

Thinking Blue Through Somatic Encounters with the Universe in Michel Serres's Philosophy

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Abstract: This essay explores how Michel Serres, a seminal yet underexamined figure in the Blue Humanities, offers a compelling framework for “thinking blue” in the Anthropocene. Drawing on his maritime heritage and interdisciplinary philosophy, Serres challenges the terrestrial bias of Western thought by emphasizing the ocean as both origin and epistemological anchor. His hydro-ecological vision weaves connections between environmental ethics and sensorial philosophy to decenter humanity and reconnect us with the material world through embodied experience. By revisiting Serres’s concept of the Great Story, I argue that revitalizing our senses and dissolving mind-body dualism can generate a renewed planetary consciousness. In an era of ecological collapse and marine devastation, Serres’s work fosters a type of “blue resistance” that redefines humanity’s relationship with water and the web of life it sustains.

Keywords: Michel Serres, Anthropocene, blue resistance, biocentrism, somatic encounters

I. Introduction

This essay builds upon the diverse body of research conducted by scholars from numerous fields in the interdisciplinary of the Blue Humanities to demonstrate how the French epistemologist and philosopher of science Michel Serres provides a preliminary roadmap for *thinking blue* in the postmodern age defined by an anthropogenic calamity of epic proportions. I will also endeavor to transcend the limitations of my earlier thought experiment in which I promoted “cosmic historiography”¹ by reflecting upon how Serres recounts what he calls the Great Story (*Grand Récit*) of the universe and our minute place in it. Specifically, Serres is the epitome of a blue thinker *par excellence*, owing to his profound maritime sensibilities as someone who descended from a long line of barge-men who dredged the Garonne River in Southwest France. Starting with the publication of the first installment of the *Hermès* series entitled *La Communication* in 1968 until his death in 2019, Serres probes the “terraqueous entanglements of human and marine life” in an effort to weaken the terrestrial-nautical binary that concretizes much of Western thought (Oppermann 443). Serres conceives a hydro-ecological framework that highlights the cosmogonic origins of all life starting with a Big Bang, including *Homo sapiens*, which promulgates a new kind of historiography and decentered ethos in general recognizing that “history no longer stops at the water’s edge” as a point of departure (Gillis qtd. in Muthyala 500). When we eliminate the dominant “terrestrial bias” that undergirds Western intellectual paradigms and adopt “an oceanic lens” to the greatest extent possible (Campbell and Paye 1), Serres illustrates that the existential quest of “knowing who and what we are in relation to the world” from whence we came starts with the ocean (Abbas 2).

For a sensualist philosopher like Serres for whom our five senses are vital epistemological and spiritual vectors, *thinking blue* entails reestablishing a direct, sensorial connection to the remainder of the cosmos from which the alienated postmodern subject has become progressively detached. To be

more precise, it is through “the somatic encounter of the living body in relation to itself and its environment” that we are able to catch a glimpse of our cosmic essence that links us to a larger web of life into which our saga has been woven (Johnsen 68). Serres exposes the shaky edifice of mind-body dualism that has relegated our sensorial faculties to the periphery or reduced them to unreliable informational channels that cannot be trusted. The maverick philosopher, who incessantly transgresses disciplinary boundaries, explores how our mind and body operate in tandem *together* to help us *make sense* out of the world in which we live and die. Serres “water-centric thinking” is sharply critical of “philosophies that close their eyes to the sensible world and listen only to (human) language” (Reshmi 1; Salisbury 43, my insertion). Based on his deep-seated conviction that “life emerges through relations” (Hebel 305), Serres implores the reader to eliminate the myriad obstacles preventing her-him from experiencing “prolonged physical encounters with the ocean” that comprises approximately seventy percent of planet earth (Mentz 443). Even if the postmodern lifestyle has dulled our senses, Serres insists that these essential epistemological pathways can be restored to their original vitality by making a concerted effort to remove ourselves, at least temporarily, from the ontological prisons in which we spend most of our time. According to Serres, the act of tasting, touching, smelling, hearing, and seeing everything that life has to afford is laden with philosophical value. Nonetheless, Serres is acutely aware that this sensorial union for which he advocates has become more difficult to realize in the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. As a pioneer in Environmental Ethics, Serres describes our current, parasitic relationship with the land that feeds as an overt declaration of war that must come to an end at all costs. In this vein, a salient feature of Serres’s philosophical project is to foster “blue resistance” in response to the unfettered parasitism that has decimated oceanic life (Ferwerda 15). Serres’s maritime reflections offer invaluable insights into the question that may one day determine the future, or lack thereof, of all species: “How can humanity’s relationship to water be detoxified” (Hebel 307).

II. Contextualization of Serres’s Environmental Thought and Sensualist Outlook on Life

Decades before most French philosophers with the notable exception of Edgar Morin began to address climate change, Serres boldly started to conceive theories about the toxicity of our rapport with both land and water that cannot be neatly separated into two distinct categories with the publication of his landmark work *Le contrat naturel* (1990). The philosopher further honed his terraqueous vision of what it means to be a sentient being indiscriminately tossed into the chaos of existence by arbitrary ecological forces in subsequent publications such as *La guerre mondiale* (2008), *Le mal propre* (2008), *Biogée* (2010), and *Musique* (2011). Similarly to how *Le contrat naturel* positioned Serres to become one of the most influential French-Francophone environmental ethicists, Serres’s rehabilitation of our much-maligned senses in the aptly named *Les cinq sens* (1985) is emblematic of his “forward thinking” (Chare 99). After refining his sensualist *weltanschauung* in *Variations sur le corps* (1999) fourteen years later, Serres cemented his place in the interdisciplinary of Sensory Studies as a key theorist. Moreover, Serres’s reworking of mainstream Western philosophy and historiography revolving around the enduring question “et si la philosophie nous venait des sens” [and if philosophy came to us from the senses]² is inextricably linked to a somatic (re-) discovery of the cosmos (Serres, *Les cinq sens* 211). As the philosopher reveals during a meditative stroll in which he thrust his water-based body back into contact with the earth, “En rebroussant chemin sur ce sentier pentu, j’évoque le rêve, poétique encore, d’une autre épistémologie. Puis-je reconstruire la connaissance à partir de cette entente ? Comment l’oreille connaît-elle ? Et comment connaît notre peau, vibrant des autres et du Monde, elle aussi” [Retracing my steps on this sloping path. I am evoking a still poetic dream of another epistemology. Can I reconstruct knowledge starting from this understanding? How does the ear know things? Additionally, how does our skin, pulsating from others and the world, know things as well] (Serres, *Musique* 89). Serres presents a “forceful case for the role of the body” in the process of knowledge formation with our senses leading the way, as an

“étrange dialogue” [strange dialogue] triggered by our sensorial faculties opens up “different pathways to expose, celebrate, and communicate with all of nature” (Stuart 46; Serres, *L'Interférence* 97; Harris 460).

III. Decentering the Narrative and Recounting the *Great Story* of Existence

Serres's promotion of this sensual zest for life is also a literary-philosophical device that enables him to examine the aquatic and cosmogonic roots that bind all organisms to the ocean. In simple terms, Serres decenters dominant anthropocentric metanarratives and questions how human history is normally framed in his “Great Story.” It is not by chance that Serres offers numerous first-person accounts of the ecstasy and revelations actuated by unfiltered contact with various bodies of water including the aforementioned Garonne River throughout his philosophical *oeuvre*, because this is where *our* story begins. Summarizing the scientific view of existence stipulating that everything was initially set into motion by a big bang before life gradually emerged from a primordial soup, Serres muses, “Alors, le récit reprend, tout au début. En route. Le monde explose, commence, s'expande, je peux raconter son Grand Récit, du commencement au Big Bang, à sa fin [...] dite big crunch” [Well, the story begins again from the very beginning. Let's go. The world explodes, starts, expands itself, I can tell its Great Story, beginning with the Big Bang, to its end [...] called the big crunch] (*Biogée* 132). From an objective frame of reference, Serres posits on the basis of scientific evidence that all species are random byproducts of indifferent evolutionary processes. Whereas the unfounded doctrine of human exceptionalism places human beings on an existential pedestal as members of an allegedly superior “race,” Serres asserts that life has no center from which it emanates.

Serres's approach of telling the story from the beginning billions of years before the appearance of the first human on this planet reflects “an oceanic point of view” underscoring that all species are “extensions of the sea” (Reshmi 103; Rojas 77). In his discussion of this common “blue ancestry,” Jonathan Howard affirms,

It is not the sort of ancestry we are hoping to discover when we pack pieces of ourselves into DNA kits promising to help us uncover our origins, but we come from “nothing but the sea.” All of us. Our beginnings-and, with the imminent threat of sea-level rise, apparently also our ends-get no more established than this. Land creatures though we've evolved to be, humanity is not spared the unsettling humility of life's oceanic heritage. (309)

A “seascape epistemology” sheds light on how land and the sea are “deeply interconnected,” regardless of whether we are referring to terrestrial or marine life (Muthyala 503; 504). When evidence related to our evolutionary origins is factored into the equation, anthropocentric delusions of ontological grandeur collapse entirely. Serres's method for recounting the *Grand Récit* places our story firmly back into the inner workings of the biosphere where it belongs. As Howard suggests, the reexamination of the cradle of life in the scientific sense is a humbling exercise. This is what Serres means when he declares, “cette égalité [...] de tous les vivants par rapport au temps (évolutionnaire) vaut bien une déclaration solennelle” [this equality [...] of all living things in relation to (evolutionary) time is well worth a solemn declaration] (Serres, *L'Incandescent* 21, my insertion). It is a comforting thought that the universe revolves around the needs and desires of one given species (i.e., *Homo sapiens*), as Judeo-Christian ideology and Cartesian philosophy imply, but “for Serres, it is via humility (that) the human subject comes into being” when traditional, chimerical illusions fall by the wayside (Connor 5, my insertion). Whether we like it or not, *all* life forms are merely “‘bodies of water’ descended from a body of water that we favor with the salt in our blood. Members of what Astrida Neimanis has termed a ‘hydrocommons’” (Howard 309).

A recognition of this shared evolutionary heritage is the starting point for Serres's (re-) conceptualization of what he terms the Great Story. Taking aim at how historical master narratives are typically framed, Serres strives to redefine the human on our blue planet outside of misleading anthropocentric abstractions such as the man-nature dichotomy and the subject-object distinction.

In *Darwin, Bonaparte et le Samaritain: Une philosophie de l'histoire*, Serres criticizes dominant historical metanarratives that exclusively focus on human exploits and ingenuity ignoring how the stories of all organisms are intertwined in addition to the role played by the natural world in the shaping of various events throughout history. Serres grumbles, "Autrement dit, l'humain constitue le sujet exclusif ou central de l'histoire, de l'ethnologie et de la préhistoire, voire leur référence" [In other words, humans are the exclusive or central focus of history, of ethnology, of prehistory, that is to say their point of reference] (*Darwin, Bonaparte et le Samaritain* 9). He adds a few lines later that "tous les vivants ont, eux aussi, une histoire" [all life forms, they too have their own history] (Serres, *Darwin, Bonaparte et le Samaritain* 9). Not only is it difficult to separate the history of one species from another on a biosphere in which everything is connected to everything else, as the first law of ecology underscores, but Serres also theorizes that all life forms have historical agency. The philosopher hypothesizes that traditional historiography disenfranchises both ethnic and moral minorities whose perspectives are marginalized or even effaced and the other-than-human inhabitants with whom we dwell.

Serres summarizes his position in an interview with Nicolas Martin in which he adamantly maintains that contemporary scientific erudition allows us to rethink how history is usually conceived. As he provocatively avers,

Les scientifiques de toute discipline ont réussi à dater leurs objets : les astrophysiciens savent dater l'origine de l'Univers et des étoiles. Les historiens naturels savent dater au carbone 14 l'origine et la disparition des espèces. La Science nous a donné une universelle datation. On peut enchaîner ces datations, et créer le Grand Récit, c'est-à-dire l'Histoire Universelle sur 15 milliards d'années : le Big Bang, la formation de la Terre par accréation il y a 4 milliards d'années, l'arrivée de la vie, c'est-à-dire des molécules qui se répliquent il y a 3,8 milliards d'années, puis l'arrivée des espèces, l'évolution, l'arrivée des humains, etc ... Tout cela, c'est une Histoire que l'Histoire ordinaire ne raconte pas, puisque là aussi il y a un narcissisme humain : on ne raconte que l'Histoire de l'Homme et guère mieux que cela : après l'invention de l'écriture sans se soucier de la préhistoire. L'Histoire est assez resserrée sur ce point, et elle est définie par un ensemble d'oublis : d'oubli du Monde, d'oubli des animaux, d'oubli du vivant.

[Scientists from all disciplines have successfully dated their objects: astrophysicists know how to date the origin of the Universe and its stars. Natural historians know how to date the appearance and disappearance of species based upon carbon 14 dating. Science has given us universal dating. We can link these forms of dating together and create the Great Story, in other words the Universal History of 15 billion years: the Big Bang, the formation of the Earth by accretion 4 billion years ago, the arrival of life, in other words molecules that replicated themselves 3.8 billion years ago, then the appearance of species, evolution, the arrival of humans, etc... All of this is a History that ordinary history does not tell, because of human narcissism: we only recount the History of Man and even worse than that: after the invention of writing without worrying about prehistory. History is rather rigid in this regard, and it is defined by a series of oversights: forgetting about the World, forgetting about animals, forgetting about living things]. (Serres qtd. in Martin n.p.)

Even if the main point that Serres is trying to convey is cogent, scholars from the field of Big History would undoubtedly take issue with the strong version of this claim. Given that researchers like David Christian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and John Robert McNeil have articulated a similar vision of how anthropocentric biases in the creation of historical accounts can be addressed, Serres overstates his valid premise. For instance, Chakrabarty's critique of "philosophers and students of history (who) have often displayed a conscious tendency to separate human history—or the story of human affairs [...] from natural history, sometimes proceeding even to deny that nature could ever have history quite in the same way humans have it" bears a striking resemblance to Serres's decentered, philosophical framework outlined in *Darwin, Bonaparte et le Samaritain: Une philosophie de l'histoire* (Chakrabarty 201, my insertion). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that anthropocentrism reigns supreme overall in most historical circles where the Great Story of all the other species that arose from the primordial soup has failed to resonate or find a place.

Whereas this oversight is applicable to all other terrestrial animals that have been largely denied any semblance of historical agency, it is even more pronounced for maritime creatures. The vast oceans around the world are often out of sight and out of mind or missing from our fractured environmental consciousness and thought systems. In the words of the professor of History John Gillis, "Western civilization is landlocked, mentally if not physically" (qtd. in Muthyala 499). As a land-based species, it is easy to forget about the so-called "great unknown," much of which remains a mystery even to scientists. Jonathan Howard decries this "defining over-preoccupation with land at the expense of a general and sustained neglect of the ocean" that he identifies as "no small feat of amnesia" (322). In this regard, research from the Blue Humanities intersects with the goals of environmental historians who have espoused Big History and theorists like Serres who are clamoring for a "move beyond an emphasis on landmass and frontiers [...] because they exist as parts of broader networks of trade and migration connecting lakes to rivers, rivers to seas, seas to oceans, oceans to continents" (Muthyala 502). Serres is uniquely suited to contribute to this terraqueous paradigm shift based on his previously mentioned childhood experiences learning to dredge the Garonne River, his studies at the French Naval Academy before transitioning to philosophy for his graduate work at the École Normale Supérieure, and his passion for scientific explanations of the world.

Serres takes advantage of evolutionary perspectives, arguing that Darwin's groundbreaking discoveries represented a scientific and philosophical revolution, in addition to insights gleaned from information theory broadly construed and the interdiscipline of biosemiotics to point out that what we commonly refer to as "bruit de fond" [background noise] is really signs being created, exchanged, and interpreted by fellow semiotic-historical agents (*Biogée* 98). Instead of being robotic automata that merely obey "the fixity of a program," as Cartesian philosophy falsely claims, the biosemiotic discovery that *all* beings from microorganisms all the way up to *Homo sapiens* communicate in meaningful and purposeful ways shatters anthropocentric wishful thinking and compels us to tell our-their story differently (Derrida 117). We now know that both the land and the ocean are teeming with semiosis (i.e., communication) at all biological levels of organization because of the pioneering work of the founding father of biosemiotics and German biologist Jakob von Uexküll and those who have followed in his footsteps. Biosemiotics has eviscerated the Cartesian split between "semiotically active humans and semiotically inactive nature" unequivocally proving that "semiosis is synonymous with life" (Maran 142; Wheeler 176). Biosemiotic studies devoted to the complexity of other-than-human semiosis have delivered the final proverbial nail in the coffin of the concept of the animal-machine that helped erect and reinforce the man-nature binary. The deconstruction of the Cartesian view of the animal through empirical evidence has paved the way for a radically different and more accurate story to be told. Far from being the only species that is able to express anything significant at all, we are immersed in a sea of semiosis of which human language(s) is a tiny fraction of the plethora of signs being sent and decoded all around us. The realization of the ubiquity of strategic and calculated semiosis throughout the universe dislodges notions of human exceptionalism around which anthropocentric explanations of existence revolve.

The word choice of "sea" above is intentional, since Serres frequently grounds his biosemiotic reflections connected to the *Grand Récit* in marine life. Even if humans possess the most sophisticated primary modelling device of all in the shape of language(s), as most mainstream biosemioticians contend, the philosopher alludes to scientific studies dedicated to "Le bruit de fond énorme des crevettes et du krill (qui) couvre les rumeurs de la mer [...] Notre écoute sous-marine détecte, par exemple, calcule, entend et négocie le bruit de fond énorme des crevettes et du krill, comme les messages que s'échangent baleines entre elles et dauphins entre eux" [The huge background noise of shrimp and krill (that) covers the rumors of the sea [...] Our underwater listening detects, for example, calculates, hears and negotiates the huge background noise of shrimp and krill, such as messages that whales exchange with each other and dolphins between themselves as well] (*Hominescence* 144–145, my insertion). Serres scoffs at what is one of the last bastions of human exceptionalism

reflected in lingering anthropocentric metanarratives—the outmoded idea that only *Homo sapiens* have semiotic faculties compared to the supposedly mechanistic vocalizations and paralinguistic signs of other species—in *La Légende des anges*. Delving into the etymology of the word “angels” meaning messengers in the general sense, Serres reveals “les Anges ne prennent pas toujours la forme humaine, mais se dissimulent dans les flux de la nature” [Angels don’t always take human form, but hide in the flows of nature] before specifying “Quelle prétention! Les dauphins et les abeilles communiquent, ainsi que les fourmis, les vents et les courants de la mer” [What pretentiousness! Dolphins and bees communicate, in addition to ants, the wind and sea currents] (*La Légende des anges* 25).

The philosopher demonstrates that it is quite the feat of mental gymnastics to cling to obsolete linguistic and thought models in the face of nearly irrefutable evidence showing that all life forms engage in semiosis at varying levels of complexity throughout the biosphere. When this last stumbling block is removed, a radically different story unfolds that redefines the human outside of oppositional thinking and reconnects us to our shared aquatic heritage. In a passage from the experimental text *Yeux* entitled “The Ecstasy of Dredging,” Serres ponders what it means to *see* and *be seen* by “deep-sea creatures, such as the stout blacksmelt with large eyes and the blind tripod fishes [...] (that) use bioluminescence as social signals to interact” with each other and other organisms deliberately and skillfully (Oppermann 458, my insertion). For those who are seeking a better understanding of what makes us human, Serres opines that we need to look no further than the ocean and the litany of other-than-human eyes endowed with their own species-specific semiotic abilities. As the philosopher-sailor exclaims, “Oui, je te reconnais, tu me fixes comme l’œil du fleuve, son globe bombé, l’éclair de son regard humble et numineux, l’étincelle de la pupille rivière, trouée d’ocelles aux millions de paupières. Je suis sauvé. Garonne m’a vu” [Yes, I recognize you, you stare at me like the eye of the river, its globe bomb, the flash of its humble and numinous gaze, the spark of the pupil river, punctuated with ocelli from millions of eyelids. I am saved. Garonne saw me] (Serres, *Yeux* 40). Serres encourages us to “swim the channel” to paraphrase the title of an essay written by William Paulson, or to submerge ourselves in this vast network of signs through intense somatic encounters.³

IV. Reestablishing a Direct, Sensorial Connection to the Remainder of the Biosphere

It is in this sense in which Serres’s sensualist philosophical method for *thinking blue* should be understood. The philosopher evokes von Uexküll’s metaphor of universal semiosis as music or a “polyphonic choir” when he urges the disconnected postmodern subject to “tiens-toi en elle; suis son cours, nage dans son flux, vis, habite et dors en elle” [hold on to it; follow its course, swim in its flow, live, live and sleep in it] (Serres, *Musique* 44). However, Serres admits that “nous perdons les sens” [we are losing our senses] because of the postmodern way of life that has hollowed out our sensory organs (*Les cinq sens* 231). Trapped inside of our walls of brick, concrete, steel, or wood, or in front of a computer, tablet, or smartphone screen, many people have very little unfiltered contact with the rest of the cosmos. As opposed to wallowing in despair about our comatose senses, Serres argues that it is still possible to transcend the confines of our “padded cells” by making a concerted effort to eliminate the barriers preventing us from having a primordial, sensorial relationship with both land and water (Chare 100). What the philosopher terms the “magic” of terraqueous relations affirms that “la magie, c’est de sentir, entendre, voir, vivre avec son Cœur, ses poumons, ses nerfs” [magic is feeling, hearing, seeing, living with one’s Heart, lungs, and nerves] (Serres, *Les cinq sens* 57). Serres speaks directly and informally to the reader inviting her-him to “viens, le dernier des enfants des hommes à pouvoir entendre et voir, viens sentir et toucher, tu apprendras bien assez tôt la science (du savoir), assuré que tu l’apprendras” [come, the last of the children of men able to hear and see, come feel and touch, you will soon enough learn the science (of knowledge), rest assured that you will learn it] (*Les cinq sens* 112; my insertion). Serres offers this practical piece of advice for rekindling our deadened senses in an interview: “Et si vous avez perdu le corps [...] il faut marcher deux heures par jour” [And if you have lost your body, you have to walk two hours a day] (Serres qtd. in Zimmerman

55). In response to the most fundamental existential question of all “Qui suis-je?” [Who am I?], Serres maintains, “Sans doute, la relation crée l’être” [Without a doubt, relationship creates being] (Serres, *Les cinq sens* 288; Serres, *L’Incandescent* 265). Serres insists that these “magical” somatic experiences are not gratuitous, but rather they represent a way of being and knowing in the world that helps us to understand our small place in the cosmos more fully.

Serres clearly valorizes all five senses as epistemological vessels, yet he also has a marked predilection for the tactile mode of perception. As Ian Tucker notes, “For Serres the skin is the dominant sense organ, with touch a primary maker of sense” (151). Specifically, the philosopher implies that “l’épiderme, si sensible” [the epidermis, so sensitive] functions like a catalyst that serves to stimulate and reinvigorate our other four senses (Serres, *Les cinq sens* 33). Elucidating his intriguing position about the role of our largest organ (i.e., our skin), Serres proclaims, “La peau intervient entre plusieurs choses du monde et les fait se mêler [...] Toute à sa place au milieu quand le milieu se concentre, tout se rencontre et se noue en ce lieu complexe, en ce nœud où tout passe comme un échangeur [...] Le monde se remplit de voiles complexes” [The skin intervenes between several things in the world and makes them mingle [...] Everything has its place in the middle when the place is concentrated to this complex place, in this knot where everything takes place, as in an exchanger [...] The world is filled with complex veils] (*Les cinq sens* 82–83). Serres’s focus on touch in addition to his literal and metaphorical calls for the subject to “swim” in the terrestrial and nautical sublime depending on the exact passage in question recall the documented testimonials of surfers highlighted by scholars from the Blue Humanities like Steve Mentz and Jan Jagodzinski. In the context of how “prolonged physical encounters with the ocean changed everything” for some surfers, the bodily act of opening up “the pores of our skin is on one level simply a matter of living in the world” (Mentz 443; 437). Jagodzinski discusses how surfers describe a sensorial phenomenon that they call “‘becoming-wave’” and how a “‘relationship’ of becoming emerges from the sea: there is interpenetration between the assembled body of the surfer [...] with the nonhuman physical world” (121). This concept of “becoming-wave” lends credence to Serres’s assertion that relationships with other-than-human forms of matter ground our very being from a philosophical standpoint.

Many surfers have also expressed that this sensorial correspondence is part of an effort to imitate the organic rhythms of the planet, especially the ocean, and to reattune themselves to these maritime flows to the greatest extent possible. For our water-based bodies that cannot escape our oceanic heritage, surfing can be addictive because the physical act itself boils down to “the correlation of our interior tides with whatever tidal motion surrounds us” (Rojas 42). Serres’s philosophy suggests that the first-hand accounts of numerous individuals for whom “an intimate connection, convergence, union with the ocean happens as the surfer’s body tunes with the wave’s rhythms” should not be too hastily dismissed (Jagodzinski 121). Heavily influenced by von Uexküll’s aforementioned metaphor of semiosis as musicality, Serres declares, “Je consonne à la rivière de ma vie pour composer de la musique [...] il n’y a là, qu’une composition” [I am in consonance with the river of my life to compose music [...] there is only one composition] (*Musique* 67). The “composition” to which Serres refers in *Musique* is what von Uexküll conceives of as the “theory of the composition of nature” (von Uexküll 98). When Serres talks about how “Musique et vie, inséparable, valent ensemble” [music and life, inseparable, waltz together], he is alluding to both universal semiosis and the same “musical” rhythms that surfers identify as being linked to a process of ecological self-actualization (*Musique* 65). The epiphany that “Nos corps habitent donc la même maison que la Musique” [our bodies therefore dwell in the same house as this Music] provoked by somatic encounters is a reflection of the “acoustique universelle [...] commencée à la Genèse” [universal acoustic [...] beginning with Genesis] or the rhythms to which surfers try to synchronize themselves (Serres, *Musique* 146; 102).

Serres develops sensual metaphors centered around the notion of fusion and immersion to underscore what this bodily reattuning encompasses. Both the frame of mind and concrete experience of “immersion makes us feel part of the watery world” in the philosopher’s prolific repertoire (Opperman 452). In Serres’s maritime thought, it is through “oceanic submersion” that “a fusion of Umwelts

happens” (Hebel 309; Jagodzinski 126). As a sensualist philosopher above all who reframes ethical debates regarding hedonistic pleasures of the flesh, Serres creates elaborate metaphors associated with nudity, matrimony, and copulation. The “extreme relationality of water which connects bodies and beings, vast spaces, and immense timescales” observed by blue humanists is evident in Serres’s promulgation of a sensorial fusion with the world (Hebel 311). Serres’s reinterpretation of the post-impressionistic artwork of Pierre Bonnard in *Les cinq sens* is revealing in this sense. Showcasing his tactile sensibilities in his vision of Bonnard’s art and outlook on life, Serres commands the reader to “Otez les feuilles, ôtez le peignoir: toucherez-vous la peau de la femme brune ou la toile du tableau” [Take off the leaves, take off the bathrobe: touch the skin of the dark-haired woman or the canvas of the painting] before lauding how “Bonnard se jette, nu, dans la piscine du Jardin, au milieu du bain de monde [...] se lancer nu dans l’océan du monde [...] l’impressionnisme en vient à son vrai sens d’origine, au contact” [Bonnard throws himself, naked, into the swimming pool of the Garden, in the middle of the bath of the world [...] launching himself naked into the ocean of the world [...] impressionism arrives at its true original meaning, contact] (*Les cinq sens* 27; 35). This metaphorical nudity that Serres champions is a philosophical plea imploring the postmodern subject to take away any walls separating us from feeling, tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing the rest of the planet directly. The philosopher’s emphasis on the act of touching water itself through our pores is also noteworthy in this passage.

Serres returns to his theory that there should be nothing between our skin and various bodies of water in *Biogée*. He stresses that we should “Ne jamais cesser de faire l’amour à Garonne” [Never stop making love to Garonne] (i.e., the Garonne River) or water in the larger sense that he depicts as a “chambre de nocces, lit conjugal, femme bien aimée, canal de naissance [...] ventre d’où je fus chassé quand je devins errant solitaire sur la Terre” [wedding room, marital bed, beloved woman, birth canal [...] womb from which I was chased when I became a solitary wanderer on earth] (Serres, *Biogée* 28–29). The philosopher concludes this erotic section of the essay with the affirmation that “Mais ma chair garde ses eaux mères” [But my flesh retains its motherly waters] (Serres, *Biogée* 29). Placing all eroticism aside, Serres encourages us to reconnect to our aquatic roots or cosmogonic ancestry through our senses. Even if some readers may be uncomfortable with the idea of engaging in coitus with a river or the ocean, Serres touches on the same “immersive experience [...] and the incessant communication between our bodies and our environment” that surfers have confided to researchers about in *Les cinq sens* and *Biogée* (Mentz 434).

V. Fostering Blue Resistance in the Anthropocene–Technocene Through *Ethical Parasitism*

At the dawn of the Anthropocene–Technocene, Serres is astutely cognizant that our relationship with the terrestrial–aquatic world is fraught with peril to the disconcerting point of depriving future generations the possibility of (re-) establishing a sensual bond with the universe through the somatic exercise of fusion. Serres poignantly sounds the alarm about the current state of the oceans linked to myopic human activities in *Biogée* that could one day abruptly end all life as we know it on this planet. It is becoming progressively harder to experience the cosmic matrimony vividly portrayed by Serres in a world that is on the brink of collapse. Serres’s lamentation “Le vent appelle désormais au secours. Je ne peux plus entendre ressac ni ouragan sans y déchiffrer ces appels canoniques: Mayday, m’aidez, venez m’aider” [The wind is now asking for help. I can no longer hear a backwash or a hurricane with deciphering these canonical calls: Mayday, help me, come help me] is indicative of “blue resistance” (Serres, *Biogée*; Ferwerda 1). The philosopher posits that we are currently writing the final chapter of the Great Story, at least as far as humans are concerned, and condemning the other “planetary histories of the earth” from a biosemiotic angle to perish as well (Ghosal and Ghosal 210).

Although Serres’s distress call in *Biogée* appeals to our sense of imagination, research conducted by marine biologists and blue humanists paints a dire picture regarding the health of the oceans that sustain the existence of all life forms. What Serres calls “le visage douloureux de la beauté mutilée”

[the painful face of mutilated beauty] epitomized by the advent of the sixth mass extinction is all too real (*Le contrat naturel* 46). In a section of his article "Into the Dark Blue: A Medi(t)ation on the Oceans—Its Pain, Its Wonder, Its Wild, and Its Hope," Jan Jagodzinski summarizes scientific studies related to oceanic degradation before concluding "to say that the health of the oceans is in trouble is surely to state the obvious" (111). Not only are scientists troubled by rising sea levels, the deleterious effects of warmer temperatures, acidification, the continual expansion of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the microplastic crisis, and the melting of the polar ice caps, but also "the appearance of dead zones [...] in numerous areas of the world's oceans are a shocking sign of impending collapse" (Buchanan and Jeffery 11–12). The National Ocean Service indicates that the expression "'dead zone' is a more common term for hypoxia, which refers to a reduced level of oxygen in the water" resulting in the creation of "biological deserts" where nothing can survive ("What is a Dead Zone" n.p.). Owing to the emergence of these dead zones connected to chemical pollution including fertilizers, Serres is properly reading the visible signs of oceanic agony.

Serres theorizes that the key to avoiding the eco-apocalypse that the multiplication of dead zones could usher in is to curb the parasitic impulses of the "*Homo terminator*" (*Hominescence* 134, italics in original). Serres's multifaceted reworking of the concept of a parasite recognizes that existence is an inherently violent act that forces *all* species to kill other living organisms for the sake of sustenance on a quotidian basis. For this reason, "Serres neither deplores the parasite, nor endorses him either. Parasitism is just a fact-of-symbiotic-life" (O'Keeffe 10). The philosopher illustrates that "the question is not therefore of doing away with the parasitic chain but rather of finding a modality that will not turn deadly" (Yates 205). Serres's nuanced point of view could be described as *ethical parasitism* that imposes limits upon our rapacious consumption. Denouncing our unfettered parasitism that has decimated our only metaphorical host in the neoliberal age predicated upon the unsustainable principle of constant growth and expansion, Serres reveals, "the parasite is a creature which feeds on another, but gives nothing in return. There's no exchange, no balance sheet to be drawn-up: there's no reciprocity in the relationship, which is one-dimensional [...] if the parasite eats too much, he'll kill his host, and it'll die by the same token" (qtd. in Mortley 57). These epitextual comments are a stark reminder of what happens to a parasite when it completely destroys its only remaining host.

Serres weaves connections between his theory of the parasite, his notion of a natural contract, and his reappropriation of the expression "world war" in *Biogée*. Serres poses these questions that are the cornerstone of his ecological thought: "Comment une déclaration de guerre ouverte peut-elle se traduire en pacte ou contrat? Comment le parasite mute-t-il en symbiote? Quand la même bête, (la) tueuse, se décidera-t-elle à cohabiter?" [How can an open declaration of war be translated into a pact or contract? How does the parasite mutate into a symbiont? When will the same beast, (the) killer, decide to coexist] (*Biogée* 148, my insertion). The philosopher hypothesizes that the only viable path forward is to envision and implement a natural contract or a peace treaty with the cosmos that would end "the 'objective war' against nature" that we are waging (Krell 4). Serres's position that "Or nous voici en face d'un problème causé par une civilisation en place depuis maintenant plus d'un siècle [...] Monopolisée par la science et l'ensemble des techniques associées au droit de propriété, la raison humaine a vaincu la nature extérieure, dans un combat qui dure depuis la préhistoire, mais qui s'accéléra de façon sévère à la révolution industrielle" [Here we are facing a problem caused by a civilization in place for now more than a century [...] Monopolized by science and by the totality of the technological advances associated with property rights, human reason defeated external nature in a struggle that has been taking place since prehistory, but which was severely accelerated by the industrial revolution] unequivocally implies that the future of the oceans and the entire planet hinges upon our ability to "look beyond capitalist enclosure" (Serres, *Le Contrat Naturel* 55; 63; Campbell and Paye 2). The idea that "vampiric capitalism" necessitating unending growth can continue unabated is an *ecocidal*, toxic way of thinking that Serres equates to a *world war* (Swarbrick 16). If we want to survive the ecological crisis of our own making, he contends that the neoliberal

paradigm that has been exported to all corners of the globe must be replaced with another economic framework. Serres's warning about the state of the oceans in *Biogée* is an emotional appeal to reduce the parasitic consumption that exemplifies late-stage capitalism highlighting that "the prospects for radical transformation lie in finding alternative, non-capitalist, ways of viewing the marine world, in restoring the numinosity of the oceans and revaluing all forms of life" (Deckard and Oloff 12).

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, Serres's inexhaustible *œuvre* provides a thought-provoking roadmap for *thinking blue* during a period of tremendous environmental uncertainty. As new dead zones are being discovered and previously identified ones are expanding at a disquieting rate, the oceans appear to be hanging on by a thread. Given that our anthropogenic transformation of land and water in late-stage capitalism has reached a tipping point, it is time for all hands on deck. Empirical studies have now validated Serres's assertion that the oceans are crying out for help submerged and overwhelmed by human pollution. Unless our thought paradigms and economic systems evolve drastically, the Great Story may soon no longer include *Homo sapiens* or any of the other sentient beings with whom we share the biosphere. In other words, our planet in its current configuration cannot survive the nefarious effects of our irresponsible parasitism. Even if the time for action has clearly passed, it may still be possible to stem the tide of the world war that we have launched against the earth. Serres's theory that our sensorial faculties are replete with epistemological value leading to a heightened awareness of our small place in the cosmos could facilitate a greater appreciation and understanding of existence. If enough people relearn how to "swim" in these channels through the reestablishment of a direct, sensorial rapport with valleys, plains, rivers, streams, and oceans, a formidable type of blue resistance could emerge changing the predictable outcome of the present doomsday scenario.

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Notes

¹ See my article entitled "Decentring and Rewriting the Universal Story of Humanity: The Cosmic Historiography of J.M.G. Le Clézio and Michel Serres" in *Green Letters*.

² All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

³ See William Paulson's book chapter in *Mapping Michel Serres* (2009).

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