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The “Beautiful Abyss” of Human Cruelty, Anthropogenic Violence, and Other-Than-Human Friendship in Yamen Manai’s *Bel Abîme*

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Abstract: Yamen Manai’s novel *Bel Abîme* upholds Dominique Lestel’s contention that friends are those who we hold near and dear in our hybrid communities. Lestel and Manai’s reexamination of the reality of other-than-human friendship presents our domesticated pets as sentient, semiotic agents with whom we co-construct meaning and a sense of identity together in the “enchanted space of trans-specific communication.” Additionally, our species appears to derive immense psychological and moral benefits from polyspecific encounters that enable us to reach a higher stage of ethical development. Nonetheless, Lestel and Manai recognize that we cannot extend the family circle to include even more other-than-human co-inhabitants of the biosphere unless we (re-) establish a more sustainable way of living and being in the world. Not only is climate change a question of survival, but it is also a matter of preserving the spaces of meaning in which we are forever transformed by the non-human Other.

Keywords: Dominique Lestel; Yamen Manai; other-than-human friendship; trans-specific communication; biosemiotics



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1. Introduction

This essay investigates the Tunisian writer-engineer Yamen Manai’s latest novel *Bel Abîme* (Manai 2021) through the transdisciplinary lens of the theories conceived by the contemporary philosopher-ethologist Dominique Lestel, who “engages with the concerns of ethology, psychology, and Continental philosophy, as well as those of popular culture” throughout his extremely diverse body of work (Taylor 2014, p. 113). *Bel Abîme* is a “short text carried by a direct language” that solidifies Manai’s status as one of the rising stars in the contemporary Maghrebi literary landscape in which the author further hones his biocentric *weltanschauung* by probing the magic of interspecific relations (Anaïs 2021).¹ Not only do Manai and Lestel demonstrate that genuine “interspecies friendship and non-human friendships” are possible, but they also compellingly posit that our quotidian, interspecific interactions with all of the non-human animals with whom we dwell within “the family circle” transform and define us (Chrulaw 2014, p. 17; Lestel 2007, p. 156). Manai and Lestel remind us that “all human societies are also animal societies” in which we co-construct a stable sense of Self with human and other-than-human subjects that are inextricably linked to the constitution of our identity in what Lestel refers to as *hybrid communities* or *mixed societies* (Lestel 2007, p. 15, italics in original). Manai and Lestel’s exploration of the space of trans-specific friendship and communication deconstructs the anthropocentric, binary view of the “animal” that we have partly inherited from Renaissance humanism, Abrahamic cosmogonic myths, and Cartesian philosophy that has reduced all other species to the status of soulless automata who would be incapable of forging any kind of meaningful bonds with anyone.

When we are confronted with the reality of other-than-human sentience and the degree of semiotic ability afforded to other life forms throughout the biosphere corresponding

to their species-specific modelling devices, which enable *all* organisms to communicate with each other and us in purposeful and strategic ways,² we can longer turn a blind eye to the *ecocidal*, anthropogenic violence that we incessantly unleash upon the remainder of the cosmos. Given that we define ourselves in relation to as opposed to against other-than-human agents in our “*polyspecific families*” in which non-human inhabitants often outnumber their human counterparts, the “sixth mass extinction” could also lead to an existential crisis because this disquieting loss in biodiversity further erodes our already impoverished comprehension of the universe and our minute place in it (Lestel 2007, p. 21; Wagler 2011, p. 78). If (re-) establishing a deep emotional connection to other-than-human subjects is an indispensable element of understanding who and what we are on an inter-connected and interdependent planet, as Manai and Lestel suggest, the ecological calamity is also an ontological crisis of meaning.

2. Contextualization of Yamen Manai’s *Bel Abîme*

It is in this sense in which Manai’s long-awaited follow-up to his critically acclaimed novel *L’amas ardent*, for which he received the coveted *Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie*, should be understood. This somber tale of an adolescent who exacts murderous revenge on all those who played a part in the execution of his beloved dog Bella, including his own father, is actually a highly original “novel of apprenticeship” in which the protagonist experiences true love and friendship for the first time (Samaan 2021). Although the reader is profoundly destabilized by the heinous, unspeakable crimes committed by the narrator, there is also a hidden, “very beautiful love story” between a social outcast and his other-than-human companion (African Manager 2021). Before an ill-advised plot to remove Bella from the protagonist’s life is set into motion by his father, who is concerned that he “likes this dog more than people,” the narrator is happier than he has ever been before (Manai 2021, p. 66). Convinced that his son’s tight-knit relationship with Bella is improper and unhealthy according to dominant social conventions, the narrator’s father orchestrates a sinister and misguided plan to kill Bella. Blinded by anthropocentric logic, the father fails to realize that Bella is a vital part of the solution for fully healing his troubled son as opposed to being the problem in this atypical *bildungsroman*. If those around him had adopted a very different approach to dealing with the issue of the protagonist’s isolation from so-called human society, it is possible that this loner could have learned to love another person one day as well instead of spending the rest of his life behind bars.

From a stylistic angle, the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature J.M.G. Le Clézio’s description of Manai as someone who writes “with the reserve and exactitude of a scientist and, at the same time, with the fire of a poet and the imagination of a novelist” rings true throughout the text (Verdier 2021). To be more precise, Le Clézio suggests that it is because of Manai’s background in the hard sciences that he is able to conjure up such searing images of human and other-than-human suffering. This precision is heightened by the usage of vernacular expressions used by Francophone youths all across the globe, including common expletives. Despite the bawdy, crude satirical language that epitomizes numerous passages, there is an insatiable *joie de vivre* in *Bel Abîme* and throughout Manai’s work that implores the reader to take advantage of every intoxicating moment that life has to afford during our ephemeral time on this earth. In the novel *Bel Abîme*, this zest for life is linked to the splendor of interspecific love and friendship. When human cruelty takes away the protagonist’s only true friend, he no longer has a reason to live.

3. The Reality of Other-Than-Human Friendship in Our *Polyspecific Families*

The outcome for the protagonist might have been different if the father had recognized that “friendship between men and animals” in our *polyspecific families* is a positive, natural phenomenon linked to the process of domestication that wove dogs, cats, hamsters, etc. into the texture of the family unit as full-fledged members (Lestel 2007, p. 37). Unfortunately, the father subscribes to “a strong line of thought which holds that such love *should* or *must* only be directed towards humans” (Milligan 2017/2018, p. 195, italics in original). The

father's fatal mistake for everyone involved was drawing the anthropocentric conclusion that his son's rapport with Bella was "improper, inappropriate and ultimately trivial" rather than building upon this breakthrough in a manner that was conducive to rehabilitation (Kavanagh 2017/2018, p. 9). In *mixed societies* in which we live "in proximity to other living beings," we develop "close relationships with other animals and build hybrid communities" together (Lestel and Taylor 2013, p. 183; Chrulow 2014, p. 37). Whether we are talking about *Homo sapiens* or other animals, "Friends are first of all those who are *close* to each other" in the common spaces where we share all of the ecstasy and anguish that life has to afford with other ephemeral human and other-than-human agents (Lestel 2007, p. 174, italics in original). For Lestel, any theoretical framework that does not take into account "the richness and complexity of relations that are woven between humans and animals" is problematic (Lestel 2014c, p. 87). Owing to the fact that "animals and humans inhabit the same physical space" in our *hybrid communities*, Lestel theorizes that there is little reason to doubt the authenticity and intensity of the friendships that we cultivate with our other-than-human companions, whom we hold *near* (Yan 2013, p. 274).

In the same vein as Lestel, albeit in a different genre, Manai also implies that it is indeed "legitimate to talk about friendship between men and animals" from an objective standpoint in what we have traditionally conceived of as exclusively human societies (Lestel 2007, p. 37). The narrator from *Bel Abîme* offers the following description of the veritable strength of these bonds that enable him to discover a state of true happiness for the first time in his tumultuous life: "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" (Manai 2021, p. 54). Even if the idea of other-than-human friendship makes some people uncomfortable because it runs counter to social mores predicated upon outdated anthropocentric logic, empirical evidence from the hard sciences lends credence to Manai's depiction of the mutual affection between a human and a canine. "Due to thousands of years of cohabitation, a strong interdependence exists between humans and other species" in *mixed societies* that numerous researchers have started to examine (Amiot and Bastian 2015, p. 6). When placed in the proper context of this "shared history," there is nothing aberrant or unnatural about the protagonist's rapport with Bella (Lestel 2004, p. 27). As Donna Haraway reveals in *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, "(d)omestication is an emergent process of co-habiting" the planet with other sentient creatures (30). The unorthodox tale of love in *Bel Abîme* is about "(t)elling a story of co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality" (Haraway 2003, p. 4). Manai undermines the "annoying hostility" to the reality of other-than-human friendship espoused by some theorists who obstinately cling to obsolete notions of human exceptionalism by painting a realistic portrait of "real friendship" between a human and other-than-human agent to which millions of people around the world can relate as members of *hybrid communities* (Lestel 2007, pp. 219, 151).

Given the porosity of the boundaries between *Homo sapiens* and other animals within "the perspective of these hybrid-animal communities," Lestel hypothesizes that our very identity is co-constructed with other-than-human entities (Lestel 2007, p. 135). The philosopher explains that we acquire "a complex identity within the particular framework of the relationships" that we maintain with the humans and non-humans with whom we spend the majority of our time (Lestel 2014b, p. 113). Although other characters in *Bel Abîme* scoff at the protagonist because of what they erroneously perceive to be an inappropriate relationship, "a dog is an extension of the cultural self of its owner-and vice versa" (Lestel 2007, p. 172). Starting with the advent of domestication, other animals would soon become "an extricable part of the constitution and understanding of (our) identity" (Lestel et al. 2014, p. 143, my insertion). Lestel's theories about other-than-human friendship shed light on the tragic *dénouement* of *Bel Abîme*. The fateful decision to attempt to "separate (...) fused souls" by any means necessary culminates in a string of murders and the barbaric

execution of an innocent other-than-human victim (Manai 2021, p. 62). The narrator cannot bear to live in a world from which all semblance of meaning has been evacuated. With nothing left to lose, the protagonist's only *raison d'être* is retribution against those who played a role in Bella's death including his father. Without Bella, the narrator has been reduced to a shell of a person with no fixed sense of identity. For a young boy who has lost his only friend, he no longer knows who he is in the absence of his companion, who was "always there" in close proximity (ibid., p. 52).

Evidently, there is no moral justification for the protagonist's murderous rampage that will leave several people dead by the end of the narrative. Nonetheless, it is through this unusual example of the splendor of other-than-human friendship that Manai delves into another taboo subject: mourning the loss of an other-than-human friend. The narrator's odious actions are a visceral reflection of the grief that he feels with the passing of his cherished dog. Since "(c)ompanion animals play a distinct role in our lives and for many, they are a part of the family, and not simply just a pet," the disappearance of an other-than-human family member can have devastating consequences (Podrazik et al. 2000, p. 361). In a *mixed society* in which "this animal gives meaning to my existence (. . .) the mutual attachment between a man and an animal can transform the death of the latter into a significant event for the former" (Lestel 2007, p. 191, italics in original). Lestel's affirmation that "the death of a friend shows that everyone dies in pieces" is applicable to the end of *Bel Abîme* (ibid., p. 187). The protagonist's crimes are undoubtedly shocking, but it is the mental anguish induced by the demise of his other-than-human friend that overshadows the murders themselves.

Specifically, the narrator's painstaking efforts to bury Bella properly and to pay his respects next to her grave immediately after every assassination are revealing in this context. The unbearable grief that the protagonist experiences upon Bella's death deconstructs the common anthropocentric argument that "(i)t simply would not be 'proper' to be that upset" about the passing of a non-human entity (Kavanagh 2017/2018, p. 5). Manai's portrayal of this searing inner pain is a response to those who argue that it is abnormal to mourn the death of a pet in the same manner as the disappearance of a human friend. When the protagonist finally learns the truth about what happened to Bella, he grieves for his best friend. As the narrator exclaims, "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" (Manai 2021, p. 78). The protagonist further reveals a few pages later,

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.³ Yes, I read the Quran, I recited the verses of the Overture⁴ 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! (Manai 2021, pp. 94–95)

Manai rather explicitly takes aim at the ontological divide between humans and other animals that lies at the heart of the pervasive mentality that grief is to be reserved for fellow *Homo sapiens* in the second passage cited above. The author alludes to the ideological origins⁵ of this misunderstanding of what constitutes *human* societies in an effort to undercut this kind of oppositional thinking. Manai demonstrates that the logic that it is somehow wrong to mourn the death of an other-than-human friend is flawed in what is, more precisely, a *hybrid community* that we co-inhabit with other species. The narrator's behavior is an artistic representation of the reality supported by recent studies 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. 2021, p. 1). Not only is it appropriate for the protagonist to love Bella more than the humans in his life who treat him poorly, but it is also natural to mourn her demise.

4. “The Enchanted Space of Trans-Specific Communication” within *Hybrid Communities or Mixed Societies*

In their poignant descriptions of the anguish associated with the loss of a pet in *hybrid communities*, which should be recognized rather than ridiculed, Lestel and Manai dissect another frequent philosophical, linguistic, and ethical position connected to anthropocentric attitudes. In addition to conceptualizing human versus animal societies in relative isolation from each other, thereby ignoring how the process of domestication fundamentally altered our shared communities, most mainstream theorists still adhere to the disproven dichotomy that pits “semiotically active humans” against “semiotically inactive nature” (Maran 2014, p. 142, 142). Some people dismiss other-than-human-friendship and the grief experienced by those who have lost a non-human companion based on the debunked notion that *Homo sapiens* is the only animal that has any linguistic ability at all. Heavily influenced by the “semiotic ethology of Jakob von Uexküll” and biosemiotic theory in general, Lestel asserts that meaningful and purposeful “communication is part and parcel of the animal world” throughout the universe (Wheeler 2014, p. 74; Lestel 2002b, p. 47). The interdisciplinary of biosemiotics, which has united many hard scientists and humanists alike in an attempt to reevaluate the complexity of other-than-human communication, has completely demystified the idea that “animals have no genuine language” (Cottingham 1978, p. 556). Even if humans are hardwired with the most sophisticated primary modeling device of all in the shape of what we call “language(s),” scientists have uncovered that “signs and communication belong to the whole of the organic world” at all biological levels of organization including microbial entities (Petrilli and Ponzio 2013, p. 374). As opposed to being the only semiotic agents in this biosphere, as proponents of human exceptionalism still maintain, we are immersed in a sea of semiosis characterized by the skillful and deliberate conception, transmission, and interpretation of signs. This finding is important, for it would be impossible to form an authentic friendship with an organism that possesses no semiotic ability. Furthermore, there would be no reason to lament the passing of a pet with whom we are unable to convey anything meaningful. Biosemiotic insights into life illustrate that the “Cartesian concept of (the) animal-machine,” or the mechanistic vision of all other creatures as “a machine blindly ‘obeying’ rules implemented from outside,” is an anthropocentric social construct that does not hold up to scrutiny (Markoš et al. 2007, p. 238, my insertion, 237).

What distinguishes Lestel from other biosemioticians is his focus on “the enchanted space of trans-specific communication” within our *mixed societies* (Lestel 2010, p. 138). Whereas many theorists who have adopted the biosemiotic approach to (re-) envisioning the complexity of other-than-human communication tend to study a given *Umwelt* in isolation from other semiotic realms, Lestel reexamines “the use of signs processes and sign relations both *between* and *within* organisms” (Favareau 2009, p. 2, my emphasis). Endeavoring to fill a gap related to “interspecific communications (that) are roughly forgotten,” Lestel affirms that “it is precisely because humans share common codes that they can constitute shared communities” (Lestel 2002a, p. 202, my insertion; Lestel 2002b, p. 55). This common semiotic grounding allows us to be able to create, exchange, and decode signs laden with value with other organisms without having the same species-specific modeling devices. Lestel’s hypotheses explain why we are capable of understanding a variety of other-than-human semiotic cues such as barking, howling, growling, scratching at the door, purring, whining, etc. in our *hybrid communities* in which we continually (re-) negotiate “a space of relationship and communication” (Lestel 1998, p. 216).

Lestel’s conclusions are in line with the findings of empirical studies (e.g., Scheider et al. 2011; Trager 1958; Thorpe 1961; Hockett 1960; Crystal 2020) examining how paralinguistic communication opens up a space for dialogue between different semiotic agents. For instance, researchers have noted that “factors such as pitch, loudness, and speed of speaking are relevant in the elicitation of differentiated responses by many domestic pets” (Crystal 2020, p. 14). The “human’s tone of voice” is also replete with semiotic content that is often correctly interpreted by our other-than-human friends (Scheider et al. 2011, p. 1).

We may not be able to understand *everything* that our pets are trying to express due to the “difficulty of accessing the logic of other communication systems,” but “most of the time, man happens to be able to communicate with animals” (Maran et al. 2016, p. 22; Lestel 2010, p. 77). As Lestel highlights in a comical and playful passage from *Les amis de mes amis*, “I have a little dog who gives me a thousand hobbies (. . .) And if he wants to ask me something. I know how he formulates his requests. He sometimes speaks to me with his eyes just as well as a lover does with his mistress” (Lestel 2007, pp. 39–40). Despite the apparent humor in this section of the text, Lestel’s main argument is extremely cogent. When their canine companions look at them in a certain way, raise or tilt their heads in a given direction, and move their tails into various positions, dog “owners” like the narrator from *Bel Abîme* sometimes understand these signs perfectly.

From a biosemiotic angle, the protagonist and Bella in *Bel Abîme* are able to communicate with each other on a regular basis effectively. They may not be capable of waxing poetic about the so-called *human condition* or reading Shakespeare together, yet they bring meaning to each other’s existence through an exchange of a wide array of emotions. When Bella displays affection for her human friend, the protagonist does not have a difficult time deciphering these codes at all. Recounting how he and Bella understood each other quite well even during the puppy stage, the narrator declares, “She began to lap at, to lick my hands, my face (. . .) And also to yelp while wagging her tail (. . .) She was playful, funny, she made me laugh, she made me happy” (Manai 2021, p. 49). Even during the worst moments of his life immediately following Bella’s execution, the protagonist fondly remembers the semiotic exchanges between the two of them that vastly improved the quality of his existence for three years. If Bella were still alive, the narrator explains that she “would have not liked to see me cry (. . .) You would have drunk my tears and dried my cheeks” (ibid., p. 92). These passages should not be labeled as anecdotal, because “new research shows that dogs respond to their owner’s unhappiness” (Coren 2021). What Bella would have probably done in the hypothetical, impossible scenario outlined by the narrator is in keeping with research from the field of psychology illustrating that “many dogs show empathy if their owner is in distress and will also try to help rescue them” (Springer 2018). Emily Sanford, Emma Burt, and Julia Meyers-Mano confirm this hypothesis with nearly irrefutable empirical data in a study in which they discovered “patterns of empathetic helping in conditions of distress” by dogs who were worried about their “owners” (Sanford et al. 2018, p. 384). Moreover, our domesticated companions are capable of articulating this apprehension through signs demonstrating the reality of inter-specific dialogue that can enchant our lives.

Although Manai devotes many pages of *Bel Abîme* to underscoring the magical space of trans-specific communication described by Lestel, the author realizes that “there is a continuum running from the most primitive of animal communications to the most sophisticated of poetic verses” in which “every animal has its place” (Lestel 1994, p. 351). Lestel and Manai seem to share a “much more nuanced account of life in signs” that recognizes the unparalleled complexity of the human primary modeling device of “language” while simultaneously presenting other species as semiotic agents in their own right. As the narrator of *Bel Abîme* avers, “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” (Manai 2021, pp. 90–91). Manai’s astute observation regarding our heightened biological predisposition to engage in semiosis further strengthens the credibility of his arguments. Thus Manai’s narrator affirms, to quote Paul Cobley, that “the difference is a matter of degree” and not of kind when comparing different semiotic systems (Cobley 2016, p. 29). However, the author is careful not to fall into the trap of reducing difference to sameness in his subtle reassessment of other-than-human semiosis. Without overstating his point or becoming hyperbolic, Manai provides a rending and realistic tableau of the sublime nature of inter-specific dialogue.

5. The Transformative Nature of Quotidian, *Polyspecific* Encounters

The protagonist's discovery of "the enchanted space of trans-specific communication" in *Bel Abîme* also recalls Lestel's premise that *Homo sapiens* are inherently defective animals who cannot be fully whole until we have been transformed through *polyspecific* encounters. Pondering why "All human societies have developed (. . .) privileged relations with *at least* one animal," Lestel concludes, "We saturate our spaces with affectionate animals because we are emotionally wounded creatures par excellence" (Lestel 2004, pp. 15–16, italics in original; Lestel 2007, p. 109). A cultural anthropologist would potentially contend that Lestel's assertion about the universality of companion animals is somewhat overstated. Nevertheless, researchers from many divergent disciplines have observed that pets are common across the cultural spectrum, including in most autochthonous societies. In reference to this universal phenomenon, the environmental ethicist James Serpell maintains, "The keeping of animals as companions is clearly not essential to human survival. We can live without it, just as we can live without singing, dancing, music, art, laughter and friendship. Yet the fact that so many people in so many different cultures are motivated to engage in these essential activities suggests that the rewards are far from negligible" (Serpell 1987, p. 173). For Lestel, the ultimate "reward" from a philosophical and ethical stance is that our other-than-human friends mold us into "the human that we want to be" owing to these "*positive values* for the human" (Lestel 2007, p. 127; 8, italics in original). Lestel specifies, "the human can love like he loves because he has established very strong emotional connections with certain animals" (ibid.). Conversely, people who have never experienced other-than-human friendship have a harder time overcoming their innate moral deficiencies as "wounded creatures."

Even if Lestel's theories might initially appear to be anecdotal at first glance, a large body of research supports his claims. For example, researchers have analyzed the short-term and long-term psychological impact of other-than-human companionship for people who are afflicted with PTSD (e.g., Van Houtert et al. 2018; O'Haire and Rodriguez 2018; Rodriguez et al. 2020), elderly individuals residing in retirement communities (e.g., Cole 2019; Cherniack and Cherniack 2014), and inmates in correctional facilities (e.g., Cooke and Farrington 2016; Mims et al. 2017; Deaton 1974). It is not by chance that prison-based canine training programs have now sprung up all across the United States. These initiatives are emblematic of a growing recognition of the pivotal role that domesticated organisms play in the rehabilitation of humans who suffer from various conditions, including the effects of solitude. As evidenced by a sharp decrease in violence and an increase in morale, prison-based dog training programs "can facilitate a change within the individual which cannot easily be matched by traditional methods" (Deaton 1974, p. 59).

This profound inner transformation, which has now been documented by the academic community, is on full display in *Bel Abîme*. After he finds and adopts Bella, the narrator is no longer the same person that he was before this fortuitous encounter. He "will forget little by little the atrocious nature of his sad reality" because of "his enthusiastic attachment to Bella" (African Manager 2021). As the narrator confesses, "For the first time, I felt a soul inhabit my body" (Manai 2021, p. 48). Realizing that he is a better version of his inner self because of his connection to an other-than-human entity, the protagonist reiterates, "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" (ibid., p. 82). From a psychological and ethical perspective, the process of healing has clearly begun for the narrator. Similar to Lestel, Manai implies that there is something unique and transformational about the bonds that we are capable of establishing with other animals in our *hybrid communities*.

Given that the protagonist has now even started to treat other creatures with dignity and respect, it was certainly within the realm of possibilities that he could have forged more meaningful relationships with other humans in the near future before the father's tragic decision to remove Bella from his son's life. After Bella entered the narrator's life,

the best case in point is the radical evolution of his rapport with flies. Whereas he used to derive sadistic pleasure from systematically torturing these “pests,” the protagonist no longer feels the urge to exterminate them senselessly. Elucidating that this inner rage is now gone, the narrator admits, “No longer any need to chase flies, they can fly around in peace from now on” (Manai 2021, p. 53). This newfound state of serenity is in stark contrast to his former mentality that “flies are bad (. . .) we must, for everyone’s sake, get rid of them at the slightest opportunity. I said to myself they are my whipping boys, this is what my revenge will fall on. This is how I will unleash my duty of violence. A filthy species, a hideous species” (ibid., p. 34). Although the people around him, including his family, are upset since he spends all of his time with Bella, the anger that the protagonist once felt for human society and some animals dissipates because of the therapeutic value of other-than-human friendship. The radical change in the narrator’s state of mind actuated by the introduction of Bella into his life aligns with empirical research highlighting how “pets provide benefits to those with mental health conditions” (Brooks et al. 2018, p. 1). Lestel and Manai may broach the topic of other-than-human friendship from different angles, but they both persuasively demonstrate that “(p)ets are often lifelines—fulfilling not just the need for company, not just the need to be loved, but our own profound need to love” (Seppälä 2017). Psychologists around the world have begun to direct more attention to the subject of other-than-human friendship due to the aforementioned “rewards” stemming from these relationships.

6. The “Dramatic Narrowing of the Semiosphere” in the Anthropocene as an Existential Crisis

On a biosphere teetering on the edge of oblivion because of human activities in the Anthropocene-Technocene, Lestel theorizes that these sorts of transformational, polyspecific encounters are in short supply. In a world epitomized by “massive environmental degradation,” Lestel argues that it is increasingly harder to engage in inter-specific dialogue when species vanish every day (Tønnessen 2009, p. 52). As the philosopher bemoans,

The collapse of biodiversity resulting from the hatred of the animal world cultivated by Western humanism has led to the massive impoverishment of humankind—psychological, intellectual, moral and spiritual. Loss of biodiversity leads to a dramatic narrowing of the semiosphere on earth and entails a problematic drying up of the very substance of humankind, which is woven into the texture of *all* living beings. The problem is that we are not even aware of what we are losing with the collapse of biodiversity because we approach the question with a maimed imagination and as a consequence we have a truncated representation of the role of other living beings in the constitution not of *what* we are but especially of *who* we are. (Lestel 2013, p. 220, italics in original)

If our sense of identity is *relational* and co-constructed with all of the animals with whom we dwell in our *mixed societies*, as Lestel hypothesizes, “species loss has both an ecological and symbolic consequence on our culture, as every species contributes to our very being, our meaning” (Bussolini 2013, p. 187). When the thick layer of human semiosis forever silences too many other biosemiotic voices, Lestel contends that it will be even more difficult to carve out spaces of meaning in our already fractured environmental imagination.

Lestel’s apocalyptic vision of an unsustainable human-centered universe marked by the irreversible destruction of “the spaces of meaning in which living species can live together” draws heavily on the thought of Paul Shepard (Lestel 2013, p. 309). Lestel’s conviction that we are at the brink of an existential crisis owing to the nefarious effects of climate change is inspired by Shepard’s view of *Homo sapiens* “as others in a world where otherness of all kinds is in danger, and in which otherness is essential to the discovery of the true self” (Nchoujie 2015, p. 184). If the constitution of the Self “emerges from biological reality and grows from the fact of interconnectedness as the general principle of life,” we are essentially effacing a part of ourselves on our present *ecocidal* trajectory (Shepard 1997, p. 111). Based on this biocentric logic, “Lestel confronts how the limitations

of quotidian Western thinking have played a role in the loss of biodiversity. He argues that the preservation of endangered species is relevant not only on the ecological level but in the semiotic dimension as well since every species contributes to the diversity of meaning. He warns that ‘each species that disappears is a part of our imagination that we amputate perhaps irreversibly’ (Taylor 2014, p. 186). Since “the disappearance of a species is not purely a biological phenomenon but a complex process that deeply alters what it means to be human” by preventing us from relating to the cosmic Other that holds the key to our understanding of the planet, Lestel insists that finding a solution to climate change is not merely a matter of self-preservation (Lestel 2013, p. 310).

Building upon the ecological concerns that he articulates in his award-winning *L’amas ardent*, Manai also explicitly decries what Lestel terms the “dramatic narrowing of the semiosphere” in *Bel Abîme*. The “beautiful abyss” of human cruelty, anthropogenic violence, and other-than-human friendship that the reader uncovers “pushes us to reflect upon our own existence in the current circumstances in which we live. It leads to the unfolding of the limits of our thought and our failed acts” (African Manager 2021). Within the larger context of the magic of human-animal relations in *hybrid communities*, Manai does not mince his words about our mistreatment of the cosmos. The author’s scathing critique of unfettered “development” mostly focuses on the ramifications of the rural exodus across the globe in *Bel Abîme*. There is an exchange early in the novel between the protagonist and his lawyer that concretizes Manai’s apprehension about excessive urbanization. When his lawyer asks him about his background and socioeconomic status, the narrator replies:

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. (Manai 2021, p. 18)

In a separate discussion with the psychologist who is trying to determine what motivated the protagonist to commit such violent crimes, the narrator expresses his derision for 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” (Manai 2021, p. 86). If we continue along our current path unabated, Manai wonders how many biosemiotic threads will soon remain in the tattered web of life that sustains our existence.

Due to our parasitic impulses that have already decimated much of the biosphere, Manai suggests that we are undeserving of the trans-specific encounters that define and transform us in *mixed societies*. As the narrator proclaims, “The truth is, we don’t deserve such good company. The truth is that we do not deserve such a beautiful nature. The truth is, we don’t deserve such beautiful countryside” (ibid., p. 36). In this passage, Manai deconstructs anthropocentric attitudes linked to an unfounded superiority complex juxtaposing humans to soulless automata that “are merely obeying the fixity of a program” (Derrida 2009, p. 117). Owing to our egregious exploitation of the planet and other humans, the writer maintains that we are unworthy of the authentic and gratuitous gift of unconditional love bestowed upon us by our other-than-human companions. Compared to the human “acts of violence and the humiliations” that the protagonist endured before meeting Bella that forced him to turn his back on fellow *Homo sapiens*, the narrator discovers the pure bliss that is indicative of other-than-human friendship (Manai 2021, p. 29).

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, Lestel and Manai underscore that friends are those who we hold *near* and *dear* in our *hybrid communities*. Lestel and Manai’s reexamination of the reality of other-than-human friendship presents our domesticated pets as sentient, semiotic agents with whom we co-construct meaning and a sense of identity *together* in the “enchanted space of trans-specific communication.” Additionally, our species appears to derive immense psychological and moral benefits from *polyspecific* encounters that enable us to reach

a higher stage of ethical development. For this reason, Lestel encourages us to expand these relationships even further by (re-) envisioning “new types of societies-fully mixed human/animal societies” (Lestel 2014a, p. 108). Nonetheless, Lestel and Manai recognize that we cannot extend the family circle to include even more other-than-human co-inhabitants of the biosphere unless we (re-) establish a more sustainable way of living and being in the world. Not only is climate change a question of survival, but it is also a matter of preserving the spaces of meaning in which we are forever transformed by the non-human Other.

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Notes

- ¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- ² This point will be further addressed in a later section of the essay.
- ³ These words are capitalized in the original French version of the text.
- ⁴ This passage is an intertextual reference to an important section of the Quran commonly known as the “ouverture” throughout the Francophone world.
- ⁵ For a more comprehensive discussion of the ideological underpinnings of the human-animal distinction in Abrahamic religions that transcends the pragmatic limitations of this present exploration, see Keith Moser’s article “Michel Onfray’s Decentered, Ecocentric, Atheistic Philosophy: A User’s Guide for the Anthropocene Epoch?” (Moser 2019)

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