Transnational Memory in Nancy Huston's *Plainsong*, *Fault Lines* and *The Mark of the Angel*

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Introduction

As a Canadian born author who has lived in Paris for the majority of her life, and who writes in English and French, Nancy Huston and her literature are defined by multiple national and linguistic spaces. These characteristics mark Huston out as a transnational subject and writer, herself and her literature existing between and across different national spaces. Huston's approach to literature, moreover, adds an alternative dimension to transnational theory; one which suggests a more nuanced way of making sense of transnational identity. For Huston, it is not enough to speak of transcending one's national roots, since national origins are key components of the transnational condition. While transnational subjects may feel an affinity with multiple local and national spaces, each of these spaces will be valuable in its own right, and the transnational subject will recognise each of those spaces as having contributed to their overall, transnational identity. Indeed, national memories set in one place and time can have a profound influence on later memories forged in a new space.

This paper will explore Huston's transnational take on memory specifically, looking at how national memory is both respected in its own right, and reconsidered in conjunction with memories set in other places and times. It will be suggested that, in *Plainsong*, *Fault Lines*, and *The Mark of the Angel*, the significance of national memory is shown to transcend the locality and time of the initial event.[1] Yet, as I will make clear, Huston does not negate the importance of preserving national difference. Indeed, Huston explores how national binaries can be brought forward and read anew, through this international

[1] All citations from these studied texts were translated by myself from the original French versions.

comparison. I will further examine how Huston rethinks national memory from the perspective of individuals within the nation, refuting a monolithic account of collective national History. In this way, we will seek to establish how far Huston's position is equally preoccupied with intranational as well as international dialogue. This paper will therefore attest to the idea that Huston's transnational approach to memory simultaneously transcends the national and preserves national difference, both inter- and intranationally. To support these arguments, I will turn to the concept of multi-directional memory as put forward by Michael Rothberg, and that of palimpsestic memory, a theory elaborated by Max Silverman. I will also discuss the concept of time, looking to Walter Benjamin's 'The Angel of History'.

Multi-Directional Memory

We must first establish what is meant by an alternative to unilateral memory, what Michael Rothberg termed *multi-directional memory*. Rothberg's theory negates a hermetic view of memory and goes against the idea that history belongs or ever belonged to one nation or community in particular. Rothberg states that:

> Memories are not owned by groups nor are groups 'owned' by memories. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are jagged; what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant.[2]

Where a cultural memory may appear specific to one space, there is always a possibility of it being tied to the memory of another space, whether spatial ('foreign') or temporal ('distant'). Nancy Huston too critiques the singularity of memory in *Plainsong*, a novel which tells the story of Paddon, a white Canadian male, and that of his lover Miranda, a native Indian Canadian. In *Plainsong*, Huston illustrates how memory is not always unique to a single place and time but built on multiple factors that extend to multiple nation-states. Huston portrays this through Paddon, and Miranda engaging in debates about history and its cultural specificity. The narrative voice states that 'One

[2] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 5.

day, you read an article to her about the extermination of the Jews and she said That's not surprising, given the way Christians have always treated other people', to which Paddon replies 'Hitler wasn't Christian at all!'[3] Miranda, however, goes on to say that

> Maybe not [...] but he grew up in a Christian world surrounded by Christian thought, influenced by that Christian habit of pushing and shoving everybody else, claiming they're the best, and of stealing other people's land and destroying everything that comes across their path. (*Plainsong*, 142)

Despite the gaps between the memory of Christian orthodoxy, colonialism and the Holocaust, Miranda does not hesitate to draw parallels between them. In this way, Huston is shedding light on the possibilities that emerge out of multi-directional accounts of memory: the possibility, amongst others, of analysing other national histories from the perspective of our own, and paradoxically, of re-evaluating our own from the perspective of the other. This serves to show that Huston's representation of memory, in alignment with Rothberg's theory on multi-directional memory, allows for national memories to be read anew and for cross-connections to be built between them.

This initiative is fundamental to *Fault Lines* too, in which the Holocaust serves as the binding agent of all four narratives, Sol's, Randall's, Sadie's, and Erra's (also known as AGM). Each narrative focuses on different wars, and different instances and locations of trauma, beginning with the Iraq war told from Sol's perspective, and moving backwards in time to discuss the Palestine and Israel divide, the war in Libya, the Cuban missile crisis, and finally the Holocaust and other horrors of the Second World War, from which all the other narratives originate. It is thanks to this reverse chronological order and pluralised narrative structure that Huston is able to build bridges between what at first sight appear to be impervious national memories. When Randall and Sadie are living in Israel, for instance, the narrative voice makes frequent references to Sadie's discoveries that she unearths through her academic research into Evil, or the Holocaust,

[3] Nancy Huston, *Cantique des Plaines* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1993), p. 142. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the essay.

such as the fact that her mother was spared by the Nazis because of her looks: "'And why did he choose to spare her, despite her flaw?'", "'Because she was so pretty, so perfectly Aryan.'"[4] There is a constant shifting between the memory of the Holocaust and the present time and space of Sadie in Israel, and thus a bringing together of two polarized moments in the temporality of Judaism. Indeed, even Randall's experience in Israel is affected by the memory of his grandmother Erra and the Holocaust, and Sadie's discoveries thereafter. When Randall innocently poses a question about the 'fountains of life', his language teacher refuses to teach him and later says to his father, "'I came here to teach a little Jewish boy, not some SS offspring.'" (*Fault Lines*, 198) Those national histories which appear independent of one another are in fact interconnected, and the reverberations of a cultural memory set in one place and time come to be felt in multiple localities and across several generations. Huston's representation of memory is thus transnational and transtemporal.

The thematic device of the Holocaust, specifically, as a comparative emblem against which to assess other memories of evil, is a recurring motif in Huston's novels and the founding premise for Rothberg's theory on multi-directional memory. What sets the Holocaust apart as the most evident example of multi-directional memory in the making is its conceptualisation as a *unique* and *absolute* moment in history. As Rothberg asserts:

> the Holocaust has come to be understood in the popular imagination [...] as a unique, *sui generis* event. In its extremity, it is sometimes even defined as only marginally connected to the course of human history.[5]

The issue of the Holocaust thus becomes more complex in so far as it cannot be understood, supposedly, by comparing it to any other national or local memory, nor to any other time, because of its abstraction from the wider course of human history. As such, the use of the Holocaust as a key marker of multi-directional memory is essential, because this act negates *absolutely* the idea that a collective

[4] Nancy Huston, *Lignes de Faille* (Montréal : Actes Sud, 2006), p. 226. All subsequent references, by page-number in parentheses, are in the body of the essay.
[5] Rothberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

memory should be unique to a single place and time, and highlights *absolutely* how far multiple memories overlap with one another. The uniqueness of the Holocaust, moreover, sets it out as the primary piste of comparison against which to compare all other instances of horror and trauma, regardless of time and place, because of its unique and absolute status. In both cases, the rhetoric of uniqueness attached to the Holocaust sets it out as the most obvious example of the extent of memory's multi-directionality.

By overturning such a rhetoric of uniqueness, Huston evades a hierarchization of national memory, eschewing what Rothberg terms 'a struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and losers' prevalent in modern articulations of memory.[6] Huston's literature more closely resembles Rothberg's own take on memory studies, which he describes in the following way:

> [...] the examples of multidirectional memory explored here are much too ambivalent and heterogeneous to reduce too quickly to questions of winning and losing - which is not to say that there is little at stake in articulations of collective memory, for quite the contrary is true.[7]

The examples of memory in Huston's literature are also too heterogeneous to 'reduce too quickly to questions of 'winning and losing'. Yet like Rothberg, Huston is not ignorant of what is 'at stake in articulations of collective memory'. Huston allows disparate collective memories equal attention and enables a dialogue between them without imposing a hierarchy of any sort. This is evident in *Plainsong*. The competition of memory is clear when Miranda ignores Paddon's reference to the Holocaust to talk about Western colonialism:

> Do you know what he did, the white man, when he first came here? she asked, and you let out a sigh. He drew a straight line, whoosh! right through the heart of blackfoot country, then he said There we go, as from today, this is called Canada, and that's the USA over there. You had nothing to say to that Paddon, you shrugged and tapped your feet,

[6] Ibid., p. 3.
[7] Ibid., p. 6.

> impatient to come back to the struggles of the European Jews. (*Plainsong*, 142-143)

The competition of memory is painfully palpable here, Miranda recounting the memory of colonialism and Paddon 'impatience'. This latter is emphasized by his sighing and the tapping of his foot, and it is clear from his sigh in particular that Miranda's tale is one of many, and that he is tired of hearing about her memories and the collective memory of her people. It is also clear that he disagrees with her decision to draw a parallel between the persecution of the Jews and of her people, saying 'not all Whites are like all other Whites' (*Plainsong*, 144). Miranda, however, tars all white people with the same brush, saying 'All I know is that [...] us lot never built any factories to kill people' (*Plainsong*, 145). Miranda creates a binary distinction between Indians and the whites, regardless of different collective and national histories. In this instance, the competition of memory that ensues from a multi-directional application of memory is evidently dangerous, silencing the history of the Jews so as to fill in the gaps of colonial history, and fusing incompatible histories together. From this standpoint, a discourse of winning-or-losing, combined with a multi-directional approach, can be dangerous to the original memory specific to particular nations. Huston's transnational approach to memory, then, is one which seeks to preserve different national memories.

This ties into what Rothberg defines as 'The dangers of the uniqueness discourse' which he claims 'potentially creates a hierarchy of suffering (which is morally offensive) and removes that suffering from the field of historical agency (which is both morally and intellectually suspect)'.[8] In both cases, Miranda's story fits this theory because she places the collective memory of her people above any other, thus creating a 'hierarchy of suffering', and sees the behaviour of the Nazis and that of the white colonialists as one and the same thing, thus extrapolating one collective memory to another nation and removing it from 'the field of historical agency'. Notwithstanding this competition on Miranda's part, however, there is an indication that the memory of her people also needs re-evaluating and recognition, and that Paddon, on some level, allows his interest in the Holocaust to overshadow his empathy towards the native Indians. This corresponds

[8] Ibid., p. 9.

with the belief in, as commented by Rothberg, 'the ever-increasing interest in the Nazi genocide [that] distracts from the consideration of other historical tragedies.'[9] The omniscient narrative voice in *Plainsong* is inviting us to acknowledge the enormity of another historical tragedy, against the backdrop of Holocaust memory. Yet this is not to say that the narrative undermines the Holocaust, given Paddon's reaction as discussed earlier on. The anachronistic repositioning of Holocaust memory does not detract from its significant place in history, but merely invites us to recognize a commonality of suffering across borders. As such, Huston not only transcends national memory in *Plainsong*, but gives a voice to different marginalized national memories, since the use of one national memory can allow for a rereading of others. To overturn a uniqueness discourse, then, is to exchange competition with comparison, a negative hierarchization with a positive reappropriation.

Transtemporal Memory

This merging of homogeneous, national memories is intimately connected to Huston's representation of time. This is particularly true for *The Mark of the Angel*, in which historical narratives are interspersed with allusions to the Holocaust, as a historical backdrop to the central narrative of Saffie, a German immigrant living in Paris. There is an obvious attempt to do away with the idea of teleological progress and of historical memory as a stagnant moment in time. The concluding passage aptly summarizes this concept:

> Germany and France are best friends; building Europe together and dreaming of sharing an army one day. The Berlin Wall collapsed – as well as, one after the other, all the communist regimes in central Europe [...]. As for Algeria, thirty years of socialist degeneration served to awaken old fantasies of religious rigour in many of its citizens. (*Mark*, *323*)

In this passage, Huston is once again blurring the boundaries between different national memories, drawing together seemingly disparate national histories into one narrative space. From a structural

[9] Ibid.

perspective, though, it is interesting that the narrative voice should close with, 'Is that the end? Oh no! I can assure you that it isn't. You simply need to open your eyes: everywhere, all around you, it's still going on' (*Mark*, 328). The juxtaposition between what seemed to be an end to the story and the reference to its continuation challenges the gap between past, present and future, and is starkly reminiscent of what Nietzsche termed the eternal recurrence of time.[10] The refusal to commit to an end negates the uniqueness of memory and the notion of teleological progress, and individual memory within one space and time is portrayed to be merely a part of a much grander narrative. Though the different national memories are cited individually, they are each a synecdoche of a wider transnational and transtemporal memory.

In this way, Huston's literature concords with Walter Benjamin's negation of a homogeneous and empty time, which he portrays in his essay 'On History'. Benjamin illustrates his concept of time through the metaphor of the 'Angel of History' which he describes in the following way: 'Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet'.[11] That which is most important for our argument is the rebuttal of 'a chain of events'. Huston is inviting us, like Benjamin, to look at History as 'one single catastrophe', where national histories come to be seen as parts of a whole and where transtemporal memory takes on an ethical agenda as signified by the Angel. If national memories are part of a bigger picture, moreover, it logically follows suit that they are more likely to be seen as heterogeneous, because they are no longer seen as isolated histories but part of the same unit. In other words, the act of bringing national memories together prevents national memories from being considered as monolithic entities; they will be re-evaluated as multi-faceted entities. In this way, a transtemporal representation of memory supports a transnational approach to memory.

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[10] Frederic Nietzsche, *Ainsi Parlait Zarathoustra,* trad. par Henri Albert, 49ieme ed. (Paris: Société du Mercure, 1903), p. 226.

[11] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' in *Selected Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and others, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1938-1940) IV (1940), 389-397 (p. 392).

For Huston, a 'chain of events' is an illusion forged by humans, in keeping with Benjamin's understanding of it as an 'appearance'. The narrative voice in *Plainsong* refers to a chain of events as 'that old trick to stop time that consists in forcing the days to look like each other, always performing the same number of restrained actions in the same order' (*Plainsong*, 292). It is also through the narrative voice of Miranda that Huston rejects an ordered temporality, implying that events and time do not make up identity and are thus not innately linked to the idea of progress. This is explained through the metaphor of a painting, through which Miranda can explain how she feels about her daughter's identity, and beyond that, human identity-formation:

> The canvas is full before I even start to paint, and Dawn's soul was complete the day she was born, and what we add to that should never clutter that plenitude nor confuse it, but merely rearrange what was already there. (*Plainsong*, 82)

This goes against the idea of a chronological accumulation of knowledge, and restructures our understanding of time by merging past, present, and future. From Miranda's perspective, any one moment in time is already encapsulated in another. Memory, in this instance, is dramatically revisited not as a moment in the past to return to, but as an active component of our everyday lives in the present.

This constitutes one of the key issues in Huston's literature: to renegotiate *what* it is important to remember and *how* much of it. As the narrative voice asks in *The Mark of the Angel*, 'How little is it necessary to remember in order to ensure the preservation of meaning?' (*Mark*, 147) This quotation demonstrates that for Huston, memory is not only essential to understanding the past, but to give our lives meaning in the present, and that there is a need to strike the balance of remembrance. Too little remembrance is fatal, but too much can obscure memory in equal measure. As the narrative voice asks, 'How many times can things repeat themselves before we die from repeating the same phrase [...] until it loses its meaning countless times.' (*Mark*, 430) This fear of dying from memory or of memory losing its meaning through over repetition is reminiscent of palimpsestic memory, which we will turn to later in this paper. The constant rewriting of memory, far from securing its place in History, can obscure the original memory to put another in its place.

There is also a danger that focusing too much on the past can have negative repercussions on the present. In *Fault Lines* the narrative voice of Sadie believes the unearthing of her mother's past and collective memory to be essential to her own, and her family's, life in the present, saying to Randall that 'We cannot build a future together without knowing the truth about our past.' (*Fault Lines*, 157) Our argument here comes full circle, returning to the idea of individual and collective memory in oscillation, and to the concept of a transtemporal and transnational memory. The preservation of collective memory not only honours the memory of a collective group in a single time and place, but gives meaning to the lives of individuals in an entirely different temporal and geographical space. This being said, Huston demonstrates that to focus too much on a then-and-there time within a now-and-here time can be detrimental to living within the present. This is shown through an argument between Sadie and her husband in *Fault Lines*, when he says, "'You're so obsessed by the suffering of those children forty years ago that you can't even notice that of your own son by your side'" (*Fault Lines*, 158). He goes on to say later in the novel that "'I didn't marry your ancestors, I married *you*, and I'd like to see you from time to time'" (*Fault Lines*, 181). On some level, the narrative is suggesting that it is wrong to create such a dichotomy in the first place, between Sadie and her ancestors. After all, as we saw in *Plainsong*, Huston postulates the possibility of blurring temporal spaces, of rethinking our conception of linear time. Yet the fact that Sadie's obsession with the past is affecting her children's lives implies that this will be detrimental to their lives in the future. If all temporal spaces are on some level interconnected, moreover, one has to rethink how they influence one another, and a hierarchization of temporal spaces proves to be just as dangerous as a hierarchization of national memories.

In actual fact, a hierarchization of national memory is directly affected by a hierarchization of time. In Saffie's case in *The Mark of the Angel*, for instance, her inability to move beyond her past makes her less aware of memories in-the-making. When András speaks of the Algerian war of Independence, Saffie replies with 'The war's finished', to which he retorts:

> The war's not finished! [...] Between 1940 and 1944 France lets herself be fucked by Germany, then she got all embarrassed so in 1946 she starts the war in Indochina. In 1954 she lost, the Viets fucked her, so three months later she starts a war with Algeria. D'you not know? (*Mark*, 166)

The grammatical errors draw our attention to the fact that this is a conversation between two foreigners, who are both bringing their past national memories to the fore within a single national space. In this quotation, moreover, there is a refusal to conceive of World War Two as the 'war to end all wars'; that is, as a war that has fully ended, as a war that constitutes the final war in the course of human History, and as a war that determines the impossibility of any future war. This quotation goes to show that, on the contrary, many wars ensued after World War Two. More obviously still, Saffie's obstinate claim that the war is finished highlights the danger that can transpire from laying too much emphasis on a past memory, so much so that collective memory in the making is ignored. This ignorance of current affairs on Saffie's part is in stark opposition to the content of the novel, which, 'Along with repeated references to the Algerian War and its impact in Paris at the time', as Kate Averis explains, 'makes reference to a vast range of other significant events in contemporary world history'.[12] And as Averis goes on to state, the narrative voice condemns Saffie for failing to take into account the enormity of wider global affairs in a present time, such as the Nobel Prize given to Albert Camus for literature in 1957: 'whilst the Nobel committee decided to award the literature prize to Albert Camus later that day, they in no way understood the political significance of that choice' (*Mark*, 81).[13] As seen in *Plainsong* earlier, there is an open invitation to be all our times, past, present and future, within the same instance. As the narrative voice neatly summarizes in *The Mark of the Angel*, we all have 'one foot in our little histories and one in the History of the century' (*Mark*, 291). And it is important to highlight that it is Saffie's obsession with her memories in Germany which makes her less inclined to engage with a present time in France. It is this relocation of memory to different temporal spaces that is key to understanding Huston's transnational

[12] Kate Averis, 'Negotiating Nomadic Identities: The Tensions of Exile in Contemporary Women's Writing in French and Spanish' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of King's College London, 2011), p. 130.
[13] Ibid.

approach to memory. It is because Huston rejects the positioning of memory within a singular time and place that allows her to present memory as transnational as well as transtemporal, and vice versa. This is in keeping with Rothberg's understanding of multi-directional memory as a transtemporal and transnational tool, based on 'Memory's anachronistic quality - its bringing of now and then, here and there'.[14] According to Rothberg, this 'anachronistic quality' allows for the reshaping of memory in different places and times, and for the creation of new memories out of the original. This process constitutes 'actually the source of its powerful creativity, its ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones.'[15] This is particularly evident in *Fault Lines* within the section about Sadie. The multi-directional memory takes a turn for the worse when the narrative voice describes a playground game taking place in the United States, where 'the boys chase the girls, their arms stretched out in front of them, shouting: "Jew! Jew!" and the girls pretend to be scared, screeching and running away while shouting "Nazi! Nazi!"' (*Fault Lines*, 351). This reinscription of Holocaust memory in Germany within an American school setting partially conceals the meaning of the initial memory, converting a memory of absolute evil into a childhood game for pleasure.[16] The creation of new cultural mythologies based on other national memories, this time set within a transtemporal and transnational mould, is dangerous to the condition of the memory that it started out with.

Palimpsestic Memory

Max Silverman's theory of palimpsestic memory offers a useful insight into this area. Palimpsestic memory is more appropriate a term here than multi-directional memory, because the notion of a palimpsest necessitates a rewriting of memory, not just a relocation as with multi-directional memory; very much as Holocaust memory is

[14] Rothberg, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[15] Ibid.
[16] It is also interesting that the reinscription of Holocaust memory, in this case, should be gendered; the victim-perpetrator dynamic of the Holocaust is substituted with the victim-perpetrator divide of the sexes of the late twentieth century Europe, an essential theme within much of Huston's works, fiction and non-fiction alike. Once again, a memory originating in one place and time comes to be geographically and temporally transplanted, and exploited to support another memory of oppression altogether.

reinscribed at the said moment in *Fault Lines*. In his introduction to *Palimpsestic Memory*, Silverman acknowledges that dangers can arise from reformulating memory within a palimpsetic framework, 'whereby one element is seen through and transformed by another'.[17] Silverman confirms that 'This version [of memory studies], like any other, is not without its dangers'.[18] And yet, he proposes that 'the aesthetic, political and ethical lessons that we can draw from this understanding of memory far outweigh the dangers.'[19] There is a need to put our faith in the ethical potential of palimpsestic memory, even with the risk of danger that it entails, and there is an equal need to consider the different forms that palimpsestic memory may take to decide which of those are dangerous and which of those can provide us with 'aesthetic, political and ethical lessons'.

There is henceforward a hierarchy at work between good fictions and bad fictions, in keeping with Giorgia Falceri's understanding of Nancy Huston's literature, whereby 'A bad fiction is, in Huston's opinion, potentially dangerous: believing that one's country, one's political opinion, one's religion, one's god are the only 'true' ones on earth'.[20] If a bad fiction is one which wrongly assumes the hegemonic uniqueness of one nation's value-systems, then a good fiction for Huston must be that which takes into consideration the relativity of one's national world-view. Following on from Giorgia Falceri's understanding of good fictions, Huston's ability to produce a transnational literature allows her to engage with a palimpsetic memory that is 'ethical' rather than dangerous, to borrow Silverman's terminology, because it allows her to rethink specific memories in a way that gives both sides of the story, and a version of events that takes into account the heterogeneity of memory. This concords with Max Silverman's view that 'In more recent decades [...] histories of extreme violence have tended to compartmentalize memory on ethno-cultural lines and, hence, blinker the attempt to see multiple connections across space and time.'[21] The very fact that Huston's

[17] Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), p. 4.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Giorgia Falceri, 'Self-Translation and Transnational Poetics', *Ticontre, Teoria, Testo, Traduzione*, 2 (2014) <http://www.ticontre.org/> [accessed 17 november 2014], 51-66 (p. 59).
[21] Silverman, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

literary representations of memory are transnational and transtemporal, allows for what Silverman names 'multiple connections across space and time', thereby evading a spatial and temporal compartmentalization of memory.

This evasion is fundamental to the creation of Huston's approach to transnational memory because, in avoiding a compartmentalization of memory, Huston escapes a mononational take on memory, opting instead for a transnational model. Just as Silverman defines his book as 'an intervention in the debate around cultural memory in a transnational age', so too can we understand Huston to be undertaking something similar in her own work.[22] Palimpsestic memory as it comes to be presented in literature, according to Silverman, 'gives us a way of perceiving history in a non-linear way and memory as a hybrid and dynamic process across individuals and communities.'[23] From this standpoint, multidirectional memory serves as a vehicle of conciliation between diverse cultures and groups of people, allowing for a transnational decentring of the local. Yet it should be noted that, though Huston opts for a memory model that transcends a monolocal and mononational viewpoint, she does so from within and without so as to rethink the national from a critical distance, not to do away with it altogether. In the same way that the term palimpsest invokes the prevailing memory beneath the new layers, so too does Huston remember the independence of national memories even while looking beyond them or in connection with other memories. The children's game in the USA cited earlier would not be as significant if the memory of the Holocaust had been entirely erased.

The Interplay between Individual Memory and Collective History

To come back to Silverman for a moment, it is interesting to note that his use of the term 'individuals' sets his theory on palimpsestic memory apart from Rothberg's work on multi-directional memory, for Rothberg affirms that 'multidirectional memory functions at the level of the collective as screen memory does at the level of the individual'.[24] Silverman, on the other hand, builds his theory in such a way that the individual maintains as much importance as the

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 5.
[24] Rothberg, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

collective.[25] The same is true for the work of Huston. It is precisely through individual narratives and memories that Huston is able to articulate her version of transnational memory so successfully. By illustrating the link between the individual and the national, Huston is able to build a bridge between palimpsestic memory and multi-directional memory. In all three of the novels under examination, Huston forges links between the memory of her key protagonists with that of their respective national contexts and others further away. Huston's transnational approach to memory, then, is not only international, but intranational. One passage stands out as memorable in this respect in *Plainsong*, when Paddon and his family are watching television:

> during the summer of 1969, to distract the world from the maddening and suffocating images of the jungle and napalm of Vietnam, the United States sent a man on the moon: we were together that night Paddon, watching the blurry cosmonauts floating and shimmering on the screen (*Plainsong*, 284).

The structural device of the television allows Huston to depict the interaction between individual narratives and collective memory. The references to monumental moments in history become diluted as secondary references within the central narrative that focuses on the lives of Paddon and his family. This scene exemplifies the literary technique throughout the novel which reinstates the importance of the individual subject within collective memory or, indeed, gives it precedence over the collective.

Averis refers to this interplay as it occurs in *The Mark of the Angel*, asserting that 'The narration draws links between History and individual histories, highlighting individuals' roles as both agents and victims of History.'[26] By giving History a capital we can assume that history is referred to in a global sense, wherein 'individual histories' are not only affected by this global History, but come to affect History too. Diana Holmes concurs with this view, arguing that, in the same text, 'the narrative succeeds in illustrating the imbrication of

[25] Silverman, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[26] Averis, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

individual story with collective History'.[27] If this is clearly shown in *The Mark of the Angel*, moreover, as substantiated by Averis and Holmes, this is perhaps even more clearly demonstrated in *Fault Lines*. Randall, for instance, engages in strategic planning against Iraq, helping to invent '"The new warrior robot"' (*Fault Lines*, 92), because of his experience with an Arab girl in Israel during his childhood. The narrative voice of Sol informs us that 'It was also in Israel that he started to dislike Arabs because of a little girl that he fell for over there' (*Fault Lines*, 19). We later find out via the narrative voice of Randall that this girl was named Nouzha, and that she threw a curse upon him after an argument regarding the Palestine and Israel conflict. Nouzha begins by saying that 'The Jews are finished [...] all of you are guilty and will forever be my enemies. Nineteen members of my family lived in Chatila' (*Fault Lines*, 236). The narrative voice of Randall then goes on to explain how she chooses to avenge her family: 'Nouzha struck me with the daraba bil- 'ayn eye – wishing a terrible misfortune upon me. It was her who caused my mother's accident, I'm sure of it' (*Fault Lines*, 248). As a child, Randall takes a childhood game as reality, and in doing so wrongly associates his mother's accident with Nouzha's curse. He then carries this hatred over to his adult life, where he makes weapons of mass destruction to participate in the war in Iraq. To borrow Falceri's term, he forges a 'bad fiction', and Randall's individual experiences come to affect collective History in the USA and Iraq

This is all the more significant when his mother, Sadie, goes on to describe the robot of war set to attack citizens of Iraq as '"The perfect Nazi"' (*Fault Lines*, 94), transplanting the memory in Israel to yet another temporal and geographical space. Where the Israeli conflict, the Iraq war, and the Holocaust are geographically and temporally distant from a collective viewpoint, Randall's individual memory comes to influence his perspective on three seemingly separate collective histories.

Once again, moreover, this is an example of the dangers that occur through palimpsestic memory. By transforming a childhood memory into a world-view that, subsequently, brings him to contribute to the collective History of the USA and Iraq, the narrative

[27] Diana Holmes, 'To write is a transitive verb: Nancy Huston and the ethics of the novel', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 14.1 (2010), 85-92 (p. 90).

voice of Randall attests to the dangers of rewriting memory. This passage thus demonstrates the extent to which History is not only a case of national binary oppositions working against each other, but of individuals investing national memory with their own personal experiences. It is important, however, to underline the words 'not only', because national binaries are still at work even within this relationship between individuals and History. After all, Randall's argument with Nouzha is owing to the Palestine and Israel conflict in the first place. As such, there is a constant interplay between individual memory, national memory, and global History which, in turn, supports a transnational representation of memory given the various geographical positionings of the protagonists whose individual memories come to affect national memory and global History too.

Diana Holmes even asserts that, in *The Mark of the Angel*, 'Characters are embedded in and shaped by political and social history'.[28] This concept is also evident in *Fault Lines*, where characters are not only shaped by history, but metonymic representations of national histories. This is plausible in the case of Sol, whose mole operation is a metaphor for the war in Iraq. The link between the war and his operation is clearly shown when the mother says 'Of course! We'll send in the antibiotic tanks' (*Fault Lines*, 78). In the same way that Sol should never have had the treatment in the first place (as AGM believes (*Fault Lines*, 86)), the implication is that America should never have gone into Iraq. Neither medical operation nor military was necessary, and in both cases the operation caused more harm than good, or as far as this metaphor leads us to believe at any rate. Far from improving Sol's figure and livelihood, the operation turns awry and he has to undergo yet another operation which leads him to feel pain not only at the initial source, but 'pain everywhere' (*Fault Lines*, 80). In this passage, then, the narration of individual memory allows for the narration of collective memory too, through metaphor. Once again, moreover, an individual narrative set in one place and time comes to represent, symbolically and transnationally, the national memory set in another.

This is not to say that Huston conveys national and individual memory to be one and the same thing. On the contrary, Huston uses

[28] Ibid., p. 90.

her novels to condemn the judgement of individuals based on their respective nationality. This is evident in *The Mark of the Angel* when Raphaël's mother is questioning his choice of bride, Saffie, on the basis that she is German. She is eager to find out more about her family's past, asking 'And do you know yet, what they did? Do you know whether they were complicit in that… monstrous regime?' (*Mark*, 57). The conversation continues thus, with Raphaël asking 'Surely you're not suggesting that guilt is hereditary? [...] Or even that Saffie would have inherited some kind of…. I don't know… some kind of Teutonic flaw… that would predispose her to cruelty, to perversion…?' (*Mark*, 58). These rhetorical questions demand that we question the relationship between collective and individual memory. Although Huston creates a bridge between the two, she is careful to portray her protagonists as individuals in their own right, though they may be intimately determined by their collective History and national memories. In this way, Huston's transnational approach to memory allows us to acknowledge the plurality of national memory too, as well as its connection to other national ones.

It is for this reason that András and Saffie in *The Mark of the Angel* are able to experience such a dramatic *coup de foudre*, despite their antagonistic national histories. The peculiarity of their love story is emphasized when Saffie first learns about András' Jewish heritage: 'You're Jewish? You? she said, for the third time. And you love *me*?' (*Mark*, 174). They love each other in spite of their respective collective histories. This is not without a little irony, however, given that, as the narrative voice explains, 'András, who couldn't bear to hear the German language, pushed on all the way to France' (*Mark*, 177). To avoid entering Germany, he undertakes a complicated trajectory to France necessitating that he travels through, 'Austria, Switzerland, France' (*Mark*, 177). Despite his strong aversion to Germany he does not question his love for Saffie based on her nationality. Quite the reverse, it is precisely their foreignness to each other which makes their love so strong to begin with.[29] Their love is situated on another plane to a national one, privileging the individual instead. And yet, it is because of these individual narratives that Huston is able to build a point of reconciliation between two antithetical national histories. In

[29] 'When two lovers are both forced to use a foreign language when speaking to one another, it's...how to put it, it's...ah no, if you don't know I'm afraid I don't think I can explain it to you.' Huston, *L'Empreinte de l'Ange*, p. 230.

this way, Huston's transnational approach to memory, ironically, allows for the reconciliation of opposing national memories, which is itself born out of the meeting of two antithetically posed national identities.

Conclusion

It is evident that Huston's focus on individual memory and its oscillation with national memory adds a new dimension to multi-directional and palimpsestic memory, fragmenting national memory to illustrate its plurality and, conversely, looking at how national memory affects individual citizens. Yet both said theories lend themselves well to Huston's transnational approach to literature. Multi-directional memory is well suited to Huston's transnational literary approach because it considers a memory's ability to exceed the limits of a single locality and event. Such a transplantation of national memory, as we have seen, also problematizes arguments of uniqueness and recognizes the potential competition and hierarchization that ensues from an inter- and intranational dialogue. As for palimpsestic memory, it also has the potential to transcend the national, in allowing for a re-inscription of an original memory. We have only to analyse originals as national, and rewritings as transnational. The term palimpsest itself, moreover, implies that even though a memory may be re-transcribed, the original memory still exists beneath the new layers. Indeed, the continued existence of this original memory is essential to the meaning inherent to the re-inscriptions thereafter. In this way, both theories fit our understanding of Huston's approach to transnational memory, because they recognize how the significance of national memory can exceed a single national space and time, even while acknowledging just how important national binaries are, whether to individual citizens (Rothberg), or to the original national memory (Silverman). The same is true for Benjamin's theory on time that concords with Huston's *transtemporal* approach to memory. Huston then uses this technique in such a way so as to support her *transnational* approach to memory. But where Huston's transnational approach to memory differs from Benjamin's is that Huston still recognizes the need for the preservation of individual national memories within the wider collective. It is precisely through Huston's focus on the individual, moreover, the bridge between palimpsestic and multi-directional memory, which enables Huston to achieve this.

Huston illustrates the extent to which national memory and global History are composed of individual memories, and vice versa, thereby attesting to the plurality of collective memory. In turn, this structural device allows Huston to rethink and conciliate opposing national memories. As a result, Huston's transnational representation of memory allows for an *internal re-evaluation of national memory* (by reflecting on national citizens' and national groups' accounts of national memory from within the nation-state itself) and for an *external evaluation of different national memories* (by drawing links between seemingly hermetic national memories). In both cases, Huston achieves this representation of memory by rethinking *national* memory from an *inter-* and *intranational* perspective; from what we can conclude to be Huston's *transnational* perspective.