</sup> that the footnotes on the bottom of page 18 are intended to function as subtitles to a film. In *Black Dance* (2014), on the other hand, Huston avoids these linguistic problems by writing this section of the text in one single language (English).

Compared to the linguistic intricacies of *Danse noire* (2013), *Black Dance* (2014) contains fewer instances of multilingual dialogues and intra-textual self-translations. Whereas *Danse noire* possesses over one hundred intra-textual, self-translated excerpts (notably of dialogues, songs, and poems), *Black Dance* only possesses three. In fact, *Black Dance* seems to have circumvented many of the linguistic problems presented in Huston's original French text. Occasionally, however, and similar to *Danse noire*, *Black Dance* uses de-familiarizing techniques of sociolinguistic interference (Sternberg, 1981, p. 230) in which various characters speak with a foreign accent (2014, p. 230). For example, on page 252 of *Black Dance*, Régis Dubé, Marie-Thérèse's French-Canadian husband, addresses Neil Noirlac with a thick French-Canadian accent. Régis remarks, "It sounds quite nice... zis poem de... how do you say his name ees? Keats?" Although this section of the text is presented as a bilingual French-Canadian/English conversation in *Danse noire*, this odd imitation of oral speech (particularly for readers who are unfamiliar with French accents) may obstruct the monolingual reader's understanding of the text (2013, p. 338-340). Like *Danse noire*'s imitations of oral speech (particularly of French-Canadian Joul and of Awinita's Cree accent), *Black Dance* provides equally estranging recreations of Irish and French accents.

In spite of these unusual oral techniques, as another strategy of linguistic simplification, Huston provides fewer bilingual and foreign-language based dialogues in *Black Dance* (2014). For example, at one point in *Danse noire* (2013), Huston presents an exclusively bilingual dialogue (written in English and French Canadian Joul) between Neil Kerrigan, his wife, Marie-Jeanne, and their linguistically polarized children. In this disorienting bilingual conversation, Marie-Jeanne addresses her son Sam in French-Canadian Joul. "Tourne ta fourchette dans l'aut' sens, Sam," ["Turn your fork the other way, Sam,"] she tells him, to which Sam replies defiantly in English, "You're not my mother" (2013, p. 306). In this dialogue, Neil's sons (who were raised to speak English) and daughters (who were raised to speak French) engage in a series of alternating bilingual questions and remarks. Within this section of the novel, the English quotes are once again translated and displayed as footnotes. In *Black Dance*, however, this dialogue is presented entirely in English.

Finally, whereas *Danse noire* (2013) contains numerous English dialogues with self-translations written as footnotes in French, *Black Dance* (2014) re-integrates these English dialogues into a predominately monolingual narrative. Compared to the monolingual reader

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Boisvert (2013, October 6). *Danse noire* de Nancy Huston: le rythme du coeur. [lapresse.ca](http://www.lapresse.ca). Retrieved from <http://www.lapresse.ca/le-soleil/arts-et-spectacles/livres/201310/05/01-4696945-danse-noire-de-nancy-huston-le-rythme-du-coeur.php>.

of *Danse noire*, the monolingual reader of *Black Dance* is better equipped to follow the narrative flow of Huston's text.

As critic Monique Verdussen aptly observes, “Alors qu’elles sont parfaitement balisées et datées, les pistes empruntées déconcertent parce qu’elles se situent à des niveaux qui obligent chaque fois à se réorienter. 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.” (2013, para. #2). [“Though perfectly dated and demarcated, the narrative paths are disconcerting because they continually force the reader to reorient his or her perception of the text. By traveling from one character to another, from one epoch, place, and language to another, from music to poetry, from a film to a novel, the reader struggles to follow the story”]. As Verdussen notes, even though *Danse noire* manages to carefully date and divide the various trajectories of its three principle narratives (that of Milo Noirlac, Neil Kerrigan, and Awinita Johnson), the resulting events of these trajectories are nevertheless disorienting. By jumping from one character, epoch, place, language, and artistic medium to the next, the monolingual and bilingual reader encounter difficulties following the plot of the novel. Moreover, the reader must continually reorient his or her perception of time and place in order to follow the complex structure of the text's three parallel running narratives. By contrast, although *Black Dance* possesses similar cinematic and oral techniques within the three alternating narratives of the text, it also provides a more subdued level of multilingualism. By substituting a variety of bilingual and foreign-language dialogues with English dialogues, *Black Dance* appears to be a more linguistically coherent novel.

## CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed Nancy Huston's varying use of multilingualism and its relationship to the general “readerly” experience of the text. By examining *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), *L’empreinte de l’ange* (1998), *The Mark of the Angel* (2000), *Danse noire* (2013), and *Black Dance* (2014), it has shown how Huston has both accepted and transgressed the limits of bilingualism. While *Limbes / Limbo* offers linguistic solutions that facilitate the overall “readerly” experience of the text, it presents creative self-translations that are slightly more accessible to the bilingual reader. In comparison, Huston's self-translated polyglot texts, *The Mark of the Angel* and *L’empreinte de l’ange*, stay well within the confines of the “readerly” threshold for multilingualism. Finally, although *Danse noire* possesses three linguistically and stylistically complex narratives that obscure the reader's understanding of the text, *Black Dance*, Huston's corresponding English self-translation, offers a more subdued use of multilingualism. Ultimately, Huston has been seen to define, transgress, and even redefine the limits of multilingual writing with varying degrees of success. This study has indicated that when used in moderation or as a form of bilingual self-translation, Huston's multilingual writing enriches her narratives. However, when used profusely, or as a way to dominate and stylize the text, this multilingualism obstructs the reader's understanding of the narrative.

In spite of *Danse noire's* (2013) excessive use of multilingualism as compared to *Limbes / Limbo* (1998), *L’empreinte de l’ange* (1998), *The Mark of the Angel* (2000), and *Black Dance* (2014), all five texts demonstrate exceptionally adept self-translations. On the ability of bilingual writers to make adequate and “responsible” linguistic choices, Elizabeth Beaujour states, “Their freedom of choice makes bilingual writers paradoxically more *responsible* to their

languages. Having once stepped outside the system of a language, they can never return to the thoughtless and unprincipled literary use of it. They are conscious of the folding and interfolding of their languages in the space within their heads.” (Beaujour, 1989, p. 56). Though these five works provide different levels of narrative ease and coherence, they all reflect Huston's noteworthy skills as a self-translator. While remaining “responsible” to both the English and French languages, Huston also provides new and innovative ways to translate herself. With the use of other languages such as German, Hungarian, Italian, Latin, and even Portuguese, Huston has and continues to expand the bounds of her own personal, intellectual, and linguistic limits.

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