

The Turn toward the Nonhuman in Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales*

Katarzyna E. Nowak-McNeice
University of Wrocław

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Volume 24 Issue 2 (March 2022) Article 4**Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice,****"The Turn toward the Nonhuman in Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss2/4>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 24.2 (2022)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss2/>>

Abstract: This article proposes a reading of Susan Straight's 2006 novel *A Million Nightingales* in the light of critical posthumanities, focusing specifically on references to nonhuman animals. It does so in order to place Straight's writing within the context of the recent posthumanist debate concerning the distinction between human and nonhuman animals (cf. Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe). I claim that while addressing the "fused" discrimination (after Carol J. Adams) of sexism, racism, and speciesism, Straight's prose can be seen as a proposition of a reconfigured subjectivity, one based on "entanglement" and "intra-action" (Karen Barad). *A Million Nightingales*, which – together with *Take One Candle Light A Room* (2010), and *Between Heaven and Here* (2012) – forms the Rio Seco trilogy, presents characters who migrate from 19th century Louisiana to California. This setting and a choice of characters allows the author to comment on science (biology and medicine) as it serves a racist agenda, and on the subtle forms of protest and subversion available to those silenced and dismissed by the official discourse who turn to animism and materiality to undermine the discriminatory apparatuses of racism, sexism and speciesism which deems them less-than-human. By re-introducing references to animality presented as a subversive strategy used by the disenfranchised characters, Straight deconstructs racist and anthropocentric notions of subjectivity based on narrowly defined belonging to the human species, which I propose to view as a post-anthropocentric redefinition of subjectivity.

Katarzyna NOWAK-McNEICE

The Turn toward the Nonhuman in Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales*

Introduction

Susan Straight is a Californian author, not only in the sense of a physical relation to a place, but in a deeper, more profound sense – one in which Georgia O'Keefe is a New Mexican painter, and Flannery O'Connor is a Georgian writer. Straight writes about Californian places with sensitivity to their peculiar inner rhythms, scents, and colors. She is not a nature writer, yet her attention to the details of local flora and fauna, combined with her profound attunement to issues of class, race, and gender, make her prose a testament to the rich heritage of the state and its people, whom she presents as intricately bound with the natural environment. In her Rio Seco trilogy, Straight paints a portrait of a fictitious community (albeit based on Riverside where she was born and still lives) of African Americans, descended from Louisiana slaves, who move to California at the beginning of the century, in an attempt to escape violence and persecution in the South.¹ The multi-vocal story of survival uses the elements of animality and physicality that challenge the anthropocentric distinction between the human and the nonhuman. This approach aligns with critical posthumanism, defined by Stefan Herbrechter as: "the cultural malaise or euphoria that is caused by the feeling that arises once you start taking the idea of 'postanthropocentrism' seriously" (*Posthumanism* 3). To concentrate on nonhuman animals means to recognize a changing focus within the humanities: as Kari Weil notes, "nonhuman animals have become a limit case for theories of difference, otherness, and power" (3); thus, to consider animals, human as well as nonhuman, is to re-evaluate the set ideas about what constitutes a defining difference and who is deemed the Other within the social and political structures informing any narrative, as well as shaping the world of socio-economic relations that allow certain narratives to come into being.

In the present essay, I focus on the relations between human and nonhuman animals, and their interactions within their environments, claiming that these complex inter-dependencies are central to an understanding of Straight's portrayal of human agency in the context of a nineteenth-century society operating within a slavery-based economy. I propose to understand the character of these inter-dependencies with reference to what Karen Barad names "entanglement," and I see Straight's novel as a voice undermining the binary distinctions between human and nonhuman animals, transposed onto the slave—slave-owning division, proposing instead a more complex, and ultimately more inclusive understanding of the relations between subjects and their worlds. As Barad explains, "The very nature of materiality is an entanglement. Matter itself is always already open to, or rather entangled with, the 'Other'" (392-3). This stands in stark contrast to a humanist understanding of the connections between humans, nonhumans and their environment(s).² The idea of animality rests on such a humanist distinction, so what is proposed here instead is that the category of animality loses its descriptive potential once it is recognized as inherently anthropocentric. In other words, to speak of animality as separate from humanity means upholding the humanist notion of the human as the generator of meaning and the self-appointed ruler of the natural world. On the other hand, to accept entanglement as the key category in an understanding of human – nonhuman interactions means to respond to an ethical call of the other, which in Barad's words means "responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part" (393). Being part of this constant process of becoming is itself an ethical phenomenon, as is assuming that humans and nonhumans are intricately entangled. Ultimately, thus, it leads to a reconfiguration of subjecthood, because, as we assume Barad's definition of entanglement, then no matter, and no subjects, can be seen in separation from other matter or subjects. According to Barad, "agential separability is enacted only within a particular phenomenon" (345); which is to say, agency and subjecthood can only be used as categories within complex webs of entanglement among humans, nonhumans, and their environs.

¹ Literary criticism concerning the work of Susan Straight is lamentably and undeservingly small. The notable exceptions are Marta Caminero-Santangelo's essay which discusses, among other works, Straight's *Highwire Moon* (2001) and Christian Michener's essay on *Aquaboogie* (1990).

² An illustration of such a humanist view would be a definition of nature proposed by Patricia Limerick, who takes the term to mean "the physical world independent of human creation." In Limerick's understanding, the term "nature" designates "the world of life and matter pursuing its own ends, independent of human design" (6). This simple yet broad definition allows one to differentiate between humans and the rest of the natural world, the distinction which, it must be stressed, is challenged in Straight's writing.

In Susan Straight's prose, movement and migration are crucial elements of these relations, underlying their dynamic and evolving character. As people migrate, their entanglement with the environment necessarily changes; being able to adapt means being able to survive, and such a strategy of survival very often depends on a recognition of animality within the human constitution. That is to say, it means going beyond anthropocentric notions of the human as a unified subject, defined against its nonhuman Other. Cary Wolfe in *Animal Rites* describes this possibility: "the only way to the 'there' in which the animals reside is to find them 'here,' in us and of us, as part of a plurality for which perhaps even 'the animals,' in the plural, is far too lame a word" (207). It is precisely this notion of "plurality" as constitutive of the relationship between humans and other animals that I want to claim as the central category that can help us understand representations of humans and other animals in Straight's fiction.

However, it does not mean that Straight focuses on what is animal about humans; or that she contrasts the two; rather, what I want to present, is how she complicates the very categories of human and animal, questioning the divide and the anthropocentric notions that mobilize and uphold it. The relationship between Straight's human characters, their environment, and nonhuman beings is one of entanglement. In the anthropocentric understanding of humanity, the division between humans and the nonhuman world rests on the idea of human superiority. The Rio Seco trilogy presents humans interacting with their environment in a way that proposes a different, inclusive and communal, way of perceiving humans and their world. Ultimately, Straight's writing challenges the distinctions between the human animal and the rest of the natural world, pointing toward a reconfiguration of the meaning of humanity, one that is inclusive of "animality". Such a reconfiguration, in fact, collapses the anthropocentric distinction between humans and other animals, and suggests instead entanglement as a more appropriate category to think about humans, nonhumans, their interactions with each other, and with the world.

To situate animality within humanity might be a risky gesture. In a crude, anthropocentric interpretation of such a gesture, it might suggest a descent to the animal level, or, alternatively, an adoption of an animal position, that is, the position of the abject; such a hierarchical or binary understanding, however, results in the limited array of traditional, anthropocentric set of subject positions. An alternative view of one's subjectivity would mean structuring it in a more inclusive, communal way, which would entail accepting one's situatedness and entanglement within the world. Richard Grusin explains the motivation behind an interest in the nonhuman, saying, "To turn toward the nonhuman is not only to confront the nonhuman but to lose the traditional way of the human" (xx). To confront the nonhuman animal, then, means to give up the anthropocentric sense of superiority that energizes the distinction between the human and nonhuman, which Dominick LaCapra calls "the conceptual Grand Canyon" (150). The search for a decisive category distinguishing the human from the nonhuman has preoccupied philosophers for centuries; Descartes, Heidegger, Freud, and Levinas were all interested in pinpointing this difference, and thus naming what it is that makes us human. But this search should not be seen as a mere exercise in classification; rather, it should be viewed in the context of the humanist preoccupation with essentializing distinctions between the proper subject of the logos and its other. In the words of Donna Haraway, "The discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal—all reduced to type, all Others to rational man, and all essential to his bright constitution—is at the heart of racism and flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism" (18). Haraway thus makes explicit the link between racism and speciesism, pointing to the common roots of these marginalizing practices without equating them. Similarly, in Straight's prose, we find a portrayal of instances of various, subtly interconnected modes of discrimination. Straight critiques the discriminatory systems entrenched in the structures of society, while saving the humanity of her characters, not despite their recognition of their own animality, but rather, as its result.

Straight's critique is directed against the nexus of anthropomorphic discriminatory practices, and rightly so, as Herbrechter reminds us that "anthropomorphism allows for both sentimental humanization of animals and animalization of humans" (*Posthumanist Shakespeares* 14). This cluster of related problems is what Carol J. Adams calls "fused oppressions" (102), pointing out that "a structure of overlapping but absent referents links violence against women and animals" (67). The connections between sexist, speciesist and, one may add, racist exclusions are portrayed in Straight's prose through the mixed-race characters, whom the racist discourse of the day would equate with (nonhuman) animals, pronouncing them less than human. Straight refuses a possible strategy of countering the accusation of animality, understood in an anthropocentric manner, which would deny the connection or equanimity between the human and nonhuman animal, and instead she proposes a space of proximity and entanglement where the term animal does not designate a lower position, and where the term human is not reserved for those fulfilling certain criteria (such as whiteness, maleness, etc.). In short, she saves the humanity of her characters, meaning that they are presented as no less than human, yet

at the same time she questions the divide between the human and the nonhuman animal, by pointing to the marginalizing practices at play whenever the term "human" is used in contrast to "animal".

Thus, Straight's project can be seen as posthumanist in the philosophical sense, that is, it can be viewed as an attempt to question the well-established divide between the human and the nonhuman. It is an ambitious task, as it means a rejection of the humanist subject based on reason and a unified, solidified ego. In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida claims, "tout autre est tout autre", thus pointing to the paradoxical necessity of going beyond the divide and at the same time an inability to do so. He suggests that the way to resolve this paradox is by accepting the immanent, and mobilizing our empathetic capability. Thus, while responding to the need to deconstruct the human-nonhuman distinction, Derrida points to the two groups' common mortality, which he calls "the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish" ("The Animal That Therefore I Am" 396), which opens up a possibility of bridging the divide. Straight's prose encourages the reader to consider the fragility of life in its human and nonhuman configurations, which, in turn, enables us to see the human in their entanglement with the world, and, perhaps, imagine a sustainable world.

A Million Nightingales

In the first novel of the Rio Seco trilogy, titled *A Million Nightingales* (2007), Straight weaves a story set in the Southern plantations not long after the Louisiana Purchase. The narrative spans the life of the protagonist, Moinette, taken away from her mother and sold at fourteen, to her death at forty-three as a free woman. Moinette is the child of a Black mother and a white father, and the idea of "mixed blood" is one of two central thematic preoccupations of the novel; the second is the confrontation between the discourses of science and animism. Moinette is exposed to the rudiments of science by her first mistress, and it is the incompatibility of scientific views presented against the animistic views of the Senegalese people, represented by her mother, that is the main source of the internal conflict for the protagonist.

The scientific perspective of the day, steeped in racism, was invested in preserving the status quo in which the paternalistic attitude toward non-whites and females prevailed. As Naomi Zack points out, the "animal status of slaves is an ancient tradition, not just in how slaves felt but in ways that slave-owning groups referred to them" and she reaches back to ancient Greece and Rome for examples of racism embedded in language to state that "The ancient Greeks referred to slaves as *andropoda* or 'man-footed beings,' analogous to *tetrapoda* for 'fourfooted beings'" (73). The speciesist and racist conjunction, then, is a well-established tradition by the time slavery solidifies its reign in the Southern states. Zack points to the pseudo-scientific theories of the day lending legitimacy to the tiered distribution of racial injustice, stating that "The historical institution of slavery was ... specially compatible with modern hierarchical biologicistic taxonomies of human race" (72). What was then seen as science validated the social and cultural construction of race and produced a hierarchy according to which "whiteness" equaled "humanity", and non-whiteness was designated as close or identical to "animality." These distinctions were undermined by people whose mixed-race origin was the reminder of violence, as well as a threat to the categorization of certain people as "white" or "non-white." Ronald Robles Sundstrom describes the position of a mixed-race person in terms of a fissure in the social fabric, saying that "Multiracial lives were from the first days of modern race theories ruptures of racial mores" and adds that the common perception of "multiracial persons" used to be that of "'mongrels' and degenerations" (21).

Moinette is the multi-racial character who struggles to define herself against the contemporary scientific discourse that situates her below humans, on the level of other animals. Her mixed blood provokes aggression; one character, Christophe, describes himself as "a horse, at least pure in blood and a useful animal," which he contrasts with Moinette's condition: "He said I was a mule, half-breed" (*Nightingales* loc. 118). Christophe's comments equating mixed-race people with mongrel nonhuman animals are a sign of his acceptance of the white slave-owners' point of view. Moinette's response is subversive: "I was an animal – larger than a dog, smaller than a horse. A mule. Petite mulâtresse" (*Nightingales* loc. 1360). While she accepts Christophe's verdict, she does not agree with the hierarchy that motivates it. Her acceptance of animality does not derive from the scientific discourse, but rather, is linked to the explanation provided by her mother: "He is orphée. He is angry that you have a mother" (loc. 173). The self-identification as an animal, then, is not demeaning; instead, it means a will to survive, even if under unjust conditions. It is an act of rebellion against the hierarchical system, embedded in pseudoscientific theories embraced by biology at the time and reproduced by slavery, meant to designate a low place for a mixed-race person like Moinette. Similarly, when Moinette states, "I was afraid of every human animal on Azure" (*Nightingales* loc. 1172), she does not point to the supposed bestiality of animals projected upon humans, but rather, she complicates the idea of any

classification of humans and nonhumans, blurring the limits between those who are admitted within the circle of humanity and those who are rejected and appointed a place beyond its limits.

At a life-threatening moment, as she is captured by a slave catcher while trying to escape the man she was sold to and return to her mother, Moinette realizes that to others, her value is reduced to surface attributes, typically associated with animals: "it was clear to me then, that every free person I met – Indian, white, African – would only sell me or use me as an animal. My skin. Hide" (*Nightingales* loc. 2211), but this skin-deep estimation of her worth does not mean giving up her humanity, but rather, is an extension and enlargement of it, as she does not accept the perspective offered by others, but subversively undermines the meaning of animality. She does so through her use of the category even lower than nonhuman animals on the anthropocentric scale of importance, namely, raw material.

The anthropocentric hierarchy would situate human at the top of the scale, then other animals, then inanimate produce; taken to the extreme, in a conflation with the racist perspective of the institution of slavery which reduced slaves to being property and thus mere material, it would mean that the status of slaves was below nonhuman animals. The protagonist momentarily agrees to being perceived not even as an animal, but as mere material: "Just take my skin. Take my hair and sell it to France. ... they needed hair in Paris for wigs. I will grow it again, and you can cut it and sell it. Over and over. I can be crop" (*Nightingales* loc. 1992). This acceptance of a status as a source of material, however, is again undermined by the animist perspective the character adopts after her mother. The elements of her physicality are used as a bargaining chip in her pleas to the nonhuman entities she sees as determining her fate: "The gods of water. Please. Here is my hair. My hair. They dropped from my fingers into the water. Here. Please" (*Nightingales* loc. 1965). In her prayer, she pulls her hair to offer it to the gods, asking for survival. The character's identification with the product that might be harvested, then, is complicated through its characterization as a sacrificial element. Conflating the human and nonhuman, Moinette's hair serves as a symbol of resistance to anthropocentric, racist hierarchies. The character identifies with the nonhuman animals, and with raw material, while simultaneously rejecting the scale of gradation according to which a human is defined as white, male and propertied.

A Million Nightingales suggests that a self-designation as an animal or a raw material is not meant to be seen as a decrease of human value; rather, it is a specific perspective the assumption of which facilitates survival, both in the literal sense, as her physical being continues, and in the metaphorical sense, as this realization helps the character understand others' perceptions of her, and draws a crucial parallel between the slaves and the slave owners as equal in their animality.

What is more, all humans are recognized as animals and called as such several times in the course of the narrative. When Moinette muses on the people for whom freedom is a given, she makes a distinction between herself and them on the basis of their immediate tasks, saying, "They were animals carrying paper. I was an animal carrying coins wrapped in cloth" (*Nightingales* loc. 4662). Even though freedom is an unquestionable value in itself, both groups remain bound in their function as beasts of burden. But these "animals carrying paper" are white and free subjects who sign documents in a court of law, so the distinction Moinette makes is between those who are the subject of law and those who remain its object. This realization comes at a moment when Moinette is promised the status of a free woman by her owner, who understands that the moment she is freed, she is going to arrange to free her own son. She cannot buy her son's freedom before he is twenty one, so the only option available to her is to purchase him. Her self-recognition as an "animal carrying coins" is thus a recognition of the larger system in which she is embedded, a system which requires that she become a slave-owner and participate in its economy. Equating the "paper carrying" and "coin carrying" subjects as animals is a subversive practice and it follows the logic of the survival tactic which undermines the hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman animals while at the same time recognizing the crucial entanglement between them.

The distinction between animals and non-animals does not parallel the distinction between those living under the conditions of freedom and slavery; nor is there an easily recognizable distinction between human and nonhuman animals. There is, however, a suggestion that the anthropocentric distinctions between humans and nonhumans might overlap with the equally problematic binary distinctions between genders, which points to both practices as fundamentally discriminatory. Not surprisingly, it is women whose perceived value is limited to their animal traits; and here the novel presents a parallel between the slave girl Moinette and her owner, Céphaline, who explains to her their common predicament: "I am not meant to know. ... Only to produce a mammal. A son. ...And you are meant to produce girl mammals" (*Nightingales* loc. 854). This common value attached to females by the anthropocentric and androcentric society of the segregated American South, which rests on the principle of reducing humans to their biology, does not mean a platform for building strategic alliances across racial barriers; they remain firmly in place. But a recognition of the entanglement between human

and nonhuman animals does allow for a reconfiguration of the hierarchies delineating one's position in society. Designating oneself as an animal carries subtle subversive potential: just as self-identification of the mixed-race character with "mongrels" and with raw material does not mean accepting the racist hierarchy of beings, but is meant to subvert it, similarly, women characters' self-identification as animals and producers of goods questions their designated place in Southern society governed by the ideology of paternalism.

This subversive potential is realized through a reconfigured understanding of the product and its place within the economy of production. Céphaline sees her place as a white woman on a slave plantation reduced to a biological function of procreation, and she points out that Moinette's role is similar, with the racially motivated distinction that a white woman is to produce white men, that is, subjects of law who will perpetuate the system of economy and governance, while a Black woman is supposed to produce females who will make the further perpetuation possible. Both Céphaline and Moinette rebel in their small ways against such categorization: Céphaline does so through learning and using scientific knowledge to present her own understanding of her place within the plantation economy which, according to her, is "to make money by marrying." Explaining the economic mechanisms at work, Céphaline tells Moinette that "the moment your mammal breathes, it will be worth money" (loc. 870), thus drawing a parallel between what she describes as their "tasks" (loc. 870). But the women's place in the plantation economy is explained even more bluntly by Moinette's mother: "Your work is *besoin*. What they need. Whoever come" (loc. 955). Moinette protests, but her mother stresses that such compliance is supposed to guarantee their remaining together, mother and daughter. Satisfying the needs of slave owners is to safeguard the livelihood of the enslaved. This unwritten transaction is premised on the assumption of hierarchy. Some lives are more important than others; the purpose of some beings is to satisfy the needs of other beings.

The alternative to this hierarchical approach, which multiplies divisions and sets apart beings, dividing them into binary categories, is to see them as entangled matter, which configures itself when coming into contact with other matter or beings. This contact is best defined after Barad as intra-action, which, as Barad explains, "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (33). Intra-action stands in opposition to the ordinary term interaction, as intra-action does not imply that agencies exist before coming into contact with one another. Matter, in turn, is "substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity" (151). When the characters in *A Million Nightingales* assume the work of satisfying the needs of others, or of being a produce, a material, it is a subversive practice: they are exercising the "congealment of agency" Barad mentions. That is to say, even though they are unable to change their status within the bounds of the legal system sanctioning slavery, they can subvert the meaning ascribed to their position, through simultaneous use of seemingly contradictory categories: material, animal, and human. Their willed acceptance of these labels means assuming control over how they are interpreted and thus exercising their agency. Moinette's subversion is based on her aligning herself with nonhuman animals and the raw product. It rests on using the understanding of the plantation economy and hierarchy of the slave owners to undermine their meaning.

The conflation of the categories of matter, nonhuman animals and womanhood serves a similar, subversive end. The narrative presents a discursive thread that links animals and produce, and extends it to humans, and more specifically, to women: "The wool coat smelled of animal. Animals have fur or hide. Mesdames have layers of corset, petticoat, linen chemise, and silk" (*Nightingales* loc. 2308). Moinette's musing suggests that both human and nonhuman animals utilize the same strategies to guarantee their survival. The woolen coat reminds her of a nonhuman animal; the sense of smell triggers a reflection that equates the value of an animal pelt and the layers of protective clothing humans use; in this configuration, it is not one's biological function that is the sole factor determining one's value, but the surface, the seemingly decorative layer over one's biological organism that substantiates the comparison between humans (women) and other animals.

The connections between human and nonhuman animals parallel and serve to accentuate the double discrimination of racism and sexism. The patriarchal and anthropocentric world is ruled by the laws of desire: "The men hunted money and sex. The women were hunted and captured, even the white women, and they demanded money for cloth and plates" (loc. 3790). Within this economy of demand, both men and women are animals governed by their desires, even though men perform the active role of a hunter, and white women enact the role of the hunted. However, it is the women of color, represented in terms of prey, who experience a combined oppression of racism and sexism, objectified and animalized within the economy fueled by desire.

The principle of desire, recognized as the driving force from the perspective of the dualistic economy based on slave labor, is contrasted with *besoin*, a French word meaning need. In a discussion of the

reasons for her second owner's violent death, Moinette rejects her third owner's view and instead proposes her own explanation: "He was a man. He didn't understand. Not desire. Desire was too sentimental. Besoin. The mere need for the passage" (3710). Thus Moinette links a position of power to the perspective from which desire is the underlying cause of action. Her own perspective, informed by her status in the hierarchical Southern society, differs, and her silent affirmation of this difference is itself a rebellious gesture against the social and cultural system that designates for her the position of a silent object of desire.

Such hierarchical divisions also mean that there is a strict division between the active subjects, those who desire, and the passive objects, the desired ones. This distinction is apparent in the compliment that Moinette's third owner pays her: "I see no avarice or desire in your bearing," he says, to which Moinette silently asks, "Did he see *besoin*? I wanted my mother and my son" (loc. 3710). The need, in contrast to desire, signifies the rejection of sentimentality. It is presented as an alternative motivation of characters' actions, a more straightforward one, and one more attuned to the demands of biological organism. By contrasting desire with need, Moinette adopts the point of view assumed by her mother ("your work is *besoin*"), and by doing so, she takes on the perspective of her mother's animism against the anthropocentric perspective of the dominant white society. Her stance suggests a rejection of the plantation economy based on ascribing certain value to subjects and goods within a specific hierarchy and their exchange.

The idea of need, rather than desire, as the driving force behind people's actions, influences the perception and interpretation of belonging. From the dominant perspective of the slave owning group, belonging is sanctioned by the law and verified through written records. The legality of one being assuming the ownership of another being, that is, of the institution of slavery, is substantiated by its inscription on paper and driven by dichotomous desire, based on the division between the desiring subject and the desired object.

In contrast, the concept of belonging assumes a different meaning if viewed from a different, non-dichotomous perspective. A conversation between Moinette and her mother, before the girl is sold away from her parent, is an illustration of this point: "'Who do I belong to?' 'Me.' She never hesitated. 'You are mine.' 'No one else?' 'No.' 'Not Msieu?' 'No.' 'Not God?' Then she would pause. ... 'Here on earth, you belong to me. If you died, then you would belong to God. Là-bas'" (loc. 149-158). When sold and experiencing the full brutality of the slave system, Moinette loses faith in her mother's assurance: "Mamère was wrong. I belonged to anyone who could catch me or buy me" (loc. 2211), yet with time, as she accepts her own human animal condition and forges agency in intra-actions with other beings, she acknowledges the validity of her mother's position: "She wasn't wrong. I would be caught, sold, traded. I would never belong to anyone. ... Her fierce prayers rose each night and drifted into the water, the rivers and bayous and the rain, and stayed damp in my hair" (loc. 2215). The idea of belonging that rests on affection and intra-actions is connected here to Moinette's mother's animism, thus being an act of subversion against the dominant, slave-owning group's worldview, pivoting on dichotomous desire. Thus, when desire is rejected as a driving force, then the understanding of what it means to belong to somebody changes. From a non-dichotomous, inclusive perspective, who belongs to whom depends not on the idea of a legal document certifying ownership, but on the connections formed between people. These connections, in turn, are intra-active, as their emergence is warranted through the act of prayer and thought, and it requires a conjunction of nonhuman elements (water, rivers, bayous, rain, and hair).

The intra-actions between human and nonhuman subjects of the world account for the development of self-awareness of the characters of the novel, as their agency is formed through coming into contact, and identification with, various elements of the represented world. Moinette's understanding of her own identity undergoes modifications, as her identification with nonhuman animals changes in the course of the narrative. The realization that a human is an animal first comes to Moinette through contact with educated whites, and at the beginning it is related to the scientific worldview that will subsequently be amended. Aware of her own vulnerability, Moinette learns of the common traits between humans and nonhumans: "Doctor Tom ... says hair and fingernails are like fur and claws. We use them the wrong way." Frustrated with this knowledge, the girl asks her mother, "Why should we try anything if we are just going to be like animals in the end?" But her mother refuses to answer the question: "Don't ask me that. Don't ask" (*Nightingales* loc. 576), she insists, suggesting that the question posed is placed in the wrong context – that of the scientific discourse – or that the question itself is a wrong question. The scientific discourse does not provide answers that can in any way be useful in their circumstances, as accepting its validity would mean consenting to their abject social standing. Moinette's mother reacts with anger and fear to the lessons the girl receives from the doctor and her owner Céphaline, and instead urges that the girl listens to her teachings, designed specifically to facilitate their survival, both spiritual and physical. She comes back to the question, however, placing it in a different context, which Moinette

will use throughout the narrative. It is not in the context of biological urges, but of compassion and care. Moinette's mother tells her, "You ask why do we try if we are only animals? Because even a rat feed her babies and work hard to get my sugar and cornbread. Even a rat sit up at night and look at the dark. When the babies sleep" (*Nightingales* loc. 901). In other words, all animals perpetuate the genetic line; all are preoccupied with survival. To compare humans with rats is not to say they are reduced to biology or animality; it means a recognition of common fragility, characteristic of all life, which depends on empathy and nurturing. The relationships between human and nonhuman animals are thus portrayed in ethical terms, in the sense in which Barad defines them. According to Barad, "Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities" (384). This posthuman view enables one to see the relationships between humans, as well as across species lines, as ethical, which means a reconsideration of what Paola Cavalieri recognizes as "the cultural paradigm" concerning human's treatment of nonhuman animals, which is "supported by more than twenty centuries of philosophical tradition aiming at excluding from the ethical domain members of species other than our own" (3). Thus it is a recognition of common vulnerability, shared among human and nonhuman animals, that allows us to reconsider the human position in the world and see it as entanglement rather than domination and as proximity rather than binary divisions.

Placing human and nonhuman animals in the context of an ethical recognition of our common vulnerability, affection and care requires full acceptance of one's animal status, and in the case of the characters of *A Million Nightingales* it is a process that is complicated through the social context of a racist and androcentric science, shaping the perception of humanity and animality. The full acceptance of animality, and a subsequent subversive understanding of it, is connected to pregnancy and childbearing, the liminal events in Moinette's life which turn her from a child of her mother's to her child's mother. As a young woman of mixed race, Moinette is seen as a "petite mulâtresse" and "daughter of joy" whose work is to silently fulfill the desires of white men whenever it is demanded of her. The conjunction of gender and race that results in her sexualized, animal status is expressed by her first owner, who sees her role as "only to move the tail aside. Like the mare" (loc. 1004). She is subjected to sexual violence; raped by two men, Moinette becomes pregnant, which prompts her to realize her doubly-animalized position, yet to accept it and to subvert it, the character needs to come to terms with her pregnancy and motherhood. When first confronted about her pregnancy, Moinette rejects any sentimentality in its perception: "'You a mother,' Leonide said," to which she responds, "Not a mother. An animal" (*Nightingales* loc. 2904). While in labor, she recognizes the common lot of female mammals, as she thinks about "All the animals under trees and in caves and bushes, lying on their sides, with infants pushing down the passages" (*Nightingales* loc. 2977). Yet even though she distances herself from an emotional acceptance of her pregnancy, and understandably so, as it is a result of sexual and racially motivated violence, the animal link between herself and the newly-born infant is represented as a moment of simplicity and acceptance of the condition of animality-in-humanity. Moinette says, "We were truly animals now. He had fur on his shoulders that Philippine said would rub away" (*Nightingales* loc. 2987). The "true" animality is accepted, as vulnerability must be admitted: "He was mewling and blind, his fingers soft worms, his fingernails—our claws, our only weapons aside from teeth and brains ... —his fingernails like paper" (loc. 2988). The continuation of one's physical being depends on others, as our own defenses prove inadequate. This bond between the mother and the child becomes the motivation for Moinette's acknowledgment of animality.

Recognition of animality-as-humanity that comes through motherhood is a process that has consequences for the reconfigured understanding of one's self, which derives from a recognition of one's own vulnerability. Taken one step further, it means a recognition of one's materiality whose meaning is also transformed in the course of the novel, from being linked with the brutalizing effects of slavery, in a situation when a man tortured for trying to escape the plantation suffers such bodily harm that "his body [is] reduced to chunks of meat" (loc. 1903), to a renewed reconfiguration of one's agency that comes from fragmentation used as a coping mechanism. This reconfigured meaning is signaled for instance when Moinette recovers from being branded with iron. She is given a piece of meat to counter the injury her body suffers as a result of burning: "My blood. Salt inside. Salt meat melting on my skin. Meat tied to meat" (loc. 2145). The equation made between a piece of nonhuman animal meat tied to her skin symbolically links the body of a nonhuman animal and the body of an enslaved human, pointing to a conjoined logic of the oppression against racialized and sexualized human and nonhuman animals which Derrida called "carnophallogocentrism" and which, in Cary Wolfe's words, describes "a ready-made symbolic economy that overdetermines the representation of women, by transcoding the *edible* bodies of animals and the *sexualized* bodies of women within an overarching 'logic of domination'" (8).

The link between nonhuman animal meat and human animal bodies offered for consumption under the "logic of domination" that governs the perception of sexualized and racialized bodies in the novel is visible in several instances in the narrative, for example, when Moinette asks the question, "what was the name for our meat? Did we have hams?" (loc. 1897), or when she comments, "my heart was only meat for another animal" (loc. 1787). When Moinette sees her rapist and the biological father of her child, she can only react with impassiveness; her feelings are betrayed by her action: "In the kitchen, my fingers tore the skin of the chicken from the boiled meat, and I returned the muscles to the pot" (loc. 3788). Moinette's decision to speak of her own body as fragmented and represented here as her "fingers", but also her decision to talk of the body of a nonhuman animal in terms of skin and muscle, that is, in the terms usually reserved for humans, signals a willed return to the presence of what Adams calls "the absent referent". Adams states, "Animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them" (66) and she discusses "a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption, which links butchering and sexual violence in our culture" (73), a cycle which in Straight's novel is made apparent not only through the use of the bodies of nonhuman animals, but also in the use of any abject entity, be it a raced or a sexualized subject. The fragmentation of the characters' bodies – their representation in terms of skin, passages, blood, muscles, etc. – corresponds to their "animalization" within the oppressive economy of slavery, but ultimately, their acceptance of their animalized status means building coalitions between human and nonhuman animals, which results in a destabilization and reconfiguration of the binary logic of the androcentric slave economy.

Identification with animals has consequences not only for a reconsideration of individual identity; it also leads to the necessary reconfiguration of familial groupings. One reason why new configurations of relations between subjects are required is because the biological links between people do not prove to be unbreakable; they are conditioned upon the laws of property, laws that can be deemed inhumane and dehumanizing, yet definitely not animal in the anthropocentric sense of the word. Rather, the relations between subjects might be described as animal-like in the reconfigured sense of the phrase, because they are based on a recognition of common vulnerability, compassion, and care. After she is torn away from her mother at fourteen, Moinette never sees her mother again; her son is also separated from her and then dies. Moinette becomes a mother for two girls whom she purchases, and allows herself to die only when the older girl is at the age when she can be freed. Moinette describes the familial labelling in a way that suggests the use of the logic of the slave economy to her own ends: "She was my daughter. Marie-Claire was my daughter because I bought her, and she had no one else, and I was her mother, and would free her when she turned twenty-one" (loc. 5389). She purchases the two girls whom she designates as her daughters, thus necessarily participating in the slave economy, yet she does so with the final aim of giving them freedom, thus subverting the meaning of the transaction. The family is described in terms suggesting nonhuman animal reference: "Only our pelts were different, I told Marie-Claire and Marie-Thérèse. Our skin and fur. Everything else was the same" (loc. 5451). The superficial differences are deemed unimportant; family is not defined in biological or genetic terms, but on the basis of underlying similitude, which links human and nonhuman animals alike. She refers to her family as "an odd assemblage of animals. Not a herd" (*Nightingales* loc. 5097), thus simultaneously accepting and denying the animality of the familial nucleus. Humanity carries within itself an element of animality, and it is the acceptance of this perspective that provides an alternative to the exclusive, anthropocentric and carnophallogocentric understanding of individual and familial identity deriving from the divisive, binary logic underlying the symbolic and material system of slavery.

Conclusions

Susan Straight's first novel in the Rio Seco trilogy is an interesting example of a radical reconfiguration of the human–nonhuman entanglement and an attempt at a portrayal of these relations from a non-anthropocentric point of view. My interpretation of the connections between human and nonhuman animals portrayed in Straight's fiction derives from a posthumanist understanding of the changing dependencies between various categories of subjects whose identities cannot be described in anthropocentric terms, but rather, must be seen, after Barad, as entangled.

Straight's prose poses questions about the meaning ascribed to the term human and its capacity to embrace a certain category of subjects while excluding others. It also questions the idea of binary distinctions between human and nonhuman animals, undermining the logic of a definition of humanity constructed in opposition to animality. It takes the racist, anthropocentric and androcentric foundations of (pseudo-)science that underscored the plantation economy, and points to the common roots of such marginalizing practices and forms of violence as racism, sexism, and speciesism. These questions can only be answered with a reinvented sense of the constitution of a subject, which means giving up a

stable sense of human identity that constructs itself as unrelated to the nonhuman world. Suely Rolnik warns us against the protective shield of a stable identity which derives from the denial of vulnerability, claiming that "only to the extent that we anesthetize our vulnerability can we maintain a stable image of ourselves and the other, that is, our supposed identities." Embracing our vulnerability, in turn, leads us to "reconfigure the outlines of our selves and our territories of existence" ("Geopolitics", np). Such a reconfiguration, with vulnerability as a common denominator between the human and the nonhuman animal, lies at the core of Straight's portrayal of the complex dependencies between these groups of subjects. It approaches Brian Massumi's pronouncement: "Take it to heart that 'at the heart of the human there is nothing human'" (13). Which is to say, nothing can be perceived as inherently human, seemingly in complete isolation from the nonhuman. Straight's novel is a case in point: if we are to dare a renewed understanding of our subjectivity, we must let go of the idea of a distinction between human and nonhuman animals. Doing so enables a reconfiguration of subjectivity and a more profound understanding of forms of abuse which prevent us from progressing toward a more open, inclusive society.

Thus the connections between human and nonhuman animals are important for a reconfiguration of otherness understood not only in the animal guise, but in a wider sense, encompassing all forms of otherness. LaCapra reminds us that "As categories of humans (such as women or nonwhite 'races') have been critically disclosed as the encrypted other of humanism, ... the other-than-human animal in its animality has been left as the residual repository of projective alienation or radical otherness" (152). Straight's prose invites an interpretation along the lines sketched by LaCapra: her portrayal of the African American community, spanning two centuries and migrating from Louisiana to California, touches upon the problems plaguing any marginalized, disenfranchised population; yet her attention to the intricacies of the coexistence of humans and nonhumans within their natural environment suggests that what interests her is a transformed understanding of the narratives of history and subjectivity, shaping a perception of class, race, and gender.

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Author's profile: Dr. Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wrocław, Poland. She was Fulbright Scholar at UCLA, Kosciuszko Fellow at Loyola Marymount University in LA, as well as a visiting researcher at King's College, London; California State University in Fullerton; Freie Universität Berlin; and the University Carlos III in Madrid, Spain. She has co-edited three collections, *Representations and Images of Frontiers and Borders: On the Edge* (Cambridge Scholars, 2021), *A Dark California: Essays on Dystopian Depictions*

in Popular Culture (McFarland, 2017); and *Interiors: Interiority/Exteriority in Literary and Cultural Discourse* (Cambridge Scholars, 2010). In 2007 she published a monograph titled *Melancholic Travelers: Autonomy, Hybridity and the Maternal* (Peter Lang); her latest monograph, *California and the Melancholic American Identity in Joan Didion's Novels: Exiled from Eden*, was published in 2019 by Routledge (paperback edition 2020). She has published on California literature, postcolonial literatures, as well as translations of essays and poetry. Her research interests include posthumanism, opera studies, vegan studies, and gender studies. Email: <katarzyna.nowak-mcneice@uwr.edu.pl>.