

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.