

**“CRITIQUE” EMERGING FROM MARSHES AND MUSHROOMS
PARASITISM AND DESTERILIZATION IN SERRES AND
TSING**

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I have heard that the white edible mushrooms are found principally at the edge of the wood, though I can't tell them apart.

Some minutes more passed, they moved still farther away from the children, and were quite alone. Varenka's heart throbbed so that she heard it beating, and felt that she was turning red and pale and red again.

To be the wife of a man like Koznyshev, after her position with Madame Stahl, was to her imagination the height of happiness. Besides, she was almost certain that she was in love with him. And this moment it would have to be decided. She felt frightened. She dreaded both his speaking and his not speaking.

Anna Karenina, Part 6, Chapter 5

Abstract

This paper looks at the theoretical practice of “critique” in the work of Michel Serres and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, focusing especially on the notion of parasitism and femininity. The co-reading shines a light on the crossings of their approaches, like a critique of “laboratory” - like conditions and a masculinist understanding of rationalism. Furthermore, it brings attention to some productive divergences. With Tsing’s approach, this paper reflects critically on Serres’s understanding of femininity and extends his philosophical elaboration of parasites and fungi with a feminist, ecological and anthropological perspective. Serres, on the other hand, contributes with his multi-faceted figure of the “third” crucially to structural reflections on the relation between fungi and femininity, as well as to an understanding of “critique” from the “middle”, beyond the “battle of the two”.

Making the dirty clean, tidying up the messiness of reality, creating sterile research conditions: such objectives have lost their theoretical attraction at two thinkers who in first sight seem to have a lot in common, but come from quite different directions – in terms of their discursive intellectual backgrounds, disciplines and methodologies. Michel Serres and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing both engage with the question of theory-practice that conceives itself from “out there”, in correlation with its subject matters like “marshes” and “fungi”, and therefore a “critique” that includes elements whose exclusion has often been constitutive of intellectual hygiene, such as the feminine and the parasite. In both Serres’s and Tsing’s approach, the challenge is going beyond masculinist rationalism and the mimicry of sterile laboratory-like conditions. They both follow aspirations to

reconfigure the human-nature relationship without necessarily replacing the sovereignty of the “human” with the “nonhuman”, but rather engage with their complex intermingling. They both “translate”¹ across disciplinary areas, and articulate a theory that refrains from understanding itself as a “mastery” of their subject matter. In this context, they can both be considered as partaking in the aim of recent political ecology, especially feminist ecology, to counterpose approaches of mastering nature (Plumwood 1994). This does nonetheless not necessarily lead to a general overcoming of distinctions like “nature” and “culture”. Posthumus argues that «unlike Bruno Latour, Serres does not collapse the distinction between nature and culture; instead, he maintains the distinction and then explores different zones of contact» (Posthumus 2007, 13).

In what follows, I will try to shine a light on two realms of theoretical resonance when it comes to Serres’s critiques of, figuratively speaking, «squeaky clean bathrooms» (*HIV*, 180). Both Serres and Tsing share an interest in philosophies that question the alliance of mysophobic, misogynistic and mycophobic tendencies. Fertility, fungi and infection create assemblages of exclusion which Serres’s and Tsing’s approaches are critical towards. Although their work seems to share many aspects and a co-reading proves in this regard to be mutually enriching, nonetheless in some respects their approaches do also diverge. This dialogue between Serres and Tsing will be addressed in three steps.

Firstly, Serres’s concept of femininity, which merges with the non-sterile, the dirt and bacteria, relates to his project of finding a “new knowledge”. I will argue that the excluded or included “femininity” in some cases overlap with the figure of the “parasite”, but that it is nevertheless not identical with it from a structural point of view. I will, secondly, attempt to examine Tsing’s work in the light of Serres’s structural approach of triangulations of the excluded middle or third, for which fungi prove to play a central role. In this regard, the dialogue between Serres and Tsing opens his concept of femininity to triangles that go beyond a “third” between a sexual binary. This will, in a third step, reflect back on the practice of “critique”, for which – despite these many parallels – I will highlight some differences between Serres and Tsing. Even though Serres and Tsing undoubtedly share the same aims when it comes to their appreciation of exposure and sensibility, Serres nevertheless sticks to his paradigm of the “third”, also in regard to his own theory-practice. Serres generally does not take position or stand in for a concept, like Tsing does when she puts for instance “vulnerability” to the fore. The critical position comes in Serres’s thinking from “in between”, it attempts to elaborate on the paradox of a positionless position, of embodying the third itself. The “in between” expands its meaning in Serres: from the “middle” as a *figure* to the *space*. He goes beyond the “battle of the two” and opens the conceptual framework up to its environmental aim: critique from both the “middle” and the “milieu” (*TK*, 43).

¹ “Translation” enfolds in both their work as a broader framework of non-language. In Serres, the translative function stands in the context of his philosophy of the “third”, which does not only represent each side equally, but which intermediates, creates, manipulates. In this sense, there is a mimetic aspect in Serres’s writerly position. “Mimicry” is furthermore intimately connected to the “game of the parasite”, in its ambivalent function between the parasitic, the creative and representational (*P*, 202). Nevertheless, as Watkin points out, Serres’s philosophy is, in respect to its eco-criticality, less «mimetic» than «methetic» (Watkin 2020, 247-252). The translational act is, so to say, rather a reciprocal participation between language and material existence than it would install a supremacy of the sense of human language. Tsing refers to Shiho Satsuka’s understanding of “translation” as «drawing of one-world project into another» (Tsing 2015, 62). Besides that, she defines “translations” as a «continual negotiation, an irregular, haphazard process in which terms are appropriated from one context to another and then used to do different work» (Tsing 1997, 2).

1. *The non-sterile and its impact on “critique”*

Serres takes into account what has been structurally excluded: mixtures and substances which are associated with disgust and fertility, such as salty marshes, menstrual blood or milk (*HIV*, 149-153). He stresses that these conglomerates are the basic condition for life and to a certain degree indispensable². Nevertheless, his intervention does not consist in including dirt as an exemplar of justice towards the “excluded” per se. He makes the excluded dirt and noise his philosophical program, not at least insofar as he regards exactly the *division* between dirt and cleanliness as a factor for the production of more dirt. In this sense, his aim is not to tribute a eulogy on dirt and a negligence towards infection. Rather, he points to cleanliness producing unimagined extents of leftovers³. The aim to create clean, laboratory-like conditions as a model beyond the laboratory itself has furthermore, following Serres, been critically taken up by Bruno Latour⁴. With the spotlight on dirtiness, Serres contributes to a field of interest that was notably opened in the 1960s by Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (1966), whose cultural-anthropological concerns interestingly also derive from a certain uncanniness of the «spotlessly clean bathroom» (Douglas 1966, 2). It is in this context not Serres’s aim to reverse the relationship between agency in regard to humans and dirt. Different from Ladelle McWhorter for instance, whose evaluation of dirt «puts forth a striking model of agency without subjects» (Alaimo 2008, 247), Serres’s notion of dirtiness is not primarily concerned with a deconstruction of the human subject as an agent. Watkins draws a picture of Serres showing that human agency is only «one mode of agency among many others, quantitatively notable but not qualitatively unique» (Watkin 2020, 298).

With the mechanics of mixtures, with emphasis on fluidity and clouds, Serres builds on the history of French philosophical discussions of science and argues generally for the emergence of order out of disorder⁵. Disorder, chaos and fluidity are generally associated with femininity in Serres’s writing, and fold back onto his understanding of “critique” as well as his own theoretical practice.

By stressing the status of fluidity in images of thought, Serres refers to the Leibnizian analogy of oceans and the distribution of knowledge (*HIV*, 167) and Lucretius’ “flows” (*B*, 21-26). Furthermore, fluids and the sea play a prominent role in his reading of

² «Out of the clean nothing emerges. From separation, nothing appears. Everything comes out of mixture. Life rises from the marshes. From the salty marshes. From the sea and blood. Today’s aseptics are appalled. From the stinking marshes only illness and perversion rises» (my own translation, *HIV*, 156).

³ In *Hermès IV*, the “squeaky clean bathrooms” produce streets full of dirt and excrements. The actual disease is, according to him, the separation or the dichotomy as such, hell is exactly the separation between heaven and hell (*HIV*, 180).

⁴ In *We Have Never Been Modern* Latour underscores the historical impacts of “purification” and its connection with the work of “translation”. Whereas purification not only creates different ontological zones (of like, for instance, humans and nonhumans), it is also followed up symmetrically by «proliferation of hybrids» (Latour 1993, 10-14, 62, 131-132). Latour relates to Serres in many instances, also when he elaborates on the “domestication of microbes” in his work on Pasteur’s impact beyond the edges of science (Latour 1988b, 5, 39, 56-57).

⁵ Serres was a direct pupil of Bachelard and makes numerous references to Bergson. Whether Serres is, as a direct pupil of Bachelard, rather “post-Bachelard” than “anti-Bachelard”, has been discussed (Simons 2019, 61). Even though Bachelard’s project seems to be «still at work in Serres’s philosophy», according to Simons, there are some clear differences to be recognized, like the different ontological role of objects or rationalism as a methodology. In their understanding of physics, they differ insofar as «Serres develops a non-determinist physics, where the starting point is not order but disorder» (Simons 2019, 68).

Michelet, whose influence regarding the metaphorical impact of femininity is not to be underestimated⁶. Serres considers himself a committed feminist: in an interview with Ada Giusti, he claims: «Je suis féministe convaincu» (Giusti 1996, 114). As Assad rightly notes, this argument stands on thin ice «and will not convince a feminist who, when everything is said and done, still sees the articulation masculine/feminine attached to gendered linguistic unity of speech» (Assad 2005, 212). In his work, Serres shows attempts to include femininity through an appreciation of “chaos”, the “non-sterile”, “menstrual blood” and generally the “soft”. This appreciation is, nevertheless, in itself rather archaic and retrograde. Following Assad’s reading of Serres, his thought seems generally more concerned with the generation of knowledge between different passages than it would be about sex and gender in first place⁷, which makes his relationship to femininity in its «mythical or folkloric-romantic form» no less an issue of discussion (Assad 2005, 211-214). Given that, how can Serres then contribute to feminist critique? The crossing between Serres and feminist critique are multiple, and despite the problematic aspects, I will in the following try to focus on the dialogue between Serres and Tsing from the perspective of the “third” and the criticism of “sterile” theory.

When Serres examines the method of “critique” in relation to sterility and putrefaction in *Hermès IV*, he focuses it less from the genealogical angle, but from the medical in its historical scientific context. He regards Nietzsche’s work less from the perspective of what he writes “against”, “anti” or “counter” – more insightful is, in his own words, which methods and weapons he uses. Rather than the hammer, as claimed by Nietzsche himself, the weapon in question is for Serres the scalpel, and Nietzsche, in his counteractivity, pierces the abscess. His work is, according to Serres, not a virulent analysis of Christianity, but a fantastic description of the activity of virulent viruses (*H IV*, 173-180), analysing Christ as a yeast fungus and Paul as saliva (*H IV*, 185-187). Serres takes on the challenge of cheese to make sense of milk, which one leaves to filth and dirt, and which exactly through that exposure transforms into something “higher” (*H IV*, 179). The decisive about the transformation is nevertheless not the duality between two states of being, but exactly the intermediary third, which Serres describes in its manipulative and creative, “good” and “devil” ambiguity (*P*, 88). The “cheese” is not only a product of a biological process, but enters furthermore into a human economic chain. Creamy and milky nutrition such as cheese are in this context characterized as “infantile” and

⁶ See Serres’s references to Michelet’s *La mer* as a model for «irenic cognition» (*H IV*, 148). Serres analyses Michelet in relation to science, traces “Neptunism” and “Heterogeny” in the theory of a prebiotic soup (*H*, 30) and identifies different “machines” in his thought, in which «the world is woman» (*H*, 35). Serres introduces a critical turn concerning the genotype of femininity. According to Serres, «one could say that these liquids are overdetermined by Michelet, by his unconscious» (*H*, 36). Even though Serres seems to admit that the “genotype is femininity” and the “eternal feminine” might be an “error” as an explanation of a series of invariants, he stresses «that in his method Michelet was seeking an invariant genotypic tree, an underlying invariance beneath the phenotypic development of the chain. This, then, is the acknowledged aim – the development of a circular chain, the disclosure of a structural invariance in genesis» (*H*, 30). Furthermore, the figure of the “sorceress” in *The Birth of Physics* shows alliances with the sorceress of Michelet, «a transhistorical woman who is the embodiment of the Other and serves the misogynist Michelet to glorify the “simple people”» (Assad 2005, 213).

⁷ In the introduction to *The Birth of Physics*, David Webb points out this for Serres’s reading of Venus and Mars, as they represent different kinds of knowledge: «Mars is not just the god of war, but also the figurehead of prevailing forms of knowledge that Serres regards as given over to violence toward the object, scientific, political or cultural. By contrast, Venus stands for an approach to knowledge informed by the contract and the restraint that comes with it» (*B*, 16).

therefore allude to an excluded third on the economic level beyond the microbiotic organism.

The inclusion of the excluded third can affect both “femininity” and the “parasite”. As shown in this example with the philosophical problem of the “cheese”, the structural function of Serres’s “femininity” and the “parasitical” overlap. They both enter into a chain that is economic and ecological, life-enabling and fertile as well as infectious and destructive. Even though Serres’s concepts of femininity and the parasite clearly cross, they are not identical. The parasite with its threefold meaning according to the French *parasite* as an “abusive guest”, an “unavoidable animal” and “a break in a message”, Serres introduces an ontology of interruptive, parasitic relations over a dominant primacy of substance in Western ontologies (Watkin 2020, 300-305). The parasite is furthermore related to “critique” as a specific relationship of theory and its matter, insofar as it transforms matter into words and vice versa (*P*, 35-36). It is a structural function, but also an «operator», «a generalized clinamen» (*P*, 188):«The clinamen and the parasite both introduce a drop of chaos into an ocean of order, around which crystals of existence begin to form» (Watkins 2020, 305). Both the “parasite” and the “feminine” therefore participate in what Watkin calls the «ontology of inclination» (Watkin 2020, 240) in Serres, with its consequences for what place the making of theory or the doing of critique takes. The “feminine”, besides entailing generally a problematic archaism in Serres, matters for his understanding of a generative theoretical practice in a double sense. His understanding of femininity is based on fluidity⁸, chaos and turbulences, in or from which islands order emerges. This leads Serres furthermore to an understanding of a «Venusian knowledge» (*B*, 43), in which the “feminine” appears to be a positive criterion for the practice of “critique”. As Assad emphasizes, the conceptual key that the feminine holds in Serres is that between immanence and nonlinearity with its «implication of otherness» (Assad 2005, 219). The implication of otherness, to which the multiple figures of the “feminine” open up, break the parasitical relation up to an immanent place of the other: a «state of grace», «sensate wisdom» and «utter immanence» (Assad 2005, 220). To summarize briefly: even though Serres “femininity” and “parasite” clearly cross in their impact for a theory-practice which considers dirt and bacteria as an included excluded, they are from a structural point of view not identical. The parasite’s relation to a relation receives its constitutive force from being *excluded*. Femininity, on the other hand, *includes* otherness to the extent of radical immanence.

To similarly dissect and combine the third as “feminine” and “parasitical” in accordance with feminist critique, I will suggest a dialogue between Serres and Tsing. Both demonstrate an explicit interest in organisms and milieus which are life-enabling and therefore also a condition for human thought. Dirt, mushrooms, bacteria or cheese

⁸ With the connection between femininity and fluidity, he shares nevertheless a “feminist” interest with Luce Irigaray’s critique of patriarchal metaphysics of the solid. Serres may be juxtaposed to Luce Irigaray’s criticism of patriarchal metaphysics of solidity (Bardsley 2019, 15-20). It has in this context been discussed whether Irigaray’s «female fluidity» follows up an essentialism – or instead, a «radical materialism» with the aim to counterpose Western materialism and its basis on solid entities (Schor 1994, 56). In Irigaray’s account, the liquid is not understood as formless, but its form as an indefinite morphological process (Irigaray 1991, 55). What furthermore relates to Serres, may be the aspect of femaleness as the excluded middle. In Timothy Morton’s reading, Irigaray is one example of what he calls a “weird essentialism”, which thinks the object in regard to an object-oriented ontology as “deviant”. Morton argues that for Irigaray «at least one entity, known as woman, falls outside the logical Law of Noncontradiction, insofar as female physicality cannot be thought either as one or as two but as a weird touching between one and two, a loop-like self-touching denigrated as narcissism» (Morton 2016, 73).

serve as starting points for their theoretical practice, and bringing them into a theoretical framework does explicitly not mean to “sterilize” them. A dialogue appears to be productive for a reading of both their work: Tsing’s research appears, under the perspective of the excluded third, structurally reflected in a triangle, whereas Serres’s writing on femininity is, by means of the phenomena Tsing points out, pushed towards a more generative and less archaic approach to dimensions of femininity.

2. *Triangulations of exclusion between fungi and femininity*

In Tsing, the interlacing between misogyny and mycophobia refuses the easy solution of equalizing them. The rejection and anxiety of fungi and of femininity is not the same. She deals less with Serresian figures like Venus, Aphrodite and Penelope than with phenomena like the prototype of the “white woman” during the uprising of the sugar cane industry who became the agent of hygiene in its broadest sense: «White women became responsible for maintaining the boundaries – of homes, families, species, and the white race» (Tsing 2012, 149). We find the making of boundaries not as the prototype of the patriarchal masculine, but in this case embodied in feminine agency. This does not reinscribe in reverse the making of boundaries as feminine in opposition to psychoanalyst patriarchal triangles, but as potentially open to all sorts of sex without these being the determinate factor. This contributes decisively to feminist questions of the “hybrid” between the binary and the plurality of figured “thirds” between female and male. Hermaphrodite does indeed play this hybrid role in Serres’s writing in an affirmative sense as well, yet he seems to attribute philosophically more appreciation to the figure of the androgyne⁹. A “third gender” has, may it be pushed to multiple forms, nevertheless an ironically *stabilizing* and furthermore *reductive* impact in its seemingly disturbing function towards the binary sexes, when it is taken into account too literally¹⁰. It is exactly the question of the “third” or “middle” which proves centrality in Serres’s thought and which does not have to be the stabilizing middle of a sexual binary. In relation to Tsing, Serres provides a mode of thought that acknowledges two triangles of exclusion (additional to the exclusion of dangerous bacteria through the line between sterility and femininity): sterility-femininity-race, in which non-white people are excluded, and sterility-femininity-home, in which non-family members are excluded. Tsing goes back to connections between the fetishization of the white race, of clean and pure homes and the limitation of love within family walls (Tsing 2012, 150): «Domination, domestication, and love are deeply entangled», as Tsing points out (Tsing 2012, 141), with which she builds on Haraway’s work on “companion species”¹¹. Besides

⁹ In *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, Serres’s Hermaphrodite appears as a figure which represents intermingling, monstrous mixture and hybridity in a not necessarily unusual way. He sees Hermaphrodite thus as a challenge to see «under the skin» and to discover, in the end, «flesh» (TK, xvi). Hermaphroditism seems to resolutely remain between the “two”: Serres speaks of a sum of halves (TK, 16), «a ship with two sides» or a messenger who «belongs to two worlds». (TK, 163). The androgyne, however, in its different being in-between, reveals less the logic of “flesh”, is less «narcissistic» and «opens on to the world» whilst being «knowledgeable» (TK, 15).

¹⁰ Gilbert Herdt has pointed to this problematic regarding a «code of thirdness» (Herdt 1994, 19), which provides a useful sensibility when it comes to the many forms transsexuality, intersexuality or hermaphroditic figures might themselves be enclosed in the power of the two.

¹¹ The exclusivity of love relationships not only between humans, but also in relation to other species has been discussed as well as problematized by Haraway in her multi-species manifesto. Haraway for instance raises a quite critical tone when it comes to the status of love as «unconditional» in the relationship between

problematizing the boundaries drawn by a domesticated household and its political expansions, Serres is furthermore adaptable to Tsing by focusing on the scale of boundaries¹². The model of sterile laboratory-like conditions pursued, in the following, its career also as a model for “critique”. It is not “out of the world” in an abstract transcendent sense, but excluding the world from the viewpoint of a sterile island. Immanence as a demand for critique shifts in its meaning in relation to it being “in the world”. There is no point in fighting against the phantasm of an otherworldly “outside” if its possibility is not acknowledged in first stance. With this, the phantasm of transcendence is, so to speak, not out of the world. As a problem of theoretical practice, it persists, in this case which is discussed here in terms of the «squeaky clean bathroom» and laboratory-like sterility, as opposed to the bacteria and fungi in the world «out there». Latour, referencing Shapin and Schaffer, will call this the sciences’ claim that reality is not «out there», but «down there», on the laboratory bench (Latour 1993, 21).

It is the «magic of translation» and the «mushroom’s relational force» which provide the essential part rather than the agents who are in play (Tsing 2015, 123-125). Similar to Serres, Tsing therefore inflates the value of the intermediary as a constitutive force. Mushrooms’ “relational force” stands both in the chains of human economy and ecological recycling. They furthermore play part of an ecological-economic chain in which they act as quasi-objects, especially in regard to Tsing’s anthropological perspective on the matsutake mushrooms¹³. In the bigger picture of a transformation of life-enabling matter, human agency is therefore not diminished, but similarly put onto another scale as well as assigned with another role – its agency becomes minor and that of the parasite. Yet the point is not to target and dismiss the idea of human agency in general, but to balance its importance¹⁴ and to bring it into structural considerations of economies of the “third”, which withdraw human as well as nonhuman agency from their exclusivity.

In the context of her reflections on the local-global relation, Tsing describes the fungi’s spores as an opening of our imagination «to another cosmopolitan topology» (Tsing 2015, 227). Whereas in the context of Serres’s “parasite” the distinction between local and global seems to correspond to the difference between «entity that takes from a host» and a general «noise» (Watkin 2020, 300), Tsing relates local and global perspective both through fungi. She inscribes them into a reflection that enfolds in *Friction* in the context

humans and dogs (Haraway 2016a, 124-125). From the perspective of constitutive exclusion, it rather raises the question of the thick line which «unconditionality» draws – and what it therefore constitutively excludes. “Love” has in Haraway, in an intellectual alliance to what Tsing is concerned with, a productive tension between affectionate relationship with our more-than-human surrounding, as well as she calls it a «nasty developmental infection» (Haraway 2008, 29).

¹² The scale of boundaries is insofar a topic for Serres, as he tries to establish an alert eye for the interconnection between philosophy and science. He introduces a heterogeneity of boundaries coming from for the instance the clouds, solid bodies, the skin, atoms, geographical territories etc (*H V*, 40-52; *B*, 97, 175, 218-219).

¹³ Equivalently to Serres’s example of the ball in a game and the status of the quasi-object between subject and object (*P*, 225), mushrooms are also able to take on the shape of a generator of collectivity. Tsing describes the matsutake mushroom, beyond it being an edible commodity, as a way to show serious commitment (Tsing 2015, 123-125). It furthermore resonates with Latour’s characterization, who has been taken up by Serres’s concept of quasi-objects at length. According to him, it stands as a hybrid between the poles of nature and society (Latour 1993, 55).

¹⁴ According to Tsing, fungi are indicator species for the human condition (Tsing 2012, 144). I would still rather call it “balancing” than inversion (which would apply the logic of domination in its opposite), as she puts emphasis on the fact that the multi-species world always creates «living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others» (Tsing 2015, 22).

of thinking global nature and worldwide relations. Her claim that «global nature both facilitates and obscures worldwide collaborations» (Tsing 2005, 124) stands in the endeavour to find ways of conceptualizing different scales, the relation between local and global movements and the unmasking of a «global dream space» (Tsing 2005, 99). Serres and Tsing conceive critique in relation to its matter and ground, which has a double function: it invites to think the “global”, like through “Nature” or “cosmopolitan mushrooms”, but at the same time it witnesses limits, a brake or friction in universalist expansions. Tsing points to the fact that the science of matsutake seems to resemble the cosmopolitanism of the spores of the mushrooms themselves. Even though she concedes that this spore-like research can sometimes be productive, she generally seems to be sceptical of «cosmopolitan knowledge» and rather stresses its «historical emergence» (Tsing 2015, 228, 239). The cosmopolitanism of the mushroom spores themselves face limits, in the way it merges with different genetic material and with «other living and non-living things» (Tsing 2015, 229, 238). Critique emerging from the marshes and mushrooms therefore exemplifies the intermingling of the local and global due to its material ground.

3. Critique in triangles – desterilization and the excluded middle as “milieu”

I have tried to argue that Serres and Tsing share a goal of offering a philosophical critique of sterility, and a co-reading seems in this regard complementing as they lead to structural triangulations of included or excluded femininity. Despite this commonality of problematizing sterility as a dominant figure of thought, their argumentations provide some generative divergences and therefore enfold a productive dialogue. The topology that Serres tries to introduce by elements of chaos and fluidity nevertheless seems to be reflected by Tsing’s mushrooms minus the problematic glorification of femininity. Fungi inhabit a place between animals and plants, which makes them not only species-wise but furthermore sexually remarkably hybrid (Tsing 2015, 230-233). What a Serresian perspective on the other hand might contribute to the question of fertility, sterility and the different economies and ecologies that thereby come into play is his structural approach of the “third”. It gives a structural perspective of triangulation as one way of framing the phenomena at stake. In *The Parasite*, Serres describes the “battle of the two” connected to the Master’s logic of breaks and cuts and the *exclusion* of the third. Different from that is the logic of «the bed, the breast, the house» where the third is *included* (P, 220). Fertility is from this perspective a triangulation in which the constitutive third is included, and it therefore entails – to speak in terms that Serres might not necessarily make us of – its own ground, its condition of possibility. Taking this structural schema, femininity does not necessarily fall together with the inclusion of dirt and bacteria. In the case which Tsing describes as the hygiene of the “white woman” during the sugar cane plantations for instance, bacteria – may they be fertile or infectious – are excluded exactly by the social construct of women. And this exclusion, to extend Serres’s thought of the multiplication of the excluded third (P, 219-220), is exposed to proliferation. In the case of the discussed phenomenon of the white woman’s economy of sterility, this multiplication of the excluded is exemplified by a variety of phantasmic boundaries to assure the “love” in between the walls of homeliness. It goes hand in hand with an exclusion of a wide range of what endangers the “pure home”: bacteria, race, strangers etc (Tsing 2012, 149-150).

In regard to the inclusion of the emotional or affective in speech, Tsing’s and Serres’s writings not only weigh in as a way to *look at* economies of love and affection, but also in

their way their writings itself bring it into play. This aspect extends the perspective to a methodological dimension. In the case of Tsing, the decisive vocabulary she brings into play is informed by an ethics of “vulnerability” and “precarity”, with which Tsing follows to a certain degree the work of Butler¹⁵. For the matter of “critique”, in its strategies of articulation and not at least *itself* embedded in economies of exclusion and inclusion, is exposed to its own challenges. To anticipate a doubt: questioning the inclusion of conceptual tools like “vulnerability” and “precarity” does neither derive from a scepticism towards the affectivity or emotionality of critique, nor from the attempt to disenchant love in its transformation in academic writing. In this case, with a methodologically alert eye on these concepts, I would rather advocate for a reflection on the possible inclusions or exclusions they produce in the sense of Serres. However, as he emphasizes in *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, these triangles are not only triples, but basically «multiple», and furthermore to be discovered with a certain caution towards the «false middle» and an «imaginary third» (TK, 7-11). Despite the broad common ground of Serres and Tsing in regard to their strategical incorporation of a fertile chaos, the appreciation of precarity and exposure (Tsing 2015, 17-26), their tactics seem to enfold differently when it comes to the *positioning* of critique.

Both Serres and Tsing seem to advocate for a powerful and severe account of sensibility, against a masculinist rationalism or a phantasm of succeeding by cutting sensibility off. Their critical strategies nevertheless play out differently. Firstly, Serres’s «virtue of sensibility» (Webb 2019, 12), is, as I would argue, not bound to the question of appropriate feelings. Sensibility is not the soft that plays against the hard, but exactly the bridge *between* the soft and the hard. Serres «couches in terms of energy and information, the hard and the soft (Webb 2019, 22). What in *The Five Senses* seems to be put forward as «risk» (FS, 29) appears in *The Troubadour of Knowledge* as the “passing third”, who is essentially characterized by exposure beyond the positioned:

Neither positioned nor opposed, unceasingly exposed. Rarely balanced, rarely also unbalanced, always deviating from the place, wandering with no fixed habitat. The passing third is characterized by the nonplace, yes, by broadening, that is, liberty, better yet, by a precarious balance – the constraining and sovereign condition of bearing toward the true (TK, 12).

Serres tries to theorize the “third” in its multiple in-betweens and similarly inhabits the “third” position and attempts to speak from “in between”. He abstains from confining one way of “being sensible in the right way” or trying to take one side of a seemingly oppositional dualism¹⁶. In this regard, his critical attempt differs from Tsing insofar as his project does not seek for a position as such, may it be characterized in terms like “vulnerability” or “precarity”. Even though both seem to be concerned with similar tasks of critique, their strategies nevertheless enfold differently. The strength of Tsing’s approach lies in her overt commitment to an anthropology which engages with the not

¹⁵ Tsing seems to be in line with an understanding of “vulnerability” which is not determined by a specific gender. Even though it is historically obviously understood as a “masculinist” ideal of independence, in Butler’s account the dissection from it being essentially “male” or “female” is quite clear (Butler 2016, 21).

¹⁶ A criticism that has for instance been brought up against Butler’s “vulnerability” is exactly that «it consistently sets up a rigid dichotomy between bad autonomy and good relationality» (Ruti 2017, 106). The strategy of vulnerability as a political concept from this point of view might be: antagonizing two sides and then taking one side by claiming that it would include the other side, as for instance in the case of vulnerability and resistance (Butler 2016, 1-2).

exclusively human matters both critically and passionately¹⁷. With this, her methodology takes clear position, even if it is not one of strength, but of vulnerability insofar as it helps «the arts of noticing» (Tsing 2015, 17-25; see also Tsing et al 2017).

Serres approach remains, and this has its own difficulties, decidedly positionless and in a «nonplace» (*TK*, 12, 30-33), albeit not in the framework of it being provisionally undecided like in the Kosselleckian alliance of “critique” and “crisis”. With the “positionlessness” of writing from “in between”, Serres is in first sight clearly opposed to feminist critiques like that of Haraway and Harding (Haraway 1988; Harding 1986, 148; Harding 1992, 444). This contrast gets, however, more complicated, when one takes into account the way in which Serres himself problematizes rationalist and not at least androcentric claims of objectivity, as well as universalist passages between the local and the global (*H V*, 84-90). The attempt to write from the “middle” rather than from a defined position has for him political – diplomatic – reasons and is not motivated by abolishing politicality, but to refrain from the logics of war-like dualisms (*NC*, 7-16). That nevertheless plays into the fact that a certain obscurity is often associated with Serres¹⁸. However, his project does not mire in the sump without generating any theoretical grip. The absorption by marshes has, in *The Natural Contract*, exactly this place of the similarly *excluded* and *absorbing* ground of the dualist battle (*NC*, 1). The *emergence* of critique *out of the marshes*, on the contrary, combines a materialist with a structuralist approach, which is genuinely defined by the “third”, the being in-between as the indispensable mediator between oppositional dualisms. It is a theory practice which reflects his attempt to abstain from being absorbed by the struggle of the two and to install a theoretical sensibility of mechanism of exclusivity. The function of the “third” leaves the question of its generative role open – whether the critique out of the marshes plays out in translative, intermediary, creative, stabilizing or destabilizing ways. As a critique it is, similarly to the mushrooms, first and foremost “out there”, and therefore double-challenged. A critique out of the mushrooms and the marshes is defined by the challenge to engage with its subject matter in a way that the methodology reflects its object of research. Paul Harris rightly claims that the philosopher’s role in Serres is neither to develop an ontology nor an epistemology exclusively, «but an *ecology* in which things and ideas interact» (Harris 1997, 39). This has, for instance, also been discussed in terms of the relationship between “word” and “world” in Serres’s writings¹⁹. Serres learns from Michelet’s “sea” that «the strategy of criticism is located in the object of criticism» (*H*, 38), and arrives at an understanding of critique which considers itself as being “in-between” and “participatory”²⁰. Tsing, on the other hand, seeks for positioning. Her approach builds on

¹⁷ The «new science studies», as Tsing emphasizes, can be critical, but it is not their *raison d’être*: «Instead, it allows something new: passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied. Once such immersion was allowed only to natural scientists, and mainly on the condition that the love didn’t show. The critical intervention of this new science studies is that it allows learnedness in natural science *and* all the tools of the arts to convey passionate connection» (Tsing 2011, 19).

¹⁸ Serres himself has a rather affirmative account of obscurity (*P*, 18), which he furthermore connects to «feminine resonances» (*C*, 148). It is nonetheless questionable if that equalizes with non-criticality, in the way that Latour points it out (Latour 1988a, 85-86).

¹⁹ Posthumus distinguishes between two fields in the interpretation of Serres’s use of metaphors: whereas critical voices like Shoshana Felman and Katherine Hayles raise objections towards Serres’s contradictory relationship of the “gap” between “word” and “world”, other readers like Mouchard, Paulson, Nabolz and Connor shine a more positive light on this issue and try to put it in a broader context (Posthumus 2007, 15).

²⁰ Watkin argues that the relationship between language and world, that Serres seems to embrace, can be defined as “methetic” rather than “mimetic”: «For Serres, language does not represent the material world

the concept of “vulnerability”, but also by the feminist attempt to understand knowledge as «situated» in a «limited location» (Haraway 1988, 583). Her anthropological perspective allows her to look at natural objects like mushrooms, but at the same time it engages with the knowledge about the mushrooms “out there” from a socially situated point of view²¹. The attempt seems to be, in accordance with Haraway, to act «symchtonically», «sympoetically», a «making with» our «biotic and abiotic symbiotic collaborators» (Haraway 2016b, 119), in a «reality» in which «nothing is truly sterile» (Haraway 2016b, 81-82). Serres seems compatible with this aim by finding ways to interact with the world in a «parasitical symbiosis» in which it is no longer possible to master, to protect or conserve the world «as fetish» (Watkin 2017, 166).

Serres and Tsing both take the ecology of critique itself into account. A critical intervention is therefore part of the ecology and economy of possible parasitisms, toxifications, and contributions to an environment of critique. Both Serres and Tsing historicize the exclusion of dirt, bacteria and its metaphorical expansions from different angles. Whereas Serres tackles the upcoming of sterile laboratory-like conditions with his reflections on Nietzsche’s method of the «scalpel» (*H IV*, 174), Tsing relies on an anthropology of the “white woman” and the exclusion of infections which reach the phantasmic (Tsing 2012, 149-150). Both identify an interlacing of the exclusion of the feminine and bacteria and fungi, which has not at least been spelled out in the practice of theory and critique. “Working against that” does not culminate in a praise of fertility. Rather, the reflection on life-enabling bacteria *and* inhabitable zones of sterility may be folded back on the practice of critique itself. In this sense, “sterility”, and its philosophical alliances with rationalist-masculinist clarity is not only the theoretical enemy which has to be diminished, but it is itself part of a critical environment. The aim of “desterilizing” critique is therefore from the feminist-ecological angle a counterposition as well as characterized by an awareness of its embeddedness in critical equilibria. Serres and Tsing are both concerned with finding a practice of theorizing that does justice to a planetary ecological crisis, albeit there is a tendency in Tsing to engage with knowledge from a socially situated perspective, and in Serres a rather radical “partaking” of knowledge in nature. This entails the search for a style of writing and a self-understanding of a perspective which neither desires to cut the “world” nor its “dirt” off. In this context, bacteria, fungi and dirt is actively included in the making of no longer “squeaky clean” theory, in which a feminist perspective plays a crucial role. The dialogue between Serres and Tsing extends on the one hand Tsing’s anthropological research with a structural triangulation, whereas on the other hand Serres’s femininity can be productively readjusted to historical phenomena by Tsing’s anthropological perspective on mushrooms. Their approaches nevertheless play out differently, and contest each other when it comes to thinking its position or positionlessness. Bringing them together

any more than the material world represents language [...]. Instead they both participate, and participate equally, in the universal condition of inclination» (Watkin 2020, 247). In this regard, Watkin argues, Serres account is less anthropocentric than Morton’s ecomimesis, as it breaks with the Cartesian paradigm more thoroughly: «It elegantly overcomes the division between “nature” and “culture” without implicitly or explicitly creating a hierarchy that elevates either term above the other, and it provides a unified approach to language that implacably resists the sacred paradigm with all its attendant problems and inadequacies» (Watkin 2020, 252).

²¹See here Harding’s specification of «natural objects», which serve for scientific research, as already deprived of «pure nature» and therefore socialized. This makes these «natural objects», as Harding argues, «socially constituted objects of knowledge» (Harding 1992, 453).

shows the two different ends of generally similar intentions: Serres's peacefully intended positionlessness and Tsing's ecological, motivated position of vulnerability.

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