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“The Other Side of the Ditch”:<sup>1</sup>  
(De)Constructing Environmental Crisis  
in William Vollmann’s *Imperial*  
and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

Although in different ways, William Vollmann’s nonfiction book *Imperial* (2009) and Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (2006) engage with current environmental and societal problems. Against the backdrop of their shared, though dissimilar, conceptualization of climate issues, in this paper I aim to investigate how these books depict the US landscape as an on-going site of emergency through an ecocritical approach. As we shall see, these works indicate the fragility of human beings and the anxiety of living in an uncertain world in the aftermath of environmental crisis. While, in these texts, Vollmann and McCarthy use different styles of writing and genres to present the urgent state of environmental problems, they both use the trope of (im)migration as an essential narrative technique that mushrooms into various thematic concerns. In this respect, both books show the consequences of (im)migration, as a result of climate problems.

#### Ecocriticism and Literary Studies

In 1996 Cheryll Glotfelty observed that in our postmodern world methodological and theoretical approaches to literary criticism are in a state of rapid change (see Glotfelty xv). While around the turn of the century this sounded evident enough, Glotfelty’s point was to show how little attention, if any, was given to that which we understand as ecocritical and environmental approaches to literary studies. Although no definitive description of environmental criticism in relation to literary studies can be

delineated, recent ecocritical scholarship has tried to offer new approaches to literature by including theoretical dimensions left out from previous works.<sup>2</sup> As Lawrence Buell has pointed out, later criticism challenged the “organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism” (*Environmental Criticism* 22). Indeed, scholars in literature-and-environment studies have gone on to theorize about social issues such as urban and environmental justice, ideas of gender and race as ecological concepts, as well as agency for animals and plants in relation to climatic problems.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of ecocriticism in literary studies started to take account of both “anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns” (33).

In this respect, one might further think of a new stage in ecocriticism in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on our natural and built environments. This final phase aligns with more recent issues such as a global understanding of ecocritical practice punctuated by the need to address urgent matters, beyond Anglo-American prominence, like global warming and climate calamities.<sup>4</sup>

### Vollmann, McCarthy, and the Imagination of Crisis

*Imperial* depicts Southern California as a dystopian wasteland as well as a haven of possibilities through a multitude of genres and writing styles. The arbitrary border of Imperial County with Mexico delineates the violent imposition of human will on the natural territory for economic and political purposes. Interestingly, Vollmann has reportedly called *Imperial* his *Moby-Dick* (see Anderson). Putting this into perspective, within the framework of the immigration situation at the US-Mexican border, one can think of the way that American capitalist greed has been relentless in imposing lines on the land, like Melville’s Ahab who relentlessly pursues the whale.

To use Vollmann’s words, “Imperial is a map of the way to wealth; the map has sun-bleached back to blankness. Leave an opened newspaper outside for a month and step on it; the way it crumbles, that’s Imperial” (591). At the same time, Imperial represents a “dream” (39) for Mexican immigrants who try to find refuge in brutal farmwork on the American

side. Nevertheless, after the diminishing of the region's economic prosperity, due to the impossibility of large-scale irrigation, to the Mexican laborers America is no longer "the dream in which they overwhelmed themselves" (39). Indeed, Vollmann's *Imperial County* shows immigration as a continuing issue of concern on both sides of the border.

Using a similar migration trope, *The Road* offers a (post)apocalyptic vision of the world where natural resources have been exhausted. The unfolding of the unknown catastrophe has led McCarthy's main characters, a man and his son, to migrate across the US. The terrain they are crossing is "[b]arren, silent, godless" (2) and the surrounding landscape offers nothing but a myriad of "limbless trunks of trees" (4). As in *Imperial*, migration seems to promise a better condition of life where the protagonists move southward toward a sea through the harsh winter in the hope of finding milder weather. Nevertheless, the gray sea at the end of the journey suggests "the shores of a world unheard of" (131) where even "the names of things one believed to be true" (52) fall into oblivion.<sup>5</sup>

In this respect, it is interesting how Vollmann has used some of the themes and concerns in McCarthy's oeuvre. One of the main issues that usually pop up in McCarthy's fiction is the representation of a culture of migration, usually beset by violence, which is a significant theme in Vollmann's works as well. One can think of McCarthy's famous "Border Trilogy" of novels (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*) as well as *No Country for Old Men*. These are all texts which have the Mexican American border as their setting and depict the material and cultural movement over those boundaries. Considering the burgeoning literary production of the prolific Vollmann, suffice it to mention that he begins his multi-part novel *Seven Dreams* in Scandinavia and follows violent confrontations across the North Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland, Newfoundland, Labrador, and throughout the expanse of Canada. Furthermore, on several occasions, he has expressed his praise for McCarthy. In an interview he said that "my favorite American writer at the moment is Cormac McCarthy. I think he's wonderful" (Boratav 130). Elsewhere, he considered McCarthy "pretty spectacular" (McIntyre 45), insofar as he is one of the contemporary writers who bring new energy to the novel.

When analyzing it more closely, one can notice that the ending of *The*

*Road* reflects what is described in the beginning, that is, skepticism toward the possibility of survival. In the initial scene, as the man is observing the road, the narrator tells us that it was “empty. Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds” (3). The river is described as a motionless snake that is also precise. Being motionless suggests lack of vitality which heightens the feeling of despair in this barren land. Nevertheless, when used of a snake, motionlessness indicates the moment before the snake strikes with deadly precision which contributes to highlight the danger in the landscape by which the characters are surrounded. Furthermore, the image of the “still gray” river with “dead reeds” on its shore is an anticipation of “the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden” (131) at the end of the journey.

By providing such descriptions of the American landscape, these books delve into the uneasiness of living in an uncertain world and depict the human cost of climate disaster. Concentrating on how they interact with one another, concerning themes related to the issue of (im)migration, I am going to show how, at the very least, these works draw popular attention to the seriousness of environmental problems in our world.

### The Representation of Disaster in *The Road*

Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a burgeoning of critical interest in (post)apocalyptic fiction as a number of prominent literary figures have employed this form in their novels.<sup>6</sup> But what exactly is (post)apocalyptic fiction? Generally, in this genre human civilization has been destroyed by a cataclysmic event and the characters have to deal with the disastrous consequences. Some of the widely recognized conventions of the genre are: “ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; [...] desperate scavenging; poignant yearning for a lost civilization, [...] and extreme violence” (Hicks 6). While the nature of the cataclysm varies, environmental disaster is one the most common themes that sets in motion the apocalyptic event.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the apocalypse genre has always been “debated among ecocritics” (Heise 122).

Apocalypse, in its original Greek meaning of "revelation," should offer some solution or salvation. For instance, Ursula Heise has observed that "environmental apocalypses include an ideal socioecological countermodel – often a pastoral one – that discourses about risk typically lack," namely "a utopian element" (141). In this subgenre the emphasis is on the distinction between a good old past and a degraded present. Nevertheless, as Heise has suggested, the pastoral element indicates that while the past is lost, there is still the hope of an achievable future. In other words, the representation of the past serves to contemplate the present and find a solution for the future.

Not only does *The Road* block from us any understanding of the past, except from the feverish dreams of the man, but it offers no promise of any fathomable future. What is dominant in the book is a sense of loss highlighted by the sheer impossibility of actually knowing things: "Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world" (77). Even though the narrator relates that for once "[h]is dreams brightened. The vanished world returned" (113), we are never given a hint of future hope throughout the text, except perhaps in the last scene where the boy joins a new family. Such a disaster heralds the high price in terms of human catastrophe due to the demise of the natural world.

*The Road* invites the reader to make sense of the characters' journey and go through their experience. In doing so, one of the main concerns of the novel is the representation of the (natural) environment in the aftermath of the catastrophic event. As George Monbiot has commented, *The Road* is "the most important environmental book ever written" (n. pag.) insofar as it provides an object lesson concerning environmental crises. Although the novel does not directly address climate issues, one can identify many scenes that depict the destruction of the natural world. Indeed, Andrew O'Hagan's laudatory statement, on the back cover of the British edition of the book, famously described the novel as "the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation" (n. pag.).<sup>8</sup>

Right from the outset we are confronted with a world in utter chaos. As the man and his son move southward, they come to realize that it is a world in which "Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered" (4). The narrator depicts the road as follows:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. [...] Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadow-lands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. (4)

The novel opens with such a postapocalyptic vision of the US, where the protagonists find themselves in a “[d]esolate country” (9). The present is shown to be so fragile that there is an oneiric quality to it. Although the man believes that the only dreams for a man in danger should be “dreams of peril” (9), he does dream about the world before the apocalypse: “He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue” (9). Embedded in such vivid depictions of normality in the past is the idea of the destruction of the natural environment. In the present atmosphere of constant fear, one of the dreams that haunts the man is the disappearance of the natural world which he probably took solace in.

Indeed, when the protagonists finally reach the coast, what they encounter is completely different from what they had hoped for. As they sit on the beach, they observe the horizon covered with a “wall of smog,” enveloping the expanse of the “bleak sea” (131). The sea not only disappoints the man, who tells his son “I’m sorry it’s not blue” (131), but also indicates the gravity of the environmental disaster. In fact, the description of the ash-covered, gray sea underscores both the characters’ disillusionment and the depth of the ecological catastrophe: “Along the shore of the cove below them windrows of small bones in the wrack. Further down the saltbleached ribcages of what may have been cattle. [...] The wind blew and dry seedpods scampered down the sands” (131). Nevertheless, in such an appalling condition, the place where they find some momentary relief is nature itself, no matter how degraded. At the sight of the unpromising sea, they take their blankets and sit “wrapped in them in the wind-shade of a great driftwood log” (131).

### The Socio-Political Nature of the Apocalypse

In the wake of the cataclysmic event, the man is aware of the impossibility of retrieving the old world before the onset of the disaster – a vision that is sometimes hinted at through the man's dreams. From the outset, he thinks that "if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (9). When in extremis, the horror of the present becomes so dominating that nothing is any "longer known in the world" (77). This leads to a situation of displacement where the characters cannot identify any safe place to settle down. When the quest of a better condition of life ends with the disheartening reality of the gray sea, the man and the boy keep moving until the father dies and the son comes across a family of "good guys" (173), who would hopefully, and ironically, take care of him on the road where his father lost his life.

At some point in the narrative, the man stops recounting stories of the past to the boy as he realizes that they have no meaning for his son. The more devastating realization comes when he understands that "to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed" (90). The novel suggests that in the face of environmental devastation, which results in human displacement and alienation, the only solution seems to be migration. Ironically, what ensues might well be further social dislocation and confusion. McCarthy's representation of the postapocalyptic world resonates with a host of environmental concerns in the present day. At the same time, the destruction of the natural world punctuates the inevitable aftermath – the crisis of only being able to subsist in the world as it now is and, more crucially, what it means to be human in such degraded conditions. In fact, in several scenes the boy begs his father to help the people they come across throughout the journey, but each time the man answers negatively, arguing: "My job is to take care of you" (44). In such episodes, McCarthy is reflecting on the loss of humanity as a result of the climatic catastrophe.

While the man's thoughts contemplate the (im)possibility of envisioning a better future, this would still be based on a world before the outbreak of the disaster, which itself was never good: "How does the never

to be differ from what never was?" (18). Considering the larger picture, this idea has something to do with the way that politicians in the US have always referred to the past as a utopian model based on which the future would be ideally made. The man's thoughts in McCarthy's novel question that imaginary "city upon a hill" as an illusion of a perfect society. Indeed, what he and his son have to live with is neither the past nor the future, but the horrifying reality of the present handed down to them by the decision makers of the past. The man reflects: "There is no past" (31) and "There is no later. This is later" (31). Indeed, the tenor of the novel is for the most part neither hopeful nor speculative. As Rune Graulund has argued, *The Road* depicts "a desert that never ends nor begins, a landscape as devoid of difference as it is of life" (61).

Such observations in the narrative might speak to the larger framework of socio-political governance and the way that governments shape our societies. Although political suggestions in the text are mostly opaque, there are a few episodes that suggest skepticism toward the working of governments. When the boy wonders why his father refers to the black lines on the map as "the state roads," the man answers: "Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states"; while the man doesn't know what exactly happened to "the states" (24), the images of the suffering, the dead, and the murdered along the road make him wonder what they had done to deserve this fate. He thinks that "in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime" (18). Here, the word "punishment" brings to mind the idea of governance and McCarthy's narrator mocks that notion by depicting the demolition of the world and its population in the aftermath of an apocalypse, which might represent the ill working of the governing system. On that score, a related scene is the description of "an army in tennis shoes, tramping" (53), which appears in the man's nightmarish vision. As the only vigorous organization in the novel, this army shows various elements of domination and abuse: "slaves in harness" dragging wagons "piled with goods of war," a dozen of women, "some of them pregnant," and a group of "catamites illclothed against the cold" (53).

## Welcome to Imperial: The Immigrants’ Plight from Bad to Worse

“WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA” (417, 435, 491), together with a number of other welcomes to different places, keeps being repeated throughout Vollmann’s encyclopedic book of one thousand and one genres. It is a fragmented collection of interviews, ethnography, memoirs, literary pastiches, environmental writing, and short stories, shedding light on Imperial’s social, geographical, and political history. One might define *Imperial* as a maximalist attempt to depict the reality of the eponymous region while recognizing the impossibility of capturing its multivalent social and political complexities. As such, in this section, I intend to address certain parts of the book which help spell out my argument, especially as regards the issue of immigration.

In one review, James Green observed that *Imperial* “might be best described as a bunch of books and a raft of notes, arranged in a way only the author could explain” (n. pag.). However, as Vollmann himself mentions in the book,

Imperial widens itself almost into boundlessness, and so does my task. [...] Imperial is palm trees, tract houses, and the full moon. Imperial is the pale green lethal stars of chollas, [...] Imperial is a landscape like wrinkled mammoth-flesh; [...] Imperial is mica; Imperial is gypsum: [...] How many books might Imperial contain? – An infinite number, of course. (256)

If Vollmann’s book reflected the reality of Imperial, it should have a fragmented and multifaceted structure. Indicating the difficulty of describing this region, Vollmann believes that such an organization of the book means “in part to appropriate” and “in part to reimagine” (255) that place. In other words, he attempts to reproduce Imperial in such a way that it would correspond “in some fashion, probably metonymically, to the reality” (255) of that geographical area.

One of the manifestations of such a rendition are the instances in which the author uses the above-mentioned welcome sentences. In most cases, these welcomes are either preceded or followed by some negative, complex description of the places they refer to. Among such depictions are those of the immigrant field workers. In fact, one of the main concerns of the book

is immigration. In this respect, the difficulty of understanding the socio-political complexities of the region heralds the impossibility of thoroughly knowing and rendering the troubles of the immigrants. Thus, one might surmise that the length of the book, with its exhaustive descriptions of the various topics, is used as a narrative technique to emphasize the struggle of knowing the problems of the immigrant workers.

*Imperial* addresses the annual exodus of Mexicans to the US along roughly eighty miles of a patchily drawn international border. Interestingly, the book starts with the narrator's account of Imperial's dividing line at the US-Mexico border, describing the Mexican "seekers of illegal self-improvement" (29) in America and the Border Patrol's effort to prevent them. Like in *The Road* the solution seems to be moving elsewhere. However, if in McCarthy's novel migration leads to no clear solution in the end, in Vollmann's book the path to America is fraught with racism, violence, and disappointment. For those who make it to the US, the new life is mostly one of ill-paid and grueling agricultural labor – a reality that is a far cry from what the immigrants had imagined before coming to America.

In this regard, *Imperial* represents what Mike Davis called an "Apocalypse theme park" (8) where on a daily basis the immigrant workers experience the wrath of a relentless nature and an exploitative economic system. The situation is worsened by the environmental conditions in Southern California, not least due to the annually rising temperature which makes large-scale industrial irrigation impossible. Vollmann relates that in the course of Imperial's history big agricultural companies have benefited from these circumstances by taking over small farmers as they have always had access to more technological facilities. Mexican immigrants and Native Americans have been the victims of such overreaching environmental and economic conditions: "It is bemusing, and ultimately chilling, to watch how American Imperial uses up one race after another for her ends" (507).

A salient section in the book which depicts the everyday "apocalyptic temper" (Davis 353) of the human disaster over the course of years in Imperial is "Steinbeck, Most American of Us All" (257). Here, Vollmann is interested in exploring John Steinbeck's thematic representations of how human beings receive one another. He is keen on understanding

Steinbeck's concerns regarding human receptivity toward the other and the multilayered conflicts it entails, as well as Steinbeck's ultimate goal of getting the readers to empathize with the problems of the characters. Indeed, a common theme in the works of both Vollmann and Steinbeck is the suffering of the immigrant laborers. Most famously, in *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck tried to show the troubles of the migrants to California and the corruption of the agricultural system which exploited human beings for economic profit.

In his essay "American Writing Today," Vollmann expresses his concern about some of the same fundamental issues that most often pop up in his oeuvre: the inefficacy of the government and the growing "apathy and misinformation" among the governed concerning important issues such as the "terrifying increase in random violence and racism of all colors [...] From homelessness to schools where nothing is taught, from impending environmental disaster to continued environmental assault" (355). The essay's final page criticizes contemporary American literature, positing that "we are producing mainly insular works" (358) by a group of writers who are, unwillingly or not, detached from the reality of "the Other."

Although the problems of the immigrant workers are an important theme in Vollmann's work, in *Imperial* he refuses to fictionalize their plight because no words, other than theirs, can render their problems: "I would never consider changing a word of their stories. They are real and they have taught me many things that are true as I peer into the mystery called Mexico" (262). One of these dreadful accounts is brought to our attention through the story of Maria, "a coarsely beautiful schoolteacher" (250) who "scrubs out other people's toilets" in the US. After expressing his desire to enter her mind and write about her, Vollmann admits that it would be impossible to do justice to her by fictionalizing her story: "So how could I learn enough about Maria's life to express the respect I have for her endurance, and the compassion I feel for her intellect which wastes itself on drudgery?" (250). If Maria chose to immigrate, whose fault is her present reality? "A foreign power which took half his country" (250)? Ironically, or not, Vollmann says that it is not his government's fault, or his own, or hers. While he knows that there is something unfair about her situation, he cannot express it as she could: "The truth is that I do not understand

enough about border people to describe them [...] which means that I remain too ill acquainted with them to fictionalize them” (250-51).

### The Environmental Cost of Socio-Political and Economic Negligence

*Imperial* shows that the concentration of wealth and business speculations within the capitalist economic system generally bring about disastrous consequences, such as widespread poverty, for the majority of Imperial's population. As I briefly hinted at, Vollmann tries to capture the complexity and fragmentary nature of Imperial by resorting to a number of discursive approaches. He includes various points of view to represent the region insofar as any single attempt to universally depict that area cannot do justice to its intricacy. Among other things, he draws on the ethnography of the region, its economic history, political economy, and environmental background.

One section of the book in which he represents the ecological problems of Imperial is chapter three. Through the first-person narrative exploration of the Rio Nuevo, we move from Mexico toward the northern part of the border in the Salton Sea. On the Mexican side the river, known as “shit water,” is the channel through which desperate Mexicans play “their ghastly ace-in-the-hole” (48) to get to the US. As the reader follows the narrator's account along the New River, they come to notice the environmental havoc wreaked upon these waters in the wake of industrial agricultural undertakings with no regard for ecological issues.

At the same time, another face of this economically motivated disaster are the beaches of the Salton Sea as a popular vacation destination which however shocks Southern Californians when they witness “[f]ish carcasses in rows and rows, more sickening stenches, the underfoot-crunch of white cheek-plates like seashells – oh, rows and banks of whiteness, banks of vertebrae; feathers and vertebrae twitching in the water” (109). Nonetheless, even though the sea is revolting at times, its greater beauty still stuns the visitors: “This purity is particularly undeniable as expressed in the shimmer on the Salton Sea, which is sometimes dark blue, sometimes infinitely white” (109). This is to suggest that while the sea does show signs

of environmental disaster, the only policies put into action are ironically those that advocate tourism and money making without any regard for ecological concerns. The proof of such negligence, among many others in Vollmann's book, is a pamphlet by the Coachella Valley Historical Society: "the Salton Sea, it informed me, was *one of the best and liveliest fishing areas on the West Coast. Stories of a polluted Salton Sea are greatly exaggerated.... The real problem is too much salt*" (110; italics in the original).

In another section of the book about San Diego County's tap water supplies, Vollmann reports that the county is about 90 percent dependent on imported water. Although this is going to be a problem in the future with an increasing population, San Diego is growing while the coastal area is rapidly shrinking. Vollmann draws upon a detailed study on the disappearing coastal line between Los Angeles and San Diego, which warns against the environmental hazards of unrestrained urban sprawl: "*Urbanization of this strip is now well underway and clearly will result in an incoherent pattern of undifferentiated and environmentally disastrous sprawl unless some logical control is exerted*" (1079; italics in the original). However, what seems to be the primary concern is economic profiteering as Ashley Economic Services, Inc. concludes that all the housing developments and commercial centers generate an overall net surplus of cash revenues over expenses for the governing cities and counties. But what about the future of water supplies in San Diego and the vanishing coastal strip? As Vollmann comments, "Who cares...?" (1080). Such irresponsible actions regarding the environment in Southern California are sources of an "apocalyptic threat" (Davis 71) which, as Wesley Marx warned, "not only amplifies natural hazards but reactivates dormant hazards and creates hazards where none existed" (qtd. in Davis 8).

#### From *The Road to Imperial*

In Vollmann's book the root cause of immigration are economic problems, insofar as socio-political governance, on both sides of the border, drives Mexican laborers to immigrate. In such a complex web of international affairs, the immigrant workers are nothing but a catalyst in the destruction

of the natural environment while paradoxically they themselves are being usurped. In McCarthy's novel, the plight of the characters leads to a similar consequence: with migration as the sole means of survival, the quest of the main characters brings them to the death of the man and the uncertain future of the boy.

In this regard, an important trope in both books is that of borders. In *The Road* the lack of any official organization has led to the absence of stable borders and regions. In *Imperial*, however, the Border Patrol avails itself of every possible tool to strengthen the border. Citing his local newspaper, Vollmann reports that the goal of installing a US Navy noise-detection apparatus in the All-American Canal is "*to create a system that can alert authorities when someone is in trouble*" (italics in the original); nonetheless, he undermines the truth of this claim ironically: "Who am I to doubt the Navy's altruism?" (29). In other words, the implication is that the Navy's main purpose is to stop the immigrants at all costs rather than caring about humanitarian concerns.

If the All-American Canal becomes a devouring monster for the Mexican immigrants, the worst part of their journey is when they realize that life in the US is not what they had expected. Oddly enough, this happens because the immigrants usually have no idea of where their destination would be, as in the case of those who try to go to Canada: "they don't know, but somebody told them it's a real nice country where you don't get hassled" (31). To these desperate individuals, the primary motivation of immigration is to escape the difficult reality of their present lives.

One can find a similar dynamic in McCarthy's novel with the man and the boy as refugees from a world that no longer exists. Nevertheless, as they migrate to provide for their basic human needs, their immediate goal is to escape from the threats to their lives, rather than reaching a utopian destination. This is shown through the unfolding of the plot as well as the characters' skepticism toward the ultimate goal of getting to the supposedly blue sea: "How long will it take us to get there? he said. Two weeks. Three. Is it blue? The sea? I don't know. It used to be" (110).

Albeit in different ways, these works indicate the urgency of emigrants to escape from their actual situation and the difficulty of finding relief elsewhere. Both Vollmann and McCarthy tap into the anxiety of living

in an unsettling world where humans are alienated. In this respect, the problem of not being able to identify with the place one is surrounded by is emphasized by the representation of environmental problems. While in *The Road* the ecological disaster is depicted through the trope of migration, and its underlying causes remain opaque, in *Imperial* the representation of the environmental problems goes hand in hand with the sufferings of the immigrants.

Vollmann's choice of using an assemblage of genres helps him render the crisis of the Mexican field workers from a variety of viewpoints without having to invent characters and fictional stories. In McCarthy's novel, however, the (post)apocalyptic genre serves for the most part to unfold the crisis of the characters. Nevertheless, unlike *Imperial*, *The Road* leaves open the possibility of interpretation in the end, though in an interview with Oprah Winfrey McCarthy expressed the message of the novel as: "Life is pretty damn good, even when it looks bad. We should be grateful."<sup>9</sup> As the man would say to his son, the good guys "keep trying. They don't give up" (80). However one interprets the matter, these two works address the enormity of the human crisis in this age of environmental devastation and try to appeal to our good sense to take immediate action.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vollmann, *Imperial 2*.

<sup>2</sup> Early ecocritics emphasized the importance of nature writing in a celebratory fashion. In this phase, the primary goal of ecocriticism was to contribute to the struggle of preserving what Aldo Leopold called "the biotic community" (174) where "the hierarchical separations between human beings and other elements of the natural world" (Elder 172) would break down. To mention but a few significant works, one can think of Karl Kroeber's 1994 *Ecological Literary Criticism* and Lawrence Buell's 1995 *The Environmental Imagination*.

<sup>3</sup> On environmental justice, see Adamson et al., *The Environmental Justice Reader*. On concerns about globality, apocalypse, and political and theoretical issues in ecocriticism, see Garrard, *Ecocriticism*.

<sup>4</sup> Among others, we can think of Greg Garrard's edited collection *Climate Change Scepticism* where, within a transnational framework, the contributors try to explain critical (literary) inadequacy in dealing with the impact of anti-environmentalist rhetoric.

<sup>5</sup> That the main characters have no names implies that, in the postmodern condition,

names are no longer capable of bearing any (stable) meaning. As we learn in *The Road*, “The sacred idiom” (52) is “shorn of its referents” and “reality.”

<sup>6</sup> One can think of Cormac McCarthy, Colson Whitehead, Paolo Bacigalupi, Margaret Atwood, and David Mitchell.

<sup>7</sup> In Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* the desire for a better life of unlimited consumerism leads to environmental destruction. Or in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* the protagonist usually describes the collapse of global civilization by using terms that indicate environmental disaster such as “the ruin” (7), “the great calamity” (54), and “the flood” (65).

<sup>8</sup> The 2010 Picador edition of *The Road* carries this endorsement.

<sup>9</sup> “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” 5 June 2007.

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