The Urban *Chora*, from Pre-Ancient Athens to Postmodern Paris

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Abstract: Jacques Derrida and Michel Serres challenge the binary logic of Western philosophy very differently, Derrida through a philosophy of discourse, Serres through a philosophy of things. Serres has begun to draw more international readers thanks to a recent shift in critical emphasis from words to things. The difference between deconstruction's word-orientated acosmism and the newer versions of thing-oriented cosmism can be fruitfully explored by comparing Derrida to Serres on the basis of their readings of Plato's cosmogony, focused on the figure of *chora* in *Timaeus*.

Jacques Derrida and Michel Serres share the ambition of overcoming the dualist, binary logic of non-contradiction which, they complain, has dominated Western philosophy since Plato. However, they challenge non-contradiction very differently, Derrida through a philosophy of discourse, Serres through a philosophy of things. These two thinkers, both born in 1930, overlapped at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris, and thus come from the same intellectual time and place. However, Serres distanced himself from the philosophies of language which dominated French thought during the mid-twentieth century, denouncing the "era of the signifier" for what he calls its "acosmism," its abandonment of things in favor of words (1977, p. 288). Serres speculates that twentieth-century philosophers became obsessed with words, at the expense of the world of things, because "perhaps we hated the object; perhaps we hated the world" (2015, p. 51). The obsession with words by French intellectuals like Derrida emboldened literary scholars by locating power in texts, at a time when science and technology were claiming increasing territory within academics, politics, and economics. For several decades, most Anglophone scholars across the humanities preferred Derrida's empowerment of discourse at the expense of the cosmos, but Serres has begun to draw more international readers thanks to a more recent shift in critical emphasis from words to things. What has changed?

The relationship between humans and the cosmos has shifted, observes Serres. While humans once completely depended on the earth to survive, today the future of the planet depends on humans, now capable of bringing about the sixth great extinction by unleashing nuclear holocaust or setting off catastrophic climate change (Serres, 2001). Philosophies of discourse only address the relationship of humans to other humans. Only a philosophy of things can effectively address the relationship of humans to the cosmos. The growing critical concern about human-nonhuman relations manifests itself in ecocriticism, new materialism, animal studies, posthumanism, anthropocene studies, object-oriented continental philosophy, the architecture of the fold, actor-network theory, and the concept of vibrant matter. Once again, matter matters. As Serres puts it in his recently translated *Geometry*, the cosmos has returned as "philosophy's paradigm, its real model," as in the time of the ancients, but with a modern scientific understanding of the physical universe (2017, p. xxxi).

The difference between deconstruction's word-orientated acosmism and the newer versions of thing-oriented cosmism can be fruitfully explored by comparing Derrida to Serres on the basis of their readings of Plato's cosmogony, as presented in *Timaeus*. Socrates and his companions task Timaeus, knowledgeable in astronomy, to explain the origins of the cosmos and the creation of humans. In his speech, Timaeus describes three kinds of being: eternal intelligible models, earthly sensible copies of the models, and thirdly the *chora*, which receives or contains the first two (Plato, 2008, pt. 48e – 49a).[1] Transcribed into Latin characters as *chora* or *khōra*, χώρα is the Greek word for space, place, location, region, or country.[2] Timaeus compares the *chora* to a receptacle, nurse, mother, virgin wax, imprint-bearer, neutral perfume base, unformed gold, and a sieve for sifting grain. Derrida and Serres both identify the *chora* as an excluded third, incompatible with the binary logic of noncontradiction which generates philosophical oppositions such as model and copy, intelligible and sensible, *logos* and *mythos*, Being and being, or presence and absence. As critics of the binary tradition, Derrida and Serres both adopt the duality-disrupting *chora* as a philosophical figure of thirdness. However, they locate the "place" designated by *chora* very differently. Plato figures *chora* as both place of writing (virgin wax, imprint bearer) and place of gestation

(mother, nurse), but Derrida favors the figures of inscription, while Serres prefers the figures of birth.

These two very different kinds of places, inscriptive or matrical, occupy different kinds of space under various temporalities. Their deployment of *chora* as a spatio-temporal figure shapes their relations to cities. Plato, citizen of Athens, wrote about *chora* during a discussion of the ideal city. Derrida wrote about *chora* while designing a postmodern garden for Paris. Serres evokes *chora* in describing the founding of Rome. I contrast these versions of *chora* in the city, beginning with Derrida's rendering of *chora* as impossible abyss, followed by Serres's celebration of *chora*'s matrical fecundity. Warning against the pitfalls of falling for the temporal illusions of presence, Derrida skirts around the edges of his choral abyss. Serres instead circumnavigates the multiple temporalities of the cosmos while exploring the regenerative possibilities offered by *chora*.

Derrida: Asexual Abyss

Derrida completed "*Khōra"* (1995) a close reading of Plato's *Timaeus*, while collaborating on a landscape architecture project with Peter Eisenman. Bernard Tschumi, a fellow deconstructionist architect, had commissioned Eisenman and Derrida to design a garden without vegetation for his La Villette park, a Mitterand-era *Grand Project* located on the site of an old slaughterhouse in northern Paris. *Chora L. Works* (1997) gathers transcripts of conversations between Eisenman's team and Derrida; a version of the latter's essay on *chora*; and related correspondence, documents, and drawings. During their first conversation, Eisenman explains how deconstruction challenges the Western architectural tradition. Derrida presents his idea that *chora* disrupts the Western philosophical tradition. They agree that in their allotted Paris garden space they will build *chora*, despite the problem of rendering tangibly sensible something that, according to Plato, is neither sensible nor intelligible. By choosing *chora*, the architect and philosopher take on their common enemies, anthropocentrism and the metaphysics of presence, which they ambitiously seek to eliminate from architecture and philosophy, respectively. Eisenman wishes to build without the constraint of designing on a human scale. Derrida wonders how something built can convey the impossibility of presence. They agree that built things always evoke presence, but that absence cannot simply be represented by an empty space, a hole, or a void. In one of their transcribed conversations, Eisenman complains that Derrida's theories "are so difficult to make." Derrida reassures him, telling him not to worry because *chora* "is an impossible paradigm for architecture" (Derrida & Eisenman, 1997, p. 71). It is perhaps unsurprising to declare the impossibility of physically building a philosophical concept, but Derrida

also suggests that *chora* is equally impossible within the domain of language because *chora* has "some impossible relation to the possibility of naming" (Derrida, 1995, p. 91).[3] Their impossible *chora* garden will never be built, but their 1986 collaboration introduces *chora* into the vocabulary of architectural theory (Burns, 2013).

Derrida begins his essay on *chora* by reflecting on the logic of binarity, the *logos* he ascribes to mainstream Western philosophy. According to his reading of *Timaeus*, Plato's entire text revolves around binary logic. As Derrida puts it, "the being-logical of logic, its essential *logos…* forms the explicit theme of the *Timaeus*" (1995, p. 106). In short, logic equals binarism. Derrida seizes on the *chora* as the excluded third element capable of troubling "the very order of polarity, of polarity in general, whether dialectical or not," because the very thought of the *chora* "exceeds" polarity (pp. 88-89, 92). [4] Citing Plato's words of caution regarding the difficulty of comprehending *chora*, Derrida positions *chora* as a foreign intruder vis-à-vs the initial two types, intelligible and sensible (pp. 89-90). He claims that *chora* is "something which is not simply Platonic"; "something Plato cannot immediately assimilate into his own thought"; something "irreducible to everything that gives Plato's philosophy coherence"; something that cannot be assimilated by Plato himself, by what we call Platonic ontology, nor by the inheritance of Plato." Referring to the extensive published commentary on Plato's *chora*, he observes that "Many have thought it is a foreign element entering Plato's texts from the early Greek materialists." Derrida agrees, telling Eisenman that "I thought it was a foreign graft within Plato's text" (1997, pp. 9-11, 99).

In order to read *Timaeus* as a pillar of philosophical dualism, Derrida ignores most of the cosmogony that makes up the bulk of this Socratic dialogue. Derrida does acknowledge that Plato's "encyclopedic" *Timaeus* includes not only "a general ontology" but also "a theology, a cosmology, a physiology, a psychology, a zoology" (1995, p. 103). However, he argues, none of this belongs to philosophy proper because Western thought has been dominated by a binary version of "Platonism" based on the intelligible-sensible couple. He concedes that this philosophical binarism amounts to an "*abstraction*" which has been "extracted" or "torn out" of "the heterogeneous text of Plato" with an "arbitrary violence" that proceeds "according to a mode which is precisely all of philosophy" (pp. 103, 119-120). Traditional philosophy has no room for the birth of the cosmos, which does not interest Derrida either.

What about the origins of the universe and its humans, a topic of great interest to the Greek materialists, whom he accuses of invading Plato's texts? Derrida mentions the cosmos near the end of his *chora* essay, but only to reinterpret *Timaeus* as a dialogue on

the genealogy of philosophy. He does so by creating an analogy between Plato's cosmogony and the history of philosophy, translating the birth of the universe into the birth of philosophy.

> The discourse on *chora* thus plays for philosophy a role analogous to the role which *chora* 'herself' plays for that which philosophy speaks, of namely, the cosmos formed or given form according to the paradigm. (p. 126)

Derrida makes a distinction between the "discourse on *chora*" and "*chora* herself." Philosophy is born of the discourse. The cosmos is born of the actual *chora*. Derrida has said a great deal about the discourse, but practically nothing about the cosmos. His essay on *Timaeus* thus exemplifies what Serres calls "acosmic" philosophy. Not content to simply overlook Plato's account of the creation of the cosmos, Derrida goes to great rhetorical lengths to extract the cosmos from Timaeus's descriptions of the *chora.*

Chora cannot belong to the cosmos because it does not even exist, claims Derrida, even though Timaeus explicitly tells his companions that "there were three distinct things in existence even before the universe was created—being, space, and creation" (Plato, 2008, pt. 52d). "Being" corresponds to the eternal forms, "creation" to the sensible copies, and "space" to *chora*. Derrida nonetheless argues that "philosophical discourse" refuses *chora* the status of "existent thing," because according to this tradition's "*ontologic,*" things that exist must be sensible or intelligible, visible or invisible, formed or formless, mimeme or paradigm (1995, pp. 91, 96-7). Derrida justifies this exclusion of *chora* from existence based on Timaeus's admission that the sensory world itself exists only as a probability (p. 112). Derrida reasons that if the existing world and its *logos* are only probable, then *chora* is not even probable, but then a few pages later he equivocates, writing that "There is *chora* but *the chora* does not exist" and that "There is *chora...* But what *there is,* there, is not." Shifting from ontology to linguistics, he adds that the word *chora* has no referent (pp. 96-97).

Having placed in doubt the existence of *chora*, Derrida questions Plato's choices of metaphors and tropes, claiming that since *chora* is not an existent, it cannot have properties, and therefore cannot have the properties of mother or nurse, despite what Timaeus says (pp. 97-98). He reworks the family analogy offered by Timaeus, who likens the father to the paradigm, the child to the copy, and the mother to a receptacle—the *chora* (Plato, 2008, pt. 50d; Derrida, 1995, p. 124). Even though Derrida tells Eisenman that father, child, and mother are "only metaphors, because they are borrowed from the sensible world," and are thus not valid comparisons (1997, p. 10; see also 1995, p. 126), in his essay "*Khōra*," he retains the father and son

comparisons, while dismissing the trope of the mother as alien to philosophy.

> Philosophy cannot speak philosophically of that which looks like its 'mother,' its 'nurse,' its 'receptacle,' or its 'imprint-bearer.' As such, it speaks only of the father and the son, as if the father engendered it all on his own. (1995, p. 126)

Why can philosophy speak of fathers and sons, and not mothers? Derrida suggests that the metaphor fails because mothers exist in the sensible world, while he has argued that *chora* cannot exist at all; stated more simply, he claims something that exists cannot stand in for something that does not exist. According to this reasoning, since the living, sensible child is by definition a copy, it can serve as a metaphor because the actual copy (living child) legitimately stands in for the Platonic copy within the family analogy. Based on this reasoning, Derrida is claiming that the living, sensible father adequately compares to the eternal, intelligible Being. If a living mother cannot stand in for *chora*, how can a living father stand in for a disembodied paradigm?

Reinforcing his claim that the father engenders philosophy, as quoted just above, Derrida again contradicts Plato by declaring that the *chora* "engenders nothing" because, he says, "mother, *chora* does not couple with the father, in other words, with the paradigmatic model" (1995, pp. 105, 124). Concluding that the mother does not "couple"—copulate—with the father presupposes a twentieth-century romantic image of two people coming together as equal partners, ignoring Timaeus's much more biological description of procreation. His speech describes the male seed as an animate creature with "a lively appetite for emission," but the crucial aspect of procreation for Timaeus is not the insertion of the male sexual organ into the vagina (to "couple"), but rather the entry of the male seed into the woman's womb which, he says, is inhabited by a different animate creature also yearning for procreation. Brought together by their mutual desire and love, the male and female "sow in the field of the womb tiny creatures." These tiny creatures, sown like seeds, develop into new lives. "The womb nourishes them until they've grown enough to emerge" (2008, 91a-d). Derrida's declaration that father and son form a procreating couple only makes sense within the confines of the intelligible-sensible binary, but to read Plato in this way is to completely overlook his discussion of insemination and gestation.

When he asserts that as third, the mother "does not belong to an oppositional couple," Derrida uses "couple" as a noun both to designate a male-female pair and the abstract concept of pair, dyad, binary opposition, polarity. He reads the mother as excluded from the binary couple "which the intelligible paradigm forms with the sensible becoming and which looks

rather like a father/son couple. The 'mother' is supposedly apart" (1995, p. 124). How can the mother remain "apart" when the father's seed grows into a son inside her? For that matter, why does Derrida presume that the child is a son? A closer look at Plato suggests that the child in question would more likely be a girl, as evidenced by the sentence uttered by Timaeus at the conclusion of his explanation of sexual reproduction: "So this is how women and females of any species were created" (Plato, 2008, p. 91d).

The banishment of the mother from philosophy can be read as a more general banishment of sexual reproduction. Derrida sterilizes the *chora* when he severs Plato's familial father-son-mother analogy from generational reproduction. According to a sympathetic commentator, Derrida's *chora* is not a mother, but "a cousin… of deconstruction, a kin of the kin-less" (Caputo, 1997, p. 97). Derrida redefines the space of the *chora* as "the place as place of writing, of inscription, of the trace" (Derrida 1992, p. 101). This leaves no room in the *chora* for a fetus. As Burchill observes, Derrida "disqualifies" all of Plato's "sexual-spatial tropes" for *chora* when he argues that mother, nurse, space, and place all belong to the realm of the sensible. In contrast, he celebrates what she calls Plato's "typographical tropes" for *chora*, such as receptacle, amorphousness, sieve, imprinting, impressing, or infusion. These for Derrida qualify as "figures of the non-figurable" As site of inscription, *chora* makes figuration possible, but for Derrida, *chora* cannot itself figure the unfigurable (Burchill 2006, p. 92; 2012, p. 46).

Derrida is interested only in reproduction by inscriptions, not by growing seeds, as further evidenced by his treatment of Plato's sieve figure. Timaeus refers to seeds when he explains that the four elements—fire, water, earth, and air—come together in the *chora*, "the receptacle of all material bodies." The elements are shaken and sifted inside the *chora*, as in a sieve that separates grain from chaff (2008, pt. 50b; 52e-53b). Translating this agrarian trope of fecundity into another sterilized abstraction, Derrida connects the grain-sorting sieve figure to the discussion of urban politics at the opening of the dialogue. Socrates recalls a previous conversation about the lottery system which appears to pair males with females by chance, but which in fact deliberately chooses pairings in order to produce the best offspring (2008, pt. 18d-3). Derrida refers to this process as "the political strategy of marriages," and characterizes the dialogue about it as "a purely political discourse." By reading an account of human breeding as a "discourse" which is "purely political," Derrida further distances the *chora* from the realm of reproduction (1995, p. 105).

Derrida discredits Plato's reproductive tropes not only by privileging typographical tropes in the text, but also by inventing three tropes of his own for *chora*: the narrative *mis-en-abîme*, Socrates, and a stringed musical instrument. Each of these new figures further alienates *chora* from its maternal functions. He textualizes *chora* when he declares it to be "a gaping opening, an abyss or a chasm" in the text, a narrative *mise-en-abyme* that embeds stories within stories, such as the telling of a tale told of the tale of an Egyptian priest telling of the early days of Athens (1995, p. 103); this reading renders Plato's maternal womb as a textual abyss. He masculinizes *chora* when he compares Socrates to a receptacle that "receives" the discourse of his companions (1995, pp. 109-111, 115, 117-118). He musicalizes *chora* when he compares it to a stringed musical instrument, playing on the phonetic similarities between *chora*, choral, chorale, and choreography (1997, pp. 96-99). I find Derrida's textual, masculine, and musical *chora* completely alien to Plato's text.

Burchill attributes Derrida's dismissal of Plato's maternal metaphors to his cooptation of *chora* as a figure for his own notion of *différance*, the temporal deferral of a text or mark or trace, whose presence never takes place in the present because it includes a future. Although Derrida does not deny that Plato's *chora* figures primordial spatiality, traditionally associated with the feminine, this spatiality "is antithetical to his own understanding of the *chora* as a site of differential inscription." Burchill reasons that Derrida must therefore "disqualify the description of the *chora* in terms of space and the feminine." Hence his valorization of inscriptive and auditory tropes over maternal and spatial tropes (2006, p. 91). I would add that Derrida also dismisses Plato's maternal tropes as part of his campaign against anthropocentrism. For me, his own privileging of human discourse proves to be even more anthropocentric than the maternal *chora*. I find it absurd that he reduces Plato's cosmogony to a problem of naming while repeatedly denouncing anthropocentrism (1995, pp. 95, 97, 103, 111), even though language belongs exclusively to the domain of the Anthropos. I must question the efficacy of any critique of anthropocentrism which begins by excluding the world of things that pre-existed humans, and which will continue to exist even in the event of human extinction.[5]

If, as *différance* implies, words inherently defer presence by their infinite referral to deferred meaning, the same cannot be said of things. Eisenman suggests that Derrida's reading of *chora* as a reproduction of words, rather than as a reproduction of things, allows him to play with presence and absence in ways impossible in the material world of architecture. Derrida prefers time to space for similar reasons. I agree with Burchill that pre-originary maternal spatiality cannot be accommodated by his philosophy, which conceptualizes non-linear time as the subversion of the presence-absence binary. In a final letter to Derrida, Eisenman

refs back to their early discussions of the presence-absence binary in relation to architecture. Reflecting on the failure of their *chora* garden project, the architect writes in his letter that unlike discourse, architecture requires a third, beyond the presence-absence binary. He argues that "architecture is not a two-term but a three-term system" which requires "another condition, which I call *presentness*, that is neither absence nor presence, neither form nor function, neither the particular use of a sign nor the crude existence of reality." Architecture operates in dimensions beyond the wordplay of a strictly discursive deconstruction, explains Eisenman. The object embodies absence, just as concepts include absence. "Each concept, as well as each object, has all that is *not* inscribed within it as traces" (in Derrida & Eisenman, 1997, pp. 187-188). Eisenman thus concedes that deconstruction works very differently in discourse than in building construction.

Contextualizing the Eisenman-Derrida exchange for architecture, Burns notes that architectural scholarship "often aligns the poststructuralist architectural work developed from 1986 to 1993 with Jacques Derrida" (2013, pp. 17, 29). She chooses 1993 as a turning point based on the publication of a landmark book, *Folding in Architecture*, which includes an essay by Lynn redefining Eisenman as a Deleuzian rather than a Derridean (Burns, 2013, p. 27; Lynn, 2004). As evidence of this Deleuzian turn in architecture theory, Burns cites an essay by Robinson, who actually references Serres instead of Deleuze. The fold was Leibnizian before it was Deleuzian, and Serres wrote his dissertation on Leibniz. In elaborating her concept of the "material fold," Robinson describes *chora* as "a continually folding, constantly evolving" place. She proclaims the "hermaphrodite architect" to be a specialist in the "placental logic" of the fold (Robinson, 2004). It seems architectural scholarship has also followed the critical move away from the sterile *chora* of acosmic deconstruction toward the sensuously fertile cosmos of Leibniz, Deleuze, and Serres.

Serres: Matrical Multiplicity

Serres challenges the Western philosophical tradition of binarity by creating a cosmic philosophy of the multiple, capable of including the excluded third. What Serres calls the multiple corresponds to that which Leibniz called an aggregate, "a set of possible things." Examples include "a flight of screaming birds, a school of herring… a cloud of chirping crickets, a booming whirlwind of mosquitos... crowds, packs, hordes" (Serres, 1995, p. 2). Serres defines the multiple as a fuzzy set of pure possibility, in contrast to the traditional philosophy which defines multiplicity negatively, labeling it "nonsense, chance, disorder" (2015, p. 210). Made uncomfortable by the unruly multiple, most philosophers respond by trying to capture it within paired concepts. Serres laments that this dualist logic of noncontradiction excludes the third, ignoring everything that takes place in the middle, in between, at the edges, on the outside (2015, p. 5). Not content to merely demonstrate mainstream philosophy's discomfort with the untamed multiple, Serres draws on the pre-Socratics and on Leibniz to reconceptualize the philosopher as "the shepherd of multiplicities" (1995, p. 23).

Serres reads Plato himself as a philosopher of the multiple. According to his reading of the *Timaeus*, Plato "tolerates" and even "negotiates" disorder, chaos, and chance. Insisting that Plato does not "dogmatically reject" the unthinkable, Serres claims that they are both carrying out the same "ruse" by thinking both the thinkable and the unthinkable, which requires thinking "pure multiplicity" (1995, pp. 112-114). Derrida's argument assumes *chora* to be unthinkable because philosophy excludes it from its two-term *logos*. Serres instead reads *chora* as integral to philosophy, proclaiming that it is "possible to think without excluding" (2015, p. 67), arguing that the excluded middle makes thought possible. As the meeting place of the sensible and the intelligible, the *chora* constitutes the very space of thought itself, the "terrain" where the abstract (intelligible form) and the concrete (sensible copy) come together. "Χώρα [*chora*]," Serres writes, "is the space or the box relative to which inclusion and exclusion are thinkable." As space of both exclusion and inclusion, *chora* functions as "the matrix for thinking" (2007, p. 216), the "pure place or naked space" where thinking takes place (1995, p. 40; see also p. 44). Only a smooth, virgin space can accommodate the thought of the multiple, and so Serres situates the excluded third "at the foundation of our logic" (2015, p. 126).

"Foundation" is a key word in the writing of Serres, who redefines it beyond its usual meaning of originary event or architectural base, transforming foundation into a sort of multiplicity. For him, foundation is historiographically multiple, each origin calling forth a previous origin, a foundation of the foundation, the source of the pre-origin. Founding is not a single event, but "is recurrent. It returns, like a refrain" (2015, p. 219). Just as founding is continuous, so an "origin refers to another origin, the beginning demands a beginning" (2015, p. 34). This understanding of foundation multiplies time, implicating both a cyclical time of recurrence as well as a chronological time of successive beginnings. Foundation is also architecturally multiple, since each place is founded on top of other places, displacing something else in order to occupy its space. Serres demonstrates the multiplicity of foundation—at once temporal, spatial, historiographical, and architectural—in a three-volume series. He devotes the first to a city. *Rome: The First Book of Foundations* (2015) offers a detailed reading of Livy's *Ab Urbe*

Condita, which literally means "from the founding of the city." Serres locates the multiple "logics of the included third," their "productive root," in "Rome and at its foundation" (p. 67). Why Rome? *Timeaus* is set in Athens, the birthplace of philosophy, while Rome is, by Serres's own admission, a difficult place to practice philosophy. "It's easy to think about places where thought already is," such as Athens, but Rome is one of "the places where thought has not yet been," a place where "it is difficult to think," such as on "a bad slope of sterile rock." Serres classifies the three foundational cities of Western civilization in terms of their relationship to thought: Athens is word, Jerusalem is book, but Rome is stone. "Rome remains of rock. It was not a philosopher: neither inventive nor meditative." Just as it is easier to think where thought has gone before, so it is easier to think mental objects like words, observes Serres, and harder to think solids. "Nothing is so difficult to conceive as the body, flesh or stone," because these are objects of the world, not of the mind. However, according to Serres, philosophy requires both abstractions like words and physicality like stones. Rome, as rock, "incarnates meaning," as "the word submerged in the flesh, in the black entrails of the untouched virgin" (pp. 51-55). Meaning resides in things, says Serres, for whom thought requires incarnation, just as the philosophy of the multiple requires the wisdom incarnated in the cosmos.

Founding the city of stone involved many kinds of multiplicity, as indicated by the chapter topics of *Rome*, each naming a different type: trampled multiplicity, fragmented multiplicity, assembled multiplicity, composite multiplicity, multiplicity in representation, agitated multiplicity, and multiplicity in peace. Serres cites Plato's *Timaeus* in chapter two, "City of Alba: The White Multiplicity." *Chora*, he says, exemplifies white or blank multiplicity (in French, *blanc* means both white and blank). Alba means white in Latin. Livy recounts that Rome conquered and subsumed the city of Alba during the turbulent time of the Roman kings, prior to the founding of the republic. This makes white/blank Alba the mother city of Rome (1995, p. 44). Alba is *chora*.

> Alba is your origin. White is your origin. Your mother's virginal womb is white; it is undecided, not cut up, not determined, underdetermined to the very limits of indetermination. Alba, the white virgin mother, is the matrical space of the Platonic χώρα [*chora*], the new uterus, the imprint-recipient from which everything has come. (2015, p. 46)

Engendering, procreation, and creation take place within Alba, the uterus in which Rome was conceived and incubated. Blank, indeterminate, "not determined," undetermined, without qualities, the virginal *chora* can become anything. Indeed, *chora* includes all possibilities, serving as "the matrix or the virginal womb" and receptacle of all "possible genealogies" (2015, p. 42). The white is "every possible world" (p. 31), the matrix is "the pure possible" (1995, p. 99). Indetermination, blank wax tablet, virgin womb, *chora* remains open to all futures. Plato's *chora*, as mother and womb, occupies a privileged place in this philosophy of the multiple, because without the mother, there is no birth, no genesis, and no possibility for producing anything new. Platonic forms cannot replicate themselves as copies without entering into the nurturing maternal space.

Serres personifies indeterminate Alba, "virgin, holy," as the first priestess of Vesta, at whose temple the Ancient Romans worshipped. Before Rome was born of the white city, its founders Romulus and Remus were born of a Vestal virgin from Alba. According to the legend recounted by Livy, prior to Rome's conquest of Alba, even before the founding of Rome, Mars raped the Alban vestal Rhea Silvia, who gave birth to the twins. Just as Mars raped the Vestal, begetting Romulus and Remus, so Rome violently conquered Alba, begetting the future empire. Serres paraphrases a line from Corneille's tragedy *Horace*, about the conquest of Alba by Rome: "You, Rome, you, force, you are plunging the sword that marks into the white womb of your Alban mother" (p. 46). The sword leaves marks in the virgin wax of the Alban *chora*. Unlike Derrida who transposes the marking of the virgin space into a scene of writing, Serres transposes inscription into corporeal violence. Rape determines and encodes:

> By the rape of a savage vestal, Mars codes the white again. Rhea Silvia, chaste, is undecided or incised, violence leaves a scarification there… This is an origin: force determines the primary indeterminate. It codes it. (2015, p. 41)

Indetermination comes first. Determination scars the undetermined, scarring the blank white wax, limiting possibilities. Force codes. "Alba is the imprint-recipient; Rome is the black force that traces and codes imprints." Coding does more than represent; it decides and determines, reprogramming the course of history. Says Serres, "Decision tears apart and cuts up. Rome, with a stroke of a sword, destroys Alba." Determination scars, decision incises (p. 47). Deciding limits possibilities.

Mars, the decisive god of war, rapes virginal Rhea Silvia, the indecisive mother of possibility. This formulaic couple, active male-passive female, would seem to replicate the sexist reading of the maternal *chora* as passive recipient of the active male paradigm (Grosz, 1994). Passive indecision, active decision. Serres appears to set up a gender binary, despite his philosophy of the included third. Critics have accused him of gender essentialism (Assad, 2005), an accusation also leveled at Kristeva for her writings about *chora* and motherhood at a time when feminists were combatting

biological determinism.[6] However, elsewhere in *Rome*, Serres disrupts the traditional gender binary by declaring that the two sexes are not male and female, but rather mothers and others: "There are two sexes, there are only two… mothers and the rest" (2015, p. 143). Mothers constitute a sex all to themselves. The other sex includes all non-mothers, whether male, female, trans, intersexed, or asexual. The English translation of *Rome* astutely uses "sex" rather than "gender" in rendering the French word *sexes*, which can also refer to reproductive organs or sexual acts (French has no separate word for gender). The mother is the first sex, the body that matters, since it takes a mother to give birth, which is why in *Rome* it is more a question of sex than of gender. What of the other sex, those who are not mothers? Fathers are merely parasites, as are fetuses, since both are received by woman, the "universal hostess," who gives without taking, since the mother receives the male in her bed, who leaves behind his seed, which grows into a fetus who takes nourishment in the shelter of her womb (Serres 2007, p. 216).

After "Mars, father of Rome, rapes Rhea Silvia, the Alban vestal virgin," Rome's mother was victimized a second time, lynched and buried alive for violating the vestal oath of chastity. Her corpse lies underneath that of her son Remus, murdered by his brother Romulus. Under Rome lies a corpse beneath a corpse, foundations under the foundation. Violence runs in Rome's founding family. "Rome killed its brother; Rome killed its mother" (2015, p. 51). Livy says little about Rhea Silvia, which is why Serres consults Plutarch for more details on the cult of Vesta. Serres laments Livy's neglect of the twins' mother:

> All the images of violence are present: the god, the rape, the growth of the flood, the rivalry. Father and brother. Only one is absolutely missing: the mother… The mother is hidden beneath the ground, and she is forgotten in the text. (p. 59)

History buries the mother beneath the foundation, then forgets her. This is the pattern of the history of urbanization, observes Serres. Cities grow by conquering or consuming other cities, according to a cycle of violence, a cycle fueled by fraternal rivalry within and among cities, led by fatherly deities. However, cities cannot survive without mothers. Livy recounts that early Rome was populated almost entirely by men. They plotted to capture and rape the Sabine women because Rome needed descendants. As Serres puts it, without wives, "Rome is going to die from lack of love." The cycle of violence requires a line of descent (p. 121). Rome killed its mother. Her twins fought each other to the death. Their comrades in arms kidnapped and raped the Sabines because they needed mothers to generate successors. "No, it's not a question of the

dismal repetition of history. It's a question of a mother," writes Serres (p. 45). A city cannot survive on warriors alone. No mothers, no history.

Maternal time, cyclical, begets historical time, successive. Time itself is a "pure multiplicity," says Serres (1995, p. 115). In addition to linear clock-time, there is also historical time, which is a succession of iterations rather than strictly linear, because just as "one city demands another city, one history requires another; we don't really know how time flows" (2015, p. 34). There is also the reversible two-way time of Newtonian physics, as well as the entropic one-way time of thermodynamics. The one-way time of entropy leads toward dissipation, decay, and death. Maternal time would correspond to what Serres describes as evolutionary time, which is negentropic, whereby sex overcomes death by perpetuating the species (1980, pp. 76-79). Given the repetitive nature of foundation for Serres, even if conceptualized only as pre-originary, the *chora* gives birth again and again, since even a pre-origin begs another origin, and another one before that. Maternity belongs to the cyclical time of nature, "which is always aborning" (1995, p. 22). Serres associates nature with birth (*naissance*): "I'm trying to think nature in the sense of birth, when newness happens, is going to happen, appears, unexpected" (2015, p. 210). Without mothers, there can be no future. *Chora* makes history possible.

Precisely because it functions as an operator in the ongoing process of foundation, Serres adopts *chora* as a properly philosophical object. He explains that in Livy's text, Alba serves as "an intelligible principle," since "Every time Livy talks about Alba, the same schema returns." Like *chora*, Alba is "a concept, that of the indeterminate." The indeterminate is virginal, blank, white, unmarked, un-incised. More importantly for Serres, the indeterminate "mixes the possibles with the achieved and makes bifurcations abound…. the undetermined is placed at the origin… It is the virgin who's going to be mother" (2015, pp. 43, 47). Mother Alba is, for Serres, no mere figurative comparison, but is instead "a conceptual form of a stunning exactitude," an "abstract form" with "precision and rigour" (p. 38). The philosophy of the multiple grants *chora* its own logic and intelligibility.

This makes the philosophy of the multiple resolutely anti-patriarchal. Males play ignoble roles in *Rome*, where they figure not only as warriors, parasitic rapists, and murderers, but also as bad philosophers, prone to simplistic binaries. Masculine dualism posits a space of error and a space of enlightenment, creating a series of binaries: "Error, truth; the known and the unknown; the unsayable and the said. Knowledge and ideology, the conscious and the unconscious, science and poetry, heaven and hell." This simple dichotomy, made up of right or wrong, black or white, is "handy for

judging," Serres admits, but it is useless at generating true knowledge (p. 61). Dualism is not only the binary logic of mainstream Western thought, but also the logic of war, since dualism breeds rivalry. War, dual, pits one side against the other, in a self-perpetuating chain of conflict. "War is the cause of its causes. It is the first positive feedback. A thousand philosophies are reducible to this feedback." Self-perpetuating war is thus "the fathering of all things" (p. 123).

The dialectic stages a combat between rival ideas. Dualist philosophers operate according to the same abstract principles as opponents in battle, according to the same patriarchal dominance. "Having laid their hands on this simple image" of the chain by which war begets war, "these philosophies profit from it; they invade, in this way and in their own field, space and time, as though inevitably… They are the continuation of war by other means, the consequence of barbarism in and through culture" (pp. 123-124). The old epistemology was violent and masculine like Mars: "I strongly fear that the common and classical theory is conjugated in the masculine, violence, exclusion, destruction." Binary thinking "belongs to violence; it belongs to the tribunal, and it belongs to the police. It belongs to those who want to be right." Dualism does not belong to the philosophy of the multiple, since violence, judgment, policing, and wanting to be right have "nothing to do with the process of knowledge" (p. 61).

The philosophy of the multiple does not engage in dualist rivalry. Peace and wisdom alike require the inclusion of the excluded third, which is why Serres associates knowledge with women, androgens, and hermaphrodites. The cult of Vesta "isn't dualist" like masculine philosophy. Instead, the "wise" feminine cult "mixes" and "accompanies" (p. 61). *Rome* explicitly encodes non-binary knowledge as feminine. Knowledge binds, while dualism cuts. He praises Penelope the weaver, wise because she is an expert at knotting and folding, unlike "simple blind men" who "haven't thought implication, the included, the fold" and who "have never known what a mixture was" (p. 69). Her understanding of inclusive folding makes Vesta "the goddess or the priestess of the new epistemology" (p. 68). Topology, fractals, algorithms, and fuzzy sets belong to this new type of knowledge, one capable of uniting "the theoretical and the object, …the theorem and the thing.\" (p. 64). Vestals are goddesses of the new knowledge because theirs is "a more concrete gnoseology, a subtler one and more faithful to the state of things than the myth of the Greek cave" with its "Platonic cinema" (pp. 61-62). In *Geometry: The Third Book of Foundations*, the mixing of the theoretical with the concrete in *chora* gives birth to geometry, making Plato the geometer one of the heroes of the concluding volume of the foundations trilogy (2017, p. xlv).

Androgens and hermaphrodites likewise personify wisdom in the writing of Serres, whose philosophy of the multiple refuses the science-humanities dualism. In *Troubadour of Knowledge*, Harlequin the androgen embodies both science and the humanities, exemplifying the thirdly educated, *le tiers instruit*, the student of the in-between (1997). Having a body enables Harlequin to fully incorporate both types of knowledge. Serres denounces patriarchal dominance as he extols the virtues of intersexuality in "L'Hermaphrodite," his highly original reading of the Balzac short story made famous by Barthes's *S/Z*. Balzac's tragic hero Sarrasine, a naïve young French man working as a sculptor in Italy, falls in love with the castrato Zambinella, whom he mistakenly believes to be a woman. Serres argues that contrary to reigning psychoanalytic theories of castration, the hermaphrodite—in this case a castrato who exhibits both masculine and feminine traits—should be understood as complete rather than as lacking, because the presence of both sexes makes a body whole. Hermaphroditism is plenitude; the inclusive hermaphrodite excludes exclusion. As inclusive third sex, the hermaphrodite eradicates phallic dominance, bringing to an end "the Greek era" of dualist philosophy because, Serres says again, dualism is masculine (1989, pp. 84, 93, 98). Without denying the power of language, Serres exposes the real physical violence of Western patriarchy, on the battlefield, in the bedroom, and in the academy. As antidote he offers *chora*, the inclusive, enfolding, nurturing, regenerative, and wise receptacle of the philosophy of the multiple.

Conclusion

The merit of deconstruction lies in its ability to expose the mechanisms by which Western logic has excluded the third, revealing the secrets of philosophy's collusion with power by providing a logic of exclusion. This insight into binary logic has enabled many minority scholars to theorize the subtle workings of social exclusion. Deconstruction's focus on language empowered literary scholars to become destroyers of polarizing boundaries. However, deconstructing binaries does little to explore the richness of all that was excluded. Derrida differentiates himself from previous commentary by exposing the exclusion of *chora*, even celebrating its outsider status, but he only ever tiptoes around it, as if heeding his own warning that *chora* is an abyss, a dangerous chasm which could swallow up anyone who teeters too close to the edge. Are mothers also to be understood as bottomless chasms too dangerous for philosophy? By stopping short of descending into the uterine abyss, Derrida not only keeps his distance from the world of things, but also strips *chora* of its powers of regeneration, reducing its procreative possibilities to an impossible impossibility.

Whereas Derrida only offers us the hope that patriarchy might teeter into his choral abyss, Serres offers us the hope that, as third, *chora* can intervene in binary rivalries, making peace by engendering multiplicities full of possibilities capable of generating a new symbiosis between humans and nature. Today's largest global cities are swallowing the earth beneath their ever-expanding built structures. Their ever-more costly gleaming structures feature security systems that exclude the vast majority of humanity. Our increasingly overbuilt planet needs an inclusive philosophy that engages not only human discourse, but the earthly world of things. In this era of global terrorism and catastrophic climate change, the earth and its inhabitants need the generative capacity and nurturing shelter of philosophy's long-repressed matrical *chora.*

Notes

[1] I use section numbers for citations to *Timaeus*, as do Derrida and other commentators.

[2] For consistency, except in the case of direct quotations I use the spelling *chora*, following Derrida & Eisenman (1997) and Serres (2015).

[3] *Chora L Works* includes both English and French versions of Derrida's *chora* essay, but the handsome book features rows of square holes cut through the pages, which make them hard to read (Derrida & Eisenman, 1997). I therefore use Derrida's 1995 version of the essay, which differs slightly.

[4] Lawrence Porter coined the term "libido desconstructendi" to describe this strategy of reinforcing binaries only so that they can then be dismantled (1991).

[5] Quentin Meillassoux calls this move "correlationism," the idea that it is impossible to consider the objective world independently of language and consciousness. Arguing against correlationism, Meillassoux points to what he calls the "ancestral," or "reality anterior to the emergence of the human species" (2008, pp. 5, 10).

[6] I have elsewhere discussed Serres, Kristeva, and the philosophical problem of the mother (Watson 2015).

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