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Keith Moser

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Article abstract

This transdisciplinary reflection examines J.M.G. Le Clézio and Jacques Derrida's *limitrophic* deconstruction of what is commonly referred to as the "genesis myth" in Judeo-Christian society. In addition to Cartesian dichotomies and debunked notions of human exceptionalism originating from Renaissance humanism, the Franco-Mauritian writer and *Pied-noir* philosopher take aim at the mainstream interpretation of Abrahamic cosmogonic narratives that have created a sharp ontological gap between *Homo sapiens* and other animals. Le Clézio and Derrida describe the genesis account of human-animal relations as an *ecocidal*, conflictual relationship that could be labeled a *world war*. They demonstrate that our dominant cognitive structures including the "genesis myth" that mostly remain uncontested, at least within the general public, have already left behind a path of irreversible destruction and other-than-human suffering. Unless we are able to curb the unending fury that the animal within us has unleashed against other sentient beings who bleed, suffer, live, and die just like us, Le Clézio and Derrida lament that our days are numbered.

J.M.G. Le Clézio and Jacques Derrida's "Limitrophic," Biocentric Deconstruction of the "Genesis Myth"

Keith Moser

I. Introduction

This essay explores how J.M.G. Le Clézio and Jacques Derrida undermine "the twenty-first-century prevalence of the legacy of Genesis" that continues to define and shape our relationship to the non-human Other (Williams 24). In his posthumous ecological thought, Derrida deconstructs what he refers to as the "awful tale of genesis" that has created a sharp ontological distinction between *Homo sapiens* and other animals that runs contrary to contemporary scientific erudition (*The Animal* 18). Owing to the nefarious effects of the human-animal binary linked to egregious acts of violence in the Anthropocene against alleged robotic automatons, which we have partly inherited from Judeo-Christian ideology, Renaissance humanism, and Cartesian philosophy, the philosopher implores us to take "this grand mechanicist […] tradition back to the drawing board" (Derrida, *The Animal* 76). Describing "the Genesis account of human/animal relations" as an *ecocidal*, overt declaration of war against the hand that feeds on an interconnected and interdependent planet, Derrida posits that the mainstream interpretation of the Judeo-Christian cosmogonic narrative must be (re-) problematized through the philosophical and ethical exercise of "limitrophy" (Westling 199). Although there is no simple definition for the multifaceted concept of *limitrophy,* which will be further probed in a later section of this present investigation, Derrida insists that "the autobiographical animal, the human being, constructs itself on the basis of a *limit* that it designs and feeds. However, the human subject is not only the one who feeds the *limit*, but also the one that is fed by the *limit*" (Ulus 120, my italics). For Derrida, the genesis myth represents a scientifically erroneous and deadly form of dichotomous logic that must be uprooted at its source in an era epitomized by ecological degradation that threatens the existence of all sentient beings with whom we co-inhabit this biosphere.

Compared to Derrida who did not directly address the impending environmental crisis until near the end of his career before his death in 2004, the Franco-Mauritian writer J.M.G. Le Clézio positioned himself to be one of the leading voices about anthropogenic climate change in French and Francophone circles with the publication of his first novel *Le Procès-verbal* in 1963. Given that the vast majority of French intellectuals devoted little attention to the environmental predicament in the sixties, Le Clézio would soon become "a pioneer and great popularizer of ecological principles now widely recognized"[1] throughout the Francophone world (Solé Castells 500). Similar to Derrida, Le Clézio attempts to trace the ideological origins of the *world war* that we are currently waging against the remainder of the cosmos, which is connected to a simplistic, reductionistic vision of the non-human animal, that has placed global society on a collision course with oblivion. In both his fiction and epitextual comments, the Nobel Laureate also decries the genesis myth as an inherently unsustainable discourse linked to the constitution of a stable sense of Self grounded in chimerical, anthropocentric delusions of grandeur as opposed to evidence and sound logic. Le Clézio reaches the same conclusion as Derrida that the ideological underpinnings of the violence we are incessantly unleashing upon the earth must be challenged and uprooted, if we are to stem the tide of the ecological calamity that is upon us. As the author's explicit confession that "It's hard to make art while wanting to do science" in the preface to his

1 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

early collection of short stories *La Fièvre* reveals, Le Clézio counterpoints the standard interpretation of the genesis myth with a heavy dose of scientific realism (8).

II. Brief Overview of the "Genesis Myth" and its Enduring Legacy

According to Derrida and Le Clézio, the common understanding of the implications of the genesis myth, which could be operationally defined as the belief that "God confers human dominion over nature" during the act of creation to humankind, is deeply problematic on multiple levels (Kay 214). The anthropocentric idea that our species has been granted "the biblical imperative to control everything that lives" by God himself creates an existential hierarchy that is fraught with peril (Estok 206). From the perspective of many believers based on a certain reading of the scriptures, we have been bequeathed the divine right to play the role of masters of the universe. In this regard, "the world of Genesis itself with its dualist ruptures" is a type of oppositional thinking that could be described as a "divine injunction that, from Genesis on, assigned to man such a destination that of marking his authority over living creatures" (Williams 35; Derrida, *The Animal* 93).

As Derrida explains, "if one believes what is called the *first* narrative […] it is in the so-called first-version that the husbandman, created as God's replica […] immediately receives the order to subject the animals to him […] God gives Ish[2] alone the freedom to name the animals […] and that represents at the same time his sovereignty […] by means of which Ish […] was going to get the upper hand with respect to the animals" (*The Animal* 15-17, italics in original). Since it is not permissible to question a supposedly infallible entity in Abrahamic religions, this "sovereignty that is most often represented as […] divine" cannot be challenged (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 14). Derrida pushes back against "the superiority of the human order over the animal order," or the "traditional (Greek or Christian) determination of the world" and the position of absolute authority that it confers upon one random byproduct of evolutionary processes (i.e. *Homo sapiens*), in an effort to inspire us to take action in defense of an imperiled planet (*The Animal* 136; *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 2* 90). Arguing that this self-proclaimed superiority is really a social convention or construct, Derrida maintains, "this absolute sovereignty is, as we shall see, anything but natural; it is the product of a mechanical artificiality, a product of man" (*The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 27). The philosopher reiterates, "if it is not natural, it is deconstructible, it is historical; and as historical, subject to infinite transformation, it is at once precarious, mortal, and perfectible" (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 27). Even if we live in a much more secular society than in the past, Derrida observes that certain Judeo-Christian concepts that have never been seriously contested still linger. When these social constructs are exposed as arbitrary, cognitive structures that can be modified over time, this deconstructive process paves the way for a sweeping (re-) conceptualization of human-animal relations starting from square one.

Le Clézio also notes that the dichotomous mental category of human-animal is intertwined with our self-professed ontological sovereignty over the rest of the cosmos that has a long history in Western civilization. As the Franco-Mauritian author elucidates in a speech at Mississippi State University in 2009 in which he reexamines the genesis myth, it is through the deconstruction of the idea that "Nature is given to man so he can use it" that "the inferior status of animals is challenged and conventional power relationships […] are undermined" (Le Clézio, "What is Literature?" qtd. in Moser 101; Martin 69). Le Clézio contends that the first step to (re-) establishing a healthier rapport with the planet is to remove any ideological stumbling block, "or any representation of life that uniquely privileges the human group, its conflicts and the trajectory of its individual or social

2 As Derrida reveals in *The Animal That Therefore I am*, it should be noted that Ish is one of the Hebrew words for man.

destiny" (Brée 51). Appealing to scientific logic in an interview with Adam Gopnik and undercutting the genesis account of life and our allegedly singular place in it as a sovereign endowed with a divine birthright, the author proclaims, "I don't feel that human beings are very different from the rest of creation" (66). Le Clézio turns to the discoveries of modern science including Darwin's theory of evolution, Barry Commoner's laws of ecology, and the laws of thermodynamics in numerous narratives to try to dislodge the genesis myth and other thoroughly ingrained social constructs from our fragmented environmental imagination.

It is perhaps in Le Clézio's experimental novel *Terra Amata* in which the author most clearly articulates his derision for the genesis myth. In a passage that is a thinly-veiled artistic representation of the big bang theory, Le Clézio recounts the universal story of how all organisms including *Homo sapiens* were indiscriminately tossed into the chaos of existence by indifferent ecological forces as part of an evolutionary process that is still ongoing. As the narrator explains, "One day there had been a spark, and since then there had been no rest anywhere […] Chancelade had never seen anything so beautiful and so terrible […] That's what the world is like. A sort of skin covered with ticks, a face ceaselessly grimacing and twitching […] But what's the good? The game still goes on, in front, behind, above, below" (196-197). The enigmatic protagonist Chancelade, who is more like an archetype than a traditional character whose name suggests that he was thrown into the world in a given spot by "chance," further clarifies, "It's the very old curse that perpetuates its action here, the kind of universal order that vibrates within life itself. It is inscribed in the center of everything, like a long crack that progresses and divides. Originally, at the very beginning, there was this explosion" (200). Le Clézio weakens the genesis myth and the superiority complex it has fostered by infusing scientific principles into his prose underscoring that humans are just another inhabitant of the universe like any other organism. The author's deconstructive approach of investigating the cosmogonic origins of the universe starting with a big bang from a scientific lens compellingly delegitimizes the absurd claim that any species has been granted any semblance of existential sovereignty. Moreover, Le Clézio's narrative techniques, which weave transdisciplinary connections between the humanities and the hard sciences, are reminiscent of the research conducted within the interdiscipline of Big History by scholars like David Christian.

III. The Mainstream Judeo-Christian Vision of the "Animal"

Derrida and Le Clézio also demonstrate that the "human face of sovereignty and the convention that founds it," which "begins with Genesis in asserting the mastery of humankind over nature," is imbricated into an anthropocentric framework that defines the *human* in opposition to the *animal* (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 52; Congdon 188). The Judeo-Christian vision of the "animal," as it is commonly understood, is a hegemonic space of utter subjugation linked to the process of identity formation "where the animal realm is so often opposed to the human realm" (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, vol. 1* 25). Juxtaposing "man as *on the one hand* superior, in his very sovereignty, to the beast that he masters, enslaves, dominates, domesticates, or kills, so that his sovereignty consists in raising himself above the animal and appropriating it, having its life at his disposal," Derrida denounces the havoc that we continually wreak upon the biosphere inspired by our "self-proclaimed superiority" (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, vol. 1* 26, italics in original; Hurst 122). Until our "*superiority* over what is called animal life" is exposed as a social construct that is contradicted by a litany of empirical evidence, the imaginary soulless automata that we have conjured up will find themselves outside the light of moral consideration (Derrida, *The Animal* 20, italics in original). The typical Judeo-Christian view of the animal presents a portrait of a savage

beast that has no other essence "than a negative one, or one supposed to be negative: namely that of not being a human being" (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 2* 8).

This preposterous caricature, or distortion of reality, was further cemented into place by the *imago dei* hypothesis. As the theologian Alexis Grasse concludes,

> one of the biblical creation accounts, Genesis 1:27, provides the foundation for two key anthropocentric beliefs among Christians: the doctrine of *imago dei* and the doctrine of dominion over creation […] The belief that humans have Godgiven dominion over creation is clearly anthropocentric-all of nature is under the authority of humankind according to this view. The doctrine of *imago dei* further establishes this special, elevated status of humanity. No other species is specifically said to be made in the likeness of God. (Grasse 3, italics in original)

The notion that *Homo sapiens* were conceived in the image of God himself unequivocally implies that our species is far superior to other organisms. When we gaze upon ourselves in the mirror, we theoretically catch a glimpse of the divine essence of God. In stark contrast to the other "profane" creatures with whom we share this planet, Derrida observes that we are like a representative of God on earth in the absence of the creator himself. If we accept the *imago dei* theory, we are "a lieutenant of God, the one who, standing in for [tenant lieu de] God, representing God on earth among men […] the substitute representative of God […] an incarnation of God on earth […] a son of man as son of God, or to some one who, in the Bible, will have represented God" (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 52-53). For this reason, "[t]he absoluteness of the human sovereign (that) […] remains essentially divine" is beyond reproach and cannot be called into question (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 54).

Nonetheless, scholars across several disciplines assert that the Judeo-Christian vision of the "animal" is much more nuanced than it at first appears. For instance, the biologist and trailblazer in the field of Environmental Ethics David Ehrenfeld maintains that our "position as lord and master of nature" is counterpointed by the "Noah principle" (Kakoliris 249; Ehrenfeld 207). According to Ehrenfeld in *The Arrogance of Humanism*, Noah's painstaking efforts to place a male and female member of every species on his ark before the deluge reflect the values of environmental stewardship. This "contemporary interpretation of the biblical flood story, or re-telling of the flood myth" is shared by numerous researchers and Christian apologists like Dan Story (Moore and Shapiro 1). Furthermore, Lila Moore and Marianna Shapiro reveal that this alternative reading of the genesis myth has now found a place in so-called Christian cinema. They offer the recent example of Daren Aronofsky and Ari Handel's film *Noah* (2014) in support of their argument that attitudes have begun to evolve in some Christian circles. Even if there is some credence to this position, the fact remains that the most common understanding of the genesis explanation of existence condemned by Derrida is still firmly entrenched in Western society. At the moment, those advocating in favor of Christian environmental ethics are marginal voices compared to a larger majority defending what they perceive to be their divine right to control, master, subdue, and exterminate the "monstrous animal" with impunity as a reflection of absolute sovereignty.

As Francine Dugast-Portes outlines in her analysis of *Terra Amata*, the disconcerting scene in which a young Chancelade sadistically tortures potato beetles is best understood in the context of the ideological influence of the doctrine of *imago dei*. Convinced of his quasi-divine role as a sovereign, "the first pages of *Terra Amata* constitute a sort of genesis in which the small boy Chancelade assumes the function of God compared to the potato beetles" (Dugast-Portes 166). Before the senseless carnage begins, the narrator indicates, "When the little boy understood that he was the god of the potato beetles, that he had an absolute power over them of life and death, he decided to act" (Le Clézio, *Terra Amata*

26). Although this passage is indicative of a strong condemnation of the lack of respect in Western civilization for the web of life into which our saga is woven, it is hard to blame the young boy who is acting in accordance with the dominant anthropocentric values undergirding his society. Chancelade has internalized the message that he is a representative of God on earth as a privileged species to such an extent that he cannot recognize the suffering of another sentient creature. Given that the strict version of the genesis myth suggests that all of the other organisms with whom we dwell are mindless machines that only exist to maximize human happiness and comfort,[3] "there is no crime against animality" of which to speak (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1 110).

The vivid depictions of the final moments of Chancelade's deadly assault leave little room for doubt that Le Clézio "condemns the domination that stems from the error of anthropocentrism" connected to the genesis myth (Roussel-Gillet 136). In addition to the blood-stained soil, distress signals, and shrieks emitted by the defenseless beetles, the deafening silence of death attacks the reader's sensibilities. When Chancelade was finished playing God or ruler,

> No whining, no screams of pain came out of the ransacked city. Instead, there was a strange silence that reigned […] But this silence was even more terrible than lamentations; it was a tragic, intense silence, that entered into the little boy's ears and chilled him slowly. It was a distant silence, a kind of extraterrestrial catastrophe, when the star suddenly exploded into billions of light years, and disappeared into the darkness of space, a simple lamp that has been extinguished. What just happened here, without Chancelade truly realizing it, was terrible. It was more important than this place, this minute, more important than himself. (*Terra Amata* 26-27)

Chancelade does not yet fully comprehend the gravity of his misguided actions as a young child, but his state of mind is drastically altered. No longer euphoric about his ability to impose his will upon another organism and to take its life, a slow moral progression appears to have begun. Chancelade is not sure why he feels a deep sense of guilt and shame immediately after his brutal onslaught comes to a close. Like other Le**C**lézian protagonists, Chancelade will later be struck by biocentric epiphanies as he gets older in a typical *bildungsroman* fashion. Later in the narrative, "the only mastery that interests him is that of the understanding of the world" (M. Le Clézio 113). Abandoning his position as the ultimate sovereign who stands in for God himself, Chancelade will embrace his cosmic smallness in the greater scheme of life in the coming years.

IV. Descartes's Mechanistic Reformulation of the "Genesis Myth:" The Pseudo-Concept of the Animal-Machine

As the plight of the potato beetles in *Terra Amata* illustrates, Descartes's "notorious *bêtemachine* theory," which has reinforced the Judeo-Christian conception of the universe, also collapses when placed under any kind of scrutiny at all (Batra 156, italics in original). Derrida and Le Clézio argue that Descartes merely rehashes the genesis myth and the *imago dei* hypothesis derived from it as opposed to engaging in rigorous philosophical inquiry and taking into account scientific evidence. Since the scientific reality of other-than-human pain has been clearly established for centuries (e.g. Sneddon et al., Watabiki et al.), Derrida and Le Clézio scoff at the ludicrous notion that other species lack the capacity to express emotions or feel pain. On the basis of empirical proof, common sense, and quotidian encounters with other creatures including our household pets, "what becomes undeniable as we move forward is that animals suffer" (Lawlor 45). Without

3 This point will soon be further addressed in the next section of the essay.

leaning on discredited ideology or what Derrida terms "pure concept(s)" (Derrida, *The Animal* 22), "it is impossible to claim that they cannot suffer precisely because they do suffer" (White 107). Instead of being a serious philosophical position, the idea that other-than-human entities obey the "fixity of a program" like a computer, smartphone, or tablet serves a larger hegemonic purpose (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 117).

To be more precise, the Judeo-Christian, mechanistic view of the animal, which was solidified by Cartesian thought, is appealing because it simplifies moral quandaries, or effectively eliminates them altogether. If all other beings are robotic automata who cannot even experience pain, trauma, or distress, anything is permissible in the ethical sense. Whereas at least a degree of moral consideration must be granted to a sentient life form, it would be illogical to sympathize with or pity a machine. As Rod Preece highlights, "If the animal is truly a living machine- 'bête machine' was Descartes' phrase […] 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 […] entirely as a means to an end" (46). Hence, Derrida concludes that Descartes fell into the trap of repackaging a pseudo-concept linked to Christian cosmogonic myths, thereby betraying the fundamental premise of his own method that encourages us to doubt everything. While simultaneously acknowledging the debt of gratitude owed to a seminal thinker whose "discourses are sound and profound," Derrida pinpoints the animal-machine hypothesis as one of the worst "asininities concerning the so-called animal" that has removed all other species from the realm of moral consideration (*The Animal* 14; 63).

Attempting to deliver the final, proverbial *coup de grâce* to a philosophical theory that should have never been taken seriously, Derrida opines,

> Here we have a character, a man, and this man is a man who having learned, fictitiously, to manufacture impeccable automatons, would conclude […] by means of a judgement, that the animals are […] for their part automatons, automatons of flesh and blood. And why is this so? Because they *resemble* automatons that *resemble* humans. And this conclusion, let us never forget, follows from a judgement […] it is an inferred judgement […] This judgement is at the same time a judicative proposition and a verdict, a sentence [*arrêt*] concerning where the animal stops, the limit at which it comes to a halt, must stop or be arrested. (*The Animal* 83, italics in original)

The philosopher describes the *bête machine* doctrine as an anthropocentric fiction that must be contested at all costs because this judgement or verdict has traditionally functioned like a death sentence for all other sentient beings. After dismantling the Cartesian proposition "that nonhuman animals are like machines; do not have thoughts, reason or souls like human animals […] and, as a result do not experience pain or certain other feelings," Derrida develops an ethic of compassion for all of the "fellow" species with whom we experience the ecstasy and anguish that life has to afford during our ephemeral time on this earth (Voelpel 1). Derrida's rejection of the Judeo-Christian, Cartesian image of the "animal" decries "[t]he worst, the cruelest, the most human violence (that) has been unleashed against living beings, beasts […] who precisely were not accorded the dignity of being fellows" (*The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 108, my insertion). In response to mechanistic explanations of the biosphere, which breed indifference to ecological destruction and other-than-human suffering by effacing the latter entirely, Derrida declares, "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).

Numerous critics such as Bronwen Martin, Marguerite Le Clézio, and Isabelle Roussel-Gillet have also noted that a salient feature of Le Clézio's diverse *œuvre* is a deconstruction of "the Cartesian concept of the animal machine" by emphasizing "the

sharing of this suffering among the living" (Derrida, *The Animal* 102; 26). Beginning with *Le Procès-verbal*, Bronwen Martin theorizes that "the animal is presented as a sentient being, capable of suffering and aware of its approaching death-factors that Descartes himself denied" (41). For both Derrida and Le Clézio, this "shared suffering, finitude, and compassion is a point of departure for rethinking the human-animal distinction from an ethical perspective" (Slater 691). The Franco-Mauritian author's first protagonist Adam Pollo is an extremely problematic character with violent tendencies living on the outskirts of society as a squatter in an abandoned house who is unsure whether he is an escaped mental patient or a military deserter. In an extremely disquieting scene, Adam Pollo kills a rat with billiard balls in a fit of rage. During this unprovoked extermination, Le Clézio presents "one of our culture's most despised creatures" in a more favorable light (Martin 41). The author demonstrates that even unwanted creatures who are considered to be "pests" live, suffer, and die just like *Homo sapiens*. Given that the reality of other-than-human anguish has been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, this scene is in keeping with research examining moral dilemmas related to "rodent control methods (that) should not lead to intense pain or discomfort" (Meerburg, Brom, and Kijlstra 1205, my insertion). Le Clézio's realistic portrayal of the pain endured by a rat in his first novel, which debunks the animal-machine hypothesis, underscores that the entirety of human-animal relations must be systematically reinvestigated including the more humane elimination of undesirable other-than-human guests in our edifices of brick, wood, or stone.

Le Clézio paints an even more rending portrait of human-induced pain inflicted upon "the wholly other, more other than any other, which *they* call an animal" in his most popular environmentally engaged work *Pawana* (Derrida, *The Animal* 11, italics in original). This short story, which is a biocentric rewriting of and "direct homage" to *Moby Dick*, cultivates a profound sense of empathy for the personified whales who are slaughtered when a secret, legendary lagoon where females give birth to their young is discovered at the height of the whale oil industry in the nineteenth century (Thibault, "Awaité Pawana" 723). The narration oscillates between the first-hand accounts of two of the sailors (John, de Nantucket[4] and Charles Melville Scammon) who were a part of this expedition. After the materialistic euphoria quickly fades, both the seasoned sailor Captain Scammon and the young John, de Nantucket will be haunted by this experience for the rest of their lives. What used to be a serene space, which was emblematic of the splendor of life itself, has been transformed into a "heavy, acrid lake of bloodshed" (Le Clézio, *Pawana* 11). As the traumatized narrator confesses, "The whale surged back through the surface of the lagoon in an extraordinary leap that weakened us all, so great were the beauty and force of this body up against the sky. She hung immobile for some few fractions of a second and then fell back […] and floated to the surface […] and we saw blood tint her tongue, redden the breath of her spouting" (Le Clézio, *Pawana*, 9). Forced to confront the fact that they are responsible for this other-than-human suffering and destruction, Captain Scammon and John, de Nantucket will spend the rest of their days wanting to turn back time. Recognizing that not everything can be justified through the endless pursuit of wealth, "the sailors rushing in pursuit of the whale embody at the outset all the brutality and ferocity of men without gods. But thereafter they appear to be seized by a mystical horror: they are show silent and immobile in the lagoon reddened by the blood of their victim" (Thibault, "Awaité Pawana" 725). Albeit in a different context, the two narrators in *Pawana* are mortified by their actions like Chancelade in *Terra Amata*. The ethical gaze of the non-human Other that bleeds and ultimately perishes just like them leads to the realization that the *human condition* is actually the universal story of all existents that have ever roamed this planet.

In his recent Mauritian saga *Alma*, Le Clézio imagines the agony experienced by the last dodo birds based on numerous eyewitness testimonies, some of which were written by

4 This is how the narrator's name appears in the French and English version of the text.

the European voyagers themselves who feasted on this easy prey. In addition to illustrating that the extinct dodo bird was a highly sentient creature endowed with the capacity to experience joy, fear, apprehension, and searing pain, the Nobel Laureate probes the "finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life" through the lens of a misunderstood creature (Derrida, *The Animal* 28). Le Clézio recounts the legendary tale of the last-known dodo bird that was "accidentally" killed by crew members on a ship who were playing a game inspired by the creature's ability to ingest metallic objects like it would a gizzard stone that aids in the digestive process. When this form of entertainment spirals out of control, the skin of the dodo bird is pierced by flying pieces of metal thrown in its direction during this "deadly rain" (Le Clézio, *Alma* 290). Keenly aware of its imminent demise and inability to dodge all of these objects, the dodo bird despondently clings to life. As the narrator explains, "so fear is born, but there is no way out, no hiding place. And then in a single blow comes a big void, a hole in the depths of the body, the heart no longer beats, no longer has the strength to control its legs, to make its wings flap on its sides, the beak is heavy, it falls to the ground" (Le Clézio, *Alma* 290). Not only does Le Clézio dissect the Cartesian argument that other-than-human screams are the product of an internal machinery in this passage, but he also reminds us that *all* species will one day return to the earth from whence we came.

Le Clézio also delves into the same aforementioned sources to point out that other animals feel both physical and emotional suffering. According to several historical documents, the dodo bird was a sensitive animal that did not fare well in captivity, especially when they were separated from their mates. As a monogamous bird that mated with one partner for life, a captured male or female would often die of hunger through its obstinate refusal to eat. Le Clézio references these well-documented stories in an interview in which he reveals, "when it is caught it cries, it lets itself die of hunger if it is locked up, it cannot live without its companion and it is condemned. (It's) a tragi-comic figure, which corresponds roughly to the idea that we have of humans" (Demorand, my insertion). Although some people might dismiss these accounts as being too anecdotal, the research conducted by scientists like Chantelle Ferland and Kurt Leroy Hoffman related to monogamous species of birds that are still living confirms the veracity of these claims. When placed in the context of these studies, the narrator's description of the "complaints of those who were captured alive and locked up in an enclosure, and who refused to eat and cried while starving themselves to death" in *Alma* does not seem fantastical at all (87). Similar to *Homo sapiens*, other animals are capable of feeling pain, experiencing intense emotions, and mourning the loss of a significant other. In this vein, Le Clézio's fiction establishes that the mainstream Judeo-Christian view of the animal recapitulated without critical reflection by Descartes is simply untenable.

V. The Genesis Myth as an Overt Declaration of War

Derrida and Le Clézio affirm that the Judeo-Christian conception of the animal strengthened by Descartes is nothing short of a "veritable war of the species" that has enabled us to transform the face of the planet in ways that our human ancestors could have never imagined through the increasing sophistication of our inventions (Derrida, *The Animal* 31). In the face of stern warnings from the scientific community about climate change, the genesis myth serves as a legitimization of our calamitous relationship with the earth. The enduring influence of the genesis myth obfuscates the scientific consensus that the predictable end game of this conflictual rapport is the collective demise of all organisms. Derrida endeavors to "intervene in this war between the species" through a deconstruction of this "(il-)legitimate violence […] (that) legitimates its own arbitrary violence" (Naas 242; Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign vol. 1* 217, my insertion). Owing to the "fragile ecological condition of the global biosphere," Derrida's ethics of compassion for the "wholly other" seeks to deracinate "the notion of human dominion over

other species" in an era defined by an ecological catastrophe of epic proportions (Williams 28; Castricano 17). The philosopher insists that this myopic "violence can only destroy both self and Other" (Kleinhaus 18).

If we fail to heed the advice of the world's eminent scientists, Derrida asserts that the dystopian, apocalyptic "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" could become a deadly reality (*The Animal* 80). Directly linking the parasitic *world war* that we are waging against the biosphere to the genesis myth and Cartesian philosophy, Derrida bemoans, "I think Cartesianism belongs, beneath its mechanicist indifference, to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition of a war against the animal, of a sacrificial war that is as old as Genesis. And that war is not just one means of applying technoscience to the animal in the absence of another possible or foreseeable means" (*The Animal* 101). The philosopher theorizes that the internalization and application of Judeo-Christian cosmogonic narratives is what initially set global society on our present *ecocidal* trajectory. Unless we deviate from our current path through the conceptualization and implementation of a radically different way of being and living in the world, Derrida alludes to the scientific theory of the "sixth mass extinction" to demonstrate that "the war without mercy against the animal" cannot continue unabated (Wagler 78; Derrida, *The Animal* 102). As the philosopher laments, "the number of species endangered because of man takes one's breath away" (Derrida, Th*e Animal* 26). Derrida's conviction that the only solution is a major paradigm shift in how we think and relate to to the cosmos in the shape of a "*Pax humana*" closely parallels Michel Serres's theory of the "natural contract" (*The Animal* 102, italics in original).

Le Clézio shares Derrida's position that our mistreatment of the planet is a short-sighted "war to the death" that must come to a close (Derrida, *The Animal* 102). The Le Clézio scholar Bruno Thibault highlights that *Pawana* is above all an "apocalyptic tale" serving as a stark reminder of the unsustainable violence that endangers all species including *Homo sapiens* (Thibault, "Awaité Pawana" 723). In the words of the poet and literary critic Bruno Doucey in his analysis of the text, "Whether it is bison or whales, the problem is the same. We would be wrong to believe that their disappearance only affects the marine world or the animal kingdom. All things being connected, the extinction of various species of cetaceans leads to ecological imbalances that also threaten the human being" (114). The irreversible ripple effects of their actions, which weigh heavily on Charles Melville Scammon and John, de Nantucket in *Pawana*, are a poignant artistic representation of ecological interconnectedness. Before the unfortunate discovery of the secret lagoon that made them very rich, the protagonists never reflected upon the fragility of the web of life that sustains all existence. Although their realization of the threads that bind us to the cosmos is belated, both narrators begin to question "any rhetoric that is based on the notion of progress of human civilizations" (Miller 36). At the end of this tragic story, the elderly Captain Scammon repents, "I think back […] as though I could stop the course of time, the stem of the launch, as though I could close up the entrance of the passage once again. I dream of all that, just as I once dreamed of opening this passage up. Then the womb of the earth could begin to live again, and the whales would softly glide through the calmest waters of the world, in this lagoon which at last would no longer have a name" (Le Clézio, *Pawana* 13). Scammon's remorseful attitude is connected to what David Ehrenfeld identifies as "the third ecological constraint" of irreversibility (Ehrenfeld 115). It may be tempting to think that we can turn back the hands of time, "[b]ut we are causing irreversible changes all the time. Species are extinguished wholesale, and no genetic prowess will ever bring them back" (Ehrenfeld 115). When we have torn too many threads from the delicate web of life through the "infinite violence […] the boundless wrong that we inflict on animals," there is no way to course-correct at the last possible moment (Derrida, *The Animal* 89).

Several Le Clézio scholars such as Bruno Thibault, Isabelle Roussel-Gillet, and Fredrik Westerlund have noted that the Franco-Mauritian writer pinpoints the rural exodus as part and parcel of our unfettered cosmic aggression. Specifically, this phenomenon is intimately tied to the sixth mass extinction, because of the critical loss of habitat that it entails. Consequently, Le Clézio often articulates his palpable anxiety related to "the violence of the expanding city" and the irreversible destruction of too many spaces that have already been "erased by urbanization" (Westerlund 77; Thibault, *J.M.G. Le Clézio* 146). Not only is the aforementioned novel *Alma* a biocentric rehabilitation of the image of the dodo bird and an evident example of the sixth mass extinction that was set into motion centuries ago in Western civilization, but it is also a lamentation of the pervasive effects of deforestation. Before the first Europeans exterminated the dodo bird and irreversibly decimated the Mauritian landscape, Le Clézio reveals in *Alma* that much of this island country was a lush forest. As Claire Devarrieux underscores in her synopsis of this recent work, "Everything disappears. The forest is now an enclave under the protection of a NGO, while it covered '*nine tenths of the island'* in 1796" (italics in original). The character Aditi who works tirelessly to protect the remaining fragments of endemic Mauritian forest may sometimes seem to be idealistic, but the narrator nonetheless admires her efforts to preserve this space for this reason. Due to the *world war* that continues to accelerate with each passing day, the narrator respects Aditi's "candor, her volunteer work to save the pink pigeons […] the kestrels, the tropicbirds, against the depredations of modern life" (Le Clézio, *Alma* 136).

Le Clézio's deep-seated concerns about excessive urbanization are perhaps even more pronounced in the aptly named *La guerre*. In this early novel, the author invites the reader to envision a world that has been entirely covered up by concrete, asphalt, and tar. Nuancing the interrelated notions of "progress" and "development," the narrator grumbles in disgust,

> The earth is a patch of tar, the water is made of cellophane, the air is nylon […] How eagerly people await for the earth to disappear beneath the cities, so that it will never again be possible to talk about trees or plants or bushes! May it come soon, the layer of tar and cement that will cover every surface! No more mountains and lakes, no more beaches, no more water, no more rivers, nothing any more! Just cement and tar everywhere […] Forests, rivers, grottoes, valleys: all are towns, now! Enough suffering! Let nature change its name. (62)

This passage could be described as a rudimentary science lesson regarding the pivotal role of trees in absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen for all of the earth's human and other-than-human inhabitants. Given that it is hard to imagine any creature could survive the complete eradication of the natural world, this doomsday scenario is harrowingly realistic because the standard conception of "technological progress in the Western world" has yet to be problematized (Le Clézio, *Le rêve mexicain 208). Le Clézio's* grim assessment of the present situation, which emphasizes the most probable outcome of "this total war […] without mercy" is strikingly similar to Derrida's concept of a world war (Le Clézio, *La guerre 146).* Without the "necessary braking," which maintains the fragile "equilibrium between man and the world," Derrida and Le Clézio conclude that the end of the planet as we know it is on the horizon *(*Le Clézio, *Le rêve mexicain 208).* In this sense, our partial mastery of the biosphere through technology promulgated as a divine birthright in the Judeo-Christian tradition is the epitome of a pyrrhic victory that could result in the unraveling of the earth's nine "life-support systems" including the atmosphere that is on the verge of being compromised because of pollution and deforestation in a cosmos that does not recognize our self-proclaimed sovereignty (Jones 181).

VI. *The Derridean Deconstruction of the Genesis Myth Through the Exercise of "Limitrophy"*

Le Clézio and Derrida try to "break down the traditional conceptual boundaries" in an attempt to conceive what scientists like Johan Rockström have labeled "[a] safe operating space for humanity" through the identification of "planetary boundaries that must not be transgressed […] causing unacceptable environmental change" (Taylor 177; Rockström et al. 472; 472). The ecological implications of Derrida's concept of "limitrophy" mirror warnings from scientists that "boundaries have been overstepped" concerning the nine life-support systems (Rockström et al. 475). For Derrida, the shifting of anthropocentric borders, or the creation of less deadly cognitive structures that influence how we live and act, is an urgent necessity. As Ryan Fics argues, "Derrida's work provides many avenues for change, and for rethinking many of the concepts we have inherited from previous generations" (vii). Derrida implies that we must first revisit these misleading mental categories before we can impose more sustainable limits on our incessant exploitation of finite "resources." The philosopher mostly focuses on what he identifies as the deadliest mental division of all in the shape of the human-animal dichotomy and its "epistemological insufficiency" that must be contested to avoid the ecological overreach in boundaries (Park 150).

The human-animal gap connected to Judeo-Christian cosmogonic myths and Cartesian philosophy is a dangerous type of oppositional thinking because of the ontological schism that it creates. The human-animal divide in its most radical form leads to the anthropocentric fallacy that *Homo sapiens* are in a different category from "animals." From this alienated frame of reference, it is easy to forget that our destiny is tied to the same ecological laws as any other mammal or primate. Since we have the same cosmic essence as any other animal, all species will live or perish together. Thus, the concept of "limitrophy" illustrates "the full extent of Derridean inquiry as it reproblematizes everything we think we know about the animal" (Michaud 41). Not only does the *limitrophic* deconstruction of the human-animal distinction place us back into the animal kingdom to which we in fact belong, but it also represents a theoretical framework for (re-) delineating the porous boundaries between humans and other animals. Derrida does not deny that there are actual differences between *Homo sapiens* and other organisms, but he refuses to fall into the conceptual trap of drawing "a single indivisible line between humans and all other animals" (Naas 233). Derrida reworks the human-animal binary through a more nuanced conversation about the genuine differences and similarities between humans and other life forms that simultaneously stresses the interconnectedness and independency of every species. As Gerald Bruns explains, "Derrida's idea is not to erase the line that separates us from other living beings but rather to multiply its dimensions," thereby avoiding the anthropocentric pitfalls of problematic oppositional thinking that has defined human-animal relations for eons (415).

In lieu of the Judeo-Christian, Cartesian pseudo-concept of the animal, Derrida proposes the philosophical and ethical exercise of *limitrophy*. Specifying what the notion of *limitrophy* entails, Derrida muses,

> *Limitrophy* is therefore my subject. No 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 insists that the conceptual borders between *Homo sapiens* and other species must be continually reshifted as new evidence from the hard sciences emerges without erasing them. From an objective standpoint, the philosopher contends that these fluid limits cannot

be definitely fixed once and for all. Although Derrida is adamant that the animal-machine hypothesis and the binary division between humans and animals is "a sin against rigorous thinking," the philosopher "wishes to interrogate rather than simply abolish" the human-animal separation from multiple non-oppositional, non-mechanistic angles (Derrida, *The Animal* 48, Phillips 70). In this sense, Derrida does not mince his words about "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).

Le Clézio's descriptions of the biosphere and our minute place in it are also scathing critiques of "the construction of the animal" that "is not some natural category that has simply been picked out by human perception and language, but is, precisely an age-old neologism and an invention of man" (Egerer 441; Naas 228). As Germaine Brée elucidates, "It's at the boundaries of the human being, surrounded by the unknown, that Le Clézio sets up his world" (52). The Franco-Mauritian author's *limitrophic*, deconstructive method for casting doubt on the intellectual rigor of the Judeo-Christian, Cartesian view of the animal is part of a broader "ecocritical attempt to think beyond conceptual dichotomies" (Heise 506-507). Le Clézio's fiction represents a recent trend of "[p]ostmodern fictions (that) also transcend false dichotomies in a process of writing that self-consciously relates texts and contexts […] and contest(s) dichotomies between nature and culture, world and word, and text and context" (Calarco 332, my insertion). Le Clézio adopts the Derridean exercise of *limitrophy* that reexamines "the barriers between the animal and human" (Roussel-Gillet 159). Given that the "gap that separates the inside world (of humans) from the outside world" has been erected on the basis of faulty dichotomous thinking, Le Clézio implodes the mental category of the *animal* as it is traditionally conceived in Western civilization (Real 184, my insertion).

Transformed by his extended stay from 1970-1974 in Panama with the autochthonous Embera and Wounaan, Le Clézio turns to Amerindian thought in numerous works including *Le rêve mexicain, Haï*, *and La fête chantée* in an effort to rework the human-animal split. Whereas the mainstream interpretation of the genesis myth and the *bêtemachine* theory essentially sever our connection to the remainder of the universe, Amerindian spiritual and philosophical paradigms weave "the human in the texture of animality" (Lestel 65). Without idealizing Amerindian cultures, Le Clézio juxtaposes the biocentric indigenous perspective of the "vital flow of the cosmos of which each being is only a tiny particle" to Western delusions of ontological sovereignty (Solé Castells 502). In opposition to the ideological rupture between the *human* and the *animal* in Western society, Le Clézio explains,

> The Indian is not separated from the world, he does not want a break between the realms. Man is alive on earth, like ants and plants, he is not exiled from his territory. Magical forces are not the privilege of the human species alone […] Man may have dominated creation through his agricultural techniques and his hunting tricks, but he is regarded by supernatural forces as other beings. (*Haï* 111-112)

Not only does the Amerindian conception of life deeply connect us to the rest of the planet, thus removing the conceptual gulf between humans and other animals, but it also reminds us that there are limits to our previously mentioned "mastery."

Compared to the unfounded idea that we were preordained by God himself to exercise ontological sovereignty over the earth, "the Indian man is not the master of the world […] he has been destroyed several times by successive cataclysms" (*Le rêve mexicain 229).* Le Clézio delves into Amerindian spiritual and philosophical texts to erode "abstract concepts and systems that condition modern life to reestablish contact with the natural world and material reality that surrounds us" (Thibault, *J.M.G. Le Clézio* 40). Le Clézio's *limitrophic* exploration of the Amerindian way of life is a celebration of the richness of Amerindian

cultures around the world that did not fall prey to the fantastical idea that humans were destined to "conquer the world" (*Haï 152).* Le Clézio suggests that a preliminary blueprint for shifting the conceptual limits that have led us astray in the scientific and philosophical sense would be to rediscover and promote some of the basic tenets of the Amerindian worldview.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, Derrida and Le Clézio try to understand how we have arrived at this critical juncture in the Anthropocene/Technocene through an exploration of the social constructs that have largely shaped our relationship to the cosmos for millennia. Specifically, they attempt to uncover the origins of the anthropocentric, mental categories that bear the heavy stamp of Judeo-Christian ideology, Renaissance humanism, and Cartesian philosophy. If we are to imagine a brighter future ahead for humanity and all of the earth's sentient creatures in a time period characterized by widespread ecological degradation, Derrida and Le Clézio demonstrate that we desperately need a "radical reinterpretation of what is living" (Derrida, *The Animal* 160). Our dominant cognitive structures that mostly remain uncontested, at least within the general public, have already left behind a path of irreversible destruction and other-than-human suffering. Perhaps, the deadliest form of magical thinking is the genesis myth that still lingers and impacts our way of being in the world. For this reason, Derrida and Le Clézio's *limitrophic* defense of the "wholly other" takes aim at the mainstream understanding of the genesis account of human-animal relations that continues to justify our current perilous route which they identify as a *world war*. Unless we are able to curb the unending fury that the animal within us has unleashed against other sentient beings who bleed, suffer, live, and die just like us, our days are numbered according to the scientific community. It may not be God staring back at us when we look in the mirror, but rather the reflection of a deluded executioner that failed to acknowledge his own cosmic essence.

Mississippi State University

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