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'A Million Nightingales,' by Susan Straight

Women's Ways of Knowing

Review by MEGAN MARSHALL

At the outset, I worried about Susan Straight's new novel, "A Million Nightingales," which includes a glossary of African, French and Creole words, African tribal names and terms from French colonial slave codes. It seemed to be advertising itself as a rigorously researched historical novel, and historical novels usually make me grit my teeth. All too often, they're either burdened with arcane details gleaned from the library stacks or they wander off into a wistful, distancing lyricism.

Then again, "The Scarlet Letter" was a historical novel, written by a man with the preternatural ability to imagine himself into the mind of a marked woman who lived two centuries before his time. Susan Straight, a white woman living in 21st-century California, has performed a similar feat in imagining her heroine, Moinette, a slave girl in early-19th-century Louisiana, marked by the lighter shade of her skin.

Moinette is a "cadeau-fille" — or "gift girl" — conceived after a rape. The term itself, considered and reconsidered throughout the book, captures the doubleness always at work in Straight's richly complicated narrative. Moinette's mother, Marie-Thérèse, is an African, kidnapped and sold into slavery; her father a nameless white sugar broker who paid a visit to Azure, the plantation where Marie-Thérèse serves as laundress. Moinette's mother had been a "gift" for the night to her master's guest; in the aftermath, she herself was left with another sort of gift, the daughter she loves and lives for, "a bright hardship" she will struggle to protect from a similar fate.

"A Million Nightingales" is the story of a woman whose very existence invites the attention of a damaged and damaging community. The conditions Moinette faces are, of course, far worse than those for a white woman — even a convicted adulteress in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In one scene, she travels upriver by steamboat, passing a plantation where the decapitated heads of runaway slaves are raised on pikes along the shore. In another scene, a house slave is staked to the ground for two days and her face gnawed by rats, a grotesque punishment for leaving her mistress alone for a few hours at night as she tended her own sick child.

In antebellum Louisiana, castes are so well established that every drop of mixed blood is measured in a vocabulary whose musical tones — *sang mêlé*, *mulâtresse*, *sacatra*, *griffone* — belie the sexual violence that created them. This is the world that Moinette, 14 years old at the start of the novel, grows into. Straight could just as well have called her novel "Women's Ways of Knowing," the title of a popular modern book on women's psychology, as she traces the development of Moinette's awareness of her circumstances and the wisdom she gains from a series of female mentors.

A gifted child who learns to read by looking over the shoulder of her master's daughter at lesson time, Moinette is, in [Henry James's](#) phrase, "one of the people on whom nothing is lost." She finds meaning even in the carved wooden clothespins her mother uses every day in her work: "Flared out at the ends like dancing ladies, I thought when I was small, only playing with the pins." As Moinette learns the truth about her birth, and her mother trains her to avoid situations that might make her vulnerable to predatory males — black and white — she thinks of different images when she pegs out the washing: "Now they looked like faceless men straddling the clothes." Yet when Moinette is abruptly sold away from Azure, she treasures the few clothespins left in her apron pocket, on which she can feel "the oils of my mother's fingertips, moving to mine."

A slave whose household Moinette joins at a second plantation, where she is set to work harvesting cane, advises the silent, traumatized girl to "make a new place here or keep a old place in your head. Only two choice." Eventually, Moinette chooses to nourish a clan of "memory people" who have helped her on her way, some of them white. The book's title comes from a lyric quoted by a Jewish man living at risk in Louisiana, where Jews are forbidden by law to establish residence: "I have a million nightingales on the branches of my heart singing freedom," he said softly. "My grandmother knew someone who sang that. So always someone is not free."

Straight's book is a deep consideration of the servitude all women experienced then — and, in some ways and some places, continue to experience even now. The white women in "A Million Nightingales" are traded in a marriage market far less brutal than the slave market, but one that nonetheless reduces them to animals, in the words of Céphaline, the master's daughter (herself a memorable character with a brilliant mind and dark wit). "She said to look at the pig's body when it was killed," Moinette recalls. "We were the same except for measurement."

In this novel, men too are animals — often, but not always, predatory. Women's vulnerability is the gift they offer, the service they provide, every day of their lives, like it or not — allowing men, in the best cases, to find an answering tenderness in themselves; in the worst, to respond with violence toward any weakness they may wish to believe is lodged solely in the feminine.

"A Million Nightingales" joins a growing literature on the mixed-race experience in America, from Danzy Senna's picaresque "Caucasia" to Zadie Smith's "On Beauty." Straight has given this body of work a historical foundation, a point of reference in the past. But her novel is, besides, a powerful and moving story, written in language so beautiful you can almost believe the words themselves are capable of salving history's wounds.

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