Introduction:
Dirty Nature: Grit, Grime, and Genre in the Anthropocene

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«Dirty» nature expands the traditional and usually aesthetic vision of green landscapes or blue seascapes into much broader horizons by including agricultural parcels and industrial farmland, brown swamps and marshes, and the gray grit of contemporary cityscapes. It alters the scope to include our physical bodies as small-scale ecosystems as well as those of the plants and animals we consume and that live in, on, and with us. Yet dirty nature also rethinks nature along the lines of Timothy Morton’s quest to speak of «Ecology without nature,» that is, without the artificial dichotomies that falsely divide the cultural from the natural as if human beings were independent from the physical world and used it only as a «resource» at their convenience. Expanding on what Heather I. Sullivan has defined as «dirt theory,» we seek to reinfuse nature with the agentic processes occurring all around and in us rather than delineating it as isolatable places that we can leave, neglect, or destroy at whim. Dirty nature locates us in the thick of things, in the elements, and the ongoing cycles of energy and matter. Indeed, in the current debates about defining «nature» in our age of the «Anthropocene,» when all surface matter and all bodies in the biosphere contain some particulates from anthropogenic industrial processes, thinking dirty nature makes sense. Dirty nature includes natural and built environments, and it most specifically postulates that «nature» is a composite of material interactions on many scales including the activities of bodies, species, and energy politics in which we human beings are full participants along with our fellow species on the planet.

This special edition of Colloquia Germanica explores a wide spectrum of dirty nature’s fundamental implications for environmental questions and challenges, from literary explorations of genre to the material engagement of specific authors and naturalists and the aesthetics of dirt, from metaphorical and metaphysical dirt to tropes of extraction and pollution, to the very (im)possibility of expressing such radically fluid and inflected landscapes and processes. In this introduction, we first define «dirty» – addressing questions of the aesthetics of ugliness and filth – with the aim of then reapproaching the loaded term «nature» safely guarded from excessively idealistic and dualistic perspectives and with the insights of the recently labeled Anthropocene.
Above all, these essays address with differing answers and approaches three questions: First, how can we conceive, evaluate culturally, and thus talk and write about the contested term «nature» today? Second, which genres and styles engage most insightfully dirty nature’s elements, pollution, and manifold agencies? And, third, how does thinking dirt alter our understanding of the interactions between human and nature?

Historically, what is considered ugly or dirty has been indirectly but neatly defined by an age-old taxonomy of beauty. Ancient Greek philosophy (Plato, Aristotle) and architecture heralded symmetry, unity, and proportion as a measure for humans, human artifacts, and the non-human life alike. This definition, based on harmony, rational order, and definiteness, largely determined Western aesthetics from the Renaissance to this day, with some notable exceptions. In eighteenth-century British philosophy (Addison, Burke), definitions of the sublime as something not necessarily pleasurable but infinitely greater and unlimited transcended the classical understanding of beauty and consequently influenced European Romantic art. In the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, on the other hand, Modernist art began consciously to reject the established norms of beauty to focus instead on the unsightly challenges of an increasingly industrialized, impoverished, and dirty Western world.

In contrast to abundant treatises on beauty, the ugly was hardly mentioned, unless by measure of exclusion as something impaired or faulty (Aquinas) or form- and shapeless (Plotinus). There are exceptions, however, such as the German Hegel students Christian Hermann Weiße, and, in particular, Karl Rosenkranz, who in his 1853 *Aesthetik des Häßlichen*, developed a systematic treatment of the hitherto neglected category of ugliness. Not surprisingly, Rosenkranz built on established characteristics of the ugly – formlessness, imperfection, disfiguration – to discuss its manifestations in nature, art, and human life. Likening beauty to health, and ugliness to illness, Rosenkranz furthermore opposed purity (of purpose, form, or even feeling) and dirt (as manifested in infection, contagion, and disease). As Sander Gilman points out, this underlying medical analogy linked ugliness to anything deviating from the healthy norm (aging, deformation, malfunction) and simultaneously equated the «unhealthy» body (of humans, animals, or even landscapes) with unhappiness.

If beauty, purity, ugliness, and dirt are distinctly man-made concepts, so, too, is nature a product of our cultural imagination. While the Latin word «natura» points to «innate disposition,» meaning that plants, animals, and geologic features develop on their own accord, «nature» in the modern world has come to denote plants, animals, and wilderness, i.e., environments be-
lieved to be unaltered by human intervention. In our age of the Anthropo-
cene, however, with its deforestation, pollution, nonnative introduced spe-
cies, planetwide spread of industrial particulates, and mass extinctions, it has
become impossible to distinguish altered from nonaltered environments,
making nature a construct of human fantasy and projection rather than an ac-
tual site or place. By entitling our collection «dirty nature,» we would like to
draw attention to this construct: rather than pure nature, i.e., an environment
without contaminants or adulteration, we pose that nature is invariably dirty,
i.e., fraught with remnants of human intervention. Yet we also make a broader
point: not only is all of nature infused by or altered by human activity in some
form, but human beings are also, and always have been, part of nature’s on-
going physical processes and cycles. In other words, we seek to dismantle
this dichotomy from both sides. There is no pure nature, nor pure culture/
humanity. They are both dirty, as in mixed and blended. Dirt can hence be
positive; it is certainly quite grounded and pragmatic.

However, upon closer inspection, dirt tends to be a similarly fraught yet
multivalent concept like beauty or purity. While «dirt» in the English lan-
guage refers to dust, filth, and grime, it also denotes soil as the fragile layers of
organic and inorganic matter covering the bedrock of the earth. In this way,
«dirt» paradoxically embodies both what is imagined as a threat to human
life and the very sustenance of it. The German language, on the other hand,
reserves different terms for «dirt» (Dreck) and «soil» (Erde or Boden) even
though the latter term has acquired a nationalistic and bigoted flavor in the
wake of the Nazi ideology of «Blut und Boden.» For this reason, «dirty na-
ture» seeks a «post-soil» approach in order to avoid such racist and disturb-
ing ideas of «purity.» Being post-soil means that we fully acknowledge the
grit and hybridity of nature in the Anthropocene while also seeking to bring
awareness to the devastating impact of current industrial and energy practices
on the physical world.

The scope of essays covered in this collection includes nineteenth- to
twenty-first-century texts, as well as an array of genres including a drama,
 novellas, novels, nature writing, scientific travel writing, and poetry. Sullivan
begins with an expanded exploration of dirty nature in terms of cultural prac-
tices, soil science, and literature. Building on dirt as both an embodiment and
product of bodily and cultural exchanges, she then studies various «narra-
tives of extraction» documenting mining and contemporary energy practices
such as solar energy in works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, E. T. A. Hoff-
mann, Jules Verne, and Andreas Eschbach. Caroline Schaumann examines
Alexander von Humboldt’s gritty engagement with his environment in con-
junction with Karl Rosenkranz’s treatise on the ugly. Whereas Rosenkranz
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judges an illustration from Humboldt’s *Vues des Cordillères* (1810–13) as an example of filthy and revolting nature, Schaumann contends that Humboldt does not distinguish between disgusting and delightful nature. Still there remains a clear rift between his descriptions in the diaries that record the unpleasant and quite bodily details of his American journey and the published account, which tends to embed the latter in a larger narrative conforming to nineteenth-century ideals of aesthetics and visual consumption. Sean Ireton expands the focus on the nineteenth century by contrasting the works of Adalbert Stifter, in particular *Der Hochwald* (1842/44) and two texts of the short story collection *Bunte Steine* (1853), with first-person nature accounts by John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. Through this cross-cultural and transnational comparison, Ireton locates Stifter in the tradition of environmental writing while providing important insights into the differences between American «nature writing» emphasizing «wilderness» and European studies of humanly inflected «landscapes.» Continuing the emphasis on Austrian writers but moving into the twentieth century, Gundolf Graml offers a close reading of Hans Lebert’s *Die Wolfshaut* (1960) as one of the first Austrian texts to address the Nazi past, war crimes, and a soldier’s self-critical reflection. Using Wolfgang Iser’s concept of «literary anthropology,» Graml reads the text’s abundant examples of dirty nature as metaphorical and metaphysical manifestations of human reality. Graml asserts that the text’s references to nature not only visualize blind spots of the Nazi past and give cues to repressed memories, but also, in the vein of Hubert Zapf’s «cultural ecology,» function as an ethical counterpoint to ideological appropriations of nature.

The final two essays look at the challenges that dirty nature, or more specifically pollution and decomposition, poses to traditional conventions of genre and form. Sabine Wilke’s reading of Wilhelm Raabe *Pfisters Mühle* (1884) not only provides the first ecocritical reading of the text in the context of Lawrence Buell’s toxic discourse but also suggests that Raabe’s experimentation with genre, discourse, and rhetorical figures transcends nineteenth-century realist fiction. Wilke contends that in the face of an all-pervasive pollution, each of Raabe’s protagonists resorts to a different register of speech. Through this discursive competition, toxic discourse emerges as a poetic practice that productively begins to shape a modernist fiction. Charlotte Melin, finally, discerns a new mode of narrating nature in twenty-first century *Naturlyrik*. In particular, she looks at two exemplary poems by Hendrik Rost and Christian Lehnert that illustrate the temporal and physical process of decomposition. In this way, Melin suggests, contemporary nature poetry recovers the missing ecological element of decay, acknowledges the effects of human intervention.
such as pollution, and seeks to depict a dynamic and changing environment that is in reciprocal interaction with humans.

This wide range of essays reconsiders a plethora of possible meanings of «nature» in the Anthropocene and offers sustenance for further engagement. If our daily contact with the environment has become «post-natural» in the sense that it is a complex hybrid of natural and cultural processes shaped by the interaction between humans and nonhuman forces and characterized by organic and inorganic pollution, this also provides us with the opportunity to rethink the established categories that define nature, culture, aesthetics, and dirt alike. The question of genre addresses a significant cultural problem today: the need to find textual forms, vocabulary, and the discourses adequate to address in a meaningful way for a broad audience the vast anthropogenic changes to the world’s physical environments.

Works Cited


