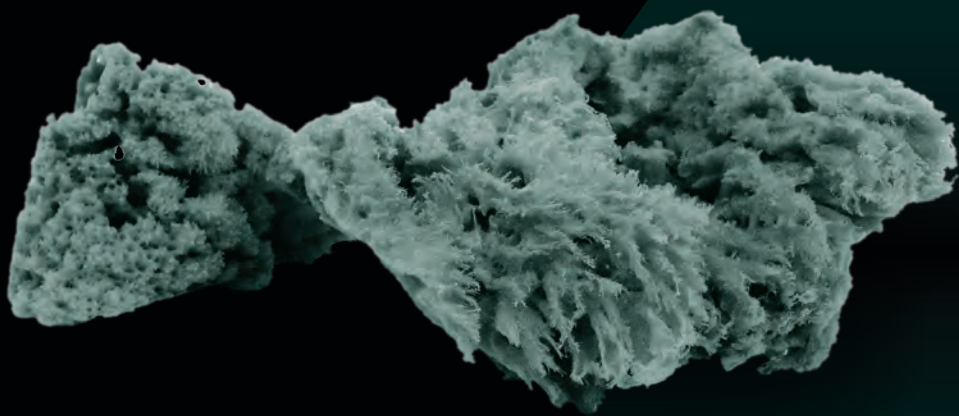


POROUS BECOMINGS
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
ENGAGEMENTS *with*
MICHEL SERRES



EDITED BY
ANDREAS BANDAK &
DANIEL M. KNIGHT

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BUY

Edited by Andreas Bandak and Daniel M. Knight

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PREFACE

More than most, this book is a product of conversation. At a time when the world was in lockdown and social interaction took its place as nostalgic reflection on good times past, conversation simmered between two editors, a bunch of authors in far-flung living rooms and makeshift offices, and a French philosopher of science whose life had fallen agonizingly short of experiencing the next big global cataclysm.

The fire was lit under the boiling pot of brimming energy driving this particular knotty conversation when we, the editors, met on a transatlantic flight from Amsterdam to Vancouver in November 2019. Back then, in the heady days of plenty, little did we know that the Vancouver AAA meetings would be one of the final opportunities for large-scale face-to-face interaction for more than two years. In March 2020, lockdown hit us both hard. Homeschooling, online teaching, our kitchen tables and children's bedrooms hosting staff meetings, hastily rearranged workshops, and, eventually, hours of talk about Michel Serres.

Serres, our companion on our individual academic journeys for almost two decades, became the third person in our COVID-era relationship. We pondered: Why had more anthropologists not delved into Serresian meandering through time and disciplines? Why should anyone dedicate more ink to yet another French white male philosopher? Why had we now turned to Serres to shine a light through our collapsing pandemic world? In Serresian style, the conversations twisted and turned, became tangled and shot off branches in weird and wonderful directions.

We agreed that Serres somehow spoke to “the anthropological project”—a deliberately porous category, if ever there was—but we could not quite pin down how or why. Perhaps this was the point; Serres drifts excitedly in pursuit

of the rainbow, in search of that pot of gold that is knowledge. He does so by following his interlocutors beyond time and place and asks you to strap in for the ride (Leibniz, Plato, the Troubadour, Hermes, Lucretius, Jules Verne). But the inability to box Serres the polymath, the time traveler, the poet, means that his work often appears merely as a footnote in anthropological texts or, sometimes, is reduced to a sound bite of his most widely known ideas (the parasite, background noise, the natural contract).

Many of the contributors to *Porous Becomings* had, sometime, somewhere, already engaged with Serres. Some had written stand-alone articles that pivoted on one or more of Serres's core concepts. Others had flirted with an idea but not pressed further into the Serresian cavern. For others still, this book represents their first encounter. Contributors come from diverse schools of thought in anthropology: phenomenology, STS, environment and medicine, media and communication, ontology, and transhumanism. Indeed, our definition of anthropology is itself purposefully porous, reflected by the way that at least two authors could claim residence on the blurry boundaries of the (inter)discipline, with twigs, sometimes branches, snaking their way into social psychology, sociology, and the creative humanities. Ethnography is drawn from New York comedy clubs, African mythology, Balkan war debris, (post)colonial bodies, and the cross-disciplinary comparison of key figures in social theory. Each author navigates Serres's oeuvre according to their own burning questions drawn from their respective field sites and filtered through eclectic epistemological lenses.

Navigation is perhaps the best trope to summarize the whole book project. From helping us navigate the COVID-19 pandemic to the routes Serres suggests our authors navigate their fields, navigation is also how we suggest the reader approach this volume. We have established sections based on Serres's core concepts of the parasite and the natural contract, spatial and temporal topologies, and the quest for knowledge and connection, but these are fluid categories. This is simply our brainchild—one of many—for a potential conversation, but each chapter can and could be placed in any order in all sections. As the author of our afterword, Jane Bennett, points out, Serres's mode of thinking resists systemization; he doesn't seek a standard "order of things." This provides the reader with an opportunity to make their own connections, strike up their own conversations between chapters, in a manner that best suits their intrigue.

Serres navigated time and space, spanned figures of thought, by way of topological relations. He transcended structure and boundaries to make connections that helped him simultaneously hold an array of themes that might otherwise be stamped as the property of the natural or social sciences, bound to a foregone era, or contained to a niche philosophical domain. Relationships,

conversations, connections free from preconception: this is how we suggest the reader approach this book. The afterword perhaps best captures the spirit of Serres: a conversation with a modern-day polymath, Jane Bennett. As such, the afterword is not meant to summarize the preceding essays, but rather to strike up a polyphonic dialogue on the relationship between a researcher and Serres as together they navigate their own version of the cosmos; we suggest that perhaps the reader might consult the afterword immediately after digesting the introduction to get a fuller sense of our endeavor.

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And finally, to geotag our location as two insignificant figures in the eternal flux of time and space:

Andreas Bandak, Copenhagen, Denmark

Daniel M. Knight, Trikala, Greece

JUNE 2022

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ANDREAS BANDAK AND DANIEL M. KNIGHT

ANGEL HAIR ANTHROPOLOGY WITH MICHEL SERRES

Serres and the Spirit of Anthropology

One of the foremost scholars and social commentators of his generation, Michel Serres (1930–2019) had an extraordinary gift to effortlessly transcend epistemological boundaries. Speaking to the foundations of what it is to be human, Serres broke the shackles of his trade to build an accessible philosophy of science free from authoritative metalanguage. He became a tutor to a generation of French social theorists and an inspiration to those wanting to better understand the world beyond the conformities of the academy and narrowly defined conditions of disciplinary thought, traversing the constraints of method, scale, and tradition. While friend and student Bruno Latour and fellow French theorists of a similar era such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida have become household names among anthropologists over the past two decades, Serres has gone relatively unnoticed, his work often reduced to sound bites in endnotes or, apparently, becoming the property of a handful of devout followers—something Serres would no doubt detest given his contempt for the notion of intellectual ownership. Immersed in his poetics that foster what he calls “conversations” across epistemological and literary genres are remarkable critiques of the human condition, historical organization, religious quest, and environmental relationality.

Through often audacious navigation of the material and the conceptual world, Serres’s interrogation of the fundamentals of human existence can propose new avenues for anthropological knowledge. Serres deploys hyphens, branches, analogies, and messengers to bring to the same conversation the diversity of science, society, and ecology. Always considered a maverick, Serres had a propensity to combine creative prose and literary nous with firsthand life

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experiences and readings of global events that complement the anthropological endeavor. His weaving of autobiography and literary fiction with deep analyses of the natural and social sciences fosters a unique approach to fathoming contemporary global problems that, in spirit, reflects anthropology at its most engaged. Conversations with Serres help further understanding of humanity and the spatial-temporal coordinates of life on Earth—and the Human in the Cosmos—as we push further into a turbulent new millennium. This book harnesses the potential for anthropology to converse with Serres across a kaleidoscope of topics.

Serres's concerns with untangling the human in and of the world map the core domains of the classic anthropological canon—economy, environment, gender, kinship, politics, religion, technology, and so on. Yet he does so without being restricted by disciplinary dogmas and by fearlessly breaching the confines of the scale and duration of human experience (momentary to epochal, even eternal, individual to collective and planetary). This can be quite a hairy ride for the anthropologist, which, however, with perseverance, can lead the reader to a state of exhilaration, of “voluptuous panic” (Caillois 2001, 23) in what they find.

For instance, much of Serres's work is dedicated to identifying relationality through encounters with Otherness—cultures, disciplines, literatures, and spacetimes. To navigate these porous networks of connectivity across space, time, and episteme, Serres employs the figures of Hermes (1968–1980) and angels (1993) to communicate between the multiple realms of Otherness. Messages delivered across nominally bounded genres reveal, for Serres, the interconnected relationality of temporal agency (particularly society located in nonlinear time), humanity's intrinsically violent disposition, and the influence of technology on the natural senses. Meditation on sameness/difference by way of transcending disciplines is explicated in *The Troubadour of Knowledge* ([1991] 1997), where Serres advocates for a pedagogical basis that combines both science's general truths and literature's singular stories to better comprehend Otherness within and without the human.¹ Continuing the interiority/exteriority distinction and expanding the theme of porosity across borders, in *The Five Senses* ([1985] 2015) Serres addresses the circulation of human bodies in information systems that increasingly place humans indoors, detached from their perceptions and senses. Serres champions the reassertion of sensory perception in tackling the myriad challenges of present and future lifeworlds.

One of Serres's seminal texts, *The Parasite* ([1980] 2007), has already nestled in the imagination of anthropologists working on hospitality, trade, and infrastructure (e.g., Kockelman 2010; Candea and da Col 2012; Lowe 2014; Shryock

2019). Here, Serres poses the human condition as akin to a parasite on a host body, with numerous pathways of Becoming (see also Brown 2002, 2013). For anthropology, the parasite may provide insights into social insurgencies staged by minority groups wishing to eat away at dominant cultures to eventually share in the power games of society-making, the piratical plundering and opportunistic symbiotic emergence of new multispecies biospheres in the wake of ecological disaster, and a deep questioning of relations of hospitality that can be scaled from everyday exchange and reciprocity to interrogate human interaction with the planet in the age of the Anthropocene and climate change. Further, as an inadvertent biproduct of human activity, parasitical noise, a “murmuring messiness” (Bennett and Connolly 2011, 155), serves nascent ecosystems in nonanthropocentric routes to Becoming (Bennett 2020). From this pretext, in *The Natural Contract* ([1990] 1995), Serres calls for a new agreement to be drawn up acknowledging the reciprocal violence perpetrated by humans and the Earth—an accord between two entities that recognizes mutual destruction and demands a reassessment of a relationship founded on extraction and shared violence. Indeed, micro-contracts, Serres suggests in conversation with Latour (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995), are required between feuding bodies of knowledge in order to find futural trajectory rather than spiral into perpetual cyclical return, often to states of violent conflict and mutual destruction. In short, problems will not be solved without a “hyphenated” agreement; despite opposing perspectives, there has to be a collaborative approach, perhaps a series of uneasy alliances, to find novel solutions to existential challenges.

In *L'Art des Ponts: Homo Pontifex* (2006, 77), Serres likens the hyphen to a bridge between the “soft empire of signs” and “the hard realms of physics and biology,” allowing communication to transcend two planes. The result is the production of newness, the harlequin figure that is born of the mixing of the hard sciences and humanities, a diversity perhaps shocking or grotesque but indicative of the experiments required to harness novelty (Serres [1991] 1997). The hyphen allows alignment and conjunction of disparate parts, indicating a branching out of expertise into new collaborative domains (centrifugal) but also the drawing together of units of knowledge (centripetal) that do not obviously fit together. The bridging of ideas and domains facilitates movement in physical space and notional time. Scaling the individual and collective, the traditional bounded community and the planetary, “the academy” and “the people,” anthropology has a key role to play as both mediator and flagbearer of these hyphenated and hybrid agreements between parasite and host, human and nonhuman, that essentially allow us to participate more fully in the chaos of the contemporary world, moving between concepts rather than becoming boxed in. Symptomatically, Serres

sees his philosophy as one of not verbs or nouns but rather prepositions, as each preposition binds, unites, and energizes language and creates webs of relations in and through time and space. Most significantly, prepositions do not create a world merely of objects and things, a world of “marble statuary” ([2019] 2022, 154; see also Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 101, 106). Anthropology is a natural home to prepositions and the harlequin, full of mischief and diversity but also, perhaps, able to lead the way in a critique of hegemony and what aspects of cosmopolitan existence must be transformed to further collective Becoming. We will return later to the hyphen as central to Serres’s method of porous connection.

The chaos of our tenure on Earth is famously tackled in *Genesis* ([1982] 1995). Here, the “background noise” driving humanity, Serres suggests, is fury, violence, disorder, and anxiety rather than any vestiges of philosophical rationale. A multidisciplinary tour de force, *Genesis* speaks to the rapidly expanding anthropological preoccupation with affect whereby the atmosphere, feeling, and aesthetic of life can only partially be explained through logical connections and philosophical reason that might classically be traced back to Rousseau’s social contract and Kant’s pragmatic anthropology. Much of chaotic human existence is felt, heard, and subconsciously sensed as a continuous resonant accompaniment in the background of everyday practice. In *Genesis*, atmospheres and aesthetics drive the human race forward, even if our propulsion systems choke and splutter on the dusty clouds of the chaos while searching for order and format. The noise drifts in and between phenomena, clots and thins and agitates, posited eloquently by Jane Bennett and William Connolly as “a syrupy material, snotty fluid . . . an emptiness or a fullness, a black absence or a superabundance of presence” (2011, 156; Serres [1982] 1995, 30). The minimal intensification or unannounced blast of noise triggers action and a new branch in the bifurcation process surges forth and novel connections are formed. More on this, too, later. How might anthropologists better capture these resonant affects that point to an intangible background *something*, ebbing and flowing, that indicates life forces in elsewheres and elsewhens beyond the narrative threshold within which our discipline mundanely operates?² The world makes sense through parallel and contradictory feelings, the eerily uncanny, affective clouds, “a change in the wind,” not simply categories of calculus or narrative, of form and structure. Often, what goes on inside the black box cannot be seen or heard and thus escapes our traditional reach of forming knowledge about the experiential world.

Genesis has been termed “apocalyptic” in asking the reader to think the unthinkable and listen to the piercing shrieks of otherworldly rebirths and Becom-

ings. With an increasing interest in end-of-the-world scenarios and speculative apocalypticism within anthropology, Serres's thinking was well ahead of the curve and offers innovative perspectives on the vertigo-inducing disorder of modern society—what he terms the “turbulence” of a world spinning at different tempos on multifarious axes ([1982] 1995, 109). Yet human beings are inclined, Serres tells us, to search for order in chaos, producing “refined instruments” to apply to “complex and fluctuating” existence ([2004] 2020, 5). Navigating the arborescent network of accidents and obstacles requires instruments of measurement, be they in the form of events and epochs in the discipline of history; units to track flows of credit and debt in economics; margins, chapters, and paragraphs in literature; or the social domains in which anthropology deals. Standardization and formatting are desirable, yet what falls through the cracks, what binds the relationship between orders, is often of utmost fascination and import. Attention must be turned to capturing those resonant *somethings* (Lepselter 2016) that reside in the dark matter between events, mathematical equations, and concepts and in the background noise and silences of narrativized prose.

Concepts are containers that momentarily format or capture fluidity (Shryock and Smail 2018b), but they do not exist in suspended animation, and their edges remain porous. The capture of information in a concept is never complete since the permeable membrane of the container allows for seepage. Concepts cannot contain everything we purport them to have, and as anthropologists, we regularly find ourselves haunted by what remains outside or what gets lost in the transfer between conditions. Serres provides the metaphor of a coffee percolator when discussing how some concepts get stuck in the filtration process; the granules are somehow tangible, they clump together and connect. Other concepts—grains, if you will—pass through the filter with the pressurized flow of the pouring water (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 58). Anthropologists tend to be concerned with the modules of social life that are caught in the filter that represent the recorded events and customs of the people we work with. These are often analyzed within the core formats of the discipline itself—say, kinship, religion, economics, politics, gender—which act as units of order and comparison.

Looking at technologies that have brought forth globalized units of ordering information, in *Branches*, Serres again turns to the hyphen of a composite word—*com-putare*—to explain the scramble to order chaos ([2004] 2020, 7; cf. Serres 2012b). Uniting the preposition *cum* with *putare*—from reckon or think and stemming from *putus*, meaning clean and pure—we assume computing allows for objective comparison. Purity, Serres suggests, indicates that information can be committed to law: “When pure, neither things nor humans lie.

Contracts become possible” ([2004] 2020, 8). But repetition of misplaced belief in the *wrong* information, in *deceptive* units of comparison, forecloses potentiality for symbiotic change and instead leads to a vicious circle of pollution and ultimately death. There is no invention, no novelty, no news from accepting a homogenizing world, and Serres enthuses us to search for fresh branches, new hyphenated and hybridized collaborations that flux and flow between concepts. This seems to us to be a crossroads for anthropology: Do we accept our inadequate and antiquated concepts for analysis, shoving fluid material (syrupy noise) into square containers and taping up the leaking creases, or, in our curiosity, seek new branches of hyphenated collaboration in addressing the questions of contemporary and future worlds?

Serres offers poignant readings of myth and history as foundationals that percolate and order Self and Society. In doing so, he returns us to the dual forces of conjoining and branching out as pertinent to the critical rethinking of social (anthropological) assumptions on Becoming. His magisterial *Rome* ([1983] 1991) and *Statues* ([1987] 2014) both attest to Serres’s lyricism in proposing how mythistorical traces shape the social reality we might call “modern” more than we may be prepared to readily acknowledge. History and Becoming are two derivative forms, which Serres explores as both conjoining to lay the footings for modern social life but also constantly branching out, bifurcating, often contradicting each other. The powerful sundering and conjoining forces of history and myth, he suggests, necessitate a much broader reading of temporality and historiography than any single disciplinary perspective can facilitate, as post-Enlightenment assumptions on historicism are overridden and overwritten (Knight and Stewart 2016, 13). Splitting and fusion are also nested in religion, which Serres etymologically traces to a dual meaning—*religere* and *religare*, of expelling or binding ([2019] 2022; cf. Ingold 2021; Bandak and Stjernholm 2022). These ostensible contradictions inherent in modernity, historiography, and religion are productive for rethinking the multiplicity of orders, past and present, as they attest to the non-modernity of humans.

From branches to angels and from hyphenation to the frenzied chaos at the birth of the universe, topological connectivity—the distorted fluxes, twists, deformations, and braids of assumed geometric phenomena—is core to Serres’s corpus of work, allowing for connection to reside alongside novelty and transformation. A convincing argument for approaching the world through topological connection can perhaps most readily be found in Serres’s work on time and temporality, which neatly mirrors the most recent “temporal turn” in anthropology (e.g., Bear 2014; Bryant and Knight 2019; Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020). In *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* ([1992] 1995), Serres argues

for a reading of time as topological rather than classically geometrical, where multiple disparate points may be simultaneously superimposed, folded in on each other. Although time may first appear to be flowing in one direction like a river passing beneath a bridge—the Heraclitean view—one often fails to consider the unseen countercurrents running beneath the surface in the opposite direction or the hidden turbulences that churn up sediment (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 58). Posing that temporal linearity is a post-Enlightenment Western construction, Serres offers analogies from the natural environment and technological assemblages to provide a critique of historicism that goes beyond the hybrid mythistory of the modern offered in his earlier works. Entwined with personal experiences of wartime violence and the legacy of global events of his lifetime, Serres contends that temporal moments are caught in a filtration process whereby they once again become contemporary when they serve a pedagogical or social purpose. In prose combining science, literature, and autobiography, Serres challenges the reader to question their usually undisputed perception of time and history as neat and linear. In doing so, Serres offers another layer to anthropological concerns with historicity and historical consciousness, such as those tabled by Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart (2006), rewriting the rulebook on how humans connect with the past through the senses. Becoming in time and history is, for Serres, a matter of nonlinear topological connection where people receive messages through the resonant noise of everything that has gone before. On the theme of temporality, Serres provides a rich conceptual-analogous repertoire to contemplate the porosity of Becoming in time and history.

Ponderings on time and event take a more radical turn in *Branches* ([2004] 2020), where Serres tackles the roots of human history in the form of an origin story to call for epochal change in collective human behavior. His approach to time and eventedness is pertinent to our understanding of the building blocks of modern social life, particularly in a world besieged by a supposedly unprecedented number of crises. For instance, in *Times of Crisis* ([2009] 2014), through medical definitions and classic etymologies of “crisis,” Serres considers how the 2008 global financial collapse facilitates a creative choice for the human subject at a fork in the road of historical experience; to change or to repeat, a cyclical temporality of recurrence or an opportunity to invent. Here we are encouraged to think about recent anthropological attention to the need for events to focus social and political action toward change, what Chloe Ahmann (2018) has examined as temporal manipulation to create events out of nothing. Serres’s musings on such individual and collective agency in creating and reacting to events foreground human ingenuity in the face of fear and the ability

to make decisions at moments of rupture and rapid social change. This is an important branch given the economic, political, environmental, and health crises facing the human race in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Making Our Intentions Known

Rich in metaphor and breaking free from disciplinary dogmas, Serres's reflections on science, culture, technology, art, and religion provide creative routes into understanding the human condition. In embracing chaos to interrogate format and hegemonic beliefs in the name of exploring diversity and the uncanny, Serres in many ways embodies the spirit of anthropology. This book is not intended to be a review of Serres's insurmountable body of work or the myriad commentaries provided from authors in complementary disciplines. Nor is it a user guide of how to neatly apply Serres to ethnographic analysis. It is rather the start of a new conversation between the philosopher and the discipline of anthropology, hyphenating his world and ours. Relationality and Otherness take on new guises as Serres maps the connections between and across formats and spacetimes. Exploring ethnographies of Becoming inspired by Serres's free-thinking reflections on humanity affords anthropology new hyphenated concepts that take the lead from but then critically destabilize standard disciplinary canons by both expanding and contracting our analytical lens. Anthropology is always trying to develop concepts, but Serres asks us not to make them too rigid or formatted since this inhibits the fluxes in noise that do not fit into the boxes of calculation and measurement. We do need traction to work toward concepts, but the shape-shifting branches that connect scalar domains of life feed off the background noise of our social universe to become its driving force. The concepts are topologically connected by difference, like layers of the harlequin, or through the bounding adventures of Hermes, ever shifting, revealing, piercing rigidity. In truly Serresian guise, the intention here is to ignite "conversation" between anthropologists and a philosopher who has so far remained on the periphery of anthropological thought. In doing so, we might just advance a multidimensional understanding of human life in the face of unprecedented challenges in the twenty-first century.

In short, authors in this volume showcase how Serres can open novel avenues for ethnographic analysis. In many ways, Serres performed an ethnography of philosophy, moving across and between concepts to deliver polyphonic readings of nature and culture. As anthropologists do, Serres mapped the constellations that connect humans, time, technology, and planet Earth. A conversation between Serres and anthropology accentuates the porous Becomings

of our research participants as they traverse formats, concepts, and social domains. People operate on the edges of the hypothetical boxes that we claim as units of analysis, at the extremities where the ink disperses on the blotting paper, oozing in multiple directions into the margins, the in-between spaces, and merging with the background noise of what we call “life.” Serres helps us better locate our subjects within and between messy trajectories of Becoming.

The collection also straddles a set of wider subclaims, providing subtle undercurrents to many of the chapters. There are resonances throughout of the potential for Serres to impact both anthropology and how the discipline is situated in collaboratively tackling contemporary (and future-oriented) problems. It becomes immediately clear that Serres offers critique on some foundational anthropological assumptions on principles of exchange (Shryock), hunter-gatherer cosmologies (Jackson), hospitality (Lowe), transhuman methodologies (Corsín Jiménez, Povinelli), human-environment relations (Henig, Brown), social structure (Boylston, Nielsen), and modes of comparison (Candea, Pipyrrou, Szokolczai). These refreshing new angles propose a rethinking of core texts and alternative interpretations of classic bodies of work.

Looking outward, the volume also hints at what an anthropological reading of Serres can provide the philosophy of science and other disciplines that already engage with his oeuvre, such as English literature, modern languages and culture, and media studies. This is not to say that the contributions here are overtly interdisciplinary; rather, a reader from another school will be able to identify a uniquely anthropological take on Serres that hopefully will add an innovative layer to collaborative knowledge-making. For instance, porosity has been a central theme in recent feminist STS scholarship, representing the merging of STS, feminism, and postcolonial studies. The intersectional approach advocates “fluid, porous and polyvocal” methods to better conceive of “the co-constitution of science and society” (Subramaniam et al. 2016, 407–8). The intention in feminist STS is to break away from simplified categories to complexify hegemonic histories of the present—of which Serres would surely approve—and to puncture nature/culture dichotomies through cross-fertilization (Phillips and Phillips 2010, 3). In proximity to feminist STS, medical anthropology and global health studies have used the concept of porosity as “the relational ecology between bodies and environments, departing from the ambivalent experiences of such relations, mediated by medical and digital technologies, as well as gender, race, and disability” (Iengo, Kotsila, and Nelson 2023, 76). In what have been termed “embodied ecologies,” porosity represents the permeability of bodies and often violent substances of the natural and technological world (Tuana 2008; Clarke 2019). Embodied ecologies,

fluidity, and the co-constitution of science and technology, in the age of a new natural contract, are debates that run in subtle ways throughout this volume. Porosity, further, emerges as a key term in recent work within the anthropology of religion, where pilgrimage shrines and sacred spaces also are understood to have such porous boundaries allowing for multiple forms of interaction, bodily comportment, and movement. These places can productively be engaged through the lens of porosity to bring out the complex and complicated negotiations within the world of devout and less devout (Coleman 2022; see also Rousseau 2016; Steil 2018). However, one could also see the very figure of the pilgrim as echoing Serres's own figures of messengers, angels, and Hermes, figures that travel and bind together a universe, a world, times, and places.

The intimacy between Serres and anthropology on display in this volume is deliberate, for there are numerous Serres "readers" available in other disciplinary contexts. In the chapters that follow, there is an "accordion effect" as authors move into and out of intimate conversation with Serres and the discipline of anthropology, scaling individual worlds and problems toward planetary and (inter)disciplinary concerns while also sometimes speaking directly to anthropological "insiders." Showcasing the concept-ethnography-Serres hyphenation provides intensity to the ultimate supernova of knowledge creation that is at once aimed at the singularity of anthropology and the wider universe of the humanities and social sciences.

Finally, the fluid scalar work done by Serres introduces the possibility of anthropology addressing issues of global standing, building on the ethnographic method to move between concepts and timescapes. Even when employing Serres as the key to unlock complex local lifeworlds, authors inevitably reference wider issues of Being and Becoming human in the twenty-first century, including accelerated globalization, pollution and climate catastrophe, global health, and decolonization. This reflects Serres's own committed worldliness (in the anthropological sense) and the way in which he dwells immersively in personal archives of experience that ultimately exceed their limits. Serres provides options for scaling contemporary problems through procedural and algorithmic thought. Anthropology can better forge new partnerships and tackle existential questions in conversation with Michel Serres.

Falling for Serres: Ethnographic Explorations

Allow us a moment to change register to consider in more detail what ethnographic analysis working in tandem with Serres might look like. Authors in this collection have had their "Serres moment": that spine-tingling encounter with a

line of thought, a particular book, metaphor, or analogy that has inspired them to pursue new and often exciting intertextualities between Serres's ideas and ethnographic practice. Contributors have arrived at Serres through numerous pathways, including prior veneration of the author, post-facto reflection on existing field material, or recognizing something of the Self in Serres's entangled project. To reach a point of conversation with Serres requires patience, a sense of goodwill toward the author, and perseverance as his texts run off on seemingly unrelated tangents and take distorted twists and turns. Moreover, Serres makes puzzling and sometimes downright infuriating assumptions about the reader's prior knowledge on vast subject matters. Yet, for all the abstraction, analogies, and ducking and diving between disciplines and scales, Serres poses unique perspectives on real-world problems that anthropologists find in the fine-grained detail of ethnography. At this point, we believe it pertinent to shift tone and share our own "Serres moment" in the hope that you, the reader, may commence your own conversation.

For Knight, the story begins in the turbulent waters, or rather plains, of Greece in a localized episode of the global financial meltdown. October 2009. A date of rupture, so sudden. The onset of what became known, simply, as the "Greek crisis." One day, the distant corner of the Eastern Mediterranean seemed immune to the worldwide banking collapse, a long way from the troubles of IndyMac, Lehman Brothers, and Goldman Sachs; the next day, the prime minister announced insurmountable public debt and deficit. No money. On the ground, conversations shifted almost as rapidly, from planning for weddings, holidays, and run-of-the-mill social events to pain-filled reflections on crises past. As the months rolled by and Greece received the first of what would become three bailout loans amounting to €326 billion in exchange for implementing crippling structural economic reform measures, talk about hunger, occupation, and violent conflict grew.

When asking a friend in his forties to describe the consequences of economic crisis on his everyday life, he went straight to the Great Famine of the early 1940s to reference his fears and expectations. Kostas believed that he was witnessing a return to a time of starvation, where food was scarce and rationing commonplace. A position supported, he insisted, by the empty supermarket shelves and the queues at petrol stations as wholesalers and transport companies went bust. Without pausing for breath, Kostas skipped to stories of Ottoman landlords in the 1800s, who made the peasant sharecroppers work their fingers to the bone while seizing the produce for themselves. These foreign occupiers were what he was reliving in 2010—just look at the way businesses were being carved up into pieces and sold to international investors. Perhaps

inevitably, the narrative string of occupation segued into Nazi rule during World War II and the taking of private lands for the German war machine. What was enforced in the 1940s by military means was now accomplished through economics. Still responding to Knight's initial prompt, Kostas sprang forward to the stock market crash of the late 1990s, when speculative investment became a national obsession. People from all walks of life would buy and sell on unregulated markets, seemingly endless in their prosperity until . . . crash! Lost homes, ravished honor, bankruptcy.

Occupations, periods of hunger and strife, the 1967–74 dictatorship (when his family was displaced to a remote island owing to perceived links to Communism), all these events, Kostas mused, were happening again, all at once. Through what Knight (2017, 37) has called “bouncing around” through the past, Kostas knitted together disparate moments that made his experience of drastic social change make sense. As well as expressing his fears, these excursions also revealed how crisis could be overcome, providing a form of comfort and a sense of futural trajectory. Temporal leaps collapsed the time of Ottoman landlords with the Great Famine, stock market crash, and dictatorship. Each event was a mashup of personal experiences, intergenerational narratives, and nationalized accounts of the past, often hinged on key figures in family history or education textbooks, the messengers bridging time and space. Pressed together, the unsequenced modules of history provided meaning to a life in turmoil. It left the anthropologist feeling seasick.

The embodiment of an assemblage of past crises would quickly become a recurring theme among Knight's research participants in the early years of austerity in Greece. Engrained in this dizzying back-and-forth were accounts of people feeling they were falling through time, expressing disorientation as to where the future lay, and the idea that material objects and artifacts were oozing uncanny history and affect. Childhood photographs from the Civil War (1946–49) years, a dress hand-sewn by a young mother in exile during the dictatorship, a photovoltaic panel indicative of an EU economic recovery plan, flipping a €1 coin between the fingers in a trouser pocket, all transported people on nauseating journeys, almost tearing them at the seams as they searched for a temporal home. “*When are we?*” Kostas rhetorically asked, referring to broken promises of limitless prosperity, modernity, and westernization that had been ruptured and replaced by a sense of spiraling freefall into poverty, peasantry, and existential quandary. How to capture the turbulence of this ethnographic mess?

As the early evening was drawing in one crisp winter's day in 2010, Knight and his partner in crime, Stavroula Pipyrrou, found themselves deep in the

bowels of Durham University Library preoccupied with some mundane tasks geared toward finishing their doctoral theses. Pipyrrou came across a discarded book strewn across a vacated desk. Noticing the title to include the word “time”—the core analytic of Knight’s work—she decided to take a look before excitedly and with a knowing smile handing it over. Leaning against the adjacent bookshelf, Knight opened the book to a random page. His world would never be the same, for this was Michel Serres’s *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (with Latour [1992] 1995). In analogies of rivers, glaciers, and the weather, Serres critiques how the assumption that time is linear is merely a construction of the post-Enlightenment West that distorts our understanding of events as proximate or distant (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 57).³ He explains through an example of the crumpled handkerchief: “If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities . . . Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points are suddenly close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant” (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 60).

The idea of polytemporality—that we are constantly “drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic” (Bennett and Connolly 2011, 159)—was Knight’s “ah-ha” moment where his ethnography made sense. Disparate pasts and futures can become superimposed, be relived, and remain contemporary by way of assemblage in the present. The notion of percolating time—“time doesn’t pass, it percolates. This means that it passes and it doesn’t pass.” It filters, “one flux passes through, while another does not” (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 58)—would become the framework for Knight’s thesis and his first published paper on “proximity” (2012) and monograph on topological time (2015). The Ottoman landlords, the Great Famine, and the stock market crash were caught in the filtration process and remained socially meaningful as the ebbs and flows, surges and lulls of time and events were woven together in the context of contemporary economic crisis. They remained proximate to lives caught in crisis, connected by a hyphen to each other as building blocks of time and history, but not confined to their own static coordinates.

Perhaps most poignantly, Serres seemed to be echoing the Greek research participants when describing the affective past of his own childhood in a time of “hunger and rationing, death and bombings” (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 2). His experience of this “vital environment” was a cumulation of global history, family narratives, and his own memories of the Spanish Civil War, the blitzkrieg, concentration camps, reprisal attacks after the liberation of France, and, at the age of fifteen, the bombing of Hiroshima. Scaling the influences

of global events on individuals and collectivities not obviously connected was precisely what Knight's informants were doing. Commenting on the affective struggle of placing oneself in the violent present of a ruptured world, Serres recounts how he cannot look at Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* owing to its association with the Spanish war of 1936. When he encounters such pictures, he physically feels history seeping from them, as witnesses to terrible events.

I have never recovered—I don't believe I'll ever recover. . . . Now that I am older, I am still hungry with the same famine, I still hear the same sirens; I would feel sick at the same violence, to my dying day. Near the midpoint of this century (1900s) my generation was born into the worst tragedies of history, without being able to act. . . . Even my own childhood photographs, happily scarce, are things I can't bear to look at. They are lucky, those who are nostalgic about their youth . . . We suffocated in an unbreathable air heavy with misfortune, violence and crime, defeat and humiliation, guilt . . . (such events as) the death camps were echoed by Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which were just as destructive of history and conscience—in both cases in a radical way, by attacking the very roots of what makes us human—tearing apart not just historic time but the time frame of human evolution. (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 4)

From that day in Durham University Library, Michel Serres became an *as if* informant, a member of Knight's research team. Feeling hungry with the same famine, not bearing to look at photographs of his childhood, deploying angels and mythical figures to make connections across the normal analytical confines of spacetime, Serres's practically scale-free thought captured the messy realities of fieldwork. This is what people were experiencing, trying to communicate. Since their first encounter, one of the most valuable methods for thinking about the multi-scalar consequences of social change has, for Knight, been by bouncing ethnographic material off Serres.

Over the years, Serres has become a muse, influencing Knight's thinking on the ethnographic field as an arena of noise where we navigate chaos while trying to pay attention to the miniscule detail that provides the foundations for grand narratives. In *Vertiginous Life* (2021), Knight draws on Serres's ideas on turbulence, vortices, and elsewhere—as discussed in *Conversations* as well *Variations on the Body* ([1999] 2012) and *Eyes* (2015a)—alongside the work of Roger Caillois, Søren Kierkegaard, Ernesto de Martino, and Eelco Runia.⁴ In an era of social rupture, people teeter on the cliff edge of time and history, experiencing intense temporal disorientation across different scales, aesthetics, and materi-

alities. Knight's argument is that certain occasions, situations, and events are vertiginous, laced with a sense of hyperconsciousness, stuckness, or constant shuddering movement. There is a zooming in and out from the Self and society where people experience nausea, dizziness, the sense of falling, dissociation with former Being, déjà vu, palpitations, and breathlessness. Lifeworlds are sent careening. As apparent when thinking through the vertiginous, Serres's openness to fluid scales of space and time, alongside his focus on surges and turbulence, lends itself to capturing atmospheres beyond the narrative form.

Serres may help anthropology embrace the incomprehensible, assist in the search for understanding by way of scaling nature and culture, pasts and futures, individual experience, and popular rhetoric. Adrift in interpretations and translations, as anthropologists we deliver messages of our craft, much like Serres's angels, working in tandem with message-laden informants and collaborators to listen to the surges in noise from our field. Serres's writing on non-linear time, events, and turbulence has helped Knight better comprehend his ethnographic material, but that is not to say that their relationship has been without its hiccups. Trouble brews, for instance, in Serres's readiness to quote Christian scripture at the drop of a hat and often without context or explanation. Particularly in his later work, Serres's brashness in addressing sensitive topics of pollution and erotic desire can be received as distasteful or flippant. On occasion, he seems to come close to endorsing cultural evolution. His central characters are often drawn from Western European notions of civilization and the classics, which begs the question of bodies beyond the Occident. And yet those "Serres moments" open hidden, often vociferous pathways for ethnographic analysis by drawing together seemingly unrelated avenues of enquiry to sprout branches of potentiality that break the shackles of conventional anthropological format.

Enrolled in a course on modern French philosophy, in 2002 Bandak was seeking to engage more seriously with trends in continental thought frequently referred to in his anthropology program. During the course, the class slowly read alongside selected thinkers including Henri Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. Each lecture was spent working through a short paragraph from a modern master. The course explored duration, Being and nothingness, perception, and subjectivity as well as difference and repetition. Deleuze was an important companion at this point; Serres, however, was not mentioned. On the side, Bandak got hold of a Danish translation of *Genesis*, which he, much like Knight, stumbled on,

this time in the basement of a well-stocked Copenhagen bookstore, which today, alas, has closed.

Genesis was captivating. The prose was at once lucid, poetic, and enigmatic: bifurcations, violence, time, dance, multiplicity, and human potentiality. Serres effortlessly crossed vast territories. A couple of lines in particular stayed with Bandak: “Background noise is the first object of metaphysics, the noise of the crowd is the first object of anthropology. The background noise made by the crowd is the first object of history” ([1982] 1995, 54). Succinctly, Serres seized how diverse disciplines work from noise toward relative degrees of order. *Genesis* also entertained a conversation with the biblical narrative of creation, with Serres’s emphasis on chaos, turbulence, and fury. The themes breached by Serres allowed Bandak to appreciate the complex fluctuations of time, history, and Becoming in his own work—a Becoming that is multiple, creative, and often marked by violence and chaos.

A signature course convened by Michael Jackson on existential-phenomenological anthropology in 2003 was influential in connecting the French philosophy in which Bandak had just been submerged with a solid anthropological grounding. While Serres did not make an appearance on the official reading list, there was some reference in Jackson’s published material, leading to very rewarding conversations during lecture intervals. In *The Politics of Storytelling* (2002), Jackson mentions Serres’s *The Natural Contract* ([1990] 1995) and the coinage of the term “epistemicodécé,” which Serres sees as replacing the theodicé of former times during the Enlightenment period. Bandak was encouraged to think about hierarchies and axioms of knowledge, which were enhanced through regular exchanges with Jackson. In particular, he was taken with the problem of knowledge that runs throughout Serres’s body of work—in *The Natural Contract*, it is how we come to know and act in relation to the climate crisis. The general inspiration from Gottfried Leibniz is evident, and the problem of knowledge directly relates to human reasoning, judgment, and the ability to act. However, where Leibniz grappled with the question of God’s good vis-à-vis the problem of evil, Serres deliberately moves the question into the domain of human knowledge, believing there to be no authority to pass judgment on good and evil ([1990] 1995, 23) and even construing it as a social problem not of attributing responsibility to God but rather of claiming that “society does not know what it does” (Serres [2019] 2022, 87).

We here touch on some classic debates in anthropology. Take E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s exemplary case of the collapse of a granary in his *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* ([1937] 1976), where all sorts of explanations are sought by the bereaved parties. According to Evans-Pritchard, the questions

revolve not around the collapse of the granary per se as there are plenty of possible explanations, such as termites that eat away the wooden base. The problem is, rather, why did the granary collapse when there was someone sitting underneath it? Addressing the complicated question of suffering, which also preoccupied Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Serres explicates, in similar terms to Evans-Pritchard, that the theodice may be experienced differently outside a Christian tradition depending on the hierarchical prioritization of axiomatic knowledge (cf. Geertz 1973, 106, 172). The basic conundrum persists: What are we to make of such situations where our knowledge explains but also inevitably falls short?

Serres does not provide a direct solution to this fundamental dilemma, but he does open the floor to creative explorations of knowledge and epistemology, even admitting that the term “epistemicodice” is somewhat ugly.⁵ For Serres, the human capacity to think is hampered by our inability to act: a central problem in the context of the climate crisis. By framing this issue as an epistemicodice, Serres plays on the contested role, or awkward relationship, of knowledge and reason when a critical problem of planetary scale is collectively encountered by humans ([1990] 1995, 23). He pushes our understanding of how knowledge, ignorance, and judgment are entwined in the human condition and the various ways we ethnographically locate willed and unwilled ignorance (Dilley 2007; High, Kelly, and Mair 2012; Bandak 2013, 2022).

Beyond Serres’s grappling with the epistemicodice, which has informed Bandak’s ethnographic musings on (lack of) knowledge, Serres has also put forward the notion of a “black box” of knowledge ([1982] 1995, 5; Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 86): a device where one may precisely specify the input on one side and equally surely describe the output on the other but be unable to detail what happens inside:

To its left, or before it, there is the world. To its right, or after it, traveling along certain circuits, there is what we call information. The energy of things goes in: disturbances of the air, shocks and vibrations, heat, alcohol or ether salts, photons. . . . Information comes out, and even meaning. We do not always know where this box is located, nor how it alters what flows through it, nor which Sirens, Muses or Bacchantes are at work inside; it remains closed to us. However, we can say with certainty that beyond this threshold, both of ignorance and perception, energies are exchanged, on their usual scale, at the levels of the world, the group and cellular biochemistry; and that on the other side of this same threshold information appears: signals, figures, languages, meaning. Before the box, the hard; after it, the soft. ([1985] 2015, 129)

Knowledge is only ever partial, based on observation of inputs and outputs, but never the whole process—something most ethnographers, not least Geertz, would sign up to. We can never see or comprehend the entire system of transformation and must, to a degree, accept that knowledge undergoes complicated compressions, manipulations, and changes of states (what Serres often puts in terms of liquid, solid, and gas ([1985] 2015; [1990] 1995) as it gets knocked around in tension between nature and culture, the hard sciences, and the humanities. Each discipline, culture, and epistemology will produce different multiplicities of knowledge depending on the contents of its own black box.⁶ Thus, with knowledge there is always ignorance, and a simple event—such as the collapse of a granary—may be filtered through multiple receptacles of interpretative transformation.

We can, however, pick up on the archaisms, repetitions, and traces of knowledge across time and history, and this is significant for Serres's notion of ichnography ([1982] 1995, 19–20; [1983] 2015, 20–21). The ebbs and flows, lulls and surges, of background noise can be understood through Serres's metaphors of crumpled handkerchiefs and the hidden currents of seemingly placid rivers, as discussed previously, but also in how radioactive fallout dates its objects since the Big Bang. We may recognize knowledge, perhaps even place it in spacetime, although a repetition will not identify as an exact copy owing to the turbulences of nature and culture battering its format across history. All of which predicates epistemologies as multiple, not singular, not at peace, but constantly warring and uneasy.

For Bandak, Serres's critiques of knowledge production and consumption have in important ways molded his conceptual positioning on how we strive toward analysis, particularly in the porosity and possibility of rereading and reweaving (Bandak and Kuzmanovic 2014; Bandak and Coleman 2019). Similarly, Serres has been influential in advocating hearing as a model of and for understanding ([1982] 1995, 61; [1985] 2015). In consonance with recent trends in anthropological research, senses beyond solely vision have gathered importance in the ethnographer not being confined to one register of knowing (Erlmann 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Larkin 2008). Along these lines, Bandak has forged a conversation between the material practices of Syrian Christians and their ways of inhabiting one of the oldest cities in the world, Damascus, and the sonorities of place in the time leading up to the uprising (Bandak 2014a, 2014b). This has led to the opening of entangled temporal registers coexisting alongside the material and sensorial (Bandak and Kaur Janeja 2018).

Twenty years on from their first encounter, Bandak still has plenty of conversations with Serres on displacement, memories and documentation, violence,

noise, and the possibilities of retying fragmented traditions. One idea Bandak is currently contemplating is the knot, or complex, as formulated by Serres in *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. The knot, as well as the fold, gives texture to multiplicity; multiplicity does not point to a location or a place, but the knot does ([1991] 1997, 24). The complex understood as a knot designates a group of folds that bespeaks a topological rather than arithmetic archive of knowledge, lending itself to the analysis, or perhaps rather synthesis, of complicated systems such as social relations, exchange networks, and cohabitation. In the manuscript he submitted the day before he passed away on June 1, 2019, which came out later that year under the title *Relire le relié* (2019, translated to *Religion* in 2022), Serres again explores bonds and bindings, this time of religion. Religion, understood as a rereading and retying of bonds, amounts to a space of possibility but also of almost inconceivable upheaval. This seems pertinent in the context of the Syrian war. As such, violence and unfathomable destruction are inherent features of Serres's thinking—and these features did, in his coining, begin Serres's constant grappling with the human limit case of Hiroshima ([2019] 2022, 33). But Serres does not end with violence, rather speculating on questions of grace, saintliness, and indeed peace, ending with “a fervent hope that a way forward may yet be found” ([2019] 2022, 191).

Through doctorates and promotions, marriages, and births, Serres has been a traveling companion: a muse, an as-if informant, and often a problem-solver who has reached a point of veneration through processes of deep reflection on ethnographic material and a deal of self-identification. Put bluntly, both Knight and Bandak find that Serres has the tendency to offer direction that at once is obvious and revelatory. Throughout his body of work, it is the porosity of concepts, the links between disciplines and epistemologies, that strikes us. Serres will not be caged. Boundaries are there to be breached, be they the classic format of historiography, instruments of the body, measurements of physical spacetime, or axiomatic ways of knowing. Serres does not rubbish the concepts, but, rather like a Dadaist, he deconstructs them, throws them in the air, and then takes a running jump at finding an absurd or ironic angle to knit the pieces back together—not in original form and always with melted and melded topological morphologies. He identifies what Michael Carrithers (2012), following Kenneth Burke (1969), termed “subcertainties”: “a redirection of perspective that (helps) gain a more detailed ethnographic picture . . . Instead of introducing endless fragmentation, subcertainties bring about concentration and strengthening of a perspective precisely because they highlight its fragility” (Pipyrrou 2014, 535). For anthropologists, Serres is asking us to ponder the

complex compressions, distortions, and vortexing that might be going on inside that black box.

What also strikes us is that despite his reputation for abstraction and wildly meandering prose, Serres sees the world in staggeringly similar ways to our interlocutors. Their lives and problems are not confined by the methods of a single discipline, neither do they experience the world through bounded concepts or containers of format—as with Greeks who bounce around through time weaving together culturally proximate events to provide an assemblage of meaning to their present. People live through the messages of “angels,” whatever their guise, delivered from disparate points in space and time. Particularly, metaphor and analogy form significant aspects of our informants’ lifeworlds as direct vessels of knowledge that help in the comprehension of the immediate social milieu. In many ways, the people we work with will have had their “Serres moment,” although few, if any, would term it such.

Hyphens and Analogies: Serres’s Method of Connections

Shimmering with billions of glorious and timid suns, night resembles Verne’s cavern with its dazzling gems and innumerable truths linked together by a thousand related networks. This is where thought sparkles, as softly as flowering pearls. More visible and beautiful than the day and peaceful in any case, the night knows while the day pronounces. Stars shiver as they look while the sun’s formidable lucidity blinds us. . . . Like any hunting animal, knowledge has night vision. (Serres 2015a, 22)

Metaphors, analogies, anecdotes, and hyphenated connections form the backbone of Serresian method and provide the mesh for how his philosophy of science transitions toward ethnographic enquiry. His detailed interrogation of the local in considering the global; his entwining of personal, cultural, and historical narratives in stories of Becoming; and his frequent application of anecdotes and analogies mirror the practices of people anthropologists encounter in the field. In Serres’s own words, he wishes to describe “a general theory of relations” (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 127) that showcases multiplicity and diversity. This task cannot be paradigmatic; at all costs, Serres wants to avoid “umbilical thinking,” that is, feeding all ideas through a single line, thus reducing all truths and discourses to a single dogmatic point (Watkin 2020, 38).⁷ An umbilical approach to knowledge elevates one model or case to the status of a paradigm that explains the whole (Watkin 2020, 48). Instead, Serres champions an algorithmic method to harness the multiplicity of truths, where each individual context is considered on its own terms while being related to a

vast web of others. As with the gems in Verne's cavern, each truth sparkles in its own way, has its own luminosity, yet shines still brighter when networked to a thousand others.

SCALING

This algorithmic approach allows Serres to connect the individual and the planetary, local knowledge and universal problems, in a way that is not axiomatic, determinate, or abstract. In a manner that seems to echo a seminar in Sociocultural Anthropology 101, Serres advocates a "procedural" step-by-step approach where we walk alongside our object rather than descending from on high. The universal and planetary should be addressed bottom-up by respecting all the possible combinations of all modes of thought fragmented in a thousand pieces, not in the polemic of truths and falsehoods. Destabilizing the dichotomy between the individual and universal, procedural thought "restores dignity to the knowledge of description as well as of the individual" (Serres 2012b, 43). Building up to the global through embracing the multiplicity of knowledge at the individual level captures Serres's philosophy of scale: "There are no concepts; there are examples and events, that is all" (Serres, Legros, and Ortolì 2016, 84, in Watkin 2020, 83). Attention is paid to each fragment on its own terms, drawing out often unexpected or disruptive connections through analogy and metaphor, providing a trampoline-like web to springboard toward the contemplation of global conditions.

In an outstanding introduction to Serres's method, Christopher Watkin (2020) explains procedural thought through the example of the dictionary, which is delivered as the definitive authority on language through hundreds of thousands of small entries, all unique but connected: "Procedural thought . . . is free of determinate content, and it prescribes operations, not magnitudes. The algorithmic order of the dictionary is practical, conventional and plural; the order of the declarative text is unitary, organised according to 'temporal succession, announcement, suspense, movements of induction and deduction, the confrontation of dialogue' (Serres and Farouki 1998, xii–xiii). The procedural text shows what it is possible to say, without saying anything in particular; the declarative text leaps from the local to the global by universalising its own approach in an umbilical gesture" (Watkin 2020, 82).

Again, we may think of the harlequin, peeling back layer upon layer of multicolored diversity yet maintaining that "everywhere everything is the same." Serres asks, "How can the thousand hues of an odd medley of colors be reduced to their white summation"? (Serres [1991] 1997, xvii). The harlequin is the personification of layered diversity yet claims universal uniformity.

Watkin (2020) explains: “Serres’ point is a chromatic one: blank, universal white is not composed of an absence of colour but of all local, determinate colours; the universal and global are arrived at not by jumping out of the local in a puff of abstraction, but by multiplying local instances and seeking carefully to relate them to each other” (41). The global is thus an ensemble of local relations.

For Serres, the connections between the fragments of knowledge are of utmost import. Borrowing from Philippe Descola’s (2005) *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Serres describes himself as “analogistic,” searching for partial correspondence or similarity across disciplines, thinkers, cultures, and histories. This is where his figures of Hermes and angels do the relational work, drawing ideas together by way of topological connection (Boylston, this volume). “Thousands and thousands of relations” bridge difference; analogism approaches the world as dispartes awaiting relations, a web always being spun rather than a fixed umbilical cord (Watkin 2020, 108). Analogism operates to create relationships between seemingly distinct and distant authors, objects, and theories. Jane Bennett and William Connolly (2011, 165) observe how, in *Conversations*, Serres explains being suddenly struck by “an uncanny resemblance between what Archimedes was saying about fluids and what Lucretius was saying about Athens: both writers told of a ‘vortical’ structure of generativity at work. Serres noted this resemblance and took it as a call to place these two thinkers into dissonant conjunction, ‘to explicate, that is, “to unpleat” the fold that they seem to be sharing.’” Bennett and Connolly astutely pin the method of analogy to Serres’s crumpled handkerchief where the noise of the past surges forward to form connections to other spacetimes: “a world of noise, with its inherent tendency towards repetition and redundancy, is a world of fractal similitudes” (2011, 165).

There is no single dominating discipline or truth, no umbilical discourse that can exhaustively describe reality but, rather, Serres insists, a cavern of twinkling truths, connected in untold ways—their “subcertainties” in Carrithers’s parlance—not blinded by the light of one pure reality. It is to different forms of connection that we now turn.

CONNECTING

A core trope to approach connection and bridge vastly different bodies of knowledge is the hyphen, and it is here that we wish to dwell a little longer. Whereas bifurcation and branches lead to a focus on the ways ideas and disciplines split and are moving in different directions, the hyphen allows consideration of how dissimilar things are brought together. Connection here differs subtly

but importantly from comparison. For anthropologists, this may at first seem provocative given their disciplinary training in *comparative* work (Fabian 1983). The anthropological legacy stems from the “armchair” where our forebearers were keen to measure and relate differences comparatively. Ethnography has, to a large extent, rested on unraveling the specificity of a given locale in relation to its Other. Comparison has been formative for the anthropological project but has also increasingly been critiqued (Abu-Lughod 1993). The impossibility of the comparative method, as recently argued by Matei Candea (2019), does not mean that we are to discard it; however, a reflexive rethinking of comparison is indeed required.

Serres’s attention to connection rather than comparison is revealing as a means to draw distinct phenomena into the same orbit. His analogies, metaphors, and allegories cross time and space as well as disciplinary traditions and open pathways beyond the realm of direct comparison. Connection operates not by relating kind to kind or measuring degrees of relative similarity or differentiation but rather by having diverse forms of material talk to each other. If anything, such a methodological focus on connection allows for the coevalness that Fabian found lacking in much classical anthropological theory. Serres possesses a fluid ability to engage characters as diverse as Lucretius and Leibniz and to think with them, allowing them to work through our problems with us, in collaboration. There is the same attention to fluid connection in Serres’s thematic choices, ranging from mathematics to art, religion to the senses. As such, Serres advocates against ownership of knowledge, either by specific individuals or as located in singular academic fields (umbilical thinking). Serres epitomizes the bold but also increasingly necessary effort to bring things, phenomena, worlds even, together. This also reveals a fundamental porosity in Serres’s endeavor; as our informants transcend concepts, disciplinary methods, the regulations of book-bound history, and scientific epistemologies, so must we as analysts seek equally dizzying routes to further connections.

Porosity is then, first, how scholars move across and between concepts in building their analysis algorithmically. There is always an instinctive correspondence between events or entities otherwise assigned to different categories, such as physics and poetry, mathematics and anthropology, ancient and modern. The work of connections through time and space is articulated in Serres’s preoccupation with mediating figures, such as the Troubadour of Knowledge ([1991] 1997) or Hermes (1982b) as messengers working toward bringing together unrelated realms. These figures traverse landscapes of incommensurability, dashing between the sparkling gems of the cavern wall, to form audacious new bonds, provide novel insights, and approach life from

unusual angles. Similarly, angels bind universes together, crossing between domains of the human and the divine as messengers. By soliciting these figures, Serres inscribes motion, dynamism, and circulation directly as models of and for thought. Hermes, angels, and the Troubadour are ciphers of movement rather than stasis, and they are harbingers of new possibilities, their very presence bringing symbiotic novelty to each landscape they traverse. The messengers bring detail to the individual cases as part of the base process that facilitates algorithmic trajectories toward grander levels of analysis.

Serres thus straddles territories not in a systematic effort to chart everything but to hyphenate what otherwise would have been unrelated or gone unnoticed. Travel and exploration are central to Serres's imagination, exemplified by his focus on Jules Verne (2003; also 2015a). To Serres, the literary experimentations of Verne bring to life not only forms of travel before they were invented—as with Captain Nemo and Nautilus—but also the very quest for invention itself. Verne, like Serres, has the audacity to traverse spacetime as author, with his characters, and through daring scholarly connections. Serres hyphenates realms of science and literature while dancing with figures of thought, bodies of knowledge, geometrical patterns, rhythmic propensities, and the noise of nature.

Mixing, intermingling, and contact form substrata of Serres's method. Take the figure of the hermaphrodite (1987) or, again, the harlequin ([1991] 1997), who attends to the multiplicities of Becoming. In *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, Serres writes, “I wander in the world and the back worlds, in bold abstraction, landscapes, cultures and languages, social castes . . . my soul exposed in learning things, just as it ventured onto the slope of glaciers and still remains there. To open the door, to pierce the partition, is ultimately to expose oneself to death. A life of experiences forges the passage, short or long, sterile or fruitful, from nothingness to death, while passing through indefinitely dilated joy” ([1991] 1997, 32).

In this one passage, Serres explicitly links porosity—“to pierce the partition” of diverse realms—with fearlessness and death. If people take the decisive and difficult leap through “the narrow door that gives access to civilization and history,” to progress and to a future, Roger Caillois (2001, 141) warns, then this “basis for collective existence” can lead to a life of captivity inside the whirlpool, clawing away at body and mind, from which there is no escape. The door to create novel connections is laced with vertiginous danger, potentially death, a theme Serres picks up (with reference to Caillois) in *Variations on the Body* ([1999] 2012). In “wandering through worlds” of daring connection, one may incur anger, put alliances on the line, invite scandal, or even run the risk of death (Foucault 2001; Pipyrrou 2016, 7–8; also Pipyrrou, this volume).

Serres's figures, from Lucretius and Plato to the harlequin and angels, participate in vast networks of information and communication superhighways.⁸ Thinking with Serres through hyphens, metaphors, analogies, and allegories allows us to bring disparate phenomena within the same constellation, bridging and exploring provocative realms. Serres works by way of conjunctions in a discourse of topological ties, ligaments, ligatures "in which knowledge grows not through interminable analysis but through overlapping strands casting shadows on each other" (Watkin 2020, 74).

Conclusion: Porous Becoming

Serres invites his readers on a journey where porosity and connection provide potential answers to scalar problems. It may not be an easy ride, but wonders await in Verne's cavern of gems. Porous becoming on a journey with Michel Serres is twofold. First, a scholar must embrace topological movement across and between hegemonic concepts and bounded formats, identifying relations between disparate and seemingly isolated thinkers, objects, and spacetimes. Second, Serres himself almost inevitably becomes an as-if informant, a muse not just for theorization but for ethnographic enquiry. The people we work with experience life on multiple scales, at various speeds, and by tapping into vaguely connected containers of knowledge. They traverse ethical registers and involve figures of mythistory in delivering messages along their personal and shared pathways of Becoming. Bandak and Knight both had their "Serres moment," quite by chance. Ever since, Serres has become part of their journey, being a scholarly companion pointing toward avenues of potential analysis, reminding them of the tribulations of conformity. He is also an as-if informant. His childhood memories, the politics of his time, his schooling in the natural sciences, his stories of navigating waterways as a bargeman and naval officer, the underlying feeling of enthusiastic allegiance to French culture and pastimes, his passion for art and poetry, his at times open animosity toward Descartes and Plato, the influence of his ancestors known and distant . . . Serres himself acts as a hyphen, a conjunction where he is at once an interlocutor and an analyst.

From ethnographic endeavors, ideas surge forth with unpredictable and entangled similarities between anthropological interpretations, concepts developed independently by scholars in seemingly incomparable fields, and inspirations drawn from scattered regions of space and time. Without initially knowing it, in their own locales Bandak and Knight were working alongside and across Serres while following the lead of their ethnographic interlocutors—porous

knowledge and violent displacement among Syrian Christians and contorted reinterpretations of the past at times of crisis in Greece. The power of ethnography is to get to the point by itself; the anthropologist is then obliged to make what they will of knowledge by way of multidimensional comparison and analysis, to build a bigger picture of the human. As Serres became contemporary with Lucretius, Leibniz, and Verne, collaboratively passing messages and making connections, so Serres has become our contemporary, our colleague, our companion on this crazy ride to make sense of the world.

For Knight, one striking example of the unwitting entwinement of thought lies in his recent conceptualization of vertiginous life. Drawn from twenty years of field research in Greece pre- and post-economic crisis, Knight started from daily narratives of nausea and dizziness of life experienced in the whirlpool of painful pasts and shattered futures to form a theory of social vertigo. Defined in terms of the *ilinx*—from the Greek for “dizziness” or “whirlpool”—it seemed the obvious direction to build from striking ethnography toward novel social theory. On completing the manuscript, constructed on individual lifestories laced with strands of Sartre and Kierkegaard, it became apparent to Knight that someone had been down the vertiginous avenue before—namely, Michel Serres. In *Variations on the Body*, Serres not only discusses social vertigo but also frames it as *ilinx*. In two of his most recent books, *Religion* ([2019] 2022) and *Eyes* (2015a), Serres also talks of vertigo and seasickness in relation to the material and sensory environment. Far from coincidentally citing commonly referenced passages—such as the handkerchief or the parasite—Knight and Serres had independently interpreted unique sets of sociohistorical material through braided topologies of knowledge to come to the same niche concept, somehow connected. Local messages had been scaled to collective truths along eerily similar trajectories.

The contributors to this volume have come to Serres by pathways of self-recognition and post-facto reflection, each on their own journey. Some are deeply versed in Serres and have long identified the need to provide anthropologically informed addendums to his core theories of contracts and planetary cohabitation (Corsín Jiménez, Povinelli), pollution and safety (Brown), and mythstories (Jackson). Others had encountered Serres only in passing, typically through some of his more popular ideas, and have taken this opportunity to become better acquainted with the ways his work might offer new trajectories to their own material (Lowe, Henig). In some chapters, concepts core to the anthropological discipline are taken through the Serresian percolator, including rethinking Mauss and Derrida on hospitality (Shryock), a comparative assessment of Serres and Gregory Bateson’s perspectives on the unity of mind and

nature (Szokolczai), a retelling of Lévi-Straussian myths in New York comedy clubs (Nielsen), and a turn toward wisdom and the practice of comparison (Candea). Finally, other authors offer a more methodological angle on how anthropology is predicated on messages, with parallels between ethnographic situations we encounter, the structure of storytelling, and our proximity with figures that surge and fade in our texts (Boylston, Pipyrrou). Such a variety of approaches plays into the insider-outsider feel that pulls chapters at their seams, offering various degrees of insider knowledge on intimate relationships with Serres and simultaneously peering both deeply into and beyond the borders of anthropology. The afterword with Jane Bennett is presented in Serres's favorite format of knowledge, a conversation, and may, we suggest, provide the reader a lucid "in" to Serres's work worthy of consultation straight after reading this introduction.

Porosity, in its many forms, has been *the* "in" for our authors in the massive Serres oeuvre. The concept is engaged by all contributors, and it is on *Porous Becomings* that the collection rumples together. Each of the three sections corresponds to a particular "in" to Serres's work. *The Parasite* and *The Natural Contract* are two key works that readers are likely to have encountered or wish to take further; the first four chapters deal directly with this material. The second section bundles chapters on the body and temporality, two further "key concepts" in Serres's work through books like *Conversations*, *The Five Senses*, and *Variations on the Body*. Although, arguably and inevitably, links to similar Serresian concepts expand throughout the volume, we simply offer potential avenues for our readers to delve into Serres. Section 3 is explicitly about methods of proximity and connection that run throughout all Serres's work, with chapters clearly addressing connection as method across a wide body of Serres's publications. We offer these knots of thematic conversations while advising the reader to be audacious in their own adventure, tying together chapters of their choosing.

The beauty of ethnography is there is no "right way," no predetermined boundaries of interpretation. So too with Serres, whose refusal to impose borders on disciplines, thoughts, and spacetimes allows for the porous traversing of channels without shutting down conversations along the lines of arbitrary categories. Rather than descending into unproductive chaos, such porosity facilitates novel connections, providing freedom to find pathways through figures of thought, be they our interlocutors, other scholars, or literary characters. The destination of the texts in this volume may ultimately be similar, but their trajectories of Becoming, the assemblages of knotty connections they engender, is invariably very different.

The ethnographic portraits in the current volume influence how the authors engage with Serres as a figure of thought, allowing them to tend to the social situation at hand. Serres provides a rich bank of ideas from which he asks us to withdraw and make our own connections and encourages us to invite our own friends to the party. But for all the adventure and enterprise that porosity gestures, Serres warns that only the courageous and open-minded need apply—he is skeptical about how conversations often lead only to more conversations, frequently reproducing rather than quelling violence (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995). Overfamiliarity with conversation for conversation's sake leads to the constraint of thought in “a context rigid with possibilities” (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 43). The audacious step beyond the comforts of disciplinary and cultural dogma is for the fearless. Anthropology must embrace the ride, the raucousness of porous connection, to bring novel socio-technical assemblages to the collective table. This means breaking from canonical thinking and forging new symbiotic relations with other disciplines, figures, and our collaborators in the field.

Having the boldness to embrace means rescaling the ambition of anthropology, even if some cannot see past the “how dare they?” audacity of the endeavor. But this is a call not to blatantly disregard concepts, genealogies, and belief systems but to hyphenate, not to belittle the power of analogy, and to realize that the relatively small-scale detail of ethnography forms the algorithmic basis for tackling large-scale issues through connection rather than dichotomy. Anthropology has the potential and the power to invent, to innovate, to inform, to pierce the rigidity of formatted knowledge, to be audacious. To deliver on this potential, we must act on the obligation to find new ways to symbiotically cross disciplines and scales. Indeed, symbiosis is so often the way forward for Serres. Responding to Latour's question on managing evil while being “emersed in [its] atmosphere,” Serres accepts the invitation to consider the violence of the world as a springboard for action. Citing *The Parasite*, Serres ponders, “What is an enemy? . . . Something to expel, excise, reject, or something we negotiate a contract of symbiosis?” (Serres and Latour [1992] 1995, 194–95). For questions to have answers, a debate needs to produce micro-contracts of understanding rather than more cycles of violence. This also seems to be the call of anthropology: to understand the Other, no matter how divergent, perplexing, or potentially repugnant. A series of hyphenated collaborations engaging with the atomic modules of vital questions that make up all scales of the contemporary will help build a grander picture of collective futures. This is something that anthropology could and should contribute to. To break free of the event horizon, to negotiate the vertiginous edge, to

navigate through that sticky dark matter, to find trajectory once again, require courage and porosity. As with Serres's organic lifeform learning from a critical event, it is symbiotic novelty or death. We invite you to the conversation.

NOTES

- 1 See in comparison Jane Bennett's engagement with Walt Whitman in *Influx and Efflux* (2020).
- 2 This resonant *something* that points toward affects and energies beyond the narrative is the subject of Susan Lepselter's (2016) work on the American uncanny and Daniel M. Knight's (2021) hypothesis on the vertiginous aesthetic.
- 3 For discussions on the social implications of the handkerchief metaphor, see Knight (2015, 6), and for an ontological take, see Bennett and Connolly (2011).
- 4 In *Eyes* (2015a, 35), Serres describes his vertigo of being transported to the ancient caves of Lascaux via virtual reality goggles. Not only is the feeling of physical movement while standing still disorienting, the experience of viewing prehistoric cave art through a futuristic technological interface scrambles "ways of seeing."
- 5 Hierarchies of epistemological knowledge have recently been explored in the collection "Emergent Axioms of Violence: Toward an Anthropology of Post-Liberal Modernity," published in *Anthropological Forum* (Pipyrrou and Sorge 2021).
- 6 An interesting comparison here is with Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" discussed by Bennett (2020), where outside influences enter bodies, infuse and confuse their organization, and then exit as something new and transformed. Bennett interrogates what goes on inside the black box of the body to transform and be transformed by nonhuman entities.
- 7 Linguistics, for instance, cannot be the "supplier of all models" (Serres and Badiou 1968, 26), harking back to the importance of the resonant something of atmosphere and aesthetic as a way of knowing.
- 8 An attempt to chart Serres inevitably leads one to Marilyn Strathern's (1996) significant work on networks, where she makes clear the importance of cuts as well as flow. Analytically, we are always in medias res, in the midst of things, opening in the middle of the plot with flashbacks/flashforwards, porously absorbing and transcending flows of information. It is thus important not only to attend to the ways things connect but also arrest their movement while words are being put on paper. But perhaps Serres also demonstrates how writing can catapult new insights, which depart and accelerate on the page. Cuts and flows in the mesh of life, or in the network, can also be instruments of insight even if, as Serres implies, we are never in full control but are being crisscrossed by forces greater than ourselves, in constant porous becoming ([1982] 1995).

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