

Chez Soi: The Carnal Transversalism of Michel Serres

Introduction: Home or Homeless?

What do home and homelessness mean in an era of economic globalization and ecological asphyxiation? On one hand, the importance of being at home has never been more at stake: millions face dispossession and displacement as climate refugees, and even humanity itself could be at risk of losing our place within our global home—the Earth. To this end, philosophers such as Gerard Kuperus and Brian Treanor call on us to rethink our relationship to our place in the world.¹ The sense of alienation, estrangement, and uncanniness that come from our dysfunctional relationship to our home perpetuate these modern crises. On the other hand, rising trends of nationalist and hyper-local secessionist movements throw this emphasis on place and home into question, since “home” can easily operate under an inclusive-exclusion, just as the common nouns of “humanity,” “progress,” “culture,” and “civilization” have been politically weaponized through the exclusion of “others” from these supposedly inclusive ideals. It is not difficult to see the connection between “home” and the “homeland” from the links of family, nation, and state brought about through racist mythologies of “blood and soil” paired with conspiracy theories of a “global elite.”² After all, the *polis* is sustained through the *oikos-nomia*, the management of households through patriarchal rule over the wife and children.³ To this end, philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri call on us to undermine these rigid

¹ See Gerard Kuperus, *Ecopolitical Homelessness: Defining place in an unsettled world* (Routledge, 2016), and Brian Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* (SUNY Press, 2014).

² For example, see Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

³ See also Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004).

boundaries through nomadology and rhizomatic thought, accrediting homelessness as a viable tactic for political resistance.⁴

I will explore this tension between home and homelessness through the philosophy of Michel Serres, particularly through his distinction between “the global” and “the local.” Serres describes his philosophy as a “philosophy of prepositions” rather than one of nouns or verbs, both in the sense of prepositional phrases such as “between” and “across,” and in the sense of being *pre-positioned*, emphasizing relationality and movement among positions one may hold. By using Serres’ philosophy of prepositions, we may move between and across the implications of home and homelessness. I argue that Serres’ ethical and political philosophy can be interpreted as *transversalist*: Serres transverses between universalism and particularism as they converge without coinciding.

Furthermore, I wish to connect this reading of Serres as a transversalist with an interpretation of Serres from carnal hermeneutics. Carnal hermeneutics is a philosophical approach concerned with the relationship between embodiment and interpretation, expanding hermeneutics beyond the typical “metaphor of the text.” Brian Treanor argues that Michel Serres can be interpreted as a hermeneutic empiricist using his emphasis on the body as a “black box” where “the hard” (i.e. embodied, carnal, given) and “the soft” (i.e. language, interpretation) are exchanged as a “mixed reality.”⁵ I wish to extend this reading through Serres’ theory of “appropriation through pollution” in which he argues that property is founded through localized embodied practices of “marking territory” that have become externalized and globalized. In this

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Continuum, 1987). See also William C. Anderson, *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition* (AK Press, 2021).

⁵ Brian Treanor, “Mind the Gap: *The Challenge of Matter*” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, eds. Brian Treanor and Richard Kearney (De Gruyter, 2017).

regard, Serres not only gives us a hermeneutic *orientation* towards the world grounded in embodiment, but a transversal *practice* of how we might live “in between” and “across” the dichotomies that have dominated the “Western philosophical canon”, making Serres a “carnal transversalist” philosopher.

Serres’ Philosophy of Prepositions

To begin, why read the work of French philosopher Michel Serres? In an interview with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres describes his work as “a philosophy of prepositions.” According to Serres, “traditional philosophy speaks in substantives or verbs, not in terms of relationships,” whereas a philosophy of prepositions follows a certain direction only to abandon it, wandering from one position to another.⁶ In one sense, we may read “preposition” as expressing the relationship between subjects and objects, typically of location, direction, or time, but we may also read it as “pre-position,” in the sense of preceding any definitive thesis. Serres moves his philosophy in, through, and around many directions, without remaining fixed to one point of reference.

Traditional philosophy begins with a Platonic sun that “sheds light on everything,” a first principle in order to deduce “a generalized logos that will confer meaning on it and establish the rules of the game for an organized debate,” the analytic ideal.⁷ However, this attempt to secure an unshakeable foundation produces its determinate negation: “if this doesn't work, then it's great destruction, suspicion, dispersal—all the contemporary doom and gloom.”⁸ While Serres is no system-builder, he is equally critical of so-called “critical philosophy.” He argues that such a

⁶ Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 101.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

philosophy produces fragmentation and suspicion as the result of its over-reliance on criticism and polemics. As he puts it, “the critic's ultimate goal is to escape all possible criticism, to be beyond criticism. He looks over everyone else's shoulder and persuades everyone that he has no shoulder.”⁹ The philosophy of prepositions establishes a fragile synthesis as a middle path between these ways of doing philosophy, an active confluence of relations. It unifies without abandoning a spirit of radical pluralism. As Latour describes Serres, it amounts to “the Enlightenment without the critique.”¹⁰

Serres’ philosophy of prepositions is exemplified in his work *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, originally *Le Tiers-Instruit*, the “third-instructed.” Serres seeks an “inclusive third” within the excluded middle, moving between and across the traditional binaries of Western philosophy—subject/object, knower/known, nature/culture—and especially the dichotomy between humanities and the sciences. He argues that pedagogy inherently involves exposure to otherness, and it is through this passage that we come to knowledge. As Cornel West puts it:

I want to be able to engage in the grand calling of a Socratic teacher, which is not to persuade and convince students, but to unsettle—to unsettle and unnerve and maybe even unhouse a few students, so that they experience that wonderful vertigo and dizziness in recognizing at least for a moment that their worldview rests on pudding, but then see that they have something to fall back on.¹¹

To learn and grow is to feel the sands shifting under your feet, to become homeless in the sense of not feeling at home in the unfamiliar (*Unheimlich*), albeit temporarily. In this voyage, we move from familiar territory (home) to the unfamiliar (homeless). We cast away from “the local” into “the global,” which brings us to this crucial distinction in Serres’ philosophy.

⁹ Serres with Latour, *Conversations*, 134.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, “The Enlightenment Without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy” in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. J. Griffith (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 83–98.

¹¹ Cornel West, “Booknotes: *The Cornel West Reader*” (C-Span, 2000).

Transversalism: On “Glocalization”

Throughout his works, Serres distinguishes between what he calls “the local” and “the global.” What is at stake in the distinction is a question of scale and orientation to the world. As Serres writes,

Orientation goes from the local to the global and from the small to the large, from atoms to stars, from inanimate matter to living matter, from crystals to shellfish, from nature to culture, from the pure to the applied, from space to time, from things to languages; thus it traverses, as well, and without difficulty, the passage(ways) that philosophy reputes to be the most delicate.¹²

Serres’ philosophy of prepositions begins with the local yet sets off for the global, with the result being “in-between.” With regards to the global, he writes that “we have produced philosophies that are so global they eradicate all history and close off the future, such powerful strategies they achieve the same deterrence as the atomic weapon and result in perfectly efficacious cultural genocide”¹³ He rejects the tendency to make philosophy (or any domain of knowledge) all-encompassing and totalizing, a tendency brought out by the desire to dominate.

Yet, he does not shy away from acknowledging that the ecological dangers we face are truly global and therefore require a global philosophy in what he calls a “natural contract” between all of humanity and the Earth, rather than social contracts which remain local while excluding nature altogether.¹⁴ Serres argues in his book aptly titled *Habiter* that ecological are “transversal” problems, which require a “practice of totalities” [*pratique des totalités*] and a

¹² Michel Serres, *Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser and William Paulson (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 14–15.

¹³ Serres, *Troubadour*; 135.

¹⁴ See Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (University of Michigan Press, 1995).

“new knowledge of everything” [*nouveau savoir du tout*].¹⁵ With regards to the local, Serres writes “the era of suspicion and of hypercriticism only spoke of fragments, of local pieces, of criticizing and destroying.”¹⁶ Moreover, in hyper-local societies, Serres argues that “each social fact tends to become a total social fact. The local invades the global and becomes totalitarian or fundamentalist.”¹⁷ Yet, he acknowledges that universals can often be found in the local, i.e. in specialized disciplines, where they do not become totalizing but in fact demonstrate restraint, a “holding back.” Serres emphasizes a mixture, a hybrid, or a cross-breed of both the local and the global. Serres’ philosophy may therefore be called *transversalist* insofar as seeks an inclusive third between the excluded middle of universalism and particularism. The concept of transversality originates in geometry: a transversal is a line that intersects two lines, even if these two lines themselves never meet. Said otherwise, there is “convergence without coincidence.”¹⁸

Within transversalism,

Globalization really means “glocalization” [...] in that it is the blending (*métissage*—to use [Édouard] Glissant’s word which he translates as “cross-breeding”) of the global and the local[...] globalization is unappealing to the world of transversality unless it is blending or cross-breeding of the global and the local.¹⁹

What emerges is a view that avoids the hubris of supposedly universal claims that subsume difference as well as the fragmentary suspicion against universal ideals in general.

Transversalism is global synthesis—but a vulnerable and ever-changing one—made up of a thousand local epistemologies criss-crossed together.

¹⁵ Michel Serres, *Habiter* (Pommier, 2011), 56.

¹⁶ Serres with Latour, *Conversations*, 89.

¹⁷ Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 78–79.

¹⁸ Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge*, *Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 75.

¹⁹ Hwa Yol Jung, *Prolegomena to a Carnal Hermeneutics* (Lexington Books, 2014), 34.

With respect to the initial tension between home and homelessness, Serres' transversalism seeks the inclusive third that moves between the two. We must wander across the span that separates the home from the homeless, which demands of us a "paradoxical rootedness in the global: not in a plot of earth, but on Earth, not in the group, but everywhere."²⁰ Due to his experience as a sailor at a young age, Serres is an academic who feels more at home when at sea. With globalization, we are losing a sense of locality. Serres compares this to being on a ship: "Because it has no left over space to which to withdraw, the ship provides a model of globality: being-there, which is local, belongs on land."²¹ Departed at sea, one is deprived of their local home. The ship is a place of no-place, *ou-topos*, as it moves from place to place. Yet, as living beings within a global biosphere—what Serres later calls *Biogea*—we are always at home. As Serres writes, "surrounded by a membrane, the cell lives less in itself or for itself as it does at home with itself [*chez soi*]. No membrane, no life: a universal theorem of biology."²² Since we are *chez soi* as embodied living beings, it is necessary to turn to the "carnal-hermeneutical" dimensions of Serres' thought.

Serres as Hermeneutic Empiricist

Carnal hermeneutics is an approach to hermeneutics concerned with the relationship between interpretation and embodiment as a carnal, sensuous, lived reality. As Brian Treanor writes in his work "Mind the Gap: The Challenge of Matter,"

Since all living is done "in," or "through," or "with," or "as" a body—choose your preposition—it seems worthwhile to reflect on the nature of our embodiment, to understand what it is like and how it shapes our capabilities, powers, and limitations, and

²⁰ Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 95.

²¹ Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 41.

²² Michel Serres, *Atlas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 43.

to appreciate the ways in which it determines our engagement with ourselves, with others, and with the world.²³

Treanor argues that the work of Michel Serres is especially relevant for carnal hermeneutics due to Serres' attention to embodiment and his distinction between "the hard" and "the soft," making it useful to consider think of him as a kind of "hermeneutic empiricist." For Serres, "the hard" refers to the aspect of reality which is physical, natural, and sensuous, while "the soft" refers to the aspect of reality which is mental, cultural, and linguistic. While this may sound like a dualism, Serres reminds us that all of reality is "mixed reality," i.e. a mixture of the hard and the soft. What is special about the body—in fact, makes it "angelic," as Serres likes to say—is that it is a "black box," where the hard and the soft "intersect, exchange, comingle, and catalyze," since we are capable of transforming hard and soft reality into one another.²⁴

Serres often criticizes our tendency to "soften the hard," to understand reality only in terms of language, and reminds us to "remember the hard," since the given always exceeds our concepts.²⁵ This puts him at odds with some hermeneutic philosophers due to their reliance on the "metaphor of the text," and yet he often invokes the figure of Hermes, the god of travel, exchange, and invention, but also of translation, speech, and eloquence.²⁶ Hermes is the figure who assists Serres in bringing discourses from various disciplines together, as well as putting experience into words. So, we must also "mind the gap" between language and the given with regards to ourselves, our bodies, and the world.²⁷ I would like to connect this reading of Serres as a hermeneutic empiricist with my reading of Serres through his theory of "appropriation through

²³ Brian Treanor, "Mind the Gap," 58.

²⁴ Brian Treanor, "Vitality: Carnal, Seraphic Bodies," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2017): 206.

²⁵ Treanor, "Mind the Gap," 68.

²⁶ Treanor, "Vitality," 205.

²⁷ Ibid.

pollution,” allowing us to transverse between the distinctions of home/homeless, the local/the global, and the hard/the soft while noting the importance of the lived-body.

Serres as Carnal Transversalist

In his work *Malfeasance* [*Le mal propre*], Serres argues for a “natural foundation of property right.” Do not be fooled into thinking that this is a Lockean view of property where one mixes their labor with nature. Rather, Serres writes,

Necessary for survival, the act of appropriation seems to me to have an animal origin that is ethological, bodily, physiological, organic, vital...and not to originate in some convention or positive right [...] *Its foundation comes from the body, alive or dead.* I see those actions, behavior, postures as sufficiently vital and common to all living beings to call them natural.²⁸

Rather than mixing one’s labor with nature, Serres argues that we appropriate through dirt, namely the “natural” dirt of our bodies— urine, shit, blood, and spit. To demonstrate this, Serres begins by citing the fact that many animals mark their territory with their urine. The same applies for humans: the armpits leave a scent on our clothing (which we conveniently “forget” at a lover’s home), we use manure for soil, a clean hotel room is one without an owner, and those with children can think of many more examples. Serres writes, “if I spit in the soup, no one else can savor it and so it becomes my property. You obtain and keep what is properly yours through dirt.”²⁹ So, the act of appropriation occurs through the body’s pollution. Serres does not view appropriation as inherently evil—after all, we cannot help but appropriate as living beings—it is the rapid growth of appropriation which is the problem. As he writes:

²⁸ Michel Serres, *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?*, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon (Stanford University Press, 2011), 12. The French title of *Malfeasance*, *Le Mal propre*, plays on the multiple meanings of “*propre*” (property, propriety, cleanliness), as well as “*mal propre*” (clean-evil) versus “*malpropre*” (dishonest).

²⁹ Serres, *Malfeasance*, 64.

Described in its rapid rhythm, *the very growth of appropriation itself becomes what is properly human*. To be sure, animals appropriate their shelter with dirt, but it is done *physiologically and locally*. *Homo [sapiens]* appropriates the *global physical world by his hard garbage* and, as we shall see, *the global human world by soft garbage*.³⁰

The shift from local appropriation to global appropriation therefore corresponds with a shift from the hard to the soft, that is, from hard pollution in our bodily excretions to soft pollution due to currency, screens, and advertisements. We turn the hard into the soft through media, yet we turn the soft back into the hard through production, consumption, and waste. The increasing volume of pollution marks “*the extension of appropriated space,*” from our local habitat to entire cities and countries, as well as “*the increase in the number of subjects of appropriation,*” from the individual to the nation. The expansion has become so totalizing that we now face the collective of humanity appropriating the entire Earth through global pollution. Though Serres does note that the wealthiest humans pollute the most. After all, they have appropriated the most.

Conclusion: The Hotel for Humanity

Serres remains optimistic even in the face of ecological collapse. He argues that our rate of appropriation is unsustainable: not simply unsustainable for the environment, but unsustainable because it cannot sustain itself. Exponential expansion is impossible with finite resources. It has become so global that there is hardly any territory left to mark, hardly any plots of land left to enclose. This leaves us with the end of property. Serres proposes that rather than considering the global Earth our home by appropriating it, collective humanity should instead consider ourselves tenants. Earth must belong to all, which is to say no one. Serres writes that “the world, which was properly a home, becomes a global rental, the *Hotel for Humanity*. We no

³⁰ Serres, *Malfaisance*, 54.

longer own it; we only live here as tenants[...] we should no longer be the masters and possessors of nature.”³¹ Furthermore, he calls on us to

Free ourselves from all these conducts and constraints of appropriation, that we get rid of all these excrements[...] we free the earth from the sacred, from blood, sacrifice, war; the soil from death, corpses, tombs, and cemeteries; the women and children from sexual appropriation and subjection; space and our perception from advertising and appropriation; and finally, free the planet from the dirty bomb of property.³²

The shift from local appropriation to global pollution requires transversal solutions, a “natural contract” which includes a “rental agreement,” i.e. usufruct: the right to enjoy the use and fruit of the Earth without destroying it. Home or homeless? Both, and neither. Home, but not our *belonging*. Homeless, but not without *our* belonging, since Serres acknowledges everyone has the natural right to a habitat:

“The first who, having enclosed a garden, decided to say ‘This is enough’ [...] without drooling on more space, made peace with his neighbors and retained the right to sleep peacefully, to have warmth plus the divine right to love.” That is the Michel Serres version of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.³³

We therefore may add “carnal transversalist” alongside “hermeneutic empiricist” to describe Serres, since he moves between the hard and the soft, the local and the global, home and homelessness while recognizing that all of these distinctions have their foundation in our vital, carnal nature: the invariable variability of the body, in which they all collide through a convergence without coincidence.

³¹ Serres, *Malfeasance*, 72.

³² Serres, *Malfeasance*, 78–79.

³³ Serres, *Malfeasance*, 86.

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