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Nancy Senior

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# Whose song, whose land? Translation and appropriation in Nancy Huston's *Plainsong* / *Cantique des plaines*<sup>1</sup>

NANCY SENIOR

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

## RÉSUMÉ

De courts extraits de nombreuses chansons, surtout des cantiques et des chansons folkloriques ou pop, sont cités dans le roman *Plainsong* / *Cantique des plaines* de Nancy Huston. Les citations de chansons servent d'élément de structure du roman, elles marquent le temps historique, et elles commentent l'action. En plus, quelques-unes font partie de l'action. Leur sens dans le roman est parfois très différent du sens originel. Dans la version française, ces chansons transmettent des informations culturelles, mais pour la plupart on ne peut pas les chanter. Par conséquent, un élément important ne passe pas en français. Néanmoins, dans les deux versions, les chansons permettent d'entendre et la voix de la narratrice et celles des personnages.

## ABSTRACT

Short extracts from many songs, particularly hymns and folk or popular songs, are quoted in Nancy Huston's *Plainsong* / *Cantique des plaines*. The songs quoted serve as a structuring element of the novel, as a temporal marker, and as a commentary on the action; in addition, some of them are part of the action itself. Their meaning within the novel is sometimes considerably different from the original meaning. In the French version, they carry cultural information but for the most part cannot be sung. As a result, an important element does not survive the passage into French. However, in both versions, the songs make it possible to hear both the voice of the narrator and those of the characters.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

appropriation, Nancy Huston, songs, translation of songs

Since no one speaks or writes in a vacuum, and since the cultural world we live in is full of texts, be they written, spoken or sung, we use, re-use and adapt these texts to our purposes. In literary composition, some of these transformations include: quotation of a text in another text, quotation of a song or parts of it in a written work, and translation from one language to another. All these occur in Nancy Huston's *Plainsong* / *Cantique des plaines*.<sup>2</sup> The songs quoted serve as a structuring element of the novel, as a temporal marker, and as a commentary on the action; in addition, some of them are part of the action itself. Their meaning in the novel is sometimes considerably different from the original meaning. The presence of these songs in the English and the French versions allows us to observe many kinds of passages from one state to another (for example, from a spoken or sung form to a written one), and the ways in which cultural materials are appropriated for new ends.

The novel presents the history of the province of Alberta through the life of one man, Paddon Sterling. Paula, who is the narrator and Paddon's granddaughter,

addresses her late grandfather: “you were pretty much as old as the century, and this century is about as old as a century can get.” (p. 1) Huston writes in an essay about the composition of the novel: “il fallait que Paddon ait vécu à peu près tout le vingtième siècle, que sa vie ait coïncidé plus ou moins avec l’histoire de sa province.” (Huston 1995: 204) Indeed, as one learns at the very end of the novel, Paddon was conceived in the early hours of January 1, 1900, and died near the end of the twentieth century, “nigh on ninety” (p. 3), never having left his home province. His father served in the Boer war and in the First World War. Paddon, just a little too young for the First War, was too old for the second; throughout his career, he was a high school teacher in Calgary. His ambition to write a philosophical study of time came to nothing. His granddaughter Paula, using her memories and Paddon’s notes towards his projected work, writes his story just after his death, more or less at the same time that Huston writes the novel. By the use of brief quotations from popular songs, folk songs and hymns current at different times in the twentieth century, the author comments on and interprets events in the life of the man and the province.

One of the dominant images in the novel is that of emptiness.<sup>3</sup> The opening scene of Paddon’s funeral imagined by Paula, despite the cutting wit with which it is written, is desolate both physically and culturally.<sup>4</sup> Later, in a passage metaphorically associating the vast spaces of the prairie with music, she describes how Paddon as a boy ran along the railroad tracks, and wished to do so again as a man:

just the two straight parallel lines and the hundreds of perpendicular ties striping their way across the flats to infinity [...] just the perfect emptiness of the plain [...] until there was not even a you left to revel in your aloneness but only the song, the single singing line of notes, the one long lonely modulated plaintive melody, the endless rippling golden unadulterated plainsong. (154)

However, not everyone sees the plains as empty. The point of view of indigenous peoples is presented later in the novel, in contrast to the European view. Paddon’s Blackfoot lover Miranda explains to him that just as her paintings are full, no matter where she stops, so in life there are no empty spaces: “There’s no such thing as an empty place in the world. Even the sky is full, even without a single cloud or bird.” (52)

The European settlers, to whom the plains did seem bare and far away from civilization, brought with them their cultural traditions, including religion and music. Miranda rejects the religion of the whites, but appreciates one contribution of the missionaries:

All we like is their songs—they know some great songs and we want to make up dances that go with them. [...] Before you know it [Methodist missionaries are] fighting with the Catholics about who’s gonna save us. [...] Okay here’s a deal, you teach us new songs and we’ll say prayers with both of you, how’s that? We’d sing matinals with the Catholics and vespers with the Methodists, or the other way round. (86)

Miranda tells many stories, in one of which a girl sings her dead father back to life. At another point in the novel she claps and hums, encouraging Paddon to dance. However, despite hints of a Native tradition of song, she does not sing songs of her people, and the only music heard in the novel is that of the whites.<sup>5</sup>

In Haiti as in Canada, missionaries try to replace indigenous culture and songs by those of Christianity, though this land, far from appearing empty, is full to excess.<sup>6</sup>

Paddon's sister Elizabeth, who has converted to Catholicism, goes to Haiti to work in the missions. She writes home in discouragement that the Haitians, despite the best efforts of the whites, cannot stop "dancing and smiling and joking and fooling around" no matter how miserable they are. (152) To make matters worse, "the words to the songs are perfectly filthy" (156-157). By dancing and singing their own songs the Haitians resist the invaders' influence.

The songs that play a part in Paddon's life belong to his own cultural tradition, and he introduced his children and grandchildren to many of them. Paula writes: "Oh Paddon I can still see those hands of yours, thick strong fingers tamping tobacco or playing piano [...] making tunes appear and go lilting sideways into other tunes." (5) His life was less harmonious than the songs he played, however. As Scarlatti is said to have made a melody from the notes struck by his cat walking on the keyboard, so Paddon hoped that his life would somehow be made into a harmonious whole:

You walked across the keyboard of the century, Paddon, trying to watch where you were going, and you failed. Listen to the notes. Black and white notes played out virtually at random. But a lot of flats. A lot of accidentals. You kept on waiting for Scarlatti to intervene, didn't you? You couldn't believe there was no Scarlatti, there would never be any Scarlatti. (6)

Now it is Paula's turn to try to make a melody of the incoherent materials of her grandfather's life.

Like Paddon, Paula makes tunes "go lilting sideways into other tunes," both as a general principle of composition and in the way extracts from songs are inserted in the text. They are quoted in run-on fashion, set off from the surrounding narration only by the use of italics, with capitalization but no separator to indicate the start of a new line. These songs were and in many cases still are part of general popular culture. The English-speaking reader will recognize, and probably be able to sing, many of them. Among the most familiar of the popular songs are "Home on the Range," "This Land is Your Land," "Sixteen Tons" and "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Well-known hymns include "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "Oh Come All Ye Faithful." Others, particularly hymns from the late nineteenth century, are less known.

Within the action of the novel, religious and popular songs stand in opposition to each other, just as the women, with their religion and desire for refinement, oppose the men's secular culture and rough ways.<sup>7</sup> Paddon is caught between the two, oppressed both by his drunken father's attempt to make a man of him and by his mother's religion, which includes compulsory attendance at church, "the endless sermon boring boring boring into [his] forehead" (19). As a boy he has to endure hymns; as an adult he makes sarcastic remarks when his moderately devout wife Karen or his exceedingly devout sister Elizabeth sing them. When Elizabeth teaches Paddon's children to sing: "God sees the little sparrow fall It meets his tender view If God so loves the little things I know He loves me too," Paddon's explosion follows immediately:

You bet He sees it fall, you repeated. He sees it fall and He just stands there watching, the sparrow splats on the sidewalk and God lets it happen and that's the proof of His love—hah! (78)

He is similarly sceptical of the line in a missionary hymn: "At his Cross they bow and weep." Thinking of recent disastrous events in Haiti, he takes the line in another sense: "You bet they bow and weep, you said to yourself. You bet they do." (151)

Finally at Paddon's funeral, Karen has the last word, and the proper Christian ceremony is a half-conscious act of revenge for her years of suffering. Paddon can no longer object when the assembled mourners sing:

"O breather into man of breath O holder of the keys of death O giver of the life within  
Save us from the death of sin That body soul and spirit be For ever living unto thee."  
(2)

Although Paddon also rejects his rough-hewn father's values and chooses the life of the mind instead, some of the father's songs fascinate him. As a child he wonders about the "mysterious and forbidden place" in the following:

Early in the mornin' when the sun is risin' See the little engines all in a row See the little  
driver pull the little lever Choo-choo-choo and away we go Down by the Bay Where the  
watermelons grow Back to my home I shall not go For if I do My mother will say Did  
you ever see a cow with a green eyebrow Down by the Bay?<sup>8</sup> (17)

In this quotation one song goes "lilting sideways" into another, to use Paula's words.<sup>9</sup> The first of these songs is an echo of one quoted earlier on the same page: "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee." (17) In this case, despite his father's occasional violence, Paddon prefers his song to the mother's.

While some songs are part of the action, others are used by the authorial voice as an ironic commentary on it. As the culmination of a series of events—loss of their land, disappearance of the buffalo, loss of hunting grounds—Native people received the dangerous gift of alcohol. The recital of disasters ends on a ferociously cheerful note:

[...] but don't you worry now everything's going to be all right, have a drink. Have a  
drink. Have another drink. All right, see? Hit the gutter. Oh give me a home where the  
buffalo roam Where the deer and the antelope play Where seldom is heard a discourag-  
ing word And the skies are not cloudy all day—EVERYBODY NOW! Home, home on  
the range... (50)

Songs are used to comment on Paddon's life as well. Mired in material necessity like the miner in Merle Travis's "Sixteen Tons," he can never get out: "You haul sixteen tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt..." (29-30) Some troubles go back to his childhood and no doubt even further into the past; as a child he was beaten by his father and saw his mother receive the same treatment. Later, driven to despair by intellectual failure and inability to support his family, Paddon beats his own wife and children. The cycle of family violence is underscored by a parody of a spritely childrens' song:

Heigh-ho a derry-o the farmer in the dell.

The farmer beats the wife, the wife beats the child, the child beats the dog, the dog  
beats the cat, the cat beats the mouse... There isn't any cheese for the mouse so it just  
has to stand alone, it has no choice but to cower in a corner and cover its ears with its  
tiny paws and tremble greily. (68)

By means of bits of song, the narrator comments on the different aspirations of the men and women preparing for a dance, and the incompatibility of Paddon's future parents, who will meet there. While the women hope to find a husband: "God of

the prairies by Thy boundless grace Give us the strength to build a worthy race," the men have other thoughts: "There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight." (225)

As part of the action or as a commentary on it, the songs, taken all together, sing Paddon's life and that of his century. Seated at her desk in Montreal, Paula closes her eyes and strains to hear, "and then a voice bubbles up and slowly starts to float across the plain, across the page, and at times the song is wistful and at other times it's full of joy." (190) Much of this life-song is made up of the individual songs evoked in brief bits throughout the book.

The use of songs in a novel is one kind of translation, and in this case they undergo yet another kind of translation in the French version. We need not enter into the controversy about whether or not the French version of the book is a separate creation (see Klein-Lataud 1996), since the songs are certainly translated.<sup>10</sup> The nature of the original and the skill in translation together determine a song's contribution to the whole: can the full resonance be heard across the language barrier? Or is only part of it transmitted, as is the case with the title *Plainsong / Cantique des plaines*?<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the result will be different according to the purpose of the translation; a version meant for singing will be different from one intended to communicate cultural content necessary to understanding a novel.

In this case, the principal content and often the poetic quality of the songs are transmitted well into French. These brief examples come from different songs:

O breather into man of breath O holder of the keys of death (2)

O Toi qui par ton souffle divin As donné le leur aux humains (6)

As I was walking that ribbon of highway I saw above me that endless skyway (8)

Par-dessus ce ruban de route Je vois à l'infini la céleste voûte (12)

God of the prairies by Thy boundless grace Give us the strength to build a noble race (225)

Dieu des Prairies, par Ton infinie grâce Donne-nous la force d'engendrer une noble race (245)

In some cases, sound and rhyme are more important than exact meaning:

Did you ever see a cow with a green eyebrow Down by the Bay? (17)

T'as déjà vu une vache Avec une moustache Au bord de la Baie? (23)

Even a good translation has its limits, however, and the impression created by bits of song is likely to be very different in the two languages. Cultural references familiar to the English-speaking reader may seem exotic to French ones. Though one may guess that the following words are derived from a song for children, much of the impact is lost if the mind's ear does not hear the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell":

Le fermier frappe sa femme—La femme frappe son enfant—L'enfant frappe le p'tit chien—Le p'tit chien frappe le chat—Le chat frappe la souris. (78)

Strategies can compensate to some extent for the loss of tone, and in this case the use of "p'tit" does suggest a coziness in contrast to the horror of violence within the family.

For the most part the songs are translated fairly literally, usually into rhyming verse. In one case, only English is given ("Hit the road, Jack") without a translation though with more of the words than in the original English version of the novel. The following part of the paragraph explains sufficiently: "Oui mon cher Papie, après

tout ce temps [...] tu as pris la route enfin.” (6) Several times, the English is given along with a translation: “Saint Peter don’t you call me ’cause I can’t go, I owe my soul to the company store—Saint Pierre ne m’appellez pas car j’peux pas venir, Je dois mon âme au magasin de la mine.”<sup>12</sup> (132)

The rhymes in the French versions, although they are sometimes not very precise and often do not conform to the rules of French versification, are usually effective in giving the impression of song. “This Land Is Your Land” is written in tetrameter rhyming couplets:

As I was walking that ribbon of highway I saw above me that endless skyway I saw  
below me that golden valley This land was made for you and me (8)

The French version is also in rhyming couplets:

Par-dessus ce ruban de route Je vois à l’infini la céleste voûte A mes pieds la vallée dorée  
Pour toi, pour moi, Dieu fit cette contrée (12)

In French poetry and song it is customary though not universal to alternate feminine rhymes (ending with a mute or unstressed *e*) with masculine ones (ending on a stressed syllable). In this case, both pairs of rhymes (*route / voute*, and *dorée / contrée*) are feminine.

Reginald Heber’s “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty” is somewhat unusual in that only one rhyme is used throughout all stanzas (all lines ending with [i]: almighty, thee, see, etc.):

Holy, Holy, Holy! though the darkness hide Thee Though the eye of sinful man Thy  
glory may not see Only Thou art holy, there is none beside Thee Perfect in power, in  
love and purity. (20)

In the translation, the single rhyme is replaced by rhyming couplets, with alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes as is usual in French versification:

O Saint, ô Saint, ô Saint! Bien que l’obscurité t’enrobe, Bien que Ta gloire à l’oeil du  
pêcheur se dérobe, Toi seul es saint, Nul à part Toi n’est pureté, Puissance et amour  
parfaits. (26)

The rhyming of *pureté* with *parfaits* is approximate but sufficient for the purpose.

In the French version of the novel, “Home on the range” is given both in English and in French:

Oh give me a home Where the buffalo roam Where the deer and the antelope (sic) play  
Where seldom is heard A discouraging word And the skies are not cloudy all day—Oh  
je veux ma maison Là où courent les bisons Où s’amusent les chevreuils et les daims Où  
c’que disent les gens N’est pas décourageant Où les cieux restent toujours sereins TOUS  
ENSEMBLE! Home, home on the range... (58)

In both languages, the same aabccb rhyme scheme is used: home / roam / play / heard / word / day, and *maison / bisons / daims / gens / décourageant / sereins*. Although a purist would not approve the rhyming of singular nouns and adjectives (*maison, décourageant*) with plural ones (*bisons, gens*), the spoken or sung verses are nevertheless quite effective. All the rhymes are masculine, which like an all-feminine scheme is somewhat unusual, and all are nasal vowels.

While the rhymes of the French versions give an impression of song, it is not always easy, and sometimes not possible, to sing them to the familiar tunes. An

exception is the French "Home on the range," which fits the tune quite well. For other songs, the misfit of words and music has two main causes, the first of which is the number of syllables. Often a French text contains more syllables than an English text with the same content, as in the following examples taken from different songs:

Though the darkness hide Thee / Bien que l'obscurité t'enrobe (20 & 26)  
 Save us from the sin of death / Ne nous laisse pas mourir Par le péché qui fait périr (2 & 6)  
 Jesus loves me / Jésus est mon ami (89 & 100)  
 Choo-choo choo and away we go / Et hop on s'en va tchou-tchou-tchou-gai (17 & 23)  
 Down by the Bay / Jusqu'au bord de la Baie (17 & 23)  
 You haul sixteen tons, and what do you get? / Tu pioches seize tonnes, et où est-ce que t'en es? (29-30 & 36)

The other reason for difficulty fitting words to tunes is the different placement of stressed syllables.<sup>13</sup>

HOLy, HOLy, HOLy / ô SAINT ô SAINT ô SAINT (17 & 23)<sup>14</sup>  
 I been WORKin' on the RAILroad / je traVAILLE au cheMIN de FER (47 & 55)

As a combined result of unfamiliarity and loss of rhythm, it is harder for the French reader than for the English one to hear Paddon's song.

Whereas difficulties in fitting French words to English tunes are no doubt inevitable, significant changes in meaning are matters of an author's or translator's choice. Few really questionable translations occur here; but one clear mistake appears to be caused by failure to recognize a biblical reference in a hymn by Charles E. Oakley.

Isles of the southern seas Deep in your coral caves Pent be each warring breeze Lulled by your restless waves He comes to reign with boundless sway And makes your wastes His great highway. (113)

The idea of making the waste lands into a highway recalls Isaiah 40:3, part of a poetic expression of the glory of God.<sup>15</sup> While still in praise of God, the English hymn refers particularly to the missionary effort. The Christian religion must replace indigenous ones, which are considered as either superstitious or nonexistent. This hymn, like several others in the novel (e.g. "Soldiers of the Cross arise" and "Coming coming yes they are"), is thus an anthem to religious and cultural imperialism. In the French version of the novel, the word "wastes" is taken to mean not lands without vegetation, but rather garbage:

Iles de la mer du Sud, Au fond de vos grottes de corail, Attachez les vents guerriers, apaisez les vagues agitées, Celui qui sur vous régnera, De vos déchets Sa route fera. (127)

Does "déchets" refer to what is thrown away by the inhabitants of the southern isles, or is it meant to characterize the inhabitants themselves as poor contemptible creatures in the eyes of the whites? In any case, a jarring note far from the original hymn has been introduced.<sup>16</sup>

For the most part, the translations are very capable work, transmitting successfully the ideas and tone of the English extracts. But the impression given by a song quotation and by its translation may differ greatly from the impression given by the song itself. Almost throughout the novel, Huston chooses the precise bit of a song that contributes to a grim and joyless picture of life, either by the lyrics themselves or

by their placement in the narration. The line quoted from the first stanza of “Holy, Holy, Holy”—“Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee” (17)—is followed immediately by the statement that Paddon’s mother believed in getting up early in the morning. A reference to the freshness and promise of the morning is transformed into the child’s reluctance to get out of bed. Later the author chooses the hymn’s one stanza mentioning discouragement and alienation: “Though the darkness hide Thee Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see [...]”<sup>17</sup>

Something similar to the case of “Holy, Holy, Holy” happens with “Sixteen Tons.” In its full form, this song expresses not only oppression but also humour, and the speaker revels in his trouble-making nature.<sup>18</sup> In the refrain he describes his hard life, and defies death:

You load sixteen tons, and what do you get / Another day older and deeper in debt /  
Saint Peter don’t you call me, ‘cause I can’t go / I owe my soul to the company store.

Even in the refrain, there is humour in the double meaning of “get” (receive as payment, and become). In the novel, the refrain alone is quoted as a comment on Paddon’s predicament: out of work, he can only hope to support his family by being rehired at a job he dislikes. The defiance expressed in the stanzas does not make its way into the novel. Not only does Huston choose the least cheerful passage of the song; she has made an apparently slight but in fact important change in the wording of the chorus: “You load sixteen tons” has become “You *haul* sixteen tons.” The change of verb allows the development of a metaphor for Paddon’s life, condemned to intolerable servitude and forever pulling a heavy load.

You haul sixteen tons, and what do you get—[...] haul, Paddon [...] Haul, man [...] haul! [...] Haul, man [...] Keep hauling [...] Haul [...] Haul, man! [...] Haul, Paddon (114-118)

You haul sixteen tons, and what do you get—[...] Tire, Paddon [...] Tire, mec [...] Tire! [...] Tire, mec [...] Allez, tire [...] Tire [...] Tire, mec! [...] Tire, Paddon (130-133)

“You haul sixteen tons” is translated earlier in the novel as “Tu pioches seize tonnes” (36); since the verb *piocher* (to dig with a pick) does not lend itself to the extended metaphor, it is replaced in the later passages by *tirer* (“Tire, Paddon”). In the French version as well, where the play on “get” is lost, the refrain sounds more despairing. Whether in the English or the French versions, one would never guess how spirited “Sixteen Tons” was when sung by Tennessee Ernie Ford. (Ford 1995)

Although Paddon liked many songs, he detested “This Land is Your Land” and refused to allow it to be sung within his earshot. Only once did he become angry at Paula; when she returned from summer camp with those words on her lips, “such beautiful words I thought,” he “harrumphed and muttered something like Cut the fucking crap” (8). It is worth examining why he hates this particular song so much, why the incident is important enough to be placed near the beginning of the novel, and how the song is changed by the way it is used.

“This Land is Your Land” was composed in 1940 by Woody Guthrie, who was living in poverty in New York after years of travelling and working in the dust-bowl western states. It is said that he wrote it because he was tired of listening to the hit of the day, Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” (Guthrie 1997, Rosen 2000) As originally written, Guthrie’s was a political protest song born of the Depression, and included three stanzas that are not part of the generally known version. One of them

refers to a sign that said "Private property" on one side, "But on the other side / It didn't say nothing." Another verse speaks of the poor in cities: "One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple / In the Relief office, I saw my people; / As they stood there hungry, I stood there wondering if / This land was made for you and me." Today "This Land" is usually considered to be a patriotic song suitable for children and notable mainly for its inclusiveness. The "you and me" for whom the land was made is generally understood to include everyone. Guthrie's criticism of wealth and property, clearly expressed in the missing stanzas, is still present implicitly but less obviously in the well-known shorter version.<sup>19</sup>

Paula learned the song at summer camp, "a week of pretending to be an Indian in my group of rosy-cheeked blue-uniformed blonde-pigtailed Girl Guides called the Sarcees." (8) In the context of the novel—with Paddon's angry reaction, and Huston's treatment of relations between European immigrants and Native peoples—"This Land" carries a very different content from Woody Guthrie's populist anthem. Whereas Guthrie was partly of Native American ancestry, Paddon takes "you and me" to refer to white people, excluding the earlier inhabitants who have been dispossessed of the land.

In the French version, the last line becomes: "Pour toi, pour moi, Dieu fit cette contrée." (12), lending divine authority to white appropriation of the land and destruction of native cultures. It is interesting to note that in the original version of the song written in 1940, although not the version first recorded by Guthrie, the chorus ends with "God blessed America for me" (Guthrie n.d.). At the conception of the song, God was on the side of the poor rather than that of the possessors; after many transformations, God returns to the same line of the song, but with almost the reverse effect. The song begins as political protest; in popular culture it is adopted as an inclusive patriotic song; in the English version of the novel it becomes an anthem of white imperialism, and finally in the French version, God returns to bless the new possessors. No wonder Paula's innocent song provokes Paddon's anger.

The various elements of religion and popular culture expressed in songs are used by the author / translator—often in different ways in the two languages—in the composition of her song. Within the novel they may carry meanings at variance with or even contrary to their original meanings. Despite numerous funny passages in the work, despite the fact that "at times the song [of Paddon's life] is wistful and at other times it's full of joy" (190), the note struck by the songs quoted is wistful more often than it is full of joy. Cheerful nonsense songs and joyful hymns alike become part of a larger composition in which hope is often absent. Woody Guthrie's inclusive populist anthem becomes the expression of exclusion, as Huston appropriates it for her critique of the appropriation of the land. She uses the songs to sing the aridity of the plain, to condemn the destruction of aboriginal culture, to tell how Paddon's intellectual aspirations are slowly destroyed by repressive religion and the rough culture of his land. They all become part of

the song, the one long lovely modulated plaintive melody, the endless rippling golden unadulterated plainsong. (154)

le chant, cette longue ligne de notes plaintives, cette lamentation immobile: le plainchant, dans toute sa splendeur monocorde. (172)

In a sense, as we have seen earlier, the entire novel consists of Paula's voice as she tries to imagine her grandfather's life. The reader is called on to perform some mental gymnastics, remembering that the entire construction, aside from Paula's memories and Paddon's notes, exists in Paula's imagination. At the same time the reader must suspend this knowledge in order to hear the voices of Paddon, his parents, his wife and children, his lover, as well as the multiple voices of their time and place. This feat would be almost impossible without the songs which "go lilting sideways into other tunes," expressing the thoughts of the characters or on the contrary commenting on them from a detached, ironic point of view. Whether they recall familiar melodies (particularly for the English reader) or introduce new cultural material (mostly for the French one), they are an essential element holding the novel together. Like Scarlatti with the notes played by his cat, Paula has succeeded in making a composition of the disorder of Paddon's life, and an important part of this composition consists of songs that add their notes to the whole.

#### NOTES

1. This article is in part the result of a seminar on Huston's *Cantique des plaines* at the University of Saskatchewan, February 2000. I would like to thank the participants in the seminar, especially the coordinator Jacques Julien, Louise Forsyth, Amy Kolot and Denis Lacroix, for their stimulating observations.
2. Quotations for the English version of the novel are from Huston 1993b; for the French, Huston 1993a. The French version, like the original English one, is by Huston.
3. Huston found Alberta to be boring: "Même à l'intérieur du pays assez fade qu'est le Canada, l'Alberta est une province particulièrement fade [...] A chaque fois que je pense à l'Alberta, j'ai envie de m'endormir." (Huston 1995: 200 and 202) She found a new interest on seeing the link between Haiti and Alberta: the destruction of indigenous populations by colonizing Europeans. (Huston 1995: 207)
4. Despite his failings as a husband and father, Paddon was a good grandfather to Paula, who in this scene takes his side and paints an unfavourable portrait of his wife and the other mourners.
5. Miranda's voice is harder to hear than that of the white characters. This is partly because, although she barely knows how to read and write, the words attributed to her are sometimes quite literary: "what makes you [whites] giddy and gay makes our heads crash uncontrollably"; her father, unable to provide for his children, "wept to see his empty hands in front of their mouths" (119). At other times she uses popular language and constructions; "you guys" (52), "gonna" (86), "I sure hope you do" (59). The difficulty is not that a person with little formal education would be intelligent, thoughtful and sometimes poetic, but that vocabulary and register in her speech are so uncertain. Critics' opinions of the character differ. While Marcotte considers her to be a "construction idéologique" rather than a real character (Marcotte 1994: 74), Potvin refers to "le merveilleux personnage de Miranda" (Potvin 1997: 13). Aside from denouncing the wicked deeds of the whites, Miranda serves as a projection of Paddon's needs: "the only strange thing was your never having seen this woman before whereas she had always existed inside of you." (Huston 1993b: 41) She represents for him "le principe vital." (Sing 1998: 30)
6. Elizabeth writes vivid descriptions of festivals, and sends photographs of dances, headdresses and voodoo altars. Paddon wonders: "How can they even breathe let alone worship in the midst of all that junk." (153)
7. A similar division is found in O. E. Rolvaag's novel of Swedish immigrants, *Giants in the Earth*, where the mother is linked to religious music and the father to folk songs. (Coleman-Hull: 1995, p. 106)
8. The Canadian reader, although not the reader in France, may think of a department store when seeing "the Bay" or "la Baie" written with a capital letter. Paddon "never could get up the guts to ask [his father] what the bay was, it couldn't have been the Hudson's Bay Company store in Calgary because there weren't any watermelons downtown." (17)
9. Another slide from one song to another—and back again—occurs with hymns: "Oh come all ye faithful—Christ the Lord has ris'n again—Oh come let us adore Him." (77)  
The words for many of the hymns can be found in *The Book of Common Praise*.

10. Nancy Huston has kindly confirmed that all the translations of songs are her own.
11. "Plainsong" calls to mind: 1) Gregorian chant, 2) the song of the plains, 3) a plain, simple song, 4) the song of a plain, ordinary person. "Cantique des plaines" also evokes religious music (though of a different kind) and the plains, but not the idea of ordinariness and simplicity.
12. In English, "go" rhymes with the Southern pronunciation "sto," but there is no rhyme in the French.
13. In the translation of songs for the purpose of singing, exact meaning is sometimes less important than the number of syllables and the stress pattern. As an illustration, the following have the same rhythmic pattern (phrases of 4, 4 and 7 syllables) but different wording:  
O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, wie treu sind deine Blätter!  
Mon beau sapin, roi des forêts, que j'aime ta verdure!  
Various English versions begin with "O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree," and continue with different words but the same rhythm: "How are thy leaves so verdant!" "How faithful are thy branches!" "How steadfast are your branches!" "Your leaves are so unchanging!"
14. The hymnal *Célébrons Dieu* contains words by H. Arnéra, which show how a version meant for singing differs from one intended to communicate the cultural and affective content of the original. Arnéra's words are sung to the same tune as "Holy holy holy": "Gloire, gloire, gloire, Honneur et puissance; / Que ton nom soit exalté sur terre et dans les cieux! / Gloire, gloire, gloire, Force, obéissance, / Pour ton amour, pour tes dons merveilleux!" There is no stanza containing a reference to darkness hiding God.
15. "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord." In the same chapter of Isaiah, "the isles" are mentioned: "The isles saw it, and feared: the ends of the earth were afraid, drew near, and came." (*Bible*, Authorized Version)
16. The Louis Segond translation of Isaiah gives: "Une voix crie: / Préparez au désert le chemin de l'Eternel, / Aplissez dans les lieux arides / Une route pour notre Dieu." (Segond 1969: 605)
17. Other stanzas, such as the picturesque image of saints casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea, are not quoted.
18. He declares that "Fighting and trouble are my middle name." Possible rivals are warned: "If you see me coming, better step aside / A lot of men didn't, and a lot of men died / One fist of iron, the other of steel / If the right one don't get you, then the left one will"
19. As the song has become almost universally known in North America, the geographical references are often changed. In the American version, the land extends "From California to the New York Island / From the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters." Canadian children sing (with possible slight variations) "From Bonavista to Vancouver Island / From the Arctic Circle to the Great Lake waters." They are sometimes surprised to hear the American version, and indignant that Americans have taken over "their" song.

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