Grotesque, Bodily, and Hydrous: The Liminal Landscapes of the Underworld In Homer, Virgil, and Dante

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Introduction and Methodology

I set out to understand the Western Underworld as an ecosemiosphere—a mythological place with a close reciprocity to a physical environment.\(^1\) I focus my study on the entrances and margins of the infernal realm, the places where myth and world merge most intensely. This underworldly endeavor is bound by the claim of material ecocriticism that “the borders between meaning and matter are constantly porous” (Iovino and Oppermann 4).

Located in the fluid interspace between the world and the Underworld, my project is fundamentally about permeable boundaries. Beginning with the seepage across landscapes and myths, I no longer see narratives as a cultural phenomenon separate from nature;\(^2\) with the acceptance of the co-contingency of matter and meaning,\(^3\) human and nonhuman agents share creativity in the generation of narratives.\(^4\) In this material ecocritical position, the Underworld is a material-semiotic\(^5\) landscape emerging from interactions\(^6\) between human and nonhuman agencies.

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1 Aldred Siewers’ concept, based out of biosemiotics and the semiosphere as postulated by Juri Lotmand. Here, a semiosphere is a world of meaning coming out of the interactions of different organisms each with their own world of meanings.  
2 As per Alaimo and Hekman, material analysis does not attempt to understand nature as prior to discourse but as constituted by various human and nonhuman forms of power and knowledge (243). See also Lehtimäki’s s“Natural Environments in Narrative Contexts”  
3 New Materialism is a post-constructionist, ontological and material turn that fundamentally disturbs the boundary between subject and object. See quantum physicist Karen Barad foundational work and her notion of “intra-action,” the “mutual entanglement of entangled agencies” (141).  
4 See the introductory chapter of Alaimo and Hekman’s Material Ecocriticism for a discussion of shared narrative creativity of human and nonhuman agents  
5 Sandra Haraway’s term. See “Simians, Cybords, and Women” for the dissolution of the dichotomy of meaning and matter, where instead bodies and objects of knowledge are both material-semiotic generative nodes.  
6 See Nancy Tuana for more discussion on interactionism as a method: “interactionism acknowledges both the agency of materiality and the porosity of entities” (191).
Imagined as a subterranean realm, the Underworld merges with the physical characteristics of the domain beneath the earth. In the first records, Hades is a dark murky realm referred to with the epithet εὐρώεις, meaning dank. The Underworld demonstrates the wet realities one would encounter on a journey beneath the topsoil. Water poignantly exemplifies the seepage between the physical world and the mythological Underworld. Particularly because of the boundary-crossing nature of fluids, water is the guiding motif in this analysis of the margins of the nether realm.

In analyzing the environments of the Underworld, I focus upon hydrous flows and the terrains formed by them. The infernal realm is accessible through certain caves, sinkholes, lakes, and marshes, all of which are geological features generated by hidden groundwater systems (Clendenon 123). My study of the liminal terrain of the netherworld can be summarized with two intertwined motifs: watery fluids and cavernous orifices. It is through these two phenomena that seepage across the boundary of the world and Underworld is materialized.

Approaching this subterranean ecosemiosphere with a material ecocritical perspective, I examine not only the porous boundaries between physical and mythological environments, but the seepage between corporeal entities. I apply Stacy Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality, a method of thinking across corporealities to reveal interactions and interconnections between various bodies, both human and nonhuman. In the new materialist conception, the body is a material-semiotic node with permeable boundaries, a series of open-ended systems existing

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7 Throughout the Homeric corpus the Underworld is referred to as such. Examples are in the Iliad 20.65, and the Odyssey 10.503.
8 For an extensive definition and discussion see the introductory chapter of Alaimo’s Bodily Natures, a foundational text for material ecocriticism.
9 See Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges” 575-599 for a discussion of bodies as material-semiotic nodes and the processes of the boundaries-making.
10 See Iovino in “Bodies of Naples” for an expansion on the porosity of bodies. She notes “bodies are what they are via their permeable boundaries” (18-19). Here, the body is a “node in the stories of matter” (22).
through contingent intertwinement with larger systems. The hydrous margins and openings of the nether terrain exemplify trans-corporeal seepage across the porous boundaries of material entities. In this paper, I hold that the terrain of the Underworld is a body.

In applying a trans-corporeal analysis to the cavernous mouths and water bodies of the Underworld, I have come to understand these as orifices and bodily fluids. Relevantly, the ancient Greeks and Romans almost always conceptualized earth as a living body. Likewise, as understood in material ecocriticism, “the ‘environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (Alaimo 4). Moreso, I see the material ecocritical dissolution of boundaries between the body and the earth as particularly compatible with two literary theories: abjection as postulated by Kristeva, and the grotesque as articulated by Bakhtin. For Kristeva, the abject is something “inbetween, ambiguous, or composite” that confronts us with our “natural, animal, and mortal state” by transgressing borders and threatening the dissolution of the inside and outside (4, 126,7). For Bakhtin, in the grotesque “the limits of the body and world are erased” (310); the body is never closed off from the rest of the world but is “transferred, merged, and fused with it” (339). The overlap of these theories indicates that a true ecocritical analysis cannot read nature as a separate spectacle but must acknowledge the abject and grotesque merging of all corporeal entities.

I aim to merge the theories of material ecocriticism, the grotesque, and the abject in my analysis of the liminal hydrous landscapes of the nether realm. These theories are not only generally compatible, but specifically fitting for an analysis of the fluids and orifices at the

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11 The later component of this definition is adapted from Grosz in *Volatile Bodies*
12 See the writings of Seneca and Hippocrates
13 See “The Trouble with Wilderness” by William Cronon for a detailed and foundational argument against such an ecocritical reading.
14 As pointed out by Cheryl Lousley, nature as a spectacle “suppresses and denies an ecological world of relational flows” while “the grotesque provides a more robust engagement with ecological materiality and evolution than the category of the natural” (121, 125).
margins of the Underworld. For Kristeva, the abject is epitomized by bodily fluids that threaten the border between the inside and the outside (3, 7). Likewise, the Hadean waters flow across the threshold between the visible terrain and the inner subterranean realm. On the other hand, in the grotesque, the orifice is emphasized because it is the place where the borders separating the body and the environment are overcome (Bakhtin 317). Moreover, the grotesque cavernous mouth is “the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld” (Bakhtin 325).

I aim to trace a genealogy of the liminal landscapes of the Underworld through the works of Homer, Virgil, and Dante. I have chosen these canonical texts because each iteration of the nether terrain explicitly adapts the previous version. Moreover, all of these works are situated in the hydrous geologies of the Aegean. The same named waters of the infernal realm persist through the accounts of these works. The ecosemiosphere of the Underworld evolves as it adapts to the contours of the specific environment of the time and place of each poet. While stagnant marshes and subterranean rivers permeate across the texts, each iteration emphasizes different features and shifts the terrain of the Underworld.

Starting with the Ancient Greek Underworld, we will focus on the Odyssey and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. The Odyssey is an 8th century epic oral poem that tells of the wanderings of Odysseus as he attempts to return home to Ithaca, during which he travels to the open gates of Hades. The 7th century Homeric Hymn to Demeter is one of a collection of sung prayers of the repertory epic tradition. The hymn details the abduction of Kore to the Underworld where she becomes Persephone and is cyclically resurrected with the seasons. This chapter will examine the hydrogeologic influence on the eco-semiosphere of the Underworld.

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15 The etymology of grotesque is the grotto; the grotesque “evokes the cave—the grotto-esque, low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, imminent, visceral” (Russo 1).
16 See Foley for an expansive analysis of the ritual aspects of the hymn and a thorough line-by-line commentary.
Here, we will see the material-semiotic emergence of water as a liminal boundary marker with a special focus on ritual and the Greek notions of pollution and purity as it relates to the nether realm. In understanding the hydrous borders of the Underworld, special attention will be paid to Oceanus and his offshoots the Oceanids and the oldest representations of caves as entrances to the infernal realm.

Next, we will turn toward the Roman Underworld—now called Dis—as envisioned in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Produced in the principate of Augustus, this written epic centers upon the minor Homeric character Aeneas to tell of the mytho-historical founding of Rome. Journeying from Troy, the Proto-Roman comes to the gates of the Underworld on the Cumean coast of Italy where he performs a katabasis and enters into Dis. This chapter will examine the eco-semiosphere of the Underworld as it relates to the specific Cumaean environment. Here, there will be a greater discussion of material toxicity in generating infernal narratives. This chapter will give special attention to analyzing Virgil’s margins of the Underworld through the grotesque image of the body, focusing on abyssal caverns and diffusive swamps.

The final chapter will descend into medieval Hell with Dante in the *Inferno* of the *Divine Comedy*. In this epic, the poet places Virgil as the guide through the spiraling circles of the nether realm. The allegorical text weaves the Greco-Roma terrain of the Underworld within the Christian moral and eschatological vision. This chapter will show the continuous fluid boundaries of the infernal realm. While seeing the hydrous origins of the Underworld persist in Hell, these liminal waters acquire abject, sinful, and transgressive associations.
The Homeric Underworld

Origins of Canonical Underworld Waters

The watery nature of the Underworld begins with the works of Homer as a liminal landscape of subterranean rivers. The watery nature of the Underworld originates in the Homeric Aegean, while hydroecologies abound throughout the nether realm in the later accounts as told by Virgil and Dante. An analysis of infernal hydrous bodies in *The Odyssey* and *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* demonstrates the beginnings of the Underworld as an ecosemiosphere and elucidates the material agency of water in the generation of narratives.

In the Aegean, waters flowing beneath the surface of the earth engendered the terrain of the Underworld. Homer first maps the gates of Hades with rivers that flow through a rock (*Ody*. 10.515). Likewise, the geology of the region is dominated by cavernous karst topography—landscapes formed by groundwater in porous rock. In Homeric Greece, people encountered rivers disappearing into chasms of the earth and later surfacing from other openings (Baleriaux 118). The mythic realm below the ground corresponds with the physical landscape of subterranean rivers in the Aegean.

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17 See Connors and Clendenon “Mapping Tartarus” for a robust discussion on karst hydrogeology in Greece and its evidence in Underworld mythology.

18 See Baleriaux for an extensive argument of the correspondence of myth and subterranean rivers

19 The Greeks learned to master karstic landscapes so well that during the Bronze age new colonizations intentionally ought to settle in similar rock formations (Baleriaux 104)

20 See Kroonenberg chapter 6 for a full account of the interconnections of the waters of the Underworld with the geology of Greece
The first literary records of the environment of Hades come from the works of Homer, such as the Odyssey. In Book X, the enchantress Circe maps the way to the gates of Hades with these rivers:

> ἔνθα μὲν εἰς Ἀχέροντα Πυριφλεγέθων τε ῥέουσιν
> Κώκυτός θ’, δὴ δὴ Στυγὸς ὕδατός ἐστιν ἀπορρώξ

There to Acheron the Pyriphlegathon flows and Cocytus, which is a branch of Styx (513-515)

The Underworld is accessed by two tributaries merging into the river Acheron: the Pyriphlegathon and a branch of Styx called Cocytus.21 The etymology of these nether waters

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21 There are physical rivers named Acheron and Cocytus on the Thesprotian coast, first identified by travel writer Pausanias in 180 AD (Kroonenberg 74). Later, an oracle of the dead called the Necromanteion was constructed at this location, with a cultic underground quarry (Kroonenberg 90).
underpins associations with the infernal realm: Acheron is the river of grieving, Styx is hated, Cocytus is the river of wailing, and Pyrphlegethon is flaming with fire. Homer’s Hadean hydrology is adapted by different narrators throughout time. The *Odyssey*’s Underworld waters continue as the foundations of the Underworld in texts such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Dante’s *Inferno*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (2.577ff).

**Oceanus: Pure Water and Boundaries**

Guided by the directions given in Book X, Odysseus arrives at the gate of Hades by the great waters of Oceanus in Book XI. Following Circe’s exact instructions, the hero performs a *nekyia*—a summoning of the dead—where he glimpses the peripheries of Hades. The repetition of the specific coordinates suggests ritual aspects of the story, where sacred actions anchored in the material world are woven into the narrative.

The bounds of the Underworld are defined by Oceanus, the God of all fresh water and the physical border of the end of Earth. To perform the *nekyia*, Odysseus must travel across the river Oceanus to the gates of Hades. The ancient Greek katabasis relates to Summerian and Akkadian narratives, where mysteries were obtained by crossing “the Waters of Death” (Clark 26). Likewise, Plato lists Oceanus as one of the rivers of the Underworld (Phaedo 112e). When specters rise from the open gates of Hades, the ghost of Odysseus’s mother tells him it is hard for the living to see the land of the dead:

> μέσσῳ γὰρ μεγάλοι ποταμοὶ καὶ δεινὰ ρέεθρα, Ὡκεανὸς μὲν πρῶτα, τὸν οὔ πως ἔστι περῆσαι πεζὸν ἐόντ᾽, ἢν μή τις ἔχῃ ἐυεργέα νῆα (*Ody.* 11.157-159)

For great rivers and terrible streams flow in between, Oceanus first of all, who is impossible to pass through going on foot, and no well-wrought ship can bear.
The great waters and rivers act to physically separate Hades from the land of the living. In the Ancient Greek cosmogony, Oceanus is the freshwater river god who encircles the boundary of the disk-shaped world (Clendenon 14, 88, 112). The Aegean people for whom this myth mattered would have encountered water as the physical edges of their world, beyond which was the unknown. While all around waves encircled the world, at the bounds of earth below as well, Ancient Greeks would have encountered groundwater. Concurrently, the watery borders of Hades correspond with geographic and political practices in Ancient Greece. Fresh water was utilized to mark regional boundaries, and city-states often incorporated rivers as political borders (Guettel Cole 8). Ecologically and culturally, waters encompassed known life, while as an unknown realm Hades lurked beyond the water's edges. The terrain of the Underworld surfaces through dynamic interplays between hydraulic and human systems.

The mythological water edges of Hades correspond with interactive, material-semiotic practices of boundary-making through purification. The Homeric vision of Oceanus separating the living world from the Underworld maps the ritual practice of marking boundaries with water. Pure water was utilized to enforce boundaries in periods of liminality such as that between life and death (Håland 102). From as early as the beginning of the Iron Age, water vessels called *hydriae* were used in death-related rites\(^{22}\) to mitigate dangerous liminality through purification.\(^{23}\)

The Ancient Greek notion of purity was conceptualized in antithesis to pollution—a metaphysical permeating seepage that was most threatening in liminal space between life and death (Petrovic 28). On the other hand, purity was defined by boundaries: the Hippocratic corpus

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\(^{22}\) See Dakouri-Hild 363-377 for the discussion of *hydriae* at Iron Age tomb sites

\(^{23}\) Note the ritual washing of the corpse as discussed by Mirto (55, 63, 68), water libations used when in contact with the dead as discussed by Gaifman, and the ritual bathing occurring in the death-rites of the Eleusian mysteries (Foley 67)
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says “we ourselves fix boundaries...so that nobody may cross them unless he is pure”

(Hippocrates IV, 55). Ritual use of fresh water enforced boundaries through separation as a sort of metaphysical filtration. Flowing at the interspace between life and death, Oceanus maps this practice of boundary-making with water.

Separated by Oceanus’s flowing waters, the place of the dead looms as an abject realm. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection is useful for conceptualizing ritual pollution that diffuses from death. Kristeva defines the abject as something liminal which cannot be assimilated and is thus understood as improper or unclean (1,2). Both the abject and ritual pollution are epitomized by death; for the Ancient Greeks, pollution emanated from the corpse, while for Kristeva the corpse is abjected because it unavoidably asserts the human body’s porosity with the more-than-human world and threatens the dissolution of the body’s borders. In the Ancient world, the pollution of death was most threatening at borders, such as at the orifices (Dakouri-Hild et.al 363). When imagined as a geographic landscape, the outlands of Hades are formed around the porous and putrescible body. Just as pure water was poured ritually to mitigate the pollution emanating from the corpse’s orifices, Oceanus flows at the threshold of the Underworld and marks the division between the realms of the living and the dead.

While ritual purity and pollution are symbolic (Parker 69), these ideas emerge from interaction between corporeal entities. As told in Homer’s companion epic the Iliad, Oceanus is the fatherly source of all rivers, springs, and wells (3.5), which are the freshwater bodies imbued with the power of purification. Such metaphysical abilities correspond with waters that are

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24 See Parker for an extensive study of ritual pollution in ancient Greece, and page 35 for this specifically; we learn the corpse pollutes the local water supply so water must be brought from a separate house. Pollution emanating from the corpse is discussed by Petrovic, Dakouri-Hild, Guettel-Cole, and Lennon
25 From an ecocritical standpoint, Val Plumwood notes that the decomposing body is abjected not only as a reminder of mortality but of ecological dependency
26 This is particularly because the corpse shows the bodily fluids and volatile material that must be ejected in order to live (Kristeva 3)
chemically pure. Notably, Oceanus’s offshoots with purifying powers are all sources of potable water. Plato defines purification as a division “that retains what is better but expels the worst” (Sph. 226.d). Plato’s definition of purification is remarkably similar to the process of urination. The word ὄὖρον for urine is used three times in the Homeric corpus for “boundary” (Liddel & Scott 578). This corresponds to Kristeva’s point that the abject is purified through the elimination of substances linked to pollution (17). Materially and symbolically, pure water filters out death-threatening pollution. Human bodies take in pure water to expel waste in order to keep living. Internally through the body, pure water separates life-giving agents from life-threatening agents. Likewise, Oceanus freshly flows at the margins of the body of earth to separate the pollution threatened by the realm of death.

**Oceanids: Water Bodies**

The ecossemiosphere of Hades corresponds with both human and water bodies through the exchange of narrative, ecological, and biological systems. As the physical source of all fresh waters and a narrative figure, Oceanus takes form with a human-like body and as a watery flow, exemplifying trans-corporeal slippage. In the *Odyssey* and parallel sources, the fresh water god has many offshoots, each with their own *stoma*, or mouth (5.408). After the Homeric period, Oceanus is described as exchanging water through channels which are called throats; this material entity also has narrative agency as he bellows, cries, and sings from his many throats of overflowing rivers and fountains (Clendenon 120). His watery identity is evasive; he flows into other Underworld rivers, and from his own body engenders water beings with stories of their own.

Oceanus’s offshoots are godly rivers and fresh water nymphs called Oceanids. Oceanus marks the boundary of Hades both as a geography and through bodily agents, as exemplified in
the moment of Persephone’s abduction to the Underworld as told in the *Homerica Hymn to Demeter*:

Δήμητρ᾽ ἠύκομον, σεμνὴν θεόν, ἀρχομ᾽ ἀείδειν,
αὐτὴν ἠδὲ θύγατρα τανύσφυρον, ἧν Ἀιδωνεὺς
ἥρπαξεν, δῶκεν δὲ βαρύκτυπος εὐρύοπα Ζεύς,
νόσφιν Δήμητρος χρυσαόρου, ἀγλαοκάρπου,
παίζουσαν κούρῃσι σὺν Ὠκεανοῦ βαθυκόλποις (1-5).

To fair-haired Demeter, awesome goddess, I begin to sing,
and her slim-ankled daughter, whom Hades
snitched; Zeus, heavy-thundering and far-seeing, gave her,
apart from Demeter of the golden sword, of glorious fruit,
as she played with the deep-swelling daughters of Oceanus.

Instead of appearing as a rushing river as in the *Odyssey*, here Oceanus signifies the boundary of Hades through the presence of his offspring, the Oceanids, at the moment Persephone is taken to the Underworld.\(^{27}\) The presence of Oceanids in the hymn suggests a location at the edge of the world and at the bounds of Hades (Foley 36). Both in ecological and corporeal forms, Oceanus signifies the fluid boundary between life and death. The nymphic Oceanids’ epithet *bathukolpois* indicates their watery nature. The prefix *bathus* means deep, and interplays with the epithet for Oceanus as a physical river in the *Odyssey*, “*bathuroos*” meaning deep-flowing (*Homer* 10.13, 19.44). The word *kolpos* refers to both the hollow between waves, the hollow between the breasts, and the womb, exemplifying the semiotic exchange between water and flesh. With the Oceanids, the borders between the body and the environment dissolve.

\(^{27}\) In the Orphic hymn to the nymphs (50.L), the Oceanids are addressed as dwelling in caves whose depths descend to hell, revealing their chthonic and cavernous associations
The Oceanids are both hydrous and corporeal; the suffix of their epithet "kolpos" refers to the womb, giving a bodily meaning to the watery boundary between life and death. The hydrous edge of the world may relate to the borders of life, marked by water breaking at birth. As the realm beyond the watery threshold of the world, the Homeric Underworld may have been imagined not just as the afterlife but as the place before birth,\(^{28}\) the abject realm that Kristeva refers to as the “land of oblivion that is constantly remembered” (8). This Underworld is mapped at the body's boundaries. We can see how the subterranean geography of Hades takes form from the inner bodily landscape, showing how the environment is not something separate from the

\(^{28}\) To support this reading, I note that in *Phaedo* Plato’s soul is immortal and continually reborn in different bodies
body but rather synonymous to it. The wet borders of the inner landscape are personified not just as waves but as a maiden's cleavage and womb. As presented in the 4th century krater, the Oceanids’ hydraulic powers are shown as emerging from the area of the womb. The boundaries of the earth that give way to Hades take on reproductive bodily dimensions.

Just as the hymn’s Oceanids incarnate the watery borders of Hades as maidenly curves, the surface of the earth that gives way to the Underworld beneath appears in fleshly, pro-creative terms. In the hymn, the poet refers to the ground as the “φερέσβιον οὖθαρ ἀρούρης,” the “live-giving udder of earth” (450). The fertile land is described as an “udder,” suggesting procreative bodily fluids emerging from beneath the earth in the subterranean realm. In the ancient world, correspondence was drawn between ecological and reproductive fertility through wetness: rivers, lakes, and springs were thought to support human procreativity (Artemid. 2.38). Located below the surface of the earth’s “life-giving udder,” the Underworld is also the inner source of fluid-dripping fertility.

The Underworld as the place before birth fits within Bakhtin’s grotesque “death-renewal-fertility,” where together “birth and death are the gaping jaws of the earth and the mother’s open womb” (329). Similarly, for Kristeva, the abject is the memory of merged boundarylessness experienced before birth. While it is traditional to view Hades only as the land of death, with the archaic Underworld as the subsurface of earth’s body, such a reading is possible.

The watery bounds of the subterreanean realm take on not just a bodily but a gendered nature. In the hymn, we see the hydrous border of Hades, Oceanus, is incarnated as curvaceous maidens. In the Iliad, Homer refers to women derogatively as “ὕδωρ καὶ γαῖα,” “water and earth” (7.99). As exemplified in the krater image of Oceanids above, in Greek visual culture,

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29 Note that in the Greek pantheon, springs and lakes are incarnated as desirable nymphs
30 Kristeva’s abject realm resides largely inside the “maternal” body. See page 13, 53-55 in particular.
water and women go together. Whether as human or water, bodies are material-semiotic nodes that engender meanings which come to matter in very real ways. In Ancient Greece, the same tests for soil moisture were used by physicians on women (Guettel Cole 162). In Hippocrates’ 4th century BCE bioclimatology text, women’s flesh is declared as more wet and porous (Guettel Cole 161). While women’s bodies are ascribed fluidity, bodily fluids are exactly what threaten the dissolution of the boundaries of the body and assert its necessary dependence on the outside. Particularly because of the seepage ascribed to their bodies, women presided over death rituals in order to buffer male family members from pollution (Guettel Cole 119). Embodying soakage, women took an absorbent position at the sidelines of death. Similarly, the fluid Oceanids accompany Persephone at the liminal interspace between life and death. The watery liminal conception of women is indicated by the Oceanids. While hydrous maidens accompany Persephone at the threshold of death, in death rituals women practiced water libations and purifications.

Chthonic Water Libations

The watery borders of the Underworld were symbolically materialized through pouring liquids into the ground from ritual vases called hydriae (Gaifman 152). Odysseus enacts such a

31 See Gaifman (pp. 109) for a discussion of women and libations. This association is especially because women were responsible for gathering water from springs and fountains. We can see this theme in the hymn as well when Demeter encounters young women at the “Maiden Well” who come to draw water (99).
32 In Haraway’s discussion of bodies as material-semiotic nodes, she calls such objects “boundary projects” where “siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice” (Haraway 595). The mapping of gender on to material bodies is an example.
33 Grosz states that the female body has been constructed “as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity” (203). Likewise, based on the work of Kristeva she argues “bodily fluids attest to the permeability of the body, it's necessary dependence on an outside” as implied by death, and attest unavoidable permeating “dirt” of the body (193-194)
34 Note that menstruation was considered highly polluting (Petrovic 17).
35 For a discussion of gender and death rituals, see Mirto (7,77).
water libation into the depths of the earth in order to open the gates of Hades. Considering the
gendered nature of water and liminality, it is notable that Odysseus is only able to access the
bounds of Hades by guidance from Circe. Repeating Circe’s exact directions, in Book XI
Odysseus performs the following necromantic libation:

ἐγὼ δ᾽ ἄορ ὀξὺ ἐρυσσάμενος παρὰ μηροῦ
βόθρον ὅρυξ᾽ ὄσσον τε πυγούσιον ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα,
ἄμφο’ αὑτῷ δὲ χοὴν χεόμην πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι,
πρῶτα μελικρήτῳ, μετέπειτα δὲ ἡδέι οἴνῳ,
τὸ τρίτον αὖθ᾽ ὕδατι: ἐπὶ δ᾽ ἄλφιτα λευκὰ πάλυνον. (24-28)

I, drawing my sharp sword from my thigh
dug a pit the length of an elbow each way,
and around it I poured a libation to all the dead:
first a drink of honey and milk, and thereafter sweet wine,
and the third time water; and thereupon I sprinkled white barley.

Symbolizing the fluid boundary between life and death, this libation is typical of practices used
to reach the dead.\footnote{See Odgen’s chapter on necromancy as well as Gaifman on libations.} For necromantic communication, liquid libations were poured into the earth
in trenches referred to as \textit{bothroi}, like the one Odysseus.\footnote{See Scullion for a discussion of bothroi and \textit{libations} in chthonic rituals as well as an expansive
discussion of the meaning of “chthonic” in Ancient Greek ritual and religion. For more information on the bothroi explicitly, see Hutchinson’s archaeological overview.} The hole signifies the openings of the
earth that yield to the Underworld.
After the Homeric epics, the oldest document discussing necromantic practices is Aeschylus’s 472 BC tragedy *Persians* (Odgen 34). Here, the queen Atossa calls up the ghost of her husband, the Persian king Darius, with a libation of milk, honey, water, and wine—the same contents Odysseus pours in his *nekyia* (*Pers. 613*). As in the *Odyssey*, the libation brings an aspect of life to the dead. Like the water, the other ingredients of the libation embody fertility.

The association of milk and fertility is self-explanatory, as the substance is produced from the udders and breasts to foster new life. As the viscous bodily substance of bees, honey canonically symbolized fertility and powers between death and life in Ancient Greece. Both Odysseus and Atossa sprinkle white barley, which likewise signifies fertility and bodily fluids: in Ancient Greece, sexual intercourse with a woman was described as a field receiving male seed, while the word *sperma* referred to plant seeds as well as semen (Guettel Cole 153, 154). As a concoction of procreative fluids inserted into a deep hole, Odysseus’s necromantic libation might be

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38 Significantly, Persephone is forced to stay in the Underworld after eating a “honey-sweet” (*μελιηδέα*) pomegranate seed in the Homeric hymn, an act which alludes to sexual consumption (372). For an overview on the ritual importance of honey in the death/rebirth/afterlife rites of Persephone at Eleusis, see Sanchez-Parodi. For the erotic associations of honey, see Pliny who reports that mages use honey to cause sexual arousal. Also, Herodotus tells of Periander the great reviving his dead wife to have sex with her using honey (5.92).
understood as a sort of insemination of the earth. The insertion of fertility fluids into the earth’s hole suggests the Underworld is not just the place of death but the place before life and likewise portrays the Underworld as the inner bodily realm.

Just as the *bothros* can be understood as the vaginal opening of the earth’s inner body, so too can we understand it as the opening into the digestive cavity. The libation is analogous to a drink poured into the mouth. The offering of the sweet wine, honey, and milk triggers the gaping of the mouth of the earth into the inner canals that digest (or de-compose). As understood in Bakhtin's grotesque image of the body, the womb is equivalent to the mouth; the womb represents new life, while the mouth is the great devouring symbol of death. The two are simultaneous in the grotesque (Bakhtin 329). Relatedly, in Ancient Greece, birth was classified with the corpse in its intensity of pollution (Petrovic 17). With the Homeric body of the Underworld, the hole of the earth is at once the devouring mouth of death and the procreative womb of new life. The meaning is symbolic (the individual soul has a second life in Hades after the death of the body) and material (decomposition cycles to ecological renewal). The hole of the earth is a brink in the skin separating the outer and inner world, while the libation seeps through the orifice and thus transgresses the boundary of world and Underworld. Both as the life-giving womb and as the devouring mouth, the *bothros* opens the boundary of the surface of the earth’s body and connects to the inner cavity that is the Underworld.

**Karstic Entrances to Hades**

While Odysseus creates an opening into the earth by digging a hole, thresholds to the internal realm also appear naturally as karstic orifices. In the *Odyssey*, the boundaries of Hades

39 What Russo calls “the female grotesque” is not exclusive to women or those with wombs, but rather is “a space of risk and abjection” (58)
are signified not just as watery flows but as caves. The two are closely related; karstic grottos are formed from the incessant seepage of waters through porous rock. Just as the waters flowing at the bounds of Hades might be understood as ingested or excreted fluids, caves can be seen as the orifices through which those fluids pass.

Later becoming a canonical motif of Underworld entrances, the cave as the entrance to Hades is first recorded in Book 24 of the *Odyssey*. We arrive at this passage after Odysseus has returned to Ithaca and has killed all the suitors who had attempted to court his wife and take over his kingdom. The psychopomp Hermes\(^\text{40}\) comes to lead their souls to Hades and they go in the following manner:

\[
\text{ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε νυκτερίδες μυχῷ ἄντρου θεσπεσίοι}
\text{τρίζουσι ποτέονται, ἐπεὶ κε τὶς ἀποπέσῃσιν}
\text{ὄρμαθοῦ ἐκ πέτρης, ἀνά τ᾽ ἄλληλησιν ἔχονται,}
\text{ὡς αἱ τετριγυῖαι ἅμ᾽ ἠϊσαν: ἦρχε δ᾽ ἄρα σφι}
\text{Ἑρμείας ἀκάκητα κατ᾽ εὐρώεντα κέλευθα (24.6-10)}
\]

Just as bats in the corner of a divinely sounding cave fly about screeching, when one has fallen off from a chain of rock, and they hold on to one another, thus crying shrilly they went together; he went first, gracious Hermes, down the dank ways.

The passing over of the souls appears in an extended simile of bats in a cave, implying the dank ways to the Underworld are of a cavernous nature. Bats, or literally “night-beings” make their homes in the innermost corners of subterranean openings, just as departed souls reside in the dank dome of the Underworld. As a mythical place, the realm of Hades is accessible through these karstic geological openings. Materially, caverns operate as a sort of opposite to the surface world by literally opening into the earth's innards. While we now are aware that caves are finite, these abyssal chasms allude to an unknown world beneath the ground.

\(^{40}\) Note Hermes’ unique ability to cross boundaries as a psychopomp
The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* further demonstrates accessing Hades through karst terrain. The episode of Persephone’s descent takes place by way of a karstic geologic phenomenon. While some caves are visible as rocky orifices at the surface of the earth, other karstic chambers are hidden below ground until they are signalled by sudden sinkholes formed by the collapse of a cave (Baleriaux 109). Such an event is alluded to in the moment of Persephone’s abduction:

χάνε δὲ χθόν εὐρύάγια
The earth with its wide ways yawned
Upon the Nysian plain, and the lord host-to-many
the revered son of Kronos, rose up with his immortal horses

The earth’s opening is enacted with the word χάσκω meaning to swallow, yawn, or gape and is a typical word choice for such geologic events (Scott 883). The language of the earth “yawning” or “gaping” is repeated in later tales of katabasis, as will be discussed later with Virgil’s Aeneid.

This oral description furthers the sense of the earth as a body and the Underworld as the innards, accessed through the gaping mouth. Here, the ground is an agent with the ability to swallow Persephone. It is visible how active geologic bodies prompt narratives of descent.

In the hymn, the geologic opening of the earth is retold by Persephone when she recounts picking a special flower and her subsequent katabasis:

υτὰρ ἐγὼ δρεπόμην περὶ χάρματι: γαῖα δ᾽ ἔνερθε χώρησεν (429-430)

“But when I plucked it in joy, the earth gave way”

While the chthonic cave is the gaping mouth of the earth, the opening of the body of earth also has vaginal connotations. The moment of Persephone’s descent is also the end of her maidenhood, as Hades assaults her. The gaping of the ground is signalled by the picking of flowers, which is a common motif of breaking the hymen (Johnson et. al. 47). The opening of the earth is referred to as χώρησεν, meaning to give way for another or to spread, while the related word χώρα denotes a submissive position. Persephone’s loss of virginity is displaced as a

41 For a full analysis of the sexual allusions of the hymn, see Foley.
karstic collapse, creating a parallel between human and geologic bodies. The suggestive spreading of earth sets up the Underworld as the inner body accessed through yielding crevices.

Karst access to the Underworld appears again when the goddess Hekate becomes aware of Persephone’s descent thusly:

οὐδὲ τις ἀθανάτων οὐδὲ θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων
ήκουσεν φωνῆς, οὐδὲ ἀγλαόκαρποι ἑλαίαι†
eι μὴ Περσαίου θυγάτηρ ἀταλὰ φρονέουσα
ἀιεν ἐξ ἄντρου, Ἑκάτη λιπαροκρήδεμνος (22-24)

not one of the gods nor mortal men
heard her call out, not even the beautiful olive trees
except the tender daughter of Persaious, bright-banded Hekate from inside a cave heard her calling

Not even the olive trees become aware of the descent, implying that Hades has taken Persephone to a place so low and dark there are no plants. Because of the lack of light, cave ecologies prevent the growth of photosynthetic life (Simon 223). The ecology of caves demonstrates how geologic bodies engender narrative meanings. More still, the material enclosure of the chamber facilitates a sonic connection into Hades. The resounding cave channels voices of the Underworld to the world. We can see at work the familiar similitude of the cave and the mouth: the cave can be understood as the earth’s mouth, agentally letting out a cry from the visceral depths of the Underworld.

It is notable that Hekate is the one who hears the call, as she is the goddess of necromancy and thresholds (d’Este). The goddess’s liminal nature corresponds with the cave she inhabits, which is a threshold into the Underworld. Hekate’s ability to access calls from the nether realm is indicative of her boundary-crossing powers (Hornblower 671). Both the goddess and the cave transcend the boundary between world and Underworld.
Conclusion

In this chapter, it has become evident that the fluid borders of the Underworld developed through dynamic interactions between human and nonhuman agents. Karstic phenomena such as subterranean rivers and sinkholes prompt narratives of descent. Focusing on purification against pollution, the hydrous, corporeal entwinement in symbolic boundary-making practices can be seen. Through an analysis of Oceanids at the margins of the Underworld, I have suggested that the watery borders of Hades are analogous to the body. Here, human and water bodies share semiotic porosity and gendered meanings implicate human and nonhuman bodies alike. With fleshly portrayals of the wet borders of the infernal realm, I have postulated that Hades is the inner bodily abyss as the cavernous openings to the subsurface realm appear as gaping mouths, a theme which is developed further in later visions of the Underworld.

The Virgilian Dis

From Homeric Greece to Augustan Rome

Between Homeric Greece and Virgilian Rome, the narrative terrain of the Underworld burgeoned. By the time of the tragedians (5th C. BCE), the rivers of Hades morph into marshy lakes. In Phaedo, Socrates says reformable criminals remain cyclically in the lava of Pyrphlegethon and the mud of Cocytus until they are forgiven by their victims, and are thus admitted to Acheron (Edmonds 213-214). In the Aeneid, Virgil draws from this well of visual and eschatalogical representations of the Underworld in addition to Homer’s works. Written

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42 In Aristophanes 405 BC text Frogs, Acheron is a marshy lake.
during the principate of Augustus to ground the historical past in the Greco-Roman mythical
tradition, the *Aeneid* was immediately canonized with long-lasting impacts. Virgil strongly
evokes the Homeric tradition, through which he validates, expands, and alters the Underworld as
the narrative landscape evolves across time, culture, and geology.

Virgil takes the Homeric hero Aeneas and places him as the epic proto-Roman. In his
account of Aeneas’ katabasis, Virgil transposes the far-off watery gates of the Underworld onto
the area of Cumae and the Bay of Naples. The poet lived in this region when he wrote the
*Aeneid*, and the physical environment permeates his narrative (Kroonenberg 31). Through
poetically invoking the Cumaean landscape, Virgil connects the historical present with the
mythic past in much the same way that his epic provides an origin story for Rome.

Virgil mythologizes the terrain of Cumae through an adaptation of the Greek vision of the
Underworld. At the same time, this environment molds Virgil’s Underworld. The epic further
demonstrates the permeability between physical and narrative landscapes. While Homer’s
Underworld has reciprocity with the general karstic geology of the Aegean, in Virgil’s telling the
surface of the nether realm is fleshed out with specific Cumaean landmarks. The description of
the chthonic geography first comes in a guiding dream, wherein Aeneas is visited by gods who
tell him to go “To Cumae with its otherworldly lakes / And Avernus with its murmuring woods”
(3.441-2). Virgil merges Homeric imagery of spectral voices and chthonic bodies of water with
the Italian landscape. By weaving the specific ecology of Cumae with infernal motifs, the *Aeneid*
further demonstrates how the Underworld can be viewed as an ecosemiosphere.

Virgil intertwines epic visions with the specific environment while spanning across time.
In the *Aeneid*’s Cumae, landmarks of the historical present merge with shadows of the place’s
past and mythic images of the Underworld. The text imagines a Roman landscape before Roman
domination, which in some aspects is wild and unravaged, and in others, signifies Rome’s future rule. Upon orders from the dream, Aeneas goes to Cumae particularly to find the prophetess Sibyl in her sanctuary. Both the temple of Apollo and the Sibylline oracle are historically grounded. These features would have been deeply familiar to Virgil’s Roman audience as markers of persisting place-based identity.

When the proto-Romans reach Italy, Aeneas searches for the temple of Apollo and the cavernous locale of the Sibyl below. Virgil locates the seer’s cave within the Euboean hill, where today there are the remnant chambers of the Apollonian prophetess’s sanctuary (Monti 55). This man-built cave is over a hundred meters long and several meters wide (Iannace 1). While Virgil writes of a time before the founding of Rome, he also monumentalizes features of this place that are contemporary to his audience. Institutional interventions in the landscape are somehow already part of the wild forest environment. The evolution and changes of the ecosystem dissolve into continuous mythic time in his telling, so that Roman power is immortally etched on to the landscape.

Immediately, the men locate fresh water, gather materials to make fire, and ravage the woods. The intervention of the Trojans on nature anticipates the domestication of the Avernus area (Barchiesi 22). The word choice for deforestation is rapio, meaning to rape, ravage, or tear off. The language of sexual conquest is a typical metaphor for imperialism by Romans (Penner 135-138). Environmental degradation stands in for a sexualized political conquest and anticipates the penetration of the Underworld. Later, a greater act of deforestation is required explicitly to access the gates of Dis (Aen. 6.180). Such a destruction relates strongly to the standard Roman conception of the earth as a body; here, political conquest of a new place involves the sexualized

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43 See Monti for a full discussion of the archaeological evidence of the Sibyl’s cave. It is notable that other landmarks named in the Aeneid (e.g. Misenum) maintain their name during the Augustan period, thus creating a similar continuity between the mythic past and the present day.
domination of the land-as-body. The deforestation of the area occurs in order to create a funeral pyre for Misenus, after whom the Trojans rename the place (Aen. 6.235). This name is still current in Virgil’s own day. The degradation of the surface preludes the katabasis and the later Roman conquest of the area.

The Hundred Mouthed Cave

The destructive treatment of the environment by the Romans contrasts with how the maddened Sibyl symbiotically inhabits the area. Described as wild and animal herself, the oracle dwells in a cave, governs the woods, and is able to navigate across the surfaces of Cumae to its Tartarean depths. Granted these abilities by the liminal goddess Hekate (Aen. 6.117-8), the Sibyl embodies the ability to cross boundaries between the world and underworld. The Sibyl’s associations with Hekate and caves demonstrates persisting liminal motifs from the Homeric hymn.

Literally and stratigraphically, Aeneas’s visit to the Sibyl’s grotto is a step down towards Dis. Located under the temple of Apollo within the surface of the chthonic ground, the opening of the Sibyl’s cave is a peek into the orifices of Dis into which the hero later journeys. Virgil establishes the oracular rock chamber as such:

Excisum Euboicae latus ingens rupis in antrum,
quo lati ducent aditus centum, ostia centum,
unde ruunt totidem uoces, responsa Sibyllae. (Aen. 6.42-44)

The rocky face of the Euboean hill is carved into a great cavern to where a hundred wide entrances conduct, a hundred mouths,

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44 Note that in the grotesque “the death of the individual” is a moment of the collective people’s “renewal and improvement” (Bakhtin 341). The death of Misenus is a microcosm of Aeneas’s katabasis which sets up a transformation of the political power of the area.

45 Macdonald argues the katabasis marks the death of Aeneas as a Trojan and the installation of Aeneas as a Proto-Roman (31)
Just as many voices hurl out, the responses of the Sibyl.

In the Latin, Virgil’s account does not make a pretense of “naturality,” of some wild cave holding the frenzied prophetess. Instead, the grammatical construction and word choice indicate a combination of natural and man-made elements (Horsfall 104). The cave is described as *excisum*, meaning cut or carved out, and is later referred to with the architectural term *domus* (*Aen. 6.53*). At the same time, it is a cave located within a hill and created from natural rock formations. The separation between natural and built dissolves as this place takes form from interactions between human and nonhuman material agents.

The term for its openings are just as polysemous; *ostia* can indicate a door, a geologic passage, or a human mouth, and its root is *os*, the Latin word for “face.” In photographs of the Sibyl’s cave, one can see many porous openings which Virgil describes as hundreds of grotto mouths. In the *Aeneid*, the rock is not just a passive slate to be cut into, but an agential body with mouths and voices (*voces*) that are hurled from it (*ruunt*). The grotto is depicted as a trans-corporeal landscape, a space where human and geologic agencies merge. The Sibyl's cave is framed as a geologic formation, a built structure, and an expelling body all at once. As the first subterranean passage of the chthonic Cumae, the grotto illuminates how the Underworld is a bodily landscape that permeates across the boundaries of human and geologic, natural and man-made.
The same permeating ambiguity between natural and human continues with the Sibyl and her geologic chamber. In the passage, the divine prophecies come from her and the mouths of the grotto in tandem. Sibyl’s prophecies are expelled not in her voice but from the voices of the cave’s openings. Whether the responses hurled from the mouths are indeed echoes or murmurs with their own life is unclear, and unimportant. Rather, the cave acts as an extension of her own body and voice through which the divine speaks. Later, when the Apollonian prophecy spumes from her, it resounds from the many orifices (Aen. 6.99). Not only has she made the grotto her place to remain (Aen. 3.638, 6.15), but has merged her mouth with the mouths of the cavern. In this way, Sibyl coextends with her cavernous abode. As Alan Montroso eloquently states, “the Sibyl speaks to the material entanglements, the co-extenstensiveness of bodies and their environs
that results from the seeping between all things” (Montroso 99). Not only does the cave respond to the Sibyl, but it seems the Sibyl herself is molded by the landscape, taking on its wildness and chthonic powers. With the Sibyl framed continually from within the great cavern, it seems mysteries surface from the prophetess particularly because of her volcanic dwelling.

Throughout the oracle of Book 6, Virgil emphasizes the sonic aspects emitted from the Sibyl and her environment. The Sibyl collaborates with the rocky chamber to create a sort of nature-cultural auditorium. The materiality of the cave shapes the nature of the sound. In fact, modern acoustical studies of the cave have shown that a speaker’s voice would be received at every point along the tunnel, meaning sound would have been projected from every rocky orifice (Iannace 1). The specific mold of the landscape co-orchestrates the Sibyl’s resounding oracle. Virgil’s emphasis on acoustics echoes Homer’s description of the souls departing to the Underworld like bats in a cave that is “divinely-sounding” (Ody. 24.6). The motif shows how grottos associated with the nether realm would have evoked an intense sensory experience, elucidating how the Underworld emerged through corporeal interactions.

Virgil furthers this auditory element through the mode of his telling. The description of the orifices emitting voices mirrors its content in its own sound. As previous scholars have noted (Horsfall 216), both unde ruunt and remugit (Aen. 99) produce gaping noises; reciting the string of “u”s opens the bodily canal from the mouth to the throat. As the Sibyl’s cavern marks the narrative threshold of Virgil’s katabasis, it is fitting that the opening of the bodily channel is highlighted auditorily. The vocal gaping symbolizes the Underworld opening to the subsurface below. Along with the mouth of the reader, the mouths of the cave and the Sibyl’s own mouth act as channels from the surface world to somewhere inside, below. At the same time, the orifices

46 For an engaging material ecocritical analysis of the Sibyl in Medieval translations, see Montroso’s full article.
demonstrate a porosity of meaning between human and nonhuman bodies. In the poetic construction, the Underworld is not just within the earth but within the body, and is accessed through human and nonhuman orifices alike.

The oral description of the chthonic terrain relates to the concept of the grotesque. Like in Virgil’s description of Sibyl’s cavern, in the grotesque, the mouth is emphasized. As Bakhtin states, “the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth” (317). This is because orifices are the sites where the body transgresses its own limits and opens to the external world, with which it merges and interchanges constituents (317). The Sibyl herself refers to the cave’s orifices explicitly as mouths with the word *ora* when she tells Virgil to pray so they may open (*Aen.* 6.53). Virgil’s word choice for “open” is *dehiscent* which means to yawn, or to gape. This phrasing is reminiscent of the scene of Persephone’s descent in the Homeric hymn when the earth “gapes” or “yawns” open (*χάνε*), creating a portal to the Underworld. The grotesque emphasizes the mouth as a liminal, penetrable feature which leads into the body's depths (Bakhtin 318). The Sibyl and her Euboean home take on the features of the grotesque where the face “is actually reduced to a gaping mouth,” a “wide-open bodily abyss” (Bakhtin 317). Thus, the grotesque body—both human and nonhuman—opens at the orifices to a subterranean abyss.

Like the grotesque face, the face of the Euboean rock opens into a gaping chamber with a hundred uttering mouths. The vastness of the cave relates to the exaggerative quality of the grotesque, while the extension of the seer with the multitudinous mouths of the cave adheres to the grotesque body’s merging and excessive nature (Bakhtin 304). Moreover, the porous and emanating cave fits the characterization of the grotesque body as open, secreting, and multiple (Russo 8). The co-extensiveness of the Sybil’s mouth and those of the cave exemplifies how the grotesque body “can merge with various natural phenomena” (Bakhtin 318). The motif of the
gaping mouth asserts trans-corporeality, both reminiscent of the gastronomical relations between
to nature and stomach and threatening the fatal swallowing and absorption of the individual by the
earth. Virgil’s portrayal of the oracular grotto represents the grotesque and ecological truth of the
body that transfers and fuses with the environment. In this way, the oracular orifices of Cumae
signify the openings of a grotesque, trans-corporeal body that lead to the abyssal Underworld.

Penetrable Orifices

The orifices of the chthonic geography take on a sexual nature. Virgil describes the Sibyl
prophesying as if she were climaxing:

“Cui talia fanti
ante fores subito non voltus, non color unus,
non comptae mansere comae; sed pectus anhelum,
et rabie fera corda tument; maiorque videri” (Aen. 6.46-61)

As she spoke before the openings,
suddenly she is transformed in expression and color,
and her hair becomes undone; and her panting breast
and heart swells with wild frenzy, she appears larger

The orgasmic description of divination analogizes the mysteries of the Underworld with the
mysteries of the inner body. With the co-extensiveness of the Sibyl’s body and the cave, this
suggestive passage frames the porous landscape of Cumae as a penetrable body. The Sibyl’s
exaggerated and enlarged body experiences symptoms of grotesque life: flushing, swelling, and

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47 In Material Ecocriticism, Alaimo cites the gastronomical relations of body and earth as a “digestible”
example of trans-corporeality (255)
48 Bakhtin writes that the grotesque body is “not separated from the world or from nature” (328)
49 Note that Bakhtin writes that the grotesque body has “no impenetrable surface” (339)
50 Exaggeration and enlargement are also characteristic of the grotesque as per Bakhtin, discussed in the
chapter “The Grotesque Image of the Body”
trembling (Bakhtin 308). The sexual imagery builds as the seer is overcome by the divination of Apollo:

At, Phoebi nondum patiens, immanis in antro
bacchatur vates, magnum si pectore possit
excussisse deum; tanto magis ille fatigat
os rabidum, fera corda domans, fingitque premendo.
Ostia iamque domus patuere ingentia centum
sponte sua, vatisque ferunt responsa per auras (Aen. 6.76-82)

But the prophetess, not yet submitting to Phoebus,
raved monstrously in the cave, trying to shake
the mighty deity from her breast; all the more he wears
her rabid mouth, dominates her wild heart, and molds her by his pressure.
The great hundred orifices of the place opened of their own will
and bore the responses from the Sibyl in breaths of air

The image of the domination of the seer in erotic terms is widespread and familiar (Horsfall 72). Just when the Sibyl submits, the orifices of the cave open. The boundaries between the Sibyl’s body and the face of the cave merge even further with this simultaneity. Both grotto and woman are described in grotesque terms of excess and monstrosity as their joined mouths open. With the merged bodies of prophetess and landscape, the gaping of the earth is likened to the sexual yielding of the body. Virgil’s word choice for subterranean entrances as gates, mouths, doors, or caves enact the Roman vocabulary of vaginal and anal innuendos (Adams 85-89, Johnson et.al 170). The opening of the body of the Sibyl and the cave augurs the gaping of the Underworld, which is indeed the inner terrain inside the surface of the Euboean hill. By portraying the Sibyl’s prophesy as an erotic opening of both woman and landscape, Virgil frames katabasis as a sexual penetration, where the Underworld is synonymous to the inner body.

Apollo’s forced opening of the cave and the Sybil prelude Aeneas’ penetration of the land. The dynamic of taming wildness is emphatically stressed in this passage. As Apollo wears
down her rabid mouth, both the orifices of the seer and of the cave are dominated. Fused with the Sibyl, the rocky landscape takes on the nature of a resistant yet ultimately yielding body. The seer’s body is described as wild (*fera*) before she submits. The word choice of Phoebus’ domination is *domo* which can mean to tame or to domesticate. The act of possession is very much likened to a domesticating domination. Especially as the Sibyl is portrayed as merged with the Cumaean landscape, sexual possession becomes a metaphor for land possession.51

Just as the opening of the oracular mouths of the Sibyl and the cave lead Aeneas into the throat of Dis, Apollo’s domestication of the “wild” Sibyl sets up and mirrors Aeneas’ conquest of Italy. The emphasis on mouths and openings elucidates how “bodily orifices seem to represent joints of entry and of exit to social units” (Douglas 3). The grotesque body with its open and liminal features is associated with social political transformation (Russo 8), exemplified by these geo-human Cumaean mouths. Just as in Book 6 places around Cumae are renamed by the Trojans (*Aen.* 6.235), so these cavernous orifices facilitate the pro-Roman political transformation of Italy.

**Discharging Toxins and the Throat of Dis**

The oracle in the cave directs Aeneas to another grotto, the throat of Dis:

> Spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu,  
> scrupea, tuta lacu nigro nemorumque tenebris,  
> quam super haud ullae poterant impune volantes  
> tendere iter pennis—talis sese halitus atris  
> faucibus effundens supera ad convexa ferebat:  

There was a deep cave with a jagged, monstrous mouth

51 Virgil’s site of katabasnal penetration, Avernus, was redesigned to be the main port of the Roman Army with a suggestively named basin “Lake Hell” in 35-38 BCE (Barchiesi 25).
shielded by the shadows of the dark wood and a black lake,
over which no birds could stretch their wings
and safely make their way in flight because of the breath
pouring out of the murky throat and rising to the surface;
The Greeks called this place Avernus.

Aeneas discovers the threshold to the Underworld at an abyssal mouth that leads into the throat
of Dis and thus the depths of the earth’s grotesque body. Like the Sibyl’s cave, the entrance to
Dis is described in grotesque, bodily terms. The cave is *alta*, implying awe-evoking depth. The
hole is *immanis*, meaning enormous or monstrous. As has been noted, exaggeration, excess, and
monstrosity are fundamentals of the grotesque bodily image (Bakhtin 305). Moreover, the
grotesque mouth continues to dominate the Cumaean geology. The word choice for the opening
is *hiatu* which comes from the verb meaning to yawn or to gape. The portrayal of the orifice as
“jagged” (*scrupea*) evokes the image of a monstrous, sharp-toothed mouth. The toxic vapors are
an “exhalation” (*halitus*) that effuse from the “throats” (*fauces*) of the cave. The environment
leading to Dis is depicted in terms of bodily openings, canals, and excretions. The *Aeneid*
illustrates the geologic openings to the subterranean world as the permeating orifices of a
grotesque body.

Like the Greeks, the Romans understand the earth as a body with hidden veins
synonymous to fluid channeling organs (Seneca *NQ* 3.15.1). As the region below the surface of
the open throat of the earth, the Tartarean Underworld is akin to the entrails. The Cumaean
eco-semiosphere of the Underworld corresponds with the open, grotesque body that displays its
inner constituents, the fluids and organs (Bakhtin 318).

Virgil describes these geologic holes as containing fluids and discharging vapors which
are highly toxic. The dark lake and fumes emitted from the cave can be read as acidic digestive
fluids or excremental bodily materials. The pollution associated with the chthonic terrain is both
corporeal and symbolic. As a terrain of death, the trans-corporeal Cumaean landscape emits the threat of pollution from the corpse that was most dangerous at the orifices (Dakouri-Hild et al. 363). Fundamentally defined by crossing boundaries, Roman religious pollution is associated strongly with the mouth and bodily fluids (Lennon 31). This is because the orifice shows the fluids and volatile material that must be abjected in order to live (Kristeva 3). Such borders of the body insist upon its trans-corporeal permeability. These openings and toxic fluids expose the necessary porosity of the body with the environment and threaten its disintegration (Grosz 193). The gate of the Underworld is one of these threatening liminal locales, described with its exhaling throat.

The gate to Dis is previously named in such “fauces grave olentis Averni,” “the malodorous throat of Avernus” (Aen. 6.200). The polluting features of the chthonic cave and lake are not only bodily and symbolic but ecological. Virgil locates the gate to Dis at Lake Avernus, a physical body of water in the terrain of Cumae. The name Avernus taken from Greek means “birdless,” evidently resulting from a long tradition of birdlessness in the area due to noxious emissions from openings in the ground. Avernus is part of a larger area known as the Phlegraean or “Burning” Fields (Kroonenberg 49). Around this area, plants do not grow because the ground is too hot and gaseous steam is expelled from openings (Kroonenberg 39).

Avernus is a crater lake, part of a larger circle of craters formed by a volcanic eruption (Kroonenberg 49-50). Virgil inscribes volcanic activity onto the entrance to Dis when he locates it at Avernus. Because of the unique geology of Cumae, the Roman vision of the Underworld shifts to emphasize volcanic as well as karstic features. Virgil’s description is true to Avernus’s

52 In Bodily Natures, Alaimo speculates that toxic bodies can lead to a practice of trans-corporeal ethics that affect multiple peoples, species, and ecologies. Here, we see the toxicity of Avernus affecting birds, the surrounding ecosystem, and the Romans.
physicality: due to its volcanic formation, the crater lake emits 2,500 tons of CO2 every year from gas bubbles rising to the surface from below the depths of the lake (Kroonenberg 31).

Virgil chooses Cumae as the threshold of the Underworld not just for the objective of the Roman world in the epic, but for its ecological conditions such as vapors that signify toxicity and death. Romans understood that certain waters, sourced from deep within the earth, held and released deadly toxins picked up from what they flowed through (Seneca NQ 3.2-8). This means that Avernus would have been thought to accumulate noxious conditions due to an underwater connection to the Underworld, and that the state of Dis would be sulfurous, toxic, and deep. Today, we know indeed this area does in fact have connections down to the hot and sulfurous world below the surface.

By designating the real Lake Avernus as the boundary between the physical and mythological world, the epic illustrates the landscape of the Underworld as an eco-semiosphere. Virgil elaborates on the mythogeologic connection between Avernus and Dis through Aeneas when he asks the Sibyl for help on his katabasis:

“quando hic inferni ianua regis
dicitur, et tenebrosa palus Acheronte refuso” (Aen. 6.106-107)

“It is said the gate of the infernal king is here,
and the murky swamp is the backflow of Acheron”

As Virgil calls Acheron a Tartarean river (Aen. 6.295), we know that this is subterranean in meaning. Thus, “backflow” (refundo) in this context means flowing back from the Underworld53. As Romans were well aware that underground rivers emerged under certain lakes (Seneca NQ

53 Aeneas’s katabasis through unknowable waters can be seen as part of a larger Roman literary tradition Rimell refers to it as possessio maris, where domination over waters is key to articulating imperial identities (1).
it is natural to conclude that in the *Aeneid* Acheron is a subterranean channel refluxing into Lake Avernus, forming it from beneath.

Lake Avernus is described with words that can indicate a swamp, bog, lake, marsh, or pool. Whatever translation is chosen, one thing is clear: Avernus is a stagnant and percolating body of water. Like the Greeks, Romans considered running water to be especially divine and used it for purification (Edlund Berry 163). The Romans called flowing water “living water” (Seneca *NQ* 3.7.3). In this dichotomy, then, still waters like Avernus would be considered “dead water.” Stagnant waters resonate with the subterranean landscape of Dis, where Romans imagined swampy waters percolating in the darkness (Seneca *NQ* 3.9.2). Toxic characteristics of water like chemical impurity and festering bacterial growth are mapped onto the Underworld, interweaving the mythic world with the environment characteristics of Lake Avernus.

**Inner Deadwaters**

Both overflowing at the surface and in the depths of the earth, the waters of the Underworld are toxic, dead waters. At the surface of the chthonic ground in her cave, the Sibyl relays that deathly waters pervade the Cumaean ground all around beneath the surface, saying “*Tenent media omnia silvae, / Cocytusque sinu labens circumvenit atro*” meaning “The forests hold everything in between / and black Cocytus flows encompassing all around” (*Aen.* 6.131-132). Cocytus is “*atris,*” sharing the same coal-black descriptor as the deathly emissions of Avernus; this indicates the pollutants surfacing from the marsh come up from the toxic fluids of the infernal Cocytus. Once in Dis beside these waters, the guiding prophetess indicates the nature of these subterranean waters: “*Cocyti stagna alta vides Stygiamque paludem*” translated as “you

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54 It is notable that Roman religious pollution indicates a concern for disease infection (Lennon 31). Such is embodied by these stagnant Hadean waters.
are looking at the great pool of Cocytus and the swamp of Styx” (*Aen.* 6.323). She refers to Cocytus as great standing waters; *stagna* refers to a pool or lake, exemplifying the antithesis of the Roman flowing, living waters. The Styx is also stagnant, referred to as a *paludem*, signifying a marshy water body akin to the deadly Avernus.\(^{55}\) Virgil’s portrayal of the Underworld waters clearly indicates stagnancy that would enable bacterial accumulation and breed carriers of deadly diseases (World Health Organization).

All of these parasitic, toxic, and deathly waters merge into each other, exceeding not only their own limits, but also transgressing the boundary between life and death. The permeating waters show the instability of all borders and the certain decomposition for all living things. Transgressing the boundary between the inner and outer body of earth, the waters assert the porosity of all corporeal systems.

Rather than entering the Underworld through the infernal waters surfacing at Avernus, Aeneas follows the Sibyl into the cavernous throat of Dis. Later, the Sybil refers back to this entrance saying “it is not divine law for an unpolluted man to cross the polluted threshold,” *nulli fas casto sceleratum insistere limen,*” (Virgil 6.562). The cave is simultaneously an environmentally toxic realm and symbolically polluting orifice; the word *casto* often denotes sexual purity (Lennon 41). There is the sense that Virgil’s katabasis is a sexual penetration\(^{55}\) of the body of earth.\(^{57}\) With Lake Avernus later built as the main port for the Roman Army,\(^{58}\) it is evident how the katabanal penetration of the land stands for a political conquest.

Aeneas follows the dark channel to Acheron, which is described thusly:

\[\text{Hinc via, Tartarei quae fert Acherontis ad undas.} \]
\[\text{Turbidus hic caeno vastaque voragine gurges} \]

\(^{55}\) As Seneca writes, there is physical spring Styx in Arcadia whose waters are deathly poisonous (3.25.1)

\(^{56}\) Lesser argues that the journey into Hades is also “that journey down into the body of the lover” (129)

\(^{57}\) Roman notions of pollution often revolve around sexual excess (Lennon 32).

\(^{58}\) See Barchiesis pp. 25, and Kroonenberg.
aestuat, atque omnem Cocytus eructat harenam (Aen. 6.295-297)

From there, the path led to the waters of Tartarean Acheron. Here, a chasmic, abyssal whirlpool turbid with filth seethes, and heaves and vomits waste into Cocytus

The waters of Hades resonate with the physical geology around Avernus where there is a bubbling mud pool (Kroonenberg 39). At the same time, the infernal waters are mapped with the language of abject bodily processes. After entering the cavernous throat of Dis, we are then exposed to its churning innards. The passage explicitly names the abject process of vomiting with *eructat*. Virgil’s portrayal of the environment of the Underworld as the inner fluids of the body corresponds with the working Roman conception of the earth. The *eructat* is likewise applied in Seneca’s natural philosophy for water emerging at the surface of the earth from a subterranean source, though this term commonly means to vomit (*NQ* 6.8.5). This suggests a commonly accepted equivalence between human and earthly bodies in the process of ejecting inner fluids from surface openings. Seneca writes “but just as in our bodies there is not only blood but many types of liquid, some essential for life, and others of an altered and slightly thicker form (the brain in the head, mucus, saliva, and tears, the marrow in the bones, and certain fluid added to the joints by which they can be bent more quickly on account of its lubrication), so in the earth there are also several types of liquid” (*NQ* 3.15.2). With Acheron, Virgil evokes the phenomenon of acid reflux with the dry waste signified by *harenam* and *caeno*, which is disgorged with the word *aestuat*, denoting burning and heaving. In light of all this, the backflow of Acheron that forms Avernus might better be understood as the reflux of bile. The subterranean waters are described as bodily fluids ejected through the digestive tract, materials and processes that conceive the Underworld as the abject innards of the body.
The Nine Circles of Styx

While Virgil’s waters of the Underworld diffuse past the borders of the earth’s surface, they also serve as boundaries within the infernal realm. The Acheron keeps out liminal souls from the depths of Dis. After ferrying across the marshy river, the Sibyl and Aeneas come to a cave guarded by the hound of Hades, Cerberus. The two are able to pass through by giving the grotesque, multi-headed monster enchanted food which he engorges with his trifaci—three throats (Aen. 6.418). The passage through the cave recalls the initial entrance through the rocky faucibus beside Avernus, that throat of Dis (Aen. 6.241). A parallel is drawn between the monstrous body of the canine guard and the liminal landscape of the Underworld. Both the guard and the earth gape open to grotesque interior depths. The movement through a second orifice signifies descent into a deeper tier of the karstic Underworld. They come upon the sad specters who committed suicided, barricaded as such:

Fas obstat, tristisque palus inamabilis undae
alligat, et noviens Styx interfusa coërcet. (Aen. 6.438-439)

Divine law stands in the way, the melancholic marsh of the repulsive current, and the Styx that encircled them nine times.

Styx imprisons the souls for their transgressive behavior. The marshy flow is used as a boundary encompassing the sad specters. The currents are referred to as inamabilis, signifying something odorous as well as morally detestable. The Styx embodies the abject both as a dejected fluid and as something that transgresses societal bounds. Notably, the marsh flows around the souls nine times, a detail that Dante expounds upon in his medieval vision of Hell.

59 Hybrid characters with “wild anatomical fantasy” are characteristic of the grotesque (Bakhtin 345)
60 As per Bakhtin’s image of the grotesque mouth dissolving the boundary between bodies (317) and gaping open into the abyss as “the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld” (325)
Conclusion

In this chapter, the watery margins of the Underworld have persisted and surfaced with swampy, grotesque details. The opening of the grotesque body of earth has been framed with sexually violent language, replaying the theme of katabasis as a sexual assault first seen in the myth of Persephone. At the same time, the earth in its opening has appeared as a bodily agent who actively gapes and transgresses boundaries with its overflows and demonstrates sonic creativity in the co-orchestration of divine prophecies. In the Aeneid, the nether realm has emerged explicitly as the inner body, accessible through polluting orifices and overflowing fluids. With Virgil’s conception, we have seen that the liminal hydrogeologies of the Underworld have become explicitly polluting. As the specific Cumaean environment has imprints on the eco-semiosphere of the infernal realm, it becomes clear how material toxicity contributes to the vision of the mythic world. With Virgil, we see a grotesque viscosity imbued into the terrain of the Underworld that persists through later visions.

Dante’s Hell

Medieval Christian Hell

Perhaps the most canonical geography of the Underworld emerges in the 14th century with Dante Alighieri’s epic poem Divine Comedy. While Dante is known for newly imagining Hell with nine descending circles, in fact he borrows this detail from Virgil. Just as we have seen in Book 6 of the Aeneid, also in Georgics Virgil says that the river Styx imprisons souls “within nine spirals” (4.480). Dante was one of Virgil’s closest readers, but he alters Virgil for his own poetic ends. Dante envisions the nine spirals as topographic layers of a conic pit descending
down to the depths of Hell. Each of the nine descending circles of Hell is separated by a distinct boundary.

Since Augustan Rome, the terrain of the Underworld has shifted and evolved greatly. The seismic rise of Christianity upheaved and transformed previous eschatological visions, contorting them through the religion’s hermeneutic grip. After the rise of Christendom, the subterranean realm below the earth is no longer the fate of all souls. Rather, Hell emerges as an exclusive destination limited to sinners. The subterranean Underworld as narrated in *Inferno* is only a portion of the eschatological landscapes. In this way, Dante’s Underworld diverges from previous Greco-Roman narratives through the context of its creation; Dante worked in a bibliocentric culture, where Scripture was accorded absolute and central authority (Macdonald 59).
Despite the domination of Christianity, Dante takes inspiration from Virgil in the *Divine Comedy* and literally places him as the guide through the afterlife—a fairly radical choice for the time period. In Canto 8, Dante refers to Virgil as the “sea of all good sense” (7). As a character in Dante’s poem, Virgil plays a similar role to the Sibyl as the guide through to Dis. As readers, we descend with the two poets through the distinctive circles, each containing a typed group of sinners. Virgil not only leads us through Hell, but explains the moral and eschalogical meanings of the encountered terrain.

While Dante’s Christian map of Hell in many ways is new territory, it stems from pre-Christian narratives. Dante invokes Virgil in a similar way that the Roman poet invokes Homer (Pinsky xi), integrating the previous narrative into the new historical moment. The *Inferno* adapts the Greco-Roman Underworld into the Christian worldview. Each iterative telling of the nether realm builds upon the inherited infernal landscape while explicitly defining new bounds, interweaving added details, and emphasizing different meanings.

Dante integrates the Greco-Roman Underworld rivers into his vision of the afterlife. The Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon flow from the world above into the basin of Hell where they form Cocytus at the very bottom, here a frozen lake that holds Satan (Dante 14.115-9). As we have seen, grotesque bodily images permeate the hydrogeology of the Greco-Roman Underworld. In the medieval epic, Dante makes the bodily nature of the infernal waters explicit, stating that they are formed by tears dripping from the earthly body of a grotesque giant above ground. As a character in the medieval epic, Virgil tells that the waters of Hell flow from fissured rock of the Old Man on Mount Ida who is now a broken statue (14.112-5). Virgil mentions this cultic locale in his katabanal story in *Georgics* (4.41). The Cretean mountain and fossilized giant represent how human history forms Hell. The statue is all metal except for the clay foot, which represents
the moral weakness of humanity as based upon a passage in the Book of Daniel (2.41-43). The tears run down to the fissured clay foot and flow past the earth’s surface to form the waters of Hell. The weakness of the foot and the descent of fluids downwards denotes an infernal association with the lower stratum of the body as well as the topographical location of Hell and its associated lower morality. The passage acknowledges the Greco-Roman water sources of the Underworld and shows Hell as formed by the excesses of the body.

Throughout the *Inferno*, Dante emphasizes the body with continually exaggerated, monstrous, and grotesque imagery (Macdonald 60). While in the classical sources the inhabitants of the Underworld are shades, mere shadows of the bodies they used to occupy, in Dante’s Hell the inhabitants are excessively corporeal. Continually, bodily and material aspects are emphasized with visceral, concrete, and grotesque detail. The body is the site of sin as well as the locus of the associated eternal punishment. Grouped by their transgression, the residents of Hell are punished by an eternal corporeal state representative of their wrongdoing, with each circle of Hell constituted by a group of sinners. In this way, the body structures the infernal geography.

*Canto 3: The Murky Borders of Hell*

Canto 3 is a liminal section, essentially acting as an extended threshold (Barolini 1). As told here, the border between the world and the first circle of Hell is an ambiguous and spacious region. The first boundary to the netherworld is accessed in a local environment and in a dark wood, just as in the *Aeneid*. While the Roman poet names this gateway as a cave, Dante refers to the opening as a portal (*porta*) with a physical sign designating the borders of Hell (3.11). After entering the city limits of Dis, Dante and Virgil must pass through Antehell and the marshy
boundary of Hell. Dante places the canonical chthonic river Acheron as the marker of the first circle of Hell. He describes the water body as a “great river” (3.70) with “dark water” (3.118) but also as a “livid marsh” (3.98). The water of the river Acheron is so slow moving it is classified as a swamp (Ireland 181). Dante’s portrayal of Acheron as both a swamp and a dark river adapts Virgil’s image of this Acheron river forming a dark “murky swamp” that surfaces at the entrance to the world below (Aen. 6.107), which itself builds upon the Homeric construction of the hydrous boundaries of the Underworld. Dante’s designation of Acheron as a river separating the world above parallels the force of the river Oceanus in Homer’s works, though the medieval writer didn’t have access to the Ancient Greek text. Still, Dante preserves the Homeric descriptions of the Underworld as murky through compounding upon the Virgilian portrayal of chthonic black swamps. In the Inferno, Dante names the Acheron *livida*—livid, painting the water the dark muddled colors of bruised flesh. Evocative of blood, the livid image recalls the Greco-Roman conception of rivers as the veins of the earth.

With each literary iteration of the subterranean landscape, the Underworld’s environmental features become more explicitly swampy. We see the evolution from Homer’s karstic subterranean realm to a medieval Hell overflowing in marshlands. Dante conceives of the Acheron as a *palude*, which he uses throughout for the waters of the Underworld. The term refers to swamps, bogs, fens, or marshes, and is cycled throughout the cantos, allowing the reader to track the spiraling descent through the layers of Hell by the wetlands that repeatedly encircle them (Ireland 181). As has been noted, the disease-ridden, parasitic, bacterial characteristics of stagnant waters signify deadliness that is fitting for the realm of death. Dante’s *palude* Acheron recalls the Virgilian *palus* Avernus which overflows from Acheron. In both poetic accounts, the

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61 For a discussion of the Biblical associations of swamplands in the Inferno and an argument for wetlands as a site of moral decay and moral correction, see Ireland.
margins of the Underworld are swampy. Marshes evoke the hermeneutics of liminality from their physical characteristics. A swamp ecology is one of ever-shifting viscosity and mutability (Ireland 178). Furthermore, wetland ecologies pervade across the earth, transcending boundaries of region and climate (Howarth 520). Whether called a marsh, wetland, bog, or swamp, these water bodies have signified ambiguity and transition in literary traditions (Howarth 521). The placement of marshes at the borders of the infernal realm shows how material hydrous forces share creativity in the generation of narratives.

As we have seen in the works of Homer and Virgil, liminality has continually characterized the waters of the Underworld. In Dante’s *Inferno*, the poet grants the Acheron’s traditional liminal meaning moral weight. Before the upper banks reside those souls who have remained neutral and are thus admitted neither to Heaven or Hell but reside at the border, forever abiding in the nether threshold (Dante 3.40-41). Their punishment is to live a life “so abject” (Dante 3.47), a fate which corresponds to the nature of their sin of being “cast out” of Heaven (41). Their rejected, ejected state embodies the abject as that which disregards boundaries (Kristeva 2), which the sinners have done by remaining in ambiguity. Abjection thus is incorporated into religious structurings as transgression (Kristeva 17), as Canto 3 demonstrates.

The fate of those in-between has biblical precedence; Dante forms the liminal landscape and its corresponding punishment from the following passage of *Revelations*: “Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth” (3.16). In the biblical passage, those who remain “lukewarm” are characterized as bodily fluids cast out from the body’s orifices.62 Dante takes this text and literally maps “lukewarm” morality upon the borders

\[\text{62 With Dante’s image of Hell as a great basin, this fits with Bakhtin’s note that “people can descend into the stomach as into an underground mine” (339)}\]
of a murky river. The sinners’ abject state is signified through their position on the edge of the hydrous margins of the body of Hell.

Situated neither inside nor outside, the sinners suffer a punishment that is equally abject: they are bitten by horseflies and wasps that streak their faces with blood, which falls mingled with tears to be eaten by sickening worms in the dirt below (67-69). Ejected bodily fluids such as blood assert the boundarylessness of abjection, furthered by the fact that they mix with the dirt below.\textsuperscript{63} The ejected fluids of the undecideds are incorporated into the environment of the Underworld. The Acheron is situated directly beside the flow of abject bodily fluids, creating a figurative parallel between the two. The murky waters running from the surface of Hell share similitude with the bodily fluids running down the bodies of the liminal souls. The blood and tears running from the bodies of the sinners are analogous both to the lukewarm souls and to the marshy borders of the surface of the body of Hell.\textsuperscript{64} The liminalility of Antehell and Acheron is conceived morally, but also through fluids that transcend the borders between body and environment.

\textbf{Swamps of Transgression}

In Canto 7 of \textit{Inferno}, Dante includes Styx in his map of Hell, borrowing the water\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{chthonic and marshy status from Greco-Roman sources for his own poetic aims. While Dante’s portrayal of Styx evokes Virgil’s toxic Avernus, at the same time this water passage resembles the place where Cocytus merges with Acheron at the base of the throat of Dis in the \textit{Aeneid}. In the Roman epic, Virgil describes a seething or boiling whirlpool that emits mud or waste into Cocytus (6.296-7). Correspondingly, Dante shows an unnamed spring seething or boiling (bolle) \textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{63 Kristeva cites both blood and dirt continually as abject fluids, while stating that the abject is also represented by the composite (4).\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{64 In the Old Testament, God refers to Jonah as in “the belly of Hell” (Jonah 2.2)\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{}}}}}}}}}}}}}}
and spilling murk into another river channel. The medieval poet gives little care to matching the names of nether water bodies with their aforementioned traits. Instead, he remaps the waters of the Underworld while liberally redistributing Virgilian hydraulic descriptors as he sees fit. While the layout of the nether world is transformed in *Inferno*, it is clear Dante is borrowing and recycling Virgilian language and imagery of Underworld hydrology to construct his Christian Hell.

Here, Styx operates as a physical and narrative boundary marker between upper Hell and nether Hell. Compared to the classical visions of the Underworld, Hell acquires sequences of topographically and morally descending circles separated by numerous marsh boundaries. In the *Aeneid*, the waters of Acheron discharge into the marsh Styx, which itself merges with the lake Cocytus and all together flow through the depths of the Underworld. In the *Aeneid*, Styx imprisons sad souls, which Dante expands upon in this Canto. Dante introduces Styx thusly:

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Noi ricidemmo il cerchio a l’altra riva
sovr’ una fonte che bolle e riversa
per un fossato che da lei deriva.
     L’acqua era buia assai più che persa;
e noi, in compagnia de l’onde bige,
intrammo giù per una diversa.
     In la palude va c’ha nome Stige
questo tristo ruscel, quand’è disceso
Al piè de le maligne piagge grige. (100-108)
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We the crossed the circle to the other bank arriving at a spring that seethes and spills into a channel that derives from her overflow. The water was much darker than purple; and we, in company with the murky current, went down a strange passage. Into the swamp whose name is Styx merged this woeful stream, when it descended at the foot of those malicious grey beaches.
Despite diverging from the Virgilian Underworld waters in many ways, the unnamed seething spring invokes the imagery of Avernus as a dark swamp formed from an overflowing subterranean source (Aen. 6.107). Like Avernus, Styx is a seemingly toxic marsh with rising vapours (Dante 8.12). As Dante tells in later Cantos, from the scum of the Styx arise intense acrid fumes that pervade the whole atmosphere around the city of Dis (9.74-5, 31-2).

Undoubtedly, the marshy environment of the Underworld is one of ecological toxicity. Moreover, the moral pollution of the Hell city is imagined as polluting waters. The hellscape is not just allegorical but trans-corporeal, signified by harmful chemical and biological agents.

Drawing upon specific Virgilian imagery, Dante reforms the Underworld for the socio-historical terrain of Sicily. As Robert Pinksey remarks, in the *Inferno*, “Hell is the parody of a city” (Pinsky xi). Dante erects structures throughout the nether landscape in his poetic vision. Unlike his classical predecessors, Dante suggests the waters of the Underworld may be engineered. He writes that the seething spring “*riversa / per un fossato che da lei deriva*” (101-2). “*Fossato*” signifies a channel, but also a ditch, a trench, or a fosse. Dis, too, has deep fosses around it’s margins (8.76), of which Styx borders. It is clear in the *Inferno* that the Stygian marsh has acquired features of a moat. However, the channel is not solely built, but rather is created with nonhuman agents. The marshy moat is formed by a spring that spills; the phrase “*riversa,*” is frequently used for erupting volcanoes, and implies forceful nonhuman agency on the part of the emergent spring. In the Italian, whether the overflowing water actively has eroded its channel through its incessant flow or if the overflow is diverted with a moat is ambiguous.

The simultaneously natural and built qualities of this nether water body reflect the flow of water through human and nonhuman systems as well as the historical context of its writing. In a comprehensive study of water in the early Middle Ages in Italy, Squatriti reflects that water was
“indissolubly both matter and custom, both nature and culture” (4). The nature-cultural duality of Styx is just another way water embodies liminality and permeates across borders.

Dante’s watercourse is a fluid boundary that quite literally guides Dante and Virgil from one circle of Hell across and down into the other circle. The river is described as “company,” which can be read as a level of agency water has as a guide to the strange passage descending deeper into Hell. While the watercourse separates the nether and upper regions, it also permeates the boundary between the two. Accompanying the water, the poets follow the path down with the current. The margins between each ring of Hell take form as ominous river banks, decidedly liminal and dangerous spaces. The banks are *maligne*, implying not only potential harm but evil contained in the landscape. An undefined, shifting, viscous body at the margins of the circle’s borders, the ominous banks and seeping waters represent the abject,\(^65\) something ambiguous that does not respect borders (Kristiva 4). In this passage, evil is held in the liminal hydrous landscape.

The abject associations with this Underworld ecology are developed in Dante’s recounting of the group of sinners who suffer their fate at the Styx:

> Ei io, che di mirare stave inteso,  
> vidi gente fangose in quel pantano,  
> Ignude tutte, con sembiante offeso.  
> Queste si percotean non pur con mano,  
> Ma con la testa e col petto e coi piedi,  
> troncandosi co’ denti a brana a brana.  
> Lo buon maestro disse: “Figlio, or vedi  
> l’anime di color cui vinse l’ira;  
> e anche vo’ che tu per certo credi  
> che sotto l’acqua è gente che sospira,  
> e fanno pullular quest’ acqua al summo,  
> come l’occhio ti dice, u’ che s’aggira.

\(^65\) Not only from in abjection from an environmental view, Mentz notes that seeping exposes the ecological certainty that all material boundaries will be crossed (282)
Fitti nel limo dicon: “Tristi fummo
ne l’aere dolce che dal sol s’allegra,
portando dentro accidioso fummo:
or ci attristiam ne la belletta negra.’
Quest’ inno si gorgolian ne la strozza,
ché dir nol posson con parola integra.”
Così girammo de la lorda pozza
grand’ arco, tra la ripa secca e ‘l mézzo,
con li occhi vòlti a chi del fango ingozza. (109-129)

And I, who was focusing intently there,
saw muddy people in that quagmire,
completely naked, with angry faces.
They struck each other not only with each hand,
but with the head and chest and feet,
And with teeth tore each other piece by piece
The kindly master said: “Son, now see
the souls whom rage overcame,
and also I would like you to know for certain
that submerged below are people who sigh,
and make bubbles swarm to the water’s surface,
as your eye wandering anywhere can tell.
Lodged in the slime they say: ‘we were sullen
in the sweet air that swells with the sun,
Holding sluggish murk inside us:
 now we are saddened by this black sludge.’
This hymn they gurgle from the gullet,
unable to speak in full words.”
So we circumscribed the grimy pool
along a great arc, in between the dry bank,
with eyes turned towards those engorged with slime.

The portrayal of Styx in this passage is extremely abject, a state triggered by filth or muck (Kristeva 3), of which this passage abounds. The pool is *lorda*, meaning filthy, gross, or dirty. The angry people are called *fangoso*, meaning muddy, oozy, or slimy. The inhabitants of Styx are engulfed by this material, an ambiguous composite neither solid nor liquid. Embodied by the murky viscosity of the Styx, the abject is not a definable object (Kristeva 1). The sullen
souls below are lodged in *limo*, a half-liquid slippery mud. The contents of the Styx epitomize the ambiguous and composite nature of the abject. The quagmire, referred to as “*pantano,*” signifies a boggy area which is both land and water. The ecology of such landscapes defy boundaries; neither solid nor liquid; wetlands are created by shifting overflows and are composed of both decay and microbiotic life. The hybrid, murky, ever-shifting viscosity of swamps shapes the environment of the Underworld as an abject ecology. Likewise, the ecology of swamps is treated as gross, hellish, and dejected.

The bodies of people are part of the gross environment. The angry sinners are completely naked in the muck. Dante’s character Virgil says they are like “*porci in brago,*” pigs in muck (8.50). The sinners are held in the state of abjection where “man strays on the territory of animal” (Kristeva 12). While Virgil demonstrates the trans-corporeality of the Underworld through depicting the nether terrain as the viscera of gaping cavernous mouths, Dante demonstrates the Underworld as trans-corporeally constituted by human and water bodies. The people are submerged within the mud, making explicit their physical interconnections with the biological world.
Those at the bottom of the mire cocreate the ecology of the swamp. They form the bubbles teeming at the water's surface, which one might associate with the scum of parasitic bacterial life on the stagnant water. Moreover, they are described as *gorgolian*, gurgling, a word associated with the sound produced by water, as well as by the movement of fluids in the intestines. In this way, the marshy slime is construed as a bodily fluid. These sullen souls below are not only surrounded by slime, but also hold it inside their bodies. This depiction of the Stygian slime melds with Kristeva’s notion of the abject as that which dissolves the boundary between inside and outside (7). The sullen are described as “*chi del fango ingozza,*” literally those who gorge on mud. *Ingozza* implies excessive eating, as to make oneself stuffed or fat.66

66 Note that enormous appetite is representative of the grotesque bodily character (See Bakhtin pp. 342).
The Stygian muck inside and around the sinners transgresses physical borders, permeating across bodies. This transfer across porous biological systems demonstrates trans-corporeality. In depicting the Styx, Dante emphasizes the digestive tract; such gastronomical relations between earth and intestines exemplifies the transfers across the body and the earth. The digestive tract is the location of grotesque, trans-corporeal fusion. As a recognition of the transfers across the boundaries of human and nonhuman bodies, trans-corporeality demonstrates aspects of abjection. Such mergent interactions and interconnects between human and environment exemplify the nebulous border of abjection which is “above all ambiguity” (Kristeva 9). The slime crosses the borders of the body as a transgressive excess.

As suggested by the sinners who dwell in the muck, the borders crossed in this liminal marsh are not just corporeal but moral. Abjection is elicited by sins and that which transgresses borders of proper behavior (Kristeva 16). As a pantano, Styx is not only a marsh but a figurative quagmire or a mess—a mistake or misstep. Wetlands have consistently been read as dangerous, filthy, and noxious (Howarth 513). The filth (lorda) of the swamp is not just physical dirt, but a material that signifies moral corruption. As Douglas theorizes, dirt is what disrupts a system of order through disregarding boundaries (160). Dante portrays the landscape of the Underworld with swamps to signify immorality; biological conditions of dirtiness, viscosity, and ambiguous boundaries signify moral misconduct. The swampy environment of Hell emerges as an ecology of transgression. Dante places sinners physically in the swamp and completely naked, which has further implications of indecency. In the medieval period, the Roman practice of public, recreational bathing faded due to Christian condemnation; public bathing was viewed as a site of moral corruption (Squatriti 56).

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67 In Canto 15, Dante comes upon another water body that is explicitly excremental which he remarks remind him of prostitutes bathing in the Bulicame, a physical hotspring outside of Rome (15.122)
With the Styx, Dante continues his practice of fitting eschatological punishment of the soul to the nature of the sin. As we have seen in Homeric Greek, *Styx* means hated or hateful; Dante draws upon this etymology when placing the angry souls in the Styx. The sin of the swamp dwellers is that of emotional excess, shown in two poles with the wrathful and the sullen. The sinners’ transgression of emotional excess corresponds to overflowing marsh ecology. In the Middle Ages, anger and depression were thought to be caused by excesses of bile in the body. Originating from Hippocratic writings, this theory of humorism held that emotions were regulated by four types of bodily fluids that corresponded with the four elements (Mann 262). Humorism conceived of porosity and symbiance between human and nonhuman material entities.

Dante depicts the terrain of Styx with the language of humorism, constructing an expressly trans-corporeal environment. Those submerged under the water are said to have held a sadness in life described as a sluggish murk, corresponding to their fate of being swamped in the Stygian sludge. As told in the *Inferno*, the state of melancholy and its material murk correspond to black bile as articulated in humorism. Characterized as a dark material equivalent to mud, an excess of black bile was thought to cause sadness and depression (Sterling 430-1). The contents of Styx are described like black bile; a black (*negra*), viscous mud (*fango*) of saddening (*triste*) marsh water. The marsh itself emerges as a landscape of black bile. Even in modern conceptions, wetlands have been described as the kidneys of the landscape (Howarth 520). The splanchnic associations of the swamp are furthered by its subsumption of the sinners all the way into their gullets. While in humorist theory it was black bile existent in the organs (Mann 262), in Dante’s conception it is the swampy slime that gurgles from inside the organs. On the one hand, the innards of the sad souls are swampy and muddy, on the other hand, the marsh itself is a
subsurface system holding abject fluids. In Dante’s portrayal, the viscous contents of the subterranean swamp consist of bile, suggesting an analogy of Hell as the inner body. At the same time, the organs that hold bile are understood as a swampy realm. Seepages of the inner body and ecologies of wetland are understood as abject terrains of transgression.

**Conclusion**

In the *Inferno*, we see how the lineage of the watery Greco-Roman Underworld is adapted in the Christian version of Hell. The waters have developed from karstic to explicitly swampy and toxic locations of punishment. Sin is mapped on the marshy, subterranean environment and oozes past the boundaries of bodies of humans and waters. Unlike in previous versions of the Underworld, human bodies make up the landscape; the hellscape is physically formed by multitudinous gross bodies. We see that the abjection of viscosity applies not only to oozing bodily fluids, but to swampy landscapes. The hellish and abject associations with swamps persist on. In our contemporary period, swamps are dejects: environmental degradation is more prominent on wetlands than any other ecosystem on earth.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have aimed to demonstrate the environment of the Underworld as an ecosemiosphere. We have witnessed the Homeric Underworld emerge as a realm encompassed by waters, generated from a karstic landscape of subterranean rivers common in the Mediterranean. The materially generated, watery borders of the subterranean have persisted throughout the evolution of the infernal realm, adapting to the specific narrative and ecological environment of the authors and their times. Coming to Virgilian Dis, we have watched the
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Cumaean environment imprint upon the mythic landscape. We see the persisting legacies of pollution and toxicity mapped onto the Underworld, as generated by toxic material agents through dynamic interactions with meaning-making practices. All the way to the Christian vision of Hell, we see the influence of murky, boundary-defying material agencies in the generation of narratives with the persistence of ambiguous swamp ecologies at the boundaries of the netherworld. Through adaptations, the margins of the Underworld morph from karstic subterranean waters into toxic marshes and swamps.

Applying an abject and grotesque analysis to the marginal terrains of the Underworld, I hope to have demonstrated the ways in which the subterranean realm is mapped through the internal body. Meaning implicates human and nonhuman bodies together, with gender affecting human and hydrous flows and pollution enmeshed across corporeal entities. While swamp ecologies are imbued with Hellish associations, like our gross but essential organs, wetlands perform essential rites of cleansing: they purify, replenish, and transform the fluids necessary for life (Howarth 520). I hope to have elucidated the semiotic intertwining of material entities: waters emerge as bodies, mouths become caverns, and the Tartarian abyss is located in the gut. I would dare to suggest that the body acts as a microcosm for the environment, and that how we imagine one viscerally affects the other.

In this paper, I have articulated a notion of “abject landscapes,” environments that do not appear in the paradisiac image of nature we imagine, but nonetheless constitute the ecological world of seepage and dependency with which we are entwined. We might understand such an ecosystem as Harding’s “Chthulucene,” deriving from the Greek chthonic, that which is of the earthly Underworld—a rewriting of the Anthropocene to break down the barrier between human and nonhuman worlds. The Chthulucene is the material-semiotic realm “of earthly ones, those
now submerged and squashed in the tunnels, caves, remnants, edges, and crevices of damaged waters, airs, and lands” (Haraway 71). This is the abode of the noncompliant, rejected, marginal flows of human and nonhuman life. Kin in our discharging of fluids, porous membranes, and meaning-making processes, all us earthly ones are part of the Chthulucene.

The abject, dejected, diffusive environments of the marginal Underworld may be seen as the environmentally-fused, transgressive body(ies) of the grotesque. As argued by many scholars, the grotesque body emerges as the repressed element of the societal unconconscious, that which must be abjected in order to maintain dominant power systems (Russo 8-9). With the inseparable intertwinement of human and nonhuman material and semiotic systems, the marginal ecologies of the Underworld are those ambiguous entities we try to push down, yet nevertheless surface: they diffuse toxins, collapse in rupture, and flood past the boundaries we have built. The liminal, diffusive, slippery material agents of the Underworld emerge rebelliously, or to paraphrase Haraway: the Chthulucene speaks resurgence (71).

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