The Biosemiosic Gaze of the Derridean "Wholly Other" in Yamen Manaï's *Bel Abîme*

KEITH MOSER

I. Introduction

This essay explores the Tunisian writer-engineer Yamen Manaï's latest novel *Bel Abîme* (2021) from a Derridean and biosemiotic lens. Delving into Jacques Derrida's posthumous ecological thought in addition to the well-established interdiscipline of biosemiotics, this investigation examines the profound inner transformation that occurs when we find ourselves under the biosemiosic gaze of another sentient, semiotic agent. After he *sees* and *is seen* by an abandoned puppy that he will soon adopt, the troubled protagonist from *Bel Abîme* will forge a meaningful bond with another living entity for the first time in his turbulent existence as he discovers the reality of other-than-human sentience and friendship. Instead of being a robotic automaton that purely operates according to an internal machinery, as much of Western philosophy theorizes, the narrator realizes that his dog Bella is endowed with a degree of semiosic ability that enables her to communicate in skillful and deliberate ways with members of the canine and human population. Owing to his tight-knight relationship with his other-than-human companion, the protagonist recognizes that "Mark, gramma, trace, and différance refer differentially to all living things, all the relations between living and nonliving" (Derrida, *The Animal* 104). When their eyes initially lock in a rather fortuitous encounter, the narrator from *Bel Abîme* cannot turn away from "the gaze called 'animal'" that represents an ethical summons to live otherwise (Derrida, *The Animal* 12). Not only will the protagonist realize a genuine state of happiness through the splendor of *interspecific* communication and friendship because of Bella, but he will also be struck by the biocentric epiphany that the "wholly other" is an ethical agent in its own right that is worthy of moral consideration (Derrida, *The Animal* 12). The realization that other species live, suffer, and die just like *Homo sapiens* leads to an ethics of compassion for all of the "fellow" ephemeral beings with whom we share the biosphere in the Anthropocene/Technocene.

II. Brief Contextualization of Yamen Manaï's *Bel Abîme*

In this regard, Manaï builds upon many of the ecological themes that he develops in his previous novel *L'Amas ardent* for which he received the prestigious *Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie*. The Tunisian writer broaches a lot of divergent subjects in this short, dense book including the disenchantment felt by many Maghrebi youth linked to the unfulfilled ideals of the Arab Spring, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, the alienation of the postmodern lifestyle, and the environmental crisis that is spiraling out of control. However, *Bel Abîme* is above all the story of a social outcast who has a difficult time establishing positive relationships with other humans who commits a string of murders after a misguided plan to remove Bella from his life was set into motion by his own father. *Bel Abîme* is a tale of retribution in which a loner callously executes all of the people who he deems responsible for his dog's death including his father. Within the context of this somber,

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tragic backdrop, the focal point of the narrative soon reveals itself to be a "very beautiful love story" between a human and an other-than-human friend ("'Bel Abîme' dernier roman de Yamen Manaï").[1] The heinous murders themselves are surprisingly overshadowed by the veritable force of the biosemiosic gaze of the "wholly other" that appears to be on the verge of healing the disconnected narrator before the ill-advised decision to take Bella away from him abruptly ends this moral progression. Unable to cope with the searing pain of losing his only friend, the protagonist's only *raison d'être* is revenge.

III. The Transformative, Biosemiosic Gaze of the "Wholly Other"

Although the "experience of coming out of the shower and being looked at naked by his household cat" recounted by Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I am* is much more light-hearted and comical compared to the brutality of the crimes depicted in *Bel Abîme*, the philosopher creates a useful theoretical framework for understanding the implications of the other-than-human gaze that sheds light on the appalling *dénouement* in Manaï's most recent work (Naas 225). The seemingly banal encounter described by Derrida opens up into profound philosophical "reappraisals of human-animal relations in general" in addition to a reevaluation of "language in the broad sense, codes of traces being designed, among all living things" (Williams 24; Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 2* 8). As evidenced by his "copious references" to the German biologist and founding father of Biosemiotics Jakob von Uexküll, Derrida leans heavily on biosemiotic theory and scientific explanations of the world in his reworking of the complexity of other-than-human semiosis (*The Animal* 143). Specifically, Derrida adopts the main biosemiotic premise that the universe is teeming with purposeful and meaningful communication from a basic cell up to *Homo sapiens*. Even if our species is hardwired with the most sophisticated primary modeling device of all in the form of "language(s)," Derrida's aforementioned destabilizing experience forces him to think harder about the other types of semiosis that are ubiquitous throughout the cosmos. Based on evidence obtained from the hard sciences, Derrida reaches the conclusion that "semiosis is synonymous with life" at all biological levels of organization (Wheeler, "The Book of Nature" 177). We may have a heightened predilection to engage in semiosis, but Derrida suggests that we should not so hastily dismiss the significance of the signs conceived, exchanged, and interpreted by other organisms in their "personal semiotic space" (Kull 172).

When the initial shock wears off, Derrida astutely observes, "The Animal is there before me […] nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking that this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next (-door) than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of the cat" (*The Animal* 11). Later in the essay, Derrida reiterates, "Let me repeat it, every living creature, and thus every animal to the extent that it is living, has recognized in it this power to move spontaneously, to feel itself and to relate to itself. However, problematic it be, that is even the characteristic of what lives" (*The Animal* 94). As opposed to being a singular human trait, as proponents of human exceptionalism obstinately maintain, every species possesses a "semiotic system" for the conception, transmission, and interpretation of signs corresponding to a "subjective point of view" of the given organism in question (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 116; Wheeler, "A Feeling" 65). Derrida catches a glimpse of this frame of reference, or "the vantage of the animal," when his eyes meet those of his cat walking out of the shower (*The Animal* 21). From a biosemiotic perspective, the philosopher's peculiar encounter with his feline companion triggers the awareness that "sensory beings should be considered as subjects inhabiting their own perceptual world, or Umwelt" (Abberley 11).

Nonetheless, Derrida is careful to not fall into the conceptual trap of assuming that another species could somehow be granted privileged access to the inner semiosic realm of another life form. The philosopher rejects the faulty oppositional thinking pitting "semiotically active humans" against "semiotically inactive nature" while simultaneously acknowledging that we can never "know (exactly) what goes on in the heads of animals" (Maran 142; 142, Derrida, *The Animal* 6, my insertion).

We will never be able to understand *everything* that our other-than-human family members are trying to convey to us from the outside looking in at "the wholly other, more other than any other, which *they* call an animal" (*The Animal* 11, italics in original). The "secret inner stirrings of (other) animals" are "uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret" in their totality (Derrida, *The Animal* 6, my insertion; 12). Nevertheless, this "bottomless gaze," which shatters the anthropocentric illusion of "animal linguistic poverty," is laden with semiotic content (Derrida, *The Animal* 12; Peterson 90). Instead of being surrounded by mindless machines that are unable to communicate anything at all, Derrida posits that we are immersed in a sea of tactical semiosis.

Moreover, the realization that "the world is a rich book of signs" explains how two species who share a long history of co-habitation owing to the advent of domestication have developed the ability to comprehend *some* of the semiotic codes of another organism, thereby enabling our pets to become full-fledged members of the family (Wheeler, "Postscript" 139). We cannot overcome the problem of "translation" identified by Derrida perfectly, or the "difficulty of accessing the logic of other communication systems," yet "most of the time, man happens to be able to communicate with (other) animals" (Maran et al. 22; Lestel 77, my insertion). This capacity to engage in *interspecific* dialogue through various vocalizations and gestures is on full display in *Bel Abîme*. When their eyes meet for the first time, the protagonist recognizes that he is in the presence of another sentient, semiotic agent. From "under the cardboard boxes" on the street, Bella's biosemiosic gaze is a look of distress that the narrator correctly interprets (Manaï 44). After answering the summons to rescue another living, vulnerable being from a terrible fate, the protagonist learns to decode other looks, noises, and body language over a period of three years before Bella is senselessly executed. Given that they usually understand each other quite well, a true friendship is born between an adolescent and his dog epitomized by the exchange of reciprocal affection and a wide range of emotions. The narrator and his other-than-human companion will experience all of the ecstasy and anguish that life has to afford *together* before Bella's murder.

The biosemiosic gaze of the "wholly other" completely transforms an alienated young man, as he connects to another entity on a deep level. The protagonist "will forget little by little the atrocious nature of his sad reality," because of "his enthusiastic attachment to Bella" ("'Bel Abîme' dernier roman de Yamen Manaï"). As the narrator reveals, "For the first time, I felt a soul inhabit my body" (Manaï 48). He further clarifies, "Love, I only saw it in her eyes and it transformed me. Believe me, a child finds in a dog what he does not find in a thousand men. We grew up together and nothing and no one had the right to separate us. I could have stepped over the good Lord to reach Bella" (Manaï 82). It is evident that the protagonist of *Bel Abîme* is no longer the same person after the inner transformation actuated by the other-than-human gaze. Although some readers might dismiss this radical evolution as being anecdotal, a large body of empirical evidence lends credence to the theory that close relationships with other animals are indeed life-altering. For instance, researchers have studied the psychological and ethical effects of other-than-human friendship for prisoners (e.g. Deaton, Flynn et al., Cooke and Farrington, Mims, Waddell, and Holton), residents of retirement facilities (e.g. Cherniack and Cherniack, Cole), and those who suffer from PTSD (e.g. Rodriguez et al., O'Haire and Rodriguez, van Houtert et al.). A salient example of these benefits is the finding from prison-based dog training programs all across the United States that other-than-human companionship "can facilitate a change within the individual which cannot easily be matched by traditional methods" (Deaton 59). Since numerous scholars have documented how quotidian encounters with other animals allow us to become a better version of our inner selves by (re-) connecting to both the human and non-human Other, Manaï's portrayal of the force of the biosemiosic gaze should be taken seriously.

During the most traumatic periods of our lives, researchers have uncovered how authentic, semiotic exchanges with other species trigger a healing process. In this vein, empirical evidence has now confirmed what many pet "owners" have known for centuries. When our dogs, cats, hamsters, etc.

attempt to comfort us when we are visibly stressed or anxious, these reactions are indicative of real compassion. Several studies have unequivocally proven that "many dogs show empathy if their owner is in distress and will also try to help rescue them" ("Empathetic Dogs"). Emily Sanford, Emma Burt, and Julia Meyers-Mano found irrefutable "patterns of empathetic helping in conditions of distress" by canines who interpreted signs of sorrow and suffering exhibited by their "owners" (384). The data presented in these experiments helps us to understand one of the most poignant scenes in the novel following Bella's death. The protagonist imagines how Bella would have reacted to his visceral grief in an impossible, hypothetical scenario. Fondly recalling how Bella would make him feel better in times of anguish, the narrator reminisces, "You would have not liked to see my cry […] You would have drunk my tears and dried my cheeks" (Manaï 92). Manaï offers an artistic representation of the reality of cross-species empathy in this passage rendered possible by *interspecific* communication. When placed in the context of "new research (which) shows that dogs respond to their owner's unhappiness," this scene should once again not be labeled as anecdotal (Coren, my insertion). Furthermore, it is well within the realm of possibilities that the psychological and moral progression propelled into motion by the biosemiosic gaze of the "wholly other" could have one day enabled the protagonist to establish positive relationships with other humans as well. Unfortunately, the narrator's development comes to a screeching halt when he loses his only friend.

IV. The Reality of Other-than-human Suffering

The protagonist's grief is compounded by the recognition of other-than-human suffering from a philosophical, psychological, and ethical standpoint. Similar to Derrida's experience coming out of the shower, the narrator from *Bel Abîme* discovers that all other organisms are not "automatons of flesh and blood" through the biosemiosic gaze (Derrida, *The Animal* 83). The protagonist envisions all of the physical and emotional pain induced by Bella's kidnapping and subsequent execution before she took her final breath. Compared to the people who plotted against Bella including the father who were operating under the scientifically erroneous assumption that there was no crime of which to speak, the narrator is keenly aware that his dog is not an *animal-machine* lacking the capacity to articulate anything at all, but rather his other-than-human friend is a sentient, semiotic agent that deserves at least some moral consideration. In other words, those responsible for Bella's murder justify their egregious actions based on the outmoded ethical position partly inherited from Judeo-Christian ideology, Cartesian thought, and Renaissance Humanism that all other creatures are essentially robots that should be relegated to the status of non-living automata. It would be utterly preposterous to feel any sense of remorse for the killing of a machine-like being. As Rod Preece concludes, "If the animal is truly a living machine […] on what basis may we respect the animal in a manner different from the bizarre idea of respecting a machine in and for itself? How may we treat the animal 'machine' as an end in itself, as an object of moral consideration, when we treat a machine-a watch, say, or a locomotive-entirely as a means to an end" (46). The previously mentioned biosemiotic insights into existence highlighted by Derrida and Manaï deliver the final proverbial *coup de grâce* to Descartes's "notorious *bêtemachine* theory" (Batra 156).

After eviscerating the "claim that animals are literally and simply machines" in his biosemiotic reflections, Derrida hypothesizes that all other species are "fellow" sentient, semiotic organisms upon which a degree of moral dignity must be conferred (Castricano 17). The anthropocentric idea that anything is permissible in the context of human-animal relations collapses. Any entity that deliberately and strategically creates, sends, and interprets signs that are paramount to its survival is not a machine in any sense. This knowledge derived from biosemiotic theory and contemporary scientific erudition serves to "awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations vis-à-vis the living in general, and precisely to this fundamental compassion that were we to take it seriously, would have to change even the very cornerstone […] of the philosophical problematic of the animal" (Derrida, *The Animal* 27). In addition to probing the semiosic abilities of his ordinary household cat, Derrida

contests the *bête-machine* doctrine by alluding to empirical evidence related to other-than-human pain (e.g. Watabiki et al., Burma et al., Sneddon et al.). Armed with the proof that other life forms suffer from the same "acute and chronic pain syndromes" as *Homo sapiens*, Derrida declares, "No one can deny the suffering, fear, or panic, the terror or fright that can seize certain animals and that we humans can witness" (Hansen 197; Derrida, The Animal 28). On the basis of evidence, experience, and common sense, the only logical, anti-Cartesian conclusion is that "what becomes undeniable as we move forward is that animals suffer" (Lawlor 45). Hence, there is no legitimate reason for the protagonist of *Bel Abîme* to discount the physical and emotional agony that Bella undoubtedly endured at the end of her life. The awareness of "the sharing of this suffering among the living" deepens the narrator's grief, for he cannot bear the thought that he was not around to protect Bella in her time of need (Derrida, *The Animal* 26).

What happens to Bella is an example of "[t]he worst, the cruelest, the most human violence (that) has been unleashed against living beings […] who precisely were not accorded the dignity of being fellows" (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 108, my insertion). Derrida's concept of a "fellow" emphasizes the universal condition of all mortal beings on a biosphere in which it is impossible to eradicate all forms of suffering. Expressing his ecological solidarity for all sentient, semiotic organisms that feel pain, bleed, and die just like *Homo sapiens*, Derrida affirms, "I am serendipitously extending the similar, the fellow, to all forms of life, to all species. All animals qua living beings are my fellows" (*The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 109). Derrida's expansion of what it means to be a "fellow" demonstrates how "deconstruction has always gestured towards the more-than-human" (Broglio 33). Even if Derrida did not devote much attention to issues connected to environmental ethics until near the end of his life, he insists that the plight of what we call the *animal* "will have always been the most important and decisive question" (*The Animal* 34). It may have taken him a while to outline his deep-seated ecological concerns, but Derrida's passionate denunciation of the violence and suffering inflicted upon the other-than-human population effectively brings the "wholly other" out of the shadows and into the light of moral consideration.

Manaï's depiction of the emotional and physical trauma experienced by Bella after her kidnapping during her final moments on this earth undermines "the organized disavowal" of the reality of other-than-human suffering underscored by Derrida (Derrida, *The Animal* 26). As he imagines the terror felt by Bella after her capture, the protagonist exclaims, "It was my fellows who terrified me, not dogs" (Manaï 45). The narrator is disgusted by the pretexts invented by the local authorities in charge of "animal control" who regularly exterminate stray dogs using the justification that it is the only solution for avoiding overpopulation and the spread of rabies. The refusal of elected officials to recognize Bella as a "fellow" is a systemic problem linked to the pervasive mistreatment of other dogs in the city. Bella is the latest victim in a long string of murders justified under the pretense of keeping everyone safe. In a human-centered culture in which the suffering of the "wholly other" is obfuscated by anthropocentric ideology that runs counter to scientific evidence, the protagonist decides to take matters into his own hands by killing as many politicians as possible during his rampage. The narrator ponders, "Why do they kill dogs? The mayor, the president, the deputies, the ministers, so they don't give a damn about talking about their fate and deciding to kill them" (Manaï 97). Convinced of their unique ontological essence because of mechanistic views of the world, the public officials in *Bel Abîme* eliminate dogs on a daily basis without a passing thought. It should also be noted that the methods employed by "animal control" in this narrative are inhumane to the extreme. As opposed to euthanizing these sentient animals with various medications designed to alleviate pain, the dog catchers shoot and beat dogs to death. For this reason, the protagonist logically assumes that Bella's execution was probably slow and excruciating.

Given that the thought of his beloved other-than-human friend in pure agony before she succumbed to death is crushing, the narrator confesses, "I collapsed to my knees. My hands were tearing my face, pulling my hair, I wanted to tear my skin, get out of my body. I mumbled Bella, Bella, I'm

sorry, I'm sorry" (Manaï 78). Reiterating that Bella was not a soulless automaton but rather a "fellow" and most importantly his best friend, the protagonist reveals,

> Under a sky of mourning and a moon of blood, I joined my hands to my chest and with a voice from beyond the grave I prayed: O you, appeased soul, return to your Lord, satisfied and approved; therefore enter among My servants, and enter into My Paradise. Yes, I read the Quran, I recited the verses of the Overture and it doesn't matter if it was on the head of a dog, and no one can come to tell me that a dog does not have a soul! (Manaï 94–95)

Even if many people in his society would criticize him for lamenting the passing of Bella, the narrator mourns like one would grieve the loss of any loved one or "fellow." Additionally, the dreadful manner in which Bella probably died intensifies his grief. Manaï's suggestion that it is normal to mourn the disappearance of an other-than-human companion with whom we experienced all of the euphoria and sorrow that is emblematic of life is bolstered by the findings of empirical studies which indicate that "[a]nimal owners who experience the death of a beloved family pet or companion animal may experience feelings of grief and loss that are synonymous with the death of a human" (Cleary et al. 1). Some individuals would judge the protagonist harshly for his "improper, inappropriate and ultimately trivial" behavior stemming from the loss of an entity that was "just a dog" (Kavanagh 9). Yet, nothing could be more proper than to apologize to Bella for the sinister manner in which she was slowly killed. The biosemiosic encounter that thrusts Bella into the narrator's life culminates in a "gaze on the commonality between animals and humans generated by shared suffering, finitude, and compassion" (Slater 691).

V. The Derridean Exercise of "Limitrophy"

The reality of other-than-human anguish also implores us to reinvestigate the porous boundaries between *Homo sapiens* and other animals. To be more precise, Derrida and Manaï's illustrations of the pain felt by our "fellows" deconstruct the pseudo-concept of the *animal* that the philosopher identifies as one of "the greatest and most symptomatic *asinanitie*s of those who call themselves humans" (Derrida, *The Animal* 41, italics in original). Derrida and Manaï compel us to rethink the actual differences and similarities between our species and other organisms outside of mechanistic logic and dichotomous frameworks. This concerted effort to (re-) delineate the "boundary between human and non-human," which takes into account biosemiotic insights and scientific knowledge, is what Derrida refers to as the philosophical and ethical exercise of *limitrophy* (Yan 281). Without ignoring "the essential or structural differences between the human and animal," "Derrida's idea is not to erase the line that separates us from other living things [...] but rather to multiply its dimensions" (Derrida, *The Animal* 89; Bruns 415). The philosopher's nuanced (re-) conceptualization of other-than-human semiosis problematizes the borders between our species and other organisms without "denying that there are significant differences between humans and other animals" (Patton 164). Derrida advocates in favor of a *limitrophic* shifting of traditional conceptual boundaries predicated upon reductionistic binary logic, but he does not propose that all limits should be effaced entirely. Since there is something unique about the semiosic vantage point of *all* beings including ours, Derrida does not reduce difference to sameness. Instead of committing a different "*asinanity*," or replacing one simplistic mental structure with another, "it is rather a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits" (Derrida, *The Animal* 47, italics in original; 48).

After acknowledging that "[t]he animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there" (Derrida, *The Animal* 29), Derrida provides the following operational definition for his concept of *limitrophy*:

> *Limitrophy* is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what *feeds the limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I'll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its

> figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply. (*The Animal* 29, italics in original)

Derrida specifies that the philosophical and moral exercise of *limitrophy* is most of all a preliminary blueprint for contesting "the limit that we have had a stomachful of, the limit between Man with a capital *M* and Animal with a capital *A*" (*The Animal* 29, italics in original). Caught under the biosemiosic gaze of the "wholly other," the philosopher starts to challenge "the very category of 'the animal' itself" (Oliver 54). Decrying the inadequacy of the "monolithic category called the animal" (Naas 231), Derrida grumbles, "The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime" (*The Animal* 47–48). As numerous scholars including Michael Naas, Gerald Bruns, and Marie-Dominique Garnier have noted, Derrida coins the neologism *animot* in an attempt to pluralize the limits between *Homo sapiens* and other animals. Beyond "the seduction of cheap verbal play," "Derrida makes incisive inroads in effacing the unfairness of the category 'animal' in which animals constitute a homogeneous set in fundamental opposition with the human […] To that end, Derrida proposes the concept *animot/animaux*, a neologism that is pronounced identically in both the singular and plural forms in French, so that the plural for *animals* resonates in the singular form" (Garnier 27; Slater 687, italics in original). When the puritanical shame that he feels trapped naked under the *animot* gaze wanes, this awkward encounter assumes the shape of a profound, *limitrophic* reflection.

The counter-hegemonic "acknowledgement of the gaze" is what "complexifies the limit between the animal and the human" in *Bel Abîme* (Slater 687; 691). It is the discovery of "compassion or love" that he experiences for the first time with Bella that leads the protagonist to question the human-animal divide (Slater 691). Over a period of approximately three years, a beautiful friendship blossoms between a disaffected young man and a canine that results in the deconstruction of "the autobiography of the human species, the whole history of the self that man recounts to himself, that is to say the thesis of a limit as rupture or abyss between those who say 'we men,' 'I, a human,' and what this man among men who say 'we,' what he *calls* the animal or animals" (Derrida, *The Animal* 29–30). Painting a rending portrait of *interspecific* friendship, which demystifies the notion of the *animal* as a homogenous set of soulless automata in sharp contrast to humans, the narrator explains, "I grew up with Bella and Bella grew up with me […] I was caught up in her pure vitality […] her energy, her joy. She was my best friend, and almost the only one. After school, I ran to find her. As soon as I opened the gate, she would cheer me on, jump on me, her tail in a whirlwind, and cover my hands and cheeks with her hot pink tongue" (Manaï 54). Given that the deep friendship between Bella and the protagonist undercuts "a strong line of thought which holds that such love *should or must* only be directed towards humans," the narrator is condemned harshly by his peers for his violation of a conceptual limit (Milligan 195, italics in original). The aforementioned plot to remove Bella from the protagonist's life, which will "separate […] fused souls," is linked to a subversive transgression of species boundaries erected on the basis of reductionistic, dichotomous thought paradigms (Manaï 62).

Similar to Derrida, Manaï's *limitrophic* exploration of the complex, intertwined relationship between *Homo sapiens* and other animals underscores our heightened biological predisposition to engage in semiosis while simultaneously presenting other organisms as semiotic and moral agents. In a revealing passage, the narrator clarifies, "You are free to think that man is speech, that we are language, that this is what distinguishes us from primates, this mutation at the level of the glottis, this ability to jabber" (Manaï 90–91). This position supported by evidence reflects the mainstream biosemiotic view that humans possess "the most powerful tool for semiotic mediation" (Hasan 489). Nonetheless, the subtlety of Manaï's arguments demonstrates that "the difference is a matter of degree" in a biosphere replete with the strategic conception, dissemination, and interpretation of signs (Cobley 29). Without being hyperbolic or dismissing our unheralded biosemiosic ability, Derrida and Manaï compellingly promulgate *limitrophic* shifts that recognize the agency of other-than-human "fellows."

VI. The "Monstrous" Declaration of War Against the Remainder of the Biosphere in the Anthropocene/Technocene

They are also both adamant in their conviction that we no longer have a choice but to "break through the institutional boundaries to interspecific compassion" in defense of other-than-human subjects at the dawn of the Anthropocene/Technocene (Chrulew 13). Derrida's affirmation that our "monstrous" debasement and exploitation of the "wholly other" equates to nothing short of a *world war* against the rest of the cosmos recalls Michel Serres's concept of *la guerre mondiale* (*The Animal* 26). Unless we heed the stern warnings from the scientific community about anthropogenic climate change, Derrida predicts that the ultimate end game of our conflictual relationship is utter oblivion. The "veritable war of the species" that we are currently waging against the earth is a "war to the death" (Derrida, *The Animal* 31; 102). The philosopher maintains that we must "intervene in this war between the species" before it is too late (Naas 242). Derrida apocalyptically encourages us to envision a "tableau of a world after animality, after a sort of holocaust, a world from which animality, at first present to man, would have one day disappeared: destroyed or annihilated by man" (*The Animal* 80). The dystopian scenario outlined by Derrida draws its strength from the scientific consensus about the ecological crisis. If we continue to turn a blind eye to the biosemiosic gazes around us that are suffering because of our myopic actions, our species will also one day vanish when too many threads have been torn from the web of life. From a *semioethical* perspective, Derrida concludes that the *world war* "is passing through a critical phase [...] We are passing through that phase, and it passes through us. To think the war we find ourselves waging is not only a duty, a responsibility, an obligation, it is also a necessity" (*The Animal* 29).

Derrida's (re-) appropriation of the expression *world war* is heavily influenced by the scientific theory of the "sixth mass extinction" connected to human activities (Wagler 78). Illustrating that the quotidian disappearance of other organisms is inherently unsustainable on an interdependent and interconnected planet, Derrida laments, "the number of species endangered because of man takes one's breath away" (*The Animal* 26). Unless we deviate from our current *ecocidal* trajectory, thus ending this "war without mercy against the animal in the form of a *pax humana*," *all* beings will soon perish (Derrida, *The Animal* 102, italics in original). In this regard, "the present environmental crisis and widespread extinction of animal species constitutes a new, unprecedently destructive turn" in human-animal relations (Baumeister 52). Derrida observes that the devastating ripple effects of our unfettered aggression against the hand that feeds are visible throughout the biotic community of life. The philosopher ponders how we will respond to the biosemiosic gaze that beckons us to co-inhabit the cosmos differently.

The moral summons extended by Bella in *Bel Abîme* takes the form of a reflection about the deadly repercussions of excessive urbanization. Whereas he used to torture flies with sadistic delight before his biosemiosic encounter with Bella, the protagonist starts to treat all living creatures with the dignity and respect that they deserve as sentient, semiotic "fellows." The narrator becomes astutely aware that the so-called rural exodus is a major ecological problem linked to a loss of habitat for other species. Articulating his derision for urban spaces in a conversation with his lawyer related to his socioeconomic status, the protagonist declares,

> Yes, I am from the southern suburbs of Tunis. The popular suburb? You are nice, popular is not really the word, rotten would be better. What's rotten about it? Oh, pretty much everything. I'm not talking about the people, those are rotten regardless of the suburbs. Yes, that's it, urbanization, infrastructure, land use planning. You have to come and visit us on rainy days, when the streets become torrential wadis and the sewers spew our own shit on us. (Manaï 18)

Later in the narrative, the narrator criticizes those who "have the haggard gaze of someone who does not understand why there is no longer a tiny piece of land in this fucking immensity to exist" (Manaï 86). The protagonist's biosemiosic encounter with Bella and the friendship that ensued

induce the realization that the other species with whom we dwell are having a difficult time surviving in a drastically altered ecological landscape. Manaï "pushes us to reflect upon our own existence in the current circumstances in which we live (which) […] leads to the unfolding of the limits of our thought and our failed acts" ("'Bel Abîme' dernier roman de Yamen Manaï," my insertion). For Derrida and Manaï, we are responsible for the destruction that we are continually wreaking upon our imperiled planet.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, Derrida and Manaï's *limitrophic* reworking of other-than-human semiosis and their reassessment of human-animal relations in general focus on the force of the biosemiosic gaze. The philosopher and Tunisian writer demonstrate that a human who *sees* and has been *seen* by the "wholly other" is no longer the same person. When we share all of the joy and sorrow that epitomizes life in its divergent forms with a non-human companion, we discover firsthand the reality of other-than-human friendship rendered possible by *interspecific* communication. As opposed to a blank stare emanating from a robotic automaton looking back at us, we are able to forge meaningful bonds with other sentient, semiotic creatures. The inner transformation that transpires through the power of the other-than-human gaze also opens the door to cross-species compassion. Without the ghost of the *animal-machine* looming over us, it is no longer possible to absolve ourselves of all responsibility for our parasitic rapport with the universe that could be described as a *world war*. Derrida and Manaï offer a stark reminder that when too many other-than-human eyes staring back at us have faded away, it could be our own extinction on the horizon.

Mississippi State University, USA

Notes

[1] All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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