Feeling Safe in a Panbiotic World

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Introduction: The Changing Nature of Safety

In *Malfeasance*, Michel Serres returns once again to distinction between the hard and the soft found across the majority of his work. On this occasion, what Serres is pointing towards is a difference between two kinds of 'pollution'. There are the 'hard' material forms of waste that are typically produced as the by-products of industrial processes, and the 'soft' cognitive or semiotic traces which accompany the extension of these processes into the organization of sociocultural life:

> Let us define two things and clearly distinguish them from one another: first the hard, the second the soft. By the first I mean on the one hand solid residues, liquids, and gases, emitted throughout the atmosphere by the big industrial companies or gigantic garbage dumps, the shameful signature of big cities. By the second, the tsunamis of writing, signs, images, and logos flooding rural, civic, public and natural spaces as well as landscapes with their advertising. Even though different in terms of energy, garbage and marks nevertheless result from the same soiling gesture, from the same intention to appropriate, and are of animal origin … in combination with hard pollution, soft pollution proceeds from the same drive … fundamentally it emanates from our will to appropriate, our desire to conquer and expand the space of our properties. (Serres, 2011: 41-42)

This passage exemplifies some of the key characteristics of Serres' thought. It deals with contemporary problems of social organization, the ways in which we live with one another and more broadly with the generalised ecological landscape that the social weighs its increasingly unstable mass upon. It offers a grand narrative sweep in which we are given to understand that the contemporary problem is not necessarily entirely novel, but instead fits within the unfolding of a drive or impetus to pollute that is archaic in nature. Then comes the twist: the roots of the 'soiling gesture' are not, in themselves, human at all, but are of 'animal origin'. We must think of pollution as a problem of a very different order from merely that of its specific forms or scale. That problem is then finally presented as one of property – the desire to 'conquer and expand space'. In a short series of moves, Serres shifts the problem space dramatically, with significant consequences for how we might think and act in relation to what pollution is and what to do about it.

In this chapter, I want to use this same intellectual strategy to consider how the practice and the idea of 'safety' has shifted during the COVID19 pandemic. For many of us, safety has constituted a background concern. Always present, to be sure, as an issue to be managed in

our workplaces, our homes, and in our sexual relations with others, but something routinised, understood to a certain degree, and for much of the time treated as something 'under control'. Safety is an outcome of engaging in a specific practice, of following the right guidelines. Sometimes it is already 'built in' to the tools and technologies we engage with, most notably in the aviation industry, which is often held up as the gold standard for safety practices. As a consequence, safety becomes most relevant at moments of sudden failure, when a series of weaknesses within a system accidentally align (the 'Swiss Cheese' model of failure produced by James Reason). Whether the pandemic is best understood in this way as a terrible series of contingencies, or the predictable outcome of poor preparation for emergent viruses in a globalised economy, COVID19 has dramatically shifted both the 'hard' material practices around safety and the 'soft' sociocognitive processes through which think about an enact safety within interpersonal relations.

It would be faithful to Serres' mode of reasoning to note at this point that none of this is without precedent. During the AIDS pandemic beginning in the 1980s, the LGBTQ+ community reinvented the concept of sexual safety, far in advance of the biomedical 'hard' discoveries that would ultimately enable HIV infection to become a routinised concern. The Black Lives Matter movement have more recently placed lack of safety as central to the protests around policing in the USA and elsewhere. There are specific genealogies which have been traced around each case which also intersect with and inform the shifts around safety during COVID19. But in this chapter, I want to focus specifically on the dissemination around safety guidance as a form of the kind of 'soft pollution' that Serres describes. Take, for example, the following graphic produced by the US Food and Drug Administration as 'Best Practices for Retail Food Stores, Restaurants, and Food Pick-Up/Delivery Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic':

(attribution)

In its most simplified form, the FDA guidance identifies four domains of concern. The first 'Be Healthy, Be Clean' concerns relations between employees. It defines the workplace as a potential locus of infection where COVID19 can be transmitted through physical proximity or through shared contact with objects (including food). This locus is constantly at risk of being destabilised by the introduction of the virus, despite the guidance for the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), social distancing and constant cleaning and chemical scouring as recommended within the second domain of 'Clean and Disinfect'. It only takes one case of infection to align all the weaknesses in the system as a whole. As one recommendation starkly states:

> If an employee is sick at work, send them home immediately. Clean and disinfect surfaces in their workspace. Others at the facility with close contact (i.e., within 6 feet) of the employee during this time should be considered exposed.

The sick employee should be considered as having polluted the entire space. This requires the immediate 'hard' response of eradicating potential traces of the virus in the immediate physical environment and the 'soft' response of recategorizing fellow workers as now likely further sources of infection. But employees are not the only concern. Customers also constitute both a threat and a potential vulnerability to the organization, as noted in the third domain of 'Social Distance'. The guidance strongly emphasises that public messaging, in the form of signs and audio recordings, be used to 'educate' both customers and employees around the need to main social distancing at all times. But this creates a further problem. The 'tsunami of writing, signs, images and logos' that sweeps through the typical retail or restaurant environment needs to be both increased and at the same time carefully managed. One potentially contradictory piece of guidance recommends that the organization should both:

> • Avoid displays that may result in customer gatherings; discontinue self-serve buffets and salad bars; discourage employee gatherings
> • Place floor markings and signs to encourage social distancing

On the one hand, the soft 'soiling gesture' of polluting the space with signs that encourage consumption should be restrained. But in its place, new signs and marks needs to be added. We might reason that this redirection of semiotic pollution might result in a scattering of attention on the part of both customers and employees that is in tension with the project of maintaining an ordered physical space. A potential solution is offered in the final domain of 'Pick-up and Delivery' which effectively extends the workplace beyond the limits of the outlet itself and into a series of mobile capillaries that enable a wider social territory to be established outside the workplace where the customer themselves is encouraged to own the calculus of risk through engaging in 'no touch deliveries' or 'curb side pick ups', in a kind 'social distancing at-a-distance'.

The potential complications and contradictions that arise from the FDA guidance are unsurprising. All risk management involves a trade-off that involves balancing degrees of freedom with calculations of safety margins. In fact, the FDA guidance is something of a model of clarity in comparison with the safety messaging provided by the UK Government during the pandemic:

(attribution)

The initial public health message was ‘Stay Home > Protect the NHS > Save Lives’, which had the virtue of indicating a clear lexical and grammatical referent of ‘home’ where people should stay – most people having only one home and knowing where it is – and what the desired consequences would be of doing so. Its subsequent replacement by ‘Stay Alert > Control the Virus > Save Lives’ was met with widespread derision given the sheer opacity of its meaning – ‘alert’ being an imprecise cognitive state that is open to interpretation. Furthermore, the idea that this ‘alertness’ might translate into ‘control’ over a virus which by definition could only be registered as perceptible following infection (at which point control has been all but entirely ceded) is entirely mysterious.

Despite the lack of clarity, in both case what is being accomplished is a deliberate shift in how safety is both understood and practiced. This shift matters considerably since it will reverberate within the shaping of the worlds that are emerging from the pandemic. The ways in which safety has been reconfigured around COVID19 have implications not merely for future pandemics, but more broadly for what ‘feeling safe’ will mean in relation to the myriad ecological, political and global health threats that are crystallising. When we have become accustomed to the idea that the embrace of a loved one or handling the same tools as an employee is a safety issue, our relationship to one another, other species and the damaged planet cannot not be changed. But in what ways? And what kind of a problem is ‘safety’ for us?

Hominescence and Death

In an oft-cited passage from one of his conversations with Bruno Latour, Serres reflects upon how the historical circumstances of his early years formed his philosophical approach:

> Here is the vital environment of those who were born, like me, around 1930: at age six, the war of 1936 in Spain; at age nine, the blitzkrieg of 1939, defeat and debacle; at age twelve, the split between the Resistance and the collaborators, the tragedy of the concentration camps and deportations; at age fourteen, Liberation and the settling of scores it brought with it in France; at age fifteen Hiroshima. In short, for age nine to seventeen, when the body and sensitivity are being formed, it was the reign of hunger and rationing, death and bombings, a thousand crimes … I was six for my first dead bodies, twenty-six for the last one. Have I answered you sufficiently about what has made my contemporaries 'gun-shy'? (Serres with Latour, 1995: 2)

Death and violence are an omnipresent feature of Serres' work, as indeed they are in many of his contemporary thinkers. In this passage, Serres seeks not merely to indicate his antipathy to conflict as a mode of intellectual exchange – a position that Latour elsewhere succinctly characterises as 'The Enlightenment without the critique' – but also to stress how the experience of suffering and the death of others is an embodied matter. Violence shapes the body, attunes its sensitivity to the milieus in which it dwells. Throughout his work, Serres has placed particular emphasis on how the training or physical modulation of the body is expressed in thought. The French edition of *Variations of the Body*, for example contains the dedication 'A mes professeurs de gymnastique, à mes entraîneurs, à mes guides de haute montagne, quie m'ont appris à penser' (1999: 5). To think is, before all else, to move, to engage, to taste, to perambulate, to climb, to leap, to travel. To be on the move. By contrast, that which is static, which cannot or can no longer move is, for Serres, associated with death. In *Statues*, Serres expounds at length on how the corpse is the first object, that which can be properly said to no longer be a subject, to have made the transition from life to death. But in the course of becoming an object, the corpse accomplishes a stabilisation of the relation between (human) subjects and objects:

> The object, the subject lacking any reference, find one in and through death since the remains define the here, mark it, fixit, in space and for time. They are organized and placed, take on meaning, in relation to death; relative to that reference, they can substitute for one another. What is the object? It's the body come back, the resurrected subject, what we call a ghost – a statue. (Serres, 2015b: 74)

Despite the 'gun-shy' nature of Serres' work, it nevertheless preserves a functional role for death within the organization of the collective. The relationship between subjects and objects – which is both extremely complex and to some extent reversible in Serres' thinking – achieves a temporary stabilization around death. The corpse and then the funereal statue which is substituted for it in some burial practices, becomes the boundary marker between subject and objects, fixing them in relation to time and space. Nowhere is this clearer for Serres than in the traditional Christian formulation used on gravestones: 'here lies'. Because the corpse/statue does not move, it can become the point around which the spatiotemporal

co-ordinates of the collective can be extended. Paris is exemplary in this respect, with its catacombs beneath the city ('I would have liked Eiffel to have put his tower up in the place of the lion, at Denfert-Rochereau, so as to sink the fluid foundations of the four pillars into the catacombs, the way the Abbot Suer founded the Basilica of Saint Denis over the crypt in which all our kings lie' Serres, 2015b: 61). It is worth noting that only recently in Western Modernity we have ceased the practice of living amongst the dead and moved burial sites to the outskirts of towns and cities.

A first attempt to define a broader conception of safety might then be *the security of the relations between subjects and objects that is provisionally secured by death*. In COVID19 guidance, for instance, the binaries of infected/disinfected, clean/dirty, safe/unsafe are all held together by the vast unseen presence of the virus and its capacity to insinuate itself into the relations between people and the ordinary object and tools which they handle. The threat of illness and death clarifies and orders humans and objects within the workplaces and homes where they interact. Safety is constituted through an attempted purification of space. It is tempting here to reverse the order of the UK Government instructions. It is by committing to the project of saving the lives of others that we enact the practices of spatiotemporal ordering that control the virus which leads to a renewal of thinking or staying alert to what we are to one another and to the broader ecology that has given rise to the pandemic.

The capacity to commit to the project of saving lives is, of course, itself underwritten by the scientific and technological powers of the contemporary medical sciences. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Serres has remained live to the liberatory power of science and technology. In *Thumbelina*, for example, Serres contrasts the connective power of digital networks with the older forms of scholarly exchange of his youth:

> At the end of my studies, when I was twenty years old, I became an 'epistemologist', which is a big word to say that I studied the methods and results of the sciences, and occasionally tried to judge them. There were, at that time, very few of us, so we corresponded with each other. A half-century later every Tom Thumb on the street can make judgements about nuclear power, surrogate mothers, GMOs, chemistry, and ecology. Though I no longer claim to work in the discipline, today everyone has become an epistemologist. There is a presumption of competence. Don't laugh, says Thumbelina. When democracy gave everyone the right to vote, it did so in opposition to those who considered it a scandal to give an equal vote to both wise men and fools, ignorant and educated. The same argument applies here. (Serres, 2015c: 62)

It is rare to hear this kind of call for the democratisation of knowledge, with all the complexities that are implied, raised with such clarity. In part, Serres' enthusiasm for modern technology is informed by the sense that it is movement that characterises invention and transformation. To see the value in social issues like the ones above debated 'live' and on the move is then consonant with the approach that informs all of Serres' work. It is everyone's business to figure out how we should best live with one another and the Earth System, rather than this being reserved for a cadre of professionals who have purified and insulated their knowledge base from the rest of the collective (this passage is also

unusual in that epistemologists are not immediately described by Serres in terms of either masturbation or defecation, as they are in other works).

But Serres' enthusiasm for science and technology is also tempered by recognition of its unequal distribution and effects. He is well-aware of vast swathes of the global population who are not, in fact, three clicks away from any piece of knowledge and of the increasing poverty, conflict and environment destruction which are ceaselessly multiplying. In *The Incandescent*, Serres nevertheless reflects on the tension between the movement towards the global and the desire to insist on limits, to project a version of the local to simplify and map the global. He considers a range of terms beginning with the prefix *pan-*: *Pantope* (the experience of seemingly limitless space), *Panchrone* (the imagination of our place in universal time), *Pangloss* (the ability to translate between all languages), *Pangnose* (the democracy of epistemology), *Panthrope* (the possibility of living amongst all peoples) and *Panurge* (the overcoming of biological limits to human powers). In each case and in combination, Serres considers the risks which attend each of these aspects of the contemporary human condition. He concludes that it is no longer within our gift as humans to refuse the universals which are now part of everyday reality. We must instead inhabit the terrors they give rise to in order to productively seek a way to turn these powers back on themselves:

> For these questions concerning our universality are borne out today in daily practices that are numerous enough for us to now negotiate them fear and trembling, if not with prudence. Everything that we call ecology – global warming, the eradication of species or protection of the environment, ethics, prudence, sustainable development – tends to ask the world itself to put limits on our enterprises: our universal exploitation of the Universe frightens us. Our new first names with their prefix pan gives us panic. We demand of the universe to accompany, regulate and moderate with its universality the panurgy of the human. (Serres, 2018: 135)

The seemingly limitless expansion of human powers has led to universal exploitation. Which in turn has led to emergent circumstances such as the capacity of an inter-species born virus to piggyback on global travel to achieve pandemic levels of infection. In the same way that social distancing and lockdown measures tried to desperately enforce a version of the local as a way of addressing the costs of global viral transmission, Serres suggests that our common response to becoming-pan in multiple ways is, ultimately, *panic*. We insist that the world itself deliver us limits to our own powers – our panurgy – which will moderate its impact. Elsewhere, Serres puts this in a slightly more pithy formulation:

> [W]e recently went from the local to the global without any conceptual or practical mastery of this latter. These globalities have just taken on another face, one that's practical, concrete and quasi-close at hand. Everything depends on us. And through new and unexpected loops, we ourselves end up depending on the things that depend globally on us. Here, risks and chances grow as fast as our omnipotence. (Serres, 2019: 10)

In this formulation, Serres reworks the old distinction between 'things that depend upon us' and 'things that do not depend upon us'. Panurgy has the consequence that 'everything depends upon us', since we have universally exploited the Earth System. But in doing so, we have come to depend upon those very same things that depend in turn upon us – the soil, clean air, drinkable water. It is as though we have developed the capacity to exercise power over everything except that very power itself – 'How can we dominate our own domination; how can we master our own mastery?' (Serres with Latour, 1995: 172). Serres uses the term 'hominescence' to describe the long journey of human evolution which has led to this point. Technology forms a crucial part of this story. For Serres, tools do not so much stand in for human powers, as they do for other philosophers of technology (see REF), rather they are a defining part of what it means to be human. Other species acquire abilities through the gradual evolution of their bodies. This is typically confirmed through the identification of vestigial structure which have lost their archaic function over the course of evolution (e.g. wings in now flightless birds). Whilst humans are endowed with such vestigial structure, we are also able to trace a parallel evolution in the artefacts and technologies that we use that begin with the body and yet are externalised at some point. For instance, we begin drinking water with our cupped hands, which leads to the crafting of rudimentary cups. The technology of scooping then gives rise to the ability to churn the land, ultimately taking on its form in the colossal technologies of digging found in the extractive industries. There is something remaining of the cupped hand in the mechanical scoop that churns up rocks and minerals from beneath the soil. Serres calls this parallel technological evolutionary process 'exo-Darwinism':

> It took millions of years for birds to grow wings and feathers; in a few months, we build an aircraft. This gain in time defines technology fairly well. The invention of the first tools caused us to leave evolution so as to enter culture … As soon as technology appears, we no longer have any need for that long patience nor for a bodily form and therefore risk disappearing less. Once the airplane is made, we embark; when making a tool is enough, the body changes little if it uses the tool … Exo-Darwinism is what I call this original movement of organs towards objects that externalise the means of adaptation. (Serres, 2019: 39)

The process of Exo-Darwinism seems to indicate that the human body will no longer be required to change in response to evolutionary pressures, which will be addressed by externalised technological means. But the body is in fact fundamentally restructured through this process. Our human capacities to think, remember, feel and perceive are taken up anew in the technologies that 'cast off' from their initial locus in the body. The eye is augmented by the mirror and the magnifying glass which set off on their own techno-evolutionary process, but which return to the intimacy of our bodies as the reading glasses we can no longer do without, the smartphone picture libraries through which we curate our identities and memories, and the tiny microscopes which when inserted into our guts may help to locate and cure the cancers which would otherwise destroy us. We have different bodies and vastly different lives because of the panurgic expansion of the technological. This leads us towards a second formulation of safety – *the balancing of the panic arising from universal exploitation with hope in the expansion of the limits of the human body*. The knowledge of the atom which results in the destruction of Hiroshima has a tributary which leads the MRI scanning which might save our lives.

The second formulation of safety expands the problem space beyond COVID19 itself, towards a much broader narrative about our relationship to one another and to the Earth System. But something of a blindspot remains. Where does this panic arise from? What is it about our confrontation with the universal that destabilizes safety? And, conversely, why did social distancing and lockdown measures, as a return to the local, ultimately prove insufficient to in allaying our fears? To gain further traction it will be necessary to go further upstream in Serres' account of hominescence to reflect on the changing relationship between safety and the local.

Property and Sacrifice

Understanding the origins of human collectivity and the ways in which it is constituted out a mixture of relations with non-human actors and the wider ecology recurs as a substantive issue across Serres' work. As he states in *The Parasite* 'What living together is. What is the collective. This question fascinates us now' (1982: 224). In addressing this question, Serres often turns towards myth and religion, digressing into extended exegesis of biblical narratives or the founding stories of Rome. In his very last work, whose manuscript was submitted the publisher on the day before his passing, Serres offers this pointed reflection on his use of these texts and source materials, rather than works of anthropology or sociology:

> Where, then, does religion come from? Having some knowledge of astronomy and electrostatics, I am well aware that no one is hurling thunderbolts from behind the clouds with the intention of illuminating, warning, or wounding; well aware, too, from what the human sciences have taught me about the bonds between father and son, of the inanity of this supernatural creature of our fantasies. Undermined by both sides – by the sciences and by the humanities, two partial and complementary points of view – why, one may wonder has religion not entirely collapsed? … None of these disciplines, hard or soft, separated by analysis, inquires into the global bond, the existential synthesis through which every human relationship has its natural place. (Serres, 2022: 170)

It is not then that either the hard sciences or the soft humanities have nothing to say on the matter. Quite the reverse: they speak of little else other than the nature of origins and the way they inform development and transformation, we might feel obliged to say. But, for Serres, the dominant mode in which these conversations are conducted is that of analysis, which he treats as fundamentally an act of dissociation, of cutting apart and division – 'analysis comes from the Greek verb to untie or to dissolve' (Serres, 2018: 151). Analysis is itself a form a violence, the building up of theses through the critical destruction of competing accounts. What Serres seeks instead is a form of synthesis, and more specifically a way of grasping the way in which violence itself and our relationship to death might have a synthetic function which binds together rather than cleaves apart. For Serres, it is myth and religion that provide some of the most compelling narratives about what it is that might bind us together, with the challenge then being how to translate those stories into the domain of the scientific or the anthropological (and vice versa). For instance, the first volume of the Foundations trilogy, *Rome*, deals with the mythical founding of the city by

Romulus and Remus. The second volume, *Statues*, argues that ritual and social technologies of exclusion remain part of the operative logic of modernity, through a comparison of the Challenger space shuttle disaster with Flaubert's account of the ancient sacrifice to Baal in Carthage. The final volume, *Geometry*, posits that mathematical knowledge provides the guiding thread to understand the historical relations between archaic and modern societies. From myth to science and back again.

The foundations of the human collective are not necessarily human. There must be an object that serves as the point of co-ordination around which the human actors can be arranged, like the points in a star figure arrayed around a centre. This 'first object' is a dead body:

> The corpse was the first object for men. Posed before them like a problem and obstacle, lying. Any other thing, tree, stone, animal could or can enter into property, individual, collective, private, public and in this last case merchandise, stake or fetish. Before the dead body, every subject draws back: the dead body lies there, cutting out its space, larger lying down than standing, more terrifying dead than alive. (Serres, 2015b: 91)

The dead body cannot be exchanged, nor can it readily be divided to form a stake or a quasi-magical object of power. Its power comes instead from its completeness and from the relationship that it now maintains with those stood around it. Serres notes that the practice of lapidation – the punishment of death by stoning – recurs across religious and mythical sources. Lapidation is often associated with either the foundation or the purification of a specific site or territory. Many of the founding myths of Rome, for instance, involving stoning or burial beneath a rock. These acts construct boundary markers, with the human corpse hidden under the rock in a manner reminiscent of the great Pyramids, whose immense construction concealed a labyrinth in which the body of the Pharoah was deliberately obscured – 'What is a statue? A living body covered with stones' (Serres, 2015b: 181).

One of the most well-known instances of (attempted) lapidation comes the bible story John 8:87. A woman is brought before Jesus, accused of adultery, who offers the judgment 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her'. Serres observes that the story has Jesus writing with his finger on ground before he makes his judgement. Could it be, he speculates, that Jesus has written out the name of the party to the adultery, and that this person is amongst the crowd now clamouring for blood. There is then at least one person who has a complicated relationship to what may or may not be about to happen – 'What matters to me is the 'at least one.' For I know him. Not by name, but by his presence and his function – I was about to say by his usefulness' (Serres, 2022: 90). Serres compares this person to that of the sole member of firing squad who is randomly issued with a blank cartridge:

> Why is this blank necessary? Why is it necessary that, amongst the executioners, this 'at least one' does not kill? Why should he be chosen, in effect, by drawing lots? For the same reason, a profound one. For in the wake of a death by stoning or by shooting, judicial review – or a palace revolt, or a popular revolution – may bring to

> light the innocence of the person who was execute. In that event the situation is reversed, and the people will turn on those who killed the now blameless defendant, which is to say the entire firing squad. But who among this group really killed the one who in the meantime has become a victim? (Serres, 2022: 90)

What Serres describes here is an additional social function that can be added to Rene Girard's theory of 'the scapegoat'. For Girard, and subsequently for Serres, the collective is founded on the exclusion of one of their number, who may be subject to banishment, or more likely death. These acts of exclusion serve the role of settling rivalries and conflicts within the nascent collective. The desires and contests which animate those who are collected together are resolved when they are turned on one specific individual, who becomes the 'it' as though in a child's game of Hunt the Slipper, or in a manner of the soccer player who has just missed a goal. The collective energises itself through its joint efforts to expel or destroy the scapegoat, like the biblical characters who clamour to stone the adulterer. But here Serres points to 'usefulness' of the word Jesus has drawn on the ground and the blank cartridge. There is one amongst us whose actions will differentiate the collective, who ensures that the relationship between the mob and the scapegoat may become reversible. If murder and exclusion are a pre-requisite to the founding of the collective, the possibility of this future reversibility, which is known to all, provides an additional bond. Here there might be a third formulation of safety – *the presence of the 'at least one' which ensures diffusion of responsibility and the possibility to reversible relations at a future date*.

If the corpse is the first object, it is certainly not the only object which may serve as a foundation. Serres notes that animals may serve as effective substitutes for humans, such that that animal sacrifice can become a means for purifying or re-collecting the bonds of the collective. In a further substitution, fetish objects such as sacred relics can replace animal sacrifice. Yet the logic of foundation remains constant throughout all of the substitutions. The energy and petty rivalries of those collected together are sublimated in ritual destruction or glorification of the object which serves as the central point of focus of the collective. In the final case of fetish objects, Serres argues that they may be accorded a kind of agency all of their own which elevates to them the effective status of 'quasi-objects'. His well-known example of the rugby game demonstrates this well, where it is the ball that operates to distribute the players across the pitch as they move to intercept passes. This leads to the conclusion that despite having its origins in death and expulsion 'the construction of the collective has been done with anyone and by means of anything. The furet is nothing, a ring, a button, a thing; the ball is a skin or an air bubble' (Serres, 1982: 229). It is not the material composition of the quasi-object that is decisive, but rather its capacity to mark out the relations between subjects:

> This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructer of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. 'We': what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of 'I'. The 'I' in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariances of subjects weave the collection. (Serres, 1982: 227)

The corpse did not move, in part because it had become an object, and thus needed to be hidden from sight to ensure that any remaining memory of subjectivity was occluded. But the fetish object realises a journey in the opposite direction. It is an object that acquires something like agency – hence 'quasi-object', although it might as well be called 'quasi-subject' – through the way that it moves and constructs intersubjectivity by creating ripples of risk and value. If you receive the ball and transmit it on to score a point, you are the hero. If you fumble the ball and lose the match, it may well be you who symbolically finds themselves under a pile of rocks.

One outcome of the panurgic drive is the constitution of quasi-objects who possess dimensions that tend towards the universal. Serres terms these 'world-objects' and defines them as 'artifacts that have at least one global-scale dimension (such as time, space, speed or energy)' (Serres, 1995: 15). A satellite, for example, has the global scale of speed, nuclear power that of energy, and fossil fuel pollution that of time. World-objects can accomplish the construction of the collective in the same manner as rugby balls or sacred artefacts, in that the become to focus of collected energies and concerns. But they also demonstrate that violence is never entirely displaced within acts of founding and re-collecting the collective. It is the threat of nuclear incineration or species extinction that is intrinsic to the function of these world-objects. In fact, Serres notes, we have never really gotten very far from the idea of violence and exclusion as part of the organization of society. Consider how many deaths from road traffic accidents societies are able to tolerate in the name personal mobility, the number of deaths by shooting that societies with access to firearms can tolerate in the name of individual liberty, or the multitude of slow deaths from racism, poverty and exploitation that a balanced against uneven capital accumulation.

This tolerance for death has its roots in the appropriative character of foundation. In *Malfeasance*, Serres argues against Rousseau's famous dictum that 'the first who after enclosing a piece of land thought of saying 'this is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him was the real founder of civil society'. This imagined act which gives rise to property rights seeks to deny the violence and destruction inherent in the appropriation of space. Someone or something must die in order to create a boundary marker. But more precisely, the burial of the corpse under the stone stains the site in a particular way that comes to define it. Serres sees this as the continuation, by other means, of an ethological strategy for marking out territory – 'tigers piss on the edge of their lair. And so do lions and dogs. Like those carnivorous mammals, many animals, our cousins, *mark* their territory with their harsh, stinking urine or with their howling, while others such as finches and nightingales use sweet songs' (Serres, 2011: 1). It is then necessary to rewrite Rousseau in the following way:

> Whoever spits in the soup keeps it; no one will touch the salad or the cheese polluted in this way. To make something its own, the body knows how to leave some personal stain: sweat on a garment, saliva or feet out into a dish, waste in space, aroma, perfume, or excrement, all of them rather hard things … but also my name, printed in black on this book cover, where my signature looks sweet and innocent, seemingly unrelated to those habits. And yet … Hence the theorem of what might becalled natural right. By 'natural' I mean the general behaviour of living species:

> *appropriation takes place through dirt*. More precisely, what is properly one's own is dirt. (Serres, 2011: 2-3)

Here we return to the 'soiling gesture', but now in the context of an archaic ethological strategy to establish territory and 'take place'. The hard dimension – excrement and sweat – is ultimately transformed into the chemical and material waste of contemporary practices, whereas the soft dimension – song and signatures – becomes the semiotic tsunami of contemporary societies. Perhaps a fourth formulation of safety then follows – *the ability to tolerate and live amongst the excrement of others*. We feel safe when we can ignore the pain and exploitation all along the supply chains that keep us alive, when we can suppress the ways in which we collude in the destructive acts that are required to keep the collective collected together. Lockdowns and social distancing were difficult because they make this collective work more difficult to accomplish. We had to recognise that our own safety was being bought at the cost to key workers and the otherwise invisible pain of the multitudes who precariously shore up global supply chains.

Panbiota

Is it possible to break with the cycle of violence and appropriation that Serres sees as intrinsic to the founding and maintenance of the collective? And if this were possible, in whatever way, how then would we be able to think of safety, particular with regard to the range of existing and emergent dimensions in which 'feeling safe' matters? In *Detachment*, Serres recounts the story of the Greek cynic Diogenes. Known for having rejected the trappings of privilege, Diogenes is living on the streets of Corinth, when he reputedly meets Alexander the Great. The King asks the philosopher what favour he might grant, what he truly desires. Enjoying the early morning sunlight, Diogenes replies 'Right now, remove yourself from my sun'. For Serres, the Diogenes story illustrates the virtues of standing aside, of refusing to enter into appropriative relations with others:

> Diogenes the Cynic has forsaken this price. Diogenes has forsaken the spice of life. Appeased, in rags, alone in front of his barrel, pointing to the zero of usefulness on the nakedness of his skin, he meditates and asks: can we invent relations other than those of struggle, other than those of exchange or worship? Is it possible for me to place my hand on an object, or look at an object which is not a stake, fetish or merchandise? (Serres, 1989: 69)

If we agree to not consider too closely the provenance of this story about a philosopher who is able to defy a King, the central message of the cost of inventing dis-interested relations to objects and others is clear. To refuse appropriation is to stand outside the usual circuits of exchange and value. In doing so we may be exculpated from participation in violence, but this does not necessarily mean that we ourselves may not be subject to appropriation (perhaps in the way that the story of Diogenes is here co-opted into a narrative of violence and safety). Serres is not, however, suggesting that Diogenes is somehow removing himself from all attachments, rather than he is seeking to open himself up to them. He does not want his relationship to the sun to be mediated by Alexander and the forms of appropriation and fetishization he stands for. Diogenes wants to immerse himself in the bonds to the world that stand before the invention of property.

These bonds or cords between the world and humans have persisted within property relations, although they have become obscured considerably. A key event in the transformation of these bonds occurred roughly 10,000 years ago with the domestication of animals by humans, eventually leading to the practice of smallhold farming. In *Hominescence*, Serres describes how living together as a 'common house' transformed the bonds between human and animals, since it forced them into something resembling reciprocal relations. In order to build these relations, it became necessary to construct new forms of communication and interaction, an acculturation of nature:

> [I]t's less a matter of understanding how we began to tame certain animals, therefore of giving in once again to anthropocentrism, than of seeing how the common hotel was constructed, the hotel in which the host-animals ended up living in symbiosis, at least an apparent one, since they were lodged, looked after and fed by the parasite-human; in order to prepare this common site, it is enough for the parasite to become host and hosts parasites, reciprocal domestication becoming then another name for symbiosis and this latter continuing the cultural genesis undertaken, body-to-body, next to every living thing. (Serres, 2019: 87)

Farming is decisive moment in hominescence, since it brings animals and humans into a close proximity where there is a mutual acculturation to one another. To live together requires a physical training or embodied co-ordination wherein species reconstruct the terms of their interaction. We humans are transformed by our close domestic contact with other species, as they are in turn by us. The biological name for this living together is 'symbiosis'. Whilst the term is often used in the contemporary humanities and social sciences as a synonym for non-extractive or mutually beneficial relationships, in its technical use it merely denotes a communal relationship where there is benefit to at least party, with 'mutualism' being the proper term for two-way exchanges of value. This is important in this case because, as Serres notes, the human remains parasitic upon domesticated animals (parasitism is a crucial term in Serres' work – see Brown 2002; 2013). However, through living together the roles of host and parasite do become at temporarily reversible. The necessity to make oneself a host as a condition of continuing to parasitise becomes entrenched at a bodily level amongst Neolithic farmers.

The value of 'living together' in this way has been lost to a certain degree. In many of his books, Serres points to the massive shift away from rural farming in the Global North as marking a new phase in hominescence where we have forgotten, at an embodied level, what living together with other species feels like, what it is to feel attached to the lives of symbionts. As a consequence, we are challenged considerably when close co-existence is forced upon us, such as in the case of urban rat colonies or flea infestations. Since we are no longer trained in the cultural accommodation of living together, we resort to the familiar strategies of purification and the defence of property and attempt to expel what we see as parasitic encroachment, as Serres so beautifully describes in his reading of Molière's *Tartuffe* in *The Parasite*. But to do so is to simply re-enter the endless cycle of violence and appropriation that ultimately leads back to the panurgic drive for universal exploitation.

Yet our current circumstances may have curiously returned us back to a situation not entirely dissimilar to the 'common site' of the Neolithic. The Pantopic globalisation of movement across the globe has not only resulted in a Panthropic collecting together of all peoples (notwithstanding the violent barriers placed against migration) but also, Serres claims, a recognition that we have now entered into Panbiota – a universal living together with all other forms of life who depend upon us. This clearly includes coronaviruses. To paraphrase Serres, we depend upon viral and bacterial life through a strange loop that has led them to globally depend on us to be what they are. As Serres notes, panbiota then in some sense 'completes' that aspect of hominescence that began with the Neolithic. How do we then think of what living together with something like coronavirus means? It is not a question of simply ignoring its presence and 'carrying on regardless', as the public health strategy in the UK has attempted and failed to do, but rather a more cautious effort at reworking the bonds between virus and human through exploring what they may be outside of relations of violence and appropriation:

> The whole of culture results from a patient, long, local and temporary management, from a comprehension and from negotiations that are as infinite as those I am recommending regarding the ineradicable accursed portion. You will suppress nature as little as you do it and suppress is as little as you do nature. However deeply your enclosure in the city and at home, in the middle of tried and proven defences, may be built, however aseptically and 'culturally' your life may unfold, the violence of the wind and of suffering always returns … The whole of the habitat is therefore built at once and without cease. At the same time as culture, morality occurs, and with a similar movement. Of course, one doesn't protect oneself against disease the way one does against a storm, nor against a murderer the way one does against a cold snap, but culture is born from having prepared these defences at a stroke. It only emerges from this prudence, said to be characteristic of the father of the family, whose wisdom manages nature and its constraints, life and its morbid bacteria, humans and their violence; it is born from voluntary symbioses. (Serres, 2018: 165)

This long and difficult passage contains the kernel of Serres' version of 'living together'. Co-existence is an infinite project that requires our full attention (hence we must, like Diogenes, ask the forces of appropriation to remove themselves from our sun). But this project will never be free from violence, from the 'accursed portion' that defines life at any planetary scale. All life engages in some form of parasitism, or taking without giving, and hence must, at times, be destructive. We have to build a home to survive, yet the fact that we must do so 'at once' does not mean that we ought not to at every turn consider the necessity of welcoming others within our home. That hospitality may have to revert 'at a stroke' into hostility, when we need to expel a parasite that threatens our survival, but this an exceptional contingency rather than a principle of living. We must be hosts by default and parasites as required, with the 'prudence' required to meditate on this process. *Voluntary and perpetual symbiosis, guided by wisdom, is the basis of panbiota*. This will also serve as a final formulation of what safety means.

I want to conclude with two final reflections on the preceeding passage. Serres speaks of 'negotiations' with the world. This is derived in part from his argument for a *Natural Contract* between humans and the Earth System. This has sometimes been derided as a

well-intentioned but unworkable anthropomorphism, where that which does not speak is only accorded rights on the basis that we engage in the pretence of speaking on its behalf. But this interpretation ignores the long and careful work that Serres does throughout his writing on the dependence of legal notions of contract with notions of harmonies and laws in nature. As David Webb has argued, in order to even think of something resembling a negotiation, we must first understand the resonances and bonds that leads to federations between things that make exchange and living together possible. To negotiate with a coronavirus, for instance, is not to fool ourselves that it can be brought into language, but rather to first understand the myriad cords through which we are connected and the nature of our mutual dependencies.

Finally, I read the reference to the 'father of the family' as an appeal to religion rather than patriarchy (in as much as it is possible to distinguish the two). Serres' final work is an appeal to return again and engage in further reading of what religion and myth provide for synthetic rather than analytic thought. He speaks of the puteal structures build in archaic times. These were walled structures built around a spot considered to be a point of passage, such as where lightning from the heavens had struck, or places where access to an underworld might be secured. These structures would typically be covered for the majority of the time, only to be revealed on festive occasions such as the *Mundus Patet* in Rome, when the 'hot spots' between worlds might be open. Unlike a temple, which by definition encloses space, or a burial site, which transforms the human into an object as a boundary marker, the puteal is open and affords what Serres calls a 'vertical binding'. If we think of this binding as not between some other world and this one, but rather of an additional dimension in the relations between people and things that accomplishes a synthetic, quasi-mathematical operation of integration, we are perhaps on the right track to where Serres' thinking was going. Living together and feeling safe will ultimately require a patient, prudent and wise exploration of what kinds of synthesis and symbiosis are possible.

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