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Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism
Heather I. Sullivan, Trinity University

This essay speaks for dirty aesthetics. Although aesthetic landscapes readily inspire environmental thinking, a case can be made for grappling with the truly local dirty matter right at hand. Dirt, soil, earth, and dust surround us at all scales: we find them on our shoes, bodies, and computer screens, in fields and forests, and floating in the air. They are the stuff of geological structures, of the rocky Earth itself, and are mobile like our bodies.

When “green thinking” neglects the less glamorous and less colorful components of dirt in both the built environment and other landscapes, it risks contributing to the dichotomy dividing our material surroundings into a place of “pure, clean nature” and the dirty human sphere. After all, we live on Earth, are dependent upon earth and soil for most of our sustenance, and are surrounded by dust. This dust emerges from our bodies, the particulate matter of air pollution, the stuff in buildings, and the desiccated landscapes of a warming world. Dirty nature is always with us as part of ongoing interactions among all kinds of material agents, and thus is, in other words, more process than place. I propose “dirt theory” as an antidote to nostalgic views rendering nature a far-away and “clean” site precisely in order to suggest that there is no ultimate boundary between us and nature. We are enmeshed within dirt in its many forms. Looking at dirty nature allows a close-up and human-scale view of the environment, yet one that is inevitably interconnected with broader views, too.

With dirt theory, one cannot focus solely on “place” since the small scale earth-forms of dirt, dust, and sand are highly mobile aspects of our material surroundings. They move with us on our shoes and bodies, are moved by elemental forces like wind and water, and are dispersed by mechanized means of travel. Rather than concentrating solely on “place,” then, dirt theory acknowledges ongoing processes through time and across space. We exist in a diaspora of

granular minerals, particulate matter, and organic odds and ends that find their way into our soil and elsewhere, too. This mobile hybridity is not only due to dirt's ability to travel, but also is a result of its actual components. The soil contains very small rocky pieces of the Earth along with vast multitudes of species and mixes of biotic matter. It is rich with microscopic organisms like bacteria, fungi, mites, nematodes, yeasts, molds, rotifers, beetles, worms, and ants, as well as minerals and, all too often, industrial byproducts. As a hybrid of organic and inorganic matter—a cyborg of sorts—soil actively participates in small-scale ecological processes that are themselves integrated into the larger niches of other assemblages. Bodies, trees, forests, towns, and cities are assemblages that are also imbricated into other assemblages on both larger and smaller scales. Dirt is the literal ground without which there would be no terrestrial life, and which is always shifting and on the move. On the darker side, dirt and dust can be highly toxic or radioactive, and thus can impose a destructively agentic influence onto most of the living things they contact. Dirt theory must encompass the full range of life-sustaining and toxic agencies in the soil without flinching. Thinking dirt is therefore challenging.

The relevance of dirt has not gone unnoticed by ecocritics and scientists. The ecocritic Anthony Lioi, for example, strives to overcome dirt rejection:

To reject dirt is to imagine that it can be separated from what is sacred, and to finalize that separation by annihilating pollution from the cosmic order itself. I want to suggest that despite its desire to affirm Earth, much of ecocritical culture has been dirt-rejecting. In our quest to promote wildness and non-anthropocentric cosmologies, ecocritics have shunned texts and places comprised by matter-out-of-place, the ritual uncleanness of cities, suburbs, and other defiled ecosystems [...] Therefore, we must consciously

construct a symbolic place in ecocriticism for dirt and pollution, an alias or icon that allows us to give dirt its due (17).

Indeed, “to give dirt its due” is the goal of this essay. Lioi’s assertion that we must construct “a symbolic place for dirt and pollution” suits material ecocriticism’s aspiration to take into account the actual matter of bodies and things into our environmental discourses. However, we want to include not just a symbolic place but also a conscious and *concrete embrace* of dirt, which cannot be avoided since we live and breathe it daily. Perhaps surprisingly, Lioi’s call for a “symbolic place” in ecocriticism is answered in the discourse of dirt in scientific studies.

That is, the slippage between dirt mythology and soil science is much more fluid than one might expect.¹ Work in the arts and humanities prepares us to contend with—and to be aware of—the often rapid flow of concrete knowledge into metaphor and beyond; ecocriticism can thus provide a solid place for the assessment of the shifts between scientific objectivity and reverential mysticism when dealing with dirt and other environmental elements. In *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*, for example, the geomorphologist David R. Montgomery claims that most cultures rise and fall based on the quality of their soil:

A common lesson of the ancient empires of the Old and New Worlds is that even innovative adaptations cannot make up for a lack of fertile soil to sustain increased productivity. As long as people take care of their land, the land can sustain them.

Conversely, neglect of the basic health of the soil accelerated the downfall of civilization after civilization even as the harsh consequences of erosion and soil exhaustion helped push Western society from Mesopotamia to Greece, Rome, and beyond. (81)

The quality of local soil, according to Montgomery, has determined the flourishing and failure of most civilizations in the past. Soil becomes the ultimate Agent in world events. Chris Maser

shares Montgomery's appreciation for good soil, and thus declares in an essay on forests that "[s]oil is the placenta that nurtures all of life—the membrane that unites the non-living components of the system [with the living]. The soil is the stage upon which the entire human drama is enacted" (14). Soil is not just the "stage" for Maser, but also the site where dirt's concrete materiality (as rich earthly "soil") becomes an almost mystical entity, the motherly "placenta." I am using the term "dirt" here as the broad term encompassing not only nurturing "soil," but also depleted soil, dust, the toxic grime on the ground of industrial sites, etc.; what both Maser and Montgomery address is the narrower category of "soil" specifically, as the fertile material so important for humanity's agriculture. Maser's celebration of soil may neglect water, but his claims nevertheless hold up well for terrestrial life forms that depend on such rich earth as the "placenta" for land-based plants, which are, in turn, food for other animals. What I wish to emphasize, however, is that the move from soil science to dirt mother is a short step. Dirt theory must therefore be both cultural and scientific, and it must attend to the slippage between the two. Yet the slippage is not to be avoided; instead it creates the very place where environmental activism's inevitably reverent, even mystical, love of nature meets and, hopefully, fruitfully joins, scientific knowledge. It is the combination of the two that promises our greatest and most concrete strength, as long as one side does not erase the other.

With such slippage in mind, this essay explores the environmental roles attributed to dirt, whether grimy materiality, mythical status, or a combination of the two, in various German and American literary works. The background for dirt theory, however, is much broader: the connection between soil and our bodies emerges in many ancient and modern narratives. As Montgomery notes: "Foundational texts of Western religions acknowledge the fundamental relationship between humanity and the soil. The Hebrew name of the first man, Adam is derived

from the word *adama*, which means earth, or soil [and] the Latin word for human, *homo* is from *humus* or living soil” (27). The more recent 2004 TV series, *Battlestar Gallactica*, also uses this connection to frame its cosmic quest to return to Earth led by the “Adama” family. Its Adama-Earth metaphor, however, is typical of most science fiction with regard to space travel: it problematically assumes that we can exist separate from our dirty planetary enmeshment, and so the show ignores our mundane yet actual biological “matrix” composed of dirt and bacteria. I mention this recent example specifically, since it is emblematic of how many narratives—from religious documents to popular culture today—presume that our time on Earth and in the dirt is a mere matter of convenience that is easily overcome with the right technology. Dirt theory, which is based on material environmental immersion, suggests something much more grounded: should we ever travel in space beyond the moon, we would have to solve problems not only of extreme distances and gravity but also the fact that our concrete survival (in space or here on Earth) depends on our full immersion into our earthy, bacteria-laden surroundings. Hence, space travel would not just involve exotic technology but most likely also the transport of loads of soil and bacteria with us on any extended journey off-planet. Indeed, the topic of how transporting dirt and bodies are entwined is central to this essay. In the brief survey of German and American texts that follows, I note how textual encoding of the mobile dirty matter surrounding us readily slips between mundane labor and mythological resonance. Again, this is a productive slippage whose energy we might harness and guide rather than seek to overcome.

Karen Duve’s 2008 best-selling German novel *Taxi* portrays a concrete link between bodies and dirt on the move. The protagonist, Alex Herwig, abandons her university studies and takes a job as a taxi driver in Hamburg. Her work as a cabbie acquaints her with the grimy

mobility of modern human beings living in a city. Alex describes with disbelief just how much dirt accumulates in her taxi:

And then the dirt. Unimaginable, how much filth the passengers carry into my taxi every night. I asked myself, where it comes from, all that filth; whether it falls out of people's pockets, or crumbles off their bodies, or what. And then there was also the filth that they give off like vapor, and that, like a stinking film, covered the steering wheel, and dashboard, and finally me, too, so that at the end of the night it would swirl in brown streaks off my hands down the sink's drain.² (Duve 29-30)

Transporting bodies appears to be a fluid and rather aimless process that continually produces a film of debris coating the surfaces of her taxi. Dirt in Duve's novel is transportable, transferable, and appears in various forms including the grime and stinking vapors that immerse both her and the taxi in inescapable materiality. The human body, like the cab, is a producer and carrier of dirt as well as a receptacle for it. Duve's novel about taxi driving that has no final destination maps an ever-shifting weave of dirt, bodies, things, and places. One doesn't escape the flows of vehicles and grime, but rather lives with them, carrying dirt around the city, exchanging it, whether willingly or not, with others.

The novel ends, though, on an oddly high note when a chimpanzee takes over Alex's taxi and crashes it, thereby freeing the ape from his aggressive handler and Alex from her taxi license, and thus from her dirty job as a driver. In the final scene, Alex stands in the early morning in front of a Laundromat, listening to a bird sing. This is a moment of freedom absurdly framed by the traditional element of bird song straight out of German romantic poetry. The conclusion also posits the hope for cleanliness, at last. That is: Alex's dirty clothes will finally get washed, a challenge she has faced throughout the novel and one that she has solved by

having her mother do her washing. Modern freedom and independence, in other words, can be had, at least if there is a handy Laundromat to be found where the daily battle with dirty clothes can be fought more or less on one's own terms. This gritty novel closes ironically with the promise of clean laundry. Duve's "high" moment of optimism is the pseudo-potential of self-determination, at least in terms of the flow of dirt among clothes and bodies. Alex may attain this minor control but not an economic self-sufficiency defining exchanges of goods and reproductive strategies (as in marriage). Dirt, bodies, and the small hope of self-determined (and cheap) cleanliness frame *Taxi*. Duve's novel documents the endlessly circling transport of dirt and bodies through the city and beyond as an enmeshed process of material interconnectedness. Its economic aimlessness takes on a clear, albeit satirical, trajectory when framed in terms of dirt.

In Paola Bacigalupi's 2010 novel *The Windup Girl*, we find a similar body-dirt connection based on mobility: human bodies are dirty, diseased matter under continual threat from rapidly spreading diseases causing mutation and decay. The government in Thailand, where the story takes place, tries to control trade as the concrete process that brings more diseases from abroad even as it provides innovative cures and food sources resistant to the diseases. Trade is the embodiment of large-scale material interactivity, but the novel documents with graphic precision just how impossible it is to control bodily and economic exchanges. The desire to have power over all exchanges, whether genetic or economic, is the dominant driver of rapid change in the novel's world. So-called "gene rippers" work for international conglomerates to create new and altered crops, but also to fashion diseases that will kill off competitors' crops, and then, in turn, to cure these same self-created diseases. Barely staying ahead of sweeping plagues, fearsome mutations, and mass starvation, the gene rippers indiscriminately exchange the material stuff of food and bodies. In Thailand, there is only one major gene ripper at work, an expatriate

American, but the Thais are able to maintain their food supply thanks to a huge hidden stock of traditional food seed and its invaluable genetic material. They therefore have very strict rules about food imports and genetically manipulated bodies. Hence the titular “windup girl,” Emiko, is an illegally constructed being from Japan under constant threat of being discovered by the Thai government and then “mulched” up with other organic matter and re-used in the “post-oil era’s” desperate quest for calories. She sees herself as filth: “The man with the mop slowly approaches. Emiko wonders if he will try to mop her away with the rest of the filth. If he will take her out and throw her into one of the trash piles, leave her for the Dung Lord’s collection” (Bacigalupi 257). Bodies dominate this text as sites of dirt, mutation, and calorie use; they are hence nodes of potential change in exchanges with a grimy environment.

Emiko’s exotic body is emphasized in the novel as something dirtied by forced sexual labor and the city’s grime. Bacigalupi highlights her efforts to clean herself up as she washes with a few precious drops of water: “Water sluices away soap and grime, even some of the shame comes with it. If she were to scrub for a thousand years she would not be clean” (Bacigalupi 102). Like in Duve’s *Taxi*, self-determination appears primarily as the possibility of personal washing. Although the Japanese genetically engineer all kinds of workers to supplement their low population, including monstrous soldiers and multi-armed factory laborers, the only actual “new people” we see directly in the novel are the “windup” girls, who work as secretaries, translators, and sex toys. Since Emiko was abandoned by her Japanese master in Thailand (it was cheaper to leave her there than fly her home, as if she were excessive baggage), her only choice is to work as a prostitute. Called “windups” because they are engineered to move like an old-fashioned wind-up toy with jerky motions, these girls stand out in a crowd if they move. Yet they also have superior resistance to human diseases, superhuman speed, and beautiful, virtually pore-

less, skin. Of course, the lack of pores means that they cannot sweat, so they overheat terribly, a distinct disadvantage in the tropics of Thailand that have become even hotter with global warming. Still, in the genetic warfare of Bacigalupi's world, they have a great advantage, for the moment, when it comes to surviving filth, pollution, and bodily waste.

In *The Windup Girl*, bodies are dirty, the built environment is decaying into dust, and the Dung Lord rules the streets. However, Bacigalupi's "material" depiction of concrete environmental damage in a dangerously warming world, with its intensely graphic details of genetically altered bodies and the vicious choices made by profit-driven economics, is framed by an overtly mythological scene with Eden-like resonance. The novel opens as the "calorie man" Anderson Lake (future lover of Emiko) savors a forbidden fruit. Lake is an American representative of the corporation "AgriGen," which is bent on stealing the secret store of genetic materials held by Thai government. The fruit Lake eats, a "ngaw" is lychee-like. Its consumption leads us into the novel as if we were entering Genesis at the moment that Eve eats the apple—but this time it's Anderson and he wants a profit. "He slips the *ngaw*'s slick translucent ball into his mouth. A fist of flavor, ripe with sugar and fecundity. The sticky flower bomb coats his tongue. It's as if he's back in the HiGro fields of Iowa, offered his first tiny block of hard candy by a Midwest Compact agronomist when he was nothing but a farmer's boy, barefoot among the corn stalks" (2). As it begins, so the novel ends, with both mythological and biblical symbolism: we are taken from the consumption of forbidden fruit (and candy made of high fructose corn syrup) to the opening up of trade and reproduction. The lone gene ripper in Thailand survives the novel's diseases and coups just long enough to offer the windups what they lack, which has thus far prevented their "natural" evolutionary expansion: the ability to reproduce. As in Genesis—and "nature," of course—fruit and reproduction are parts of the same

process. In *The Windup Girl*, controlling fruit/reproduction means ultimately controlling trade and thus economic power. While Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* finally rejects the reproductive option for its creature, Bacigalupi's novel embraces it with all the future possibility (and overpopulation challenges) of unstoppable fruitfulness. The most graphic bodily materiality inexorably emerges with mythological resonance.

The framing of the concrete materiality of mobile bodies, fruit, trade, disease, and dirt within mythological narratives marks Bacigalupi's novel. But it is hardly unique in that regard. Indeed, one of the most famous of all European dramas, Goethe's 1832 tragedy *Faust*, reveals a similar play with materiality and mythology. In the case of *Faust*, the story begins with the overtly mythological and Christian story of the protagonist's gamble with Mephistopheles, and ends with the concrete materiality of a dike construction and meteorological patterns. The Mephistophelean pact means that Faust can enjoy life any way he likes—as long as he doesn't enjoy it enough to want to stop and relish the moment. The first thing that Faust does, inevitably, is to take advantage of a rejuvenating process so that he can pluck the fruit of the first pretty girl he meets: Gretchen. Part I of Goethe's *Faust* depicts the dangers of fruitful reproduction, as Faust seduces then abandons Gretchen. After giving birth and committing infanticide, she is executed. Part II, in contrast, moves from local bodies to a much broader exploration of cultural developments through three thousand years of European history. Faust witnesses and/or participates in the eruption into modernity in transportation, banking systems, the economic dependency of early capitalism on “piracy, war, and trade,” and the attempt to control nature with large development projects like a dike to hold back the sea. The tragedy ends with Faust's death and his body rising heavenwards, a scene which reflects not only traditional Christian imagery of “ascension,” but also Goethe's meteorological studies in how air currents carry

moisture upwards. That is, *Faust* documents the move from the mythological frames of Christian and ancient Greek texts into a modern presentation of science and technology, blending, finally, the two. Both Goethe's and Bacigalupi's narratives share mythological frameworks, and both raise hard-core material questions regarding the fate of dirty bodies. Whereas Bacigalupi builds his text on a seemingly overwhelming material premise, his story still begins and ends with a rather mythological promise of new humanity and new fruitfulness. Goethe's play, in contrast, begins with an adamantly religious framework and leads to ever more material and scientific concerns; many readers have indeed noted its foundational move into secular materiality.³ Above all, though, *Faust* is an exercise in uniting, however brutally, the mythological and the material. This form of modernity doesn't deny its cultural past; it embraces its messy conjunctions. Where else can we begin practically?

Goethe's *Faust* also provides much good fodder for dirt theory, since the play is framed by specific references to various forms of "earth." Faust begins the action in Part I by conjuring the "Earth Spirit" in his lab, only to be rejected by it; and, finally, Faust dies while proclaiming his most invaluable achievement to be a massive *earthen* dike holding back the sea. The earth spirit rules in the beginning, but by the end it seems that "earth" has been put in its place by Faust's grandiose efforts. Though Faust's final ascent is portrayed in overtly religious terms as a form of transcendence, the scene also puts an almost equal weight on descriptions of the weather patterns in which Goethe had an avid interest at the end of his life. Faust, in other words, ascends heavenwards either because his soul is rising—or because his body's water joins the water cycle and rises with the swirling pattern of warm air currents. In fact, Goethe uses the same terms for the three air regions through which Faust's remains rise, the lower, middle, and upper stratum (he floats "onwards" at the end of the play), that he uses in his meteorological essays on shifting

air pressure, storms, and the flow of air up and down in weather changes.⁴ The fact that Goethe compares the human soul to water in his poem, “Song of the Spirits over the Waters” needs mentioning here, since his drama ends as aery angels carry Faust’s “water-like” soul upwards. In his scientific writings, he similarly describes a physical tension—battle, even—between the “earth and the air” that changes air pressure and thus the ability to control water. This tension allows air to “carry” moisture upwards when the “atmosphere” reigns supreme. He claims that when the atmosphere “overcomes the earth,” water vapor rises: “High barometric pressure eliminates precipitation, since the atmosphere is able *to carry the moisture or to reduce it to its elements.*”⁵ Faust’s conjuring of the earth spirit at the beginning of the play must be contextualized in terms of his post-mortem ascent within both cosmological imagery and the material flows of weather patterns.

Moreover, the “earth-air” battles in the play proliferate in other forms, as well. Most notably, Mephistopheles arrives for the first time immediately after Faust gives his famous “two-souls” speech, in which he claims to be torn between the lusty “earth” and the desire to escape into the “air.” Faust concludes this speech with a cry to the “air-spirits,” to come and take him away from the “earth” to a new life. The call to the *air* brings his devilish companion, not some mysterious conjuring. The *earthly* Mephistopheles is, indeed, biblically associated with *air*. Additionally, the earth-air tension structures the final scenes: believing that lemurs are digging dirty channels (“Graben”) to remove the swamp water and so free up the land, the blind Faust fails to realize that they are actually digging his grave (“Grab”). Claiming victory, he dies only to have the angels scatter burning petals which aide them as they snatch Faust’s “earthly” remains and soar upwards using, apparently, the heat-driven rising air to their advantage. This moment of “joining the air” must be considered at least partially ambiguous, considering Mephistopheles’

role as “air spirit” in Part I. Though Faust’s final aery journey upwards as his “earthly remains” are carried by cloud-like angels is usually held to mean he has divine forgiveness, the scene functions within the larger earth-air tensions of the drama. The earthen dike stands as a monument to Faust’s blindly hubristic belief that he has “reconciled the earth with itself,” and “set a boundary to the sea.”⁶ And Faust must also address the putrid (“dirty,” one might say) swamp that results from the construction of the dike. At the end, the earth spirit is gone and Faust’s remains are floating upwards in the air, but the dike and dirty swamp boldly remain beyond his demise. In this way, Goethe’s *Faust* evokes the enmeshment within materiality where the physical environment functions as an agentic force in human life.⁷ The battle between the elemental forces of earth and air drive much of Goethe’s play, and Faust’s body is drawn by their influences into biological and economic exchanges much like Emiko in Bacigalupi’s novel. However, even though Goethe may accomplish as much as recent authors in wide-ranging explorations of humanity within materiality’s activities, his drama leaves out much of the actual laborious reality of shaping dirt. That is, Faust’s minions—the mystical lemurs, that is—dig channels and build the dike without any mention in the text of the vast quantities of dirt that they must transport in order to form the dike itself. Since Goethe’s *Faust* has long been considered the quintessential heroic tale of modern man, this lack of the representation of labor and dirt is relevant.

Theodor Storm’s 1888/1889 Frisian novella, *The Dyke Master*, shares with *Faust* battles against the elements and the construction of a dike; in contrast to Goethe’s play, however, Storm’s tale has extensive references to the cartloads of dirt needed to build the dike. Storm’s dike master, Hauke Haien, defies tradition by using new-fangled, mathematical schemes to build a much more durable structure with a long, gentle slope on the shores of the North Sea. Haien’s

ironic fate is to become a ghost rider in Storm's novella, which attempts a "rational" depiction of an otherwise spooky story. The final storm—the revenge of the weather patterns again, as in *Faust*—breaches the connection between an old, weakened dike and Haien's rationally designed new one. The play is filled with concrete references to dirt being gathered, carried, and dumped to create the new earthen dike. Above all, the vast, dirty labor of the construction is emphasized, in sharp contrast to *Faust* where we see *only* the final product. Storm, unlike Goethe, concretely details the labor necessary to haul the innumerable wagon loads necessary to hold back the sea:

Finally, when the Whitsun bells were ringing out across the land, the work had begun: the tip-carts ceaselessly journeyed from the foreland to the line of the dyke to deliver the clay, and the same number were already returning to the foreland to be loaded up again; on the line of the dyke itself stood men with shovels and spades moving the cartloads of clay to the right place and leveling it off; enormous loads of straw were driven up and unloaded... ” (80).

For Storm, the labor and the dike are material despite being contextualized by a ghost story, whereas for Goethe, the digging is mythological but the human body appears to join the material elements at the end. Both authors map out dynamic tensions between grimy materiality and mythological narratives.

In the end, Haien's scientific dike does succeed—the narrator many years later rides along its well-formed edge—yet the dike master is nevertheless defeated by his fellow villagers' unwillingness to modernize the link to the old dike's walls. Hence, when the final storm comes and destroys the link between old and new systems, the water rushes in and sweeps away Haien's wife and child. Haien then spurs his ghostly white horse (which provides the name for the original German title, *The White Horse Rider*, or *Der Schimmelreiter*) into the devastating

waves, only to ride endlessly in every storm up and down the dike for all eternity. The “modern” narrator, does, indeed, spot just such a ghostly figure before arriving at an inn and being told the tale on a dark and stormy night. In Storm’s novella of realism, the question is how to keep a ghost story grounded with precise numbers of dirt-cartloads and rationalist explanations by the schoolteacher narrator. Storm’s *Dyke Master* asserts the possibility of rationally controlling dirt in contrast to the insurmountable task of controlling the superstitious bent of local villagers. In the long run, the earthen dike still stands, just as the ghost stories persevere, as if the dike and the stories exist in an eternal Faustian tension of materiality and mythology. Storm documents a ceaseless quest to control the mobility of dirt and water through contained narrativity.

The challenge of shaping dirt and negotiating with its mobile grit functions as a metaphor for the project of modernity. Modernity’s many anti-dirt campaigns include efforts made to remove or conceal bodily filth, waste, and the sweaty labor of agricultural processes. Overall, the more sanitary conditions have been profoundly healthy for human beings (if not for many environments more broadly), though some aspects have led to unintended and not always positive consequences. For one thing, the efforts to conceal “dirt” in its many forms have encouraged urban residents to believe that dirty nature is something far away and disconnected from themselves and their bodies. This concealment functions alongside the over-production of “things” that can simply be thrown away, never to be seen again, as if waste and dirt blissfully disappeared from the earth in a wink of the eye. In contrast to such suppression, Patrick Süskind’s 1985 satirical novel *Perfume* highlights all kinds of dirt, filth, and stinking bodies in a raucous portrayal of the French enlightenment as the gateway to modernity. Ironically, though, the greatest emphasis is on smell, which offers invisible yet highly concrete evidence of our material embodiment. The novel gleefully asserts that the human soul is actually a reproducible

and material “stink,” or “essence.” Süskind depicts enlightenment as a rather dirty and even quite putrid process. He does so with a humorous emphasis on the uncanny olfactory abilities of the protagonist Grenouille, a Parisian monster who can discern any smell but lacks an odor and thus, apparently, a soul. Like Faust, Grenouille murders with nary a qualm to achieve his ends (Faust to seduce Gretchen and later to build his dike, Grenouille to create the perfect perfume by killing lovely pubescent girls and stealing their scent). With Faustian grandeur, Grenouille also retreats from the human world to a cave, where he literally enters the earth.⁸ In his case, it is to spend the entire Seven Years War (1756-1763) creating an imagined world of smells. Grenouille gains a horrifying self-awareness, like any good romantic protagonist, but in his case it is when he suddenly realizes that he lacks a smell. Thus he sets off on a new quest to “find himself,” by, it turns out, using dirt, excrement, and some oils to make a human scent.

Dirt appears in many forms in *Perfume*: evoked by stinking bodies (and souls) and fully immersing Paris, the center of the rational Enlightenment yet filthy beyond compare:

The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of mouldering wood and cat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired parlours stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber pots. The stench of sulphur rose from the chimneys, the stench of caustic lyes from the tanneries, and from the slaughterhouses came the stench of congealed blood. People stank of sweat and unwashed clothes; from their mouths came the stench of rotting teeth, from their bellies that of onions, and from their bodies, if they were no longer very young, came the stench of sour milk and tumorous disease. (3)

Süskind continues for two more pages of stink, filth, and unwashed bodies, and does so with great historical accuracy, at least if we note the work of such scholars as Georges Vigarello. Süskind concludes with a significant nod to bacteria: “For in the eighteenth century there was nothing to hinder bacteria busy at decomposition, and so there was no human activity, either constructive or destructive, no manifestation of germinating or decaying life, that was not accompanied by stench. And of course the stench was foulest in Paris ...” (4).

Dirt plays another essential role in *Perfume*: Grenouille eventually gains the appearance of being a modern middle-class citizen when a “scientifically” oriented Marquis with an anti-dirt vision rescues the young man, providing him clean clothes, cosmetics, and a few lessons in etiquette. The appearance of control over dirt is, after all, an essential part of the move into modernity. The Marquis claims that proximity to “earth” is dangerous, since it produces a *fluidum letale*, impairing “vital energies” so that “[a]ll living creatures therefore endeavour to distance themselves from the earth by growing [upwards]” (140). Hence Grenouille is “cured” of filthiness by the Marquis’ “anti-earth” treatment of fresh air and foods taken from tree tops. The Marquis, a parody of Enlightenment science, espouses all kinds of absurd theories based on his conviction that life must escape the earth’s lethal fumes and strive upwards “away from it” (which resonates with the final line in *Faust*). This is why “the most valuable parts” of all living creatures “are lifted heavenwards; the ears of grain, the blossoms of flowers, the head of man” until age brings them back to the earth, where “they will inevitably fall victim to the lethal gas” (145). The Marquis’ use of his special ventilation machine has little actual impact on the filthy cave-dweller; his real gift to Grenouille is the middle-class veneer provided by clean clothes, cosmetics, and learning to walk upright and speak more clearly. With this veneer, Grenouille is able to “pass” as a clean and normally smelling person and to pursue his ultimate goal of stealing

the scent of beautiful girls at the cusp of puberty. The scents he gathers are so intoxicating that his final perfume causes everyone in his vicinity to desire—and consume—him in a final cannibalistic orgy. It's a shocking end, but it shares with *Faust* the notion that there are elemental, material forces driving us “onward.” Süskind calls the combination of these forces a “rip-tide no human could have resisted” (262). Dirt, as stinking essence in *Perfume*, functions both as the body and the soul of the “enlightened man's” steps towards modernity. Süskind cleverly weds materiality and mythology without losing his sense of humor.

These five literary works portray various roles of dirt as an essential element in our environment. The nuances of dirt imagery reveal much about our fundamental understanding of bodies as well as their immersion in the radically local and mobile environments that are always with us but never entirely under our conscious control. Within the biospheric processes constantly reshaping all matter, there can be no long-term stability for the boundaries we declare between clean and unclean, sanitary and unsanitary, or the pure and the dirty. Yet ignoring such boundaries can increase disease and death. With dirt theory, we see that most of these boundaries are actually porous membranes participating in often disturbing exchanges of energy and matter. Human bodies and minds are fully ensconced in material environments, which shape us just as vividly as we shape them. For Stacy Alaimo, to be materially embedded and open to our physical surroundings is a matter of “transcorporeality,” of an exchange of matter across bodies that is potentially nutritional or polluting. For Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought*, it is the “mesh” of interconnected things and “radical openness.” Jane Bennett likewise speaks of the “vibrancy of matter” of which we are all a part; and Lynn Margulis notes that living things are really collections of bacterial cells or offspring of bacterial actors whose manifold forms of bodily exchanges and transfers outperform even the most creative of human actors.

In dirt theory, we also view the dark side of vibrant, trans-corporeal exchanges in the bacterial mesh. Most of our discursive and material practices posit human beings in opposition to the “earth” instead of fully participating in dirty processes. Indeed, cultural references to dirt, soil, and the earth more often suggest forms of despised than desired interconnectedness. The grime of taxis, heaps of dirty laundry, gritty labor of dike construction, and the stinking human scent are just several examples of the less vaunted forms of such connections. Despite dirt’s association with “mother earth” and top soil, it is often overlooked, under-appreciated, condemned by the anti-dirt campaigns of cleaning-products industries, or laden with gendered, racial, and class connotations. Dirt is our radically local, material environment, and it demands our ecological and cultural attention. As the texts by Duve, Bacigalupi, Goethe, Storm, and Süskind demonstrate, we overlook the fruitful or toxic yet certainly agentic power of the material element of “earth,” or dirt, at our own peril. Such elemental aspects of the environment share both a concrete materiality and an unavoidably mystical resonance. Material ecocriticism might productively embrace the combination of dirt’s gritty physicality with its elemental potential to inspire reverence and, hopefully, responsible care. The energizing slippage between these stances, when recognized as such instead of blindly adopted as part of a fervent belief, is a practical place for environmental action.

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¹ See Douglas and Masquelier on the anthropological discourses of dirt and cleanliness in terms of gender, class, and race.

² My translation of: "Und dann der Schmutz. Unvorstellbar, wie viel Dreck die Fahrgäste jede Nacht in mein Taxi schleppen. Ich fragte mich, wo der herkam, der ganze Dreck; ob der den Leuten aus der Tasche fiel oder vom Körper bröselte oder wie. Und dann war da noch der Dreck, den sie ausdünsteten, und der als stinkender Belag das Lenkrad und das Armaturenbrett überzog und schließlich auch mich, und der am Ende einer Nacht in braunen Schlieren von meinen Händen in den Abfluss des Waschbeckens strudelte."

³ See especially Tantillo and McCarthy.

⁴ I discuss this at length elsewhere, 2010.

⁵ My translation from Goethe's essay on barometer changes (my emphasis, 259). The original describes air pressure changes as shifting power struggles between the earth and the air: "Hoher Barometerstand hebt die Wasserbildung auf, die Atmosphäre vermag die Feuchte zu tragen, oder sie in ihre Elemente zu zersetzen; niedriger Barometerstand läßt eine Wasserbildung zu, die oft grenzenlos zu sein scheint. Nach unserer Terminologie würden wir also sagen: zeigt die Erde sich mächtig, vermehrt sie ihre Anziehungskraft, so überwindet sie die Atmosphäre, deren Inhalt ihr nun ganz angehört; was allenfalls darin zu Stande kommt muß als Tau, als Reif herunter..."

⁶ My translation of lines 11539-43. In German: "Wie das Geklirr der Spaten mich ergötzt! / Es ist die Menge, dir mir frönet, / Die Erde mit sich selbst versöhnet, / Den Wellen ihre Grenze setzt, / Das Meer mit strengem Band umzieht."

⁷ For a more critical and thorough ecocritical reading of *Faust* and of Goethe's work in terms of European romanticism, see Rigby.

⁸ In Part I, Faust famously retreats into nature to the "Forest and Cave," where he contemplates his next move in the seduction of Gretchen.