

CONTEMPORARY FRENCH ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA. By Keith Moser. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 262 pp.

Could biosemiotic logic, in the context of post-pandemic and microbial ethics, find its cross-species sympathetic analog in the spiritual and moral practices of Oriental thinking cognizant of other-than-human life and the perils of speciesism on an imperiled biosphere, as evidenced by *Jataka Tales* (an attempt to foster an altruism reconnecting to a deep knowledge of the cosmos)?

In *Contemporary French Environmental Thought in the Post-COVID-19 Era*, Keith Moser deconstructs core Western mental principles, and offers us five refined and promising examinations on ecological theories and meaning in the larger context of the post-pandemic era. In a series of seamlessly connected musings from a plethora of biosemiotic and scientific sources — the main subjects being Michel Serres, Edgar Morin, Jacques Derrida, Michel Onfray and Dominique Lestel, and dominant postulates of Western thinking ranging from Cartesian dualities to Judeo-Christian ideology which “prevents us from understanding our life on this earth and from taking our true place in the universe” as described by Onfray (2015) —, Moser offers a purposely ironic discourse centered on the timely topic of “ecological degradation” (66). The fact that the book is more an assemblage of practical propositions than an armchair theory, and that it at times presents more criticism than praise for even the five aforementioned prominent French thinkers, is very effective given that Western thought is too human-centered and it “has become a real environmental problem linked to an alarming loss of biodiversity on a global scale” (5). Moser compellingly makes the case for the rehabilitation of the anthropogenic imagination, as Western civilization might reconcile “the doctrine of *imago dei*” in Genesis 1:27 which “creates a conflictual relationship between humans and all other species” (153). It is a provocative book meant to make us upset; Moser’s detailed and logical observations invite us to reflect upon the faults of “*Homo sapiens*” (1) and to ponder our moral responsibility for many other-than-human entities.

While the author’s enlightening approach, as other organisms are placed back into the light of moral consideration through Derrida’s neologism “*animot*” (2008) or Morin’s “*computo ergo sum*” (1986), is open to everyone affected by Western thinking, the crucial insights provided are, in a connotative manner, absorbing and well worth consideration. Moser’s book joins a multidisciplinary field of biosemiotic studies, ranging from biology (Jiang 2019), to ecology (Zapf 2016), to ethology (Townsend 2012), to philosophy (Petrilli 2013), to ethics (Cockell 2011), to politics (Llored 2014), to linguistics (Stibbe 2015), to robotics (Brier 2006), to economics (Hornborg 2014), and more. Such studies acknowledge that biosemiotic revelations represent a necessary paradigm shift in our thinking about the planet: human beings continue to undermine our very existence in the form of anthropogenic climate change and a dramatic increase in emerging infectious diseases. In other words, these works ponder whether Descartes’s animal-machine theory is problematic and potentially lethal to all of the world’s human and other-than-human inhabitants in the post-COVID-19 era.

Moser focuses on “new *limitrophic* ethical and legal frameworks” (239) that genuinely reflect, struggle with, and reconcile the present “*ecocidal*” (46) realities. Specifically, Moser laments the harmful “human *Umwelt*” reflecting “a subjectively experienced phenomenal world” (5) filtered through modern technology linked to “VR” (43) that has expanded like never before, and in so doing, attempts to foster a ubiquitous realm of sympathy over our dominant anthropocentric mental structures: “[N]ot only must we curb our parasitic impulses that have forced pathogenic microorganisms to find other environmental niches leading to increased zoonotic disease outbreaks, but we should also consider granting *some* rights to *weak* subjects like symbiotic bacteria and viruses in the Anthropocene epoch” (239). He highlights this biocentric worldview in the five previously mentioned French thinkers, most notably Dominique Lestel, whose theory of “*polyspecific families*”

(2007) Moser describes as a “biocentric reworking of subjecthood and personhood” — connected to the rehabilitation of our much-maligned five senses and transcending the limitations of Cartesian binaries. Moser concludes, “[W]e have a moral obligation to protect those we hold *near* in our *mixed communities*” (211).

Moser also derives inspiration from Serres who takes advantage of the metaphor of music to demonstrate the splendor of the cosmos by attuning ourselves to the “immense rhapsody” (2006) of the universe. In an effort to reinvestigate Cartesian presuppositions as a starting point of Western thinking which slight many other-than-human entities, Moser opines:

When we have no choice but to acknowledge that all organisms including bacteria and viruses possess a degree of sentience and semiotic freedom, ethical quandaries related to the rights of other animals, plants, trees, and microbes cannot simply be swept under the rug (16).

The author indignantly argues that we should “take aim at the ghost of the *animal-machine* that continues to haunt Western civilization” (231). Even though the digital era represents a profound social transformation, we cannot lose our capacity for critical reflection owing to “the deluge of *fake news* that obfuscates reality and prevents us from proposing potential solutions to dire problems, and anthropogenic climate change that threatens the existence of all sentient beings that roam this planet” (229). This radical paradigm shift in our thinking must therefore wrestle with “the erosion of the real by the proliferation of hyperreal simulacra” (238) — the imposition of an alternative reality without a human-animal bond.

As denizens on this present planet, where “the concept of *quorum sensing* sheds light on how miniscule bacteria skillfully communicate through the secretion of tiny molecules or peptides” (2-3), we must, according to Moser, turn our attention to who is “the worst parasite or virus of all” in the impending ecological apocalypse. Moser posits, “If we obstinately continue to follow our current *ecocidal* trajectory toward oblivion and what biosemioticians refer to as *semiocide*, the most probable and frightening end game is the complete destruction of *Homeland Earth* (Morin)” (241). For a civilization epitomized by the “human-animal duality,” this biosemiotic perspective must be fully developed as a form of cross-species empathy leading to the dawn of a biocentric, Western altruism (115).

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