

explorations



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Posthumanist Reading of Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales* and Her Representations of African American Family

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Abstract. This study presents a new posthumanist reading of Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales* (2007), proposing a novel vision of familial relationships. The primary focus of my analysis is on the posthumanist representations of the African American family in *A Million Nightingales*, which suggest the blurring of existing boundaries and hierarchies through the underscoring of the importance of memory, body marks, and animated things. I draw inspiration from both Jane Bennett's and Donna Haraway's theories, assuming that a new reading of the novel should focus on the importance of embracing all the differences to create a more interconnected and harmonious existence for all beings.

Key words: Susan Straight, *A Million Nightingales*, African American family, posthumanism

1. INTRODUCTION

The world constantly evolves due to advancements in cybernetics and biotechnology, which obscure the lines between the hard sciences and humanities in the academic discourse. This shift creates a new need to go beyond traditional norms and binaries between humans and non-humans. Throughout human history, humanism has been the primary system, with anthropocentrism valuing humans as superiors and discounting other units (Boslaugh 2016). In turn, this has led to a lack of value for both excluded human groups and non-human entities. As Rosi Braidotti (2017, 10), a contemporary philosopher and feminist theorist suggests, a more egalitarian approach is necessary because of the intricate relationships between beings and the need for a more inclusive approach. That is what posthumanism as a dominant philosophical theory does: it suggests blurring the existing boundaries "to experiment with new fundamental schemes of thought" while also considering the entities that humanism has historically overlooked (Braidotti 2013, 196).

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It may seem like issues of unfair treatment, oppression, and discrimination are relics. However, a closer look reveals that African Americans continue to be marginalized. Despite many shifts and improvements, Chris Robinson (2015, 96) points out, "African Americans live a different time from whites, a time where justice and law enforcement are still executed as unfairly as they were long ago". The ongoing dominance of white hegemony perpetuates the dehumanisation of Black individuals. Patrick Elliot Alexander (2018, 6) asserts that this continued mistreatment "is inextricably linked to the logic and impunity of white supremacist social control." The persistence of inequalities underscores the need for novelists to depict and portray facets of African American culture, especially the intricate idea of family. Furthermore, narrative allows for the expression of diverse identities, and posthumanism, as a dominant philosophical realm, provides valuable tools for re-examining established concepts.

Susan Straight is a relatively young author of white background who writes about Black characters' perspectives. Given the contemporary nature of her oeuvre, critics have not devoted much attention to her work. Even though Straight is a white writer, she writes about Black characters with full respect. Her novels, according to Stephanie Li (2007, 271), become a part of neo-slave narratives as Straight "breaks the silence surrounding a wide variety of experiences of the antebellum South." Straight provides powerful insights into the struggles and experience of Black people. Given that Straight began her literary career in the late twentieth century, it is reasonable to apply the posthumanist theory to her works, by taking into consideration that the posthumanist approach encourages a deeper exploration of identity and existence beyond traditional humanist perspectives.

A Million Nightingales is a historical novel set in the era of slavery. The narrative follows the experiences of a mixed-race girl named Moinette who is separated from her mother and sold to another plantation owner. Moinette is not only intellectually gifted, but she also possesses remarkable courage and resilience. She attempts to flee in order to reunite with her mother, but her efforts are unsuccessful. Moinette is raped and then gives birth to her son. Once more, Moinette is sold and separated from her son. Her new owner, Msieu Antoine, respects Moinette, and assists her in attaining her freedom. He purchases her son and also affords her the opportunity to become a home owner. Despite the death of her son, Moinette persists and decides to purchase two girls in order to establish a new family unit.

A Million Nightingales addresses a number of topics, with a primary emphasis on the concept of the Black family. Presenting a character who faces numerous difficult choices, the narrative poses questions about the nature of choice. The title, *A Million Nightingales*, is derived from the song of the same name, which speaks of the souls of the ancestors who sing at night like nightingales do. The grandmother of one of the white characters, Mr. Green, sang this song; for Mr. Green, nightingales are just a part of the song. He asserts that these birds are merely singing, stating, "I have a million nightingales on the branches of my heart singing freedom...So always someone is not free" (Straight 2006, 315). He is convinced that there is nothing he can do to change the situation. However, for Moinette, the nightingales are not merely birds; they are a symbol of resilience and a call to action to save Black people. This can be achieved by purchasing their freedom, which is exactly what she does. Moinette chooses to establish her family regardless of whether the members are her biological relatives or not.

2. SUSAN STRAIGHT'S OEUVRE

Susan Straight is a 21st-century novelist and a National Book Award finalist for her novel *Highwire Moon* (2001). She is known for her writing that undermines “clearly definable distinctions between human and nonhuman characters” (Nowak-McNeice 2024, 124), a theme that resonates with this research. I agree with Nowak-McNeice’s view that Straight’s works interrogate the humanist perspective, delving into the complexities of human nature and its relationships with other beings. However, while Nowak-McNeice in her article “Post-anthropocentric Hinterlands: Susan Straight’s California” focuses on the Californian hinterlands and the questions of land responsibility and possession, my work shifts the emphasis to a posthumanist reading of family dynamics. Through this lens, I aim to reveal how Straight’s narratives offer a more inclusive portrayal of African American families, moving beyond traditional concepts and re-examining earlier beliefs. Many of her nine novels serve as neo-slave narratives, addressing themes of migration, race, history, and the evolving nature of African American familial relationships.

Some would argue that Straight, as a white woman, cannot be a reliable source to inform us about the African American experience or to challenge the binaries between humans and nonhumans. According to Toni Morrison, Black people have often been excluded from critical discussions, thus making it more appropriate for Black people to address their own exclusion and let them talk about their experiences. Morrison (1995, 91) states: “The exercise [of writing about traumatic experiences of Black people] is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.” This implies that only Black individuals are truly qualified to delve into these topics and convey the horrors they have faced. In her view, white writers struggle to engage with the African American experience authentically, often focusing more on their own perspectives. In *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (2019, 160), she asserts that no book written by white authors about Black people “was ever written for black people, any more than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written for Uncle Tom to read or be persuaded by... the subject of the dream is the dreamer.” This perspective emphasises the need for genuine representation that honours the voices of those most affected.

Consequently, it could be argued that in the era of posthumanism, Straight’s work does not transcend white oppression but rather reinforces it; for example, King (2019, 223) suggests that the narratives about Black people are often used not to erase the distinctions between human and nonhuman, nor to rethink the idea of the human, but rather “for the self-realization of the human... to fix the human category.” In other words, following King’s opinion, a discussion about Black people by Straight cannot provide any substantial and profound insight into the experiences of Black individuals. Instead, it may serve to uphold existing power structures and perpetuate stereotypes. This raises questions about the true intentions and impact of Straight’s work in the context of posthumanism.

However, my reading of Straight’s writing suggests a posthumanist idea of entanglement, where two entities (Black and white people) are interconnected and cannot be described independently. Straight, a white woman, attempts to portray the world from the perspective of a Black person with the full respect for their differences. Her prose

presents a vision in which humans are neither superior nor separate from the rest of the world. Straight's representation aligns with the ideas of American feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad (2007, 341), who argues that "'Humans' are part of the world-body space in its dynamic structuration." Barad asserts that humans engage in the intra-activity with other beings, where entanglement occurs. Following her thoughts, I fully agree that human beings are not limited within the confines of their bodies and are not the sole creators of the world. It is crucial for humans to understand the utmost importance of interacting with other beings to discover new possibilities "in an endless reconfiguring of boundaries and properties" (Barad 2007, 376). Straight's prose may be said to perform entanglement in its representation of Black characters, as "'having-the-other-in-one's-skin' includes a spectrum of possibilities, including the 'other than human' as well as the 'human'" (Barad 2007, 392). Entanglement and the process of understanding someone by acknowledging and accepting their differences can help us overcome human limits and narcissistic humanistic visions of other species. Such entanglement allows for a deeper connection and appreciation of the complexities of different beings, leading to a more inclusive and empathetic worldview. By embracing this entanglement, Straight moves beyond traditional boundaries and hierarchies and creates a more interconnected and harmonious existence with all beings.

However, Straight is concerned with African American issues not only because of the oppression and trauma that inherent in Black culture but also because of her three daughters, who are Black. The impulse to write *A Million Nightingales* (2006) arose one night when she was contemplated what life might have been like for them under slavery: "Can you imagine what their lives would have been like, with their looks and their brains?" Straight reflected as she began to develop the idea (O'Connor 2006). *A Million Nightingales* (2006), together with *Take One Candle Light A Room* (2010), and *Between Heaven and Here* (2012), forms the Rio Seco trilogy.

In this analysis, only the first novel will be examined, focusing on the representation of African American families through the lens of posthumanism as a prominent philosophical concept. In her essay "Post-anthropocentric Hinterlands: Susan Straight's California," Nowak-McNeice offers a posthumanist reading of Straight's works. She claims that in Straight's novel the distinction between humans and animals "belongs to the contested official narrative" (Nowak-McNeice 2024, 129). Nowak-McNeice argues that the novel portrays connections between animals and humans, or rather, the absence of any distinctions—as something natural. Straight presents an alternative form of African American familial relationships that departs from traditional norms of humanism.

3. THE STRUCTURE OF THE FAMILY IN *A MILLION NIGHTINGALES* (2007)

The novel explores two types of relationships that are crucial for understanding the notion of family. These relationships are both defined by choice. The first type arises from the historical context of slavery. According to Libra R. Hilde (2020, 1), "[s]lavery denied the enslaved control of their bodies and lives." Black people were not free to choose their owners or even family members; everything depended on the will of the owner. In the story of Tretite, Straight (2006, 308) describes a man who wished to marry her without regard for his owner's opinion: "Ramon say his msieu cannot tell who love." However, he was not merely punished; he was torn apart by other white masters. For the

slavers there was no I; they were only words and numbers in the ledgers that recorded their owners' possessions. Blacks were denied the right to marry without the consent of whites. This passage exemplifies the harsh reality of slavery, where Black individuals lacked basic rights and the freedom to choose.

The issue of choice is well illustrated by the story of Moinette, the novel's protagonist and narrator. As a young girl, she is observant, curious, and eager for knowledge. The first person to influence Moinette's life – not by choice – is Céphaline, the daughter of Moinette's owner. Céphaline was the person who taught young Moinette, opening up a world of words that would be of great help to Moinette as she grew older. Owing to Céphaline, Moinette's ability to read and write allows her to run a guesthouse and earn money for her family later on in her life. Céphaline's words accompany the protagonist throughout her life and remain with her until her death: "I missed her voice. Her words like embroidery in the air. She didn't love me. But I had heard her voice all my life" (Straight 2006, 114). Despite Céphaline's influence, it is important to note that these relationships are not based on Moinette's will. The protagonist's awareness of her position in relation to white people is evident throughout the text. For example, when Céphaline claims that their lives are similar as they do not belong to themselves, Moinette hates her. This highlights the fact that Moinette is fully aware of her subordinate status during the time of slavery.

Nevertheless, Moinette's relationship with her last owner, Msieu Antoine, is quite different; it is also rooted in a lack of choice, but it is much more complicated. Initially, Moinette hates him and has little trust in him. Yet she later discovers that she is not being used merely to please her master, but rather as a cover for him: he is in love with another man and does not want to reveal his true identity to the others. He treats her with the utmost respect and never allows himself to touch or harm her. Their relationship is kind and tender, resembling a friendship rather than a slavery-based relation. Moinette even says, "I had trusted him with our lives" (Straight 2006, 326). He helps Moinette buy her son and, before he leaves for Europe, gives her the house. This type of a relationship may stem from Msieu Antoine's situation: he wants to be seen as an ordinary white man who has a black girl, but not as a man in love with another marginalised man. Msieu Antoine's partner is Jewish, so the men are restricted by humanist standards of relationships. Therefore, Msieu Antoine and Moinette's relationships are based on an equal understanding of the lack of choice in American society.

The relationship between Msieu Antoine and Moinette exemplifies the characters' attempt to transcend the boundaries between humans and non-humans, as viewed from the dominant perspective of slave owners. Black people were in the group of non-humans and were treated in a subordinate manner. As Lake has argued, European racists imposed the idea on the American psyche that African Americans were inferior to whites. She states that Europeans portrayed Black people as they "were without intelligence, without culture... [were] deemed grotesque and bestial" (Lake 2003, xi). The dehumanisation of Black individuals perpetuated the belief in their inferiority and justified their mistreatment. The novel challenges this deeply ingrained societal distinction through the relationship between Moinette and Msieu Antoine, exploring the genuine connection between different beings.

Straight highlights the inequality experienced by Black people in two main situations in the novel, while also taking some steps towards reconfiguring the standards of family norms. Moinette leaves her mother not by choice, but because she is treated as property

rather than as a person with rights. As Berlin (2004, 13) explains, Black people were “defined as property and condemned as little more than beasts.” This passage clarifies the reason for Moinette's mistreatment: under slavery, Black people were treated as objects without feelings, compassion, or other senses. When sold, Moinette is not given a fair chance to say goodbye to her mother or promise to return.

A similar situation occurs when Moinette is sold and separated from her young son, Jean-Paul. He is cared for by two other women, Fantine and Emilia, who show him warmth and tenderness. It is important to note that they respect Moinette's rights and never refer to themselves as his mother, “He knew the word. *Maman*. He didn't call *maman* to Emilia or Fantine. He called them *tante*. Aunt. I cried, from gratitude to them, and said my name over and over to him. *Maman*” (Straight 2006, 271). This scene emphasises the significance of the expanded family – as a source for survival and support. African Americans demonstrate their support and appreciation for each other through strong familial bonds that extend beyond traditional family structures.

The narrative complicates the concept of family choice. Straight portrays a different kind of relationship, where Black individuals have agency and can make choices based on their circumstances or desires. The protagonist, Moinette, is presented with an opportunity to leave for New Orleans with a man she has feelings for. Hervé Richard offers to help Moinette because he likes her. However, Moinette decides not to leave due to her responsibility as a mother to her new-born son. When considering his offer, she recalls her mother with the words “My mother. My son” (Straight 2006, 227). Despite not feeling like she knows her son, she builds a connection with him through the memory of her mother. It is her choice to stay with him, just as her mother would likely do in the same circumstances.

Moinette desires to reunite with her mother, but her decisions are often driven by other issues. When she finally has the opportunity to reconnect with her mother, it is too late; her mother may have already passed away or gone in search for her. Despite this, Moinette chooses not to be alone and instead claims Tretite as her own mother. However, her owner, Msieu Antoine, a perceptive man, uncovers the deception during a conversation with Moinette. In response to her confession of substitution he replied, “But you have chosen her so” (Straight 2006, 298). This interaction highlights Moinette's deep desire for a mother figure and her willingness to create that bond, even if it is not based on a blood relationship. Moreover, this is also a question of survival and of saving another person. Her actions blur the distinctions between biological and non-biological family members. This aligns with Haraway's view of making kin with those who may be unfamiliar to us, which is to say, those “outside of what we thought was family or gens” (2016, 103). Moinette considers individuals who are not her blood relatives as part of her family.

By expanding the very definition of family, Moinette goes even further when she decides to buy and adopt two girls. She remains a strong-willed woman with a determination to continue her life despite her experiences of loneliness and losing her mother and son. She feels responsible for the sacrifices her loved ones made to save her and share their stories. She understands clearly why she has chosen Tretite as her mother and explains that “[y]ou sometimes make your family” (Straight 2006, 324). Moinette's decision to adopt two girls demonstrates her belief that family is not defined by blood but by the bonds of love and support. This highlights the idea that family can be chosen and built through shared experiences and connections.

Moinette's strong desire for connections and the ability to share experiences, stories, and knowledge lead her to purchase other girls. Initially, Moinette buys Marie-Claire and accepts her as her own daughter, pointing out that "[she] lit my rooms the best she could" (Straight 2006, 363). The word "lit" alludes to the title of the second novel, *Take One Candle Light A Room* (2010), and it implies the importance of the relationships that bring hope and joy even in the darkest moments of life. In Haraway's words, the idea of extending the family and making kinship gives Moinette a chance for "recuperation and recomposition"¹ with others (2016, 101). Moinette wants to keep a part of herself alive in the memory of her relatives. Therefore, five years after adopting Marie-Claire, she buys Marie-Thérèse, whom she names after her mother. The reason Moinette chooses these girls to be her daughters is because she does not want to pass away with:

no one left behind ever remembered me, the touch of my hand on skull, the tender part down the center of someone's hair—if no one remembered that I had saved coins and then the paper printed with ink worth much more, that I had paid for this house where my blood stained the floor in one room and was covered with a small Turkish rug—then my mother's words were nothing but sound formed around lye steam and saliva and evaporated in the wind of the clearing, and my own words were nothing but ink in trails on pressed tree bark (Straight 2006, 365).

Moinette aims to form a new family with individuals who are not her biological relatives, as she desires to be remembered. She strives to embrace other people, whether they are her blood relatives or not. She hopes to create lasting connections based on mutual understanding and love, as the aspect of memory is crucial to her. She cannot allow her own experiences and those of her loved ones to disappear into nothingness. Memory is a decisive element not only in building family relationships but also in African American culture as a whole. By forming these new family connections, Moinette is actively participating in the tradition of passing down stories and experiences to future generations.

4. MEMORY AND BODY TRAUMA

Memory plays a vital role in Black culture. Kenneth Milton Stampp (1956, viii) highlights that "knowledge of the past is a key to understand the present." This suggests that awareness is fundamentally tied to the act of remembering. Memory serves as a powerful means of resilience, shaping how stories and traditions are transmitted across generations, helping Black individuals confront challenges and draw strength from their ancestors' wisdom. As Berlin (2004, 74) points out, memory fosters a strong sense of identity and belonging, connecting "slaves together" just as it did in the past. Moreover, the act of remembering empowers and resists by preserving the historical narratives and experiences that define the Black experience. The three centuries of slavery and the countless lives lost have left an indelible mark; rather than fading into history, the

¹ Haraway states, "One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses" (2016, 101).

oppression, dishonor, and violence of that time irrevocably altered the trajectory of American history and shaped African American culture and family structures. Roynon (2013, 54) asserts that “the course of [American] history has been permanently shaped by the fact of slavery” and must be acknowledged in discussions about African American families. Slavery significantly impacted the traditions, beliefs, and practices of Black people, as Berlin (2004, 15) notes that “slaves transformed their experience...into a culture that joined them together.” The legacy of slavery, encapsulated in the memories and stories of Black individuals, has been preserved across generations. In discussing the importance of memory, it's essential to consider Morrison's perspective. She argues that the memory of slavery and its often-ignored history not only shapes the Black American psyche but also influences the broader American consciousness (Morrison 1988, 126). According to Morrison, understanding the memory of slavery is crucial for grasping Black American identity as well as the overall American experience.

Memory plays a significant role in Moinette's life as well, as it is the element that links her with her mother during the six years that Moinette is away from her, following her mother's and Jean-Paul's deaths. When Moinette is separated from her mother, she initially considers ending her life to be reunited with her “là-bas,” in heaven. However, the memory of her mother waiting for her provides the strength Moinette needs to survive. As she reflects, “But what if Mamère waited for me to come back to her?...Sitting, just like me, waiting” (Straight 2006, 93). This recollection of her mother waiting becomes a source of strength and motivation for Moinette to persevere, even in the face of struggle and mistreatment. Memory serves as a unifying force that transcends the constraints of physical distance.

The ability of memory to transcend the limitations of space and time becomes a powerful tool for Moinette not only for survival, but also to feel connected to her loved ones, to be a part of something greater. Because of her recollections, Moinette says that “you grew older and lived inside your memory, the things you saw and tasted and smelled in the past” (Straight 2006, 272). Moinette's collection of people in her mind gives her not only comfort and solace, but the sense of being supported as well. For all her misery and pain, she cannot be erased because she “had [her] children”; she says, “My memories of Jean-Paul...my property, my memory, my history, my future” (Straight 2006, 367). These memories encompass both the history of her ancestors and a foundation for future generations. Memory serves as a link between past, present, and future, allowing the legacy of resilience and survival to be passed down through generations.

Memory not only reinforces the connections between generations but also becomes a profound source of power. The novel encapsulates the wide spectrum of experiences of different characters, including Moinette, her mother, grandmother, Jean-Pierre, and others. Nowak-McNeice (2024, 128) highlights the importance of memory in narratives by naming it “the key to survival.” In the novel, recollections of family members passed down through generations not only provide vital information but also foster hope for a better future. Through memories, the characters are able to better understand their past and make sense of the present.

Recollections of the past do not simply encompass the stories of the characters. Physical evidence, such as marks of slavery (bruises, brandings, scars from the lashings) or tribal signs on the body, all have a lasting effect. Branding and signs carry profound meanings and are situated on opposite ends of the extremes. During the era of slavery,

branding was primarily used for identification purposes, to determine a person's origin. In the novel, we learn about this purpose from the dialogue between two owners, when one of them says: "You can tell by the scars they came on a boat" (Straight 2006, 60). The black body was treated as an object or property, stripped of freedom and agency, because, as Berlin (2004, 18) says, "[s]lave owners treated their slaves with extreme callousness and cruelty," and this was widely accepted. Such deprivation of agency was a key aspect of the institution of slavery, perpetuating the cycle of oppression and cruelty.

Iron branding represents another form of oppression and a symbol of disempowerment. Slave owners created their unique branding marks, which could be used not only to identify the owner but also to determine whether the slave had attempted to escape and how many times. The black body serves as a permanent reminder of the institution of slavery and its horrors to the slave owner and anyone who witnesses it. Moinette, who was branded when attempting to escape and return to her mother, vividly describes the experience: "Then I tasted black, saw black, felt the sear in my shoulder. Blacksmith. Molten. Red in my throat" (Straight 2006, 146). Moinette's description captures profound pain and trauma associated with being branded, illustrating the lasting impact it had on both body and mind.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all body marks symbolise oppression. Taking from Africa to America, slaves bore with various designs on their bodies as a means to signify their tribal identities. As Shadiat Olapeju Shuaib (2020, 3) explains, African tradition has its unique characteristics of body marking such as "cicatrisation...scarification, teeth filing, hairdressing, and body painting." Tribal scars were used for various purposes such as beauty, identification, rituals, and as expressions of belonging. Moinette's mother had them: "Her tribal scars shone – she was from Africa, I knew" (Straight 2006, 24). Marie-Thérèse took proud of her scars, which linked her to her roots and heritage. These marks were not meant to oppress, but rather display cultural identity. For many enslaved people body marks were a source of dignity and personality. Black people used these marks to navigate in the times of slavery, despite from being far away from their home, from Africa.

Oppression can manifest itself in various forms, some of which may not be immediately apparent, such as the internal damage that can ultimately lead to death. In the narrative, Moinette's mother emphasises the significance of the indigo plant, which may seem harmless at first glance. Marie-Thérèse recalls a time when enslaved women were forced to make indigo, beating the plants with sticks to extract the blue dye. The process released a toxic odour that contributed to their demise. Over the years, these women passed away, leaving behind nothing but a cemetery marked by loss: "The black row of the slave cemetery was a line of wooden crosses with arms nearly touching" (Straight 2006, 52). There were no markers bearing their names. This poignant account serves as a stark reminder of the devastating impact of slavery on countless lives. The disappearance of Black bodies went unnoticed, with only Moinette's mother bearing witness to this tragedy, oppression, and erasure.

In the narrative Moinette uses memory as a means of both navigating her past and shaping her present. Her actions exemplify the transformative power of memory. By remembering, Moinette confronts her own history and that of her loved ones, creating new possibilities for herself and future generations. Moinette's strong desire to collect and preserve diverse experiences positively impacts her vision for a better future. A close examination of Moinette's attitude toward the interpretation of historical events and their

implications reveals a potential connection with the concept of the Chthulucene. The framework of Chthulucene implies a hopeful outlook on the future, bringing together various entities while interweaving and multiplying different histories. Haraway (2016, 55) notes that the Chthulucene differs from the Capitalocene or Anthropocene because “the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet.” In essence, the Chthulucene fosters coexistence and collaboration among diverse beings, offering a sense of hope and possibility for the future. My argument is that Moinette’s actions demonstrate this concept as she challenges traditional notions of family and forges a strong connection between past, present, and future. By going beyond the boundaries, Moinette offers a more inclusive vision of the future for the future generations. Through resilience and adaptability, Moinette exemplifies the mindset of the Chthulucene, embracing change and uncertainty while paving the way for a more interconnected and sustainable world.

5. ANIMATED THINGS

The passage to a better future is not solely shaped by Moinette’s actions, but also by a particular vision of interconnections between humans and nonhumans, specifically animated objects². In the novel, the borders between humans and things are blurred, as the main characters believe that the latter are animated. African American spirituality is characterised by a belief in the spiritual domain, the presence of spirits within objects, and multiple gods. According to researchers, “relying on spirituality has been a coping mechanism for those dealing with the perils of prejudice and racism” (Thompson and Brown-Burton 2015, 37). Such beliefs formed the basis of Black culture, especially for those forcibly removed from their homeland, separated from loved ones, or treated as deviant. However, the attitude of humans towards things can be explained not only by the spiritual culture of African Americans but also by an attempt to exceed the constructed limits of human and nonhuman nature. This perspective invites a re-examination of agency and interconnectedness, suggesting that even inanimate objects can hold significance and meaning in the broader narrative of survival and resilience.

In the novel, characters attribute special significance to matter, not only as a means of coping with injustice and unequal treatment but also as a way to transcend the boundaries of time and space. The concept of the spirit of hair is particularly important to Moinette, who initially perceives hair as inanimate. At first, she was affected by Céphaline and the doctor, and she did not take her mother seriously. However, Marie-Thérèse shares Moinette the story of her mother, explaining that the spirit of person (“ni”) is inside the hair. Marie-Thérèse recalls her mother words: “I wash your hair, I be careful for your ni...I braid, I hold gentle on your ni. My mother tell me on the boat... She say in my ear about the hair” (Straight 2006, 83). This understanding of the spirit of the hair as a part of

² In the present analysis I will not touch upon the topic of animality and interconnections between humans and nonhumans animals. This vast topic requires an in-depth further research. Nowak-McNeice comments on the fact that Straight’s prose makes an interesting vision on these relationships, by portraying “continuity between human and nonhuman animals...[and] the impossibility of distinguishing between... ‘people’ and ‘animals’” (2024, 125).

oneself and a connection to ancestors plays a significant role in Moinette's journey of self-discovery. Over time, she understands the profound role of hair spirit, which serves as a bridge linking past, present, and future.

Moinette's approach to the hair spirit significantly impacts her daughters' identities and culture. She perceives hair not merely as inanimate matter but as a living extension of the individual, one that accumulates experiences and embodies the essence of both the owner and their ancestors. Moinette imparts this wisdom to Marie-Claire, emphasizing that each time she touches and combs her hair, she recognises her mother's *ni* (Straight 2006, 374). Through this transmission of tradition and connection to the hair spirit, Moinette ensures that her daughters maintain a strong link to their ancestry and heritage. This bond with the hair continues to shape the sense of self and belonging in the world. The hair spirit becomes an actant that is able to influence characters' life.

In the narrative matter is not passive – it acts and influences. Objects such as coffee beans, clothespins, and hair are not inert substance. “Three coffee beans. Two clothespins,” – there are the things that remind Moinette of Marie-Thérèse and give her the feeling of strong bond between them even when she is far away from her mother (Straight 2006, 114). These objects transmit Marie-Thérèse's habits, leading Moinette to emulate her mother's actions. Initially, she is fascinated by Marie-Thérèse's early rising and her love for coffee: “I was all she cared about, except for the coffee she loved so much she hoarded the beans inside a special tin in our room” (Straight 2006, 19). Eventually, Moinette starts to do the same – take care of her children and coffee. This illustrates how matter becomes a potent force, shaping the lives and identities of the characters in profound ways.

The concept of active matter is explored by political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett in her work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Bennett shifts the focus from the way people perceive things to the inherent vitality of those things themselves. She invites us to rethink our understanding of “life” and “matter,” arguing that nonhuman forces are actively engaged in shaping our experiences. She agrees that thinking about the vitality of matter may seem strange, and yet such actions can unveil new ideas and new possibilities, “I will turn the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter; around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange...In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape” (Bennet 2010, vii). The theorist proposes a new perspective on things, seeking to move beyond established ways of thinking. Bennett's theoretical framework resonates with the characters' interactions with nonhuman matter in the narrative, as they recognize these objects as dynamic forces that influence their lives and relationships.

The narrative transcends established notions by portraying characters who believe that things are animated and are able to have a prevailing influence over their lives. For instance, by means of water, Moinette feels the connection with her mother when she is separated by water; by means of coffee beans, Moinette finds the capacity to carry on with her life because coffee beans are parts of her mother; and by means of hair, it is possible to transcend the separation from part of another person. Bennett (2010, viii) names this phenomenon the vitality of matter, describing it as a capability “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces...of their own.” Bennett's words provide an explanation for the narrative, where various things profoundly influence the characters' lives because of their perceived animacy. Such a belief in the agency of objects adds layers of complexity to the spiritual

practices and worldviews of African Americans, challenging traditional Western notions of inanimate objects and highlighting the interconnectedness between humans and the material world.

The concept of animated objects challenges traditional humanistic view of materiality. In her work, Bennett discusses previous assumptions about the vitality of matter but goes further by claiming that matter is not imbued with spirit but is inherently dynamic. She contends that her understanding of vitalism differs from others because she links “affect with materiality, rather than posit[s] a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body” (Bennet 2010, xiii). Bennet’s assumption resonates with the novel, particularly in the portrayal of the spirit of the hair (ni), which exists intrinsically within the hair and can be transmitted to others. Bennett’s concept of vital materialism redefines traditional notions of vitality by emphasising the inherent dynamism of matter itself. Bennet (2010, xvi) asserts that thinking about objects as vital is crucial, as it challenges the humanist thinking, continuing that “I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces...in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought.” This perspective underscores the agency of nonhuman forces and advocates for a shift away from anthropocentrism. By acknowledging the vitality of objects, we can better understand the interconnectedness of all things in the world.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the narrative serves as a nuanced exploration of identity, kinship, and memory within the historical context of slavery and its enduring repercussions. The character of Moinette exemplifies the struggle for agency and connection in a societal framework that frequently undermines both. Through her relationships—with Céphaline, Msieu Antoine, and her adopted daughters—Moinette navigates the complexities of her lived experience while redefining the concept of family. The text challenges conventional notions of kinship, positing that family can be constructed through choice, shared experiences, and mutual support rather than being solely defined by biological ties. This is particularly evident in Moinette’s decision to adopt and nurture her daughters, which underscores the assertion that love and responsibility can forge connections that transcend traditional boundaries.

Furthermore, the narrative engages with contemporary theoretical frameworks, notably Haraway’s concept of the Chthulucene and Bennett’s vital materialism, to blur the distinctions between human and nonhuman entities. By portraying objects—such as hair and coffee beans—as active participants in Moinette’s life, the narrative invites a reconsideration of the agency of nonhuman matter and its role in shaping human experiences. This perspective not only enriches the characters’ spiritual practices but also emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of community and resilience.

Ultimately, the novel highlights the pivotal role of memory as a means of survival and transformation. Moinette’s recollections serve to link her to her past, enabling the creation of a heritage that honours her ancestors while simultaneously paving a hopeful path for future generations. In this way, Straight proposes solutions to contemporary problems and suggests the creation of an equal world for all through the incorporation of

different entities, both human and non-human. Through these multifaceted relationships and the reimagining of familial constructs, the narrative offers profound insights into the potential for healing and connection in a fragmented world, advocating for a more equitable and interconnected existence for all.

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