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**WASTE: DISPOSABILITY, DECAY AND DEPLETION**

# Dynamic Dirt: Medieval Holy Dust, Ritual Erosion, and Pilgrimage Eco-poetics

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Environmental citizenship has intellectual roots extending into the Middle Ages. We need to get down and dirty—literally. This article—rooted in vibrant materialist intersections with medieval pilgrimage poetry—transverses literary and ecological paths as it explores pilgrimage eco-poetics. From the Middle Ages to today, voluntary migrants in the form of pilgrims cause environment degradation, everything from waste disposal to soil erosion on frequented paths. Focusing on dirt in which pilgrimage paths have sprung up and dirt used as healing relic, we come to understand actants like dirt and holy dust in a new way. Tomb dust and holy dirt convey an agency that catalyzes our understanding of pilgrimage as materially grounded in the earth. Things are not mere objects, but possess independence from us. Possessing agency, matter itself is not static but generative. Dirt's extended fellows include reviled trash, waste, and crap. A modern-day pilgrimage shrine, the Cathedral of Junk in Austin, TX, is a refuse pile of rejected garbage. Sustainably reused by the creator, this shrine perfectly realizes a Judeo-Christian ethos of charity. See in this way, dirt—normally reviled as abject, even 'out of place' (Douglas 1966/2002: 44)—can be viewed as positive, even sacred. Like waste poetry, dirt ultimately heals homeopathically for both spirit and body.

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'[A] pilgrim for environmental protection...'

(DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011: 18, citing Singh, Singh, and Heptulla, 2003: xvi)

In the Middle Ages, the concept of waste as understood in Western culture significantly developed in textured ways.<sup>1</sup> Though stemming from the category of waste, both dirt in which pilgrimage paths sprang up and dirt used as healing relic were integral aspects of pilgrimage ecopoetics. Pilgrimage as a practice suggests an ideal crucible for exploring interspecies interaction across both landscape and textscape. Dirt acts as an element in historical pilgrimage: pilgrims caused erosion on unpaved paths and affected environments in negative ways. Roadways became polluted and authorities insisted they be cleaned up to allow for clear passage. Some medieval miracle stories attest to the belief that dirt sparked healing, reminding us how 'many soils have human stories attached to them' (Lines-Kelly, 2004: 6). The converse is true as well: humans have many soil stories attached to them.

Pilgrimage functions as a human endeavor throughout multiple cultures. Just as beavers' dam building is 'as much a part of the phenotypic expression of beavers' genes as are their webbed feet or wood-cutting teeth' (Egan, 2015: 48), pilgrimage functions as a phenotypic structure inherent to humans. Humans feel compelled to seek their way in the world, whether journeying to obtain food, mates, and trade opportunities or for the purposes of religious ritual. Indeed, '[H]uman cognitive predispositions support our wayfinding, knowledge-seeking, and highly social nature, having evolved to solve environmental challenges in our evolutionary past' (Easterlin, 2010: 262–3). Seen in this light, pilgrimage is not merely the propulsion of one human actor along a road or path to a perceived sacred space for the purposes of healing or spiritual devotion, as in the ideal[ized] understanding of religious pilgrimage. Predisposed to understand where we are and where we are headed,

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<sup>1</sup> See Morrison (2015). Tarlo (n.d.) has suggested the necessity to 'explore our antecedents in this field [of ecofeminism] ... [S]ome of the earlier ecocriticism was perhaps over-fixated on British and American Romantic poets'.

human beings are natural wayfarers, fashioning narrative to 'secur[e] in memory events from the past, including memories of those nonhuman beings' we interact with (Morrison, 2018). The lived practice of pilgrimage necessitates the interaction between humans and non-human actors, whether nettles, rocks, or dirt, each of which has intrinsic value (Riordan, 2004: 46).

I can attest to this lived pilgrimage practice. In 1994, my husband and I undertook the entire 137-mile Pilgrims' Way from Winchester to Canterbury. At Winchester Cathedral, the porter served us 'Wayfarer's Dole' (bread and ale), even bringing out a fourteenth-century horn and silver cup as we chatted. The most prevalent theme in my diary was my feet, imprisoned in heavy boots (see Ingold, 2004: 319, 323). At the close of the first day—when all we'd done was travel a few miles—I complained, 'My feet are TOTALLY killing me. *Plus*, I have 'nettle leg'! My feet hurt so much. I think they must be swollen. I put moleskin on the toe pads of my right middle and 'ring' toe *and* use a toe separator which helps—but agony still persists'. One thing is clear: the physical aspects of walking for days affects the phenomenological response to pilgrimage, whether undertaken as historical ritual or touristic nature hike. The materiality of experience is key to perceptions of journeys as somatic, emotional, and spiritual events. Further, the interkinship of human, road, and environment shows how each element acts dynamically. It is not just the human acting upon the road or within the environment; the road operates as a vibrant agent, as does ecology itself, within the 'interconnectedness', the mesh, which is 'the ecological thought' (Morton, 2010: 15, 3).

Theoretical approaches such as New Materialism[s], ecomaterialism, material ecocriticism, the material turn, and vibrant materialism concur that '*things matter* [...] they possess integrity, power, independence and vibrancy' (Cohen, 2012: 7; emphasis in original). Objects function as 'full-fledged actors' (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014: 4, citing Latour, 1999: 174). A paradigm stemming from the human actor, ecomaterialism 'invites us to rethink the anthropocentric notion that human owners hold dominion over a somehow separate, nonhuman, corporeal world' (Provost, 2016: 49–50). By displacing the centrality of humans, we open 'up more loving affiliations between us

and the environment' (Provost, 2016: 50). In a similar vein, this article looks beyond human actors to the 'network of animals, plants, and abiotic matter composing' the environs of which we are part (Provost, 2016: 49).

The objects and non-human actors littering pilgrimage are multiple. The pilgrimage route tells the tales of human and other entities through 'storied matter' (Oppermann, 2016a: 30). Transcorporeality (Alaimo, 2014: 187–8) of human with nonhuman actants such as the road and dirt recurs to sustain a practice and poetics of interspecies kinship (Oppermann, 2017c: 3, citing Haraway, 2015: 160). 'Interspecies' carries multiple valences. We might expansively view 'species' to include non-organic critters, such as the road itself, a vibrant geospatial entity and member of 'an active, dynamic system' (Riordan, 2004: 48). Or 'species' might refer to the dirt the pilgrim materially encounters in her struggle to cross fields or roads. Pilgrimage writings parallel what occurred on the tracks criss-crossing Europe from shrine to shrine, reveling in the dirt and materiality of the physical pilgrimage. All these ultimately allowed the reader to enact forms of affective piety in a spiritually inflected reading experience.

Actants like dirt and holy dust catalyze our understanding of pilgrimage as materially grounded in the earth. We need to get down and dirty—literally.

Whatever you have to say, leave the roots on, let them dangle.

And the dirt,

Just to make clear where they come from.

Charles Olson, 'These Days' (1987: 106)

While I was teaching a course on 12<sup>th</sup>- to 15<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman, Latin, and Middle English pilgrimage works, a student brought me a small, clear plastic bottle as a gift. Inside it was dirt—not just any dirt, rather sacred soil from the Sanctuary of Chimayo in New Mexico. This container now sits on a humble shrine, among various votive offerings, including a replica of the Statue of the Virgin and Child from Walsingham and an Irish cross. Chimayo is most widely known for its *pocito* [little

well] filled with 'holy dirt', alleged to have miraculous and curative powers. Many pilgrims travel to El Santuario to obtain some of this dirt (Ortega, 2014: 15), so much so that the local priest has to truck in new dirt to fill in what has been removed: 'I even have to buy clean dirt!', he complains (Eckholm, 2008). The priest attributes miraculous healings to the power of God rather than the dirt itself.

How can dirt, generally disdained as a sullyng agent, be praised as an actor for healing and purification? We need to take a step back to see waste—and its subset, dirt—within the medieval context (Morrison, 2015). In the earliest usages in English, waste was whatever is no longer of use, something squandered or lacking purpose. Waste has meant barrenness and emptiness—such as uncultivated land—but also excess and surplus—extremes viewed as problematic. The history of waste records a mutable relationship that can alter over time. Clearly one must be wary of making equivalencies between the medieval period, say, and the twenty-first century. An umbrella concept referring to everything from garbage and discards to excrement and dirt, waste is contextual. Once understood in a richly complex way by medievals, images of waste and dirt have become coarse and debased as we have stripped them of their ambivalence. For example, medieval models of virtue are linked to manure, revitalizing as it fertilizes crops. For medieval farmers, excrement was seen as a sign of redemption, contributing to the growth of a harvest that would feed new souls. In Chaucer's 'The Nun's Priest's Tale', a town is made mention of, whose dung is clearly meant for delivery outside of the walls to fertilize nearby fields. Ecocritics maintain that knowing where our food comes from and where our waste is disposed of prevents alienation and cultivates a sense of agency and even, as Wendell Berry argues, 'responsibility' (1990: 149). Just this sort of awareness of waste disposal and food production is integral to the positive weight given to dung in medieval writers.

In this vein, dirt conveyed redemption and healing within a sacred context. While we have 'broken the bonds of tens of millions of years of coevolution of dirt and terrestrial-vertebrate immunology' (Lines-Kelly, 2004: 8), dirt was used both as evidence of pilgrims in the form of traces of their paths and by pilgrims for healing

purposes. Pilgrims gloss the physical landscape they encounter. Pilgrims gather proof of their travels. In doing so, they leave marks.<sup>2</sup> Even my student changed the landscape, leaving with a vial of dirt, thus transforming the surface of the earth upon which he had trod. Conversely, the path functions as a co-author with ‘narrative agenc[y]’ (Oppermann, 2018: 13).

In the emerging discipline of Ecological Digital Humanities, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie LeMenager have argued for the urgency of exploring, among other things, ‘space[s] of practice’. Pilgrimage is such a space of practice, where multiple actors—human and nonhuman—interact, exemplifying ‘multispecies assemblage’ as well as an ‘ecosystem’ (Cohen and LeMenager, 2016: 341). This multispecies interaction between human and nonhuman actors has generally been elided in the exploration of pilgrimage narrative. As Cohen and LeMenager have pointed out, ‘Created by and for humans, narrative—the natural habitat of most literary scholarship—has a difficult time capturing the nonhuman world, an entangled domain that is always too slow, too swift, too vast, or too small for immediate apprehension’ (2016: 342). Who thinks of the actual stones tripping up physical pilgrims when parsing Middle English lines of, say, Chaucer? Yet, like Cohen’s ‘eco-medieval’ of ‘stone structures used to send wordless stories across millennia’ (Cohen and LeMenager, 2016: 342), pilgrimage paths ‘speak’. We can trace their ‘vibrancy across time’, including the importance of the role of ‘nonhuman forces (weather, sunlight, microclimates, pollution, decay)’ (Cohen and LeMenager, 2016: 343). Pilgrimage practice and pilgrimage narrative conjoin in intra-action (Bennett, 2016: 363, citing Barad, 2007) to create a ‘dappled history’ (Lethbridge and Hartman, 2016: 384) of human communities’ inter- and intra-actions with landscape (Ingold, 2004: 333, referencing Tilley, 1994: 29–30; also

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<sup>2</sup> From the twelfth-century Christina of Markyate’s sign of the cross graffitied into the door at St Alban’s Abbey by scratching her fingernails, to the audible jangling of bagpipes as witnessed by the heretical Lollard William Thorpe, medieval pilgrims left evidence—ephemeral or lasting—of their presence. Pilgrimage poem readers left their marks too, such as readers’ glossing of manuscripts to those referred to textually, like the glossing of the Wife of Bath’s body by her husband Jankyn. See, for example, Caie (1976) or Griffiths (2014).

Eade, referencing Maddrell et al.). Relics venerated by pilgrims emanate thing-power, just as pilgrimage narratives express vitality.

The life as pilgrimage metaphor spurs human desire to act as physical and spiritual pilgrims in our lives. Certain 'distinctly geographical acts...encourage *spatial* thoughts and actions' (Cresswell, 1997: 334; emphasis in the original). Metaphor usage is not inconsequential. Tim Cresswell criticizes metaphors of displacement ("the ecological metaphor of the "weed," the medical metaphor of "disease," and the bodily metaphor of "secretion") as used in geographical writing which have political implications (1997: 330). Rather than those of *displacement*, let us see how pilgrimage poetry uses *placement* metaphors. Dirt literally and metaphorically roots the pilgrim into the earth, humbly ('humus' is related to 'humble') grounding the seeking soul on and in the soil she sometimes ingests. Soil, itself 'a living multispecies world' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 172), vibrantly changes itself and provokes change in other actors. Indeed, 'soil guardianship' can be viewed as 'a form of ecological curating where the matter of soil is also a metaphor for cultivating the soil of community' (Fabre Lewin, Gathorne-Hardy, and Adams, 2015: 438).

The vernacular practice of pilgrimage affects land and dirt—both the dirt in which pilgrimage paths have sprung up and the dirt used as healing relic. From the Middle Ages until today, dirt's vibrant materialism continues to exert its agency on the devout pilgrim. While Serpil Oppermann has looked at instances where the human body becomes toxic through its integration with polluting agents (Oppermann, 2017a: 413, 415), we can understand a substance normally identified as toxic and unhealthful to be a transformative and curative element in the 'trans-corporeality' (Alaimo, 2012: 476) of body and dirt (Oppermann, 2016b: 166). Dirt and human become intertwined in moments of intersection. Vibrant dirt entangles with ailing bodies.

What could be more ecological than dirt itself? Why shouldn't it be healthful? '[M]aterial "contexts" are seldom passive' as Cohen reminds us (2015: 11). 'Active matter [...] radiates agency' (Cohen, 2015: 22). This is true of dirt: indeed, 'soil reveals itself as one of the most active organs in the Earth's "body"' (Volk, 2015: 103). Rebecca



Lines-Kelly has argued that the 'story of soil is essentially the story of humanity' (2004: 2). Though urban dwellers may have soil blindness, many cultures have specific words for different soils. Soils are heterogenous living systems (Lines-Kelly, 2004: 12) into which humans can be woven. This 'traffic of anthropogenic transformations' (Oppermann, 2017a: 415) indicates an enrichment of both human body and what is seen as an ecological other—dirt, reminiscent of what Timothy Morton has called "dark ecology," which is "realistic, depressing, intimate, and alive and ironic at the same time" (Oppermann, 2016b: 166, citing Morton 2010: 16). The human body, as Oppermann suggests, 'is storied humus as a knot of biological and imaginative journeys. Its compost stories are inscribed in dirt, in the food we eat, and in poetry' (2017b, 142; also 146). This hybridity (Iovino, 2014: 101) of human body and dirt shows how each entity catalyzes the other dynamically to provoke healing in an ecosystem of mutuality. Further, as Oppermann suggests, 'the co-extensive materiality of humans and nonhumans offer multiple possibilities for forging new environmental paths' (2016b: 163, citing Alaimo and Hekman. 2008: 9). The path in the material I focus on is literary—the poetic line—as well as literal—the pilgrimage path of medieval pilgrimage both practiced and imagined in the Middle Ages.

*Al-'ithyar*, the dust of feet.

(al-Din al-Nuwayri 2016: 28)

How does one balance ideals of a traditional practice with modern efforts of environmental preservation? Pilgrimage, enacted on well-worn roads, over fields, and through mastered forests, exists in no pristine bubble. Indeed, 'the quest for a deeper understanding of the soil's role in the natural environment and in the life of humanity [...] might even be something of a spiritual pilgrimage, impelled by an ancient call, a yearning to return to a life of greater authenticity' (Lines-Kelly, 2004: 8, referencing Hillel, 1991: 18). In contrast to the climate change refugees of late capitalism (Oppermann, 2017c; Haraway, 2015: 160), pilgrims as voluntary migrants have caused environment degradation from the Middle Ages to today. While 'bioturbation is the rearrangement of soil morphology and disturbance

of sediments by burrowing animals like ants, earthworms, beavers, rodents and plants with root movements that push away soil', human actors have modified and stressed soil and habitats. Indeed, 'anthroturbation is actually the worst of all human-induced alterations of the fabric of the Earth' (Oppermann, 2018: 4–5). Evolving studies examine 'compelling emotional accounts of environmental degradation in pilgrimage centres' (Shinde, 2007: 344), from India to Ireland. One issue with pilgrimage degradation focuses on the seasonality of mass migration (Shinde, 2007: 346). Pilgrimage shrines often exist in small towns unaccustomed to a regular flow (literally) of waste in and out. Problems that arise include stress on sewage facilities, solid waste disposal from plastic bottles to convenience foods with packaging, and air pollution from vehicles. Deforestation can also occur, whether from the masses of pilgrims needing paths or roads through forests or from the use of wood for building bridges and accommodation. The introduction of lighting for the safety of pilgrims drives away wildlife, contributing to the eco-devastation of wooded areas. Groundwater is likewise affected, due to deforestation and use by visitors. Traditionally, peak visits would occur at special festival days, such as the day of the Virgin Mary's Assumption at the shrine of Walsingham. But now pilgrims come at all times of the year, making 'it difficult for the environment to recover its own capability and render[ing] it vulnerable to degradation' (Shinde, 2007: 357). One study of Croagh Patrick, in Ireland, suggests this pilgrimage site likewise faces extensive issues in terms of footpath erosion (Prendergast, 2005: 35, 63). While a quarter (24%) of interviewees in a study worried about litter and erosion, few (9%) felt there should be artificial footpath maintenance. Many (45%) felt the difficulties caused by erosion in climbing was part of the experience (Prendergast, 2005: 109). As successful pilgrimages centres see a rise in population, including vendors or merchants of tourist wares or food, the sacred landscape becomes profane.

Evidence of pressures put on the environment by pilgrims also existed in the Middle Ages. The 'environmental impact' of the medieval road system development was 'severely detrimental to the landscape' (Oram, 2016: 304). Clearances could be extended from established roads into what was called the "waste" [...] land that was

not intensively exploited for agriculture or bearing a settled population' (Oram, 2016: 314). While trees provided shade along the Pilgrims' Way in England –that route from Winchester to Canterbury along the North and South Downs into the Medway Valley, south of the Roman Road [Watling Street] that Chaucer's pilgrims would have traversed–the ancient route underwent human pruning. Edward I introduced legislation decreeing the edges of highways should be kept clear to reduce the likelihood of crime; brigands were known to prey on defenseless pilgrims far from home (Webb, 2000: 221; Bright, 2010: 20–1; Allen, 2013: 21; Allen and Evans, 2016: 16, 21; Hindle, 2016: 34–5; Cooper, 2016: 62; Prestwich, 2016: 177; Oram, 2016: 308). The Downs route, as a less trafficked path, would have drawn less criminal activity than the main thoroughfare where more victims would likely have been found. Pilgrims, who interact with the land, affect environment: '[T]he landscape surface is thus supposed to present itself as a palimpsest for the inscription of cultural form' (Ingold, 2004: 333), as well as 'a palimpsest of human and nonhuman movements: a communally intersecting biography' (Tsing, 2014: 237). Documented erosion suggests that poetic travel goes hand in hand with poetic and physical travail. Pilgrims function as landscape poets, carving their poetic line in the soil that leads from village through wilderness and forest to sacred space.

Medieval roads, determined by function rather than 'construction and physical parts' (Allen, 2013: 20), constituted vital arteries from town to town and shrine to shrine. Valerie Allen defines a road as 'a modification of the environment to enable forward passage to animals and vehicles in a specific geographical direction' (2013: 21). Roads–ways used by pilgrims–were legally required to be mended. Poetic lines, themselves furrows seeded with fertile words, acknowledge this necessity. In William Langland's 14th-century pilgrimage allegory *Piers Plowman*, Truth points out acts of piety, including mending roads:

Wikked ways wightlich hem *amende*

And do bote to brugges that tobroke were

(And promptly fix bad roads, and repair bridges that were collapsed)

(Langland 2006: VII. 27–8, translation from Allen, 2016: 85, my italics).

The concept of a public road suggests as well how everyone has a responsibility or duty to help maintain it, including fixing it (Allen and Evans, 2016: 16). 'Mend' and 'amend' are variants of the same concept, with 'mend' an aphetic version of 'amend'. Mending a road constitutes a common good (Allen, 2016: 76; also 81, 89). Dame Joan Chamberlain, best known for leaving money to start a school, was the wife of Sir William Chamberlain. She bequeathed money in her will (1501/2), 'for the "amendinge and reparinge" of York's surrounding infrastructure, specifically "wayes or briges, broken or hurte"' (Allen, 2016: 75). When blocked through man-made or natural impediments, efforts were made to keep roads clear. Numerous legal cases in the Middle Ages and early modern period attest to the necessity for preventing impasses in a road.<sup>3</sup>

A kind of 'dirt' key for roads in the Middle Ages was that of pollution or filth. The 'interconnectedness between humanity and nonhumanity' (Bennett, 2004: 367) includes an entanglement which has not always been welcome. Naturalizing the concealment of systems of waste processing, the state enhances its own power both through keeping clear roadways along with maintaining the surveillance of filth (Ingold, 2004: 326). An official entry from 31 August 1445 records:

Agreement made by the Congregation in the Guildhall with Thomas Bene concerning [Sedgeford] lane, which was continually obstructed by the deposit of dung and other decaying matter: Bene was to have the lane and to keep it clean, paying 2d annual rent to the Mayor and community (A2A, Norfolk Record Office, King's Lynn Borough Archives, Catalogue Ref. KL/C50/437, date: 1445–1606).

This financial dealing seems to have been advantageous to each party; the town is guaranteed a clean lane and Bene rents it on condition he keep it clean. Documents

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<sup>3</sup> The filthing of private property differs from naturally induced disasters, such as 'if a waterway, because of its own habits, flooded a piece of land, the land's owner must absorb the damage, and no human was liable' (Provost 2016: 69). Provost's fascinating argument suggests how '[E]ven insentient property sometimes acts as a magistrate, altering legal ownership in ways that involved neither human reason nor even sentient volition' (72).

specify that the owners of tenements and land must articulate actual boundaries and access points, such as ‘free entry and exit to a comon [original spelling] privy next to John le Scrivenor’s land’.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of legal documents from Chester and Canterbury, to take just two sites as examples, attest to the necessity for the maintenance of clear and well-kept thoroughfares.<sup>5</sup> We should not forget William Shakespeare’s father, fined twelpepence in 1552 for neglecting to move a dungheap from in front of his house in Stratford-upon-Avon (Dundes, 1984: 15). While these many recorded instances of people fined for polluting thoroughfares affected not just pilgrims but all wayfarers and travellers, they indicate a fundamental fact: legally, members of a society were all required to keep ways clear for free, safe, and unencumbered passage along common roads. Human waste affected the experience of pilgrimage (Miles-Watson and Miles-Watson, 2011: 325).

### Healing Humus and Salvational Soil

‘[H]umans make the [modified] environment meaningful to them’ (Allen, 2013: 26). Indeed, according to cognitive ecocritical theory:

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<sup>4</sup> A2A, Norfolk Record Office, King’s Lynn Borough Archives, Catalogue Ref. KL/C50/41, date: 1314 or 1316, 1606.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, A2A, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, The Canterbury Court of Quarter Sessions, Catalogue Ref. CC/JQ/237/2, date: 4 March 1348; A2A, Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service, City of Chester Assembly, Catalogue Ref. ZA/F/1/f. 3, date: 1421; A2A, Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service, Sheriffs’ of Chester Books, Catalogue Ref. ZS/B/6ag, date 1505–06, from Scope and Content; A2A, Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service, Sheriffs’ of Chester Books, Catalogue Ref. ZS/B/5 e, date 1509–10, from Scope and Content; A2A, Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service, Sheriffs’ of Chester Books, Catalogue Ref. ZS/B/5 f, date 1510–11, from Scope and Content; A2A, Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service, Sheriffs’ of Chester Books, Catalogue Ref. ZS/B/5g, date 1512–13, from Scope and Content; A2A, Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service, Sheriffs’ of Chester Books, Catalogue Ref. ZS/B7 b, date 1533–34., from Scope and Content; A2A, Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service, Sheriffs’ of Chester Books, Catalogue Ref. ZS/B/7 d, date 1535–36, from Scope and Content; A2A, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, The Canterbury Court of Quarter Sessions, Catalogue Ref. CC/JQ/307/iv [n.d.], from Scope and Content; A2A, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, The Canterbury Court of Quarter Sessions, Catalogue Ref. CC/JQ/327/ii, date: 1528, from Scope and Content; A2A, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, The Canterbury Court of Quarter Sessions, Catalogue Ref. CC/JQ/352/3, [n.d.], from Scope and Content; A2A, contact Canterbury Cathedral Archives, The Canterbury Court of Quarter Sessions, Catalogue Ref. CC/JQ/392/iv, date: 1592, from Scope and Content; A2A, Centre for Kentish Studies, West Kent Quarter Sessions Records, Catalogue Ref. QM/SI/1602/26, date: 1 Jan. 1601/2, from Scope and Content.

[A]n understanding of humans as wayfinders suggests a complex and dynamic interest on the part of humans in the environment, the surround itself is complex and dynamic and is frequently in a state of change as the individual or group moves through it (Easterlin, 2010: 261).

In order to 'stay safe', medieval travellers needed to be able to look around with an unobstructed view. The pilgrim, perceiving herself as part of an interconnected world, takes in 'a continuous ambit of nested and interconnected surfaces, edges, angles, textures and colors—that is, an amphitheater that includes the traveler within its landscape' (Allen, 2013: 25, citing Rackham, 1986: 268–71). As such, 'a road is an assemblage of actors' (Allen, 2013: 26). One of those actors, I argue, is dirt itself.

The ingestion of dirt as sacred cure transforms both landscape and individual, dynamically woven together in the mesh. Energized and energizing dirt interweaves human and nonhuman (Siewers, 2013: 16, 9, 6). A recent volume, *Dirt: A Love Story*,<sup>6</sup> points out '[I]t all begins with soil' (Hogan, 2015: 13). 'Dirt is us' (Kanze, 2015: 3; see Marder, 2016: 5), comprises us, if we accept the account in *Genesis* (Cohen, 2015: 1; Marder, 2016: 36). The ritual of the dead with the words 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust', 'openly [acknowledges] the porous boundary between body and earth, conceiving matter's animate qualities to define both person and land' (Feerick, 2012: 233; Waage, 2005: 147). Medieval miracle stories express '[e]lemental, magical' dirt (Krysl, 2015: 70; also Steel, 2015: 209, 226; Marder, 2016: 4–5, 86; Cohen and Duckert, 2015: 13; White, 1967: 1205). While secondary relics came into contact with a saint in his or her lifetime, tertiary relics involved 'items that have come into contact with relics', thus giving the ability to carry sacred power away from the location where the relic resides (Montgomery, 2010: 128; also Stephens, 2015: 80; Montgomery, 2015: 140; Richardson, 2015: xix–xx; Oppermann, 2017b: 141–2, citing Latour, 2014; Bynum, 2015: 278.). Just like my student, pilgrims have been taking soil from holy land or the graves of saints for centuries, if not millennia.

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<sup>6</sup> Short (2015: 36) explores the differences between soil and dirt and suggests that soil is 'snooty'. Soil suggests something alive while dirt has been disdained. Yet, 'there's something wholesome about the ubiquity of dirt as it crosses social boundaries and connects us to the ground beneath our feet'. Maybe the earth would be treated more compassionately if we treated our dirt like soil.

Based in homeopathy, dirt can purify (Bishop, 2007: 150–1). There was a belief that even Christ's own excrement could function like a healing relic (Bourke, 1891: 56). Dirt came to be ingested for healing purposes (Steele, 2013: 95).<sup>7</sup> This belief in dirt's efficacy even enters Erasmus' mocking satire of the kind of filth one might find with relics. His character 'Gratian Pullus', visiting Canterbury in the early 16th century, expresses disgust when 'presented with one of the rags with which, "they say, the holy man [Thomas à Becket] wiped the sweat from his face or neck, the dirt from his nose, or whatever other kinds of filth human bodies have"' (Minnis, 2009: 132, qtd Erasmus, 1969: l.3. 491 and Erasmus, 1997: 645). Chaucer likewise acknowledges a connection between dirt and relics. At the conclusion of 'The Pardoner's Tale', the ambiguously gendered, avaricious Pardoner provokes the conventionally manly Host, Harry Bailey, by suggesting that he kiss the Pardoner's (admittedly false) relics. In a furious retort, the Host accuses the Pardoner of wanting to have him kiss the corrupt religious agent's feces-stained undergarments as though they were relics. Harry intimates he would be delighted to cut off the Pardoner's balls and enshrine them in a hog's turd. The ultimate dirty relic is epitomized in these shit-besmeared breeches of Chaucer's Pardoner (Morrison, 2008: 97–101; Minnis, 2009: 130–36, 161–2).

Such parodic examples ironically reflect a deeply felt faith in the medicinal efficacy of dirt. Tales of miraculous and vibrant dirt explore intra-actions among human and nonhuman, where dirt becomes enmeshed with infirm bodies. In the first book of Bede's eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Germanus visits the tomb 'of the blessed martyr Alban' (1990: 67)<sup>8</sup> to place 'relics of all the Apostles and several martyrs' into it:

And when he had reverently deposited these relics, Germanus took away with him a portion of the earth from the place where the blessed martyr's

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<sup>7</sup> In his examination of a late medieval A *Disputation Betwyx þe Body and Wormes*, Steel (2013) points out how corpses are interconnected and entangled in the mesh of other bodies, whether it be those of microbes, worms, or bacteria (102). Even after a corpse is ash or dust, appetites can continue as we see in these instances of dust and dirt being eaten and consumed for holy and efficacious reasons.

<sup>8</sup> See Justice (2008) on an assessment of scholarly views interpreting medieval miracles, especially 4–5 with a brief mention of Bede.

blood had been shed. This earth was seen to have retained the martyr's blood, which had reddened the shrine where his persecutor had grown pale with fear (Bede, 1990: 67–8).

In Book III, 'Oswald, the most Christian king of the Northumbrians' (Bede, 1990: 157), is martyred in battle, his death followed by miracles. We know this, Bede tells us, because:

At the place where he was killed fighting for his country against the heathen, sick men and beasts are healed to this day. Many people took away the very dust from the place where his body fell, and put it in water, from which sick folk who drank it received great benefit. This practice became so popular that, as the earth was gradually removed, a pit was left in which a man could stand [...]. Many miracles are reported as having occurred at this spot, or by means of the earth taken from it (1990: 158).

Sacred blood catalyzes the dirt as efficacious. An ailing horse, collapsing and falling on this spot, rises up 'fully recovered' (Bede, 1990: 158). Marking the location, the horse's master brings a paralyzed girl who becomes healed. The place where Oswald fell is more 'green and beautiful than the rest of the field' (Bede, 1990: 159). A Briton 'took away some of the earth wrapped up in a linen cloth, thinking that, as the event proved, it might have the power to heal the sick' (Bede, 1990: 59). He hangs it on a beam when visiting neighbors. They proceed to celebrate when, suddenly, a fire burns down the house:

Only the beam from which the earth hung remained whole and untouched by the flames [...] they found that the man had taken the earth from the place where Oswald's blood had been shed. These marvels were reported far and wide, and many folk began to visit the place each day and obtained healing for themselves and their families (Bede, 1990: 159).

The reference to 'obtain[ing] healing' suggests that they, too, may have gathered up some dirt and taken it with them. Subsequently, Oswald's bones are recovered and



translated to a nearby church. Queen Osthyrd tells the visiting abbess Ethelhild, 'how the dust from the pavement, on which the water that had washed the bones had been spilt, had already healed many sick people. The abbess then asked that she might be given some of this healing dust' (Bede, 1990: 161). Upon her wish being granted, she takes it with her in a little cloth. Later, a victim of demonic possession is cured by the dust upon her entering 'the porch of the house where the possessed man lay writhing' (Bede, 1990: 161). Ethelhild gives him a gift of some of it.

'[H]oly matter' including 'mounds of earth' were sites of decay and persistence, corruption and fertility, death, and life (Bynum, 2015: 17). The 'materialization of piety' included 'earth' and 'holy dust' (Bynum, 2015: 20; also 25, 136, 151, 153, 240, 50, 261). *Eulogia* or 'blessing' was an earthen token stamped with an iconic image. Carried away by the pilgrim, it conveyed the healing presence of the saint away from his or her resting place (Vikan, 2003: 6). Tomb dust, 'the sediment that has settled on the reliquaries of saints, scrapings taken from the tombs of saints and soil from around those tombs' (Gardenour, 2010: 761; also Minnis, 2009: 134, 145–7), likewise was much desired (Marder, 2016: xi; Gardenour, 2010: 761).<sup>9</sup> John of Plumgarde, who suffered from a femur tumor, was cured by 'scrapings from the cement of Saint Hugh's tomb' (Gardenour, 2010: 761). A blind woman mixes healing holy dust with holy water while on her pilgrimage to Saint Verena's shrine in order to see again (Gardenour, 2010: 761). In the sixth century, a woman's speech was cured after utilizing oil and dust from St Martin's tomb; his tomb dust alleviates Gregory of Tours' intestinal complaint (Freeman, 2011: 51, 56). Earth surrounding the tomb of Isabelle of France (d. 1270) 'was said to heal' (Bynum, 2015: 136; also 227; Field, 2006: 135, also 141). Typically, as in these examples, dust or dirt would not be ingested dry but mixed with (holy) water or wine. After all, earth needs 'something extra to liven it up' (Steel, 2015: 213; also, Gross-Diaz, 2010: 276; McMillan, 2013: 10; Keshman, 2010: 110–11; Cohen, 2015: 234–5).

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<sup>9</sup> For a present-day example, see Baker 2016.

Landscapes were transformed through this belief in holy dirt (Montgomery, 2010: 130). Bede's fifth and final book lays out a virtual pilgrimage to the Holy Land for the reader. In writing of the place of the Lord's ascension, Bede explains:

In the centre of the Church, where our Lord ascended, can be seen His last footprints, exposed to the sky above. And although the earth is daily removed by the faithful, it remains undiminished, and still retains these marks resembling footprints (1990: 297).

This chapter immediately precedes one telling of the goodness of the West Saxon Bishop Haeddi. Aldhelm relates, according to Bede:

how many miracles of healing occurred through Haeddi's holiness at the place where he died. He says that the people of that province used to carry away earth from it to mix in water for the sick, and that many sick men and beasts who drank or were sprinkled with it were restored to health. In consequence, there was a considerable pit created there by the continual removal of the hallowed soil (1990: 298).

As these references suggest, soil erosion occurred at holy sites whose dirt was seen as healing and curative. Pilgrims clearly changed and continue to shape the environment and landscape. In a much later work from the 14th century, John Mandeville in his *Travels* tells us that at the Holy Sepulchre, 'because people came along and attempted to break the stone in pieces or into dust to take away with them, the Sultan has had a wall made around the grave so nobody can touch it except on the left side' (2012: 40; Hamelius, 1919, 1923: 1:49.). In Ephesus, St. John the Evangelist is said to have placed himself in his own tomb: '[T]ruly, it is a really astonishing thing, for people say the earth around the tomb has stirred many times and moved as though there's a living thing underneath' (Mandeville, 2012: 14; Hamelius, 1919, 1923: 1:14.). Only our Lord's dirt, we are told, replenishes itself, dirt actively regenerating through its own vibrant agency (Sandilands, 2000; Mandeville, 2012: 49, 55; Gersdorf, 2013: 50;

Eckholm, 2008). In a form of interactive 'resilience', dirt was both used by pilgrims for healing purposes and for evidence of pilgrims in the form of traces of their paths in the landscape (Mandeville, 2012: 18–9; Hamelius, 1919, 1923: 1:19–20).

### **Dynamic Dirt: 'Soil really is the basis for life, after all' (Milman, 2019)**

Earth is the matter of dirt; dirt is the matter of earth (Bynum, 2015: 231). Is dirt dead in contrast to soil or earth, lively and capable of becoming? Matter generates dynamically (Bynum, 2015: 239, also 231). Nature is an active agent, not a passive object, for '[a]ll are subjects' (Oppermann, 2014: 24, qtd Birch, 1988: 70–71; also Iovino and Oppermann, 2012b: 80). In these miracle stories, dirt is a true actant (Cohen, 2015: 13), encountering the human at the moment of ingestion provoking entanglement, engaging humans as 'full participant "members" of the soil community' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 192). The passageway of the human welcomes the dirt. This fusion of soil with soiled soul purifies each, one into redolent fertilizer, the other into healthy human body and spirit. Indeed, '[t]he less human the collective, the more humane it may become' (Cohen and Duckert, 2015: 4). If '[h]ospitality is the fundamental virtue of the soil' (Lines-Kelly, 2004: 6, qtd Logan, 1995: 19) and if dirt generously helps permeable humans by acting (Alaimo, 2012: 477; Amidon, 2015: 44), dirt may even desire the human to fulfill its own potential of healing agency (Iovino and Opperman, 2012a 465; also 468). If we '[r]elish dirt's unbiased receptivity' (Richardson, 2015: xx), we learn to understand it as vibrant object, whose materiality links the human with nonhuman assemblages (Marder, 2016: 45–6, 49).

Theologically, literal dirt becomes a metaphor of the spotted soul, filthied with sin. A dirty spirit encased in a grimy body can be healed. To suggest that dirt is bad only maligns dirt. Indeed, dirt, the filthy soul, teaches us to remember our humanity. The 14<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Julian of Norwich pleads for self-compassion when we sin. For her, sin—causing the soul to become dirty or filthy—only brings us closer to God, healing us spiritually in a homeopathic medicine with Christ as *leche* ('doctor').

Dirt's extended fellows include reviled garbage, waste, and crap. One pilgrimage, to the Cathedral of Junk in Austin, Texas, composed by a vernacular artist, forces the

devout wanderer to contact the creator of the monument even before entering the sacred grounds of a scrap shrine.<sup>10</sup> Rubber duckies to out-of-date televisions sacralize this refuse pile of rejected debris. Perhaps its divinity lies in having reused garbage, sustained with care and tenderness. Just as the angel in *Piers Plowman* reminds the Commons not to 'strip law bare' (2006: 137), the modern pilgrim is reminded to offer gleanings to the dispossessed. In order to minimize waste, we can salvage objects to create new-fangled and new-fashioned hallowed shrines. Even a humble dumpster, like that analyzed through Huston-Tillotson University's The Dumpster Project, promotes sustainable and small living.<sup>11</sup> One professor lived in a tricked-out dumpster for an entire year, to show how little we need to survive. Students measured the amount of energy needed to light and maintain such a small space, suggesting how wastefully McMansions and other excessive buildings consume fossil fuels.

El Santuario de Chimayo suggests ways the pilgrim can use dirt. For example, 'Rub the Holy Dirt over the part of your body in need of healing while you invoke the name of Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You finish this prayer with:

Glory be to the Father  
and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit.  
Amen (Suggestions for the Use of Holy Dirt, n.d.).

The dust we all came from heals in a homeopathic ritual of blessed grace. If you prefer, you can buy what is touted to be genuine holy earth from The Jerusalem Gift Shop in the Old City in Jerusalem, in a lovely display box. Comparable websites advertise holy water, oil, and soil from the Jordan River, Galilee, and various other places identified in Judeo-Christian history. Whether the soil actually comes from

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<sup>10</sup> A comparable cathedral from recycled material exists in Mejorada del Campo, Spain. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/17/world/europe/mejorada-del-campo-spain-justo-gallego-cathedral.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/17/world/europe/mejorada-del-campo-spain-justo-gallego-cathedral.html?_r=0) (Last accessed 21 April 2017).

<sup>11</sup> See The Dumpster Project <http://dumpsterproject.org/> (Last accessed 29 January 2019).

the suggested locale cannot be determined by this author. What is clear is that the imagination of the dirt buyer imbues the soil with a magico-spiritual aura that emanates—even animates—vibrant power.

Dirt dances under us and, in these medieval stories of holy dust and dirt, *in us*. *Dirt: A Love Story* asks us to ‘Thank heaven for dirt—literally. What is it, after all, but stardust?’ (Kanze, 2015: 4; Marder, 2016: 43–4). And so we are: ‘[I]f we look at dirt closely enough, we are no longer looking at dirt. We are looking at human lives’ (Olsen, 2015: 31). The contrary is true too. Looking at human lives, we are looking at dirt (Krysl, 2015: 73; Richardson, 2015: xix; Goodchild, 2016: 271). Indeed, ‘[n]otions of humans as members, or even of humans *being soil*, thrive outside science’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 193; emphasis in the original). If we are dirt and we consume dirt, then this geophagy, a cannibalistic autophagy of the earth, functions as consecrated—taboo and sacred—transubstantiation (Cresswell, 2013: 62–3; Hogan, 2015: 14): ‘[T]ouching the soil literally earths us, connects our human spirit to our core’ (Lines-Kelly, 2004: 8). Currently, scientists, conservationists, and farmers are experimenting with how soil can be used to ameliorate climate change by pulling carbon out of the air. (Velasquez-Manoff, 2018; Milman, 2019). If this succeeds, dirt clearly will be seen as an actor not just for itself and may save us all.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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